

## **“Fathers and Sons”: Generation Gaps in History of Imperial Russia.**

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### **Abstract**

The paper is dedicated to the problem of historical generations in Russian society and culture of the XIX century. I consider generations in the XIX century as some ‘imagined communities’ because people were connected by common cultural space, historical events and cultural representations. Separation and definition of generation could be a way of formation of cultural or political identity in Imperial Russia. The specific generation discourse created a new reality for perception of Past, comprehension of Present and building of Future. Russian intellectuals often translated their representations about key opposition “oldness – newness” using the opposition of generations, for example “fathers – sons”. It’s extremely important to research the different meanings of concept “generation” in the context of Russian culture.

The main subjects are the generation of the “Age of Reason” (which was connected with the rule of Catherine the Great), the generation of 1812 (Great Patriotic War) and the generation of 1860-s. Famous Russian historian V. Kluchevsky defined one case of the generation gap in the beginning of the XIX century, “Fathers were Russian who wished to become French and their sons were French who wished to become Russian”. Thus, generation of sons was perceived as a sign of formation of a new national identity, new system of values.

Another case of the generation gap was the gap between ‘fathers and sons’ in the years of the ‘Great Reforms’ in the second half of the XIX century. The famous literary embodiment of this phenomenon was novel “Fathers and sons” by I. Turgenev. “Young Russia” became a symbol of revolutionary changes in Russian Empire.

**Key words:** generation gap, Imperial Russia, identity, imagined community, representations, intellectuals, reforms.

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Searching for a universal unit of measurement of human history, the historians resorted to the idea of generations repeatedly. The desire to analyze the idea of generations with the modern theoretical tools is typical of the professional corporation of historians. However, most researchers assume a priori that the generation is a real community, whose representatives are

united by the date of birth. We offer another version of the understanding of generation community: generation is a symbolic community of people who are united by the date of birth, who are contemporaries of common historical events, creating their original communicative space.

The history of generations in Russia is closely connected with the history of the intelligentsia (intellectuals) who have formed and translated the actual idea of generation and the characteristics that distinguish one generation from another, becoming its “heralds”. In the Russian society, the idea of generation gap formed and developed as a necessary condition for the development of self-consciousness of intellectuals, as a way to understand the changes occurring in Russia and implementation of idea of struggle between the olden time (relic of the past) and novelty in the Russian society and culture. The famous Russian philosopher G. Fedotov wrote using the popular generation rhetoric, “Every generation of intellectuals defined themselves in their own way, denied their ancestors and began a new era - for ten years -”<sup>1</sup>

Our main aim is to reveal the dynamics of the concept of “generation” in Russia of the 20th century, the meanings that comprised the concept of “generation gap”, peculiarities of the generation discourse in Russia in the 19th century. According to P. Nora, the French Revolution founded the generation idea in history,

not so much because it induced a particular generation (this generation would be seen only later, thanks to the historical flashbacks (retrospectively), but because it has opened, made possible, founded the universe of changes and that egalitarian world. Only in that atmosphere the “generation consciousness” could have appeared.<sup>2</sup>

Historical consciousness as a reflection of the accelerated progress of history, social and cultural changes, is a prerequisite for the formation of the concept of generation. This concept has been used for the understanding (comprehension) of these changes. In this case, the formation of the generation concept can be considered as a manifestation of the modernization of society and culture. Its urgency is associated with the accelerated modernization processes, which inevitably leads to conflict between the old and new socio-cultural components. This conflict is embodied in the conflict of generations. Consequently, the concept of generation is becoming popular, (topical) especially in epochs of changes, becoming a way of understanding the processes and events.

In Russia at the turn of the XVIII-XIX centuries, generation discourse began to emerge, reflecting the emergence of a new type of identity (generation identity). Due to cultural transformation at the turn of the

centuries, the concept “generation” contained not only concrete «age» meaning but also served as a specific socio-cultural code. First of all, it was the “young generation” that embarked on active political, literary, public, social activity in the reign of Emperor Alexander I. The “fathers – sons” method of self-identification spread, as other methods and began to express national and cultural identity of Russian educated society. By the way, the “auto image” of that generation, of the first quarter of the XIXth century, was reflected in the memoirs and then broadcasted in the second half of the XIXth century, defining the perception of that era and was repeated in historical compositions. V.O. Klyuchevsky (a famous Russian historian) noted a significant change in the generation that replaced Catherine’s free-minded people,

Merry cosmopolitan sentimentality of the fathers now transformed in a patriotic grief of their children. The Fathers were Russians, who passionately wanted to become French; the sons were raised as French and passionately wanted to become Russians. That is the difference between fathers and children.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to note that the “young generation” was not opposed to the “old generation” in the generation discourse of the beginning of the 19th century. Not the generation gap but the connection of generations was emphasized. Perhaps it was the result of the “discovery” of historical continuity, the great chain of times in the historical consciousness of society. Partially, those changes were due to the influence of historiography of that time. In such treatises the History of “New Russia” started in the 18th century with the modernization of the country, reforms of Peter the Great who created a strong link between the 18th century and the 19th in the social consciousness. In addition, it was the time of social rise of the beginning of the 19th century, in the beginning of Alexander’s reign (“perfect start of the Alexander’s days”), the interaction of the intellectuals and the power, patriotic enthusiasm caused by the Patriotic War of 1812. In such conditions, the concept of “generation connection” was demanded, focusing only on the continuity of different age categories. According to P. Nora, “recognized public consensus coincides exactly in time with relaxation of tension between fathers and children in their struggle for autonomy of generations.”<sup>4</sup>

Russian intellectuals of the beginning of the 19th century identified themselves as a particular generation in relation to future generations rather than to previous ones, defining the objectives of their work in the present, being aware of the value of the future and the progressive course of history. Consequently, they constructed the generation identity as a stage in the progressive and determined history, and thus the idea of generation chain

clearly suppressed the generation gap. In this case we can assume that the nature of historical representations, especially the historical consciousness determined the generation identity. Expansion of the idea of connection of times determined the idea of connection of generations, the idea of commitment, duty and responsibility of the older generation to younger.

In connection with the hopes for a constitution in Russia, especially after that Emperor Alexander granted Constitution to Poland in 1818, generation rhetoric can be explained by the importance of constitutional reforms in Russia, the necessity to prepare the ground for the future. The idea of freedom became one of the keys to the generation discourse at that time. P. Vyazemsky wrote in the letter to A. Turgenyev, "it is necessary that our generation create the foundation for everything. However, if our children are born in the time of the old order, so - farewell! We were the students of fate; they will be pupils of habits."<sup>5</sup>

The value of this present activity was justified by the benefit of future generations,

let us leave a trace of our lives for our descendants, let us form an opinion that will warm up and wake up from a stupor in our hands! Now it is time for it: the children will thank us. We were sneaking through life but we must advance steadily.<sup>6</sup>

In the mid 1850-ies, beginning of the new reign, the preparation and carrying out modernization of reform once again updated the idea of generations in the minds of Russian intellectuals. Community cohesion of the early years of the reign of Alexander II, then the contemporaries nostalgically called it "spring of our young community," introduced the idea of generation continuity as a necessary condition for renewal of Russia. The first ideological versions of generation discourse were drawn during that period. The hopes of the joint participation of generations of fathers and children in the reforms of the Russian empire predetermined the liberal approach to the generation graduation of history; its essence was interpretation of history as a logical generation transition. It was definitely formulated by historian K.D. Kavelin, who wrote that each generation decides its historical task. He supposed that the mission of his generation was the destruction of serfdom, the purpose of following generations was "to grow and foster" social institutions, which had been created by the era of reform.

The disappointment in the tempos, scope and results of first liberal reforms predetermined socio-cultural and ideological split among the Russian intellectuals and between the power and educated society as well. In addition, the Emancipation reform intensified modernization changes in the public consciousness, including the emancipation from traditionalist culture with its

customs, values and behavioral models of the ancestors. The young-minded Russian socio-political movements sought for symbolic dominance and adopted the generation idea as a tool of consolidation of their supporters. Democrats were the first to wage the struggle “for the young generation.” Positivists N.G. Chernyshevskiy, N.V. Shelgunov, D.I. Pisarev, who firmly believed in Progress and development of mankind for the better, proclaimed the struggle of generations the main motive power of social progress. Return of the generation theory was caused by the requirements of political struggle. The Fathers were declared the conservative force, the future was consigned only for the new / young people whose “hopes haven’t been cut off by experience yet.” The generation of fathers was labeled with negative connotations as “children of Nicholas’s hard times”, “responsible for Russian disgraceful defeat in the Crimean War”, “groundless idealists.” The image of young people was described on the principle of binary oppositions as the generation of progressive, new, emancipated, realistic. The idea of generation struggle for democracy was not only a matter of theoretical reflection but also a practical implementation for social mobilization of young people. Proclamations became the first attempt of the Democrats to broadcast their ideas among the educated youth. Shelgunov wrote in one of them, symbolically named «To the Younger Generation» (September, 1861),

The younger generation! We appeal to you because we believe that you are the people who are able to save Russia, you have real power, you are the leaders of the people ... We believe in our brand new energies, we believe that you are summoned to bring a new beginning in history, you can say a new word rather than repeat past achievements of Europe ...<sup>7</sup>

In 1862, the theme of the struggle of generations became acute for Russian public opinion. Journal “Russkiy Vestnik” published the famous novel “Fathers and Sons” by Ivan Turgenev. Literary critic A.M. Skabichesky wrote,

Nobody thought about any antagonism between the older and younger generations until 1862. We differentiated between revolutionaries, adherents of piecemeal reforms, reactionaries and owners of serfs, only on political ground without any distinction of age. Turgenev’s novel highlighted the gap between fathers and children, the people of 1840s and 1860s.<sup>8</sup>

Regardless of Turgenev's motives, his novel became the banner of the struggle between fathers and children, not only political and literary journals discussed this struggle but literary salons and families as well. The most radical solution for the problem of generations was proposed by eighteen years old P. Tkachev when he was imprisoned in the Peter and Paul's Fortress, "to kill all people older than 25 years as the carriers of old world's ideas."<sup>9</sup> That generation was future-oriented, focused on transformation of the *old* world in accordance with *new* principles. A set of principles reflected the changing values of young people under the influence of modernization: the rationalization and secularization of consciousness, materialism and individualism, the destruction of patriarchal and monarchical illusions. In this regard, it is not occasional that not real people but literary characters became the models of the *new* people for the reading Russia of 1860s (Bazarov, heroes of N.G. Chernyshevsky).

We can recognize some evident ideological groups in the framework of generation in the second half of the 19th century. In 1860s, the Democrats were involved in the construction and representation of self image of Sixties generation. Later, Russian populist intellectuals fulfilled this function. Thus, the concept of generation in the second half of the 19th century meant not only the age. It was, first of all, ideological identity, the model based on the attitude to the ideas of the previous epoch. Symbolically, the "self name" of the younger generation was "new people" but the suggestive nickname given to them by their ideological opponents was "nihilists." The image of the generation 1860s originally constructed on the principle of binary oppositions to the people of 1840s and then in opposition to new generations of intellectuals. What is worth mentioning is that the generation gap in this case was the way to create a positive identity, not perceived in a negative, passive mode.

Thus, generation identity became increasingly important for Russian intellectuals during the 19th century. The generation discourse reflected the changes in perception of time, history and modernization processes in Russia, because they do not accidentally key generation rhetoric, identifying challenges for the present and the future, had the notions of "youth" and "novelty". The gap and the chain (connection) of generations as concepts coexisted in the same communicative space, as a means of expression of cultural or political identity. Actualization of one of them was largely determined by socio-cultural situation in the country. Russian intellectuals comprehended reality, defining their place in society and the "stream" of history, created "generations" and fought for them, reflecting the clash of different values and strategies of behavior. Generations, their continuity and the gap became significant socio-cultural projects in Imperial Russia of the 19th century, embodying the present, constructing the past and the future.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> G Fedotov, 'Tragedy of Intelligentsia', in *About Russia and Russian Philosophical Culture*, Nauka, Moscow, 1990, p. 405.

<sup>2</sup> P Nora, 'Generation as *'lieux de memoire'*', in *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, vol. 2 (30), 1998, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> V Kluchevskiy, *Course of Russian History*, part 3, Moscow, 1993, p. 420.

<sup>4</sup> Nora, *op.cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>5</sup> *Ostafievsky Archive of Vyzemsky*, part 1, St. Petersburg, 1899, p. 341.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 377.

<sup>7</sup> N Shelgunov, 'To the Younger Generation', in *Narodnicheskaya economic literature*, Moscow, 1958, p. 86.

<sup>8</sup> A Skabichevsky, *Literary memoirs*, Moscow, 2001, pp. 288-289.

<sup>9</sup> P Tkachev, *Compositions*, part 1, Moscow, 1975, p.8.

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