

**Zeitschrift:** Zeitschrift für pädagogische Historiographie  
**Herausgeber:** Pädagogische Hochschule Zürich  
**Band:** 14 (2008)  
**Heft:** 1

**Artikel:** "The old must die ..." : generation conflict and left wing radicalism in Italy and Germany during the Great War  
**Autor:** Ekman Jørgenson, Thomas  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-901786>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 17.03.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# «The old must die ...»

Generation Conflict and Left Wing Radicalism in Italy and Germany during the Great War

**(Red.) Im frühen 20. Jahrhundert gab es eine gut organisierte, international verbreitete radikale sozialistische Jugendbewegung, die sich nicht nur von der bürgerlich-biederem, national ausgerichteten Wandervogel-Bewegung in Deutschland deutlich unterschied, sondern auch von der oppositionelleren italienischen Jugendbewegung jener Zeit. An der Frage der Konstruktion des Generationen-Verhältnisses untersucht der folgende Beitrag die Unterschiede zwischen diesen Jugendbewegungen und bringt bisher wenig bemerkte, national unterschiedliche Konstruktionen von Jugend im Vorfeld der beiden faschistischen Staaten zu Tage.**

■ Thomas Ekman Jørgensen

«The old must die», such was one of the headlines of the revolutionary paper *Jugend-Internationale* in the spring of 1916. The occasion was the death of the French socialist Édouard Vaillant. This veteran of the Paris Commune had only few years before been among those who advocated the use of an international general strike in case of war, but as war broke out in August 1914, he had turned about with the majority of the party and supported the war effort. As such, he represented the generation of socialists that the paper wanted to distance itself from, the generation who had failed to stop the war and allied themselves with the capitalist system. The article about Vaillant's death drew the parallel to the Exodus, to the Deuteronomy. Here, the Israelites cross the desert and behold the Promised Land, but dare not enter. As a punishment, God condemns the people to wander in the desert, until the generation that hesitated to follow his bidding has all expired. In the same way, the old generation of socialists had not dared to use the force of the working class to prevent the war with the result that «our – the red banner – is now but a rag in the dust, while the national, capitalist banners proudly wave over Europe» (*Jugend-Internationale* no. 3 1916, p. 2–3). The failed generation had to leave the scene to the new revolutionary generation of young workers, who would not repeat the fatal mistakes of the old.

The Great War as a scene of a generation conflict is a familiar idea. It was a part of the history of the war almost before the conflict had ended. Among some veterans, the experience of the harsh life and the dangers of the trenches stood as an example of a new set of values on which to rebuild the societies that had crumbled in the long and bloody conflict. On the right wing, Benito Mussolini spoke of an «aristocracy of the trenches» (Mussolini 1917/1958) while German veterans such as Ernst Röhm spoke of the «political soldier» whose task was to translate the experience of the trenches to a political programme (see Longerich 1989, p. 17–21). The war experience was seen as something that divided the generations, an event where those young enough to have fought had transgressed the society of their father and seen the birth of a New Man.

Recent discussions on the concept of generation have been concerned in particular with the linguistic construction of generations; one of the most influential German historians on this topic, Jürgen Reulecke, for example – in a typical German play on nouns – defines «Generationalität» (roughly, the nature of the generation) as «the approximation to the subjective replacement of one-self and others in time and the reconstruction of meaning that occurs in this replacement» (Reulecke 2003, p. VIII).

This perspective aims at studying generations as social constructions, the definition of a generation by itself and others. Although such an approach certainly is fruitful for the definition of different generations over time, it does risk reducing the concept to an arbitrary social construct. Particularly in relation to concrete experiences of crisis, such as the Great War, it does not take into account the actual divide between those that were immediately exposed to the crisis and those either too old or too young to feel its immediate impact. Nor does it take into account the particular divides between generations produced by particular social contexts, such as this study on political movements.

In political movements, generations play a role both in terms of hierarchy within the organisation and in terms of formative experiences, of «identity shocks» that take one generation in the movement in a different direction the older generation in power. The time that it takes to gain power in a movement does that the leaders have made their way to the top in a political context and through experiences different from the younger cadres. For this reason, different generations within a move-

ment are often stratified hierarchically as well as in terms of formative experiences (Sirinelli 1989, p. 69–71). This is not to say that the concept of generation can be divided into «real» and «imagined» generations (Schulz/Grebner 2003, p. 12), but rather that specific external limits may constitute generational divides that are not only the product of subjective replacement.

The aim of this article is to explore the two generational divides, on one hand the conceptual construction of a generation gap, the subjective replacement, on the other hand its relationship to the hierarchical stratification of old and young within the socialist movements in Italy and Germany in a period of crisis.

Within the workers' movement, the young socialists were radicalised during the war and for a great part went into the communist movement in the post-war years. Indeed, many of the articles of the *Jugend-Internationale* were written by militants who would later be among the founders of local communist parties<sup>1</sup>. The paper itself was an impressive testimony to the radicalism and organisational capacity of the working class youth during the war. It was the fruit of the European network of socialist youth movements that had been established in the decades before the war. While the Second International broke down at the beginning of the war, the radical young workers founded their own *Youth International* in Switzerland, parallel to the *Zimmerwald movement* of adult socialists. This movement co-ordinated the activities in the individual countries, organised campaigns to support comrades in prison and not least published the *Jugend-Internationale*. The paper contained well written, if often very militant articles against the war with contributors from all over Europe. It was translated into several languages and smuggled into the different countries where it would be printed and distributed locally. Due to the clandestine nature of the paper, it is difficult to say anything precise about the number of copies printed or level of actual distribution, but it is certain that the paper reached many European countries and had a considerable impact on the national youth movements. It bore testimony to a widespread feeling among young workers that the hardship of war at home and at the front were products of the failure of the older men in the adult parties to live up to the ideals and goals of socialism. Instead, it hailed the young generation and youth in general as the vanguard of the revolution and the hope of the working class.

### The Cult of Youth

The young radical workers were far from the first to hail youth as a symbol of energy and renewal. Particularly in Germany, the decades preceding the war had witnessed a veritable cult of youth. Youth in Wilhelmine Germany was a many-faceted concept which stood for dynamism and re-

newal as well as a model for the young Empire and not least the young, virile Emperor. At the same time, youth culture – in particular the largely bourgeois *Wandervogel* – contained important historical and romantic elements that pointed to the past (Reulecke 1982, p. 313). In general, the cult of youth entailed a denial of everything complacent and decadent and hailed audaciousness, simplicity, energy and courage. It was as such to a large extent an existential concept, an ideal that was to be lived out by for instance walking the countryside freely, away from the decadence of the cities; to be young was to be courageous and free.

While the concept of youth in Germany was often connected to the values of the Empire, the Italian concept had much more oppositional elements. Like its German counterpart, renewal and audacious dynamism played a large part, but these elements were directed against a political order that was dominated by corruption and individual interests. The political institutions had been in a state of crisis since the turn of the century. The growing socialist movement and the frequent social riots indicated a vast lack of legitimacy in large parts of the population, and inside the walls of government and parliament buildings, power was only maintained by an intricate system of favours and mutual interests. Groups of young intellectuals opposed this state of affairs and called for change through the creation of an organic unity for the greatness of the nation, instead of petty deals and compromises in the corridors of power. The young hailed war and revolution as means to overthrow the government of the old and create a new, dynamic and courageous Italy.

### Youth and the young in the working class

Both the *Wandervogel* as well as the young Italian intellectuals were decisively bourgeois groups, and the cult of youth was a phenomenon that particularly concerned the young of the upper and middle classes. The youth of the working class occupied a different position in the public debate as well as in the workers' movement.

In Germany, where the concept of youth had attained a generally positive, if rather diffuse, connotation, the young workers were seen as a destructive threat to the established order. Whereas the middle class youth in the *Wandervogel* radiated positive energy and dynamism, the young workers constituted a menace that was to be reigned in and controlled (Reulecke 1982, p. 312). Around 1900, young workers entered the workforce in large numbers as apprentices, and at the same time the education of young workers changed from a traditional master-apprentice relationship to an institutionalised process in the large factories (Linton 1991, p. 22f., S. 30f.). Never the less, young workers still suffered from the so-called «apprentice breeding» where they were used as cheap labour without re-

ceiving proper training, and they were often victims of systematic violence and abuse by older workers. In this way, young workers appeared as a distinct group with special problems. In June 1904, the suicide of an apprentice, which had been victim of physical abuse in his workshop, led to the formation of a socialist youth organisation to deal specifically with the problems of young workers. The organisation did not only look after the social well-being of its members, but also contained a large element of education of the new generation of workers, both in terms of the theory of the workers' movement by unveiling the nature of capitalism as well as providing intellectual stimulation and moral education. In the last point, they mirrored the concerns of the authorities that the young workers should be tempted by the lures of city life such as bad films and books (see Hall 1978). Different from the encouragement to self-organisation and untamed life of the bourgeois youth of the *Wandervogel*, the young workers around 1914 found themselves surrounded by patronising organisations that sought to protect and educate them. Particularly the political independence of the young suffered from the fear of the young worker. From 1911, political youth organisations were banned in Germany, and the SPD had to conduct its work among the young through subscriptions and reading-circles of the magazine *Arbeiter-Jugend*. The party leadership feared the latent radicalism of the young and made little resistance to the legal obstacles to political youth activities, and thus the magazine was kept in a very moderate tone. Here, youth was seen as those that should make themselves ready to take over the work and values of the older generation and lead the workers' movement towards the goal of socialism. They were just another generation in the ongoing construction of a just society.

In Italy, industrialisation was far less advanced than in Germany, and the problems of the apprentice concerned only a fraction of the young workers. The majority of the population lived in the countryside, where they performed simple tasks in the field. Tellingly, the Italian word for these agricultural workers was *braccianti* derived from *braccio*, meaning arm; they were people of physical strength. The youth organisation of the Italian socialist party, FIGS (*Federazione Italiana Giovanile Socialista*), was a significant part of the stormy political life of the party, but it was relatively unconcerned by the concepts of youth among the intellectuals. Instead, it acted as a political organisation within the party advocating revolutionary strategies and supporting the so-called maximalist wing against the reformists (for a detailed account see Martinelli 1976 and Gozzini 1979). Its weekly paper, *L'Avanguardia*, loudly proclaimed the radicalism and revolutionary intentions of the FIGS, but it contained very little about the particular problems of youth and almost nothing about youth as a special

category with its own historic mission. It was an organisation of young proletarians with strong emphasis on the latter. The only specific youth issue was the anti-militarist activities of the organisation. One of its goals – which it had copied from its Belgian model – was agitation among the recruits. The idea was that an army of class conscious conscripts would be unusable against social uprisings and could not protect the capitalist system against the coming revolution. Again, however, the agitation contained little rhetoric concerning youth, but emphasised class and class conflict. One obvious explanation is that young workers in Italy did in fact find themselves in the same situations as the old workers, working side by side in the field and struggling against the common enemy in the shape of the local land-owner and the authorities of the state. They were workers who happened to still be young.

### The treachery of the old

When *Jugend-Internationale* proclaimed that «the old must die» it was a sign of a new concept of youth among the young workers, one that combined youth with revolutionary radicalism in contrast to the values of the old generation of socialists. It denied the view of *Arbeiter-Jugend* that the young should continue the work of the older generations, and it put youth before class as the carrier of the revolution.

The immediate background for this idea about youth was explicitly the failure of the Second International to prevent the war and the rallying of the individual socialist parties to the national cause. Both in Germany and, particularly, in Italy, the youth organisations had emphasised anti-militarism in order to counter the attempts to use the military as a base for creating loyalty to the authorities and – as mentioned above – to prevent the army to be used against «internal enemies». Right up until August 1914, the socialist parties had pledged to fight nationalism and militarism. As late as July 1914, the SPD organised massive demonstrations against the war, mobilising as many as 750'000 participants across the empire (Kruse 1993, p. 36–42). In Italy, the Italo-Turkish war of 1911–1912 had left a considerable imprint on the PSI, and particularly FIGS, which saw war as a way to cheat the proletariat to fight for the interests of the capitalists, luring them with national pathos and patriotism (Arfé 1965, p. 190). As war broke out, however, the European socialist parties turned their back on one another and chose to support the war fully.

One exception was the Italian socialists. Italy only entered the war in 1915 under internal pressure from pro-war groups, while large parts of the population as well as the political establishment actually opposed the war. The socialists chose a stance of «neither support nor sabotage», which in the European context seemed radical. In the Italian con-

text, however, this seemed a continuation of the half-hearted attitude towards the use of force that was typical of the reformist leadership. Even though Italy was a society marked by violent confrontations between workers and the authorities, the PSI had never wanted to grasp the opportunity to lead an organised revolt. The left wing of the party, where FIGS was located, was very dissatisfied with this failure of the leadership. For them, the adequate answer to the war was no less than revolution.

The foundation of the *Youth International* in the spring of 1915 co-incited Italy's declaration of war. FIGS had good connections to the milieu in Switzerland and soon began to echo the tenor of *Jugend-Internationale*. Now, there appeared an explicit connection between the old generation and reformism as a contrast to the revolutionary youth. This had not been the case when Mussolini half a year earlier had appealed to the Italian youth to follow him into the camp of those advocating to enter the war, nor had it been the case in the preceding years, when youth had been synonymous with political change among the intellectuals. However, as the *Youth International* connected the dynamic concept of youth with revolutionary spirit, *L'Avanguardia* adopted the new language of youth under the telling title *From Bern to Reggio Emilia*: «For it is indeed in youth, full of burning determination and ready for the greatest sacrifice, that the force of life and idealism finds its most fertile ground and safest haven» (*L'Avanguardia*, 28 March 1915).

The expressions of idealism and sacrifice were the same that the new national right used to convey their images of a new, youthful and dynamic Italy; with the inspiration from the *Youth International* the nation had been exchanged with class, war with revolution, but the image of youth as the herald of the new age was the same.

This new generation-oriented language pointed at some lasting conflicts within the PSI. For decades, the party had been split between those that aimed specifically at revolution and the maximal realisation of the socialist programme, termed maximalists, and those advocating reformism through the existing institutions. FIGS had always stood firmly on the side of the maximalists, and scorned the petty deals of parliamentary work. In this, it was closer to the syndicalist trends on the extreme left, which heralded action and full commitment. The idea of a generation conflict could thus easily be connected to the existing political divides within the socialist movement as such, the old were the men of petty compromises in the party top, while the young were those that dared to carry out the revolution and achieve true greatness. Mussolini, who had been close to FIGS before his conversion, used exactly this divide for his opening article in the pro-war newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, where he renounced the cowardice of pacifism and the socialist party (Mussolini 1914/1956). The rhetoric had may-

be thus been to close to that of the pro-war groups, but through the *Youth International* it was sanctioned for the revolutionary movement to amplify the conflict between reformists and maximalists.

In Germany, the sudden turnaround of the SPD from anti-war campaign to unanimous support in parliament came as a shock to many young workers. While *Arbeiter-Jugend* had been written in a moderate style of the party's right wing, the local youth activities were often in the hands of left-leaning leaders (Linton 1991, p. 126). As the magazine followed the parliamentary group in support from the war, many young workers saw it as a betrayal of the movement and the socialist cause. In September 1914, the lead article bore the title *To the front, comrades* («An die Front, Kameraden», note the soldier-like word for comrade, *Kamerad*, and not the class-oriented *Genosse*) (*Arbeiter-Jugend* no. 19, 12 September 1914). The next issue commemorated the former youth-leader Ludwig Frank, who had volunteered for service and fallen in France. As a protest, three quarters of the distributors of the magazine refused to carry it out (Kruse 1993, p. 180). Disillusioned youth saw this as proof that the party leadership had betrayed the cause and began to organise local groups to oppose the war.

Different from their Italian counterparts, they had little organisational experience or a well-developed political identity. Hence, different and diffuse groups grew out of local context, often copying the youth culture of the bourgeois groups, as well as reaching back to the first organised youth movement at the beginning of the century, where self-organisation had played an important role. Instead of the official language of youth standing on the shoulders of the old, these new groups adopted the idea that youth was a special category, apart from the old generation, with special values and a special mission. These were widespread ideas in Wilhelmine Germany, and the radical workers in Germany borrowed heavily from the language of the Wilhelmine cult of youth, not least from the *Wandervogel* movement. Much of this was echoed in the *Jugend-Internationale*, which had strong connections to the German movement being edited by the Thuringian Willy Münzenberg. The language of the emerging movement became a merger of the pre-existing concept of youth as a force of energy and change with the explicit revolutionary, socialist mission of the young workers. Here, the implosion of the Second International became the treachery of the old, the generation that failed and now had to leave the scene to the young revolutionaries that would dare to enter the promised land of socialism. This was closely connected to the concrete experience of August 1914, when the SPD had voted for the war credits. Time and again the event was used as an illustration that the young had to rise by themselves to lead to movement, that it was necessary to transcend the values of the old generation

and embark on a new, uncompromising course. By the spring of 1916, the movement had grown enough to organise on the national level. At Easter, representatives from all over Germany met in Jena to found a free youth movement, not the educational association dependent on the adult party, but an independent and committed revolutionary organisation<sup>2</sup>.

From the rhetoric that spread through the German and Italian organisations, it seems clear that the war experience gave birth to a strong divide between the generations within the workers' movement. The unwillingness of the older leaders to block the war through revolutionary means, the sudden turnaround from pacifism to support for the war seems a formative experience that profoundly divided large groups of young workers from their older leaders.

However obvious this may seem, it is questionable to assume a direct relationship between political rhetoric and the life-world relations of political activism. It is necessary to ask the question, whether the rhetorical generation gap was mirrored by similar gap in the life-world of the young workers.

### Youth as foot soldiers, pupils or avant-garde

In both the German and the Italian sources, one person stands out as a symbol and leader of the youth movement, the German social democrat Karl Liebknecht. Born in 1871, he was hardly young anymore, but never the less he became the most important figure for the youth movement. A decade before, in 1907, he had written a longer pamphlet on the role of the socialist youth movement in Europe with special focus on anti-militarism (Liebknecht 1907), and in December 1914, he was the first social democrat to vote against new war credits. This gave him great prestige beyond the borders of Germany. He was invited as the main speaker at the youth conference in Jena 1916, and the resolutions from the event bore his obvious fingerprints in the refusal of compromises and the adherence to revolutionary action. Here, there was no hint of a generation conflict; rather it was a case of the older, experienced revolutionary teaching the young.

As the revolutionary youth movement took off in Germany in the first years of the war, the main activity of the activists consisted of the distribution of leaflets. Often, these were not written by the young themselves, but came from the Spartakus-group, Karl Liebknechts political home on the left fringe of the opposition to the war. One illustrative example of this was the long case against what was labelled as a youth group in Karlsruhe. The group had received a package of pamphlets from the Spartakist Clara Zetkin in Berlin, which contained the resolution from the *Socialist Women's Conference* against the war in Switzerland 1915. The pamphlet contained an appeal for the women at

home to work actively against the war, which the prosecutor sustained amounted to high treason, since it was an act that aimed at weakening Germany in times of war. The group was led by the 27 year old printer Georg Dietrich while the other members were between 20 and 38 years old. Zetkin, who was the ideological motor, was 57 at the time of her arrest (Bundesarchiv, Reichsministerium des Innern, R 1501/12473, Landesverräter). The division of labour between old and young is recognisable in other such cases, where the courts reconstructed the work of the youth groups. Older radical socialists, particularly connected to Liebknecht and the Spartakus group, provided the written material, while local groups of younger workers, but not exclusively those, distributed them. Here, the young might have paid lip service to the rhetoric of independent youth work and their special mission, but in the practical activities they worked closely with and particularly for older activists.

The hierarchical relationship between old and young was even more pronounced in the cases of political schooling. The Spartakist intellectuals in particular offered clandestine lessons in Marxist theory to young, committed activists. Even if the young workers had officially discarded the idea of the youth organisation as an educational association, many activists later have written testimonies<sup>3</sup> to the influence of in particular the classes of Hermann Duncker (born 1874) in the Berlin neighbourhood of Neukölln. Every Thursday, Duncker gathered young workers in his flat in Hermannstrasse to provide the radical youth with theoretical knowledge. In Thuringia, the ten year younger Georg Schumann gave similar lessons to the local youth, as well as providing contact to the Spartakists in Berlin. This perspective from the viewpoint of the activists on the ground provides quite a different picture than the one of the *Jugend-Internationale*, rather than an independent political organisation, the radical youth worked in a close and decidedly hierarchical relationship with particularly the Spartakus group.

Compared to the Germans, the FIGS in Italy acted much more as an independent political agent. It did not make hierarchical bonds with a certain political group in the way that the German radical youth tied itself to Spartakus, rather it worked through its own means in a horizontal relationship with other groups. The FIGS was already a working organisation with a national network of activists, political programme and written material to distribute. Just a few years earlier, during the Italo-Turkish war, it had conducted its own campaign against the military campaign. In this way, the organisation had the know-how and capacity to work as an individual political force.

As such, it was in fact possible to conduct activities against the war organised and carried out by the young. In Bologna, for example, an *Action Committee* was constituted by young socialists and an-

archists in the summer of 1917. It consisted of young workers that wanted to – in the words of the local prefect – «stop the war and oppose the reformist methods, of which the young socialists accuse the local and national leadership» (Archivio Centrale dello Stato, PS A5G Prima Guerra Mondiale, busta 5, fasc. 7/54, letter from Prefettura di Bologna 27 August 1917). Such committees appeared in other cities like Turin and Florence, where anarchist, syndicalists and young socialists made alliances to oppose the war in a revolutionary way (although it seldom resulted in concrete action). The waning anarchist movement in particular sought alliances with the stronger socialists, and here the young socialists were always present (Archivio Centrale dello Stato, PS A5G Prima Guerra Mondiale, busta 4 «Propaganda control la guerra ...» 29 December 1916). As such, the FIGS in many ways did play the role as the avant-garde of the revolution that it advocated in *L'Avanguardia*, organising propaganda and allying themselves with groups that had the same inclinations towards uncompromising action.

In terms of ideology, the movement also produced its own intellectuals, most notably during the war, Amadeo Bordiga. He was 25 as Italy entered the war, and as such too old to actually be member of the FIGS (the limit was 21 years), but still a very young party member. As the war drew on and the internal repression rose, most of the leadership of the organisation got either arrested or sent to the front. This meant that the whole middle layer of local leaders was gone including important parts of the national leadership (Gozzini 1979, p. 71). In this situation of crisis, the organisation depended on either very young members or those actually too old, but still connected to the youth. Bordiga was an example of the latter. In 1917, he took over as editor of *L'Avanguardia* and exerted a considerable ideological influence over the organisation with his «absenteist» ideas about absolute and unrelenting refusal of capitalist society and its institutions. Another example of a youth intellectual was Antonio Gramsci, who was two years younger than Bordiga. Although his influence would rise considerably after the war, his ideas about involvement in civil society already had impact on sizeable parts of the organisation during the war years. His Turin paper, *La Città futura*, was in fact published by the local branch of FIGS and dedicated to the ardour of youth. The important difference between these intellectuals and the leaders of the Spartakus was that whereas the Germans were already established figures in the socialist movement, the Italians had grown directly out of the youth movement and were making their political career as a part of it. Where Liebknecht addressed the young as a model and a teacher, Bordiga and Gramsci were still part of the youth movement.

On the level of the national party, the existing gap was between the adults in the PSI and the young in the FIGS. In 1917, the young sent an offi-

cial memorandum to the party, criticising its moderate policies and demanding new, radical action against the war (Spriano 1967, p. 9). In the columns of *L'Avanguardia*, this was put clearly as a conflict between the young and the old, and at the congress in Florence that year the independence of the organisation was connected with theoretical and practical coherence built upon the maximalist and Marxist foundations (*L'Avanguardia* no. 507, 7 October 1917). Less than two months after the congress, a small group of socialists met clandestinely in Florence to discuss revolutionary tactics, only three days after the October Revolution. Here, the group that should develop into the Italian communist party took shape. Again, it was dominated by youth; Bordiga and Gramsci were both present and particularly Bordiga played an important role at the meeting. These young socialists were the ones to draw revolutionary conclusions from the European situation, while the older thought that the only realistic tactics were the «neither support, nor sabotage», articulated at the beginning of the conflict. Even among the radicals, it was obvious that Bordiga and Gramsci in their mid-twenties were much more radical than the forty-year old Serrati, who would later found the communist party together with the two young revolutionaries (Spriano 1967, p. 3–19).

It seemed that the FIGS and its leading intellectuals did in fact represent a generation that adhered to brand of radicalism that transgressed even that of the older maximalists. This was no phenomenon of the party leadership alone, *L'Avanguardia* printed numerous notes from the local branches that confirmed the revolutionary zeal among the members. At the final split of the PSI in 1921 and the foundation of the communist party, the FIGS went almost completely with the communists. It would hence not be exaggerated to say that the birth of the Italian communist movement was the result of a generation conflict, even a generation gap with the socialist movement.

## Conclusions and outlook

The two countries thus present very different histories about the relationships between the generations. Whereas the German youth had by far the most well-developed concept of youth as a special category with a unique historical mission, the lived relation between old and young consisted of co-operation, even a hierarchical master-apprentice relationship or adoration of revolutionary father-figures. In Italy, the merger of the concept of youth with the political, revolutionary programme happened rather late and clearly under the influence of the German movement, despite the organisational strength, independence and political maturity of the Italian youth movement.

This demonstrates how concepts were transferred in Europe at the time of the war, and how

political networks made these transfers possible. It also demonstrates that even if the concepts were similar, it did not mean that their reference to the lived relation between generations was the same, or that there were any correlation between the intensity of the language of youth and the actual status of the young in the groups. The language of youth did not refer to a specific political status of a generation, but was an articulation of an often idealised identity as young revolutionaries.

From the perspective of the inter-war years, these conclusions shed light on dissimilarity of the rhetorical status of youth in the political language, and the actual role of youth in society. In both the Fascist and Nazi dictatorship, the cult of youth and in particular of the front-generation was extremely prominent in the political language. However, the actual status of the young within the movements consisted of subordination to the older leaders. Despite of naming the National Socialists the «Party of youth», Hitler disliked and distrusted *Hitler Jugend* in 1920s (Stachura 1975, p. 149f.). In Fascist Italy, the old cadres of the early years upheld the youthful image of the regime, but never the less failed to make the younger generations enter positions of power and thus created an increasingly aging establishment (Wanrooij 1987). Youth remained a politically attractive term with a fragile relation to the life and status of those young people it hailed.

#### Notes

- 1 The article on Vaillant was for example written by the Dane Marie Nielsen, who would go on to be a key figure in the creation of the Danish communist party.
- 2 The resolutions from the conference are in the Bundesarchiv, RY 11/II 107/2 (see also Luban 1971).
- 3 These testimonies by old activists were gathered in the GDR in the 1950s and 1960s in attempt to reconstruct the history of German communism, they are in the Bundesarchiv in Berlin (SAPMO, SgY 30).

#### Archives

Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome  
PS A5G Prima Guerra Mondiale  
Bundesarchiv, Berlin  
RY 11/II 107, Sozialistische Arbeiterjugend  
R 1501/12473, Landesverräter  
SAPMO, SgY 30

#### Periodicals

Arbeiter-Jugend  
L'Avanguardia  
Jugend-Internationale

#### Literature

- Arfé, Gaetano: *Storia del socialismo italiano (1892–1926)*. Torino 1965
- Gozzini, Giovanni: *Alle origine del comunismo italiano. Storia della federazione giovanile socialista (1907–1921)*. Bari 1979
- Hall, Alex: *Youth in Rebellion: The Beginnings of the Socialist Youth Movement 1904–14*. In: Richard J. Evans (ed.): *Society and Politics in Wilhelmine Germany*. London: Croom Helm 1978, p. 241–266
- Kruse, Wolfgang: *Krieg und nationale Integration. Eine Neuinterpretation des sozialdemokratischen Burgfriedschlusses 1914/15*. Essen 1993
- Liebkecht, Karl: *Militarismus und Antimilitarismus unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der internationalen Jugendbewegung*. Leipzig 1907
- Linton, Derek S.: *«Who has Youth has the Future». The campaign to save young workers in Imperial Germany*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991
- Longerich, Peter: *Die braunen Bataillone*. München 1989
- Luban, Ottokar: *Die Auswirkungen der Jenaer Jugendkonferenz 1916 und die Beziehungen der revolutionären Arbeiterjugend zur Führung der Spartakusgruppe*. In: *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte XI(1971)*, p. 185–223
- Martinelli, Renzo: *I giovani nel movimento operaio italiano dalla FGS alla FGC*. In: *Movimento operaio e socialista 22(1976)*, vol.3, p. 247–284
- Mussolini, Benito: *Audacia! (1914)*. In: Benito Mussolini: *Opera omnia*. Florence 1956, p. 5–7
- Mussolini, Benito: *Trincerocrazia (1917)*. In: Benito Mussolini: *Opera omnia*. Florence 1958, p. 140–142
- Reulecke, Jürgen: *Bürgerliche Sozialreformer und Arbeiterjugend im Kaiserreich*. In: *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte 22(1982)*, p. 299–329
- Reulecke, Jürgen: *Einführung: Lebensgeschichten des 20. Jahrhunderts – im «Generationencontainer»*. In: Jürgen Reulecke/Elisabeth Müller-Luckner (eds.): *Generationalität und Lebensgeschichten im 20. Jahrhundert*. München 2003, S. VII–XV
- Schulz, Andreas/Grebner, Gundula: *Generation und Geschichte. Zur Renaissance eines umstrittenen Forschungskonzepts*. In: *Historische Zeitschrift, Sonderheft 36(2003)*, S. 2–21
- Sirinelli, Francois: *Génération et histoire politique. Vingtième Siècle*. In: *Revue d'histoire 22(1989)*, p. 67–80
- Spriano, Paolo: *Storia del Partito comunista italiano*. Turin 1967
- Stachura, Peter D.: *Nazi youth in the Weimar Republic*. Santa Barbara: Clio Books 1975
- Wanrooij, Bruno: *The Rise and Fall of Italian Fascism as a Generational Revolt*. In: *Journal of Contemporary History 22(1987)*, vol.3, p. 401–418