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Saving Heroism in the Online Sphere: The Heroic in Far-Right Internet Memes

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Saving Heroism in the Online Sphere: The Heroic in Far-Right Internet Memes

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Abstract

While the far right is usually associated with an actively practiced hero worship, the relationship of new right-wing movements to the heroic remains undertheorized. This paper seeks to fill this void arguing that far-right online internet meme culture is marked by an ambivalent relationship to heroism, which stands in contrast to the serious, unambiguous take on heroism in “traditional” Nazi and neo-Nazi propaganda: In the context of the Great Meme War, a (partly) self-ironic approach to the desire for heroism can be observed, which, as I argue, serves to immunise the heroic in view of its feared loss/absence in the online sphere.

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SAVING HEROISM IN THE ONLINE SPHERE - THE HEROIC IN FAR-RIGHT INTERNET MEMES

- Working paper by Johanna Maj Schmidt -

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Images 1-3: Nazi propaganda posters

While, traditionally, the far right has been associated with an actively practiced hero and martyr worship, the relationship of new rightwing movements to the heroic remains undertheorized. If it is mentioned at all, it is generally assumed that the old far-right hero cult remains unchanged. My research is based on the assumption that the far right is torn between a resurrection of heroic values and narratives and the longing for hero figures on the one hand, and a self-reflexive understanding of the nostalgia inherent in such a longing on the other hand. I want to argue that this conflict manifests itself in the so-called Great Meme War: in this context, a (partly)

self-ironic relationship to the meme producers' own desire for heroism emerges, which stands in contrast to representations of "traditional" heroic Nazi and neo-Nazi propaganda that appeared to communicate a rather serious, unambiguous take on heroism (see examples above).

Before focussing on the far right's changing approach to heroism in the context of the Great Meme War, I will briefly outline the concept of "post-heroism", which suggests, on a broader scale, that the relevance of heroism is shrinking. The term exists both in military theory and in management theory, with different meanings in each field. The former discourse conceptualises it primarily as a decreasing willingness to sacrifice and suffer in the fight for ideals and in exchange for honour (Münkler 2006: 310). The term was coined by military historian Edward Luttwak (1995: 115) in 1995, who analysed how the drastic drop in birth rates at the end of the Cold War made families less willing to sacrifice their children for war purposes. To lose one's life in combat became increasingly unthought of given the prospect of a full adult life (Ignatieff 2001: 177) and the "disillusionment with the great utopian projects of the past" (Coker 2001: 146). Moreover, new military technologies and armed drones are considered to contribute to the transition from the heroic to the post-heroic society because their operation no longer entails physical risk (Enemark 2014: 20). The invulnerability of drone operators and the consequent vanishing of the opportunity to perform bravely or even heroically in combat has sparked an ethical debate about military virtues in post-heroic times (ibid.: 85-91). – Suffice it to say here that concepts of post-heroic leadership are common in management theory as well, which increasingly rates heroism as a dysfunctional structure (Baecker 2015: 3). In this context, post-heroic leadership refers to a situative, incrementalist way of reacting to complexity and to dehierarchised ways of organising the distribution of responsibilities.

So my question is: If the relevance of heroic concepts of leadership are in dispute with regards to new military and entrepreneurial challenges, where and how does contemporary hero worship materialise? And how do new far-right movements in so-called post-heroic societies react to the changing significance of heroism? – On image boards such as reddit, 4chan, and 8kun, new types of self-proclaimed "meme warriors" have appeared on the scene. According to the Urban Dictionary (2020), a meme warrior can be described as a "brave warrior who fights using only memes". The idea of the meme warrior gained importance in the US during the 2016 presidential election, which was referred to as the (First) "Great Meme War" by Trump supporters (Knowyourmeme 2019). The Great Meme War is an example of an "internet war", "in which opposing factions use internet memes to battle against one another" (ibid.). After the First Great Meme War, a vast number of memes and merchandise products appeared that worshipped all veterans, who "served" bravely in the "war".

I am particularly interested in the internal contradictions that characterise internet memes, which use references to historical physical combat in order to honour contemporary online “warriors”. The Urban dictionary’s definition of the term “meme warrior” that I quoted earlier seems to be conscious of that contradiction: in describing meme warriors as “brave” we associate heroic fighters. The fact that they are “using only memes” (Urban Dictionary 2020) provokes associations of them using their bare hands or an inefficient weapon compared to the arms of their enemies. In this light, the definition appears to be a self-mockery to some extent, given the fact that meme warriors are not putting their lives at risk by producing memes. As we have seen before, the lack of physical risk is an essential point in the current debate on post-heroism in military theory and reappears here as the basis for a, to some extent, ironised relationship to the heroic. Hence, I want to make the claim that parts of the far right in post-heroic societies seem to respond to a presumed loss in heroism by referring to it in a self-ironic manner. While, without doubt, “traditional”/serious approaches to the heroic do live on in the online realm, my focus lies on representations of the heroic, which imply a questioning of the very role it plays in the online context. Below, you can see two examples of such a self-reflexive, often ironic, approach to heroism that I am trying to outline in my project: both of the internet memes seem to play with the difference between “real” war and “effeminate” online war. The meme on the left depicts “Oscar the Grouch” as he is remembering military aircrafts, which obviously do not exist in the context of the meme wars. The meme on the right stages downwards falling chicken nuggets as “the fallen” of the Great Meme War.



Images 4 & 5: Memes “commemorating” the Great Meme War

In order to further support my claim about the online far right's changing relationship to heroism, I want to present a more detailed analysis of one exemplary meme (see below). In my PhD project, I am studying far-right internet memes following two different methodologies, the first part being inspired by Roswitha Breckner's sociological visual segment analysis (2010) and the second one by Lorenzer's social-psychological depth-hermeneutics (1970/1986). Whereas the former offers an analytic structure for examining the meanings produced by individual parts of the meme as well as by their interplay on a manifest level, the latter allows me to search for latent, hidden meanings underlying the cultural artefacts, which might be suppressed in light of collectively shared norms (ibid.: 26-29). Following Lorenzer's suggestion that the depth-hermeneutic interpretation of cultural products should be conducted in groups as they allow for a reciprocal review of the participants' possibly diverging readings of the material (ibid.: 87), I conducted the second part of the analysis with the help of an interpretation group. Below, I will firstly present a part of my analysis of the meme's segments adopting Breckner's method and, secondly, provide an insight into the depth-hermeneutic interpretation group discussion.

When you're telling your grand kids
all about the meme wars you fought
in back in 2014, 2015, and 2016



Image 6: (Post-)heroic meme example

Segment analysis following Breckner –

Segment of the grandfather

In terms of his clothing, the elderly man on the photograph looks as if he could have been from any time between the 80s and nowadays. He is wearing generic, “timeless” garments: an off-white short-sleeved shirt and dark trousers with a leather belt. His skin colour is white. Located in the middle ground, in the golden ratio of the left image half, the grandfather is dominating the image part of the meme. While he is frontally facing

the camera, the grandson is facing it with his back. Hence, the grandfather looks like a central character in this scene, the grandson rather like an extra. In contrast to the huge size of the font, however, both of the figures seem quite small and, therefore, give me the impression that they are primarily illustrating the text.

The grandfather is vividly telling a story to his grandson. Narrating his story seems to bring him alive. The fact that he holds an almost empty glass of water suggests that the two might have been sitting there for a while. The hand gesture of the old man (his right hand) could be understood as an emblematic way of pointing to the past/backwards since he is pointing leftwards, against the usual reading direction. In other words, the gesture seems to underline the past the grandfather reconstructs in his narration and introduces to the present/future represented by his descendant. The fact that the grandson appears to listen to the grandfather quietly and attentively indicates the maturity, experience, and wisdom I associate with the latter: the grandfather seems to have a personal experience of past times and valuable insight into life. He appears to feel obliged/happy/entitled to share it. The grandfather is looking at his grandson and I have the impression that he wants him to follow his narration.

The fact that grandfather and grandson are sitting opposite to each other adds a formal aspect to the scene. It is not a casual meeting between the two relatives but serves a specific purpose: that of passing on knowledge from one generation to the other. There are no other relatives visible, so it appears to be an intimate “grandfather-grandson moment”. Even though no other person is visible in the image, I imagine there to be parents (as it seems to be a happy picture-book family). In particular, I imagine the mother of the grandson or the grandmother somewhere in the background to make sure that the grandfather gets enough water whilst telling his stories from the past. The scene seems to show a good example – even a text book example – of intergenerational exchange. Because of its prototypical appeal, I assume the meme to be based on staged stock footage.

Text segment

The meme’s caption “When you are telling your grand kids all about the meme wars you fought in back in 2014, 2015, and 2016” refers to the time between 2014 and 2016 as the grandfather’s bygone youth. The time between the occurrence of the meme wars in 2014/2015/2016 and the present depicted in the meme remains an undefined gap. There is a clear distinction made between a present shared by the grandfather and the grandson and the past (“back in...”), of which the grandfather is the only eyewitness/expert in this scene. Through the narration that is passed on by word of mouth, the introduction of this time-period receives a mythical touch. The text evokes a temporality defined by the succession of generations and wars. The valuable

knowledge of the meme wars the grandfather took part in is handed down to the grandson but it does not seem to be his intention to warn his descendants of war and violence, but rather, to enlighten them about the heroic deeds of the elders in this online war. Moreover, the text refers to the “grand kids” even though there is only one supposed grandSON visible in the image. This makes the relationship between the two figures prototypical and unspecific, despite the intimacy of telling the life story. Therefore, one might ask oneself if, what seems to matter here, is, in fact, the random transmission of the heroic story to whomever would listen or to the grand kids as a hollow “institution”, rather than building a personal relationship with the particular grandson we see in the picture.

The text segment, which seems to be written from the grandfather’s perspective, adds to the wise appeal of the old man in the picture. The description of how he is telling his grandkids about the meme wars he fought in, however, is marked by an ironic break with the themes of maturity, wisdom, and experience associated with the grandfather. We could think of veteran stories, the World Wars or Vietnam, eyewitnesses, relics from the past etc. looking at him. Yet, the associations with internet culture, meme wars, youth culture in the image part of the meme are more likely to be related to the grandson – even though they are said to characterise the past of the grandfather according to the text. So, whilst one could have imagined the latter to be a battle-scarred war veteran, he spent three years of his youth in front of a computer screen engaging in the half-ironic/half-serious meme wars, without risking his life. Here, a play with expectable associations becomes apparent. Through the temporal jump, the idea of the grandfather’s relationship to the teenage grandson, whom we more likely imagine to be a digital native, who is creating memes etc., is twisted: instead, the grandfather is identified with the meme wars and presents his experience of it as respectable knowledge.

Segment of the grandson

The grandson’s look (a classic black t-shirt), appears to be rather generic, too, and could be associated with any time period, presumably from the 1980s until today. He is located in the foreground and his contour is slightly blurred as the camera takes the grandfather into focus. Because we only get to see his back, the grandson does not seem to be as important in this scene as the grandfather, although they are taking up the same amount of space. The viewer is looking at the grandfather over the grandson’s shoulder from close up. Hence, in contrast to the caption, the image part of the meme identifies the viewer’s perspective with the perspective of the grandson.

While seemingly listening to what his grandfather is telling him, the head of the grandson is slightly inclined, which makes him appear to be an empathetic listener. As the grandfather is looking into the eyes of the

grandson, I imagine the grandson to look back into the eyes of the grandfather. Even though the image does not show his facial expression, I imagine him to be receptive and respectful. Perhaps he is even interviewing his grandfather, encouraging him to reflect on his past. Despite the respectful attitude I associate with the grandson, the fact that he appears incognito and in dark clothes provokes the feeling in me that there could be something gangster-like about him. While the grandfather looks like a skinny little man without strong physical power, the grandson looks muscular. The association with a gangster does not reappear in any way in the rest of the image: the grandfather looks harmless and the surrounding environment seems idyllic and carefree. As there is no female person visible in the image, the masculinity of both grandfather and grandson is not contrasted and, thus, seems to be naturalised to some extent.

Segment of the surroundings

The surrounding green shows nothing but leafy bushes (some with red berries/flowers) and a blurred white colour field in the upper right corner, which could be a house. It does not depict wilderness: there is a little piece of cut grass visible behind the grandfather. The background suggests that the scene is taking place outside a house, in the garden of the family. It encloses the space and adds a cosy feeling to it. In connection with the caption, the lush garden gives me the impression that the grandfather is now safe after unsafe times. The table at which grandfather and grandson are sitting appears to be an isle surrounded by green, where time seems to stand still during the narration of the grandfather. Everything around the two people could be imagined to be “frozen”, perhaps due to the scene’s staged impression. Although the secluded green is reinforcing the rapt atmosphere of the conversation, the background is not important for the understanding of the scene. The interaction between the grandfather and the grandson could have been staged in any other environment.

Depth-hermeneutic interpretation group discussion following Lorenzer

Having expanded on the different segments of the meme and the associations they provoked in me above, I will now present an excerpt of the “thick description” of the discussion of the meme our interpretation group had based on Lorenzer’s depth-hermeneutic approach. As mentioned above, his methodology is based on the idea that the interpretation of cultural artefacts with the help of an interpretation group makes it possible to take diverging, possibly contradicting, readings of the material into consideration in order to unveil latent layers of meaning that are communicated preconsciously, underneath the manifest surface of the artefact. The depth-hermeneutic study group I worked with consisted of young researchers (four women, one man) either trained in sociology or social psychology, who are affiliated with the Else-Frenkel-Brunswik-Institute (EFBI) that is based in Leipzig, Germany.

The discussion centred on the relationship between the grandfather and the grandson as well as on the switching perspectives inherent in the meme: while the text takes on the perspective of the grandfather, the viewer is observing the scene from the grandson's point of view in the image. Furthermore, the group raised the questions in how far the meme wars and "real" wars differ and in what way the non-existent risks "warriors" are facing in online wars might change the character of "veteran" stories and affect the relationship between grandfathers and grandsons. Over the course of the discussion, a gender based reading became evident: while the meme seems to express the desire to belong to a masculine line of tradition, there does not seem to be any relationship offers towards women transmitted through the meme, despite the pseudo-inclusive addressing of the "grandkids".

Switching Perspectives – in-between grandson and grandfather

There is a confusion about "who is who and who speaks" in the meme, given the fact that it addresses its audience with the voice of the grandfather but the perspective of the viewer is that of the grandson: one is looking at the grandfather over the shoulder of the grandson. Cf interprets the play with perspectives as a "narcissistic gaze into the mirror" and does not feel that the image is focussing on the grandson, whom she sees as a mere "container" for the heroic stories of the grandfather. In contrast, Df and Am have the impression that, through the switching between the two perspectives, the meme communicates that there is something "going on in-between" the two figures. Am is surprised that the intergenerational transference seems to work, despite the fact that the grandfather does not seem to have interesting stories to tell: "nevertheless the grandson is sitting down and listening". To him, the grandson's longing for the heroic stories of the grandfather, which seem to be present even though war is not waged any longer in the way it used to be, appears to be the most dangerous aspect manifesting in the meme.

The emotive responses to the two figures and their relationship vary widely: Df is touched by the lively intergenerational exchange and the meme causes Bf to long for her grandparents as the image looks idyllic and reminds her of home. In contrast, Am is annoyed by the grandfather in the picture, who seems senile and disconnected from reality to him. He makes him recall a scene from the film "Mann beißt Hund" (Man Bites Dog, 1992), in which an elderly man lies in a hospital bed telling a nurse that he is "shitting all over the place just for her because otherwise she would be angry at him". Moreover, Am has the association of the grandfather "pressing his butt cheeks together" and, instead of telling his stories inspirationally, he would make opaque sounds like "uuuuhlll". His image of the grandfather in the meme stands in stark contrast to a Nazi grandfather he saw in the documentary "Kleine Germanen" (Little Germans, 2019) that is portraying children growing

up in far-right families. The Nazi grandfather in the documentary seemed to be more loving, re-enacting historical situations (like the killing of the Russians) with his granddaughter, whom he called his “little general”. According to Am, this somewhat warm relationship does not come across in the meme because of the huge distance between the two figures and the, what seems to him, “senile character” of the grandfather. As opposed to this, Cf sees the grandfather as vivid and assumes that he would be proudly telling stories from “back then” to his grandson. With his broad shoulders and neat hairdo, the grandson provokes associations of the Identitarian Movement (Am), gangsters, as well as Banksy (Df). He appears to be soldier-like and ready to use violence to Am. Related to the suggestion that the grandson has a longing for a heroic grandfather, Bf has to think of neo-Nazi rocksongs that are heroising grandfathers like “Opa war Sturmführer bei der SS von Landser” (Grandpa was a stormtrooper for the SS of Landser). In contrast, Cf and Af do not share the impression that the grandson is longing for heroic stories but feel that he is letting the grandfather chat, yet, his narrations would “go in one ear and out the other”, since, in actual fact, he hopes that the “food would be ready soon”.

Ultimately, the group identifies four contrary readings of the two figures and their relationship: Firstly, the scene can be seen from the perspective of the grandfather, who would either feel the need to “discharge his shit”, unable to filter whatever comes out of his mouth. Alternatively, he could have a sense of mission, trying to communicate his stories in a way that they would actually reach his grandson. Secondly, the grandson could either be longing for the grandfather and soak in his heroic stories or he could not listen properly but hope for the “flood of words to pass quickly”. Hence, instead of a polarization, the meme transmits the sense of a “horizontal proliferation”, which manifests itself in the group discussion with the splitting of the two perspectives in two possible versions each. Df describes the two versions of the grandfather as a “good one” vs. a “bad one“. This labelling leads Cf to pose the question, which version of the grandfather could be considered “the good one”, given the fact that his sense of mission is a sense of mission in the name of war.

Meme War vs. Real War

It is generally agreed that the meme is drawing upon a comparison between the meme wars and real war and, thus, it provokes associations to different historical wars in the participants: Bf, who gets nostalgic about her grandparents looking at the meme, immediately has to think of the Second World War. Cf and Am have associations with Vietnam veterans. Starting from this vantage point, the discussion takes on a judgemental tone as most participants are sceptical of comparing the meme wars to real wars. Df interprets the meme as a joke by a current meme warrior, who would present himself as a heroic veteran, even though he would have been “sliding smoothly from one comfortable position to the next comfortable position”. So, “from sitting on

the couch and making memes” he would have moved “towards a future, in which a sense of peace and quite would have been artificially produced after this supposed ‘battle’”. On that note, Am suggests that telling “all about the meme wars” would not be that much, compared to what can be told about real wars, as there are no heroic deeds. One could merely try to impress others by telling something like: “then I photoshopped this and that sentence over this and that picture”, which does “not feel that heroic at all” (Am). He claims that the fact that our idea of what a hero is, is related to something vitalist-violent, plays into our hands because “we could always accuse the meme makers of pretending to be heroes”, while actually they were none. In fact, Cf catches herself thinking that those who were/are taking part in traditional wars “at least risked their lives” or “did horrible things, went to the brink of the abyss” and “experienced existential moments”. Instead, this grandfather would have sat in front of his computer and fought in a disembodied way, “pressing a few keys” rather than shooting for real and getting injured. She has the feeling that she needs to censor herself, clarifying that it is embarrassing/problematic to defend real wars as being heroic. Df claims that, by questioning if the grandfather could have anything interesting to tell because he has not fought in real wars, the interpretation group seems to reveal a sensationalistic relationship to wars, favouring real fighters over this “bore, pretending to be a veteran”, who seems to merely be fudging stories. To her, the meme appears to pose the question “if wars have been so boring for myself already, what can my grandson expect at all?” Am argues that the meme makers perhaps feel the same way about this lack of excitement, making fun of it in this very meme.

The group goes on to speculate what fictional “historic” moment is shown in the meme. While Df and Cf have the feeling that the image depicts a peaceful time after the meme warriors’ victory/a state of exception, where everything has been “put to zero, with the idyllic garden, relaxation, security”, Am is convinced that there has never been a war. In his opinion, they have remained the same couch potatoes as before. Nothing has happened but they ironically pretended as if. Bf, in contrast, has the sense that the meme wars could have been the beginning of something bigger and the future would be completely changed afterwards. Following this, Am suggests that, by downplaying their heroism, we might be defending ourselves against the idea that this could have been the beginning of a real war. It could have been the onset of the “great triumph of the alt-right over the whole world” and “behind the green bush could be barbed wire and behind it a complete waste land and they have defended their small privileged area”.

Male line of tradition & relationship to women

A gender-based reading becomes more and more apparent over the course of the discussion: Following Bf, the meme can be seen as a sort of self-portrayal, expressing the wish to become a property owning elderly man,

who can tell heroic stories to his male descendants. Am, in contrast, is able to relate to the grandson's yearning gaze at the "garden-family-thing" as well as the line of tradition of masculine heroes in the family represented by the grandfather. He feels that the two characters have something "dark in common". The grandson would be longing for male "authority and wisdom", which had helped to build this idyllic, peaceful place and which would still be of use in the present. He seems to be grateful that the grandfather has fought for these things, according to Bf. Moreover, the elderly man's hand movement reminds Df of the patriarchal, clerical gesture of an orthodox priest and, to Bf, it seems like a blessing before going into battle, as if the meme author(s) want "to get the benediction of the last real heroes in order to stand in one line with them". In this connection, the fact that the majority of men does not need to fight anymore – as more and more wars are fought with drones or specialized troops and there is no general mobilisation turning whole generations of young men into canon-fodder, which "allowed them" to fight at the same time – is brought up; and Am suggests that the meme expresses the feeling of being cut off from this patriarchal fighting tradition. Since the only thing that seems to be left for its author(s) is "this fucking meme war", which is "completely ridiculous", they might be longing for their grandfathers and desiring to be a part of this line of male tradition because it provides orientation. Similarly, Df has the impression that the depicted relationship between a grandfather and a male grandson is the least ironic aspect of the meme. To her, the creation of such memes seems to serve as a sort of self-diagnosis and is even therapeutic, allowing the authors to digest their feelings of powerlessness and confusion. Knowing that it would be impossible for the meme makers to achieve anything as bold as "world domination", they contend themselves with having a kind of "support group", Cf adds.

As the male-centric perspective expressed in the meme seems so apparent to the group, the question is raised what relationship offers are communicated that would address women. In the very beginning, Cf imagines the grandfather to be potentially "grabbing" somebody in a sexualised manner, despite his innocent look. Later, Df raises the question why he has a grandson at all speculating that he could have been involved in incel culture in his youth while fighting in the meme wars, and Bf suggests that he might have "won" a woman after being victorious in the meme war. Af has an even more drastic idea of his past, believing that he might have raped women during the war, revealing to his grandson: "you originated from two rapes in those wars". Discussing the potentially propagandistic attempts behind meme making, Cf argues that, if it was their aim to achieve cultural hegemony, the "meme warriors" would, unlike other propagandists, "be dumb, strategically speaking" to exclude the female half of humankind. According to Cf, "they would not be able to win the world this way" – it would not be wise to attempt to "conquer only half of the world". She points out that the Nazis addressed women explicitly with their propaganda. On that note, Bf imagines women to be included in the meme as

“baby producers” through the term “grandkids”. To Am, it seems clear that the authors of the meme do not actually intend to win a war but appear to be primarily concerned with issues of masculinity and to be adhering to a patriarchal line of tradition for their guidance. Perhaps, they are realistic enough to know that they would not be able to win women for their cause. Af boils it down to the question: “If women are their enemies why would they try to recruit them for their purposes?”

To sum up, the group was torn between a sympathy for the grandfather’s wish to pass on his life story to the next generation as well as for the longing of the grandson for his heroic stories on the one side, and a questioning of the grandfather’s heroic credibility as well as a suspicion towards the grandson’s genuine interest in his narration on the other side. The idea that heroism requires an exceptional level of sacrifice and physical risk seemed to remain the dominant criterion for judging the grandfather’s heroic legitimacy, which was critically reflected by the group. While the dangerous potential of meme making was downplayed by most participants as a ridiculous practice in the beginning, in the course of the discussion, some participants brought up the fantasy that the meme war could have resulted in the alt-right’s triumph. In the end, the group highlighted the seeming lack of identification offers addressing female recipients of the meme as it depicts a solely masculine line of tradition.

I would claim that, on a manifest level, a new type of hero is creatively invented in the meme “When you are telling your grand kids all about the meme wars you fought in [...]”, who does not need to take any risks but is nevertheless respected as a hero. However, this conception is disavowed at the same time by relating to the underlying longing for heroism in an ironic way. On a latent level, however, the meme seems to communicate a genuine longing for heroism. The simultaneous confession and denial of the desire for heroism that seems to be inherent in the meme was mirrored in the participants’ diverging reactions to the meme, which oscillated between accepting the constructed figure to some extent (considering it a touching/successful intergenerational exchange) and not being satisfied by it (questioning the grandfather’s status as a hero as he only sat in front of his computer and did not experience any physical fights). Hence, there seemed to be a disappointment with the level of heroic identification offered by the made up meme warrior-grandfather. As his heroism rests on common internet activities it could not satisfy the desire for heroic tales, which are expected to constitute an (imaginary) exception from everyday life and hold the promise that threats from the outside can be averted by outstandingly brave individuals. The replacement of the heroic role model one can look up to (since he had to overcome extraordinary dangers in real life) with a trivialised alternative version that is not ahead of oneself in any way and does not need to sacrifice anything, is perceived as an unsatisfying surrogate.

Conclusion

What can these findings from the twofold analysis of the meme “When you are telling your grandkids all about the meme wars you fought in back in 2014, 2015, and 2016” tell us with regards to the initial supposition that the far right’s relationship to the heroic in so-called post-heroic societies might be changing? In view of the meme example, I want to make the claim that the relationship to the heroic in the context of the meme war differs significantly from the rather serious or, in fact, deadly serious, approach to heroism associated with the “traditional” far right, which is known for its glorification of soldierly masculinity, worship of “war heroes” and “martyrs”, often times an unabated admiration for “the Führer” etc. What we find in the context of the meme war, in contrast, is a partly ironic appropriation of representations of the heroic, which I understand as an attempt at *sublimating* the feared loss/lack of heroism in order to “save” the heroic for its persistence in the online sphere. By humorously pointing to the differences between “real” war and “online” war such as the obvious lack of physical risk, the author/s of the discussed meme example appear to *immunise* their longing for heroism against its shrinking relevance in the online context. The question what exact function irony plays in this connection needs to be further explored. For the time being, I want to argue that, beyond the strategic role it might play in the online far right’s cultural production, which often aims at plausibly denying misanthropic, racist, antisemitic, sexist, homo- and transphobic positions, far-right internet meme culture is also offering a, to some extent, self-reflexive way of ironically processing the authors’/recipients’ own masculine position. So, in contrast to visual NS-propaganda, which did not leave any room for doubt about one’s “own” (German) heroic masculinity and was limited to the projective effemination of “others” (Jews, Homosexuals, Sinti, and Roma), in the context of the meme war, at times, rightwing propaganda responds to such doubts by sublimating them by means of irony. It seems to me that this, unfortunately, adds to its attraction.

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Images

- Img. 1 & 2: http://museenkoeln.de/ausstellungen/nsd_1609_hitlerjugend/03_03hitlerjugendKrieghtml#prettyPhoto
- Img. 3: <https://pra.org/publicdl/Historical%20Documents/WWII%20Propaganda%20Posters/WWII%20Nazi%20Propaganda%20Posters/>
- Img. 4: <https://imgflip.com/i/1vfpbg>
- Img. 5: <https://me.me/i/remember-the-fallen-the-great-meme-war-2015-2016-31d45568c68d427182d42876ae33ac22>
- Img. 6: <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1191388-meme-wars>