

**V. Bazarov, “O. Spengler and his critics,” *Krasnaia nov’* no. 2 (1922), 211-231.**

<<“The Decline of Europe”>> [NB: Russian translations use this rather than “The Decline of the West,” and the usage will be retained here.]

O. Spengler’s book *The Decline of Europe* is one of the most instructive events in the intellectual life of modern Germany. The huge demand for this book (32 editions over 2 years); its very broad popularity, not only in talking “salons,” but also among serious, hardworking university students; the number of clubs (“circles”) and scientific societies founded with the aim of formulating problems of history and culture in the spirit of the new doctrine; and finally, the impressive campaign against Spengler as a corrupter of youth, organized by German professors and lecturers for the salvation of the “eternal values” of culture, starting with the venerable keeper of traditions, the theologian von Harnack, and ending with the radical and fanatic of “full socialization,” Otto Neurath—all of this suggests that Spengler has managed better than anyone else to formulate the ideology of modern cultural crisis.

Thus as a symptom and symbol of the cultural catastrophe being experienced by the West, *The Decline of Europe* is indisputably a deeply momentous and significant event. And this significance does not depend on whether we evaluate the author’s achievements highly or lowly from a scientific, philosophical, or generally any kind of abstract and theoretical point of view. The work of Spengler is primarily an outstanding fact of real life, a significant chunk of concrete history of our days, and only secondarily a “philosophy of history,” perhaps unsubstantiated scientifically, poorly grounded, and generally sinning against the so-called “truth.” But where it is a matter of direct apprehension of reality, where “what?” and “how?” are being asked (rather than “why?” or “on what grounds?”), that is where, following Spengler’s just remark, “the facts is more important than the truth.”

However, both from the standpoint of historical fact, and as an ideological reflection of the “declining” processes of Western European culture, not everything in Spengler is of equal value. In decline and pre-decline eras the consciousness of the social strata, that of the intellectual leaders of the cultural and historical formation doomed to perish, is characterized by two features: on the one hand, a certain intellectual sophistication, the ability to turn away mentally from those special categories, concepts, and emotions which appear to [political] leaders and activists as something absolute, unquestionable, “a priori,” and on the other hand, a thirst for new faiths, searches for new absolutes—this is an unquenchable thirst, these searches are fruitless, for fading cultures are powerless to generate living, solid belief, and are only able to weave scraps of dead religions into a bright pattern of ephemeral superstitions.

The sophistication of intellect, the keen vigilance that makes it possible to look beyond the horizon of one’s cultural bell tower, has an indisputable value, not only as the content of a given period of history, but also as a testament for coming generations, those future heirs who will perhaps someday lay the foundation of a new cultural structure, a new “Tower of Babel,” on and from the wreckage and debris of the dying civilization. By contrast, dying superstitions, even as symptoms and facts of historical reality, are of limited interest: they are essentially not what is found but what is sought, they are not one or the other surrogates of religion but the structure of religious need itself, the specific nature of the religious aspirations of the era.

In *The Decline of Europe* both of these decadent outlooks have found expression. Unfortunately, giving any complete and clear sketch of the views of Spengler in a journal article is not possible. Spengler's book is not a scientific or science-forming "system," but rather a work of art: a portrait gallery of cultures and cultural phenomena.

Any generalized, schematized presentation here would be an inevitable distortion. To acquaint someone with Spengler who has not read the book is possible only through extensive excerpts, which I have no room for. The collective work published in Moscow, *Oswald Spengler and the Decline of Europe*, gives a preliminary orientation, enough to understand what is at stake; it is also useful to read the article of D. Shikovskii, translated from *Neue Zeit* in the first issue of the Petersburg journal *Nachalo*, and the article of A. Deborin in issue no. 1-2 of the Moscow journal *Under the Banner of Marxism*.

Referring the reader who has not had the opportunity to get acquainted with Spengler in the original to these Russian sources, I further restrict myself to analysis of the major architectural lines of Spengler's construction—those lines that have attracted the particular attention of German academic criticism, and which in my opinion are of considerable interest for the Marxist as well.

At the base of Spengler's conception lies the concept of culture or cultural "soul" as a self-sufficient organic unity.

"Culture is born at the time," writes Spengler, "when a great soul awakens from the eternally infant primordial state of mankind, differentiates itself as form from the formless, as bounded and transitional from the boundless and abiding. Culture thrives on the basis of a strictly bounded area ("Landschaft") with which it is organically associated. Culture dies out when its soul has realized the sum total of its possibilities in the form of peoples, languages, religious teachings, arts, governments, and sciences, and returns to the primordial state, to the "Ur-state of the soul" ("Urseelentum").

When the task of culture is fulfilled, its idea realized, all the fullness of its possibilities has been manifested, culture quickly congeals, dies, its blood clots, it overtakes its strength—it becomes a civilization, and, like a dead tree, a giant primeval forest, it may even extend its dried branches in the air for entire centuries.

Civilization is the decline of culture. And Western Europe is currently in this phase.

For the six thousand years of our historical horizon several of these stand-alone, self-contained cultural organisms have been born in different areas of the world, flourished, and faded: Chinese, Hindu, Egyptian, Babylonian culture, Maya, the ancient world, the magical culture of Islam and Eastern Christianity, all of which is already in the past, and, finally, the now dying "Faustian" or Western European culture.

Thus "world history" does not exist. Spengler sarcastically mocks the naive efforts of West European scholars to stretch the story of "humanity" into a linear series of successive stages of progressive development, the crown of which is, of course, our recent history, that is, the last few centuries in the life of Europe.

Spengler contrasts this ridiculous Euro-centrism in its undue pretension, this “Ptolemaic system of history,” with his “Copernican” view, which considers each culture as an organism from within, as an autonomous entity that has its own, peculiar forms of existence, ideas, emotions, passions, its particular destiny, life and death, its history. “There are flourishing and aging cultures, peoples, languages, truths, gods, and locales, just as there are young and old oaks and pine trees, flowers, branches, and leaves, but there is no aging ‘mankind.’ Each culture has its own forms of expression that arise, ripen, wither, and are never revived again. Many different sculptures, paintings, mathematics, physics exist”—as many as there are different cultures.

As you can see, the main feature of Spengler’s historiosophy is consistent historical or sociological relativism carried to completion. Not only scientific theories, aesthetic, philosophical, or religious constructs, but also the most basic perceptions that underlie all experience, like the perceptions of space and time, as well as the basic techniques of logical thinking, in short, everything that Kant considered ‘a priori’ mandatory categories or forms of knowledge for every rational being—all of this is in reality different for the representatives of different cultures.

This basic idea is not proved but shown by Spengler: it is visually demonstrated in a number of vivid images that reproduce the style of the arts and sciences, religions and philosophies, political and economic structures, characteristic of different cultural-historical types. Spengler treats this artistic and intuitive or “physiognomic” method as the only method acceptable in history and consciously contrasts it to the scientific, analytic, or mathematical method applicable only to externally dead nature. Incidentally, nature in its entirety is also a living organism according to Spengler and can be contemplated from within, as Goethe contemplated it, despising mathematics with its dead schemes and regarding nature “historically” in the process of living becoming [sic]. But modern man is not only contemplator but also actor, warrior: mechanizing nature, driving it into the fixed categories of scientific knowledge, he thereby subjugates the forces of nature to himself, forces them to serve his aims, to realize his “will to power.”

Thus the contrast of nature and history passing like a red thread through Spengler’s entire book does not imply the existence of two separate domains or subjects of investigation, but establishes only two points of view equally legitimate in any domain, equally applicable to any subject of our experience: and which one we choose is entirely dependent on the task we set ourselves in a given case. If we want to reestablish a famous event as it actually happened, that is, as it was experienced by its direct participants, we will try to empathize our way into the psychology of the actors of the historical drama or comedy that interests us, to identify with them internally. This is a method of artistic resurrection of an era, or, in Spengler’s words, a portrait of “that which became as that which is becoming,” a physiognomy, a portrayal.

Not only the historian, but also a sociologist, obviously cannot forgo such a portrayal when striving to know an era in “science-like” fashion, that is, to establish law-like connections between events, causal dependencies, etc. After all, before you can “explain” you have to establish as clearly as possible the material subject to explanation, which is impossible except by means of “physiognomic” reproduction of the past on the basis of those fragments which give us our so-called “sources.” Physiognomy is a necessary preliminary step for systematics, and Spengler falls into a glaring, though very common, misconception in modern European

scholarship when he, following Rickert on the one hand and Bergson on the other, polemically contrasts his intuitive method with scientific, “systematic” study of historical reality.

I have found it useful from the start to dwell on this point in some detail because the glorification of intuition in counterbalance and detriment to science naturally puts every objectivist sociologist and especially materialist on their guard from the very first pages of reading Spengler’s book. A supporter of the scientific method will hasten to take a defensive position, to turn up in the constructions of the author as many errors and weaknesses as possible, in order to discredit this “mystic” and thereby restore the authority of science flouted by him. There are more than enough mistakes and errors in Spengler. But we will not rush to expose and denounce, and we will try first to specify the positive and valuable that can be gleaned from Spengler’s intuitive excursions into the “soul” of different cultures, bearing in mind that the potential successes of these excursions will not in great measure shake the positions of objective science. On the contrary, enriching the material of research they will benefit any historian and sociologist: the objectivist and the materialist as much as the romantic and the mystic.

*[Bazarov then follows with a lengthy discourse on the German academic response to Spengler.]*

And such in general is the relationship between cultures. Continuous ties between cultures as whole organisms do not exist, but some of the knowledge, techniques, and generally elements of one culture can be assimilated by another, just like a living organism “assimilates” to itself the body of another in eating it, just like one building can be constructed from bricks taken from another.

Penetrating the “soul” of a foreign culture without losing one’s own soul is not possible. Spengler falls into the same naive illusion as Plutarch’s lawyers and the journalists of the French Convention [circa 1793] imagining themselves heroes, if he thinks his “portraits” grasp the intellectual world of Hellas from the inside. We learn that the Greeks called the space between bodies “το μη ον” (no being), that depth perception and the concept of infinite space were alien to the Hellenic mind. But these purely negative symptoms do not allow us to penetrate into the Hellenistic intuition of space and its closely associated style of mathematics. We get at our disposal not an intuitive but a rational concept, the same heuristic construction which we rely on in the natural sciences. It makes it possible to determine in advance what kinds of problems could and could not develop within the bounds of Hellenic science, just like, for example, how a structural chemical formula establishes in advance which combinations of hydrogen and carbon atoms are possible and which are not within the bounds of a given aliphatic series. But the internal logic of ancient mathematics, denying our own logic, remains for us a book with seven locks.

In the replacement of cultures one may conditionally speak of progress or regress depending on how rich the style of the dying and the newly arising culture is, how vast and diverse the opportunities for development are within one or the other. However, the “replacement” itself is always a catastrophe, the most devastating possible revolution. And it is not only during the so-called “transition period” that countless cultural treasures are destroyed and perish, but also during the establishment of the new style of life, even if it is richer, more “progressive” than its predecessor, something is irretrievably lost. Comparing ancient mathematics with our own, we do not notice the loss; we think that everything is in modern mathematics that was in the ancient,

plus much more. But this comforting illusion is not always possible even at the most superficial glance. For example, E. Frank points out that the fragments of Euripides' musical drama "Orestes" found in 1892 appear to us to be an "incoherent sequence of senseless tones." Our polyphonic and contrapuntal music is infinitely richer than Hellenic "homophonic" music, and yet we do not have the key to understanding the latter.

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If official "bourgeois" science tries whatever it can to save the theory of linear progress and the apparatus of eternal cultural values underpinning it, then this is, as we already mentioned, entirely understandable: for the ideological leaders of modern culture its destruction is the destruction of any human culture in general, the prospect of unrelieved darkness and savagery. Naturally one would expect a different attitude toward the problem from socialists, however, who feel like pioneers of a new cultural cycle, and especially on the part of Marxists. After all, the Marxist philosophy of history by virtue of its Hegelian origin is fundamentally different from the usual "evolutionary" theory of progress. Marx saw in history not the climbing of a ladder by a single mankind toward the sun of eternal truth, but the [successive] replacement of socio-economic "formations" differing substantially in their structure, chief of which he considered four: Asiatic despotism, the ancient world, the feudal and the bourgeois order. Each of these formations is characterized by a peculiar type of industrial relations and a special order of systems of political institutions, theoretical views, moral principles, and beliefs peculiar to it alone. Each cultural-historical type or structure thus has an inner unity, has its own style, its own system of organizing relations, which Marxist theory not only grasps "physiognomically" and postulates, but also explains in materialist terms. The higher "cultural values," its "eternal" truths and "sacred" commandments are precisely those bonds or instruments of social organization. It goes without saying that they are eternal and sacred only within the bounds of a given cultural and historical formation, only for the organizers of a given social order. Finally, the replacement of one system by another is always a social catastrophe, death and birth, the most profound revolution, but not in any event an evolutionary ascent from step to step.

It would seem that the Marxist critique, having noted the "idealism" of Spengler, his reactionary politics, the superstitious illusion of his "analogical" and "homologous" divinations, further ought to have postulated, not without a certain satisfaction, the approach of declining bourgeois thought to the conception of history which heretofore only revolutionary socialism had upheld, and which was naturally alien to the bourgeoisie in the period of its dawning and ecstasy of cultural mission.

Surprisingly, in the few reviews of Spengler I have encountered in the socialist press there is no attempt to take one's own position and only the main motifs of German professorial critics are reproduced.

In the German socialist literature I am aware of two critical notes on *The Decline of Europe*: one by Herman Schmalenbach located in issue 7 of *Joz* [sic] *Monatshefte* (9 December 1919), and another, already mentioned above, translated by the journal *Nachalo*, the article of Shikovskii. Schmalenbach in his brief and rather superficial review declares himself a staunch supporter of Rickert and dissatisfied that Spengler's attempts to establish historical regularity contradict "creative freedom always and down to its most profound fundamental principles of the active

deed.” But the chief danger of Spenglerism is, of course, “relativism.” The author hopes, however, that readers will not succumb to this danger and will be able to see “the unity in all different colors of refracted light, and consequently a single light in every individual color, a light which includes at the same time as the given one all the other colors.” In his criticism of Spengler Shikovskii also does not step one iota beyond the bounds of professorial convention. And for him the chief enemy is relativism and the related idea of historical catastrophes. “Nothing will die or has died in the material and the spiritual world,” he writes. “For someone who observes the historical process as a whole, there are no ups or downs, there are only transitions... isolated cultures and civilizations contain at their core so many elements of universal emotion that their spirit becomes clear to anyone who wants to penetrate into their mind’s eye... The principle of cultural development, contrary to Spengler, is not in the meaningless, incoherent ascent and fall, but in the constant formation and growth of cultural values striving towards a definite goal.”

So, all is well, “the historical process as a whole” does not know death, without sharp ups and downs it gradually rises up the ladder of progress, higher and higher toward the sun of eternal “cultural values.”

From the Russian Marxists A. Deborin has devoted a detailed article to Spengler in the newly released first issue of the new journal *Under the Banner of Marxism*. Deborin analyzes and criticizes in detail not only the general philosophical but also the political views of Spengler, as laid out by the latter not in *The Decline of Europe* but in his later work *Preussentum und Sozialismus*. In contrast to the German socialist journal articles I just analyzed, the work of Deborin is strictly restrained in its approach to the subject, in its tools of criticism, and in its very style in the spirit of orthodox Marxism. The author reveals the reactionary essence of Spengler, uncovers his class background, and sarcastically laughs at his attempt to weld together the Prussian national monarchical tradition and the socialist ideal of the proletariat. All this is correct and well-deserved. Spengler’s dreams of the revival and global triumph of Prussianism under the banner of the imperialist workers’ International are indisputably reactionary and merit all censure. The truth in this little idea of Spengler is perhaps not as groundless as it seems at first glance. It may be that something more serious is concealed here than the boundless fantasy of a desperate reactionary thrown from the saddle by revolution. But we will leave aside this aspect of the problem. Spengler's political sympathies have, in his words, only “biographical interest.” They are not organically related to his main historico-philosophical conception, and as far as we can judge from our beautiful distance, “Spenglerism” in Germany does not necessarily act in conjunction with monarchism, but is easily reconciled with other, more democratic perspectives on life.

We return therefore to the main problem, the replacement of cultures. “The content of culture changes,” writes Deborin, “while culture itself remains and makes ever new conquests. Socialism does not strive for the destruction of culture, but to “conquer” it, and to further its development, investing it with new content. Therefore we can speak of the “destruction” of particular content of culture, but not of culture in general. The perishing content of culture is contrasted here with the immutability of culture itself or “culture in general,” i.e. obviously the immutability of forms of culture, its organizing principles, its unifying ties. In history, as it were, just the opposite took place. Individual “contents”—useful information, technical inventions, labor devices—migrated from culture to culture, but “cultures themselves,” living and evolving

from time immemorial, always perished in the end, giving way to others. Can one say, for example, that Christianity has kept pagan Roman culture unchanged, enriching it with new content? Or that the forms of culture have remained unchanged during the transition from the feudal order to the bourgeois? And in any case, it is obvious that socialism, presupposing a new type of organization, new labor incentives, new political institutions, a new order of ideas and feelings, is primarily a change in culture itself, in the main pillars of its forms. And if these new forms had arisen in the bosom of the socialist movement, at least in embryo, the socialists, sensing their vitality, would have had enough presence of mind to watch the decline of bourgeois culture without getting dizzy, and would not have felt the need for illusory “eternal values,” “objective truths,” and other relics of the deceased divine revelation. It is significant, however, that even Deborin, who has remained true to the maximum extent to Marxist orthodoxy, in essence takes the same position which, as we have just seen, united German professors and moderate socialists in the battle against Spenglerism. “The content of cultures changes, but culture as such will never perish” is a paraphrase of the words of Shikovskii quoted above: “the historical process as a whole” knows neither ups nor downs, but knows only transitions. Deborin sees no signs of the decline of Europe and regards Spengler’s pessimism as something like a post-war and post-revolutionary “Katzenjammer” [very loosely: hangover], forgetting that Spengler wrote his book before the war, and that the war itself, and more so the postwar state of “neither war nor peace,” are striking symptoms of a “decline” underway. And finally, like all the critics of Spengler we dealt with above, Deborin eventually takes refuge from cultural disasters and catastrophes under the canopy of objective truth and the progressive evolution of humanity: “The profound metaphysics of Spengler, of Danilevskii,” he writes, “thus leads inevitably to the denial of evolution and human progress, to the collapse of science and of all objective knowledge, but our ideologists of nationalism have a good feel for where ‘the shoe is too tight.’ Both attack Darwinism and socialism with the same ferocity, well aware that the ideas of evolution and scientific objectivism constitute a serious threat to their ideology.”

Oh, if only the “idea” of evolution could turn back the actual process of degradation, and the “idea” of objectivism protected truths from factual death!

So, our cursory review of the anti-Spengler literature leads to the surprising conclusion that all opponents of Spengler, for all the diversity of their philosophical views, political convictions, and individual temperaments, form a sort of “united front” of paladins of eternal truth, global evolution, and uninterrupted progress. And so far no one, to my knowledge, has yet contrasted Spengler’s pessimism of wasting away with the optimism of an origin [*i.e., the Bolshevik revolution as metaphorical birth*] issuing not from fearful denial but from courageous recognition of the catastrophic nature of the global process, of the transient nature of cultures and their truths, and, in particular, from recognition of the impending doom of the European culture now living out its century. What does this mean? Is there not a single believing socialist remaining in the sublunary world? Or perhaps the true revolutionaries, the true bearers of the shoots of the coming culture, are busy with more important matters, and they have no time to react to Spenglerism? Let us hope that the latter is true.

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V. Vaganian [an early editor of *Under the Banner of Marxism*], reviewing articles by F. A. Stepun, S. L. Frank, N. A. Berdiaev, and Ia. M. Bukshpan devoted to Spengler, titled his note:

“Our Russian Spenglerians.” This, of course, is an exaggeration: none of these authors can be called a “Spenglerian.” But it is true that they all relate to Spengler much more favorably than the majority of German critics of *The Decline of Europe*. And S. L. Frank and N. A. Berdiaev see in Spenglerism a symptom of a “benevolent” turn in the minds of the Western intelligentsia, namely, its turn to faith. The “decline of Europe” is a punishment for godlessness, and a return to Christianity would be the revival of a dying culture—that is the gist of their reflections on Spengler’s book.

That thirst for faith is one of the main motifs of the Spengler symphony of sentiments is indisputable, but according to Spengler falling away from Christianity cannot be regarded as accidental and remediable “sin,” and a return to faith does not depend on the goodwill of Western intellectuals: Christianity has inwardly outlived itself, and it is dying just as other great religions have died. That is the historical destiny with which we must be reconciled, because any attempts to revolt against it will only lead to the development of an impotent, soul-enervating, romantic-religious reverie, but in no event they will not return to dying Christianity the effective, culturally-creative power it has lost. And it is curious that Russian religious-philosophical thought, a tradition which S. L. Frank and, in particular, N. A. Berdiaev support, in the person of its last major representatives also arrives at essentially the same conclusion. In fact, what is the “Grand Inquisitor” if not a picture of the irreligious “civilization” to which the death of the Christian God must inevitably lead humanity after a series of disastrous revolutions? But what Dostoevsky hinted at in parables, Vladimir Soloviev expressed directly and clearly in his “Three Conversations”: the historical mission of Christianity is over, and with it the meaning of history is exhausted. No cultural renaissance is possible henceforward, and the believer can only wait for the apotheosis preached by the Book of Revelations.

In substance I shall confine my remarks to this, and finally say a few words about the “portrait” of Spengler sketched by F. A. Stepun. He distinguishes in the Spengler “three faces”: Spengler “is not only a romantic-illusionist of yesterday, and not only a mystic-gnostic of the eternal day of humanity—he is in addition still a modern man, too, poisoned by toxins of all-European civilization. Having fathomed with prophetic power the image of this civilization as an image of a Europe made ready for death, he has remained in some sense its sword and its song.” Depicting the image of Spengler, F. Stepun tries to be faithful to reality, but not for nothing do they say that every work of art is most of all like its creator. And in the Stepun portrait of Spengler the features of a self-portrait inadvertently show through: the visage of the romantic-illusionist, so close to the soul of the artist, comes to the fore, pushing away and concealing other “visages,” especially the strange visage, incomprehensible to F. A. Stepun, of “the sword and singer of modern civilization.” And yet this is the visage before which Stepun stops in complete incomprehension (“in some sense,” “some kind of Prussian-Roman taste,” etc.), whose inner connection with Spengler’s worldview he never once tries to expose. Precisely this visage is the true visage of Spengler, organically fused with his basic intuition of “destiny.”

“Destiny,” as Spengler understands and feels it, has nothing to do with fatalism, with the idea of fate or predestination. Spengler’s idea of “fate” is identical with Bergson’s understanding of the definite orientation of creative aspirations. This is the direction in which the creative forces of culture, following their internal momentum, their organic nature, build up history, and without which nothing culturally valuable and historically significant can be created. In a word, in the intuitive language of Spengler “historic destiny” names the same thing that on the plane of



objective knowledge Marxists call the “tendency of historical development.” “Destiny” understood in this sense is not an inexorable fate: one might not follow its dictates, not recognize them, and even struggle with them, but any such rejection of historical destiny is equally fruitless and misspent waste of forces. The main feature of giftedness for Spengler is “physiognomic tact,” that is the ability to intuitively guess the future and act in its direction. That is why Spengler treats “romantic illusionism” so contemptuously, laughs so bitterly at its “provincial” idealistic reverie. In the eyes of Spengler romanticism testifies not only to impotence, but also to the mediocrity of the mind vanquished by it. It is possible that Spengler is struggling here with his own unconscious romantic visage, but in any case this visage is chased by Spengler from the field of clear daytime consciousness with great mercilessness.

Thus, when reading the essay by F. A. Stepun it is necessary to carry out a substantial shifting of Spengler’s “visages” to restore the correct perspective. Nonetheless, this essay of all the expositions that I know of the philosopher Spengler, not only in Russian, but also in German, is the closest approximation to the original, and therefore it should be read by anyone interested in Spengler and lacking the opportunity to acquaint himself with him in the original.

Translation: KH