

Papers from 'Generations in Europe' (Oxford, April 2005)

The following four articles were originally presented as papers at a conference on 'Generations in Europe', held at New College, Oxford in April 2005, and organised by Catriona Kelly and Stephen Lovell, assisted by Andy Byford. It brought together speakers and participants from Britain, Russia, Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, and the US, and covered a range of disciplines, including history, theology, sociology, and anthropology. Some of the sixteen speakers dealt primarily with theoretical or methodological issues. The conference began with a session at which Christoph Conrad (University of Geneva) gave an overview of the history of generational research, and spoke about different interpretations of the term 'generation' (including age cohorts, phases in the life cycle, people of different ages relative to each other, inhabitants of family relationships, etc.) He also spoke about the split, in research on 'generations', between work on 'constructions' and on 'experience'. In an address that was, from the point of view of traditional historiography, iconoclastic, Bernd Weisbrod (University of Göttingen) spoke

about the tendency of generational paradigms in history to avoid the central issue of how generational identity is constructed by hegemonic groups in retrospect. Two further papers in later sessions dealt with the interpretation of generational experience in disciplines beyond history: Heather Montgomery (Open University) addressed the curious absence of working children from anthropological literature, and Hilary Pilkington (University of Warwick) spoke about the problems of applying generational theory, such as the work of Mannheim, to youth culture in contemporary Russian cities.

The other speakers discussed a wide range of specific topics in the history of generations, variously interpreted. Initiation rituals and cross-generational affective relationships in the classical world were the subject of a talk by the theologian Jan Bremmer, of Groningen University. Two key generations in Russian history received attention from Anna Krylova, Duke University (on the '1910' generation in Soviet Russia), and from Steve Smith, University of Essex (on the 'revolutionary' generation of Russian children). A similar approach to Bernd Weisbrod's was adopted by Holger Nehring, University of Oxford, who addressed the diversity of 'generations' traditionally seen as unified (the '68' in Germany, France, and Italy), by Richard Vinen, King's College, London (on the 'war' generation in France), by Juliane Fürst, St John's College, Oxford (on the 'front' generation in the Soviet Union), and by Nicholas Stargardt, Magdalen College, Oxford (on the war experience of German, Jewish, and Polish children). The highly specific case of Britain, a European country that has not tended to label age cohorts in terms of 'historical generations', was addressed by Pat Thane (Goldsmith's College, London). Other topics included generational self-representation (Ilya Utekhin, European University, St Petersburg, on personal histories of Blockade experience as told to members of younger generations), and cross-generational relationships (Catriona Kelly spoke about disobedience and 'eavesdropping' as central mechanisms in child-adult relations in Russia at the turn of the century, and their relationship with generational conflict in a political sense, and Alexandra Piir (European University, St Petersburg) about the way that young people and children versus adults and the elderly had made use of the Leningrad city courtyard during the middle of the twentieth century). A 'snapshot' of a recent generational divide (but also solidarity across this) was given by Alessandro Portelli (University of Rome) in a talk about the experience of participants of political action at Genoa and of their parents, former '68-ers' whose parental anxieties were both allayed and sharpened by their sympathy for the youngsters' outlook, and their earlier direct contact with similar events.

The debates took place in a rigorous but lively atmosphere, with plenty of genuine dialogue between paper-presenters and the audi-

ence. Some of the combinations of papers seemed, on the face of it, capricious, for example a session including a paper on initiation rituals in classical Greece (Bremmer) and a paper on drug use in modern Russian provincial cities (Pilkington), but in fact instructive and surprising parallels were generated by such juxtapositions, and the paper-givers worked hard to absorb material from each other and to provide a new 'frame' for their research. Christoph Conrad's paper worked as a stimulating and helpful introduction to the general issues involved. Some of the questions debated included whether the term 'generation' was useful as an analytical tool in historical discussion, or ought to be understood as an instrument of self-mythologisation and identity construction employed by certain politically dominant groups (the latter view was particularly vehemently argued by Bernd Weisbrod); the extent to which identity formation was politically based, or might depend on lifestyle choices (consumption of clothes, gadgets such as mobile telephones, mind-altering substances, etc.); the role played by the state in generation formation through 'pre-emptive' constructs (as was particularly obvious in the Soviet Union, where terms such as 'the generation of 1910' or 'the coevals of Revolution' were used as labels to try and direct the actual behaviour of young people of a given age); and the extent to which labels imposed post-factum (the '68 generation', the *frontoviki*, or 'soldiers from the Front' of the Soviet late 1940s) had any relevance to real-life experience. There were also interesting discussions of different phases of the life cycle in relation to each other and in relation to political change – for example, in Steve Smith's paper on anti-religious agitation among children in Russia during the 1920s, or Hilary Pilkington's paper on drug use, or Alexandra Piir's study of children in the courtyards of Leningrad and of the regulatory force exercised by older people, whether informally as grandmothers or formally, as 'yardmen' (janitors, caretakers) and employees of the state housing administration offices or housing co-operative managements.

Disciplinary lines remained fairly firm, with most historians (apart from Pat Thane and Nicholas Stargardt), concentrating on event-related understandings of generation, whether they chose to question or to reassert these. In contrast, those working in the field of culture tended to concentrate on intergenerational relations and the expression of generational identity as a set of social practices and sometimes – as in Ilia Utekhin's paper on narratives about the Blockade in Leningrad – rhetorical strategies as well. None the less, all the participants felt that contact with different interpretations of the term 'generation', and the requirement to justify particular approaches to the study of the life-cycle or of political groups belonging to a given age cohort had been useful and thought-provoking. Overall, there was little unreflective 'generationalising' (a term

coined by Berndt Weisbrod), though some speakers (Steve Smith, Anna Krylova) did choose to emphasise the 'chronotopic' historical and cultural specificity of their human subjects' experience.

The division between an interpretation of 'generations' that is primarily diachronic and an interpretation that is essentially synchronic and attentive to key practices and representational strategies has persisted in the publications of papers resulting from the conference. A number of the papers in the first category (those by Conrad, Vinen, Stargardt, Nehring, Thane, Weisbrod, and Smith, as well as new papers written specially for the collection by Kelly, Krylova, Souto Kustrín, and Lovell) have been published in a separate collection.¹ The collection of papers that follows here brings together several discussions that are focused on the relationship between generational identity and socio-cultural practices: those by Sandro Portelli, Hilary Pilkington, Iliia Utekhin, and Alexandra Piir. All four papers are linked together also by the use of oral testimony, presented in different ways in each discussion. In Hilary Pilkington's paper, informants define themselves and are defined with relation to immediate social issues of drug use and the various forms this can take; in the other papers, the testimony refers to retrospective experience, ranging from the very recent past (in Portelli's case) to the early to mid twentieth century (Piir, Utekhin). Alexandra Piir uses oral testimony alongside literary and memoir sources, and a selection of normative materials (particularly city council regulations), to create a 'slice of past time'; Utekhin and Portelli are more explicitly concerned with the ways in which people remember, with the dynamic between informant and interlocutor. In all four cases, however, extensive quotations from the informants' recollections and/or self-descriptions are included, so that there is a sense of the dynamic between primary source and the recapitulation or analysis of this at one remove by the academic author.

Hilary Pilkington's paper is a slightly different text from the one presented at the conference, including empirical material drawn from an in-depth ethnographical study of urban young people in Russia alongside theoretical observations; the others, apart from minor revisions, are essentially in the form in which they were originally circulated to conference participants. We are glad to have the opportunity of presenting this interdisciplinary set of papers by scholars working in the field of generational culture, which brings together work by an oral historian, a sociologist, a linguistic anthropologist, and an urban ethnographer, to the audience of *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*.

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¹ Lovell S. (ed.) *Generations in Twentieth-Century Europe*. Basingstoke, 2007.