

'Time of Troubles': Arnold J. Toynbee's twentieth century

IAN HALL*

Arnold J. Toynbee (1889–1975) was synonymous with the Royal Institute of International Affairs for the first half of its history.¹ He held the post of Director of Studies from 1925 to 1954, and thereafter retained an office in Chatham House until his death. Throughout that half-century he combined the roles of scholar and public intellectual, using *International Affairs*—along with many other outlets—to communicate the fruits and findings of his research to policy-makers and the wider community. During his 50 years at Chatham House Toynbee contributed 19 essays to the journal—which must surely be the most of any individual author—and produced his two monumental multi-volume works, the *Survey of international affairs*, which he penned, edited or commissioned from 1925 until 1958,² and *A study of history*, which appeared in twelve volumes between 1934 and 1961.³ He also published a further 50 books and hundreds of scholarly articles during his lifetime, as well as many interviews and lesser pieces. If one includes reviews of books by others, Toynbee's complete works amount to almost 3,000 items.⁴

Toynbee served his country during and after both world wars, seeking to shape policy-making as well as to study it. During the first he worked for the Foreign Office's Political Intelligence Department, having avoided the trenches on medical grounds,⁵ and joined the British delegation to the Versailles Conference. He played a significant, much-debated role in Britain's approach to the Middle East at Versailles and afterwards.⁶ Throughout the interwar years, Toynbee was

* I am grateful to Caroline Soper for the invitation to contribute this article, to the referees for their advice, to Luca G. Castellin for sharing with me his published and unpublished work on Toynbee, and to Robert Ayson for providing swift and incisive comments on an earlier draft.

¹ See esp. Andrea Bosco and Cornelia Navari, eds, *Chatham House and British foreign policy, 1919–1945: the Royal Institute of International Affairs in the inter-war period* (London: Lothian Foundation Press, 1994); and, notoriously, Elie Kedourie, 'The Chatham House version', in his *The Chatham House version and other essays* (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press and University Press of New England, 1984; first publ. 1970), pp. 351–94.

² Toynbee handed over the postwar volumes first to Coral Bell and then to others, including Geoffrey Barraclough, in the early 1950s, though he continued to work on those on the war years. The last of these was published in 1958.

³ Arnold J. Toynbee, *A study of history*, 12 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1934–61).

⁴ See W. H. McNeill, *Arnold J. Toynbee: a life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); and, for a full list of his work, S. Fiona Morton, ed., *A bibliography of Arnold J. Toynbee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

⁵ There is controversy about this episode. See esp. W. H. McNeill, 'Toynbee revisited', in Wm Roger Louis, ed., *Adventures with Britannia: personalities, politics and culture in Britain* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996), p. 177.

⁶ See Kedourie, 'The Chatham House version'.

prominent and influential in public life: his advice and conversation were sought by British policy-makers, at Chatham House and elsewhere, and foreign politicians, including Adolf Hitler, who invited a highly sceptical Toynbee to Germany for a private interview in 1936.⁷ In the 1920s and 1930s, traumatized by the loss of many friends and former students in the war, he became a prominent public advocate of the League of Nations. As its failure became clear, he shifted position, becoming a resolute opponent of appeasement. When war broke out once more, he rejoined the Foreign Office to conduct research on postwar reconstruction; after it ended, he returned to the role of public intellectual, his writings and lectures much in demand both within and outside Britain.

Toynbee's prominence and his idiosyncratic scholarship attracted plaudits and, inevitably, criticism. His positions on the League and then appeasement drew much fire in the 1930s, not least from E. H. Carr, who mocked Toynbee's attachment to liberalism and 'abstract conception[s] like collective security'.⁸ In Carr's *The twenty years' crisis* (1939), indeed, Toynbee was lampooned as the paradigmatic Utopian, capable only of shrill moralizing, soon to be consigned to the Realist's dustbin of history, as the march of progress moved on towards a bright—albeit totalitarian—future.⁹ In the 1950s, Toynbee faced even fiercer assaults, especially after the publication of volumes 7–10 of his *A study of history*.¹⁰ Fellow historians lined up to denounce his historical method as a 'sham' and to dismiss his 'laws' of civilizational growth and decay.¹¹ They lamented his reliance on secondary sources—including many that were decades out of date—and the patchiness of his knowledge about certain places and periods.¹²

His critics' greatest ire, however, was reserved for his attitude to the West and his new-found religiosity.¹³ In the 1930s, Toynbee's gentle warning that western civilization might not represent the high point of human achievement was reasonably well received.¹⁴ In the 1950s the same argument, complete with reminders of the horrors inflicted on non-western peoples by European imperialism, was not so well met.¹⁵ Toynbee was denounced by conservatives and some liberals as an

⁷ McNeill, *Arnold J. Toynbee*, p. 172. Toynbee's recollections of the interview were typed up and passed on to the then Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden. See the transcript, dated 13 March 1936, in Toynbee MS 76, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

⁸ Carr, review of Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs, 1935* in *International Affairs* 16: 2, 1937, p. 281.

⁹ E. H. Carr, *The twenty years' crisis: an introduction to the study of international relations*, 1st edn (London: Macmillan, 1939), pp. 53, 82n. 2, 100–101, 103, 142.

¹⁰ Toynbee replied at length to his many critics in *A study of history*, vol. 12 (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), but his peers were unconvinced. Among today's historians, as Michael Lang recently observed, Toynbee is 'regarded like an embarrassing uncle at a house party': 'Globalization and global history in Toynbee', *Journal of World History* 22: 4, 2011, pp. 747–83.

¹¹ Maurice Cowling, *Religion and the public doctrine in modern England*, I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 20. On Toynbee's 'laws', see Pieter Geyl, 'Toynbee's system of civilizations', in M. F. Ashley Montagu, ed., *Toynbee and history: critical essays and reviews* (Boston, MA: Porter Sargent, 1956), pp. 39–72.

¹² See, for example, Wayne Etree, 'Toynbee's treatment of Chinese history', in Montagu, ed., *Toynbee and history*, pp. 243–72.

¹³ Ian Hall, 'The "Toynbee convector": the rise and fall of Arnold J. Toynbee's anti-imperial mission to the West', *The European Legacy* 17: 4, 2012, pp. 455–69.

¹⁴ For a representative review, see Geoffrey Hudson, 'Professor Toynbee and Western civilisation', *The Criterion*, xv, October 1935–July 1936, collected edn (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), pp. 441–54.

¹⁵ Ian Hall, *Dilemmas of decline: British intellectuals and world politics, 1945–75* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 131–51.

'Time of Troubles'

out-and-out liar and crypto-communist, bent on undermining the West as it faced the twin threats of the Soviet Union and anti-colonial revolution.¹⁶ The fact that he couched his arguments in religious language did nothing to help: his prophesying, for many of his critics, was no more desirable than his near-treachery. The aggressive secularists who dominated postwar British academia—among them A. J. P. Taylor and Hugh Trevor-Roper—took turns to ridicule Toynbee's supposed 'mish-mash' religion and his belief that it could solve the problems of the world.¹⁷

This tarnishing of Toynbee's image has had unfortunate effects. Above all, it has distracted the attention of later scholars from his extraordinary contribution to the study of international affairs and his role as a public intellectual.¹⁸ His interpretation of the causes of crisis in the international relations of the 'short' twentieth century—that tumultuous and bloody interval between 1914 and 1989 which he called a 'Time of Troubles'—shaped the ideas of a series of important thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic and, latterly, in the rest of the world.¹⁹ This article analyses that interpretation, its origins and its evolution in Toynbee's thought. It argues that while the form and much of the content of his work were highly personal, and unfriendly to the latter-day reader, he deserves due recognition from historians of international thought as one of the twentieth century's foremost British contributors to public debate about the world politics of his time.

Foundations

My generation was almost the last in England to be given an education in the Greek and Latin languages and literature that remained faithful to the strictest fifteenth century standards.²⁰

Toynbee's international thought is best conceived of as an attempt to interpret the contemporary world through the lens of the Greek and Roman classics and a parallel, simultaneous attempt to look beyond it. At Harrow and then at Oxford, he was provided with the finest classical education Edwardian England could provide, and he excelled in those studies. He took time, however, to find his vocation. An impressive first in Greats won him a fellowship at Balliol College,

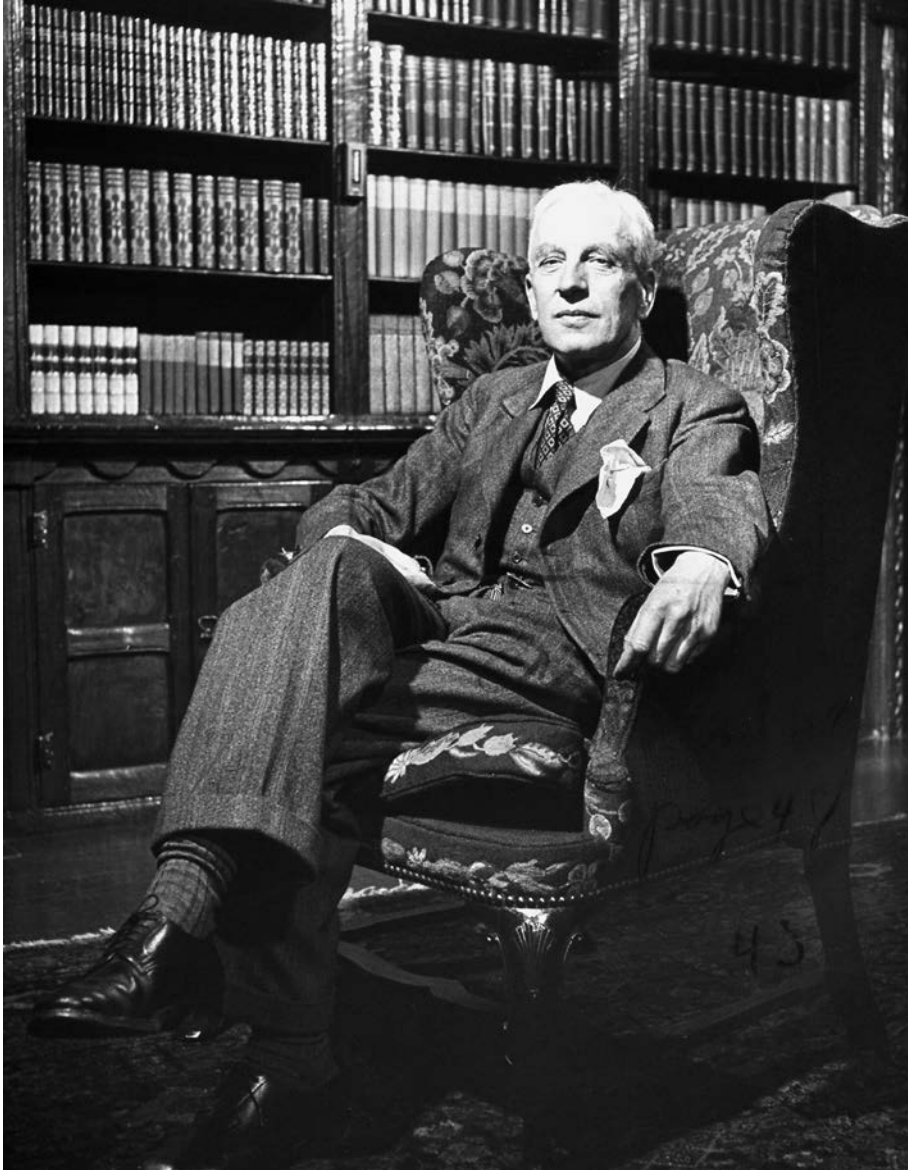
¹⁶ Douglas Jerrold, *The lie about the West: a response to Professor Toynbee's challenge* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1954).

¹⁷ A. J. P. Taylor, 'Much learning ...', in Montagu, ed., *Toynbee and history*, p. 117. See also Hugh Trevor-Roper, 'Testing the Toynbee system', in Montagu, ed., *Toynbee and history*, pp. 122–4.

¹⁸ This neglect has begun to be addressed. See, for example, Luca G. Castellin's *Ascesa e declino delle civiltà: La teoria delle macro-trasformazioni politiche di Arnold J. Toynbee* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2010) and Cornelia Navari, 'Toynbee, decline and civilization', in her *Public intellectuals and international affairs: essays on public thinkers and political projects* (Dordrecht: Republic of Letters, 2012), pp. 113–36.

¹⁹ See Henry Kissinger, 'The meaning of history: reflections on Spengler, Toynbee and Kant', unpublished undergraduate honours thesis, Harvard University, 1950; Hans J. Morgenthau, 'Toynbee and the historical imagination', *Encounter* 4: 3, 1955, pp. 70–76; Kenneth Thompson, *Toynbee's philosophy of world history and politics* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1985); also Martin Wight, *Systems of states*, ed. Hedley Bull (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977); Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, eds, *The expansion of international society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). Toynbee still has a particularly strong following in Japan. See Jacob Kovalio, 'A. J. Toynbee and Japan', in Kovalio, ed., *Japan in focus* (Toronto: CAPTUS Press and York University Publications, 1994), pp. 301–312.

²⁰ Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. 12, p. 577. See also 'Three Greek educations', in Arnold J. Toynbee, *Experiences* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 10–45.



Arnold J. Toynbee, 1 April 1947.

Copyright: Frank Scherschel/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images.

Oxford, in 1912, but he was soon unhappy with the mundane drudgery of teaching and administration.²¹ The First World War provided an opportunity for change, but Toynbee's actions in bringing about that change generated a difficult legacy. Though probably fit for military service, Toynbee was persuaded (or persuaded himself) to get a pacifist doctor to excuse him, citing a bout of dysentery some

²¹ Toynbee, *Experiences*, pp. 66–71.

years earlier.²² This seems to have been a fateful decision, a moment that defines much of Toynbee's later career. Having escaped the trenches himself, Toynbee was haunted by the memories of all those—colleagues, friends and students—who did not, later surrounding himself, in his office at Chatham House, with their sepia-tinted photographs. Guilt and grief drove his work on after 1918, infusing many of his writings with acutely felt emotion.

In 1915 Toynbee left Oxford for the Foreign Office, where he worked during and after the Versailles Conference with the Political Intelligence Department, producing propaganda and then planning for the postwar order. In 1919 he signalled a shift in his intellectual interests away from the classics and towards contemporary politics, taking up the Koraes Chair in Byzantine and Modern Greek History at the University of London. His stint in that post was not, however, a happy one. Since completing his degree, Toynbee's views had shifted from philhellenism to something near hostility to modern Greece, laced with pro-Turkish sentiments.²³ This did not please the funders of the Chair. In 1924, at the age of 35, Toynbee managed to escape, this time to Chatham House and to its new publication, the annual *Survey of international affairs*, conceived by the Institute to help fulfil its mission to inform the public about world politics.

Toynbee brought to the Institute an idiosyncratic understanding of international relations, with some very orthodox elements and some distinctly not. He was a liberal, though one with socialist leanings. At this time he was an atheist, but one with a deep interest in metaphysics and in what has been called 'evolutionary idealism', exemplified by the work of Henri Bergson and J. C. Smuts.²⁴ He was a supporter of the League of Nations, but more because of the principles he took it to embody than because of any great enthusiasm for its rules or institutions. He had written little on international relations, except for a great deal of wartime propaganda and a book called *Nationality and the war* (1915), but he had become acquainted, at Versailles, with the politics of the Arab world. Apart from that, Toynbee knew little 'international relations theory' and little historical theory to ground contemporary history. His core insight was a commonplace one for late Victorian and Edwardian Britons: that the industrial economy had unified the world and that political unity, in some form, must follow.²⁵ He knew almost nothing more about economics and finance, and he resolved to farm out those sections of the *Survey* to experts on those topics.²⁶ He kept the rest, however, for himself.

In the first few volumes, covering the period from 1920 to 1929, Toynbee provided more or less dispassionate narratives of diplomatic doings and sayings.

²² Toynbee, *Experiences*, pp. 38–40. For a discussion of this episode and its significance, see McNeill, 'Toynbee revisited', p. 177.

²³ See Richard Clogg, *Politics and the academy: Arnold Toynbee and the Koraes chair* (London and New York: Routledge, 1986).

²⁴ Lang, 'Globalization and global history in Toynbee', pp. 750–55. See also Henri Bergson, *Creative evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1998; first publ. 1911); J. C. Smuts, *Meaning and holism*, 3rd edn (London: Macmillan, 1936).

²⁵ See Toynbee, *Nationality and the war* (London and Toronto: Dent, 1915), p. 6. For a later iteration of this argument, see Toynbee, 'Economics versus politics', *The Listener* 4: 95, 1930, pp. 824–5.

²⁶ Toynbee, *Experiences*, p. 75.

These narratives were assembled at great speed, normally in less than six months,²⁷ with data gleaned from official publications and from press clippings collected in the Chatham House library. In the early *Surveys*, Toynbee's own views intruded in just two respects. First, he was keen to emphasize the need for a holistic view of world politics that reflected the way in which all societies were now united into one international system, self-consciously taking a cue from Polybius to match the 'unity of events' with a 'unity of composition'.²⁸ Second, he was prone to interpolate classical analogies into the story of contemporary events. Toynbee's discussion of the collective psychology of the French in 1920, for instance, led into a long, but not especially original, discussion of Roman attitudes before and after the destruction of Carthage.²⁹ In general, however, he worked hard during the 1920s to maintain what he took to be a neutral stance towards the behaviour of the various players.

While Toynbee worked away at narrating events on the world stage, he was also at work on what he called his 'Nonsense Book', *A study of history*. A hugely ambitious, sprawling book, the *Study* tried to put contemporary politics and international relations into context and to provide nothing less than a complete reinterpretation of the history of the modern West. Toynbee took aim at almost all the accepted verities of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historiography: that modern history was a story of unrelenting and unstoppable progress; that the nation-state was the highest political form to which humanity could aspire; that the West had 'won' and that its values, ideas and institutions—especially democracy and industrialism—were thus superior to others. He even attacked the way in which his fellow historians worked—that 'industrialisation of historical thought' which valued learned articles on ever more narrow and obscure topics more than bold, broad and book-length interpretations of the past.³⁰

In the *Study*, Toynbee took a very different approach and told a very different story. He took a global view, acknowledging the unification of humanity that had come about in the nineteenth century through imperialism and technological change.³¹ Just as the history of Great Britain makes sense only when examined in terms of wider European events, Toynbee argued, so the history of western civilization (or 'Western Society') was 'intelligible' only when viewed as a whole, longitudinally and spatially.³² And he went further, insisting that a true understanding of the history of any civilization required a comparative approach,³³

²⁷ Roland N. Stromberg notes that from the mid-1920s to 1939, Toynbee established the habit of finishing the *Survey* for the previous year by June of the next, then handing over the copy-editing and proofs to his assistant, Veronica Boulter, so that he could write the *Study* from July to November: 'A study of history and a world at war: Toynbee's two great enterprises', in C. T. McIntire and Marvin Perry, eds, *Toynbee reappraisals* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), p. 141.

²⁸ See the opening epigraphs in Arnold J. Toynbee, *Survey of international affairs, 1920–1923* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927).

²⁹ Toynbee, *Survey of international affairs, 1920–1923*, pp. 61–4.

³⁰ Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. 1, p. 5.

³¹ Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. 1, p. 27.

³² Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. 1, pp. 17–50.

³³ Here Toynbee took his cue especially from Edward Freeman, whose *Historical essays* he once called, in correspondence, 'one of the greatest historical books of the world' (Toynbee to Darbshire, 19 Aug. 1912, Toynbee MS 80).

setting it against all the others that have existed, and treating them as if they were 'philosophically contemporary' to one another.³⁴ When we do this, Toynbee argued, we find similarities in the developmental trajectories of civilizations—periods of genesis, growth, breakdown and disintegration, universal states and universal churches that succeed one another in the histories of many societies.

Toynbee was concerned not just with describing these likenesses, but also with establishing the causes for these various phases in the histories of civilizations. The *Study* was not a dispassionate piece of history-writing; rather, it was a very present-minded enterprise. The study of the past, Toynbee believed, could help us manage our affairs in the present, including in our international relations. Civilizations were not predetermined, he argued, to rise or fall. Theories of racial superiority and inferiority could not account for the emergence and development of civilizations, he argued, since the 21 or so civilizations that had hitherto risen and fallen had been composed of people of different races.³⁵ Theories of environmental determinism were similarly vulnerable, to Toynbee's mind, since civilizations had developed in very different natural environments.³⁶ What drove the growth, breakdown and disintegration, and indeed the advent of universal states or empires and universal churches or religions was human agency—or, to be more specific, human 'creativity'.

Toynbee's fascination with that topic dated back to his undergraduate days, if not before, when he came under the influence of Henri Bergson and his concept of 'creative evolution'.³⁷ Bergson argued that social change came from particularly creative individuals imbued with what he called the *élan vital*, who generated new beliefs, concepts and values, and who were needed if societies were not to become stale and static, and go into decline.³⁸ Such ideas chimed with the young Toynbee, who became convinced that there are, as he wrote to a friend in 1911, 'two great classes of people, first the fanatics—prophets, martyrs (and virgins)—who set the task and create the new work ... [and] secondly, the great multitude of comfortable men, who perform the immense labour of just keeping going what has been created'.³⁹ In the *Study*, Toynbee argued along much the same lines, positing that civilizations 'grew' as social challenges were responded to (and overcome) by creative individuals, often on the margins of society or in some form of exile.⁴⁰ These individuals presented the new beliefs, concepts or values that permitted a civilization to reorganize its social practices, with the mass of people adapting themselves to imitate the new creed.

Toynbee's *Study* was more than an investigation into the causes of civilizational birth, growth and decay, in other words: it presented wider social philosophy

³⁴ Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. 1, pp. 172–7.

³⁵ Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. 1, pp. 207–49.

³⁶ Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. 1, pp. 250–71.

³⁷ See e.g. Toynbee's unpublished essay, 'What the historian does', read to an undergraduate club in the academic year 1910–11, Toynbee MS 1, p. 6. He was still reading Bergson in the 1920s: see Toynbee to Darbshire, 23 Sept. 1925, Toynbee MS 80.

³⁸ See Bergson, *Creative evolution and The two sources of morality and religion*, trans. R. A. Audra and C. Brereton (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986).

³⁹ Toynbee to Darbshire, 17 May 1911, Toynbee MS 80.

⁴⁰ A lengthy discussion of examples of these individuals takes up the second half of vol. 3 of *A study of history*. See esp. pp. 217–376.

conveyed in a set of extended parables for the contemporary world.⁴¹ Toynbee was convinced that such a philosophy was urgently required. The modern West, he believed, was past its genesis and growth phases, and was now in breakdown—indeed, it was now in a ‘Time of Troubles’ from which only a resurgence of ‘creativity’ could liberate it.

Time of Troubles

We have seen all the human and material resources of a Westernized and industrialized world being mobilized to feed the furnaces of Moloch in which *Homo Occidentalis* has made a holocaust of his own children in our great Western civil war of AD 1914–18.⁴²

In his *Study*, Toynbee identified several past Times of Troubles. The one that first seized his attention was the period beginning with ‘the Hannibalic [*sic*] War, in which Hellenic Society was no longer creative and was ... patently in decline’.⁴³ He located another in ‘Egyptaic Society’ after the passing of the Fifth Dynasty (c. 2424 BCE, by Toynbee’s reckoning), which led to the ‘break-up of the Egyptian United Kingdom’ and the emergence of a set of smaller states.⁴⁴ In ‘Indic Society’, the Time of Troubles followed the creative phase which produced the Vedas and coincided with the rise and fall of the Mauryan Empire in the third and fourth centuries BCE, immediately prior to the emergence of Buddhism.⁴⁵ In ‘Sinic Society’ it occurred marginally earlier, before Confucius, in the fifth and sixth centuries BCE.⁴⁶ And Toynbee found even more examples in his collection of ‘fossil’ civilizations—the Minoan, Sumeric, Hittite, Babylonian, Andean, Mayan, Yucatec and Mexic—arguing that each had experienced a similar period of endemic, debilitating conflict.⁴⁷

Persistent, unlimited war was the most obvious symptom, to use Toynbee’s language, of a Time of Troubles, but it was not its cause. Wars happened early in the ‘life’ of a civilization, during the creative phase, when they were often divided into many different polities. But these wars—while ‘a great tax on civilisation and a great evil’—were generally ‘kept more or less within bounds’.⁴⁸ In a Time of Troubles, war burst these bounds and threatened the existence of the civilization. The causes of this development, Toynbee argued, were many and varied. First, there was a palpable loss of creativity, of the ability to respond to new challenges. Second, he observed that each civilization had seen a ‘Schism in the Body Social’ between the elite and the mass, between the ‘dominant minority’ and

⁴¹ In 1918, Toynbee had considered writing ‘a short history of Greece, and a much longer history of how Rome destroyed the world’, specifically to recount his understanding of the causes and consequences of the Great War in parables, noting: ‘I believe that one can put one’s experience of the war best in parables’ (Toynbee to Darbishire, 5 May 1918, Toynbee MS 80).

⁴² Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. 5, p. 16.

⁴³ Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. 1, p. 53.

⁴⁴ Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. 1, p. 137.

⁴⁵ Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. 1, pp. 86–7.

⁴⁶ Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. 1, p. 89.

⁴⁷ Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. 1, pp. 92–129.

⁴⁸ Toynbee, *Democracy in the atomic age*, the Dyason Lectures 1956 (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 39.

'Time of Troubles'

the 'internal proletariat'.⁴⁹ Third, he noted the presence in each case of an 'external proletariat' of barbarians or foreigners from a different civilization, which threatened the civilization from beyond its walls.⁵⁰ Last, Toynbee detected a 'Schism in the Soul' of each civilization which led to such social evils as a longing for a lost past or an unattainable future, a loss of individual or collective self-control, a rise in 'truancy and martyrdom', a tendency to fatalism, and an upsurge in cultural, sartorial, linguistic and sexual promiscuity.⁵¹

As the 1930s wore on, these theories crept from the *Study* into Toynbee's *Survey of international affairs*, leaving readers in no doubt as to his conviction that the contemporary world was now in its own Time of Troubles. In the first half-dozen volumes, the *Surveys* consisted for the most part of dry accounts of everyday diplomacy.⁵² After 1930, however, things changed. In this typically convoluted passage, Toynbee signalled his reasons for his move towards a more judgemental style:

When the prospects of the 'Great Society', into which Mankind has recently coalesced on Western initiative, are a matter of anxious consideration among people of all classes and all nationalities in every part of the world, it may not be inappropriate to indicate, briefly and tentatively, the balance of successes and failures in the movement of international affairs during the last completed calendar year.⁵³

Anticipating a core argument of E. H. Carr's *Twenty years' crisis* as well as the argument in his *Study*, Toynbee warned that a 'schism between the "satiated" and the "hungry", the possessed and the dispossessed, the apprehensive and the restive' was opening up, and that this 'would signify a conviction on both sides that the problems of post-war Europe would not or could not ... be settled by the new methods of reason, debate and conciliation but only by the old methods of violence'.⁵⁴

In subsequent volumes of the *Survey* Toynbee proceeded to mix neutral narrative with passionate pleas for a return to the principles and practices of the League, as well as for efforts to find the means to address the widening divisions within and between western states. He opened the *Survey* for 1931 with a lengthy and emotional reflection on the lessons of that *annus horribilis*, as he called it, a year in which 'men and women all over the world were seriously contemplating and frankly discussing the possibility that the Western system of Society might break down and cease to work'.⁵⁵ He became even more demonstrative as the 1930s wore on. Toynbee complained in the *Survey* for 1933 that the twin pillars of western civilization, humanism and Christianity, had been displaced by 'a worship of unregenerate Human Nature', labelling Nazism 'the consummation of a politico-religious movement, the pagan deification and worship of parochial human communities'.⁵⁶ In the *Survey* for 1935, which ran to two volumes, he went even

⁴⁹ Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. 5, pp. 35–193.

⁵⁰ Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. 5, pp. 194–319.

⁵¹ Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. 5, pp. 376–568.

⁵² The one exception to this rule was the *Survey* for 1928, which contained an extraordinary paean of praise for the Pact of Paris.

⁵³ Toynbee, *Survey of international affairs*, 1930, pp. v–vi.

⁵⁴ Toynbee, *Survey of international affairs*, 1930, p. 10.

⁵⁵ Toynbee, *Survey of international affairs*, 1931, p. 1.

⁵⁶ Toynbee, *Survey of international affairs*, 1933, pp. 4, III.

further, calling Mussolini's conquest of Abyssinia and western acquiescence in it a 'tragic episode of international history' that could only be described as 'a tale of sin and nemesis'.⁵⁷

Together, then, the *Study* and the *Survey* provided the basis for Toynbee's assessment of the causes of the twentieth-century Time of Troubles. Drawing on the historical parallels in the *Study* in an article for *International Affairs*, Toynbee represented the failure of the League and the inability of political elites to move beyond what he disparagingly termed 'local' or 'parochial' sovereign states as indicators of a loss of 'creativity'.⁵⁸ The challenges generated by industrialism and modern communications, which had unified the world economically, were simply not being met with adequate responses. A 'thorough-going internationalism', Toynbee argued, again in *International Affairs*, was the 'only alternative to the breakdown of modern civilisation', but it had still not been realized.⁵⁹ The majority of the 'internal proletariat' knew this to be true, but the 'dominant minority' failed to acknowledge it and to generate the needed creative response. Worse still, the external proletariat were massing, this time within and outside the walls, in the form of violent extremists both communist and fascist, worshipping their own false idols with equal devotion.

Toynbee knew how this predicament had been resolved in the past. In the Hellenic world, the Roman dominant minority resorted to violent means to keep order within its borders and waged war on the barbarians outside them, establishing an empire. But such an empire or 'universal state', he believed, was not something to be celebrated. It was merely a 'rally' by a 'dominant minority', not a truly creative response to the challenges that civilization faced, and it was doomed to an eventual 'rout' at the hands of the internal and external proletariats.⁶⁰ The lesson for the contemporary world was clear. By 1938, Toynbee was issuing public warnings that the current Time of Troubles was likely to lead to the establishment of a new 'universal state'. 'If we fail to make a success of collective security', he told an audience at Chatham House in March that year, 'then I think the world is going to be unified politically, not by peaceful agreement, but by the ancient method of force in the form of a military conquest by some Power or group of Powers'.⁶¹ And the British empire was unlikely to triumph, Toynbee declared; indeed, he thought it 'could not possibly survive even one more round of a struggle of all against all in an anarchic world'.⁶²

The defeat of Nazism did little to change Toynbee's conviction that the world was soon to be unified either by agreement or—more likely—by force. In his postwar work, he continued to labour the point that the world had been united,

⁵⁷ Toynbee, *Survey of international affairs, 1935*, vol. 2, p. 1.

⁵⁸ Arnold J. Toynbee, 'Historical parallels to current international problems', *International Affairs* 10: 4, 1931, pp. 479–92.

⁵⁹ Arnold J. Toynbee, 'The trend of international affairs since the war', *International Affairs* 10: 6, 1931, p. 806. See also his *Economics and politics in international life*, Montague Burton Foundation Lecture 1930 (Nottingham: University College, 1930).

⁶⁰ On the dynamics of 'rally-and-rout', see Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. 6.

⁶¹ Arnold J. Toynbee, 'The issues in British foreign policy', *International Affairs* 27: 3, 1938, p. 317.

⁶² Toynbee, 'The issues in British foreign policy', p. 318.

economically and culturally, and that political unification must follow.⁶³ But his thinking had changed in two crucial respects. First, he was doubtful that Europeans such as himself could now play any meaningful role in that great endeavour. As early as 1946, Toynbee was telling audiences that the new 'giant states' of the United States and Soviet Union were now the only ones that mattered; they now dwarfed Britain and France as those emerging nation-states had come to dwarf the city-states of 'Venice and Florence and Ghent and Bruges' four centuries before.⁶⁴ The US and USSR now faced each other, he argued in *International Affairs*, like Rome and Carthage, awaiting the round of warfare in which 'one surviving Great Power "knocks out" the last remaining competitor and imposes peace on the world by conquest'.⁶⁵ For this reason, and others, Toynbee was also now convinced that the right responses to the challenges of the contemporary Time of Troubles lay not in politics, but in religion.

This aspect of Toynbee's thought is complex and remains controversial.⁶⁶ He was brought up a conventional Anglican, but lost his faith in his teens, and remained an agnostic through his twenties and early thirties. In the early 1930s, however, personal and public circumstances brought about a change in perspective. His marriage came under strain: he was tempted to initiate an affair with a fellow historian, Eileen Power, and, despite no liaison actually being conducted, he was afterwards wracked by guilt.⁶⁷ Further tensions appeared when his wife, Rosalind, was moved to rebel against her staunchly atheist parents, eventually converting to Roman Catholicism in 1932 and becoming a 'pamphleteer and apologist for Catholic truth'.⁶⁸ Toynbee would not go that far, but he did begin to re-evaluate his beliefs, impelled substantially by the growing evidence that his preferred political solutions were not working. He began to have increasing resort to religious concepts to critique secular societies, past and present; in the early 1930s his language becomes markedly more religious, as he talks of sin, idolatry and salvation, building to a crescendo in the second instalment of the *Study*, published on the eve of war.

The twin catastrophes of 1939—the outbreak of war and the suicide of his eldest son, Anthony—pushed Toynbee closest to outright acceptance of Christianity, though not Roman Catholicism, as Rosalind wished.⁶⁹ His Burge lecture of 1940, *Christianity and civilisation*, marks a crucial turning-point. He opens by assailing Gibbon for treating Christianity as the 'destroyer' of Hellenic civilization, arguing instead that the roots of its downfall went much deeper, back to the fifth century BCE and the birth of political theory, with its focus on the individual's

⁶³ Arnold J. Toynbee, *Civilization on trial* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 91, 158. See also 'The unification of the world and the change in historical perspective', *History* 33: 117–18, 1948, pp. 1–28.

⁶⁴ Arnold J. Toynbee, 'The virtue of the middle way', *The Listener* 36: 931, 1946, p. 661.

⁶⁵ Arnold J. Toynbee, 'The international outlook', *International Affairs* 23: 4, 1947, p. 464.

⁶⁶ For a good but terse treatment of the subject, see Christian Peper, 'Toynbee: an historian's conscience', in McIntire and Perry, eds, *Toynbee reappraisals*, pp. 50–62.

⁶⁷ McNeill, *Arnold J. Toynbee*, pp. 141–3.

⁶⁸ William H. McNeill, 'Some unresolved questions', in McIntire and Perry, eds, *Toynbee reappraisals*, p. 43.

⁶⁹ See the reference to Toynbee's 'public anxiety and private grief' in the Preface to *A study of history*, vol. 4, p. viii, as well as his references to St Augustine's *City of God* on p. ix. For context, see McIntire, 'Toynbee's philosophy of history: his Christian period', in McIntire and Perry, eds, *Toynbee reappraisals*, pp. 66–71.

obligations to the state.⁷⁰ Just as crucially, Toynbee also rejected his earlier thesis that ‘universal religions’ that emerged out of the ruins of ‘universal states’, as Christianity did from those of the Roman empire, were the keepers of the intellectual inheritances of civilizations, passing on what they preserved to the next civilizational generation.⁷¹ Now, Toynbee believed that civilizations were the ‘handmaids of religion’ and that their ‘historical function’ was to ‘serve, by their downfall, as stepping-stones to a progressive process of the revelation of always deeper religious insight’.⁷² The collapse of western civilization, should it occur, was not to be lamented: the West had unified the world, as the Roman empire had done before it, and now Christianity could spread.⁷³

During the Second World War, Toynbee worshipped as an Anglican, but moved away from orthodox interpretations of Christianity. Three factors were at play. The first was his lingering conviction, which he had held throughout the 1930s and which he attributed to the Roman Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, that there were many roads to God, of which the Christian way was just one.⁷⁴ The second was the collapse in 1942 of his marriage to Rosalind, which foreclosed a conversion to Roman Catholicism. The last was intertwined with the second: to cope with his grief about his son and his feelings about Rosalind, Toynbee underwent a course of psychotherapy, which introduced him to the work of C. G. Jung.⁷⁵ Jung’s ideas chimed with Toynbee’s earlier encounters with Plato, Bergson and others on myth, and Jungian ‘archetypes’ provided him with a means of organizing his thoughts about the various dimensions of what he came to call the ‘higher religions’.

In the final volumes of the *Study* and in a set of Gifford Lectures, published as *An historian’s approach to religion*, Toynbee argued that the leading four ‘higher religions’ of the contemporary world—Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Mahayana Buddhism—each presented a different way to the same end: God’s Love.⁷⁶ All represented advances on earlier religious thinking because they directed human beings away from nature or themselves towards God. And all were much needed in the contemporary world because only these higher religions could dissuade people from worshipping other man-made idols, like reason or science or the modern sovereign state. Our ‘Time of Troubles’ demanded, in other words, a recognition of what history told us about the higher religions: that each held a promise of transcending mere political woes and moving civilization forward onto a higher plane. In the *Study* and in the many books, articles, lectures and

⁷⁰ Arnold J. Toynbee, *Christianity and civilisation*, Burge Memorial Lecture (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1940), pp. 8–11.

⁷¹ On the role of Christianity in bridging Hellenic and western society, see Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. 1, pp. 56–7. For one intriguing take on this supposed phenomenon, see Walter M. Miller Jr’s extraordinary novel *A canticle for Leibowitz* (New York: Eos, 2006; first publ. 1959).

⁷² Toynbee, *Christianity and civilisation*, pp. 14, 23.

⁷³ Toynbee, *Christianity and civilisation*, p. 23.

⁷⁴ See Peper, ‘Toynbee: an historian’s conscience’, p. 53.

⁷⁵ For an account of what Toynbee took from Jung, see Arnold J. Toynbee, ‘The value of C. G. Jung’s work for historians’, *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 1: 2, 1956, pp. 193–4.

⁷⁶ See esp. Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. 7, and Arnold J. Toynbee, *An historian’s approach to religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956).

speeches he produced in the 20 or so years after its completion, Toynbee called for nothing less than a 'spiritual revolution' to free humankind from materialism, inequality, endemic conflict and the threat of nuclear annihilation in one state's pursuit of universal empire.⁷⁷

Conclusion

The human race has now condemned itself, by its technological prowess, to having to choose between committed universal genocide and learning to live as one family.⁷⁸

Toynbee is today unfashionable, at least among scholars of International Relations. There are good reasons for this lack of interest—and some bad ones. His writing is prolix, overwrought, and often in need of a robust editor. He wrote far too much, far too quickly. His theories are often expressed unclearly, through allusion or allegory, and grasping them requires a rare knowledge of the classics, the Bible and other major religious works, Bergson and Jung, and a swathe of modern historiography. Aside from his essays in *Foreign Affairs* and *International Affairs*, which are clear, direct and accessible, much of the rest of Toynbee's work is—in short—unappealing, and some of it is unrewarding. Toynbee did make significant contributions to the scholarly field of International Relations, shaping the thinking of later theorists like Martin Wight,⁷⁹ as well as still controversial ones in Middle Eastern studies,⁸⁰ and he did have a lasting effect on historiography, especially in America, where grand history continues to appeal.⁸¹ But in the end, Toynbee's contributions to public debates about policy and practice are the most lasting.

Whatever Toynbee's failing as a historian or theorist, he was an acute interpreter of contemporary events, as both the *Survey* and his *International Affairs* essays show—far more acute, indeed, than many of his contemporary critics. His articles of the late 1930s are especially impressive: 'After Munich: the world outlook' and 'A turning point in history' are incisive and prescient accounts of the balance of power in Europe.⁸² In the event, it was Toynbee's not-always-firm Utopian faith in liberalism that won out over Carr's totalitarian Realism; resisting Hitler was in the end preferable, morally and strategically, to appeasing and emulating him—or indeed Stalin, as Carr later preferred.⁸³ Toynbee's views on the iniquities of European imperialism—and on the wider impact of the West upon the 'rest'—are now widely accepted. And while his prediction that a world-state would be established after the end of the Second World War was not realized, his early

⁷⁷ Arnold J. Toynbee, *America and the world revolution* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 75–7.

⁷⁸ Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. 12, p. 579.

⁷⁹ Ian Hall, 'Challenge and response: the lasting engagement of Arnold J. Toynbee and Martin Wight', *International Relations* 17: 3, 2003, pp. 389–404.

⁸⁰ On Toynbee's influence, see Albert Hourani, *The emergence of the modern Middle East* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1981).

⁸¹ Toynbee was particularly important for scholars like W. H. McNeill, whose *The rise of the West: a history of the human community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) continues to appeal, 50 years after its original publication in 1964.

⁸² Arnold J. Toynbee, 'After Munich: the world outlook', *International Affairs* 18: 1, 1939, pp. 1–28; 'A turning point in history', *Foreign Affairs* 17: 2, 1939, pp. 305–20.

⁸³ E. H. Carr, *The Soviet impact on the western world* (New York: Macmillan, 1947).

appreciation that the United States and Soviet Union had eclipsed Britain and other West European states as the most influential forces in world politics was similarly shrewd.⁸⁴

Toynbee deserves acknowledgement, in other words, as an often courageous, humane, and frequently perspicacious interpreter of the twentieth century's Time of Troubles. He was not always right and his method defies all attempts at imitation. But he showed, especially in the pages of *International Affairs*, what could and should be done to inform and influence public debate by scholars of the field.

⁸⁴ Arnold J. Toynbee, 'The international outlook', *International Affairs* 23: 4, October 1947, pp. 463–76.