

# History and archaeology

## История и археология

UDC 94(47).084.3

DOI: 10.29013/AJH-20-9.10-3-9

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### GRAND DUKE MIKHAIL ALEXANDROVICH'S PARTICIPATION IN WORLD WAR I

#### Abstract

**Purpose:** to analyze the role of Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich during World War I.

**Methods:** empirical and ideographic studies.

**Results:** A study of Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich's life and activities during World War I was carried out; his personal features were identified and his reputation among the "riders" of the Caucasus Native Cavalry Division were assessed, as well as his contribution to the organization of this division – one of the most battle-worthy units in the Russian army. The period of the Grand Duke's service in the 2-nd Cavalry Corps of the 7<sup>th</sup> Army at the Southwestern front was also thoroughly analyzed.

**Scientific novelty:** This is the first study of Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich's service in the 2-nd Cavalry Corps during World War I on the basis of his personal diaries.

**Practical importance:** the results of the study can be used in academic and educational activities related to studying the history of the Romanov dynasty and the Russian Empire.

**Keywords:** Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich, World War I, Commander, the Caucasus Native Cavalry Division, Second Cavalry Corps.

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**For citation:** Volodko A. V. Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich's Participation In World War I, Austrian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 2020, No. 9–10. – P. 3–9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29013/AJH-20-9.10-3-9>

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#### Introduction

The figure of Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich – the youngest son of Emperor Alexander III – stands out in the last generation of the Romanov dynasty. This extraordinary person with a complex and contradictory fate attracts well-deserved attention both from professional historians and the public interested in Russian history. Indeed, there were two main driving forces in the

life of the Grand Duke – his desire to get free from burdensome formalities of the court, on the one hand, and responsibility towards the country and the royal family which he belonged to by right of birth, on the other. In this connection the national ordeal of World War I, or the Second Patriotic War, as it was called in those days, certainly stands out as a period of Mikhail's life when his sense of duty prevailed.

The article is based on archival documents, the diary of Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich<sup>1</sup>, memoirs of his contemporaries, – Adjutant General A. A. Brusilov [2], general P. N. Krasnov [4], Y. N. Lodyzhensky [5] and others – and historical studies on the biography of Mikhail Alexandrovich and his service in the Caucasus Native Cavalry Division and the 2-nd Cavalry Corps during World War I: V. M. Khrustalev's books "Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich" [9] and "World War I. In Charge of the "Wild Division" [10]; "The Caucasus Cavalry Division. 1914–1917: Return from Oblivion" by O. L. Opryshko [7]; "The Romanovs: History and Genealogy" by E. V. Pchelov [8, p. 339–346]; "The Romanovs at the battlefields of World War I" by I. A. Kovalev [3, p. 100–123] etc.

### The Results of the Study

Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich was born on November 22, 1978. He was the youngest and favorite son of Emperor Alexander III. Mikhail was growing up as a straightforward, sincere and kind young man. He was not ambitious, loathed the official duties of his status and strived for a simple life of a private person. At the same time, contrary to many contemporaries' opinion, he can hardly be called a passive and spineless character: Mikhail Alexandrovich was an active person, an excellent sportsman, an efficient philanthropist and arts patron, and, when it was really necessary, was able to show mettle and act resolutely.

In 1899, after the death of his brother Georgii, he became heir to the throne and remained in this status until the son of Nicholas II was born. In 1901 Mikhail Alexandrovich on the Emperor's orders began to participate in the sessions of the State Council, in 1902 he joined the Committee of Ministers and performed a number of other official and ceremonial duties. Thanks to his natural abilities and an excellent education the Grand Duke performed all these functions quite well. The problem, as far as the interests of the dynasty were concerned, was that he totally lacked "a penchant for power" and any desire "to prepare for it diligently."<sup>2</sup> For instance, when Nicholas's son was finally born, he was happy, and not only for his brother the Emperor: as Grand Duke Kon-

stantin Konstantinovich observed, "the former heir Mi-sha ... was gleaming with joy that he was not the heir any more" [6, p. 247]. However, he was not absolutely freed from this duty: after the birth of the heir Emperor Nicholas made him the Regent in case of his death.

Mikhail Alexandrovich was more enthusiastic about the military service that he was obliged to do like all the Romanovs. He was a fan of sports (especially horseracing) and new technologies: Mikhail was an excellent car driver and wanted to become a pilot. While studying at the Mikhalovskoe Artillery School the Grand Duke underwent practical training as an officer at the 5<sup>th</sup> battery of the Guards Horse Artillery Brigade, and the teachers noted his diligence as a student and the high marks he received. After that he served for a while in the Preobrazhensky Guards Regiment, then again in the Guards Horse Artillery, and in 1906 assumed command of a squadron of the Her Imperial Majesty Life Guard Cuirassier Regiment (the famous "Blue Cuirassiers") with a perspective of becoming the commander of this elite unit [9, c. 108].

Mikhail Alexandrovich's military career proceeded successfully. But one event changed the Grand Duke's life completely. In the regiment he met Natalia Sergeevna, the wife of his subordinate, Lieutenant Vladimir Wolfert, and they fell in love with each other [8, p. 341]. Mikhail was quite popular with the ladies, and in 1904 he already had a "scandalous" affair with A. V. Kossikovskaya, Lady-in-Waiting of his sister Olga, whom he wanted to marry contrary to all dynastic rules. Then the Empress Dowager and Nicholas II spared no effort to ruin this potential "unequal marriage."

This time, however, though his mother and brother-emperor were categorically against his choice (apart from "inequality by birth" Natalia had a divorce and a daughter behind her back), Mikhail stood by the woman he loved. The scandal spilled into public view, threatening the royal family's reputation, and Nicholas II sent his brother into exile, appointing him the commander of the 17<sup>th</sup> Chernigov Hussar Regiment quartered in the city of Orel. In this position which he held from May 16, 1909 to September 3, 1911, Mikhail proved himself a good commander, diligent to his duties and caring for his men. On January 1, 1912 Mikhail Alexandrovich was appointed the commander of Her Majesty's Empress Maria Fyodorovna Cavalier Guard Regiment and occupied this post until December 17.

<sup>1</sup> The Diaries and Correspondence of Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich: 1915–1918 / Compiled and edited by V. M. Khrustalev. – Moscow: PROZAIK, 2012. – 800 p. (In Russian).

<sup>2</sup> The State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), collection 6501, inventory 1, file 206, P. 1 verso, 2–2 verso. (In Russian).

By that time Natalia Sergeyevna divorced and made Mikhail a happy father of a son Georgii, whom the Emperor granted the status of a nobleman by birth, the patronymic “Mikhailovich” and the surname Brasov after the name of the Grand Duke’s estate in the village of Brasovo near Orel. However, he still did not allow them to marry, making Mikhail to give a corresponding promise.

Mikhail Alexandrovich, however, could not stand Natalia’s dubious position and decided to break his promise. In 1912 the couple married secretly in Vienna. The enraged Emperor wrote to his mother: “I am through with him now because he broke his word.”<sup>1</sup> After thismorganatic marriage Nicholas banned his brother from returning to Russia, removed him from all official positions and sequestered his property, putting it under state custody.

The Grand Duke settled in Britain with his wife and child, but he suffered from psychological discomfort of being banned from his country and the humiliation of having his assets alienated.

When World War I broke out, Mikhail Alexandrovich asked his brother’s permission to return: “I can be punished by taking away the rights and property belonging to me by right of birth, but nobody can deny me the right to shed blood for my Motherland!” [1, p. 252]. The permission was granted and on August 11, 1914 the Grand Duke arrived to St. Petersburg. He requested to be sent to the frontline, but the Emperor ordered him to stay in the capital, and Mikhail Alexandrovich had to live in forced inaction which frustrated him greatly. Then Count Illarion Ivanovich Vorontsov-Dashkov, the Emperor’s Viceroy in the Caucasus and the commanding general of the Caucasus military district, whose son was Mikhail’s old friend, came to his aid.

With the beginning of the war many highlanders from the Caucasus, exempt from National Service in the Russian Empire, submitted requests to be enrolled in combat units, and Vorontsov-Dashkov proposed to form for them a special volunteer unit – the Caucasus Native Cavalry Division – and put Grand Duke Mikhail in charge of it. Nicholas II accepted the proposal, and on August 23, 1914, simultaneously with the order to organize the division, promoted his brother to the rank of Major General and appointed him its commander. In

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<sup>1</sup> The State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), collection 642, inventory 1, file 2332, – P. 24–25 verso. (In Russian).

the imperial family and at the court this appointment was interpreted as a manifestation of the Emperor’s continuing disfavor: Mikhail was put in charge of a very specific unit consisting of Muslim volunteers from mountain peoples that had not so long ago fiercely resisted Russia during the Caucasian War. The highlanders were known as proud and assertive men, defying standard military discipline and subordination, and it was very difficult to win authority among this kind of soldiers.

In late September 1914 Mikhail Alexandrovich was sent to the Caucasus to get acquainted with his new command and supervise the organization of the Division, and then left for the front together with it.

Let’s say a few words about this unique military unit. The division consisted of three brigades with two regiments in each: the Kabardin and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dagestan regiments, the Tatar (Azerbaijani) and the Chechen regiments, the Circassian and the Ingush regiments, respectively [7, p. 9]. Each regiment had 625 officers and enlisted men. The division also included additional units like the Ossetian infantry brigade, the Cossack artillery battalion, the machine-gun detachment etc. Its soldiers, unlike in regular army cavalry, were officially called “riders” instead of “troopers.” The Caucasus Native Cavalry Division was attached to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Corps of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army fighting in Galicia. In 1915 it was redeployed to the 9<sup>th</sup> Army, in 1916 – to the 7<sup>th</sup> Army of the Southwestern and Rumanian Fronts, and from July 23, 1917 assigned to the 8<sup>th</sup> Army once again.

Highlander volunteers were distinguished by a very high fighting spirit and daredevil bravery, but had a very peculiar idea of military discipline and subordination. For instance, the riders, many of whom spoke Russian badly, addressed their officers, including generals, not with the polite “vy” (you), as in the regular army, but with the unceremonious “ty” (thou), and the routine life in the division was based exclusively on mutual respect. The highlanders’ specific mentality was also reflected in the fact that they flatly refused to serve in logistical units (they had to be manned by ethnic Russians), and even in such a trifle as the attitude to the design of combat medals. Many authors writing about this division retell the following characteristic story: in the Imperial award system there was a special version of the St. George Order (Cross) for Muslims. As a token of respect for their religious feelings the image of the Orthodox saint – St. George – on the order’s central medallion was replaced by that of the double-headed eagle. The highlanders, though Muslim,

however, regarded St. George on horseback as an image of a daring warrior, and demanded to be awarded only with this version of the order. So an exception had to be made for them. Their attitude to government issue was also quite “unorthodox”: when the division was formed, its soldiers were given Cossack-style weaponry, including pikes. However, when 9-th Army commander General Platon Alekseyevich Lechitsky reviewed the unit, he saw no pikes. Asking where were they, he received from one of the riders the following answer: highlanders use daggers, sabers and rifles, not pikes, so they threw them away [Sukhov 2012]<sup>1</sup>. In fairness, however, it should be noted that in time the highlanders came to appreciate this kind of pole-arms. In fact, it was a pike blow by a Circassian rider that wounded the future president of Yugoslavia Josip Broz Tito, who served in the Austrian army during World War I.

Therefore, an unusual way to discipline the volunteers was found: for major offenses the culprits were discharged from the Division and sent home. The perspective of disgracing themselves before relatives and neighbours horrified the riders more than even the death penalty.

In short, the Caucasus Division got the nickname “Savage” in the Russian army with good reason. But this very peculiarity attracted into its ranks many Russian and even foreign aristocrats (the latter included, for instance, Napoleon Murat, a descendant of the famous French Marshal, and the Persian Prince Feyzullah Mirza Qajar. Historian Vladimir Khrustalev has all the reasons to point out: “By the number of famous names the “Wild Division” could compete with any Guards unit” [10, p. 105].

Relationships between the Grand Duke and his subordinates developed perfectly. The patriarchal, free of servility toward superiors, mores in the division suited Mikhail Alexandrovich with his simple and open manner. The highlanders, for their turn, were certainly flattered by the fact that they were commanded by the Tsar’s sibling. They also appreciated their general’s personal features: his exceptional bravery, physical strength, excellent cavalry training and love for horses.

The Grand Duke took care of his soldiers: for instance, he successfully insisted on the highest service pay for his riders (troopers): they received 25 rubles per month, while in regular units officers’ pay was not much

bigger – 35 rubles. Enlisted men adored and respected their commander, proudly calling him “our jigit (brave and daring horseman in Turkic languages) Misha.”

The Savage Division was dispatched to the South-western Front to fight the Austro-Hungarians in the region of Galicia: the Headquarters thought that the terrain of the Carpathian mountains, which the advancing Russian army was approaching, would be more familiar to the Caucasus highlanders. Therefore in late September – early October 1914 its regiments were redeployed to the Ukraine, where their organization and training were finalized, and on November 15 the division was ordered to move to the frontline and join the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Corps under the command of Lieutenant General Huseyn Khan Nakhchivanski that was a part of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army headed by famous General Aleksei Alekseyevich Brusilov. In December 1914 highlander volunteers got their baptism of fire in the heavy fighting in the Carpathians, when the Austrians, recovering from their defeat in summer, tried to stop the Russian offensive, occupying strongly fortified positions in the mountains and launching frequent counterattacks.

In early January the Austrians went on a large-scale offensive in the Carpathians in an effort to relieve the siege of the Przemyśl fortress encircled by the Russians. The highlanders faced two enemy divisions, but managed in the severe winter conditions to repulse all the attacks and even go to the offensive. Mikhail Alexandrovich regularly went to the frontline and personally led his troops under enemy artillery fire. General P. N. Krasnov, who commanded the 3-d brigade of the Caucasus Native Division at that time, wrote in his memoirs that the Grand Duke’s presence on the frontline had “a great moral importance” for officers and riders, “and they were ashamed to say that they cannot stay in the trenches any more, or complain about heavy enemy artillery fire, when the Emperor’s brother walked around the station that was indeed shelled by heavy guns, and exchanged jokes with his aide-de-camps and other officers” [4, p. 481]. For these battles in January – February 1915 General Brusilov recommended Grand Duke Mikhail for a decoration by the Cross of St. George Fourth Class, noting in the citation: “From January 14 to 25 the force under the Grand Duke withstood the onslaught of overwhelming enemy forces, screening a very important direction to Lomna – Stare Miasto, and when the Cavalry Corps launched a general offensive it assisted the successful advance by aggressive actions... The Grand Duke inspired the troops by his

<sup>1</sup> Sukhov I. “The “Wild Division” free of Myths) // The New Times. 2012. – February 13. – No. 05 (233). [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://newtimes.ru/articles/detail/49735>. (Access date 12.08.2020). (In Russian).

personal presence on the battlefield, even under enemy shrapnel fire that clearly threatened His Highness's life" [3, p. 109]. On March 3, 1915 the Emperor approved the recommendation; after that Mikhail Alexandrovich said that he owed this high award to the bravery of all men of his division.

In this short article it is impossible to describe in detail all the outstanding exploits of the Caucasus Native Cavalry Division. Let us just note that in the summer of 1915, when the elite German units coming to the Austrians' assistance broke the Russian front in Galicia and the ill-famed "Great Retreat" started, the highlanders had to fight hard rearguard battles, delaying and driving back the adversary. Then, when the frontline stabilized, the Savage Division occupied a position along the Dniester River and defended it until the spring of 1916.

The Caucasus Native Cavalry Division won a solid reputation as one of the most brave and battle-worthy units in the Russian Army. The highlanders' combat exploits are reflected in the fact that "16 officers were awarded the Order of St. George, 18 officers – the St. George Sword (an award weapon considered as one of St. George Order grade), 3744 riders – the Cross of St. George and 2344 riders – the Medal of St. George."<sup>1</sup> If we note that in the course of war the total of 7000 people served in the ranks of the Division (including replacements), we will see that practically all its personnel received combat decorations.

Mikhail Alexandrovich himself received for valor in battle the Order of St. Vladimir Third Class with Swords (January 20, 1915), the Order of St. George Fourth Class (March 3, 1915) and the St. George Sword (June 27, 1915).

On February 4, 1916 Mikhail Alexandrovich was appointed the Commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Corps.

In his farewell address to the division the Grand Duke said: "It is impossible to enumerate all the individual feats of the Caucasian heroes, representatives of the valiant peoples of the Caucasus, whose selfless service demonstrated an unshakeable loyalty to the Tsar and our common Motherland and glorified forever the young Caucasus regiments now seasoned in bloody battles... As far as I am concerned, I will be proud to my dying day that I was the commander of the Caucasus mountain eagles, now so dear to my heart."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Russian State Military History Archive (RGVIA), collection 3638, inventory 1, file 84, – P. 51. (In Russian).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

The Caucasus Native Cavalry Division was a part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Corps since its formation in October 1914. Apart from it, the Corps at various times included the 12<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Divisions and the 6<sup>th</sup> Don Cossack Division. From February 1, 1916 to June 16, 1917 the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Corps belonged to the 7<sup>th</sup> Army under Adjutant General of His Imperial Majesty's Suite Dmitry Grigorievich Shcherbachev. The 7<sup>th</sup> Army was formed in the Odessa Military District on July 17, 1914, and from August 1915 to April 1918 was a part of the Southwestern Front. In 1916 it took part in the famous Brusilov offensive.

In February 1916 Mikhail Alexandrovich left Gatchina for Mogilev, where he met Nicholas II at his Stavka (Headquarters). Then he went to Kiev and visited the officers' hospital organized under his auspices in collaboration with the Red Cross. According to the memoirs of Yurii Ilyich Lodyzhinsky, an army doctor who had served earlier in the Savage Division, the hospital received wounded officers from all units of the Southwestern Front. It was fully equipped for their successful treatment, having large premises, experienced medical staff and all necessary medical equipment: "at the casualty clearing station the wounded themselves often insisted to be sent to the Grand Duke's hospital" [5, p. 103].

On February 18 the Grand Duke arrived to the Southwestern Front Headquarters in the town of Berdichev, met with its commander Adjutant General N. I. Ivanov (on March 17, 1916 he would be replaced by Adjutant General Aleksei Alekseyevich Brusilov). Then, passing through Kamieniec Podolski, where the 9<sup>th</sup> Army Headquarters was located, he arrived to Kopychyntsi, to the Headquarters of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Corps which at that time was in the reserve of the 7<sup>th</sup> Army.

Due to the defeat of the Italians during a successful Austrian offensive in Trentino, Southwestern Front Commander General Brusilov had to change the plan of the offensive scheduled for May 22, 1916. The 7<sup>th</sup> Army, including the Grand Duke's Corps, was to take part in this operation.

On May 12 Mikhail Alexandrovich wrote in his diary: "Recently the Italians suffered a big defeat, losing some 15 thousand POWs and more than 200 guns. The Germans in the last few days intensified their attacks at Verdun again."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The Diaries and Correspondence of Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich: 1915–1918 /Compiled and edited by V. M. Khrustalev. Moscow: PROZAIK, 2012.– P. 254. (In Russian).

The Grand Duke, however, could not personally take part in the battle due to the exacerbation of his stomach ulcer. 7<sup>th</sup> Army Commander General Shcherbachev ordered him to go on sick leave and appointed Lieutenant General Prince Konstantin Sergeyeovich Begil'deev as temporary Corps Commander.

During the battle the Austro-Hungarian forces confronting the 7<sup>th</sup> Army were forced to retreat across the Strypa River. The Army's 16<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> Corps together with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Corps routed the 4<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Corps and that of Lieutenant Field Marshal Peter von Hoffmann.

On May 30 Mikhail Alexandrovich made the following entry in his diary: "On the battlefield we are still doing well, the Armies of the Southwestern front have captured 1700 officers and 113000 enlisted men."<sup>1</sup>

On June 15 Mikhail Alexandrovich returned from his leave.

Meanwhile the fighting went on. The Grand Duke commented on the successes of the Southwestern front as follows: "The approximate count of POWs and trophies during the operation of Adjutant General Brusilov's troops against the Austrian and German armies from May 22 to June 27 gives the figures of 5620 officers and 266000 enlisted men taken prisoner, 312 artillery pieces and 833 machine guns."<sup>2</sup>

On July 2, 1916 Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich was promoted to Lieutenant General, but without the simultaneous promotion to Adjutant General of His Imperial Majesty's Suite that was usual in such cases. This rank he received only on August 20, 1916.

In late July 1916 the 7<sup>th</sup> Army carried out another successful combat operation: on July 25 it went to the offensive and captured the Burkanuv forest, on July 31 won the battle with the Southern Army under General F. Von Bothmer, capturing Tlustobaby and Zbarazh, on August 18 broke through the Austrian positions at the Galich axis. Later it achieved another breakthrough in the Naraivka valley. However, its advance to Galich was stopped due to a shortage of heavy artillery and the arriving German reinforcements.

<sup>1</sup> The Diaries and Correspondence of Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich: 1915–1918 / Compiled and edited by V.M. Khrustalev. Moscow: PROZAIK, 2012.– P. 260. (In Russian).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. P. 269.

On Brusilov's orders, the 7<sup>th</sup> Army went to the offensive again on September 3 and managed to inflict heavy losses on the adversary. On September 17 it dealt a new blow to Hoffmann's Corps, throwing it back across the Naraivka and Tseniuvka rivers.

In the fall of 1916 Mikhail Alexandrovich suffered from another exacerbation of his chronic gastric disease and on November 18 he went for treatment to the Crimea together with Natalia Brasova.

On January 19, 1917 the Grand Duke was recalled from the frontline and appointed Inspector General of the cavalry.

General Brusilov left an accurate assessment of Mikhail Alexandrovich's personality: "I liked him very much as an undoubtedly honest man pure of heart, who had nothing to do with any kind of intrigues and wanted only to live as a private person making no use of the Imperial family's privileges. Both in the family life and in the military service he stayed as far as possible from any squabbles; as a soldier he was a brave general, carrying out his duty modestly and diligently" [2, p. 203].

### Conclusions

During World War I Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich was a commanding general of the "Savage" Caucasus Native Cavalry Division (from August 23, 1914) and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Corps of the 7<sup>th</sup> Army (from February 4, 1916). His "riders" from the Caucasus appreciated Mikhail Alexandrovich's exceptional bravery, physical strength, excellent cavalry training and love for horses. He was constantly at the frontline and personally led his troops, receiving high state awards for his exceptional valor. He gained high authority and respect among his subordinates. Under his command the Savage Division won a solid reputation as one of the most brave and battle-worthy units in the Russian Army.

This article is the first assessment of Mikhail Alexandrovich's service in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Corps on the basis of his private diaries. Due to periodical exacerbation of his chronic gastric disease the Grand Duke was not always able to take a personal part in combat operations, but took to his heart and closely followed the military fortunes of the 7<sup>th</sup> Army and the Southwestern Front in their confrontations with the Austro-Hungarian forces.

During the war Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich proved himself as a brave, valiant soldier and commander, absolutely loyal to his country.

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