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Oswald Spengler

Oswald Arnold Gottfried Spengler (German: [ˈɔsvalt ˈʃpɛŋlɐ]; 29 May 1880 – 8 May 1936) was a German historian and philosopher of history whose interests included mathematics, science, and art, as well as their relation to his organic theory of history. He is best known for his two-volume work, *The Decline of the West* (*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*), published in 1918 and 1922, covering world history. Spengler's model of history postulates that human cultures and civilizations are akin to biological entities, each with a limited, predictable, and deterministic lifespan.

Spengler predicted that about the year 2000, Western civilization would enter the period of pre-death emergency whose countering would lead to 200 years of Caesarism (extra-constitutional omnipotence of the executive branch of government) before Western civilization's final collapse.

Spengler is regarded as a nationalist and an anti-democrat, and he was a prominent member of the Conservative Revolution. Consequently, he criticised Nazism due to its excessive racialist elements. He saw Benito Mussolini, and entrepreneurial types, like the mining magnate Cecil Rhodes,^[3] as examples of the impending Caesars of Western culture—showcasing his stark criticism of Mussolini's imperial adventures.^[4]

He strongly influenced other historians, including Franz Borkenau and especially Arnold J. Toynbee^[5] and other successors including Francis Parker Yockey, Carroll Quigley, and Samuel P. Huntington. John Calvert notes that Spengler's critique of the West is popular with Islamists.^[6]

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Oswald Spengler



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Died	8 May 1936 (aged 55) Munich, Bavaria, Germany
Alma mater	University of Munich University of Berlin University of Halle
Era	20th-century philosophy
Region	Western philosophy

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Goethean science^{[1][2]}
Conservative Revolution**Thesis***Der metaphysische Grundgedanke der heraklitischen Philosophie (The Fundamental Metaphysical Thought of the Heraclitean Philosophy)* (<http://archive.org/details/dermetaphysisch00spengoo>) (1904)**Doctoral advisor**Alois Riehl**Main interests**Philosophy of history, political philosophy**Notable ideas**The Decline of the West**Influences**Heraclitus • Tacitus • Winckelmann • Goethe • Hegel • Schopenhauer • Mach • Le Bon • Riehl • Nietzsche • Frobenius**Influenced**Theodor Adorno • Ludwig Wittgenstein • Northrop Frye • Karl Haushofer • Ernst Jünger • George F. Kennan • Henry Kissinger • H. P. Lovecraft • Malcolm X • Henry Miller • Paul Nitze • Ortega y Gasset • Arnold J. Toynbee • Leo Strauss • G. H. von Wright • Julius Evola •

Biography

Early life and family

Oswald Arnold Gottfried Spengler was born on 29 May 1880 in Blankenburg, Duchy of Brunswick, German Empire, the oldest surviving child of Bernhard Spengler (1844–1901) and Pauline Spengler (1840–1910), née Grantzow, the descendant of an artistic family.^{[7][8]} Oswald's elder brother was born prematurely in 1879, when his mother tried to move a heavy laundry basket, and died at the age of three weeks. Oswald was born ten months after his brother's death.^[9] His younger sisters were Adele (1881–1917), Gertrud (1882–1957), and Hildegard (1885–1942).^[7] Oswald's paternal grandfather, Theodor Spengler (1806–76), was a metallurgical inspector (*Hütteninspektor*) in Altenbrak.^[10]

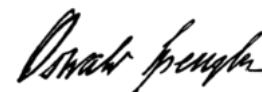
Oswald's father, Bernhard Spengler, held the position of a postal secretary (*Postsekretär*) and was a hard-working man with a marked dislike of intellectualism, who tried to instil the same values and attitudes in his son.

Spengler's maternal great-grandfather, Friedrich Wilhelm Grantzow, a tailor's apprentice in Berlin, had three children out of wedlock with a Jewish woman named Bräunchen Moses (c. 1769–1849) whom he later married, on 26 May 1799.^[11] Shortly before the wedding, Moses was baptized as Johanna Elisabeth Anspachin; the surname was chosen after her birthplace—Anspach.^[12] Her parents, Abraham and Reile

Moses, were both deceased by then. The couple had another five children,^[11] one of whom was Spengler's maternal grandfather, Gustav Adolf Grantzow (1811–83)—a solo dancer and ballet master in Berlin, who in 1837 married Katharina Kirchner (1813–73), a solo dancer from a Munich Catholic family;^[12] the second of their four daughters was Oswald Spengler's mother Pauline Grantzow.^[13] Like the Grantzows in general, Pauline was of a Bohemian disposition, and, before marrying Bernhard Spengler, accompanied her dancer sisters on tours. In appearance, she was plump. Her temperament, which Oswald inherited, complemented her appearance and frail physique: she was moody, irritable, and morose.^[14]

Francis Parker Yockey · Oswald Mosley · Robert Mathews · Carlos Keller · Alberto Edwards

Signature



Education

When Oswald was ten years of age, his family moved to the university city of Halle. Here he received a classical education at the local Gymnasium (academically oriented secondary school), studying Greek, Latin, mathematics and sciences. Here, too, he developed his propensity for the arts—especially poetry, drama, and music—and came under the influence of the ideas of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Nietzsche.^[1] At 17, he wrote a drama titled *Montezuma*.^[8]

After his father's death in 1901, Spengler attended several universities (Munich, Berlin, and Halle) as a private scholar, taking courses in a wide range of subjects. His studies were undirected. In 1903, he failed his doctoral thesis on Heraclitus—titled *Der metaphysische Grundgedanke der heraklitischen Philosophie* (*The Fundamental Metaphysical Thought of the Heraclitean Philosophy*) and conducted under the direction of Alois Riehl—because of insufficient references. He took the doctoral oral exam again and received his PhD from Halle on 6 April 1904. In December 1904, he began to write the secondary dissertation (*Staatsexamensarbeit*) 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* (*Die Entwicklung des Sehorgans bei den Hauptstufen des Tierreiches*), a text now lost.^[15] It was approved and he received his teaching certificate. In 1905, Spengler suffered a nervous breakdown.

Career

Spengler briefly served as a teacher in Saarbrücken then in Düsseldorf. From 1908 to 1911 he worked at a grammar school (*Realgymnasium*) in Hamburg, where he taught science, German history, and mathematics. Biographers report that his life as a teacher was uneventful.

In 1911, following his mother's death, he moved to Munich, where he would live for the rest of his life. He lived as a cloistered scholar, supported by his modest inheritance. Spengler survived on very limited means and was marked by loneliness. He owned no books, and took work as a tutor or wrote for magazines to earn additional income. Due to a severe heart problem, Spengler was exempted from military service.^[8] During the war, his inheritance was useless because it was invested overseas; thus, he lived in genuine poverty for this period.

He began work on the first volume of *The Decline of the West* intending to focus on Germany within Europe. The Agadir Crisis of 1911 affected him deeply, though, so he widened the scope of his study. According to Spengler the book was completed in 1914, but the first edition was

published in the summer of 1918, shortly before the end of World War I.^[16] Spengler wrote about the years immediately prior to World War I in *Decline*:

At that time the World-War appeared to me both as imminent and also as the inevitable outward manifestation of the historical crisis, and my endeavor was to comprehend it from an examination of the spirit of the preceding centuries—not years. ... Thereafter I saw the present—the approaching World-War—in a quite other light. It was no longer a momentary constellation of casual facts due to national sentiments, personal influences, or economic tendencies endowed with an appearance of unity and necessity by some historian's scheme of political or social cause-and-effect, but the type of *historical change of phase* occurring within a great historical organism of definable compass at the point preordained for it hundreds of years ago.^[17]

When the first volume of *The Decline of the West* was published, it was a wild success.^[a] Spengler became an instant celebrity.^[16] The national humiliation of the Treaty of Versailles (1919), followed by economic depression in 1923 and hyperinflation, seemed to prove Spengler right. *Decline* comforted Germans because it could be used as a rationale for their diminished pre-eminence, i.e. due to larger world-historical processes. The book met with wide success outside of Germany as well, and by 1919 had been translated into several other languages.

The second volume of *Decline* was published in 1922. In the second volume, Spengler argued that German socialism differed from Marxism; instead, he said it was more compatible with traditional German conservatism. Spengler declined an appointment as Professor of Philosophy at the University of Göttingen, saying he needed time to focus on writing.

The book was widely discussed, even by those who had not read it. Historians took umbrage at his unapologetically non-scientific approach. Novelist Thomas Mann compared reading Spengler's book to reading Schopenhauer for the first time. Academics gave it a mixed reception. Sociologist Max Weber described Spengler as a "very ingenious and learned dilettante", while philosopher Karl Popper called the thesis "pointless". Both volumes of *Decline* were published in English by Alfred A. Knopf in 1926.

Aftermath

In 1924, following the social-economic upheaval and hyperinflation, Spengler entered politics in an effort to bring Reichswehr General Hans von Seeckt to power as the country's leader. The attempt failed and Spengler proved ineffective in practical politics.

A 1928 *Time* review of the second volume of *Decline* described the immense influence and controversy Spengler's ideas enjoyed during the 1920s: "When the first volume of *The Decline of the West* appeared in Germany a few years ago, thousands of copies were sold. Cultivated European discourse quickly became Spengler-saturated. Spenglerism spurted from the pens of countless disciples. It was imperative to read Spengler, to sympathize or revolt. It still remains so".^[18]

In 1931, he published *Man and Technics*, which warned against the dangers of technology and industrialism to culture. He especially pointed to the tendency of Western technology to spread to hostile "Colored races" which would then use the weapons against the West.^[19] It was poorly

received because of its anti-industrialism. This book contains the well-known Spengler quote "Optimism is cowardice".

Despite voting for Hitler over Hindenburg in 1932, Spengler found the Führer vulgar. He met Hitler in 1933 and after a lengthy discussion remained unimpressed, saying that Germany did not need a "heroic tenor [*Heldentenor*: one of several conventional tenor classifications] but a real hero [*Held*]". He quarreled publicly with Alfred Rosenberg, and his pessimism and remarks about the Führer resulted in isolation and public silence. He further rejected offers from Joseph Goebbels to give public speeches. However, Spengler did become a member of the German Academy that year.

The Hour of Decision, published in 1934, was a bestseller, but was later banned for its critique of National Socialism. Spengler's criticisms of liberalism^[20] were welcomed by the Nazis, but Spengler disagreed with their biological ideology and anti-Semitism.^[21] While racial mysticism played a key role in his own worldview, Spengler had always been an outspoken critic of the racial theories professed by the Nazis and many others in his time, and was not inclined to change his views during and after Hitler's rise to power.^[22] Although a German nationalist, Spengler viewed the Nazis as too narrowly German, and not occidental enough to lead the fight against other peoples. The book also warned of a coming world war in which Western Civilization risked being destroyed, and was widely distributed abroad before eventually being banned by the National Socialist German Workers Party in Germany. A *Time* review of *The Hour of Decision* noted Spengler's international popularity as a polemicist, observing that "When Oswald Spengler speaks, many a Western Worldling stops to listen". The review recommended the book for "readers who enjoy vigorous writing", who "will be glad to be rubbed the wrong way by Spengler's harsh aphorisms" and his pessimistic predictions.^[23]

Later life and death

On 13 October 1933, Spengler became one of the hundred senators of the German Academy.^{[24][25]}

Spengler spent his final years in Munich, listening to Beethoven, reading Molière and Shakespeare, buying several thousand books, and collecting ancient Turkish, Persian and Indian weapons. He made occasional trips to the Harz mountains and to Italy. In the spring of 1936 (shortly before his death), he prophetically remarked in a letter to Reichsleiter Hans Frank that "in ten years, a German Reich will probably no longer exist" ("*da ja wohl in zehn Jahren ein Deutsches Reich nicht mehr existieren wird!*").^[26]

Spengler died of a heart attack on 8 May 1936, in Munich, three weeks before his 56th birthday.^[27]

Views

Influences

In the introduction to *The Decline of the West*, Spengler cites Johann W. von Goethe and Friedrich Nietzsche as his major influences. Goethe's vitalism and Nietzsche's cultural criticism, in particular, are highlighted in his works.^[28]

I feel urged to name once more those to whom I owe practically everything: Goethe and Nietzsche. Goethe gave me method, Nietzsche the questioning faculty...^[29]

Spengler was also influenced by the universal and cyclical vision of world history proposed by the German historian Eduard Meyer.^[28] The belief in the progression of civilizations through an evolutionary process comparable with living beings can be traced back to classical antiquity, although it is difficult to assess the extent of the influence those thinkers had on Spengler: Cato the Elder, Cicero, Seneca, Florus, Ammianus Marcellinus, and later, Francis Bacon, who compared different empires with each other with the help of biological analogies.^[30]

The Decline of the West (1918)

The concept of historical philosophy developed by Spengler is founded upon two assumptions:

- the existence of social entities called 'Cultures' (*Kulturen*) and regarded as the largest possible actors in human history, which itself had no metaphysical sense,
- the parallelism between the evolution of those Cultures and the evolution of living beings.

Spengler enumerates nine Cultures: Ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, Indian, Chinese, Greco-Roman or 'Apollonian', 'Magian' or 'Arabic' (including early and Byzantine Christianity and Islam), Mexican, Western or 'Faustian', and Russian. They interacted with each other in time and space but were distinctive due to 'internal' attributes. According to Spengler, "Cultures are organisms, and world-history is their collective biography."^[31]

'Mankind'... has no aim, no idea, no plan, any more than the family of butterflies or orchids. 'Mankind' is a zoological expression, or an empty word. ... I see, in place of that empty figment of one linear history which can only be kept up by shutting one's eyes to the overwhelming multitude of the facts, the drama of a number of mighty Cultures, each springing with primitive strength from the soil of a mother region to which it remains firmly bound throughout its whole life-cycle; each stamping its material, its mankind, in its own image; each having its own idea, its own passions, its own life, will and feeling, its own death.^[32]

Spengler also compares the evolution of Cultures to the different ages of human life, "Every Culture passes through the age-phases of the individual man. Each has its childhood, youth, manhood and old age." When a Culture enters its late stage, Spengler argues, it becomes a 'Civilization' (*Zivilisation*), a petrified body characterized in the modern age by technology, imperialism, and mass society, which he expected to fossilize and decline from the 2000s onward.^[33] The first-millennium Near East was, in his view, not a transition between Classical Antiquity, Western Christianity, and Islam, but rather an emerging new Culture he named 'Arabian' or 'Magian', explaining messianic Judaism, early Christianity, Gnosticism, Mandaeism, Zoroastrianism, and Islam as different expressions of a single Culture sharing a unique worldview.^[34]

The great historian of antiquity Eduard Meyer thought highly of Spengler, although he also had some criticisms of him. Spengler's obscurity, intuitiveness, and mysticism were easy targets,

especially for the positivists and neo-Kantians who rejected the possibility that there was meaning in world history. The critic and aesthete Count Harry Kessler thought him unoriginal and rather inane, especially in regard to his opinion on Nietzsche. Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, however, shared Spengler's cultural pessimism. Spengler's work became an important foundation for social cycle theory.^[35]

Prussianism and Socialism (1919)

In late 1919, Spengler published *Prussianism and Socialism* (*Preußentum und Sozialismus*), an essay based on notes intended for the second volume of *The Decline of the West* in which he argues that German socialism is the correct socialism in contrast to English socialism.^[36] In his view, correct socialism has a much more "national" spirit.^[37]

According to Spengler, the West will spend the next and last several hundred years of its existence in a state of Caesarian socialism, when all humans will be synergized into a harmonious and happy totality by a dictator, like an orchestra is synergized into a harmonious totality by its conductor.^[38]

According to some recent critics such as Ishay Landa, "Prussian socialism" has some decidedly capitalistic traits.^[39] Spengler declares himself resolutely opposed to labor strikes (Spengler describes them as "the unsocialistic earmark of Marxism"), trade unions ("wage-Bolshevism" in Spengler's terms), progressive taxation or any imposition of taxes on the rich ("dry Bolshevism"), any shortening of the working day (he argues that workers should work even on Sundays), as well as any form of government insurance for sickness, old age, accidents, or unemployment.^[39]

Nazism and Fascism

In his private papers, Spengler denounced Nazi anti-Semitism in even stronger terms, wondering "how much envy of the capability of other people in view of one's lack of it lies hidden in anti-Semitism!", and arguing that "when one would rather destroy business and scholarship than see Jews in them, one is an ideologue, i.e., a danger for the nation. Idiotic."^[21] Spengler was an admirer of the old Prussian aristocracy and showed contempt for the proletarian and demagogic character of the Nazi party, and considered the Aryan racial doctrine to be nonsense. In 1934, Spengler pronounced the funeral oration for one of the victims of the Night of the Long Knives and retired in 1935 from the board of the highly influential Nietzsche Archive in opposition to the regime.^[22]

Spengler, however, regarded the transformation of ultra-capitalist mass democracies into dictatorial regimes as inevitable, and he had expressed some sympathy for Benito Mussolini and the Italian Fascist movement as a first symptom of this development.^[22]

He also considered Judaism to be a "disintegrating element" (zersetzendes Element) that acts destructively "wherever it intervenes" (wo es auch eingreift). In his view, Jews are characterized by a "cynical intelligence" (zynische Intelligenz) and their "money thinking" (Gelddenken).^[40] Therefore, they were incapable of adapting to Western culture and represented a foreign body in Europe. He also clarifies in *The Decline of the West* that this is a pattern shared in all civilizations: He mentions how the ancient Jew would have seen the cynical, atheistic Romans of the late Roman empire the same way Westerners today see Jews. Alexander Bein argues that with these characterizations Spengler contributed significantly to the enforcement of Jewish stereotypes in

pre-WW2 German circles.^[41]

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See also

- Arnold J. Toynbee

- [Carroll Quigley](#)
- [Francis Parker Yockey](#)
- [Feliks Koneczny](#)
- [Samuel P. Huntington](#)
- [Social cycle theory](#)
- [The Decline of the West](#)

Notes

- a. The original Preface is dated December 1917 and ends with Spengler expressing hope that "his book would not be unworthy of German military achievements".

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