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Department of Political Science
MCs in International Relations
Dissertation in Comparative History of Political Systems

THE PROPHET AND THE DICTATOR
OSWALD SPENGLER, BENITO MUSSOLINI AND THE INTELLECTUAL JUSTIFICATIONS FOR AUTHORITARIAN POWER

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Academic Year 2023/2024

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INTRODUCTION

In the Book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, awakens with a heavy heart after a disturbing dream and asks his magicians, astrologists and sages to reveal the meaning of his dream to him. The wise men approach the king and demand that he tells them the content of his dream so that they can interpret it. However, the king commands that they reveal to him the dream itself along with its meaning. If they fail, they will be killed, and their houses will be razed. Astonished, the wise men try to take time, asking him once more for the content of the dream. The king insists: either they tell him what his dream was, or he will execute them. Desperate, the king's sages try to convince Nebuchadnezzar that it's beyond any mortal's power to read a man's mind. Nebuchadnezzar, furious, decrees the death of every sage in Babylon. Among those to be slain is Daniel, a young Israelite deported to Babylon after the conquest of Jerusalem. Hearing about the decree and reasons behind it, Daniel acts swiftly and asks Arioch, the head of the king's guard, for more time. He pledges to reveal the dream's content to Nebuchadnezzar the next day. Then, he reunites his friends to implore God for help. That night, the king's dream is revealed to Daniel, who praises God. The following day, Daniel is brought before the throne by Arioch, and the king demands both the content and meaning of his disturbing dream. Daniel begins explaining: the dream was about what will happen in the future, about the end of days. He tells Nebuchadnezzar that, in his dream, he saw a gigantic, terrifying statue with a golden head, a silver chest and arms, a bronze abdomen, legs of iron, and feet partly of iron and partly of clay. Suddenly, the statue was shattered into fragments by an enormous rock, and the wind dispersed all the remains, leaving only the rock, which then transformed into a mountain[1]. Next, Daniel explains the meaning of the vision:

> *"You, O king, are the king of kings; to you the God of heaven has given dominion and strength, power and glory; human beings, wild beasts, and birds of the air, wherever they may dwell, he has handed over to you, making you ruler over them all; you are the head of gold. Another kingdom shall take your place, inferior to yours, then a third kingdom, of bronze, which shall rule over the whole earth. There shall be a fourth*

[1] Daniel 2:1-36, New American Bible (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), https://bible.usccb.org/bible/daniel/2.

kingdom, strong as iron; it shall break in pieces and subdue all these others, just as iron breaks in pieces and crushes everything else. The feet and toes you saw, partly of clay and partly of iron, mean that it shall be a divided kingdom, but yet have some of the hardness of iron. As you saw the iron mixed with clay tile, and the toes partly iron and partly clay, the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly fragile. The iron mixed with clay means that they shall seal their alliances by intermarriage, but they shall not stay united, any more than iron mixes with clay. In the lifetime of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed or delivered up to another people; rather, it shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and put an end to them, and it shall stand forever. That is the meaning of the stone you saw hewn from the mountain without a hand being put to it, which broke in pieces the iron, bronze, clay, silver, and gold. The great God has revealed to the king what shall be in the future."[2]

Nebuchadnezzar is speechless and falls to his knees, praising the young Israelite and his God. Daniel is later promoted chief of all the sages in Babylonia and appointed governor of the capital province[3].

In *Prisoners of Time*, Christopher Clark offers a beautiful reading of Nebuchadnezzar's dream and its interpretation by Daniel. Clark describes the story as a fable on power. Before his angsts, the most powerful man in the world is helpless and his most trusted bureaucrats and experts are useless. Daniel alone can read the king's soul: Nebuchadnezzar, who has no equal, fears his own mortality. Thus, Daniel reassures the king, affirming that his reign will stand unequalled until the end of time. Nonetheless, he imparts a sobering lesson: power is temporary and ultimately destined to fade. The king is in awe as he realises the finiteness of his reign, power, and, ultimately, life.

Daniel's vision of history has influenced generations of historians and tormented countless powerful figures. For many, history appeared as a foreordained sequence of

[2] Daniel 2:37-45, *New American Bible* (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), https://bible.usccb.org/bible/daniel/2.

[3] Daniel 2:46-48, New American Bible (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), https://bible.usccb.org/bible/daniel/2.

reigns, empires, and cultures, each doomed to decline and collapse[4]. Historians across generations have framed history a sequence of epochs marked by the birth and death of empires. The eschatological reflection on history has generated a vast body of literature, novels, essays, and has influenced many other facets of Western cultural production. Nonetheless, to confine its impact to the academic and cultural realms would be an underestimation. This historical vision, especially during times of great turmoil and crisis, has visibly shaped politics. Kings, princes, and politicians have wrought havoc under the justification of preserving states, cultures or even entire civilizations from the forces of decline. Amidst crisis and decline, there have always been intellectuals prepared to take on the task of interpreting their age. Following in the eschatological tradition previously mentioned, some thinkers have not only analysed their present crises but attempted to define the nature and trajectory of humanity's historical experiences, at times assuming the role of prophets. Oswald Spengler is one such figure.

In *The Decline of the West*, Spengler elaborates a theory of history, an assessment of his time, and a vision for the future of the West. In my thesis I discuss the link between Spenglerian thought and fascism, focusing on Spengler's reception in Italy, in particular among fascist intellectuals and Mussolini himself. Moreover, my study aspires to provide a broader hint on the relationship between decline – or, rather, historical-intellectual narratives and politico-popular perceptions of decline – and power, particularly authoritarian, antiliberal power. The thesis is thus structured around three chapters.

In the first chapter, I shall explore the "Spirit of the time" in which Oswald Spengler reflected on his vision of history and wrote his masterpiece. Spengler published *The Decline of the West* during the final acts of the *Weltkrieg*[5]. This monumental book is the result of Spengler's reflections on the political and societal shifts that occurred between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. The sudden and remarkable success of the manuscript, in turn, is the product of the uncertainty of the 1920s and the despair of the 1930s. Spengler belongs to the group of conservative thinkers that emerged in Germany after 1918 and known as the "Conservative Revolution". The

[4] Christopher Clark, *Prisoners of Time: Prussians, Germans and Other Humans* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2021), 19-21.

[5] German term for the Great War.

Conservative Revolution rejected liberalism and communism. Its chief figures envisioned a conservatism emphasising the heroic and irrational aspects of human nature, stressed the need for an authoritarian elite able to inspire the masses to pursue values beyond individual realisation and wellbeing[6]. The Conservative Revolution was the pinnacle of a broader rejection to the burgeoning optimism in the finality of history, proposed by Anglo-American Liberals and European Communists. Spengler's work and influence are deeply embedded in this cultural context. Therefore, examining the broader historical phase in which Spengler's work is situated will assist in understanding its foundations and its impact.

In the second chapter, I will explore the life and work of Oswald Spengler. Born into the emerging German middle class of the late nineteenth century, Spengler was a troubled and solitary figure, driven by aspirations of intellectual greatness and an early fascination with themes of cultural and civilizational decline. His work reflects his acute sense of the looming downfall of a civilization he only partly experienced, alongside a deep nostalgia for eras he never lived. *The Decline of the West* and his later works embody his perceptions and reflections on history. I intend to underline the principal themes presented in *The Decline of the West* and to delve into his subsequent works, particularly *Man and Technics* and *The Hour of Decision*, his final major contribution. Furthermore, I will analyse certain central themes in his work: his critique of the idea of Progress, his prophecy of Caesarism as the ultimate political form before the inevitable exhaustion of Western civilization, and his anxiety about demographic decline, cosmopolitanism and the abandonment of traditional values. Lastly, I will briefly address the academic, intellectual, and popular responses to *The Decline of the West* in both Europe and the United States.

In the third and central chapter of my research, I will examine Spengler's reception in Italy, his reception by Italian fascism, and his relationship with Mussolini himself. I will rely heavily on the analysis of Michael Thondl, the most comprehensive account of

[6] Matthew Rose, *A World After Liberalism: Five Thinkers Who Inspired the Radical Right* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 6-7.

the relationship between the German thinker and Italian fascism[7] – an often-overlooked relationship that proved consequential and influential for both Spengler and the regime. Spengler believed that Mussolini was the incarnation of the "Ceasar": the true leader (*Herrscherr*) that will appear in the last, glorious historical phase of the Western Civilisation. A man above passions and politics. Spengler praised Mussolini multiple times for his policies. He described the *Duce* as a man capable of repulsing individual and group interests for the sake of his country, a man above his own party[8]. In Mussolini, Spengler saw the re-emergence of elitist authority countering the massification of the political. My research question examines the extent to which Spengler influenced Mussolini and the fascist intelligentsia. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that Spengler had a significant impact on Mussolini, who returned the philosopher's admiration. Several documents show that Mussolini engaged with Spengler's ideas, as did many other fascist intellectuals. Moreover, I will use primary and secondary sources to investigate *how* Spengler was read and interpreted during the *Ventennio,* identifying which themes in his work were considered particularly relevant and examining how these influenced fascist ideology and policy. Finally, I will focus on the writings and speeches of Mussolini to demonstrate his frequent use of Spenglerian themes, in particular in relation to the critique of liberal democracy, the contempt for urbanisation and the legitimisation of authoritarian power.

Was Spengler a prophet, an ideologue or an enabler? I will conclude this thesis by assessing Spengler's overall impact on the fascist regime and Benito Mussolini, examining his relationship with authoritarian power in Italy.

Furthermore, Spengler represents the first of his kind – a type of intellectuals who in the twentieth and twenty-first century inspired a rejection of the liberal notion that history has a clear finality, with that being the continuous march of mankind toward progress and individual liberation. What relationship do these intellectuals share with the authoritarian, reactionary leaders of their time? What is the connection between intellectual narratives of Western decline and the reactionary policies that cyclically emerged during the past

[7] Michael Thondl, *Oswald Spengler in Italien: Kulturexport politischer Ideen der "Konservativen Revolution"* (Leipzig: Leipzig University Press, 2010).

[8] Ben Lewis, *Oswald Spengler and the Politics of Decline* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2022), 157-158.

century and still emerge today? What is, in the end, the relationship between the prophet and the dictator? A decent analysis extends beyond the scope of this thesis. Hence, I will limit myself to provide an assessment of Spengler's work, identifying its place in time and space, and then analysing its influence on Italian fascism. Even so, I will conclude with a brief reflection on the relationship between narratives of decline and authoritarian power.

1. ZEITGEIST

Hitler and Stalin meet while strolling through the park of Schönbrunn Castle. Thomas Mann comes close to declaring himself homosexual, and Franz Kafka nearly loses his mind for love. A cat furtively settles on Sigmund Freud's couch. It is bitterly cold, and the snow crunches underfoot. Else Lasker-Schüler is penniless and in love with Gottfried Benn; she receives a postcard from Franz Marc depicting a horse but dismisses Gabriele Münter as a nobody. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner sketches the cocottes of Potsdamer Platz. The first loop-the-loop in aviation is performed. But none of it matters. Oswald Spengler is already working on The Decline of the West.[9]

The late nineteenth and the initial part of the twentieth centuries were marked by profound upheavals that reshaped Western societies, politics, and ideologies. This chapter examines the *spirit of the age* – or *Zeitgeist* – that characterised this turbulent period and the subsequent political and intellectual transformations. At the end of the nineteenth century, multiple crises unfolded, from societal transformation to international tentions. These crises were international, national and personal. The world 'crisis' derives from the Latin *crisis*, which in turn comes from the Greek *κρίσις* (*krísis*), the Greek term originates from the verb *κρίνω* (*krínō*), which means 'to divide', 'to separate', 'to distinguish', or 'to decide'. The societal, scientific and social upheavals of the decades between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century generated several divides, distinctions and undoubtedly led some people to make decisions with significant consequences. These divisions, distinctions, and decisions had dimensions that were as much international, diplomatic, or political as they were personal and intimate.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the massification of the political and the erosion of traditional societal structures created public and intimate crises of identity in Western societies. These trends were accelerated by the catastrophe of the Great War. In the aftermath of the conflict, political and ideological disorientation permeated Western society, leading to new conflicts and fractures. The rise of

[9] Florian Illies, *1913. L'anno prima della tempesta* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2013), 7.

Bolshevism as well as the liberal ethos of the ‘20s, seismic shifts in gender roles, further democratisation and massification of politics, technological innovations and new political developments generated a deep re-evaluation of the moral and ideological underpinnings of society in the West. Moreover, the emergence of anti-colonial and non-white political movements in the non-western world and the perceived demographic decline in white polities contributed to the growth of a sense of uncertainty and fatalism. In this context, a reaction to the perceived decline of the traditional structures and the inadequacy of the mainstream ideologies such as liberalism and socialism mounted. The conservative response to these crises generated intellectual and political movements devoted to the replacement of the supposedly outdated structures of power with new forms of politics. These new systems were deemed necessary to protect the fundamental values of what reactionaries and right-wing radicals considered as the spiritual foundations of the Western civilisation.

Oswald Spengler simultaneously absorbed and analysed the crises of his time, reinforced the beliefs generated by these upheavals through his work, and openly called for a response. To understand his ideas, their influence on the Western world at large and in Italy in particular, and their appeal to men like Mussolini, it is essential to understand these crises.

1.1 A World in Turmoil

Spengler was socialized in a Europe of monarchs. When Queen Victoria died in 1901, Kaiser Wilhelm, Tsar Nicholas II, and the queens of Bulgaria, Sweden, Spain, Norway, and Greece all lost their grandmother. In England, Edward ascended the throne, he was related to Leopold II of Belgium as well. When World War I broke out, every European state except France and Switzerland was still ruled by a sovereign. The European monarchies were closely connected. Rulers spoke the same languages, were bound by family ties, and shared a common culture. Certainly, except for Russia, and to a lesser extent Austria-Hungary and Germany, monarchy and aristocracy had largely yielded to the demands of the bourgeoisie. Yet sovereigns remained the ultimate representatives of a Europe at the height of its power. However, alongside the old dynasties, a new reality was emerging – that of the Industrial Revolution, of masses of

workers in cities and the countryside, and above all, of the bourgeoisie. Mass society was taking shape – more unstable and dynamic – and the elites that had long ruled Europe were now forced to struggle with it. It is no coincidence that Hobsbawm would later describe this period as *"the triumph of the bourgeoisie."*[10]

Politics had already ceased to be the exclusive domain of monarchs and aristocrats; it was increasingly shaped by the bourgeoisie and the masses. The centres of mass politicisation were the cities, which were growing larger and more densely populated. London had six million inhabitants, Paris three million, while Vienna and Berlin each housed two million[11]. Berlin had undergone a profound transformation, evolving from a small political hub into a major industrial, scientific, financial, and cultural centre, populated by a vast middle and lower-middle class employed in the state apparatus, industries, and services. More than in Western European capitals, those of Central Europe had witnessed a significant influx of foreigners, mainly from Central and Eastern Europe, quickly becoming cosmopolitan cities where multiple languages were spoken, and different ethnic groups coexisted.

The rapid growth of early 20th-century metropolises coincided with the depopulation of rural areas, as peasants abandoned the countryside in search of better opportunities, and with the decline of the nobility – not only demographically but more importantly, politically and economically. These changes were not merely statistic phenomena but profound social transformations that were beginning to shake the seemingly stable society of the *Belle Époque*. For those who had dominated Europe for generations, the golden age of economic and imperial expansion carried ominous signs[12]. It is not difficult to imagine the sense of disorientation an aristocrat born in the Berlin of Wilhelm I might have felt upon finding himself, thirty years later, surrounded by a growing bourgeois and proletarian mass in Wilhelm II's Berlin, whose population had more than doubled in three decades.

As the expanding West extended its dominance over the rest of the world to sustain the growth of its internal markets, Africa and Asia became possessions of the

[10] Eric J. Hobsbaw, *Il trionfo della borghesia (1848-1875)* (Bari-Roma: Laterza, 2003).
[11] Simona Colarizi, *Novecento d'Europa* (Bari-Roma: Laterza, 2023) 9-10.

[12] *Ibid*., 12.

European great powers, which extracted resources and secured privileged markets, justifying colonial violence under the guise of a civilising mission. Yet, in the *New World*, the first signs of resistance among the subjugated populations were beginning to emerge. European embassies in Beijing were besieged by the *Boxers*, prompting the formation of a multinational force to regain control of China. Meanwhile, Britain began to feel the initial pressures of Indian nationalism, as well as of the nationalist movements in Egypt and among the Boers in South Africa. In Namibia, Germany responded to the Herero uprisings with genocide. While nationalist claims in the colonies were still in their beginning, within Europe, they were attracting increasing support across all social classes. *Pan-Germanism*, Serbian nationalism, and *Pan-Slavism* sought to create large nation-states encompassing all speakers of German, Serbian, or Slavic languages, often at the expense of minorities who found themselves on the wrong side of new borders. Nationalism and imperialism – two sides of the same coin – became defining elements of the emerging European bourgeoisie. Thanks to new means of communication and the spread of knowledge, nationalist and imperialist rhetoric could inflame public opinion with increasing ease. Imperialism and nationalism were both the cause and justification for the growing *will to power* that characterized broad segments of European society – particularly, and somewhat paradoxically, among the educated. While in Southern Italy, the Russian and Habsburg Empires, poverty, illiteracy, and ethnic divisions stifled the growth of nationalism and exceptionalist ideologies, these ideas flourished in more developed states with efficient, far-reaching bureaucracies.

The expansion of state institutions and the economy was driven by industrial and technological progress, which was seen as the engine of advancement. Science, reason, and technology formed the secular trinity of a generation that placed near-religious faith in the continuous improvement of technology and the steady rise of prosperity. For visitors to the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris, the future was a promising frontier, an unstoppable march forward. Markets redistributed the benefits of this progress, however unevenly. Consumer goods became more widely available, luring more people into buy through advertisements in newspapers, theatres, cinemas, and neon signs lighting up city streets. As the *Fourth Estate* took shape, so too did the *masses*, which became not just demographic entities but social and political forces. These masses could be influenced and directed through new means of communication. Their ambitions, tastes, and

imagination were shaped by newspapers, which played a crucial role in reinforcing the belief in an orderly, continuous progress, overseen by capable liberal elites who managed economic growth and ensured public welfare.

Yet this was not merely an era of consumption and expansion. Economic growth came at a cost, paid by countless workers subjected to harsh conditions, extracting resources and producing goods in Europe's mines and factories. Across European cities, the proletariat lived in inhumane conditions. Workers returned from twelve to fourteen hour shifts to overcrowded apartments, where up to sixteen people shared a single space without sanitation or running water. In London, even in the early 20th century, the poor were still dying from cholera epidemics.

Conditions in the countryside were often even worse. Millions of peasants had left Southern and Central-Eastern Europe to emigrate to the Americas, while others had abandoned the fields for the factories. Yet those who remained still constituted the majority of the population in both Western and Eastern Europe, enduring similarly brutal living conditions[13]. It was inevitable that such circumstances would lead to unrest, both in rural areas and in the cities. The discontent of the dispossessed was channelled by socialist movements, which were gaining increasing support and promising a future free from the power structures and capitalist exploitation brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Alongside the socialists, social Catholicism also responded to these grievances, promoting egalitarian and communitarian ideals.

These movements took advantage of modern communication and organizational tools to mobilize support, continuously rallying the masses around new demands and expanding their social influence. Newspapers, publishing houses, trade unions, cultural

[13] A note on German agrarian society. Unlike in other European countries, German agrarian society was characterised by a greater harmony between landowners and peasants. Moreover, both landowners and peasants shared a deep aversion to urbanisation, industrialisation, and technological progress. They perceived these developments as threats to the land, nature, and the soil to which the German aristocracy had long been spiritually bound. These forces were perceived as destructive to traditional, archaic cultural values and ways of life. It is no surprise, then, that Spengler – an admirer of aristocracy and a ruralist – embraced these ideological coordinates. As we will see in Chapter Two, the idealization of the countryside and the contempt for the city are central themes in Spengler's interpretation of the decline of the West.

organizations, and societies emerged to provide support for workers and peasants. Many European governments pursued conciliation and concessions to prevent the pressure from organized masses from leading to widespread social upheaval. Predictably, these reforms reinforced the credibility of socialist and social-democratic parties, as reflected in their electoral victories. For example, in 1912, the German SPD secured 34% of the vote. Social progress was slow, but it instilled a sense of confidence in the future among socialists and social democrats. In contrast, conservatives grew increasingly alarmed by the raising strength of left-wing parties and movements among the urban and rural proletariat.

Despite these social advances, a revolutionary faction within international socialism was gaining traction. These socialists rejected the parliamentary path as an illusion and instead advocated violent revolution. Their stance was reinforced by the brutal repression of peasant and worker uprisings in Russia in 1905, as well as the failure other upheavals in Southern Europe and the economic crisis of 1907. Many intellectuals also began to see violence as the only means of achieving profound change[14]. This shift brought a growing inclination toward extremism and glorification of violence within the left, a sentiment that had long existed in the most reactionary and nationalist fringes of the right.

In the years leading up to the war, excitement and anxiety grew in tandem. The political, intellectual, and scientific climate suggested the imminent end of an era – the collapse of the *Belle Époque* and the monarchic-bourgeois order of Europe – and the dawn of something new. This new era was heralded by relentless scientific and technological advancements. Intellectual and political ferment, artistic and literary movements in constant turmoil, and ever more promising innovations shook Western society. As Simona Colarizi notes in *Novecento d'Europa*, this period produced *"visions of progress articulated in futurist terms"* but also *"theories of social crisis that came to be seen as crises of civilization."* This *fin de siècle* anxiety was reflected in the works of novelists and artists who sensed both excitement and decline. Among the latter was Spengler, who in January 1913 wrote, *"I am the last in a series."*[15] Together with Spengler, figures such

[14] Colarizi, *Novecento*, 36.

[15] Illies, *1913*, 26

as Thomas Mann, Anton Chekhov, and Rudolf Steiner believed that an entire world was disappearing – some mourned its loss, while others hoped for something better.

A brief digression. Spengler also confessed his fear of women, admitting that he found intellectual conversations with them unbearable[16]. He was not alone in this sentiment. It is no coincidence that violence and virility were glorified among nationalists and conservatives. In *The Sleepwalkers*, Christopher Clark describes the profound crisis of masculinity experienced by men of the time. As Clark writes, *"In the period spanning the late 19th and early 20th centuries (...) competition with subordinate and marginalized forms of masculinity – such as the proletarian or non-white male – intensified the expression of 'true masculinity' within the elites."*[17] Hardness, strength, and decisiveness were qualities that the ruling classes, entirely male, boasted incessantly.

This *fin de siècle* masculinity, as Clark calls it, was a reaction to the social transformations of the time, which not only saw the emergence of new masculine models – no more just the aristocrat, but also the bourgeois and the worker – but also the increasingly organized and vocal demands of women for political participation. The feminist movement was growing rapidly. Women were taking on important professions, particularly teaching, especially in Northern Europe. Female philanthropic organizations were multiplying, and women-led peace movements mobilized tens of thousands across various countries to demand disarmament and an end to militarisation. It is not surprising that men like Spengler responded by associating pacifism with senility, softness, and femininity – traits he described as biologically and morally inadequate to ensure the survival of the West in what he later called *an age of world wars and revolutions*. As we will see, Spengler dedicated several pages to attacking shifts in gender roles, the relationships between rulers and the populace, between city and countryside, between white and non-white populations. He saw in these social changes the end of a disciplined, aristocratic, authoritarian, and masculine West.

[16] *Ibid*., 40, 168.
[17] Christopher Clark, *I Sonnambuli. Come l'Europa arrivò alla Grande Guerra* (Bari: Laterza, 2013), 392-393.

1.2 The Collapse of Beliefs

Spengler completed *The Decline of the West* in 1917, while the Great War was still raging. The interwar years are crucial for understanding the events and phenomena that shaped his later works, particularly *Man and Technics* and *The Hour of Decision*, which we I examine in greater detail in the next chapter.

In the end, the Great War – feared and anticipated – arrived, tearing apart the social order of the late 19th century. The Europe that emerged from the Great War was entirely different from the one that had entered the 20th century. The monarchs were gone. Germany, Russia, Austria, Hungary, and Turkey had become republics. The great multinational empires had collapsed, from their ashes emerged a series of new nation-states in Central and Eastern Europe. The war not only redrew Europe's political map but also accelerated social transformations already underway before its outbreak.

The *effeminate liberal elites*, as nationalists and conservatives derisively called them, were forced to adopt militarist policies, impose oppressive measures restricting personal freedoms, and transform the liberal state into a planner-state – rationalizing and controlling production and resource distribution. Equally transformative was the mobilization of women, which revolutionised social norms and values. Women became factory workers, clerks, and employees in public services. More significantly, their political role was legitimised as they became activists, supported the war effort through associations and mobilisations, and became national heroines on the war and home fronts. Role models such as Red Cross nurses and wartime caregivers entered the feminine imagination as symbols of both heroism and newfound sexual freedom[18]. By the time the war ended, an old world had indeed vanished, and a new one had emerged. In this sense, it is hard to blame those, like Spengler, who wondered whether an entire civilisation had truly come to an end.

The image of the working woman – smoking, claiming her economic and sexual independence – stood in stark contrast to the millions of *"wounded patriarchs"* who returned from the war shaken, mutilated, and traumatized, only to find a social landscape

[18] Colarizi, *Novecento*, 77.

profoundly changed down to the family level. Many never returned at all, leaving behind tens of thousands of widows and orphans who now depended on the state, which took on an increasingly paternal role, extending its reach even deeper into the private lives of its citizens.

When Spengler refers to the *"Ibsen woman"* in *The Decline of the West* and revisits the subject in his later works, he is engaging in a heated debate that was raging across the West about the role of women in society. Many observers questioned what kind of mothers city-dwelling women would become – women who, beyond motherhood, were increasingly workers, activists, and consumers of goods and pleasures. If women abandoned their traditional roles, they were no longer *mothers*, which posed not only a moral problem but a demographic one.

The 1920s were marked by a collective hysteria over declining birth rates and an obsession with motherhood. A 1927 study on birth rates by Richard Korherr (who would later become the chief statistician of the SS), published in Italy in 1928 with a preface by Spengler and Mussolini, caused widespread anxiety in Germany, which was already gripped by fears of demographic decline[19]. These fears were amplified by the contrast between Europe's falling birth rates and the population growth of so-called *"coloured races"*. Newspapers, political speeches, and intellectual circles were filled with warnings about the *"overflowing fertility of Africans and Asians."* The *Yellow Peril*, which had terrified Europeans at the turn of the century following Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, resurfaced.

The preservation of racial health became a primary concern, particularly in cities, where governments took an increasingly active role in addressing public hygiene. Municipal and national authorities sought to rationalize urban planning, build public housing, and improve living conditions in the outskirts – while also purging these areas of activities and individuals deemed antisocial.

At the same time, the expansion of global markets and international finance, which continued throughout the decade, fuelled growing anxieties. Critics began to speak

[19] Mark Mazower, *Le Ombre dell'Europa. Democrazie e totalitarismi nel XX secolo* (Milano: Garzanti, 2018), 93.

out against *delocalization* – the relocation of industries to colonial territories where labour costs were lower. Spengler was one of the leading voices of these *proto-anti-globalists*, writing: *"Nearly everywhere – East Asia, India, South America, South Africa – industrial regions are emerging or are on the verge of emerging, threatening us with ruinous competition due to their low wages. The unassailable privileges of the white races have been swept away, squandered, betrayed... The exploited world is beginning to exact its revenge on its rulers."*[20] This argument would later face strong criticism from the liberal philosopher Benedetto Croce in his review of *Man and Technics*, as I will discuss in Chapter Three.

In the fundamental struggle of that time – between the liberal, democratic world represented by Croce and the reactionary, conservative, far-right world represented by Spengler and other intellectuals like Jünger or Smith – it was the former that was forced to retreat. As we will see in the final section of this chapter, the conservative response to the crisis mounted a successful counteroffensive against the postwar changes, ultimately dismantling the fragile liberal order that had emerged from Versailles.

1.3 Ideological Responses to the Crisis

Spengler was one of the leading intellectuals shaping the conservative response to the world that emerged from the Great War. Later, I will examine in greater detail his proposed solutions to the problems of democracy, international conflicts, and the restoration of the order that had been swept away by the conflict. For now, a few general observations on the European context will suffice.

The 1920s and 1930s were not decades in which figures like Hitler, Mussolini, Antonescu, or Horthy represented peculiar anomalies who happened to seize power by chance or luck. Especially after the 1929 crisis, much of the European population was open to authoritarian shifts. The global capitalist collapse inevitably undermined the credibility of political liberalism, which increasingly lost touch with reality, clinging to political practices and narratives that were being rapidly disrupted by Nazism, Fascism, and Communism. Moreover, by the early 1920s, Fascism and Communism were already

[20] *Ibid*., 119.

perceived by many intellectuals, officials, and political observers as successful models capable of ensuring both development and stability. For large segments of the European population – traumatized by the upheavals of the early century, the war, and its chaotic aftermath – stability and economic progress were often reason enough to accept the dismantling of democracy. Even the ruling classes, in many cases, were willing to soften their opposition to the odious aspects of right-wing authoritarianism in order to suppress socialist revolutions. Meanwhile, industrial and financial elites quickly adapted, finding a *modus vivendi* within corporatist or National Socialist economic frameworks that ultimately allowed them to retain considerable autonomy while also "pacifying" the labour force. This was the *spirit of the time*. The European left had been neutralised, and even when it was not entirely powerless, it struggled to shake off the suspicion that it operated under Moscow's influence. Meanwhile, liberalism lost its credibility. As Mark Mazower points out, the failure of alternatives to the right and conservatism was so stark that political debate increasingly took place *within* the right itself[21]. Indeed, as we will see, throughout the early 1930s, Hitler and Mussolini competed for ideological and political dominance over fascist Europe. The main fracture within the right lay between two broad camps. The majority of right-wing regimes – such as those in Romania, Portugal, Spain under Franco, and Hungary – adopted fascist aesthetics, rhetoric, and symbolism while ultimately serving as authoritarian-conservative safeguards for the interests of industrialists, landowners, clergy and the upper middle class. By contrast, other regimes, particularly Nazi Germany and, from 1936 onward, Fascist Italy (albeit with important distinctions), took a more totalitarian turn. While still protecting economic elites, these regimes sought to subordinate them to state power and politics and reshape society as a whole.

Spengler was undoubtedly a theorist of this authoritarian restoration, actively working – both intellectually and practically – to justify the superiority of the authoritarian and reactionary model that took hold across Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. In his view, as well as in the views of other ideologues of authoritarianism, this model was precisely what Europe needed to respond effectively to the civilizational crisis it was undergoing.

[21] *Ibid*., 40.

2 THE PROPHET

2.1 A Brief Account of the Life and Intellectual Journey of Oswald Spengler

Discontented with the twentieth century, Spengler considered himself one of the last representatives of the ruling classes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His sense of longing and nostalgia for a past he never experienced permeate his work[22].

Spengler was born into a middle-class family on May 29, 1880, in Germany. His education was provided by the Francke Foundation, an educational institution influenced by Protestant Pietism. His childhood was sad, lonesome, and frustrated by frequent, severe headaches. Spengler showed an early fascination for world empires and the themes of conflict and decline. He wrote *Montezuma* at the age of seventeen[23]. *Montezuma* foreshadows the themes that would characterise Spengler's mature work. The drama narrates the clash between the European *conquistadores* and the Aztec Civilisation. The protagonist, Montezuma, is a tragic figure facing the inevitable doom of his civilisation. Exempted from military service because of a severe heart problem, Spengler studied in Halle, Munich and Berlin before receiving his PhD in 1904, defending a thesis on Heraclitus[24][25]. Spengler retired from teaching in 1911, when thanks to the small sum inherited after the death of his mother, he became able to live as an independent writer. After moving to Munich, Spengler spent the years from 1911 to 1918 in a state of isolation. He stayed in contact with very few people and, between 1913 and 1918, engaged in regular correspondence only with Hans Klore. During these years of isolation, Spengler devoted himself almost entirely to reading dozens of books on a wide range of

[22] David Engels, *"Oswald Spengler and the Decline of the West,"* in *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right: Behind the New Threat to Liberal Democracy*, ed. Mark Sedgwick (New York, NY: Oxford Academic, 2019), 3.

[23] *Ibid.*, 4.

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] According to the Greek philosopher, time and history unfold in a cyclical manner. For Heraclitus, existence is a cycle of creation, transformation, destruction and re-creation. The philosopher refutes the idea of a linear progression towards a certain end. Heraclitus believed that time and history possessed no finality and were characterized by cycles of creation and destruction.

subjects, from art to archaeology[26]. Upon hearing the news of the outbreak of World War I, he reacted with enthusiasm, viewing the war as an antidote to the decadence of the present. Spengler attempted to enlist but was once again rejected due to his fragile health. His initial enthusiasm for the war soon turned to disillusionment as his optimistic predictions proved unfounded. The Entente's blockade and the prolonged duration of the conflict brought hunger, poverty, and death on the battlefields and on the home front. The years of the First World War were marked by personal grief for Spengler: one his sisters took her own life, and the husband of another sister was killed in the trenches.

He started to work on *The Decline of the West* in Munich. Fischer writes that Spengler decided to write *The Decline* after seeing a book by Otto Seeck on the history of decline in antiquity displayed in a bookstore window. In reality, the idea that the West had exhausted its creative drive had always been present in Spengler's thought, along with his fascination with the decline and fall of great empires and civilisations. In contrast to the prevailing notions of progress and the linear development of history among his contemporaries, Spengler saw signs of the Western civilisation's decline and an impending catastrophe everywhere[27]. According to David Engels, the writing of his *magnum opus* was particularly difficult because of his tormented, self-doubting personality and the magnitude of the effort undertaken[28]. Nonetheless, Spengler was frantically working on *The Decline* between 1913 and 1917. He completed *The Decline* in 1917, and in 1918, the book was published by a Viennese publishing house. To some extent, it was the defeat of the Second Reich that contributed to the book's success, as it captured the sense of disorientation, catastrophe, and fatalism that pervade German society at the time. The book's success brought Spengler into the spotlight and made him known across Europe[29].

During the turbulent and chaotic early years of the Weimar Republic, Spengler engaged in intense political activity aimed at overthrowing democratic institutions and

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[26] Klaus P. Fischer, *History and Prophecy: Oswald Spengler and The Decline of The West* (Durham: Moore Publishing Company, 1977), 42.

[27] *Ibid*., 43.

[28] Engels, *Oswald Spengler and The Decline*, 5.

[29] Fischer, *History and Prophecy*, 45-46.

restoring an authoritarian, reactionary, and aristocratic regime in Germany. His most significant work from this period is *Prussianism and Socialism*, a political manifesto published in 1919 that immediately became a bestseller. Faced with the real threat of a communist revolution in Germany, which he believed to be imminent, Spengler proposed a "Prussian" alternative to Marxist communism. In the pamphlet, Spengler advocates for a pacification between the workers and the aristocracy under the authoritarian and paternalistic leadership of the latter. His fame and ultraconservative ideas allowed him to establish contacts with prominent figures of German conservatism such as Admiral von Tirpitz, Walther Rathenau, Erich Ludendorff, and Hans von Seeckt. Between 1919 and 1920, he joins the circles of reactionary elites who despised the Weimar Republic[30]. He became adviser to a network of Ruhr industrialists and political activists in Bavaria and Berlin, finding himself on the fringes of a national-conservative plot to overthrow the Weimar Republic[31]. Spengler's political activism led to nothing, and by 1924 he had to come to terms with the reality that the new democratic regime had overcome its most turbulent phase and was stabilising. As a result, he withdrew from political engagement and returned to his studies.

When the 1929 financial crisis broke out in the United States, Germany was among the countries most severely affected. The relative stability and prosperity of the late 1920s ended abruptly. Anti-system parties regained strength, and both the Nazis and the Communists won dozens of seats in the 1930 parliamentary elections. According to his sister's diaries, Spengler did not hesitate to support the NSDAP. Spengler voted for the Nazi in 1932 and went as far as to hang swastika flags from the windows of their house[32]. Although he had doubts about Hitler – he expected Germany's strongman to be of aristocratic origin, while Hitler was a 'Bohemian corporal' of humble origins – Spengler saw Nazism as an opportunity for national rebirth and to end Weimar democracy. He desired to become an authoritative advisor to the Nazi leadership. He had his chance to secure the role in a meeting with Hitler in June 1933. Available historical

[30] *Ibid*., 58.

[31] Neil McInnes, "The Great Doomsayer: Oswald Spengler Reconsidered", *The National Interest*, no. 48 (Summer 1997): 65-76, 66.

[32] Lewis, *Oswald Spengler*, 146.

sources suggest that Spengler left the meeting with a rather positive impression of Hitler. He felt reassured by Hitler's determination and his commitment to serving Germany[3334]. At the same time, Spengler was unimpressed by Hitler's intellectual and political stature. He would later confess that he had not met the strong, resolute figure capable of shaping history that he had previously imagined. From this point onward, sources diverge. Some historians and biographers – such as Farrenkopf, Fischer, Hughes, and Fennelly – argue that in the months following their meeting, Spengler developed a strong hostility toward Nazism, eventually viewing it as potentially dangerous for Germany and distancing himself from the movement to the point of being suspected an opponent by some Nazi officials[35]. Lewis, on the other hand, argues that Spengler's break with Nazism was more gradual, noting that he even sent a copy of *The Hour of Decision* as a gift to Hitler. According to this view, his disengagement, never publicly declared, materialised only after the Night of the Long Knives in the summer of 1934, an event that horrified Spengler, particularly due to the killing of his friend and correspondent, Gregor Strasser[36]. A leading intellectual of the NSDAP's left wing, Strasser was executed along with other SA leaders. Whatever the case, from mid-1934 until his sudden death in 1936, Spengler withdrew from public life, spending his last years in isolation.

When Spengler died, his family placed a copy of Goethe's Faust and Nietzsche's Thus Spoke Zarathustra in his coffin. Spengler never ceased to express his gratitude toward Goethe and Nietzsche. According to him, from the former, he had inherited the methodology for investigating the world, and from the latter, critical thinking. From Goethe, Spengler adopted the organic, biological vision of history, which led him to view cultures as living organisms with their own birth, growth, and death. From Nietzsche – whom he also resembled in his personal attitudes toward life – he acquired the understanding that history is not a mere sequence of events to be analysed through the

[33] *Ibid*., 150.

[34] Fischer, *History and Prophecy*, 70-73.

[35] *Ibid*., 76.

[36] Lewis, *Oswald Spengler*, 158-160.

scientific methods of professional historians, but a metaphysical flow in which all cultures and races experienced a spiritual development akin to that of individuals[37].

2.2 The Decline of the West

> *"Mankind" ... has no aim, no idea, no plan, any more than the family butterflies or orchids. I see, in place of that empty figment of one linear history which can only be kept up by shutting one's eyes to the overwhelming multitude of the facts, the drama of several mighty Cultures, each springing with primitive strength from the soil of a mother region to which it remains firmly bound throughout its whole life cycle...*[38]

The Decline of the West was difficult to categorize. Thomas Mann, Martin Heidegger, and Northrop Frye described it as either a novel, a philosophical treatise, or a poem[39]. Matthew Rose describes it as "*a work of poetry that invited theoretical debate, a work of philosophy expressed in images, and a work of history that aimed at spiritual conversion."*[40]

The distinctive feature of *The Decline of the West* is Spengler's rejection to study history through analytical means and his preference for rigorous historical analogy. According to Spengler, a kind of natural-science search for root causes explaining unfolding events is unable to appreciate the mystery of destiny[41]. His view of history is Romantic. The world of organisms, history, and life cannot be understood through the scientific method; only intuition, impression and imagination can grasp the deeper meaning of this world of the living forms[42]. Spengler argues that history does not have a destination or a single direction. History is a cycle of birth, death, and chaos. Such theories

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[37] John F. Fennelly, *Twilight of the Evening Lands* (New York: The Brookdale Press, 1972), 60-62.

[38] Oswald Spengler, *Il Tramonto dell'Occidente: lineamenti di una morfologia di una storia mondiale*, ed. Rita Calabrese Conte, Margherita Cottone, Furio Jesi (Parma: Ugo Guanda Editore), 40.

[39] Rose, *A World After Liberalism*, 22.

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] Robert W. Merry, "Spengler's Ominous Prophecy,", *The National Interest*, no. 123 (January/February 2013): 11-22, 14.

[42] Northrop Frye, "The Decline of the West," *Daedalus* 103, no. 1 (Winter 1974): 1-2.

of history are as old as the Greeks and Romans, what was original in Spengler was his suggestion about what rose and fell: cultures[43].

Knowing the past and the future requires understanding the story of the cultures whose rise and fall have produced human history. Spengler affirms that mankind is an empty concept – a biological notion rather than an historical one. He states that history is the tale of different cultures. Spengler describes cultures as biological entities whose processes of birth, growth and decline follow the same pattern. He identifies eight cultures: Western, Classical, Arabian, Indian, Babylonian, Chinese, Egyptian and Mexican. He argues that every culture is organised around a symbol that governs the mentality and practices of its members. Everything that a culture creates can be interpreted only in relation to its central symbol. Spengler observes that human beings cannot perceive and understand reality outside of a particular culture. Thus, cultures are the modes by which humans experience reality. Furthermore, he argues that cultures are unintelligible for outsiders – the member of a civilisation will never know what it is like to be a member of another civilisation. Individuals can examine and compare cultures, but they will never be able to access another civilisation's metaphysical foundation. Hence, Spengler dismisses multiculturalism as a chimera[44]. Nonetheless, he rejects the idea of a hierarchy of cultures. On the contrary, Spengler is a cultural relativist who opposes the contemporary conception that presented the Western world at the centre of history and judged all other cultures by Western standards. He affirms that the validity of each culture is unquestionable. Once developed, a culture is, by itself, legitimate.

However, one culture is exceptional. One culture has a special destiny: to strive for infinity. Infinity is the *Ur-symbol* of the Faustian culture. The Faustian culture, as Spengler names the Western culture, is defined by the ambition to transcend finitude and move beyond the borders of the existent. Spengler chooses the name of the protagonist of Goethe's most famous work, Faust, to name Western *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*. Faust embodies the vital impulse, the drive toward the infinite that distinguishes the West from all other cultures, past and present. Western men are creators, pioneers, and explorers guided by the desire to challenge mortality. The Faustian West is an exceptional

[43] McInnes, *The Great Doomsayer*, 66.

[44] Rose, *A World After Liberalism*, 26.

development in human history, emerging with Romanesque architecture and Scholastic philosophy, shaped by a newfound confidence in human powers, the consolidation of imperial power, Aristotelian science, orchestral music, and ultimately empowered by the eradication of priestly authority following the Reformation[45]. The ambition to attain the highest excellence, the willingness to sacrifice everything, the most severe self-sacrifice – these were the characteristics of the Western *Kultur*. This drive has led the West to expand beyond its geographical boundaries and spread across the world, connecting all cultures for the first time in history.

Spengler's description of the Faustian West reveals a clear admiration for aristocratic societies, an idealised belief in the superiority of the imagined European aristocracy celebrated in medieval *chansons de geste*. His portrayal of the Western *man* – as I will later discuss, the Western woman is confined to the role of mother – reflects the vision of masculinity and manhood promoted by various political, cultural and artistic movements of his era. Militarism's praise for self-sacrifice and discipline, Romantic medievalism's revival of chivalric heroism or Futurism's celebration of masculine dynamism shaped the *cultural* atmosphere of his time – masculinity was tied to leadership, cultural vitality, and the transcendence of natural boundaries. However, while Spengler was undoubtedly nationalist, imperialist, and most likely racist – having been socialised in Wilhelmine Germany, it would be difficult for him to be otherwise – his emphasis on the unique expansive impulse of Faustian civilisation should not be interpreted as a claim of its superiority over other cultures. Rather, it serves as an explanation of why, among various civilisations, the Western one expanded to the point of dominating the rest of the world.

The Faustian drive toward infinity cannot escape mortality. According to Spengler, the Western culture has entered its civilisational phase, the last phase of a culture. Spengler distinguishes between Culture (*Kultur*) and Civilisation (*Zivilisation*). Civilisation is marked by technology, expansion, imperialism and mass society. This phase is characterised by cosmopolitanism, irreligious values, soulless artistic production, the dominance of money. In Spengler's understanding, *Zivilisation* is the fossilisation of

[45] *Ibid*., 30-31.

a culture[46]. While *Kultur* embodies passions, vitality, and desire, *Zivilisation* signifies rationalism, technicism, effectiveness. The vitality of art and philosophy in the Faustian culture appear to have been exhausted, with every development seeming merely a repetition of what has already been. Now, *Kultur*, having transitioned into *Zivilisation*, is characterised by technological advancements, engineering achievements, the overwhelming power of its nations, and the magnitude of its megacities, which consume the energy and spirituality of their inhabitants[47]. In addition, Spengler argues that the global dominance of the West – driven by its greater dynamism – and the resulting imposition of the Western model upon other cultures have created in the Western mind the illusion that humanity shares a common destiny. However, this is merely an illusion, destined to be shattered by the foreseeable rebellion of non-Western peoples against their masters. According to Spengler, these peoples did not adopt Western technologies and institutions for their spiritual or political value, but as tools against the West itself – to free themselves from Faustian dominance and compete on equal footing in the global arena[48]. Writing during a period when anticolonial movements were emerging, and when Japan had demonstrated that a non-Western nation could assimilate Western technological, legal, military, and scientific advancements and use them against Western imperialism, he interpreted the adoption of Western practices and technologies not as an acceptance of Western superiority or an acceptance of Western values, but as a survival strategy to overthrow the very order imposed by Faustian civilisation. According to Spengler, the internal corrosion, the lack of morality, the decay of traditional social structures, and the population decline will fuel the rebellion of the subjugated peoples.

In the face of this imminent struggle, the West is divided between two opposing worldviews: the German – socialistic and authoritarian – and the Anglo-Saxon, capitalist and liberal. Spengler hopes that Germany will prevail and rule over the entire West. According to him, only the Germans are young enough to take on the titanic challenge posed by the winter of the West. The British are too old, the French too few, and the

[46] Engels, *Oswald Spengler and The Decline*, 10.

[47] Frye, *The Decline of the West*, 2.

[48] John Farrenkopf, "Spengler's Historical Pessimism and the Tragedy of Our Age," *Theory and Society* 22, no. 3 (June 1993): 391-412, 399.

Americans too amorphous to lead the civilisation. Spengler sees in Germany, in the Germans the will to determine their own destiny and to shape the final form of Western *Zivilisation* before its inevitable exhaustion[49].

2.3 Man and Technics and The Hour of Decision

In Man and Technics, Spengler explores the primitive nature of humanity. He identifies the superior intellect of the human species as the key advantage that has given mankind the edge over other predators. However, this extraordinary intellect is also the burden that humanity must carry. While human intellect enables the creation of new technologies, the organisation of increasingly complex societies, and the transition from the state of nature to structured and civilised communities, the ancestral and bestial instinct remains embedded in the human spirit. It is this tension between intellect and progress on one side and instincts and ferocity on the other that constitutes the tragedy of the human condition. As intellect drives humanity to develop ever more sophisticated technologies to improve its existence, humanity's predatory instinct turns the same advancements into tools of war and destruction. Thus, the more humanity refines its intellect, the more it sows the seeds of increasingly deadly and destructive wars.

In the case of the Faustian man, it will be his own inventions that bring about his downfall. Spengler writes that Western man has exhausted his strength, compromised his spirit with decadent modernity, and no longer possesses the vigour needed to face the human tide of other races eager to affirm their dominance. In front of this fate, Spengler calls for stoic resolve and determination, summoning those who still embody the Faustian spirit for one last desperate defence of Western civilisation. Like the Roman soldier who does not abandon his post as Vesuvius erupts, the Faustian man confronts his destiny with firmness.

Man and Technics was Spengler's least successful work, largely due to its overwhelming pessimism and fatalism[50]. Nonetheless, its content is worth recalling, as it

[49] Frye, *The Decline of the West*, 3.

[50] Fischer, *History and Prophecy*, 76.

represents an intermediate stage of development between *The Decline of the West* and *The Hour of Decision*. In particular, the reflection on humanity's feral, predatory nature, the prediction of an inevitable clash between an exhausted Faustian civilisation and younger, rising races, and the call for a steadfast – though resigned – resistance in the face of an already sealed fate are all themes that Spengler would later elaborate in *The Hour of Decision*, a book that, as we will see, was important for Mussolini's understanding of Spengler.

The Hour of Decision was published in 1933 and quickly became a bestseller. The book outlines Spengler's view of the epoch in general. The author investigates "*the great spectacle of global politics*" and the role that the German nation – "*the most decisive nation*" – will play on this stage. Moreover, Spengler explores the rise of global conflicts and great powers, the dominance of finance over politics, the emergence of working-class movements in Europe, the upcoming revolt of the *"coloured people."*

Spengler dedicates an entire chapter to the so-called revolt of the *"coloured world."* The races once subject to Western authority have seen the white man bleed and die in the trenches, and soon they will be ready to rise against him. Among these emerging civilisations, Spengler sees Russia and Japan as the most formidable adversaries of the West. Russia, an Asian power whose *Ur-symbol* is the vastness of its distances, has only been superficially influenced by Western culture and philosophy. Spengler considers the Russian spirit to be fundamentally Asian: totalitarian, collectivistic, and hive-like. According to Spengler, communism is an ideology imported from the West and fundamentally alien to Russia, which will sooner or later cast it off and return to autocracy.

While Spengler is fascinated by Russia, he is horrified by the United States. He describes the United States as the most palpable expression of Western decadence. In his view, capitalist materialism reigns supreme in America. Spengler criticises the separation of powers in the United States, viewing it as inherently paralysing. He despises the nation's multiculturalism, which he believes will inevitably lead to racial conflict, and rejects the people's individualism. According to Spengler, America's economic wealth, industrial development and technological achievements conceal deep spiritual emptiness. The primacy of capitalism and the dominance of money can only last until they collapse

under their own weight, at which point the United States will be lost. However, Spengler believes the United States can still be saved from itself. Once again, he suggests authoritarian and autocratic solutions. If the old American elite manages to reclaim its prerogatives and privileges, suppressing the lower classes and the *"hordes of new Americans"* who corrupt the country, it can restore the social cohesion, identity, and discipline needed to fully exploit the country's vast natural and economic resources. In this way, the United States will be able to compete for supremacy in the forthcoming era, which Spengler calls the *"age of World Wars and World Powers."*

The future is a time of conflicts made increasingly destructive by technological advances, where there will be no room for pacifist and liberal nations – only for disciplined, autocratic, resolute, and martial ones. The pacifism of the 1920s and early 1930s, Spengler claims, is nothing more than a pale illusion, the dying hope of a senile Europe whose youth perished in the trenches. Human history will belong to the races that remain young and dynamic, while the old and exhausted ones will be swept away[51]. Thus, according to Spengler, if the white man does not regain his martial prowess, the future will belong to the *"coloured world."*

The Hour of Decision provides important insights into the relationship between Spengler and fascism in Italy and Germany. In the introduction of the book, Spengler describes the Nazi rise to powers positively. Nazism is presented as a historical event. He affirms that Nazism can save the German nation from the dangers of the world, represented by the *"coloured revolution"* and the *"white revolution".* I have already discussed the characteristics of the "coloured revolution". Now, I will investigate the "*white revolution*." This is a revolution from below. Liberalism and Bolshevism fuel "*the desire for majorities … for the heard over the gentleman."*[52] This *"offensive from below"* generates a vertical struggle between the masses and the forces of tradition. Caesarism will secure victory for the forces of tradition.

[51] I must stress that Spengler defines the concept of race in an ambivalent manner in the book. While in his previous works he consistently defined race in psychological and spiritual terms, in The Hour of Decision he places greater emphasis on biology, as in the distinction between "white" and "coloured" peoples.

[52] Lewis, Oswald Spengler, 155.

Spengler views fascism as a positive force for the survival of the West. He focuses primarily on Italian fascism, which he considers the model that had inspired similar movements across Europe. Spengler classifies movement-based, party-driven fascism within the framework of the *"white revolution."* However, he distinguishes between mass fascism and Caesarist fascism. Mass fascism is plebiscitary and advances the corrosive power of the multitude, Caesarist fascism keeps the masses in check and away from power. While both use the mob, parties, and the parliaments to conquer power, the key difference is that in the Caesarian version the strongman ultimately gets rid of these instruments, consolidating his position as the sole, uncontested ruler of his country. Spengler sees Mussolini as the embodiment of this form of fascism. He views him as the true ruler he hopes would one day lead Germany – a ruthless figure who looks down upon the masses, consolidates power through violence, and is willing to crush even his own "Praetorians" to maintain absolute power[53]. Mussolini, in Spengler's eyes, represents the example that other strongmen in Europe should follow, beginning with Hitler, who had recently come to power in Germany.

2.4 A Focus: Caesarism, Ruralism and the attack on the idea of Progress

The idea of Progress has animated thinking of nearly all significant Western thought since its first stirrings in the Late Middle Ages. This idea is the progenitor of the concepts of Eurocentrism, American exceptionalism[54], and most importantly liberalism and communism. Most of the great philosophers and intellectuals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – from Herder to Kant, from Hegel to Marx – expressed optimism and confidence in the future of humanity, envisioning, albeit in very different ways, a path of progress and triumph through which the West, or humanity as a whole, was

[53] According to Klaus P. Fischer's account of Spengler's personal meeting with Hitler, at the end of their conversation, Hitler asked Spengler for one final piece of advice. Spengler responded, *"Watch your Praetorians!"* Whether Spengler truly gave this warning or whether Hitler listened to it is uncertain. What is certain, however, is that because of the shock for the assassination of two of his friends – one of whom was Strasser, mentioned earlier – during the *Night of the Long Knives*, Hitler's purge of his SA *Praetorians*, Spengler began to distance himself from National Socialism.

[54] Merry, *Spengler's Ominous Prophecy*, 13.

moving. This perspective was also pivotal to German historicism. Spengler rejected this understanding of history and embraced a different interpretation. Spengler's view of history implies that every civilisation, including Western civilisation, will decline. Thus, the exceptionalism attributed to the foundational concepts of Western society and institutions is ultimately fallacious. Furthermore, Spengler's thesis of distinct, living cultures that follow independent patterns of development and decline, denies the idea that all human beings on earth share a common civilisational destiny. Spengler regarded his morphological approach as a revolutionary alternative to the prevailing view of history. Spengler's stance was a rebellion – a violent and total attack against optimism – which would earn him the widespread hostility of professional German historians of his time. It was from Nietzsche that Spengler drew such a fierce and destructive critique of the optimism of his era[55]. For both Nietzsche and Spengler, their contemporaries' faith in progress was merely another manifestation of a Western world too entrenched in the cult of reason, in its belief in the scientific method and technological development, to recognise the clouds gathering on the horizon of its history. When *The Decline of the West* was published, the myth of progress still permeated Western culture. Spengler's assertion that technological advancement was not a sign of a civilisation's vitality but rather an indication of the exhaustion of its cultural and artistic drive – of its stagnation – had a profound impact. It gave expression to many anxieties that, in the aftermath of the Great War's devastation, were beginning to take root.

If the fundamental premise of the teleological view of history is the liberation of the individual[56], Spengler predicts that the final stage of Western civilisation will be characterized by the rise of imperialism and Caesarism. In this final phase, which Spengler predicts will last for two hundred years, Western civilisation will be dominated by authoritarian men who elevate themselves above all else, ruling for the sake of power

[55] Farrenkopf, *Spengler's Historical Pessimism*, 393-395.

[56] Either communism or liberalism imagines that the ultimate state of human civilisation will be the liberation of mankind from its chains. Liberalism envisions liberation as the removal of the constraints on individual liberty, particularly from excessive state authority. Communism defines liberation as the end of class oppression through the abolition of capitalistic ownership of the means of production. Notwithstanding their evident theoretical differences, the two ideologies share a foundational belief in the idea of Progress and human emancipation.

and its perpetuation. Caesarism is the ultimate manifestation of the will to consolidate and concentrate power. Imperialism appears as the external expression of Caesarism: a manifestation of the will to dominate over other peoples. Spengler predicts that the rise of Caesars will end the dominance of money over politics, a defining trait of the civilizational phase. Taking advantage of what Spengler describes as an inbuilt democratic tendency toward dictatorship, strongmen will mobilize the masses for the sake of seizing political power and will establish lasting dictatorships[57].

According to Spengler, through Caesarism, Germany can fulfil her historical role. The German nation can lead the Western world during its final stage, but only if Germany ceases to be a land of intellectuals and artists, and becomes the nation of engineers, industrialist, technicians, and anti-democratic dictators. In 1921, Spengler wrote that Germany could no longer produce another Goethe but was certainly capable of giving rise to a Caesar[58]. Spengler, a nationalist, viewed Germany as the Faustian nation *par excellence*, needing only a strong leader to unleash its full potential. Spengler actively promoted his ideas during the 1920s. In *Rebuilding the German Reich*, Spengler explicitly advocates for the *"side of tradition"* to break with existing forms of political representation, legitimizing coups and authoritarian rule as integral instruments of political action, necessary measures to save Germany from the grip of corrosive democratic institutions[59]. Caesarism is explicitly programmatic. Spengler does not merely predict and describe the phenomenon; he provides a blueprint for future strongmen. Therefore, as Ben Lewis has written in *Oswald Spengler and the Politics of Decline*, Caesarism should be interpreted on two levels. On one hand, Caesarism is a *prognosis* – a prediction, an analysis of what awaits Faustian *Zivilisation* in the future. Hence, it is presented as a phenomenon expected to emerge around the year 2000, lasting for two centuries and representing the final form of political organisation and spiritual impetus in the West. On the other hand, Caesarism is a *political program*, an historical necessity. It is a political alternative to liberal democracy. An alternative that Spengler himself

[57] Lewis, *Oswald Spengler*, 82.

[58] McInnes, *The Great Doomsayer*, 66.

[59] Lewis, *Oswald Spengler*, 134.

actively sought to promote during the first half of the 1920s[60]. Spengler's support for Caesarist solutions may seem contradictory given his admiration for the political culture of the nobility and his commitment to an aristocratic restoration during the first years of the Weimar Republic. In *The Decline*, Spengler resolves this apparent contradiction by describing Caesarism as a phenomenon that, while emerging because of the irrevocable decay of democracy, remains a product of aristocratic tradition. Spengler envisages the strongman emerging from the salon rather than the streets, in close consultation with the business and the political forces of the reaction. For instance, Spengler praised Mussolini for his strong ties with the business elite[6162]. Nonetheless, Spengler argues that those seeking to establish Caesarism must not reject but rather master the very elements of modern society that he despises. The dominance of money, materialism, democracy, and political massification should be controlled and leveraged to restore authoritarian rule. Spengler anticipates (advocates) the transformation of political parties into leader-centred organizations, led by small elites who will channel popular frustration with parliamentary democracy into violent action. By mobilizing mass discontent, they can seize power through social upheaval. Spengler's program to prepare the ground for his strongman is detailed: the strategic use of the press and new communication technologies, mass mobilization, the formation of leader-centred movements, and securing the backing of economic elites. These, in his view, are the means through which Caesarism will rise to power[63]. Once asserted, Caesarism will restore discipline and tradition to prepare the Western *Zivilisation* for the upcoming world wars. In conclusion, Caesarism is the supreme triumph of politics.

Zivilisation is characterised above all by the expansion of urban settlements. The rise of megacities, where individuals *"dissolve into shapeless masses"*, is the defining feature of this era. Spengler sees urbanisation not only as a symptom but also as a cause of civilisational decline. The man of *Zivilisation* abandons his rural roots, his bond with

[60] *Ibid*., 74-75.

[61] *Ibid*., 139.

[62] In a speech given to a group of conservative students in 1924, Spengler outlined the characteristics of the German Ceasar. Remarkably, he suggests that the German strongman will resemble Mussolini. A sombre equation between German Caesarism and fascism in light of Hitler's appointment as Chancellor in 1933.

[63] *Ibid*., 78-79.

the soil and nature, to move into cities, which consume his spirit. Spengler writes of *"masses of bed-occupiers"* and *"seas of houses"* through which city-dwellers wander. He sees in the grid-like layouts of these cities the mark of rationality, a lack of soul and creativity characteristic of the declining civilisations that build them – from the Aztec to the Roman. It is this abstraction that gives rise to *"intellectual nomads"* and *"culture-men"*, who forget and reject the meaning of their existence. Spengler predicts that Western civilisation will produce even larger cities, dream of megacities designed for ten or twenty million people – immense urban centres with such fantastic systems of communication and transportation that merely imagining them would drive one mad. These monstrous creations devour endless rows of people, draining the countryside, which once generated the vitality, the fresh blood of *Kultur*. In the metropolises, religion is replaced by science, vigour by rationality, and men become mere gears in the machine of materialism. At the same time, they develop intellectual ambitions that distance them from traditional values: procreation is replaced by pleasure, manual labour by intellectual work, rest by entertainment, and spirituality by excitement and frenzy. Just as Imperial Rome had its arena games and lavish feasts, and Crete had tauromachy, so too Western megalopolises have cinema, poker, boxing, and clubs where people dance to music foreign to Western culture, music of the *"coloured races."* The man of the megacity undergoes an *"essentially metaphysical turn towards death."* No longer an individual, but an insignificant part of a collective, he ceases to care about death. While the peasant – who remains an individual – fearing death and the destruction of his legacy, procreates to preserve his blood and the land of his ancestors, the city-dweller has no interest in having children because he finds no meaning in procreation. Spengler writes that when people begin to see children not a means to overcome death, but as a rational choice weighed by "pros" and "cons", this marks the turning point from *Kultur* to *Zivilisation*. Birth rates decline, and populations slowly die out.

Gender roles also shift. Women emancipate themselves in the cities, they pursue their own ambitions and neglect their *"natural role"* as mothers. Rural women, according to Spengler, are exclusively mothers, whereas urban women begin to experience inner existential conflicts, to think, to read to demand equality in marriage, to engage in politics, and ultimately *"to belong to themselves."* This reality terrifies Spengler – a misogynist who, according to his diaries, was afraid to talk to women, likely never had a partner, and

maintained a morbid dependence on his sisters, who took care of him throughout his life. The *Ibsen* woman rejects family, children, and her primordial role. Spengler names the modern woman the *Ibsen* woman because, like Nora from Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*, she emancipates herself, refuses her traditional role as mother and wife, and abandons her house to live the life she has chosen. Instead, Spengler believes that for the good of the Western civilisation Nora would have been better off remaining ignorant, fragile, devoted to childbearing, imprisoned in her *"doll's house."*[64]

At this stage, *Zivilisation* is over. The population begins its slow decline. The cities are the first to empty, followed by the countryside, now barren and drained of its best blood by the cities' insatiable hunger for men. So it was for Rome, or Babylon, and so it is for the West. The great megacities, once monuments to civilisation, become ghost towns, abandoned ruins inhabited only by a few desperate souls in tattered clothing. The city, which sacrificed men and their souls on the altar of development, technology, and progress, ultimately devours itself.

2.5 Reception

The Decline of the West came out in 1918 and 1922 and sold one hundred thousand copies, an enormous success. Its appeal to Germans defeated and wrecked by economic and political crisis was the message that a similar fate awaited the victors. The message resonated far beyond Germany. As Eric Kahler wrote in *The Meaning of History* (New York: George Braziller, 1964), the catastrophe of the First World War and the subsequent change of values, roles and perspectives prepared the ground for the suggestion that modern societies could decline and disappear the same way as the Roman or the Pre-Columbian empires did[65]. Between the First and Second World War, many believed that Western society was rotten. Spengler expressed in a poignant way what many felt. Nevertheless, he faced significant criticism from academics and intellectuals who rejected his method of inquiry. Moreover, *The Decline* unsettled several observers who saw in Spengler's work a call for the resurgence of German nationalism and Prussian militarism,

[64] Frye, *The Decline of the West*, 10.

[65] McInnes, *The Great Doomsayer*, 68.

while others refused his pessimism and fatalism[66]. Academics and intellectuals focused against Spengler's method. His use of analogy to describe the history of civilisations and his depiction of civilisations as living organisms stood in clear opposition to the prevailing methodologies and research directions of historiography at the time. Finally, he was criticised for his interpretation of cultures as isolated systems and because of the dogmatism of his perspectives[67]. In conclusion, academic historians dismissed Spengler's work, criticising his reliance on analogies and biological metaphors rather than rigorous empirical analysis. His cyclical vision of history, while fascinating for some, was seen as overly deterministic and speculative. The rejection of contingency and human agency in historical development further alienated professionals.

Abroad, the book provoked even harsher reactions among scholars, many of whom interpreted *The Decline* as a political manifesto rather than a historical work. In France, historian André Fauconnet labelled Spengler's book as chauvinistic. In the United Kingdom and the United States, Spengler's arguments against liberal democracy and multiculturalism were met with strong criticism[68].

Naturally, the rejection of Spengler's *The Decline* by professional historians can also be interpreted through another lens. Regardless of what academics claimed, the book was a global phenomenon, a massive success that sparked widespread debate and discussion at that time. This could predictably irritate scholars who were accustomed to writing for much smaller audiences, and who were directly criticised by Spengler himself. Spengler regarded specialised, scientific, and compartmentalised historical research as useful but incapable of grasping the *"sense of history"* that he, as an amateur historian writing a "pop" historical study, claimed to have captured[69].

However, as Frye stresses in his review, despite the fierce opposition from professional historians and intellectual circles, *The Decline* left a profound and lasting mark on Western culture. Not only did it give rise to an entire genre on the decline of the West and the clash of civilisations that has continued to inspire numerous works, but it

[66] Fennelly, *Twilight*, 56.

[67] *Ibid*.

[68] *Ibid*., 71.

[69] Fischer, *History and Prophecy*, 48.

also became deeply ingrained in the psychology and common understanding of Westerners. Frye writes: *"What seems to me most impressive about Spengler is the fact that everybody does accept his main thesis in practice, whatever they think or say they accept. Everybody thinks in terms of a "Western" culture to which Europeans and Americans belong; everybody thinks of that culture as old, not young."*[70]

Without doubt, Spengler's undeniable literary qualities – his burning narrative, poetic writing, ad Nietzschean style – captivated the public and won widespread admiration at a time when people had lost faith in progress. He appealed to the irrational, to myth, to will and passion in an era that had just witnessed the failure of science and reason. Spengler was remarkably successful in the United States, where the first edition of *The Decline* sold 21,000 copies and *The Hour of Decision* sold even more copies a few years later. His success in the United States was likewise tied to the shifting cultural sensibilities in the country. A whole generation of American artists, writers, and musicians had grown disillusioned and rebelled against the bourgeois optimism of the early 1900s. After the devastation of war, the failure of reason, and the experience of the destructive power of technological development, Americans sought to explore human irrationality, myth, and the passions of both the masses and individuals, rejecting materialism and pragmatism. Paradoxically, Spengler's fierce critique of American culture found particularly fertile ground in the United States of the "Lost Generation".

Spengler's later works did not achieve the same level of success as *The Decline*. *Man and Technics* (1931), with its bleak view of technological development, was met with coldness and never won public interest. *The Hour of Decision* (1933), by contrast, became a bestseller. Yet, its critique of liberal democracy, praise for authoritarianism and ambivalence toward Nazism provoked mixed reactions: some praised the author for his understanding of the global political climate of the time, some considered it as the work of an embittered reactionary, others saw him as a prophet and an ideologue, embracing the political and programmatic aspects of his thought.

[70] Frye, *The Decline of the West*, 6.

3 THE PROPHET AND THE DICTATOR

3.1 Spengler in Italy

Spengler's works reached Italy through reviews, specialist and journalistic articles, a few monographs, and the translation of *Man and Technics* and *The Hour of Decision*. The first to engage with Spengler was Benedetto Croce, who learned about *The Decline of the West* through a letter from Karl Vossler, who enthusiastically recommended the book. In his reply, Croce described it as *"painful"* to know that such a work – "*anti-methodical," "pretentious,"* and *"full of fantasies"* – had achieved such great success[71].

In 1921, Adriano Tilgher, one of the most prominent intellectuals of the time, dedicated a short essay to Spengler, expressing sympathy for his ideas and claiming he had developed similar arguments even before the publication of *The Decline*[72]. Despite Spengler's widespread fame, he received little academic attention in 1920s Italy. However, he was well known, and *The Decline* was famous in Italian intellectual and political circles. This is evident in Spengler's correspondence with Francesco Saverio Nitti, who expressed a certain admiration for him and recommended a chapter dedicated to foreign policy from his son's book, *L'Opera di Nitti*[73].

Academic interest in Spengler remained limited in the 1930s as well. Mussolini himself lamented this to Yvon De Begnac, complaining that, despite his efforts, Spengler failed to generate enthusiasm among intellectuals and readers[74]. Still, two monographs on Spengler were published during this period – one by Vittorio Beonio Bocchieri in 1928 and another by Lorenzo Giusso in 1935. In a study on the organization of the National Fascist Party published in 1939, the antifascist academic Antonio Canepa mentioned

[71] Thondl, *Spengler in Italien*, 88-89.

[72] *Ibid*., 90-91.

[73] *Ibid*., 189-190.

[74] *Ibid*., 92.

Spengler as a precursor of authoritarianism and acknowledged the significance of his insights regarding the rise of strongmen and totalitarian models throughout Europe[75].

Returning to Croce, he referenced or wrote about Spengler on multiple occasions. His two main works on the German thinker were both published in *La Critica* and were fiercely critical. The first was a review of *The Decline of the West*. Croce accused Spengler of ignorance, dilettantism and unawareness, lamenting the book's success as evidence of the decline in scientific rigor in Germany. According to the Italian philosopher, Spengler was speculative and lacked a reliable method of analysis. Thus, Croce argued that Spengler's conceptualisation of world history derived from incoherent and arbitrary combinations of notions, without a real logical and methodological consistency. Croce wrote that Spenglerian determinism was *"sheer nonsense"*[76], describing this approach as a pessimistic attitude threatening to gain popularity and produce moral and intellectual harm[77]. Against Spenglerian naturalism, Croce claimed that the human being possesses the creative power and the spiritual force to confront the most desperate situations and master them[78]. Croce dismissed Spenglerian statements that the Western culture was declining and argued that recent history demonstrated that the West was capable of great achievements. In 1923, Giuseppe Rensi described Spengler's philosophy as the antithesis of "*Crocianesimo*". In fact, Croce had an optimistic view of history, while Spengler a pessimistic and cyclical perspective[79]. In his book on Spengler's reception in Italy, Michael Thondl writes that once Croce came into contact with Spengler, he set out to *"immunize"* his fellow citizens against Spenglerian thought[80]. Margherita Cottone suggests that Croce's judgement delayed the Italian translation of *The Decline* until 1957.

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[75] *Ibid*., 93

[76] *Ibid*., 94.

[77] Margherita Cottone, "Recezione di Spengler in Italia", in *Il Tramonto dell'Occidente*: *lineamenti di una morfologia di una storia mondiale* by Oswald Spengler, ed. Rita Calabrese Conte, Margherita Cottone, Furio Jesi (Parma: Ugo Guanda Editore, 1978), XXXI.

[78] Thondl, *Spengler in Italien*, 95.

[79] *Ibid*.

[80] *Ibid*., 85.

In 1932, Croce published a review of *Man and Technics* in *La Critica*. Once again, he criticised the dilettantism and dogmatism that characterized Spengler's work. Criticizing the German thinker's pessimism, Croce warned of its dangers and condemned Spengler for his lack of morality. Without genuine moral sensitivity, humanity, or principles, Croce argued, Spengler could not claim to write a history of mankind[81]. Croce dismissed as absurd Spengler's claim that the West would soon be incapable of sustaining technological progress. Even more irrational, in Croce's view, was the idea that technological advancement would erode the moral virtues of Western societies.

Spengler's statements on the so-called *"coloured races"* were distasteful in the eyes of the Italian philosopher. Croce described him as a *"foolish Pan-Germanist"* consumed by bitterness and despair. The contrast between the two thinkers' views on globalization, industrialization, and multiculturalism continues to be relevant today. As a liberal, Croce saw the sharing of technology, the spread of knowledge, and economic prosperity as historical necessities that would elevate humanity to ever-higher levels of well-being. Spengler, by contrast, held an entirely opposing view. He argued that the shift of industrial centres from the West to the rest of the world was the root cause of unemployment in Europe – a true catastrophe. Moreover, as previously noted, Spengler considered the transfer of technological knowledge a grave danger, convinced that *"coloured peoples"* would soon turn that very technology against the West.

Croce dismissed these ideas, describing Spengler as nothing more than a mouthpiece for the narrow-minded, petty-bourgeois entrepreneurs who had been defeated by the expansion of global markets[82]. The debate between one of the greatest liberal thinkers of the 20th century and one of the intellectual forefathers of the radical right remains fascinating. It condenses the core hopes and anxieties that continue to divide the West today.

Massimo Ferrari Zumbini notes that, despite his fierce criticism of Spengler, Croce's correspondence and certain passages of his writings suggest that, over time, he

[81] *Ibid*., 96.

[82] *Ibid*., 99.

began to fear that some of Spengler's predictions might be correct[83]. In a 1928 letter, for example, Croce wondered whether Italy would emerge stronger and more liberal from its political crisis or if it would instead become the first Western European state to fulfil Spengler's prophecy. In 1944, at the Italian Liberal Party congress in Naples, Croce cited Spengler once again. While describing him as a *"not strictly scientific"* thinker, he acknowledged his keen observation of the rising German militarism that had since consumed Europe[84]. It seems, then, that at a certain point, Croce began to take Spengler more seriously, even while continuing to disdain his lack of method and his worldview.

Among Croce's intellectual circle, Francesco Flora wrote an article titled *Spengleriana* in *La Critica*, in which he described *The Decline of the West* as *"an enjoyable read."* He praised Spengler for having written a book that *"sparked many ideas"* and *"stirred in the soul a fervour of musical wonders."*[85] While aligning with Croce's critical stance, Flora – who wrote under a pseudonym – recognised Spengler's literary talent and engaging style, which, he admitted, had the power to provoke an intellectual reaction in the reader.

Spengler drew attention from observers on the left as well. Thondl cites Nitti and Gramsci among those who engaged with his work. Nitti, previously mentioned, changed his view on Spengler in the 1930s. He criticized Spengler's understanding of declining birth rates, arguing that the causes were economic and social rather than moral or spiritual. He also dismissed Spengler's claim that *"coloured races"* would attack *"white"* populations. Overall, Nitti regarded Spengler as *"a boring philosopher who had written massive volumes filled with banalities"* and saw him as nothing more than a product of Germany's political climate at the time[86]. Gramsci, on the other hand, analysed Spengler's work through a Marxist lens. He identified Spengler as an intellectual serving the ruling

[83] Massimo Ferrari Zumbini, "Lo Spatwerk storico-filosofico di Oswald Spengler," in *Storia e Politica*, no. 14 (1975): 377-407, 401.

[84] Thondl, *Spengler in Italien*, 103-104.

[85] *Ibid*., 102.

[86] *Ibid*., 188-191.

classes, arguing that his writings sought to instil a set of values in the oppressed that would lead them to submit rather than rebel against their masters[87].

Notwithstanding the negative reaction of the most prominent liberal and leftist Italian intellectuals, Spenglerian ideas found significant traction in Italy not as philosophical writing but as frameworks for political thought[88]. Despite Croce's disapproval of Spengler's catastrophism and determinism, some were fascinated by the Spenglerian emphasis on the sacred and ancestral elements of culture, a theme that resonated within the Italian political and cultural discourse of the time.

3.2 Spengler and Fascism

While Spenglerian determinism remained controversial among Italian academics, his apocalyptic vision of Western decline, his critique of urbanisation and liberalism, and his praise of authoritarianism found a receptive audience in Italian fascists. Thinkers like Spengler, who described the decline of liberal democracies as an inevitable process inevitable in the face of modern challenges, offered several arguments to fascism. The Spenglerian conceptualisation of history, in which civilizations rise and fall, legitimised fascism's self-portrayal as a force of renewal, capable of revitalizing the West. Fascism, as an expression of the crisis of the age, was a manifestation of absolute activism, detached from any tradition and intrinsically devoid of principles, ideas, or values that transcended political contingency. Therefore, as absolute activism, fascism reduced any principle, idea, and value to *myth* and aspired only to conquer power to manifest its will to power[89]. The political use of *myth* mirrored certain aspects of Spenglerian Caesarism, where principles and ideologies were seen not as truths but as tools to inspire action. Furthermore, the emphasis on activism and relativism recalls the Spenglerian belief in the decay of rationalistic ideologies. Such ideologies were viewed as symptomatic of Western decline. Fascism adopted this framework to present itself as the sole alternative to liberalism's perceived stagnation and decay. This fusion of modernist activism and

[87] *Ibid*., 193.

[88] Cottone, Recezione, XXXII.

[89] Emilio Gentile. *Le Origini dell'Ideologia Fascista, 1918-1925* (Il Mulino, 2011), 380.

traditionalist rhetoric enabled fascism to appeal both to revolutionary thinkers, disillusioned by rationalist ideologies, and to conservative elites seeking stability.

Starting in the 1930s, Spengler's work began to be interpreted through a new lens. The Fascist regime and its press portrayed him as a prophet of democracy's dissolution and a herald of authoritarian power[90]. Besides, he was often depicted as an apologist for German strength and its right to assert dominance. This characterization appeared in the 1936 *Enciclopedia Italiana*, where the article introducing him described his work as undeniably poetic and presented Spengler as a champion of hegemony, Prussianism, and submission to the state[91]. In 1940, Professor Felice Battaglia introduced Spengler in the *Dizionario di Politica*, published by the Fascist Party. Battaglia offered a largely negative assessment, joining the chorus of voices that had long criticized Spengler's naturalism and weak methodology. He also condemned Spengler's pessimism and highlighted the contradiction between the intellectual who announced an inevitable decline and the political thinker who advocated authoritarian state-building and promoted Germany's imperial mission. Battaglia solved the contradiction suggesting that Spengler had shifted from a pessimistic outlook in *The Decline* to a more action-oriented stance in *The Hour of Decision*[92].

Several intellectuals aligned with the regime praised Spengler, chief among them Julius Evola, who after the Second World War published the first Italian translation of *The Decline of the West*. Apparently, Yvon De Begnac described Evola as Spengler's prophet in Italy. Whether De Begnac made this statement or not, it is true that Evola was one of Spengler's most devoted supporters and scholars. Spengler deeply influenced and stimulated Evola, who read the German philosopher through the lens of his own traditionalist and spiritualist sensibilities.

In 1936, Evola published a long article in *La Vita Italiana*, paying tribute to the recently deceased thinker and offering a general assessment of his work. He focused primarily on two of Spengler's publications: *The Decline of the West* and *The Hour of*

[90] Thondl, *Spengler in Italien*, 85.

[91] *Ibid*., 146-147.

[92] *Ibid*., 148.

Decision, considering the latter a continuation of the former. Evola viewed Spengler's greatest achievement as the destruction of the myth of progress and evolution.

However, he criticized Spengler's concept of *Caesarism*, arguing that the absence of tradition in the modern world made it impossible for figures like those who once ruled Rome to reemerge. Additionally, Evola diverged from Spengler on the role of the new Caesar. While Spengler envisioned him as a strong leader capable of dominating the masses, Evola, through his traditionalist and esoteric perspective, saw the Caesar as a figure who would dissolve the masses altogether, paving the way for a new hierarchical society of castes built on entirely different foundations.

Alongside Evola was Del Massa, a Fascist intellectual who, in 1937, dedicated a section of his monograph *Uomini ed Idee* to Spengler. Del Massa embraced many of Spengler's ideas, particularly those articulated in *Man and Technics*. He praised Spengler's conceptualization of race and commended his intellectual and political commitment to reaction, strength, and state power. Spengler was depicted as a champion of hierarchy and reaction, a thinker who had fought against Bolshevism and the revolution from below[93]. Vittorio Beonio Brocchieri wrote the first Italian monograph on Spengler, most perhaps the text Mussolini used to deepen his knowledge of the German thinker. While noting the distinctly pan-Germanist, Prussian, bellicose character of Spengler's philosophy, Brocchieri described him as a stimulating writer and keen observer whose publications had had a great impact on culture and philosophy.[94]

Fascist journals discussed Spengler's ideas in several instances, with varying degrees of approval. The consensus was that his philosophy had a distinctly Germanic, Gothic nature.

In 1931, Francesco Coppola, editor of *Politica*, referred to him as *"a brilliant Gothic thinker"*[95], commenting on an article in the journal that explored Spengler's

[93] *Ibid*., 170

[94] *Ibid*., 171.

[95] *Ibid*., 186.

philosophy of history and described him as *"a unique and compelling voice of our time."*[96]

In *Critica Fascista*, a more moderate journal, Spengler faced strong criticism, particularly from Longhitano, who in 1936 denounced his philosophy as *"inhuman and unoriginal."* However, just a year earlier, Lorenzo Giusso had published a favourable article. In the review, Giusso, a historian and philosopher of Romantic idealism, discussed Spengler's political writings. Giusso's analysis focused on Spengler's hatred for Anglo-Saxon liberalism, French democracy and Russian Bolshevism. The Italian intellectual praised Spengler for developing a theory of power that legitimised the rise of the authoritarian state as a response to the weaknesses of liberalism and bolshevism. Giusso maintained that the Spenglerian conceptualisation of the *"omnipotent state"* found its realisation in the fascist regime Mussolini had established. Giusso also dedicated a monograph to Spengler's philosophy of history and, in 1944, included the German philosopher in a publication on German historicism. In his 1944 book, he once again stressed the programmatic and political nature of Spengler's later works, in particular *The Hour of Decision*. He identified the central thesis of the book in the condemnation of the supremacy of money over politics, against which Spengler advocated the rise of new Caesars. In sum, Giusso embraced the Spenglerian theses on politics and philosophy and praised the German philosopher throughout his works.

Spengler found the most enthusiastic support in *La Vita Italiana* and the newspaper *Regime Fascista*, both founded and edited by Roberto Farinacci, a leading figure of the regime's most radical faction. I have already discussed Evola's enthusiastic article published in 1936 in *La Vita Italiana*. Additionally, *Regime Fascista* published a commemorative article when Spengler died, describing him as *"one of the most profound and brilliant thinkers"* of modern times, whose ideas had left a lasting mark on contemporary thought[97].

One of the most prominent Spenglerian intellectuals in Italy was Yvon De Begnac. However, as Michael Thondl stresses, De Begnac's accounts should be treated with

[96] *Ibid.*

[97] *Ibid.*, 194.

caution. Thondl suggests that De Begnac's records serve a propagandistic function, depicting Mussolini as a historical force capable of overcoming Spengler's deterministic vision. The narrative attempts to cast Mussolini as a "new Caesar" and Spengler as his intellectual prophet. Because of his profound adherence to fascism and because of his personal and political closeness to Mussolini, the objectiveness of these accounts is questionable. Therefore, I will not cite the passages from De Begnac's work that report Mussolini's statements on Spengler, as I consider them doubtful.

Nevertheless, De Begnac's work remains a credible source in providing a general picture of Mussolini's interest in Spengler, an interest confirmed by more reliable sources, particularly Mussolini's own writings. With this in mind, I will limit myself to referencing a few passages from De Begnac that serve as a useful introduction to the next paragraph. For instance, Mussolini's remarks in De Begnac's writings suggest a reinterpretation of Spengler, arguing for resistance against decline rather than passive acceptance[98]. On another occasion, De Begnac portrays Spengler as a key intellectual influence on Mussolini's demographic policies. Mussolini is said to have credited Spengler and Korherr with shaping fascist pro-natalist policies. Finally, De Begnac writes that Mussolini described himself as Spengler's example of leadership overcoming bureaucratic stagnation and indecisiveness and praised Spengler's hatred for liberalism[99].

In conclusion, there is no doubt on the fact that Mussolini admired Spengler and praised his publications. In 1925, Spengler sent him his writings, and by 1932, *Man and Technics* and *The Hour of Decision* had Italian translations. In 1933, Mussolini celebrated *The Hour of Decision* in *Il Popolo d'Italia*.

3.3 Spenglerian Themes in Mussolini's Speeches and Writings

Spengler had sent his writings to Mussolini in 1925. However, according to De Felice, it is more likely that the *Duce* came into contact with Spengler's work around 1927-1928, with the publication of a series of studies on *The Decline of the West* by Vittorio Beonio Brocchieri. During this period, Europe's crisis was often discussed in

[98] *Ibid*., 154.

[99] *Ibid*., 155.

Italy, and abroad[100]. In fact, references to Spengler in Mussolini's speeches and writings increased from 1928 onwards. For instance, in the second half of 1928, Mussolini wrote the preface to the Italian edition of *The Decline of Births: The Death of Peoples* by R. Korherr. The book included an additional preface written by Spengler himself.

Mussolini often evoked Spenglerian themes in his writings in the 1930s. Explicit references to the German thinker, however, remained rare. De Felice explains the scarcity of explicit references to Spengler *"with the fact that being Spengler primarily known as a proponent of the historical mission of the German people (and for his sympathies toward National Socialism), Mussolini could not risk any misunderstandings."*[101] The *Duce* could not align himself with the Spenglerian vision of Germanic supremacy over the world.

In 1933, Mussolini dedicated a positive review to *The Hour of Decision*. The book held significant importance for Mussolini because of two reasons. On one hand, Spengler appeared to implicitly criticize National Socialism in certain passages of the book[102], and on the other, he provided an intellectual justification for authoritarian power in Europe, which Mussolini was consolidating in Italy during those years, through the further development of the historical theory of Caesarism.

Spengler's prophetization of the West standing on the edge of the Caesarian age must have been particularly appealing to Mussolini[103]. In this framework, Spengler praised Mussolini as the brightest example of this new type of men, willing to rise above past ideologies and party politics to impose absolute personal rule and guide the West. As I will discuss, Mussolini recurrently repeated Spengler's arguments in his criticism of democracy and mass society. Spengler's conceptualisation of Caesarism was the aspect of Spengler's theory that most captivated Mussolini's fascination, more than any other aspect of Spengler's philosophy of history and helped him construct not only the historical-philosophical justifications for his power but also, quite likely, the very image

[100] Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Vol. I: Gli Anni del Consenso, 1929-1936* (Torino: Einaudi, 2019), 39.

[101] *Ibid*., 40.

[102] In 1933, a convergence between Italian Fascism and German National Socialism was far from inevitable.

[103] *Ibid*., 43.

of himself as the absolute leader of Italy during the totalitarian phase of his government. Once again, De Felice offers an illuminating perspective, stating that *"in a certain sense, it was only thanks to Spengler's concept of 'Caesarism' that the various psychological and cultural elements contributing to the formation of the 'moral idea' which animated Mussolini's politics between 1929 and 1936 found their cohesion."*[104]

Mussolini appropriated other Spenglerian themes as well. First and foremost, the cyclical conception of history, which posits that human history is marked by the rise and fall of civilisations and peoples. Mussolini used this framework of interpretation as a rhetorical tool to predict the imminent collapse of the much despised '*demoliberal'* systems. Actually, some of his statements reveal that Mussolini had no illusions on the fact that Fascism was not immune to the inevitability of history.

Additionally, Mussolini recycled the Spenglerian argument about the superiority of rural life over that of the cosmopolitan metropolis, and the superiority of the people of the countryside over urbanised citizens. Furthermore, at least until the mid-1930s, he adopted the Spenglerian conceptualisation of race as a spiritual and moral element rather than a biological one.

These ideas were present in Mussolini's thinking even before he came into contact with Spengler. Therefore, the German author served more as an authoritative confirmation of Mussolini's preexisting political intuitions than as a genuine source of inspiration[105]. Nonetheless, this convergence is not coincidental. Spengler provided Mussolini with the historical and philosophical *gravitas* necessary to add intellectual weight and complexity to several of his otherwise less well-defined ideas.

Nevertheless, Mussolini's relationship with Spengler should not be understood as one of unconditional admiration or total intellectual alignment. Indeed, it also involved a rejection and denial of the German author's more fatalistic theses. While Mussolini was fascinated by Spengler's cyclical and apocalyptic view of history, he rejected its core premise – that the destiny of civilisation is predetermined. Instead, he emphasised the vitality of fascism as an ideology, a societal model, and a transformative way to organise

[104] *Ibid*., 44.

[105] *Ibid*., 41.

power capable of revitalising the West. Commenting on the Spenglerian inevitability of decline, Mussolini wrote in his diaries that *"Spengler cannot prove the impossibility of the miracle."* Mussolini placed himself among the *"new men of Europe"* who would realise that miracle and prevent the fall[106]. Yet, in the final years of the Second World War, as the defeat in the conflict and the end of his life approached, in the midst of the European tragedy, a desolate Mussolini succumbed to the Spenglerian ominous prophecy.

I have selected and analysed a vast array of speeches and writings that demonstrate the influence of the German author in Mussolini's discourse. I decided to focus my attention on three topical themes – the assault on liberal democracy, the narrative on demographic decline and the superiority of rural life over urbanised society, and the justification of authoritarianism. In the following paragraphs, I will analyse the contents and characteristics of the interactions between the prophet of decline and the Italian dictator.

3.3.1 The Attack on Liberal Democracy

As early as 1919, Mussolini declared that parliamentarism was in the midst of an irreversible crisis and that the solution lay in abolishing traditional parliamentary structures in favour of new forms of political representation[107]. Mussolini framed liberal democracy as an outdated system incapable of addressing the challenges of modernity. He never concealed his belief that liberal democracy was an alien concept – an imported system fundamentally disconnected with the virtues and character of the Italian people.

In his speeches, the Italian dictator portrayed fascism as the remedy to the irreversible crisis of liberal democracy. He argued that democratic institutions – above all, Parliament – needed to be dismantled and disrupted to allow fascism to fully realize its political potential[108].

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[106] Marino Biondi e Alessandro Borsetti, *Cultura e Fascismo* (Firenze: Ponte alle Grazie, 1996), 86.

[107] Benito Mussolini, *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini, Dal Secondo Congresso dei Fasci al Trattato di Rapallo* (Firenze: La Fenice, 1953), 9.

[108] Benito Mussolini, *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini, Dall'Attentato Zaniboni al Discorso dell'Ascensione* (Firenze: La Fenice, 1957), 286.

In an article titled "*Between Two Civilizations*", published in 1933 in the Fascist newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia*, Mussolini articulated his belief that the "*demoliberal*" civilization was nearing its end and that the vitality of authoritarianism was destined to replace it across the Western world. Mussolini's explanations for the decline of liberal democratic civilization contain several Spenglerian statements. Mussolini categorises between the *"negative causes"* and *"positive causes"* of the demise of liberal democracy. The negative causes are the predatory and accumulative nature of capitalism, the massification of politics, and the stagnation and inaction of liberal democratic parliaments and governments. The *"positive causes"* are interpreted as the results of the fascist experience. The *Duce* highlights the decisiveness, energy, and transformative character of the regime, citing achievements such as the foundation of the Italian Empire and the reclamation of the Pontine Marshes. He contrasts the stagnation and contentiousness of democracies with the vital dynamism of the regime, embodied in its transformative impact on both society and nature. Furthermore, Mussolini views the emerging Nazi regime in Germany as evidence that the West is moving in a clear historical direction – one that inevitably leads to authoritarianism. An interesting section of the article written by the Italian dictator is his assessment on the American president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. According to Mussolini, Roosevelt personifies the Caesarism that Spengler anticipated. Roosevelt is described as a Caesar, a providential figure who, following the dramatic failures of liberal economy and politics, has subjugated all "*demoliberal*" institutions (the parliament, the press, the trade unions) and principles. Mussolini writes that there exists only one will, that of Roosevelt, and that nothing stands between him and the nation. In these developments, Mussolini sees the signs of the end of the liberal democratic civilisation and the dawn of an authoritarian era[109]. This article was not the first time that Mussolini expressed his conviction that the election of FDR was a turning point in the crisis of liberal-democratic civilisation. In an article published on June 28, 1933, Mussolini described a Roosevelt's alleged accumulation of powers and decisions promoting heavy state intervention in the economy as *"negation of the system."*[110] Mussolini did not consider Roosevelt as a fellow fascist. However, so deeply convinced

[109] Benito Mussolini, *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini, Dal Patto a Quattro alla Fondazione della Provincia di Littoria* (Firenze: La Fenice, 1958), 43-45.

[110] *Ibid*., 10.

of his belief that, amid the severe crisis facing Western nations, only strongmen could lead their people, he interpreted Roosevelt's presidency as the sign of an embryonic *fascistisation* of American politics. The analysis, evidently poorly informed and shortsighted, was rooted in the aforementioned conviction that, given the depth of the postwar *polycrisis*, dictatorship was the only possible way out for the Western world.

In November of that year, in a speech delivered before the general assembly of the National Council of the Corporations, Mussolini reiterated his criticism of capitalism and liberalism, using a series of Spenglerian *tòpoi*. During the speech, Mussolini described capitalism as progressing through three stages – dynamic, static and decadent – recalling Spengler's conception of history as a cyclical process. Mussolini defined the final stage of capitalism as "*supercapitalism*", a social phenomenon pursuing the standardisation of human life and the reduction of individuals to mere units of production and consumption. He lamented the dominance of economic logic over spiritual values, decrying the homologation of individuals in the service of profit. His depiction of "*supercapitalism*" echoes Spengler's characterisation of *Zivilisation* as a stage marked by sterility, massification, technical efficiency, and veneration of profit. As "*supercapitalism*" advances, Mussolini argued, Europe loses its political, economic and cultural dominance over the world[111].

In December 1933, Mussolini published a review of *Jahre der Entscheidung* (*The Hour of Decision*), Spengler's last publication. In the article, Mussolini deals with several themes present in the book and identifies as the central thesis of the work the argument that the Western world is menaced by two revolutions: a "white" one and a "coloured" one. The "white" revolution is a social upheaval originating from the collapse of the values of the *Ancien Régime* and later from the false promises of liberalism and democracy. The *"realm of the masses"* that gather in filthy metropolises – a *tòpos* that I will discuss in the next paragraph – universal suffrage, and demagoguery are the root causes of the "white" revolution. *"How to endure?", "What should be done?"* Mussolini asks, expressing his anguish in front of these challenges. He highlights Spengler's admiration for fascism and its effort to morally fortifying the Italian nation, yet he

[111] *Ibid*., 86-96.

acknowledges that Spengler remains vague about resolutive solutions to counter the revolutions that menace the West.

The review confirms the *Duce*'s engaged but non-uncritical interest in the work of the German writer. Additionally, Mussolini cites *The Decline of the West*, showing some knowledge of Spengler's *magnum opus*. In the conclusion, the dictator urges Professor Vittorio Beonio Brocchieri, to further discuss *The Hour of Decision*, as he had previously done with *The Decline*[112].

Mussolini would reaffirm his hostility to libera democracy several times. In a speech to the Blackshirts in 1944, the *Duce*, portrayed democracy as the political manifestation of Anglo-Saxon and Jewish capitalism[113]. In fact, after the antisemitic turn of the late 1930s, Mussolini shifted the focus of his hostility toward liberal capitalism and democracy from the contempt for Anglo-Saxon ideals to hatred of the Jews. In this speech, he described democracy as nothing more than a tool of capitalism designed to bring about the end of Christian civilisation and realise the scientific exploitation of the world.

In a later conversation with German journalist Magdalena Mollier, Mussolini stressed the inherent incompatibility between European foundational traditions, values and both American (Anglo-Saxon) liberalism and Russian (Asiatic) communism – opinions he had consistently maintained in his speeches and writings, especially the latter[114]. In rejecting both political models and denouncing their anthropological irreconcilability with European civilisation and existence, Mussolini recalled Spengler's vehement dismissal of both liberalism and communism as viable political ideologies. Furthermore, he repeated the German thinker's call for Europeans to rediscover unity and vigour to safeguard their civilisation from destruction.

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[112] *Ibid*., 122-123.

[113] Benito Mussolini, *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini, Dalla Liberazione di Mussolini all'Epilogo. La Repubblica Sociale Italiana* (Firenze: La Fenice, 1960), 109-111.

[114] *Ibid*., 159.

3.3.2 Demographic Decline, Cosmopolitanism, and Ruralism

Among the Spenglerian themes that Mussolini repeats in his narrative are disdain for cosmopolitanism, modern metropolises, praise for rural life, and an obsession with declining birth rates.

These subjects, deeply controversial at the time, are interlinked in both Spengler's and Mussolini's reasoning. As seen, Spengler links the demographic decline of the West to the growth of large metropolises and the abandonment of traditional gender roles. The cosmopolitan metropolises of *Zivilisation*, with their array of pleasures, distractions, and entertainments, corrupt their citizens, mix the races and lead women to abandon their roles as mothers. For Spengler, the transition from rural to urban dominance marked the irreversible decline of a *Kultur*, as cities became symbols of decadence and civilisational exhaustion. As I shall note, Mussolini consistently adopted such perspective and arguments in his rhetoric, citing Spengler on at least a couple of occasions.

Mussolini's rhetoric often reflected his anxiety over the perceived demographic decline. To address this phenomenon, the Italian dictator sought to rejuvenate the Italian agricultural sector, promoting self-sufficiency and celebrating rural life as an antidote to urban alienation, individualism and hedonism. Mussolini idealises the peasant as the model citizen, contrasting the purity of rural life with the moral and social corruption of the cities. For instance, in a speech to the Chamber of Deputies in May 1927, Mussolini discussed the state of the Italian race, asking himself whether it was in a phase of crisis or progress. A few sentences later, he focused on population growth, which he viewed as a measure of national strength – the more numerous a nation's people, the more it could *"matter."* He drew a parallel with the Roman empire to stress the urgency of addressing declining birth rates, which he directly linked to the decay of empires and nations[115].

More revealing is Mussolini's previously mentioned preface to the book *The Decline of Births: The Death of Peoples* by Richard Korherr, published in 1928 in the journal *Gerarchia*. Mussolini opens the text mentioning Oswald Spengler and his seminal *The Decline of the West*. Spengler had also written a preface to Korherr's book. In his

[115] Mussolini, *Dall'Attentato Zaniboni al Discorso dell'Ascensione*, 364-365.

review, Mussolini describes the work as *"powerfully effective"* and fully embraces the thesis presented by both Korherr and Spengler – that the decline in birth rates and the consequential decline of peoples is primarily caused by urbanisation and metropolitan cosmopolitanism. Mussolini writes that *"the more the city grows morbidly"* until it becomes a metropolis, *"the more infertile it becomes."* Its citizens are *"sterilised as soon as they set foot in it."* The *Duce* continues, arguing that this trend is not exclusive to Italy but affects *"the entire white race, the entire Western race, which risks being overwhelmed by other races of colour that multiply at rates unknown to Western peoples."* Mussolini asks himself whether *"blacks and yellows"* are at the gates of European civilisation and answers in the affirmative, alluding to the Spenglerian belief that the non-Faustian/Western civilisations – Mussolini uses the term races, though the concept is the same – are not only more vital and therefore prolific but have also become self-aware of their destiny and future, a realisation encouraged by the West itself. Thus, Mussolini states that Western civilisation is threatened by the rising African-American population in the United States of America, the growth of the Chinese population and that of Russia, all of which he sees as ready to jump on Europe's and North America's *"undefended borders."* Mussolini concludes comparing birth rates in Italian rural areas with those in Italian cities, reiterating his conviction in the existence of an inverse relationship between the growth of cities and increasing birth rates[116].

In the same year, 1928, during a speech in Rome in the context of the fourth year of the *Battle for Grain*, Mussolini announced significant investments in rural areas[117]. I shall emphasize his assessment that investments in the cities had run their course and that the time had come to turn to the countryside to address the *"anguishing"* problems of economic crisis and demographic decline. A couple of weeks after this speech, the Italian dictator would again declare, before sixty thousand farmers, that *"peoples who abandon the land are doomed to decay."*[118] Once again, the Spenglerian idealisation of European

[116] Benito Mussolini*, Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini, Dal Discorso dell'Ascensione agli Accordi del Laterano* (Firenze: La Fenice, 1957), 209-216.

[117] *Ibid*., 236-237.

[118] *Ibid*., 246-247.

peasants reappears – a once rural, vital and prolific civilisation that has condemned itself to decline through urbanisation.

Mussolini continued to emphasise the importance of the demographic factor throughout his regime. As late as 1933, he noted in *Il Popolo d'Italia* the *"grave, unstoppable demographic decline"* of Berlin. In this article, Mussolini pointed his finger against the *"tentacular city"*, whose myth, he argued, was collapsing, as evidenced by the migration from large metropolises to the countryside. The *"overgrown city that gnaws and consumes itself"* was, in his view, now devoid of youth and vitality[119]. A month later, in September of the same year, Mussolini published another article titled "*Il numero è forza*" ("Strength in Numbers"), where he linked population growth to economic prosperity. He stated – an idea quite widespread at the time, even among democratic thinkers – that the larger the population, the broader the market on which businesses could rely to increase production and profits[120]. In December 1933, he published the previously mentioned review of Spengler's *The Hour of Decision*, in which he referred to Spengler's thesis that the Western civilisation was threatened not only by the "white" revolution but also by the "coloured" revolution. The latter, according to Spengler, was an existential menace because of the rising populations of non-white groups that would eventually "overwhelm" the white race.

Before proceeding, a brief digression. Mussolini lauded what he defined as Spengler's *"notable"* rejection of the *"rude, Darwinian, and materialistic conception of race fashionable among the antisemites of Europe and America."* In fact, in the *Hour of Decision,* Spengler opposed the pseudoscientific definition of race in biological terms promoted by National socialism. Spengler argued that those obsessed with race *"no longer have it in them."*[121] Several scholars include the Spenglerian definition of race among the main reasons of his alienation from the NSDAP[122]. Nevertheless, I must stress that this interpretation of the "racial problem" by both Mussolini and Spengler must not be understood in humanitarian sense. Mussolini and Spengler were convinced of the

[119] Mussolini, *Dal Patto a Quattro all'Inaugurazione della Provincia di Littoria*, 42.

[120] *Ibid*., 52-53.

[121] Rose, *A World After Liberalism*, 36.

[122] *See* Rose, Engels, Fischer.

existence of races, and as their views on the threat of the *"coloured revolution"* demonstrate, they perceived inter-racial relations in anything but a benevolent way. At this point of their political experience, they converged on the idea that races were not rooted in biology or genetics but instead in spirituality, culture, and politics[123]. Again, their view does not mean that they did believe in the possibility of an egalitarian relationship between different races nor that they believed in peaceful coexistence between different civilisations. As the tragic evolution of fascist policies demonstrates, Mussolini will later abandon the psycho-spiritual interpretation to align fascism with National socialism.

Two more excerpts from Mussolini's writings illustrate his persistent concern with demographic decline.

In the first excerpt, Mussolini emphasises the disparity between urban and rural fertility rate. By lamenting a *"race's suicidal run"*, Mussolini dramatizes the stakes of declining birth rates, attributing the issue primarily to urban centres[124]. Once again, the *Duce's* portrayal of cities as the epicentre of decline repeats Spengler's statements on the cosmopolitan magnetism of metropolises eroding traditional values and social cohesion.

In the second passage, written a month later, Mussolini expands his assessment, observing that the demographic decline is no longer confined to cities but has begun to impact the countryside as well[125]. His argument that *"the great city first devastates the countryside, then leads it to sterility"* emphasizes his description of urbanisation as inherently corrupted. Instead, his rhetoric romanticizes the rural world as a source of vitality and national regeneration. Once again, his ruralist perspective mirrors the Spenglerian glorification of agricultural societies as the bedrock of cultural and racial continuity, contrasting them with the decadence of industrialized urban civilisations. It would be redundant to list all the instance where Mussolini lamented the demographic decline, denounced urbanisation, or issued alarmist warnings about the end of the white

[123] Mussolini, *Dal Patto a Quattro all'Inaugurazione della Provincia di Littoria*, 122-123.

[124] *Ibid*., 159-160.

[125] *Ibid*., 174.

race. However, it is worthwhile to cite a few more examples to illustrate the enduring presence of these themes in his rhetoric.

Two years after the speeches mentioned earlier, Mussolini wrote again in *Il Popolo d'Italia*, reiterating his earlier *"apocalyptic inked warnings"* about the fatal consequences of declining birth rates *"for the cultural, moral, and spiritual life of the white race."*[126] He found further proof of this alarm in the closure of numerous schools in Vienna due to a lack of students. Mussolini described the situation in almost biblical terms, defining the decline in birth rates as a phenomenon depriving Western/white civilisation of *"new souls."* A month later, in the same newspaper, he returned to the topic of Austrian demographics, praising the prolific rural population that was helping to improve the country's demographic situation. He exalted *"the rural people who are beginning to defend themselves"* and who *"practice those high human and national duties without which nations and peoples are doomed to decline."*[127]

Terms like "decline", "threatened civilisation", and the celebration of rural values are unmistakably Spenglerian and remain integral to Mussolini's rhetoric even after Spengler's death. Spengler, in fact, had passed away in the spring of 1936, while Mussolini's articles were published that summer. Although, Spengler had already stepped of the stage a couple of years earlier, sidelined by the Nazi regime, Mussolini will continue to use his arguments.

The contents of Mussolini's writings grew more optimistic in the winter of 1936. Mussolini praised the Nazi regime's reversal of alarming demographic trends[128]. A brief note before continuing, Mussolini's demographic concerns intensified his admiration for Nazi Germany's pronatalist policies. He closely followed Germany's population increase under Hitler's regime and contrasted it with the declining vitality of Western democracies. This biological conceptualisation of population as a source of strength contributed to Mussolini's and Hitler's political convergence starting in the mid-1930s onwards[129].

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[126] Benito Mussolini*, Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini, Dalla Proclamazione dell'Impero al Viaggio in Germania* (Firenze: La Fenice, 1959), 17.

[127] *Ibid*., 23.

[128] *Ibid*., 79.

[129] Cottone, *Recezione*, XXXVI.

Later, on December 8, he published an article celebrating Fascism's efforts to revitalise the countryside.

Two more passages are relevant for the scope of my research. In one, Mussolini asserts that *"national flourishing always coincides with agricultural development,"* while political decline is either preceded or accompanied by the decline of agriculture. In another passage, recalling a central premise in Spengler's beliefs, he states that *"while industrial and urban civilisation removes women from their traditional roles,"* rural life reinforces the domestic and maternal role of women[130]. Moreover, Mussolini contrasted Fascism's rejuvenation of agricultural life with the perceived indolence and stagnation of democracies, which he accused of being unable to inspire their citizens to settle in the colonies they had previously conquered. From now on, the Italian dictator's stance on the demographic issue took on ambivalent tones.

In late December 1936, the *Duce* praised Italy's population growth and the regime's agricultural policies. Yet, by January 1937, he lamented in two articles published four days apart in *Il Popolo d'Italia* that the regime's pro-natalist policy, launched in 1926, had *"practically failed."*[131] In examining the causes of this failure, Mussolini blamed the urban bourgeoisie, who he accused of being *"locked away in their palaces and luxurious apartments,"* while praising the vitality of the poorer, rural sectors of the population. He framed the declining birth rates as a *"moral"* and "*bourgeois"* problem, unrelated to economic factors. In February of that year, he spoke of a *"demographic twilight in Europe,"* which he predicted would inevitably lead to the end of its civilisation[132]. Later in 1937 and throughout 1938, however, he returned to exalting the *"demographic strength"* of Italy, which he argued conferred a responsibility toward the entirety of Western civilisation[133].

The topic received less attention as the onset of World War II approached.

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[130] *Ibid*., 87.

[131] *Ibid*., 111.

[132] *Ibid*., 124.

[133] Benito Mussolini, *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini, Dal Viaggio in Germania all'intervento nella Seconda Guerra Mondiale* (Firenze: La Fenice, 1959), 49.

3.3.3 Civilizational Destiny and the Justification of Authoritarian Power

In Mussolini's writings and speeches, the conceptualisation of the destiny of Western civilisation and the nature of power merge into a narrative and intellectual framework that justifies the existence of authoritarian rule as a means to fulfil civilisational destiny[134]. The Spenglerian conceptualisation of the Western civilisation as a *unicum* destined to transcend the limits of life and nature in pursuit of the infinite is reflected in Mussolini's rhetoric. In Mussolini's words, and in Spengler's thinking, Western civilisational destiny is often in opposition to that of other civilisations. Interactions between civilisations are rarely depicted as peaceful encounters, let alone as moments of fusion or mutual understanding, but rather as clashes – either ongoing or imminent. Thus, the vision of a world constantly marked by fatal clashes and conflicts among races or civilisations is accompanied by the idea that only authoritarianism, decisive leadership, and the suppression of bourgeois individuality and freedoms can enable a civilisation to prevail over others and win the struggle for spiritual survival. The threats faced by Western civilisation – and thus, the Italian people as well – such as bolshevism, cosmopolitan liberalism, and the *"coloured revolution"* – are deemed too severe for dysfunctional systems like the "*demoliberal*" ones. Only the authoritarian strength of resolute leaders can give Italy and the West a fighting chance.

As noted by the historian of Fascism Renzo De Felice, the intellectual and political justification of authoritarianism through this historical perspective is probably the most evident and consistent instance of the Italian dictator's reliance on Spenglerian ideas[135]. After all, Mussolini could not help but feel pleased – and most probably inspired – by the

[134] As Jens Petersen notes in *Hitler e Mussolini. La difficile alleanza* (Laterza, 1975), Mussolini placed great importance on the intellectual justification of the regime. During the ideological dispute between Fascism and Nazism unfolding in the early 1930s, Mussolini leveraged Spengler's praise for his regime – by then, Spengler was already regarded as a foundational thinker of the radical right – to affirm the ideological primacy of Fascism over Nazism. During this dispute, both regimes claimed to be the originator of this new political doctrine they viewed as the salvific idea for Western civilisation.

[135] De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce*, 41.

admiration that one of the most prominent intellectuals of his time had repeatedly expressed toward him.

In an article published on *Il Popolo d'Italia* on January 12, 1932, Mussolini wrote that *"something is creaking"* and that *"certain traditional and foundational assumptions are collapsing,"* observing those symptoms of decline that had characterised the downfall of other civilisations in the past. He went on to state that *"the entire white race could disintegrate."*[136] In another article, published in the summer of 1933 in the same newspaper, he wrote, *"This, too, is a Caesarian age, dominated as it is by exceptional personalities who embody the powers of the State for the good of the people, against the parliaments."*[137] Here, Mussolini explicitly quotes the Spenglerian arguments in favour of Caesarism and authoritarianism, using these ideas to legitimise his role as the sole ruler of Italy. Indeed, it is possible that Spengler's prophecies about the rise of Caesarism helped to shape and reinforce Mussolini's perception of himself as a providential leader as well as his glorification of Imperial Rome. Mussolini may have believed that his role was legitimised by history itself, viewing his time as the dawn of a new era dominated by the new Caesars.

Even before encountering Spengler's writings, Mussolini emphasised, between 1918 and 1919, the incompatibility of communism – described as a *"truly Asiatic and Russian phenomenon"* – with the spiritual and moral constitution of Western civilisation[138][139][140]. By 1922, he appealed to the unity of the *"mighty virtues"* of Western civilisation to halt the "Bolshevik madness" and save a Europe besieged *"on all sides."*[141] Mussolini called upon the great and medium powers of Western Europe to resist the *"pernicious influences of the East"* that seriously menaced the *"juridical-political-*

[136] *Ibid*., 43.

[137] *Ibid*.

[138] Benito Mussolini, *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini, Dagli Armistizi al Discorso di Piazza San Sepolcro* (Firenze: La Fenice, 1953), 93.

[139] *Ibid*., 96-97.

[140] *Ibid*., 152.

[141] Benito Mussolini, *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini, Dalla Marcia su Roma al Viaggio negli Abruzzi* (Firenze: La Fenice, 1956), 34.

economical foundations which constitute the basis of Western civilisation."[142] A decade later – by this time he had certainly came into contact with Spengler's works – Mussolini, in his review of Emilio De Bono's book *La Nuova Italia d'Oltremare*, celebrated Italy's colonial efforts, which were *"creating Western civilisation on the fourth shore"* of the Italian empire[143].

Mussolini's rhetoric reveals the dictator's opportunism in extending or narrowing the concept of civilisation as he saw fit. In an article already referenced in section 3.2.1, Mussolini placed the "*demoliberal*" system outside of the spiritual boundaries of Western civilisation. He described it first as a "phase" and later as a "civilisation", one that was declining and being replaced by the new Fascist civilisation, created out of the only true political doctrine capable of saving the West.

Between 1933 and 1934, Mussolini frequently returned to the relationship between the West and the East, sometimes with an optimistic attitude. During a speech to Japanese students in Rome, he expressed hope for collaboration between Rome and the East to save the "civilisation of the world".[144] At other times, he adopted a more pessimistic stance, wondering whether China, which he identified as the true guardian of Asia's destiny, would approach *"white civilisation"* with benevolence or enmity[145]. In the same article, published in *Il Popolo d'Italia*, Mussolini described the relationship between the East and he West as *"the eternal theme of universal history"* and observed how the rise of Asian nations, particularly Japan, was perceived as a threat in Europe. Additionally, he stated that the fear of the *"Yellow Peril"* – emerged after the shock of Russia's defeat at Mukden and Tsushima at the hands of the Japanese – had gained credibility. He warned that if *"the powers of white, Western civilisation"* failed to cooperate, this theory would no longer remain a mere fantasy[146].

[142] *Ibid*., 68.

[143] Mussolini, *Dal Patto a Quattro alla Fondazione della Provincia di Littoria*, 29-31.

[144] *Ibid*., 127-128.

[145] *Ibid*., 155.

[146] *Ibid*., 155-156.

With the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and the subsequent fascist support for Franco's coup, the anti-Bolshevik themes of two decades earlier resurfaced[147]. In a series of articles and letters during the summer of 1937, Mussolini described the struggle of the falangists and fascists against the *"reds"* as a *"battle that has pitted two types of civilisations against each other"* and praised Franco's efforts as a fight *"in the name of Western civilisation"* and against *"the destructive forces of civilisation."*[148]

A few years later, Mussolini quoted Spengler in a letter to Hitler dated January 5, 1940[149]. This letter was sent less than four months after the start of the war – at that time Italy was still neutral – and was intended to signal Italy's willingness to mediate an agreement with England and France. The letter was thus of great importance during a time when Mussolini had not yet made the decision to enter the war and was, in fact, under pressure from certain elements within the regime, such as the Italian foreign minister Galeazzo Ciano, to maintain neutrality. In this letter, Mussolini, in an effort to remind Hitler his old commitment to defeat the Soviet Union – thereby annihilating Bolshevism and ensuring the German nation its *Lebensraum* – reminds him that Germany's historical mission is defend Europe from Asia. To strengthen his hand, Mussolini invokes the fact that Spengler himself had supported that very thesis. What makes this citation interesting is Mussolini's choice to use Spengler to reinforce the ideological strength of his appeal to Hitler. In doing so, he sought to encourage Hitler to adopt a policy of compromise with France and England to focus on the "world's number one enemy".

Mussolini continued to frame the fight against Bolshevism and liberal democracies as a struggle for Western civilisation throughout the Second World War. For instance, in 1943, he described the Italo-German war effort, along with that of the other Axis nations[150], as a battle *"to defend the millennial European civilisation."* The coalition

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[147] Mussolini, *Dal Viaggio in Germania all'Intervento nella Seconda Guerra Mondiale*, 294.

[148] *Ibid*., 454.

[149] Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce, Vol. II: Lo Stato Totalitario, 1936-1940* (Torino: Einaudi, 2019), 749-752.

[150] Benito Mussolini, *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini, Dal Discorso al Direttorio Nazionale del PNF del 3 gennaio 1942 alla Liberazione di Mussolini* (Firenze: La Fenice, 1960), 282.

between *"plutocracy and Bolshevism"* was described as a front aimed at destroying everything that European civilisation had produced[151].

Remarkably, toward the end of the war, when defeat was certain, Mussolini placed his hopes for the salvation of Western civilisation in political unity among European nations. He argued that to save Europe, the Europeans would need to form a *"socialist union, a formidable bloc"* that transcended national concerns[152]. While this overlap between Mussolini's statement and the federalist ambitions of Spinelli and other anti-fascists he had exiled in Ventotene – authors of the Manifesto of Ventotene three years earlier – might seem surprising at first glance, a closer look reveals that the European far-right has always nourished a conceptualisation of Europe as a third political space, distinct from Soviet Bolshevism and American liberal capitalism. This idea, which gained traction after the Second World War and with the onset of the Cold War, can be traced back to Spengler, albeit he developed it in an embryonal and nationalist form: according to Spengler, such unity would be realised under German hegemony over the Old Continent. The concept was later developed by far-right thinkers like Francis Parker Yockey and political movements such as the Italian *Terza Posizione*.

A few weeks before his death, during a meeting of the Council of Ministers of the Italian Social Republic (RSI) on March 22, 1945, Mussolini sent greetings from the RSI to the soldiers of the Reich, who were *"heroically defending the millennial civilisation and the idea of the century."*[153] Again, on April 18, nine days before being captured by the partisans of the 52nd Garibaldi Brigade – who were fighting for the liberation of Italy from Nazi-Fascist oppression – a resigned and depressed Mussolini shared his predictions about the future of Europe and the West during a conversation with Prefect Nicolini. This conversation is remarkable because Mussolini's statements to Nicolini contain a summary of his conception of Western civilisation and his ideas about how it might be saved. Mussolini told Nicolini that the defeat of the Axis *"will mean the end of Europe, the Bolshevisation of the West"*, adding that the consequences would be *"not dissimilar to*

[151] *Ibid*., 286.

[152] Benito Mussolini, *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini, Dalla Liberazione di Mussolini all'Epilogo. La Repubblica Sociale Italiana* (Firenze: La Fenice, 1960), 159.

[153] *Ibid*., 182.

those foreseen by Spengler himself." This statement, I would argue, confirms once again the significance of the German author, Spengler is the last intellectual cited by Mussolini in his final days – at least according to official sources – before his execution on April 28. In the same conversation, Mussolini also emphasised British responsibility for the *"end of civilisation"*, which, in his view, could only have been averted by promoting the unity of the continent – a cause he had never pursued during the two decades in which he held near-absolute power over Italian foreign policy[154].

In conclusion, Mussolini appropriated Spenglerian themes to construct a narrative of civilisational renewal that justified his authoritarian policies and leadership. Mussolini's engagement with Spenglerian ideas is a combination of admiration, adaptation, and selective rejection. Mussolini was inspired by Spengler's critiques of liberalism, urbanisation, and demographic decline, he reinterpreted these themes to suit his political agenda, particularly his vision of fascism as a vital force capable of reversing the perceived decline of Western civilisation. Additionally, Caesarism offered Mussolini intellectual justification for his authoritarian rule and on the psychological level reinforced his representation of himself as a providential leader for Italy and the West. Conversely, Mussolini distanced himself from Spenglerian deterministic fatalism, instead presenting Fascism as a solution capable of transcending historical inevitabilities.

[154] *Ibid*., 188-189.

4 CONCLUSION: A REFLECTION ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NARRATIVES OF DECLINE AND POWER

Spenglerian pathos is a mood that can lead to some fatalistic compromises. Whether or not doomsaying is justified, it carries significant political and moral consequences. Thomas Mann powerfully denounced the risks of such consequences. Spengler did not reconcile himself with the idea of an inevitable decline, he believed that there were still choices to be made. For example, he believed a choice had to be made between Anglo-Saxon delusional cosmopolitism and the heroic, masculine, authoritarian Prussian way of life. Spengler, an improvised politician, could only advocate for such choices; others took them. The significance of this vision within Fascist Italy, particularly in Benito Mussolini's political thought, underscores the fundamental relationship between intellectual narratives of decline and authoritarian power. Throughout this thesis, I have traced how Spengler's conception of history – his rejection of linear progress, his glorification of Caesarism, and his disdain for mass society – was appropriated, adapted, and, at times, contradicted by Mussolini. This concluding chapter reflects on the broader implications of these narratives, situating them within a wider intellectual and political tradition while discussing their lasting influence.

Discourses of decline are rarely neutral. The concept of crisis is not merely descriptive but constitutive of political action; it structures perceptions of the present and forecloses or legitimises possible futures. In this sense, Spengler's narrative of civilizational collapse provided a useful ideological justification for authoritarians that sought to present themselves as the last bulwark against disintegration. As I have argued throughout the thesis, his work was not simply a historical analysis but an intervention, a call for action. Spengler himself engaged in politics, advising influential reactionaries and businessmen devoted to overthrowing the Weimar Republic.

The Fascist regime's engagement with Spenglerian themes demonstrates how such narratives are politically instrumental. Mussolini, while sharing Spengler's contempt for liberal democracy and cosmopolitanism, ultimately rejected the notion of inescapable decline, replacing it with the rhetoric of regeneration. In this, he was not unique. As Corey Robin has noted, reactionary ideologies do not simply lament decline; they mobilize it,

transforming nostalgia into a justification for radical action[155]. For Mussolini, Spengler's deterministic vision was useful insofar as it diagnosed the weaknesses of liberal democracy, but it had to be modified to allow for Fascism's claim to be a transformative force. Indeed, while Spengler saw authoritarian rulers as stoic figures fighting during the inevitable final phase of Faustian *Zivilisation*, Mussolini positioned himself as a creator of a new epoch, a *Duce* who could halt and reverse the decline. This balancing act is evident in Mussolini's 1933 praise of *The Hour of Decision*, where he acknowledged Spengler's analysis of crisis but insisted that fascism could provide a way out. The dictator must, in a sense, prove the prophet wrong while drawing legitimacy from his warnings. Here, we see the elasticity of Spengler's legacy – his ideas could be adapted to both fatalism and action, to both resignation and mobilisation.

One of the most frequent ways in which narratives of decline manifest politically is through demographic anxieties. The fear of civilizational exhaustion, often expressed in terms of falling birth rates and urban decadence, was central both to Spengler's thought and Mussolini's policies. Demographic concerns have historically fuelled nationalist and authoritarian projects, with states mobilizing pronatalist and xenophobic policies to combat perceived existential threats[156]. Spengler's vision of the megalopolis – the soulless, infertile, and decadent city as the graveyard of a civilization – influenced Mussolini's rhetoric on ruralism. Mussolini's glorification of the countryside and his policies aimed at reversing urban migration were not merely economic strategies but ideological responses to the anxieties of the time that Spengler had interpreted. Yet, while Spengler saw urbanization as an irreversible symptom of decline, Mussolini sought to counter the phenomenon through propaganda and state intervention, exemplified in programs like the *Battle for Births* and the *Battle for Grain*. Moreover, the racial dimension of Spengler's decline narrative – his warnings about the *"revolt of the coloured world"* against the exhausted West – found an echo in Fascist discourse. Mussolini's rhetoric on the demographic decline of the white race and his justifications for Italian colonial expansion were framed in similarly apocalyptic terms. However, as I have noted,

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[155] Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind. Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[156] Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception. The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), *see* Chapters 2 and 3.

Mussolini initially resisted biological racism in favour of a more Spenglerian conception of race as cultural and spiritual. This changed in the late 1930s, as the Fascist regime aligned itself with Nazi racial doctrines, abandoning Spengler's critique of scientific racism in for of more explicit racial policies.

The notion that democracy inevitably degenerates into mediocrity, necessitating the rise of an extraordinary leader, was not unique to Spengler. It has deep roots in Western political thought. In the 1920s and 1930s, Europe was gripped by widespread distrust toward liberal democracy. In this sense, Spengler was a product of certain intellectual currents of his time, which had long developed anti-democratic and authoritarian visions. However, he introduced a groundbreaking element with his concept of *Caesarism*. If the 19th century had been defined by the restoration of monarchic and aristocratic rule, the early 20th century would be marked by the primacy and sacralization of politics imposed by totalitarian regimes and their leaders. While Spengler expressed an idealistic inclination for aristocratic and elitist forms of government, Caesarism was, in practice, a theory of political authoritarianism. More than that, it was a manual that harboured no illusions about the realities of the time but instead exposed them so that the *Caesar* could exploit them to his advantage. Far from being an idealistic call for a return to a past ruled by kings, aristocrats, and enlightened statesmen, Caesarism was a pragmatic political program. Spengler's concept of Caesarism – the rule of a decisive leader who emerges in the twilight of a civilisation – offered an appealing theoretical framework for authoritarian rulers. In *The Prophet of Decline*, Farrenkopf has argued that Spengler's Caesar was not necessarily a fascist; he was an archetype, a necessary figure in the final phase of a civilizational cycle[157]. Nevertheless, Mussolini found in this idea a powerful justification for his rule. In fact, as De Felice has argued, Mussolini found in the idea both an inspiration for the affirmation of his rule and a psychological validation of his actions.

The fascist engagement with Spengler is not an isolated historical episode. Narratives of decline have been, and continue to be, powerful tools in political discourse. Contemporary far-right movements invoke civilisational decay to justify illiberal policies, from anti-immigration measures to attacks on democratic institutions. The idea that the

[157] John Farrenkopf, *Prophet of Decline* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 246.

West is in crisis, that it has lost its moral and cultural vigour, remains a central theme in right-wing rhetoric today. This raises an important question: is the Spenglerian narrative of decline inherently reactionary, or does it contain analytical value beyond its political instrumentalization? Some scholars have argued that Spengler's insights into the fragility of civilizations remain relevant, even if one rejects his determinism[158]. Others, like Mark Mazower, emphasize that narratives of crisis can be self-fulfilling – what begins as a pessimistic analysis can become a justification for authoritarian measures that, paradoxically, accelerate the very decline they claim to prevent. As Farrenkopf wrote about Spengler and Nazism:

"Spengler's politics of cultural despair helped to generate an intellectual climate receptive to Nazism's ideology and radical goals and thereby inadvertently helped Hitler, once the Great Depression had reduced the German people to desperation, to destroy Germany's first democracy. Spengler thereby indirectly assisted a dangerous political movement in coming to power."[159]

The relationship between narratives of decline and authoritarian power is complex and bidirectional. It is complex because such narratives create an intellectual climate that prepares the terrain for authoritarian rule, though it is difficult to attribute direct political responsibility for their instrumentalization to the intellectuals who conceptualise them. It is bidirectional because these two phenomena influence one another. Mussolini's use of Spenglerian *tòpoi* clearly demonstrates that intellectual developments do not occur in isolation; they have long-term effects on political attitudes and processes.

Spengler gave rise to a literary tradition that has profoundly shaped how the West perceives itself throughout the 20th century and into the 21st. In just the past thirty years, amid a historical conjuncture that presents unsettling similarities to the 1920s – defined by conflicts over immigration, feminist and queer movements, demographic decline, and the crisis of the liberal order – dozens of works have been published that echo Spenglerian themes. *The Clash of Civilizations* by Samuel P. Huntington, *The Death of the West* by Pat Buchanan, and *La Défaite de l'Occident* by Emmanuel Todd are just a few of the most

[158] *See* Frye, Engels, Rose, Fischer.

[159] Farrenkop, *Prophet of Decline*, 240.

notable, influential, or recent examples of an intellectual tendency toward a sense of impending catastrophe, which has vehemently resurfaced in contemporary discourse.

The relationship between Spengler and Mussolini – never personal yet characterized by an evident effort at mutual ideological and political legitimization – is just one example of the broader connection between *declinism* and politics. While this thesis does not aim to explore this relationship in depth, it is an issue that deserves further systematic and comprehensive research.

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