THE EARLY PHASE IN SPENGLER'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

John Farrenkopf

Although to what extent Oswald Spengler served as a forerunner or precursor of National Socialism remains controversial, scholars unanimously agree that he was a virulent antidemocratic thinker. Indeed, the mere mentioning of his name immediately conjures up among students of German political philosophy associations of intense antidemocratic sentiment. The epithet of virulent opponent of democracy is certainly well-deserved for the period in his political-philosophical development when he was famous, spanning 1919, the year the heated controversy surrounding his major work *The Decline of the West* erupted, to his untimely death in 1936. Yet what about the little-known, but important phase in the evolution of Spengler's political thought, the years immediately before the shocking military collapse of Imperial Germany and the outbreak of socialist revolution in the fall of 1918 aroused the hostility of the entire right against Germany's first democracy? These were years when Spengler, as an unknown private scholar industriously composing his *chef-d'oeuvre*, was politically inactive.[1] Was Spengler passionately anti-democratic before he became an embittered man? The following investigation of this rather obscure but important period in his thought, which draws heavily upon his private papers in the Spengler Archives,[2] surprisingly reveals that he was not vehemently antidemocratic during this time and was, in fact, a cynical and opportunistic conservative advocate of the idea of the quasi-democratization of the Second Reich. Spengler scholars, it should be noted, including among others Anton

[1] In this article we will restrict ourselves to investigating Spengler's political thought and aims during the Great War. Unfortunately, Anton Mirko Koktanek's authoritative biography, *Oswald Spengler in seiner Zeit*, provides no details about Spengler's voting habits during the Wilhelmine period. Moreover, there is no correspondence extant before 1913.

[2] The Spengler Archives, housed at the Bavarian State Library in Munich, has an extensive collection of material on his life and thought. The wealth of documents, photographs and sketches, miscellaneous papers, interviews and newspaper articles, accounts by third parties, original letters to and from Spengler; notes intended for an autobiography which was never written, and papers and diaries of his sister, Hilde Kornhardt, were indispensable in Koktanek's research of his biography. The largely biographical material is complemented by the rich collection of scholarly papers. Numerous, aphoristic notes on metaphysics and world history were posthumously edited and published in two companion volumes thanks to the research diligence of Koktanek (*Urfragen* and *Frühzeit der Weltgeschichte*). Of further interest are Spengler's unpublished fragments on politics including partial drafts of memoranda to the German Kaiser and the nobility apparently composed during the First World War and notes for the projected continuation of *Years of Decision* as well as unpublished poems, unfinished dramatic and epic compositions, and scattered reflections on questions of poetry and the visual arts.

HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT. Vol. XIII. No. 2. Summer 1992

Mirko Koktanek, Gilbert Merlio, H. Stuart Hughes, Klemens von Klemperer, Horst Möller, Walter Struve and Detlef Felken, do not argue this novel position as they are not of the opinion that any significant changes in his attitude towards democratization in Germany took place in his intellectual career.[3]

Substantiation of this bold claim rests primarily upon careful examination of two unfinished, unsolicited memoranda drafted by Spengler, along with several related notes on political matters. He addressed one memorandum to the Kaiser and the other to the German nobility,[4] yet apparently never submitted them. Although these interesting political documents are unfortunately undated, their context indicates that they were composed from approximately 1914 to 1917. Despite being fragmentary in nature, the memoranda and notes still amount in transcript form to sixty-five double-spaced pages. The archival material used in this controversial interpretation of Spengler's early political philosophy is supplemented by pertinent passages from his correspondence.

Spengler's attitude towards the democratization of German political life before the Weimar period is both cynical and ambivalent. Cynical in that he has a discerning eye for what are arguably democracy's multifarious weaknesses, a strength more than outweighed by his disastrous enthusiasm for authoritarian solutions to the problems of governance characteristic of the post-First World War phase in his political thought. Ambivalent in that although Spengler laments the rise of mass democratic politics, he regards it and imperialism as irresistible historical forces of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He exudes

[3] See A.M. Koktanek, *Oswald Spengler in seiner Zeit* (Munich, 1968); G. Merlio, *Oswald Spengler: Témoin de son temps* (Stuttgart, 1982); H.S. Hughes, *Oswald Spengler: A Critical Estimate* (New York, 1952); K. von Klemperer, *Germany's New Conservatism: Its History and Dilemma in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 1968); H. Möller, 'Oswald Spengler — Geschichte im Dienste der Zeitkritik', in *Spengler heute*, ed. P.C. Ludz (Munich, 1980); W. Struve, *Elites Against Democracy: Leadership Ideals in Bourgeois Political Thought in Germany, 1890–1933* (Princeton, 1973); and D. Felken, *Oswald Spengler: Konservativer Denker zwischen Kaiserreich und Diktatur* (Munich, 1988).

Anton Koktanek argues that the fragmentary memoranda and related political notes 'outline [Spengler's] in essence not further changed political position' (Koktanek, *Spengler in seiner Zeit*, p. 182). Gilbert Merlio's discussion of the incomplete memoranda and notes is extremely abbreviated. H. Stuart Hughes does not make use of them, as they were apparently unavailable to him when he prepared his monograph in the early fifties. He consequently does not discuss at all Spengler's political thought in the years immediately preceding Germany's defeat in the First World War. Neither Klemens von Klemperer nor Horst Möller uncover a phase in the development of Spengler's political philosophy when he cynically and opportunistically advocated the conservative quasi-democratization of the Second Reich. In his discussion of Spengler's political ideas during this period, Walter Struve mentions the unfinished memoranda and related notes only in passing. He asserts, 'there is no indication of an abrupt break in the development of his views' (Struve, *Elites Against Democracy*, p. 235). Detlef Felken sees Spengler's political thought as being marked by continuity throughout the Wilhelmine, Weimar and Nazi periods.

All the translations from German into English in the text and footnotes of this article, including those of Spengler's translated and untranslated writings, are the author's.

[4] Spengler was eventually honoured with the opportunity to deliver an address to the annual assembly of the German aristocracy in 1924 in Breslau.

confidence in the prospects for promoting a substantial measure of democratization of the monarchical regime of Wilhelmine Germany in a manner which will bestow upon it redeeming features from a power-political perspective. Spengler's adherence to the monarchical principle was quite typical of his age and was not inconsistent with support of a programme of partial democratization of the Second Reich. Although the monarchical form of government in Germany was subjected to guarded criticism, and a number of politicians called for its democratic modification, none of the political parties during the Wilhelmine period actively opposed the institution of monarchy. Only the Social Democratic party was committed in its official programme to the republican form of government.[5]

Proper understanding of Spengler's early political philosophy requires recognition of the ambivalent attitude of this historical pessimist towards the modern world. His historicist affirmation of history and his attempt to contribute to the German tradition of power politics, which counsels an acceptance of the world as it is and places a premium upon success, induce him to portray the process of decline he conceptualizes from ultimately irreconcilable perspectives. Thus there are two Spenglers present in the cyclorama of modernity unveiled in *The Decline of the West*. One encounters the nostalgic, romantic, agrarian conservative who as a lover of cultural refinement and traditional social mores bemoans the setting of the sun upon Western culture. One also meets the resolute modernist and stern *realpolitiker* inspired by Nietzsche's clarion call of the will to power, who as a historical determinist readily accepts the decline of Western *Kultur*. For it heralds the dawn, the *Morgenröte* of a titanic age completely dedicated to the heady tasks of *Zivilisation* — of technology, international economics and global imperialist politics. It is an era where the overflowing Faustian energies of the West are pressed into the service of its final, international-political form — the *imperium Germanum*. The preoccupation with the depressing idea of decline, which the arresting title *The Decline of the West* naturally gives rise to in the reader, should not prevent him from grasping the counterbalancing, affirmative qualities of Spengler's modernist perspective. He is at one and the same time a sensitive aestheticist and nostalgic, agrarian conservative and a resolute modernist and glorifier of the will to power. In his political thought, where for him success is the ultimate arbiter of sound politics, Spengler thoroughly suppresses during the First World War, as we shall see, his nostalgic, conservative sentiments for a 'forward-looking' strategy of conservative democratization and ardent imperialism. His brooding cultural despair yields an *amor fati* of soaring, power-political optimism and global imperialism.

In different fashion, but like noted contributors to the German tradition of speculative historical philosophy before him — Hegel and Marx, Spengler was a historical determinist. Of fundamental importance to Spengler's political philosophy is his largely deterministic, historical philosophy, which in leaving

[5] W.H. Kaufmann, *Monarchism in the Weimar Republic* (New York, 1973), p. 14.

little scope for the exercise of freedom in historical action conceives of history as moving forward 'independent of ideals and hopes'. 'There is a logic of history which is inevitable.' Serenely unconcerned about the ideals of political actors, history 'moves forward'.[6]

In a political typology one can assign Spengler without hesitation to the general category of neo-conservative. The conservativism of his early phase lacks reactionary features. It is complex, being flexible and adaptive, striving to adapt conservative aspirations to what he sees as the irresistible march of historical events.[7] Categorizing liberalism as doctrinaire and socialism as ideological, he expresses his belief that German conservatism must liberate itself from its 'provincialism'[8] and learn to be above all practical. The programme of conservatism is 'dead' and must be completely reformed.[9] The conservative politician and statesman must make use of the 'most modern means with perfect expert knowledge' to achieve realizable goals, and not vainly expend his energy in the service of obsolescent, romantic conservative ideals.[10] Conservativism must adapt to the new reality of the political mobilization of the masses which set in after 1890 in Wilhelmine Germany.[11] Moreover, Spengler advocates the strategy of profiting from the ideas and policy proposals of the two major political movements in Germany which his conservative, agrarian contemporaries energetically opposed: liberalism and socialism. 'The genuine conservative, as I would like him to be, employs without hesitation liberal and socialistic measures, the moment he finds them expedient.'[12]

Spengler counsels conservatives to abandon their antagonism to the idea of parliamentarism in Germany and instead to master its practices and customs. A wise conservative

> should neither, like the stupid conservative, see in parliamentarism an enemy of the old, nor like the genuine liberal, a wonderful ideal, but merely an instrument of modern political life, which one must study as a machine and handle without prejudice and with virtuosity.[13]

Spengler realizes and accepts the fact that, in pursuing this resourceful strategy of adjusting to changing historical conditions through compromising one's

[6] *Politica*, 'Aufruf: Konservatismus', #79-4, Spengler Archives.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Politica*, 'Das politische Buch', #79-6, Spengler Archives.

[11] G.A. Ritter, *Die deutschen Parteien 1830–1914: Parteien und Gesellschaft im konstitutionellen Regierungssystem* (Göttingen, 1985), p. 23.

[12] *Politica*, #79-5, Spengler Archives.

[13] *Politica*, 'Das politische Buch', #79-6, Spengler Archives.

principles and adroitly utilizing the most modern methods of political practice, one's conservative values are ultimately destroyed by relentless, historical processes. 'It is not sufficient to be an exponent of one's political ideals. One must also be capable of giving them up and opposing them, if one sees that they are impossible . . . We live — unfortunately — in the twentieth century.'[14] A politician in the twentieth century must content himself with achieving precious little of his ideals in an era of mass politics and rapid, inevitable, historical change. 'A party has a lot of luck if it can achieve 10% of its ideals in the course of its existence, and even that it only achieves by sacrificing for it 50%.'[15]

The Prussian landed aristocracy formed the bulwark of German conservatism in the nineteenth century. Spengler argues that German conservatism must be regenerated in the new age of *Weltpolitik* which supplanted Bismarck's cautious, Continental-oriented, foreign policy in the years following victory in the Franco-Prussian war. The Junkers must replace their provincialism with a kind of pragmatic cosmopolitanism, gained through wider experiences, if they want to play a major constructive role in the future of their country. 'Send your sons to the big international firms, to the fleet, to the colonies', he urges the patrician patriarchs.[16] He hopes to see a Prussian Upper House of genuine distinction 'in which no one sits who owes his seat merely to his birth'.[17]

Spengler supports certain democratic ideas not out of conviction but out of expediency. His willingness to accommodate some of the major aspirations of democratic forces in Wilhelmine Germany most certainly should not be misconstrued as a faint manifestation of the traditional, normative search in Western political thought since Plato and Aristotle for the optimal ordering of a political community in pursuit of higher values. Spengler's interest in conservative democratic reform derives virtually exclusively from considerations of *realpolitik*. He believed, in conformity with the German power-political tradition, that domestic political concerns must be subordinated to the overriding concerns of the state in its external relations. Yet, despite his fidelity to Leopold von Ranke's historicist tenet of the primacy of foreign policy (*das Primat der Außenpolitik*), Spengler assigns a domestic political function to his quasi-Social-Darwinistic, imperialistic aims. He abounds with confidence that if Germany's imperialist strivings during the Great War are crowned with success and its impressive, economic upswing of the pre-war era can be resumed, then imperialistic policies carried out by a strong alliance between the aristocratic and bourgeois élites will serve to integrate successfully the industrial working class in a conservatively democratic, monarchical state. Victory in the First World War will help greatly to resolve the troubling social question, and enormously enhance the prestige of the state in the eyes of the whole populace.

[14] *Politica*, 'Denkschrift', #79-7, Spengler Archives.

[15] *Politica*, #79-8, Spengler Archives.

[16] *Politica*, 'Denkschrift II', #79-15, Spengler Archives.

[17] *Ibid.*

As Ludwig Frank observed about Germany in 1911, 'practically the whole bourgeoisie . . . has become imperialistic'.[18] Neo-Rankean historical thinkers, including Max Lenz, Hans Delbrück, Otto Hintze, Hermann Oncken, Erich Marks, Max Weber and Friedrich Meinecke, jealously eyed Britain's mastery of the oceans of the world and the vast extent of her imperial possessions. These bourgeois intellectuals advocated for Wilhelmine Germany the assumption of a purportedly equal status for her among the other world powers through an assertive foreign policy. The decades before the First World War had seen the United States and Japan join the growing ranks of imperialist world powers after their respective victories in the Spanish-American War and the Russo–Japanese War. Enthusiasts of a risky *Weltpolitik*, the Neo-Rankeans aspired to transform the European balance-of-power system, which Bismarck had striven after 1871 to uphold, into a truly global one in an age of intense, imperialistic rivalries. Spengler's imperialism was more daring and radical than that of the Neo-Rankeans. He espoused not the transformation of the traditional European balance-of-power system which Ranke had celebrated, but the smashing of it. In his overly ambitious scheme Wilhelmine Germany was to hammer together through colossal conflicts the foundation for global economic hegemony. 'But today the Reich stands there, no longer the Greater Prussia, the result of Sedan, but the world empire, the core of an *imperium Germanicum*.'[19]

Spengler's tremendous faith in the capacity of the German people to overcome the political divisiveness which characterized German politics from the founding of the Second Reich to the traumatic end of the First World War, has two sources. Firstly, he overestimates the depth and longevity of the *Burgfrieden*, the interclass solidarity which arose in the euphoria of August 1914. Contemplating the European scene, he boldly claims in May 1915 in his correspondence, 'the German people is the only unshakeable political entity'.[20] Secondly, Spengler is grossly overconfident about Germany's ability to emerge as the decisive victor in the Great War. Despite the disturbing failure of the Schlieffen plan in the pivotal battle of the Marne, Spengler wrote in a letter in October 1914, 'I am thoroughly optimistic'.[21] In 1915, Germany's success in the Gorlice campaign provoked the following outburst of confidence in German victory. In a letter he informs Hans Klöres, his close friend and his chief correspondent of the war years, that Germany was experiencing a 'monstrous movement on the path towards world power, which only the Romans from 300 to 50 BC experienced' before them.[22] His overconfidence soars again after the

[18] D. Stegmann, *Die Erben Bismarcks: Parteien und Verbände in der Spätphase des Wilhelminischen Deutschlands* (Köln, 1970), p. 113.

[19] *Politica*, 'Denkschrift I', #79-22, Spengler Archives.

[20] O. Spengler, *Briefe, 1913–1936*, ed. A.M. Koktanek and M.Schröter (Munich, 1963), p. 37. Letter dated 24 May 1915.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 29. Letter dated 25 October 1914.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 42. Letter dated 14 July 1915.

signing of the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, as Spengler eagerly anticipated the establishment of 'the factual German protectorate over the Continent (up to the Urals)'.[23]

During the war, the parties of the right were determined to frustrate the aspirations of the Social Democratic party and the trade unions for democratic government and social reform. They believed that the working classes could be fobbed off with an extravagant programme of territorial expansionism. Spengler, on the other hand, espoused a programme combining annexations with political reform. Because he strongly and very optimistically believed that German military victory and success in its imperialistic ventures and in international economic competition in the decades following the outbreak of the Great War would legitimize to the masses the guiding role of the aristocracy and bourgeoise in a reformed constitutional monarchy, he has no qualms about promoting the democratization of the Second Reich. 'A conservative of political profundity and vision [should] readily accept and push through "democratization" '.[24] While Bethmann-Hollweg was persuaded that serious, constitutional reform had to be postponed until after the war, because traditional, conservative forces still possessed sufficient strength to block it,[25] Spengler was convinced that the time for decisive action had come. Although the war had brought about a marked erosion in the power of the Crown, he believed that it must play a key role in initiating political reform. Such an act of monarchical benevolence would, in adapting to the regrettable, ineluctable, historical trend of democratization, be in the Crown's enlightened self-interest. He expresses his optimism, perhaps without justification, that the German state would retain its conservative character irrespective of the degree to which German national political life might be democratized. 'If the parliamentary form is highly democratic it will be offset by the conservative frame of mind of the house.'[26] Believing that the German people, for the most part, had attained a mature, cool-headed and confident political orientation (something he most certainly did not believe after the crushing military defeat and socialist revolution in 1918),[27] Spengler calls upon his emperor to grant Germany immediately a conservative-democratic, political form. 'Give to Germany today a democratic form, such as there has never been before, one conceived from a people so maturely conservative.'[28] To be sure, he advocates not a comprehensive democratization of German

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 97. Letter dated 11 May 1918.

[24] *Politica*, 'Parlament', #79-10, Spengler Archives.

[25] H. Holborn, *A History of Modern Germany 1840–1945* (Princeton, 1969), p. 466.

[26] *Politica*, 'Denkschrift', #79-75, Spengler Archives.

[27] These momentous events, transpiring during what Spengler describes as 'weeks of the deepest shame' for Germany, prompted him to claim that the majority of Germans, irrespective of their social position, had proven themselves to be 'base, dishonourable rabble'. Spengler, *Briefe*, p. 111. Letter dated 18 December 1918.

[28] *Politica*, 'Denkschrift III', #79-24, Spengler Archives.

political life, but nonetheless substantial reform. Spengler's position was unusual, given his neo-conservative and National Liberal sentiments. As one scholar notes, during the war conservative groups 'vehemently opposed any concessions to parliamentarism', while the majority of the National Liberal Party opposed parliamentary reforms.[29]

Partial democratization of the Wilhelmine Reich for Spengler certainly did not mean that the people would truly govern their own affairs.

> A dishonest characteristic runs through democratic theory from Rousseau on: [its proponents] are silent about the organization of the government by the people, or they indulge in hollow words, because they do not have the courage to admit the utopian nature of the word 'self-government'.[30]

Spengler's conception of political leadership was consistently élitist in nature. Like the economist and sociologist Vilfredo Pareto, he contends that democratic rule by the people is an illusion; that a small élite governs.[31] 'In reality it is always a dozen gifted people who rule',[32] Spengler notes. Yet his élitism does not derive from a selfish desire to preserve the privileges of a select few in a polity; indeed, this bourgeois thinker celebrates the 'self-made man'. He advocates a generous amount of upward, social mobility on the basis of talent and achievement, as it makes a polity stronger and more capable of pursuing a successful foreign policy in an age of industrialization and abrasive competition between the imperialistic powers.

Spengler's élitism in matters of governance springs from his conviction of the supreme complexity of modern statecraft and the perilous nature of great power rivalry. He supports this stance by expanding upon the comparison between the popularity of the culture of classical antiquity and the esoteric exclusiveness of West European culture, which he had discussed in *The Decline of the West*.[33] While he argues that in classical antiquity cultural forms are comparatively readily apprehensible by every citizen, in West European culture 'the more important, the more genuine and profounder something is, the more incomprehensible it is to "the people" '.[34] Spengler echoes Ranke's teaching of the extraordinarily complex nature of modern statecraft.[35]

[29] Kaufmann, *Monarchism*, p. 35.

[30] *Politica*, #79-57, Spengler Archives.

[31] It is 'extremely unlikely' that Spengler had studied Pareto's works. Hughes, *Oswald Spengler*, p. 52.

[32] *Politica*, 'Parlament', #79-29, Spengler Archives.

[33] O. Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Umrisse einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*, Vol. I, *Gestalt und Wirklichkeit* (Munich, rev. edn., 1923), pp. 417 ff.

[34] *Politica*, 'Parlament', #79-52, Spengler Archives.

[35] Ranke considered the art of statecraft to be the rare gift of an élite; this 'difficult art' is 'perhaps the most difficult' of all activities in life. L. von Ranke, *Politisches Gespräch*, ed. H. von Srbik (1836; Leipzig, 1941), p. 58.

> Contemporary politics is incomprehensible to the people, although it is performed more than ever for the people. It is irrelevant what is the condition of the education of the masses, the popular welfare, the newspapers — politics presupposes connoisseurs which, in terms of the level of intelligence and the extent of their education, only a few among thousands can come up to the standard.[36]

Thus, not unlike Max Weber, against whom he debated his historical philosophy in the Munich Rathaus in February 1920, Spengler considers the question of leadership selection to be a decisive problem in modern politics. Its solution will fortify Germany's position in the international arena. 'It must be somehow possible that the relatively few intellectuals of statesmanlike talent and knowledge are at the same time "the elected".'[37]

Spengler was interested in exploring ways to accommodate some of the aspirations of the Social Democratic party, which had become the largest party in the *Reichstag* in 1912. The Social Democratic party, which had consistently rejected military, naval and colonial politics during the Second Reich, voted in 1914 for credits in support of the war effort. This epochal act of national solidarity with their peacetime antagonists in the *Reichstag* presumably encouraged Spengler to be receptive to the idea of favouring their further integration into the mainstream of German political life. The memoranda and related material show that his attitude towards the Social Democratic party was far more moderate and conciliatory than that of most conservatives. Indeed, the political parties of the right and middle generally viewed the Social Democratic party as 'a thoroughly pernicious force for whose destruction all resources were to be mobilised'.[38] Spengler did not believe that the growing strength of the German industrial working class imperilled the internal status quo; on the contrary, he was optimistic about the prospects of its integration into German society. The question of the preservation or the reform of the notorious Prussian conservative institution, the three-class electoral system, had been the major issue of German domestic politics in the decades preceding the war.[39] The chief demand of the Social Democrats for years had been the reform of this undemocratic franchise, which had posed a tremendous obstacle to the democratization of the Second Reich.[40] Spengler supported this demand, calling for the elimination of this controversial feature of the electoral system in order to diminish German socialist antagonism to the state.[41] Under the influence of revisionism as propounded by the Bavarian party leader Georg Vollmar and the socialist

[36] *Politica*, 'Parlament', #79-52, Spengler Archives.

[37] *Politica*, 'Denkschrift', #79-51, Spengler Archives.

[38] V.R. Berghahn, *Modern Germany: Society, Economics, and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2nd edn., 1987), p. 23.

[39] Holborn, *Modern Germany*, p. 365.

[40] Ritter, *Die deutschen Parteien*, p. 36.

[41] *Politica*, 'Das politische Buch', #79-6, Spengler Archives.

theorist Eduard Bernstein, the Social Democratic party transformed itself from a party radically opposed to the state to one which regarded itself as a loyal oppositional force. Cognizant of the reformist nature of mainstream Social Democrats, Spengler goes so far as to welcome the idea of assigning leading socialists ministerial portfolios. 'Germany has more than one socialist who in large-scale organizational work has become mature and cool-headed enough to become a minister.'[42] Yet one glaring weakness in his strategy of opening up the political process to greater participation by the industrial working class and their socialist leaders is that he overlooks that the Social Democrats justified their support of the war only insofar as it could be considered to be a defensive effort. Most Social Democrats rejected grandiose schemes of annexation.

To manage the extremely complicated tasks facing this purportedly emergent German world empire, Spengler proposes a wholesale housecleaning in the *Reichstag*, eliminating what he disparages as 'provincial wind-bags and local celebrities, climbers and philistines'.[43] He criticizes the leadership of the Second Reich for having been niggardly in awarding ministerial positions to leading bourgeois figures. Sharing a milder form of Weber's opposition to the purported existence of excessive bureaucratization in Wilhelmine Germany, Spengler wishes at the same time to limit the power of the bureaucracy, which had traditionally resisted any increase in the power of the parties. The superior organizational talents of bourgeois Germany, men of accomplishment who have proven themselves through 'magnificent practical life in great circumstances', must replace the bureaucrats of lesser *niveau* of the past, he declares.[44] Indeed, it is the best and brightest of the bourgeoisie who had engineered Germany's extraordinary economic growth during the Second Reich. The *Reichstag* should be composed of successful and pragmatic members from a cross-section of economic life. 'And in this *Reichstag* [one should seat] our capable engineers, industrialists, businessmen and socialist secretaries, and commercial farmers and no bureaucrats, retired men of wealth, writers, and 'artists' — that is it.'[45]

Spengler, flushed with wartime optimism, believed that German political life after the triumphant conclusion of the First World War would be distinguished by a truly superior level of political skill. Shortly before the passage of the Peace Resolution in July 1917 he declares in a letter: 'I at any rate believe here in a *niveau* of political thought and action in the *new* Germany, which will rank alongside that of the French in 1789, even if one appraises the latter very highly.'[46] One should not overlook here Spengler's implicit, high regard for the political acumen of the early French revolutionary élite, not at all what one would expect from a vehemently antidemocratic thinker.

[42] *Politica*, 'Denkschrift IX', #79-18, Spengler Archives.

[43] *Politica*, 'Denkschrift', #79-68, Spengler Archives.

[44] *Politica*, 'Denkschrift', #79-61, Spengler Archives.

[45] *Politica*, 'Denkschrift VI', #79-21, Spengler Archives.

[46] Spengler, *Briefe*, p. 75. Letter dated 1 April 1917. Emphasis of the original retained.

Skilful governance in the twentieth century presupposes familiarity with complex international economic questions. Spengler recognized in the early twentieth century that economics had assumed a position of decisive importance in world politics, as it had also in domestic politics. 'International transportation, commerce, credit conditions and heavy industry determine today the existence of states.'[47] He regards the *Reichstag* as 'an administrative centre for the most valuable economic system of Europe, perhaps in the world'.[48]

Spengler anticipates significant upward mobility and new opportunities for members of the bourgeoisie in the German 'superpower' of the twentieth century. He desires to see the management of foreign affairs, the highest realm of politics in his philosophy and the traditional preserve of the Crown and the Junkers, placed in the hands of outstanding members of the bourgeoisie.

> Here one courageously draws the consequences. Let's chance it that the nobility completely disappears from the diplomatic ranks. One lets in here only people who have put themselves to the test in a praxis of great style. The state today is a joint stock company, not a manorial estate.[49]

Of the military he writes: 'We will get, besides the nobility, a class of highly intelligent bourgeois officers, people like our engineers and industrialists, among whom organizational and technical abilities guarantee rapid advancement.' He envisions a wide range of opportunities awaiting 'self-made' men: 'But I see also the time drawing near, when *other* positions of great responsibility, in government, the organization of commerce, industry, transportation, colonies, will be filled no longer by privy councillors, but by self-made men'.[50]

A stormy debate about war aims erupted in Germany in 1915, one which finds its echo in Spengler's letters. We find that his conviction of the tremendous importance of economics in world affairs is reflected in his attitude towards German imperialism. Spengler's oracular pronouncements about Caesarism and his glorification of war and martial virtues have obscured the fact that his imperialism was primarily economic, and secondarily territorial, in nature. One is struck by the absence of Lebensraum components in his thought, while the Pan-German league came very close 'to treating Lebensraum as its central program element'.[51] Although the population of Germany had grown very rapidly during the decades before the First World War, Spengler was already discussing in *The Decline of the West* how the Germans, and other West-European peoples as well, would experience sharply reduced birth rates in the not too distant future. Since he did not anticipate that the German people would

[47] *Politica*, 'Denkschrift', #79-69, Spengler Archives.

[48] *Politica*, 'Denkschrift', #79-66, Spengler Archives.

[49] *Politica*, #79-62, Spengler Archives.

[50] Spengler, *Briefe*, pp. 47–8. Letter dated 7 September 1915. Emphasis of the original retained.

[51] W.D. Smith, *The Ideological Origins of Nazi Imperialism* (New York, 1986), p. 95.

substantially increase in numbers, and viewed the urbanization of Germany as an irreversible historical trend, he logically did not urge annexation of agricultural lands for purposes of peasant settlement as the advocates of Lebensraum imperialism typically did. Moreover, while being deeply interested in maintaining the integrity of German culture, despite his thesis of the inevitability of its deterioration, he did not advocate the preservation of the German national character, of *Deutschtum*, through peasant migration. During the war Spengler supported a policy of limited annexations in Europe in order to improve the security posture of Germany and to enhance her industry's access to important natural resources. Annexations would be complemented by a process of economic satellization. These measures would have combined to ensure German continental hegemony. Beyond Europe he called for the expansion of Germany's African colonial holdings, elevating them to the status of a substantial colonial empire. The economic nature of his highly imperialistic programme of action for Wilhelmine Germany is epitomized in the following lines from one of his memoranda.

> But the spirit of the Germans, with their machines, billions of marks, railroads and steamships will rule *the world* . . . The *new* Germany will be present everywhere with its best powers — in Buenos Aires and Shanghai, in San Francisco and Capetown.[52]

One avoids being perplexed by what seems to be, in retrospect, the almost fantastical nature of Spengler's vision of German global hegemony if one takes note of the fact that he did not anticipate America's emergence as a decisive power in world affairs in 1917. Although his historical philosophy played a pioneering role in overcoming the Eurocentrism of nineteenth-century historical thought,[53] the same can not be said for his international political thought, which was decidedly Eurocentric during the Great War. In fact, the implications of American entry in the conflict are never even discussed in his correspondence! He interpreted the Great War as a titanic struggle for global economic hegemony between Germany and England, the leading world power in the nineteenth century. Thus he wrote in a letter in December 1914, employing an image from duelling: 'This war intensifies to a decision between England and Germany: the other powers are only the seconds.'[54]

Although the fragmentary drafts of Spengler's two memoranda and related political notes are undated, it is clear that his attitude towards the future role of the *Reichstag* changes dramatically in the course of the war. In a few sections he assigns the *Reichstag* a central role, arguing that leading men of accomplishment from civil society can make major contributions to political decision-making. Spengler does not spell out what constitutional powers this

[52] *Politica*, #79-13, Spengler Archives. Emphasis of the original retained.

[53] See J. Vogt, *Wege zum historischen Universum: von Ranke bis Toynbee* (Stuttgart, 1961).

[54] Spengler, *Briefe*, p. 32. Letter dated 18 December 1914.

governmental institution should possess. He does not discuss the question of whether the chancellor's position should ultimately depend upon the favour of the Crown or upon the formation of a parliamentary majority. Yet he conveys the distinct impression that he wishes to see the marked expansion of the powers of the *Reichstag*, making the representative assembly rather than the monarch the centre of political power. 'One gives to the *Reichstag* a larger area of responsibility and demands at the same time, as "good form", that "little people" (intellectually) do not get in.'[55] Elsewhere he writes: 'Today the *Reichstag* is that which has become the organ of the whole. Everything else is in the shadows.'[56] In other places a decidedly cynical attitude towards the *Reichstag* surfaces. He asserts, 'the *Reichstag* will be merely a symbol',[57] for extraparliamentary forces will essentially determine affairs of state. It appears that this striking shift of attitude results from Spengler's reflections upon the dramatic events of the summer of 1917, when the Peace Resolution was passed by the parties of the Left and Centre-Left in the face of increasing privation on the home front. The resolution called for a peace of understanding and permanent reconciliation among peoples. It renounced territorial annexation and political, economic and financial oppression. The cooperation of the Centre party, the Progressives and the Social Democrats in support of the Peace Resolution was a significant development in German political history in the twentieth century, foreshadowing the active coalition of these political groups in the Weimar National Assembly of 1919. To Spengler, the Peace Resolution was a treasonous renunciation of the sacred cause of German imperialism, and 'naturally' placed into question his earlier more accommodating stance on the role of the parliament in government. He terms the summer of 1917 the 'debut' of the "German Parliament", complains of its 'undignified scenes', and now, in an about-face, claims that the German people are not suited for parliamentarism.[58] The passage of the Peace Resolution precipitated a vigorous reaction from forces on the right with the founding of the stridently imperialistic Fatherland party in September 1917 by Admiral von Tirpitz and Wolfgang Kapp.

An idea basic to German conservatism and one central to Spengler's political thought is that each of the peoples of the West possess a style of governance appropriate to its national ethos. He argues that Germany needs its own specific form of democracy. Writing after the controversial Peace Resolution of 1917 Spengler asserts, with England in mind, 'the German people has political instincts which are very democratic but do not follow this "Western" orientation'. According to him, in this indigenous German form of 'democracy' extraparliamentary interest groups, the unions, industrial organizations,

[55] *Politica*, #79-68, Spengler Archives.

[56] *Politica*, 'Denkschrift VI', #79-21, Spengler Archives.

[57] *Politica*, 'Parlament', #79-40, Spengler Archives.

[58] *Ibid.*

agricultural organizations, the press and the financial community will powerfully influence the political decision-making process.[59] Indeed, powerful economic interest groups had already acquired significant influence upon the political parties in Germany in the 1870s. Spengler maintains that Western parliaments will progressively lose real political power. 'The centre of gravity of political decisions shifts to the tactics, hidden from public view, of large associations and interest groups, and to be sure, the more decisively so the more economic questions form the centre of politics.' 'Parliaments will soon play a decorative role in comparison to economic factors.'[60]

A letter which is particularly revealing about Spengler's war-time political orientation is addressed to Hans Klöres and is dated 6 November 1917. Spengler unambiguously voices his hope that the National Liberals will rejuvenate themselves and expand their base of support and their political influence. He advises his friend,

> If you therefore — hopefully! — after the war think of political activity, so penetrate first into the party-political situation, where, in my opinion, the organization of the moderate liberals is the most important problem, because here industry, commerce and higher intelligence must come together. The National Liberal party is inadequate in its present form, and its connections to an absolutely reliable press is weak. However the party could, with some skill on the part of new personalities, become a representative of the whole of property and a large part of the upper working class, and with that take a position . . . And there you could, if you start from my ideas, also work for that which I myself can not, namely, draw the *practical* consequences.[61]

Much has been made in the Spengler literature about his being a prophet of Caesarism and how Hitler's rise to power seemed to bear out his clairvoyance. Yet Spengler, at the time he was composing the first volume of *The Decline of the West*, regarded himself not so much as a prophet of Caesarism, but as a prophet of a partially democratically-reformed German monarchy which would lay the foundation for a global economic empire through victories in world wars. Caesarism would emerge after the ineluctable egalitarian forces of the twentieth century had atomized society and plutocratic elements had thoroughly debased political life; it was a political phenomenon which belonged to the far shores of the future. Thus he wrote in *The Decline of the West*, 'Rhodes makes his appearance as the first precursor of a Western type of Caesar, whose day is to come though yet distant'.[62]

[59] *Ibid.*

[60] *Politica*, 'Politik', #79-54, Spengler Archives.

[61] Spengler, *Briefe*, p. 83. Letter dated 6 November 1917. Emphasis of the original retained.

[62] Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, Vol. I, p. 50. Spengler also refers to Rhodes as a precursor of 'a very significant type of the twentieth-first century' (*ibid.*, p. 445).

For Spengler, the nineteenth century is the winter of Western culture; the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars signalled the beginning of the epochal transition from innerly creative and vital *Kultur* to extensive but sterile *Zivilisation*. The democratization of Wilhelmine Germany, as he envisages it, would basically amount to an unavoidable manifestation of decadence, a lamentable movement away from the exercise of political power in Germany by the traditional ruling powers for most of the history of Western European culture, namely the monarchs and the aristocracy. Thus Spengler's nostalgic, political ideal, which he explicitly renounces because it belongs to the past and is thoroughly unattainable in the present, is the 'monarchy of the eighteenth century'.[63] The decadence in political life which democratization signifies has its counterpart in the cultural decadence of Germany. Yet, on the positive side, substantial democratic reform of the Second Reich would supposedly markedly reduce socialist opposition to the state and finally give to the German bourgeoisie a very important voice in affairs of state, enabling it to fully employ its talents for making Germany dominant in the world, politically, economically and militarily.

In contrast to virtually all the academic historical thinkers of Wilhelmine Germany, Spengler was extremely pessimistic about her cultural future in the long run. He understood the decline of Western culture to be a comprehensive phenomenon which affected all the nations of this tradition. While many French and British intellectuals pictured their countries as being bulwarks of civilization against 'German barbarism', it was customary among many German thinkers during the First World War, in proclaiming the 'ideas of 1914', to view their nation as the champion of culture and the Western democracies as the protagonists of decadent civilization.[64] Although Spengler, like Werner Sombart and Thomas Mann, paid tribute to what he considered to be the distinctive national qualities of Germany, and advocated an antagonistic nationalism, nonetheless he saw the entire West as inexorably moving towards cultural sterility and decadence. Thus, in this key respect, his position was the diametrical opposite of that of the exponents of the 'ideas of 1914'. Indeed in a remarkable formulation (one found not surprisingly discretely buried away in his correspondence instead of prominently displayed in his published works for consumption by the German public, most of whom would have found such an idea repugnant), he conceived Germany's future to consist in becoming 'a second America'.[65] Spengler maintained that the transition in modern Germany from culture to civilization had already been completed by 1900.[66] In the

[63] *Politica*, 'Denkschrift', #79-7, Spengler Archives.

[64] F. Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley, 1961), p. 196.

[65] Spengler, *Briefe*, p. 44. Letter dated 14 July 1915.

[66] Fritz Stern errs when he argues that Spengler posited the antithesis between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*, between a decadent West and a still vital Prussia. In Spengler's philosophy, *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*, as a conceptual pair, unambiguously denote diachronicity and not contemporaneity.

following passage, from a letter written in October 1914 when most German intellectuals were trumpeting the vitality of German culture in the desperate struggle of their country against the Western powers, Spengler concisely expresses his bleak assessment of the future of German culture.

> What is in store for us is unfortunately not any more consoling, as long as one thinks and feels as a man of culture. Because the glimmer of inner culture, which the age of Goethe developed and which lost the best since Sedan and the Berliner represents the new-German type, has been completely extinguished by this war. In the Germany, which through technical intelligence, money and an eye for facts has secured its great position in the world, a completely soulless Americanism will rise to ascendancy, which will reduce art, the nobility, the church and *Weltanschauung* to a materialism as only existed before in Rome in the earliest imperial period.[67]

In summation, Spengler espouses for Germany after the Great War, which he confidently expects her to win decisively, a partially democratically-reformed monarchy. In this post-war era the nobility, particularly the Junkers, the traditional ruling élite of Prussia which was the dominant federal state in terms of size, population and political power in the centralized *Bundesstaat* (the Second German Empire), renounce agrarian, romantic conservatism. They become more modern, flexible and international in outlook and prepared, for the greater good of Germany, to engage in a full political partnership with the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, the increasingly differentiated middle class finally attain a prominent, if not leading, role in politics in accordance with their importance to the second most productive economy in the world and their growing contribution to the ranks of not only the officer corps of the fleet, but the army as well. Finally, the industrial working class is better integrated. Spengler advocates the conservative quasi-democratization of German political life for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it is a historical stage in a grand, ineluctable process. 'This result is necessary in Germany, not in the sense of a party ideal, but naturally inevitable.'[68] If the Crown seizes the initiative, it can have an input in how this process of democratization proceeds, making it more beneficent for the prospects of the state in the rivalries of world affairs. Secondly, the *zeitgeist* demands some democratization: it is necessary in an era increasingly characterized by mass politics, because of the importance of political symbolism.[69] Thirdly, democratization will purportedly reduce the antagonism of much of the left to

True, he did hope that the Germans would bring the *Zivilisation* of the West to its final grand form, believing that Prussia personified the universal Western phenomenon in a more vital and noble manner than it was embodied by America. (Stern, *Cultural Despair*, p. 238.)

[67] Spengler, *Briefe*, p. 29. Letter dated 25 October 1914.

[68] *Politica*, 'Politisches Buch', #79-34, Spengler Archives.

[69] *Politica*, 'Parlament', #79-29, Spengler Archives.

the power-political ambitions of the German state. Fourthly, democratization brings the bourgeoisie into a wide spectrum of positions of great political responsibility, and draws upon their manifold talents for ensuring Germany stunning success both in international economic and power-political competition. Fifthly, conservative, democratic reform will not alter the fact that the conduct of political affairs in Germany will not devolve to 'the people', but will remain securely in the hands of an élite, albeit an expanded one more capable of fulfilling the complex tasks facing Germany in the twentieth century.

That Spengler never conceded in his publications or private papers that the realization of major aims of his early political thought were completely frustrated by the actual course of history does not discredit the thesis of this article. A brilliant and flamboyant dramaturge of the grand movements and tendencies of history, Spengler never tired of trying to project an image of prophetic genius and infallibility. For example, in 1932, in the preface to a volume of his collected political writings, he audaciously claimed that in his analysis of the great political and economic issues of his age, 'I have, I am allowed to say straight out, not erred in any essential point'.[70]

Spengler's boundless optimism about Germany's prospects for winning a decisive victory in the First World War made him totally psychologically unprepared for her shocking military collapse in 1918. Like Hitler, he broke down and sobbed upon learning of Germany's defeat. It meant, in Spengler's words, 'the collapse of all that which was deeply cherished and valued by me'.[71] He blamed the debacle, like other conservative nationalists, on the undermining of the home front by what were deemed to be disloyal groups. Crushing military defeat and socialist revolution in Germany destroyed Spengler's dream of carrying out a programme of partial democratic reform of the Second Reich in order to help lay the foundation of a global empire. The parliamentary democracy which arose in 1919 on the rubble of his dreams was totally discredited at its birth, in his eyes. In his opinion, its proponents had traitorously sapped the war effort and bore responsibility for inflicting upon their country humiliating defeat and the overthrow of the old order which, despite its need for restructuring, should have served as a valuable foundation for building upon. In 1919 he venomously declared, 'Parliamentarism in Germany is nonsense or treason'.[72] Spengler lent his support to the notorious stab-in-the-back legend, and with his new-found fame became active in political life. He advocated the founding of an *Obrigkeitsstaat* in the influential treatise *Prussianism and Socialism* (1919), a polity combining Prussian authoritarianism with socialistic features. An embittered man, he engaged in conspiratorial politics from 1919 to 1923, aiming to overturn Germany's fledgling post-war democracy. Yet in 1924, in

[70] O. Spengler, *Politische Schriften* (Munich, 1932), p. v.

[71] Spengler, *Briefe*, p. 111. Letter dated 18 December 1918.

[72] O. Spengler, *Preussentum und Sozialismus* (Munich, 1920), p. 54.

Reconstruction of the German Reich, an echo of Spengler's shattered dream of an imperialistic, conservative, quasi-democratic German Reich returns. Spengler declares that the unwillingness of Bismarck and the Hohenzollerns to confer bona fide governmental responsibility upon leading members of bourgeois society was a critical factor in fostering the disastrous and shortsighted assessment of the international political situation in the years preceding the outbreak of the Great War. Bismarck's consummate mastery of foreign policy did not fully compensate for his failure to educate politically the German people, to establish a tradition of political maturity and realism, so that his achievements could be secured and built upon. Here Spengler is in agreement with Weber, who had complained that Bismarck 'left behind a nation *without any political education at all*'.[73] Spengler does not concede, of course, that the imperialistic plans he concocted for Germany during the Great War were excessive and unrealistic. Thus he moderates his celebration of the Prussian ideal of an *Obrigkeitsstaat* advanced in *Prussianism and Socialism*, adopting a critical tone towards the leadership of the Second Reich. According to him, this period in European history, when Bismarck established an authoritarian state, was the 'last splendid era of West European parliamentarianism'. The success of the conservatives in England under Disraeli attested to the possibilities open to Germany if Bismarck had decided to expand the inner circle of power to include highly talented and promising members of German society.[74] The Iron Chancellor missed a golden opportunity in the first decade of the Second Reich to extend to the political parties in the *Reichstag* 'the sharing of responsibility for the administration and leadership of the powerfully rising country and the difficult tasks of its foreign policy'.[75]

Interestingly, Spengler notes that the unfavourability of the Central European position of Germany, whose geopolitical vulnerability had purportedly given birth to an ethos of authoritarianism, was in this respect 'disastrous'. The leadership of Wilhelmine Germany suffered from an arrogance, with its superb administration, bureaucracy and army, that it alone knew the correct policies to implement, refusing to cultivate and utilize the expertise and sound judgment of leading figures of society.[76]

Spengler's confidence in the feasibility of the kind of process of partial conservative democratization he espoused for Wilhelmine Germany, and his faith in the ability of its leaders to pursue successfully grandiose imperialistic plans, appears in retrospect to be unjustified. Not only did the determination of conservative forces to maintain their political power and privileged position

[73] M. Weber, *Gesammelte Politische Schriften* (Tübingen, 3rd rev. edn., 1971), p. 319. Emphasis of the original retained.

[74] O. Spengler, *Neubau des deutschen Reiches*, in *Politische Schriften*, p. 188.

[75] *Ibid.*

[76] *Ibid.*, pp. 188–9.

speak against his vision, but so also did the powerful constraints under which German foreign policy operated. Even if the Second Reich had been blessed with better leadership after 1890 than that which was actually provided by Bismarck's successors, its prospects for successfully carrying out a highly aggressive foreign policy of imperialism seemed poor because of the Anglo-German antagonism, the breakdown of good relations with Russia, the historic rivalry with France, and America's determination to prevent German hegemony over the Continent. Furthermore, even if Germany had somehow been able to emerge as the clear winner of the First World War in such a profoundly unfavourable constellation of power relationships, it is very questionable if she would have enjoyed an acceptable degree of social and political stability. The realization of extreme war aims by Germany would have exacerbated the already profound tensions between supporters of authoritarian rule and traditional privilege and the millions of ordinary citizens who, having sacrificed their blood and endured innumerable hardships on the home front, would then have demanded a thoroughgoing reform of German political institutions. Annexation of significant amounts of territory on the European continent and the consequent need to hold down subjected peoples would have necessitated the maintenance of a very large, peace-time military establishment. The resultant militarization of life would have worsened social and political tensions in German society. Moreover, the problems the Second Reich had encountered before 1914 in Alsace Lorraine and the Polish provinces strongly suggested that the subjection of additional foreign peoples to German rule would have placed great strains upon the state. Finally, this enlarged German empire would have become embroiled in further intense and destabilizing conflict, as other great powers would not have tolerated such a revolution in world affairs. What Germany clearly needed on the eve of the Great War was a foreign policy of circumspection and detente, not one audaciously aiming to establish a dubious modern counterpart to the Roman Empire, as Spengler had advocated.

Nonetheless, this inquiry into this rather obscure but important early phase in Spengler's political thought provides a case study in the crucial role the agonizing loss of the First World War, and the myth that democratic elements on the home front were mainly responsible for it, played in fuelling hostility among embittered conservatives towards Germany's first democracy. Moreover, the fact that its leaders were understandably firmly opposed to the kind of extreme imperialistic aspirations Spengler stubbornly refused to give up in the years following Versailles only served to inflame his antagonism towards the Weimar Republic. The Peace Resolution of 1917 greatly undermined Spengler's opportunistic and cynical interest in partially democratizing German political life; socialist revolution and Versailles destroyed it. For only the overthrow of the Weimar Republic and the establishment of an authoritarian regime held the promise of putting Germany in a position to try again to attain world-power status, or even global hegemony, through militarism, imperialism and international economic competition, as Spengler advocated. Thus, the now virulently anti-democratic thinker, through his corrosive assault on the

legitimacy of the Weimar Republic and his glorification of war and imperialism, proceeded, despite his critical stance towards Hitler and the Nazi movement, inadvertently to help clear his path to power. The totalitarian regime Hitler founded brought about a far greater disaster for Germany than the loss of the First World War.

John Farrenkopf NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY