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CHAPTER I

Introduction: generation conflict and German history 1770–1968

Mark Roseman

I

Why adopt a generational perspective on modern German history? One obvious reason is the striking persistence of youthful rebellion in Germany. From the 1770s onwards, German society found its values and norms subjected to recurrent and intense challenge by rebellious youth, initially by the young writers of the *Sturm und Drang* in the late eighteenth century, then by the youthful enthusiasts of the Young Germany movement in the 1830s and 1840s, later by the thousands of youngsters who climbed the Hohe Meißner mountain, turning their backs on Wilhelmine Germany. In the post-1918 era youthful separatism reached its zenith, with almost half of all German youth organised in some group or other. The Weimar Republic's short life was punctuated by the regular spectacle of youngsters taking to the streets and its demise was heralded by young protesters in brown shirts, carrying their torchlit zealotry through the length and breadth of Germany. And more recently, few voices of the international youth movement in the 1960s attained the self-confident, iconoclastic authority of a Rudi Dutschke or rejected the system with quite such uncompromising ruthlessness as did an Ulrike Meinhof.

A second reason is that few other nations have experienced such a succession of dramatic breaks in their historical narrative. Germany emerged as a nation only in 1871, industrialising at breakneck pace to become one of the world's leading powers by the end of the century. Then in 1914 came an increasingly total war, followed after four years by defeat, upheaval, the violent overthrow of the old regime and the creation of Germany's first democracy. Less than

I am indebted to John Gaffney, Liz Harvey, Joan Roseman, Cornelie Usborne, David Vincent and Joachim Whaley for their many comments and advice.

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fourteen years after the signing of the Weimar Constitution, Germany experienced a new and even more radical change with the creation of the 'Third Reich'. A dozen years further on, and the Fatherland suffered a more total defeat than has ever been endured by an advanced industrial nation. After the interregnum of the occupation, Germany again found itself flung headlong on a new course, or rather two new courses. The West had a second try at democracy and experienced the dramatic social and economic transformation wrought by the economic miracle; the East underwent a new set of radical social and political changes under the banner of Real Existing Socialism. The result of each of these ruptures was that successive generations grew up under social and political conditions that differed markedly, sometimes fundamentally, from those of their predecessors. Few other national histories offer such obvious potential for dividing one cohort from another and rendering them unable to communicate across the gulf between their respective socialisations and experiences.

Juxtaposing these two facts – the tradition of youthful revolt and the recurrence of discontinuities – makes clear that German history offers fascinating ground on which to analyse generational identities and generation conflict. But it also presents something of a paradox. The long line of youthful rebellions, often apparently so similar in form and style, would suggest that some sustained ideology or inherited cultural pattern had inclined successive generations to rise up against their parents. But looking at such turning points as 1918, 1933 or 1945 the dominant impression is of changes in nation and society so abrupt as to divide one generation from the next. A culturally and socially inherited tradition of youthful rebellion, then, or a history of discontinuities, of cohorts unable to communicate with each other? In attempting to answer this question the present volume aims to identify not only why generation conflict takes place but also its relationship to the wider patterns of modern German history.

Within those wider patterns the problem of National Socialism of course commands the historian's particular attention. Here, too, the generational theme is an important one. A number of scholars have seen the National Socialist movement as essentially a generational rebellion. Some have identified a long tradition of over-confident youthful recklessness, nationalism and intolerance leading from *Sturm und Drang* to *Sturmabteilung* and Dachau. Others have empha-

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sised the transformative experiences of total war and defeat and have traced National Socialism's origins to the specific cohort mentality of the generations forged by trench warfare and the home front. Thus here again the notion of a long tradition of youthful rebellion vies with an emphasis on rupture and discontinuity. In taking up these issues this collection aims to shed new light on the generational roots and impact of National Socialism.

II

It is a surprising fact that this is the first English-language collection on German history to adopt a generational theme. Why have historians been so slow to take up the issue? In the case of British scholars, it is partly because they have had so little first hand experience of real generational revolt. Elsewhere, interest in generations was often the result of historians being confronted by some example of youthful rebellion in their own days.[1] This was evident in Germany in the 1920s, when an increasingly organised and noisy youth inspired Karl Mannheim to produce the first fully articulated historical theory of generations.[2] And it was again the case in the 1970s when, in the aftermath of the student revolts, historians in Germany and the USA were galvanised into looking for earlier incarnations of generational conflict.[3] In Britain, youthful rebellion has been so muted and unpolitical that the issue has had great difficulty forcing its way into the academic consciousness at all, even among British historians of countries such as Germany, where the tradition of youthful revolt was so much better established.[4]

In any case, generations have always seemed rather flimsy craft compared with the sturdy steamships of social class. Social historians, generally adopting a materialist approach, have tended to

[1] Alan B. Spitzer, 'The historical problems of generations', *American Historical Review*, vol. 78 (1973), p. 1353.

[2] Karl Mannheim, 'Das Problem der Generationen', *Kölner Vierteljahreshefte für Soziologie*, vol. 7 (1928), pp. 157–180 and pp. 309–350.

[3] Philip Abrams, '*Rites de Passage*: the conflict of generations in industrial society', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 5 (1970), 1, p. 175; see also the introduction to D. Dowe, *Jugendprotest und Generationenkonflikte in Europa im 20. Jahrhundert. Deutschland, England, Frankreich und Italien im Vergleich* (Bonn 1986).

[4] On the other hand, because a subpolitical proletarian youthful 'deviancy' was so marked in Britain, British *sociologists* have long taken an active interest in the subject. Their work, in particular that of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, has been highly influential in Germany. Cf. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, *Resistance through rituals: youth subcultures in post-war Britain* (London 1976).

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assume that social groupings attain real identity and force only if they share some clearly defined material interest. Since it was not clear that there was any enduring material interest that could unite one generation and divide it from another, it was hard to see much significance in generational divisions. And certainly the hold which class conflict held on the collective imagination of capitalist societies from the mid-nineteenth century until well into the post-1945 era seemed to bear out the view that the only conflict worth talking about was that between the owners of the means of production and those who possessed nothing but their labour.

Over the last few years, however, historians have begun to concern themselves more intensively with groupings, collectives and boundaries other than social class. In part this is because the end of the cold war and the collapse of Soviet Communism has robbed Marxist-influenced academic discourse of some of its political bite (rather oddly so, since the survival of the sclerotic regime in the Kremlin was surely never the proof of the quality of Marx's analysis). But the international events of the late 1980s in fact served only to reinforce an intellectual shift that was already underway. The influence of Michel Foucault, Jacques Donzelot and other French critical theorists has been one important ingredient in this process.[5] Foucault's work, in particular, has increased historians' awareness of the power inherent in establishing the language and categories used to describe society. Against this general background, recent interest in nations and nationalism has revealed how powerfully an imagined common identity, in this case ethnic or national identity, can shape collective behaviour. The result has been a new sense of the degree to which class, as a perceived and felt entity, as a way of defining common interest and common purpose, shares with other types of social grouping the status of an 'imagined community'.[6]

The corollary of these various insights has been a new interest in the way modern societies classify and categorise themselves along lines of ethnicity, race, religion, gender and, most relevant for our purposes, generation. In the context of German history, a small but growing number of scholars over the last ten years have begun not

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[5] See e.g. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison* (New York 1977), and see the discussion of Foucault's influence and also that of Norbert Elias in Detlev Peukert, *Grenzen der Sozialdisziplinierung. Aufstieg und Krise der deutschen Jugendfürsorge 1878–1932* (Cologne 1986), pp. 18ff.; Jacques Donzelot, *The policing of families* (London 1980).

[6] The term was coined by Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism* (London 1983).

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only to take issues of youth and generation more seriously but also to adopt new questions and approaches. Whereas the older German studies, for example, often tended to focus on the organisational level of the youth movement and rather take for granted the movement's claim to speak for the younger generation as a whole, newer work has cast its net wider, to include the wider social and ideological realities and limits to generational identities. Historians have also begun to consider the process by which the German state defined and refined the generational categories, at the 'social disciplining' of young people and at youthful resistance to such social engineering. These new questions and approaches inform many of the contributions to the present volume.

What are generations? The starting-point for any analysis must be that 'generation' is, first and foremost, a word aspiring to catch social phenomena in its net rather than a clear-cut social reality for which we happen to have coined a term. Like most labels for social groupings it leads a double life as a term in common parlance and an instrument of historical and social analysis. Perhaps more than most it has been used with very varying meanings and very different levels of precision. Moreover, because historically generations have been much less the subject of theory than has social class, the historian of generations cannot have recourse to the same well-rehearsed set of understandings. At one level, therefore to ask 'What is a generation?' would be to miss the point. There is no single phenomenon.

Even so, we can at least sketch out some of the concept's boundaries and parameters. At its least ambitious, though perhaps most widely applicable level, it can be used to describe any age-defined subgroup within a given wider population which has some recognisable and distinct characteristic. This is the approach taken here by Jacob Borut's analysis of the Jewish community at the end of the nineteenth century. Borut begins with the observation that the 1880s and 1890s saw the Jewish community become far more assertive, self-confident and anti-assimilationist. His biographical analysis of contemporary Jewish activists reveals that the advocates of the new approach were considerably younger than the defenders of the old cautious line. He argues persuasively that the age split revealed different mentalities between those socialised before and after Jewish emancipation. The former continued to regard their religious freedom as a luxury and tended to keep their heads down; the

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latter took their religious freedoms for granted and asserted community interests more aggressively.

It is clear that these two 'generations' are very much secondary phenomena. Though there are, as Borut argues, parallels with developments in the wider community, the generations as described exist only within the confines of one religious subgrouping and are constituted simply by the fact that on a given issue – in this case how best to pursue the community's corporate interest – the experiences of younger and older activists led them in different directions. The great value of Borut's approach lies thus not in defining a clear-cut social grouping but in introducing a model of delayed causation. The historian's natural inclination, confronted with a political change, is to seek some contemporaneous or directly preceding cause. Borut reminds us that the cause may lie some thirty to forty years earlier, in some decisive change from the experience of the outgoing to that of the incoming cohorts. Whilst a small number of other historians of Germany have adopted similar methodologies, Volker Berghahn and Detlev Peukert being notable examples,[7] there is scope for a great deal more work to be done on these lines.

Since the nineteenth century, a number of sociologists and to a lesser extent historians have tried to use generations as a more ambitious category, whereby society as a whole is divided up into a number of generations. Discounting some early theories which followed a genealogical model according to which the next generation would emerge almost mechanically every fifteen to twenty years or so, most models of generations fall into one of two categories.[8] Sociologists have tended to conceptualise generations as distinct phases in the life-cycle, for example, 'childhood', 'youth', 'adulthood' and 'old age'. Conflict takes place between young and old, for instance, or youth and adults, along lines determined by the roles and situation characteristic of each life phase. In contrast to the genealogical model, individuals move from one generational grouping to the next as they age their way through the life-cycle. For society as a whole, the demarcation lines between the generations will remain relatively fixed, evolving only as a result of the relatively

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[7] Volker R. Berghahn, *The Americanisation of German industry* (Leamington Spa 1986); Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: the crisis of classical modernity* (London 1991).

[8] See Irmtraud Götz von Olenhusen, *Jugendreich, Gottesreich, Deutsches Reich. Junge Generation, Religion und Politik 1928–1933* (Cologne 1987), pp. 14–18; Ortega y Gasset, *The modern theme* (London 1931).

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long-term processes of change which affect social definitions of the life-cycle.

Sociologies of youth, old age and so on offer many insights but usually fall short of providing direct models for the kind of generational phenomena in which historians are interested. For one thing, there is the bewildering diversity of explanations – psychoanalytical,[9] structural–functionalist,[10] phenomenological[11] and so on – as to how and why particular life-phases take on specific characters.[12] For another, there is the problem that sociologists often seek to explain enduring universal features of modern society, whereas the historian is interested in the nationally specific or the points where conflicts or rebellion come to a head. Often, too, life-phase models are static, lacking the dimension of change. And they tend to be more efficient at explaining the common characteristics of *individual* behaviour on the part of the members of each life-phase than why at some points a collective consciousness or group identity emerges.

Historians have therefore tended to conceptualise generations in a second way, namely as historical cohorts. Here generations are defined by key experiences; the demarcation lines etched into the societal age pyramid are the dates on which formative experiences take place. According to this view, the individual's steady progress through the life-cycle has no impact on his or her generational identity. That individual remains always on one or other side of a particular historical generational divide. For society as a whole, the generational divide between any two cohorts steadily ages as the years pass following the defining event or experience. At some point, the older generation will disappear altogether. The most comprehensive and sophisticated model of historical cohorts is still that evolved by Karl Mannheim during the 1920s.[13] His definition introduced a number of powerful distinctions, most notably between the cohort characterised by common experiences and characteristics (what Marx would have called a generation in itself) and the self-conscious cohort that attained a real self-conscious identity. Many of

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[9] Erik Erikson, *Childhood and society* (Harmondsworth 1965).

[10] E.g. S. N. Eisenstadt, *From generation to generation: age groups and social structure* (New York 1966).

[11] E.g. Helmut Schelsky, *Die skeptische Generation* (Düsseldorf 1963, special edition).

[12] See also Hartmut M. Griese, *Sozialwissenschaftliche Jugendtheorien. Eine Einführung* (Weinheim, Basel 1982).

[13] Mannheim, 'Problem der Generationen'.

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the essays in this volume explicitly or implicitly benefit from his analysis.

There remains, however, no common agreement as to the point at which the decisive experience of a particular cohort takes place; Mannheim assumed it is during adolescence; others, such as Glen H. Elder, have argued that a cohort may share certain early childhood experiences and that these can be decisive.[14] Some analysts, indeed, challenge the notion of a formative set of experiences altogether and adopt a cumulative experiential model.[15] Apart from such uncertainty, the chief problem with cohort models is that – unless one is arguing that there are persistent discontinuities of a consistent kind – it is not obvious that they explain why in a particular culture there should be marked, frequent and powerful recurrence of generation conflict. And a cohort model alone will not explain why it is so often the life-phase group *youth* which is at the centre of generational conflict.

The choice between the life-phase or cohort model of generation conflict is closely linked to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter about continuity or discontinuity in German history. If the persistence of generational conflict is essentially about a tradition, and about inherited patterns of behaviour, then it may well be that the enduring character of particular life-phase groups (or perhaps of the relationship between them) is the decisive factor in defining identities and provoking conflict. On the other hand, if *discontinuities* are decisive, this suggests that conflict arises because of the contrasts between the formative experiences of the cohorts involved. Or perhaps the choice is a false one, belying a more complex interaction between cultural continuity and cohort specificities. Continuity or discontinuity, life-phase groups or cohorts? In introducing the other contributions to this volume, the remaining part of this chapter seeks to answer these questions.

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[14] Glen H. Elder and Avsholm Caspi, 'Persönliche Entwicklung und sozialer Wandel. Die Entstehung der Lebensverlaufsforschung', in Karl Ulrich Mayer (ed.), *Lebensverläufe und sozialer Wandel* (special issue of *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*) vol. 31 (1990), pp. 22–57.

[15] See for example M. Jennings, M. Kent and R. Jansen, 'Die Jugendlichen in der Bundesrepublik', *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, vol. 17 (1976), pp. 317–343; Kendall J. Baker and Russell J. Dalton, *Germany transformed: political culture and the new politics* (Cambridge 1981), pp. 45–50. Jacob Borut's essay implicitly treats the age-range between the 20s and mid-30s as the period in which decisive political experiences are garnered.

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III

Joachim Whaley's essay immediately challenges many of the schematic distinctions we have just made. Whaley describes how the poets and dramatists of eighteenth-century Germany manufactured an image of youth which was to exert extraordinary influence on German culture until well into the twentieth century.[16] Using three celebrated works of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as examples, Whaley shows how, despite the coming and going of a succession of literary modes, German writers from the *Sturm und Drang* onwards continually returned to the theme of youth as a spiritual force somehow outside adult society, enjoying a special mission of redemption. This idea of youthful redemption went hand in hand with the idea that natural or spiritual forces needed to assert themselves against the purely rational or material. Youth's mission was thus conceptualised primarily as an aesthetic one, bringing pure aesthetics into a world of philistinism and materialism, yet, as Whaley shows, this was an argument that could take political overtones. It was also one that might be linked to the nationalist cause.

As subsequent essays demonstrate, the power of this myth and the recurrent belief that youth somehow stood outside society, representing an aesthetically pure and more moral alternative capable of redeeming contemporary society from its current ills, was an important and distinctive feature of German development. Society's perception of youth, and indeed youth's perception of itself, was rarely just of a particular generation. It was always permeated by a sense of mission and alternative possibility. What is distinctive about 'generation conflict' in Germany, then, is as much the way a particular generation, youth, became a cultural label, a projection or repository, as the actual conflict or differences between real social groupings.

This interaction between literary ideal and social identities is the subject matter of Rainer Elkar's account of the Young Germany movement in the pre-1848 era. Using an outstanding array of sources, Elkar shows how the intellectual world of a small group of

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[16] There is a sizeable German literature on the youth myth. See Thomas Koebner, Rolf-Peter Janz and Frank Trommler (eds.), *'Mit uns zieht die neue Zeit'. Der Mythos Jugend* (Frankfurt 1985); Hans Heinrich Muchow, *Jugend und Zeitgeist. Morphologie der Kulturpubertät* (Reinbek 1962); Walter Rüegg (ed.), *Kulturkritik und Jugendkult* (Frankfurt 1974).

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literati and intellectual friendship clubs in the third quarter of the eighteenth century spread to university and *Gymnasium* culture. The cult of youth, its linkage to a particular language of moral and aesthetic redemption, thus graduated from a few intellectual circles to become the common language for generations of students in the early nineteenth century. Then, during the 1830s and early 1840s, Elkar (as, indeed, the authorities at the time) detects a further shift. Out of this widely disseminated literary culture, Young Germany became something more – an expression of identity among young Germans. This new sense of broad group identity was coupled with a growing self-confidence and an increasingly political consciousness. The imagined community 'Young Germany' and the reality of many young Germans thus moved closer together.

At first sight, what is happening here is the literary manufacture of a generation. Yet as Whaley and Elkar show, this is far from the whole story. In the first place, it is clear that fantasising about youth was triggered partly by changes in everyday social definitions of how youth, as a phase in the life-cycle, was to be lived. In fact, Whaley echoes John Gillis in arguing that it was in the second half of the eighteenth century that youth in a modern sense emerged at all.[17] It was only then that social, cultural and legal norms began to define the age-span of youth more narrowly and uniformly.[18] As well as becoming better defined, the life-phase youth (initially only among the more affluent bourgeoisie) was becoming increasingly associated with, in Rainer Elkar's words, a 'moratorium', a period of 'time out', when individuals with most of the biological and intellectual capacities of adulthood were nevertheless free of the responsibilities of adulthood and were not, or not fully, integrated into working life. In two senses this moratorium was crucial to understanding the evolution of a myth of youthful redemption. First, it helped trigger the fantasies about youth. Youth was not yet fully integrated into society, and was therefore seen as capable of transcending social particularity. It was free from labour and therefore attractively free

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[17] John R. Gillis, *Youth and history: tradition and change in European age relations, 1770 to the present* (New York, London 1981, 2nd edn.), pp. 38ff.

[18] Even if there was, perhaps, more of a sense of maturation and thus more of a conception of 'adolescence' in pre-industrial times than Gillis has acknowledged. See Michael Mitterauer, 'Gesindedienst und Jugendphase im europäischen Vergleich', *GG*, vol. 11 (1985), 2, pp. 177–204.