

The Decline of European Civilization

THE DUTCH HISTORIAN JOHAN HUIZINGA (yoh-HAHN HY-zin-guh) (1872–1945) was one of many European intellectuals who questioned the very survival of European civilization as a result of the crises that ensued in the aftermath of World War I. In his book *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*, written in 1936, Huizinga lamented the decline of civilization in his own age, which he attributed in large part to World War I.

Johan Huizinga, *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*

We are living in a demented world. And we know it. It would not come as a surprise to anyone if tomorrow the madness gave way to a frenzy which would leave our poor Europe in a state of distracted stupor, with engines still turning and flags streaming in the breeze, but with the spirit gone.

Everywhere there are doubts as to the solidity of our social structure, vague fears of the imminent future, a feeling that our civilization is on the way to ruin. They are not merely the shapeless anxieties which beset us in the small hours of the night when the flame of life burns low. They are considered expectations founded on observation and judgment of an overwhelming multitude of facts. How to avoid the recognition that almost all things which once seemed sacred and immutable have now become unsettled, truth and humanity, justice and reason? We see forms of government no longer capable of functioning, production systems on the verge of collapse, social forces gone wild with power. The roaring engine of this tremendous time seems to be heading for a breakdown. . . .

The first ten years of this century have known little if anything in the way of fears and apprehensions regarding the

future of our civilization. Friction and threats, shocks and dangers, there were then as ever. But except for the revolutionary menace which Marxism had hung over the world, they did not appear as evils threatening mankind with ruin. . . .

Today, however, the sense of living in the midst of a violent crisis of civilization, threatening complete collapse, has spread far and wide. Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* has been the alarm signal for untold numbers the world over. . . . It has jolted [people] out of their unreasoning faith in the providential nature of Progress and familiarized them with the idea of a decline of existing civilization and culture in our own time. Unperturbed optimism is at present only possible for those who . . . in their social or political creed of salvation think to have the key to the hidden treasure-room of earthly weal from which to scatter on humanity the blessings of the civilization to come. . . .

How naïve the glad and confident hope of a century ago, that the advance of science and the general extension of education assured the progressive perfection of society, seems to us today! Who can still seriously believe that the translation of scientific triumphs into still more marvelous technical achievements is enough to save civilization. . . . Modern society, with its intensive development and mechanization, indeed looks very different from the dream vision of Progress! . . .

Q What problems does Huizinga describe in this excerpt? Why does he think these problems negate the prewar vision of progress?

Source: From Johan Huizinga, *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* (W.W.Norton, 1936), p. 386.

with Russia had served to threaten Germany with the possibility of a two-front war. But Communist Russia was now a hostile power. To compensate, France built a network of alliances in eastern Europe with Poland and the members of the so-called Little Entente (Czechoslovakia, Romania, Yugoslavia). Although these alliances looked good on paper as a way to contain Germany and maintain the new status quo, they overlooked the fundamental military weaknesses of those nations. Poland and the Little Entente states were not substitutes for Russia.

THE FRENCH POLICY OF COERCION (1919–1924) Unable to secure military support through the League of Nations, France sought security between 1919 and 1924 by relying primarily on a strict enforcement of the Treaty of Versailles. This tough policy



The Little Entente

toward Germany began with the issue of reparations, the payments that the Germans were supposed to make to compensate for the “damage done to the civilian population of the Allied and Associated Powers and to their property,” as the treaty asserted.

In April 1921, the Allied Reparations Commission settled on a sum of 132 billion marks (\$33 billion) for German reparations, payable in annual installments of 2.5 billion (gold) marks. Confronted with Allied threats to occupy the Ruhr valley, Germany’s chief industrial and mining center, the new German republic accepted the reparations settlement and made its first payment in 1921. The following year, however, facing financial problems, the German government announced that it was unable to pay any more. Outraged by what it considered Germany’s violation of the peace settlement, the French government sent troops to occupy