This project analyses the processes of mental remapping that took place in Europe and North America between the mid-1940s and mid-1950s, examining how the notion of the West – the idea that North America and Western Europe formed a unique civilisation bound by a common cultural, historical and religious heritage – became influential and informed North Americans’ and West Europeans’ spatial perception of the world after 1945. It specifically asks how Americans, who had traditionally defined their nation in opposition to the “Old World”, reinvented themselves as the leaders of a “Western World” and how West Germans and Italians, who had historically considered their countries anti-poles of “Western Civilisation”, re-imagined themselves as “Western” and were also accepted as equal members of the “West” by their West European and North American partners.

A broad sample of leading American, Canadian, British, French, West German and Italian newspapers and magazines are analysed in order to find out when the concept of the West emerged in the public discourse and to which semantic fields it was connected. Secondly, I examine the correspondence of selected intellectuals who were part of transatlantic networks and reconstruct how conceptions of “the West” were generated and how they crossed national borders such that a transnational understanding of the contours of “the West” emerged.

Thirdly, my study uses diplomatic sources to ask whether the idea of North America and (Western) Europe forming a “Western Civilisation” shaped foreign-policy makers’ perceptions of international events and informed their political goals, or whether political elites used the idea of the West retrospectively in order to legitimise the post-war order. Finally, I investigate cartographical material to trace how world maps and European maps changed in the early phase of the Cold War to visually promote the idea that there was a geographically identifiable “West” and that (West) Germany and Italy were West European countries. Maps in school atlases and textbooks are particularly relevant in this respect, since they shaped the spatial imagination of following generations, and since they were subject to state approval, thus reflecting the politically desired perspective.

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Maps are not a mere reflection of reality but an interpretation of facts and that they are therefore always linked to time- and context-specific patterns of perception.

Maps express a subjective worldview, irrespective of whether their authors deliberately pursued political interests when designing them or whether they believed they were objectively depicting reality in their works. The fact that maps of Europe and the world changed during the early years of the Cold War is thus the result of a changing spatial imagination rather than of more objective methods of cartographical representation.

The GEI library allowed for a thorough examination of these changes, since it holds multiple editions of most atlas series published and used in schools in (West) Germany and other West European countries during the Cold War. Such important works included the Diercke-Weltatlas, Putzgers Historischer Schulatlas, Westermanns Welt-Atlas, Philips’ Modern School Atlas, Collins-Longmans Study Atlas, Wheaton School Atlas, Oxford School Atlas, Nelson’s School Atlas, Atlas général Bordas or the (Nuovo) Atlante geografico by the Istituto Geografico de Agostini.