

The Workers' Opposition in Nazi Germany

- Tim Mason

Tim Mason on resistance to the Nazis from the German working class.

I want to begin with a distinction - the distinction between the political resistance of the German working class to nazi rule, and what I want to call the workers' opposition.

Resistance in this sense comprised only the clearly politically self-conscious behaviour of the adherents of persecuted organisations -the illegal, conspiratorial activities of those groups and individuals, who sought to weaken or overthrow the nazi dictatorship in the name of Social Democracy, Communism, or the trade union movement; political activity, that is, which was characterized by a general and basic rejection of, and challenge to National Socialist rule.

However, the political role of the working class in the Third Reich was not confined to this heroic and tragic underground struggle. Alongside the resilient agitation and organisation of the illegal groups, economic class conflict re-emerged in Germany on a broad front after 1936. This took forms which were not clearly political in character, as far as the demonstrable motives of the workers who took part were concerned. Indeed, in many cases it is not possible to detect in the sources any evidence at all of conscious political considerations among them. Further, this struggle for the basic economic interests of the working class does not appear to have been organised in any way. It manifested itself through spontaneous strikes, through the exercise of collective pressure on employers and on nazi organisations, through the most various acts of defiance against work-place rules and governmental decrees, through slow-downs in production, the taking of sick-leave, demonstrations of discontent, etc.

This refusal of the working class fully to subordinate itself to the nazi system, can be termed opposition: opposition which exploited the contradictions within the capitalist economic order and within the dictatorship, and heightened these contradictions. It occupied the grey area on the margins of fascist legality. It posed a massive, but not a fundamental principled challenge to the regime.

This distinction between opposition, and resistance in the working class is not a matter of the pursuit of analytical clarity for its own sake. The distinction has a real basis in the facts of the working-class experience, which is itself of central importance to any discussion of the theme: for, the effective separation of the political resistance groups from their class was a decisive success for the regime of police terror in the Third Reich. The powers of the Gestapo meant that political resistance had above all to be secret. (The only exception were the funerals of resisters who died under interrogation or 'while trying to escape'. Comrades and friends of the dead person assembled at the graveside, and the Gestapo just watched.) Class conflict in industry was, on the other hand, in all its forms, necessarily public - public in the sense that a slow-down, for example, or demands for better working conditions, were immediately registered by employers and by government agencies; indeed, after 1938 such behaviour was increasingly likely to attract the attention of the Gestapo itself.

It was, I think, in the first instance for these reasons, that the members of underground political groups did not take part in the class conflicts in industry - had they done so, they would have lost their cover, and thus have set their political work severely at risk. It is arguable, further, that this separation of resistance groups from their class was further accentuated by the character of German Communism after 1928: communist resistance groups were the most activist of all, but their illegal work was marked by the overwhelming

importance to it of ideological factors and of organisational loyalties. Before 1933 the roots of the KPD in the industrial working class were not far-flung and they were deep only in some places; thereafter, its underground struggle seems to have drawn little inspiration from class conflict in the workplace.

Thus the distinction between resistance and opposition is not imposed by the historian in hindsight, but derives from the actual situation of the working class under nazi rule. This is brought out most clearly in the reports by the Gestapo, by the party's German Labour Front and by the state labour administration on discontent and conflicts in industry. These organisations always acted on the supposition that, behind every strike, etc., stood a communist 'wire-puller' or a Marxist 'agitator'. Despite their brutal methods of interrogation, however, the police were rarely able to prove that this was the case, and on these rare occasions, they usually discovered individual ex-members of working-class parties, not underground activists. These findings were a cause of considerable doubt and puzzlement to the regime. (2)

This distinction between resistance and opposition cannot, however, be allowed to lead us to the simple conclusion that the workers' opposition was completely apolitical. Do the scale and the forms of this opposition tell us anything about its specific qualities? What is the meaning of terms like political and a-political in respect of the German working class in the Third Reich? In what sense can one speak of class conflict in a situation where the class had been deprived of the possibility of organising itself and of educating itself politically? What determined the behaviour of industrial workers in the years of nazi rule? The theme of the workers' opposition raises all these different questions of interpretation, and more.

In this brief paper it is not possible to go into detail into the institutional and economic background to these questions. But two features of the origins and establishment of the nazi dictatorship are of great direct importance for an assessment of the workers' opposition. First, it must be strongly emphasized that the organisations of the working-class movement were destroyed by force in 1933. Unlike many middle-class organizations, they were not gradually undermined from within, politically outflanked and 'coordinated' by tactical maneuvers. Taken as a whole, the German working-class movement had lost surprisingly little of its substance in the years of crisis before 1933 -the nazi party did not succeed to a significant extent in subverting the loyalty of members and supporters of the parties or the trade unions. Thus in this sector the Third Reich began with a massive act of physical destruction and repression. This swift and brutal elimination of the working-class movement had many short-term advantages to the new regime, but it was bound to leave behind a legacy of deep bitterness in the working class - which, moreover, in political and industrial terms, already looked back on a long history and a wide experience, and which had been on the whole well educated by its organisations. It cannot be stressed strongly enough that a very large proportion of the workers involved in the opposition of the late 1930s had for years been members or supporters of these working-class organisations. Fascist demagoguery could not obliterate what they had learned from this activity.

A second background point: both the political victory of Nazism over the working-class movement, and the extraordinary powers which employers gained over their own workers through the legislation of 1933-34, were consequences of the economic crisis and of mass unemployment. In a vital respect the repression of the working class began in the labour market. Alongside and beyond the political terror of 1933, the universal fear of unemployment, hunger and destitution had a strong disciplining impact on the working class, and this fear was systematically played upon. In the first two years of nazi rule, employers and the party could choose who kept or obtained a job. However, this essential material basis

of the common dictatorial power of the state, the party and capital, was inevitably eroded by the regime's policy of rearmament. (3)

Full employment which resulted from this policy, formed the basic condition for the emergence of the workers' opposition, and also gave it one of its most obvious forms of expression. Rearmament transformed mass unemployment into a labour shortage. This change took place in a labour market which remained largely unregulated until mid- 1938, for a worker's freedom to change jobs was, from the point of view of employers and the state, an acceptable mechanism for guaranteeing the supply of labour to the expanding armaments industry - acceptable, as long as it was a matter of re-allocating the unemployed. Soon, however, key groups of skilled workers, and shortly, thereafter all wage earners, found themselves in a situation in which they could sell their labour power to the highest bidder: by the end of 1938 there were 1 million vacancies, a million unfilled jobs, in the German economy as a whole. (4) Workers changed jobs within the same branch of industry, in order to earn higher wages. Job-changing increased to such an extent that in 1938-39 all people in regular employment were moving on average once every 12 months. (5) By now, only a small part of this movement of labour represented recruitment by the armaments sector from other sectors (while the sectors which, were still losing labour, especially agriculture, could not afford to do so). Job-changing now appeared above all as a major source of disruption in the factories: before a worker left, there would be long discussions on the shop-floor; he/she would need time to get used to a new job; wages increased; production costs increased still faster. Complaints from industry over these conditions became more and more numerous, more and more emphatic - a fact which, on its own, admittedly does not demonstrate any link between job-changing and workers' opposition.

This was, however, not a matter of the impersonal, automatic unfolding of the laws of supply and demand in the labour market - that sort of thing only happens in economics text books. The new possibilities for action had to be recognised and used by the workers. This occurred on the one hand through the individual worker playing the market and seeking his personal advantage wherever he could find it; such modes of action often, if not always, ran counter to the interests of industry and the regime, and were frequently associated with defiance of regulations and with breach of contract. However, more interesting in the context of this paper were actions which rested upon group solidarity among workers. From 1936 on, it was widely reported that workers were taking collective action in order to lend weight to their demands. Under the conditions of growing labour shortage, the handing in of notice was no longer an instrument of employer discipline, but rather a lever for those groups of workers who, in one way or another, could get together within their firm. Demands for wage increases, accompanied by realistic threats of a collective giving of notice, became quite frequent. These tactics were very often successful, especially, but not exclusively, in the building industry, where smaller and middle-sized firms had to reckon with the solidarity of their whole labour force. Firms in the glass and wood industries came under the same pressures during 1937; and in autumn 1938 the labour administration reported that collective negotiations and threats of this kind were growing ever more widespread -despite the general lengthening of periods of notice required. Such action by workers was frequently successful.

In many other cases collective pressures from the workers are remarked upon, without there being any mention of threats. In the coalmines and in the printing and paper industries of the Ruhr, for example, officials of the Labour Front found that they had no choice but to make wage demands on behalf of the workers - they were not supposed to act as spokesmen but the mood on the shop-floor was so solid. The fascist organisation did not have the strength to hold the government's line on wage policy at the shop-floor level, and for this reason often became the target of informally organised pressures on the part of its captive membership. In

still further cases the sources give no information concerning the specific forms of collective action, but merely remark that collective demands were raised. Among these were actions by groups of workers which did not have strong traditions of trade union militancy, such as agricultural labourers in the northern provinces of Prussia, textile workers (men and women) in Hesse and Saxony, and shop-assistants in the retail trade who, in the 18 months before the invasion of Poland, sustained a partly successful campaign for early closing on Saturdays. (6)

This type of practical solidarity was not expressly forbidden by the regime. But it required a measure of collective independence which was fundamentally incompatible with the nazi system of domination, the destruction of which was one of the regime's main goals in domestic policy. It was the solidarity of a largely unbroken class consciousness, and it was for that reason that these developments were watched so closely by government and party agencies. This class consciousness was not merely economic, at least not in the narrowest sense of the term. Trade union or social democratic yard-sticks of social justice were repeatedly brought forward by groups of workers in conflict situations, and were recognised as such by government officials, on whose records we have to rely. Thus it was repeatedly remarked upon, that workers were very well informed about the overall movements of profits, prices and wages, and could quote the relevant figures in support of their demands. The same trained eye for economic realities, the same sense of social justice is also apparent in the widespread discussions among workers about the continuing high rate of contributions for unemployment insurance in the later 1930s when unemployment was disappearing. (The government did not have sufficient confidence in its propaganda skills to advertise the fact that the money was financing the building of the autobahns!) (7) The many rumours which circulated among industrial workers during the later 1930s also demonstrate the durability and effectiveness of long years of trade unions struggles before 1933. Against a background of growing economic difficulties and bottlenecks which were obvious to all who worked, there were persistent rumours that the government wanted to abolish the 8-hour day, to cut wages, to introduce food rationing, and so on. Such rumours represented and fed on keen insights into the pattern of economic developments; indeed, in its own interest, the government ought to have been acting in accordance with them, but before June 1938 it desisted from such measures out of fear of the opposition which they would surely arouse."(8)

Fascist propaganda could not eradicate this sort of class consciousness. Loyalty to trade unionism was sometimes explicitly stated. In June 1937 for example the great miners' strike of 1889 and its 'allegedly good results' were the subject of widespread and lively discussion in the Ruhr coalfields. The previous summer, the Ministry of Labour had warned the nazi press against publishing full reports on the sit-in strikes in France. The intention of these reports was to celebrate the superiority of the German social order over the degenerate inefficiency of divided France. It was observed, however, that the reports were, for quite other reasons, attracting 'undesirably strong attention' among German industrial workers, who did not normally read the nazi press with much care. The warning was repeated in March 1937. (9)

Strike threats, heated industrial conflicts and actual strikes were in fact not infrequent in Germany after 1935. In an important policy document of October 1936 Ministers noted that strike attempts by skilled workers, in order to gain wage increases, were no longer a rarity. (10) A tabulation of strikes has recently come to light in the Wiener Library in London. For the 18-month period from February 1936 to July 1937 the officials of the Information Office of the Labour Front listed 192 strikes and strike-like protests. As a source for historians this confidential memorandum has many defects and the list of strikes is not even fully complete. But it is the best document that we have to date on this important theme, and the strikes

which it does tabulate can certainly be taken as a large and representative cross-section of those which did take place. (11)

They were nearly all small. In only 6 cases did more than 80 people take part; the average was probably around 30. In every case the strike was confined to a single workplace, in larger firms to a single department. This brings out clearly one particularly important point: police terrorism had robbed the working class of its ability to achieve spontaneous active solidarity on all but the smallest scale. Without their own organisations, groups of workers in such conflicts were heavily isolated from each other. The strikes were also all short-lived - the Gestapo, state and party officials were always on the spot the same day, often within hours. The strikes all seem to have been about questions of wages and working conditions; sometimes specific acts of chicanery by employers or by the labour exchanges furnished the occasion. Some strikes were defensive, others, it seems, offensive efforts to gain improvements; and there are trustworthy references to offensive strikes in other sources from these years. The tabulation is too sketchy to permit a more substantial analysis, but one thing does clearly stand out: in the light of the prohibition on strikes, of the permanent repression and surveillance, of the fact that there was no doubt that the Gestapo would arrest strikers, it called for a very high degree of determination and solidarity to down tools. Over ten strikes per month, spread, as they were, over most sectors of the economy, was, also, not a small number. And, of course, those groups of workers who almost came out on strike, then finally did not, do not appear in the statistics - like those in one firm, for example, who all simultaneously began to wear red-rubber washers from beer bottles around their jacket buttons. They all asserted that the washers were necessary to hold their buttons on. (12) Nothing more seems to have happened, but the fact that this incident was recorded shows that the authorities and the employers were getting nervous: industrial peace, the great national community of effort and all the other self-congratulatory propaganda slogans could not be taken for granted.

One reason for this was the weakness of the nazi presence on the shop-floor. This is brought out with unusual clarity by the report on a strike in a glass factory early in 1937. The nazi spokesmen of the workers, whose task it was to deepen the atmosphere of trust in each firm, themselves joined the 150 strikers; among these 'Councilors of Trust' were members of the SS and others who had been on training courses for the exercise of their office. (13) From the following years there are further examples of the predominance on the shop-floor of class solidarities over the political loyalties of nazism. Late in 1938, for instance, a supervisor in a large firm was charged with revising (that is, cutting) piece rates. He was a member of the nazi Storm Troopers' Organisation. Some of the men whose wages he had to cut were also Storm Troopers, and they told him that he must either refuse to do the job, or resign from the SA. Here a nazi organisation and its ideal of comradeship was being firmly used against its original purposes. (14)

That these conflicts in industry were not more severe and more numerous was due in some part to the fact that employers increasingly tended to give way to the pressure from below: weekly earnings in industry increased rapidly in the 3 years before the invasion of Poland - on average by around 17%.¹⁵ But it was for industry not just a case of giving way to worker pressure. In order to recruit additional labour, employers in the large and rapidly expanding armaments sector found it necessary to improve wages and working conditions off their own bat; necessary, furthermore, to make this connection clear in public. By poaching workers from other firms, they helped to publicize the new balance of forces in the labour market. They could not act otherwise, for on the one hand the state was unwilling to regulate the labour market in their interests, yet on the other hand was demanding rapid increases in armaments output. Poaching by means of higher wage rates, the offer of supplementary

health insurance, cheap canteen meals, generous holiday pay, assistance with travel to and from work, bonuses of all kinds, Christmas boxes, installments on a Volkswagen etc., could only have the effect of raising the workers' consciousness of their own market value - the more so, since this competition among firms for workers was not confined to inflationary job offers in the daily press, but sometimes took on rather crude forms: the football team of a big firm from Magdeburg traveled to Berlin one week-end in the autumn of 1936 in order to play a match against the team of Rheinmetall-Borsig. The Berlin firm offered its visitors considerably higher wages, and they all stayed to work for Borsig. (16) The costs of these policies were passed onto the state, in the form of higher prices for armaments and other government contracts. From the vantage point of the Reich government, it was beginning to look by 1938 as though class conflict in the labour market might be collusive as between two parties directly concerned, and as though the only certain outcome would be the undermining of the financial system. As one well-informed General put it, what was taking place here was "a war of all against all." (17)

On the whole these employers, money was not very well spent. Higher wages and welfare benefits at work did not make workers more contented, or less desirous of further material advances for themselves. One Trustee of Labour saw this problem clearly at an early stage: wage increases, he reported, 'have not improved the mood of the workers; it even seems as if the workers have become more dissatisfied'. (18) in many cases it was obvious to all that the benevolence of employers was a crudely pragmatic method of securing their labour force: bottle-necks in the engineering and machine tools sectors;

Even where there has hitherto been little evidence of a genuine sympathy for the social interest of the members of the retinues, the social conscience (of the employers) is now growing proportionately to the increasing shortage of labour. (19)

Workers were not likely to be impressed by this sort of thing:

Armaments firms are falling over themselves to introduce social reforms and welfare amenities. The fact that indiscipline can frequently be observed in precisely these firms, proves that the hoped-for psychological effects (of the welfare measures) on the workers are not taking place, and that even the opposite effects are being achieved. (20)

These attempts to placate and to bind workers to their firms through concessions and fringe benefits lead in to the second part of a consideration of the workers' opposition - to the questions of productivity and work-discipline. For, according to the official ideology, improvements to working conditions served above all the goal of raising productivity: the workers would, so it was proclaimed, honour the evidence that industry cared for them - evidence in the shape of better lighting, reduction of noise, canteens, health programmes, factory sport, etc. - by working harder. Strength through Joy was not just the name of the most notorious organisation in this field, it was also a programme.

The expectation was disappointed. In the late 1930s productivity per head seems to have fallen in many branches of industry. Both for industry and for the regime this was a decisive issue, for the trend endangered the re-armament drive and therewith the whole policy of expansion through war. Despite its importance, the problem was never investigated comprehensively or in detail at the time - a fact which throws an interesting light on the indifference of the regime to modern scientific methods, but which also makes it very difficult for the historian to interpret the trend. There is hardly any good statistical evidence. The only exception is the coalmines, where per capita productivity fell by 10% between 1935 and 1938. (21) Otherwise I only have hard figures from various building firms, in which productivity fell by between 9% and 60% in the same period. In July 1938 an informed estimate put the national fall in productivity in the building industry at 20%. At the same time

the head of the administration in Saxony put the drop in all industries at between 15% and 30%. (22) Beyond this there is a very large number of general and impressionistic reports from industrialists and from the labour administration, all of which complain about falling output and declining work-effort without putting clear numerical values to the complaints. (It is not easy to make such calculations in branches of industry where technical changes regularly alter the categories of measurement.) The aggregate economic statistics do also point in the direction of a fall in productivity, but it is not possible to do precise calculations with them. Hoffmann's indices of industrial output divide industry into different branches from the categories used for employment figures, but it is noteworthy that these indices show a slowing down in the rate of growth of output in most branches in the years 1938-39, and stagnation in one or two. (23) Thus it can probably be assumed that the problem of productivity was indeed serious, though it is not yet possible to say exactly how serious.

Neither is it possible to give a clear or definitive account of the reasons for it. A general fall in productivity can have a variety of different causes: shortages of raw materials and spare parts; bad production planning; the wearing out of plant; bottle necks in the engineering and machine tools sector; and in the mines, the attempt to exploit more difficult seams. Now there is no doubt that all of these factors did play a role in Germany in the late 1930s. It was recognised in the government and in industry, on all sides, that the hectic preparations for war, together with the relatively high level of consumption, had led to a general overstraining of the whole economic system.

However, industrialists and senior civil servants at the time were quite certain that by far the most important single factor was declining effort on the part of the workers. Their reports and memoranda from the years 1938-39 are full of examples of bad work discipline, 'declining work morale' as they called it. The source materials give the impression that detailed description of this type of behaviour was almost intended to serve in place of the missing productivity statistics. Whether or not it could be proved exactly, it was self-evident to them that the main problem was 'the human factor'. The workers were simply not co-operating.

By and large, one can probably accept them as descriptively accurate. A degree of scepticism is certainly not out of place, for it is not unknown for employers to make untrue assertions about their workers! In some cases it is indeed quite possible that reports on low productivity were filed in order to blame workers for some shortfall or other, for which otherwise the employer himself could have been called to account, some managers of armaments firms asserted for example that their workers were so tired and dissatisfied that they had deliberately prevented the punctual completion of military contracts. (24) However, they could have been telling the truth. At this distance in time the story cannot be checked. On the whole, the overwhelming number of the complaints, the fact that they come from a variety of different sources simultaneously, and the fact that individually, they could have been checked at the time by one or another branch of the state bureaucracy - are all considerations pointing to their basic reliability. And this impression is borne out when we come to examine government policy, for the government acted as if they were true.

Under the polemical umbrella heading 'declining work morale' the holders of power in state and industry threw together a rich variety of different modes of behaviour. It was widely observed, especially in the mines and the building industry, that workers went absent from the job for days on end. They were now earning enough to be able to afford it. In a mine in Silesia absenteeism increased fivefold in a 12 month period, up to 7% of the labour force; and in August and September 1939 20% of the workers were missing from Berlin armaments factories on the day after pay day each week; this in a period of war conditions. (25) Some employers desisted from imposing the fixed fines for absenteeism, lest the attitude of their workers become even more recalcitrant as a result. There was a growing refusal to work

overtime - the people wanted their rest. Bad workmanship and slow working were frequently deplored; workers brought pressure to bear on especially diligent colleagues, in order to get them to slow down. Drinking at work increased. There were frequent conflicts and quarrels with foremen and managers. Carelessness on the job led to accidents and damage to machinery, incidents which often looked like industrial sabotage. The sickness rate rose rapidly, so that many industrial insurance schemes got into the red - and here there was no question that some of this sickness was feigned, by people who just wanted to have a few days off. And so on . . . This is no more than an extremely compressed sketch of what was a very broad, diffuse and varied development .

What was really at stake in this 'collapse of labour discipline'? Formulating an answer is made the more difficult by the fact that those people, whose actions are at issue, had every reason to disguise their own motives. Secrecy and deceit were among the most important techniques of the art of survival under the nazi dictatorship. Workers who repeatedly went absent without good reason, and were then arrested, for example, were not about to tell the Gestapo that they had acted in this way because they considered the regime to be criminal, and rejected its repression, its exploitation and its war - even if this were true. This was the shortest route into the concentration camp. They spoke of being over-tired, of having to attend to family problems - which need not have been false. 'Everything is disguised today', said the spokesman of one group of workers to their employer, 'and thus we have to behave accordingly.' (26) That was perhaps the only certain truth. Our sources come entirely from those in authority, and are thus difficult to interpret, even when they contain direct or indirect quotation from workers. When asked, workers made it clear that they knew they were being lied to the whole time. They responded in kind.

On the basis of their own experience, employers and civil servants constructed for themselves two explanations of the problem. First was the hypothesis that the labour shortage had by now become so acute that 'inferior human material' was being employed on a regular basis in industry, people with physical or personality weaknesses which would have normally prevented them from gaining such jobs, the 'antisocial elements' in the language of the Gestapo. There may have been odd fragments of evidence for this piece of social darwinist speculation, but it could not account for the fact that 'work morale' was often especially bad among experienced and well paid skilled and semi-skilled workers. The authorities thus tended to on a crude version of the reserve army of labour theory, and to see the collapse of discipline as an inevitable, mechanical consequence of full employment: from 1938, almost every worker could be sure that he or she was irreplaceable, and, if sacked for bad work, sure that they could get another job. One foundation of industrial discipline was fear of unemployment, so this view ran; since this fear was no longer present, the workers were no longer putting themselves out.

This explanation is clearly too crude and global. The psychology of work, the psychology of class is not so simple. After all, even in the years 1938-40, pride in craft and pride in achievement did not entirely disappear from German industry. However, this is an inadequate rather than a totally misleading hypothesis. Full employment was a condition of the development of the workers' opposition. And there can be no question that many workers did simply exploit the new labour market situation for their own individual and immediate advantage. This attitude, in which peace and quiet, personal convenience, private needs, amusement and relaxation centrally determined behaviour at work, seems from the sources to have been especially widespread among young workers and among women workers; and a large proportion of the women who worked in industry were also young. In 1939 most workers in these two groups would have had little or no conscious experience of the working class movement. Furthermore, the education of youth under National Socialism formed an

extremely bad preparation, with its emphasis on a youth culture of excitement and adventure, for the hard routine of the industrial working week; for their part, women often had to bear the typical double burden of industrial labour and housework, and often gave priority to their households. As far as motives are concerned, this side of the decline in work discipline may have been a-political. We do not know, but it remains noteworthy that the simple private, interests of a large number of workers were coming increasingly into conflict with the demands of rearmament and war.

This point by no means exhausts the subject. 'Bad work discipline' was not just an individual matter. Here too, group solidarities were very much in evidence. From 1938 on there appear to have been fewer strikes than in the preceding years, but the informal collective pressures on employers remained very strong. Attempts to enforce a speedup, for example, often met with a resilient opposition, which rested on conscious cooperation among the workers affected. It also seems most unlikely that the mass absenteeism in certain firms came about without mutual understanding among the workers. The same applies to refusal to do overtime, and to continuing wage demands. These phenomena seem to be something more than 'bad work discipline' - these were new, class-specific forms of oppositional behaviour, dependent upon large-scale group solidarities and tactically appropriate to a regime of terroristic repression. On the state of affairs in some nearby lignite mines the War Economy Inspector in Dresden reported laconically:

Epidemic of absenteeism. Similarly, insistence upon longer holidays. Threats of dismissal without notice naturally make no impression at all.

This was March 1939. (28)

This element of collective self-assertion on the part of the working class becomes the more apparent, if the process of the collapse of work morale is set alongside the increasingly severe interventions of the state against the rights and interests of industrial labour. For a large part of the bad discipline was in fact the direct and conscious expression of resentment against the new measures of regimentation. Every new measure occasioned a new wave of opposition, and these activities cannot be dismissed as an automatic consequence of full employment and economic security.

This began with the first governmental attempts to restrict the freedom to change jobs. Workers felt strongly about this freedom, both in principle, and because it was a guarantee of the possibility of financial or professional advancement. In an engineering firm, skilled workers reacted to the new restrictions in 1937 with a dramatic mime, dragging themselves around the shop-floor as though they were chained to their work-place. A group of basket makers from Bavaria wanted to take jobs in the building industry, but were refused permission by the labour exchange; they all withdrew together from the Labour Front and refused to pay their dues. (29). Legal restrictions of this kind were extended to cover more and more branches of the economy during 1938, and everywhere they met the same resentment. They were regularly and systematically subverted by workers, who understood full well how to make their employer glad to part with them: bad work and indiscipline were among the main methods used in order to force through a desired change of employment, which had in the first instance been prohibited. This type of opposition to the new restrictions was thus to a considerable degree individualistic and instrumental - large numbers of individual workers wanted to take better jobs. The deep discontent, however, was general, and the restrictions were a frequent topic of bitter criticism.

But the next two sets of government measures hit whole groups of workers, often all the employees of particular firms. From June 1938 on the state attempted to prevent further wage increases by use of administrative force and the criminal law, and also to force through wage

reductions in two main sectors of industry. These controls led to further apathy, resignation and bitterness in the working class - they were not exactly designed to improve morale! In firms where wages were actually reduced there occurred, almost across the board, a fall in output - as if, as was observed at the time, workers on time rates wanted to cut their productivity by the same sort of amount as their wages had been cut: a striking testimony to the durability of trade union solidarities. (30)

At the same time, the government introduced a scheme of civil conscription, whereby it could compel workers to take on particular jobs by force of law; conscripts were often separated from their families. Despite the police terror, despite the propaganda campaign on behalf of sacrifice for the Fuhrer, Volk and Fatherland, etc., this measure also met with strong opposition. In Berlin, wives demonstrated at the railway stations as their menfolk were carted off to build the Siegfried Line; many conscripts simply failed to appear at their new designated place of employment; and the productivity of those who did turn up was often so low that many employers after a time decided to make no use of their right to request conscripts, and to struggle on against the labour shortage on their own, without the assistance offered by the state. Conscript labourers also mounted a series of strike actions over their legal status and their wages and working conditions. (31)

Yet all of this opposition was overshadowed by the reaction of workers to the war Measures of September 1939. The government ordered further wage cuts and more civil conscription; hours of work were lengthened and overtime bonuses abolished, paid holidays were suspended. Wage earners lost virtually all their remaining rights. The consequence was a massive wave of resentment. Absenteeism and refusals to do overtime and week-end shifts increased to such an extent that production was seriously disrupted in October. The appeal to the workers' patriotism had little effect, although the war was now a shooting war. One Secretary of State spoke of 'behaviour which in formal terms amounted to sabotage'. The government was forced to give way and to withdraw most of its war measures, lest the 'home front' collapse. (32)

Now it cannot be demonstrated that what occurred in German industry in the first weeks of the war amounted to a general rejection of the war by a large section of the working class. While it is true that the war was unpopular throughout Germany at this time, this interpretation cannot actually be proved from the sources. That is to say, we probably cannot speak of resistance in the precise sense of the term. But what happened clearly did have a quite different quality from 'bad work discipline': it had the quality of a broad denial of co-operation by the working class, a denial marked by economic class consciousness in the widest sense, and in which the solidarities of the old working-class movement were still a driving force. This refusal to co-operate was the exactly appropriate method of asserting immediate class interests within the dictatorship. More aggressive or decisive actions, the 'riot' or 'rising' which Hitler feared, (33) could hardly be brought about in the absence of organisations, and would, as everyone knew, have been repressed with ruthless brutality. And the denial of co-operation by the working class, a denial marked by economic class consciousness in the widest sense was adequate to the situation, in that its scale was sufficient to force the government to change its social and economic policies within 5-12 weeks. This was no small achievement, for the relaxations were at odds with military requirements.

Taken in the round, the opposition amounted to a new form of class struggle: a diffuse, almost wordless conflict, which lacked the rules and procedures for the temporary resolution of the issues, lacked the specific partial goals, which the existence of independent class organisations impose upon the class struggle. It was an unregulated, and seemingly endless trench war, along a badly defined, straggling and long front, in which the working class fought with the few weapons left to it (the partial withdrawal of labour power), and the

government, faced with the earlier failure of incentives to produce results, could hope only to buy time. It was reduced to a combination of material concessions and police terror.

A few representatives of the ruling groups did see what was at stake. The verdict, 'formally speaking, sabotage', I have already quoted. Perhaps a little more precise was the term 'passive resistance', which was also occasionally used at the time by civil servants. (34) The owner of a tannery in Dresden spoke of a 'disguised strike', a rather exact formulation. (35) A senior officer of the War Economy Staff tried to get behind the disguises by making a trip around the factories and mines of the Ruhr in autumn 1938. He was a prudent man and so conversed only with workers' spokesmen (presumed nazi supporters), security officers and employers. The opinions, interests and complaints which he noted bore, taken together, a fair resemblance to the programme of present day Social Democracy - in the whole system of national socialist rule and policies, only the person of Hitler seemed to meet with much approval. Workers wanted free speech, an honest press and radio, higher real wages, a free labour market with the right to change jobs, fewer collections for and fewer demands on their time by nazi organisations, and no war; between the lines a desire for the reinstatement of trade unions can be detected.(36)

To put the problem in this way inside the regime called not only for a degree of insight but also for a little courage. For terms like 'disguised strike' pointed directly to the failure of National Socialism in its central attempt to build a national community which would transcend class conflict. The report on the Ruhr workers closed with the words: 'The education of the population as a whole to the tasks which will be demanded of it by a total war with all its various burdens, this education has by no means been adequately carried out'. That the great denial by the workers did indeed carry this political implication was indirectly acknowledged by the regime itself: for the repeated warnings to workers to turn up on time, to work conscientiously, etc., all brought home to them the political, economic and military consequences of their poor work morale. Low productivity, it was stressed, meant a direct weakening of the German armaments effort, and thus after September 1939 aid to the allies, the betrayal of the German soldier. In the general crisis of the first months of war, this was not an exaggeration. At the very least, therefore, the denial of co-operation by the German working class was politicized from above. Whatever the motives of individual workers or groups of workers may have been at first in their refusal to put themselves out, whether at first purely private, of a trade union order, or secretly political - their attitudes were politicized by the regime. They were reproached with a political failure. After repeated warnings of this kind, and then threats, every act of absenteeism was at the very least in this sense a political act. (37)

Warnings had little effect. They had to be supplemented. In the summer of 1938 a large part of the labour law had effectively been transformed into criminal law: some 'slackers' were brought up in court and imprisoned, mainly to encourage the rest. (38)

But this was a cumbersome way of dealing with the problem -soon the Gestapo intervened directly, and the apparatus of police terror, with its arbitrary arrests and its labour and concentration, camps was unleashed on 'work-shy and anti-social' elements. This began before the war. One week after the invasion of Poland, Himmler announced demonstratively that a communist had been executed for refusing to work. (39). From 1938 on the maintenance of labour discipline quickly became a new central area of Gestapo responsibility. It grew with a certain necessity alongside the original main task of the Gestapo - the persecution of the political and economic organisations of the working class. (40)

Neither resistance nor opposition were able to overthrow the nazi regime. In the event, the opposition probably caused it more trouble than the resistance. The regime had to take

account of the 'disguised strike', for without efficient armaments production there would be no war of expansion. The fact that the government gave way on essential points to the workers' opposition in the autumn of 1939 probably saved the whole regime from major turmoils and domestic crisis in the first winter of World War II.

Some historians and social scientists find little surprising, little of interest in this chapter in the history of the German working class. Is it not always the case, they ask, then and now, in capitalist and in communist systems, that workers exploit a favourable labour market for their own purposes? Against this very general and rather knowing approach, one must insist upon the importance of the specific political context in which the workers' opposition against National Socialism developed. Among these particular conditions were

1. the recent physical destruction of working-class organisations;
2. the massive repression and exploitation of the working class during the years 1933-36;
3. the implausibility, even evident mendacity of nazi propaganda in the sphere of economic and social affairs (Gemeinschaft - the stress on community of interests etc.), which seems to have confirmed and intensified the alienation of the working class;
4. the fact that from 1938 the government was obviously steering a course towards war in external, and fiercer repression in internal affairs;
5. the circumstance that the workers' opposition did indeed weaken the re-armament and war effort, and was for this reason repressed and thus politicized by the regime;
6. the effects of the omnipresent police terror - this certainly meant that the extent and intensity of that opposition which was actually expressed and recorded, was considerably less than the sum of resentments, bitterness, and hatreds which workers actually carried around with them in the late 1930s. By 1939 the Gestapo made it prudent to desist from opposition, let alone from resistance.

How significant was the workers' opposition? How many people engaged in oppositional activity? How far were they drawing on traditions of the German Labour movement? How far did their actions express political antipathy to the nazi regime? These questions of interpretation necessarily remain in part open, because we don't know very much about what was going on in the heads of workers in these years - less, probably, than at any other time in the history of the German working class. The disfranchisement of this class by National Socialism included its disfranchisement before the bar of history: in very large measure it lost the possibility of documenting its experience, its situation, its consciousness for the future. The dictatorship isolated it from its own future, and from us today.

But on odd occasions the pedantry of the Gestapo does allow the disfranchised to speak for themselves. In November 1937 slips of paper were circulating in the mining town of Beuthen, Upper Silesia, which bore the motto, 'We are all aryans, for we are proletarians'. It is worth reflecting on the angry wit, the daring, and the impotence of the author of the comment; on the mindless diligence of the police officer who copied it into his notebook, then typed it up and riled his report in multiple copies, one of which went to an army staff officer in Breslau; on the dutifulness of this officer, who in turn had the motto transcribed and forwarded to his superior in Berlin, who preserved the report for posterity. (41) 'We are all aryans . . .'

But the protest in chalk was wrong. German workers were workers rather than proletarians, and that was part of the problem. Who were the German proletarians? They were those people who could, in the end or from time to time, stand the strain of experiencing the social and political order under which they lived as totally inhumane, of experiencing it in all its different guises as the enemy. They were those who, at least at some time, were not misled by

the seductive and threatening appeals to their patriotism, or to their pride in their craft skills or their powers of endurance; those who knew, or at some point realized, that Hitler was not a magical embodiment of the interests of 'the German people', whose good intentions were being constantly frustrated by his lieutenants; they were those who did not permit themselves to be reconciled to the regime by its persistent gestures in the direction of social equality and welfare, and those who did not wish to be part of a German master-race, supervising an enslaved slave labour force. The proletarians were those whom well-grounded fear of torture and execution did not hold back from acts of defiance, conspiracy and political solidarity. They were numerous. That they were neither numerous nor well organised enough, was in the first instance due to the Gestapo and its informers. However, the inability of the German working class to mount a massive, open challenge to the nazi regime, also had something to do with the difficulty which, for much of the time, most German workers had in experiencing that regime as absolutely intolerable.

Its capacity to bend a little under the pressure of opposition helped a little to draw the sting of resistance, helped to make it that much more difficult to feel and to live an active, categorical rejection. If the regime had not bent in October/November 1939 there could well have been riotous demonstrations and strikes - this matter requires exact and disciplined speculation. Quite as difficult to answer is the question: what, early in 1940, were the social and political attitudes of those workers whose absenteeism and go-slows had forced the government to bend in the previous autumn? We do not know. Some were perhaps looking for their next success in a conflict with management and the regime. Others were perhaps confirmed in a 'them-us' cynicism: extortion was indeed the only legitimate and effective mode of bargaining ... Others again may have felt a subjective relief or reconciliation, a sense of partial wrongs being partially righted. And some of the workers concerned were certainly in the German Army, being trained for the invasion of France.

The only thing which we today can be sure of, is that no one group of workers involved in the non-co-operation of 1939 knew how any other group interpreted that experience of conflict. Factual information could not be exchanged; motives, intentions and strategies could not be analysed and discussed. This particular impotence, instituted and perpetuated by the exactly synchronised machineries of terror and propaganda, made it much harder for workers to become proletarians.

This essay was originally a paper at a Ruskin Workshop. It has slowly been revised and extended in the light of the comments of colleagues and of discussions in several different seminars and conferences. It is no longer a paper, but it is not yet a comprehensive article. I had intended to develop it into a more detailed and more analytical article of some 40-50 pages, and have worked through some of the additional relevant source materials. But this intention has been overtaken both by the opening up of quite new collections of source materials in recent years (Gestapo files on individual opponents of the regime; records from the lowest levels of the civil administration in Bavaria; reports from the social democratic underground to the exile leadership), and by the progress of new research projects on particular aspects of the general themes of this essay. With the exception of the studies of the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich (the Bavaria project), of Ian Kershaw, Manchester, on popular images of Hitler, and of Detlev Peukert, Essen, on the working-class and communist resistance struggles, little of this new work has yet been published. Much of it, however, is nearing completion. The following list of researchers whose theses and projects will shortly deepen and alter our understanding of this terrible chapter in working-class history is not exhaustive - but it does show how much interest the subject now commands: Tim Ash (St. Antony's College, Oxford); Edward Harrison (University of Salford); Gunther Morsch (Technical University, Berlin); Stephen Salter (St. Antony's

College, Oxford); Annemarie Trügler (Free University, Berlin); Michael Voges (Kiel University). Several of these studies take the analysis through to the end of the war. The fact that my essay ends in 1940 is not the least of its weaknesses.

This new work has rendered absurd the idea that any article of 40-50 pages on the workers' opposition could be comprehensive. The justification for an essay on 'work in progress' at this particular time is the hope that it may serve to open up a discussion of the central issues of interpretation - a discussion which could, perhaps, take place in the pages of *History Workshop Journal*. Further, the importance of the theme is not confined to Germany and does not diminish with the end of World War II: different forms of workers' opposition and resistance to different kinds of extreme repression urgently need to be compared. However informal, such comparisons will define the problems more sharply. This discussion seems to be on the intellectual agenda for historians on the Left; and the question of opposition and resistance does also have, contingently, a certain sad political actuality.

The notion of making comparisons raises the first of two big problems of interpretation about which I am still very unsure. By deliberate implication my essay conveys the impression that the workers' opposition in Nazi Germany was something of real substance, both in its forms and in its scale. Others, however, with an eye perhaps to more recent movements among black workers and students in South Africa, or to the Sandinista movement in Nicaragua, may find it surprising that there were not massive moments of desperate insurgency and violent outrage. Did the Nazi regime not merit such moments? Perhaps the question should be turned around: why was opposition, as defined above, not more spontaneously militant? There are no simple answers on this issue. I am still not sure what it is that most needs to be accounted for, the defiance of German workers, or their ultimate containment until April/May 1945. Clearly both need to be accounted for; at issue is the crucial problem of emphasis. My emphasis upon defiance is provisional. Comparisons offer one possibility of clarifying this bitterly difficult problem.

The second uncertainty of interpretation is no less fundamental. In explaining the nature and extent of the workers' opposition, I have attached considerable significance to the schooling which millions of German wage-earners had gained as members of trade unions between 1890 and 1933. Many of their actions after 1933 look like informal trade unionism - the assertion of values and the continuation of practices which could no longer be associated with formal organisation. (There were some exceptions: the opposition of those groups of workers who had probably had no direct experience of trade unions is noted as such.) This reading of the sources has been contested by researchers into 19th century German labour history. They regard these forms of opposition as typical rather of pre than of post-trade union experience and point out correctly that it has not yet been proved that the trades which were best organised in the 1920s were the ones with the highest incidence of collective opposition in the 1930s. Was the workers' opposition a forcibly induced regression in terms of working-class tactics, a retreat into primitive forms of bargaining in which sheer resentment was the dominant motive and in which the never-organised workers could play a greater role than the ex-union members, precisely because they were not weighed down with experience (= caution, sense of order?) of formally organised class conflict? I doubt it. But it is a good question. It is a question about the quality of the affiliation of German industrial workers to their unions in the years 1914-33. How much these trade unions mattered in the lives of their members, what they learned from them, are questions which have not yet been systematically investigated. There can of course be no general answer - conditions varied from place to place, trade to trade, time to time, and union membership fluctuated quite violently during these two decades. For the moment, however, I am inclined to stick by my provisional impression that the skills and social values which informed much (clearly not all) of the

workers' opposition after 1933 had been produced by the organised working-class movement before it was destroyed in that year. A truly pre-trade union workers' opposition would perhaps have been more desperate and more violent, less canny. But this question, like the preceding one, and several others of lesser significance, is wide open. The answers will be plural and complicated. Work is in progress.

Notes:

1. The assistance and encouragement which Raphael Samuel and Jane Caplan gave me in all stages of the work on this essay went beyond the call of normal editorial duty.
2. The division between resistance and opposition was not, of course, absolute. In 1938 the exiled leadership of the Communist party encouraged underground resistance workers to concentrate their word-of-mouth propaganda in the factories on day-to-day issues of wages, deductions from pay, working conditions, etc. - that is, on the sorts of issues which were often the occasion of open opposition by groups of workers. And in 1939 a Communist Party pamphlet, 'The Ten Commandments', circulated in the Ruhr, advising workers on how to cause the maximum trouble in the mines and factories without running too much risk of arrest: that is, by raising as many questions as possible with management about industrial safety, etc., in order to slow down production. My evidence suggests, however, that oppositional forms of behaviour in industry were widespread before the KPD adopted this strategy, and were not dependent upon underground encouragement for their vitality; further, that underground resistance workers, for very good reasons, did not themselves play a prominent role in oppositional activities. But there is room for much more research.
3. For a detailed discussion of these two background points, see T.W.Mason *Sozialpolitik im Dritten Reich*, Opladen, 1977, ch.II-IV.
4. Minister of Labour to Lammers, Reich Chancellery, 17 December 1938, in T.W.Mason, ed., *Arbeiterklasse und Volksgemeinschaft*, Opladen, 1975, doc.no. 149.
5. F.Syrup, *Hundert Jahre staatliche Sozialpolitik*, ed., O.Neuloh, Stuttgart, 1957, p.423.
6. The above examples are taken from the very detailed reports of the Trustees of Labour (high state officials) which are reprinted in Mason, ed., *Arbeiterklasse und Volksgemeinschaft*.
7. The files of the Gestapo, the Trustees of Labour and the armed forces' War Economy Inspectors contain many references to discontent over this issue in 1938. For the way in which the insurance funds were in fact used see the official Labour Front publication, *Deutsche Sozialpolitik 1938*, pp.244ff.
8. Details of the rumours are contained in the reports of the Trustees of Labour (see Mason, *Arbeiterklasse*). In his sociological study of rumours in Nazi Germany, *Der zerredete Widerstand*, Dusseldorf, 1970, Franz Dröge persistently underestimates the experience and intelligence which was necessary in order to generate plausible rumours within the working class. The topic merits further analysis.
9. Reports of the Trustees of Labour in Mason, *Arbeiterklasse*, doc.no. 41, 30.
10. Detailed memorandum of Ministries of Labour and Economics on labour policy and legislation for the new Four Year Plan, Mason, *Arbeiterklasse*, doc-no. 3.
11. The main report is cyclostyled, and is entitled 'Arbeitsniederlegungen', Folgell. The file in the Wiener Library also includes one other report by the Information Office of the DAF and one number of its bulletin, 'I-Nachrichten', both of which contain supplementary information on strikes.

12. Gestapo L'œneburg, annual report for 1937, Bundesarchiv Koblenz (in future HA), R58, file 457.
13. Trustees' reports, February 1937, Mason, Arbeiterklasse, doc.no. 27.
14. Trustees' reports, last quarter 1938, Mason, Arbeiterklasse, doc.no. 150.
15. G.Bry, Wages in Germany 1871-1945, Princeton, 1960, p.243.
16. War Economy Inspector, Hanover, to W.Stab, 15 September 1936 (appendix), Bundesarchiv-Milit'œrarchiv Freiburg (in future BA/MA), WiIF5, file 202. The firm which lost its team was almost certainly Krupp.
17. Cf.General Thomas as quoted by B.A.Carroll ,Design for Total War,The Hague 1968, p.210 (21 October 1939). General Keitel used a very similar phrase with specific reference to the economy at a meeting of the Reich Defence Committee, 15 December 1938, BA/MA, WiIF5, file 560/2. And Goring spoke in the same vein to the Reich Defence Council, 18 November 1938, Mason, Arbeiterklasse, doc.no. 152. It is important to note that members of the dictatorial elite saw social and economic developments in this way at the time.
18. Trustees' reports, September 1937, Mason, Arbeiterklasse, doc.no. 45.
19. Trustees' reports, third quarter 1938, Mason, Arbeiterklasse, doc.no. 136.
20. W.Stab, compilation of War Economy Inspectors' reports, 20February 1939, BA/MA, WiIF5. file 176.
21. Mason, Arbeiterklasse, ch.XI
22. 'Der Deutsche Volkswirt', 22 July 1938; Oberpr'œsident of Saxony to Ministry of Economics, 25 April 1938, HA, R41, file 151.
23. See W.G.Hoffmann, Der Wachstum der deutschen Volkswirtschaft seit der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts, Berlin/Heidelberg/New York, 1965, pp. 70-5, 346, 354, 362, 389-95; also Bry, Wages, p.20; and Statistisches Handbuch von Deutschland 1928-1944, Munich, 1949, ch.Vc.
24. War Economy Inspector, Berlin, to W.Stab,18 August 1939,BA/MA,WOI-8,file282. 25 War Economy Inspector, Breslau, to W.Stab, 27 July 1939, BA/MA WOI-8, file 287; and War Economy Inspector, Berlin, to W.Stab, 19 September 1939, BA/MA, WOI-8, file 282.
26. War Economy Inspector, Dresden, to W.Stab, 17 August 1939, BA/MA, WOI-8, file 283.
27. On the contradictions between the nazi ideology of female domesticity and the needsof German wartime industry, see T.Mason, 'Women in Nazi Germany, 1925-1940', in History W-orkshop Journal, I and 2, 1976.
28. W.Stab, compilation of War Economy Inspectors' reports, 10 March 1939, BA/MA. WiIF5, file 176.
29. Trustees' reports for March and September 1937, Mason, Arbeiterklasse, doc.no. 30, 45.
30. War Economy Inspector, Wiesbaden, to W.Stab, 9 March 1939, BA/MA, WOI-8, file 291.
31. For details see Mason, Arbeiterklasse, ch.XIII.
32. I have published a brief sketch of this crisis in 'Labour in the Third Reich 1933-1939'. Past & Present, 33, April 1966. For full documentation see Arbeiterklasse, ch.XXI.
33. See A.Speff , Etinnerungen, Frankfurt/M 1969, pp. 173, 229.
34. Both Trustees of Labour and War Army Inspectors spoke of the workers' opposition as 'passive resistance' in the later 1930s.

35. War Economy Inspector, Dresden, to W.Stab, 17 August 1939, BA/MA, WOI-8, file 283.
36. War Economy Inspector, Munster, to W.Stab, 3 September 1938, HA/MA, WiIF5, file 187.
37. The files of the personnel department of the (then) IG Farben Film Factory at Wolfen give a very detailed picture of this build-up of managerial and political pressure against slack discipline', 1939-40.
38. Criminal prosecutions for indiscipline at work had been made possible by the Wage Decree of June 1938. The Trustees acted as prosecutors. In November 1939 one Trustee had over 1,000 such prosecutions pending in his district- War Economy Inspector, Munster, to W-Stab, 22 November 1939, BA/MA, W08, file 106/17.
39. W.Shirer, Berlin Diary, London, 1941, entry for 8 September 1939; M.Broszat, " The Concentration Camps 1933-1945' in Anatomy of the SS State, (paperback) St. Albans, 1970, p.210.
40. For examples of the rapid growth of Gestapo activity in big industrial firms(often at the invitation of management), see W.Stab, compilation of War Economy Inspectors Reports, 20 April 1939 (Nuremberg district), BA/MA, WiIF5, file 176; and notes by the Hamburg Inspector in November 1939, HA/MA, W08, file 110/3.
41. War Economy Inspector, Breslau, to W.Stab, report for November 1937, BA/MA, WOI-8, file 265.e

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