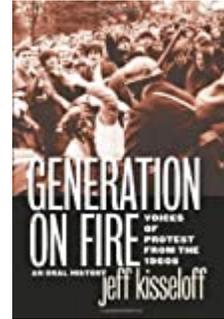




**Jeff Kisseloff.** *Generation on Fire: Voices of Protest from the 1960s—An Oral History.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006. 284 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2416-2.



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### Memories of an Era of Activism

Jeff Kisseloff's collection of oral interviews deals with the social, cultural, and political upheaval of the 1960s. *Generation on Fire* presents sixteen individuals who were involved directly with an event or issue during the decade. Many of the people in the book, such as Jesuit priest Daniel Berrigan, are well-known activists or at least relatively so, while others, such as poet and commune resident Verandah Porche, are less familiar figures. All of the accounts are fascinating. The interviews are engrossing enough to overcome Kisseloff's inadequate remarks that introduce the volume and preface each chapter.

Beginning with the title, Kisseloff needlessly simplifies the book's content. The use of the singular "generation" implies a focus upon a particular age cohort, and the dust-jacket features a picture of protesting undergraduate students, suggesting that this is a book about young activists. Kisseloff explicitly confirms this assumption in his introductory essay by repeatedly referencing the "young" activists who are "of the '60s," the "so-called baby boomers who came of age in the 1960s," and the "children of [Tom] Brokaw's 'greatest' generation" (pp.

1, 4). This mischaracterizes the content of the book, though. A surprising number of the oral histories are with people who are clearly not baby boomers. Around half of the people in *Generation on Fire* were born before the United States entered World War II, including three who were born in the 1920s (and one that fought in World War II). So, contrary to the title and introduction, this is a book about many generations, not just one. Baby boomers were hardly the only generation of the decade's activists that mattered, so it is fitting that this volume features many different age groups. It is strange that Kisseloff has chosen to obscure this point. The title is not the only place where Kisseloff abridges something for effect. Kisseloff writes that J. Edgar Hoover "tried to arrange a hit" on humorist Paul Krassner, but Krassner's interview does not precisely confirm this tidy summation (pp. 64, 74). Also, Kisseloff twice asserts that the National Guard killed four Kent State students "for exercising their right to protest," a too neat rendering of the guardsmen's collective intent (pp. 3, 5). While he is not entirely off-base in these examples, neither is he totally accurate. Kisseloff seeks to impose order upon events that actually have a more ambiguous or compli-

cated reality. His Kent State summary is particularly odd since an interview in the book specifically points out that two of the students were not protesting when they were killed (p. 263).[1]

These errors, along with his introductory essay, reveal that Kisseloff is not comfortable with, or at least not interested in, complexity. For Kisseloff, the heroes and villains of the decade are obvious, as are the achievements of his favored activists. Thus, for instance, he can write that the tactics of the antiwar movement were very effective in helping stop the war in Vietnam, a debatable assertion (p. 2). His view of the era is one in which left-of-center activists righteously confronted, and sometimes triumphed, over the authoritarian and conservative establishment. This mindset explains why Kisseloff's book features not a single right-of-center voice. Judging from the somewhat dated bibliography that concludes the volume, Kisseloff is unaware of less polemical interpretations of the decade, and of scholarship that takes into account the attitudes, appeal, and achievements of self-identified conservative activists.[2] (His prefatory remarks that begin each chapter are similarly skewed, and are peppered with casual, even corny, lines.[3]) Fortunately, this is not a Kisseloff-written textbook, but a collection of oral interviews. The interviews, which read like uninterrupted monologues in paragraph form, are of a consistent high quality. Each one typically contains a vignette or two about the subject's childhood, a discussion—featuring colorful anecdotes—of what the narrator did during the 1960s, and a few paragraphs of reflection. That is not to say that the interviews are formulaic. On the contrary, each one reads very engagingly, and is presented in the natural voice of each speaker.

Here Kisseloff deserves praise. For while it seems a simple enough task to run a tape recorder and listen to people talk, successful oral interviews are not so easy. Even with the good fortune of finding extraordinary people willing to talk at length about notable subjects, Kisseloff still needed to ask well-chosen questions to provoke interesting responses. And once the interviews were over, much of Kisseloff's work had just begun in the form of editing the words into coherent and compelling accounts. The fact that each interview reads so effortlessly, entertainingly, and with such authenticity is a testament not only to the storytelling abilities of the interviewees, but to Kisseloff's behind-the-scenes work in shaping the final product.

The interviews cover a wide range of topics, including the civil rights movement (Bernard LaFayette, Bob

Zellner, and Gloria Richardson Dandridge); free speech (Paul Krassner); the anti-Vietnam War movement (David Cline, Doris Krause and Barry Levine, Daniel Berrigan, and Lee Weiner); the women's rights movement (Marilyn Salzman Webb); and the counterculture (Barry Melton, Peter Berg, Verandah Porche, and Elsa Marley Skylark). There are a few surprising—and satisfying—figures Kisseloff has also chosen to feature, such as David Meggyesy, an outspoken professional football player, and Frank Kameny, an activist now considered the grandfather of the gay rights movement. It is unlikely this collection of interviews will inspire new scholarly interpretations of the decade (because many of the figures have already been studied, and because the interviews are mostly episodic in nature rather than exhaustive), but the immediacy of the first-person accounts makes for gripping reading.

The book, for example, vividly conveys how civil rights activists knew they were risking their lives with their efforts. Bernard LaFayette, recounting when the Freedom Riders traveled from Alabama to Mississippi, said, "Inside the bus was eerie and quiet. Out the window, we saw this moss hanging from the trees, and we wondered what stories they could tell" (p. 16). Civil rights activist Bob Zellner remembered his feelings of Mississippi similarly: "I was from Alabama and I was afraid to go to Mississippi, and I was white" (p. 32). Zellner's interview offers graphic accounts of how he barely survived shootings and beatings at the hands of white supremacists. After describing one particularly vicious episode in which his tormenter "started putting his fingers into my eye sockets," Zellner, lucky to still have sight, commented, "Boy, that's a tough little muscle there, that eyeball" (p. 32).

The interviews touch upon personal moments that exemplified larger trends. Marilyn Salzman Webb, a prominent figure in the women's liberation movement, recounted the sexual harassment she endured not only from professors while in graduate school, but from fellow activists in the antiwar movement. "These were supposed to be my brothers and sisters!" Webb recalled with dismay (p. 177). The interview with Gloria Richardson Dandridge, a black middle-aged activist in Maryland, revealed the tensions that existed within the civil rights movement. "I wasn't committed to nonviolence," recalled Dandridge. "I thought violence was the only thing they listened to" (p. 58). Dandridge's militancy and resistance to compromise led her to personally snub Martin Luther King Jr. at a public meeting. When Frank Kameny was fired from his federal job because he was a homosexual,

he was forever changed. “I had a burning sense of injustice,” he remembered. “This simply wasn’t right, and something needed to be done” (p. 186). The connection between the political and personal was not always so profound, though, such as antiwar radical and Chicago Eight defendant Lee Weiner’s recollection of an “argument over whether it was counterrevolutionary to enjoy a sunset” (p. 95).

Kisseloff’s book features an eclectic mix of figures. The counterculture is given significant space. Two interviews (Verandah Porche and Elsa Marley Skylark) dwell on commune living, while Peter Berg explains the founding of the Diggers, and Country Joe and the Fish guitarist Barry Melton explores the era’s rock music scene. More novel is the interview with National Football League player David Meggyesy, because it shows how not even professional sports were immune from the influence of sixties activism. As a player, Meggyesy was outspoken about racism and the Vietnam War, and he later wrote a book decrying the violence and inhumanity of the game.

The fifteenth and last chapter, which is about the Kent State killings on May 4, 1970, is different in two ways: it deals at length with a single moment, and it consists of two interviews. The killing of student Allison Krause is told through the words of her boyfriend, Barry Levine, and mother, Doris Krause. Due to its narrow focus, the description of that tragic day and immediate aftermath is told in great depth, and to tremendous effect. Unlike the other chapters, which contain moments of triumph, this one is haunted by loss. Levine recounted feeling “all alone in this little redneck town,” and how he had to endure FBI surveillance after the shootings (p. 257). Doris Krause described her tense relationship with some of the other victims’ families, recalling: “There was a feeling from some of them that because their children weren’t protesting, as Allison and Jeff [Miller] were, their children were innocent, which would make our children guilty” (p. 263). There is an unmistakable sorrow and rage over Allison Krause’s death that makes this stand-out chapter particularly devastating to read.

The major success of this collection is how it so clearly emphasizes the personal, often idiosyncratic, journeys of the protagonists. For, on the one hand, these activists during the sixties “movement” were driven by a sense of moral purpose, a belief that they were agents of historical change, a part of a wave of reform shared by many like-minded people. Yet as these interviews also show, the activists often had to look inward before continuing down their chosen path. Whether it was con-

fronting authority figures, writing a controversial book, breaking with fellow activists, starting a commune, facing prison, or risking one’s life, all of the interviews dwell on moments of personal decisions and courageous individual actions.

Since the interviews deal dramatically with many significant historical subjects, *Generation on Fire* could work well as supplemental reading in an undergraduate history course. (That is, as long as the interviews are placed, either via lectures or other texts, in better historical context than that which is provided by Kisseloff.) The book, which is geared mostly for non-specialists, also has an appeal beyond the classroom. It offers a usable history that could be read with benefit by people who are not specifically interested in 1960s history, such as aspiring or tiring activists. Several of the interviews emphasize how it was the nitty-gritty, often anonymous daily work of community organizers, and not stirring speeches by national figures that was most responsible for promoting change.

*Generation on Fire* is about people who worked tirelessly in trying to exemplify the ideals they espoused. Instead of reading about history, they made it; instead of apathy, they responded with activism. While Kisseloff’s essays provide a weak introduction to the era, the oral interviews—which are the bulk of the book—successfully capture various aspects of the sixties movement.

#### Notes

[1]. Examples of other errors include: Kisseloff writes that twelve Kent State students were injured alongside the four who were killed, when the actual number injured was nine (p. 244). Nixon’s resignation came over two years after J. Edgar Hoover’s death, not one year (p. 103).

[2]. In the bibliography, the recommended books are listed under several topics such as “Civil Rights” and “Vietnam and the Antiwar Movement.” The first section is titled “General Sixties,” and it consists of books published in the 1970s and 1980s, with an exception of one book about Watergate (an event not even alluded to in *Generation on Fire*) that was published in 1994. No books written by historians David Farber or Maurice Isserman, for example—both of whom have written and edited several important, relevant, and accessible volumes—appear anywhere. (Isserman does provide a blurb on the dust jacket.) Not even Peter Levy’s *Civil War on Race Street: The Civil Rights Movement in Cambridge, Maryland* (2003) is mentioned, even though it

overlaps directly with the content of Gloria Richardson Dandridge's interview. Some books are listed in more than one category, which would rebut claims that space was an overriding issue in the omission of additional secondary sources.

[3]. Regarding David Meggyesy, the out-spoken professional football player who wrote a book, Kisseloff writes, "Who knew jocks could write anything but their autographs?" He also suggests that Meggyesy "wouldn't have been any less shocking if he had shown up at the opening coin toss in a pink tutu and ballet slippers" (p. 210). In another section, Kisseloff explains that the counterculture adherents "were just continuing a San Francisco tradition, like Rice-A-Roni" (p. 137). (Rice-A-Roni was introduced in 1958 and tied to San Francisco via an advertising slogan, not tradition. Kisseloff's play-

ful comparison, then, is useless and misleading.) Such comments suggest Kisseloff might have needlessly been trying to make the book more palatable for young or non-scholarly audiences. Yet the interviews are rarely annotated, so occasional references made during interviews about Diane Nash, Greensboro, Fred Hampton, the French in Dien Bien Phu, CORE, and Jane Fonda's antiwar activism, for example, are not clarified, meaning that Kisseloff apparently assumes the reader already has a solid working knowledge of the era. Kisseloff gushes praise onto the people featured in the book, and there is a therapeutic, Oprah-like aspect to his writing ("I hope you will...possibly recognize yourself in their struggles to learn who they were and what place they were meant to assume in the world" [p. 4]), qualities that distract more than illuminate.

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