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The Cambridge Five Spy Ring: The Notorious Bane of the British Government

Beginning with the communist recruitment of Kim Philby in 1934, this paper traces the decades-long espionage journey of the notorious Cambridge Five spy ring. Exploring the reach they had from the halls of the British government to Washington D.C, this paper highlights the building blocks of the Five's legacy and their implications. This paper details the levels of and effects of British governmental incompetence in cementing the Five as international spy celebrities and enabling their Soviet espionage endeavors. Overall, it seeks to explore how the British were the agents of their own humiliation regarding espionage, and unnecessarily increased tension with their American allies, ultimately elevating Soviet espionage by baring the incompetence of their own.

The Cambridge Five Spy Ring: The Notorious Bane of the British Government

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“We need people who could penetrate into the bourgeois institutions. [Do it] for us!”¹

Those were the words of the Soviet recruiter Arnold Deutsch to Kim Philby, the first of five men to be recruited to the notorious Cambridge Five (more extravagantly known as the Magnificent Five). The Cambridge Five were a group of young men who attended Cambridge University between World War I and World War II. Their names were Kim Philby, Anthony Blunt, Guy Burgess, John Cairncross, and Donald Maclean. These young men were politically radicalized, well-educated, and well-primed to enter the British halls of power, making them susceptible targets to recruitment at the hands of Soviet handler Arnold Deutsch.² Their recruitment before WWII was initially under the guise of joining the anti-fascist organization Comintern³ as fears of Naziism spread but escalated into full work for the NKVD (now known as the KGB) during and after WWII.⁴ At the prompting of their Soviet handlers, the Five infiltrated nearly every office of the British government with ease, progressively using their power to climb the hierarchy. Their staggering access to confidential information during WWII led them to hand thousands of documents off to the Soviets while the British government’s attention was diverted to the Nazis. The Five’s extended cooperation with the Soviets was not revealed until the sudden disappearance (later revealed to be a defection) of Maclean and Burgess in 1951. Their disappearances were highly publicized, and concealment of the true details served to fuel conspiracy theorists and paranoia about communist spies. The disappearances of Burgess and Maclean were the main contributing factors to support the Five’s legacy of paranoia. Three of the Five died in Moscow after defecting: Burgess, Maclean, and later, Philby. The eventual discovery of the remaining members extended over nearly forty years (the last man, Cairncross,

¹ Andrew Christopher and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB*, Introduction to the Paperback Edition. (New York: Basic Books, 1999), pg 51.

² Christopher and Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, 57.

³ Christopher and Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, 59.

⁴ Christopher and Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, 62.

confessed in 1990).⁵ To this day investigators theorize there was a sixth and even a seventh member. While Deutsch and the NKVD expertly operated the now notorious Ring of Five, it is important to acknowledge that the British government was hugely complicit, and often actively allowed the Five to operate. The British government's blatant and repeated mismanagement of their intelligence agencies, and poor handling of international secrets with their American allies, was revealed and exacerbated by decades of sensationalized publishing, contributing to the Cambridge Five's personification of superior Soviet espionage endeavors.

Before examining the larger implications of the Cambridge Five's journey through British governmental organizations (colloquially referred to as Whitehall), it is important to understand who recruited them, and in what manner. Arnold Deutsch, the handler of the Five, was an Austrian Jew who worked for the NKVD. Deutsch largely focused on Cambridge University as his recruiting grounds due to the prevalence of eager young minds who were fed up with the state of British Society. This location choice was also advantageous in that communism was seen as a "passing fancy of youth"⁶ that affected the highly educated, meaning his recruits could attribute their "previous" communist beliefs to peer pressure (something that proved useful for the Five). Initially, Deutsch operated alone and facilitated the recruitment of the first three of the spy ring: Philby, Maclean, and Burgess, in that order. The NKVD later sent assistance in the form of Teodor Maly, an agent who sparked the second phase of recruitment, completing the Five with Blunt and Cairncross.⁷ These two final recruits would be the last members revealed to the public. After the recruitment of Philby in 1934 a domino-like recruitment strategy was put into place.⁸ Philby was used to set up a meeting between Deutsch and Maclean, and each

⁵ Christopher and Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, 65.

⁶ Christopher and Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, 58.

⁷ Christopher and Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, 64.

⁸ Richard Davenport-Hines, *Enemies Within*, (London: William Collins, 2018), 177.

subsequent member contributed to the recruitment of another. Once the ring was complete, all of the Five were discouraged by Deutsch from joining the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), to help their future immunity from accusations. Maclean was the only one who had joined before recruitment.⁹ All the members of the Cambridge Five are part of a group historians have dubbed “The Great Illegals.” Members of this group were part of an intelligence agency (in this case the NKVD), who were living in a foreign nation without documentation, and had no legal affiliation with Moscow.¹⁰ This status helped them evade detection for as long as possible, as they had few ties to Moscow. The Five, along with other Great Illegals infiltrated nearly every British governmental organization. The most notable were The Secret Intelligence Service (which is both referred to as MI6 and the SIS)¹¹, the Security Service (MI5), and the Foreign Office (abbreviated as FO, later renamed the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office in 1968).¹² All three of these organizations and their departments fell victim to the Five.

British negligence in their intelligence agencies not only passively allowed for the Five to infiltrate Whitehall, but actively ignored warning signs, and avoided opportunities to prevent disaster. One of the most notable forms of negligence presented itself in their lackadaisical recruitment policies, which were a manifestation of the general office culture in Whitehall at the time. The Cambridge Five were all middle to upper-class members of British society who had been well-educated and were (generally) well-mannered. This background was in their favor, as the pervasive belief in governmental organizations at that time was that men of “good breeding” were inherently virtuous. This naïve trust of even entry-level employees resulted in a system where files were circulated to be debated and revised, even when classified. This led to leakages,

⁹ Davenport-Hines, *Enemies Within*, 219.

¹⁰ Davenport-Hines, *Enemies Within*, 21.

¹¹ The sources used for this paper employ the abbreviations MI6 and SIS interchangeably when referring to the Secret Intelligence Service. For this paper, they will be used interchangeably, or as stated in a quote.

¹² Davenport-Hines, *Enemies Within*, xvii.

inefficiency, and confusion due to doubled labor.¹³ Despite the drawbacks of this bias-based lax security, it was so ingrained in the culture that when Burgess and Maclean disappeared from their work at the Foreign Office in 1951, Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden proclaimed to the Commons that all officials could be trusted as neutral, if not entirely in favor of their government. He stated his belief plainly: members of the civil service could not conceivably let politics impact their conduct.¹⁴ Another example of this bias overpowering known facts and threats presented itself in the interview protocol for the Foreign Office. After Maclean aced his Foreign Office entrance exam, he underwent an interview, in which he was asked if he had held communist views, as he had joined the CPGB during his time at Cambridge. His response was blatantly honest: “‘Yes,’ [he] said, ‘I did have such views – and I haven’t entirely shaken them off.’”¹⁵ He was let into the Foreign Office in October 1935, the first of the Five to infiltrate the government, despite the fact he was a known communist sympathizer. Directly after his employment, Maclean was placed as third secretary in the western department of the Foreign Office. Despite his affiliations, there were no restrictions placed on what information he had access to, so he was able to photograph and smuggle files containing information concerning six different countries. The files were even color-coded, allowing him to identify on sight which ones contained the information Moscow would benefit from.¹⁶ Maclean wasn’t the only one with staggeringly easy access to confidential information. Blunt was appointed to the MI5 after a friendly interview, and within a few years, he had climbed the hierarchy far enough that he was delegated the task of designing the organization’s operating procedures handbook. The entirety of this book, predictably, got handed over to Moscow, jeopardizing the British ability to conduct

¹³ Davenport-Hines, *Enemies Within*, 79.

¹⁴ Davenport-Hines, *Enemies Within*, 77.

¹⁵ Christopher and Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, 61.

¹⁶ Davenport-Hines, *Enemies Within*, 244.

any intelligence efforts with full secrecy.¹⁷ Cairncross was also allowed easy access to classified information early in his career. Renowned for his polyglot abilities, he easily secured a job at the British treasury. While he was there he came across information that the Anglo-American alliance was working on an atomic bomb, of which he notified Moscow.¹⁸ It is rather jarring how blatantly careless the British intelligence agencies were in their recruitment of communists, handling of files, and their willingness to assume social contracts were binding. It is even more concerning when it is revealed that these poorly run intelligence agencies received minimal funding, and were severely understaffed, further inhibiting any quality intelligence efforts. In 1938, at which point several of the Five had infiltrated the government, the MI5 only had 26 officers.¹⁹ From 1939 to 1940, the MI5 was only budgeted 93,000 pounds by the government, minimizing the ability to hire competent employees, conduct espionage, and simply keep on top of files and information. For reference, when accounting for inflation, 93,000 pounds is five million pounds today, a mere fraction of MI5's current budget of 3.711 billion pounds annually. This underappreciation from external sources, paired with internal negligence did not just harm Britain: the Five were allowed to hugely implicate Britain's American allies.

Even before the Five and their involvement in America was revealed, Britain and the United States were on different pages when it came to Soviet Russia, which had been causing tension in international policy. In an attempt to prove that Britain was shifting towards a staunchly anti-communist perspective, Prime Minister Clement Attlee announced his intent to

¹⁷ David Gioe and Joseph Hatfield, "A Damage Assessment Framework for Insider Threats to National Security Information: Edward Snowden and the Cambridge Five in Comparative Historical Perspective," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, no. 5 (2021): 724. doi:10.1080/09557571.2020.1853053.

¹⁸ Jérôme Mellon, "How Seriously did the Cambridge Spies Damage British Interests During World War Two?" *School of English, Sociology, Politics and Contemporary History at University of Salford*, (2002): 12. citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=6f7ef5d653c789a6a1aea6109adb714209720905.

¹⁹ Davenport-Hines, *Enemies Within*, 170.

weed out communist and fascist moles from British intelligence agencies.²⁰ This proclamation was naïve in its impossibility: it was well-established that British intelligence agencies were too underfunded and understaffed to execute efficient counter-espionage. This lack of follow through on a publicized promise was damaging, and highly evident in the two nations' contrasting statistics of apprehending moles: "In the Home Civil Service between 1948 and 1982, twenty-five officials were dismissed for security reasons, eighty-three were shifted to non-sensitive work and thirty-three were reinstated after further investigation. None was publicly named. In the USA over a comparable period, 9500 federal civil servants had been purged, another 15000 resigned while under investigation as communists, and all were named."²¹ This data suggests that America and Britain had drastically different priorities and abilities when it came to apprehending communist sympathizers and spies. This rift ultimately set the stage for an unhealthy relationship, rising tension and miscommunication between the two nations.

This gap between Britain and American intelligence efforts primed the Five for their damaging infiltration of both nations, which came through classified information and physical access. Three of the Five served as liaisons at the Washington Embassy. Maclean was assigned First Secretary,²² and Burgess was Second Secretary. Philby, however, would prove to be the most important of the three: he was the chief liaison for the SIS, giving him prime access to joint intelligence efforts, and opportunities to form friendships with members of the CIA and FBI.²³ One of the most instrumental parts of Philby's time in Washington was his access to the VENONA project, a joint Anglo-American intelligence operation that sought to decode Soviet communications and reveal moles in the process.²⁴ While VENONA was a joint effort, branches

²⁰ Davenport-Hines, *Enemies Within*, 369.

²¹ Davenport-Hines, *Enemies Within*, 371.

²² Gioe and Hatfield, "Damage Assessment," 725.

²³ Gioe and Hatfield, "Damage Assessment," 721.

²⁴ "Venona," NSA/CSS, Accessed December 13, 2023, [nsa.gov/Helpful-Links/NSA-FOIA/Declassification-Transparency-Initiatives/Historical-Releases/Venona/](https://www.nsa.gov/Helpful-Links/NSA-FOIA/Declassification-Transparency-Initiatives/Historical-Releases/Venona/).

of it were exclusive to London. VENONA indicated to London that a spy, code name HOMER, was working in Washington. The UK shared this information with the United States seeking to be transparent, as President Hoover and the FBI were already tense due to the recent revelations of atomic Soviet spies Nunn May and Fuchs.²⁵ The issue with this well-intentioned communication? All their correspondence, in addition to the contents of VENONA, crossed Philby's desk in Washington.²⁶ After reading the files, Philby identified HOMER as Maclean. This crucial information let Philby alert Maclean and Burgess that their secrecy had been compromised, sparking their decisions to defect. Despite the fact Philby had a known association with Burgess, he escaped suspicion through his close relationship with James Angleton, the CIA's chief mole hunter.²⁷ Angleton was so inclined to believe in Philby's strong moral character and his devotion to the Anglo-American allyship that he did not seek an investigation into Philby. It took years for any suspicion to be placed on Philby, but eventually, he underwent three rounds of interviews, all from his colleagues who respected him. He was often fed "pat answers,"²⁸ and was not grilled as though he were a potential spy. The British intelligence agencies were so lenient, in fact, that Foreign Secretary Macmillan said in a press conference after the FBI strategically leaked stories naming Philby as the "third man" that Philby could not have been the one to tip off Burgess and Maclean.²⁹ This press storm created enough pressure on the British that Philby resigned, after which he received two thousand pounds in gratuity.³⁰ After his resignation, investigations continued, and pressure from the FBI and CIA increased. Philby eventually chose to confess, but did so discerningly: he stated he had only worked from 1936 to 1946 and had done nothing in the Cold War. The SIS chose to take this at face value, and told

²⁵ Davenport-Hines, *Enemies Within*, 395.

²⁶ Davenport-Hines, *Enemies Within*, 395.

²⁷ Gioe and Hatfield, "Damage Assessment," 719.

²⁸ Davenport-Hines, *Enemies Within*, 444.

²⁹ Davenport-Hines, *Enemies Within*, 444.

³⁰ Davenport-Hines, *Enemies Within*, 419.

Hoover falsely that Philby's espionage was limited to WWII.³¹ This made the eventual reveal of Philby's true treachery all the more embarrassing and lit the press on fire: The British had either been unable to or unwilling to conduct damage assessments of their own national security and had deceived their ally in the process.³² This embarrassment was compounded when Philby, who had been allowed to take a press job in a small town, suddenly defected to Moscow on July 1, 1963.³³ Before the British government could come out and say they knew what had happened to Philby, Moscow confirmed the defection, causing the press to rip Britain's intelligence efforts into shreds: they had let the most successful Soviet spy in history escape. Philby's defection was also harmful in the clinical paranoia it induced in his former friend, James Angleton.³⁴ The paranoia was so crippling, in fact, that when the CIA launched a damage assessment after the defection, it was simply a waste of time and resources, due to Angleton's bias against Philby.³⁵ The repeated incompetence in identifying moles' intentions to defect was latched onto by the press, skyrocketing Maclean, Burgess, and Philby to worldwide fame. This new celebrity status was built through all types of publishing: newspapers, biographies, memoirs, and even press conferences from Moscow.

The British mismanagement of the Anglo-American intelligence relationship highlighted their incompetence and served to make the first three of the Five international celebrities. The Five then compounded this fame through their knowledge and employment of subversive propaganda. Just as with Philby, the impact of the defectors and the remaining members Cairncross and Blunt was underestimated, further proving Britain's espionage was inferior to that of the Soviets. After the defections of Burgess and Maclean in 1951, the press went into an

³¹ Davenport-Hines, *Enemies Within*, 495.

³² Gioe and Hatfield, "Damage Assessment," 723.

³³ Davenport-Hines, *Enemies Within*, 497.

³⁴ Davenport-Hines, *Enemies Within*, 497.

³⁵ Tom Mangold, *Cold Warrior: James Jesus Angleton, The CIA's Master Spy Hunter* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 67.

uproar. *The Daily Express* was the first to break the news, and for the next decade they allocated 100,000 pounds to the pursuit and publishing of headlines surrounding the Cambridge Five due to high demand.³⁶ The British Government failed to get ahead of the press frenzy and neglected to make a statement on the true nature of Maclean and Burgess's disappearances (the confidentiality of the VENONA project prohibited it). As a result, conspiracy theories abounded. Family members were interviewed by newspapers: Lady Maclean theorized her son had disappeared in fearful anticipation of his mother-in-law arriving in England. Nigel Burgess thought his brother was faking a mission to say he worked for Churchill. Newspapers spread rumors that Burgess and Maclean were a gay couple fleeing to France, although Maclean had a family (his wife was eight months pregnant, and she was left behind with their other children). Some thought they were working to create a peace mission in Russia. Some even thought that "the missing diplomats had been kidnapped by American agents for interrogation to give the State Department an edge over the Foreign Office."³⁷ This press uproar was not temporary. Each year on the anniversary of the defections the press interviewed family members and ran money-grabbing stories. In 1952, the paparazzi photographed the Maclean family's children walking into their school building and sought interviews with Melinda Maclean. One year later, the Maclean family disappeared, reigniting the press frenzy. Previously regarded as demure, and pitied for being abandoned while pregnant, Melinda Maclean was now condemned as always having held the qualities of a communist traitor.³⁸ The narrative around the Five wasn't only controlled by the press, however. Burgess and Maclean took the confirmation of their defection into their own hands, voluntarily appearing at a five-minute press conference in Moscow in

³⁶ Davenport-Hines, *Enemies Within*, 406.

³⁷ Davenport-Hines, *Enemies Within*, 406.

³⁸ Davenport-Hines, *Enemies Within*, 417.

1956.³⁹ This press conference was designed to hit an Anglo-American relational sore spot, and subversively place themselves on the moral high ground by saying they defected in favor of improving Anglo-Soviet relations. Here is a quote from either Philby or Maclean (it's not specified) that was published in a newspaper called *The Age*. The article was entitled "Missing Diplomats in Moscow: Announce Why They Left Britain."

"We both of us came to the Soviet Union to work for the aim of a better understanding between the Soviet Union and the West, having both of us become convinced from official knowledge in our possession that neither the British nor, still more, the American government was at this time seriously working for that aim."⁴⁰

This quote perfectly showcases what the Five sought to manipulate the press into doing: placing Soviet-affiliated people as peace seekers and undermining the international efforts of both Britain and America. Their appearance blatantly highlighted British incompetencies in espionage, and their words subtly undermine them further. Philby was another member of the Five to utilize a press frenzy to humiliate the British. He published his memoir, entitled *My Silent War*, in 1968, five years after his unexpected defection.⁴¹ The book detailed his time spent in the SIS as a spy and was engineered by the NKVD to inspire young radical idealists to follow his example. This more surface-level initial intention worked immediately on an American high schooler, who journeyed to Soviet Russia, and was immediately given Philby's old code name: SONNY, or SYNOK in Russian. Beyond the immediate impact, the book served to twist Philby's espionage efforts into a morally good light: he was simply doing his job, and trying to fight fascism, which was hard to argue with.⁴² Many of the stories in Philby's memoir have now been

³⁹ "Missing Diplomats in Moscow: Announcement Why They Left Britain," *The Age*, February 13, 1956, books.google.com/books?id=zE0RAAAAIBAJ&lpg=PA1&dq=burgess%20and%20maclean&pg=PA3#v=onepage&q&f=false.

⁴⁰ The Age, "Missing Diplomats."

⁴¹ Christopher and Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, 413.

⁴² Christopher and Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, 413.

disproven, with the more recent disclosure of classified materials. Before the press had a chance to truly quiet down, Anthony Blunt was revealed as a traitor in 1979: Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher publicly condemned him, exposed the full extent of his betrayal, and revoked his knighthood (which he had been granted in 1956 for serving as an art curator in Buckingham Palace).⁴³ The public was enraged at the seeming cover-up of a man “with powerful friends.”⁴⁴ Thatcher shockingly revealed that Blunt had confessed to aiding Burgess and Maclean back in 1962, and in yet another case of unintended consequences, the press revealed the information in a more sensationalized manner than the British government could have if they were transparent.

In yet another poor communications move, the British government concealed the fifth man Cairncross until he died. Cairncross was interrogated in 1964 about Philby’s defection,⁴⁵ but was not revealed as the “fifth man” until the 1990s when a soviet intelligence officer named Yuri Modin published his memoir that included his relationship with the Five. Nothing was done to prosecute Cairncross. Rather, he moved into a flat in England and published his memoir, called *The Enigma Spy*, published posthumously in 1997.⁴⁶ Just like Philby’s memoir, Cairncross included subtle propaganda and distortion of facts. These distortions were not evident until 1995 when the VENONA project was declassified, which is why they were so effective in their time: the public had no other reliable source to default to. This declassification led to analysis of documents, and articles criticizing past actions of the British intelligence agencies in the press, and yet again, highlighted the notoriety of the Five. Around the same time, another crucial piece

⁴³ Borders, William, “Knighted Art Adviser to Queen Is Named as Former Soviet Spy; Stripped of Knighthood,” *New York Times*, November 16, 1979, [nytimes.com/1979/11/16/archives/knighted-art-adviser-to-queen-is-named-as-former-soviet-spy.html](https://www.nytimes.com/1979/11/16/archives/knighted-art-adviser-to-queen-is-named-as-former-soviet-spy.html).

⁴⁴ Borders, “Stripped of Knighthood.”

⁴⁵ “John Cairncross: Spy, Britain,” Atomic Heritage Foundation, 2022, ahf.nuclearmuseum.org/ahf/profile/john-cairncross/.

⁴⁶ Atomic Heritage Foundation, “John Cairncross.”

of information, *The Mitrokhin Archive*, was published. Vasili Mitrokhin was a retired archivist for the KGB, and when he defected to England he brought his files with him. Published in 1999, the archives included substantial information on the Five and cleared up questions about questionable British conduct.⁴⁷ These declassified documents extended publicity of the Five, reminded the public of past British intelligence faux pas decades after they had occurred, and served as a reminder of the loss of objectivity this topic suffered.

Due to the highly sensationalized nature of the Cambridge Five, it can be difficult to identify true timelines and objective facts. Because of this, most research that exists on the Cambridge Five focuses on the content of the files they leaked and emphasizes the sheer amount of information they gave to Moscow, rather than the incompetencies in British intelligence they personified. While the intelligence leaks were important, it is arguable that the amount of information they leaked was burdensome for Moscow. For example, Cairncross supplied so many documents during the years of 1939-1941, that Moscow “complained that the secret material supplied by him in that period was too profuse to encipher.”⁴⁸ This complaint was echoed about other members of the Five and arguably emphasizes the incompetence of British intelligence organizations at the time. This very incompetence ensured that Stalin and Moscow’s intelligence as a whole were already well informed on British intelligence without the Five and that the main impact of the spy ring was their long-lasting and highly publicized operation in the high levels of the British government.

As for the specific impacts of the Five on British intelligence policy: it is difficult to directly attribute any policy or funding changes to the Cambridge Five. They operated at a time when British national security interests shifted towards hostility when it came to communism.

⁴⁷ S.J Hamrick, *Deceiving the Deceivers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 16.

⁴⁸ Davenport-Hines, *Enemies Within*, 327.

This, among other significant spies being revealed, implies that any tightening in security policy and increase in funding for British intelligence agencies was a case of correlation, not causation. This matter of correlation means that the majority of sources on the Cambridge Five, again, focus on the files they leaked, and not their larger impacts apart from publicity.

All this to say, while the Cambridge Five leaked important secrets during WWII and the Cold War, it was the British aiding and abetting of their crimes that caused scandal in the publishing world. This scandal served to magnify the feats of the Five, and the astonishing incompetency of the British government in managing the Five. This incompetency was revived for decades as America became implicated through VENONA and the Washington embassy, and as various members of the Five were revealed or defected. The evident inability of the British intelligence agencies to improve and adjust their strategies when it came to Soviet spies was contrasted with the brilliance of the Five and served to create a lasting legacy of Soviet Russia's superior espionage, permanently memorialized in print. While Soviet Russia did not succeed in mass popularizing communism in Britain and America, they excelled in impressing the power of Soviet espionage upon the minds of the public, and humiliating the British intelligence agencies in the process.

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