



## Oswald Spengler: An Introduction to his Life and Ideas

by Keith Stimely

Oswald Spengler was born in Blankenburg (Harz) in central Germany in 1880, the eldest of four children, and the only boy. His mother's side of the family was quite artistically bent. His father, who had originally been a mining technician and came from a long line of mineworkers, was an official in the German postal bureaucracy, and he provided his family with a simple but comfortable middle class home.

The young Oswald never enjoyed the best of health, and suffered from migraine headaches that were to plague him all his life. He also had an anxiety complex, though he was not without grandiose thoughts -- which because of his frail constitution had to be acted out in daydreams only.

When he was ten the family moved to the university city of Halle. Here Spengler received a classical Gymnasium education, studying Greek, Latin, mathematics and natural sciences. Here too he developed his strong affinity for the arts -- especially poetry, drama, and music. He tried his hand at some youthful artistic creations of his own, a few of which have survived -- they are indicative of a tremendous enthusiasm but not much else. At this time also he came under the influence of Goethe and Nietzsche, two figures whose importance to Spengler the youth and the man cannot be overestimated.

After his father's death in 1901, Spengler at 21 entered the University of Munich. In accordance with German student-custom of the time, after a year he proceeded to other universities, first Berlin and then Halle. His main courses of study were in the classical cultures, mathematics, and the physical sciences. His university education was financed in large part by a legacy from a deceased aunt.

His doctoral dissertation at Halle was on Heraclitus, the "dark philosopher" of ancient Greece whose most memorable line was "War is the Father of all things." He failed to pass his first examination because of "insufficient references" -- a characteristic of all his later writings that some critics took a great delight in pointing out. However, he passed a second examination in 1904, and then set to writing the secondary dissertation necessary to qualify as a high school teacher. This became *The Development of the Organ of Sight in the Higher Realms of the Animal Kingdom*. It was approved, and Spengler received his teaching certificate.

His first post was at a school in Saarbrücken. Then he moved to Düsseldorf and, finally, Hamburg. He taught mathematics, physical sciences, history, and German literature, and by all accounts was a good and conscientious instructor. But his heart was not really in it, and when in 1911 the opportunity presented itself for him to "go his own way" (his mother had died and left him an inheritance that guaranteed him a measure of financial independence), he took it, and left the teaching profession for good.

### Historical Explanation of Current Trends

He settled in Munich, there to live the life of an independent scholar/philosopher. He began the writing of a book of observations on contemporary politics whose idea had preoccupied him for some time. Originally to be titled *Conservative and Liberal*, it was planned as an exposition and explanation of the current trends in Europe -- an accelerating arms race, Entente "encirclement" of Germany, a succession of international crises, increasing polarity of the nations -- and where they were leading. However in late 1911 he was suddenly struck by the notion that the events of the day could only be interpreted in "global" and "total-cultural" terms. He saw Europe as marching off to suicide, a first step toward the final demise of European culture in the world and in history.

The Great War of 1914-1918 only confirmed in his mind the validity of a thesis already developed. His planned work kept increasing in scope far, far beyond the original bounds.

Spengler had tied up most of his money in foreign investments, but the war had largely invalidated them, and he was forced to live out the war years in conditions of genuine poverty. Nevertheless he kept at his work, often writing by candle-light, and in 1917 was ready to publish. He encountered great difficulty in finding a publisher, partly because of the nature of the work, partly because of the chaotic conditions prevailing at the time. However in the summer of 1918, coincident with the German collapse, finally appeared the first volume of *The Decline of the West*, subtitled Form and Actuality.

### Publishing Success

To no little surprise on the part of both Spengler and his publisher, the book was an immediate and unprecedented success. It offered a rational explanation for the great European disaster, explaining it as part of an inevitable world-historic process. German readers especially took it to heart, but the work soon proved popular throughout Europe and was quickly translated into other languages. Nineteen-nineteen was "Spengler's year," and his name was on many tongues.

Professional historians, however, took great umbrage at this pretentious work by an amateur (Spengler was not a trained historian), and their criticisms -- particularly of numerous errors of fact and the unique and unapologetic "non-scientific" approach of the author -- filled many pages. It is easier now than it was then to dispose of this line of rejection-criticism. Anyway, with regard to the validity of his postulate of rapid Western decline, the contemporary Spenglerian need only say to these critics: Look about you. What do you see?

In 1922 Spengler issued a revised edition of the first volume containing minor corrections and revisions, and the year after saw the appearance of the second volume, subtitled Perspectives of World History. He thereafter remained satisfied with the work, and all his later writings and pronouncements are only enlargements upon the theme he laid out *Decline*.

### A Direct Approach

The basic idea and essential components of *The Decline of the West* are not difficult to understand or delineate. (In fact, it is the work's very simplicity that was too much for his professional critics.) First, though, a proper understanding requires a recognition of Spengler's special approach to history. He himself called it the "physiognomic"

approach -- looking things directly in the face or heart, intuitively, rather than strictly scientifically. Too often the real meaning of things is obscured by a mask of scientific-mechanistic "facts." Hence the blindness of the professional "scientist-type" historians, who in a grand lack of imagination see only the visible.

Utilizing his physiognomic approach, Spengler was confident of his ability to decipher the riddle of History -- even, as he states in *Decline's* very first sentence, to predetermine history.

The following are his basic postulates:

1. The "linear" view of history must be rejected, in favor of the cyclical. Heretofore history, especially Western history, had been viewed as a "linear" progression from lower to higher, like rungs on a ladder -- an unlimited evolution upward. Western history is thus viewed as developing progressively: Greek ' Roman ' Medieval ' Renaissance ' Modern, or, Ancient ' Medieval ' Modern. This concept, Spengler insisted, is only a product of Western man's ego -- as if everything in the past pointed to him, existed so that he might exist as a yet-more perfected form.

This "incredibly jejune and meaningless scheme" can at last be replaced by one now discernible from the vantage-point of years and a greater and more fundamental knowledge of the past: the notion of History as moving in definite, observable, and -- except in minor ways -- unrelated cycles.

#### **"High Cultures"**

2. The cyclical movements of history are not those of mere nations, states, races, or events, but of High Cultures. Recorded history gives us eight such "high cultures": the Indian, the Babylonian, the Egyptian, the Chinese, the Mexican (Mayan-Aztec), the Arabian (or "Magian"), the Classical (Greece and Rome), and the European-Western.

Each High Culture has as a distinguishing feature a "prime symbol." The Egyptian symbol, for example, was the "Way" or "Path," which can be seen in the ancient Egyptians' preoccupation -- in religion, art, and architecture (the pyramids) -- with the sequential passages of the soul. The prime symbol of the Classical culture was the "point-present" concern, that is, the fascination with the nearby, the small, the "space" of immediate and logical visibility: note here Euclidean geometry, the two-dimensional style of Classical painting and relief-sculpture (you will never see a vanishing point in the background, that is, where there is a background at all), and especially: the lack of facial expression of Grecian busts and statues, signifying nothing behind or beyond the outward.

The prime symbol of Western culture is the "Faustian Soul" (from the tale of Doctor Faustus), symbolizing the upward reaching for nothing less than the "Infinite." This is basically a tragic symbol, for it reaches for what even the reacher knows is unreachable. It is exemplified, for instance, by Gothic architecture (especially the interiors of Gothic cathedrals, with their vertical lines and seeming "ceilinglessness").

The "prime symbol" affects everything in the Culture, manifesting itself in art, science, technics and politics. Each Culture's symbol-soul expresses itself especially in its art, and each Culture has an art form that is most representative of its own symbol. In the Classical, they were sculpture and drama. In Western culture, after architecture in the Gothic era, the great representative form was music -- actually the pluperfect expression of the Faustian soul, transcending as it does the limits of sight for the "limitless" world of sound.

#### **"Organic" Development**

3. High Cultures are "living" things -- organic in nature -- and must pass through the stages of birth-development-fulfillment-decay-death. Hence a "morphology" of history. All previous cultures have passed through these distinct stages, and Western culture can be no exception. In fact, its present stage in the organic development-process can be pinpointed.

The high-water mark of a High Culture is its phase of fulfillment -- called the "culture" phase. The beginning of decline and decay in a Culture is the transition point between its "culture" phase and the "civilization" phase that inevitably follows.

The "civilization" phase witnesses drastic social upheavals, mass movements of peoples, continual wars and constant crises. All this takes place along with the growth of the great "megapolis" -- huge urban and suburban centers that sap the surrounding countryside of their vitality, intellect, strength, and soul. The inhabitants of these urban conglomerations -- now the bulk of the populace -- are a rootless, soulless, godless, and materialistic mass, who love nothing more than their panem et circenses. From these come the subhuman "fellaheen" -- fitting participants in the dying-out of a culture.

With the civilization phase comes the rule of Money and its twin tools, Democracy and the Press. Money rules over the chaos, and only Money profits by it. But the true bearers of the culture -- the men whose souls are still one with the culture-soul -- are disgusted and repelled by the Money-power and its fellaheen, and act to break it, as they are compelled to do so -- and as the mass culture-soul compels finally the end of the dictatorship of money. Thus the civilization phase concludes with the Age of Caesarism, in which great power comes into the hands of great men, helped in this by the chaos of late Money-rule. The advent of the Caesars marks the return of Authority and Duty, of Honor and "Blood," and the end of democracy.

With this arrives the "imperialistic" stage of civilization, in which the Caesars with their bands of followers battle each other for control of the earth. The great masses are uncomprehending and uncaring; the megalopoli slowly depopulate, and the masses gradually "return to the land," to busy themselves there with the same soil-tasks as their ancestors centuries before. The turmoil of events goes on above their heads. Now, amidst all the chaos of the times, there comes a "second religiosity"; a longing return to the old symbols of the faith of the culture. Fortified thus, the masses in a kind of resigned contentment bury their souls and their efforts into the soil from which they and their culture sprang, and against this background the dying of the Culture and the civilization it created is played out.

#### **Predictable Life Cycles**

Every Culture's life-span can be seen to last about a thousand years: The Classical existed from 900 BC to 100 AD; the Arabian (Hebraic-semitic Christian-Islamic) from 100 BC to 900 AD; the Western from 1000 AD to 2000 AD. However, this span is the ideal, in the sense that a man's ideal life-span is 70 years, though he may never reach that age, or may live well beyond it. The death of a Culture may in fact be played out over hundreds of years, or it may occur instantaneously because of outer forces -- as in the sudden end of the Mexican Culture.

Also, though every culture has its unique Soul and is in essence a special and separate entity, the development of the life cycle is paralleled in all of them: For each phase of the cycle in a given Culture, and for all great events affecting its course, there is a counterpart in the history of every other culture. Thus, Napoleon, who ushered in the civilization

phase of the Western, finds his counterpart in Alexander of Macedon, who did the same for the Classical. Hence the "contemporaneity" of all high cultures.

In barest outline these are the essential components of Spengler's theory of historical Culture-cycles. In a few sentences it might be summed up:

Human history is the cyclical record of the rise and fall of unrelated High Cultures. These Cultures are in reality super life-forms, that is, they are organic in nature, and like all organisms must pass through the phases of birth-life-death. Though separate entities in themselves, all High Cultures experience parallel development, and events and phases in any one find their corresponding events and phases in the others. It is possible from the vantage point of the twentieth century to glean from the past the meaning of cyclic history, and thus to predict the decline and fall of the West.

Needless to say, such a theory -- though somewhat heralded in the work of Giambattista Vico and the 19th-century Russian Nikolai Danilevsky, as well as in Nietzsche -- was destined to shake the foundations of the intellectual and semi-intellectual world. It did so in short order, partly owing to its felicitous timing, and partly to the brilliance (though not unflawed) with which Spengler presented it.

#### **Polemical Style**

There are easier books to read than *Decline* -- there are also harder -- but a big reason for its unprecedented (for such a work) popular success was the same reason for its by-and-large dismissal by the learned critics: its style. Scorning the type of "learnedness" that demanded only cautionary and judicious statements -- every one backed by a footnote -- Spengler gave freewheeling vent to his opinions and judgments. Many passages are in the style of a polemic, from which no disagreement can be brooked.

To be sure, the two volumes of *Decline*, no matter the opinionated style and unconventional methodology, are essentially a comprehensive justification of the ideas presented, drawn from the histories of the different High Cultures. He used the comparative method which, of course, is appropriate if indeed all the phases of a High Culture are contemporaneous with those of any other. No one man could possibly have an equally comprehensive knowledge of all the Cultures surveyed, hence Spengler's treatment is uneven, and he spends relatively little time on the Mexican, Indian, Egyptian, Babylonian, and Chinese -- concentrating on the Arabian, Classical, and Western, especially these last two. The most valuable portion of the work, as even his critics acknowledge, is his comparative delineation of the parallel developments of the Classical and Western cultures.

Spengler's vast knowledge of the arts allowed him to place learned emphasis on their importance to the symbolism and inner meaning of a Culture, and the passages on art forms are generally regarded as being among the more thought-provoking. Also eyebrow-raising is a chapter (the very first, in fact, after the Introduction) on "The Meaning of Numbers," in which he asserted that even mathematics -- supposedly the one certain "universal" field of knowledge -- has a different meaning in different cultures: numbers are relative to the people who use them.

"Truth" is likewise relative, and Spengler conceded that what was true for him might not be true for another -- even another wholly of the same culture and era. Thus Spengler's greatest breakthrough may perhaps be his postulation of the non-universality of things, the "differentness" or distinctiveness of different people and cultures (despite their fated common end) -- an idea that is beginning to take hold in the modern West, which started this century supremely confident of the wisdom and possibility of making the world over in its image.

#### **Age of Caesars**

But it was his placing of the current West into his historical scheme that aroused the most interest and the most controversy. Spengler, as the title of his work suggests, saw the West as doomed to the same eventual extinction that all the other High Cultures had faced. The West, he said, was now in the middle of its "civilization" phase, which had begun, roughly, with Napoleon. The coming of the Caesars (of which Napoleon was only a foreshadowing) was perhaps only decades away. Yet Spengler did not counsel any kind of sighing resignation to fate, or blithe acceptance of coming defeat and death. In a later essay, *Pessimism?* (1922), he wrote that the men of the West must still be men, and do all they could to realize the immense possibilities still open to them. Above all, they must embrace the one absolute imperative: The destruction of Money and democracy, especially in the field of politics, that grand and all-encompassing field of endeavor.

#### **"Prussian" Socialism**

After the publication of the first volume of *Decline*, Spengler's thoughts turned increasingly to contemporary politics in Germany. After experiencing the Bavarian revolution and its short-lived Soviet republic, he wrote a slender volume titled *Prussianism and Socialism*. Its theme was that a tragic misunderstanding of the concepts was at work: Conservatives and socialists, instead of being at loggerheads, should unite under the banner of a true socialism. This was not the Marxist-materialist abomination, he said, but essentially the same thing as Prussianism: a socialism of the German community, based on its unique work ethic, discipline, and organic rank instead of "money." This "Prussian" socialism he sharply contrasted both to the capitalistic ethic of England and the "socialism" of Marx (!), whose theories amounted to "capitalism for the proletariat."

In his corporate state proposals Spengler anticipated the Fascists, although he never was one, and his "socialism" was essentially that of the National Socialists (but without the folkish racialism). His early appraisal of a corporation for which the State would have directional control but not ownership of or direct responsibility for the various private segments of the economy sounded much like Werner Sombart's later favorable review of National Socialist economics in his *A New Social Philosophy* [Princeton Univ. Press, 1937; translation of *Deutscher Sozialismus* (1934)].

*Prussianism and Socialism* did not meet with a favorable reaction from the critics or the public -- eager though the public had been, at first, to learn his views. The book's message was considered too "visionary" and eccentric -- it cut across too many party lines. The years 1920-23 saw Spengler retreat into a preoccupation with the revision of the first volume of *Decline*, and the completion of the second. He did occasionally give lectures, and wrote some essays, only a few of which have survived.

#### **Political Involvement**

In 1924, following the social-economic upheaval of the terrible inflation, Spengler entered the political fray in an effort to bring Reichswehr general Hans von Seeckt to power as the country's leader. But the effort came to naught. Spengler proved totally ineffective in practical politics. It was the old story of the would-be "philosopher-king," who was more philosopher than king (or king-maker).

After 1925, at the start of Weimar Germany's all-too-brief period of relative stability, Spengler devoted most of his time to his research and writing. He was particularly concerned that he had left an important gap in his great work -- that of the pre-history of man. In *Decline* he had written that prehistoric man was basically without a history, but he revised that opinion. His work on the subject was only fragmentary, but 30 years after his death a compilation was published under the title *Early Period of World History*.

His main task as he saw it, however, was a grand and all-encompassing work on his metaphysics -- of which *Decline* had only given hints. He never did finish this, though *Fundamental Questions*, in the main a collection of aphorisms on the subject, was published in 1965.

In 1931 he published *Man and Technics*, a book that reflected his fascination with the development and usage, past and future, of the technical. The development of advanced technology is unique to the West, and he predicted where it would lead. *Man and Technics* is a racist book, though not in a narrow "Germanic" sense. Rather it warns the European or white races of the pressing danger from the outer Colored races. It predicts a time when the Colored peoples of the earth will use the very technology of the West to destroy the West.

#### **Reservations About Hitler**

There is much in Spengler's thinking that permits one to characterize him as a kind of "proto-Nazi": his call for a return to Authority, his hatred of "decadent" democracy, his exaltation of the spirit of "Prussianism," his idea of war as essential to life. However, he never joined the National Socialist party, despite the repeated entreaties of such NS luminaries as Gregor Strasser and Ernst Hanfstaengl. He regarded the National Socialists as immature, fascinated with marching bands and patriotic slogans, playing with the bauble of power but not realizing the philosophical significance and new imperatives of the age. Of Hitler he supposed to have said that what Germany needed was a hero, not a heroic tenor. Still, he did vote for Hitler against Hindenburg in the 1932 election. He met Hitler in person only once, in July 1933, but Spengler came away unimpressed from their lengthy discussion.

His views about the National Socialists and the direction Germany should properly be taking surfaced in late 1933, in his book *The Hour of Decision* [translation of *Die Jahre der Entscheidung*]. He began it by stating that no one could have looked forward to the National Socialist revolution with greater longing than he. In the course of the work, though, he expressed (sometimes in veiled form) his reservations about the new regime. Germanophile though he certainly was, nevertheless he viewed the National Socialists as too narrowly German in character, and not sufficiently European.

Although he continued the racist tone of *Man and Technics*, Spengler belittled what he regarded as the exclusiveness of the National Socialist concept of race. In the face of the outer danger, what should be emphasized is the unity of the various European races, not their fragmentation. Beyond a matter-of-fact recognition of the "colored peril" and the superiority of white civilization, Spengler repeated his own "non-materialist" concept of race (which he had already expressed in *Decline*): Certain men -- of whatever ancestry -- have "race" (a kind of will-to-power), and these are the makers of history.

Predicting a second world war, Spengler warned in *Hour of Decision* that the National Socialists were not sufficiently watchful of the powerful hostile forces outside the country that would mobilize to destroy them, and Germany. His most direct criticism was phrased in this way: "And the National Socialists believe that they can afford to ignore the world or oppose it, and build their castles-in-the-air without creating a possibly silent, but very palpable reaction from abroad." Finally, but after it had already achieved a wide circulation, the authorities prohibited the book's further distribution.

Oswald Spengler, shortly after predicting that in a decade there would no longer be a German Reich, died of a heart attack on May 8, 1936, in his Munich apartment. He went to his death convinced that he had been right, and that events were unfolding in fulfillment of what he had written in *The Decline of the West*. He was certain that he lived in the twilight period of his Culture -- which, despite his foreboding and gloomy pronouncements, he loved and cared for deeply to the very end.

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#### **About the author**

Keith Stimely was born on April 9, 1957, in Connecticut, but grew up and was educated on the West coast. He studied at San Jose State University and the University of Oregon, from where he graduated in 1980 with a bachelor's degree in history. (This essay was written in December 1978 for a University of Oregon history class.) Stimely then joined the US Army, serving as a reserve officer. His interest in revisionist history began in high school, and in 1980 he spoke at the second IHR Conference (Pomona College). He joined the IHR *Journal's* editorial staff in June 1982, and served as its chief editor from February 1983 until February 1985. He compiled the *1981 Revisionist Bibliography* (no longer in print), and was a gifted artist and pianist. He died in Portland, Oregon, on December 19, 1992.

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