

Anthropologists at War: Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict and the ‘principal danger in the world ... the spread of fascism’¹

On 9 December 1941 Franklin D. Roosevelt declared ‘We are going to win the war and we are going to win the peace that follows.’² Entry into World War II meant that the U.S. was now truly invested in the outcome of the war and in the prospects for lasting peace. The war effort created the vital question of “what to do” with Germany and Japan and led to several key requirements that needed to be met. What was called for was knowledge of one’s enemies so they could be beaten; knowledge of one’s allies so as to fight alongside them, and finally knowledge of oneself so that one’s own strengths could be utilized effectively. Perhaps surprisingly Anthropology was one of the disciplines that went to war and aimed to answer this question and meet these requirements. The significant role played by Drs. Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict is an interesting example not only of unprecedented solutions to unprecedented problems but is also a fascinating illumination of the importance of female experts in wartime government service. Few realize that Anthropologists were involved in analysing German and Japanese mentality and explaining the principle of reeducation, the overriding aim of American peace planning. The plan to reeducate Germany and Japan aimed to ensure that the two defeated, former enemy powers would never again succumb to dangerous and poisonous ideologies. This was an imaginative policy designed to secure lasting peace and prevent World War III. It entailed comprehensive psychological, ideological, and cultural reconstruction. It sought to eradicate the foundations of the authoritarian and militaristic systems of Germany and Japan, particularly in the realm of ideas, and put in their place the political, ethical, and philosophical principles of the United States. The ultimate goal was to cure the German and Japanese nations of their current sickness: fascism. Thus, this paper demonstrates the integral role of Mead and Benedict in American responses to the “spread of fascism.”

Dr. Wendy Toon

University of Worcester

¹ Margaret Mead, “The Comparative Study of Cultures and the Purposive Cultivation of Democratic Values, 1941-1949” in Lyman Bryson; Louis Finkelstein & R. M. Maciver (eds.) Perspectives on a Trouble Decade: Science, Philosophy, and Religion, 1939-1949 – Tenth Symposium. New York: Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion in Their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life Inc., 1950, p. 87.

² FDR, ‘Fireside Chat to the Nation Following the Declaration of War with Japan’, 9 December 1941 in Samuel I. Rosenman (ed.), Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Volume 10: The Call to Battle Stations, 1941. New York: Random House, 1938-1950, p. 530.