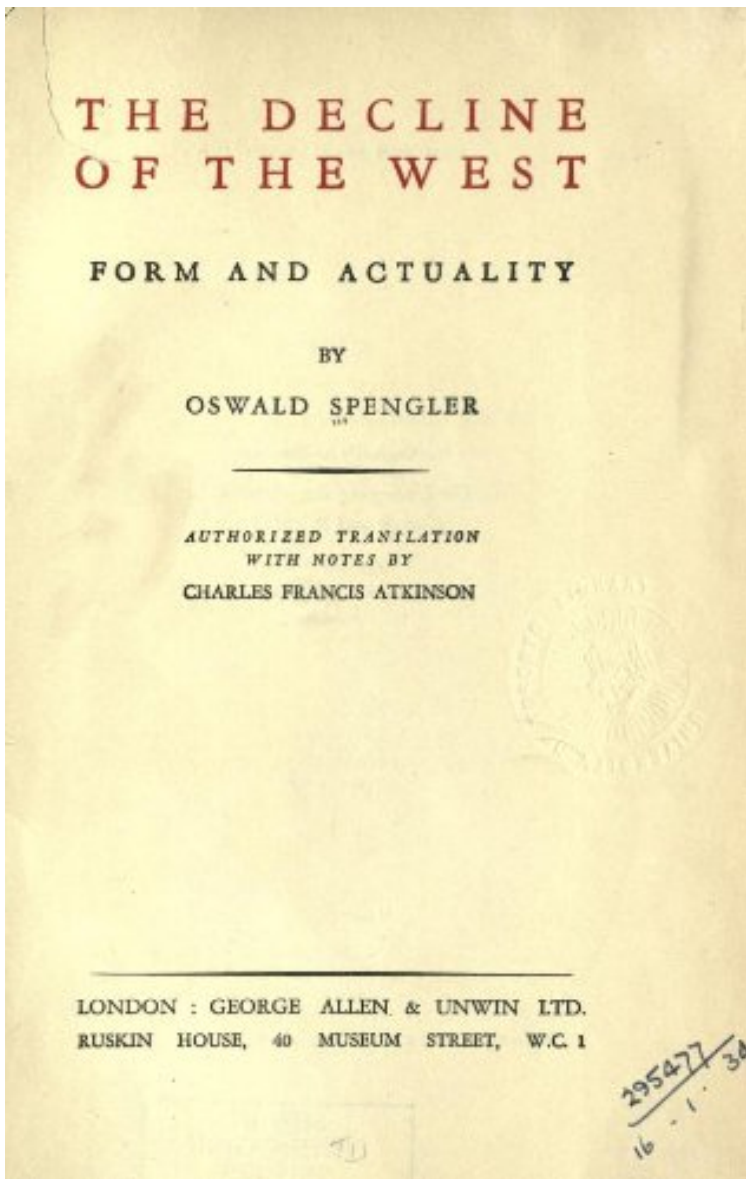


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# The decline of the West (English Edition)



*Par Oswald Spengler*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe decline of the West ([c1918])ExtraitINTRODUCTIONIn this book is attempted for the first time the venture of predetermining history, of following the still untravelled stages in the destiny of a Culture, and specifically of the only Culture of our time and on our planet which is actually in the phase of fulfilment--the West European--American.Is there a logic of history? Is there, beyond all the casual and incalculable elements of the separate events, something that we may call a metaphysical structure of historic humanity, something that is essentially independent of the outward forms--social, spiritual and political--which we see so clearly? Are not these actualities indeed secondary or derived from that something? Does

world-history present to the seeing eye certain grand traits, again and again, with sufficient constancy to justify certain conclusions? And if so, what are the limits to which reasoning from such premisses may be pushed? Is it possible to find in life itself--for human history is the sum of mighty life-courses which already have had to be endowed with ego and personality, in customary thought and expression, by predicating entities of a higher order like "the Classical" or "the Chinese Culture," "Modern Civilization"--a series of stages which must be traversed, and traversed moreover in an ordered and obligatory sequence? For everything organic the notions of birth, death, youth, age, lifetime, are fundamentals--may not these notions, in this sphere also, possess a rigorous meaning which no one has as yet extracted? In short, is all history founded upon general biographic archetypes? The decline of the West, which at first sight may appear, like the corresponding decline of the Classical Culture, a phenomenon limited in time and space, we now perceive to be a philosophical problem that, when comprehended in all its gravity, includes within itself every great question of Being. If therefore we are to discover in what form the destiny of the Western Culture will be accomplished, we must first be clear as to what culture is, what its relations are to visible history, to life, to soul, to nature, to intellect, what the forms of its manifestation are and how far these forms--peoples, tongues and epochs, battles and ideas, states and gods, arts and craftworks, sciences, laws, economic types and world-ideas, great men and great events--may be accepted and pointed to as symbols. The means whereby to identify dead forms is Mathematical Law. The means whereby to understand living forms is Analogy. By these means we are enabled to distinguish polarity and periodicity in the world. It is, and has always been, a matter of knowledge that the expression-forms of world-history are limited in number, and that eras, epochs, situations, persons, are ever repeating themselves true to type. Napoleon has hardly ever been discussed without a side-glance at Caesar and Alexander--analogies of which, as we shall see, the first is morphologically quite in acceptable and the second is correct. Frederick the Great, in his political writings--such as his Considerations, 1738--moves among analogies with perfect assurance. Thus he compares the French to the Macedonians under Philip and the Germans to the Greeks. "Even now," he says, "the Thermopylae of Germany, Alsace and Lorraine, are in the hands of Philip," therein exactly characterizing the policy of Cardinal Fleury. We find him drawing parallels also between the policies of the Houses of Habsburg and Bourbon and the proscriptions of Antony and of Octavius. Still, all this was only fragmentary and arbitrary, and usually implied rather a momentary inclination to poetical or ingenious expressions than a really deep sense of historical forms. In this region no one hitherto has set himself to work out a method, nor has had the slightest inkling that there is here a root, in fact the only root, from which can come a broad solution of the problems of History. Analogies, insofar as they laid bare the organic structure of history, might be a blessing to historical thought. Their technique, developing under the influence of a comprehensive idea, would surely eventuate in inevitable conclusions and logical mastery. But as hitherto understood and practised, they have been a curse, for they have enabled the historians to follow their own tastes, instead of soberly realizing that their first and hardest task was concerned with the symbolism of history and its analogies. Thus our theme, which originally comprised only the limited problem of present-day civilization, broadens itself into a new philosophy--the philosophy of the future, so far as the metaphysically exhausted soil of the West can bear such, and in any case the only philosophy which is within the possibilities of the West European mind in its next stages. It expands into the conception of a morphology of world-history, of the world-as-history in contrast to the morphology of the world-as-nature that hitherto has been almost the only theme of philosophy. And it reviews once again the forms and movements of the world in their depths and final significance, but this time according to an entirely different ordering, which groups them, not in an ensemble picture inclusive of everything known, but in a picture of life, and presents them not as things-become, but as things-becoming. The world-as-history, conceived, viewed and given form from out of its opposite, the world-as-nature--here is a new aspect of human existence on this earth. As yet, in spite of its immense significance, both practical and theoretical, this aspect has not been realized, still less presented. Some obscure inkling of it there may have been, a distant momentary glimpse there has often been, but no one has deliberately faced it and taken it in with all its implications. We have before us two possible ways in which man may inwardly possess and experience the world around him. With all rigour I distinguish (as to form, not substance) the organic from the mechanical world-impression, the content of images from that of laws, the picture and symbol from the formula and the system, the instantly actual from the constantly possible, the intents and purposes of imagination ordering according to plan from the intents and purposes of experience dissecting according to scheme; and--to mention even thus early an opposition that has never yet been noted, in spite of its significance--the domain

of chronological from that of mathematical number. Consequently, in a research such as that lying before us, there can be no question of taking spiritual-political events, as they become visible day by day on the surface, at their face value, and arranging them on a scheme of "causes" or "effects" and following them up in the obvious and intellectually easy directions. Such a "pragmatic" handling of history would be nothing but a piece of "natural science" in disguise, and for their part, the supporters of the materialistic idea of history make no secret about it--it is their adversaries who largely fail to see the similarity of the two methods. What concerns us is not what the historical facts which appear at this or that time are, per se, but what they signify, what they point to, by appearing. I have not hitherto found one who has carefully considered the morphological relationship that inwardly binds together the expression-forms of all branches of a Culture. Yet, viewed from this morphological standpoint, even the humdrum facts of politics assume a symbolic and even a metaphysical character, and--what has perhaps been impossible hitherto--things such as the Egyptian administrative system, the Classical coinage, analytical geometry, the cheque, the Suez Canal, the book-printing of the Chinese, the Prussian Army, and the Roman road-engineering can, as symbols, be made uniformly understandable and appreciable. But at once the fact presents itself that as yet there exists no theory-enlightened art of historical treatment. What passes as such draws its methods almost exclusively from the domain of that science which alone has completely disciplined the methods of cognition, viz., physics, and thus we imagine ourselves to be carrying on historical research when we are really following out objective connexions of cause and effect. Judged by the standards of the physicist and the mathematician, the historian becomes careless as soon as he has assembled and ordered his material and passes on to interpretation. That there is, besides a necessity of cause and effect--which I may call the logic of space--another necessity, an organic necessity in life, that of Destiny--the logic of time--is a fact of the deepest inward certainty, a fact which suffuses the whole of mythological religions and artistic thought and constitutes the essence and kernel of all history (in contradistinction to nature) but is unapproachable through the cognition-forms which the Critique of Pure Reason investigates. This fact still awaits its theoretical formulation. Mathematics and the principle of Causality lead to a naturalistic, Chronology and the idea of Destiny to a historical ordering of the phenomenal world. Both orderings, each on its own account, cover the whole world. The difference is only in the eyes by which and through which this world is realized.

**THE MEANING OF HISTORY FOR THE INDIVIDUAL** Nature is the shape in which the man of higher Cultures synthesizes and interprets the immediate impressions of his senses. History is that from which his imagination seeks comprehension of the living existence of the world in relation to his own life, which he thereby invests with a deeper reality. Whether he is capable of creating these shapes, which of them it is that dominates his waking consciousness, is a primordial problem of all human existence. Man, thus, has before him two possible ways of regarding the world....

Revue de presse "This grand panorama, this imaginative sweep, this staggering erudition, this Nietzschean prose, with its fine color and ringing force, mark a work that must endure."-- Henry Hazlitt, New York Sun. "Here is one of the mighty books of the century, which, sooner or later, will be read by all who ponder the riddle of existence... it is a truly monumental work, at once depressing in its pessimism and exhilarating in its compelling challenge to our accepted ideas."-- Arthur D. Gayer, The Forum. "As one reads Spengler the thought keeps recurring, ever more insistently, that here again is one of those universal minds which we had come to think were no longer possible."-- Allen V. Peden, St. Louis Post-Dispatch. "Audacious, profound, crochety, absurd, exciting, and magnificent."-- Lewis Mumford, The New Republic. "With monumental learning, with an independence and coldness of judgment which defers nothing to great names or consecrated opinions, and in a style always forceful and in places eloquent, Spengler surveys man's cosmic march, analyzes social classes and the work of leaders, dissects the idea of the State... challenges the economic interpretation of history and appraises religion and religions, only to find them all, in the culture of the West, running fast to decay under the impetus of civilization doomed by destiny from which there is no escape."-- William MacDonald, New York Times. "Not since Nietzsche left his indelible mark upon European thought has a work of philosophy come out of Germany, or any other country in Europe, comparable in importance, brilliance and encyclopaedic knowledge with The Decline of the West."-- Ernest Boyd, The Independent. "For his methods, his challenges, and his attempts to portray the morphology of civilization, and his flaming appeal to the imagination, Spengler should be read by all who are trying to grope their way in the dusk of evening or dawn."-- Charles Beard, New York Herald Tribune Books.