

THE GENERATION OF 1914 BY ROBERT WOHL

The Generation of 1914 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979) by Robert Wohl, Professor of History at the University of California, Los Angeles, seeks to “rescue the generation of 1914 from the shadowland of myth and to restore it to the realm of history” (2). The book, as defined by the author, is a “quest for the realities behind the myths of the lost generation” (4) with a view toward a better understanding not only of the origins of the Great War but also the complex social and political developments in early twentieth-century Europe that led to “the spread of pessimism and despair, the waning of liberal and humanitarian values, the rise of the Communist and Fascist movements, and the sudden eruption of violence in Europe’s most progressive countries” (2). Wohl optimistically undertook such a project with the hope that “such a history [of the generation of 1914] would yield a new perspective on the period as a whole—or at the least, a finer sense for its conflicts and concerns” (2). But he soon learned that the “generation of 1914” epitomized just as complex a phenomenon as the epoch which gave rise to its conceptualization. He states:

A study of generational theories persuaded me that no available model of generation was flexible enough to encompass the baffling variety of ways in which the term “generation of 1914” and its synonyms had been used in the discourse of early twentieth-century Europe. Theorists had naturally tried to be consistent; but the most striking thing about the generation of 1914 seemed to be the indeterminacy of the social group to which the phrase referred. For some time I searched for a solution that would do justice to the complexity of the facts. The one I chose was to abandon theoretical and lexicographical consistency as standards and to try to find out what people living in early twentieth-century Europe had meant by the “generation of 1914.” After all, the generation of 1914 was an idea. Why not approach it as such and attempt to determine how and in what contexts people used it, to what individuals or groups it referred, what shifts if any occurred in its usage, why (and which) people found it indispensable, and what interests—hence what politics—lay behind it (2).

This observation led Wohl to his particular methodology which is a kind of collective biography of prominent social and political intellectuals and their contributions to generational thought based on personal experiences. In order to get at an assumed “unity of experience, feeling, and fate that transcended national borders” (3), Wohl discusses important literati from five European countries—France, Germany, England, Spain, and Italy. But to avoid what he calls “false universalism,” he elucidates the thought of each author within the strict context of his (or her¹) own country.² This allows him to see what the “generation of 1914” meant to coevals in a given nation, from which he is able to make comparisons with the ideas of key thinkers in other nations and thereby build a general European understanding about the generation of 1914 as a whole. Wohl consequently describes his work as “European in scope, comparative in method, though national in structure” (3).

Wohl disappointingly does not propose any definite thesis in his introductory remarks. He avows that “the argument of the book therefore proceeds nationally, topically, and to some extent chronologically” (4), but he goes on to outline the content and structure of the book, not its thesis. To the contrary, he leaves the issue rather vague, as he intends to use his final chapter to “bring together *the various strands of the argument*, enlarge the context of the discussion to Europe as a whole, and present [his] own reflections on the generation of 1914” (4; emphasis mine, DWF). Wohl, in fact, waits until not the last chapter but the last two pages of the last

¹Wohl discusses only one female author in the book, and that is Vera Brittain and her *Testament of Youth* (110-111).

²Wohl departs from this strict pattern in his inclusion of Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* in his chapter on England rather than the section on Germany (106-107). Wohl does not indicate why he does this, except that he considers the translation of *Im Western Nichts Neues* one among many war books to appear in England in the late 1920s.

chapter to state his thesis. Here, at the very last, the author's ambiguity about the generation of 1914 becomes quite clear to the reader. He concludes:

The generational idea turned out to be one of the most negative items in the ensemble of ill-assorted attitudes, prejudices, and beliefs with which the generation of 1914 embarked on life. For the generational idea, as developed by intellectuals of the late nineteenth century, suggested a biological determinism that had no basis in social fact; it implied that stage of life was a prison from which there was no escape and that communication across the chasm of age was impossible; it postulated that the differences between age-groups were more important than the differences within them; it demoted the mind and called into question its autonomy by explaining ideas as the direct and unmediated product of experience; it obscured the importance of social divisions by subordinating class interests to generational values; it vastly exaggerated the importance of literary intellectuals by locating in them the conscience and dynamic vanguard of society at large; and it prevented those who fell under its spell from seeing that all lasting historical action takes the form of the transformation of that which already exists and results from the collaboration (as well as the conflict) of different age-groups.

This is why in the end the term "generation of 1914" must remain confined within the quotation marks from which I had originally hoped to liberate it. An exercise in self-portrayal that never described more than a minority within the elite of the European educated classes, a project of social and political domination that was realized only in Italy and there but for a brief historical moment, the "generation of 1914" also proved inadequate when used as a conceptual device by men and women born in the late nineteenth century to explain their history. The intellectual foundations on which the generational interpretation was raised were too faulty to support the interpretative structure. The strange mixture of idealism and biological determinism on which the generational interpretation was based obscures our understanding of the major movements of the period more than it enlightens it" (236-237).

Wohl clearly seems unable to reach his goal to untangle reality about the generation of 1914 from its myths and to restore that reality to the realm of history. Because he is unable to do this, he judges both the legitimacy of the concept and its utility for enlightenment on critical events such as the Great War.³ Wohl candidly admits a "failure of interpretation" as regards the

³This judgment by the author comes at the reader almost like a "bolt out of the blue"—a surprise that is unexpected. Wohl does not develop anywhere else in his book this connection between biological determinism and generational ideology, even though the parts of generational ideology, which he does elaborate, do indeed suggest a link to biological determinism as the overriding philosophy of the whole (i.e., the idea of a generation of 1914).

generation of 1914. So perhaps this is why he reveals his thesis only at the conclusion of his work, since it does not—nor could it—provide an overall guide to his treatment of the diverse range of data that he uncovers.⁴

But maybe this is to judge Wohl too harshly. He does indicate a considerable usefulness for his study—the impact that this notion of a generation of 1914 made on the self-consciousness of erudite Europeans in the first third of the twentieth-century. He says, “No one who has studied the writings and followed the careers of European intellectuals born during this period can doubt that generationalism was one of the most widespread and deeply enrooted convictions of the ‘generation of 1914’” (237). For this reason alone, Wohl’s study is an important descriptive account about the nationalistic impact of scholarly generational theory in Europe at the turn of the century. Wohl paints five distinct portraits of generational understanding. And this is to be expected, since he elucidates five distinct cultures each with its own set of ideas about human interrelationships that are veiled in a particular linguistic framework. This is why he must look at the Expressionists, Futurists, and Fabians in France (chapter one), the Youth Movement, Wilhelmine Establishment, and Social Democrats in Germany (chapter two), the Victorians, Elites, and New Poets in England (chapter three), the Monarchists, Restorationists, and Regenerationists in Spain (chapter four), and the Neutralists, Interventionists, and Fascists in Italy (chapter five). As he describes the generation of 1914 as “wanderers between two worlds,” Wohl himself becomes a wanderer among these five nationalistic worlds.

⁴Each chapter of the book can be read as a distinct or separate entity. Even the issue of the Great War does not unify the whole (e.g., chapter four on Spain’s Jose Ortega).

This diversity, perhaps, enhances the importance of Wohl's study as a contribution to the intellectual history of early twentieth-century Europe. He gleans his material from a variety of sources (i.e., autobiographies, conversations, essays, lectures, poems, novels, memoirs, newspaper articles, personal notes, political speeches, private letters, and sociological and philosophical treatises).⁵ This results in a wonderfully rich narrative on the influence of key thinkers, a narrative that is balanced and thorough.⁶ Wohl is able to show how men like Ernest Psichari, Henry de Montherlant, and Henri Daniel-Rops (in France), Walter Flex, Ernst Juenger, and Karl Mannheim (in Germany), Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, and T. E. Lawrence (in England), Jose Ortega y Gasset (in Spain), and Giuseppe Prezzolini, Benito Mussolini, Adolfo Omodeo, and Antonio Gramsci (in Italy) influenced their respective societies with generational ideology. He further links the dynamic youth movements, especially in Germany and Italy, with important intellectual contributions to the perceived distinction between the failure of the older generation and the possibilities for renewal inherent in the younger generation. And Wohl indicates how the Great War caused a gigantic rift between those who fought at the front (i.e., the younger generation) and those who created and directed the war from behind the lines (i.e., the older generation). He also notes the development of an "intergenerational" conflict among the

⁵These sources vary significantly according to national locale, as Wohl notes, "Thus the Germans were more likely to produce full-fledged social theories dealing with the generation problem, whereas the English wrote poetry, novels, memoirs, and letters commenting on their generation's fate. The French were given to generational portraits organized around groups of writers; the Italians excelled in essays analyzing the politics of the generation of 1914. In Spain Ortega presented his most important generational theories in public discourses and university lectures designed to be heard rather than read" (3).

⁶The exception to this balance might be chapter four which discusses primarily the work of Jose Ortega y Gasset.

trench warriors themselves—those who began the fight and the “second wave” (in Germany) and the “young warriors” versus the “paladins of anxiety” (in France).

The best of Wohl’s book, in the opinion of this reviewer, comes in Chapter Three, England: Lost Legions of Youth (85-121). In this section, Wohl hits the mark with respect to his original goal, because, in the case of England, he strips away the myths of a “lost generation” and recovers kernels of truth. It is not true that Britain lost a generation to the Great War. British losses numbered much less than those of either France or Germany, hardly a generation of men. And it is not true that only the noblest and purest died in the war. Death in the trenches was no respecter of character or person. In addition, it is not true that the old men “came back” after the war and deprived returning soldiers of “their victory.” The truth is that the “old men” (who were not so old) never left, and what happened after 1919 was “the normal renewal of personnel in the commanding heights of politics and culture, a process of generational turnover that was much less affected by the gigantic losses of the war than everyone thought” (223-224). This is where Wohl’s work shines—in corrective insights to the mistaken myths of a lost generation in England. Perhaps he would have done better to revise his thesis accordingly, but then he would not have been able to detail the generational thinking of elites in France, Germany, Spain, and Italy. It is because of its international scope that *The Generation of 1914* stands as a worthy contribution to the early twentieth-century intellectual history of Europe.