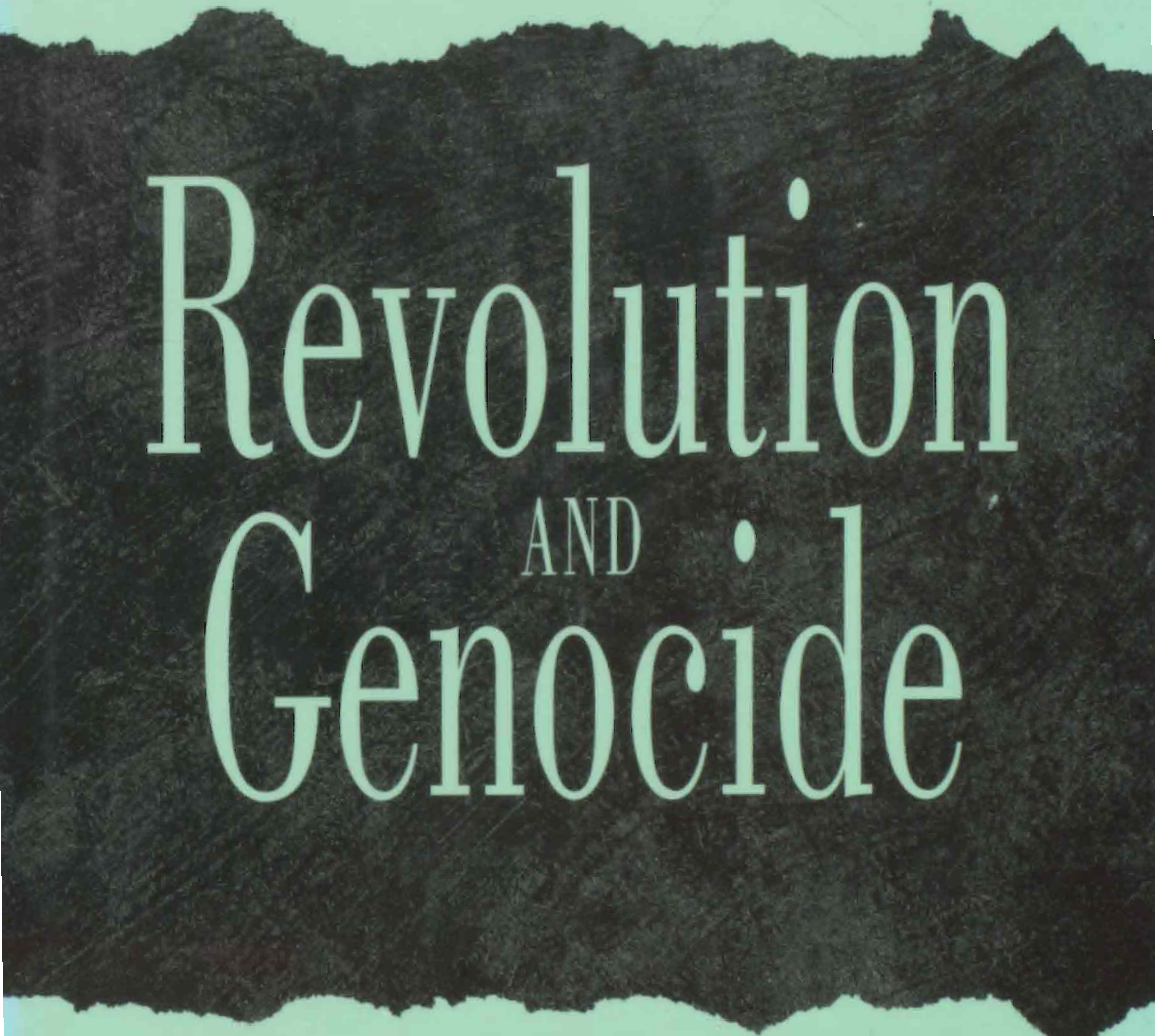


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Robert F. Melson



Revolution  
AND  
Genocide

On the Origins of the  
Armenian Genocide  
and the Holocaust

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**ROBERT MELSON**

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**REVOLUTION  
AND GENOCIDE**

**On the Origins of the  
Armenian Genocide  
and the Holocaust**

With a Foreword by  
**LEO KUPER**

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS  
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Robert Melson is associate professor of political science and chairperson of the Jewish Studies Program at Purdue University

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To Gail, as always

IN MEMORY OF ש"ת

MY GRANDPARENTS

Sylvia Sara Blumenfeld Mendelsohn (d. Davos, 1916)

Julius Joel Mendelsohn (d. Stanislawov, 1941)

Stefania Bathsheba Gromb Ponczek (d. Treblinka, 1942)

Leon Leib Judah Ponczek (d. Treblinka, 1942)

AND MY TEACHER

Professor Daniel Lerner (1917–1980)

AND MY FRIEND

Professor Larry Axel (1946–1991)

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# FOREWORD

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The expectation that victims of oppression, when liberated, would transcend their own trauma in compassion for the suffering of others seems unrealistic in retrospect. So I was intrigued to meet at the home of an Armenian colleague a survivor of the Holocaust, who had devoted a significant part of his academic career to pioneering studies of the Armenian genocide. Professor Melson's traumatic experiences in the Holocaust go back to early childhood when he and his parents, in October 1941, escaped annihilation by a Nazi extermination squad, which massacred most of the Jews of the small Polish town in which they lived; his parents had refused to go to the appointed place of assembly. Thereafter, acquiring false papers and assuming the identity of Polish aristocrats, they managed to survive to the end of the war. Other members of his family were less fortunate.

This direct experience of the Holocaust has left its marked imprint on his academic orientation, and in particular on his preoccupation with total genocide, the subject of the present volume. If I recall correctly, at one time he defined genocide, within an encompassing concern for massacre, as total genocide. His experience is also reflected in his discussion of the particularist approach to the Holocaust, which emphasizes the incomparable uniqueness of that event, and the universalist perspective, which subsumes it under the category of genocide.

Reading his comments, one cannot fail to be impressed by the distinctive qualities in his academic approach; the analytical attention to detail, the fair presentation of both perspectives, the careful examination of the pros and cons of these diametrically opposed points of view, and his final resolution of the issue. From my own point of view, growing up in the racially oppressive police state of South Africa which preceded apartheid, and with the experience of an indigenous Nazi movement, and experience also in World War II, I tend to equate the particularist orientation with an alienating ethnocentrism.

The universalist definition of genocide by Raphael Lemkin, who pioneered the concept, seems to me perfectly acceptable—"a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of the national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves."

So, too, the definition in the UN Convention on the Prevention of

the Crime of Genocide, derived in the process of lengthy debates, incorporating the varied experiences of the annihilation of peoples, represented a universalistic approach. The inclusion of the Holocaust within the general comprehensive concept of genocide does not imply equating it with other genocides, or even comparing it with other genocides. Each genocide contains its unique aspect together with the general defining characteristic of genocide at a high level of abstraction.

Professor Melson, in his own approach to problems of definition, reverts to his initial concern with mass killing. From a humanitarian point of view, this is the basic issue and not precision in the specific labeling. Defining the victims broadly as a "social collectivity or category usually a communal group, a class or political faction," he develops a typology, moving from massacre or pogrom through partial genocide and total genocide to the Holocaust as "a specific historical instance of total genocide."

This typology seems an admirable one. There is a problem, however, in the general definition, which if applied might deprive genocide of its unique horror. Presumably the definition chosen from the abundant offerings in the field would depend on the objective. If it is to activate the UN machinery for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, or to extend domestic jurisdiction to punishment of this international crime, one would fall back on the internationally accepted legal definition.

A further formative influence on Professor Melson's theoretical orientation and the present study was a brief experience as an Africanist in Nigeria shortly before the military coup in 1966 and a major massacre of Ibos. Rejecting communalism (or tribalism or primordial sentiment) as the precipitating cause, he argues that it is the process of change (such as urbanization, mass education, the diffusion of the mass media, and the development of increasingly efficient and productive commercial networks) that give rise to a new social mobilization. As a result, men come to desire precisely the same things, and they engage in conflict not because they are different but because they are essentially the same (Robert Melson and Howard Wolpe, "Modernization and the Politics of Communalism," *American Political Science Review* 64, no. 4 [1970], Proposition 1, p. 1114).

So, too, it is not ideology in isolation that is the propelling force in genocide but the broad socioeconomic political context within which ideology becomes effectively motivating. Nor is the Holocaust to be ex-

plained simply as a manifestation of deep-rooted German antisemitism with its long history of Jewish victimization and dehumanization. "But," as he comments in a personal communication, "antisemitism existed in Imperial Germany without its leading to genocide, and Jewish victimization and dehumanization had a long history prior to the Holocaust." Revolution was the catalyst that transformed German antisemitism into total domestic genocide, not ideology, nor the needs and dynamics of party organizations and bureaucratic structures that developed and manned the machinery of destruction. However influential these factors may have been, they neglect, as an explanation of the Holocaust, the circumstances enabling the Nazis to come to power and implement their ideology as the public policy of the state. The effective precipitating causes were the revolutionary interregnum in Germany, which enabled the Nazis to become the effective rulers, and World War II. The revolutionary regime, in redefining German political culture and the identity of the new political community, rendered excluded groups vulnerable to genocide.

The same themes of war and revolution are analyzed in the transformation of the traditional conditional tolerance of the Ottoman Empire into the narrow, chauvinistic, and xenophobic Turkish nationalism of the ruling revolutionary Committee of Union and Progress. In the process, and in the overall context of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and military defeat, Armenians became redundant. Indeed, they were viewed as enemies, particularly dangerous, since they occupied the heartland of Turkey and straddled the boundary with Russia. The provocative thesis, that Armenians, by reason of their revolutionary and provocative behavior were in fact the agents of their own destruction, offers a parallel to the Nazi ideology of Jews engaged in an international conspiracy against the Third Reich.

This analytical procedure linking revolution to total domestic genocide is applied briefly also to the annihilation of the Kulaks in Soviet Russia under Stalin and to the "autogenocide" in Kampuchea. Drawing on his conclusions in the Armenian and Nazi case studies, and the confirming evidence in the destruction of the Kulaks and in the Cambodian "autogenocide," Professor Melson analyzes, in a final chapter, the processes linking revolution, war, and total domestic genocide (presumably in plural societies). But the argument is carefully qualified, since there are revolutions and wars that do not produce genocide. Revolution and war, though necessary conditions, are not sufficient in themselves. They are



only potentially genocidal, depending on many variables that influence the final result.

Ideology, in interaction with structural conditions, is one of these variables, particularly in the manner in which the excluded groups are defined. Is the taint ineradicable as in antisemitic and racial ideologies, or the perception of the Armenians in the ideology of Turkish nationalism, or of social background as in Stalinism and the Khmer Rouge annihilation of the middle classes, the compradore bourgeoisie? Or can the excluded group be reeducated or treated by other measures less drastic, such as territorial segregation or expulsion?

A further significant variable related impending war to the probability of genocide, when the excluded group is believed to have links to the enemy either through its diaspora or through betrayal, as in the Armenian case. And the Nazi view of Russia and communism as tools of the "Jewish World Conspiracy" rendered all Jews everywhere, and above all in Russia, targets for annihilation. Charges of international conspiracy were, of course, common in Stalinist Russia against excluded groups or individuals or those categorized as enemies of the people, or against the Kulaks, or Ukrainian leaders during the Great Famine. The personality of the leaders is also significant, whether motivated by paranoid fantasies or firmly opposed to the final solution of annihilation. A further variable is the vulnerability of the victims, which renders them an ideal target for persecution and as scapegoats.

This study is distinctive for the quality of its scholarship and the originality of its contribution. This is the first study that links that Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide as examples of total domestic genocide and explores the role of revolution and war. These often appear in the literature in narrative form. Professor Melson's contribution, however, lies in the exploration of the manner in which they may facilitate total domestic genocide by providing "ideological vanguards with an opportunity to come to power and to refashion the identity of the society and the system of legitimation." The general principles he advances should open up a rich and creative field for future research.

Professor Melson concludes his study with a quotation from the Algerian French writer Camus who risked his life to bring about conciliation between the warring parties in his native country, and who provided us with the ordeal of Sisyphus as symbolic of the endless struggle against oppression and for justice, of which his own life was a most eloquent expression. "Nothing," he wrote, "is given to men and the little they

can conquer is paid with unjust deaths. But man's greatness lies elsewhere. It lies in his decision to be stronger than his condition. And if his condition is unjust, he has only one way of overcoming it, which is to be just himself."

Reflecting on this quotation, I remembered that Professor Melson had told me that he concluded his course on the Holocaust with reference to Philip Hallie's book *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*. This was the story of the French Huguenot village of Le Chambon which rescued many Jewish refugees during the Vichy and Nazi occupations. The moral lessons to his class were "to draw out the generous, universal, loving aspect of your tradition. Love the stranger as yourself."

I then settled down to read Hallie's book. It was most impressive, a welcome correction to my opening comments expressing the somewhat jaundiced view of extreme suffering as alienating. Here were the descendants of the Protestants, who had experienced the most horrendous persecution of their faith, responding to the desperate need of others at great risk to their own survival. It was enough for them to see the need in the eyes of those they rescued.

This book and Professor Melson's life and career and human concern recalled to me Lifton and Markusen's concept of Species Mentality, which they contrasted with Genocidal Mentality. They described Species Mentality as "an expansion of collective awareness, an altered sense of self, that embraces our reality as members of a single species."

May Species Mentality prevail in a world torn by lethal ethnic conflict, and by religious persecution, with starvation used as a genocidal weapon, and a vigorous arms trade in more and more deadly annihilatory weapons.

Leo Kuper  
Professor Emeritus  
University of California, Los Angeles

October 1991

# P R E F A C E

---

Defenseless under the night  
Our world in stupor lies;  
Yet, dotted everywhere,  
Ironic points of light  
Flash out wherever the Just  
Exchange their messages:  
May I, composed like them  
Of eros and of dust,  
Beleaguered by the same  
Negation and Despair,  
Show an affirming flame.

W. H. Auden  
"September 1, 1939"

This book compares the Holocaust to the Armenian Genocide in order to try to answer the questions, *Why did genocide happen in these two instances, and why does it happen at all?* Our goal is to identify some of the deadly intentions and circumstances that turn ordinary human beings into killers and their victims.

Although the Holocaust stands apart in modern consciousness as the apotheosis of mass destruction, the Armenian Genocide resembles it in significant ways. As in the case of the Final Solution, a regime formulated a public policy whose intent was the physical destruction of the Armenian community and its elimination from the society, culture, and politics of the Ottoman Empire. Both the Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide were the quintessential examples of total domestic genocide, what the United Nations has called "genocide-in-whole" to distinguish such instances from "genocide-in-part."

This book seeks to compare the histories of these two instances, including their suggestive similarities and significant differences. The main aims of this work are to help clarify their common causes and to formulate a credible explanatory framework for genocide-in-whole or total domestic genocide. Indeed, this study proposes that such mass mur-

der may best be understood as a complex process that is set in motion by revolution and war.

Revolutionary governments that come to power after the breakdown of old regimes need to create a new order that will support the revolutionary state. Desiring to reconstruct the polity according to their own views, revolutionary vanguards are likely to label some groups as the "people," "the class," "the nation," or "the race," that is, those who support the revolution and from whom the new regime derives its legitimacy. By the same token, revolutionary regimes are also likely to label other groups as the "enemies of the revolution and the people." Such enemies may become candidates for repression and even genocide.

The likelihood that the outcome of a revolution will include genocide increases with war when the domestic "enemies of the revolution" come to be identified with external foes of the revolutionary regime. Especially vulnerable are communal groups and classes that are despised by society at large while, at the same time, they seem able to succeed in the modern world. When a revolutionary regime can identify such "problem" collectivities with its domestic and international enemies, in the absence of other alternatives it may turn to "final solutions."

Clearly it is not the case that every revolution leads to genocide or that every genocide in history has occurred because of revolution. It is likely, however, as this work tries to show, that in the modern world total genocides have mainly been launched by revolutionary states seeking to transform society in their image. In addition to the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust, the two other examples that may be cited are the destruction of the Kulaks by the Stalinists and the "autogenocide" of the Khmer Rouge.

In our era not only have millions of innocent human beings been slaughtered, usually by their own governments espousing bizarre world-views, but genocide has revealed to us aspects of human behavior so terrible that one begins to question the worth of the human enterprise. After experiencing or otherwise becoming aware of genocidal bestiality and irrationality, one begins to dream of a world without people, a primordial world of plants and animals where pain exists but cruelty does not, where killing occurs out of necessity—not out of malice, paranoid fantasy, or blind commitment to a political faith. Despite the understandable dread one feels in dealing with such a topic, one needs to face up to the fact that genocide, mass murder, is part of human history, and thus in principle explainable in broadly historical terms.

There is, however, a danger implicit in the search for understanding the mainsprings of the Holocaust and genocide. In our eagerness for closure, for putting the past behind us, we run the danger of oversimplifying the events and thereby trivializing them. Writing of the casual manner in which terms like "genocide," "holocaust," and "Auschwitz" have been used in our time, Peter Gay has remarked: "Such trivializing of the awesome is itself evidence that the world is a beastly place—impatient with precision, anxious to set memories aside, callous, heartlessly forgetful."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, for some survivors of genocide the very attempt at explanation is a form of transgression, if not violence. This is so because they believe that events like the Holocaust or the Armenian Genocide are inherently inexplicable—the product of heinous, radically evil minds and spirits. Moreover, the very attempt at explanation may be both a distancing of oneself from the victims and an expression of empathy for the killers. Understanding may be an attempt at affirming life beyond the murders, but it is an affirmation that—given the horror—may be both false and a sacrilege.

I come to the question of genocide both through personal experience and scholarly reflection. On 12 October 1941, *Einsatzgruppe D*, a special formation of the SS and other units, massacred most of the Jews in the little Polish town of Stanislawov. My parents and I were those who survived; I was four years old at the time. We survived because my parents mistrusted the Germans' motives and refused to go to the place of assembly. Later, because we looked Slavic, we were able to acquire false papers of identity and to pass as non-Jews until the end of the war. Most other Jews were less lucky. My grandparents, my mother's parents, living in Warsaw perished in Treblinka. My grandfather, my father's father, had been killed by the Gestapo even before the massacre of 12 October. Other relatives who were killed I never knew or do not remember.

When I became older and tried to think about what had happened to my family and to all those who had been killed for no reason other than the accident of their birth, I would become so overcome that I simply could not sustain thinking about what others called "the Holocaust." The memory was a trauma, a "wounding experience," not to be "understood" but simply endured.

In 1966, when I was in my late twenties, thousands of Ibos were massacred in Northern Nigeria. Later, during the civil war that lasted from 1967 until 1970, some one million, perhaps as many as two million,

people starved to death. They perished because the Federal Military Government (FMG) refused to lift the blockade that would have relieved the defenders, and the Biafrans refused to surrender.

In 1965, a year before the onset of these massacres, I had returned to America from Nigeria where I had done my fieldwork on the country's labor movement as part of the requirement for a doctorate in political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. As did so many of my generation growing up in the late 1950s and 1960s, I had hoped that Africa, the Third World, would avoid the recent horrors of Europe. Gail Freedman, who was then finishing up at Radcliffe, had joined me in Ibadan, where we were married. It was a promising and happy time.

Soon after we returned to America, the killings began. Their reality was brought home to me in a nondescript hotel room in New York. At a meeting of the African Studies Association, I ran into a Nigerian acquaintance, a trade unionist I knew from Lagos. We went up to his room with some other people, and over a beer I asked him about Gogo Chu Nzeribe, a trade unionist I had interviewed and respected. "Gogo? Haven't you heard? Some troops came to his house in Ikeja and clubbed him to death." The conversation continued to swirl about me, but I no longer heard. Gogo was dead. When I had first met him he had seemed indestructible. Not tall, but solid and broad, with the shoulders of a linebacker. He was very canny, very smart about Nigeria and the world. He had an explosive sense of humor and a certain generosity of spirit. When that night I heard that he had been killed, it was as if the twenty years after the Second World War had been compressed into a few minutes. I felt as if the war had never ended, and it was no use trying to escape it in Africa or elsewhere.

When I realized that Ibos like Gogo were being slaughtered for no other reason than their ethnicity, I could not help making the connection between my family's experience and their own. I wholeheartedly supported the Biafran secession and was convinced that, should it fail, Ibos would be massacred by the Nigerians. Thankfully, I and others who thought like I did were wrong. The Nigerians were not Nazis, and the Ibos were not Jews. When the Nigerians proved victorious, their peace terms were humane and generous. But from then on I knew I had to return to the Holocaust to try to make sense of it both at the level of personal emotion and in some broader comparative intellectual perspective.

Thinking through what had happened in Biafra I realized that this

instance of mass death was in some essential ways not comparable to the Holocaust—for one thing the FMG had no intention of exterminating the Ibos or of destroying them as a collectivity. Indeed, when I tried to find instances of comparison for the Holocaust, I settled not on Biafra but on the Armenian Genocide as the case that most closely resembled it.

In 1977, seven years after the end of the Biafran war, and again in 1983, I spent a portion of a sabbatical year at the Harry S. Truman Institute of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. It was there in an office that overlooked the Judean desert and the Dead Sea that I started in earnest on the work of comparing the Holocaust to the Armenian Genocide. It felt like an appropriate place for such a project.

In Jerusalem I had the opportunity to discuss my work with scholars like Professors Israel Guttman, Shmuel Almog, Yehuda Bauer, and the late Shmuel Ettinger, some of them survivors who had devoted their lives to the study of the Holocaust and antisemitism. I also took the opportunity to reacquaint myself with Professor S. N. Eisenstadt, my old teacher from MIT and Harvard, who is the preeminent authority on comparative historical sociology—a field crucial to this study. At other times I was shown about the Armenian quarter in Jerusalem by George Hintlian, secretary to the patriarchate. There I was introduced to Professor Vahakn N. Dadrian, a lifetime student of the Armenian Genocide, who has been a mentor and a colleague ever since. These scholars' lucid and skeptical questions have kept me busy for years.

In the spring of 1990, together with other researchers from around the world, I was invited by the Academy of Sciences of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic to Yerevan to participate in a commemorative scholarly conference on the Armenian Genocide. On 24 April, the day that Armenians memorialize the genocide, I stood in silence with my colleagues from the conference among thousands of people who were commemorating their dead and the loss of their lands.

I have sketched out a portion of the personal road I traveled before coming to this study in order to help clarify my motives. These do not spring from a desire to trivialize the Holocaust by spuriously universalizing human suffering and denying its unique and perhaps unfathomable characteristics. Nor do they arise out of a personal animus against any group or nation.

Having completed this study—one writes the preface at the end of a work—I am more convinced than ever that the capacity to perpetrate

genocide is not limited to one culture or one people but is an inherent potential of the human condition. The task before us is to explain those special political and other circumstances that turn ordinary men and women into killers and victims.

Partial explanations like the one I propose in this book will not bring the dead back to life, nor undo the cruelty, but at least they may help us—I mean all of us who have been struck forever by the terrible knowledge of these events—to deal with our memories and to become, in Auden's phrase, "an affirming flame." Beyond that—are we expecting too much?—by linking causes to effects, valid explanations may serve as warnings of human crimes and disasters to come.

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My professional training is in comparative politics. I cannot claim to be an expert in Armenian, Ottoman, Turkish, Jewish, and German history—all areas crucial to this study. I am most grateful to the following friends and colleagues who steered me to the appropriate literatures and who invested their valuable time in criticizing various parts of the manuscript. Their help was invaluable, and without it I could not have completed this book. It goes without saying that they did not always agree with my interpretations, and if there are any errors and mistakes in the manuscript they are my own.

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