

Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 307 pages, with numerous illustrations, introduction, endnotes, and index. Wohl is Professor of History, University of California, and also author of *French Communism in the Making, 1914-1924*.

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Introduction. Wohl states as his purpose for writing: “to rescue the generation of 1914 from the shadowland of myth and to restore it to the realm of history” (2). The book is about “a quest for the realities behind the myths of the lost generation” (4). This research, he believes, might help to better understand the origins of the Great War and “such critical developments as 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 during the years between 1914 and 1945” (2). He defines his methods—the use of generational theory, the treatment of several key European nations, the breadth of his source material, and his treatment of the subject as a collective biography.

Chapter One. “Historical generations are not born; they are made. They are a device by which people conceptualize society and seek to transform it. But what people? In early twentieth-century Europe generationalists were almost always literary intellectuals living in large cities. They were members of a small elite who were keenly aware of their uniqueness and proud of their intellectual superiority. What concerned these writers or would-be writers was the decline of culture and the waning of vital energies; what drove them together was the desire to create new values and to replace those that were fading; what incited them to action was the conviction that they represented the future in the present; what dismayed them was their problematic relationship to the masses they would have liked to lead. Whether they called themselves Expressionists, Futurists, or Fabians, they felt above all like ‘young men of today’” (5).

In this chapter, Wohl treats the generational thinking of Henri Massis, Alfred de Tarde, Maurice Barres, Ernest Psichari, Henri Franck, Francois Mentre, Henry de Montherlant, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, Henri Daniel-Rops, Marcel Arland, Jean Prevost, Andre Chamson, and Victor Giraud. Three groups or generations are to be distinguished: (1) the men of the prewar revival, represented by Massis and Psichari; (2) the young warriors of 1920-1925, represented by

Montherlant and Drieu la Rochelle; and (3) the “paladins of anxiety” in 1927-1930, represented by Marcel Arland and Daniel-Rops. “The difference among these generations is the difference in their relationship to the war. The first generation grew up under its menace and prepared to fight it; the second was caught up by it like a leaf in a hurricane and had no choice but to yield to it and to derive what lessons it could from the experience; the third missed serving in it but was marked forever by its passions and the disillusionment and disorder that followed in its wake. The pattern, then, is jagged and irregular. We have three generations that appear and noisily proclaim their programs in a period of exactly fifteen years. Three generations that identify their fate with the First World War. Three generations that are so tightly packed together that they could easily be present in the progeny of a single family” (36).

How does this type of theorizing function, at least in early twentieth-century French intellectual circles? “First, that generation was a means of conceptualizing society and one’s place in it; second, that this way of thinking about society was becoming more widespread because of contemporary developments, of which the war was a spectacular example; and third, that the generational idea was being used to mobilize people for cultural and political purposes” (38). Since “the generational idea feeds on a sense of discontinuity and disconnection from the past,” those who suffer such loss and feel a need to regain a sense of identity have two basic options: “They can hurry forward to a new world or seek to return to the old one. In either case, the young men of today—that is, the young generation—are lost by definition. Their mission can only be to prepare the way and to build for their successors. Hence the spokesmen for the present generation, once they begin to think of themselves as belonging to a generation, will represent themselves and their coevals as unique, lost, sacrificed, and charged by history with a special task. These categories of uniqueness, loss, sacrifice, and mission were all present . . . in the generational writings . . . [so that in France] by 1912 . . . generational portraiture and polemic had reached the status of a literary genre . . . [with] its rules, its structure, and its themes. One of its rules was the assumption, seldom made explicit because it was taken so for granted, that generations could be reduced to the handful of writers who exemplified them” (39). But the genre of this “literary imperialism,” according to Wohl, certainly appealed to the general public, since it filled many needs. But what needs in France he does not explain, as he turns his attention to Germany.

Chapter Two. “The problem of the generation of 1914 is so inextricably connected with the problem of youth that to discuss one means inevitably to discuss the other. This is especially true in the case of Germany. Like ‘generation,’ ‘youth’ is an ambiguous word. Throughout the nineteenth century it was used in Germany primarily to designate a stage in an individual’s life history. This stage of life was invested by German intellectuals with a range of meanings and a wealth of emotional resonance not to be found in other European countries. . . . However, *Jugend* [came] to have another meaning. It referred not only to a stage of life but to a group or class of individuals who were united by a common age and a common set of attitudes. In other words, ‘youth’ had become a synonym for ‘generation’” (42).

Linguistic shifts, according to Wohl, followed developments in the Youth Movement. “The Youth Movement became a haven for the amalgam of confused and irrational ideas known in German as *Lebensphilosophie*, in which the ultimate value was vitality and the ultimate

standard ‘the needs of life’” (43). With its themes of generational conflict, conceptualizations about youth were “assigned a political value” and served as symbols for “the renewal of society and culture as a whole” (45-46). Sensitive to the issues of materialism, modernity, and cosmopolitanism and the *Angst* of youth concerning such, the Youth Movement “gave [youth] the opportunity to flee from the unpleasant realities and insoluble dilemmas of Wilhelmine Germany into a knightly and rural world of youth where they could dream, untroubled, of cultural renewal. As they hiked through the unspoiled countryside, danced around flaring bonfires, sang folk songs, strummed their guitars, and declaimed Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* and Stefan George’s poetry, they could forget the asphalt and the grey working masses of the cities and congratulate themselves on having achieved a true national community or *Volksgemeinschaft* within their marching groups. They believed that they had escaped from the lies and hypocrisy of the adult world, and they fancied that they were laying the foundation for a new and better Germany. Ethical purity and spiritual growth were their objectives, and to the extent that they walled themselves off from the adult world they achieved them. Small wonder, therefore, that they listened with approval to men outside the movement, like the educational reformer Gustav Wyneken and the publisher Eugen Diederichs, who told them that they represented a ‘new generation’ and that they bore within them a revolution of the body against the exaggerated rationalism and the smug self-satisfaction of a soulless epoch” (47).

But “in 1913 there seemed little reason to believe that German life was going to undergo any major change. . . . Official Germany held all the levers of political and economic power, while its most serious challenger was working-class Germany, represented by the Social Democratic party with its massive organization. The inner renewal that middle-class Germany had chosen in preference to practical party politics seemed to preclude success. The war provided a solution to this dilemma. By undermining official Germany and discrediting its leaders and institutions, it made possible and even inevitable sweeping structural change. . . . Yet the price that had to be paid for this opportunity was awesome, for middle-class youth had to fight the war that official Germany had unleashed upon the European continent. . . . [Regardless] no social group gave itself more unreservedly to the war effort than middle-class youth. Recruiting officers were mobbed by student volunteers. Nor did any social group show greater readiness to die in the service of the German state. In October 1914 a force of volunteers, composed largely of students and former members of the Youth Movement, stormed a fortified position in Flanders and suffered staggering losses. The ‘heroes of Langemarck’, as they were christened, were said to have gone to their deaths fearlessly and with patriotic songs resounding from their lips. They soon became symbols of a generation of youth who combined gaiety with sobriety and disapproval of society as it then existed with an unqualified, almost lighthearted willingness to lay down their lives for the redemption of their fellow Germans” (48).

Wohl elaborates on the nature of this generation gap in the work of Walter Flex, *Der Wanderer zwischen beiden Welten* [The Wanderer between Two Worlds], an examination of the war experience of his friend Ernst Wurch. First published in 1917, the book “went through thirty-nine editions and sold 250,000 copies in less than two years” (50). The book represented the attitudes of a generation that practically spiritualized the war effort, so consequently “the moral attitude with which many German middle-class volunteers went to war contained within it the potential for enormous disillusionment. Confronted with the reality of war, expended like materiel, reduced to the life of a troglodyte, surrounded by images of ugliness, cut off from the

world of civilians, deprived of victory, the volunteer could easily turn against the forces that brutalized him and condemned him to what he increasingly suspected was a meaningless sacrifice” (51). This shift is seen clearly in Fritz von Unruh’s *Opfergang* [Way of Sacrifice], an expressionist novel “which was written in 1916 during the battle of Verdun at the request of the German General Staff, but then suppressed because of its revolutionary overtones” (51). “Striving to make sense of the slaughter at Verdun, Unruh has intuitively fused the prewar ideas of generationalism, youth ideology, and cultural renewal that were present in the Youth Movement and Expressionism with the notions of the front experience and the brotherhood of soldiers. The distinction between the morally pure and the corrupt . . . was now translated into a rift between the world of the front and the world of the rear. Unruh located the agents of cultural renewal in the survivors of trench warfare. . . . The men of the front would one day return to bring the light of their revelation to the moral darkness of civilian Germany, whose population had not been able to live up to the virtues of their fighting forces” (53).

This “idea of the front generation,” in turn, “was never effectively exploited by the left-wing parties. Instead, it became an important ideological and organizational weapon in the arsenal of the German radical Right” (54). Wohl describes Ernst Juenger’s role in this development, his *Stahlgewittern* [Storm of Steel] and *Der Krieg als inneres Erlebnis* [War as Inner Experience]. Yet, for all Juenger’s rhetoric about war as “a creative force” and “his idealization of the trench fighter and his insistence that morale and fighting spirit were more important than numbers or equipment, Juenger recognized that masses and materiel had won the war” (59). Nevertheless, in the long view, “the outcome of the war mattered little. On the contrary, the lessons the war had to teach could be learned even better in defeat than in victory. For in the depths of his despair the German soldier had made a precious discovery: He had come to know and worship the nation. He had come to realize that the *I* was nothing and that the *we* to which he belonged was everything. He had liberated himself from the old liberal values and had come to long after a new, tragic form of life. The ‘new man’ would never again be satisfied with the values of the nineteenth century. He fulfilled himself in war. . . . Territories and war aims were mere symbols necessary to get men to die. War was an eternal rite in which young celebrants strove after moral perfection. In the performance of this rite, death was unimportant. Those who died left the imperfect Germany of appearances and took their place in the profound reality of ‘eternal Germany’ where they contributed to ‘the sources of our feelings, acts, and thoughts.’ Every generation drew upon its predecessor. Nothing was lost. The generations of men were like a coral reef in which no layer could exist without the innumerable already decomposed layers from which it derived its substance. ‘Man,’ Juenger affirmed, ‘is the bearer, the constantly changing vessel, which contains everything that has been done, thought, and felt before him.’ This was the most profound lesson of the war. No one had died in vain. The English, French, and Germans had all been working toward a common goal: a new mode of life” (59-60). But “the fight had gone out of many of these fighters” (60).

In response, there arose a “second wave” of the front generation, defined by men like Hans Zehrer, Edgar Jung, and Uttmann von Elterlein. The matter of generation became confused. “It was difficult to know to what generation any given individual belonged. In general, though, men born before 1880 stood outside the twentieth century’s zone of influence. . . . The front generation consisted of those born between 1890 and 1900; their tragedy was that they had a foot in each century. Then came the class of 1902, a transitional generation, followed

in turn by those born after 1910, whom Elterlein perceived to be ‘essentially different from us.’ Even to use the word ‘generation,’ Elterlein warned, could thus be confusing; for when one said generation, one really meant the relationship of the twentieth to the nineteenth century, ‘the relationship of materialism to spirituality, of rationalism to idealism. Thus one doesn’t really mean generation at all’” (65).

It was left to men like Frank Matzke, Ernst Wilhelm Eschmann, E. Guenther Gruendel, and Karl Mannheim to sift through this ambiguity and provide some clarity. Gruendel argued that “generations were ‘waves of humanity,’ consisting of men born within a band of more or less thirty years, ‘in which the cultural-historical action of peoples manifests itself.’ These ‘creative unities’ bore the stamp of certain particularly important historical moments or events. The young generation in Germany . . . was made up of those born roughly between 1890 and 1920. To be properly understood, this mass of youth had to be further divided into three subgenerations: the young front generation (born between 1890 and 1900); the war youth generation (born between 1900 and 1910); and the postwar generation (born after 1910). Each of these subgenerations had its distinctive experience and characteristics” (68). “For all their differences, however, the three subgenerations were bound together by their relationship to the war and by their central place in the unfolding of the bourgeois crisis” (69). But some said their main trait was *Sachlichkeit* or matter-of-factness, while to others they were noted above all “by their outer coolness and inner passion” (70).

Nevertheless, three features of German generation theory stand out in contrast with that of the French: “a tendency to view youth as a social category and a historical agent in its own right, an awareness that age-groups do not necessarily blossom into ‘generations,’ and a concern for the conditions under which a generational change produces a revolution in national life” (73). For all his brilliant insight into the mechanisms of generationalism, Wohl notes, “it is curious that Mannheim never made the connection between the popularity of generational thinking in the Weimar Republic and the transformations that were taking place in society and politics” (83). Although “Mannheim devised many of the distinctions necessary to transform the concept of generation into a serviceable intellectual tool,” he, like many other theorists, “remained a prisoner of the idea of the young generation and its mission. After all, born in 1893, he too was a member of the generation of 1914” (84).

Chapter Three. Wohl recounts the legend about twentieth-century England, how a generation of strong, brave, and beautiful young men of unusual abilities volunteered to fight in the Great War. “Brought up to revere England and to do their duty, they embraced their country’s cause and accepted lightheartedly the likelihood of early death. Most of them were killed on the battlefields of Gallipoli, Ypres, Loos, the Somme, Passchendaele, and Cambrai. Those who were not killed were mutilated in mind and body. They limped home in 1919 to find that their sacrifice had been in vain. The hard-faced, hard-hearted old men had come back and seized the levers of power. Youth had been defeated by age. Civilization had been dealt a fatal blow. Few in number, tired and shell-shocked, disillusioned by what they found at home, they sat by helplessly during the interwar years and watched the old politicians flounder in incompetence and squander their victory. The peace was lost; English hegemony in the world was lost; the empire was lost; even traditional English values were lost, as the English submitted

to the tyranny of foreign models. Eventually a second war came to seal the disaster of the first, and England slipped pusillanimously into the category of second-rate powers. All might have been different if only the splendid young men of 1914 had not given up their lives on the fields of Flanders and the beaches of Gallipoli” (85-86).

Wohl notes that “this myth had its origins in a disillusioning experience shared by many Englishmen of the privileged class” (86). He speaks of Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves, Richard Aldington, Frederick Manning, and Henry Williamson. At first, “for two and half years the war was . . . exciting, fulfilling, glorious, holy, noble, beautiful, gay, and, all in all, great fun” (92). Yes, the front was hell, but there were “compensations” early on: “the troops were not always in the trenches; some sectors were relatively quiet; one lived outdoors, and though Flanders could be wet and cold there were also moments . . . when ‘the naked earth is warm with Spring, and with green grass and bursting trees’” (93). But most importantly, “one was doing what was right. Few young English officers doubted that Germany had broken the code of European nations and deserved to be punished” (93). Further, these men had been “trained in a literary tradition that translated quotidian and unpleasant reality into elevated sentiment and diction. . . . Death was a crossing of the bar, a kiss, or an embrace. It was an awakening from the dream of life. They knew from their Horace that it was sweet to die for one’s country and from their Homer that it was in battle that one demonstrated one’s virtue and worth. . . . The ugly aspects of life one never talked about, not even to one’s parents and most intimate friends. The needs of the body, for example, were not to be mentioned. Sex could be discussed only after it had been rarefied into love. Fear was such a disgrace that it had to be disguised beneath bluff humor, and pain had always to be understated if talked about at all. Since the front was filled with ugliness, since death was seldom noble, since bodily functions—sexual and otherwise—could not be hidden and provided one of the main sources of imagery in conversation among the other ranks, and since fear and the struggle against it were uppermost in the thoughts of all men at the front, educated Englishmen found it impossible, or undesirable, to describe in simple and direct language what they were seeing and feeling. Experience, even when unpleasant, was quickly transformed into ‘literature,’ and in the process of transformation was distorted and rendered palatable to those at home. . . . The parents, teachers, and rulers of these young men collaborated gratefully and wholeheartedly in this distortion of experience and this idealization of mass slaughter” (93-94).

It was not until after the battle of the Somme in the summer and fall of 1916 that “a new image of the war and the generation who were fighting it began to emerge, and even then it remained the disputed image of a minority, angrily rejected by the English establishment and the great majority of the English public” (94). This new image came from the trenches of the Western Front from those who, by virtue of the senseless brutality of the war, felt “a sense of identification with the enemy and a skepticism about the aims for which the war was being fought” (94). “The men in the trenches felt deceived, abandoned, betrayed. France was no longer a place to which one went in search of glory, but a place one went to die and to disappear into mass and unmarked graves. England had become a strange land where business went on as usual and where people were incapable of understanding what life was like at the front. Why bother, then, to tell them? Embittered silence broadened the rift between the civilians and the soldiers. And out of this trauma . . . arose a new poetry, and ultimately a new literature, which represented the fate of the English generation of 1914 in radically different terms” (95).

To Siegfried Sassoon, “nothing was beautiful; heroism was a virtue reserved for conversations with civilians; and the enemy was at home in Parliament and on the General Staff. Sassoon’s soldiers floundered, blundered, slid, tripped, and lurched blindly through slimy, sludge-filled trenches. They were denizens of ‘death’s gray land’ and dwelled in a place ‘rotten with death’ where all was ruin ‘and nothing blossoms but the sky.’ They were disconsolate, haggard, and hopeless. Their faces were dulled and sunken. They raved at the ‘bleeding war’ and moaned, sobbed, and choked with ‘rampant grief’ when they heard of a brother’s death. They committed suicide out of despair . . . They died slowly in isolated shell-holes moaning for water or ‘flapping above the fire-step like a fish.’ When they returned to England on leave, they were ‘driven stark, staring mad’ by memories of the ‘whispering guns’ and by ‘dreams that drip with murder.’ They were pursued by images of ‘green-faced Germans’ running and screaming while British troops stuck them like pigs. And in their fantasies they imagined their troops and war machines being turned against the ‘Yellow Press-men,’ the ‘Junkers in Parliament,’ and the crowds that thronged music halls and cackled at patriotic jokes:

I’d like to see a Tank come down the stalls,  
Lurching to ragtime tunes, or ‘Home, sweet Home,’--  
And there’d be no more jokes in Music-halls  
To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.

. . . [And] it was the atmosphere in England, as much as conditions at the front, that fueled anger and fierce epigrams:

‘Good morning; good morning!’ the General said  
When we met him last week on our way to the line.  
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of ‘em dead,  
And we’re cursing his staff for incompetent swine.  
‘He’s a cheery old card,’ grunted Harry to Jack  
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.

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But he did for them both by his plan of attack” (95, 99).

Interestingly, Wohl argues that Sassoon’s anger “drowned out the internal contradictions of the warrior. Sassoon was powerfully attracted toward the front—so powerfully attracted that he was never happy when away from it. There was something in him that courted death, that craved annihilation, that derived a drug-like satisfaction from facing danger unafraid, that drove him back to France time and again until chance provided him with the wounds and ailments that saved him” (100). Thus, the poetry that victimizes the soldier, this poetry of compassion, is also “a poetry of self-indulgence, which conceals the positive values Sassoon found in the war” (100).

Wohl discusses the work of Winfred Owen and notes that since he was “steeped in the imagery of the Bible and still deeply Christian in his patterns of thought, he came quite naturally to view the combatants as a generation of innocent youth being led to the slaughter. . . . Many war poets wrote verses on this theme, but none expressed the central idea so powerfully or

related it so effectively to Christian [and Jewish] tradition as Owen did in his poem ‘The Parable of the Old Man and the Young’:

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,  
And took the fire with him, and a knife,  
And as they sojourned both of them together,  
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,  
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,  
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?  
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,  
And builded parapets and trenches there,  
And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.  
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,  
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,  
Neither do anything to him. Behold,  
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horn;  
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.  
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,  
And half the seed of Europe, one by one” (104-105).

Most of the writing came from those soldiers who were born in the 1890s, just out of school when the war started. They wrote autobiography, novels, memoirs, poetry, and testaments. They would relate their war experience in bestsellers that were bitter, brutal, cynical, and pessimistic. But most of all, they would “throw light on the collective experience and fate of an entire age-group” (105).

Dissenting voices, such as Douglas Jerrold and Charles Carrington, did not sway “the majority of the English literary establishment from what had now become an *idée fixe*” (109). “Disillusion,” Carrington stated in his *A Subaltern’s War*, “came in with peace, not with war; peace at first was the futile state” (109). But “these lonely and uninfluential voices failed. . . . By the end of the 1920s most English intellectuals believed that the war had been a general and unmitigated disaster, that England’s victory was in reality a defeat, and hence that the men who had caused England to enter the war and to fight it through to the bloody end were either mercenary blackguards or blundering old fools. . . . From a conservative point of view, it seemed evident that the war had demolished the old world beyond all hope of restoration. . . . In short, the England of Victoria and Edward was dead and gone forever. . . . Viewed from the Left, things looked little better. The war had not made possible a breakthrough into some new and more dynamic future. . . . Nor had the war brought peace. The persistence of tension among the continental countries and the mounting tide of German nationalism were additional reminders that the ‘war to end all wars’ had been fought in vain. What was more natural than to blame this dreadful situation on the Victorians and the hard-hearted old men who lacked courage, compassion, and imagination” (109-110).

A classic example of English lost generation literature is to be found in Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth*. She writes from a strong socialist and feminist perspective, but her book, even though it sold well and gained the author a considerable reputation, was “too self-indulgent,



too self-pitying, and too lacking in self-irony to be good literature” (111). Cast in the form of a generational memoir, it owed its success “to the fact that it made explicit, as no other war book had, the narrative sequence within which many English survivors of the war had come to perceive their past. This form was an adaptation of the medieval romance. First came a phase of innocence identified with the years before 1914. As Brittain’s talented young heroes graduate from their public school in July 1914, they have no premonition of ‘the threatening woe’ that their ‘adventurous feet’ will ‘starkly meet.’ Then followed the ordeal of war service in France. Full of enthusiasm when they volunteer, they lose their heroic illusions before dying in a war that they have come to regard as evil and futile. The third stage in the narrative was the return to England. Battered by ‘storm winds,’ a few survivors make their way home, only to discover that they are ‘ghosts of a time no future can restore.’ They are condemned by their fate to ‘desolately roam for evermore an empty shore.’ The final disillusionment was the survivors’ discovery that the sacrifice of the dead had been in vain. The so-called victory had in fact been a setback for civilization; war would come again; another idealistic generation would be destroyed” (111). Brittain’s book certainly touched “some deep emotions in the English reading public; within six years [of 1933], *Testament of Youth* sold 120,000 copies” (111).

Wohl notes that by the beginning of the next world war, the idea of a lost generation had “hardened into a generally accepted interpretation of recent English history” (112). In fact, “‘lost’ generation was increasingly being equated with ‘missing’ generation; the idea of disorientation and discontinuity was being subordinated to the suggestion of physical absence, so much so that the term was sometimes used as if there had been no survivors worth mentioning at all” (112). But, as Reginald Pound points out in his book, *The Lost Generation*, the real losses were those of “cultural potential and character” (112). In reality, British losses numbered “less than those of the other major European countries” (113). To be sure, losses were terrible, but “not sufficient to destroy a generation—if one defines a generation in mass terms as a group of people of roughly similar age bound together by a common historical experience and a common fate” (113). Yet the myth states that the best men died. “Supposedly, the purest and noblest, the strongest and most cultivated had fallen; the weakest and least courageous had survived. This process of reverse selection had meant ‘failure and calamity in every department of human life’ and was held responsible by some for the decline of England and the coming of the Second World War” (113).

No doubt, death in the trenches was no respecter of character or person. But the deep entrenchment of this notion of a missing generation probably happened “because of the small and well-defined nature of the English elite and its unprecedented involvement in the actual fighting of the war. It is easy to forget that Britain differed from other continental powers in that before 1914 military service was not a sacred obligation incumbent upon all able-bodied male citizens, but a profession practiced by a privileged few—generally the less talented sons of the upper classes—and a refuge and dead end for members of the lower orders who had been unable or unwilling to make their way in civilian life. Between 1914 and 1918 this changed: The army became a fate that the majority of men born between 1880 and 1899 shared. This fate embraced men of all social categories. In the records left for posterity and in the annals of the higher culture, however, it was associated almost exclusively with members of the middle and upper classes” (114). During the war, “everything was done to keep the memory of *these* dead—that is, the dead of the elite—alive. Later when the war had ended and its fruits appeared so meager,

these losses became a popular way of explaining British decline. . . . Still, the fact remains that most men who served, even from within the elite, came back. . . . [So] why did the survivors of the Great War perpetuate the myth? What stake could they have had in keeping alive the idea of a lost or missing generation? The answer is that the myth of the missing generation provided an important self-image for the survivors from within the educated elite and a psychologically satisfying and perhaps even necessary explanation of what happened to them after they returned from the war. The cult of the dead became a means of accounting for the disappointments of the present. To be sure, this cult had its origins in the war experience itself. It reflected the natural guilt of the survivors who knew they had no right to live when those around them had died, as well as their angry feeling, stronger in England than anywhere else, that they had been the victims of a dirty trick played by History incarnated in the evil form of the Older Generation” (115-116).

In an interesting conclusion to the chapter, Wohl notes that “among the more famous and articulate English war survivors, T. E. Lawrence was alone to understand and to denounce the dangerous uses of the myth of the lost generation. This is all the more surprising because Lawrence himself, by his actions and writings, had contributed to the articulation and credibility of the myth during the immediate postwar period. Like Rupert Brooke, Lawrence had already created a legend around himself before the war began. But in Lawrence’s case, there was a good deal more substance to the legend and more authentic mystery surrounding the circumstances of his life” (116). Wohl talks about this development and asserts “that Lawrence was able to act out in the real world the romantic dreams that so many young men entertained when they went off to war in 1914. He blew up bridges, scouted behind the Turkish lines, engaged in guerrilla raids, and never knew the immobility and impersonality of trench warfare that so afflicted Sassoon, Graves, Owen, and others. He became a full-fledged hero and was acknowledged by the world as such” (117).

But as Wohl details, he too was transformed in a negative way by his war experience (118). After the war, he was skeptical about the self-pity of the war writings of the survivors. “Lawrence warned his friends against blaming all their current problems on the war. The war, he noted, seemed more horrible in retrospect than it had seemed when they were in it. It was a change in the survivors and their situation, he thought, that had produced this blurring of perspective. When the translation of *All Quiet on the Western Front* appeared in England, Lawrence dismissed it as ‘postwar nostalgia shoved into the war period’ and ‘the screaming of a feeble man.’ ‘The worst thing about the war generation of introspects,’ he complained to Henry Williamson, ‘is that they can’t keep off their blooming selves.’ . . . Lawrence seems to have feared that the legend of a lost generation was becoming an excuse for inaction and self-indulgence on the part of many men like himself who had fought and distinguished themselves during the war. It was not true, he protested, that no first-rate men were left among the war survivors. ‘What an uncertain, disappointed, barbarous generation we war-timers have been,’ he wrote to the painter William Rothenstein in 1928. ‘They said the best ones were killed. There’s far too much talent still alive” (120).

Chapter Four. This chapter is devoted to the generational thinking of Jose Ortega y Gasset of Spain. For Spain, the generation of 1914 becomes the generation of 1898, the year in which it suffered defeat by the United States and the rapid decline in its status as a world power. The work of Ortega, like many other Spanish intellectuals, is to be seen as the earnest attempt to move Spain out of the mysticism of the medieval tradition into the reality of being a part of modern Europe. Wohl says very little, if anything, about the Spanish experience of the Great War.

Chapter Five. Here, Wohl treats the generational thinking of Giovanni Papini, Giuseppe Prezzolini, Gabriele D'Annunzio, and Benito Mussolini. In Italy, the neutralist majority accepted the fact of war but resented it. The interventionists were forced to defend it even though its justification seemed questionable. The political split over the war reflected "the hierarchical constitution of the army. The nonprofessional officers, most of them young and almost all of them recruited from the educated middle classes, approached the war with enthusiasm and often with selfless dedication. . . . The mass of soldiers, most of them peasants and many from the South and the islands where disaffection from the central government was most acute, at best endured the war with resignation. . . . To many of them the war seemed absurd; after all, Italian territory was not occupied and evident national interests were not at stake. . . . Was not the war, like the unified state itself, another caprice of the *signori*, to be paid for by the *contadini*? These attitudes created a serious problem for the interventionist officers, who quickly came to understand that their patriotic ideals were not shared by their soldiers. Yet the shared sufferings of war eventually brought young bourgeois officers and their men together and presented them with a common enemy: the shirker or *imboscato* who lived off the blood of the trench fighter or *combattente* and avoided the perils of the front. Since many industrial workers had been released from front-line service to work in war plants located in or near the cities, the antagonism between *combattenti* and *imboscato* became identified on the one hand with the distinction between bourgeois patriots and worker socialists and on the other with the distinction between the countryside and the corrupt, pleasure-loving town" (171).

Wohl develops the work of Mussolini in the rise of Fascism. Mussolini himself changed as a result of the war. "He was more resolute, more hardened, more reconciled to the use of violence, more conscious of the infinite pliability of the masses with whom he had lived at the front, and at the same time more open to nationalist and imperialist ideas. He had seen and felt that class had less power as a moving myth than the nation. Thus, foraging about for a new clientele with which to pursue his vocation as a public man and a leader of masses, Mussolini turned to the one group to which he felt bound and with which he had maintained good relations: the men of the front, the *combattenti*. . . . [But] he made it clear that among the mass of the combatants, it was above all the young reserve officers—a group he christened 'the trenchocracy'—that he intended to represent. The reserve officers, he said, had been the real 'authors of victory.' 'The soldier is the mass, the stupid mass, powerful but inert, without a propulsive force that gives direction to his effort and establishes the objectives to be attained. The officers have been this force. . . . They are the elite of the new aristocracy, of the Italian trenchocracy'" (173). This social group, really an amalgam of classes, was bound together by a mentality, *combattentismo*, which "combined nationalist and socialist motifs in a general and

often naive demand for a purification of politics and a renewal of national mores” (174). Full of resentment and anger, they transformed their war experience into a political myth. They forged alliances with existing radical movements in order to refashion both politics and culture.

Typical of the young soldiers attracted to Mussolini were Italo Balbo and Giuseppe Bottai. “Balbo returned from the war full of hate for the enemy in the rear and persuaded that the liberal politicians had betrayed the combatants by accepting a shameful peace. . . . If it had not been for Mussolini, Balbo asserted, three-quarters of Italian youth returning from the trenches would have become Bolsheviks, for they wanted a revolution at any cost. But Mussolini . . . gave fighting youth the program of radical negation they sought; and beyond the overthrow of the existing system, he offered them a positive vision: the regime of the young, a nation of victors, the Fascist state” (175). Bottai spent two years in the trenches and returned home after being wounded. He felt abandoned by his country, so to deal with his disillusionment he turned to poetry. He doubted any sense of belonging, but after he met Mussolini, he “became convinced that literature must be sacrificed to concrete political activity. . . . He had nothing but scorn for moral or aesthetic neutralism. Socialism was bad because it generated cowardice and did away with risk and creative tension; Fascism was good because it elevated the human spirit and appealed to what was noble in man” (176).

But Mussolini expanded his recruiting beyond the combatants and veterans to make Fascism a movement of youth. “‘Youth’ became a social category and a political slogan that made it possible to merge the aspirations of the combattenti with the aspirations of a larger social coalition. . . . Mussolini used the term ‘youth’ to signify a social coalition of ever broadening dimensions whose mobilization and whose leadership he sought; after October 1922, when the Fascists came to power, ‘youth’ became a prominent and distinguishing characteristic of the regime’s style, an element in its political program, and an essential aspect of its myth. This institutionalization of youth ideology in Italy was to a great extent a consequence of the Fascist movements’ doctrinal poverty. Mussolini reached and retained power by exploiting the mistakes of the Socialists, the fears of the possessing classes, and the ambitions of people within the middle class who saw the opportunity to assume the leadership of the country in the name of an antimaterialist and nationalist revolution. Yet as Mussolini himself acknowledged on more than one occasion, he came to power without a program—other than the loosely defined aim of defending and giving substance to the Italian victory. This flexibility was Fascism’s strength; because of it, Mussolini was able to confound and ultimately to defeat his rivals. But the lack of ideology was also a potential weakness. . . . An admirer of Georges Sorel, Mussolini knew that myths were necessary to get large masses to act. As a Socialist and later during the war, Mussolini believed that he had verified Sorel’s affirmation that men acted not out of reason, but out of faith. Thus, after being named premier, he acted to achieve legitimacy for his government and to provide it, if not with a doctrine, at least with a program, a style, and a myth. One source to which he turned was generationalism” (177-178). “By the end of the twenties it had become a truism, though a frequently discussed one, that Fascism was a creation of the war generation and that Mussolini’s regime was a regime of youth” (179).

In light of this development, Wohl surveys the counter voices of Adolfo Omodeo, who valued the role of individual freedom in his *Moments in Wartime Life*, and that of Antonio Gramsci, who did not serve in the war due to physical deformity but developed generational thought from a Marxist framework.

Chapter Six. Wohl reiterates the distinction between a social or historical definition of generation and the traditional notion that is based on fixed intervals of genealogical time. He asserts that “once grasped, the dynamics of the generational idea make it easy to understand why all generationists have a tendency to represent their generations as unique, sacrificed, and lost. The notion at the heart of the generational idea—the discontinuity of age-groups—demands it. Barres and others had pronounced their generations lost and sacrificed long before the Great War came. So too Erich Maria Remarque and Ernest Hemingway were marching in the line of a long-established tradition when they put this idea at the heart of their books in the 1920s. Nothing suggests that the idea is dead today. All historical generations are ‘lost’” (203).

This final chapter adds nothing new to Wohl’s development of the idea of generation. But he does mention some interesting characteristics about the world in general at the time of the Great War. He notes, “What allowed European intellectuals born between 1880 and 1900 to view themselves as a distinct generation was that their youth coincided with the opening of the twentieth century and their lives were then bifurcated by the Great War. Those who survived into the decade of the 1920s perceived their lives as being neatly divided in a *before*, a *during*, and an *after*, categories most of them equated with the stages of life known as youth, young manhood, and maturity. What bound the generation of 1914 together was not just their experiences during the war, as many of them later came to believe, but the fact that they grew up and formulated their first ideas in the world from which the war issued, a world framed by two dates, 1900 and 1914. This world was the ‘vital horizon’ within which they began conscious historical life” (210). Wohl notes three broad characteristics of this time: a world rapidly transformed by technology, a world evolving by revolutionary changes in political and social structures, and a world that stood under the inevitable but seemingly impossible “cloud of threatening war.” These dynamics defined what to Carl Zuckmayer and many of his contemporaries called “*our time, our world, our sense of life that came rushing upon me, falling upon me, and suddenly I awakened to a consciousness of a new generation, a consciousness that even the most intelligent, most aware and unbiased parents could not share*” (214). But, as Wohl notes, this experience of “revelation” and “illumination” did come from the creative work of the parents of these intellectuals.

Also, in an interesting section, Wohl defines two of the more positive results of the war experience held in common by the generation of 1914, namely, the discovery of comradeship and the simplification of life or a return to the bare necessities, the last things, the baser instincts (220-221). Wohl notes that the war itself did not give rise to the idea of a “new generation,” since “that notion was a product of the decade before 1914 and a reflection of the atmosphere of novelty created by technological change, shifts in the structure of society, the threat of a general European war, and the appearance of a new culture. But the war did fortify and diffuse the consciousness of a new generation and gave plausibility to the idea of its unity by creating an overwhelming sense of rupture with the past. Those who lived through the war could never rid themselves of the belief that one world had ended and another begun in August 1914” (222).

Wohl mentions the new pan-Europeanism that resulted from the war, but he debunks the idea, based on the disappointment of the returning combatants, that the “old men” had “come back and deprived them of their victory. This was nonsense. The old men had not come back. They had never left. Nor were the men who wielded power in most European countries during the 1920s all that old. What took place 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. The leaders of postwar Europe had all served their apprenticeship before 1914. The strange thing was to expect them to yield their places to younger men who had little more to recommend them than their medals and their ambitions. The truth was that most returning veterans, especially the younger ones, lacked the skills necessary for postwar reconstruction. They had to be educated in the techniques of peace. They were also tired and eager for pleasure after years of suffering and renunciation. And they had to liberate themselves from their memories of death and war before they could be useful or happy in the civilian world. It would be hard enough for most of them to save themselves, not to mention to redeem the problem-saddled world to which they were returning. Some degree of disillusionment was thus implicit in their situation. It always has been and always will be difficult for young warriors to come home, and it was especially difficult in 1919 because the armistice did not immediately bring with it a cessation of conflict among nations or within them” (223-224).

Wohl ends on the fascination of the “lost” generation with movement and its linkage to renewal or rebirth, as if they were “wanderers between two worlds.” But, in conclusion, he says that the idea of a “generation of 1914” rested in large measure on “a biological determinism that had no basis in social fact” (236). For this reason, “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. . . . Yet this failure of interpretation in no way annuls the importance that this idea had in the history and consciousness of Europeans who lived during the first third of the twentieth century” (237).