INTRODUCTION/ВВЕДЕНИЕ

REX A. WADE (Fairfax, VA, USA)

GENERATIONS IN RUSSIAN AND SOVIET HISTORY

"O my son Absalom! my son, my son Absalom! would God I might die for thee, O Absalom my son, my son!"
Second Samuel 18: 33

"Man is incapable of useful thoughts after the age of twenty-five years."
Unnamed character in Nikolai Chernyshevsky, What is to be Done?

"The generation is a dynamic compromise between mass and individual, and is the most important conception in history. It is, so to speak, the pivot responsible for the movements of historical evolution."
Jose Garcia y Ortega, The Modern Theme

What makes the theme of generations and generational conflict so fascinating and so powerful is that we all are involved in it. At the most basic level we all are Sons or Daughters, and most of us become Fathers or Mothers as well. Often we are both simultaneously, and sometimes additional generations in the form of grandparents or grandchildren are added in. We all have to face the basic issue of our relationship to parents, and most of us to our own children in turn, in every variation of love, resentments, friendship, strife, dependence and independence known to mankind. This is the simplest, yet perhaps also most complex, level of generational relationships. Anyone who doubts that, or our current societal obsession with it, need only pick up popular magazines, wander through any book store, or just read general book reviews (the day that I write this passage, the Washington Post's Sunday book review section reviewed three books by women exploring their – apparently difficult – relationships with their mothers, and in one the mother joined in the writing of the book!). Beyond these are the tricky questions of generation-based stereotypes: nurturing mother, stern father, ungrateful child, their opposites and their many variations.
There are, moreover, much broader questions about generations than simple family relationships and genealogical generations. What is a “generation,” what defines it and makes it up? What other kinds of “generations” are there besides age cohorts? To what generational cohort(s) does one belong? How valid is the generational terminology that we so readily utilize – the beat generation, Gen X, baby boomers, 60s generation (in the U.S. and the USSR), “the greatest generation” (to pick one that was coined only late in its members’ lives and after many of them were dead)? How valid are the characteristics and characterizations we assign to these generations? What makes a person a member of some designated “generation,” since some terms obviously include only a portion of the people of that particular age group? What about generational power relationships (psychological, financial, other), the varieties of youth rebellions, and old age with its reconciliations and its competing status and resource demands against the younger generations? These are only some of the questions raised by the notion of “generations.”

The concept of generations is both very old and surprising new. Generations and generational conflict is as old as our existence and reflected in our religious belief systems, our founding myths, our literature, and the earliest histories. In Greek mythology, Chronos first overthrew his father, Uranus (by castration!), then devoured his children so that they could not overthrow him, but nonetheless in turn was overthrown by his son Zeus (who had his own problems with his offspring). Far around the globe, the Maori also found generational conflict in the process of creation of the heavens and earth, as Ku, the war god, advocated killing his parents, the earth goddess and sky father, to separate them and force creation, but a brother accomplished it in a non-lethal way (and less harsh than Chronos). The stories of Oedipus and the multi-generational trials of the house of Atreus are imbedded in Western culture. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, we find a long range of generational themes, running from Genesis (“This is the book of the generations of Adam”) to Absalom’s attempt to overthrow his father, King David, to the extremely complex Christian theology of the Father and the Son. Veneration of ancestors of families or clans and ancestor cults play an important role in East Asian and some other cultures; in China, *The Twenty-Five Examples of Filial Piety* was considered important moral reading for the young. Not all Asian generational relations were peaceful – in Japanese mythology, the Storm God was banished by his father, Izanagi, while in the South Asian *Ramayama* banishment of Rama by his father the king plays a central role. In the Muslim world, the claim to being a descendent of the Prophet has played and continues to play a significant role in bestowing authority. Later, Ibn Khaldun explored generation cycles in his fourteenth-century analysis of world history,