

OSWALD SPENGLER'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY AND GLOBAL HISTORY

Y. A. Yahela

jy.yahela@proton.me

Scientific advisor – A. I. Zelenkov, doctor of science (philosophy), professor

German philosopher O. Spengler, best known for his two-volume work «The Decline of the West», has been considered an enigmatic and ambiguous figure in academic circles, occupying peripheral status in serious literature. This article aims to demonstrate signs of a renaissance of Spenglerian thought and to establish its role and significance for a newly forming field of study – global history. As the relevance of some of O. Spengler's ideas is being discovered the question of the methodological and prognostic force of his ideas reemerges.

Keywords: Oswald Spengler; global history; world history; theory of civilization; Spenglerianism;

O. Spengler was a German philosopher of the XX century best known for his magnum opus «The Decline of the West». He remains an enigmatic figure whose works, though wildly popular initially, were openly criticized and often disregarded or ignored in academic circles. There has been ongoing discussion around his works, many researchers have tried to conclude the debate around the subject matter by claiming that O. Spengler's ideas and work are unsound, unscientific, inconsistent, etc. Every time it would seem that the debate was finally over only to be revived once again. The beginning of the XXI century marks a renaissance of Spenglerian thought paralleled only by its initial popularity. It would seem that the state of instability, turbulence and crisis in the world today has created fertile intellectual ground for the reconsideration of O. Spengler's philosophy of history presented in the «Decline of the West». This article aims to demonstrate signs of a renaissance of Spenglerian thought, as well as uncover its role and significance in a newly forming field of study – global history. As the relevance of some of his ideas in different subject areas is being discovered and the German philosopher gradually gains legitimate status within some academic circles, the question of the methodological and prognostic force of his ideas re-emergence.

When O. Spengler's «Decline of the West» first came out it gained a lot of attention and was generally very popular. Despite this, he was often viewed as an obscure and marginal figure in academic circles. Many scholars and intellectuals disregarded his work, heavily criticizing it on various grounds including methodological inconsistency and factual inaccuracy. At the same time there were notable thinkers like T. Adorno, G. Simmel, H. Kissinger, L. Wittgenstein among others who noted the significance and potential of O. Spengler's works.

Currently the German philosopher is still regarded as a dubious figure, but certain circumstances point to a change in perception. One such circumstance is the recent heightened interest in his work. Articles discussing or mentioning O. Spengler appear on a regular basis. Recently a number of books have been published covering various aspects of O. Spengler's views including a doctoral thesis [1; 2]. The Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence issued a volume in 2022 dedicated to O. Spengler and «The Decline of the West» [3]. In 2017 The Oswald Spengler Society was founded. The organization remains active dedicating itself to the study of world history while «drawing inspiration from the works and ideas of Oswald Spengler» [4]. In the foreword to the above mentioned journal, philosopher G. M. Swer points out that interest and research into the work of O. Spengler has never stopped, moreover recently interest in his intellectual legacy has spiked [4]. Professor D. Engels in the recently published book «Key Thinkers of the Radical Right» (2019) observes that «there [has] been something of a renaissance of Spengler, exemplified by an ever-growing series of studies and conferences» [2, p. 13–15]. The current wave of interest is perhaps the most significant since the initial popularity of «The Decline of the West» when it was first published. New actualizations of O. Spengler's ideas are most apparent within the realm of political and global historical thought. We will focus on the latter.

In his two-volume work «The Decline of the West» O. Spengler offered a bird's-eye view on history and refused the popular at the time Eurocentric approach. He helped shape the perception of Western culture as a whole, describing it as Faustian in its core essence. He offered an organicist approach to understanding cultures viewing them as living organisms. Each culture inevitably goes through a life cycle that includes the stages of birth, development, decline and death. It has a unique «soul» fundamentally impenetrable to other cultures. The culture of the West is only one of the many souls to exist and is currently entering the stage of decline which O. Spengler termed as civilization. Though «The Decline of the West» was often denied any significance in historical thought, it helped spark fruitful conversation and debate inspiring great works of historical thought. For example, the English historian A. Toynbee built on O. Spengler's approach creating a similar civilizational theory. The prominent American historian W. McNeill wrote one of his main works «The Rise of the West: a History of human Community» (1963) as an antidote to the German philosopher's «The Decline of the West». It gained general approval even in academic circles at the time and was claimed to be one of the most influential books on history written in the 20th century. The book greatly contributed to forming the field of world history studies. After the book came out many campuses rebranded their Western civilization courses into world history [5]. American historian B. Mazlish would later call O. Spengler and A. Toynbee the

«guardian angels» of world history and stated that they «strongly influenc[ed] William McNeill, recognized by many as the father of world history» [6; p. 105–106]. Currently global history, a more sophisticated and contemporary version of world history, is a field of study that is quickly developing and offers much potential to significantly influence not only the general field of history studies and the philosophy of history, but all of the humanities and social sciences [7; p. 3–6]. Global history is a subject matter as well as a methodological approach that may have such long-reaching implications as to «effect a change in the organization and institutional order of knowledge» [7; p. 4]. Historian S. Conrad offers a preliminary and broad definition of global history as «a form of historical analysis in which phenomena, events, and processes are placed in global contexts» [7; p. 5]. A fundamental aspect of global history, and one that sets it apart from world history, is its orientation towards achieving a perspective on historical processes from the outside, observing from a bird's-eye view. This means the nation-state perspective is forfeited as essentialist and one-sided, generally unable to make objective observation due to its inherent short-sightedness. Naturally this also refutes eurocentrism or any other –ism as a hindrance to true historical inquiry. At the same time, global history stresses the positionality of any history researcher: «historians may write about the entire planet, but they do so from a particular place, and their narratives will partly be colored by the dynamics of that location» [7; p. 67]. The genealogy of these fundamental aspect of global history can be traced back to O. Spengler [2; 8]. These ideas permeate the «The Decline of the West» and were initially disregarded. Recently historian D. Pereira offered a reconsideration of O. Spengler's and A. Toynbee's contribution to global history. He views both authors as source of a «dark root» within the new field of study. The concept of the «dark root» encompasses «the controversial, speculative and anti-scientific claims» of O. Spengler and A. Toynbee, namely the cyclical vision of history, the intention to predict the future and perhaps discreditation of cultures. D. Pereira views O. Spengler's «The Decline of the West» as a foundational work of the «dark root» of global history. The historian points out that contemporary historian D. Christian arrives at a similar line of thought as did O. Spengler and A. Toynbee: «Ironically, the path of science leads Christian to the same Spenglerian and Toynbian destinations, that is, that the major and fundamental hazard to civilization, in this case a global civilization, comes from inwards and not outwards». D. Pereira also notes that some of the criticism aimed at O. Spengler and A. Toynbee may soon be refuted scientifically [8; p. 693].

In conclusion we have established, firstly, that the popularity of O. Spengler is generally on the rise and he is potentially gaining a legitimate status within some academic circles. Secondly, one of the new actualizations of Spengler's ideas is within a new, influential and quickly-developing field of study: global

history. Both of these factors give reason to believe that a shift in the status and perception of O. Spengler's work is already taking place. The shift grants Spengler's work a more significant place in the realm of human knowledge, bringing his ideas up for serious consideration, including questions regarding their methodological and prognostic force especially in regards to global history.

References

1. *Lewis B.* Oswald Spengler and the Politics of Decline. New York: Berghahn Books, 2022.
2. *Sedgwick M.* Key Thinkers of the Radical Right: Behind the New Threat to Liberal Democracy. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.
3. Oswald Spengler's international influence: from the decline of the west till the present day [Electronic resource]. *Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence*. 2022. Vol. VI, iss. 2. URL: <https://trivent-publishing.eu/home/151-pjcv-62-oswald-spengler.html>. Date of access: 15.03.2023.
4. *Mazlish B.* The New Global History. New York: Routledge, 2006.
5. *Conrad S.* What is Global History? New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016.
6. *Pereira D.* "Dark Root" of Global History: Contributions made by Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee // *Brazilian Journal of International Relations*. 2021. Vol. 10, n. 3. P. 677–698.