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**Archie Brown.** "The Change to Engagement in Britain's Cold War Policy: The Origins of the Thatcher-Gorbachev Relationship." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 10:3 (Summer 2008): 3-47. DOI: 10.1162/jcws.2008.10.3.3. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2008.10.3.3> .

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In debates over how the Cold War ended—and where credit belongs for the rapid warming in Soviet-Western relations that made its peaceful dénouement possible—most attention naturally focuses on Moscow and Washington, and most discussion turns on the relative weighting of material vs. ideational factors. At least in the international relations (IR) literature, the main contention is between realists who see economic crisis as having left the USSR with no good options save for retreat from global competition, and constructivists and liberals who variously credit the norms of disarmament and global cooperation, or the networks and institutions that diffused them to Moscow. (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2000-01; English, 2000; Evangelista, 1999). Again, in IR scholarship, the role of individuals is seen as secondary at best, and that of leaders or advisers other than those of the main protagonists in the Kremlin or White House is even less considered.

Archie Brown—our preeminent biographer of Mikhail Gorbachev, and most persuasive advocate of “the Gorbachev factor” in the Cold War’s end—again makes us rethink our assumptions about this complex process and reconsider the role of leaders and key individuals in historic change (Brown, 1996). In fact, Brown’s goals in this article are far more modest, namely to shed new light on the “change to engagement in Britain’s Cold War policy” under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Specifically, his focus is on the role of academic and Foreign Office specialists in that change, as seen in two special “seminars” held at the prime minister’s Chequers country residence, in September 1983 and February, 1987. The first of these was pivotal, and accordingly is the object of much closer attention.

The 1983 seminar was pivotal in its own right, in the first instance, because it facilitated a notable shift for the conservative, stridently anti-communist Thatcher. She called the two-day meeting to reconsider “the government’s strategy in international affairs with a view to establishing clear aims for the next few years” as well as “practical action in furtherance of

these aims” (Brown, 2008, p. 4) Coming at a time when East-West relations were at a nadir (with the Euromissile crisis and collapse of arms talks, followed by downing of Korean Airlines Flight 007 and subsequent scandal) and with little or no sense in conservative circles that positive change from Moscow was likely anytime soon—“Gorbachev was only a speck on the horizon”—the origins of Mrs. Thatcher’s initiative remain a bit mysterious (*Ibid.*, pp. 4-5). Was it concern that East-West relations had grown unacceptably dangerous? An as-yet inchoate sense that positive evolution in the communist bloc was nevertheless possible? An instinct that the coupling of the two presented an opportunity for British diplomacy to play an important role in mediating East-West rivalry?

The latter, in Brown’s telling, was central; he cites Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe’s pre-seminar memo to Mrs. Thatcher:

At the moment Chancellor Kohl is effectively the only top level Western leader in close and direct contact with the Russians. The French will always be idiosyncratic; while in the United States, where Reagan could have a rough race on his hands next year, the tendency will continue to be for the Americans to see East/West relations mainly in domestic political terms. Our own unique relationship with the President and your standing in Europe and elsewhere can, it seems to me, give Britain a voice in the Alliance which it badly needs at a time when the Soviet campaign against INF deployment is obviously nearing a peak period. (*Ibid.*, p. 10)

This highlights the second respect in which the 1983 seminar, and Thatcher’s subsequent turn to engagement, was pivotal. That is, her impeccable conservative credentials together with her early embrace of Gorbachev—famously pronouncing “I like Mr. Gorbachev, we can do business together” after his visit to London in December, 1984, still several months before his election as General Secretary—positioned Britain to play an influential role in similarly encouraging Washington and Moscow toward rapprochement and reform. She was perhaps the only Western leader who could wield such influence on her friend and conservative counterpart Ronald Reagan, and certainly the only one who could similarly sway Mikhail Gorbachev (re Thatcher’s impact on Gorbachev see English 2000, pp. 219-220)

More on the Cold War dénouement in a moment. First, back to the events of 1983, which Brown illustrates citing documents released under Britain’s new “Freedom of Information” act as well as his extensive interviews with witnesses and participants (of which he was a prominent member). As noted, Thatcher’s priorities in deciding to hold the first Chequers seminar remain somewhat unclear. But her seriousness was reflected in two days of close attention and questioning. Thatcher had read the analyses and prognostications of both the Foreign Office as well as Britain’s leading academic specialists, who in addition to Brown (writing on the Soviet political system and party leadership) included Alec Nove (on the Soviet economic system), Alex Pravda (dissent and nationalities issues), Michael Bourdeaux (religion), Michael Kaser (institutional and demographic economic constraints),

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Ronald Amann (technological inertia), Christopher Donnelly (Soviet military power and strategy) and George Schopflin (the USSR and Eastern Europe).

There isn't sufficient space here to detail the scholars' analyses, nor the preparatory papers of the Foreign Office staff. Brown carefully summarizes the highlights, noting the broad agreement between the two groups on key issues as well as the academics' greater boldness in contemplating the possibility of significant Soviet change/reform (Brown, 2008, p. 28). Thatcher was unfairly if characteristically harsh in her assessment of the Foreign Office's contributions while praising that of the academics—"the right people, and some first-class papers" (Thatcher, 1993, p. 451). Notably, with particular regard to the subject of power and leadership in Moscow, Thatcher felt the Chequers analysis "put flesh on the bones of what I had learned [earlier] from Robert Conquest (*Ibid.*).

The paper at issue here was Brown's own, which proved especially prescient in its identification of Gorbachev as the likely future General Secretary and, even more importantly, on his likely reformism. Insofar as it apparently made the greatest impression on the Prime Minister and encouraged her to invite Gorbachev to London a year later—a visit which both helped Gorbachev's accession in the USSR, as well as the cause of his "new thinking" in the West—Brown's role was uniquely consequential for a scholar (Brown, 2008, p. 33). Yet his "task" was considerably easier than that facing an adviser to President Reagan (who had certainly never read Conquest, nor other serious, scholarly work on the USSR or international affairs more generally). Consider the challenge confronting the scholar-cum-diplomat Jack Matlock, at this time Reagan's chief Soviet expert on the National Security Council. Matlock praises Reagan's political instincts, and is at pains to detail his efforts to reach out to the Soviet leadership at precisely this time (Matlock, 2004, pp. 52-105)

But it was difficult enough that the tensions arising from collapsing arms talks, KAL 007, the shooting of U.S. Army Major Arthur Nicholson, and other arenas of East-West confrontation (including the Soviet-led boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles summer Olympic Games) naturally complicated relations with Washington more than London. It was even harder with a CIA director (William Casey) and Secretary of Defense (Caspar Weinberger) actively working to block any improvement in U.S.-Soviet relations, even in defiance of Reagan's orders (Matlock, 2004, pp. 101-102 and *passim*). Matlock also faced the challenge of educating a well-meaning but woefully ignorant Reagan on the fundamentals of Soviet politics and history something he tackled with a series of 21 briefing papers—"Soviet Union 101"—in 1985. The often-unfocused Reagan would concentrate on an issue only when a concrete task was at hand, in this case meeting with the new Soviet leadership. These papers, and meetings with historian Nina Tumarkin (on Lenin's legacy in the USSR) and writer Suzanne Massie (author of the cultural history *Land of the Firebird*) on the eve of his late-1985 first encounter with Gorbachev, were in some ways the closest Washington equivalent to the Chequers seminar of *two years earlier*.

Perhaps Gorbachev's determination to end the East-West strategic rivalry, and his boldness in discarding longstanding ideology and offering far-reaching concessions, were so great that, in the end, Reagan (or any other American leader) could hardly have failed to find

common ground with Moscow. All the same, hindsight tends to blur contingency and exaggerate a sense of inevitability. Numerous obstacles to “doing business with Mr. Gorbachev” existed in Washington too, and there is little doubt that absent Thatcher’s advocacy Reagan would certainly have been slower to embrace him—a delay that could have seriously impacted Gorbachev’s policies and prospects. As Matlock recalls, “Her influence on Reagan surpassed that of any other foreign leader. In fact, it exceeded that of most of his own cabinet members” (Matlock, p. 34). Even critics, such as Thatcher’s then foreign-policy aide Sir Percy Craddock, acknowledge the pivotal role the Prime Minister played in bringing about Soviet-American rapprochement. They and others may argue that excessive “Gorbymania” tied Western governments too closely to Soviet domestic affairs and Gorbachev personally, and so may ultimately have proved harmful in the long run for both sides. But even they recognize the unique contribution of Britain to the Cold War’s sudden end. As Craddock notes,

Mrs. Thatcher came close to claiming that she had discovered, even invented Gorbachev; her meetings and debates with him were deliberately high profile and added to her, and Britain’s, international standing. More seriously, she acted as a conduit from Gorbachev to Reagan, selling him in Washington as a man to do business with, and operating as an agent of influence in both directions (cited in Brown, 2008 p. 41).

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