Political and Personal: Gorbachev, Thatcher and the End of the Cold War

Witness Remarks

Andrei GRACHEV

The "special relationship" between Mikhail Gorbachev and Margaret Thatcher undoubtedly played an essential role in the process of rapprochement and the building of understanding between the new Soviet leadership and the leaders of the major Western powers. During the years of perestroika this singular mix of politics and personal chemistry originally came about as one of those accidents of history. The British Prime Minister was the only a major Western leader who had the chance to meet this untypical future Soviet General Secretary before he was elected officially to that post; a representative of the new political generation, it was still by no means certain that he would be chosen.[1]

For Gorbachev, it really was only by chance in late 1984 that Thatcher became his first top-level Western contact. Having succeeded Mikhail Suslov as chief ideologist of the Politburo, he also inherited the role of Chairman of the Supreme Soviet Foreign Affairs Committee. It was largely accidental that this should have meant that he would lead a Supreme Soviet delegation to Britain. However, for Thatcher it was rather different. She was curious about Gorbachev and keen to meet him. Her interest had been aroused some time before, probably at the noted Chequers seminar on 8 September 1983 where Archie Brown pointed to him as a future General Secretary, describing him as an unusual Soviet political figure and certainly the most promising.

According to the memoirs of Anatoly Chernyaev, who became Gorbachev's principal assistant for international affairs (he remains the main source of first-hand information about the development of this political "romance"), the story of the visit started quite prosaically at the end of September 1984. Chernyaev, who at that time was deputy head of the International Department of the Central Committee and responsible for contacts with British left-wing political parties, recalls that after he had accompanied Gorbachev to a meeting with a delegation of the British Communist

1. Andrei Grachev is a Russian political analyst and journalist, Ph. D in history from the Academy of Social Sciences, Moscow (1976), presently editorialist for the *Novaya Gazeta* (Russia) and Chairman of the Scientific Committee of The World Political Forum. Grachev was Consultant and Deputy Director on the International Department of the Central Committee of CPSU (1974-1987), adviser and official Spokesman for Mikhail Gorbachev until his resignation in December 1991 and senior research fellow in the Institute of World Economy and International relations, Russian Academy of Science (Moscow) between 1992-1995. Grachev held positions of Visiting Professor in Kyoto and Paris and of Senior Researcher in Oxford. Among his books in Russian, French and English: *L'Histoire vraie de la fin de l'URSS* (1992); *La chute du Kremlin. L'empire du non-sens* (1994); *Meeting of Civilizations: Clash or Dialogue?*, UNESCO (1996); *Le mystère Gorbatchev. La terre et le destin* (2004); *Gorbachev's Gamble. Soviet Foreign Policy and the End of Cold War* (2008.).

https://doi.org/10.5771/0947-9511-2010-1-45 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.60, am 24.01.2026, 19:17:49. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

Party, Gorbachev rang him and mentioned a possible trip to Britain at the head of a Soviet parliamentary delegation. Chernyaev enthusiastically supported the idea and tried to convince Gorbachev to profit from this visit, above all with regard to foreign policy issues. It could be a chance to place additional emphasis on Soviet European policy as well as to soften the anti-American confrontationist hard line characteristic of Gromyko-led Soviet diplomacy at that time.

Yet it became apparent during their conversation that for Gorbachev the main interest of the trip lay elsewhere – in the realm of internal policy. As Gorbachev indicated to Chernyaev, he apparently regarded the proposed visit as an opportunity not only to start breaking Gromyko's monopoly domination over Soviet foreign policy but even more as an occasion for sending a political message to the Western world from the new generation of Soviet political leaders.[2]

In Gromyko's time, Soviet relations with Britain were on the "back burner": the long-serving head of Soviet foreign policy was convinced that his privileged partner in the West was Washington. British diplomacy, especially in the Thatcher years, appeared to Moscow to be largely subordinate to US global strategy and insufficiently 'European-minded' for the UK to be regarded as an independent player worthy of particular attention. At the same time, it is quite possible that Thatcher, starting her second term as Prime Minister, decided to change this situation. She could not have relished being permanently regarded by the Soviet Union merely as America's junior partner, while enviously observing France and West Germany successfully elaborating their own political strategies vis-à-vis Moscow: the French had Charles de Gaulle's widely proclaimed vision of a Europe "from the Atlantic to the Urals", while the Germans embraced Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*. Yet with Soviet diplomacy stagnating, with the anti-Western arrogance of the late Brezhnev years and the hopeless image projected by his immediate successors, Juri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko, there was very little space for an innovative British initiative in the direction of Moscow. That is why Thatcher must impatiently have been looking ahead to the post-Chernenko era, trying to work out who could become his successor.

Chernyaev, whose formal sector of professional concern was limited to the CPSU's contacts with the British Communist Party and to a much lesser extent with the British Labour Party and trade union leaders, was certainly sensitive to the signals coming from the UK political elite, which is why he had reason to tell Gorbachev that he was impatiently awaited "by everybody including Madame".[3]

For a number of reasons Gorbachev's December 15-21 1984 visit to Britain turned into a remarkable political event far beyond the modest objective of eroding Gromyko's monopoly control over Soviet foreign policy. And not only because within three months, the relatively obscure ideology chief of the Central Committee was propelled to the position of one of the two most influential world leaders.

2. A.S. CHERNYAEV, *Shest' let s Gorbachevym: Po dnevnikovym zapisyam*, Kul'tura, Moscow, 1993, p.25.
3. Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.5771/0947-9511-2010-1-45 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.60, am 24.01.2026, 19:17:49. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

Chernyaev himself was not misled by Gorbachev's apparent modesty. In his diary he noted at the time: "He has big plans".

In fact, after Gorbachev's first trip abroad (in July 1984) in his status as the "new Suslov" to attend the funeral of the Italian Communist leader Enrique Berlinguer, his coming to London offered him an opportunity to step beyond his formal position as the second man in the Party hierarchy as he tried on the attire of "shadow head of State", responsible not only for doctrinal questions but also for crucial political and diplomatic issues. This potential aspect of the visit did not escape Gromyko, which explains his formal objection to the idea that Gorbachev would be accompanied on the trip by his first deputy, Georgy Kornienko. Later Gromyko went so far as to reprimand Anatoly Dobrynin, the influential Soviet Ambassador in Washington, for, in spite of his considerable experience, overrating the significance of an "average parliamentary delegation". Dobrynin's offence had been to send cables to Moscow describing the great attention given to Gorbachev's British visit by Washington political circles and the American press.[4]

However the main, even if undeclared, foreign policy goal of Gorbachev's visit to a Western capital was to serve as an informal spokesman for a new generation of Soviet political leaders preparing to replace the "old guard". The main message, therefore, was a general one: Gorbachev wanted to transmit the idea to the Soviet Union's Western partners that the future Soviet leadership would be willing to put an end to an epoch of sterile and dangerous confrontation. At that time, Gorbachev's motivation was closely related to the pragmatic priorities of his internal political plans (even if at this stage they still looked rather vague). In his opinion the only chance to overcome the growing gap in development separating his country from the West, and to raise the standard of living of its population, largely depended on the possibility of ending the arms race and easing the burden of militarisation that was crushing the Soviet economy.

Naturally, in his conversations with Margaret Thatcher, both at 10 Downing street and during the unusually long (unprecedented for any Soviet dignitary) discussions at Chequers, Gorbachev did not present any concrete proposals – he was certainly not authorised to do so and probably personally was not yet ready. But he did produce charts drafted by the Soviet General Staff showing Soviet and Western nuclear missiles targeted at each other and capable of destroying life on Earth a thousand times over, and he spoke of the absurdity of the logic of overkill. His main arguments, as he recalls, were taken not from the ideological dictionary but inspired by common sense.[5]

However, in several public speeches delivered in London, Gorbachev did reveal certain important aspects of his reflections on foreign policy issues. Thus, when addressing British members of parliament, he referred for the first time to a "Common European Home", although at that point it was still more a metaphor than a political

4. Author's personal record of Dobrynin's remarks on the subject, December 2, 1989.
5. M.S. GORBACHEV, *Zhizn' i reformy*, Novosti, Moscow, 1995, Vol.1, p.258.

https://doi.org/10.5771/0947-9511-2010-1-45 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.60, am 24.01.2026, 19:17:49. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

project. He also declared that "the nuclear age inevitably dictates new political thinking".[6]

It took Gorbachev about three years to formulate this concept in concrete terms and present it in his book Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World. But it was not his innovative proposals or initiatives that impressed his British hosts, but rather his style, apparent open-mindedness and sense of humour; they were delighted to discover that he was most unlike a stereotypical apparatchik and behaved like a normal human being. He spoke freely, answered questions without resorting to notes, made jokes himself and laughed at the jokes of others. He also clearly was fond and proud of his elegant wife Raisa who accompanied him to London. All this produced a political effect far more significant than any that could have come simply as a result of a well-planned diplomatic mission.

As for his personal relations with Margaret Thatcher, the visit marked the beginning of an exceptional political collaboration between two outstanding leaders based on mutual respect, perhaps even admiration. They both understood that each had a specific role in the delicate process of overcoming the legacy of the Cold War, while the special chemistry between them suggested a striking similarity of character despite all the ideological differences. Thatcher apparently was seduced by the straightforwardness of Gorbachev and even admitted this herself, speaking to him in March 1987 during her visit to Moscow: "We have similar characters. We both want to pronounce the last word". As for Chernyaev's personal impressions, he confirms that Gorbachev was usually more open with her than with other Western leaders.[7]

Later Thatcher gave the following explanation of her own unusually enthusiastic résumé of their first meeting in London: "His personality could not have been more different from the wooden ventriloquism of the average Soviet apparatchik […]. I found myself liking him".[8] In the years that followed, Margaret Thatcher continued to profit from a kind of privileged position among all other Western leaders in contacts with Gorbachev which naturally was beneficial for Britain's international status. I agree with Archie Brown who has written that

> "Margaret Thatcher was able to become a more important partner of the Soviet Union, on the one hand, and the United States, on the other, than any British Prime Minister since Churchill".[9]

However, Thatcher's role in the history of the end of the Cold War and her participation in the demolition of the Iron Curtain (its existence first announced by her illustrious predecessor in 1946) was not just a question of "discovering" Gorbachev. Until her resignation and even subsequently, she remained one of the most attentive observers of Gorbachev's endeavour and an enthusiastic supporter of his project of perestroika. Paradoxically, on a number of occasions she was much more supportive

6. Ibid., p.257, and Vol.2, p.70.
7. A.S. CHERNYAEV, *Shest' let s Gorbachevym* ..., op.cit., p.135.
8. M. THATCHER, *The Downing Street Years*, HarperCollins, London, 1993, p.461.
9. A. BROWN, *The Gorbachev Factor*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996, p.243.

https://doi.org/10.5771/0947-9511-2010-1-45 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.60, am 24.01.2026, 19:17:49. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

of Gorbachev's domestic strategies than of some of his foreign policy initiatives such as the INF Treaty, the abolition of nuclear weapons or his approach to German unification where she was either sceptical or openly critical. It was the consistency of her support for Gorbachev's domestic project that prompted Chernyaev to declare that "Thatcher's position on perestroika set the pace for our recognition by the West". Gorbachev greatly appreciated this, saying that Thatcher "had honestly tried to help us by mobilizing the West's help for perestroika".[10]

Yet perhaps "paradox" is not the appropriate term. It was an interesting aspect of Thatcher's understanding of Gorbachev that either intuitively or out of political wisdom she realized that for Gorbachev himself, his innovative foreign policy was, if not secondary, then certainly subordinate to his main project of internal political reform. This, in turn, meant that the global, strategic and long-term benefit for the West in dealing with Gorbachev would come less from some concrete, practical and ultimately short-term successful deals or gains in the field of foreign policy bargaining but more from the long-term results of his ambitious plans for the internal transformation and modernization of his country, its society and its political system.

I can think only of one other Western politician – François Mitterrand – who to the same degree as Thatcher paid much more attention to Gorbachev's internal perestroika than to his new thinking on foreign affairs. George Bush and Helmut Kohl, each for their own reasons, were anxious to seize maximum profit from Gorbachev's stay in the Kremlin, seeking to "lock in the change" that he personified, the former in the field of security and the strategic balance between the superpowers, the latter on the question of German reunification. Thatcher and Mitterrand were sincere fans of political perestroika and behaved accordingly, although they differed in their political and ideological aspirations. Mitterrand, the French socialist, envisaged the realisation of a century-old dream of European social democracy – not so much of the ruin of Soviet Bolshevism but, far better, its historic repentance and conversion into a social democratic model, thus confirming the historic victory of reformist socialism over the revolutionary model. Thatcher, on the other hand, was betting on an eventual triumph of liberal values in the Soviet economy and polity that in the long run would totally transform Russia, bringing it back to Europe and linking it to the West.

Even after she left office, Thatcher did not abandon her efforts to assist Gorbachev in his reform project, considering it to be a historic chance both for Russia and the world. Jack Matlock, the American Ambassador to Moscow, has recorded that when Thatcher was on a private visit to Moscow in the summer of 1991, he was invited to a meeting with her in the residence of the British Ambassador, Sir Rodric Braithwaite. There the former Prime Minister asked him to transmit her emotional appeal to President Bush to stop looking for excuses and find a way to help Gorbachev.[11] In July of the same year during the G-7 summit in London, Thatcher, aware of its unhappy results for Gorbachev, visited him in the Soviet embassy and expressed her disap-

10. A.S. CHERNYAEV, *My Six Years with Gorbachev*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 2000, p.222.
11. Author's conversation with Jack Matlock, October 22, 1999.

https://doi.org/10.5771/0947-9511-2010-1-45 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.60, am 24.01.2026, 19:17:49. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

pointment with the position taken by the majority of G-7 leaders. Pavel Palazchenko, who translated their conversation, cites her as saying: "I know they let you down", adding:

> "How couldn't they understand that what is most important at present is really to support Gorbachev and undertake important moves in order to consolidate what you have started in the USSR".[12]

Coming back to December 1984, it is important to remember that for Gorbachev also the encouraging outcome of his first official political mission abroad played an extremely important role. Significantly, it gave him psychological assurance. Having successfully passed the "Thatcher test", especially since the "iron lady" had the reputation of being a top political professional and certainly a "tough nut" for anybody to deal with and perhaps especially for him, given her outspoken anticommunism, the future General Secretary could now feel assured that "if he could make it in London, he could make it anywhere".

Next, and rather quickly afterwards, came the first political dividends from the London visit; not only did Thatcher famously announce: "I like Mr. Gorbachev. We can do business together",[13] but within days after her meeting with Gorbachev she flew to Washington to convey her positive impressions to the US President Ronald Reagan. Thatcher's recommendation was extremely important since according to the US Secretary of State George Shultz, Reagan "had immense confidence in her and her views carried great weight".[14] In the words of Reagan himself (cited by Archie Brown),

> "she told me that Gorbachev was different from any of the other Kremlin leaders. She believed that there was a chance for a great opening. Of course, she was proven exactly right".[15]

Gorbachev's visit to Britain was important for him personally also for another reason. Just as his previous trip to Italy in July of the same year, it marked an important step in his education as a future political leader. Even though it was far from his first visit to a Western country, in many aspects, as again notes Archie Brown, this journey was "an eye-opening one for him".[16] One might even say that thanks to this visit, with its various components that included meetings with the parliamentarians, the Prime Minister and several members of her cabinet, opposition leaders and the press (the coverage of the visit by some of the British tabloids turned into a real baptism of fire for Gorbachev and especially for Raisa), Gorbachev for the first time was able to step into a typical Western "political kitchen" (in its perhaps peculiar but highly instructive British version). Another specific feature of the event was the fact that Gorbachev

12. P. R. PALAZCHENKO, *Chto za slovom?*, in: V.B. KUVALDIN, A.B. VEBER (eds.), *Proryv k svobode. O perestroike dvadtsat' let spustya*, Al'pina Biznes Buks, Moscow, 2005, pp.274.
13. *Financial Times*, 22.12.1984.
14. G.P. SHULTZ, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State*, Charles Scribner's, New York, 1993, pp.508-509.
15. A. BROWN, *The Gorbachev Factor*, op.cit., p.335, n.121.
16. Ibid., p.77.

https://doi.org/10.5771/0947-9511-2010-1-45 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.60, am 24.01.2026, 19:17:49. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

could bring with him some of those who were to become future members of his political team and group of experts: Alexander Yakovlev, Academician Evgeny Velikhov, Anatoly Kovalev (future first deputy of Edward Shevardnadze) and General Nikolay Chervov from the Soviet General Staff.

Because of the sudden death of one of the strongmen in Moscow, Marshal Dmitry Ustinov (an ally in the Politburo), Gorbachev was obliged to shorten his British programme by one day. Less than three months later, on 10 March 1985, came the death of Konstantin Chernenko, General Secretary for little more than a year. This opened the way for Gorbachev's long-awaited election to this post.

It was, of course, for Gorbachev, and not out of any desire to pay tribute to Chernenko, that an exceptional group of global leaders came to Moscow for the funeral in March 1985. And naturally Thatcher was among them. It may be worth citing again Chernyaev's record of their short but by now informal encounter on this occasion since apparently Gorbachev singled it out among the marathon series of obligatory meetings with foreign leaders during these days:

> "'Madam' [later between themselves Gorbachev and Chernyaev often referred to Thatcher as 'Margo'] was all compliments and charm. He responded in kind. Apparently, she doesn't just want to conduct politics with her good looks, she banks on using Gorbachev to get the better of Kohl, Mitterrand and even Reagan himself. It seems she also enjoys exercising her feminine wiles on Gorbachev in particular".[17]

In the years that followed the two leaders never missed an occasion to meet, although there were not too many opportunities. The rigid rules of diplomatic protocol during what was still a rather precarious political climate – it was only the first stage of global political warming - would not, for example, allow Thatcher to fly to Moscow to watch the Bolshoi in the way that Tony Blair, a decade later and impatient to meet Vladimir Putin, came to St Petersburg for a performance of the Kirov ballet. Also, Gorbachev's ultra-intensive schedule, imposed by the torrent of perestroika, did not leave him much chance to select visitors to his liking. Out of the few meetings he had with Margaret Thatcher, perhaps her visit to Moscow in March 1987 was the richest in political and even emotional content.

From the very beginning the conversation between Gorbachev and Thatcher took the form of a fencing match. Thatcher was the first to attack. She argued that the "Brezhnev Doctrine" was still active, with Communism striving for global dominance. She pointed to Yemen, Angola, Nicaragua, Ethiopia, Mozambique, the Cuban troops in Africa, and went on: "And what about Afghanistan? That's why we say the foreign policy of communism aims to rule the world".[18]

Gorbachev was on the defensive and obliged to answer for the policies of his predecessors. Caught in the logic of formal diplomatic and ideological wrangling, he claimed that the Soviet Union never had a doctrine of spreading socialist revolution across the world. It was simply a question of socialism following capitalism where

17. A.S. CHERNYAEV, *My Six Years* ..., op.cit., p.23.
18. Ibid., p.100.

https://doi.org/10.5771/0947-9511-2010-1-45 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.60, am 24.01.2026, 19:17:49. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

people could no longer tolerate exploitation as in the case of Nicaragua. And yet even within this ritualistic exchange, he introduced an argument from his nascent philosophy of new thinking (which in the long run worked out in Thatcher's favour): freedom of choice. Suggesting that they end the ideological debate, Gorbachev proposed they agree that both capitalism and socialism were existing realities and that every people had to make its own choice between these alternatives. Gone was Nikita Khrushchev's promise "to bury" capitalism, which would end in "the ash-bin of history". By this time, as Chernyaev observes, Gorbachev already felt "the contradiction between the logic of perestroika and the logic of the system he was defending". Writing in the 1990s, Chernyaev observed that "in historical perspective, Thatcher turned out to be more correct".[19]

It could be argued that Thatcher actually helped Gorbachev to arrive at his own subsequent conclusion, that in order to go beyond peaceful coexistence and achieve cooperation with the West, the Soviet Union would have to change radically. Later, with the benefit of hindsight, Gorbachev himself admitted:

> "For us, Margaret Thatcher was not an easy partner, especially having in mind her anti-communism which sometimes prevented her from seeing things more realistically. Although in many cases she was able to illustrate her accusations with facts which *later* [italics added, AG] we ourselves began to subject to reappraisal".[20]

However, on the subject of nuclear weapons and disarmament, it was Thatcher's turn to have to defend and justify herself. By that time Gorbachev had proved how far he was prepared to go and that he "was genuinely committed to eliminating the burden of armaments and the nuclear threat". He showed no hesitation in his counter attack. "You, Madam Thatcher, with your stance on nuclear weapons […] are an ardent supporter of those who are prepared to accept the risk of war". Chernyaev, in his role of amazed observer, notes that the heated character of the debate "strangely enough […] only strengthened their mutual sympathy".[21]

Yet, Gorbachev's respect and even admiration for this hard-line British Amazon should not be regarded as only a unique personal reaction. During her visit to the Soviet Union, and especially after she was interviewed on Soviet TV, "Margo" charmed the Soviet public probably even more than Gorbachev charmed the British during his first visit to London (taking into account the fact that he did not appear on television). And apparently this was not just the short-lived surprise effect of encountering an intelligent and dynamic woman in the role of successful politician. Two years later in 1989 according to a poll conducted by the major public opinion research institute VTsIOM, Soviet respondents named her the "woman of the year".[22]

19. Ibid., p.102.
20. M.S. GORBACHEV, *Ponyat' perestroyku… pochemu eto vazhno seychas*, Al'pina biznes buks, Moscow, 2006, p.190.
21. A.S. CHERNYAEV, *My Six Years …*, op.cit., pp.102-103.
22. A. BROWN, *Seven Years that Changed the World: Perestroika in Perspective*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007, p.235.

https://doi.org/10.5771/0947-9511-2010-1-45 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.60, am 24.01.2026, 19:17:49. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

Gorbachev successfully used Thatcher's 1987 visit to Moscow to solidify the foundations of his new foreign policy as part of the daily pedagogy in which he was engaged within the Politburo. "It was important to see what such people are really thinking", he said he in his report to the Politburo.

> "Thatcher is an ardent defender of Western interests […]. She is sincere but determined. She is greatly interested in everything that is going on in the Soviet Union […]. She was deeply impressed. Let her think about it".[23]

But having said this, Gorbachev moved on to the subjects on which the Politburo in turn had to reflect. He reproduced Thatcher's arguments about Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Afghanistan. "We are afraid of you", she said. "She's sure we have not given up the Brezhnev Doctrine. This is really something to ponder, comrades. We can't just brush it aside".[24]

Another consequence of the visit was that Gorbachev turned his attention to Western Europe. He said to his advisors:

> "We have to plan our European policy seriously. Maybe we should set up a European Research Center [a new academic Institute of Europe directed by Vitaly Zhurkin was established shortly afterwards]. And remember: Western Europe is our basic partner".[25]

Summing up his appraisal of Thatcher's visit, Gorbachev stressed the strategic place of Britain:

> "Thatcher is important not only in herself but also stands for both the US and the European direction which for us has a key significance. *The increase of Britain's role corresponds to our interests* [my italics, AG]".[26]

Gorbachev was supposed to pay a return visit to the UK at the end of 1988 on his way back from the UN General Assembly, but this trip had to be cancelled because of the Armenian earthquake. In fact while still in New York he learned about the event from Thatcher's telegram of condolence. His visit to Britain thus took place in April of the following year.

According to Chernyaev, Thatcher was lavish with high praise for Gorbachev in public, even in defiance of her own establishment and other Western leaders. He interpreted this as a reflection of her "two parts", part statesman motivated by principled, long-term concerns and part politician who, having placed her bet on Gorbachev, had a personal interest in his success.[27]

In his view, the practical significance of this 1989 meeting lay less in bringing closer their respective positions on disarmament and regional affairs (the two continued to argue about nuclear strategy) but in the fact that Thatcher, along with Kohl and Mitterrand later, did much to ease Gorbachev's suspicion that the new US Pres-

23. A.S. CHERNYAEV, *My Six Years* ..., op.cit., p.104.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., p.105.
26. A.S. CHERNYAEV, *Shest' let s Gorbachevym* ..., op.cit., p.138.
27. A.S. CHERNYAEV, *My Six Years* ..., op.cit., p.221.

https://doi.org/10.5771/0947-9511-2010-1-45 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.60, am 24.01.2026, 19:17:49. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

ident Bush would veer off the course that he and Reagan had established. At that time Gorbachev complained to Thatcher about the "meditation pause" taken by the American administration in order to formulate its own position regarding the Soviet perestroika and its leader. Remembering her role in establishing his contact with Reagan, he tried to use her as an intermediary to pass on a message to the US President.

Reporting to the Politburo on 13 April 1989 about his visit to the UK Gorbachev said:

> "I like Thatcher's independence […]. It's always interesting to debate with her […]. You can talk to her about anything. And she understands it all. She is a reliable person. Each time we argue vehemently about nuclear weapons she is obliged to fight back. She feels the flaws in her position. She realistically evaluates the situation that perestroika has created in the world. And doesn't hesitate to confirm that 'they need' our perestroika. So here we can observe the real turn in people's minds".[28]

Chernyaev reports an interesting detail from the discussion of the "Margaret phenomenon" on the plane that brought Gorbachev and his team back from London. During the exchange of impressions about the visit between Shevardnadze, Yakovlev and Raisa Gorbacheva, among others, Chernyaev reproached Gorbachev for being so restrained with Thatcher. He elaborated on this, once again enthusiastically praising her position. Gorbachev defended himself: "There's nothing wrong with that […]. She and I are different".[29] The original Russian version of Chernyaev's diary gives an amusing continuation of the conversation: "The women present advanced their own version of Gorbachev's restraint: Look at their photo in *Moscow News*: real lovers".[30] It is certainly true that the two were quite different. On another occasion, for example, Chernyaev speaks of Thatcher as "stubborn and sometimes didactic", which can hardly be said about Gorbachev. This characteristic of Thatcher is rather reminiscent of Raisa. It could be that in this similarity between the two women, one can find the explanation for Gorbachev's attraction to both.

The unexpected acceleration of the process of German unification in the autumn of 1989 forced the two leaders to have a series of emergency consultations with the idea of coordinating their position. When Margaret Thatcher came to Moscow in September, she had raised the question of German unity which at that time still looked like a largely hypothetical and distant possibility. "She explained to Gorbachev that Germany's allies were apprehensive about German reunification despite their traditional statements in support", writes Rodric Brathwaite who had become British Ambassador to Moscow the previous year. Reacting to Thatcher's concerns, Gorbachev politely agreed, saying that the Russians did not want German reunification either. This rather abstract exchange of generalities created an ambiguity which was confirmed two months later after the fall of the Berlin wall and especially after the surprise

28. *V Politbyuro TsK KPSS ...* [Records of Politburo sessions according to the notes of Anatoly Chernyaev, Vadim Medvedev, Georgy Shakhnazarov, (1985–1991)], Al'pina Biznes Buks, Moscow, 2006, p.469.
29. A.S. CHERNYAEV, *My Six Years ...*, op.cit., p. 222.
30. A.S. CHERNYAEV, *Shest' let s Gorbachevym ...*, op.cit.,,p.289.

https://doi.org/10.5771/0947-9511-2010-1-45 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.60, am 24.01.2026, 19:17:49. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

announcement by Kohl of his ten-point programme of accelerated rapprochement between the two German states. Thatcher and Gorbachev found themselves in a situation where each had to react almost daily to the precipitate development of the situation. The British Prime Minister's initial reaction to the spectre of a united Germany suddenly becoming a reality was more emotional than political. She convinced herself that Gorbachev, both for strategic as well as for internal political reasons, would categorically oppose it, using not only political arguments but perhaps even military objections as well. But as Braithwaite justly remarks,

> "she had misunderstood Gorbachev: he did not intend to stand uselessly against the tide of history. His problem was a different one: to extract the best bargain he could in exchange for Russia's inevitable retreat".[31]

After the fall of the wall on 9 November, and particularly after Kohl presented his 10-point programme to the Bundestag, Thatcher, in private conversations with Gorbachev (in some cases she even asked Chernyaev to stop taking notes), and Mitterrand shared their concerns about the "unpredictable consequences" and the risks of "international destabilization" that could arise from the speedy German march to unity. Vadim Medvedev, who led a Soviet parliamentary delegation to London in March 1990, reports that his face-to-face conversation with the "iron lady" left him with the clear impression that she not only did not welcome the unification of Germany, but ardently hoped that Gorbachev would block it. However, despite all the prompting he was receiving from Thatcher and Mitterrand, Gorbachev was quite conscious of the fact that neither of them would ever publicly express their reservations about the structure and timing of German unification. "They were counting on us to slow it down and if possible to block the process", according to Vadim Zagladin.[32] Chernyaev's interpretation is similar:

> "Gorbachev realized that Thatcher and Mitterrand would never conspire with him against the Germans, especially after Bush made his views known. It was also clear to him that they would like to use him as a braking mechanism. Yet since it was obvious that the process of unification had already begun and could not be stopped, he feared that it might go ahead without him and would consequently be directed against him".[33]

As Rodric Braithwaite has noted:

> "In June 1990, Thatcher came to Moscow for her last visit as Prime Minister. By then her position had changed, and she tried to convince Gorbachev that the presence of a united Germany in NATO would be of positive advantage to the Soviet Union".[34]

By that time Gorbachev had already made his decision and Thatcher's arguments just proved to him that he was right not to follow the initial advice of the British and

31. R. BRAITHWAITE, *Across the Moscow River. The World Turned Upside Down*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2002, p.136.
32. Author's interview with Zagladin, December 1, 1997.
33. Author's interview with Chernyaev, February 10, 2000.
34. R. BRAITHWAITE, *Across the Moscow River* ..., op.cit. p.137.

https://doi.org/10.5771/0947-9511-2010-1-45 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.60, am 24.01.2026, 19:17:49. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

French leaders who both, having panicked at the prospect of the resurrection of the German giant, tried to incite him to block this process.

The last official contact between the two leaders took place in November 1990 in Paris during the OCSE conference that ended with the signing of the Charter of the New Europe and the conclusion of the CFE Treaty. Thatcher was soon after forced to resign by a revolt inside her own party. Gorbachev was able rapidly to forge friendly relations with John Major, largely thanks to his special relations with Thatcher. But in the course of the next year he, too, was forced to resign in the aftermath of two successive plots staged against him. The first took place in August 1991 in the form of a putsch jointly prepared by his conservative adversaries; several months later came the second, a conspiracy of the three leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Byelorussia who announced the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Galina Starovoitova, a member of the Yeltsin team and future member of the Russian parliament (she was assassinated in 1998 in St Petersburg), happened to be in London in August 1991. She reported that when she called on Thatcher during those days, she could see how worried Thatcher was about the fate of Gorbachev - he had been arrested by the putschists at his summer residence in Crimea - and that it was Thatcher who proposed the setting up of an international investigation mission that could go to Russia to make sure that Gorbachev's life was not endangered.

https://doi.org/10.5771/0947-9511-2010-1-45 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.60, am 24.01.2026, 19:17:49. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

Making the Single Market

Witness Remarks

Stephen WALL

As early as 1982, Margaret Thatcher reported to the House of Commons that she had, at a meeting of the European Council, stressed to her fellow Heads of Government the vital need to complete the single market in services.[1]

The European Council in Fontainebleau in June 1984 was most notable for its resolution of the long and bloody battle over the British EU budget contribution. But at that meeting Thatcher also gave to her fellow leaders a booklet, drafted in the British Cabinet Office and Foreign Office. Although it was not written by Thatcher, she had read it and approved it which, in her case, invariably meant reading every word. "We must" said the pamphlet

> "create the genuine common market in goods and services which is envisaged in the Treaty of Rome and will be crucial to our ability to meet the US and Japanese technological challenge. Only by a sustained effort to removing remaining obstacles to intra-Community trade can we enable the citizens of Europe to benefit from the dynamic effects of a fully integrated common market with immense purchasing power…We must create the conditions in which European businessmen too can build on their strengths and create prosperity and jobs. This means action to harmonise standards and prevent their deliberate use as barriers to intra-Community trade; more rapid and better coordinated procedures; a major effort to improve mutual recognition of professional qualifications; and liberalising trade in services, including banking, insurance and transportation of good and people […]".

Such was the importance Britain attached to the pamphlet that the British Ambassador in Bonn, Sir Julian Bullard, asked Chancellor Helmut Kohl's closest adviser, Horst Teltschik, whether there was anything in the British approach which the Germans found unacceptable or inadequate. Teltschik responded that the Germans found the British paper a very good starting point but Germany wanted not just to fulfil the existing Treaty, including by completing the single market, but to take a qualitative step forward in political union.

1. From 1979 to 1983, Stephen Wall served in the British Embassy in Washington. On return to the FCO he was Assistant Head and then Head of European Community Department (Internal). From 1988 to 1991, he was Private Secretary to three successive Foreign Secretaries (Geoffrey Howe, John Major and Douglas Hurd). From 1991 to 1993, he returned to N° 10 Downing Street as Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, John Major, responsible for Foreign Policy and Defence. Stephen Wall served as British Ambassador to Portugal from 1993 to 1995. He was the Permanent Representative to the European Union from 1995-2000. From 2000-2004 he was the Head of the European Secretariat in the Cabinet Office in London and EU adviser to the Prime Minister, Tony Blair. He is currently the official historian for the Cabinet Office. In 2008, he wrote *A Stranger in Europe, Britain and the EU from Thatcher to Blair*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

https://doi.org/10.5771/0947-9511-2010-1-45 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.60, am 24.01.2026, 19:17:49. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.