Adolescent Ambassadors: 20th-Century Youth Organizations and International Relations

Veranstalter: Mischa Honeck, German Historical Institute, Washington DC; Gabriel Rosenberg, Duke University
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Youth is crashing the international headlines. The Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and other border-crossing moments of public activism are challenging the global status quo. Often it is young people who march in the forward ranks of these present-day transnational movements. However, this is not the first youth cohort that mobilized to shape the planet's destiny. One of the goals of the workshop „Adolescent Ambassadors" was to demonstrate that youth history offers a rich and unexploited field for rethinking the transnational entanglements of the twentieth century.

The papers presented highlighted and connected some of the imprints young people left in the international arena from World War I to the end of the Cold War, both individually and as part of adult-led organizations. In their opening remarks, Mischa Honeck (Washington DC) and Gabriel Rosenberg (Duke) outlined the potential benefits that initiating a dialogue between scholars of inter- and transnational history and historians of youth and childhood could yield. Given that the voices of children and teenagers are often hard to glean from traditional sources, Honeck and Rosenberg also spoke about the methodological challenges that lay ahead. Where do we find the cultural and political footprints of youth in a globalized world? Do young people have identities beyond the nation? What is specific about their transnational actions and experiences? How are they endowed with, and how do they claim „ambassadorship" of states, social movements, and cultural formations? Finally, how does our understanding of the past change when we apply the analytical lenses of age and generation?

The first panel probed some of these questions in the context of Scouting, arguably the most successful archetype of global youth organizing in the twentieth century. BENJAMIN JORDAN (Memphis) focused on a peculiar form of cultural diplomacy that U.S. Boy Scouts practiced with Native Americans in the 1920s. Jordan contended that white Scouts' fascination with „primitive" cultures led to a reappreciation of Native Americans, which the latter actively used to demand rights and recognition. Simultaneously, white U.S. boys „played Indian" at international Scout festivals to promote a typically American way of Scouting abroad. MARCIA CHATELAIN (Georgetown) discussed the internationalism of the Girl Scouts of America after World War II. Using the example of Nuestra Cabana, an international Girl Scouts center in Mexico, Chatelain recounted episodes of U.S. girls traveling south as ambassadors of goodwill. Despite intercultural and intergenerational tensions, Chatelain stressed that engaging with foreign others sensitized many girls for struggles against discrimination at home. In her commentary, LESLIE PARIS (Vancouver) reiterated the significance of Scouting as a twentieth-century manifestation of youth transnationalism. Rather than elaborating on the adult dimensions of the movement as prior works have done, Paris called on researchers to pay more attention to how boys and girls in Scout uniform developed their own gender and civic identities.

The second panel charted the international ties of fascist youth in the 1930s and 1940s. ALESSIO PONZIO (Wellesley) investigated the exchanges between the German Hitler Youth and the Italian Opera Nazionale Balilla. Both organizations learned from the other's attempts to breed racially pure youthful bodies as the heralds of a future fascist Europe. But as Ponzio pointed out, these conversations became increasingly uneven as Nazi Germany acquired greater military and imperial clout. KRISTIN MULREADY-STONE's (Kansas State) treatment of young Chinese collaborators with Imperial Japan revealed a similar dynamic of cross-cultural adaptation. Eager to pacify and rebuild their nation after years of war, Chinese adolescents bonded together in new groups such as the

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Chinese Youth Corps, which borrowed elements from internationally successful models of youth organizing at the time. ANNA VON DER GOLTZ (Georgetown) raised a couple of methodological issues in her response. Although Ponzio's and Mulready-Stone's accounts chipped away at parochial histories of fascist youth, more empirical work was needed to gauge the broader implications of transnational youth cooperation for hypernationalist regimes.

The third panel spotlighted two fascinating cases of youth diplomacy in the early Cold War. Introducing three U.S. foster parenting organizations that expanded their overseas activities after 1945, SARA FIELDSTON (Yale) delved into the realm of international child sponsorship. Aiding children from the era's global hotspots such as China and Korea served the image of the United States as a benevolent leader of the free world. However, Fieldston emphasized that non-Western youths were not merely on the receiving end but tried to influence their American foster parents on a range of economic, cultural, and political issues. SEAN GUILLORY (Pittsburgh) talked about the student exchange programs that the Soviet Union launched to attract talented African youth. Below the official rhetoric of international class solidarity, Guillory identified cultural misunderstandings and contentions. Whereas the Soviets tended to racialize their black guests, African students, many of whom were privileged and well-traveled, often compared Soviet life unfavorably with Western standards of living. AKIRA IRIYE's (Harvard) comments put the panel in a wider historical context. Iriye observed that Fieldston and Guillory reflected on youth histories in a Cold War world but also showed how these histories transcended Cold War binaries.

Akira Iriye concluded the first day with his keynote lecture „Youth Makes History." Iriye revisited the historiographical turns of the last decades that have integrated youth more fully into the study of the past. He insisted that young people had made essential contributions in culture and society. They have stood at the vanguard of innovations in communication and transportation that have made the world a smaller one. Even as their transnationalism comes into conflict with local loyalties of nation, race, and religion, Iriye noted with undaunted optimism that today's young people share a greater sense of „planetarity" that may encourage them to join hands across borders for the preservation of the planet.

The second day began with a panel that addressed the efforts of postwar youth to develop notions of transnational citizenship. CHRISTINA NORWIG's (Göttingen) examination of the European Youth Campaign of the 1950s detailed how young activists drew on the perception of youth as a unifying, regenerative social force to promote a common European identity based on liberal values. At the same time, these adolescents struggled to find a language conducive to that aim as the „myth of youth" was still fraught with prewar military and nationalist tropes. TAMARA MYERS (Vancouver) moved the discussion to Canadian schoolchildren, who played a central role in turning Miles for Millions, a walkathon created in the 1960s to ease third world hunger, into a mass phenomenon. For Myers, the Miles for Millions events exemplified that the youngest members of society were quite capable of expressing sentiments of long-distance solidarity and global responsibility that impressed their elders. PAULA FASS (Berkeley) commented on the forms of youth activism that Norwig and Myers presented. Applauding both for dissecting historically specific moments of youth mobilization with the help of rich visual material, Fass urged researchers to also interrogate the cultural and interpersonal aspects of transnational youth politics.

The fifth panel explored the impact of youth from non-Western countries on global discourses on human rights. MATTHEW SHANNON's (Philadelphia) discussion of Iranian student lobbying abroad illuminated an effective case of transnational youth organizing in the 1970s. Forming alliances with countercultural movements in Europe and North America, educated young Iranians pushed the different U.S. administrations to reconsider their relations with the Western-supported regime of Shah Reza Palavi. MARK MALISA (Saint Rose) weighed in on the role that indigenous African youth protest played in bringing about the downfall of South African

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apartheid. Images of brutalized children, Malisa demonstrated, turned out to be powerful tools for mobilizing global public opinion against the country's racist leadership and human rights abuses. DEBORAH DURHAM (Sweet Briar), in her response, reminded transnational scholars to take non-Western constructions of youth seriously and not universalize Western conceptions. On another level, Durham, an anthropologist, stressed the flexibility of such constructions in cultures where local rites, rather than codified law, determined the boundaries between young and old.

The concluding plenary discussion returned to general questions about the cultural, social, and political locations of young people in twentieth-century history. The participants agreed that developing a precise analytical vocabulary was a prerequisite for further study. Youth can be quite tricky conceptually, and scholars need to be aware that they are dealing with a multivalent term. Historically, youth has encompassed people who are young in a biological sense, adults who invest in young people or embody youthfulness, and a cultural trope that connotes forward-looking designs of regeneration and renewal. Modern characterizations of organized youth as the embodiment of the future, as the best what societies could offer, proved empowering to young people, heightening their visibility in spaces beyond the domains of home and school. As most papers suggested, „youth-making" in the twentieth century was first and foremost an intergenerational process, one that was not confined by national boundaries. Since young people were never passive objects of socialization, historians may be well advised to view them not simply as recipients but as catalysts of transformation, nationally as well as internationally.

Conference Overview:

Opening Remarks: Mischa Honeck, Gabriel Rosenberg

Panel I: Youth and Global Scouting

Benjamin Jordan (Christian Brothers University): Native Americans, Cultural Diplomacy, and Negotiating Citizenship in the Boy Scouts of America, 1910-1932

Marcia Chatelain (Georgetown University): International Friendship, Domestic Sisterhood: Post-World War II Girl Scouts and Nuestra Cabana

Comment: Leslie Paris (University of British Columbia)

Panel II: Youth and the Fascist International

Alessio Ponzio (Wellesley College): Balilla and Hitlerjungen as Ambassadors of the Fascist and Nazi Regimes

Kristin Mulready-Stone (Kansas State University): Japanese Recruitment of Collaborators through the Chinese Youth Corps in Wartime Shanghai, 1937-1942

Comment: Anna von der Goltz (Georgetown University)

Panel III: Youth and the Global Cold War

Sara Fieldston (Yale University): Little Cold Warriors: Child Sponsorship and International Affairs

Sean Guillory (University of Pittsburgh): Studying in the Socialist Paradise: Soviet Patronage and Third World Students' Identity in the Soviet Union, 1957-1970

Comment: Akira Iriye (Harvard University)

Keynote: Akira Iriye (Harvard University): Youth Makes History

Panel IV: Youth and Transnational Citizenship

Christina Norwig (University of Göttingen): A „First European Generation"? The Myth of Youth and European Integration in the 1950s

Tamara Myers (University of British Columbia): Local Action and Global Thinking: Operation Blister, Youth, and International Development in 1960s and 70s Canada

Comment: Paula Fass (University of California, Berkeley)

Panel V: Youth and Human Rights

Matthew Shannon (Temple University): Which Human Rights? Student Migration,

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Internationalism, and the Shah of Iran

Mark Malisa (College of Saint Rose): South African Youths and the Anti-Apartheid Movement: Reclaiming Humanity in the 20th Century

Comment: Deborah Durham (Sweet Briar College)

Plenary Discussion: Organizing Youth, Organizing Globalization

Concluding Remarks: Mischa Honeck, Gabriel Rosenberg

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