

## Peter Viereck's View of Metternich's Conservative Internationalism

GERGELY EGEDY

Writing in 1849 a keen-eyed observer, Gustav von Usedom came to the conclusion that “*Metternich was a principle*”, “*a banner which one part of the century followed while another took a stand against it*”.<sup>1</sup> Peter Viereck, one of the most influential exponents of the “conservative renaissance” in the United States after the World War II looked upon Metternich as the “principle” of true conservatism. He held that a political philosophy in the abstract is incomplete, its content can be grasped better if we connect it to a historical figure who tried to realize it. In his view it was Klemens von Metternich, the powerful chancellor and foreign minister of the Hapsburg Empire in the first half of the nineteenth century who is “*an object lesson not only of short-run conservative action but of an enduring conservative philosophy*”. To put it tersely, Viereck was of the view that Metternich had become “*conservatism's lasting symbol*”, although in most modern eyes the symbol of conservatism at its most unpopular.<sup>2</sup>

One of the crucial components of the political principle represented by Metternich is “conservative internationalism”. Viereck had no doubt that the world needed conservative internationalism in the twentieth century even more than in the nineteenth century. In the foreword to the first, 1949 edition of *Conservatism Revisited* he *expressis verbis* stated: in order to reassess the present western crisis, the historian must revisit the earlier crisis most resembling ours. This requires revisiting the “*unacknowledged ancestor of our Western union, Metternich's Concert of Europe...*”<sup>3</sup> In the following study the present author will try to outline Viereck's interpretation of Metternichian conservatism, with a special emphasis on conservative internationalism.

### Conservatism as the opposite of political extremes

Viereck was convinced that the “*par excellence*” conservative principle was “*to be moderate in all things*”, respecting “*proportion and measure*”,

---

<sup>1</sup> H. von SRBIK, *Metternich, der Staatsmann und der Mensch, Vols. I–II*, München 1925, Vol. I, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> P. VIERECK, *Conservatism Revisited*, New Brunswick, London 2005, (Originally published by Charles Scribner's Sons in 1949), p. 69.

<sup>3</sup> P. VIERECK, *Foreword to the 1949 Edition*. VIERECK, p. 64.

rejecting all kinds of political extremes.<sup>4</sup> This basic conviction provided the theoretical foundation for all of his major works, including *Metapolitics* (1941), *Conservatism Revisited* (1949), *Shame and Glory of the Intellectuals* (1953) and *The Unadjusted Man* (1956). The main objective of genuine conservatism, Viereck believed, is to arouse in Western man the sense of higher moral destiny. Laying emphasis on the idea of the nation was considered by him to be incompatible with moderation. In this respect Viereck held a markedly untypical view because the mainstream of conservative thinking has been traditionally committed to emphasizing the importance of national identity.<sup>5</sup> One of the main reasons of why he valued so highly the politics of Metternich is that he perceived in his efforts – realistically – the will to suppress national movements all of which threatened directly the existence of the supranational Hapsburg Empire. This attitude in Viereck was in all probability closely bound up with the tragic experiences of the two world wars for which he held responsible – like a large number of other political thinkers – the national principle. He summarized his position in the following passage: “*In a Europe of overlapping nationalities, a Europe of endless Alsace-Lorraines, Schleswig-Holsteins, Sudetenlands, Polish Corridors, Transylvanias, Bessarabias, Macedonias, Trentinos and Triestes – in such a jigsaw-puzzle Europe nationalism could in no case have asserted its claims except by unliberal blood-and-iron methods.*”<sup>6</sup>

The analysis offered by Viereck of the political views and preferences of Metternich is highly interesting for the historian of political ideas even if the reconstruction of historical reality by the noted conservative thinker can be criticized in a number of respects. Though there can be no denying the fact that Viereck conducted a deep research into the activity of Metternich, his approach is undoubtedly subjective. Consequently the interpretation of Metternich as a principle of conservatism reveals more about Viereck's own worldview than about the Austrian chancellor's actual achievement; however, for the purpose of this study, it is the viewpoint of the historian of ideas that is relevant.

---

<sup>4</sup> VIERECK, pp. 70, 75. (“*The conservative is by definition moderate in all things*”). For a general overview of Viereck's conservatism see Ryn's excellent introduction: C. G. RYN, *Peter Viereck and Conservatism*. VIERECK, pp. 3–45.

<sup>5</sup> For more details on the question of relation of conservative thought to the idea of the nation see: G. EGEDY, *Konzervativizmus és nemzettudat* (Conservatism and National Consciousness), in: G. EGEDY, *Konzervativizmus az ezredfordulón* (Conservatism at the Millennium), Budapest 2001, pp. 143–171.

<sup>6</sup> VIERECK, p. 86.

## The interpretation of the historical context

Any evaluation of Metternich cannot be separated from how we interpret his age, the historical background of his activity. The present author starts from the assumption that the key factor in this respect was the emergence of the national movements in Central Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century. The largest impact was generated by the Germans' efforts at creating political unity, bringing to an end the age-old division of their states.<sup>7</sup> The crucial point is how one relates to these movements. This process of nation-building was considered by most observers – even by such analysts who were very critical towards the idea of the nation – as natural and legitimate. However, Viereck took an entirely different stand: he wrote about a “*German revolt against Europe*”. His words show quite clearly that in his eyes the German national renaissance constituted nothing less than nationalism, even chauvinism. It becomes evident upon reading his arguments that he makes no difference between two different concepts, i.e. patriotism and nationalism. According to the present author this is an oversimplification but without taking it into consideration one cannot fully understand Viereck's attitude towards internationalism.

How did Viereck present the German national movement whose emergence was motivated to a large degree by the desire to counter the Napoleonic wars of French expansion?

In his view the defining feature of this complex movement was the assumption of the existence of a mysteriously indivisible unit, the *Volk*. His thesis was expounded in details in his first book entitled “*Metapolitics*”, based upon his doctoral dissertation and published in 1941. Its subtitle is revealing: “*From the Romantics to Hitler*”.<sup>8</sup> The date of publication tells us that Viereck's work was one of the earliest analyses of National Socialism – and it should be added that one of the most profound, surpassing in quality a large number of later works.<sup>9</sup> Viereck's *Metapolitics* derived the career of the idea of National Socialism not, as usual, from the consequences of the lost world war and of the great economic crisis of 1929–1933 but directly from German romanticism. The American thinker, himself of German origin makes the following often-cited statement in this

---

<sup>7</sup> For more details on the German national movement see: I. GEISS, *The Questions of German Unification, 1806–1996*, London 1997, pp. 31–51.

<sup>8</sup> For the present study the following edition was used: P. VIERECK, *Metapolitics. The Roots of the Nazi Mind*, Capricorn Books 1965. (Originally published by A. Knopf in 1941).

<sup>9</sup> In his later years Viereck himself criticized some statements of *Metapolitics* but Ryn rightly stresses: “*it reaches deep into the malady of modern western culture.*” RYN, p. 23.

book: "...through the centre of German hearts runs the great Roman wall. Speaking metaphorically, on one side of the wall are the classical, rational, legalist and Christian traditions (often mutually conflicting) of the Romanized German; on the other side (often mutually conflicting) are the paganism of the old Saxons, the barbaric tribal cults of war and blood and the anti-rationalism and anti-legalism of the romantics".<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that connecting Nazism with the German romantics was a new idea at that time and Viereck received heavy criticism for doing this; he was accused of anti-German war-mongering even by some anti-fascist Americans.<sup>11</sup> However, this was certainly not the case on his part.

In Viereck's interpretation the idea of the *Volk* – surpassing class boundaries – connects the romantic national movement of the nineteenth century with the National Socialism of the twentieth century. In proof of his statement he emphasizes: all the influential leaders of this movement believed passionately in the existence of the *Volk*. If we forget about it, says Viereck, we simply cannot understand German history after 1848. As for Metternich: if we wish to understand him, we have to know who in reality his enemies were.

The wisdom of Metternich is proved in Viereck's eyes by nothing else more convincingly than his definite rejection of the concept of *Volk*. The great conservative statesman considered it to be nonsense, and, in a similar vein, he was opposed to substituting the mysterious idea of "metapolitics" for rational politics. Grillparzer, the well-known Austrian poet and writer later criticized heavily Metternich, alleging that his outlook had been narrowly fastened upon petty cabinet matters, "unaware that the time of national mass-politics had arrived". Viereck acknowledges that Grillparzer was right: the time did arrive for the politics of the *Volk*. However, there was not much good in "*Völkerpolitik*".<sup>12</sup> It found its natural tool in "*Realpolitik*", based on brute force – the very opposite of the concept of the "rule of law", espoused by Metternich. The conclusion by Viereck can be summarized as follows: it was the merger of romantic nationalism,

---

<sup>10</sup> VIERECK, *Metapolitics*, p. 5. A number of commentators have pointed out that Viereck's writings were in all probability influenced by his desire to dissociate himself from his father, a naturalized American who had openly sympathized with Germany during the World War II, and for his pro-German activity he had even been put in prison.

<sup>11</sup> A noted critic was the historian Jacques Barzun, professor of Columbia University. He accused Viereck of committing the error of „seeing the past only through the eyes of the present". The 1965 edition of *Metapolitics* includes as appendix Barzun's article originally published in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* in 1941. See: VIERECK, *Metapolitics*, pp. 347–351.

<sup>12</sup> VIERECK, *Conservatism*, pp. 89–90.

elaborating the idea of the *Volk* with materialist radicalism that led finally to the birth of German National Socialism.

But is it not an extreme exaggeration to look for the roots of the twentieth-century totalitarianism in the first part of the nineteenth century? This question is posed by Viereck as well. “*Is it being unhistorical to judge the anti-Metternichian nationalism and racism of nineteenth-century Germany by its Nazi consequences?*”<sup>13</sup> Though one may have doubts, the arguments in “*Metapolitics*” and “*Conservatism Revisited*” leave no doubt about the answer the American thinker: in his eyes this evaluation is perfectly valid.

To prove his thesis Viereck devotes much energy to characterize the spiritual leaders of the German national movement of the first half of the nineteenth century; in fact, he deduces the character of the whole movement from their ideas. It is in this context that he lays special emphasis on presenting Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, the nationalist educator, organizer of student associations, (Bursenschaften), and propagandist of gymnastics as the first “storm trooper”. Jahn preceded Gobineau in proclaiming the “biological purity” of the *Volk* and in propagating the idea of German racial superiority. In his view “*Jahn – and later, Richard Wagner – are the two nineteenth-century Germans in whose writings the entire Nazi ideology appears point by point, long before any Treaty of Versailles*”.<sup>14</sup> The public book-burnings in Wartburg in 1817 were also inspired and guided from afar by Jahn –and later praised by Goebbels. Viereck also emphasizes the role of Ernst Arndt: though he was “*no ruffian demagogue like Jahn*”, he was a very influential nationalist political philosopher who combined his anti-French feelings with a general xenophobia. Viereck quotes Goethe who feared that the romantic revival of the Siegfried legends might easily result in the glorification of ancient Teutonic barbarism. The famous poet, Heinrich Heine is also cited: though he himself was an ardent liberal and thus an enemy of Metternich, he feared more the emergent new German nationalism than the conservative regime of Metternich.<sup>15</sup> In his essay on German philosophy Heine anticipated that the German romantics would help bring about an anti-Christian religion, eulogizing nationalism and “*the fanaticism of the Will*”.

Another spiritual enemy of Metternich’s politics was the romantic dramatist Heinrich von Kleist. He is also presented as the representative of that Pan-German nationalism whose influence on twentieth-century fascism was – according to Viereck – direct and crucial. In his drama “*Her-*

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 93.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 96.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 94.

*mann's Battle*" (Die Hermannschlacht) written in 1808 about the struggle of the Germans and Romans, Kleist pictures the hero Hermann as a real Führer. He glorifies him for deceiving and then massacring the Roman legions of Augustus. The message of the play was that Germans must resist French civilization just as they resisted the Roman attack in A.D. 9. In *Metapolitics* Viereck remarked: "Most of this influential play sounds as if written by a Nazi today...Hermann's warriors appeal to the pagan god Wotan for victory. <Falseness> is deemed the eternal opposite of <blond hair and blue eyes>. The most ruthless militarism and Realpolitik are preached..."<sup>16</sup> Hermann tricks the Roman Emperor "by a sort of Munich Pact", and the playwright considers *all means justified* for Hermann. No wonder, adds the American thinker, that the Nazi editor of Kleist summarized it as "revenge for suffered wrongs", drawing an analogy with Hitler's revenge against Versailles.

Searching for the roots of the twentieth-century tragedies Viereck came to the conclusion that prior to 1848 both the pro-Metternich conservatives and the anti-Metternich liberals were right in many respects; their greatest mistake was not to have become allies against the nationalists – the forebears of National Socialism. "They should have joined their respective half-truths against the whole-lies of their real enemies, the self-styled realists of anti-ethical Realpolitik..."<sup>17</sup> The liberals committed the serious mistake of supposing – as Herder did – that nationalism might turn out liberal. According to Viereck it was this error that destroyed liberalism and democracy in Central Europe. The liberal internationalism of the middle classes and the conservative internationalism of the aristocrats spent all their energies in destroying each other and thereby created a "vacuum of loyalty" which came to be filled by militant nationalism as "*tertius gaudens*". Referring to these historical experiences Viereck *expressis verbis* acknowledged in the preface for the 1962 edition of *Conservatism Revisited*: in 1949, in the context of the Cold War his book tried to unite conservatives and liberals "against both fascism (heir of Metternich's enemy: Realpolitik nationalism) and communism (heir of Metternich's enemy: Jacobin terrorist radicalism)".<sup>18</sup> The mutual acceptance of the principle of moderation can – and must – create an alliance between conservatives and liberals if they are faced by political extremes of whatever shade.

---

<sup>16</sup> VIERECK, *Metapolitics*, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> VIERECK, *Conservatism*, p. 86.

<sup>18</sup> P. VIERECK, *Author's Note for the 1962 Edition*. VIERECK, *Conservatism*, p. 59.

## Metternich's conservatism

This interpretation of the historical context, this undoubtedly subjective interpretation of the German national movement provides the background for Viereck's analysis of Metternich's political views and attitudes. The American philosopher and historian considered Metternich to be the last great statesman of Europe because he had taken a stand for the political unity of the western world and had rejected definitely the idea of the nation. (*"Europe has become my native country"* – Metternich said to Wellington).<sup>19</sup> In this approach the politics of the Austrian chancellor came to be identified with politics based on principles while the politics of his enemies are presented as based merely on mere force. (It is another question to what extent Viereck's approach is justified by the facts of history but this dilemma is not primarily relevant in this study). Viereck even suggests that Metternich fought not only for the interests of Austria but for the stability of the whole continent, starting from the assumption that Austria's interests overlapped with those of Europe. He reminds us that Metternich was almost predestined for a supranational way of thinking. He was born in the Rhineland, Koblenz, he was at home in all European capitals and set foot in Vienna only at the age of 22. The social class he came from, the aristocracy spoke the same language all over Europe and formed, using Viereck's witty metaphor, an "international trade union". Consequently his worldview *"could not help being international"*.<sup>20</sup>

In connection with this personal background Metternich looked upon Europe – more than 150 years before the start of European integration! – as a single indivisible unit. To demonstrate the validity of this statement Viereck quotes the words of Metternich's close friend and associate, Friedrich Gentz, who *"expressed the great truth that was also Metternich's basic assumption"*:

*"Through their geographic position, through the uniformity of their customs, their laws, their needs, their way of life and their culture, all the states of this continent form a great political league, which with some justification has been dubbed the European Republic."*<sup>21</sup>

Metternich's hope to achieve the "rebirth of Europe", together with his preference for moderation and his political wisdom clearly manifested itself at the Congress of Vienna where he came out in support of avoiding drastic sanctions against France. Prudently, he did not wish to incite the

---

<sup>19</sup> SRBIK, Vol. I., p. 320.

<sup>20</sup> VIERECK, *Conservatism*, p. 90.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 87.

French to a new war of revenge. As a result, France could keep – against the demands of Prussia – Alsace-Lorraine, of which she was stripped in 1871 by the heirs of Metternich's opponents.

The conservative internationalism of Metternich played a crucial role also in the long struggle for German unification, in the rivalry between Prussia and the Hapsburg Empire. The contest between Berlin's Stein and Vienna's Metternich is presented by Viereck as not merely a personal rivalry but also as a conflict of impersonal principles. The American thinker emphasizes that the two statesmen fought for two entirely different objectives. Stein was committed to the German national idea and his only aim was to destroy the power of France, while Metternich was thinking in much broader terms: he wanted to rebuild the political unity of Europe, shaken by the French Revolution. Consequently, "*they were fighting two different wars*": Stein's was a "*national war*", a war of peoples, while Metternich's was "*an international civil war*".<sup>22</sup> For Metternich it was the "revolutionary spirit" that hid under the veil of national spirit. In other words: for Metternich both Jacobinism and nationalism were "anti-conservative heresies". In keeping with this evaluation Viereck approved Metternich's tough measures against the revolutionary German students applauding Blücher, the victorious Prussian general at Waterloo because he perceived in them "national Jacobins" who had prepared the way for the National Socialism of the twentieth century.

Viereck found it extremely important and therefore emphasized it in all his writings concerning Metternich that in contrast to the German nationalists the Austrian chancellor never persecuted the non-German nations of the Hapsburg Empire. His attitude was in sharp contrast with the anti-Metternichian liberals who surrendered before German nationalism when their representatives in July 1848 supported by their votes the intervention of the Prussian army in the Polish provinces. Their leader, Wilhelm Jordan openly advocated the politics of "*Drang nach Osten*" and the Pan-German idea. In 1849 January Jordan even spoke about the Germans' mission to Germanize other races.<sup>23</sup> Viereck's conclusion is unequivocal: "*Such were the Good Democrats who liberated Europe from Metternich.*"<sup>24</sup> The wisdom of Metternich's politics was proved in Viereck's eyes also by the failure of his short-sighted successor, Prince Schwarzen-

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 92.

<sup>23</sup> In *Metapolitics* Viereck states that the German Revolution of 1848 is "*falsely called a liberal revolution.*" VIERECK, *Metapolitics*, p. 60. In *Conservatism Revisited* he also criticized the leaders of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848, alleging that "*the intolerant liberals and leftists of Kossuth*" wanted the Croats speak only Hungarian in the new parliament. VIERECK, *Conservatism*, p. 99.

<sup>24</sup> VIERECK, *Conservatism*, p. 101.



berg: his version of *Realpolitik*, based on the principle of “*vive la force!*” did much to pave the way for the success of Bismarck and Pan-German nationalism.

In the 1960s a lively debate began among historians of the western world about the historical role of Metternich. In 1971 a book was edited with the title “*The Metternich Controversy*” containing the writings of the most respected experts, including Henry Kissinger’s. Viereck was also asked to contribute an article. The conservative American thinker gave the following expressive title to his article about Metternich: “*Bastion Against Potential Fascism.*”<sup>25</sup> In this writing Viereck almost equals Heinrich Ritter von Srbik, the well-known Viennese historian, the author of the two-volume biography of Metternich in defending the Austrian chancellor. He argues that it is a huge mistake committed by a large number of historians to perceive in every anti-Metternichian actor a “liberal”. In many important cases his opponents were in fact not only nationalists but militarists, racists or even proto-fascists, like for example the above-mentioned Slav-hating, war-glorifying Jordan. And when – adds Viereck – his opponents were genuine liberals, they tended to be abstract doctrinaires who tried to transplant such institutions in Central Europe that had there no historic roots.<sup>26</sup> Metternich as a conservative disciple of Burke knew all too well that reforms and new institutions cannot be introduced “overnight”.

As a logical corollary to this chain of thoughts Viereck draws the conclusion: we must choose at last between an international and a provincial perspective. The question to be posed is the following. Should we look upon our native country as “*an ever broadening community of humanity*”, as Europe was for Metternich, or is it be a narrowly provincial nation? Viereck gives a definite answer: “*On this choice the great builders of Western culture, whether an Alexander the Great or an Erasmus or St. Paul long ago took their stand. And on this they stand closer to Professor Metternich than to all the Carbonari of Naples or to any Baron vom und zum Stein.*”<sup>27</sup>

### **Metternich and the conservative concept of freedom**

Any reference to Metternich would hardly remind a Czech or Hungarian reader of the idea of freedom since the chancellor’s name has been tradi-

---

<sup>25</sup> P. VIERECK, *Bulwark Against Potential Fascism. The Metternich Controversy*, in: E. KREAHE (Ed.), New York 1971, pp. 89–93.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 90–91.

<sup>27</sup> VIERECK, *Conservatism*, p. 103.

tionally associated with a repressive regime. However, Viereck is convinced that the preferences and ideas of Metternich are much closer to the values of the British parliamentary system than is usually assumed by historians. In his view Metternich was a devoted student of the “father of conservatism”, Edmund Burke, who had taught him to insist on organic development and self-restraint. Viereck speaks of a “basic link” between the English and the Metternichian ideas and assumes a “common evolution” from Burke.<sup>28</sup> (It is worth remarking this it was Metternich's close friend and associate, Friedrich Gentz who translated into German Burke's famous work on the French Revolution).

As mentioned above, insistence on political moderation was a moral imperative for Viereck and this stance also involved a great respect for law. “*The conservative lays the greatest possible stress on the necessity and sanctity of law*” – he writes in *Conservatism Revisited*, and goes on to formulate the often-cited words: “*What prevents today's baby from remaining a caveman is the conservative force of law and tradition...*”<sup>29</sup> It is hardly surprising in the light of this that Viereck calls one of the greatest merits of Metternich his commitment to the idea of the rule of law. The guiding principle, which Metternich claimed for his political values, is suggested by the motto in his coat of arms: *Kraft im Recht*, i.e. *Strength in Law*. For the historian of ideas it is of secondary importance whether Metternich always kept to this principle in practice; the relevant aspect for this study is that Viereck attributes to Metternich the right conservative interpretation of freedom. (This, in other words, also means that he expounds his own preferences and priorities referring to Metternich).

What are the main features of this concept of freedom?

After his political fall in 1848 Metternich sought – and found – asylum in liberal England and many of his enemies saw in this fact the irony of fate. The arch-reactionary fleeing to the most liberal country of Europe... However, they were wrong, stresses Viereck because Britain's success was not a disproof but a justification of the validity of Metternich's ideas. In his *Mémoires* the defeated chancellor wrote the following words about England: “*The freest land on earth because the best disciplined.*” In his unfinished *Political Testament* he offers the explanation, too: “*Without the base of order liberty is only a disguise for the ambitions of some selfish group.*”<sup>30</sup> However, if Metternich's evaluation of the British political system was so favourable, then arises the question: when he was

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 105.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 72.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. 106.

in power, why did he not pursue such politics that were in keeping with the tenets of British conservatism?

The answer is quite evident for Viereck. Metternich as a clever conservative recognized clearly that there was no universal model of the good constitution; the political establishment of a state must always conform to the local cultural and political traditions. And as for Central Europe, he was deeply convinced that it had not yet become ripe for more political freedom, whether governed by kings or liberals. The main reason for this was that Central Europe lacked the traditions of voluntary order. This insight explains the fact, argues Viereck, that although Metternich esteemed highly the British constitution, he consistently resisted the attempts at introducing it artificially in the Hapsburg Empire in the first half of the nineteenth century. The drastic changes demanded by the liberals in the Empire would have led to such an anarchy that would have been much worse than keeping to the traditional ways of government. Self-imposed order is better than order imposed from above but even the latter is preferable to anarchy. *“Had these liberal doctrinaires of Naples and Cadiz understood Metternich’s philosophy of evolutionary growth, they might have rebelled less hastily and slandered his motives less”* – remarked Viereck.<sup>31</sup> Metternich had no doubt at all that a written constitution in itself was not more than “a sheet of paper”. By contrast the English constitution “is the work of centuries”, and not the work of a single decree. The difference between a real statesman and a fanatic ideologue lies in the fact, points out Viereck, that *“the former knows the humble wisdom of the second best when the best is historically impossible.”*<sup>32</sup>

Most books on history present Metternich as an ardent enemy of any change and reform but this presentation is basically wrong according to the American thinker. To prove his view he mentions that by 1832 Metternich had prepared large-scale plans for a new constitution and a parliament and their failure was not his fault but of his stubborn ruler, Emperor Francis who rejected outright any change in the government of his empire. Metternich tried to convince his Emperor by pointing out that his proposals reconciled *“the opposition between the monarchist principle and the democratic”* – an argument, which gained the special approval of Viereck. He commented on it in the following way: *“This is western spirit: this is conservatism at its best, the evolutionary middle way between despots like Francis and the 1848 liberals.”* He reminds his readers that 1832 was the very year when the new Reform Bill was accepted in England,

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, p. 107.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem.

enlarging the franchise and draws the conclusion: "1832 is dramatic evidence for our distinction between western and eastern conservatism."<sup>33</sup>

By contrasting Metternich with Emperor Francis Viereck on the one hand perceptibly endeavors to find excuses for Metternich – for example he alleges that he bore no personal responsibility for the large-scale network of secret police.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, more importantly, by emphasizing this contrast he conveys the meaning of the difference between the conservative and the "reactionary" which is important because he rejected the latter just as resolutely as he rejected the radical-liberal position. (Therefore he hastens to add: this distinction is crucial in his days because too many Americans tend to think that communism can be opposed "by backing not conservatives but reactionaries like General Franco").<sup>35</sup> His summary is that Metternich was not in a position to use the extraordinary prestige he earned in foreign policy in domestic affairs.

Of all this Viereck quotes the following words of Metternich: "... [Emperor Francis] followed my advice on foreign policy. He did not do so in internal affairs...Attributing a perhaps exaggerated importance to the secret societies...he thought he found the remedy against the evil in a minute surveillance of the would-be intellectual classes exercised by the police, who thereby became one of the chief instruments of his government....in short, in a moral closing of the frontier. But it is useless to close the gates against ideas, they overleap them...The result was a dull irritation against the government among the educated classes. I told that to the emperor but on that point he was unshakable... If in 1817, even as late as 1826 the emperor had accepted my ideas on the reorganization of the diets, we would be perhaps in a position to face the tempest. Today it is too late" – he wrote on 1 March 1848.<sup>36</sup>

For all his sympathy Viereck also criticizes Metternich in some respects, especially for those of his measures that were directed against the freedom of thinking. The main targets are the ominous Carlsbad Decrees of 1819, which instituted censorship of the press and limited academic freedom. From a conservative point of view these are unacceptable – pointed out Viereck. (Carlsbad was Metternich at his "un-conservative worst"). However, he added in his article published in *The Metternich Controversy* that Metternich's measures "were milksop compared with the racist, anti-semitic, war-plotting dictatorship favoured by such anti-

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, p. 108.

<sup>34</sup> "In general, the police harrowings known as the Metternich system should properly be called the Emperor Francis system." VIERECK, *Foreword to the 1949 Edition*, p. 65.

<sup>35</sup> VIERECK, *Conservatism*, p. 110.

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, pp. 108–109.

*Metternichian agitators as Jahn.*”<sup>37</sup> The German universities were the strongholds of nationalist opposition to Metternich. (By way of excuse Metternich himself referred to his desire to save Germany from “*the dictatorship of such men as Jahn and Arndt*”). Metternich’s goal was, in Viereck’s interpretation, not to limit free thought but to prevent the enslavement of free thought by irrational emotions.

Viereck even suggests that if Metternich’s reform-proposals had been realized, the nations of the Hapsburg Empire could have enjoyed a slow and organic evolutionary development similar to that of England. Thereby they could have avoided stagnation, leading to revolution.<sup>38</sup> As a result of the upheavals in 1848 and the ensuing triumph of “ruthless dictatorship” practically all-constituent units of the empire received much harsher treatment from the central government in Vienna than before. Thus Viereck concludes that first the revolutionaries, and then the representatives of *Realpolitik* blocked Metternich’s conservative way to freedom. He was also convinced that since Metternich’s ideas had been defeated in 1848, Central Europe alternated between unrepresentative extremes of right and left without establishing any deep-rooted centre.

Viereck’s remarks on Metternich’s attitude to socio-political questions are also noteworthy. In his view Metternich preceded Marx in perceiving that the liberty for which the new capitalist middle class was fighting was primarily a means by the help of which it hoped to wrestle away power from the aristocracy. In other words the slogan of liberty was a means for substituting its own economic oligarchy for the more responsible traditional aristocracy. Metternich saw clearly that behind the clamor for representative institutions egoistic group-interests lay, and not at all the “*common good of the people*”. The rising middle class wanted to make representative institutions its own instruments. “*The first instrument in the hands of the middle class is the modern representative system*” – these are Metternich’s own words in a letter written in 1831.<sup>39</sup> Thus Viereck argues that Metternich was well aware of the fact that the grab for power by the new capitalist class meant a direct threat to social harmony. He also cites another letter of Metternich, written to the then French premier Guizot in which we can read the following interesting statement:

*“The true character of our time is that of an era of transition....To me the political game did not at all seem to answer to the needs of the time: I made myself a conservative socialist. [socialiste conservateur] The conservative principles are applicable to the most diverse situations; their*

---

<sup>37</sup> VIERECK, *Bulwark*, p. 92.

<sup>38</sup> VIERECK, *Conservatism*, p. 112.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 114.

*worship is not enclosed within narrow bounds, they are enemies of anarchy, moral and material.*"<sup>40</sup> To Count Rechberg he wrote that it was no longer politics but the "social problem" that counted. In this – highly controversial – interpretation Metternich is portrayed as a protector of the lower social classes. However, even Viereck could not give details of how Metternich tried to cope with the challenge of the "social problem". On the other hand, this interpretation of the chancellor's views was in close harmony with Viereck's own aversion to free-market capitalism. He often praised the great conservative nineteenth-century English statesman, Benjamin Disraeli for seeking restraints on the emerging liberal oligarchy and trying to reconcile the "two nations" of the rich and poor. Viereck supported the New Deal policy of Roosevelt for which he came to be very severely criticized by the mainstream of American conservative thought.<sup>41</sup>

### **The Political Heritage of Metternich**

If we wish to summarize Viereck's analysis of Metternich, we have to point out that the most crucial element among Metternich's ideas was identified by Viereck as the moral imperative to avoid at all costs political extremes. As mentioned above, this stance coincided fully with the American thinker's own preferences, so he quoted with full approbation the words of the Austrian chancellor: "*My constant efforts are directed against the ultras of all kinds.*" He quotes from the *Mémoires* of Metternich the following statement as well: "*The red and white doctrinaires shun me like the plague.*"<sup>42</sup> About the extreme royalists of the French Restoration the Austrian chancellor declared: "*The Legitimists are legitimizing the Revolution.*" Metternich was convinced that there was no greater danger for society than any type of fanaticism. Significantly, Viereck adds: in his own century, as in Metternich's day, "*the only sane asylum... is an internationalism based on the middle way of balance and moderation.*" This logically rules out an internationalism, which is based on extremes of left or right.<sup>43</sup> In this way the principle of moderation is inseparably intertwined with the concept of conservative internationalism. Ryn is right in emphasizing that although the accuracy of Viereck's interpretation of Metternichian politics might be questioned, his development of the idea of conservatism "*as a spirit of mediation between inherited traditional authority*

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, p. 115.

<sup>41</sup> R. MUCCIGROSSO, *Basic History of American Conservatism (The Anvil Series)*, Malabar, Florida 2001, p. 88.

<sup>42</sup> VIERECK, *Conservatism*, p. 124.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem.

and calls for reform”, in general terms mediation between extreme positions merits close attention.<sup>44</sup>

In the second half of the twentieth century, in the age of the Cold War Viereck considered it to be the task of the heirs of the framers of the American constitution to defend the Western heritage. In the spirit of Metternich he urged the United States to fight relentlessly “the national bolshevism” of Russia, “the Kremlin resurrection of Hitler” because he looked upon communism as an incarnation of fascism, as another variation of totalitarianism.<sup>45</sup> He was sure that in its struggle against political extremes the Western world would benefit much from a reassessment of Metternich’s historical role.<sup>46</sup>

### Abstract

This study is focussed on the political views of Clemens Metternich, the chancellor and foreign minister of the Hapsburg Empire. To be more precise, the article is concerned with Viereck’s interpretation of Metternich. Peter Viereck was one of the principle theoreticians of conservatism in twentieth-century America, who offered a markedly unorthodox analysis of Metternich’s conservatism, touching upon a number of crucial questions. He considers Metternich to be a “principle”, an exponent and guardian of prudential conservatism and conservative internationalism. He emphasizes Metternich’s efforts to tame the resurgent nationalism of the European nations and also his little-known attempts to reform the structure of the Hapsburg Empire. The approach adopted by this study is defined primarily by an interest in the history of political ideas.

### Keywords

Aristocratic Spirit, Concert of Europe, Conservative Internationalism, Conservative Way to Freedom, Fascist-Bolshevist Synthesis, “Kraft im Recht”, “Principles” versus “Force”

---

<sup>44</sup> RYN, p. 39.

<sup>45</sup> Viereck was convinced in the 1950s that communism was “*obviously the greatest single threat to the world*”. P. VIERECK, *Shame and Glory of the Intellectuals*, New York 1965 (First published in 1953 by Beacon Press), p. 132.

<sup>46</sup> VIERECK, *Bulwark*, p. 93.

