Fichte's Philosophy and its Influence on the Ideas of the Fall of 1914.

Philosopher’s responsibility for interpretation and use of his ideas.

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ABSTRACT: Recent discussions on the political role of some 20th Century philosophers and their ideas, from Heidegger to Sartre and Lukacs, offer some new venues for our analysis of the similar role played by some of the classical figures in the history of modern philosophy. We have attempted to review some relevant aspects of Fichte's philosophy, in particular as to their possible influence on the war supporting ideology created by German intellectualis at the outbreak of the World War I — so-called ideas of Fall 1914.

RÉSUMÉ: Des discussions récentes sur le rôle politique de certains philosophes du XXe siècle et de leurs idées, de Heidegger à Sartre et Lukacs, offrent de nouvelles avenues pour l'analyse du rôle similaire qu’auraient joué quelques figures classiques de l’histoire moderne de la philosophie. Nous nous sommes penché sur quelques aspects pertinents de la philosophie fichtéenne, en particulier sur ceux qui se rapportent à son influence possible sur l’idéologie belliciste défendue par les intellectuels allemands au début de la Première Guerre mondiale, connue en tant qu’idées d’Automne 1914.

There is a standard and well justified practice — and not just in the disciplines of philosophy and history of philosophy — to differentiate between the original position of a thinker and the various forms of its reception and interpretation by both his/her contemporaries and by the following generations. In the case of contemporaries, the original thinker has at least an option to comment on such derivative and interpretative attempts. Many did, including e.g. Edmund Husserl or all those honored by The Library of Living Philosophers. However, when this ceases to be possible, due to the historical or geo-linguistic distance, a difficult process of assessment — one that seeks an equilibrium between the originally intended message and its subsequent modulations or mutations — has to take place. The proponent of

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the original position can neither be universally blamed for its subsequent modifications, nor be completely absolved from his inherent responsibility.

As the most recently discussed case of Martin Heidegger suggests, an attempt at a balanced and a fair assessment is more difficult when the thinker himself appears to have used his philosophical ideas to support his entry into political life. In what follows, we shall not try the impossible — to pass a justified judgment on Fichte's own intentions and wisdom, both as a public figure and philosopher. Rather, we shall try to review some of those aspects of Fichte's ideas, which were taken up by the bellicose philosophers and philosophical pamphleteers at crucial historical moments in the development of the 20th Century Germany. In particular, we shall focus on the outbreak of World War One — on the so-called ideas of Fall 1914 and their aftermath, as presented by selected philosophers, who, as was the case with Germany, were often university teachers.

To understand the conceptual difficulty of this project, we have to realize that (1) in general, we cannot merely focus on what the philosopher wrote and said, but must consider, at least tentatively, why he might have lent himself to some of those interpretations, while the others did not. Greatly oversimplifying, what and why Fichte did and why some other German philosophers (to set at least some limits) even of his times did not.

In a different and broader context, that of civil rights, even such a politically unengaged contemporary philosopher, as Dieter Henrich, cautiously observed ¹

The political programs that were developed out of the new fundamental theories of classical German philosophy, with the important exception of Kant's, in fact could be employed and exploited by the political powers that tried to stem the revolutionary process more than they helped the liberation movements that continued to insist on civil rights.

(2) Philosophical systems, and this is precisely what the leading representatives of German classical philosophy attempted to create, are complex theoretical structures, out of intellectual reach of an average reader, and thus basically harmless for politics. Visions, of whatever provenance, are not. Thus irrespective of the way the philosopher views the coherence of the whole body of his various public pronouncements, passing a negative judgment on some of them may not influence our positive appreciation of others.

(3) In practice, nationalism is an inconsistent and at times a very volatile ideological doctrine. It's dynamics tend to be unpredictable even within the short scope of time. Fight for the national liberation from Napoleon's direct
and indirect rule and for the national unification at the beginning of the 19th century is fundamentally different from the fight for the enhancement of the role and prestige of the unified and strong Germany after 1870.

In our more focused treatment of this broad subject we shall first give a short review of the so-called Ideas of Fall of 1914. In the second part, we shall present the particular stands taken by the three central figures of Marburg School of neo-Kantianism: Hermann Cohen, Paul Natorp and Ernst Cassirer. Next, within our context, we will highlight some of the crucial ideas from Fichte's three works *The Closed Commercial State* (1800), *Patriotism and Its Counterpart* (1807), and finally the most famous and broadly influential *Addresses to the German Nation* (1808). Almost as an afterthought, we will make some suggestions on the relation between various aspects of Ideas of 1914 and Fichte's thoughts.

What was the historical situation in the Fall of 1914 and why was there such a susceptibility to an acceptance of outrageously optimistic view of the conflict which had barely started? Historians in general agree that in the case of the first few months of WWI and completely unlike the first months of WWII, all warring sides bore quite unrealistic expectations about the length of the war and succumbed to a two prong nationalistic hysteria oriented, on the one hand, towards demonization or at least despise for the enemy and on the other hand towards the glorification of one's own state and nation. This view was most strongly exhibited by the young people, in particular, but supported and spelled out in theoretical terms by some leading intellectuals of the day.

It is a myth that European youth was ruthlessly sacrificed in 1914 by selfish and cynical age. The speeches of pre-war politicians were crammed with appeals to youth. Youth movements were a European phenomenon, especially in Germany where 25,000 members of the *Wandervögel* clubs hiked, strummed guitars, protested about pollution and the growth of cities and damned the old [including such future 'pillars' of exact science as Werner Heisenberg — VZ]. Opinion-formers like Max Weber and Arthur Moeller van den Bruck demanded that youth be brought to the helm. The nation, wrote Bruck, 'needs a change of blood, an insurrection of the sons against the fathers, a substitution of the old by the young'. All over Europe, sociologists were assiduously studying youth to find what it thought and wanted.

And of course what youth wanted was war. The first pampered 'youth generation' went enthusiastically to war which their elders, almost without exception, accepted with
horror or fatalistic despair. Among the articulate middle-class youth it was, at the outset at least, the most popular war in the history. They dropped their guitars and seized their rifles. Charles Peguy wrote that he went ‘eagerly’ to the front (and death). Henri de Motherlant reported that he ‘loved life at the front, the bath in the elemental, the annihilation of the intelligence and the heart’. Pierre Drieu la Rochelle called the war ‘a marvelous surprise’. Young German writers Walter Flex, Ernst Wurche and Ernst Jünger celebrated what Jünger called ‘the holy moment’ of August 1914.

While this view of the situation is shared by both more popular and more scholarly oriented histories of the times,3 we tend to overlook both these historical facts and their presentation by the historians.

In a similar way, when we try to understand and assess the national feelings of German intelligentsia at the time of WWI in general, we do not normally turn to those early excesses. Rather, we tend to see them through the eyes of either the total exhaustion of the last year of the war or in the context of political, social and economic difficulties arising in the post-war period. Alternatively, we may witness the difficulties of Thomas Mann, the future star of Weimar Republic, attempting to come as late as 1918 to some understanding of both internal and external dilemmas facing Germany.4

When...I have held that democracy, that politics itself, is foreign and poisonous to the German character; when I have doubted or argued against Germany’s calling to politics, I have not done so ... with the laughable purpose of spoiling my nation’s will to reality, of shaking its belief in the justice of its international claims. I myself confess that I am deeply convinced that the German people will never be able to love political democracy simply because they cannot love politics itself, and the much decried “authoritarian state” is and remains the one that is proper and becoming to the German people, and the one they basically want.

Honest, as Mann’s formulation of this conception “of the completely nonpolitical German nation” might have been, it certainly was a delusion. However, given its late appearance in the war, it could not substantially influence the general opinion during the war itself. For that we have to go back to the Fall of 1914 to ask what were the principle ideas and who were their proponents. One more qualification has to be made: concentrating on
Germany should not be understood as a claim that similar views did not appear among philosophers in European countries (in France represented by Emile Boutroux or Henri Bergson among others), and even in the United States (e.g., J. Dewey).

Hermann Lübbe makes a point that in the 19th Century a tradition has developed, making it a justified common practice that in the case of war philosophers would put themselves into the service of their own nation, using their philosophy to support such a task. If we concentrate on Germany solely, and on more than occasional speeches and manifest, then according to Lübbe the leading role among philosophers would have to be assigned to a 1908 Nobel price laureate Rudolf Eucken. Eucken’s main thesis was that the world war was the international authentication test of German inwardsness (“die Weltbewährungsprobe deutscher Innerlichkeit”) opposing the general decline of culture and its reduction to material civilization.

Appealing to Fichte, Eucken claims that the inwardsness, became “for us, Germans, more than for any other nation (Volke) a common power, governing our creativity and our history.” It is only from it that the forces grew without which the human life would be deprived of “the greatness and heroism.” To save the culture surrounded by the outward civilization — that is the German vocation, to be especially fulfilled in this war.

While this search for the essential characteristics of being German or belonging to a German nation originally (Fichte included) appeared as an defensive attempt to raise the self-consciousness and pride through some metaphysical underpinning, now the stress is not only on its uniqueness but even more on its role in preventing the whole world to slide into the civilizational unidimensionality. In the spirit similar to Clausewitz’ conception of war as the continuation of politics through other means, Eucken here mixes metaphysics of German nationalism with the metaphysics of war.

To consider a broader spectrum of German philosophers’ reactions to the war and to introduce some further elements needed for the tracing of Fichte’s influence on the Ideas of the Fall of 1914, we propose to compare the philosophical views of the three main representatives of Marburg neo-Kantianism: Hermann Cohen, Paul Natorp and Ernst Cassirer.

Hermann Cohen, philosopher, non-Marxian socialist and Jewish theologian, makes rather measured claims on the specificity of German nation and spirit.
We would attribute a bad characteristic to a particular national spirit, if we could not consider it at the same time from within the universal spirit of humanity. That, what the Greeks commenced, Germans congenially continued — this is specific for them. And even when all modern nations, to that degree to which they share this scientific culture, must share also this characteristic feature, it is not only this degree, to which the German science embodies it, that constitutes it. It is through the philosophy itself that the German spirit develops this peculiarity into its characteristic feature.

It is in this respect that Germany has to fight the war, as the fight for the retention of its fully legitimized leading role in cultural and political sense.

Our general political situation is for us not confusing but straightforward and clear. After all, not only the war fell on us, but from the time we have built our own state (“Reich” — VZ), to be sure so deplorably late among the modern nations, others with hypocrisy and cunning planned the destruction of our state and the thwarting of our leading participation in the administering of Europe. When the political leadership in ethical sense of the world history indeed belongs to the spirit and to the universal spiritual stock, our participation has to retain its leading role.

More measured in his public statements, Cohen was in private occasionally more outspoken in his animosity, in particular towards the French.

Paul Natorp was as a socialist involved in the German public life well beyond the limits of the usual ‘Kathedersozialist’, and even as a scholar he was much more involved in various controversies — from his excursion into the realm of Plato research, through his theory of social education and concluding with his late attempts to pass beyond the limits of Marburgian neo-Kantianism. To him war appeared as a liberation from a crisis and his social pedagogy focused on the education of will, originally oriented towards popular education, eased itself rather seamlessly into the service of German war propaganda. However, even Natorp abstained from formulating the idea of German “world calling” primarily in aggressive or expansionistic terms.

To our detriment, we usually overlook a deeper — more historical and theoretical — analysis of German cultural tradition. Ernst Cassirer’s study Freiheit und Form: Studien zur deutschen Geistesgeschichte (Berlin 1916). It can be viewed as an attempt to force the German intellectuals to broaden the conception of their own national culture and to balance some of their
simplistic and chauvinistic interpretations by putting stress on the humanistic side of the same tradition. Later, in the face of threat of Fascism, as well as now, at the time of growing disenchantment and exhaustion, it is Goethe who comes to the forefront.  

Cassirer’s more pluralistic conception of German tradition influences also his presentation of Fichte. It is not the nationalistic zeal, but the metaphysical roots of national identity which become stressed. Where some other nations identified themselves with the state, in the not yet unified Germany

Fichte claimed that Germans not only had the historical, through the historical tradition developed individuality [or identity — Selbst], but also the “metaphysical” individuality; which in his language simply means that they gave themselves such individuality as well as founded it through a free spiritual act.

In this sense, Fichte shares with some of his contemporaries the view that the concept of being German is a “general spiritual task”. A reminder worthy of consideration and not necessarily popular at the height of the war. In particular, since even this very idea of spiritual task received towards the end of the 19th Century quite often an expansionistic coloring. If we switch in time from Cassirer back to the otherwise reserved Max Weber, such idea appears to lead to a passionate but rather ambiguous appeal:

We will not succeed in banning the course under which we stand — that of being the aftermath of a politically great epoch — unless we are able to be something else: precursors of the greater.

Within the boarders of German Reich this call for awakening from Wilhelminian lethargy took most often the radical form of a call for a new ‘Kulturkampf’ and generational change in favor of the youth, mentioned above.

Some qualifications are required before we consider Fichte’s ideas about the nation and nationalism. (1) there were other, more popular representatives of nationalistic ideas and movement in Germany like Moritz Arndt or Father Jahn; (2) even if we concentrate solely on philosophy, it would be a mistake to consider Fichte as a sole representative of German romantically oriented nationalistic philosophy. Hans Kohn in his seminal work The Mind of Germany: The Education of a Nation ascribes the leading role of a political philosopher of romanticism to Adam Mueller. This opponent of Enlightenment and a disgruntled critic of French Revolution stated in his 1806 lectures in Dresden, “The development of the scholarly mind in
Germany is the most important event in modern intellectual history. [...] Just as the German tribes founded the political order in Europe, so the German mind will eventually dominate the continent”. Kohn adds that Kant's cosmopolitan view of the world and his idea of eternal peace were erroneous since they “[...] would bring human development to a standstill. Nothing could unite a nation more firmly than a ‘true’ war. Nothing else could give the citizen a true understanding of the state.” In spite of his recognition of some crucial differences between a more crude politician Mueller and the more refined philosopher Fichte, Kohn brings continuously attention to their basic similarities as well.

One of the relevant issues is the proper incorporation into a time frame — in our case the time of Napoleonic Wars — and the type of public and therefore the style used — in our case the broader cultural public, not the students in his seminars nor his colleagues on such an occasion as, say, a customary inaugural lecture. The three works of Fichte we shall refer to, are *The Closed Commercial State* (1800), *Patriotism and Its Counterpart* (1807), and finally the most famous and broadly influential *Addresses to the German Nation* (1808).

In general, we can say that all these three works can be viewed from two different perspectives. The first one, more rigorous, sees them as a philosophically enframed attempt to overcome the polar character of the particularity represented by the belonging to the German nation on the one hand, and the universality in the form of humanity on the other hand. In respect of our context, George Santayana made already in 1916 a very perceptive remark15

The moment we hear Fichte and Hegel mentioning a providential plan of the world, we gather that in their view the history of things is not infinite and endlessly various, but has a closed plot like a drama in which one nation (the very one to which these philosophers belong) has the central place and the chief role: and perceive at once that theirs is a revealed philosophy. ...From the same tenet of Fichte and Hegel we may also learn that in the plan of the world, as this revealed philosophy conceives it, the principal figures are not individuals, like the Creator, the Redeemer, and one’s own soul, but nations and institutions.

The second perspective, more shallow but much more popular, views these works (together with many others) as a political expression of the essence and thus of specificity of the German nationhood. While the first perspective requires a close study of author’s development, the second blurs the differences in a favor of an ideologically exploitable holistic position.
The Closed Commercial State pre-dates the political turmoil brought on the German states by the Napoleonic wars. It is interesting to consider why did Fichte wrote it. He started from a premise that while to the politically unified Christian Europe corresponded the commerce not limited by any boarders, the plurality of states at his own time required the appropriate segregation in the sphere of commerce as well.

The real matter of transition from all contemporary political systems related to commerce and trades ...to — according to our view — the solely appropriate and by reason required system is as follows: that the state completely closes itself against any commerce with foreign countries. From now on, the state becomes in commerce a body as separate as it has already been in judicial and political sense. When this closure is established, everything else simply follows. From now on the measures to be adhered to do not lie in the field of politics but in the field of pure jurisprudence.

The previously cosmopolitan Fichte seeks to conceive a new sort of relation between the politically based patriotism and the cosmopolitanism he has not yet completely abandoned. However, observe also the order of determination: the closed political formation requires closed economic formation and not the other way around. It is important to note as well that Fichte appears to use the terms nation and state interchangeably — e.g., when he speaks about the concepts of national wealth or of the national well-being.

Yet, the basis for the tendency towards considering the Germans as the chosen people is already present, though strongly balanced by a clear feeling of local economic and political inferiority.

The people of the old world were sharply separated one from another through a multitude of circumstances. Any stranger was for them an enemy or a barbarian. On the other hand, the people of the new Christian Europe can be considered as a singular nation. They were connected by the same origin and by the same customs and concepts stemming from the forests of Germany. After they spread through the provinces of the western Roman Empire, they became connected by the same shared religion and by the same subordination to its visible head. The people of different origin, who came later, accepted together with the new religion the same Germanic elementary system of traditions and concepts as well.
According to Fichte, the state is justified to establish itself within its natural boarders, preferably by the means of an occupation rather than war. However, the means proposed, accidentally or not, closely approximate the much later policies of planned "unification" of the "new" with the "old provinces". Such ideas were exploited in the second half of the 19th century, for example in Silesia and Alsace, and, after 1939, in Bohemia and Moravia, just to name few examples. The idea of an economic autarchy is supplemented by the idea of the general closure of the state boarders in order that a clearly defined national character and this new nation may develop. It is only through philosophy, through his concept of "Wissenschaft" and nowhere else that these differences may be overcome:

[...] as far as I see it, by our striving to be everything and to be everywhere at home we have not become properly anything and we are nowhere at home. Outside the science (Wissenschaft) there is nothing that would genuinely overcome all differences in circumstances and among the people, that would consider simply the human being as such, and not a citizen. Through the science and only through the science will and should be the humans permanently connected, after their segregation into nations (Völker) has been completed. Only it will remain their common property, after they divided among themselves everything else. This connexion cannot be abolished by any closed state, on the contrary, it will favor it.

The rest of the just quoted paragraph is simply an ideological promise of a paradise, as we know it from the work of certain positivist and Marxist philosophers.

Fichte's Der Patriotismus und sein Gegenteil (1806) may be viewed as a continuation of his ideological shift from cosmopolitanism to patriotism:

Cosmopolitanism is the dominant will, that the purpose of existence, of humanity be really achieved by humanity. Patriotism is the will, that this purpose be first fulfilled in that nation of which ourselves are members, and that the result shall spread from it to the whole of mankind.

Once more, it is the German equipped by his language and philosophy who can understand and fulfill this task:

The German alone can therefore be a patriot. He alone can for the sake of his nation encompass the whole of mankind.
Contrasted with him, from now on, the patriotism of every other nation must be egoistic, narrow, and hostile to the rest of mankind.

Fichte's Addresses of 1807-8 are the most popular — as well as the most translated and thus best known — of his political writings. The book represents a further continuation and culmination of the ideas we have already reviewed. Another aspect of this work. At least some historians of philosophy claim, that the common view describing the immediate popularity and influence of is simply another of self-serving nationalistic legends. Thus James Collins in his History of Modern European Philosophy (1954) sees them basically as a non-event, which through the later edification only achieved its notoriety:

His Addresses to the German Nation was delivered as a lecture course in Berlin, during the French occupation of 1807-1808. A nationalistic legend later sprang up, concerning the inflammatory effect of these speeches and their contribution to the German opposition to the Napoleonic armies. Actually, they made no stir whatever among Fichte's contemporaries. Nevertheless, they did contain useful materials which were exploited, subsequently in the nineteenth century, by German nationalists.

Such view notwithstanding, it was finally here that specific position and the leading role of German nation was spelled out in full, supplemented by a stern warning:

The German alone — the original, not the institutionalized, withered man — has truly a nation, and ... he alone is entitled to count on one and is capable of loving his nation in the true way, according to reason. ...Should the German not assume the government of the world through philosophy, the Turks, the Negroes, the North American tribes, will finally take it over and put an end to the present civilization.

The generally accepted historical explanation is that Fichte here effectively creates and mobilizes, against the powers of French revolution, similar powers of German nationalism. He invokes the powerful notions of the original nation — Urvolk- and the original language — Ursprache. However, both the idea of the chosen people as well as its reverse, the idea of the
marginalization of others and their identification with the mortal threat to the culture in general are unmistakably present.

Some preliminary concluding notes: As far as the traditional interpretation of Fichte's nationalistic views is concerned, already on the centenary of Fichte's birth, an influential nationalist academician Heinrich von Treitschke, (who might have otherwise preferred the more extremist ideas of Heinrich von Kleist) felt justified to claim

Our living generation will preserve Fichte's spirit most faithfully when all nobler minds among us will work to the end that in our fellow citizens there may grow and mature the character of the warrior who knows how to sacrifice himself for the state.

As a purely statistical consideration (according to Lübbe), in the last decade of the 19th century, only ten titles on Fichte's philosophy of right and his social philosophy were published, between 1900 and 1920 two hundred such works appeared in print; obviously not all of them of the same ideological orientation. It is in this context that the Ideas of the Fall of 1914 appear to be part of a continuum of the standard popular interpretation of Fichte's views.

In our own times, we seem to be more forced to perform the continuous historical and political assessment than either at the time of Fichte or even a whole century later, immediately prior to WWI. While some recent controversies among historians dealt primarily with the deeds of average German population during the Nazi time, the problems of ideological "Gleichschaltung" have bothered us at least from the time immediately following the WWII, the time of so-called de-nazification and re-education. Political activity or passivity of various philosophers have been in some cases, like that of Heidegger, treated rather extensively, and in other cases, like that of Gadamer, passed over more or less in silence. This is not only true in respect to Nazism and to Germany. However, the cumulative effect of the pronouncements, advices or public activities of hundreds of Nazi or communist philosophy professors on their students, remains (as far as I know) locked into the private reminiscences of a handful of aging intellectuals. This may also provide at least a partial explanation why we chose as the topic of this paper a specific case — that of Fichte — to consider the responsibilities of intellectuals in general and philosophers in particular.

Unfortunately, the relevance of this topic may also be also more general and more pressing. German-American historian Fritz Stern (Columbia University) stated in his 1998 German lecture entitled "Rückkehr der Geschichte"
The nationalistic and antiforeign passions have flared up today even in the peaceful regions of Europe. ... The great excitement, which originally supported the construction of new Europe, has disappeared or solidified into a ritual. As a consequence, the desire for pure national communities could become stronger. Even the longing for an imaginary community composed of one single heroic people may be still to heads of many people.

Whether pessimistic or not, this assessment entails the aspect which we cannot overlook; many of those searching for an intellectual support of their ideas will be once more browsing through some of those very books the pre-WWI generation considered as the beacon of their theoretical guidance.

In the existing literature, the main features of the ideology of the Fall of 1914 appeared to include the following: a special political and cultural role of Germany; culture above civilization; Gemeinschaft over Gesellschaft in general, nation over the state in particular; the concept of separate generations, in particular of youth, as a special community; and the cleansing role of war. All these phenomena appeared in the forms ranging from the seemingly pure, scholarly, ones all the way to pronounced ideological ones. We tried to show, albeit in a rather preliminary way, to what degree Fichte’s ideas might have prepared the soil for some of these ideological constraints. As well, we made some suggestions, as to why his presentation might have been found more appealing than some others. In respect to the latter, it appears that this is precisely where the incipient danger posed by philosophy is to be found — its ideas appear to be necessary, having a non-ideological, even scientific legitimation. Moreover, if we accept Fichte’s claim that the German language is the proper language of philosophy, then the same role attributed to clergy in respect to the Holy Script is now ascribed with the same exclusivity to one nation in respect to philosophy.
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5 Politische Philosophie in Deutschland, München, dtv, 1974, p. 171.
7 Lübbe, op.cit., p. 185.
8 Über das Eigentuemliche des deutschen Geistes, p. 262-3.
9 Ibid., p. 296.
10 Ernst Cassirer returns to this inner tension within German culture once more, at the very end of his life; in particular, the otherwise incompatible philosophical positions of Fichte and Goethe appear to come together in their respective positing of action above the fact.
11 Freiheit und Form, p. 337-8.
16 All quotations, unless specifically stated, are from Fichte im Kontext, based on 1845-6 edition of Fichtes Werke, and have been translated by the author of this paper. III 476
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18 Ibid., III513.
19 H. Kohn, Prelude to Nation-States, p. 233.
20 Ibid., p. 234.
21 l.c., p. 565.
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