

Führer



As part of Thailand’s homegrown ‘Nazi chic,’ Adolf Hitler has been reinvented as a series of cutesy cartoon characters emblazoned on T-shirts. The Israeli Embassy and the Simon Wiesenthal Center are concerned.

HEIL McHITLER: A young woman poses for her boyfriend with the trademark dummy of Seven Star, a shop at a high-end mall in Bangkok that sells popular caricatures of Adolf Hitler on T-shirts, jackets and cigarette boxes

Tibor Krausz Bangkok

THE TOOTHBRUSH MUSTACHE, the smug scowl, the arm raised in salute – they instantly give him away. Otherwise, though, it’s Hitler as you’ve never seen him. Plastered on myriad designer T-shirts, the Nazi tyrant shows up in ever more unexpected hybrids of cartoonist caricature. In each he looks

cute, cuddly almost.

In one cartoon representation Hitler is turned into Ronald McDonald, the fast-food chain’s clownish mascot, sporting a bouffant cherry-red hairdo and a censorious look. In another he’s shown wearing an oh-so-lovely panda costume with a Nazi armband. In yet another he appears as a pink Teletubby with doe

eyes, jug ears and a pink swastika for an antenna, pouting irritably like a spoiled brat while flashing the Nazi salute.

For couples who wish to wear the führer on matching outfits, some shirts – which cost from 200 baht to 370 baht (\$7 to \$12) apiece – come in both male and female versions. On the latter, Ronald-Adolf is depicted as a transvestite with fuchsia

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hair, lipstick, long lashes and a timid smile. Panda Adolf's manlier alter ego, meanwhile, wears a Brownshirt uniform.

IN BUDDHIST THAILAND, WHERE spiritual rebirths are believed to be a fact of life, the führer has been reincarnated as a popular fashion accessory. Some Jews and Israelis aren't amused.

"They get upset [when they see my T-shirts]. They come to my shop and complain," laments the owner of Seven Star, a small clothing shop at Terminal 21, a new high-end designer mall in central Bangkok. He's a thirtyish, wiry fellow who crowns his wavy, shoulder-length locks with a jaunty bowler hat. A graduate of a local university's arts program, the cartoonist does brisk business selling his "McHitler" T-shirts. He identifies himself only by his nickname as "Hut."

Covering walls in Hut's garage-size shop are large hand-drawn comic strip panels. They feature his caricatures of Michael Jackson, Kim Jong-il, Che Guevara and other iconic figures. But the most prominent character by far is Adolf McDonald. In one panel by the entrance, the Nazi dictator greets visitors with a Sieg Heil salute and a friendly "Hello everybody." In another, he smiles and declares: "Time to party!"

Outside the shop stands a five-foot-tall McHitler dummy, whose motorized left arm goes up and down, up and down, in the Nazi salute. A week before Christmas, the dummy wore a Santa hat. A week before that, it had a sign soliciting donations for the victims of the recent devastating floods in Thailand.

"It's not that I like Hitler," Hut insists defensively. "But he looks funny and the shirts are very popular with young people."

"Hitler looks cool because he seems like an interesting character," agrees Pitawat Chaiyot, a 21-year-old university student who buys himself a green shirt with the

image of Hitler as a yellow Teletubby. "Actually, I don't know much about him," he admits. "In school we only learn Thai history. But I know he was a communist leader," he says, unwittingly demonstrating the level of ignorance the average young Thai has about the Nazi leader and the genocidal crimes of his regime.

Following a popular vote, Hut's clothing label has been named by a local youth streetwear magazine as one of Thailand's Top Five T-shirt brands of 2011. On his Facebook page, the up-and-coming designer basks in his fame by proudly displaying photos of soap opera starlets, actors and pop stars posing at his shop with his trademark dummy.

"IF GOOD MANNERS DON'T help, I may go back and break the hand of that doll," fumes Itzhak Shoham, Israel's ambassador to Thailand.

The Israeli Embassy is located just a few hundred meters from Terminal 21, and recently Shoham came face to face with the Hitler look-alike dummy saluting nonstop with its electric arm. "You don't want to see memories of the Nazi period trivialized in this manner," he stresses. "It hurts the feelings of every Jew and every civilized person."

He decided to confront the shop's owner. "I said to him, 'I don't mind the doll; just take the face off,'" recalls Shoham, a portly, grandfatherly man in his 60s. "He completely ignored me. He just turned his back on me. So I lost my temper." He chuckles.

Hut still seems frazzled by the experience. "Israeli big boss came in here and got angry," he complains, with the air of someone unfairly wronged. "He ruffled some of my shirts and crumpled one of my business cards."

Now nearby shop owners alert him to the presence of approaching foreigners who look like trouble. In such cases he yanks down the shutters and disappears for a

while. "When foreigners complain [about my representations of Hitler]," Hut tells *The Report*, just as a series of Thai shoppers stop by to pose cheerfully with his doll, "I tell them it's Charlie Chaplin."

Do they buy it? "No!" he says and laughs.

Shoham wants all Hitler imagery removed from the shop. He's spoken to the mall's managers, who have been noncommittal about the issue. So he plans to recruit other ambassadors, such as Germany's and Austria's, to apply further pressure on Thai authorities, who, he says, have promised to see if there are grounds for legal action against shop owners selling merchandise with Hitler's likeness.

The ambassador may be facing a losing battle. Unlike in Israel and Europe, Nazi regalia aren't illegal in Thailand. Across town at another fashion mall, another small shop hawks its own cutesy caricatures of Hitler plastered on T-shirts, including Panda Adolf. The Nazi leader takes pride of place among Smurfs, pop stars and Japanese manga characters. "Hitler shirts are very popular, especially with teenage boys," notes the shop's owner, Sirinapa Hemmaruk, 30, whose family operates a clothing factory.

On Bangkok's Khao San Road, a backpacker haven popular with young Israeli travelers, yet other T-shirt designs boast images of Hitler. These include Photoshopped prints of the führer sunbathing naked on a tropical beach. Shoppers looking for Nazi flags, reproduction Third Reich propaganda posters, pennants with the Iron Cross and Nazi eagles, and faux SS helmets for motorcyclists can find them at the sprawling Chatuchak weekend market, where they're on sale alongside Bob Marley portraits and Rastafarian accoutrements.

When I show him pictures of Panda Adolf and Hitler as a Teletubby, Shoham sighs. "There's no ill intent [in such designs]," he concedes. "Let's be realistic: Thais just

don't know about history, including their own. Still, we have to fight this rather unpleasant phenomenon."

During his previous posting in Singapore, Shoham says, he encountered similar manifestations of so-called "Nazi chic," an appropriation of Nazi imagery as subversive symbols in popular fashion, which traces its origins to the punk subculture in Britain, in the 1970s. In Japan and Hong Kong, Nazi-themed costumes are popular in cosplay, a fashion fad that sees teens dress up as their favorite Japanese comic book and cartoon characters. "Mein Kampf" has even been adapted as a manga-style comic book in Japan, where "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" is a perennial bestseller.

LAST SEPTEMBER IN THE northern Thai city of Chiang Mai, a group of high school students managed to outdo their rivals by showing up for "sport day" in something truly eye-catching: homemade Nazi uniforms, complete with swastika armbands and toy guns. Led by a fresh-faced teenage girl in a Brownshirt uniform, sporting a painted Hitler mustache and wielding a cheerleader's baton, they paraded around downtown in their SS uniforms, carrying a large Nazi flag and saluting spryly. Locals cheered

them on merrily from the sidewalks as foreign tourists looked on stunned.

In 2007 hundreds of students at a government school in Bangkok staged a similar Nazi-themed costume parade. On both occasions an international hue and cry ensued. At each school teachers blamed the students, pleading ignorance of their plans for using Nazi designs during their costume parades. In the case of the recent parade, though, it didn't help matters that the students came from Sacred Heart College, a Catholic preparatory school attached to the local diocese. The city's bishop has since apologized to Shoham.

"It's true on one level that [such displays] are all down to ignorance," says Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles. "But with ignorance comes lack of sensitivity," he adds. "We're not blaming the children. But teachers should have known better, especially at a Catholic school."

Harry Soicher, a Romanian Jew who teaches geography at a Bangkok high school, isn't so sure about the teachers. "The foreign teachers [at my school] were shocked, but the Thai teachers didn't understand what the fuss was all about," he says. "They just want to live their lives stress-free. They don't want to know about subjects like the Holocaust. Their favorite

expression is *mai tong kit mak* (Don't think too much)."

"The Jewish concept of memory, which emphasizes an overarching connection of the past to the present, is not a universally practiced or even accepted idea," explains Cooper, who has studied the phenomenon of Nazi chic across Southeast and North-east Asia from Thailand to Taiwan.

It's not that countries in the region don't have their own cultural taboos. Several Thais, for instance, have been sentenced to long years in prison for posting doctored images on Facebook of the country's inviolable royals, who are protected by a draconian *lèse-majesté* law. "Thai people know full well where they must draw a line on parody," Cooper notes.

Then there's the issue of cultural disconnect. Jews recoil at the very sight of the swastika, which, as Cooper puts it, "has a toxic and foreboding image as a living symbol of pure evil." Yet to Hindus and Buddhists, the swastika, which Hitler appropriated as an emblem of Aryan superiority, is an ancient good luck symbol. During World War II, countries in Southeast Asia came under the yoke of Japanese occupiers, but they had no direct experience of Nazi atrocities. And so, shorn of their historical context, the potent imagery and hallucinogenic pageantry of Nazi visual

Nazi Chic Merry-Go-Round

A FEW YEARS AGO TWO ENTERPRISING restaurateurs in Taipei, Taiwan, came up with a novel idea: an eatery modeled after a concentration camp.

Called Jail, the designer restaurant invited diners to polish off their plates of gourmet dishes among hand-painted murals and WWII photographs of skeletal death camp inmates in striped pajamas staring from behind barbed wire or lying on their bunk beds. Toilets were dubbed "Gas Chambers" and decorated with gas pipes and pressure gauges.

Not to be outdone in its embrace of Nazi chic, India, too, had its own Hitler-themed café. Catering to a posh clientele of businessmen and Bollywood stars in Mumbai, Hitler's Cross – as the restaurant was called after the Nazis' Cross of Honor of the German Mother, a crucifix with a swastika awarded to fecund German mothers – boasted a logo with a Hitler-mustached

chef, a pair of Nazi swastikas and the motto in Gothic font: "Fine Dining Macht Frei."

Both eateries were redecorated, willy-nilly, by their owners after an outcry from foreign embassies.

Such incidents across the region follow a predictable script: Some locals decide to use Nazi imagery for commercial or fashion purposes; foreign embassies express outrage; the culprits plead ignorance of the Nazi period and issue apologies. Then comes another case of blatant Nazi chic somewhere else. And so the merry-go-round spins on.

A decade ago, a Thai advertising agency thought it a swell idea to market potato chips with Hitler's image. Two years ago a new waxworks museum in the country followed suit by advertising itself with a giant billboard featuring the führer with the words in Thai: "Hitler is not dead!"

In Taiwan, 7-Elevens sold dolls and

key chains with Hitler's likeness. In Hong Kong, a clothing store decorated its premises with Nazi flags and banners. In South Korea and Japan, Nazi-style memorabilia are coveted by many fashion-conscious youths, who often enjoy listening to white power music, for good measure.

In 2002, "The Times of India" surveyed students at elite colleges across the subcontinent about who they saw as an exemplary leader. Hitler finished ahead of the likes of Nelson Mandela and Abraham Lincoln, coming close behind Mahatma Gandhi. The students cited his drive, discipline and efficiency in their choice for the führer.

"The fault," the paper's political editor lamented, "lies with the collapse of the higher educational system." The lack of teaching history to young people, he opined, has led to "the atrophy of society's value[s]."

T. K.



OH SO CUTE: A collection of cartoonist designs with Hitler's image from designer T-shirts on sale in Bangkok

propaganda continue to fascinate fashion-conscious youngsters across the region.

Unlike in neighboring Muslim-majority Malaysia, anti-Semitism among Thais is practically nonexistent; most don't even know who Jews are. Yet "in the era of the Internet, where anything can go viral overnight," Cooper stresses, "we can't afford to let the frivolous use of Nazi imagery go unmentioned."

And some Thai-style Nazi chic has gone viral. A recent music video by a popular Thai pop group called Slur shows its four members each dressed up as Hitler. "The mohawk or the skinhead... is it hip?" the catchy refrain goes in a jejune song about fashion. The Thai expression *hit ler* (meaning "Is it hip?") is a homophone that rhymes with the dictator's name. In their video, which is highly popular on YouTube with millions of hits and thousands of "likes," the Thai musicians prance about and torment prisoners in striped pajamas.

FOLLOWING THE NAZI-STYLE parade in Chiang Mai, Soicher decided to organize a lecture at his school about the Holocaust. He showed students old photos and newsreels from the

death camps. "They were shocked," he says. "But many of them found it hard to believe something like this could have happened."

A recent interview with Thai college students suggested that most educated young Thais have only a very vague notion of neighboring Cambodia's recent genocide, never mind the Holocaust. This, despite the fact that the policies of the communist Khmer Rouge regime, which was responsible for the death of an estimated two million Cambodians between 1975 and 1979, directly impacted politics and events in Thailand for decades.

Undaunted, Shoham and Cooper are both working on plans to offer educational projects for some Thai schools about the Nazi period, using learning materials developed by Jerusalem's Yad Vashem and the Simon Wiesenthal Center. "It will have to be very basic, definitely, but you have to start somewhere," Shoham notes.

Some locals, though, don't think Thais should bother learning about Nazism at all. "Why should they [Thais and Asians] care about a period in European history? Why should they have Westerners' cultural hang-ups about it?" insists an editor of a prominent daily, which publishes a supple-

ment for students.

Cooper has an answer for that. "Had the Nazis prevailed during World War II, their racist ideology would have eventually targeted all races the Nazis deemed 'inferior,' including Asians," he points out. "Many neo-Nazis today loathe and demean and sometimes attack people of Asian descent."

Yet if online comments are any indication, quite a few Thais have adopted a haughty leave-us-be attitude in the face of foreigners' criticism of Thai-style Nazi chic. "This is just a song, grow up already!" one commenter opines in English on YouTube in defense of Slur's Nazi-themed music video. "Shut the [expletive] up and enjoy the music," advises another.

On Seven Star's Facebook page, meanwhile, fans of the clothing label complain that foreigners upset about Hut's führer cartoons have "no sense of humor."

Soon after his run-in with the Israeli ambassador last December, the Thai designer taped down his McHitler dummy's mustache with a small piece of paper scrawled "sensor" on it. (He meant "censored.") Presently, though, the sign was off.

Arguably, playful depictions of Hitler can be seen as just mischievous satire. After all, it's unlikely that the intensely image-conscious Nazi dictator would be pleased to see himself depicted as a fast-food chain's red-haired clown or a pink Teletubby.

Jewish humorists, too, have engaged in subversive parody of the führer and the Nazis, most notably in Mel Brooks' 1968 film "The Producers," a comedy in which two down-on-their-luck Jewish theater producers hatch a get-rich-quick scheme that involves staging a harebrained play glorifying Hitler. Ahead of his new movie "The Dictator," due out next summer, British-Jewish comedian Sacha Baron Cohen's promotional posters feature a scantily dressed Megan Fox with a Hitler mustache standing in front of a Nazi flag.

Seven Star's own motto is "Made for Fun," and Hut insists he means no harm or offense. Meanwhile, buoyed by great demand for his hybridized Hitler drawings, he has just started selling jackets, cigarette boxes and postcards with them as well.

Cooper doesn't see such images of Hitler as a laughing matter. "In a country that seeks and welcomes millions of tourists every year, claiming these designs are a joke just won't do," he insists. "They are a parody of what? Mass murder?"