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Soviet Champagne: A Festive History

The emotional experience with which we associate Soviet culture could be summed up as ‘mixed feelings’. Historical knowledge and memoir literature about the Soviet past have revealed striking dissonances, which provide equal justification for totalitarian and revisionist paradigms in the interpretation of Soviet history. It was long ago noted that in nostalgic reminiscences about the Soviet past, the respondents of sociological surveys predictably identify as the characteristic values of Soviet collectivism which, in their opinion, have since been lost, qualities such as spirituality, sincerity, kindness, joy and so on.¹ At the same time, specific questions about the particular features of everyday life, work conditions, ideology and politics oblige those same respondents to contradict themselves, so that Soviet reality appears as a reality of mutual alienation, suspicion, and cruelty.

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Ten years ago, an article called ‘Objective Happiness’, written by the psychologist and economist Daniel Kahneman, recalled the remote dreams of Jeremy Bentham and the Victorian economist Francis Edgeworth about

¹ See for example the material from the surveys of the Public Opinion Fund (FOM), which can be found on the FOM Database site <<http://www.fom.ru/>>: ‘Interpersonal Trust and Mutual Aid in Russian Society’; ‘Spirituality — Yesterday and Today’; ‘Friends and Friendship’.

inventing a piece of equipment (a ‘hedonometer’) that could provide an index of social satisfaction on the basis of indicators of an individual’s feelings [Kahneman 1999] (see also: [Alexander 2005]). Hopes of inventing this kind of equipment are still expressed to this day, but in the absence of any newly-invented psychometric strategies, with a unified scale that could take on the role of a diagnostic method of the emotional self-assessment of a collective, words remain the tools used to define these feelings. Primarily the matter at stake concerns so-called emotional concepts. It is these concepts that articulate performative devices of communicative self-belief. When they embellish speech, they simultaneously impart an emotionally motivating and semantically regimented meaning. Famously, William Reddy proposed on this basis to talk in general not about emotions but ‘emotives’, that is to say about the expression of emotions through language. This circumstance is important, since linguistic definitions of emotions are primarily differentiative and, accordingly, *socially prescriptive* concepts [Reddy 1999; 1997], which should be distinguished from emotions per se, in so far as the latter, from a psychological point of view, have a non-discrete, continuous zonal structure that hinders their unambiguous delimitation [Vinarskaya 2001: 12–13]. In other words: as soon as they are named, emotions acquire a semantic discernibility and discursive reproducibility in culture and ideology.

All these debates are important with regard to my announced theme in two partly content-based and partly methodological aspects. The first is strictly linguistic. As prescriptive concepts, emotives indicate not only whether an experience is positive or negative, but also the area of background knowledge linked to it that implies some supporting – regularly reproduced – designation. Thus, the concept of satisfaction could imply the idea of sex, and perhaps be used about a well-cooked beef steak. In other words, emotives, although they formalise indexing levels of social satisfaction, they also function in contextual co-subordination with other discursive markers, that are by no means necessarily of an emotive nature. From this point of view, the sociolinguistic counterpart of the hedonometer that Bentham and Edgeworth dreamed about would be a kind of comparative frequency dictionary of linguistic concepts. In my view, we can well imagine this kind of dictionary, but it is crucial that the description of these concepts takes historical dynamics and the transformation of their connected contexts into account, because otherwise – and examples of this are unfortunately numerous in Russian linguistics – we end up formalising self-sufficient and historically inflexible ‘linguistic maps of the world’.

The second methodological consequence that we can draw from these debates concerns the possibilities linked to strategies of historical description in terms of its retrospective and value scalability.

It was long ago noted that ideas about Russian history diverge when its ‘vectorial’ dominant is modified — when Russian history is described not from Ivan the Terrible to Peter the Great, or, later, Lenin to Stalin, but from, say, Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich to Catherine II and Alexander II. Research in the areas of oral history and the discursive analysis of culture provides even more evidence of these differences. The question of which ideas should be understood as offering the ‘more correct’ view of history is complex beyond description.

To say that the history of Soviet champagne can somehow in this case ‘substitute’ itself for the history of the USSR, would of course be too bold. But it can certainly supplement and to some extent complicate it, especially when it comes to scrutinising the finer details of this story’s chronological coincidences with, as we might put it, the ‘reader’s’ history of the USSR.

The key milestones in the history of Soviet champagne run as follows. An announcement about the intention to provide the Soviet people with an affordable sparkling wine was one of the first resolutions of the Council of Peoples Commissars in 1924 under the presidency of Aleksei Ivanovich Rykov, a man partial to a drink, which revoked the ‘dry law’ introduced back in 1914 (Rykov’s name was linked to the first Soviet 27 % vodka also launched in 1924, which was popularly known as ‘Rykovka’). Up until this time, Soviet citizens knew about champagne either through old memories or hearsay. The capital’s reserves of champagne were evacuated as early as February 1917, and deliveries of French champagne ceased after the October Revolution. The only factory, in Abrau-Dyurso, where in 1924 Russian champagne was still produced lacked power: champagne was prepared using the traditional and labour-intensive bottle-aged method called *méthode champenoise*. Moreover, the production itself was constantly under siege from revolutionary-minded citizens. In 1919 this siege almost cost the life of the head of production at Abrau-Dyurso, Anton Mikhailovich Frolov-Bagreev (1877–1953). Armed proletarians demanded that he give them all his wine reserves, and when he refused, they sentenced him to be shot. The arrested wine-maker was saved by his own workers. At first they hid him in the cellars among the barrels, then they presented a collective petition demanding that the revolutionaries cease this outrage and arbitrary rule. On this occasion, the demand had the desired effect, and Frolov-Bagreev was freed. The freed wine-maker was destined to play a key role in the technological history of Soviet champagne [Merzhanian 1978]. In essence, his biography would be a suitable plot for a novel, but I will note only, based on my love of coincidences, that Frolov-Bagreev was born the year before Stalin and died in the same year as him, five months later.

In 1928 the champagne produced in Abrau-Dyurso was given the brand name ‘Sovetskoe Shampanskoe’, as approved by the Council of the National Economy. This timing can also be considered highly significant — in this same year, the first five-year plan for developing the national economy was pompously proclaimed, laying down the beginning of mass collectivisation and compulsory State grain purchases.

The next milestone in the history of ‘Sovetskoe Shampanskoe’ was a meeting of the Politburo on 28 July 1936, when, with the personal involvement of Stalin and with his signature at the bottom, was passed the Resolution of the Council of the National Economy of the USSR and the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), ‘On the Production of “Sovetskoe Shampanskoe”, Dessert and Table wines’, which stipulated the construction of factories to produce champagne wines in the major cities of the USSR. The latter were obliged to reach an output of 12 million bottles over the course of the next five-year period.

Interestingly, this resolution was passed at what one might call a fateful moment for the country. The trial against the ‘enemies of the people’ in the ‘Trotsky-Zinoviev United Centre’ was on the point of being launched. Just two weeks later came the announcement of the NKVD investigation results, and the beginning of the show trial in the October Hall at the House of Unions, at the end of which the 16 defendants, led by Zinoviev and Kamenev, were sentenced to ‘the highest measure of punishment’ — death by shooting.

The public frame of mind in 1936 was to a remarkable degree defined by two separate and contradictory discursive components — an angry chorus condemning the ‘enemies of the people’ amidst general exultation about the joys that were seen clearly in the new ‘Stalinist Constitution’ and in Stalin’s bon-mot of 1935, ‘Life is getting better, comrades, life is becoming more joyous’. These words of Stalin (spoken in the context of the country withdrawing ration cards and declaring an increase in bread, flour, and grain provision for the population) were immediately perceived in a performative and approbatory sense. I have already had the opportunity to write on the topic of the ‘mathematical quantity’ of joy that swept the country after Stalin’s summary, which was measured by the all-out confection of joyful songs, cinematographic laughter, and comic pictures. The main forms of media in the latter half of the 1930s — cinema, radio and newspapers — inventively demonstrated Soviet people’s readiness not just for labour and defence, but also for politically stimulated fervour. The anthem of this fervour was a song by V. I. Lebedev-Kumach set to music by A. V. Aleksandrov, created in 1936, which set Stalin’s words to the musical refrain of a celebratory toast:

Our whole huge country from its west to its east
 Wants to thank Comrade Stalin for this glorious feast.
 ‘Long life, dear leader, may you good health enjoy.
 Life is improving, life has more joy!’
 [Bogdanov 2009: 192 ff.]

Henceforth the indispensable attribute of Party-secured joy would be ‘Sovetskoe Shampanskoe’. As the then manager of the Soviet food industry, Anastas Mikoyan, glossed the Council of People’s Commissars resolution demanding an abrupt increase in the production of champagne wines:

Comrade Stalin is occupied with the greatest of questions relating to building socialism in our country. He remains focused on the whole of the national economy, but at the same time he does not forget the small things, since each one has significance. Comrade Stalin has said that Stakhanovites now earn a lot of money, and engineers and labourers earn lots too. But if they want champagne, can they acquire it? Champagne is a sign of material prosperity, a sign of affluence [Bolshevik 1936: 59].

Incidentally, in another speech in the same year (1936), Mikoyan lucidly explained that not all alcohol is equal, and unmasked the legend about Russian drunkenness:

Some people think and talk about the fact that we have, they say, many people who drink vodka, whereas abroad few people drink. At its root this idea is incorrect. Here are the figures of the consumption per capita of vodka, wine and beer, in terms of pure alcohol, in 1931: France — 18.9 litres, Belgium — 11.2, England — 3.2, USSR — 1.6... So why is Russia still renowned for drunkenness? Because under the tsars the people were destitute, and people did not drink out of joy, but out of woe, because of their poverty. They drank to get drunk and forget about their cursed lives. A man would sometimes get his hands on a bottle of vodka and drink, consequently not having enough money for food, and being left with nothing to eat he would drink himself into a stupor. Now, life is more joyous. You don’t drink yourself into a stupor because you have a good and full life [...] Life has become more joyous, so you can have a drink, but in such a way that you don’t lose your judgement or do any harm to your health (quoted according to: [Bezelyansky 2001: 57]).

It is important to note that the plans for mass-producing Soviet champagne hinted at by the Council of People’s Commissars were already at that time technologically well-founded. The fundamental achievements along this trajectory had been prepared by the efforts of Frolov-Bagreev, who had continued as head of champagne production at Abrau-Dyurso, whilst at the same time working

actively on introducing the reservoir method of champagnization. Frolov-Bagreev improved upon contemporary European technology for the reservoir method of preparing sparkling wines (in 1936 Frolov-Bagreev also went on assignments to Germany, France and Italy with the object of familiarising himself with these technologies) by, unlike his European counterparts, making the fermentation and cooling of champagnized wine take place in the same piece of apparatus — the so-called champagne-fermenting tank.¹ In 1936, experiments involving the reservoir method of producing sparkling wines were taking place in the Don Factory of Champagne Wines (now the Rostov Factory of Champagne Wines). In 1937, the first bottle of ‘Sovetskoe Shampanskoe’ came off the production line there, made using Frolov-Bagreev’s reservoir method. In 1939, the Gorkov (now Nizhy Novgorod) Factory of Champagne Wines entered into the system.

On 10 April 1942, A. M. Frolov-Bagreev was awarded a Stalin Prize, First Class, and the Order of Lenin. All this took place in a mood of celebration following the successful counteroffensive on Moscow and the freeing of the Moscow, Tula, and parts of the Kalinin and Smolensk provinces, from the Nazi invaders. The Gorky Factory of Champagne Wines continued its work throughout the war. During the same wartime period, Frolov-Bagreev’s main academic work was released: *Sovetskoe Shampanskoe: The Techniques for the Production of Champagne (Sparkling) Wines* (M., 1943; second edition 1948). Frolov-Bagreev’s enterprising followers continued to refine his method and attain new successes in this profession. By the 1960s, G. G. Agabalyants, A. A. Merzhanin and S. A. Brusilovsky were proposing a new method with an entirely automated process, to ensure an uninterrupted flow of champagne. In 1961, they all gained the Lenin Prize for their invention — and this conferment also coincided with landmark events in the life of the country: the Twenty-Second Congress of the Communist Party (at which the mass removal of Stalin statues was ordered), and the adoption of a new programme for the CPSU that proclaimed a two-decade drive to construct communism by 1980. From a news report on the awarding

¹ ‘Frolov-Bagreev’s champagne-fermenting tank system’ consists of a vertical steel cylinder with a capacity of 5,000 or 10,000 L (smaller tanks also exist, with capacities of 350 or 500 L), comprised of two parts connected by flanges, with a spherical bottom and a lid. Inside, the champagne-fermenting tank is covered with enamel, and the outside has three casings of various heights with brine circulating to cool the champagnized wine to facilitate immediate fermentation. Unlike the classic method of producing sparkling wines in a champagne-fermenting tank or the reservoir method (also called the Charmat process), the secondary fermentation takes place over 25–27 days. To be precise, this process is stopped by lowering the temperature after the pressure in the reservoir reaches around 5 atmospheres. The cooled champagne is kept cold for some time, then it is decanted into bottles through a fine-pored filter under pressure from carbon dioxide (partly natural, partly introduced into the reservoir from a container). Using this method, the entire process takes around a month. For more detail, see: [Frolov-Bagreev 1943; 1958]. See also: [Pavlov 1979: 233–236].

of the Lenin Prizes for science and technology, Soviet readers also discovered that thanks to ‘an original process of making champagne in an uninterrupted flow through a system of fermentative equipment [...] the resulting productivity of reservoir factories has increased by 70 % and the cost price of the manufacture has been lowered without compromising on the quality of the wine’. They also discovered that ‘in September 1960, champagne made using the new method by Moscow City Council of People’s Commissars’ was awarded a gold medal at a competition in Budapest — the city from which, during the several months beforehand Soviet troops had been withdrawn, having been left there for three years after the suppression of the Hungarian uprising (or to use the official terminology of the time, the ‘Hungarian counter-revolutionary rebellion’) [*Nauka i zhizn.* 23 April 1961].

Given such heightened attention to the production and propaganda of Soviet champagne, it might be considered symbolic that Olga Lepeshinskaya, notorious for her so-called ‘scientific studies’ of ‘living matter’ and active support for charlatan biologist Trofim Lysenko in his persecution of his colleagues, should have resurfaced precisely at this point. Though Lepeshinskaya had now lost the power and privileges given to her in the late 1940s, she was actively seeking new leverage with the Soviet political leadership. In her pursuit of this she began propagandising champagne as a means of prolonging life and increasing labour productivity. In June 1962, Lepeshinskaya sent Nikita Khrushchev a verbose and laboured note, ‘On the Reconsideration of the Law on Pensioner Provision (Increasing Labour Productivity by the Stimulation of Active Longevity and the Fight against Alcoholism)’, in which, as well as recommending soda baths, she advised expanding the production of champagne, as an alternative to industrially-produced spirits and bootleg liquor. ‘Persistent bootleggers’, she wrote towards the end of her missive, ‘should “get their chips”’, which became a pet phrase of the chair of the Central Committee as the alternative name for Soviet champagne [Gaisinovich, Muzrukova 1991: 90].¹

The subsequent production of champagne wines in the USSR could be called intensive: towards the end of the USSR’s trajectory, in 1984, the country had 32 factories producing more than 249 million bottles of ‘Sovetskoe Shampanskoe’ every day, compared to only 8 million in 1940 [Planned Economy 1984]. In exchange for champagne that for three hundred years had been manufactured exclusively using the bottle-aged method (‘during which,’ as the

¹ The phrase used in the original Russian is *pokazat kuzkinu mat*, literally, ‘to show s.o. Kuzka’s mother’, a folksy saying that was a favourite of Khrushchev’s for semi-jocular threats (‘we’ll soon show you Americans Kuzka’s mother’). The English expression ‘to get your chips’ (i.e. have something dreadful happen to you) is used as a rough equivalent [Eds.].

same newspaper triumphantly reported, ‘the technological cycle lasts for three years, while the loss of wine through bottles exploding is almost 20 %’), the Soviet people were getting champagne produced in cisterns: a sea of champagne.

The significance of champagne in the life of Soviet society appears, against the background of all these coincidences, to be quite specific. Firstly, its very name is directly linked to the state ideology whose aggressive nature is manifest in the oxymoronic combination of two toponyms, ‘Soviet’ and ‘Champagne’, the first of which essentially annexes the second. The well-known indifference towards this circumstance among compatriots can be summed up by the fact that the word ‘champagne’ is almost invariably perceived as the name of a wine, not a locality. ‘Soviet French Wine’ would perhaps have been perceived differently, although I am not certain of that either. Secondly, the history of Soviet champagne is in various ways linked to landmark events in the life of the country and — through the media — correlates to these events. Drinking champagne is acceptable where there is no suggestion of socially risky or ideologically reprehensible drunkenness: suitable occasions are chiefly official, ‘cultural’, and, ideally, nationwide celebrations. The semantic differences become especially conspicuous in comparison to the topic of literary references to champagne in Russia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

At the outset of my work on this topic, I had great expectations for a recent book by T. B. Zabožlaeva called *Champagne in Russian Culture from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Centuries*, in which, in the author’s words, she attempts ‘to trace the history of Russian culture and morals in the context of the consumption of this French wine’. Alas, the book did not live up to its topic. Suffice it to say that, in anticipation of her conclusions, the author begins her narrative with this assertion: ‘Champagne long ago became a metaphor for creativity for Russians’ [Zabožlaeva 2007: 9]. Meanwhile, her example references to champagne in Russian literature of the nineteenth century are rather obvious and hackneyed, and at best only slightly relevant to the idea of creativity. By and large, her exposition takes the form of a theme and variations from the semantic series: ‘love — drinking spree — hussars — ladies of easy virtue — gypsies’.

Thus, in Griboedov’s play *Woe from Wit* (1824), Chatsky curses Moscow society because it is flooded with champagne, while society accuses Chatsky of himself having ‘Swigged champagne in plenty’ (the old woman Khlyostova); ‘He drank it by the bottle’ (Natalya Dmitrievna); ‘No, sir! It was by the vat!’ (Zagoretsky).

Pushkin’s mythologisation of champagne emerges on the basis of the intersection between two traditions — the cultures of antiquity and France, combining the connotations of ‘freedom’, ‘love’ and ‘youth’.

In Gogol's *Dead Souls*, Nozdryov boasts: 'We had champagne — why, compare with it the champagne we had at the governor's was nothing but *kvass!* Just imagine, not Cliquot, but Cliquot-Matradura, which means double Cliquot. And he also got us a nice little bottle of French wine called Bon-bon. Bouquet? The fragrance of roses and anything you like. What a damned good time we had! Some prince arrived after us and sent to the shop for champagne, but there wasn't a bottle left in the whole town. The dragoon officers had drunk it all. Believe it or not, I alone drank seventeen bottles of champagne at dinner.'¹

In Turgenev's *Fathers and Children*, champagne appears in the scene where Bazarov, Arkady, Evdoksia and Sitnikov meet: they have champagne with luncheon, which ends, in Arkady's words, in 'Bedlam'.

Champagne is mentioned in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, in the description of Oblonsky: 'He was on familiar terms with everybody he drank champagne with, and he drank champagne with everybody.'²

In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, champagne is the signal for a drinking bout on the grand scale, and a demonstration of ostentatious generosity: 'I promised him champagne, Alyosha, on top of everything else, if he brought you to me. Let's have champagne, I'll drink, too! Fenya, Fenya, bring us champagne, the bottle Mitya left, run quickly. Though I'm stingy, I'll stand you a bottle.'³

By the end of the twentieth century, changes were beginning to be felt, but they were not radical: champagne was an attribute of poetic ecstasy (self-consciously so used in Igor Severyanin's 'Pineapples in Champagne' and 'Champagne in a Lily') or stood for the height of conspicuous ('bathing in champagne').⁴

In Soviet culture, champagne sometimes evoked similar connotations. In Leonid Gaidai's much-loved film comedy *The Diamond Arm* (1968), the catchphrase of the smuggler Lyolik (played by Anatoly Papanov), was 'Only aristocrats and degenerates drink champagne in the morning'. It evoked the same tradition of carousing and hard-drinking dissoluteness (though the film also showed champagne fuelling the continuation of Gesha Kozodoyev's drinking spree, while Lyolik himself, although condemning drinking champagne in the morning, downs it there and then and even washes his neck with it).

¹ N. V. Gogol. *Dead Souls* / Trans. D. Magarshack. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961. P. 74.

² L. Tolstoy. *Anna Karenina* / Trans. L. Maude, A. Maude. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1999. P. 16.

³ F. Dostoevsky. *The Brothers Karamazov* / Trans. R. Pevear, L. Volokhonsky. London: Vintage, 2004. P. 349.

⁴ See other examples cited in the article: [Vyskochkov 2005].

Nevertheless, these connotations were not definitive in relation to the perception of champagne in Soviet culture. Rather, its primary associations were nationwide festivals and all kinds of collective, inevitable, and formalised, yet also spontaneous, celebrations, such as weddings and major anniversaries. Drinking champagne to celebrate New Year or, for example, International Women's Day on 8 March was ritualised and reinforced through the work of the Soviet media. Especially significant in this category were such leaders in Soviet cinema and television distribution *Carnival Night* (1956) and *The Irony of Fate, or 'Enjoy Your Steam-Bath!'* (1975), where the tinkling of glasses filled with champagne was an ever-present note on the soundtrack (in the case of *The Irony of Fate*, this tinkling noticeably contrasts with the rougher chime of beer and vodka glasses at the beginning of the film).

A semiotic detail of no small importance, which supported the ideological connotations linked to Soviet champagne, was the address made by the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU, which was transmitted annually on radio and later on television, wishing the Soviet people a happy New Year, timed to coincide with the Kremlin chimes at midnight.

In sum we can say that although in nineteenth-century Russia, freedom-loving and rather risqué subjects were often associated with champagne, within Soviet culture it became a festive and above all 'cultured' drink that distinguished its consumers from those who preferred vodka, port or beer. It was also important that its connotations were ideologically tinged and leveled out: with every mouthful of champagne Soviet people demonstrated their level of culture (*kulturnost*) in the Soviet sense and simultaneously affirmed their adherence to Soviet values. Therefore, the strange summons, which became one of the masterpieces of Russian advertising during the Soviet period, 'Drink Soviet Champagne!' was full of meaning, even in the absence of other alternatives: if there had been alternatives, Soviet man could not have failed to drink Soviet champagne, just as he could not fail to be a Soviet person.

In order to pull the threads of my discussion together and to return to the theory with which I began, I will remind us at this point of a classic hypothesis about the replacement of social reality during Soviet times by texts and phantasmagoria. Thus, in his interpretation of the unprecedented popularity of the *Book of Tasty and Healthy Food*, Evgeny Dobrenko wrote, 'In the world of the total derealisation of life, all social functions are subjected to "literaturization", and in Stalinism even nutrition is transformed into a verbal act. So that in the end, it turns out that knowing how to correctly *read food* is not only the height of taste and a guarantee of health, it is the only means

of survival, no less important than the ability to cook and consume it' [Dobrenko 2009; emphasis added — *K. B.*].

I think, though, that where alcohol — or at least champagne — is concerned, we should not be talking about 'derealisation', but, on the contrary, the very effective appropriation by Soviet people of the social reality in which they happened to live. 'Sovetskoe Shampanskoe' remained on sale right up until the beginning of Gorbachev's perestroika, and it was always a relatively expensive drink (in the 1960s it cost 3 roubles 67 kopecks a bottle, in 1970, 4 roubles and 17 kopecks, this at a time when a modest lunch could be had for a rouble and a glass of soda water for a few kopecks). But the cost was not so high that Soviet citizens could not permit themselves to buy it on special occasions.

The Finnish sociologist Jukka Gronow, in a book first published about 15 years ago, assigned champagne to a category of consumption that formed in the USSR in the 1930s, and which might be termed 'democratic luxury' (besides champagne, Gronow also mentions caviar, cognac, chocolate, pastries and cakes) [Gronow 1997; 2003]. I agree with this definition, although with the added qualification that champagne as an item of luxury was furthermore prescriptively defined as Soviet. The consumption of a product in this case entirely corresponded to 'reading' it — or in any case reading what was written on its label. I am inclined to think that this process of 'reading' conjured predominantly positive emotions within Soviet citizens, in a way that was not necessarily directly dependent on the sort of emotions evoked by the content of the bottle itself.

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