

Merchants of Death and the Weapons Trade

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Abstract

The recent highly publicized human trade between Russia and the United States involved one of the most infamous arms dealers in the world, along with an American basketball player, and brought arms dealing into the forefront of public opinion. Viktor Bout's involvement in the arms trade is indicative of how lucrative the business can be for individuals. At the other end of the spectrum is the multibillion-dollar business of nations selling weapons to other countries. There are few instances of this resulting in what it was actually intended to do, aside from the immediate economic advantages. Unintended consequences have included American soldiers fighting and dying against weapons originally supplied by this country to nations either considered allies at the time, or for some related political agenda.

Keywords: arms trade, weapons, military arms, trafficking, cold war

Introduction

The weapons trade is a very big business. The sale of arms, including various types of pistols, revolvers, rifles, shotguns, and other individually-fired weapons, is largely out of control, both by individuals and by nations. The United States has sold more than \$197 billion dollars' worth of conventional weapons and related military support to 167 countries since 2002 (Thrall and Dorminey, 2018). Hartung, Arabia and Yousif (2020) report that in 2019 alone the United States government approved at least \$85.1 billion in arms sales under the Pentagon's Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program and through Direct Commercial Sales (DCS) licensed under the State Department. Arms are generally sold from three sources: private individuals, corporations which produce weapons, and governments who authorize the sale of certain weapons and weapons systems to foreign nations. The primary issue with selling weapons is the inherent impossibility of knowing where the arms will end up, or how they will eventually be used. More than once American soldiers have been involved in fights against people using weapons originally created by American companies and acquired from the United States. Proponents of arms sales argue that selling weapons to one's ally makes America stronger, but too often today's allies become tomorrow's enemy. Selling expensive, new weapons and weapon systems creates a temporary economic advantage, but there may be unintended negative strategic consequences in the future, far outweighing the former. One private citizen who became famous selling weapons has recently become a focus of the American media.

The Merchant of Death

Increasing public pressure on President Biden recently resulted in a successful prisoner exchange for Brittney Griner, an American female basketball player arrested and tried in Russia in 2022 for possession of drug evidence in her luggage at the Moscow airport. An agreement between Russia and the United States for the exchange was made in early December 2022, between Viktor Bout, the Russian gun dealer who was convicted in a New York court in April 2012, and Griner. At that point he was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison, and was possibly the single biggest arms dealer in the world.

Brittney Griner, an American basketball star, had been in custody in Russia since February 2022 after officials in Moscow found cannabis oil in her luggage when she was attempting to return to the United States after playing basketball in Russia. Media in the United States had been reporting rumors that the State Department had been trying to obtain Griner's release in exchange for Bout, the arms dealer.

Bout, known in the media as the Merchant of Death, began his arms dealing business in the early 1990s after the collapse of the former Soviet Union, as a military transporter and weapons supplier. Representative of many small arms dealers around the world, he was smart enough to take advantage of the military arms available when the Cold War ended in the early 1990s, and acquired a fleet of Soviet aircraft including Antonov and Ilyushin military cargo planes and used them to deliver weapons primarily to various combatants in Africa. According to Farah and Braun (2007), Bout began his arms dealing business by acquiring military airplanes left on the runways of the collapsing Soviet nation in the early 1990s. At that point in time, the Soviet cargo military aircraft, along with their crews, were up for sale, and were perfectly suited for Bout's plans to transport weapons around the world.

Bout is said to have begun his weapons business by channeling weapons through various front companies to different parts of the African continent. Afterward, the United Nations reported that Bout was an "associate" of former Liberian President Charles Taylor, who was convicted in 2012 on charges of aiding and abetting war crimes during the Sierra Leone war, and that Bout was a "transporter of weapons" who supported Taylor's regime in an effort to destabilize Sierra Leone and gain access to diamonds. Media in the Middle East claimed that Bout supplied weapons for both the Taliban and al-Qaeda, which he denied in an interview with England's Channel 4 News in 2009 (BBC, 2022). However, he did admit to transporting arms to Afghanistan during the mid-1990s, claiming that they were used by the military fighting against the Taliban. He also claimed to have assisted the French in transporting weapons to Rwanda after the genocide, and to have transported United Nations peacekeepers, as well.

Law enforcement agencies began to pursue Bout during the early 2000s. As a result, he left his home in Belgium in 2002, traveling under various aliases, moving through countries such as the United Arab Emirates and South Africa, before surfacing in Russia in 2003, after the authorities issued a warrant for his arrest. That year, British Foreign Office Minister Peter Hain said, "Bout is the leading merchant of death who is the principal conduit for planes and supply routes that take arms...from East Europe, principally Bulgaria, Moldova and Ukraine to Liberia and Angola. The UN has exposed Bout as the center of a spider's web of shady arms dealers, diamond brokers and other operatives, sustaining the wars" (BBC, 2022). According to the BBC, the British Foreign Minister was the first politician to use the phrase "Merchant of Death," which was mentioned in the 2005 film *Lord of War*, loosely based on the arms dealer's life. Ironically, in the film, the anti-hero escapes justice at the end, which, after 12 years behind bars, Bout actually did, by virtue of political and media pressure on President Biden to make the exchange.

The United States began legal action against Bout during the 2000s, actually freezing his assets in 2006, but at the time there was no law under which he could be prosecuted. In 2008, agents from the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) created a sting operation, posing as potential buyers from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known as FARC. At the time, FARC was classified as a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department. After the sting operation was completed in 2008, Bout was extradited from Thailand to the United States in 2010, and accused of a conspiracy to kill American pilots working with Colombian officials and US officials, delivering anti-aircraft missiles and aiding a terrorist organization (FARC). The jury in New York apparently didn't believe his defense story, that he was simply an entrepreneur with a legitimate international transport business, and after his conviction the judge in the case sentenced him to 25 years in prison in 2012. Since his release back to Russia in December, he has publicly supported President Putin's offensive war in Ukraine.

What we can learn about Bout and his experiences relates to patterns involving the transport and sale of arms: when and to whom they are sold; who buys them (people or states); whether the weapons are new or used; and whether the sale of the weapons is legal in terms of national and international law. Bout, as an individual, also was representative of the change in status of the "seller," from primarily nation-states during the Cold War, to many individuals similar to Bout after the fall of the U.S.S.R. Of course, nations have continued to sell weapons. According to Grant (2012), in 2011 the United States sold a record \$66.3 billion dollars' worth of weapons (more than 75% of the world weapons market for that year) and twice what was sold the previous year. In addition, for the first time during the 1990s black market weapons were more plentiful and cheaper than newly-produced weapons.

The global arms trade has historically been increased by the steady development of new and more deadly weapons, which are usually more advanced technically, and therefore more expensive. With each new level of weapons, arms dealers would look for places and people to offload older weapons to make room for newer, more deadly versions to market, as well as make more money in the process.

The Global Arms Trade is Born

Bout's dealings in Africa clearly reflect how that continent, in particular, has been saturated for centuries by the small arms trade. Arms traders from Europe began trafficking arms into Africa and America at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Weapons makers in that area of the world helped to dominate the trade in part because of advances in gunpowder and firearm technology as well as their experience in developing trade routes. Portugal, in particular, initiated small arms traffic into Africa, which brought them great wealth. By the seventeenth century, the Dutch had become the leading weapons exporters, with buyers in France and England, as well as Russia, Sweden, Portugal, Venice, and Morocco. As technology in the firearms trade changed, traders in Europe wanted to sell off old, less desirable weapons anywhere they could make a profit, including Africa. In 1650 many new flintlock muskets along with older matchlocks from European armies began to pour into West Africa, for eventual transport to the Gold Coast and Slave Coast. In part, the increased trade of European weapons to Africa in the late seventeenth century was linked to the slave trade from Africa. The arms trade and the slave trade became inextricably bound. Grant (2012) writes, "Of the estimated 283,000-394,000 firearms annually imported into West Africa between 1750 and 1807, England accounted for about 45 percent," (p. 4).

Guns and the Increase in Technology

Arms trafficking saw an increase in the late nineteenth century as industrialization increased in Europe. A continual improvement in firearms technology coupled with mass production techniques generated weapons, both old and new, on an increasing scale. At that point in time the primary players in terms of arms to Africa from Europe were the Belgians and the French. Older (and cheaper) Remington and Gras rifles were best-sellers, instead of the newer (and much better) Mauser and Steyr weapons. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Belgian city of Liege had become a primary supplier of weapons to Africa, and accounted for 67 percent of the total arms traffic to that country by 1907. Due to unrest in the country, East Africa had become the chief destination for weapons through trafficking and state government purchases during the last quarter of the century.

Although there was good money to be made in selling used guns, an easier and much more lucrative way was in the manufacture and sale of new weapons to governments. In that area, the primary military arms producers were Schneider-Creusot in France, Vickers in Great Britain, and Krupp in Germany.

Arms Trade during World War I and Sir Basil Zaharoff

Sir Basil Zaharoff, the first Merchant of Death, was in all likelihood the world's best-known arms dealer through World War I. Born Vasileios Zacharias, October 6, 1849, in Greece, he became an arms dealer and industrialist and was known for his cunning and aggressive business tactics. These included the sale of arms to opposing sides in conflicts, sometimes delivering fake or faulty machinery and guns, and skillfully using the media to attack business rivals. George Bernard Shaw based his character of Andrew Undershaft in his play *Major Barbara* on Zaharoff, and he likely was the inspiration for Ian Fleming's recurring fictional super-villain of Ernst Stavro Blofeld in several of the James Bond 007 books and movies.

Zaharoff sold arms to various countries, including Germany, England, the Russian and Ottoman Empires, Spain, Greece, Japan, and the United States. He was also instrumental in marketing military weapons, including the famous Maxim machine gun and the first working submarine (as well as a model which did not work so well).

Maxim Machine Gun

The gun designed by Hiram Maxim was one of the first fully automatic machine guns and a significant improvement over the then-current hand-cranked rotary barrel guns, with a faster rate of fire. Maxim's gun was more reliable and faster than anything rival gun-maker Nordenfält had at the time. Zaharoff, working with or for Nordenfält, likely was instrumental in the events surrounding Maxim's attempts to demonstrate his gun between 1886 and 1888. In the first, both Maxim's and Nordenfält's machine guns were scheduled for a dual demonstration at La Spezia, Italy, before a distinguished audience which included the Duke of Genoa.

However, Maxim's people did not show up; an unknown person (probably Zaharoff) had waylaid them with a long tour of La Spezia's nightlife leaving them unfit for the demonstration the next morning. At the next scheduled demonstration, in Vienna, someone (again, probably Zaharoff) had sabotaged the Maxim guns. At the third meeting and demonstration, the Maxim machine gun worked perfectly, but someone had convinced senior officers prior to the event the gun could not be mass-produced in sufficient quantities to satisfy a modern army. Nordenfelt and Zaharoff had won. Maxim successfully completed a merger in 1888 with Nordenfelt, engaging Zaharoff as the principal salesman on a huge commission.

Submarines

From 1886 to 1889, Zaharoff and Nordenfelt tried to develop a submarine to market to governments. One of Zaharoff's most infamous sales was the *Nordenfelt I*, a steam-driven submarine based on a design by the English inventor George Garrett. The Greek arms dealer sold the first model to the Greeks. After that, he successfully persuaded the Turks they needed two submarines for defense (because their neighbor Greece had one already). Later, he talked the Russians into buying two more because of the new "significant threat" on the Black Sea (the three submarines he had previously sold to Greece and Turkey).

The mechanics of the steam propulsion system in the submarines were inadequate for navigation underwater, and they failed when undergoing sea trials by each of the countries. Not only did the submarines have faulty propulsion systems, they were also unstable. One of the Turkish submarines actually sank during a torpedo firing test. Despite the obvious setback, Zaharoff went on to sell weapons to the Spanish Army, acquire a Spanish munitions factory, and arrange for Vickers (the munitions factory for which he worked) to obtain exclusive naval construction rights for the Spanish Navy. He died in 1936, at the onset of the Spanish Civil War.

Arms Control between the two World Wars

The idea that nations should limit arms sales for the possible avoidance of war resulted in the creation of the League of Nations on January 10, 1920 by the Paris Peace Conference. The efforts made toward regulating the sale of weapons between countries were not always successful, however. European colonial powers recognized the advantage that arms control gave them in terms of maintaining power over their empires, but smaller countries astutely reasoned their sovereignty would be reduced by a regulation of weapons by a few large nations. In spite of that roadblock, some principles of arms control were established. The civil war in China which began in 1915 produced a demand for weapons, and the armistice which ended the war in 1918 produced stockpiles of arms. Great Britain, France and the United States agreed to an arms embargo on China from 1919 to 1929, the first international embargo against a single country. Other smaller nations did not join the embargo, and did a very good business, as did the independent arms dealers working in Beijing, but most of the arms traders were independent contractors, lacking formal connections to any country. By 1940, Sweden, England, Belgium and the United States had all agreed to peacetime licensing of weapons exports.

Post-World War II and the Cold War

The period after the Second World War saw an increase in arms trafficking resulting primarily from the war surplus weaponry located in certain areas following World War II. One of the contributing factors was the flood of second-hand but still serviceable World War II and cold-war weapons into the market by people like Viktor Bout and Samuel Cummings, who took full advantage of the available military weapons.

Similar to Bout, Samuel Cummings built his gun trading business by collecting military weapons from German Army surplus and from government arsenals. His first major deal was procuring 7,000 weapons from Panama and then selling them to American civilians. At one point in the 1950s Cummings had approximately 2 million weapons in Great Britain. According to Cummins, between 1953 and 1968, he bought 4.5 million weapons and 500 million bullets (Grant, 2012). Like Bout, at times he supplied weapons to both sides in a dispute: for example, he sold weapons to both combatants in the Costa Rican Civil War.

As the war changed in favor of the Allies during 1944, the Russian Army collected thousands of weapons from the Germans. Resulting from the Russian push into Germany, many of these weapons did not have time to get to the front. Unlike many other countries which opted to destroy a majority of the weapons leaving them either inoperable or in various stages of disrepair, by order of Stalin, these weapons were maintained regularly.

According to the 1943-1945 reports of the Trophy Committee of the Red Army, over 257,000 7.92mm MG-42/ MG-34 machineguns and 3 million 7.92mm Mauser 98k rifles were collected by Russian units in addition to an undefined quantity of 9mm MP-38/40 Schmeisser submachine guns and P-08 Luger and Walther P-38 handguns (Konashnekov and Masterok, 2019).

The cold war rivalry between the United States and the USSR greatly contributed to the global arms trade. For the first time in history, country to country transactions came to typify the arms trade. Prior to the 1960s the government to government weapons trade operated in the millions, but afterward it became billions of USD annually. Avoiding direct conflict between the nuclear armed superpowers locked in an ICBM stalemate, numerous proxy wars by local factions in areas of disputed influence were heavily supported in war materials and became the common method of attempting to gain a strategic advantage. Between 1973 and 1980, Russia and the United States accounted for two-thirds of all arms sold to less-developed countries. In the eight years from 1978 to 1985, arms sales to Third World countries included 13,960 tanks and self-propelled artillery, 4005 supersonic aircraft, 27,605 armored personnel carriers, and 34,948 surface-to-air missiles, totaling \$258 billion (Grant, 2012).

Vietnam and the Impact of Military Technical Assistance from Both Sides

Soviet aid to Vietnam began after 1964 with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam for economic and technical assistance which ranged from 3.6-8 Billion USD for both arms and ammunition. This was a direct response to Russia's December 1961 pledge of support for the North Vietnamese following the United States' increase in foreign aid and military support for the Saigon Government, which included WW2 and Korean War military arms and equipment. "In 1975, Communist Vietnam became heir to huge numbers of arms available following the communist victory and American withdrawal from the war in South-East Asia including roughly 2 million small arms [M-16 variants] and 150 tons of supplied ammunition" among 2 billion USD of captured equipment estimated to be worth \$9.6 billion in 2020-dollar estimates (Grant, 2012). Among these were large numbers of M-60 light machine guns, Browning 1919 light machine guns, M-1 Carbines, M-1 Garand rifles, M-14 rifles, and Thompson submachine guns into Viet-Cong and NVA stockpiles throughout the country.

Many of the former American weapons were in storage awaiting further developments by the western democratic countries. They were probably found by rural populations to be stowed away or sold on the black market eventually landing within reach of transnational criminal organizations connected to the Golden Triangle. Most were within the regions in close proximity to the Mekong Delta, and "the five main roads, 29 branch roads, and many cutoffs and bypasses, adding up altogether to about 12,000 miles of paths" which made up the Ho-Chi-Minh Trail (Correll, 2005). This included communist Laos, Cambodia, and Burma. In the decades of harsh storage conditions, the standardized chrome-lined bores and chambers of the upgraded American M-16a1, M-14 and all Soviet and Chinese communist small arms produced post-1952 (aside from the firearms produced in Kragujevac, Yugoslavia) have often remained operable due to their resistance to rust.

American Weapons in Central America

Many of the American weapons found their way back to central America in the 1980's as the Soviet-allied Vietnamese traded them to the communist Cuban government. In the following years, the Cubans then trafficked the same weapons by boat and by plane into Central America to support the spread of leftist revolution by supplying the FMLN in El Salvador and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua (Grant, 2012). "The serial numbers of many of the M-16s captured from the El Salvadorian insurgents could be traced back to pre-1975 US weapons shipments to the South Vietnamese Army" (Pribbenow, 2020). "In 1986, the Chilean government under General Pinochet captured large caches of weapons and ammunition including 3,000 M-16 rifles that had originally been supplied to the South Vietnamese Army and accused Vietnam of supplying the shipments" (Pribbenow, 2020). In both cases, published excerpts from official internal Vietnamese Army history [translated into English] provides evidence that the Vietnamese shipped captured American-made [second generation] weapons to numerous Latin American insurgents through the Cubans, during the late 1970's and early 1980's. Some of the supply of American-produced weapons with origins dating back to World War 2 and the Vietnam War resurfaced in relatively large quantity in recent conflicts within the southern Philippines. The weapons were apparently used by the self-proclaimed Islamic State militant Maute and Abu Sayyaf jihadists in their attempts to establish a Southeast Asian Caliphate in the Mindanao region in May 2017. Insurgent fighters occupying the predominantly Muslim City of Marawi were claimed by the Filipino government forces to have a large supply of 5.56x45mm, 7.62x51mm, 7.62x63mm and 7.62x33mm ammunition sourced from the Privi Partisan PPU factory in Serbia.

From the hands of the militants, predominantly early models of the M-16 were confiscated by the Philippine government in addition to M-1 Garand rifles, M-1 Carbines, and M-14 rifles amongst other weapons. According to the Philippines Government, following the processing of more than 1,000 firearms captured from terrorist caches and suppressed militants, “none of the weapons inventoried so far match those in the inventory of the Armed Filipino Forces” (Nepomuceno, 2017). They were likely acquired through illicit sources within the underground arms market. Due to their design, these former American weapons of war still in circulation in countries by militant/insurgent forces may prove to be deadly to other nations.

The 1979 Afghan Invasion

Providing arms to our allies in the form of small arms and light weapons have created unintentional secondary issues. More specifically, to counteract the deployment of Soviet troops into Afghanistan, and the later instability following these campaigns prove that “even legal well-intentioned arms transfers can go awry despite the intention to provide greater security and NATO interdependence” (Chivers, 2011, p. 119). “An infantry rifle can survive many decades in the battlefield; so long in fact that no one knows how long they take to die because many of the original items are still being used by guerillas” (Chivers, 2011, p. 117). The United States, through the CIA, choreographed and underwrote the arming of the Mujahideen during the bulk of the Soviet-Afghan War passing shipments through the Pakistani Inter-Services intelligence Agency covertly in an attempt to ensure American involvement could not be confirmed. Dubbed Operation Cyclone, the US beginning in 1979 under the Carter administration initially funneled hard currency into the region before the Afghan invasion. This turned into more direct methods which combined both arms and financial support to our (at the time) Jihadist allies to steer influence away from Marxist forces in the region. The CIA basic strategy was to use a mix of weapons, logistics, and training to enhance the rebels’ ability to fight against the Soviets as well as adversely affect the Russian war machine. Within the first six years, 1.6 billion USD was funneled via assistance package followed by another 1.74 billion specifically for military sales (Services, 2021). Like the Soviets, “the CIA was especially resistant to calls for providing the Mujahideen with US-made weaponry. Traditionally the agency purchased foreign usually Soviet-styled weaponry in case the need to plausibly deny US involvement arose. Throughout the Afghan War the CIA purchased Soviet-designed weapons from Egypt, China and elsewhere and transported them to Pakistan.” (Galster, 2001).

As early as 1980, 7.62x39mm Chinese Type-56 and Egyptian Maadi rifles were supplied to the rebels in Afghanistan. Weapons similar to these began to increase in the region throughout the ensuing decade. These same weapons supplied by the Central Intelligence Agency would end up in the hands of America’s enemies following the September 11th attack response in Afghanistan now controlled by the Taliban whose rise in influence was arguably a direct result of US funding, training, and arming against the Russians. Since 2011, for example, the US has openly purchased tens of thousands of former eastern-bloc small arms for redistribution to government forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. Not long after the government of Hamid Karzai was established in Kabul, the Czech Republic donated thousands of 7.62x39mm VZ-58 automatic rifles to equip the Afghan security forces. Although this rifle is visually similar to the Soviet AK and AKM pattern of rifles, the Czech examples retain no parts interchangeability with the popular and quantitatively superior AK-47.

The Pentagon in 2011 became involved in the process of purchasing consignments of US-made M-16A2 and A4 rifles for the Afghan Army to use standardized NATO-spec calibers to prevent Taliban forces from obtaining a constant supply of newly produced 7.62x39 ammunition from the Afghan personnel as the 5.56x45mm cartridge is not compatible. Ten years later, in 2021, the United States’ hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan has yet again indirectly armed the new generation of Jihadi Mujahideen as we have done over the prior 40 years. Only now, the Islamic fundamental extremists of the modern era are armed with some of the most sophisticated weaponry in the world.

The current problems of gun-running and weapons trafficking are not recent developments, or solely resulting from international consequences of Cold War tensions. “Business careers as an arms transporter in Eastern Europe reveals much about the consequences of globalization in the post-Soviet Post-Cold war world, as working with the abandoned military surplus of the Soviet-Bloc that underpaid or unpaid soldiers and commanders were only too eager to sell for ready cash” (Grant, 2019). Individuals and/or groups transfer guns and munitions through front companies using facially legitimate end-user certificates falsified by corrupt officials often connected to or bribed by organized crime to deliver otherwise prohibited military arms around the globe to sovereign governments, unrecognized regimes/ dictatorships, and insurgent factions.

Surplus Small Arms

Activities such as those of Viktor Bout “marked a significant change in the history of the global arms trade since for the first time thanks to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, black market supplies are now more plentiful and cheaper than newly produced weapons.” (Grant, 2012) The flood of second-hand Cold War weapons into the market made the last few decades unprecedented in unsanctioned private arms dealing. The United States has due to its positive geographical attributes enjoyed the beneficial advantage of remaining in physical isolation from its adversarial acquaintances (other than Mexico). Many countries are surrounded by historical and political adversaries posing immediate external threats to their safety, natural resources, national sovereignty, and domestic security. The affordability of these black-market weapons may be of valuable tactical and strategic importance in maintaining a relatively peaceful status quo in poorer nations within the global community through effective deterrence if in the right hands. The opposite is true if these weapons fall into the hands of an aggressor. It is arguable that the two largest wars of the 21st century (the United States’ wars in Iraq and Afghanistan) have actually left America and the world much less secure than if they had never been undertaken (Holden, et al. 2007).

Conclusion

It is clear that both the legal and illegal transfer of weapons including small arms and ammunition have directly and indirectly contributed to the instability that plagues the modern world. International trading in weapons largely began in the sixteenth century when European traders realized that Africa might be a good marketplace for weapons. This continued until recently, with Viktor Bout. The consequences of cold war era military arms diplomacy by the United States, Russia, and their respective allies have continued to extend far beyond the point in history designating the fall of the U.S.S.R. Some of the weapons of the Cold War due to design often will remain in an operable and serviceable condition for decades lying dormant waiting for the next generations to retrieve them for good, or for malice. The endless cycle of violence detrimentally plaguing localities, states and nations across the globe will continue to remain unbroken for as long as the flow of surplus arms remains readily available to the next willing bidder be it a government agency with covert ties in a distant land, or the lone wolf terrorist living down the street.

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