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Détente, the rebirth of anti-communism, and the rise of a transatlantic 'neo-conservative' network: the case of the *Cercle*

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Abstract
The so-called *Cercle*, *Cercle Pinay* or *Cercle Violet* emerged in the 1960s as an informal discussion group of senior politicians, publicists, businessmen and intelligence officers from France, Germany and other Western European countries. A secret meeting place for conservative elites, the *Cercle* was initially based on the transnational network of the French lawyer, political advisor and anti-communist activist Jean Violet. In the second half of the 1970s, in reaction to Détente, the *Cercle* turned into a transatlantic forum with close personal ties to Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. The *Cercle* thus became both a catalyst and a typical example of a 'neo-conservatism' that combined classical conservative positions with neoliberal principles. What was 'new' about this 'neo-conservatism' was above all that it overcame the contradictions between different national currents of conservatism. Its representatives saw themselves as part of a transnational community and emphasized the global dimension of their political thought and action. Within this transatlantic conservative alliance, the fight against communism served as both a means of integration and an overarching goal. Nevertheless, the *Cercle* survived the collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War. It has remained a transnational meeting place for conservative elites to this day, although its focus seems to have shifted from anti-communism to anti-terrorism.

Keywords Anti-communism · Conservatism · Neo-conservatism · Western Europe · UK · USA · Franz Josef Strauß · Margaret Thatcher · Ronald Reagan

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Introduction

The private papers of Julian Amery, son-in-law of Harold Macmillan, long-standing member of the British Parliament and Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office from 1972 to 1974, contain a curious document from the early 1990s. It describes the history, the mission and the operation of an anonymous 'Group':

> At the beginning it was mainly concerned with cutting through bureaucratic red tape to ensure co-operation between the governments of Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg. Later, as strong UK and USA elements became involved, the Group was enlarged to become an informal round table of European and American personalities belonging to the political, financial and diplomatic world. Its meetings took place twice a year and allowed for an exchange of views and news on the world situation from which all concerned could benefit. It was also very much in the minds of the founders that these meetings would lead to personal relationships which would be politically important; experience has showed that these relationships have indeed been useful in overcoming difficulties both within Europe and between Europe and the United States.[1]

As for the ideological orientation of this 'Group,' the document left no doubt as to the anti-communist convictions and concerns of its members:

> Generally speaking, the Group has interested itself in the different threats which Soviet policy and activity posed to the freedom of Europe and the Atlantic Alliance, both directly and through its subversive activities in other parts of the world. The Group has been and continues to be, deeply concerned with the building of Europe and the maintenance of a close cooperation between Europe and the United States. Although the Soviet threat itself has decreased and altered with the discrediting and collapse of Communism, the old Warsaw Pact area, particularly the old USSR area, with its growing political, military, economic and social problems, remains of great concern to the Group. The promotion of democracy and free enterprise there is of great importance to the Group. Other problems of interest to the Group remain or arise e.g. the Middle East, terrorism, etc.[2]

The 'Group' presented by this document as a non-partisan, almost charitable brain trust, was in fact an informal and elitist lobbying group, born out of the context of the Cold War and European integration, and made up of conservative decision-makers from Western Europe and the USA, the so-called *Cercle*, *Cercle Violet* or *Cercle Pinay*.[3] Julian Amery had chaired the *Cercle* since the early 1980s. An ardent

[1] Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge (hereafter: CAC), private papers of Julian Amery, AMEJ 31/1: "The Group", n.d. [December 1991].

[2] Ibid.

[3] For a comprehensive account of the *Cercle*'s history, see Großmann (2014a), 437–96 and 533–65. See also the rather sensational portraits provided by Hänni (2014) and Hänni (2016).

anti-communist and a determined Cold Warrior, Amery had watched the collapse of communist rule in Eastern Europe with great personal satisfaction. But he felt that the *Cercle*'s mission had not been accomplished with the end of the Cold War. Rather, the fundamental global changes of the early 1990s seemed to offer a unique opportunity to recruit new members and sponsors for the *Cercle* and to ensure its continuing influence on the international decision-making process.

Research on the history of Cold War anti-communism has long been limited to the period between the late 1940s and the early 1960s, and to a mainly national focus. Few authors have attempted to compare different national regimes or types of anti-communism. If anti-communism has been perceived as a transnational phenomenon at all, it has been interpreted as a core element of 'Western' propaganda, as an ideological lubricant for a US-sponsored 'state-private network'[4] aimed at implementing the doctrine of liberation and containment in Western Europe.[5] Over the past two and a half decades, research has taken a particular interest in the activities of anti-communist organizations and institutions, especially those funded by the CIA and US foundations, such as the *Congress for Cultural Freedom*, the *National Committee for a Free Europe* and its broadcasting service *Radio Free Europe*.[6] Some of this work has shown that, despite state influence, the protagonists of such anti-communist forums pursued their own intellectual agendas. This research highlights the ideological flexibility and the temporal changes of anti-communism,[7] its relevance for intellectual exchange and cultural transfer on an international scale,[8] and its fundamental role the creation of transnational social spaces.[9]

This article takes up these questions and asks how anti-communist ideas, actors and practices were influenced and transformed by the process of Détente, reluctantly initiated by both superpowers in the early 1960s and culminating with the Helsinki Accords of 1975. It refers to Giles Scott-Smith's observation that Western Europe underwent a shift from a 'negative' anti-communism, consisting of a simple rejection and denigration of communism, to a 'positive' anti-communism, emphasizing the achievements, the advantages and the superiority of the 'Free World'.[10] The article focuses on the *Cercle*, which served as a secret meeting place for Western European and American anti-communists and became the core of a transatlantic 'neo-conservative' network in the 1970s and 1980s. It is less about the direct influence of the *Cercle* and its protagonists on concrete political processes and decisions.

[4] Laville and Wilford (2006).

[5] See, for example, Stöver (2002).

[6] See, for example, Berghahn (2002), Scott-Smith (2002), Johnson (2010), Kádár Lynn (2013) and Bischof and Jürgens (2015).

[7] See, for example, Wilford (2003); Scott-Smith and Krabbendam (2003); Scott-Smith (2012); Waters and Goethem (2013).

[8] Hochgeschwender (1998).

[9] Großmann (2014a) ; Dongen, Roulin and Scott-Smith (2014); Burke (2018).

[10] Scott-Smith (2012).

As fascinating as this question may be, it is difficult to answer from an empirical and methodological point of view. What can be better reconstructed and traced, and was ultimately more significant, is the *Cercle*'s role as a transnational intermediary between conservative elites from different Western countries and for its indirect political influence through the hearts and minds of its protagonists. In other words: The focus is less on the importance of the *Cercle* as a forum for a kind of secondary foreign policy, although it did appear to be so, at least at times. Rather, the article is devoted to the *Cercle* as a transnational microcosm that contributed to the rapprochement, exchange and mutual understanding of Western European and American conservatives.

In this respect, the article adopts a *longue durée* perspective. It will attempt to show that the 'long' 1960s[11] and the process of Détente did not lead to a disintegration and dismantling, but rather to a relocation, transformation and readjustment of anti-communism to the challenges—real and perceived—of globalization, multipolarity and interdependence. This renewed anti-communism was the crucial intellectual component of a transatlantic 'neo-conservatism' that increasingly influenced governmental attitudes and positions in the USA and Western Europe from the late 1970s onward and even survived the end of the Cold War in Europe.

The transnational career of Jean Violet and the origins of the *Cercle*[12]

There has been much speculation about the origins of what later came to be known as the *Cercle*. We now know that the group was founded by the French lawyer Jean Violet, whose multifaceted transnational career as an anti-communist activist, political advisor, intelligence agent and business consultant reads like a miniature history of Europe's 'short twentieth century.'[13] Born in 1917, Jean Violet grew up in a bourgeois, strongly conservative, deeply religious and anti-liberal environment. In the mid-1930s, as a law student in Paris, he seems to have sympathized with radical anti-democratic and proto-fascist groups.[14] After the war, Violet continued his studies, specializing in questions of criminology, international law and political economy. In 1948, he became an advisor to the Holy See and was even an informal member of its delegation to the United Nations Legal Committee.[15] At the same time, Violet worked as an international consultant for companies and businessmen from France and several other countries.

In 1952, the French Prime Minister Antoine Pinay recruited Violet as an informal advisor and collaborator. Violet launched a lobbying campaign in favor of the highly

[11] For this periodization, see Großmann and Miard-Delacroix (2018).

[12] For a more detailed biographical sketch of Jean Violet, see Großmann (2014b).

[13] Hobsbawm (1994).

[14] See Péan (1984), 34–40. Even if Péan did not prove his allegations, Violet has never denied them publicly.

[15] 'Exposé sommaire de mon activité d'avocat à la Cour de Paris sur le plan professionnel et sur le plan politique,' typescript by Jean Violet, 1986. A copy of this document has been given to the author by Jean Violet's daughter. See also Lebec (1997), 120–2.

controversial French colonial policy in North Africa, using a combination of soft and hard persuasion. In particular, he was able to influence several Latin American governments, preventing any formal condemnation of France in the United Nations General Assembly until 1955. Violet also encouraged Pinay to pursue a policy of rapprochement with Franco's Spain, which had been internationally isolated since the end of the Second World War. Finally, Violet began to act as an intermediary between Pinay and several senior German politicians, including Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and his young and ambitious minister Franz Josef Strauß from Bavaria.[16] This liaison survived Pinay's resignation as Prime Minister and remained an important source of information for both sides. It helped to calm the controversy surrounding the European Defense Community and its eventual failure, to resolve the Saar question and to bridge the period of uncertainty caused by Charles de Gaulle's return to the political scene in May 1958. From 1955, Violet also became an informal collaborator of the French foreign intelligence service, the *Service de documentation extérieure et de contre-espionnage* (SDECE). He served as a special envoy to resolve difficult diplomatic situations and promoted cooperation with other European and Latin American intelligence services, particularly in the field of anti-communist operations.[17]

The *Cercle* was in fact a by-product of Violet's activities.[18] In the 1960s, Violet seems to have decided to make use of his extensive international network by creating a regular meeting place and an informal discussion group for distinguished and influential conservative politicians, diplomats, businessmen and intellectuals. Among the participants of these secret meetings were Violet's long-time mentors Pinay and Strauß, the Italian Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti, the Spanish Minister of Information and Tourism Alfredo Sánchez Bella, the Austrian heir apparent Otto von Habsburg, the Italian industrialist Carlo Pesenti, and the former head of the Central Bank of Argentina, Luis María Otero Montsegur. In a sense, Violet may have had in mind the creation of a decidedly conservative counterpart to the Bilderberg conferences in which his political mentor Pinay had attended regularly since the mid-1950s.[19] The *Cercle*'s first US American participant was also an avid attendee of the Bilderberg meetings: David Rockefeller, president of the *Chase Manhattan Bank* and one of the most influential power brokers behind the political scenes in Washington.

In general, it is interesting to see how Violet overcame his former anti-liberal and anti-American convictions, inviting businessmen and politicians from the USA and refashioning the *Cercle* as a transatlantic forum from the late 1960s onward.[20] After the 1968 presidential election, Rockefeller's close relationship with Henry Kissinger, who was to become President Richard Nixon's National Security Advisor,

[16] See, for example, Strauß (1989), 215–7.

[17] Großmann (2014a), 437–58.

[18] Ibid., 458–64.

[19] For a comprehensive analysis of the Bilderberg Group, see Gijswijt (2019). See also Gijswijt's article in the present issue.

[20] Großmann (2014a), 464–75.

seemed to give the *Cercle* privileged access to the newly elected US administration. In a letter to Strauß sent from Washington just one day after the election, Violet enthused: 'Nixon's victory [and] David's influence on the new President make that our [forthcoming] meeting has a really outstanding significance […]. From a European point of view, we have to embrace this opportunity. We have to embrace it all together, immediately.'[21]

Facing Détente: the 'Operation Helsinki' and the rebirth of anti-communism

It has often been described as an irony of fate that the conservative 'white hope' Richard Nixon, known as an anti-communist hardliner, should become a driving force of Détente and pave the way for the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. We seem much more willing to see a progressive politician such as Willy Brandt, social democratic chancellor and figurehead of the new German *Ostpolitik*, as the forerunner and embodiment of a seemingly more liberal and conciliatory spirit. However, a closer look at the process of Détente reveals that it was not implemented against the will, but rather with the active participation of conservative politicians, whether in government or in the minority. It would therefore be inadequate to interpret the implementation of Détente as a simple triumph of progressive ideas over conservative ones. Rather, Détente was the indicator of and the testing ground for a fundamental reorientation and readjustment of conservative thought and action in the face of a new world order. Only an active and constructive participation enabled conservative politicians to influence the process of Détente, to regain their sovereignty of interpretation and their freedom of action.

Accordingly, Détente did not mean the end of anti-communism. From a conservative point of view, Détente was rather anti-communism by other means. This is also and especially true of Jean Violet. After de Gaulle's resignation in 1969, Violet had fallen out of favor with France's new political leaders and lost his position as a volunteer correspondent for the SDECE. But instead of seeing himself as a victim of Détente, Violet took the initiative of approaching high-level decision-makers to convince them that a rapprochement between 'East' and 'West' would not only involve risks but also opportunities for conservative policies. Given the unmistakable trends in public opinion and politics, Violet could not see the point in simply refusing or obstructing the holding of a Conference on European Security. In his view, the paradigm of Détente was certainly a tactical maneuver emanating from Moscow and a Communist propaganda coup. But the 'West' might be able to turn the tables by making the 'free movement of people and ideas' a precondition for dialogue, and by focusing negotiations on issues of freedom and human rights. This would 'infuse the Eastern European countries with the idea of freedom' and thus

[21] *Archiv für Christlich-Soziale Politik*, Munich (hereafter: ACSP), private papers of Franz Josef Strauß, BMF 180: Violet to Strauß, November 6, 1968.

destroy the 'communist totalitarianism.'[22] Violet thus echoed an idea that his political mentor, Pinay, then French foreign minister, had already formulated during the discussions on 'Peaceful Coexistence' at the Geneva Conference on Foreign Affairs in the fall of 1955.[23]

In his so-called *Document Vert* or 'Green Document', an anonymous typescript circulated to a considerable number of Western decision-makers, Violet summarized his thoughts.[24] He outlined proposals for a real improvement in East–West relations, such as the learning of foreign languages, a common European holiday, cultural exchange programs, freedom of travel, cooperation in the field of information technology, youth camps, and intensified trade relations. Violet's initiative was supported by a petition-based campaign, including newsletters, magazine articles and public meetings, and attracted nearly 3000 signatures from senior officials across Western Europe. By urging members of the Western delegations to include references to freedom and human rights in their negotiations and agreements with the Communist governments, this campaign accompanied the genesis of what would become Basket III of the Helsinki Final Act.[25] It is difficult to judge whether Violet's campaign had a direct impact on the CSCE negotiations. It seems possible that Kissinger's close contacts with the *Cercle* led him to make the free movement of people and ideas a core demand of the US negotiating position and to campaign strongly for the achievement of Basket III.[26] In any case, the pressure from conservative lobby groups encouraged Western governments put human rights issues at the center of the discussion and to link the security aspect discursively with the idea of freedom.

Violet's 'Operation Helsinki' reflects the transition from a purely 'negative' toward a mainly 'positive' anti-communism. This 'positive' anti-communism was based on the assumption that the simple negation of communism and its suppression by the means of hard power had failed to be successful. To win the Cold War, the 'West' would have to surpass the communist model in terms of soft power and attractiveness. The 'Free World' would have to rethink the methods and content of its political communication, show a genuine and honest interest in the trials and tribulations of the people living on both sides of the 'Iron Curtain', emphasize the advantages of its own socio-political system and defend its liberal orientation.

[22] 'Opération Helsinki,' typescript and documentation by Jean Violet, [ca. 1996]. A copy of this document has been given to the author by Jean Violet's daughter. For a detailed analysis of the 'Operation Helsinki,' see Großmann (2014a), 481–9.

[23] See Pinay's statements from October 31, November 14 and November 16, 1955, in *Dokumente zur Deutschlandpolitik*, ser. III, vol. 1 (Frankfurt: Metzner, 1961), 528–30, 681–4 and 710–4.

[24] 'Opération Helsinki,' appendix no. 1: 'Conférence sur la Sécurité Européenne. Réflexions et Propositions,' [1970], handwritten title 'Le Document Vert.' A copy of this document can be found in *Archiv für Christlich-Demokratische Politik*, Sankt Augustin (hereafter: ACDP), private papers of Alois Mertes, 01-403-098/2(b).

[25] On the role of the Helsinki accords and its Basket III as a watershed in East–West relations, see Morgan (2018).

[26] On Kissinger's negotiating principles, see Suri (2008).

Thus, in the 1970s, 'Freedom', 'Democracy' and 'Human Rights' became the catchwords of a new conservative self-image and the core of a renewed, 'positive' anti-communism.[27]

'For a Free Europe': the *Cercle* as a Conservative International?

The fact that conservative politicians and networkers tried to adapt to and exploit the new international situation did not, of course, mean that they appreciated every step taken by the 'Western' governments to promote Détente. On the contrary, *Cercle* members such as Pesenti complained of a 'constant deterioration of the international situation.'[28] But the arguments they used to justify this attitude were new. They criticized the reluctance of their own governments to denounce the human rights violations in the communist sphere. They accused Moscow of exporting violence and maintaining a global terrorist network. They deplored the abuse of democratic freedoms by extremist groups and individuals. And they painted a nightmare scenario of a creeping 'socialization' of free-market economies through regulation, deficit spending and welfare expansion. The dangers were perceived through a neoliberal and global lens, as were the possible countermeasures. Instead of hard power and national solutions, the protagonists of the *Cercle* were determined to 'strengthen our exchange of information and our mutual international support.'[29] Apparently, the *Cercle* members themselves wanted to become the backbone of a strong conservative coalition in Europe.

It was Franz Josef Strauß, in particular, who began to use the *Cercle*'s political and diplomatic potential more efficiently and systematically. From 1975 the *Cercle* met regularly at the new conference center of the Bavarian *Christlich-Soziale Union* (CSU) in Wildbad Kreuth. Other politicians from the CSU and the German *Christlich Demokratische Union* (CDU) joined the meetings, including Hans Graf Huyn, Alois Mertes, Werner Marx and the future Vice-President of the European Commission, Karl-Heinz Narjes. Strauß, who was elected Minister-President of Bavaria in 1978, used the *Cercle* as a platform for his intensive parallel diplomacy aimed at outflanking the social-liberal Federal Government, presenting himself as a conservative leader of international standing and underlining his ambitions for the German chancellorship.[30]

Strauß's idea of forming a 'conservative front within the European Community'[31] attracted the attention of the British Tories, who, after their defeat in the general election of October 1974, were about to undergo a radical political change and adopt

[27] See Steber (2017, 410–22); Scott-Smith (2012, 209–42).

[28] ACSP, private papers of Franz Josef Strauß, Büro PV 6727: Pesenti to Strauß, May 24, 1972, personal.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Großmann (2014a), 493–94.

[31] CAC, private papers of Margaret Thatcher, THCR 2/1/1/4: Amery to Thatcher, December 9, 1975, confidential.

a strongly neoliberal agenda under their new leader, Margaret Thatcher.[32] The role of an intermediary between Thatcher and the *Cercle* was played by Julian Amery, who became a member of the *Cercle* in the mid-1970s, along with several other British politicians and former intelligence officers such as Alun Jones (Baron Chalfont), Nicholas Elliott, 'Billy' McLean and Peter Tennant. In May 1977, one of Amery's letters to Thatcher gave a detailed account of a *Cercle* meeting in Bavaria:

> There was general agreement that the international situation was deteriorating rapidly and that 1978 could be a year of disaster. Quite apart from the continuing build up of Soviet forces by land, sea and air, there was the rapid growth of Soviet influence in Libya and Algeria, in the Horn of Africa, and, above all, in Central and Southern Africa. Nor did things look much brighter in South East Asia where pro-Soviet guerrilla operations were increasing.

With 'little prospect of any resolute response to Soviet expansion outside Europe' from the newly installed US administration of Jimmy Carter, and no sign of 'any leadership from the present European Governments,' the 'only hope in the view of those present was that the "conservative" leaders of the principal European countries should get together and give a collective lead to the West as a whole.' Such an alliance, Amery argued, could also 'have a profound effect on American opinion.'[33]

One of the ideas discussed by the members of the *Cercle* was therefore.

> to form a Conservative International like the Socialist International. The main objection to this is, of course, that while the British and German conservative movements cover the whole political spectrum from extreme right to centre and even to left of centre, in France, Italy and Spain the conservatives are fragmented into several parties.

The *Cercle* therefore advocated 'a more practical approach,' creating 'a movement which might be called "For a Free Europe." Its twin themes would be to promote freedom at home and to defend Europe against Soviet Imperialism.' Strauß and Jacques Chirac, the former French prime minister and current mayor of Paris, seemed to be Thatcher's natural partners to conceive and lead such a movement. But Amery had serious doubts about 'whether Strauss—though the ablest politician in Germany—will ever be more than number two.'[34] Chirac, for his part, showed little enthusiasm for participating in an explicitly 'conservative' and anti-communist alliance. He argued that 'pro Russian sentiment in France' was quite strong and 'still existed even in his own party.'[35] As for other important countries in Europe, such as Italy and Spain, there did not even seem to be any prominent and promising conservative leader in sight.[36]

[32] See, for example, Geppert (2002).

[33] CAC, private papers of Margaret Thatcher, THCR 2/1/1/4: Amery to Thatcher, May 23, 1977, secret.

[34] Ibid.

[35] CAC, private papers of Margaret Thatcher, THCR 2/1/1/4: Amery to Thatcher, June 29, 1977, confidential.

[36] CAC, private papers of Margaret Thatcher, THCR 2/1/1/4. Amery to Thatcher, May 23, 1977, secret.

The *Cercle* in power? Providing advice to Thatcher and Reagan

While Margaret Thatcher's campaign was successful in the May 1979 general election, Franz Josef Strauß lost his bid for the German chancellorship in the October 1980 Federal election. The chance for a radical conservative turn in Germany had been missed, even though two years later Strauß' intra-party rival Helmut Kohl was able to replace the social-liberal government with a new coalition led by the CDU. Elsewhere in Western Europe, the situation was even worse. In France, Chirac missed the second round of the presidential election in the spring of 1981. The socialist François Mitterrand was elected President, forming the first government with communist participation since 1947. In Spain, the socialist party won a landslide victory in the general elections of October 1982. And in Italy, the *Democrazia Cristiana* seemed on the verge of losing its long-standing political dominance. At the same time, the *Cercle* began to suffer from a bad press. It was publicly criticized for its covert support of Strauß' election campaign[37] and haunted by the involvement of Violet and several other members in a grotesque fraud scandal, the so-called 'Great Oil Sniffer Hoax'.[38] Several of the *Cercle*'s founding fathers and spokesmen from Western Europe withdrew, leaving the more recently admitted British participants, riding the wave of Thatcherism, to gain even more influence.[39]

They were joined by a growing number of participants from the USA. Already in the second half of the 1970s, the US presence in the *Cercle* had been growing slowly but steadily. Among the new US participants were several retired CIA officials such as William E. Colby and Vernon A. Walters, former military commanders such as General Richard G. Stilwell and Rear Admiral Robert J. Hanks, and a striking number of policy advisors and think-tankers such as John E. Carbaugh, James Lucier, Edwin Feulner and Richard Perle. All these figures had in common that they were fierce opponents of Jimmy Carter's foreign policy. Some of them would go on to important positions in the federal administration after Ronald Reagan won the presidential election in November 1980. Others were able to exert some influence on Reagan's policy choices and decisions as advisors on security and foreign policy issues.[40]

So it was with Brian Crozier, an Australian-born journalist and political analyst based in Britain. In the late 1960s, Crozier had been the director of *Forum World Features*, a press agency set up by the *Congress for Cultural Freedom*. In 1970, he had founded the *Institute for the Study of Conflict* in London, which published reports on what was interpreted and denounced as a global Soviet strategy of infiltration, subversion and terrorism.[41] From the mid-1970s Crozier was a regular attendee

[37] See, for example, 'Dann kommt alles ins Rollen,' *Der Spiegel* (Hamburg), February 25 (1980) and 'Franz Josef sein Milljöh,' *Der Spiegel* (Hamburg), March 3 (1980).

[38] See especially Péan, *V*. For an evaluation of this scandal from a sociological perspective see Lascoumes (1999), 129–55.

[39] Großmann (2014a), 533–40.

[40] Ibid., 490–93, 496 and 540–2.

[41] Michaels (2014).

at *Cercle* meetings. At the same time, both Thatcher and Reagan took notice of this stalwart Cold Warrior, whom they valued as much for his geopolitical expertise as for his propaganda skills. If Crozier's narcissistic memoirs are to be believed, his advice was influential when these future leaders prepared their election campaigns and outlined their policy programs.[42]

There is evidence that Crozier's ideas and opinions continued to be taken into account when Thatcher and Reagan were in office, even though both leaders were keen to avoid any public meeting with him. For example, when Reagan planned to visit West Germany in May 1985, Crozier tried to dissuade him from meeting the head of the German *Sozialdemokratische Partei* (SPD), former chancellor Willy Brandt. Crozier highlighted Brandt's support for the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, his opposition to the deployment of Pershing II missiles in Western Europe, and his role in turning 'the Socialist International into a tool of Soviet policy with special reference to the undermining of NATO.' In his eyes, there were 'powerful arguments against your receiving Willy Brandt, and absolutely none in favour.'[43] Reagan eventually decided to cancel the meeting, leaving the German media in doubt as to his reasons and fueling speculations about the American president's 'general dislike' for the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Brandt.[44] There is little point in discussing whether the decision was actually due to Crozier's intervention. Certainly, Reagan did not make his decisions at the request of a single advisor. But the episode illustrates the extent to which conservative politics transcended national boundaries: An Australian-born British citizen tried to dissuade the US president from meeting a former German chancellor.

Transatlantic crossings: 'neo-conservatism' as a transnational phenomenon

It is instructive to see how, in the late 1970s and the 1980s, the *Cercle* became a transatlantic platform for the renewal and reorientation of conservative ideas in the face of a rapidly and radically changing global context.[45] When we use the term 'neo-conservatism' here, we do not mean a supposedly American or Anglo-Saxon development that was then transferred to Western Europe and adopted there, at least in part. We also reject the notion of a fixed and stable 'neo-conservative' canon of ideas, which is widespread in political science research. Conservatism remained a highly pragmatic and flexible political attitude, combining different and sometimes contradictory ideologies. What was new about the 'neo-conservatism' described in this article was above all its transnational dynamic. Previously very different

[42] Crozier (1993), 127–36 and 178–86.

[43] Hoover Institution, Stanford (hereafter: HI), private papers of Monique Garnier-Lançon, Box 6, Folder 13: Crozier to Reagan, December 19, 1984.

[44] 'Vielleicht Nancy: Wer steckte hinter Reagans Weigerung, den SPD-Chef zu empfangen?,' *Der Spiegel* (Hamburg), May 13 (1985).

[45] For the interpretation of the late 1970s as a global watershed, see Caryl (2013) and Bösch (2019).

national traditions of conservatism began to converge. At the same time, conservatives increasingly thought and argued in a global framework. They sought contact and forged alliances with like-minded people around the world. In this respect, the *Cercle* was certainly an indicator of a more general trend.

In the 19th and first half of the twentieth century, Western European conservatism was generally characterized by national demarcation. A common denominator was hard to find. In Great Britain, the Netherlands or the Nordic countries conservatism had always been closely associated with economically liberal principles and a rejection of strong state intervention. In countries like France and Spain, it had a monarchist and reactionary streak, combined with a willingness to accept state control and a fundamental distrust of entrepreneurial freedom. In Germany and Austria, conservative thought has traditionally been close to the state, oriented toward hierarchical social orders and convinced of the need for close coordination of political and economic interests. US conservatism, with its long republican and libertarian tradition, was clearly distinct from all these different currents of Western European conservative thought.

However, as a result of the world wars, the onset of the Cold War and the increasing political and economic interdependence of Western countries, the different national traditions of thought were increasingly challenged and questioned. The post-war years can therefore be interpreted as a period of uncertainty, but also of increasing exchange, adaptation and convergence. Transnational meetings and forums played an essential role in this process, leading to the mutual adaptation of conservative positions and beliefs from other national contexts. The Cercle was by no means the first and only such forum. But it was particularly important and influential because of its broad geographical scope and its links with the highest political ranks and social echelons.

In fact, the European, British and American participants of the *Cercle* meetings came to share a very similar view of the world. They emphasized the same arguments and pursued the same political goals: They all wanted, or at least pretended, to protect democracy from an anarchic exaggeration of egalitarian principles. They condemned the excesses of the welfare state and called for the restoration of free-market economy through deregulation, liberalization and privatization. They rejected both isolationism and protectionism, were aware of global 'interdependence'[46] and believed in the beneficial effects of global exchange and trade relations, while maintaining a world-view based on nation-states. They valued technological progress but insisted on bourgeois values and rejected social reform. They criticized the left-wing intelligentsia and its alleged prerogative of interpretation. Above all, they called for rearmament, a tough stance against communism, and a clear strategy to win the Cold War.

'Liberty' and 'freedom'—as opposed to 'socialism'—became the buzzwords of this transatlantic conservative consensus, bridging and reconciling previously very different national backgrounds and political landscapes. These buzzwords were at

[46] For the notion of 'interdependence' and its breakthrough as an explanatory model during the 1970s, see Deuerlein (2020).

the heart of an extensive 'semantic network' that promoted a common ideological orientation and convergent policy goals. Conservatives from Europe, Britain and the USA presented themselves as defenders of 'democracy', 'open society', 'human rights', 'social progress', the 'free market' and the 'rule of law', while their political opponents were indiscriminately portrayed as 'collectivist', 'extremist' and 'totalitarian'.[47] Anti-communism had overcome the shock of Détente and found its way back into the political discourse of the Western world. In contrast to the 1950s and 1960s, however, anti-communism was now able to propagate a positive counter-model to socialism, using a different language and presenting the democratic progress and the economic achievements of the post-war period as the successes of conservative policies.

The spokespersons and protagonists of this 'new' and decidedly transnational conservatism had come to their common positions in very different ways. Some of them, especially from the USA and Britain, had started from liberal positions and increasingly internalized conservative ideas during the 1960s and 1970s. Others had always considered themselves as conservatives and became 'neo-conservatives' through a selective appropriation of pluralist and neoliberal beliefs and values. This was particularly true of the *Cercle*'s founding fathers from Western Europe, with their history of anti-liberal, authoritarian and nationalist traditions. Finally, there were also some renegades who had gone from being devout communists and socialists to being ardent anti-communists and conservatives. These different paths may also explain the internal contradictions of 'neo-conservatism', which should not be understood as a consistent and stable ideology, but as an ephemeral conglomerate and transitional alliance of very different ideological, social and national currents.

Surviving the end of the cold war: from anti-communism to anti-terrorism

As for the foreign policy of Reagan and Thatcher, the fight against communism remained one of the *Cercle*'s first and foremost concerns. In a paper delivered at a *Cercle* meeting in Wildbad Kreuth in June 1982, Crozier painted a picture of the global situation that was both optimistic and alarming. Looking at the Soviet Union and its allies, he found himself 'faced with a paradox: on the one hand, the failure of the system is patent; on the other hand, the power of the empire is at its height.' The 'collectivist' economy had collapsed and lost any 'capacity to feed its people.' The Soviets were dependent on Western imports. The international reputation and authority of the Soviet leaders had been 'badly shaken,' and the socialist system was no longer a desirable model, even if Marxism-Leninism continued 'to inspire terrorist and guerilla groups in a number of countries.' In Crozier's eyes, however, there was no evidence that the West would take advantage of this 'Crisis of the Empire' and turn the Cold War in its favor. Rather, Crozier saw the current situation as 'a

[47] See for this observation, with reference to the convergence of German CDU/CSU and British Tories, also Steber (2017), 410–9.

dramatic one, without precedent in contemporary history. By taking advantage of the absence of unity among the Western powers, the Soviet regime could well gain the upper hand.'[48]

Not only Crozier, but also Strauß and Amery were convinced that the *Cercle* should 'play a more active political role than it has done in recent years.'[49] Indeed, in the months and years that followed, the *Cercle*'s links with the US administration grew closer. More and more of Reagan's staff and advisors joined the *Cercle*. They included Fred Iklé, Sven F. Kraemer, Charles T. Mayer, Richard McCormack, Walter Raymond, William Schneider and the first US ambassador to the Vatican, William A. Wilson. Many of them remained loyal to the *Cercle* until the 1990s. The same was true of the lawyer Robert Knight and the former CIA officers James H. Critchfield and Theodore Shackley. The *Cercle*'s links with the British conservative establishment also remained strong. Several of its meetings were attended by Hugh Thomas (Baron Thomas of Swynnerton), whose *Centre for Policy Studies* (CPS) served as a key architect of Thatcher's policies. During the 1980s, the *Cercle* recruited the former MI6 officers Frank Steele and Anthony Cavendish and a number of conservative MPs such as Robert Gascoyne-Cecil (Lord Cranborne), Philip Goodhart, Winston Spencer-Churchill and Jonathan Aitken. Some of them were seen as internal opponents of Thatcher, criticizing her, for example, for her 'liberal' stance on Northern Ireland, Rhodesia and South Africa.

It is not surprising, therefore, that most members of the *Cercle* opposed the international isolation of the South African apartheid regime and called for firm action against communist influence in sub-Saharan Africa. Former Rhodesian foreign minister Pieter Van der Byl and a group of South African diplomats led by Ambassador Brand Fourie became welcome and frequent interlocutors. In January 1984 in Stellenbosch and in March 1988 in Cape Town, members of the *Cercle* were able to gain first-hand impressions and meet with senior South African officials. According to Crozier, the international campaigns against the apartheid regime could 'not be ascribed solely to the Soviet propaganda machine,' but they were 'skilfully exploited, orchestrated and amplified for Soviet ends.'[50] Despite all the signs of fundamental global change, and despite Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of 'Glasnost' and 'Perestroika', the *Cercle* clung to its one-sided and dualistic world-view and continued to interpret every event and development through the lens of the Cold War.

When, at the end of the 1980s, the communist regimes in Eastern Europe collapsed and the 'Iron Curtain' was lifted, the members of the *Cercle* seemed surprised by what they had been fighting for since decades. Indeed, one might think that with the end of the Cold War, the *Cercle* had lost its *raison d'être*. But its leading protagonists reacted promptly, interpreting the new situation as an opportunity to

[48] HI, private papers of Monique Garnier-Lançon, Box 32, Folder 1: 'Crisis of the Empire,' notes for a memorandum by Brian Crozier at the *Cercle* meeting in Wildbad Kreuth, June 11–13, 1982.

[49] HI, private papers of Monique Garnier-Lançon, Box 32, Folder 1: Invitation letter by Amery and Strauß for the *Cercle* meeting in Wildbad Kreuth, June 11–13, 1982.

[50] HI, private papers of Monique Garnier-Lançon, Box 32, Folder 3: 'Soviet Strategy for Southern Africa,' paper given by Brian Crozier at the *Cercle* meeting in Stellenbosch, January 12–15, 1984.

expand the group's scope and influence. A few days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Amery drafted a brief description of the *Cercle* designed to recruit new members.[51] Two weeks later, *Cercle* members met in Washington to discuss the recent developments in Eastern Europe. Keynote speeches were given by US National Security Advisor General Brent Scowcroft, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Richard Nixon.[52] A few months later, in June 1990, the members of the *Cercle* had the opportunity to visit Berlin and see 'what a city is like after 40 years under socialist rule.'[53]

Far from disintegrating, the *Cercle* survived the end of the Cold War and even the death of its founding father Jean Violet in December 2000. Its members continued to meet regularly twice a year. They observed, discussed and accompanied the political and socio-economic transformation in Eastern Europe, the violent break-up of Yugoslavia, the First Gulf War, the end of apartheid in South African and the Arab–Israeli rapprochement of the mid-1990s.[54] There are only few archival and printed sources available to trace the development of the *Cercle* to the present day. However, it seems that the *Cercle* enabled conservatives from Europe and the USA to stay in touch during Bill Clinton's presidency. There is also some evidence of a biographical and intellectual continuity between the *Cercle*'s politics of anti-communism and what would become the foreign policy of the George W. Bush administration after 2001. The problem of terrorism had been a major concern of the *Cercle* meetings since the early 1970s. Originally interpreted as a coordinated communist strategy to undermine the 'Free World' and to attack the 'Western' countries without declaring war, the phenomenon of international terrorism began to be perceived by *Cercle* members through a cultural and religious lens after the end of the Cold War. Even before 9/11, they seemed to be quite familiar with and sympathetic to the motives, principles and objectives of what was to become the 'War on Terror'. Anti-terrorism had become the new anti-communism.

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[51] CAC, private papers of Julian Amery, AMEJ 33/2: 'Draft for new cercle invitees,' November 15, 1989, private.

[52] CAC, private papers of Julian Amery, AMEJ 33/2: Program for the *Cercle* meeting in Washington, November 30–December 3, 1989.

[53] CAC, private papers of Julian Amery, AMEJ 33/2: Program for the *Cercle* meeting in Berlin, June 28–July 1, 1990.

[54] Großmann (2014a), 547–54.

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