

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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# Nietzsche, Spengler, and the Politics of Cultural Despair

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Oswald Spengler's fame as a controversial philosopher of world history has not fully succeeded in overshadowing his notoriety as an influential political thinker who stridently opposed Germany's first democracy and inadvertently helped to clear the path for the establishment of Nazi totalitarian rule. His magnum opus, *The Decline of the West*, which, in the words of the historian Hagen Schulze, "shaped the intellectual discourse of the twenties [in Germany] like no other work" (p. 137), was primarily conceived as a bold contribution to historical philosophy and *Kulturkritik*. Yet it was also clearly intended to generate enthusiasm among the German educated public for conservative, authoritarian, and imperialistic politics. Imperialism and the achievement of a "suitable" position for the Second Reich in world politics had become a top priority of Max Weber and fellow German bourgeois intellectuals since Bismarck's dismissal in 1890 signalled the abandonment of his cautious and "saturated" Continental policy and the inauguration of a risky German *Weltpolitik*. Power politics and imperialism were lifelong passions of Spengler, born in 1880, who at the age of sixteen had already labored for three years on a richly detailed, fifty-page history of the phantastical empire, *Afrikasien* (OS, pp. 27ff. "OS" is the abbreviation for Koktanek's authoritative Spengler biography). While Gibbon had been stimulated to commence composing his masterpiece by a visit to the Roman Forum and Toynbee by an excursion to the ruins of Knossos, Spengler was galvanized into setting to work on his tome by a dramatic international political event, the Agadir crisis of 1911, which aroused the specter of a general European war. Yet he suppressed his anxieties and accepted without reservations the notion of the impending First World War as a necessary and giant step on the path to German global hegemony, styling his major work as a philosophical contribution to its attainment. Thus he penned the curious concluding lines to the preface of the first edition, expressing his hope that his "book would not stand completely unworthy alongside the military achievements of Germany" (UdA I, p. x. Spengler's texts are cited by abbreviations noted in the References).

Spengler also left his stamp upon the political discussion in interwar Germany through a number of minor works. Of particular note are *Prussianism and Socialism*, which sounded in 1919 the clarion call for the ideological assault upon the political legitimacy of the Weimar Republic from the antagonis-

tic right, and *Years of Decision*, which, appearing in 1933, the very year of Hitler's appointment to the Chancellorship, constituted the only work critical of the regime to be published during the Third Reich (Felken, p. 195).

In the following pages, I will inquire into Spengler's controversial but imaginative reception of Nietzsche's ideas, focusing on the impact exercised by Nietzsche upon Spengler's historical and political philosophy as elaborated in *The Decline of the West*. The first volume, appearing in 1918, shortly before the shocking collapse of the German army and the fall of the Hohenzollern monarchy, unleashed a storm of controversy in Germany the following year (Schröter). Many of Spengler's innumerable critics, motivated at times it seems by a desire to discredit a thinker who was not only an unwelcome oracle of decline, but even worse, one lacking professorial credentials, immediately began to raise the related issues of the intellectual influences reflected in his work and its originality. At one point in a letter to his friend and editor, Oscar Beck, Spengler complained that if one were to compile a list of all the possible intellectual predecessors alleged by his critics it would mushroom to over a hundred names. In the same breath he underscored his intellectual "dependence" upon Goethe and Nietzsche. The latter he paid a supreme compliment: "today it is not possible to express anything which hasn't already been touched upon in Nietzsche's posthumous works" (Letter to O. Beck, September 18, 1921, OS, p. xx). In the preface to the revised edition of the first volume of *The Decline of the West*, which appeared in 1923, Spengler, perhaps in an effort to put an end to the unseemly, protracted discussion of the disputed paternity of his ideas, publicly stated that Goethe and Nietzsche were the decisive influences. No matter what may have been the reason why Spengler had not originally explicitly identified Nietzsche as one of his mentors in the preface to the first edition of his major work, there is no doubt, as we shall presently see, that the influence of Nietzsche upon it was immense. As one student of the question of the impact of Nietzsche upon Spengler's philosophy observed, "Nietzsche is present almost everywhere in *The Decline of the West*" (Zumbini, p. 217).

Thomas Mann, despite his hostility towards Spengler on account of political differences, was impressed by his main work. In 1923 he stated, "his decline is the 'product' of enormous ability and strength of mind, full of erudition and ingenious" (1960, p. 841). But years later, in voicing his concern about the tragic political consequences of Spengler's philosophy following the nightmare of Nazism, he branded him Nietzsche's "clever ape" (1948, p. 40). Mann's famous words of disparagement are certainly clever and stinging but fail to reflect accurately the nature of the complex intellectual relationship between Nietzsche and Spengler. Heidegger, in contemplating the future of the West, also showed little appreciation for the complexity of Spengler's creative interpretation of Nietzsche's work, claiming in a condescending manner that he "calculated" the decline of the West on the basis of Nietzsche's "all too crudely understood" philosophy (Heidegger, p. 301). To be sure, it is appropriate to

regard *The Decline of the West* as an ambitious attempt to systematize in world-historical philosophical form Nietzsche's seminal diagnosis of the crisis of the modern West and to execute in considerable detail his project, announced in the famous preface to *The Will to Power*, of narrating "the history of the next two centuries" (WzM, p. 3. Nietzsche's texts are cited by abbreviations noted in the References). Spengler's thought is not merely derivative of Nietzsche's as Mann's striking simian slur and Heidegger's slighting remark suggest, however, but involved an intellectually fruitful adaptation of his ideas. As Nietzsche himself stressed, "One repays a teacher poorly, if one always remains his follower" (EH, p. 260). Spengler was an original thinker who either rejected key ideas of Nietzsche or usually modified those which he did accept. Conversation with Nietzsche helped him to conceive his own provocative vision of world history and to underwrite his own authoritarian and imperialistic political agenda.

Spengler, an omnivorous reader who sneaked his way as a schoolboy into the university library in Halle to indulge his intellectual curiosity, discovered Nietzsche at the impressionable age of sixteen through his *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Thereafter, its author assumed a permanent role in Spengler's intellectual development, from his doctoral dissertation on the one philosopher whom Nietzsche revered, Heraclitus, to his major work, and finally, in his fascinating and little-known later work, much of it consisting of aphoristic notes patterned after those of Nietzsche. Interestingly, the success which *The Decline of the West* showered upon him brought him into contact with Nietzsche's intimate world. His adored Lou Andreas-Salomé was ecstatic about Spengler's principal work, as evidenced in her effusive letter to Rilke in December 1919 (Rilke and Salomé, pp. 409–10). Moreover, Spengler was awarded the Lassen Prize of the Nietzsche Foundation along with his former teacher, the philosopher Hans Vaihinger, and the writer and philosopher Graf Keyserling, in November 1919. He subsequently developed a friendly professional relationship with Nietzsche's sister, Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche. To Spengler's credit, he broke off all contact with her upon resigning his position on the board of directors of the Nietzsche Archive in 1935, disgusted with the manipulation of Nietzsche's ideas into ideological support of Nazism (OS, pp. 459ff.). Also *Sprach Zarathustra*, which along with Goethe's *Faust* were Spengler's favorite books during his occasional travels in the temporal world, accompanied him on his journey into the next one after his untimely death in 1936.

In the preface to the revised edition of the first volume of *The Decline of the West*, Spengler described his relationship to Nietzsche in the succinct formulation, "I have made from his outlook a commanding view" (UdA I, p. ix). He boldly implied that he had elevated Nietzsche's thought to a higher level by virtue of his own burning commitment to the historicist axiom that the study of history provided the indispensable intellectual vehicle for comprehending man

as both a social and political being, in contrast to Nietzsche, who had once warned of the historical sickness (NuN, p. 329). Although Nietzsche came to value historical thought more highly in the later stages of his philosophical development<sup>2</sup> and distanced himself from his condemnation of historicism in his second *Untimely Meditation*, he never came close to revering the historical mode of understanding reality as did Spengler (UdA I, pp. 6ff.). Moreover, Nietzsche persisted in taking a jaundiced view of pressing the extraordinary complexity of human history into a methodical system of historical philosophy, as exemplified in his unflinching opposition to Hegel. For that matter, Nietzsche held a dim view of almost any attempt at systematic thought, having never formulated his own philosophy in systematic form. “I distrust all systematizers and avoid them. The will to system is a lack of integrity” (GD, p. 63). Spengler, in emphatically rejecting his distaste for systematic thought and his unwillingness to endorse historicism’s celebration of history as the path to penetrating insights about the human condition, envisioned himself as correcting these and other purported shortcomings of Nietzsche’s philosophy in *The Decline of the West*.

Despite important affinities between Spengler’s historical thought and mainstream German historicism, he appropriated one of Nietzsche’s antihistoricist ideas, assigning it a key position in his historical-philosophical architecture. Hegel and prominent representatives of historicism, like Humboldt, Ranke, and Droysen, optimistically believed that the course of history conformed to a moral order of divine origin. Nietzsche attacked this appealing notion with his customary wit: “all of history, is to be sure, the experimental rebuttal of the thesis of the so-called ‘moral world-order’” (EH, p. 367). Spengler, like Nietzsche, championed yea-saying to the *Diesseits*, the real world of sense experience, and dismissed the *Jenseits*, the realm of the ideal and of Providence as a mere chimera.<sup>3</sup> Thus Spengler followed in Nietzsche’s footsteps in rejecting the traditional optimism of historicism. He painted in vibrant brushstrokes a cyclorama of the past and unfolding future as a wondrous, amoral, historical spectacle.

It is a spectacle, which is sublime in its purposelessness, without aim and majestic like the motion of the stars, the rotation of the earth, the alternation of land and sea and of ice and primeval forests upon her. One can admire or bewail it—but it is there. (UdA II, p. 543)

*The Decline of the West* was the first work of thoroughgoing, historical-philosophical pessimism to achieve fame in the German-speaking world. Spengler integrated into his major work Nietzsche’s denial of the idea of progress: “‘Progress’ is merely a modern idea, that is to say a false idea” (A, p. 171). Confidence in progress dominated the intellectual landscape of the West in the nineteenth century, being expressed in diverse fashion by such luminaries in historical thought as Condorcet, Hegel, Ranke, Macaulay, Bancroft, and

Marx. Spengler singled out for particularly sharp criticism, like Nietzsche before him, Hegelian and Marxian visions of human progress, despite his recognition of the influence Hegel had exerted upon the conception of his historical philosophy (P, p. 66).

The guardians of the German tradition of historicism became increasingly concerned about the danger of the relativization of historical values consequent to the erosion of faith in a historical metaphysics. It was upon such a secure foundation that Ranke, the venerated founder of the German historical school, had composed his trailblazing work. Nietzsche, in his radical and individualistic epistemology, advocated perspectivism (J, p. 26) and denied the existence of eternal truths in the stream of historical time. "But everything has become; there are not any eternal facts: as well as there are not any absolute truths" (MA, p. 25). Spengler followed in his footsteps by fashioning a historical philosophy which systematically grounded relativism, although diverse cultural orientations and not the individualistic thinker were held to be the ultimate source of relative truth and values. He took issue with the idea of the existence of eternal and absolute truths and cultural values in history, picturing them as dissolving in the Heraclitean, kaleidoscopic pageant of civilizational rise and fall. Every culture gave birth to its own truths, moral systems, philosophies, and sciences. Spengler's denial of absolute truths and eternal values helped to support his abrasive, quasi-Social Darwinistic approach to power politics, which prized "realism" and success and disdained idealistic commitment to eternal values and a "moral" foreign policy.

That Spengler should not be disparaged as being merely derivative of Nietzsche, as Mann and Heidegger did, is most strikingly shown by his rejection of the fervent aspiration which animates Nietzsche's entire thought, to return European man to the ennobling spirit of classical Greece. He pointedly criticized Nietzsche as "the last romantic" (UdA I, p. 473), as the "last prisoner of the South" (UdA I, p. 39). Spengler strenuously objected to his dubious thesis that modern Western European man was inferior to the denizens of the classical world and of Renaissance Italy, who had sought to resurrect the ethos of antiquity.<sup>4</sup> Reflection upon the essence of the cultural and historical experience of antiquity had been a central concern of German thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nietzsche, in his philosophical debut, *The Birth of Tragedy*, launched his seminal critique of the idealization of Hellas in which Winckelmann, Herder, Goethe, and Hegel had indulged. Although Nietzsche dissented from their position with his imaginative argument of the interplay of the Apollonian and the Dionysian spirits, he nonetheless retained an adulatory view towards antiquity which is most certainly open to debate. Moreover, Nietzsche's ardent admiration of the classical was not restricted to his beloved Greece, extending to Rome as well. He extolled the Roman Empire as "the most admirable work of art of a great style" which ever existed (A, p. 246).

Nietzsche's veneration of the classical world and his despair about the pur-

portedly fallen condition of modern man is strikingly reminiscent of the historical pessimism of the obscure professor of constitutional law and politics from Marburg, Karl Friedrich Vollgraff (Schoeps). Vollgraff idolized antiquity and bemoaned the past two millennia as a protracted period of decline. Yet while Nietzsche sank into profound disillusionment and saw no way forward for modern European man out of the morass of modernity, he did not abandon hope. He believed that if modern European man followed his battle cry and waged war against the supposedly exhausted and pernicious ideals of Christianity, then a glorious return to the heroism and sensuality of pagan antiquity was within his grasp.

Spengler's philosophy of history played a trailblazing role in overcoming the self-limiting Eurocentrism which had previously characterized modern Western historiography. Well before Toynbee's *A Study of History*, his main work expanded the scope of historical inquiry to comprehend non-Western cultures, recognizing their cultural worth. Nonetheless, in subtitling his work "Sketch of a Morphology of World History" (*Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*), he restricted himself to an intensive investigation of the cultural and historical experiences of western Europe, ancient Greece and Rome, and the Arab world. Moreover, his extensive, comparative analysis of the Graeco-Roman cultural cycle and that of western Europe, which profited from his training as a classical scholar, forms the centerpiece of *The Decline of the West*. As H. Stuart Hughes observed, it was the first work to showcase a highly detailed parallelization of the decline of Roman civilization and the purported decline of modern civilization (p. 7).

Spengler's preoccupation with the classical world places him squarely in the German intellectual tradition of reflection upon antiquity. Profoundly interested in aesthetic matters, as was Nietzsche, he rejects the latter's glorification of antiquity largely on aesthetic grounds. Spengler advanced the thesis that each culture possessed its own distinctive cultural ethos and style rooted in its prime-symbol (*Ursymbol*). While the *Ursymbol* of antiquity is the sensuously present individual body, that of Faustian culture is pure infinite space. Influences exerted by a culture upon its neighbor or successor in world history, he argued, never affected its essence but only superficial externalities of cultural expression. As far as the aesthetic style of the civilizational products of antiquity, christened Apollonian in imitation of Nietzsche, were concerned, its *Formensprache* (form-language), Spengler maintained, was "almost the inversion of that of the West"<sup>3</sup> (UdA I, p. 231). Even such an otherwise hostile critic as R. G. Collingwood was impressed with the manner in which Spengler imaginatively buttressed his daring thesis, confessing, "the unforgettable things in the book are the passages in which the author characterizes such fundamental differences as those between classical things and their modern analogues" (p. 313). Although he maintained that all the high cultures were endowed with equal significance, in a contradictory manner Spengler makes no effort to dis-

guise the fact that he considers west European culture, praised by him as a “*Willenskultur*,” to be superior because of its unparalleled dynamism, expansive energy, and transformative power. He impresses upon the reader that Western culture since the Gothic age is “energetic, imperativistic, and dynamic,” distinguished by historical personalities without parallel in world history (UdA I, pp. 393 and 442–44). The “intellectual will to power” holistically informs its magnificent artistic traditions and all other essential aspects of its cultural and historical experience. Not only is Western culture the most dynamic that has ever existed, being driven by the “will to spatial transcendence,” it is the most complex as well, “the most abstract of all,” displaying the most esoteric qualities of all the cultures that have ever existed (UdA I, pp. 292, 157, and 417ff.). Thus, although Spengler is a determined opponent of the idea of progress, he still manages to place west European culture upon a pedestal.

Spengler interprets in dualistic fashion the sources of these extraordinary character traits he ascribes to west European culture, which he suggestively dubs Faustian. At one level, he evaluates them as being expressive of the passions of the beast of prey which is west European man, of an “irrepressible life force” which resonates throughout the grand sweep of Western history since 1000 A.D. (UdA I, p. 443). Central to the origination and evolution of Western culture is not the cultivation of human rationality, as Enlightenment thinkers steadfastly maintained, but instead the “primary emotions of an energetic human existence, the cruelty, the joy in excitement, danger, the violent act, victory, crime, the thrill of a conquerer and destroyer” (UdA I, p. 411). This portrait of a “Dionysian” behavioral type is borrowed from Nietzsche, although its specific application to west European historical experience is Spenglerian. Nietzsche had argued that “danger, toughness, violence, danger in the alley as in the heart, inequality of rights, secrecy, stoicism, the art of the tempter, devilish tricks of every kind . . . are necessary to the elevation of the type man” (WzM, p. 638). At a second level, Spengler regards the distinctive dynamism, expansive energy, and transformative power of the West, as manifested in the entire range of its cultural products, as profound, aesthetic responses to the experience of the prime-symbol of Western culture, pure infinite space.

While Spengler falls into raptures about the purportedly superior cultural qualities and extraordinary spirit of Western history, the classical world is subjected to disparagement. As Moeller van den Bruck noted, “a quiet hostility towards antiquity stirs throughout” *The Decline of the West* (p. 56). Antiquity is belittled by Spengler as the culture of the “small, easy, and simple” (UdA I, p. 262). If that is not enough, he claims that the classical world is virtually inferior to non-Western cultures. Spengler asserts that “the magnificence of the spiritual conception” and “the power of the rise” of Indian, Babylonian, Chinese, Egyptian, Arabian, and Mexican culture “surpassed” by “many times” that of the Graeco-Roman world (UdA I, p. 23). Moreover, with his argument of the remarkable contrast in ethos between Faustian and Apollonian culture, he

diverges from Nietzsche, refusing to ascribe much significance to the Renaissance, which, after all, raised antiquity to the status of an ideal. Thus, he asserted, the Renaissance “did not change at all the way of thought or the life-feeling of Western Europe” (UdA I, p. 300). Spengler’s depreciation of the Graeco-Roman world admittedly may be too extreme, yet its redeeming feature is that it illuminates how the modern West represents in many ways a distinct break from antiquity.

Given Spengler’s unflattering portrait of the Graeco-Roman world, it comes as little surprise to discover that he found only two things, both of a political nature, to be truly commendable in all of antiquity. Firstly, he echoes the analysis of Machiavelli in his *Discourses* and interweaves it with the Rankean doctrine of the primacy of foreign policy. Spengler argues that Rome alone in ancient history was blessed with an ability to channel domestic political tensions into constructive political competition. This virtue enabled the state to excel in achieving its purposes in its external relations. It is Spengler’s hope that Wilhelmine Germany can duplicate Rome’s success in this regard, transcending the political differences in German society and directing all its energies into presenting a united front to its opponents in the Great War. Secondly, Spengler delivers a panegyric to the Roman Senate’s splendid tradition of statecraft, which had laid the power-political foundation for the *imperium Romanum*.

Although Spengler wrote very approvingly about the success the Roman elite enjoyed in building their empire, he remained unimpressed by their efforts at maintaining it. This curious attitude derived in part from his bold thesis that a deep sense of history was alien to the ethos of the Graeco-Roman world; it was transfixed by the historical present, the immediate, the here and now (UdA I, p. 85). He conveys the impression that the Romans lacked the foresight and ability to organize their empire skillfully, and systematically, which might have conferred on it the capacity to endure far longer than it actually did. Nietzsche thought otherwise, emphasizing that the Romans possessed a “genius of organization and administration, the belief, the will to a societal future.” The Roman Empire personified “*aere perennius*,” being “the most magnificent organizational form under difficult conditions, which has been achieved up to now” (A, pp. 245–48).

Nietzsche considered the will to power to be a fundamental principle active not only in all of human history, but in the animal kingdom as well. Spengler deviates from him in the first volume of *The Decline of the West* by making the will to power, which Nietzsche calls “the prime fact of all of history” (J, p. 208), the exclusive property of west European culture.<sup>6</sup> He takes Nietzsche to task for his polemics against Christianity’s purportedly debilitating influence upon west European man, arguing that Nietzsche was blind to the richly varied expressions of the will to power pervading the history of Western Europe.<sup>7</sup> He notes with disapproval that Nietzsche, with his romantic attachment to antiq-

uity, completely failed to realize that west European man had always epitomized the heroism and virtue which he longed to see recaptured, from the Vikings, to the Crusaders, to the explorers of the Age of Discovery, to the British Empire builders, to Napoleon and Bismarck.<sup>8</sup> Spengler depicts Gothic Christianity as a formative experience in west European culture, although he stresses that its moralistic qualities never seriously constrained west European man in giving free rein to his will to power. Gothic and later variants of Christianity in the West animate the Faustian dynamic, transformative, and expansive ethos in its secular expressions as well, as they all conceive of “the soul as a pure center of force for all eternity” (UdA II, p. 68).

Spengler was convinced that Nietzsche’s philosophy possessed both profoundly realistic and unrealistic features. His doctrine of the will to power was prized by Spengler as a supremely important, realistic insight. Yet he repudiates his teachings of the *Übermensch* and of the eternal return as being hopelessly unrealistic, attesting to Nietzsche’s confusion about how modern Western man should respond to the emergent realities of his history.<sup>9</sup>

In the modern age, one of rapid and mind-boggling historical change, the individual seems at times to be buffeted by historical forces beyond his control. Spengler grapples with the crucial question of the degree to which man is the autonomous shaper of his history. He concluded that necessity and not human freedom was of primary importance in history. Thus, he envisioned the decline of the West to be an inevitable process, in contrast to other leading cultural pessimists like Nietzsche; his friend and colleague at Basel, Burckhardt; and Lagarde. Nietzsche, who inveighed against Schopenhauerian pessimism in his later writings and proclaimed himself to be “the bearer of good news” (EH, p. 366), fervently hoped to see the rejuvenation of Western civilization through commitment to tellurian values. Burckhardt believed in an eventual rebirth of Europe through aesthetic and moral norms and Lagarde in renewal through the Christian faith. Although Spengler was powerfully inspired by Nietzsche’s penetrating analysis of the decadence of European culture, he dismisses his notion that regeneration was possible. Here he is arguably more realistic than Nietzsche in contending that modern Western man has no escape from the decadence of modernity. Spengler’s controversial thesis of preprogrammed, cyclical cultural change deprives man of the requisite freedom to alter his future profoundly and to initiate a process of cultural renewal. One can perhaps retard the process of decline, yet certainly not effectuate a regeneration. This deterministic tenet is utterly foreign to Nietzsche’s historical philosophy, which is an elitist one of creative freedom.

Spengler’s conviction that cultural renewal was an appealing but unrealistic aspiration meant that the only “realistic” course of action remaining was to embrace the present and its narrowly defined, historically determined possibilities. One should strive to live and act in a manner conforming to the *Zeitgeist*, he advised. And the spirit of the age was, as Nietzsche had perceived,

one of spreading decadence and materialistic, megalopolitan civilization and not of aristocratic tradition and refined urban culture. The tasks of the twentieth century, according to Spengler, were practical and extensive—global imperialist politics, international economic competition, and science and technology.

Spengler's historicist affirmation of the mode of historical understanding and his attempt to enrich the German tradition of power politics, which counsels an acceptance of the world as it is and places a premium upon success, induce him to view the process of cultural decline he conceptualizes from ultimately irreconcilable perspectives. Thus, there are two Spenglers in *The Decline of the West*. One encounters the nostalgic, romantic, agrarian conservative who, as a lover of cultural refinement and traditional social mores, laments the setting of the sun upon Western culture. One also meets the resolute modernist and stern realpolitiker, who says yes to the decline of Western *Kultur* because it heralds the dawn, the *Morgenröte* of a titanic age completely devoted to the heady tasks of *Zivilisation*—of technology, economics, and politics—an era where the overflowing, Faustian energies of the West are pressed into the service of its final international political form—the *imperium Germanum*. Spengler's passion for imperialism derives its strength from an aesthetic vision: imperialism is the decadent but intoxicating final form of the dynamism, expansive power, and transformative energy of the West. His cultural despair yields an *amor fati* (love of fate) of power politics and imperialism.

Fritz Stern, in his classic study of Germany and the politics of cultural despair, fails to realize that while Nietzsche laments what he perceives to be the cultural decline of modern Germany, Spengler virtually embraces it.<sup>10</sup> During World War I, the aspiring *praeceptor Germaniae* drafted a number of unpublished memoranda addressed to Kaiser Wilhelm II and the German nobility, unsolicited *Denkschriften* which Spengler probably never submitted (OS, p. 206). For him, the Germany of outstanding cultural achievements, the celebrated land of "poets and thinkers," is a thing of the past. It is being ineluctably superseded by the Germany of modern Western civilization, whose pragmatism, materialism, and culturelessness America exhibited in ample measure.<sup>11</sup> It was precisely because he believed that Germany consummately expressed the spirit of Western civilization in the dawning materialistic age devoted entirely to the problems of economics, technology, and politics, which was eclipsing the moribund age of culture, that Spengler was convinced during World War I that she would emerge triumphant as the architect of the crowning imperial form of the West.

But the spirit of the Germans, with their machines, billions of marks, railroads, and steamships will rule *the world*. . . The *new* Germany will be present everywhere with its best powers—in Buenos Aires and Shanghai, in San Francisco and Capetown. (PO, No. G5-13, emphasis original).

Spengler projected Nietzsche's individualistic concept of *amor fati* onto the political collective. Nietzsche enjoined man to love his fate, not in order to

succumb to the temptation of passively accepting it, but in order to accept the ongoing challenge of exercising one's creativity to force one's indeterminate future to bend as much as possible to one's instinctual energy and will. Spengler called upon man to love his fate, to summon up manly fortitude and heroic sacrifice to goals set, not freely by the individual, but by the tidal movements of history. A wouldbe playwright, he employs evocative and stirring language in dramatizing history, aiming to inspire man to love a fate (*Schicksal*) he cannot freely shape, but one filled with ennobling hardship and challenge. The future of west European man, as adumbrated by the author of *The Decline of the West*, was not an open one as it was for Nietzsche. His fate was largely previewed in the cyclical historical experiences of defunct cultures. "We learn there on another course of life to know ourselves, how we are, how we must be and will be; that is the great school of our future" (UdA II, p. 57).

Spengler sees Nietzsche, despite his commitment to *amor fati* and his yearning to reach the other side, as in reality desiring to move backwards in history and not relentlessly forward in the Western historical cycle. While Nietzsche yearned to return to the ethos of Hellas in order to regenerate the modern West, for Spengler, with his quasi-positivistic thesis of comparable historical cycles, antiquity had already returned to the twentieth century, to be sure in its decadence and in modified Roman imperial form. The analogue to Western history since Napoleon, an age of intense, imperialistic rivalries and approaching world wars, was the period which spanned the First Punic War and the founding of the *Imperium Romanum* by Augustus. Spengler believed fervently in a German mission, yet one of a power-political instead of a cultural nature. The Prussians, the Romans of modernity, were to bring the postcultural phase of the West European-American civilizational cycle to a glorious climax, by hammering together a world empire which would supplant that of the declining, dominant great power, England. In Spengler's philosophy of history, the United States personified the decadence of modern civilization and was not destined to create a Pax Americana. Yet Germany, which he provocatively characterized as a "second America" (Letter to H. Klöres, July 14, 1915, B, p. 44), would establish and preside over a Pax Germanica characterized by a nobler form of decadent, American modernity.<sup>12</sup> While Nietzsche taught that the future was to a considerable degree open, Spengler contended that it was subject to profound constraints. The latter's philosophy was future-oriented, yet not in order to contemplate how the historical actor might exercise his reservoir of human freedom to shape decisively the emerging yet flexible contours of the future, but in order to apply the experience of the past in discerning the lineaments of the future face of time. "Henceforth it will be everyone's duty, to inform himself of what *can* happen and therefore *will* happen with the inalterable necessity of destiny, and therefore completely independent of personal ideals, hopes and wishes" (UdA I, pp. 52–53).

Despite the absence of eternal truths and values in history, Spengler, the

thoroughgoing philosophical relativist, made no secret of his own values in his work. As already adumbrated, his thought deviated from that of Nietzsche on the decisive question of the German citizen's proper attitude towards the state and imperialism.<sup>13</sup> While Spengler appealed to leading Germans to devote themselves to affairs of state, international economic competition, and science and technology, Nietzsche remained true to higher cultural values.<sup>14</sup> A radical individualist, he decried the state as "the coldest of all cold monsters" (ASZ, p. 61). Proudly regarding himself as being "the last unpolitical German" (Hofmann, p. 292), Nietzsche took a jaundiced view of German unity and the accompanying upsurge in national sentiment following the proclamation of the Second Reich in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles in 1871, emotions he deplored as "political and national madness" (M, p. 163). Spengler, on the other hand, swelled with pride when reflecting upon the founding of and the prospects for the expansion of the Second Reich. He esteemed values which he believed would impart an aura of triumph and glory to it as it faced the tough power-political challenges of the future. He sang songs of praise to power politics, imperialism, and martial virtues.

Both Nietzsche and Spengler admired the great men of history. Yet Spengler, like Hegel before him, envisions them more as main characters conforming to the script of a historical drama, than as self-determining agents of their historical careers. In particular, all three adore Napoleon. While Nietzsche regretted that the German people had helped frustrate the bid of this "force majeure of genius and will" to unify Europe (EH, p. 360), Spengler did not, as he placed his hopes with the Germans and their newly-won Reich. Nietzsche hoped that Europe could somehow overcome the internecine potentialities inherent in its competing nationalisms, attaining a condition of unity and thereby assuring itself the paramount role in world affairs it had enjoyed since the Age of Discovery. Although Spengler was not "a good European" in the fashion of Nietzsche, he dreamed that a German Napoleonic figure would come to the fore who would lead his country in a Herculean effort to break European resistance to German hegemony and forge an empire eclipsing that which Napoleon had vainly striven to create.

Spengler's radical, anti-Nietzschean, imperialistic program, envisioning the destruction of European cultural individualism and national independence which classic German historicism had revered, was not rooted, it should be emphasized, in a shallow German cultural chauvinism. Indeed, it is remarkable how his perspective deviates from many of the commonly shared, core ideas of Pan-German-oriented thinkers. The Pan-Germans, who are synonymous with aggressive German nationalism during the Wilhelmine period, typically painted "a thoroughly negative" picture of the history of France; Spengler honored the ancien régime of Louis XIV and his heirs as the apex of Western culture (UdA I, pp. 194–95). The Pan-Germans disparaged the supposed "perfidy and unscrupulousness" of British balance of power politics; for Spengler, next to

Rome, Britain had produced the most superb tradition of statecraft in world history. The Pan-Germans conceptualized history in racist categories as opposed to Spengler, who denied race a role in cultural differentiation. They smugly looked down upon the Slavs as “inferior” peoples; for Spengler, the Russians were the bearers of the next high culture of world history, as heralded by Dostoyevski. While extreme nationalists typically idealized German cultural achievements, Spengler viewed the cultural identity of the West as being more significant than that of its constituent national cultures. However, this atypical exponent of German imperialism shares essential elements of Pan-German thought—the doctrine of the primacy of foreign policy, the glorification of war and Prussia, and the championing of radical imperialist goals (Krause, pp. 196–97).

The state for Spengler, as for Hegel earlier, enters upon the historical stage as the supreme political actor. Yet perhaps with a greater sense of realism than Hegel, and certainly benefiting from hindsight, Spengler declared the modern German state to be, not the quintessence of rationalism, but something “daemonic-unfathomable” (PuS, p. 7). Like Ranke, but without the Christian humanism and idealism which conveyed upon his philosophy of power politics its lofty normative appeal, Spengler taught the primacy of power politics. Spengler held a conservative, authoritarian state to be best qualified to meet the formidable challenges of foreign policy.

. . . but it is a grave error of modern doctrinaires, to regard the spirit of domestic history as that of history in general. *World history is the history of states* and it will always be so. The inner constitution of a nation always and everywhere has the purpose, to be “in condition” for the external struggle, be it of a military, diplomatic, or economic nature. (UdA II, p. 452, emphasis original)

He ridiculed the idealistic orientation towards world affairs which grew in popularity after the carnage and devastation of World War I, finding its greatest expression in the founding of the League of Nations. He derided pacifism, the ideals of world peace and international understanding, cosmopolitanism, and blueprints for improving the state of the world as symptoms of “European weariness,” as a “flight from the struggle for existence” (UdA I, p. 454).

For Spengler, in keeping with the German tradition of *realpolitik*, foreign policy took precedence over domestic politics and the decisive criterion in statecraft was success. His orientation towards foreign affairs is particularly conflictual for two reasons: firstly, because of his conviction that the tendencies of his age towards acute imperialistic rivalries and world wars fought over economic hegemony were determined by tidal movements of history beyond the control of political communities and their leaders, and secondly, because the statesman must pursue success in foreign policy at all costs.

An abstract ideal of justice pervades the minds and writings of all men whose intellect is noble and strong and whose blood is weak, pervades all religions and all

philosophies, but the fact-world of history knows only *success* which turns the law of the stronger into the law for all. (UdA II, p. 448, emphasis original).

Nietzsche refused to place such an extreme value upon success in political life. "Greatness should not depend upon success and Demosthenes had greatness, although he didn't have any success" (NuN, p. 321).

The first volume of *The Decline of the West* was composed in the eager expectation of German victory, the second completed after the twin traumata of German defeat and the Diktat of Versailles. Consequently, Spengler's discussion of politics acquired an even harsher and more abrasive tone in the second volume than was the case in the first. His political philosophy is Social Darwinistic in its emphasis on struggle, although such key features of Social Darwinistic thought as racism and the idea of the achievement of progress through competition are absent. In a simplification of Ranke's seminal historicist doctrine of the centrality of great power rivalry to modern history and in criticism of Burckhardt's idea of history as cultural history, Spengler militarizes to a considerable degree the march of history.

Genuine history [is] not cultural history in the anti-political sense . . . but quite the contrary race history, military history, diplomatic history, the destiny of streams of existence in the form of man and woman, tribe, people, class, state, which defend themselves against each other and desire to overwhelm each other in the crashing waves of great facts. (UdA II, p. 417)

Spengler weaves Nietzsche's alarming predictions that Europe would experience wars of an intensity unparalleled in all of history (FW, pp. 609–10) and that the twentieth century would witness "a struggle for domination of the earth" (J, p. 140) into the fabric of his historical philosophy. Spengler interprets the twentieth century as being one of bitter global struggle for international economic hegemony. Shortly after Germany's defeat, he maintained that the decisive question of Western civilization since Napoleon was whether control of the organization of the international economy would be won through global conflict by the "capitalist" powers, the United States and England, or by Germany, revitalized by authoritarian and imperialistic socialism (PuS, pp. 50–51). His thesis of the tendency in modern history towards the establishment of global economic hegemony was rooted in Nietzsche's thought. Nietzsche had spoken of the "inevitable, impending total economic administration of the earth" (WzM, p. 590).

Spengler's elitist and authoritarian political philosophy derives not only from his conviction, contra Nietzsche, of the necessity to subordinate domestic political concerns to the foreign policy exigencies arising in the great power rivalry of the golden age of European imperialism. It also results from his sense of elitism, his contempt for notions of equality, and his hostility to democracy and the masses, all of which are prominent elements in Nietzsche's thought.<sup>15</sup>

Partially under the influence of the idea of grand political cycles as developed by Polybius and Machiavelli, both of whom Spengler admired, he argued that every culture undergoes an analogous cycle of political developments. Rooted in a robust aristocracy and peasantry, the West achieved its zenith with the formation of mature political forms, the dynastic monarchies of Europe. The bearers of the urban intellect, the third estate of the bourgeoisie and the fourth estate of the masses, thereupon enter the historical stage, performing their destructive, levelling work on the pyramidlike, mature polities of the monarchies.

In the materialistic, civilizational late period, the captains of industry and finance acquire tremendous political weight. The highly touted freedom of the press is in reality nothing more than its cynical manipulation by plutocratic powers. Election campaigns are derided as quasi-civil wars. The French Revolution does not represent an enormous step forward in the coming-to-consciousness of freedom as Hegel imagined, but on the contrary, forms a watershed in the decline of mature political and social forms. The West will witness the emergence of towering figures, from Napoleon to the coming Caesars, who will unleash the terrible wars of an imperialistic era. Parliamentary government, at home only in England, is not a triumph of the West, but has degenerated in the twentieth century into a decadent form (*Verfallsform*), inevitably reaching its end. Or in Nietzsche's lapidary formulation, "modern democracy is the historical form of the decline of the state" (MA, p. 306). Instead of government molded by tradition and rich experience and led by a capable elite, the West will be subjected to makeshift governments (*Zufallsregimente*) headed by Caesaristic individuals. In the twilight of the West, with the destruction of the old order of culture through shallow intellect and money, the bourgeoisie and the masses, demagogues and plutocrats, there emerge out of the chaos the modern Caesars and their bands of followers, who will forge at the anvil of world history the final political form of the West, a world empire. However, the Western world empire that Spengler hoped that Germany would succeed in building despite the determined opposition of England and the United States, would only endure for a couple of centuries or so, luxuriating in a debilitating affluence, before the Russian hordes overwhelmed it. After completing *The Decline of the West*, Spengler refined his position. He went on to argue that the global revolt against the non-Western world would be spearheaded by the Soviet Union and Japan and would eventually triumph through war and economic competition in completely undermining Occidental hegemony (JdE and MuT).

Spengler emphasized the egoism and ruthlessness displayed in the recurrent struggles for power and plunder among the aspirants to the imperial purple of ancient Rome. Yet for all his talk of realism and his antipathy towards idealism in political thought, he embraced a very idealistic conception of the nature of the Caesarism which he predicted for his native land (P, p. 79). The modern German Caesar should serve a higher goal, that of the common good, which

can only be guaranteed through a successful foreign policy. In opposition to Marxism, he argued that the German Caesar should “call to life a mighty political-economic order above all class interests, a system of *lofty* care and duty, which keeps the whole in fine form for the decisive struggle of history” (UdA II, p. 629, emphasis original). Spengler was not willing to accept the fact that his thesis of the ineluctable decline of aristocratic and monarchical forms of political order and the increasing vulgarization of political life in an age of mass politics and plutocratic tendencies contradicted his romantic vision of the possibility of the founding in the early twentieth century of an imperialistic state animated by the lofty, selfless ethos of Prussian state service.

Any discussion of Nietzsche’s influence upon Spengler’s political philosophy would be incomplete without at least a resume of Spengler’s relationship to National Socialism. It is primarily because of the nightmare of German totalitarianism that his political thought is the subject of scholarly study. The best-seller status of *The Decline of the West* helped to confer upon its author his credentials as one of the leading antidemocratic thinkers during the Weimar era. Spengler’s virulent opposition to the Versailles Treaty, his hatred of the Weimar Republic, and his glorification of martial instincts and power politics were major elements which he shared with Hitler. On the other hand, like Heidegger, he opposed the ideological tenets of racism and antisemitism fundamental to National Socialism. Moreover, his rejection of Hitler as a plebeian figure, whom he correctly regarded as unfit to lead Germany,<sup>16</sup> his Cassandra warning against the reckless idea of launching a large-scale invasion of the Soviet Union (JdE, pp. 43–44), his deep scepticism about the purported need of Germany for Lebensraum, and finally, his argument of the inevitable and comparatively rapid decline of Western civilization, on account of which Hitler explicitly and frequently criticized him (Turner, 1978, p. 290, provides a good example) made every form of collaboration with the “Providential” leader of a racially based, one-thousand-year Reich impossible for Spengler, as it was not for Heidegger. Indeed, Spengler criticized the National Socialists publicly after 1924, the year of Hitler’s trial for treason after the ignominious failure of his Munich putsch. But Spengler’s antidemocratic politics, elaborated in a number of political treatises after the publication of the first volume of his principal work, provided the enemies of Germany’s first democracy with weapons to help effectuate the Nazi seizure of power. And the system which Hitler erected was, to be sure, not a “Prussian-socialistic” system of noble care and duty, as Spengler at the beginning of the Weimar era naively hoped from the Caesaristic figure whom he prophesied for his native land, but one of appalling criminality and enslavement.

The end of the Cold War, the acute crisis of the Communist world, and the gratifying upsurge in yearning for democracy and free-market economics around the globe have precipitated a euphoric outburst of liberal optimism and Western triumphalism. To the optimistically minded in the West, it must seem

downright perverse to take seriously in the final decade of the twentieth century, as this author does, Spengler's historical and cultural pessimism. Yet to those who insist upon regarding contemporary history from a pessimistic perspective, he succeeded to a significant degree in the historicization of Nietzsche's philosophy. Our century has already witnessed world wars, economic depression, totalitarianism, genocide, the fragmentation of the social fabric of the West and the decay of its urban life, and the rise of a mass, popular culture—one shudders to think what awaits us as the global ecological crisis intensifies; the North-South gap deepens and the population explosion in the Third World continues; and cultural, ethnic, and nationalistic conflict persists. Furthermore, American democracy, the standard-bearer of Western triumphalism and liberal optimism, seems to be completely incapable of coming to grips with the grave problems which preoccupy its citizenry. As one scholar reflecting on Spengler's ideas recently concluded, "it does not take much imagination to observe in the decadence of the West the last twilight-dream of a democracy already grown weary of itself" (Sunic, p. 62).

Spengler's thesis of the inevitability of the decline of Western civilization is probably more realistic than Nietzsche's dream of cultural renewal, and this is the enduring value of his alarming thought. Yet Spengler tragically failed in his politicization of Nietzsche's philosophy. Spengler's political philosophy, although it represents a creative and not an epigonal response to Nietzsche's philosophy, utterly failed in its core aspiration. His dream of contributing to the founding of a Prussian, conservative, authoritarian polity capable of playing a decisive role in world affairs and executing a successful foreign policy remained an unfulfilled one which soon turned into a nightmare. His politics of cultural despair helped instead to generate an "intellectual" climate in Germany more receptive to the ideology and radical goals of National Socialism. He thereby indirectly assisted in coming to power a dangerous political movement which brought about the fiery destruction of Prussia as a European great power in the horror and devastation of the Second World War.

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## NOTES

1. Spengler found Nietzsche's Eurocentrism and lack of a universal, systematizing historical-philosophical perspective to be a decisive weakness. "Let us consider the historical horizon of Nietzsche. His concepts of decadence, of nihilism, of the transformation of all values, of the will to power, which are deeply rooted in the essence of Western civilization and simply essential for its analysis—what were the foundation for their discovery? Romans and Greeks, Renaissance and the European present, the incorporation of a fleeting look sideways to a (misunderstood) Indian philosophy, in short: Antiquity, Middle Ages, modern period. Strictly speaking, he never moved beyond that and the other thinkers of his age as little as he" (UdA I, p. 31). English translations in this article are the present author's.

2. "A lack of the historical sense is the hereditary defect of all philosophers" (MA, p. 24).

3. "God, the formula for every slander of 'this world,' for every lie of an 'other world!'" (A, p. 185).

4. Nietzsche claimed, "We have, for example, with all the exertion of three centuries not yet reached again the *man of the Renaissance*; and on the other hand, the man of the Renaissance remained behind the *man of antiquity*" (WzM, p. 599, emphasis original).

5. Spengler contrasts, among other things, the Apollonian statue of the freestanding nude body with Faustian perspective painting and spatially transcendent instrumental music; the majestic repose of a Doric temple with the straining towards infinity of a Gothic cathedral; and the physical form of money, the Apollonian coin, with the Faustian, dynamic credit system based on double-entry bookkeeping.

6. Spengler already reverts to a significant degree to Nietzsche's position in the second volume of *The Decline of the West*. For example, in discussing the imperialistic drive of the Aztecs, he describes them as being, "rugged, barbaric and with an insatiable will to power" (UdA II, p. 54).

7. Spengler asks, "And where does one find at the heights of Faustian man from the Crusades to the World War that 'slave morality,' that meek resignation, that charity in the sense of a churchy type?" (UdA I, p. 443).

8. "Nietzsche's 'slave-morality' is a phantom. *His master-morality is a reality*. It did not need to be first conceived; it existed since long ago. Take away the romantic Borgia-mask and those nebulous visions of an *Übermensch*, so remains the Faustian man himself as he is today and was already at the time of the Icelandic sagas, the type of an energetic, imperativistic, dynamic culture" (UdA I, p. 444, emphasis original).

9. "It is of the deepest significance that Nietzsche is completely clear and sure as long as it is a question of what should be destroyed and transvalued. He loses himself in nebulous generalities as soon as he comes to discuss the whither, the goal. His critique of decadence is irrefutable, his theory of the *Übermensch* is a castle in the air. Nietzsche's strained conception of an eternal return arose out of this tragic situation. He never believed in it in good conscience, but nevertheless clung to it in order to salvage the feeling of a mission" (UdA I., pp. 462–63).

10. "The prerequisite to education, the teachers, are missing, except for the exceptions of the exceptions: therefore the decline of German culture" (Nietzsche, GD, p. 107). Stern errs when he argues that Spengler posited "the antithesis between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*, between a decadent West and a still vital Prussia." In Spengler's philosophy, *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*, as a conceptual pair, unambiguously denote diachronicity and not contemporaneity. True, he did hope that the Germans would bring the *Zivilisation* of the West to its final grand form, believing that Prussia personified the universal Western phenomenon in a more vital and noble manner than it was embodied by America (Stern, p. 238).

11. In his memorandum intended for Kaiser Wilhelm II he writes, "The spirit of the people is reborn: the poet is finally reforged into a 'fact man.' You will not see any more a great poet, thinker, or composer in your Germany. You will rule Americans or Romans of the iron character of Caesar—which is the same. Majesty, this great turn of events is your work, an epoch, which Rome adorned with her greatest names" (PO, No. 79-22, Spengler Archive).

12. "The best Germans of the next generation will be those who count the most in practical affairs. They will represent a new kind of American, more refined, nobler" (PO, No. 79-13, Spengler Archive).

13. Spengler regarded Nietzsche as an insightful observer of political realities who had the wrong attitude towards politics. In his private notes, he expressed it thus: "Even Nietzsche, who as an *observer* was thoroughly in the know, rails against politics, states, wars, and the nations of his age. Here the philologers' philosophy makes its appearance" (PO, [131] No. B3-11, Spengler Archive, emphasis original).

14. "So little state as possible!—All political and economic matters do not deserve it, that precisely the most gifted intellects are allowed to and must concern themselves with them. Such a waste of the intellect is, after all, worse than a condition of distress" (M, p. 157).

15. Spengler was cynical and critical but, interestingly, not downright hostile towards democratic aspirations in Germany during World War I until the Peace Resolution of 1917 made democratic forces appear treasonous in his eyes. Prior to this disillusionment, Spengler, for reasons of expediency and not conviction, had hoped to see a not-insubstantial process of democratization take place rather quickly in wartime Germany. He advocated such measures as the elimination of the notorious Prussian three-class franchise system and the appointment of socialist leaders to cabinet positions. Yet the harsh provisions of the Versailles Treaty and his acceptance of the infamous stab-in-the-back legend turned him into a bitter opponent of democratic forces in the Weimar Republic.

16. The criticism of Hitler and National Socialism voiced by Spengler in his private papers is understandably both more personal and biting than that which he dared to put in print after Hitler's accession to power. He lambasted Hitler's personality in the following words, "a lot of talk, incapable, externally shallow, internally empty." Spengler emphatically denied that *der Führer* would prove to be a competent, national leader. "Who grows up in the dumb and dirty atmosphere of agitation—public meetings and editing, is for once and for all spoiled in becoming a *statesman*" (PO, [54] No. B3-46 and [131] No. B3-65, Spengler Archive, emphasis original).

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