

From genealogy to generation: the birth of cohort thinking in Russia.

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From Genealogy to Generation: The Birth of Cohort Thinking in Russia

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Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History

Slavica Publishers

Volume 9, Number 3, Summer 2008 (New Series)

pp. 567-594

10.1353/kri.0.0016

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

From Genealogy to Generation The Birth of Cohort Thinking in Russia

Stephen Lovell (bio)

The keywords in my title refer to two distinct ways in which members of a society may think about their location in time. One way—genealogy—takes its bearings from lines of family descent. The other—generation—finds its units of measurement in cohorts of people born at approximately the same time. These two approaches have something in common: they both use biological relationships as a way of thinking about social relationships. But the differences between them are equally clear. Genealogy provides a vertical sense of belonging that defines the people of the present in terms of their ancestors. Generation is horizontal: it constructs a community of coevals. Genealogy concentrates on succession, whereas generation emphasizes simultaneity. Genealogy attaches importance to kin connection; generation potentially transcends kin.

Two commonsensical things might be said about this pair of concepts with respect to prerevolutionary Russia. First, we might expect Russia to be more genealogically minded than most European societies. This was a place where power was notoriously personalistic; where a group of noble families, tightly woven together in their lineage, held sway; and where kin connections mattered far more than merit or rule of law or non-kin allegiance. Second, with regard to generation, it is well known that Russia had one of the most acute recorded cases of generational rebellion—a youth subculture of the 1860s that has frequently been cited as the first of its kind anywhere in Europe.

My primary task in this paper is to account for this apparent discrepancy. How to explain the shift from *ancien régime* to vanguard? How did Russia move from a “vertical” to a “horizontal” sense of generation: from long chains of succession within an overarching kin structure to a sense of belonging with one’s coevals (“cohort thinking”). I look at generation not in social-science terms—as a cohort empirically extractable from history—but as an idea. For my purposes, the crucial question is: when does it become important for people to identify themselves in generational rather than in some other terms? **[End Page 567]**

This question has a commonsensical kind of answer, which may be expressed in one word as “modernization.” The historiography of modern Europe places the birth of cohort thinking in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Certain groups in society (in the first instance, young, well-off, well-educated males) were stimulated by new institutions (universities, bureaucracies), places (notably cities), and events (notably the French Revolution) to find a sense of solidarity with their coevals that might override previous loyalties such as those within a family, clan, or social estate. Of course, the awareness of generational difference was not an invention of 1789: generation is discussed as a mechanism of political change even in Plato. But the idea usually advanced by scholars is that the revolutionary period brought awareness of broad horizontal allegiances, not just of difference from the older generation, and that it made generational consciousness a historical phenomenon. Young men were now not simply the sons of their fathers but a uniquely situated historical cohort.

Following on from this, it would appear that generational issues are articulated with particular vehemence at moments when societies are facing fundamental choices about the allocation of collective resources and the redistribution of political authority. Prominent examples include countries suffering the teething troubles of modernization: France in the few decades following 1789; Germany and Italy in the middle of the 19th century; and of course, Russia in the late tsarist era.

This, broadly speaking, was the line of interpretation taken by many distinguished commentators when the academic study of generations took off in the postwar era. Lewis S. Feuer, author of perhaps the most impressive of the many studies of generations that were inspired by the protest movements of the 1960s, found in Russian history evidence of generational conflict “of unparalleled intensity” resulting from “special social circumstances.”¹ He went on to devote almost 100 pages in his voluminous study, which was informed by what the author had recently observed on the Berkeley campus, to the Russian student movement of the 1860s.

*Article***From Genealogy to Generation**
The Birth of Cohort Thinking in Russia

STEPHEN LOVELL

The keywords in my title refer to two distinct ways in which members of a society may think about their location in time. One way—genealogy—takes its bearings from lines of family descent. The other—generation—finds its units of measurement in cohorts of people born at approximately the same time. These two approaches have something in common: they both use biological relationships as a way of thinking about social relationships. But the differences between them are equally clear. Genealogy provides a vertical sense of belonging that defines the people of the present in terms of their ancestors. Generation is horizontal: it constructs a community of coevals. Genealogy concentrates on succession, whereas generation emphasizes simultaneity. Genealogy attaches importance to kin connection; generation potentially transcends kin.

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Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History 9, 3 (Summer 2008): 567–94.



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