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. 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. 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. 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

transatlantic relations. 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.

**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


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 Poggiolini. 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 Poggiolini is indebted to the European and Russian-Eurasian Studies Centres at St. Antony’s College Oxford. Conversations with St. Antony’s former Warden, Lord Ralph 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.6

British archival sources and published documents, as well as documents released under the Freedom of Information Act,7 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 1989.8

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

8. I. POGGIOLINI, 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.9 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.10 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


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.11

From Moscow’s perspective, a key issue in any such 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.12 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 antinuclear 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.13 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.14 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

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.\textsuperscript{15}

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.\textsuperscript{16} 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.\textsuperscript{17} 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.\textsuperscript{18}

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.

\textsuperscript{15} M.S. GORBACHEV, Zhizn’ …, op.cit., p.83.
\textsuperscript{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.
\textsuperscript{17} Gorbachev comments in meeting with the British ambassador, Rodric Braithwaite, 15 June 1991, in V Politburo TsK KPSS, p.676.
\textsuperscript{18} Anatoliy 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.