

Introduction

Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West: Outlines of a Morphology of World History* (1918/22) exerted a profound influence on intellectual discourse in Germany and across the globe. His ideas were critically received and discussed by Theodor W. Adorno, Ernst Bloch, T.S. Eliot, Georg Lukács, Thomas Mann, Arnold Toynbee and many others. However, despite such wide-ranging influence on twentieth-century intellectual history, Spengler's work has not received the attention it deserves: only four full-length English-language studies have appeared on him in the last seventy years.

Published against the backdrop of social turmoil and revolutionary upheaval, *The Decline of the West* immediately struck a nerve amongst a German population in search of reasons for its own perceived terminal decline following military defeat. Given its length and often difficult style, *The Decline of the West* seemed an unlikely candidate for bestseller status. But a bestseller it became. By 1938, the book had sold a staggering 200,000 copies.

Yet within secondary literature, the success and import of the work with which Spengler has become synonymous have obscured something fundamental about him as a thinker and historical actor. Existing research on him is unduly focused on his magnum opus and the arguments it advances in relation to specialist disciplines such as aesthetics, ancient history, metaphysics and religion.

Moreover, *The Decline of the West* has overwhelmingly been interpreted as a pessimistic and fatalistic text that offers few positive proposals for the last days of the Western world. This *communis opinio* is misleading for two reasons. First, it downplays how Spengler sought not merely to analyse the decline and downfall of the West, but also how he was engaged in sustained attempts to create a political alternative within this process of decline. Specifically, existing research often fails to account for the text's extensive discussion of what Spengler understood as the leadership necessary to navigate the tides of history and ensure that Germany would emerge as the leading power of the declining Western world.

Second, it overlooks how *The Decline of the West* relates to the remainder of Spengler's career as a political activist, networker and publicist; he used the fame he established for himself with this publication to devote his energies to a right-wing nationalist project aimed at overthrowing the Weimar Republic. In so doing, he became a respected and well-connected thinker among the German elite, someone who published extensively on the socio-political issues of his day.

Even a cursory look at Spengler's copious writings, not least his commercially successful political texts such as *Prussianism and Socialism* (1919), *Rebuilding the German Reich* (1924) and *The Hour of Decision. Part I: Germany and World-Historical Evolution* (1933), as well as the various articles, essays and speeches collated in his *Political Writings 1919–1926* (1932) and *Speeches and Essays* (1937), makes clear how there is much more to him than just *The Decline of the West*. Many of his political writings reached circulation numbers in the six figures. His last published work, *The Hour of Decision*, sold even more copies than *The Decline of the West*.

Existing scholarship has done insufficient justice to the breadth, importance and impact of Spengler's political publications and has thus been unable to locate his ideological position within the right-wing nationalist movement (*nationale Bewegung*) against the Weimar Republic. While there has been renewed academic interest in his thought during the past twenty years, this interest has largely been restricted to German-language scholarship, as well as to the potential relevance of *The Decline of the West* in the twenty-first century.

Since the Second World War, there have only been four studies which focus predominantly on the nature of Spengler's political ideas, networks and projects. All are written in German. More importantly, these studies fail to grasp the significance of Spengler the political philosopher in two respects. They tend to view Spengler's political thought as a static and largely unchanging entity that is the logical outcome of his philosophy of history. In other words, instead of exploring in detail his views on democracy, race or socialism across his career, secondary literature often speaks of his *view* of a particular concept in the singular. The few studies that do locate shifts and developments within his political ideas throughout his life either do not explain these amendments with reference to the historical context in which Spengler felt the need to make them, or they do not sufficiently bring out how these amendments relate to central ideas in his thought that he did not feel compelled to modify.

This volume seeks to address this lacuna in Spengler studies. It does so by developing a new way of understanding what I will call his *politics of decline*. It explains the evolution of his thought as the outcome of a dynamic interplay between his metahistorical considerations on world

history ('the decline of the West') on the one hand, and the practical difficulties and considerations of *Realpolitik* on the other hand. As we will see, in order to arrive at a more rounded appreciation of Spengler's political thought, it is necessary to consider method alongside motivation, content alongside context, consistency alongside change.

Our discussion will therefore begin with a biographical chapter, which will serve as a foundation for understanding Spengler's politics of decline by reconstructing the most significant developments in his lifetime and by exploring how these found reflection in his political aims and activities.

Chapter 2 will provide a brief survey of the most significant English- and German-language studies of Spengler over the past eighty years or so. It will identify some of the trends, advances and breakthroughs in Spengler studies. On this basis, it will explain in more detail how this volume attempts to fill the gap in the understanding of his political thought.

An analysis of Spengler's politics of decline presupposes an understanding of what he viewed as the motor of historical change. This is the aim of Chapter 3, which will provide an overview of his theory of history as expressed in *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*. It will show that Spengler's understanding of historical development can be read on two levels: as a largely metaphysical portrayal of the stages through which all historical entities must inevitably pass in their journey from birth to death; and as a more specific socio-political theory purportedly able to predict future developments. Following a critical summary of the general theory, we will discuss why Spengler was convinced that he was able to foresee the future of the West – what he called 'Faustian' culture – and its inexorable decline.

Spengler's theory of the nature of Western decline and his attempts to intervene in this process will be covered in Chapter 4. This chapter will discuss his views on the socio-political challenges and opportunities presented by Western democracies. Following a summary of what *The Decline of the West* highlights as the major features and underlying dynamics of this era, I will demonstrate how – against the common reading of *The Decline of the West* as a fatalist and pessimist text – Spengler understood the decline of the West as a historical process that is both predetermined and to some extent open-ended. The exact arrangement of the Western world's final days is yet to be decided. Above all, it will be influenced by the ideas and actions of powerful individuals in politics, industry, the press and the military. Spengler was convinced that the fate of the world increasingly lies in the hands of a small number of world-historical figures. He referred to this phenomenon as *Caesarism* and felt that his historical method alone could provide these strongmen with the necessary historical consciousness to address successfully the key political

questions of the age. This age, as we will discover, is one of industrial warfare and global power politics, not of poetry and painting. Finally, this chapter will outline the basis of Spengler's political alternative, which I will call the project of *Preußentum* (Prussianism). This outlook combined two ideological commitments on his part: his nationalist obligation to Germany as the purported 'last nation of the West'¹ in the latter's final days; and his conviction that a successful modern state must draw on the best of the past. Here he was thinking of the elitist traditions and absolutist politics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, before the French Revolution of 1789 and the rise of mass politics and democracy. However, as we will see, the principles of *Preußentum* outlined in *The Decline of the West* by no means found immediate or consistent reflection in his political writings, but assumed a variety of contours across his career.

A case in point was Spengler's widely read book *Prussianism and Socialism* (1919), which is the subject of Chapter 5. This publication is of central interest to the evolution of his politics of decline because it was written after Volume 1 of *The Decline of the West* in 1918, but before the publication of Volume 2 in 1922, in which his emphasis on the importance of elitist politics and Caesarist authoritarianism is particularly prominent. *Prussianism and Socialism* is significant because it develops the rallying idea of a revitalised German nation inspired not by the ideals of absolutism or Caesarism developed in his main work, but of *Prussian Socialism*. After providing some contextual background, I will discuss exactly what Spengler understood by socialism and explore his captivating, understudied intellectual relationship to the German socialist movement. Close attention will be paid to a discussion of the question of whether Prussian socialism was the concrete manifestation of his philosophy of world history, or whether it was more indicative of an opportunist gamble to exploit the all-pervasive rhetoric of socialism in the early Weimar Republic so as to gain support for his attempts to overthrow that state.

Spengler's activities as a thinker, speaker, organiser and publicist of the *nationale Bewegung* through to the attempted coup against the government in 1923 – the so-called Beer Hall Putsch in Munich – will form the opening section of Chapter 6. These activities provide the backdrop to his most programmatic text, *Rebuilding the German Reich* (1924). After a summary of this largely overlooked work and a comparison of its main arguments with those of *Prussianism and Socialism*, this chapter will make the case that *Rebuilding the German Reich* is not indicative of a conservative theorist who moderated his views on the need to overthrow democracy; rather, it is reflective of a Caesarist thinker who remained committed to a radical overhaul of the Weimar Constitution.

Chapter 7 will explore Spengler's understanding of the force that eventually succeeded in deposing the Weimar Republic: German National

Socialism. It will begin with an overview of Spengler's response to the Nazi rise to power and will discuss his assessment of leading Nazis such as Adolf Hitler, Joseph Goebbels and Gregor Strasser. It will emphasise that Spengler was no Nazi, but that he made various statements on the Nazis that have divided most of the secondary literature between viewing him either as a forerunner of the Hitler regime or as one of its most influential public critics.

The chapter will then discuss Spengler's *The Hour of Decision* (1933) and what it reveals about his understanding of the relationship between Caesarism and National Socialism. In contrast to much of the secondary literature, we will demonstrate how *The Hour of Decision* cannot be viewed as a critique of National Socialism, even though several Nazi thinkers felt compelled to criticise the publication sharply. After surveying some of the Nazi reception of *The Hour of Decision*, I will take a step back from the text in order to analyse Spengler's arguments on race and racism, as well as the so-called Jewish question, across his work as a whole. I will show that Spengler consistently rejected the biological anti-Semitism of many on the German right. At the same time, I will explain how Spengler's historical method proceeded from the assumption of Jewish metaphysical otherness and thus often had recourse to several of the prevalent anti-Semitic prejudices and tropes of his age. This chapter will bring out the ironic and even tragic aspects of Spengler's response to National Socialism. Despite having predicted and agitated for Caesarist dictatorial political institutions in Germany, he was horrified at the reality of dictatorship.

The volume will conclude with some comments on the main arguments it has advanced and the contributions it has made to understanding Spengler's legacy. Moreover, it will provide a synopsis of what the continuities, breaks and shifting emphases in his thought – not least in his changing understanding of socialism and his ideal German state – reveal about the difficulties involved in applying a rigid *Weltanschauung* to the ever-shifting reality of day-to-day politics.

Notes

1. Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*, 686 (my translation – unless otherwise stated, the translations of German-language citations from Spengler's writings and from the scholarly literature are my own throughout the book).