

Book Reviews



Thomas W. Gijswijt, 2019. *Informal Alliance: The Bilderberg Group and Transatlantic Relations During the Cold War, 1952–1968*. London/New York. Routledge. 310 pp. £120.00 Hardback ISBN 978-0815396741.

For many years it seemed that the secrecy surrounding the Bilderberg Group was paralleled by a curse preventing researchers in this field to publish their findings. The more fortunate it is that we can now consult the first published, scientific monograph on the history of Bilderberg, which enables us to escape the sphere of rumors, myths and conspiracies. Instead, we can begin to understand the origins and evolution of Bilderberg and have a serious discussion on the significance of informal aspects of global governance, diplomacy and relations.

To produce his study, Thomas Gijswijt has impressively researched more than 40 archives in seven countries, which permits him to trace this transnational forum of elite people from both a North American and Western European setting, including in Great Britain, Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and the US. At the same time, Gijswijt relates this history to the development of European integration, NATO, decolonization and more generally the Cold War.

Gijswijt convincingly demonstrates that Bilderberg, which was initiated in 1954 and met yearly from 1957 onwards, was a European initiative and that its leadership and direction mainly came from Europe. Central, in the first decades, was the Polish exile Joseph A. Retinger, “one of the most fascinating figures involved in international relations during the 20th century,” and Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands.

Contrary to misleading ideas that Bilderberg constituted a shadowy world government, Gijswijt underlines that Bilderberg was not a decision-making apparatus, but instead emphasizes how it facilitated personal connections and contributed to form transatlantic agendas, consensus, collaboration and crisis management. In particular, it provided a space for participants to link up with,

inform and influence each other. "Influence often works most effectively," Gijswijt reminds us, citing Carl J. Friedrich, "by creating a certain ambience for decisions through its effect on attitudes, beliefs and values unrelated to immediate decisions" (104).

In a chapter on "NATO, Nuclear Strategy and the Cold War," Gijswijt demonstrates how this worked in practice. During the Eisenhower administration, Bilderberg became a platform where crucial information on the administration's nuclear strategy of massive retaliation was circulated and criticism of it was formulated, aiming at a more flexible NATO response to the Soviet threat. Another example is when the French Finance Minister Antoine Pinay traveled to the US in 1959, asking Retinger for support in setting up informal meetings with leading financiers and business men to discuss the economic recovery of France. Or when Henry Kissinger used Bilderberg meetings to discuss *Ostpolitik* with Egon Bahr, West German Chancellor Willy Brandt's foreign policy advisor and the main architect behind this policy.

Bilderberg was definitely not the only organization active in the transatlantic arena, in fact it inspired the formation of the Institute for Strategic Studies in London in 1958 and several prominent Bilderberg participants were involved in establishing the Atlantic Institute in 1961 and other similar organizations. This was all part of a drastic expansion of transnational state-private networks that took place in the early Cold War. In chapters such as "The Return of Nationalism. From de Gaulle to Kennedy" and "Alliance in Crisis," Gijswijt analyses how cracks in the transatlantic alliance were dealt with at Bilderberg and how the forum contributed to cementing an informal transnational alliance that complemented the formal one.

However, despite its many merits, there are also problematic aspects of this study. Some are minor, but in light of the prejudice against women in Bilderberg, it is unfortunate that Princess Beatrix is absent from the book's index. She was the first female attendant in 1962 and remained the only one for quite some years. Also, the Cold War division of Europe, the overall context of this study, disappears when references to Germany substitutes for East and West Germany.

More importantly, some state-of-the-art studies in this area are absent. Had William Carroll's works on the transnational capitalist class been included, it might have added important perspectives on what interests elite figures involved in Bilderberg represented.¹ I agree when Gijswijt highlights the need for

1 See for example his *The Making of a Transnational Capitalist Class: Corporate Power in the Twenty-First Century* (London; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

further studies of transatlantic organizations and personalities in this period, but given his specific reference to the German politician Kurt Birrenbach as one of them, the monograph should have included Samuel Joseph Baurkot's doctoral thesis "Kurt Birrenbach and the Evolution of German Atlanticism" in its otherwise impressive bibliography.²

Moreover, Gijswijt's attempt to analyze the "emotional community" formed among Bilderberg participants has a great potential, because it goes beyond the traditional approach of merely looking at the participants' social backgrounds or shared world views. Thus, it might have added new layers to the understanding of what formed the basis of the transatlantic alliance, including its persistence, one of the book's main aims. However, with only sporadic mentioning of the emotional aspects of this history and the absence of theoretical and methodological reflections on them, these efforts are at best half-hearted, and at worst an excuse for accommodating the prevailing *Zeitgeist* in the historical discipline.

Overall, the lack of methodological considerations becomes the book's Achilles heel. For example, despite a chapter on "Decolonization and the global Cold War," and the abovementioned chapter on the "Alliance in Crisis," the monograph does not really engage with the significance of the Vietnam War for Bilderberg. The fact that the war was ignored at most Bilderberg Conferences, because of its controversial and divisive nature for the transatlantic relationship, is not an excuse for the historian to follow suit. On the contrary, the silence of the sources tells us a lot about the informal diplomacy that Bilderberg practiced, including its limitations. Perhaps an analysis of Bilderberg and the Vietnam War, involving related domestic developments in the countries included in this study, could have led to important insights into the evolution and transformation of Bilderberg in the late 1960's and early '70s.

Another example is when utterances are taken at face value. Prince Bernhard is quoted for emphasizing that Bilderberg should be a balanced group "of different shades of opinion" and the Dutch businessman Paul Rijkens for stressing that the idea in Bilderberg was to bring together the leaders of the left and the right (50). Instead of critically examining such claims, the book ends up echoing them:

"Despite its secretive nature," Gijswijt writes, "Bilderberg in fact contributed to a democratization and broadening of the transatlantic foreign policy elite in the 1950s and 1960s. Its organizers were convinced that international

2 Baurkot, S.J. "Kurt Birrenbach and the Evolution of German Atlanticism" unpublished PhD thesis, Columbia University, 2014.

understanding would only take hold if as many societal groups as possible were represented.”³

However, just from reading the monograph itself, it is evident that this was not true, as revealed by the anecdote included about the first conference at the Bilderberg Hotel in 1954: hotel staff with Communist sympathies were told not to be present.⁴

Contrasting words with deeds, another picture begins to form. Yes, there were conservatives, liberals, and social-democrats/socialists present at Bilderberg, but the political forces that were critical of NATO, European integration, US influence in Western Europe, free trade etc. were – with a few exceptions – excluded, whether from the left or right. The plurality of Bilderberg was in fact a well-guarded plurality of the mainstream.

Furthermore, Bilderberg was an elite forum. Participants reflected the upper echelons of government, intelligence, business, the media etc., not grass-roots organizations, social movements or counter cultural currents. Labor had a strong presence to begin with, but only when its representatives had abandoned ideas to revolutionize or even fundamentally reform societies.

Bilderberg’s relationship with democracy was troubled. Not only did Bilderberg avoid public accountability, its organizers deliberately chose to emphasize “western ethical and cultural values,” not democratic values, as a criterion for participation, as Ingeborg Philipsen has demonstrated.⁵ In this way, representatives of – or with ties to – authoritarian governments in Portugal, Greece and Turkey could attend.

That said, Gijswijt’s work contributes positively to challenge dominant state-based historiographies and understand the many layers of global governance and diplomacy, including the important role of informal gatherings such as the Bilderberg Conferences, for the evolution of transatlantic relations.

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3 See p. 2; something Gijswijt repeats in his conclusion, p. 267.

4 See p. 61.

5 See Philipsen, I. “Diplomacy with Ambiguity” unpublished PhD thesis, University of Copenhagen, 2009, 91.