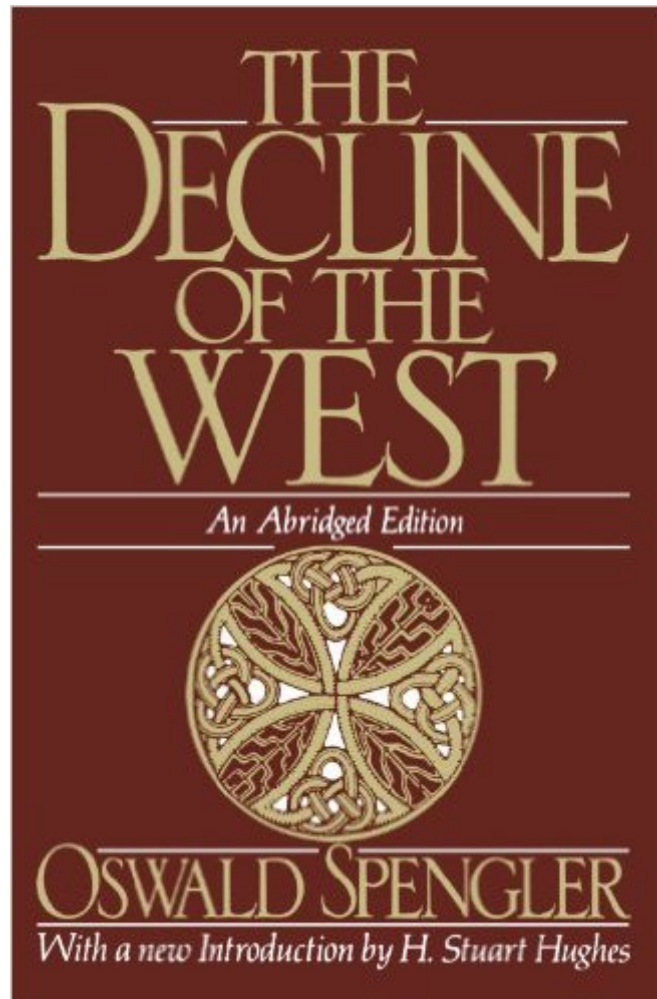


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The Decline Of The West (Oxford Paperbacks)



Synopsis

Since its first publication in two volumes between 1918-1923, *The Decline of the West* has ranked as one of the most widely read and most talked about books of our time. In all its various editions, it has sold nearly 100,000 copies. A twentieth-century Cassandra, Oswald Spengler thoroughly probed the origin and "fate" of our civilization, and the result can be (and has been) read as a prophesy of the Nazi regime. His challenging views have led to harsh criticism over the years, but the knowledge and eloquence that went into his sweeping study of Western culture have kept *The Decline of the West* alive. As the face of Germany and Europe as a whole continues to change each day, *The Decline of the West* cannot be ignored. The abridgment, prepared by the German scholar Helmut Werner, with the blessing of the Spengler estate, consists of selections from the original (translated into English by Charles Francis Atkinson) linked by explanatory passages which have been put into English by Arthur Helps. H. Stuart Hughes has written a new introduction for this edition. In this engrossing and highly controversial philosophy of history, Spengler describes how we have entered into a centuries-long "world-historical" phase comparable to late antiquity. Guided by the philosophies of Goethe and Nietzsche, he rejects linear progression, and instead presents a world view based on the cyclical rise and decline of civilizations. He argues that a culture blossoms from the soil of a definable landscape and dies when it has exhausted all of its possibilities. Despite Spengler's reputation today as an extreme pessimist, *The Decline of the West* remains essential reading for anyone interested in the history of civilization.

Book Information

Series: Oxford Paperbacks

Paperback: 492 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (February 14, 1991)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0195066340

ISBN-13: 978-0195066340

Product Dimensions: 8 x 1.1 x 5.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviews Â (106 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #48,292 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #5 in Â Books > Textbooks >

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Customer Reviews

This paperback edition is NOT "The Decline of the West" by Oswald Spengler. It is an abridgement of that work perpetrated by one Arthur Helps apparently from a German abridgement by Helmut Werner and an English translation (of the original or the abridgement?) by Charles Francis Atkinson. So if you buy this, you're not buying Spengler (leave aside the issue of how much of Spengler you're getting when you have to read it in translation - who would want to give up all the literature in the world written in languages he doesn't read?). What you're buying is sort-of Spengler. Now, in fairness, at 400+ pages this isn't exactly the Classic Comic Book retelling of Spengler's long and complex work. But it isn't that work either. And it is very hard to tell this from the announcement or description of the book. And that's simply wrong. It's a deception. I don't think it's one that was done to trick people. It's more likely the product of sloppiness or inattention. Some people may believe that a shortened Spengler is just fine for their purposes. I have no disagreement with them. My concern is that those who, like me, would never have even considered buying an abridgement of a book like this can be misled into doing so by an inaccurate description of what the book is. So now I have a book to return instead of to read. I hope to save someone else that inconvenience.

This postmodern chronicle of the western world by early 20th century German historian and philosopher, Oswald Spengler, offers a lot for today's reader despite its flaws. It's an incredibly rich and complex analysis, attacking the causal factors of the development of western culture on many fronts simultaneously: historically, scientifically, artistically, architecturally, ecclesiastically, and so much more. This book is capable of describing many different aspects of western culture to many different readers, depending on who they happen to be and what their interest in western history is. I will only mention three aspects of Spengler's work in my review, since these aspects are what grabbed my attention, bearing in mind that the book contains much more than what I touch on here. A. Spengler, a westerner himself, constructs detailed accounts in describing the historical development of western Europe. One of his main theses is a distinction between culture and civilization, which he derives from a credible, if difficult to falsify model for a universal cycle of human cultural growth, followed by decline into advanced civilization. For those familiar with biological theory, Spengler's model is essentially a growth curve. The familiar biological model is the lag phase, then the log phase, followed by the stationary phase, and ending in the death phase; which repeats itself virtually ad infinitum. In Spengler's model he labels these phases, respectively, after the seasons, beginning with spring and ending with winter. The spring-time of a people is a mythical phase, where settled economic life grows from a rural peasantry. This is followed by the

summer, or cultural phase of strong and dynamic growth in all important aspects of a people; of economic, religious, martial, and other relevant human impulses. Then comes the fall, where dogma forms. Where adult-like reason takes root from the innocent cultural phase and puritan oversight of national religion and government begin to set hard like concrete. Finally, the winter of a people is when the national personality and traditions lose their effectiveness. Civilized and urbane money and economic issues tend to become preimminent over the cultural issues. Technology and irreligion become rampant. This cycle is not a modern phenomena, but repeats itself as seen in ancient Egyptian, Roman, and Aztec civilizations; and again, currently in America.

B. Spengler's style in elucidating a history of the west, and developing an hypothesis of universal and collective human behavior, is punctuated by the era in which he wrote: the early 20th century. Much of the historical analysis before and after this era lacks the materialist, psychoanalytical, and structural influence that typified thinking and literature when Spengler wrote. Published in 1926, *The Decline of the West* contains that biting air of criticism and structuralism so fecund in those times. This critical structural analysis gives Spengler's work a sharper contrast and greater depth of field than would likely have been possible for a writer from before or after Spengler's time. This is not to take away from Spengler's native insight and acuity, which was nevertheless, likely heightened by the charged literary atmosphere of early 20th century Germany.

C. The way Spengler psychoanalyzes the structure of history through art and architecture is almost wholly absent from the majority of standard historical analyses. Reading Spengler makes one aware of this common lack. This is one of the strong points of this book, since art and architecture express so much of what a culture is and why it thinks in the ways it does.

All in all, despite the typical fallacies of sex and race Spengler repeats, one could say this is a seminal work describing western development and thought which no student of history should leave unopened. An advantage of reading this book today instead of when it was originally released is the internet. If you lack truly comprehensive powers of recall regarding the art and architecture Spengler uses to analyze his subject cultures, then using the internet to pull up the various paintings, sculptures, and architectural examples is most helpful as an active part of reading this work; turning what could otherwise be a dry, boring read into something more alive that captures what the author is trying to convey. If possible, bring up the actual images of the art and architecture Spengler describes at the moment you're reading about it. This gave me a more graphic and focused perspective of the cultures he analyzes. Reading this book was like experiencing a kaleidoscope of mind candy.

The Decline of the West is mainly known for Spengler's striking insights on diverse subjects that are

everywhere in the book. It is also enlightening in its overall metaphor of organic growth and decline of cultures and civilizations (what the book is mainly known for, but not its only virtue). Also he is very enlightening in his ability to describe universal type - within various subjects - and bring many things into perspective... If you already know basic, universal world history to any extent then Spengler's book - more so, I think, than other famous philosophies of history (Augustine's City of God, Hegel's History lectures, etc...) - can hit like a revelation. It's one of those books, though, that many people learn a lot from but find it hard to recommend or - if they're famous or have reputations (academic, etc.) to consider - talk about publicly because people get such different things out of it. This is not an anecdote about liberal or conservative, but I remember reading once that Henry Kissinger gave an edition of *Decline of the West* to Richard Nixon as a gift. As I was saying, because the book has such large stereotypes attached to it neither of those two very public men would want to talk about the book publicly, but it is read - and is a must read to some degree - by most everybody who is really interested in getting an understanding of history...a subject very central to overall understanding of almost everything...

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