Abstract:
The main purpose of the research over the presence of Spengler’s famous book “Der Untergang des Abendlandes” in the Bulgarian intellectual area between the two world wars is to find explanation about the power and significance of the prophecy that the book contained – especially in the “Bulgarian case.” An accent is put on the interaction between Spengler’s ideas about the decline of the West, and the Eurasian movement whose manifesto carried the emblematic title “Back to the East.” The conclusion is that Spengler’s book played its most important role with regard to this vital question for Bulgarian national self-consciousness – the definition of Bulgarian cultural identity.

Key words: Spengler, national and cultural identity, autochthonous nationalism, eurasianism.

“It is quite understandable that the idea of the decadence of West European culture provoked a significant response in Bulgaria. Of course, the wave of moods resulting from the thought of the actual or approaching decline of West European culture was not solely connected with the name of Spengler. Ortega-y-Gasset pointed out in The Revolt of the Masses “in recent years there is much talk about the decline of Europe. I ardently plead that people not be so naive as to think of Spengler whenever there is talk about the decline of Europe or the West. Before his book appeared, the whole world was talking about this, and the success of the book was due to the fact that such a doubt or concern, engendered by a variety of feelings, had already taken hold of everyone.” (Ortega-y-Gasset 1993: 131) But the theme of Spengler’s book thrilled the Bulgarian intelligentsia not so much in connection with the actual or alleged decadence of the West, as by the prophecy it contained about the expected flourishing of the East, of Slavic culture. This aspect of the widely discussed work caused considerable excitement in Bulgarian cultural life, and provoked reasoning on the historical destiny of Bulgaria.

The high interest in the prophecies of the German philosopher subsided in Bulgaria as everywhere else, but its presence endured in the Bulgarian intellectual area (according to data presented by Vladimir Svintila, lectures on Spengler, in a critical aspect, were held by the professors Dimiter Mihalchev and Assen Zlatarov in about 40-50 library centres throughout Bulgaria. (Svintila 2006: 234-240)) We must stress another important circumstance in the interwar period in Bulgaria, which served as a catalyst for the reception of Spengler’s work. The Eurasian movement had made its much talked about start, and its manifesto carried the emblematic title “Back to the East.” Of course, we should recall that the collective work of the first four Eurasians was published in Sofia in 1921, so
the interaction between the two theses had a truly explosive impact. Both books affirmed the idea of the uniqueness of national development, and that a nation’s path was separate, so that “catching up with” others became therefore unnecessary; such ideas were soothing to the sensibilities and national complexes of the Bulgarian intelligentsia at that time. In addition to the autochthonous nationalism, which was later to take intense nationalist forms, also emblematic for the early 1920s were philosophical discussions based on the opposition between culture and civilization, where the decaying Western civilization was denounced and national culture was extolled. Before enumerating the currents of influence and the forms in which Spengler’s work was present in Bulgaria, I would like to give some brief facts: until the first complete translation into Bulgarian that came out in 1994, only the introduction to the celebrated work had been published (in 1931), but Bulgarian philosophers and scholars of culture, etc., were certainly acquainted with the full two volumes. Starting from the Liberation (1878), philosophical thought in Bulgaria was oriented to European models; understandably Germany, a center of European philosophical activity, was particularly attractive for Bulgarian intellectuals. Most young Bulgarian philosophers had received their education in Germany and had the opportunity to establish direct contacts with many eminent figures of the German cultural scene at that time. This tendency continued till the end of the interwar period.

As for the large number of publications devoted to The Decline, this can be explained, as Atanas Stamatov pointed out, by the fact that “Spengler was not simply ‘the latest fashion’ in Europe, but a challenge to the whole gamut of European philosophical and historical literature. His words sounded prophetic; his tone, apocalyptic; the message was understandable for practically any more or less intelligent person. In such a situation, it was a matter of proving one’s professionalism to try to respond to the challenge. Almost all Bulgarian authors permanently engaged in the problems of philosophy and history did make this effort. This is why I would tentatively define the attitude to Spengler in Bulgarian philosophical and historical thought as a ‘ritual’ one.” (Stamatov 2000: 94)

In enumerating the Bulgarian intellectual responses1 to Spengler, first in order is definitely the book by the noted Bulgarian specialist in German studies, Konstantin Galabov The End of Western Culture according to Spengler, published in 1925. In periodicals devoted to the humanities, such as “Zlatorog”, “Scientific Thought”, “Scientific Tribune”, etc. there were articles and materials that aimed at popularizing the work. A noteworthy article by Rayna Stancheva-Andreeva, devoted to Spengler and entitled “Spengler and Nietzsche (Dependence and Opposites)” appeared in the journal “School Review” in 1944. Since only the first part of her study was published – the rest was lost during the bombardment of Sofia that year, we can only judge that the text pointed out what the author saw as the limitations and schematic nature of Spengler’s conception of history. (Stancheva-Andreeva 1944: 63) In the only specialized philosophical journal of that time, “Philosophical Review”, two theoretical articles were published on topics connected with The Decline and the fate of this work, as well as several briefer reviews. “Philosophical Review” in general was a journal whose authors who did not special sympathize with the rising spirit of nationalism in the mid 1930s, and this tone was, no doubt, set by the editor in chief, Dimitar Mihalchev (In connection with this he was occasionally qualified and identified in various respects with Marxism and Marxist internationalism). Whereas the problem field around nationalism, national identity, national destiny, etc., was closely connected with the reception of Spengler’s work in Bulgaria. The head of propaganda in the Third Reich, Otto Dietrich, in his “Philosophical Foundations of National Socialism” (a work that was translated into Bulgarian), wrote that “Individualistic thought ends in pessimism and the prophecy of the ‘decline of Western culture’. Community-minded thinking and national socialist action open the door to a new epoch of social advance, a new flourishing and development of West European culture.” (Dietrich 1941: 86) The basis of refutation of Spengler’s prophecy about the breakdown of Western culture, lies in the new interpretation of the subject of that culture, in the shift of emphasis from the individual to the united “we”, to the cohesion of the monolithic national body, a sure guarantee for the advance of a new Europe. (Perhaps we should recall that quite a few Bulgarian public figures and intellectuals who were adherents of the “new order”,

1 In the forward to the new, 1994 edition of Spengler’s work, Assen Davidov writes: “...though sporadic, the interest in Spengler has not passed in our country either.” (Davidov 1994: 37) However, a number of publications at that time disprove this estimate.
were also passionate anti-Europeans, who perceived Europe as synonymous with a decadent, decayed civilization."

Focused as it was on the value of one’s own nation, Bulgarian nationalism, which was quite a strong current during this period, understandably depreciated the European; this attitude was provoked initially by the unjust peace treaties that Europe had ratified, but was due also to ardent rejection by the “new order” of the values of liberalism and democracy. Europe became a symbol of civilization in the Spenglerian sense; European acquired a pejorative connotation; it embodied everything that an autochthonous culture in course of formation should preserve itself from. (An emblematic example in this respect is Janko Janev’s essay “The Philosophy of the Fatherland”, 1934, in which the dichotomy “culture – civilization” and the problem of “building” European culture into a civilization were expressed entirely in tune with Spengler.) Anti-Western feelings were not simply fashionable, they had an impressively wide scope, encompassing the radical attitudes of the proponents of the Arian Proto-Bulgarian principle, but also all sorts of defenders of national uniqueness.

Similar to the solution proposed by national socialism as a way out of Spenglerian pessimism, Dimitar Mihalchev also insisted on a different understanding of the subject of future European culture, but his course was in a contrary direction to Spengler’s and also to the “latest” German ideology. In his journal Mihalchev printed a letter from a reader, who wrote: “Mr. D. Mihalchev! Philosophical Review has published on several occasions articles on Spengler and his ideas about the end of European culture, and also on the corresponding views of Paul Valery... I feel that you personally owe your readers a clarification as to the question of the destiny of present-day culture. Are there no signs that the new European world is now old and the time is coming when its culture will be exposed to the same dire lot that befell the cultures of ancient Egypt, of Babylon, of ancient Greece, Arabia, etc.? In any case, the German kultur philosopher Spengler, the one who most systematically and dismally portrayed the end of Western culture, seems to be right in his diagnosis of our times and in his prognosis about the future. But would you express your opinion on this question?” (Mihalchev 1981: 584)

In his answer Mihalchev pointed out that West European culture was undoubtedly undergoing some kind of crisis, something was indeed decaying (obviously he was thinking of “greedy imperialism”) and disappearing, something else was coming in its place. But Western European culture in itself is not, as Spengler claims, some isolated phenomenon; in this respect, according to the Bulgarian philosopher, what we have is simply a change of the social subject of this culture, which Mihalchev connected with the success of the colonial movement.

We see that the assessments of Spengler and his book in Bulgaria were situated in quite a wide range—from complete support to strong rejection. Occasionally there were views of the following type (curiously, these were voiced by theologians): the German author was claimed to be a “great thinker”, and his work “epoch-making”, for “he was the first who dared speak about the future with the confidence of a clairvoyant...” (Panchovsky and Panchovsky 1943: 209). But in general, a more sober and critical tone prevailed in Bulgarian assessments.

Overall there were three main dimensions of the presence of Spengler in the attention of Bulgarian intellectuals:

1. Some Bulgarian authors discussed Spengler’s concept in its quality of a philosophy of history and a philosophy of culture. (As the philosopher Janko Janev pointed out, the past years since the publication of The Decline had dispelled the initial enthusiasm about the book, had revealed the falsity of a number of assertions contained in it, sensational views had ceded to more objective considerations, but Spengler remained in the focus of attention – “In any case, nowadays no one can examine the problem of culture or history without taking a stand regarding Spengler.” (Janev 1934a: 98-99));

2. Commentaries on the decline of the West in connection with the destiny of Slavic peoples. Bulgarian Slavophilism and Bulgarian Europeanism were both rather marginal currents in the interwar period;

3. The search for a national cultural identity as far as it was motivated by Spengler’s work.

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1. Spengler’s historiosophic conception

Spengler’s ideas about the hermetic and isolated nature of separate cultures met with hardly any approval by Bulgaria authors. Most of them were
critical on various points in this conception. For instance the literary critic Georgi Konstantinov was categorical that the Spenglerian type of generalizations “can in no case win a place either as a method or a variant of penetrating into the impulses of our history, of our spirit.” (Konstantinov 1933: 151) But even Konstantin Galabov, Spengler’s most enthusiastic Bulgarian admirer, viewed the German thinker’s views about the decline of the present-day epoch of Western civilization, analogous with that of Greek civilization, as problematic and unconvincing. He also rejected the categorical pessimism of Spengler, which Galabov considered to be an inevitable consequence of the view that cultures were unable to interact. Like most Bulgarian authors, Galabov did not agree with the view that cultures were isolated from one another. He definitely believed – and many Bulgarian intellectuals agreed on this point, that history did not signify the history of separate peoples, and that unity was achieved by continuity of cultural forms, which enables us to view history as a unity: “A cultural past in which are interwoven people of completely different mentalities, some sort of Martians, for instance, would be absolutely inaccessible to our experience, hence to our understanding. History as an experience and understanding are possible only because people are identical.” (Galabov 1925: 59-60) Thus, very generally speaking, the most outspoken Bulgarian admirer of Spengler’s work, for all his respect, claimed that this work “will not play the role of a gospel.” (Ibid: 54) But he left his colleagues with the impression that this was precisely how he perceived Spengler’s book: as a revelation. In fact Galabov’s attitude was ambivalent: in addition to conceptual critique, shared by most Bulgarian authors in their assessment of Spengler, there was also something very essential and emblematic in Galabov’s views: in his own works he attempted to apply precisely those aspects of the theory that he rejected. Not overlooking the element of bias contained in Vladimir Vassilev’s judgment (stemming from personal disagreements with Galabov at the time), we cannot deny they are justified: “There is not a single article, Vassilev wrote, in which [Galabov] does not play with the name of Spengler, making references to “his own” article about him. Spengler’s view that cultures live out their lives and others come in their place, a view he deduced from the history of humanity as a whole, Mr. Galabov is trying to “apply” to quite specific phenomena in our history and culture. The result of applying a global and millennial scale to them can, naturally, be nothing but comic...” (Vassilev 1992: 337) In this commentary Vassilev’s reference is to Galabov’s efforts to present the three phases that the Bulgarian soul goes through in similarity with the stages of all cultures: birth, maturity, and decline. The analogies of these stages are: feeling, reason, and will. Thus, inspired by Spengler, in his study “The Physiognomic” [of Bulgarians], Galabov shows how the man of feeling will be surpassed by the man of reason, and the latter in turn by the man of action, of will. This application is probably the only true example of the presence in Bulgaria of Spengler’s culturological and philosophical conception, adapted to Bulgarian conditions.

We mentioned the position of Dimitar Mihalchev, stemming from his principles: he does not agree with the main view of the German philosopher, who denies regularity in historical development. Mihalchev’s position in the field of philosophy of history was often and justifiably identified with the positions of historical materialism. A true Marxist would have criticized Spengler in much the same way. Moreover, Mihalchev believed that Spengler was giving his imagination free rein (“It takes a lot of fantasy to unite, under the common denominator of the Faustian yearning for the eternal and boundless, the spires of the Cathedral of Amiens with the oratorios of Bach with Leibniz’s integral calculus!” (Mihalchev 1981: 588), and what he presented was not exactly a philosophy of history or culture but a kind of historiosophy; considering the Bulgarian philosopher’s aversion to any kind of non-scientific approach masked as philosophy, his categorically negative attitude to the idea of The Decline is understandable.

Ivan Shishmanov also leveled a conceptual critique at Spengler’s conception. Invited to Germany to lecture on Slavic culture, the eminent Bulgarian scholar commented in his article “The German and the Slavic Worlds”, 1929, on the vagueness of Spengler’s notion of Proto-soul (Urseele): “But what is the proto-soul? We hardly know what the soul is, let alone the proto-soul. Is this expression not simply an empty word within a brilliant but superficial construction? Yet Spengler goes on with his argument, unperturbed. Although the Russian proto-soul is inscrutable, he is obviously quite familiar with the inner life of its feelings, its most secret passions and emotions. He is even informed about the underground instincts of Russia and has much to say about the terrible proto-Russian
hatred of the West, a hatred equal to that of the Apocalypse towards ancient culture, a hatred possessing the gloomy bitterness of the Maccabees.” (Shishmanov 1924: 85)

2. The Decline of the West and the Destiny of Slavic Nations

In his well-known essay entitled “The Soul of Europe”, published in the journal “Zlatorog” in 1932, the philosopher Janko Janev wrote: “The history of Europe is full of gospel premonitions that the end of civilization is near and in its place a new world will appear. Slavic revolutionary idealism is especially full of such visions, and nearly all social and political Utopians in Europe have not rarely foreseen the approaching end of Western man, weary and without faith in his own forces...” (Janev 1932: 41)

Curiously enough, the chief proponent of Spengler’s Slavophile messianism in Bulgaria was, once again, Konstantin Galabov, a specialist in German studies (and, incidentally, the only authentic “pro-Westerner” among Bulgarian intellectuals at that time), while Boris Jotsov, a Slavophile of long standing, in the late 1930s and early 1940s began depicting the Bulgarian as “disappointed in his national feelings of “Easterners.””

Thus the presence of Spengler is especially prominent in the Slavophile trends among Bulgarian intellectuals (trends that were comparatively rare in the interwar period), due to many assertions that tended to exalt the national feelings of “Easterners.”

Quite similar are the thoughts of Aleksander Nikolov about the “sated and weary world”, which is now waiting for Slavs to say their word. Although in his essay on the Slavic spirit there is something of a political curtsy (it was published in 1947), his characterizations of the Slavic conception of the world, of Slavic culture as a system of spiritual values, are, overall, in line with Russian Slavophile traditions (but they omit the element of mysticism, which Nikolov considered unessential for Slavic culture). As a “member of the great family of Slavic nations”, Bulgarians share such fundamental Slavic characteristics as the yearning for justice, the search for perfection, the willingness to struggle in the name of ideals, the attraction to a global man, a global humanity. Incorporating Russian mysticism, Polish and Serbian romanticism, as well as rugged Bulgarian practical-mindedness, “the Slav is a person who, out of the deepest inner necessity, refuses to set limits to his strivings. Opposed to the hedonism of the West, there is in him an elemental self-sacrificing will burning to perform an apostolic mission, and the ethics of sacrifice and suffering in the name of humanity.” (Nikolov 1947: 124)

The essay discusses Hegel’s well-known thesis about the “non-historic peoples”, with whom he classified the Slavs, and shows it to be untenable; Nikolov affirmed the Slavic spirit as a fact of a cultural-historical order. This point is constitutive of a “Slavophile” philosophy of history in Bulgaria.

3. Spengler as Instrumental for Our Own National Destiny

But while for a small part of Bulgarian thinkers the belief in the Slavic future was inspiring with regard to the cultural advance of our country, as part of the advance of all Slavic peoples, other authors
questioned precisely the affiliation of Bulgaria to the Slavic cultural type. The role of Slavophilism as a social and cultural factor in our times was also questioned. (Cf. Mihalchev 1936) The search for the Bulgarian national identity that various representatives of the Bulgarian intelligentsia were then conducting persistently (as well as some manifestations of nationalism) is the third and most important mark of the intellectual presence of Spengler in our country. (One example out of many: when the philosopher and theorist of art Atanas Iliev grounded the national characteristics of culture, he referred to Spengler (Iliev 1944: 32-33), as did a number of Bulgarian culturologists). The alternative to Bulgarian Slavophilism was the search for a special, unique identity of our own. This approach was very characteristic of Janko Janev for instance, but also of others who were overcome by the strong nationalist mood of the interwar period. I believe it would be fitting to place this Bulgarian philosopher among the host of famous thinkers who made the destiny of their own people the object of their cultural-philosophical work, such as Lucian Blaga, Mircea Eliade, Mircea Vulcănescu, and Emil Cioran in Rumania; Lajos Prohászka and Gabor Liuko in Hungary; and Vladimir Dvornikovic and Nikolai Velimirovic in Yugoslavia. (Balázs 2001) The words of Vladimir Dvornikovic, a “theoretician of the Yugoslav race” as he came to be known in Bulgaria as well, sound similar to texts by Yanko Yanev. The Crisis of West European Culture (Sarajevo, 1923) is the characteristic title of Dvornikovic’s book from which the following quotation is taken. “This decayed West European cultural type, which so many European thinkers have sentenced to death, will not eat into our healthy national body as well?” (Quoted from Malinovska 1931: 460)

But for Janko Janev, brilliant stylist and connoisseur of Western culture, Bulgarians must not look to the West. For the West “today has no foothold, no dogma, no religion. What can we expect from a world that is on its way to disappearing?” (Janev 1994: 340) This assertion is based on a reading of Spengler as well, and it is categorical. On the other hand, the Bulgarian author definitively rejects Spengler’s ideas about the future blossoming of Russian-Siberian culture and the prophecies of “Spengler & Co.” about the future of the Slavic world. Janev’s attitude to the Slavic cultural-historical factor is, of course, contradictory. In some places he defines Slavophilism as a category of the historiosophic type of thinking, and as entirely outdated; he writes that the Slavic soul has completely changed, has lost the power of “the apocalypse and the metaphysical hymnic, of religious depth, of national romanticism, and the living God-bearing Word.” (Ibid: 339) This discouraging condition of the “Slavic soul” implies that Spengler’s prophecies are illusory, invalid. Janev expresses these thoughts in an essay published in the journal “Zlatorog” in 1933. In his book The Heroic Man, published the following year, Janev seems to be rehabilitating Slavs with regard to their historical importance; he points out the possible role of Slavic nations in world history, who have remained unaffected by the “herd period”, the period when Europeans grow petty and uniform, and which is the last stage in Western culture. According to Janko Janev only Slavs have remained uncorrupted by Western civilization (this term is used precisely in the Spenglerian sense, although in other respects Spengler is used by the Bulgarian author as a support for National Socialist ideas); that is why it can be said they have a future. Slavdom can be conceived of as a separate historical category, and, despite the fact that in our times the Slavic spirit has practically rejected itself with the advent of Bolshevism, the Bulgarian author claims: “But the Slavic spirit of Dostoevsky will be fateful. The soul of Russia will repent and return to itself. It is impossible for the Russian people, divided between the great tenderness of the child and the ferociousness of the villain, to die without achieving its mission…” (Janev 1934b: 32-33)

However this destiny and this mission, which the Russian national consciousness has always ascribed to Russia, Janko Janev assigns to the Bulgarian people. Precisely Bulgaria must be the link between East and West, the great East-West that is traditionally identified with Russia. The Bulgarian people, which has synthesized in itself the Western and the Slavic principle, both law and knowledge, and anarchy and intuition, this people harbors in itself the force needed for a great renaissance: “We are the most primal and virginally elemental people, which has not yet said its word.” (Janev 1994: 341)

In his passionate efforts to separate Bulgarians as a special, unique cultural type, and pointing out their pure pagan and primal character, Janev presents frankly nationalist ideas. Moreover, in drawing closer to the spirit of National Socialism, he moves away from Spenglerian pessimism: “...Germany today, inspired by ideals and seeking new values, wanting to restore the greatness of the
German race, denies the weary and fatalistic spirit of Spengler’s philosophy.” (Janev 1934a: 109)

The attempts to define the Bulgarian cultural type in the interwar period were the main result, and one of the factors for it was the influence of The Decline of the West. The conceptual work achieved in the field of philosophy of history, and provoked by this widely discussed book, was not without importance, as likewise the cultural diagnostic of modern times; but nevertheless Spengler’s book played its most important role with regard to this vital question for Bulgarian national self-consciousness – the definition of Bulgarian cultural identity.

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