Introduction

> The streets on the way back into central Berlin seemed unnaturally quiet, and when [detective Xavier] March reached Werdescher-Markt, he discovered the reason. A large notice board in the foyer announced there would be a government statement at 4:30 . . . He was just in time . . .
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> How many of these events could March remember? . . . In '38, he had been called out of his classroom to hear that . . . Austria had returned to the Fatherland . . .
>
> He had been at sea for the next few broadcasts. Victory over Russia in the spring of '43 – a triumph for the Führer's strategic genius! . . .
>
> Peace with the British in '44 – a triumph for the Führer's counter-intelligence genius! . . .
>
> Peace with the Americans in '46 – a triumph for the Führer's scientific genius! When America had defeated Japan by detonating an atomic bomb, the Führer had sent a V-3 rocket to explode in the skies over New York to prove he could retaliate in kind if struck. After that, the war had dwindled to . . . a nuclear stalemate the diplomats called the cold war.[1]

British novelist Robert Harris's description of a Nazi-dominated Europe after World War II in his international bestseller, *Fatherland* (1992), provides probably the best-known example of an unusual and increasingly prominent way in which the experience of Nazism has come to shape the Western imagination. Harris's novel is a work of "alternate history," a counterfactual mode of narrative representation that, in recent years, has been applied with striking frequency to the subject of the Third Reich. Since the end of World War II, and particularly in the last generation, numerous alternate histories of the Third Reich have appeared in Great Britain, the United States, Germany, and elsewhere in the form of novels, short stories, films, television broadcasts, plays, comic books, and historical essays. These diverse works have explored an equally diverse range of questions: What if the Nazis had won World War II? What if Adolf

Hitler had escaped from Nazi Germany in 1945 and gone into hiding in the jungles of South America? What if Hitler had been assassinated or had never been born? What if the Holocaust had been completed or could somehow be undone? Such counterfactual questions may initially strike us as absurd, even pointless. But they have been posed by an astonishingly varied range of people and appeared in a dizzying array of venues. Alternate histories on the subject of Nazism have been produced by high-brow writers like Philip Roth, prodigious mass-market novelists such as Harry Turtledove, playwrights like Noël Coward, politicians such as Newt Gingrich, filmmakers like Armin Mueller-Stahl, and historians such as John Lukacs. "What if?" scenarios involving the Third Reich have been featured in American television shows like *The Twilight Zone*, *Saturday Night Live*, and *Star Trek*, satirical journals like *National Lampoon* and *The Onion*, comic books like *Strange Adventures* and *The Justice League of America,* and innumerable internet web sites. The list is an eclectic one. But it demonstrates a clear trend: speculating about alternate outcomes to the Nazi era has become a notable phenomenon in Western popular culture.

What explains the growing tendency to wonder how the history of the Third Reich might have turned out differently? My interest in this question dates back over a decade to the year 1993 when I – like millions of readers around the same time – picked up a copy of Robert Harris's novel *Fatherland*, in my case to bring along for "light" reading on a research trip to Germany. I must confess that my encounter with *Fatherland* was hardly a transformative experience. Reading it was entertaining, but the novel hardly converted me into an avid fan of alternate history. In the early 1990s, as Europeans and Americans were fervently marking the fiftieth anniversary of the pivotal events of World War II, my attention was largely focused on how the Germans were coming to terms with the *real* historical legacy of the Third Reich half a century after its collapse. Nevertheless, in the ensuing years my interest in alternate history gradually, if imperceptibly, grew. Ironically enough, the reason was not so much my already strong interest in the past as my increasing fascination with the present. During the second half of the 1990s, the information revolution hit the mainstream and I, like so many others, became more and more intrigued with the internet and the new culture it was spawning. As I grappled with the concept of "cyberspace" and became aware of the blurring boundaries between the real and the imagined, I became reacquainted with the work of Philip K. Dick, a writer who was being celebrated for having anticipated the rise of a virtual world.[2] I had read Dick's classic novel depicting a Nazi

victory in World War II, *The Man in the High Castle*, some years earlier, but only now began to see it from a new perspective. Soon enough, I recognized Dick's connection to Harris, and then to other counterfactual texts I had read long before by such disparate figures as William Shirer, Ralph Giordano, and George Steiner. Finally, thanks to the world wide web, I learned that my nascent object of interest was shared by others and that it had a name – alternate history.

As I immersed myself in the field of alternate history and learned of the surprisingly large number of counterfactual narratives that had been produced on the subject of Nazism, I became convinced that it represented a significant trend. I was especially encouraged in this belief after I realized that the phenomenon of alternate history was hardly new, but rather a relatively well-established genre. As far back as World War II, and then throughout the postwar era, a wide range of Europeans and Americans had been prompted to produce highly elaborate counterfactual narratives about the Third Reich. This compulsion had intensified in the last generation, I recognized, but it was hardly unprecedented. In reflecting upon these facts, I became curious about a variety of related questions: What set of motivations or concerns had led people over the years to wonder "what if?" with respect to the Nazi era? How had they imagined that the world might have been different? What explained the growth of such accounts in recent years? Finally, and most importantly, what did alternate histories reveal about the evolving place of the Nazi past in Western memory? My longtime interest in the shifting status of the Nazi legacy in postwar consciousness made this question the most intriguing of all. In setting out to write this study, therefore, I decided to focus on the various ways in which alternate history could help shed light upon the subject of historical memory.

In the process of researching and writing this book, however, I was surprised to encounter deep-seated resistance to alternate history as a genre worthy of serious study. Scholars of alternate history commonly lament the lack of respect for their subject. Yet the genre's growing prominence had led me to assume that such opposition had waned. Personal experience taught me otherwise. At conferences where I spoke about alternate history, more than a few prominent scholars raised epistemological, methodological, and even moral objections to it. Some argued that since history deals solely with the description and interpretation of events that really happened, exploring what *might have happened but never did* amounted to little more than idle speculation based on sheer fancy or wishful thinking. Others expressed skepticism about the value of examining works of popular

culture, insisting that they were of inferior quality compared with works of high culture, that they were of marginal relevance, and that they were therefore unworthy of serious consideration. I suspect that the moralistic undertones to these objections, finally, were due to the fact that the particular alternate histories in question focused on the highly sensitive subject of the Third Reich. Several scholars expressed qualms about giving attention to narratives whose unconventional conclusions about the Nazi past they regarded as impious, at best, and dangerously revisionist, at worst. Such works, they insisted, should simply be ignored as the rantings of the lunatic fringe.

As I hope to show in the pages that follow, however, all of these objections fail to appreciate alternate history's significance as an important cultural phenomenon and overlook its unique ability to provide insights into the dynamics of remembrance. In writing *The World Hitler Never Made*, I hope to convince readers of alternate history's legitimacy as a subject of scholarly inquiry and persuade them that examining tales of what never happened can help us understand the memory of what did.

THE RISE OF ALTERNATE HISTORY

Understanding the appearance of alternate histories of Nazism requires understanding alternate history itself.[3] As a genre of narrative representation, alternate history resists easy classification. It transcends traditional cultural categories, being simultaneously a sub-field of history, a sub-genre of science fiction, and a mode of expression that can easily assume literary, cinematic, dramatic, or analytical forms.[4] At the most basic level, however, tales of alternate history – or what have been termed "allohistorical" or "uchronian" narratives – investigate the possible consequences of "what if" questions within specific historical contexts.[5] What if Jesus had escaped crucifixion? What if Columbus had never discovered the New World? What if the South had won the American Civil War? In posing and answering such questions, alternate histories assume a variety of different narrative forms. Those produced by historians and other scholars usually take the form of sober analytical essays, while those produced by novelists, filmmakers, and playwrights assume a more overtly fictional form through the use of such familiar narrative devices as plot development, setting, and character portrayal.[6] What links such "analytical" and "fictional" alternate histories is their exploration of how the alteration of some variable in the historical record would have changed the overall course of historical events. The inclusion of this element – often called a "point of divergence" – is

what distinguishes alternate history from other related genres, such as historical fiction. Alternate history, to be sure, is far from monolithic and has various narrative cousins, some of which, such as "secret histories" and "future histories," I have included in this study.[7] Without getting bogged down by complex taxonomical distinctions, however, alternate histories are essentially defined by an "estranging" rather than a mimetic relationship to historical reality.[8]

As a genre of narrative representation, alternate history is an age-old phenomenon. Indeed, it traces its roots back to the origins of Western historiography itself. No less a figure than the Greek historian Herodotus speculated about the possible consequences of the Persians defeating the Greeks at Marathon in the year 490 B.C.E., while the Roman historian Livy wondered how the Roman empire would have fared against the armies of Alexander the Great.[9] Ever since antiquity, the posing of counterfactual questions has constituted an implicit, if underacknowledged, component of historical thought, helping historians establish causal connections and draw moral conclusions in interpreting the past.[10] Yet, with the rise of modern "scientific" historiography in the nineteenth century, allohistorical reasoning became stigmatized as empirically unverifiable and was banished to the realm of lighthearted cocktail party conversations and parlor games.[11] As a result, alternate history slowly migrated to the field of imaginative literature. It is no coincidence that the first allohistorical novels appeared in the mid-nineteenth century, most notably Charles Renouvier's *Uchronie* (1876), which lent the genre one of its defining terms.[12] Up through the first half of the early twentieth century, both fictional and analytical alternate histories appeared largely in scattered pulp science fiction magazines and scholarly anthologies.[13] On the whole, the genre remained fairly marginalized, known only to a handful of ardent practitioners.

Since the end of World War II, and especially since the 1960s, however, alternate history has gained both in popularity and respectability.[14] The mass media's recognition of alternate history as a contemporary phenomenon in the late 1990s is the most obvious indication of this trend.[15] But this new attention is itself the result of the even more notable increase in the publication of alternate history novels and short story collections.[16] Further evidence of alternate history's new status is provided by the fact that the writers of allohistorical novels no longer hail exclusively from science fiction circles but also from the cultural mainstream.[17] The proliferation of alternate history web sites, meanwhile, reflects the genre's popularity among the general public.[18] Overall, however, the best evidence for the

increased acceptance of alternate history has been its embrace by the academic community, which has demonstrated a growing interest in the subject with a variety of recent publications.[19] Especially as the most skeptical academics of all – historians – have slowly begun to set aside their longtime reservations about the field, it is likely that alternate history will continue to gain in prominence and respectability.

It is, fittingly enough, still a matter of speculation why the fascination with alternate history has grown in recent years, but it seems to be the byproduct of broader political and cultural trends. To begin with, the new prominence of alternate history reflects the progressive discrediting of political ideologies in the West since 1945. In insisting that everything in the past could have been different, in stressing the role of contingency in history, and in emphasizing the open-endedness of historical change, alternate history is inherently anti-deterministic.[20] It is no coincidence that the upsurge in allohistorical thinking has taken place in an era where deterministic political ideologies have come under unprecedented attack from the political right, left, and center. The emergence of our post-ideological age began in the immediate aftermath of World War II, when rightwing intellectuals, eager to distance themselves from the failure of fascism, proclaimed the dawning of a new era of "posthistory."[21] By the late 1960s, leftwing intellectuals, chastened by the failure of socialist radicalism in Western Europe, helped further to erode the authority of political ideologies by establishing the foundation for the postmodern movement's rejection of all totalizing "metanarratives" in the 1970s.[22] Finally, the end of the cold war and the collapse of communism in the late 1980s prompted the belief among liberals that humankind had reached the end point of its ideological evolution and, indeed, had reached "the end of history" itself.[23]

The end of ideological struggle has promoted the rise of allohistorical thinking in diverse ways. Paradoxically, such thinking has been advanced by a simultaneous increase in both confidence and insecurity since the end of the cold war. On the one hand, by declaring liberalism victorious, the end of ideological struggle initially gave many in the West the security to reconsider whether our present-day world was indeed inevitable or whether other outcomes – once thought too frightening to consider – were ever possible. It is only since the threats of fascism and communism have been eliminated that historians have begun to reconsider whether liberalism's twentieth-century triumph over them had to occur as it did.[24] On the other hand, by opening up new ways for history to get "restarted" again, the end of ideological struggle has made us painfully aware of the open-ended

nature of historical development. The end of the cold war has produced new worries in the West – about resurgent nationalism, religious fundamentalism, environmental destruction, and, most recently, global terrorism – that have contributed to an atmosphere of renewed insecurity. In our current transitional era, in which the future is less clear than ever, we recognize that nothing is inevitable at all.[25]

Closely tied to the death of political ideologies in promoting the upsurge of alternate history is the emergence of the cultural movement of postmodernism.[26] While alternate history clearly predates the rise of postmodernism, the latter movement has certainly enabled the former to move into the mainstream.[27] Postmodernism, of course, is a complex phenomenon that has shaped Western culture in a wide variety of ways. But it is in its distinct relationship to history in particular that it has helped to encourage the acceptance of allohistorical thinking. Postmodernism's playfully ironic relationship to history (seen most vividly in the simulated historical environments of postmodern architecture) has found expression in alternate history's playful rearranging of the narratives of real history.[28] Indeed, the blurring of fact and fiction so intrinsic to the field of alternate history mirrors postmodernism's tendency to blur the once-rigid boundaries that separated different realms of culture.[29] At the same time, the postmodern movement's general valorization of "the other" and its attempt to resurrect suppressed or alternate voices dovetails with alternate history's promotion of unconventional views of the past. Finally, postmodernism has encouraged the rise of a more subjective and relativistic variety of historical consciousness so necessary for allohistorical speculation.[30] If, as historians now recognize, history is not about discovering a single "truth" about the past but understanding how diverse contingent factors determine its varying representation, it is no wonder that accounts of the past that diverge from the accepted historical record have begun to proliferate as never before. All of these general trends have eroded the traditional dominance of an objectivist, scientific kind of historiography and have helped foster the acceptance of its alternate cousin.

Beyond the influence of postmodernism, recent scientific trends have further promoted allohistorical thinking. Ever since the appearance of Einstein's theory of relativity and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, modern science has been moving away from determinism and towards a belief in indeterminacy. The notion of "complexity theory" or "chaos theory," which asserts that some universal laws are so complex that they appear to be chaotic or random in appearance, has lessened the appeal of determinstic explanations of history. Evolutionary biology has shed light

on the profound role of chance events – like meteor strikes – in negating seemingly linear evolutionary patterns based on pre-existing genetic advantages. Recent scientific theories regarding parallel or multiple universes can also be seen as sustaining allohistorical speculation.[31] As a result of such scientific theories, historians like Niall Ferguson have recommended that the field of history grant new respect to counterfactual speculation and embrace something known as "chaostory."[32] Such an amended notion of history would aid our understanding of historical causation by considering the probability of plausible alternatives to the real historical record. It would make us realize that in order to understand "how it actually was" we have to understand "how it actually wasn't."[33]

The new prominence of alternate history can also be seen as a byproduct of technological trends, specifically the "information revolution." Through the appearance of new, digitally based computer and communications technologies, most notably the internet, we have witnessed the birth of cyberspace, a realm of existence that has broken the restrictions of real time and space and introduced us to an alternate or "virtual" reality. In a world where the digital alteration of photographs has become commonplace on magazine covers, where digitally altered (or generated) actors populate movie screens, and where online chats replace face-to-face contact, we have become increasingly separated from the real world. It is little wonder, then, that in such a climate our imaginations have become separated from the constraints of real history as well.[34] As the alternate realm of cyberspace becomes the place where we live much of our daily lives in the present, so too does our capacity – and perhaps inclination – to imagine an alternate realm for the past.

The new interest in alternate history can further be explained by the growing presence of what might be called a speculative sensibility within contemporary popular culture. Instead of simply mirroring reality, recent works of film and fiction have begun to explore alternatives to it. This speculative sensibility has been most noticeable of late in major motion pictures – among them, *Sliding Doors*, *Run Lola Run*, *Femme Fatale*, and *The Butterfly Effect* – which have portrayed small points of divergence in the lives of the central characters leading to dramatically different outcomes.[35] A similar embrace of speculation has further been visible in the decision of directors to allow audiences to select alternate endings to their films according to personal preference.[36] And the tendency to envision alternatives has found expression in the increasing popularity of "fan fiction" – where amateur writers supply their own supplementary narratives to established television shows and literary series. The growth of

this speculative impulse can be seen as part of a larger imaginative turn within popular culture in general. Over the course of the last generation, certain genres of narrative representation – especially science fiction and fantasy – have left their former location on the cultural periphery and assumed mainstream status. Beginning with the emergence of the "New Wave" of socially conscious science fiction literature in the late 1960s, through the Hollywood blockbuster space epics of Spielberg and Lucas in the 1970s and 1980s, all the way up to the current vogue for Philip K. Dick, science fiction has gained a sizable share of the pop culture market.[37] The same can be said about the genre of fantasy, as seen in the enduring popularity of J. R. R. Tolkien's epic novel (and Peter Jackson's recent Oscar-winning cinematic portrayal of) *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as the immense success of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Both genres, of course, are defined by their vivid imagination of alternate worlds far removed from contemporary reality – the world of science fiction typically set in a speculative future, that of fantasy situated in a magical, mythological past.[38] The popularity of both, however, seems to have facilitated the acceptance of that one related genre that focuses its imaginative gaze upon the *actual* past – alternate history. As allohistorical narratives rely on the same imaginative speculation as science fiction and fantasy narratives, it is no wonder that the first-named have ridden the coat-tails of the other two to new prominence.

Finally, the new prominence of alternate history is explained by the acceleration of what has been called the "Entertainment Revolution."[39] The emergence of entertainment as one of the primary standards of value in modern Western society is a complex phenomenon with distant origins, but it has become especially apparent in recent years.[40] If steady economic prosperity, an increase in leisure time, and growing opportunities for mass consumption explain the general public's insatiable appetite for pleasurable diversion, the fiercely competitive (but also immensely lucrative) forces of the capitalist free market explain why the television, film, newspaper, and book publishing industries – not to mention less overtly commercially minded fields like politics, religion, and education – have all attempted to lure viewers, readers, and supporters by entertaining them. Various observers have pointed out the worrisome consequences of this phenomenon: the shrinking attention span of a general public more interested in superficial images than complex analysis; the fascination with celebrity, scandal, and sensationalism; the dumbing-down of real news into "infotainment"; not to mention the encouragement of increasingly extreme behavior in the effort to satiate the craving for diversion.[41] Few fields have been spared this

trend, not even the ivory tower world of academia, which has recently witnessed the rise of media-savvy, celebrity professors who can entertain with the same skill as television personalities. The discipline of history, too, has been affected by the entertainment revolution, as is demonstrated by the emergence of its own "media dons" like Simon Schama, Niall Ferguson, and Andrew Roberts, the success of the *History Channel*, and the increasing tendency of historical scholarship to focus on sensationalistic events like criminal trials, massacres, and other scandals (a genre recently dubbed "the new mystery history").[42] But the impact of entertainment on history is perhaps most obvious in the new popularity of alternate history itself. Unlike conventional history, which remains largely constrained by the serious imperatives of analysis and enlightenment, alternate history's penchant for the unconventional, the sensationalistic, and the irreverent caters to the general public's hunger for pleasurable diversion. Alternate history, in a word, is "fun." And in a culture increasingly oriented towards fun, it was probably only a matter of time before the genre's money-making potential was recognized and it established a firm niche for itself in the competitive publishing industry.

And yet, no matter how much alternate history's new prominence lies in recent cultural trends, the genre's appeal may ultimately be rooted in deeper human urges. It may well lie within our very nature as human beings, in fact, to engage in counterfactual speculation. Many of us at one point or another have doubtless asked the question "what if?" about pivotal moments in our personal lives: What if we had attended a different school, taken a different job, lived in a different place? What if we had never met certain individuals who became colleagues, friends, or spouses? In short, what if we had decided to go down Robert Frost's famous "Road Not Taken?" *Why* we ask such questions – and the issue of *when* we ask them – is far from simple, but at the risk of over-generalizing, it seems clear that when we speculate about what might have happened if certain events had or had not occurred in our past, we are really expressing our feelings about the present.[43] When we ask "what if?" we are either expressing gratitude that things worked out as they did or regret that they did not occur differently. The same concerns are manifest in the broader realm of alternate history.

Alternate history is inherently presentist.[44] It explores the past less for its own sake than to utilize it instrumentally to comment upon the state of the contemporary world. When the producers of alternate histories speculate on how the past might have been different, they invariably express their own highly subjective present-day hopes and fears.[45] It is no coincidence,