

# Britain in Europe in the 1980s: East & West. Introduction

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Twenty years after the end of the Cold War the literature on the history of a divided and then reunited Europe is richer than ever. This issue builds on four trends in historiography which have emerged over the last two decades. First, it draws upon the writings of those who have linked the phenomenon of European détente to West European *Ostpolitik*, Eastern *Westpolitik*, and, more generally, to the process of liberalisation in Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Second, the last decade of the Cold War has now become a very attractive object of investigation for scholars, and not only for historians, thus requiring knowledge of different disciplinary approaches to the topic.<sup>2</sup> Third, studying the “return” of the other half of Europe to the West as a vital moment in the process ending the Cold War and transforming Europe, has highlighted the need to access sources beyond the thirty years rule and for historians to use these sources to transcend the earlier boundaries separating areas of study such as transatlantic relations, the history of European integration, the study of the former Soviet Union, or Western and Eastern Europe.<sup>3</sup> Finally, this tendency to overcome disciplinary barriers and the interest of historians in the 1980s has provided fertile ground for reflecting the role played by Britain in the 1980s, in Europe and in its

1. A. HOFMANN, *The emergence of Détente in Europe. Brandt, Kennedy and the formation of Ostpolitik*, Routledge, Abingdon/New York, 2007; O. BANGE, G. NIEDHART (eds.), *Helsinki 1975 and the Transformation of Europe*, Berghahn Books, Oxford, 2008; A. WENGER, V. MASTNY, C. NUENLIST, *Origins of the European Security System: The Helsinki Process Revisited, 1965-1975*, Routledge, Abingdon/New York, 2008; D.J. GALBREATH, *The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe*, Routledge, Abingdon/New York, 2007; A. VARSORI (ed.), *Inside the European Community: Actors and Policies in European Integration 1957-1972*, Nomos/Braylant, Baden-Baden/Bruxelles, 2006; A. ROMANO, *From Détente in Europe to European Détente. How the West Shaped the Helsinki CSCE*, PIE-Peter Lang, Bruxelles, 2009; W. LOTH, G.-H. SOUTOU (eds.), *The Making of Détente: Eastern and Western Europe in the Cold War, 1965-75*, Routledge, Abingdon/New York, 2008; J. von DANNENBERG, *The foundations of Ostpolitik. The making of the Moscow Treaty between West Germany and the USSR*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008; C. FINK, B. SCAHEFER (eds.), *Ostpolitik, 1969-1974: European and global responses*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009.
2. O. NJOLSTAD (ed.), *The Last Decade of the Cold War: From Conflict Escalation to Conflict Transformation*, Frank Cass, London, 2004; F. BOZO, M.-P. REY, N.P. LUDLOW, L. NUTI (ed.), *Europe and the End of the Cold War. A Reappraisal*, Routledge, London, 2009.
3. K. SCHWABE, The Cold War and European Integration, 1947-1963, in: *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 4(2001), pp.18-34; A. DEIGHTON, *Ostpolitik or Westpolitik? British Foreign Policy, 1968-75*, in: *International Affairs*, 4(October 1998), pp.893-901; N.P. LUDLOW (ed.), *European integration and the Cold War: Ostpolitik-Westpolitik, 1965-1973*, Routledge, Abingdon/New York, 2007

transatlantic relations.<sup>4</sup> The articles and participants' evidence included in this special issue represent a significant contribution to our understanding of British *Ostpolitik* and on the related question of Thatcher's pursuit of the liberal option in the two halves of Europe.<sup>5</sup>

## Thatcher and Gorbachev 'the odd couple' of the 1980s?

In the second half of the 1980s Britain deployed a wider, more active and more effective *Ostpolitik* than at any time since the onset of the Cold War. It was the rise in Cold War tensions in the early years of the decade that largely prompted Margaret Thatcher to try and open up dialogue with Moscow. In this sense, her initiative recalled previous attempts by British Prime Ministers, notably Harold Macmillan, to defuse high levels of superpower tension. Thatcher's approach was broader in scope, embracing Eastern Europe as well as the Soviet Union. Some of the contributors in this issue who focus on the Thatcher-Gorbachev relationship argue that her diplomacy was far more intense than that of her predecessors and more successful in building understanding and respect. Second, the relationship she built with Mikhail Gorbachev was far closer than the distance separating their ideological positions and national interests would have led one to expect. Indeed, both the Foreign Office and Prime Minister Thatcher built on the 1970s approach to *Ostpolitik* - a mixture of pressures and incentives to governments and opposition movements. Thatcher often took a personal approach to *Ostpolitik*, particularly during her visits to Hungary and Poland in 1984 and 1988. At the same time, she was determined not to upset the existing

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4. H. PARR, *Britain's Policy towards the European Community, 1964–7: Harold Wilson and Britain's World Role*, Routledge, Abingdon/New York, 2006; S. GREENWOOD, *Helping to Open the Door? Britain in the Last Decade of the Cold War*" in *The Last Decade of the Cold War: From Conflict Escalation to Conflict Transformation*, Frank Cass, New York, 2004; S. WALL, *A Stranger in Europe: Britain and the EU from Thatcher to Blair*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008; G. URBAN, *Diplomacy and Disillusion at the Court of Margaret Thatcher*, St Martin Press, New York, 1996; I. POGGIOLINI, *Thatcher's double track road to the end of the Cold War: the irreconcilability of liberalization and preservation*, in: F. BOZO, M.-P. REY, N.P. LUDLOW (eds.), *Visions of the end of the Cold War in Europe*, Berghahn Books, Oxford/New York, 2010.
5. The starting point for this project is a research project funded by the Italian MIUR (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca) and the University of Pavia on "A Common European destiny and identity beyond the borders of the Cold War? British 'Ostpolitik' and the new battlefield of ideas in Eastern Europe (Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia) 1984-92", led by Ilaria Poggolini. The scientific results of the project were discussed at the conference "Britain and Europe in the 1980s: East & West" (University of Pavia) where most contributors to this issue were present. Ilaria Poggolini is indebted to the European and Russian-Eurasian Studies Centres at St. Antony's College Oxford. Conversations with St. Antony's former Warden, Lord Ralf Dahrendorf, who died on 18 June 2009, were an inspirational guide to the understanding of ideas of freedom in Europe.

nuclear and political balance of power in East-West relations or endanger the stability of transatlantic relations, by pushing the limits of British *Ostpolitik*.<sup>6</sup>

British archival sources and published documents, as well as documents released under the Freedom of Information Act,<sup>7</sup> have been an invaluable asset in undertaking the research which informs the articles in this special issue and seeks to reassess Thatcher's role, the complex interaction between 10 Downing Street and the Foreign Office in elaborating Eastern policies and, more broadly, continuity and change in British *Ostpolitik*.

Outside Europe, within the larger context of the transformation in East-West relations in these years, Thatcher's role was significant though limited. The British Prime Minister was not in a position to conduct any real negotiations with Moscow. The heavy lifting of negotiating agreements was done throughout this period by Washington and in the later stages also by Bonn. Where Thatcher played an outstanding role was in helping to transform the climate of relations between East and West, particularly in the early years. Her contribution to the changes in the political milieu was three-fold. First, she was a trailblazer in developing the new dialogue with Moscow. Second, she acted as an interpreter, helping on the one hand to explain US thinking to a more open-minded yet still suspicious Kremlin; and, on the other, to convey the importance to the West of perestroika to those who had doubts about Gorbachev's reforms. It was as an enthusiastic, if critically-minded, champion of perestroika, that Thatcher made her third and arguably most important contribution: the building of higher levels of understanding and confidence. This is not to claim that she played the key role in the West in creating the new levels of trust associated with the end of the Cold War. Confidence-building on the Western side was the result of the effort of a number of leaders, both European and American. Yet, in her characteristically determined manner, Thatcher played an important role in the beginning of the drama. However, she was definitely upstaged as soon as the process of progressive change in the East gathered speed and a radical, swift transformation brought the Cold War to an end. She had never expected or desired the acceleration of history which produced 1989.<sup>8</sup>

The contributions in this issue by Andrei Grachev, Rodric Braithwaite and Archie Brown highlight the importance of personal factors in shaping the relationship between Margaret Thatcher and Gorbachev. The first two are insider accounts of the

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6. UK National Archives, London (UKNA), FCO 30/2493, FCO Future Policy towards Eastern Europe, January 1974.
7. Conference "Britain and Europe in the 1980s: East & West". See also A. HAMILTON (ed.), *Documents on British Policy Overseas*, "Britain and the Soviet Union, 1968-1972", s.3, vol.1, The Stationery Office, London, 1997, pp.42-48; *Documents on British Policy Overseas*, Series III, Vol.VII, German Unification 1989-1990, Whitehall History Publishing, London, 2009. Annual Reports by British Ambassadors between 1879 and 1989 have been released as result of a series of FOIA requests submitted while carrying on the above mentioned research project in cooperation with the Machiavelli Centre for Cold War Studies (CIMA). All documents we have obtained are now available online on the Thatcher Foundation website [www.margaretthatcher.org](http://www.margaretthatcher.org).
8. I. POGGIOLETTI, *Thatcher's double track ...*, op.cit.

relationship, one from a Soviet and one from a British perspective. Andrei Grachev was a senior member of the International Department of the Central Committee, and in 1991 served as President Gorbachev's press spokesman. He brings to bear insights from his time in the corridors of power to shed light on Kremlin views of the relationship with Thatcher. Rodric Braithwaite draws on his experience in Whitehall in the early 1980s to trace the emergence of the new approach to the Soviet Union. The critical years (1988-1992) he spent as British Ambassador in Moscow inform his assessment of the dynamics of relations between the two leaders. Archie Brown, an academic and a leading authority on Soviet politics, was himself involved in key discussions in the 1980s which influenced the evolution of Thatcher's views of Gorbachev and his reforms. Brown's meticulous account of how those views evolved is based on recently declassified British documents as well as Soviet archives.

Both Gorbachev and Thatcher gave great importance to the role of personal diplomacy – what Gorbachev called the 'human factor' – in international politics. Both did so partly because of great confidence in their own powers of persuasion. Personal chemistry also played a part. Thatcher found Gorbachev personally charming. He was more equivocal, finding her impudent as well as engaging. As Grachev notes, Gorbachev was attracted by her qualities as a strong-minded woman; he was used to vigorous discussions with his wife Raisa. The personal rapport between the two leaders was strengthened by shared habits, including a Stakhanovite attitude to discussion, and a fondness for long speeches and having the last word.<sup>9</sup> The most important common trait - and a major reason for the sustained intensity of their engagement - was a passionate commitment to their own fundamental political convictions and keen enjoyment in debating these in quasi-philosophical manner.

Political interest reinforced the personal compatibility of this rather odd couple. Yet the bilateral relationship remained far thinner than the engagement between the two leaders. London derived its value for Moscow mainly from its Atlantic position. Being an off-shore player, as far as European developments were concerned, made London attractive for a Kremlin trying to pay more attention to Western Europe while retaining the US as its primary target. The main 'European' issues Moscow raised with London centred on security; these were essentially Atlantic questions where Britain carried some weight and on which it could provide valuable insight. For Gorbachev the main policy value of Thatcher hinged on her capacity to interpret US views as well as exercise influence on the White House. The Prime Minister's political and personal proximity to Reagan made her a more valuable interlocutor than European leaders such as President François Mitterrand, whose views on the US and security Gorbachev found more congenial yet less reliable.<sup>10</sup> Thatcher did not see herself as a broker of particular deals, but aspired to be a general intermediary between the superpowers. In the Reagan era she played this role to some effect, especially in the

9. See M.S. GORBACHEV, *Zhizn' i reformy*, vol.2, Novosti, Moscow, 1995, p.81; for banter about their shared habits, see Gorbachev Foundation Archives, 'Zapis' peregovorov M.S. Gorbacheva s prem'er-ministrom Velikobritanii M. Tetcher, 30 marta 1987 goda', p.17.
10. See Gorbachev Foundation Archives, Gorbachev's comments on Thatcher at the Politburo on 2 April 1987, as noted by Anatoliy Chernyaev.

early years. Her assessment of Gorbachev encouraged an American President who, as he began his second term, was also thinking about developing dialogue with the Kremlin.<sup>11</sup>

From Moscow's perspective, a key issue in any such a dialogue on which Thatcher might have a useful influence was that of the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI). As Braithwaite points out, her views on Star Wars were mixed. She supported the research Ronald Reagan wanted to develop. But she had doubts stemming from scepticism about the technical feasibility of the project and fears that the development of missile defence would weaken nuclear deterrence. Beyond the immediate issue of SDI, Thatcher's commitment to nuclear deterrence made her a problematic if useful interlocutor for Moscow. Her alarm at how close the Reykjavik summit had come to agreement on the elimination of nuclear weapons caused irritation in the Kremlin.<sup>12</sup> Still, the very firmness of her stand against far-reaching disarmament made it worth Moscow's while to try and allay her anxieties; this was especially the case when she took the lead in airing West European anxieties about plans to cut short-range missiles.

At the fundamental level of thinking about security, Thatcher's militant attachment to deterrence made her an attractive challenge for a Soviet leader with an anti-nuclear mission. Gorbachev seemed to relish their robust exchanges on deterrence and even flattered himself that his arguments had tempered her policy positions, if not her basic commitment to deterrence.<sup>13</sup> As Grachev notes, the Soviet leader got more return from their discussions about threat perceptions. In highly combative exchanges at the March 1987 meeting, Thatcher insisted that Soviet interventions in Eastern Europe and the Third World fuelled continuing Western fears of an aggressive Moscow. Gorbachev used her testimony about the reality of a perceived Soviet threat to drive home to his Politburo colleagues the costs of forceful interventionism.<sup>14</sup> As Gorbachev's new line against the use of force gained political ascendancy in the course of 1988, so Thatcher became less useful as a foil for his arguments. Her value on the Washington front also declined with the passing of the Reagan era. She remained of some interest as a source of information in early 1989 when Gorbachev was anxious about the intentions of the new Bush administration. She went out of her

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11. See Reagan Library, European and Soviet Affairs, NSC Record Dec 1984(1) Box 90902, record of conversation between Thatcher and President Reagan at Camp David on 22 December 1984, text on Thatcher Foundation website; and J.F. MATLOCK Jr., *1984: Reagan Prepares; Moscow Dawdles*, in: J.F. MATLOCK Jr., *Reagan and Gorbachev. How the Cold War Ended*, Random House, New York, 2004, pp.78-105.
12. A.S. CHERNYAEV, *My Six Years with Gorbachev*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania, 2000, p.88; for Thatcher's views, see, M. THATCHER, *The Downing Street Years*, Harper Collins, London, 1993, pp.470-472.
13. Comments to the Politburo on 2 April 1987, M.S. GORBACHEV, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol.2, Moscow, Ves Mir, 2008, p.224.
14. Ibid.; and Gorbachev Foundation Archives, comments by Gorbachev to the Politburo, 8 May 1987, as noted by Chernyaev.

way to reassure him on that score and, more generally, about continued Western support for perestroika.<sup>15</sup>

It was Thatcher's steadfast support for the perestroika project that underpinned the building of trust between the two leaders. The articles by Brown, Grachev and Braithwaite all highlight the importance of trust and confidence in the relationship. Personal qualities played a part in shaping Gorbachev's general confidence in Thatcher. He considered her straightforward and, unlike Mitterrand, incapable of hiding her intentions.<sup>16</sup> To be sure, there were occasions on which Gorbachev felt let down by her lack of frankness. As Braithwaite recalls, there was disappointment that the Prime Minister made no mention at their meeting in April 1989 of the expulsion of Soviet diplomats which followed a month later. Even so, the relationship between them remained one of considerable trust. Such trust came in large measure from Thatcher's genuine admiration for the Soviet leader and for his efforts to push through radical reform. As Brown notes, she took an early interest in perestroika and came to identify with Gorbachev in his struggle for radical change. In a sense she saw him as 'one of us', a fellow radical, heroically battling against incompetent and conservative bureaucrats. He in turn was impressed by her well-informed observations on Soviet developments and appreciated her steadfast support for perestroika.<sup>17</sup> Her loyalty was valued all the more in 1989-1991, when the Kremlin feared that Western leaders were becoming ever more pessimistic about perestroika and increasingly doubtful about Gorbachev's survival. Thatcher, by contrast, was seen as a relatively steadfast champion of project and leader alike.<sup>18</sup>

The strength of Thatcher's support for perestroika affected her stance on developments in Eastern Europe. She saw the region in terms of captive nations and herself as the champion of self-liberation. She understood that Gorbachev was trying to distance himself from the captor tradition, even if she, along with many others, remained unsure until very late in the day whether he would be able to constrain traditional Soviet reaction to crisis in the region. It was to help avoid such crises, and the damage a forceful Soviet response would do to perestroika, that Thatcher exercised unusual self-restraint in her dealings with Eastern Europe.

15. M.S. GORBACHEV, *Zhizn'* ..., op.cit., p.83.

16. Gorbachev Foundation Archives, Chernyaev's notes of Gorbachev's comments to a group of advisers on 1 April 1987 and his comments to the Politburo, 2 April 1987.

17. Gorbachev comments in meeting with the British ambassador, Rodric Braithwaite, 15 June 1991, in V Politbyuro TsK KPSS, p.676.

18. Anatolij Chernyaev, Gorbachev's closest foreign policy aide, thought highly of Thatcher's commitment to perestroika, and appreciated the support given by the British ambassador, Rodric Braithwaite. See A. CHERNYAEV, *My Six Years* ..., op.cit. pp.221-222.

## British traditions of ‘looking east’

Thatcher, the “champion of self-liberation” in Eastern Europe probably never realised that she was not standing alone. As the article by Carola Cerami points out, Thatcher was in the company of a significant number of prominent academics, politicians and diplomats who were not Cold War warriors but shared her belief in the cause of Eastern Europe. Furthermore, during the 1970s and 1980s the other half of Europe started being rediscovered. Gradually, as Sara Tavani shows, both external observers and internal dissidents contributed to bring back this area - first figuratively and then from being Eastern Europe, to Central Europe, a concept evoking both pre-communist memories and ideas of future liberalisation and openness.<sup>19</sup>

Prominent voices of democratic dissidents and free-market thinkers in the Communist bloc in the early eighties gave substance and depth to the claim that a distinctively Central European identity still existed and now demanded to be acknowledged.<sup>20</sup> This new awareness of a possible “return” of Central Europe to Europe grew rapidly in the 1980s on both sides of the Iron Curtain and itself fed Western *Ostpolitik*.

The return of the idea of Central Europe and that of a strong interest in the revival of civil society East of the Iron Curtain were parallel processes. In 1995, Michael Ignatieff in reviewing Ernest Gellner’s book *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals in Foreign Affairs*, observed that, “since the 1980s, the renewed East European interest in civil society has returned West European intellectuals to a concept they had forgotten”<sup>21</sup> Among those intellectuals Gellner and the German born Ralf Dahrendorf, played a central role. As Carola Cerami shows, these two scholars responded with extraordinary intellectual eagerness to East European interests in civil society. Besides thinking and writing on this theme, they actively engaged in initiatives such as Dahrendorf’s project of a “common market of the mind”, open to both sides of Europe, and Gellner’s involvement with the creation of the Centre for the study of nationalism at the Central European University, funded by George Soros. The debate on the return of Central Europe and that on civil society contributed to creating a solid intellectual basis for British *Ostpolitik*. These developments, as Sara

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19. Central Europe a “contrast concept” is discussed in K. KUMAR, *1989 Revolutionary Ideas and Ideals*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2001, p.77; see also J RUPNIK, *The Other Europe. The Rise and Fall of Communism in East-Central Europe*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1989; I.T. BEREND, *What is Central Europe*, in: *European Journal of Social Theory*, 4(2005); I.T. BEREND, *Central and Eastern Europe, 1944-1993: Detour from the Periphery to the Periphery*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996; R.F. COLUMBUS (ed.) *Central and Eastern Europe in Transition*, Nova Science Publishers, New York, 1998.
20. G. KONRAD, *Is the dream of Central Europe still alive?, Cross Current, 1986, and Antipolitics: An Essay*, QuarterBooks, London, 1984; M. KUNDERA, *The Tragedy of Central Europe*, in: *The New York Review of Books*, 26.04.1984; T. GARTON-ASH, *Does Central Europe Exist?*, in: *New York Review of Books*, 09.10.1986.
21. M. IGNATIEFF, *On Civil Society: Why Eastern Europe’s Revolutions could Succeed*, in: *Foreign Affairs*, March-April 1995.

Tavani argues, set in motion a process of mutual reinforcement of *Ost-* and *Westpolitik*.

Prime Minister Thatcher publicly entered the debate on Central Europe when she talked about her aspirations while visiting Hungary in February 1984. On that occasion she uncharacteristically embraced the FCO briefing without reserve and expressed her wish to contribute to the creation of a society “Central rather than Eastern European in character”.<sup>22</sup>

Politicians as well as engaged individuals played key roles in the debate on the European transformation on both sides of the European divide in the 1980s and the essays in this issue offer valuable insights and reflections on how the “human factor” played out in Britain in the 1980s.<sup>23</sup> In a recent conversation Timothy Garton Ash recalled:

“I do not think we created a sort of international civil society, a network of intellectual in Eastern and Western Europe a liberating “internazionale”. But, first of all, particular individual matters a lot in history, and individuals who mattered a lot in 1989 were often intellectuals.<sup>24</sup>

## Britain, the EC and the Eastern dimension

How did the European Community dimension play into this?

Stephen Wall, the Head of the European Community Department and Private Secretary to three successive Foreign Secretaries and to Tony Blair, points out that Thatcher’s tough style in pursuit of the rebate in the first half of the 1980s made the deal ultimately possible but convinced her partners that she did not understand the Community. When the UK delegation at the Fontainebleau Summit of 25-26<sup>th</sup> June 1984 submitted a document called “Europe-the future” which Wall himself describes

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22. FCO Steering Brief, Prime Minister’s visit to Hungary, 02.-04.02.1984, FOIA request 2007 by I. Poggolini, for the Machiavelli Centre, now online at [www.margaretthatcher.org](http://www.margaretthatcher.org).
23. For an approach to détente and the end of the Cold War focused on individuals and movements and in general on a larger picture than the strictly political or diplomatic one, see J SURI, *Power and Protest: Global Revolutions and the Rise of Détente*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2005; W. WOHLFORTH (ed.), *Cold War Endgame: Oral History, Analysis, Debate*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 2003; O.A. WESTAD (ed.), *Reviewing the Cold War: Approaches, Interpretations, Theory*, Frank Cass, London, 2000; M.E. SAROTTE, 1989: *The struggle to create Post Cold War Europe*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2009.
24. Timothy Garton Ash in conversation with Ilaria Poggolini, 22.10.2009, St. Antony’s College Oxford. See also T. GARTON ASH, *We the people: the revolution of 1989 as witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague*, Granta Paperback, Cambridge, 1990; T. GARTON ASH, *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe*, Granta, Cambridge, 1989

as the “most complete and coherent statement of European policy made by any British government”, the event passed almost unnoticed.<sup>25</sup>

Now that the contents of the document have been made available, we know that it rested primarily on the idea of the Single Market as the main unfulfilled objective of the original Treaty of Rome, but listed also other areas of British interest in fostering European cooperation. Among the most relevant were: research and development, common external policies, improved European defence, environmental coordination and efforts to bring the Community closer to the lives of European citizens. The timing and place chosen for the presentation of “Europe-the future” indicated that the controversy regarding the rebate could be set aside and that Britain would now make her contribution to the European project. As far as our partial access to the archives suggests, nothing came of this initiative, adding yet one more “missed opportunity” to a long list of missed turning points in the relationship between Britain and Europe.

Indeed, the EC was soon to be the cause of the widening gap between Thatcher and her diplomats although they remained close in carrying on British *Ostpolitik*, as in the occasion of Thatcher’s visit to Poland in November 1988. In Gdansk with Solidarity’s leaders or in Warsaw with Wojciech Jaruzelski, Thatcher ended up by urging caution on both sides notwithstanding her instincts to encourage the radical opposition and “do battle with the communist authorities”<sup>26</sup>.

In the fall of 1988 before the Polish trip, Thatcher delivered her most controversial statement on Europe at the College of Europe in Bruges on September 1988. Passages of the speech are often quoted with enthusiasm by eurosceptics. As recalled by Wall, the genesis of the famous Bruges speech was a long process of writing and re-writing,<sup>27</sup> up to the last moments when the draft, rewritten by Charles Powell, was “batted backwards and forwards across Downing Street”. Wall, who was directly involved in the preparation of the speech, argues that:

“the shocked reaction to the speech in much of Europe at the time, as well as the iconic status it has achieved among Euro-sceptics, owed much to the way it was briefed to the Press by Mrs Thatcher’s spokesman, Bernard Ingham”.

In many ways, Wall believes, the speech was no more than “a classic exposition of British views” and Thatcher’s first guiding principle in the Bruges speech (“willing and active cooperation between independent sovereign states is the best way to build a successful European Community”) “was taken, almost word for word by Tony Blair as his defining vision when he spoke in Oxford in February 2006”.<sup>28</sup>

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25. Stephen Wall’s witness remarks on this issue. See also S. WALL, *A stranger in Europe. Britain and the EU from Thatcher to Blair*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008, p.41.

26. M. THATCHER, op.cit., pp.778-782.

27. Documentation on the genesis of the speech is now available at [www.margaretthatcher.org](http://www.margaretthatcher.org).

28. S. WALL, op.cit, pp.78-81; I. POGGIOLOGI, *Britain’s problem: how to be nice about Europe*, in: *The Political Quarterly*, 1(2009), pp.136-140.

Yet Thatcher's exposition of the British view at Bruges was particularly damaging because it came after a basic failure of the British Europeanists to promote a fresh start and after the end of the brief parenthesis of active engagement in the creation of Single European Act. It also further raised the level of confrontation between the Prime Minister and the President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, by responding publicly to what she had interpreted as a personal challenge delivered on her own ground: Delors' speech to the British Trade Union Congress on September 8<sup>th</sup> 1988. At Bruges Thatcher denied that the European Community was the main manifestation of European identity, rejected the move towards more centralisation of power in the EEC and made clear that she would not have "successfully ruled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at the European level with a European super-state exercising a new dominance from Brussels". This line of her speech overshadowed everything else she said, including her noteworthy appeal for the return of Eastern Europe to the freedom of Western Europe. By 1988, her conviction that more idealism could be found on the other side of the Iron Curtain than on the Western side was the result of her frustration with the project of the Single Market. She now charged against the "European super state" on behalf of Britain as well as of Eastern Europe and of their common struggle for liberal values and the open society.<sup>29</sup> This is a linkage of great importance in UK's EC policies and its policies towards Eastern Europe in the late Thatcher's years.

However, Thatcher's ideas of freedom did not help her to understand that there was no necessary contradiction in a liberalisation that develops swiftly into liberation as in the German case. According to Timothy Garton Ash, also one of the specialists invited to the seminar on the future of Germany held at Chequers in March 1990, "she definitely missed the moment completely because of her totally misguided and anachronistic reaction to German reunification and fear that the acceleration would undermine Gorbachev".<sup>30</sup> Thatcher's inability to adjust to the transformation of 1989 deprived her of a share in two European successes: the reunification of Germany and the opening of the EC/EU door to Central Eastern Europe. However, her personal and political relationship with Gorbachev and the long term achievement of British *Ostpolitik* were important factors in the wider process leading to the end of the Cold War.

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29. "Arguably", Thatcher wrote, "it was the Czech, Poles and Hungarians who were the real – indeed the last – European 'idealists'". M. THATCHER, op.cit., p.744.

30. Timothy Garton Ash in conversation with Ilaria Poggolini, 22.10.2009, St. Antony's College Oxford; see also Powell to Garton Ash, Meeting at Chequers on 19.03.1990, [www.Margaretthatcher.org](http://www.Margaretthatcher.org).

# Margaret Thatcher and Perceptions of Change in the Soviet Union

Archie BROWN

In the 1970s and well into the second half of the 1980s there was a variety of views on how change could come about in the Soviet Union and in Communist states more generally. Not everyone, though, wished even to pose that question. One widely-held assumption was that the Soviet Union was impervious to change. At a conference (in which I participated) its chairman, a retired British ambassador, summed up the proceedings by saying, to murmurs of approval from prominent members of the foreign policy communities in Britain and the United States: 'There's one thing we all know. The Soviet Union isn't going to change'. That statement was made in February 1985 – one month before Mikhail Gorbachev succeeded Konstantin Chernenko as General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and embarked on reform of the USSR. By 1988 Gorbachev had come to the conclusion that the system needed to be fundamentally transformed. Liberalisation and, subsequently, democratisation of the Soviet system (a process that remained, however, incomplete both then and in post-Soviet Russia) were consciously pursued by Gorbachev. The break-up of the Soviet state was, in contrast, an entirely unintended consequence of the pluralisation of the political system.<sup>1</sup>

The pre-perestroika notion that the Soviet Union was largely immune to change, especially of a democratising kind, went along with a view that the most that could be achieved was to manage the relationship with the Communist world in a way which avoided crises and reduced the risk of nuclear war. It implied 'business as usual' over the long term. That outlook undoubtedly had its adherents within the British Foreign Office. Some officials there had, indeed, concluded that, since attempts at radical change in Communist countries were doomed to failure, it was foolish even to try. I recall having a very vigorous argument with two FCO exponents of such 'realism' in the early 1970s. One was a leading Foreign Office specialist on Czechoslovakia and the other, who also had a primary specialisation on East-Central Europe, went

1. For my substantiation of the points briefly made in that opening paragraph, see A. BROWN, *The Gorbachev Factor*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996; A. BROWN, *Seven Years that Changed the World: Perestroika in Perspective*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007; and A. BROWN, *The Rise and Fall of Communism*, Bodley Head, London, 2009. So far as the break-up of the Union is concerned, the continued membership within it of the Baltic republics was essentially incompatible with democratisation. However, there was nothing preordained about all fifteen union republics becoming separate states, in spite of the fact that they had institutional resources that, in the transformed political climate, they could use to pursue independence. For differing evaluations of the reasons for the dissolution of the Soviet state, see M.R. BEISSINGER, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002; V.J. BUNCE, *Subversive Institutions: The Design and the Destruction of Socialism and the State*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999; and S.F. COHEN, *Soviet Fates and Lost Alternatives: From Stalinism to the New Cold War*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2009.