During the Second World War, the U.S. government strove to “better know” their enemies—Germany and Japan—not only in an effort to win the war but also in an attempt to radically transform Axis society, and thereby destroy fascism and militarism while preventing their resurgence. To this end, the government collected and solicited expert analyses of two nations from some of the top social scientists of the era. These experts agreed that to subdue both Axis nations, the United States had to craft Germany and Japan into the liberal democrats they had failed to become in their short histories as modern nations.

Few historians have compared U.S. occupation planning for Germany with that for Japan. When studies compare the two, they often assume that the debate around the “German Question” was more dynamic, while the Japanese side was static and dominated by racial concerns. This paper, however, suggests that the debates about the Axis nations among experts actually shared many more similarities than traditionally acknowledged. Indeed, experts often came up with parallel images of German and Japanese history, culture, and psyche to explain the two countries’ violent, aggressive, and anti-democratic tendencies. These opinions provided a scientific basis for wartime planning at a time when the United States government increasingly looked to social scientists to help in planning to reengineer Germany and Japan during the occupations.

In the pursuit of reforming and revolutionizing German and Japanese society, social science offered the promise of an objective basis for social change and engineering. The experts examined here include anthropologist Margaret Meade, Historians Toshiyo Tsukahira and Hugh Borton, British psychologist Geoffrey Gorer, and German philosopher Herbert Marcuse. Expert opinion filtered into wartime planning through numerous government and military intelligence agencies such as the Office of Strategic Services – the precursor to the CIA, the State Department’s Country and Area Committees, and the forerunner of the National Security Council – the State, War, Navy Coordinating committee.

Expert explanations for Germany and Japan’s stunted development and violent aggression ranged from the historical, to the psychological, and included cultural factors. While there is truth to the idea that cultural affinity and civilizational dissimilarities shaped expert views images to a point, this paper argues that they also developed similar analyses for both Axis nations. These included academic discussions of parallel “special paths” to modernity that missed liberal democratic development or a collective “horde” psychology that gave too much deference to authority. Experts also ventured more eccentric views, such as one officer’s plan to introduce square dancing as a lesson in democracy for Japan, or a psychologist’s assertion that Axis culture lacked a sense of “Anglo-American” sportsmanship.
Approaching the Axis nations through history, psychology, and anthropology, intellectuals and academics helped to create a parallel image of Germany and Japan to explain why the enemy had not become democratic, and how the US could reengineer these societies in the laboratories of occupation. The faith placed in social scientists to come up with ways to “fix” Japan and Germany, and the opportunity provided by occupations, represented a belief in the benefit of “social change” among academics, policy makers, and even the public. The experts involved in wartime planning, at the heart of their analyses, similarly envisioned a kind of democratic “social engineering” for the German and Japanese people. It was the war that brought these men and women into conversation with the government, and it was the occupation that provided many of them the opportunity to test their theories.