

Thomas W. Gijswijt, *Informal Alliance: The Bilderberg Group and Transatlantic Relations during the Cold War, 1952-1968*, London, Routledge, 2018, pp. 310
by Giacomo Mazzei

On the list of conspiracy theories populating public discourse nowadays and obviously running amok on the Internet, those regarding the Bilderberg Group consistently hold one of the very top spots. There are few groups of people eliciting suspicion and speculation as does this small coterie of business leaders, former politicians and diplomats, plus the occasional foreign-policy expert, leading journalist, and even trade-union official, who gather once a year for a couple of days in some exclusive, fenced-off location between North America and Europe, to discreetly discuss major world problems. No doubt that this is a rather secretive organization, deliberately avoiding public scrutiny. It has been so since it was first assembled at the Hotel de Bilderberg in Oosterbeek, Netherlands, in 1954, and though it currently even has its own official website, where anyone can sift through the list of meetings held over more than six decades, the main topics debated at the conference convened at each meeting, and the names of all members of the Group's steering committee¹, the proceedings of the conferences remain, as they always have been, undisclosed to the public. Not to mention the more intimate conversations surrounding the conferences, which of course are equally part of the reason why these powerful people congregate and whose contents, as for the proceedings, no one has ever leaked to the press. In fact, the few journalists who bother following the utterly unaccessible events usually satisfy themselves by taking snapshots of the guests entering well-guarded gates, or by producing longer reportages of the demonstrations that lately have begun to crowd the neighborhoods of the Bilderberg meetings.

Historians, however, do have at their disposal a treasure trove of records regarding the early meetings, located at the Dutch National Archives in Amsterdam and governed by a fifty-year access rule. Those records add key documentation to the scant pieces of evidence that have been accessible for a while at other European and American government archives and in the personal papers of former Group members at various separate repositories. It is possible,

¹ <<https://bilderbergmeetings.org>>, last accessed, May 17, 2021.

in other words, to quite thoroughly reconstruct the history of the Bilderberg Group, albeit limited to its initial twenty years, which is what the records now available allow. Thomas Gijswijt did exactly that. Looking at those in Amsterdam and a large variety of other primary and secondary sources, he wrote the first archival-based, book-length treatment of the subject. It covers the span of time from 1952, when the project for an elite forum of discussion between Americans and Europeans came into being, until 1968, indeed a convenient landmark in any periodization of transatlantic relations.

Originating from his PhD dissertation and following a brief series of short essays and articles by him and few others on the origins of the Bilderberg Group and some of its more or less controversial activities and connections through the 1970s², Gijswijt's painstakingly-researched work was published three years ago, but as of yet it has attracted little attention among practitioners of the field. Very few reviews about it have appeared in specialized journals, due perhaps to the dearth of Bilderberg studies and the consequent difficulty at contextualizing those within the relevant historiography³. There is, to be sure, growing scholarly interest in translational networks by historians as well as political scientists, particularly as relates to the Euro-American context following World War II, and some, at least according to Google Scholar citations, have started to build on Gijswijt's study. Nonetheless, it seems to have been surprisingly under-appreciated while there is much to be done to fully flesh out its potential for shedding light on a number of related matters concerning postwar and Cold-War relations between the United States and Europe, including Italy, where a sizable

² Thomas W. Gijswijt, *Beyond NATO: Transatlantic Elite Networks and the Atlantic Alliance*, in Andreas Wenger et al. (a cura di), *Transforming NATO in the Cold War. Challenges Beyond Deterrence in the 1960s*, London, Routledge, 2007; Id., *The Bilderberg Group and the End of the Cold War: The Disengagement Debate in the 1950s*, in Frédéric Bozo et al. (a cura di), *Visions of the End of the Cold War in Europe, 1945-1990*, Berghahn Books, New York 2012; Id., *The Kennedy Administration, Alliance Politics and Informal Diplomacy during the Transatlantic Crisis of 1962-63*, in Johannes Großmann e Helene Miard-Delacroix (a cura di), *Deutschland, Frankreich und die USA in den "langen" 1960er Jahren. Ein transatlantisches Dreiecksverhältnis*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart 2018; Hugh Wilford, *CIA Plot, Socialist Conspiracy, or New World Order? The Origins of the Bilderberg Group, 1952-55*, «Diplomacy and Statecraft», v. 14, n. 3, 2003, pp. 70-82; Valerie Aubourg, *Organizing Atlanticism. The Bilderberg Group and the Atlantic Institute, 1952-1963*, «Intelligence and National Security», v. 18, n. 2, 2003, pp. 92-105; Id., *The Bilderberg Group: Promoting European Governance Inside an Atlantic Community of Values*, in Wolfram Kaiser, Brigitte Leucht e Michael Gehler (a cura di), *Transnational Networks in Regional Integration: Governing Europe, 1945-83*, Routledge, London 2010; Ingeborg Philipsen, *"For Better or for Worse?" The Bilderberg Meetings and the Lockheed Affair*, in Giles Scott-Smith e Valérie Aubourg (a cura di), *Atlantic, Euratlantic, or Europe-America?*, Soleb, Paris 2011.

³ This reviewer was able to find only two other reviews of the book, in *Diplomatica* and *Sehepunkte* respectively.

contingent of Bilderbergers came from. It would be certainly refreshing to look at the Bilderberg Group knowing a bit of its actual history, that is, moving beyond the realm of cheap innuendos, to try and grasp in a more perceptive and nuanced way what it really was about and presumably still is.

Setting the record straight, and in the process debunking the multifarious mythologies about the Bilderberg Group, was precisely what Gijswijt set out to do. That is not to say that in his book he shies away from delving into the manyfold relationships – between foreign policy establishment figures, the monied elites, and the intelligence branches of Western governments – which centered around the Group since before it was founded. This was not, however, a creation of the CIA, as typically alleged by conspiracy theorists, though several Bilderbergers definitely had close ties to US intelligence, as did the Ford and Rockefeller foundations, which helped keep it going and growing after its auspicious beginnings, providing grants that supplemented financial contributions from some of its wealthiest members. The initiative to create what would have later become the Bilderberg Group actually came from the Europeans, most notably the German-born Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, its patron and chairman through the mid-1970s, and the Polish exile Joseph A. Retinger, a preeminent proponent of European integration with high-up contacts in the United States including the influential American Committee on United Europe (ACUE), who was the real brain behind it⁴. Bernhard and Retinger, along with few others committed Europeanists with an Atlanticist mindset, reached out to Americans due to growing concern in Western Europe about the hysteria of McCarthyism overseas and the increasingly unpopular US military intervention in Korea. The foundational meeting at the Hotel de Bilderberg took place at a low ebb of transatlantic relations and was aimed at mending fences by way of mutual understanding.

The success of this initially originally experimental endeavor accounted for its continuation, thus turning the first meeting into regular engagements. In the following years, thanks again mainly to European leadership, the Bilderberg

⁴ In passing, it is worth noting that one of Gijswijt's numerous findings refutes the long-accepted claim by Richard Aldrich, a British diplomatic historian and renowned student of intelligence, that in 1948 the ACUE funneled CIA funds to help start the European Movement (EU), of which Retinger was the first secretary-general. According to Gijswijt, there is no evidence that the ACUE was a CIA front organization, while documents show that it was wealthy American internationalists who contributed financially, through the ACUE, to the foundation of the EEC, which did not receive US Government funding until 1951. In this case too, therefore, the initiative seems to have come from private individuals. Thomas W. Gijswijt, *Informal Alliance: The Bilderberg Group and Transatlantic Relations during the Cold War, 1952-1968*, Routledge, London 2018, pp. 19-21; Cfr. Richard J. Aldrich, *OSS, CIA and European Unity: The American Committee on United Europe, 1948-1960*, «Diplomacy and Statecraft», v. 8, n. 1, 1997, pp. 184-227.

Group rapidly became an integral part of the state-private networks that emerged in the West during the Cold War, providing the kind of informal environment that facilitated the carrying out of official diplomatic relations and that more and more scholars find useful to investigating the mentality of transnational elites and the sources of contemporary global governance. But, once again contrary to myth-making and common misconceptions, this was never a world government in redux, at least not in any institutionalized and therefore effectively operational shape or form. It did not function as a decision-making body nor did its members impart directives to regularly elected government officials, who generally avoided taking part in the meetings. Rather, as Gijswijt carefully illustrates, it worked as a sort of clearing house where valuable information and top-notch analyses circulated, as well as a venue for participants to connect on a personal basis and influence each other, possibly reaching consensus, sparking collaboration, setting agendas. That said, the Bilderbergers definitely contributed to further integrating Europe, dealt somewhat less productively with the divisive issues of decolonization and the global Cold War, at times finding themselves passionately at odds with each other, as was the case for example during the 1956 Suez crisis, helped assuage tensions within NATO on nuclear strategy, easing the way from Eisenhower's massive retaliation to Kennedy's flexible response, smoothed out differences on trade policies, such as those negotiated in the Kennedy Round, but could not do much to prevent the resurgence of French nationalism under de Gaulle from straining the Atlantic Alliance.

Another crisis they found hard to manage and in fact preferred almost to ignore was the ill-fated US escalation of military conflict in Vietnam, which was seldom seriously addressed at the meetings of the mid-to-late 1960s. This is quite telling, considering the huge repercussions of the Vietnam War on international affairs in those years, yet the author surprisingly pays little attention to such deafening silence. He does report that there was concern at the meetings, particularly by Europeans, about the course of the war and the mounting protest against it, that in 1967 US Secretary of State and long-time member of the Group, George Ball, tried to reassure his fellow Bilderbergers on prospects of military success, as did other Americans on various occasions, even though Ball himself was a strong opponent of the war inside the Johnson Administration and despite warnings about the likelihood of a quagmire that had come from authoritative French members as early as 1964. But, overall, Gijswijt does not really delve into why the issue remained fairly absent from discussion. Perhaps he relied excessively on its precious sources, of which at times he seems to be wholly enamored, reading them a bit too literally, and which seemingly do not say much about it. That silence, however, speaks volumes about the limits of the Bilderberg

Group in dealing with an issue that struck at the heart of faulty Western assumptions regarding the relationship of communism and nationalism in post-colonial, underdeveloped countries, while also highlighting the distance inside the West between established elites and popular ferments or generational change. The choice by the Group's steering committee to include younger, fresher, and unconventional voices at the 1968 meeting sounds like a sensible but belated effort, one that deserves less credit than Gijswijt is willing to give.

He ends his book with a rather positive evaluation of the Bilderberg Group in its first decade and a half, praising it for its useful role in the development of transatlantic relations, even though he acknowledges that its «benefits», given the informality of the functions it performs, are always «difficult to calculate». He recognizes as well the risks to the democratic processes of sovereign countries involved in the dealings of such an organization, but he concludes that «those risks appear to be small as long as the Bilderberg organizers ensure that different political and societal groups are sufficiently represented», which is apparently what he assumes they did over the period he examined⁵. This seems too optimistic and does not entirely reflect the documentary evidence which he himself relied upon. Participants over the course the 1950s and '60s were by and large in the pro-Western mainstream of the political spectrum, an assortment of conservatives, liberals, and social-democrats who were staunchly in favor of NATO, European integration, free trade, and global capitalism, and who proved scarcely receptive to radical critiques of those from both the left and right. Whether enormously wealthy or extremely influential in their respective businesses and areas of expertise, they were naturally all white and almost exclusively male – the only woman was Prince Bernhard's oldest daughter, Beatrix, who attended the conferences stickily as an observer starting in 1962. They were, to all intents and purposes, a who's who's of the Western elites at the time, mostly detached from social and countercultural movements. The makeup of the Bilderberg Group seems not to have changed substantially since then.

These qualms aside, troublesome though they might be, *Informal Alliance* is an effective, thought-provoking contribution to the study of transnational networks, world politics, and the social history of elites during the Cold War. The author's impressive research – he visited approximately forty archives in seven countries – as well as his rigorous historical reconstruction provide much-needed details about the history of an organization whose relevance so far has been validated by its endurance and resilience⁶. There is enough material and there

⁵ T.W. Gijswijt, *Informal Alliance*, cit., p. 267.

⁶ Incidentally, the Bilderberg Group did not meet as scheduled in 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This was only the second time that a meeting was postponed. As Gijswijt dutifully notes in his closing pages, it had happened before in 1976, when that year's meeting was abruptly

also are plenty of references in Gijswijt's study which can help better understand that history, orientate future research through the wealth of sources he perused, and raise novel, historically significant questions.

Finally, this review would not be complete without some consideration of Italian participation in the Bilderberg Group as shown by Gijswijt, plus a few additional notations. Prominent Italians were involved in the high-level conversations held in preparation of its first meeting over the previous year and a half and initially among Europeans only. No less than Prime Minister Alcide de Gasperi, who had served as honorary member of the European Movement and knew Retinger personally, as well as distinguished diplomat Pietro Quaroni, then the Italian Ambassador to France, took part in those conversations and actively helped in the preparatory work. Unlike Quaroni, a regular participant in the meetings and a founding member of the Group's steering committee, the Christian Democratic statesman, who by the time of the meeting at Oosterbeek had lost his grips on power and was hampered by serious ailments that would lead to his death just a few months later, did not leave Italy on that occasion, sending to the Netherlands a less-known politician as his replacement, Senator Raffaele Cafiero, who was, interestingly, a monarchist close to the right-wing mayor of Naples, Achille Lauro. De Gasperi, however, did contribute a paper to the conference, on the topic of anticommunism in Italy, and was also instrumental in extending invitations to FIAT President Vittorio Valletta, to Alberto Pirelli, owner of the homonymous company, and to Giovanni Malagodi, who became Secretary of the Italian Liberal Party a month before he stepped inside the premises of the Hotel de Bilderberg.

With the Bilderberg Group rapidly establishing itself as a fixture of transatlantic dialogue, Malagodi and Pirelli were frequently at meetings in the following years while Valletta made room for FIAT's heir Gianni Agnelli, who would rise to become one of the Group's most prominent members, soon joining Quaroni in the steering committee and even paying out of his deep pockets to single-handedly organize the 1965 meeting at Villa d'Este on Lake Como. Italy's specific issues were raised at times by Italians, as did Pirelli in the mid-1950s, when he called for more foreign aid to Italy, namely to its economically underdeveloped Southern region, and for less restrictions to international migratory flows in order to counter the country's endemic overpopulation. Other

called off as news broke out of Prince Bernhard's involvement in the infamous Lockheed scandal. Afterwards, Bernhard resigned his chairmanship and the fate of the Bilderberg Group was temporarily in question, but the organization survived thanks to the initiative especially of its European members, yet again those who appeared to care the most about it. It remains to be seen when the next meeting will take place, but there seems to be little doubt that it will at some point in the near future.

Italian members reportedly were NATO Secretary General Manlio Brosio and Italian Socialist Party Senator and close aid to the Party's leader Pietro Nenni, Paolo Vittorelli, both present at several meetings in the 1960s.

One occasional but notable member that Gijswijt does not mention was Altiero Spinelli, the well-known, long-time advocate of European integration and future European Commissioner, who participated in the 1968 meeting. Spinelli, who in previous years had been enmeshed in the transatlantic networks, securing funds from the Ford Foundation to jumpstart his foreign-affairs think-tank, the Istituto Affari Internazionali, was invited to participate by Agnelli, now head of FIAT and at the zenith of his international prestige, on behalf of the Bilderberg steering committee. Spinelli could offer them a learned perspective on a fast-changing world and was thus the kind of personality they had decided to allow in their midst at that sensitive juncture⁷.

As many other aspects of the Bilderberg story, those regarding Italy and some of the country's most cosmopolitan and internationally-minded political, economic, and cultural leaders during the Cold War suggest further lines of research, and in this respect, too, important work awaits to be done.

⁷ Gianni Agnelli to Altiero Spinelli, November 27, 1967; Altiero Spinelli to Gianni Agnelli, December 4, 1967, Archives of the Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome, Altiero Spinelli File, Folder "Corrispondenza 1966-1980".