INTRODUCTION

Originally mocked, subsequently feared, posthumously vilified, Adolf Hitler today is becoming normalized. Throughout the Western world, the Nazi dictator has long been regarded as the epitome of evil. But since the turn of the millennium, he has been increasingly transformed into a more ambiguous figure. Nowhere is this transformation clearer than on the Internet. Anyone who conducts a simple image search of Hitler on the World Wide Web will encounter an eclectic array of representations, ranging from archival photographs documenting the dictator's role in the Third Reich to digitally altered images that spoof him for laughs. The diversity of images is striking, but what is most notable is how the line separating them is beginning to blur. As discerning web users probably know, certain photographs of Hitler are now doing double duty, serving the purpose of both documentation and exploitation.

Consider Figure 1. Originally taken by Hitler's personal photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann, in his Munich studio in 1927, it is one of a famous series of photographs that portray the then struggling Nazi party leader meticulously practicing his oratorical choreography.[1] The photograph depicts Hitler in a pose of fanatical intensity, his fists clenched, his face contorted in an expression of fury about what we can only imagine was one of the countless grievances that fueled his political agenda. As a document of history, the photograph is significant for showing how Hitler methodically rehearsed what were widely thought to be "spontaneous" gestures, a fact that explains why the Nazi party leader, eager to protect his image as a "naturally" gifted

Figure 1. This photograph of Hitler, taken by his personal photographer Heinrich Hoffmann in 1927, was part of a larger series of photos in which the Nazi party leader rehearsed his "spontaneous" oratorical gestures for the camera.

orator, forbade the image – and the entire series of which it was part – from being shown to the German public during his lifetime.[2]

Hoffmann's photograph is not merely a document of history, however, but a document of memory thanks to its recent transformation on the Internet. More than eighty years after it was originally taken, Hoffmann's photo appeared on the popular website, Meme Generator, having been dramatically altered by the addition of a 1970s-style mirror ball over the Nazi dictator's head (Figure 2).[3] The mashup image, called "Disco Hitler," radically subverts the original photograph's intended purpose of portraying the Nazi leader as a passionate politician by satirically depicting him as a dexterous dancer. The transfiguration does not stop there, however. Meme Generator allows web users to add humorous captions to the digitally altered image, thereby transforming it into an "image macro."[4] The term may not be familiar to average readers, but image macros are a staple of contemporary Internet culture. Comprised of photographs with superimposed texts rendered in (by now ubiquitous) Impact font, image macros seek to make people laugh by juxtaposing images and texts in ironic, incongruous, or absurd combinations. Many such images have proliferated on Internet

Figure 2. "Disco Hitler" is one of the more popular image macros on the Internet that lampoons Hitler. Thousands of web users have added crudely humorous captions to the image on websites, such as Meme Generator. This particular caption is a German-themed pun on the well-known rap phrase, "Where My Bitches At?"

websites, forums, and imageboards in recent years – so much so, that image macros have risen to the status of Internet "memes," ideas that have spread virally and achieved iconic status on the World Wide Web. "Disco Hitler" is one of the more popular image macros of the Nazi dictator on the Internet, with nearly three thousand currently in existence on Meme Generator alone.[5] Although their captions appear in many different languages, all of them strive to be humorous, albeit in different ways. Some seek laughs by employing crude puns and occasional German words, for instance: "Disco Hitler Says Stalin Alive!" and "Wehrmacht Bitches At?" Others end up offending rather than amusing, as with the tasteless phrases: "I Said 'A Glass of Juice,' Not Gas the Jews!" and "Six Million! New High Score!" Still other captions veer toward the absurd, as with "I Did It for the Lulz."[6]

These and countless other versions of "Disco Hitler" are merely a tiny fraction of the myriad image macros that poke fun at the Nazi dictator on the Internet. An estimated 61,000 Hitler-related image macros are currently listed on Meme Generator and thousands more exist on competing meme-generating sites.[7] They include the
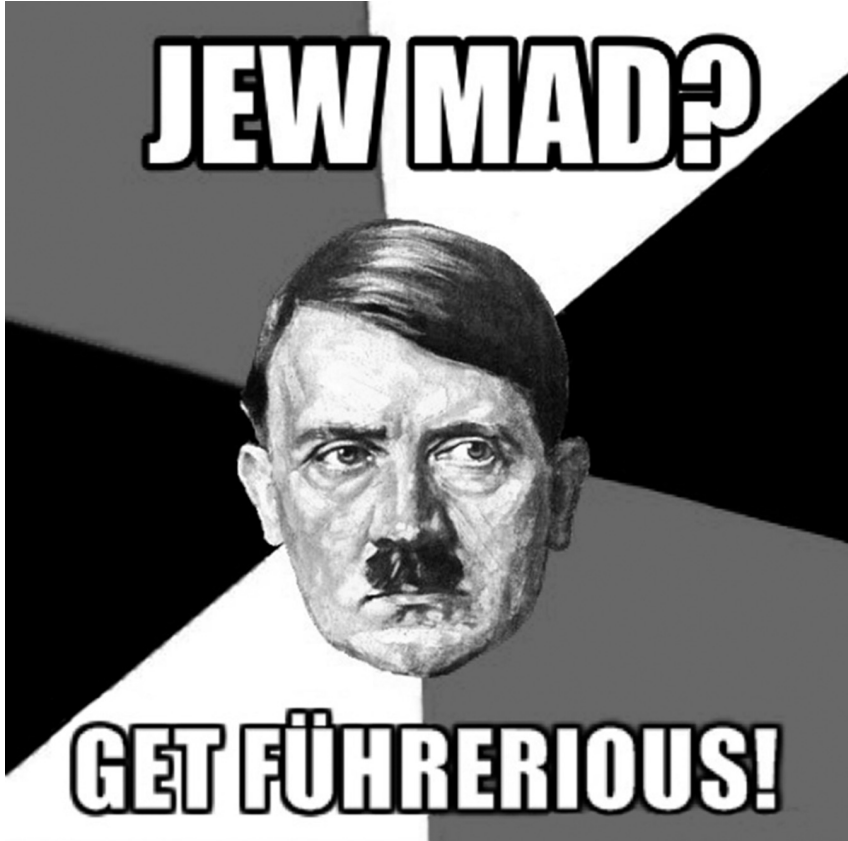
Figure 3. "Advice Hitler" is probably the best-known image macro of the Nazi dictator on the Internet. A take-off of the famous meme, Advice Dog, it depicts the Nazi dictator offering words of "advice," often in the form of groan-inducing puns.

ever-popular "Advice Hitler" (a knock-off of the famous "Advice Dog" meme), which features the Nazi dictator's disembodied head – set against the backdrop of a black, white, and red color wheel – dispensing words of bad "advice" (Figure 3). There is "Bedtime Hitler," depicting a pajama-clad Führer riding a toboggan across a night-time sky. There is "Chilling Hitler," which shows the dictator relaxing with a newspaper on a patio chair in Berchtesgaden.[8] There are even image macros of Hitler's head photoshopped onto the bodies of supermodels, pop singers, and rappers.[9] Like "Disco Hitler," all of these images have also been supplied with user-generated captions meant to elicit laughs.

Among the many captions that have accompanied these images, one of the most memorable is "Hi Hitler!" The phrase has appeared in

Figure 4. The "Hi Hitler" meme has found expression in many forms, such as this parody of the famous British poster from 1939, "Keep Calm and Carry On."

the "Disco Hitler" and "Advice Hitler" memes, as well as in other off-shoots, including parodies of the Pokemon character Pikachu; spoofs of vintage British posters ("Keep Calm and Hi Hitler" (Figure 4)); and photographs of sundry house pets.[10] At first glance, the phrase "Hi Hitler!" may seem banal. Read at the literal level, the phrase merely extends a

greeting – a colloquial version of the word "hello" – to an image of the Nazi dictator. At a deeper level, however, the phrase contains a more satirical message. As even moderately informed web users know, the exclamation "Hi Hitler!" is a corruption of the infamous Nazi salutation, "Heil Hitler!" ("Hail Hitler"). This German slogan was originally coined in the early 1920s to buttress the cult of personality known as the "Führer myth."[11] In its more recent incarnation, however, the slogan's original meaning has been inverted. The substitution of the casual English word "hi" for the more grandiose German word "heil" punctures the Nazi salutation's pomposity and renders it laughable. The humorous effect is further enhanced by the ambiguity of whether or not the mangling of the original salutation is intentional. In all probability, the phrase "Hi Hitler!" has spread on the Internet due to the efforts of savvy web users who appreciate a good pun. Yet there is anecdotal evidence that certain people, ignorant of German, have mistaken the original German "heil" for the English "hi," and naively believe that "Hi Hitler" represents a historically authentic phrase. In reproducing and circulating it, therefore, they have added to its humor by unintentionally committing a malapropism.[12]

The phrase "Hi Hitler!" is notable not merely for being funny, however, but for symbolizing a new trend in the representation of Nazism. In an ironic turnabout – indeed, in what might be regarded as a bizarre form of deferred justice – the politician who insisted on maintaining complete control over his public image during his lifetime has, of late, been subjected to infinite forms of digital distortion. Thanks to the Internet, Hitler has been transformed into a meme in his own right.[13] Beyond appearing in countless image macros, he has starred in thousands of satirical movie and music videos; he has been featured in Web-based comic strips; he has been profiled in mock encyclopedia entries; he has even inspired online games. In light of this trend, the phrase "Hi Hitler!" can be interpreted as a gesture of welcome to a radically new view of the Nazi dictator – one that regards him as a symbol of humor instead of horror.

The increasingly comic representation of Hitler on the Internet is part of a larger shift currently underway in the memory of the Nazi past. Since the turn of the millennium, the traditional belief throughout much of the Western world that the Third Reich should be remembered from a moralistic perspective has been challenged by a powerful wave of normalization. This wave has manifested itself in many areas of

contemporary intellectual and cultural life. It has appeared in sophisticated works of academic scholarship and journalism; in popular novels and short stories; in works of film and television; and, most prominently, on innumerable Internet websites. Whether aiming high or low, all of these works have transformed the Third Reich in different ways. Some have relativized it in order to minimize its historical distinctiveness. Others have universalized it in order to emphasize its alleged relevance for contemporary issues. Still others have aestheticized it through unconventional means of representation. The works comprising this trend have appeared in many different nations, whether in Europe, North America, or the non-Western world. They have reflected diverse motives, ranging from the political to the puerile. This diversity notwithstanding, the normalizing wave has generally focused on a single goal: overturning the perceived exceptionality of the Nazi era.

Memory and normalization

Overturning the sense of the past's exceptionality is one of several goals that define the broader phenomenon of normalization. Normalization is a relatively new concept that historians and other scholars have increasingly employed to understand how and why perceptions of the past shift over time.[14] The concept has been used in different ways: to explain how the past is represented in written history, how it takes shape in cultural memory, how it determines group identity, and even how it influences governmental policy. Regardless of the form it takes, normalization is defined by several basic features. At the most abstract level, it entails the replacement of difference with similarity. With respect to history and memory, for example, normalization involves a process through which a specific historical legacy comes to be viewed like any other. The legacy may involve a particular era, an event, a person, or a combination thereof. But for a given past to become normalized, it has to shed the features that set it apart from other pasts. The normalization of the past can also shape the formation of group identity, enabling nations and other collectively defined groups to perceive themselves as being similar to, instead of different from, others. Normalization can furthermore liberate national governments to embrace the same kind of "normal" domestic and foreign policies that are pursued by other nations. To be sure, the assertion that normalizing the past can have these effects is

underpinned by certain assumptions: first, that certain pasts may some-how be "abnormal" in the first place; second, that there is an ultimate end point of "normality" towards which all pasts eventually proceed. These assumptions are far from being unproblematic. But no matter what one thinks of them, they are rooted in an undeniable fact: not all pasts are created equal. Some are less – and some are more – "normal" than others.

What determines whether or not a given past is perceived as normal? There is no simple answer to this question, partly due to the difficulty of defining the concept of normality in the first place. On the one hand, normality is typically associated with positive qualities – for example, being healthy, natural, and stable. At the same time, normality can be defined via negation, with reference to traits that are directly opposed to it, such as abnormality and deviance.[15] All of these qualities rest on standards that vary according to time and place, and so normality is ultimately a relative concept. At its core, though, normality is associated with the condition of being typical, unexceptional, or average.

These observations help us determine whether or not a given past can be seen as "normal." Generally speaking, the normality of a specific historical legacy depends on its status within a nation's historical consciousness. Most eras of a nation's history, it is safe to say, are viewed with a sense of detachment, if not indifference. Ask ordinary Europeans about the reigns of most of their country's monarchs, ask Americans about the administrations of most of their presidents, and you will typically get a shrug of the shoulders. These "normal" eras receive little notice, as they are defined by the ordinary, the routine, and the run-of-the-mill. Other eras, by contrast, have a less normal status because of their disproportionate presence in popular consciousness. These eras are typically associated with pivotal events in a nation's history. These events may be positive ones that contribute to a nation's sense of self-esteem, such as successful revolutions or military triumphs. Or they may be negative ones – military defeats, political crimes, or other injustices – that are surrounded by trauma, guilt, and shame. Both types of events, whether positive or negative, usually have a strong emotional impact upon the people who experienced them and often their descendants as well. As a result, these particular historical legacies acquire a special status in memory.

More than anything else, they become viewed from a moralistic perspective. This perspective is underpinned by the conviction that the

past should not merely be explained, but judged. It should be studied not only from a stance of dispassionate neutrality, but of ethical engagement. Above all, the past should be studied in such a way that its proper "lessons" are learned and preserved in memory. These lessons can be positive ones of emulation or negative ones of admonition; they can highlight accomplishments that should be repeated or errors that should be avoided. In both cases, the past is to be viewed didactically. This perspective is, in many ways, an admirable one that stems from noble motives. Yet it is prone to certain excesses. A moralistic perspective towards the past can foster distortions in historical consciousness. It can cloak the past with myths and taboos that are meant to reinforce its accepted "lessons" and prevent subsequent challenges to them. It can foster a dogmatic and ritualistic form of historical consciousness that can easily devolve into stale orthodoxy. And it can produce a view of the past that impedes, rather than promotes, genuine historical understanding.[16] To be sure, a moralistic view of history need not fall victim to these pitfalls. But being aware of their existence is necessary to prevent it from happening. In the end, it is far from clear when exactly a moralistic view of the past begins to obey the law of diminishing returns. One thing, though, is indisputable: it is the moralistic aura surrounding a given historical legacy that defines its exceptional status and keeps it from being considered "normal."

The fading of this sense of exceptionality, in turn, marks the phenomenon of normalization. Why, though, do perceptions of the past change? What forces shape the evolution of historical memory? In answering these questions, it is important to recognize that memory is not monolithic. Rarely does a single view of a specific historical legacy exist in a given society. Instead, there are multiple competing perspectives. Some are dominant, or "official," memories, defined by state support; others are "counter-memories," defined by popular dissent.[17] These competing memories exist in different forms. There is the "communicative memory" of historical events, meaning the oral preservation and transmission of eyewitness recollections of the past. And there is the "cultural memory" of historical events, referring to their subsequent representation in different cultural forms, whether film, literature, theater, art, or architecture.[18] These forms, finally, serve different social functions. Communicative memories are usually expressed and preserved in the private sphere; cultural memories typically have a more public presence. Taken together, all these forms of memory – official and

counter, communicative and cultural, private and public – determine a society's historical consciousness. Their coexistence, however, is rarely static and evolves over time. The official memory that predominates in one era can easily be replaced by a dissenting counter-memory in another; communicative memories eventually yield to cultural memories; and recollections originally restricted to the sphere of private memory often become public.

These patterns of interaction are all involved in the process of normalization. To be sure, the process is far from simple. As with memory in general, normalization is not monolithic; it assumes different forms and develops in different ways according to different methods. To begin with, there is the phenomenon of organic normalization. This concept refers to the process in which the passing of time, the disappearance of older generations of people who personally experienced historical events, and the maturation of new generations bearing a less personal relationship to them, bring about a less morally oriented perspective towards the past. In this version of the phenomenon, normalization is a descriptive concept that denotes a natural, if not inevitable, process. It is a process, moreover, that offers an important corrective to some of moralism's pitfalls. Organic normalization can promote a shift from an emotionally charged view of the past to one that is more dispassionate; it can facilitate a turn away from subjective judgment to objective understanding.

Organic normalization is not alone, however. There are other, more prescriptive, versions of normalization that take a more active role in shaping the memory of the past. These versions assume different forms, but they all express a basic human desire for normality. The desire to feel normal, whether at the individual or group level, is a natural one that should be seen as entirely legitimate. Yet, because normality ultimately is an ideal, attaining it in practice can be difficult. Those who pursue it, therefore, often become impatient and employ various strategies to hasten its arrival. They may seek to relativize a specific historical legacy by minimizing its distinctiveness through comparisons to other historical events. They may attempt to universalize it by explaining its origins, and highlighting its relevance, in general rather than particular terms.[19] And they may try to aestheticize it by subjecting it to forms of representation that mute its moral dimensions. All three strategies differ in their methods, but they pursue the common goal of overturning the sense of the past's exceptionality.