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## Overview

This supplement is designed to assist teachers of history and civilization courses, at the high school and college level, as they work with the material in Helena Schrader's novel *An Obsolete Honor*. It is especially appropriate for courses dealing with World War II and the resistance within Germany to Nazism culminating in the Valkyrie Plot. It gives teachers a clear picture of the events and issues covered in the novel, and it includes questions to get students actively thinking and talking about these events and issues. Suggested theme assignments enable students to engage themselves further with these issues through research, discussion, and writing. Detailed chapter-by-chapter questions help students retain and review knowledge from each chapter.

# Summary of the Novel

- Paperback: 568 pages
- Publisher: iUniverse, Inc. (March 13, 2008)
- Language: English
- ISBN-10: 0595490883
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- **Product Dimensions:** 9 x 6 x 1.4 inches
- Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds

An Obsolete Honor is a historical novel set in Germany during World War II. Philip Baron von Feldburg is a German officer deeply concerned about the direction in which his country is heading. He is an Army General Staff Officer eventually drawn into taking part in the July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler. At the same time, young medical student Marianne Moldenauer is appalled by the Nazis' mistreatment of the Jews. She begins secret and dangerous efforts to assist them. Through Philip, Marianne, and a wide variety of other characters in the novel, the experiences of the German people during the war—and their responses to the hardships and moral dilemmas with which they are faced—are examined from many different perspectives.

## **General Questions for Thought and Discussion**

The following general questions highlight the central issues covered in *An Obsolete Honor*. These can be useful as a starting point for discussion.

- What factors hold a nation together and make it thrive? What factors weaken a nation? How are shared values important?
- How do the character and values of individuals make a difference to a society or to a nation?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of a democracy? What are the advantages and disadvantages of a dictatorship?
- How is a hierarchy or system of separate social classes helpful to a society? How can it be detrimental? What is necessary to make such a system work effectively?
- What challenges are posed by the presence of different ethnic and/or racial groups within a nation?
- How are civil liberties within a country treated differently during wartime, and why? What are the advantages of setting limits on civil liberties, and what are the dangers?
- What happens when political leadership sets rules governing the practice of religion? When might this be necessary? What are the dangers?
- How does the role of women in a society affect that society? What happens when a government imposes changes on the role of women?
- What factors help make a society more productive (in areas such as farming and food production, manufacturing, essential services, justice, and national defense)? What factors hinder productivity?
- What would have happened if the assassination and coup had succeeded on 20 July 1944? Do you think there would have been civil war? Could the interim post-Hitler government have negotiated a peace? Would the Allies have insisted on "Unconditional Surrender"? Do you think a new "stab in the back" legend would have evolved? Do you think democracy would be stronger or weaker in Germany today?
- Can you imagine any circumstances in which Americans might have to act "treasonously" in order to save the country, or in order to save our values?
- Would it be possible for a dictator to come to power in America? If so, what methods and ideology might the dictatorship use? Would there be resistance? What form might this take?
- Would it be possible for a military coup to succeed in the U.S.? What might motivate such an action?

## Chapter-by-Chapter Recall Questions

#### Chapter 1

- 1. Compare and contrast the Christmas celebrations in the Halle and von Feldburg households. How do the differences reflect social class? Which do you like better?
- 2. What advantages do the characters in the novel see in Hitler's regime? What negative effects are seen? How are the negative effects hidden, by whom, and why?
- 3. What social situation caused Theresa to feel like an outsider as a child? What new environment changed things for her, and why? How do these past experiences affect her political views?
- 4. In what environment, after her marriage, had Sophia Maria felt comfortable and included despite her difference in religion from her husband? In what environment had she felt like an outsider, and why?
- 5. How were the various characters affected by the Great War (World War I) and its aftermath in Germany?
- 6. With which of the characters do you identify most? Who do you like best?

#### Chapter 2

- 1. Speculate on the significance of the painting of the Battle of Waterloo in Philip's office.
- 2. Contrast the scene in Berlin at the outbreak of the Great War, as Philip remembers it, with what he now sees at the outbreak of World War II. Why do you think these two scenes are so different?
- 3. Discuss the limitations to free speech in 1938 Germany as experienced by the Moldenauers.
- 4. What group of people does Walther represent in the new Germany? What are his motivations? What are Theresa's motivations? Do you sympathize with them? How do they differ–if at all–from ambitious young people today?
- 5. Discuss news and propaganda in Germany as described in this chapter.

#### Chapter 3

- 1. Describe the effects of the Nuremberg Laws and the war on the village of Altdorf.
- 2. Contrast the viewpoint of the German military high command to that of Hitler. Why does Hitler's viewpoint appear reasonable to many Germans at this time?
- 3. Discuss morality and power as reflected in the German military and the SS. What constraints does the war place upon moral decisions? Compare this to the impact of September 11. Have American attitudes toward "due process" (as seen in the issue of Guantanamo Bay) changed? What about our attitudes toward torture?

- 1. Explain how new laws cause problems in the running of the farm at Altdorf.
- 2. What segment of the German people do Frau Opitz and Theo Pfalz represent? What are their motivations?
- 3. What group of people does the Kreisleiter represent? What are his motivations?
- 4. Describe the significance of the *Frauenschaft* in the new Germany, as reflected in this chapter. Why is the *Kreisleiter* so anxious to have Sophia Maria be the leader of the *Frauenschaft* in Altdorf? How would you have acted in Sophia Maria's shoes?

5. Describe the respective roles of the General Staff and the Gestapo, and discuss the tension between them, as shown in this chapter. What effect does the Gestapo have on the private lives of the characters?

#### **Chapter 5**

- 1. Describe the effects of the war in Poland as seen by Theresa as she enters Warsaw; as she is met by her husband; and as she arrives at their new home. Would you have acted differently? If so, how?
- 2. What is the role of the SS with respect to business in Poland?
- 3. How will Theresa's life be different in Poland?
- 4. Describe the effects of the war on the Polish people, as shown in the letter from the wife of one of Sophia Maria's Polish workers.
- 5. What obstacles does German law place in the way of humane treatment of the Polish people?

#### **Chapter 6**

- 1. How does Marianne's social background differ from Peter's? In what ways does she seem unusual to him?
- 2. Describe the Gestapo from Peter Kessler's point of view. Why does he believe in his work?
- 3. Why does Peter believe it was right for Marianne's father to be dismissed from his position at the university? Do you agree or disagree, and why? Do you agree or disagree with the distinction he makes between the "error" of Prof. Dr. Moldenauer and that of Jähring? Can you see parallels in today's world?

#### **Chapter 7**

- 1. In this chapter, both Christian and Philip act contrary to orders on the battlefield. Compare and contrast the two situations, the two men's motivations, the mistakes each made, and the results.
- 2. Contrast Viebranz's and Guderian's responses to Philip's actions, and explain why they responded differently.
- 3. How do the last two scenes in the chapter reflect a human response to war?

- 1. Compare the viewpoints of Yvette, Gabrielle, and M. St. Pierre on the war. Explain how and why they differ.
- 2. Compare Dieter's view on the war with Christian's (from the previous chapter). Why do you think they differ?
- 3. Why do the French women find German military men attractive?
- 4. In the celebration at Altdorf, what is the significance of symbols (clothing, uniforms, flags, food, church bells, songs) in expressing the attitude of the villagers toward the victory in France? Is this their real attitude, or is it just the official "party line"? Discuss.
- 5. Explain the significance of the new oath to Hitler and the way it is introduced to Philip and his fellow officers. What might the ultimate effect of this be in terms of the real loyalty of those who take the oath?
- 6. What basic issues about war and government are raised by Philip and Sophia Maria at the end of the chapter? Do you think a nation's military should ever lead it intentionally to defeat? What should the German Army do?

## Chapters 9 and 10

- 1. Contrast the viewpoint of the fighter pilots with that of the bomber pilot. If given a chance, how could one of the fighter pilots have answered the bomber pilot's question?
- 2. What are the concerns of those fighting the war and those planning it, as reflected in the conversation between Christian and Philip?
- 3. What groups of men in uniform seem most removed from the war?
- 4. In what ways does the war help cause a lack of true connection between Gabrielle and Christian?

#### Chapter 11

- 1. Why is Marianne lonely and unhappy in the RAD? Would you have been happy in the RAD? Why or why not? (Remember, Theresa loved it!)
- 2. What changes does she see in the social order?
- 3. What explanations do the SS give for the conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto?
- 4. How does the war affect the relationship of Dieter and Yvette?

#### Chapter 12

- 1. What signs are there at AHA that the political orientation there is different from that elsewhere in Germany?
- 2. Explain the significance of the statue (bust) in General Olbricht's office.
- 3. Why is Frl. von Mollwitz so concerned about the Commissar Order and the Barbarossa Instructions? What steps have been taken to mitigate these orders, and how are these steps limited in effect?
- 4. What is Grete's dilemma concerning her answers on her school history test?
- 5. What larger issue does Alix raise with her stepfather in response to Grete's problem?

#### Chapter 13

- 1. What official reason is given for the invasion of the Soviet Union?
- 2. Why is Philip impressed by the way Alix dresses?
- 3. How does a German legal education (at this time) differ from American law school?
- 4. What changes in life for the German Jews are apparent when Marianne visits the Silbers?
- 5. Why is Dimitri's view of the invasion of the Soviet Union different from that of other characters in the novel?

- 1. What does Alix's story show about the differences in the role of women before and after the Nazis come to power? How might her experience have differed had she been younger?
- 2. As described by Alix, how has the Nazi regime affected the practice of law in Germany?
- 3. How does the form of greeting used by various characters (in face-to-face meetings and in letters) reflect their political orientation or attitude?

- 1. How does Yvette's experience show how "collaborators" are viewed in occupied France? Considering Yvette's and Dieter's views on the war, how is their situation ironic?
- 2. Why is Alix's stepfather initially hostile to Philip? What changes his mind?
- 3. As evidenced in her letters to her mother, how do Theresa's values differ from those of her family? Why?

### Chapters 16 and 17

- 1. As shown in the scene with Philip and Alix, how do military orders in wartime affect the lives of young couples as they plan their future? What are the temptations and risks?
- 2. Imagine the journey from Berlin to Smolensk before the outbreak of war. How have conditions changed in wartime?
- 3. How does poor planning by the German military authorities cause the troops to suffer?
- 4. What order by Hitler makes things worse?
- 5. What conditions cause Philip to be reassigned? What difficulties does he foresee? Describe the situation he finds on arrival at his new post.
- 6. What is Rittenbach's leadership style, and why is it effective? How does his style affect Philip's role?
- 7. How is unexpected compassion shown by the Russians?
- 8. How does the makeup of the German officer staff at Maloyaroslavets create difficulties? Do you identify with the aging "amateur" soldiers of the support staff? Or with the professionals–Rittenbach and Philip?

- 1. Compare Stefan's experience of the war (described in his letter) to Philip's experience (described in the previous chapter).
- 2. What are the consequences, to Sponeck and Hoepner, of defying Hitler's "stand and die" order? What are the positive results of their actions?
- 3. What happens to the Silbers? How do they show their dignity and character?
- 4. How does Marianne feel after their departure? What do you think she might do?
- 5. Chapter 19
- 6. How does Rittenbach adapt to the dilemma in which he is placed? Why is he successful?
- 7. What does Albrowski find in Zubovo? Why is he horrified? What is Rittenbach's response, and why?
- 8. In Rittenbach's view, what causes such inhumane behavior? What lessons are there for us nowadays?
- 9. What causes Rittenbach's frustration? What strategies do he and Philip discuss? What do you think they should do?
- 10. Contrast the behavior of Model to that of Bock and Manstein.
- 11. Compare the values of Yvette to those of Gabrielle.

- 1. What values are instilled within the German Joint High Command? What buzzwords are used? In contrast, what are Rittenbach's values?
- 2. How does politics affect Alix's wedding plans?
- 3. From Rudi's conversations at the dinner table and later with Stefan, what viewpoint are young Germans taught about the war and about German leadership? What dilemma does this create for Rudi at home? Do you think Rudi would really have betrayed his parents? Do you think any teenagers might have done so? What might motivate them?
- 4. What questions does Stefan raise in Rudi's mind?

## Chapters 21 and 22

- 1. Why do you think General Olbricht chose Alix, rather than Annie Lerche, to work on the Valkyrie plans?
- 2. How have the "rules of war" followed by the Nazis been changed by the Barbarossa Instructions, as illustrated by their treatment of the prisoners from the cellars? How does Wittig justify this treatment?
- 3. What is Philip's response? How does the encounter leave him feeling?
- 4. How does Walther try to make a good impression on Philip? Why do his efforts fail? Is Philip just being a snob?
- 5. What does Philip notice most on his visit to Walther and Theresa in Poland? What do you think is most important?

### **Chapter 23**

- 1. How does the war situation affect Alix and Philip's ability to visit with their loved ones at their wedding reception in Berlin? How does it affect their travel to Altdorf?
- 2. How do their fellow passengers on the train show a double standard of morality?
- 3. What news of the war, brought by Alix, is a total surprise to Sophia Maria?
- 4. What further news is brought by Father Georg? What measures did the Nazis take to try to keep this program secret?
- 5. What other Nazi program does Father Lucas report?
- 6. How does the political situation affect Alix and Philip's wedding night in Baden-Baden and their next day there?

- 1. In what situation is Marianne first asked for help by a Jewish family? What difficulties does she encounter? What would you have done?
- 2. What objections do Marianne's parents raise? What do they believe about Jewish resettlement? Why does Marianne believe differently? How would your parents have reacted?
- 3. What initial solutions does Marianne propose, and why do these fail? What solution does she finally find? What deceptions are necessary?
- 4. Why does Kluge believe that Hitler must be killed, rather than merely deposed?

5. What is the real importance of Tresckow to General Olbricht, regardless of his relatively low military rank? What discussion does Tresckow have with Philip after Philip's return from Welikije-Luki? Would you have been convinced by Tresckow's arguments?

## Chapter 25

- 1. What work does the Confessing Church do in Berlin?
- 2. What is Marianne's new role in helping the Jews? How does her living situation make this work difficult? Would you have taken these risks to help strangers?
- 3. In what ways is Marianne deceptive with Peter?
- 4. What truths about the motivations of several characters in the novel are expressed in Christian's dream?
- 5. What tactic do the Germans plan for the desert airfield they are abandoning?

#### **Chapter 26**

- 1. What is the state of the German forces at Verchne Solonovski when Philip arrives? Why is this a problem for the effectiveness of the troops?
- 2. What situation does the Luftwaffe lieutenant report in the Stalingrad "fortress"?
- 3. What objection does Rittenbach make to the assassination of Hitler? Do you agree or disagree with him? Why?

#### Chapter 27

- 1. In this chapter, what additional objection does Rittenbach make to Hitler's assassination? Who is right? Philip or Rittenbach?
- 2. Describe the two Russian officers who are taken prisoner. How are the two different? What does this scene tell us about the Soviet Union? Do the events described support Philip or Rittenbach?
- 3. Who are the "German commissars" referred to by Philip?
- 4. What is the "Brown Plague"?
- 5. What decision did Rittenbach refuse to make himself, and why? Would you have done the same? Do you think an American officer/general would have?

#### Chapter 28

- 1. What demand by the Allies diminishes potential support for the anti-Hitler plot?
- 2. What details of Plan Valkyrie are revealed now to Alix?
- 3. Why does Marianne ignore the air-raid siren when it first sounded? Why can she later not find shelter at the Swedish Church?
- 4. What are the values and motivations of Nurse Tuchel? How do they differ from Marianne's? Do you know people like Nurse Tuchel? Is Nurse Tuchel or Marianne more typical?

## Chapter 29

1. Why, according to Manstein, was it good for the Germans that the 6<sup>th</sup> Army did not surrender sooner? Do you agree?

- 2. Why does Seydlitz go to Philip for an answer to his question about God and the war? What is Philip's answer? How would you have answered the question? What do you think your pastor/rabbi/imam/priest would have said?
- 3. What action does Philip take when he meets the fleeing German soldiers at Sadki, and why? Was his action heroic or foolhardy?

- 1. How do Alix's fellow workers respond to the announcement about industrial conscription for women?
- 2. What are the possible penalties and consequences for the woman accused of black marketeering? Do you think these penalties are justified? Proportional?
- 3. What other laws create difficulty for Sophia Maria and her community at Altdorf? Are these laws justified? Compare them to current anti-terrorist laws, wire-tapping, etc.
- 4. What is Sophia Maria's response to the news about Christian? Why is she affected so profoundly?

### Chapter 31

- 1. What hardships do the tenants of Philip's Berlin apartment building face? In what varied ways do they respond?
- 2. What orders are issued that affect Grete and Rudi? What is their father's response? How would you and your parents have reacted?
- 3. What effect does Beck's illness have on the conspiracy?
- 4. What important event is planned for the day of Hitler's speech at the exhibition? How does Alix attempt to communicate this to Philip? How does Philip's hospital roommate understand her words?
- 5. What piece of bad luck had foiled a previous assassination attempt? What misfortune prevents the attempt on the day of the exhibition?
- 6. What complaint does the wife of Philip's hospital roommate make? How does that sound to Philip and Alix?
- 7. What bad news for the conspiracy does General Olbricht report?

#### Chapter 32

- 1. How has Dimitri's opinion of the Germans changed, and why? What is Alix's response?
- 2. How has Lotte's situation changed because of new war policies? What does she propose to do? What does Alix suggest instead? What would you have felt? Done?
- 3. Why does Theresa decide to leave Warsaw? What does she experience on the train trip to Berlin? Why is she dissatisfied with her reception at the Feldburg apartment?
- 4. What is Philip's response to Theresa's complaints?
- 5. What is Philip's response to the news about Christian?

#### **Chapter 33**

1. How has Theresa's attitude toward religion changed, and why? How has her behavior changed at home in Altdorf? Do you know of people who have undergone similar change by going away from home?

- 2. How does Father Matthias comfort Sophia Maria about her daughter? Do you think he is right? How much responsibility do parents have for the character and behavior of their children?
- 3. What prayers by Father Matthias cause many in the congregation to be angry, and why? What are his reasons for praying as openly as he does?
- 4. What are Sophia Maria's and Philip's thoughts about Father Matthias' choice? Do you side with Sophia Maria or Philip?
- 5. How does Walther plan to solve his manpower problems at the factory? Wouldn't any good businessman make the same decisions?
- 6. How does the war affect Alix and Philip in a very personal way upon their reunion at Altdorf?

- 1. What kinds of culture shock does Stefan experience when he returns to Germany? How are his responsibilities different?
- 2. Why are moments like Alix's trip to the zoo with Stefan so precious to her?
- 3. According to Alix, what does Stefan need to consider and to learn? What challenges does the war bring to everyone? Do you sympathize with Stefan or Alix?
- 4. According to Philip, how can premonitions of death be self-fulfilling?
- 5. How does Philip explain his hopefulness to Stefan? What doesn't he say, and why?

#### Chapter 35

- 1. As Stauffenberg begins his new assignment under General Olbricht, what two recent developments make his position especially important?
- 2. How does Stauffenberg's personality and style contrast with Philip's? According to Alix, what fuels his enthusiasm?
- 3. Why is Alix stressed and angry about her current legal case?
- 4. In the cellar during the air raid, what threat does Nurse Tuchel pose to Marianne? How is the situation temporarily defused?

- 1. What are Marianne's fears when she is arrested?
- 2. Describe the tactics of her interrogator. How does Marianne respond? How does she show courage and resourcefulness? How would you have reacted?
- 3. What further surprise and humiliation await her after the interrogation?
- 4. How do her arrest and release bring her differences with Peter to the surface?
- 5. What problems have arisen between Walther and Theresa, and why?

- 6. What new plan is put in place to assassinate Hitler? Why does it fail?
- 7. Why does Stauffenberg believe Stalin might negotiate peace with Germany? Why does Alix disagree? Who do you think is right?

- 1. After Alix's meeting with Gräfin Moltke, what reason do she and Philip see for continuing with the plot, even if it is doomed to fail? Do you agree?
- 2. What concerns does Alix have when she finds she is pregnant?
- 3. How does Philip receive the news?
- 4. How and why was Lotte's experience (of four years ago) different?

#### Chapter 38

- 1. Describe Alix's going-away party. How do the hosts and guests adapt to wartime conditions?
- 2. How has Rudi's political attitude changed?
- 3. What events break up the party?
- 4. What event changes Alix's travel plans? What comment at the party foreshadows this? Why does Philip tell Alix, "I've failed you"?
- 5. What is Herr von Rantzow's view of the Americans? What does he hope for now? What does he report? Do you think he is right about the Americans? Why or why not?
- 6. What are Philip's further arguments for continuing with the plot? Do you agree with him?

#### Chapter 39

- 1. What incident leads to Marianne's second arrest? In what ways does she deflect her interrogator this time? Would you have employed the same tactics? If not, what would you have done?
- 2. How does she react to the air raid while in prison? How do you think you would have reacted?
- 3. Why does she decide to stop her underground activities? Is she right?
- 4. What is General Stülpnagel's role in Paris? What are his challenges and frustrations?
- 5. Why do Philip and the General consider the possibility of letting the British and Americans win? How do they consider that Rommel might help their plans, and why? Do you think this plan might have succeeded? Why or why not?
- 6. What does Theo Pfalz say to Philip that surprises him? What does this imply?
- 7. What prompts Stauffenberg to decide to attempt the assassination himself? Do you think this was a wise decision? Would you have done the same thing?

- 1. Why does General Olbricht decide to issue the Level One Valkyrie orders on July 15 before the briefing?
- 2. When there is no opportunity for the assassination, how does Olbricht explain his issuance of the orders?

- 3. What action does Alix take, and why is it unusual? How is she treated by her fellow passengers on the train?
- 4. How do the air raids make it difficult for Philip to meet Alix when she arrives?

- 1. What situation causes confusion in the first hours after the July 20 assassination attempt? What story do the conspirators give out? What do the Bendlerstrasse officers who are loyal to the government believe?
- 2. When it is clear that the assassination attempt has failed, how do the conspirators proceed, and why?
- 3. What does Philip attempt to convince *Oberst* Röggner to do? Why does Röggner refuse? Do you think he did the right thing? What would you have done in his shoes? In Philip's?
- 4. What does Philip finally decide to do, and why?
- 5. How does Marianne help Philip and Alix?

## Epilogue

- 1. Which of the fictional characters in the story suffer the most after the coup attempt? In what ways, and why? Which ones escape the worst consequences, and why?
- 2. What problems do many of the surviving characters face in their marriages?
- 3. Do you find the fate of any of the characters surprising? Why, or why not?

## **Suggested Theme Assignments**

- Choose one of the characters in the novel whose experience speaks to you in a special way. Discuss the issues posed by this character and explain what you have learned from him or her. Describe how you might apply their experience to your own life.
- Choose one of the questions listed in the previous section (General Questions for Thought and Discussion). Write an essay expanding on your answer to the question. Give specific examples to illustrate the points you make.
- Select one of the historical incidents mentioned in the novel. Do further research on this incident. Expand in more depth about the incident and its significance.
- Speculate on what circumstances might lead to a coup d'etat and/or a dictatorship in the United States. Describe how it might come about, and what ideology or excuses might be employed to justify it. Speculate on how Americans might oppose or resist such a dictatorship.

## **References for Further Study**

## **Recommended References**

The following books are highly recommended as books that focus on the personal impact of Nazism in very readable form.

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The memoirs of a German girl who became a leader among the Hitler Youth while her Social Democratic family kept from her the secret of her partial Jewish heritage.

Zuckmayer, Carl, and Sebastian Hoffman, *The Devil's General and Germany: Jekyll and Hyde*, Continuum, 2005.

*Des Teufels General* is a play written during the Second World War by Carl Zuckmayer, a German playwright living in exile. This book in English consists of two publications combined into one: an abridged translation (approved by Zuckmayer before his death) of his play *Des Teufels General* and a contemporary study of Nazi history by Sebastian Hoffman.

## **Additional References**

The following sources can provide additional information on related topics.

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# NOTES:

Also, on-line, visit Helena Schrader's websites which offer in depth articles on related topics.

Valkyrie Conspiracy <u>http://valkyrie-plot.com</u>

Author Helena Schrader <u>http://helena-schrader.com</u> This site has many articles about WWII, especially pilots, both male and female. Also a great source for historical photos to enhance teaching this subject.

Helena would love to hear from you with your questions and comments, especially if you use this book for a school course.

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