Organised by MARY FULBROOK (University College London) and CHRISTINA VON HODENBERG (Queen Mary University London), and hosted by the German Historical Institute London (GHIL), this workshop brought together both established and younger scholars from the UK and Germany in order to present and discuss research projects concerned with the central theme of ‘Generations, Violence and Memory in twentieth-century Germany’.

Opening the workshop, BERND WEISBROD (Göttingen) in his paper on ‘Post-war memory and pre-traumatic generation disorder’ addressed the issue that the impact of war violence on the body and the mind, and its importance in the constitution of a generation, depended much on how it was framed or perceived and how this ‘framing’ had changed over time. In the interwar period, he argued, the literary imagination constituted an important reading of violence, which coupled with a (limited) medical framing set standards of manly behaviour and norms of suffering e.g. shell shock. Over time however, Weisbrod argued, the growing body of professional medical knowledge in the realms of psychiatry and psychoanalysis has increasingly come to act as a ‘memory moderator’. In fact, memory construction has become a combination of this ‘medical framing’ as well as the experience of violence itself. Today we subscribe to the psychiatric paradigm of framing war experience that was discovered in Vietnam: post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a reading that helps to establish a claim on moral acknowledgement as a lost generation. However, it cannot be read back into previous generations who had to ‘get on with life’. Indeed, psychiatry did not recognise the ‘lasting effects’ of the Holocaust on its victims until the late 1950s and the lasting effects of incarceration on German PoWs were not recognised until after re-unification in 1990. Weisbrod here made reference to ‘a competition of victimhood’ in post-war Germany which was also utilized, he argued, in order to ‘make a claim on moral acknowledgement’.

UFFA JENSEN (Göttingen) presented on ‘Freud’s generations: Violence, trauma, and psychoanalysis in twentieth-century Germany’ in which he focused on how the new science of psychoanalysis served to create the patterns of ‘generations’ and ‘trauma’. He argued it was no coincidence that the concept of generations emerged at the same time as psychoanalysis. Freud’s thinking relied on the problem of unconscious baggage in intergenerational relations, formative traumatic experiences and on some recurring organising narrative principles (such as the Oedipus complex) which subsequently shaped intergenerational and scholarly communication. He argued that the discipline may have been rejected by the German establishment who found the ahistoric approach of Freud problematic i.e. the disassociation of the event and the trauma, but psychoanalysis gradually entered mainstream culture both in academic and social realms through its practical application in the treatment of post-World War One neuroses.

Next MARY FULBROOK presented her current research on the experiences and memories of violence in the construction of generations. An initial section illustrating key theoretical approaches was followed by case-
study examples to highlight the experience of violence, the involvement in violence and the differing degrees of responsibility for violence and their importance in differential generational groups.

Setting herself against Karl Mannheim’s concept of the formation of generations, Fulbrook argued that it is in fact common challenges and unresolved experiences that contribute to the formation of generations. They may be experienced at different times and in different ways by different cohorts, however, it is an approach that embraces the autonomous character of individual agency in opposition to more deterministic approaches. Fulbrook emphasized ‘availability for mobilisation’, a notion which allows for differences in cultural and structural ‘availabil-ity’, as well as the distinction between one’s inner perception of self and outer behavior. She also argued that there is fluidity in the construction of collective identities as unresolved issues take on importance as nexuses of self-conception if they remain emotionally salient in the current context.

Fulbrook illustrated some fundamental differences in the memory of violence after 1945 between East and West Germany. Concerning East Germany, she argued that coming to terms with the present actually displaced coming to terms with the past. She maintained that denazi-fication took place much more severely than in the West and produced a much lesser ‘guilt-laden silence’ in terms of community guilt. However, East Germans also had to deal with displacements such as the Wall and the inherent institutionalised violence, which thereby affected the cultural salience of the past traumas of the Third Reich and the war.

In the discussion after the first panel a number of interesting points were raised including whether or not the concept of generations is a male debate, and the question of ‘silent generations’. Weisbrod emphasised that we have to historicize the construction of generations, while Jensen pointed out that the concept of generations and its utilisation was specifically German in nature. He maintained that self-identification of generations does exist in other countries, but is much weaker. Moreover, it was also noted that self-stylization of a generation was essentially a (German) urban, bourgeois way of conceiving of and explaining a group identity; inarticulate groups that did not fit the profile could thus be considered ‘silent generations’. Fulbrook emphasised that one should not use the concept of generation to explain, but rather treat it as the ‘thing which needs to be explained.’ Weisbrod took this one step further stating that the concept of ‘genera-
tion is not the solution to historical issues, it is the prob-
lem’. The discussion also examined the issue of why some cohorts are made, or attempt to make themselves, into generations, while others are, or do not. There was agreement that the genesis of generations depends on the media communicating, and on contemporary sciences shaping, perceptions.

CHRISTINA VON HODENBERG began the next panel by examining ‘generations of historians and the narratives of post-war German history’. Her paper focused on West German ‘1945er’ historians such as Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Heinrich August Winkler and others and how the historiography of the era in which they were professionally active was shaped by a generational paradigm. In her definition of a generation, she focused on the ‘self-interpretation’ of people’s past, arguing that people who belong to the same generation do not necessarily have to have the same birth years, they do nevertheless have to share shaping perspectives and to have at least passively participated in debates of formative experience. Von Hodenberg then examined some of the characteristics of the ‘1945ers’ by using her research on journalists and historians from this period as a case study. She argued that historians of the ‘1945er generation’ shared certain lines of generational thinking in their modes of engagement. They were open to the West in their search for substitute values to a strong state and utopian ideals, engineered the breakthrough of new methods and pushed for a ‘critical examination of the past’. Yet von Hodenberg pointed out that their approach nevertheless sheltered the ‘Mitläufer’ from criticism by blaming the ‘real Nazi criminals’, thereby entering into a ‘silent pact’ with the older generations. She attempted to account for this attitude by referring to the common stance they took in their appraisal of Nazism i.e. that it was a betrayal, and a loss of ideals.

Von Hodenberg also addressed generational patterns associated with the ‘Sonderweg’ thesis espoused by these historians. This was an attempt to orient Germany towards the West and to couple German modernisation with Western democracies such as Britain and the US in order to overcome the danger of a new ‘1933’ and stabilise the Republic. She maintained that this approach ‘can morph into a self-proclaimed success story and one can lose sight of current problems and ruptures’. LU SEEGER’S (Giessen) presented a paper on ‘discourses on and memories of war-related fatherlessness in Germany’ in which she discussed how fatherlessness was experienced by children growing up in post-war East and West Germany, the narratives they established about miss-
ing fathers and the impact this had on their later lives. Seegers based her paper on twelve ‘life-story’ interviews which she conducted with war children without fathers born between 1935 and 1945.

She highlighted that many of her respondents’ early memories of their fathers were vague and happy, arguing that these anecdotal memories were ‘immune to the Nazi regime’. She also underlined that complicated family relations were common to East and West German families. Evacuation often meant that widows had to live with older relations, which caused tensions within the vertical ordering of the family. However, there were also tensions on a horizontal plane because sibling relations were characterized by fatherlessness whereby boys were allowed to mourn the loss more than girls. Yet in spite of the silence that was prevalent with reference to the Nazi period, in both East and West German fatherless families, memories of Dads were present. Western families, for example, depoliticised the memory of the father, situating him as an enemy of Nazism and of Communism remembering him as having simply fought for the ‘Fatherland’ and died a victim of the Wehrmacht. Seegers also stressed how mothers took on the burden of suffering and how children felt that they should compensate for this.

She concluded that the East German respondents did see themselves as war children despite the fact that there was no public discussion on incomplete families but, unlike in West Germany, there were ‘no communities of memory’. She explained this difference as, at least in part, a reflection of the legal and economic structures of the two German states: West German ‘war widows’ received pensions to compensate for material loss, which enabled them to stay at home as mothers whereas in East Germany the category of victim of war was eliminated and ‘war widows’ were integrated into the workforce.

ANNA MENGE (Oxford) presented the final paper on the ‘Around “1968” in East and West Germany – the merits and limitations of the generational paradigm’. Her research forms part of a larger comparative oral history project focusing on ’1968’ in 15 different countries. She remarked that celebrations for the 40th anniversary of 1968 have grown in volume from the 30th anniversary ten years ago, although there is little historiographical consensus surrounding this assumed generational label (in part due to its blurred use in both academic and pop culture arenas). She particularly focused on the networks and relationships of activists and workers and aimed to move away from the ‘social movement approach’. In West Germany, she argued, the ‘1968ers’ seemed to be an obviously self-constructed group. Key actors made up a very small core faction whereas many ‘1968ers’ self-stylized and retrospectively defined themselves as such, claiming to have been influenced by events even if they themselves did not participate or act in a historically significant way. Menge also highlighted the problem of the 68er generation in an East German context for ’1968’ did not really happen in the same obviously visible way. As a result, some argue that trying to find a ‘1968er generation’ in the GDR is falsely imposing a West German model on an incompatible social experience, or that because of the political culture of the GDR, in which people could not talk openly about their political beliefs, the culture of generational self-definition did not evolve. Yet Menge underlined that 1968 is an important reference point for East Germans and we should seek to find out how it was both experienced and retrospectively integrated into a life story, rather than merely look for experiences similar to West German ‘1968ers’.

The discussion at the end of the second session addressed a wide thematic. Jensen questioned the absence of anti-Semitism in traditional ‘Sonderweg’ arguments, making reference to what he called ’Doppelgänger historians’ i.e. German-Jewish émigrés using the same set of historical questions for a different end – to research anti-Semitism. Weisbrod added that the ’Sonderweg’ view of the West was completely idealized, Sonderweg historians had ’misread the West for particular German purposes’. ANDREAS GESTRICL (German Historical Institute London) raised the question of why these historians managed to dominate the discourse for a certain period of time but then subsequently failed. Did it amount to a generational disintegration? On fatherless children, it was noted that occasional gladness was experienced when fathers never came home as other returning fathers seemed rough or nervous; moreover later in life they were often relieved that they did not have to ask too many questions about what their father had done during the war. This led Weisbrod to comment on new ideas of victimhood that permeate our interpretation of all life experiences, and ‘a growing trend toward self-identification with a generalised victimhood’ as a ‘coping mechanism’, rather than an ‘actual’ confrontation with historical experience.

In the closing discussion Andreas Gestrich and STEPHEN LOVELL (King’s College London) offered some reflections on ‘German generations in a European perspective’. Gestrich firstly addressed numerous important themes which had arisen throughout the workshop. On the statement ‘generations are not the solution,
they are the problem’, he argued that generations are a way of conscripting society into a new collective, which then needs to be deconstructed in a particular fashion. He also suggested a diachronic approach to generations, in between the theories of Mannheim and those posed by Fulbrook in her paper, suggesting that common challenges were not enough to limit the scope of what could be called a generation. The notion of path determination and coherence, he argued, ought also to be considered when looking at the ways in which those problems were solved. In terms of the ’1945ers’ he agreed that the concept of generation was connected to ruptures in society and the need to start afresh. Nevertheless, he highlighted the problem that perpetrators are left out of this model. Moreover, he concluded, that there is a tendency to be forever past-oriented and concerned with trauma, without addressing the counter-aspects both of healing and aspirations towards the future.

Lovell made reference to the link to psychiatry and noted the extent to which the conception of ‘the self was sociologised via these disciplines’. He maintained that ‘generations’ was an interesting way of conceiving the fusion of the individual and society. Lovell also addressed how we can balance the deconstructive and the reconstructive. He expressed scepticism that generations are a specifically German concept, instead purporting that the concept may be an outgrowth of nationalist thinking which took a strong hold on discourse in post-War Germany for various reasons, including the exculpation of guilt. He also argued that as the modern welfare state established closer relations to individual citizens it should be (re)considered as an activating generational force as individuals felt they could make claims back on the state, and so find new ways to articulate their position within society.

Concluding reflective remarks on generations by the workshop participants also brought up the importance of the notion of the ‘revolutionary man’ who, in his search for a new (generational) identity, engages in a political battle which, at the same time as changing the ‘self’ into the ‘new man’, will, in turn, change society. Though this stance is possibly anti-generational, Gestrich remarked that generations are formed more by how they looked at the future than by a common past, connecting this notion of the revolutionary man to Lovell’s thoughts on the relation between the individual and the state in modern societies. This workshop brought the concept of ‘generations’ back into a wider scope, considering the concept not only in relation to violence and memory but also in relation to literary, national and political topoi, as well as the sciences of self and the media.

Conference Overview

First panel:

BERND WEISBROD (Göttingen) ‘How to find a “lost” generation - and how to make it: Post-war memory and pre-traumatic generation disorder’ UFFA JENSEN (Göttingen) ‘Freud’s generations: Violence, trauma, and psychoanalysis in twentieth-century Germany’ MARY FULBROOK (UCL) ‘Experiences and memories of violence in the construction of generations’

Second Panel:

CHRISTINA VON HODENBERG (QMUL) ‘Generations of historians and the narratives of post-war German history’ LU SEEGERS (Giessen) ‘“Dead dads”: Discourses on and memories of war-related fatherlessness in Germany’ ANNA MENGE (Oxford) ‘Around 1968” in East and West Germany - the merits and limitations of the generational paradigm’

Third Panel:

‘German generations in European perspective’: General discussion. Commentators: ANDREAS GESTRICH (GHIL), STEPHEN LOVELL (KCL)

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