Thatcher, Gorbachev, Bush

the secret Kremlin records

Remarkable cache of official transcripts of conversations which show the then Prime Minister’s hostility towards a united Germany. From the Times Online, translation and additional research by Sergei Cristo.

Note by Anatoly Chernyaev on conclusions from the Conference for International Policy.

March 10 1986: excerpt

Shouldn’t we actually thoroughly consider whether we could mount this whole ‘German-German question’ in such a way so it benefits the socialist community, socialism and our politics? After all the most important card, the decision about the so-called ‘re-unification’ of Germany, is in our hands. With this, we can tie in the whole line about moving the Federal Republic closer to us. There are a lot of underwater rocks there. Everything needs to be researched very thoroughly, together with serious specialists and scientists. Perhaps some stereotypes would have to be overcome, which were quite naturally borne out on reflection of what Germans did during the War. In any case, we need to find out what is the likelihood of new Bismarcks or Hitlers [appearing from the woodwork]. In brief, the German theme requires our serious attention. It looks as though it is becoming the main [route] in the realisation of our European course.

Gorbachev at the Politburo meeting
October 6 1988: excerpt

With all differences and nuances, there are many signs that the growing problems faced by our fraternal nations are of similar nature. The similarity of symptoms points to the fact that the illness is caused not by some evil virus which managed to infect those who have not taken precautions but is due to certain factors within the economic and political model of socialism. Within the model which was first adopted by us, and then used with insignificant modifications in those countries which chose the path of socialism in the post-war period.

We have already exposed weaknesses in this model and are gradually eliminating them. In this, as the matter of fact, is the key objective of Perestroika, [which is] to give socialism a new quality. Several countries have followed our example or even have overtaken us on the course of major reforms. Some, such as the GDR, Romania and China have not yet realised the need for change but it is due mostly to political reasons rather than to unwillingness of the current leadership to change. In reality, everyone needs to change but we do not say so publicly so that we are not accused in trying to force our Perestroika on to our friends.

However, the fact remains: clear signs of a crisis point to a need for radical reforms across the socialist world.

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A conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher

September 23 1989 : transcript

Thatcher:

I wanted to raise some questions regarding the situation in the countries of Eastern Europe. I was deeply impressed by the
courage of General Jaruzelski in Poland and by his patriotism. Of course, the future of Poland and its alliance with you are very important. I noticed that you reacted calmly to the results of the Polish elections and generally to processes taking part in this and other Eastern European countries. My understanding of your position is following: you welcome each country developing in its own way on the condition that Warsaw Pact stays. I understand this position perfectly.

Now I would like to say something in complete confidence and would ask you not to record this part of our conversation.

Gorbachev:

I agree to your request.

(The following part of the conversation is reproduced from memory)

Thatcher:

We are very concerned about the processes taking place in Eastern Germany. Some big changes could happen there, forced partly by the state of the society and partly by the illness of Erich Honecker. One example of this is the flight of thousands of people from the GDR to the FRG. All of this is on the surface, it is very important but even more important is something else.

The reunification of Germany is not in the interests of Britain and Western Europe. It might look different from public pronouncements, in official communiqué at Nato meetings, but it is not worth paying ones attention to it. We do not want a united Germany. This would have led to a change to post-war borders and we can not allow that because such development would undermine the stability of the whole international situation and could endanger our security.

In the same way, a destabilisation of Eastern Europe and
breakdown of the Warsaw Pact are also not in our interests. Of course, internal changes are happening in all Eastern European countries, somewhere they are deeper than in others. However, we would prefer if those processes were entirely internal, we would not interfere in them or push the de-communisation of Eastern Europe. I can say that the President of the United States is of the same position. He sent me a telegram to Tokyo in which he asked me directly to tell you that the United States would not do anything that might put at risk the security of the Soviet Union or perceived by the Soviet society as danger. I am fulfilling his request.

Gorbachev:

Thank you for this message. In broad terms, you have outlined our position correctly. We believe that socialist countries should solve their internal problems themselves, chose themselves the course and speed on the way of implementation of their socialist choice. We do not want and will not interfere but will, of course help our allies as we have always done.

As for the state of health of Erich Honecker, he is planning to take part in all events commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the GDR. I can tell you that I am planning to arrive to the GDR on 6-7th October to celebrate this anniversary.

Thatcher:

Thank you.

The diary of Anatoly Chernyaev, a senior analyst in the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee’s International Department, who was in charge of relations with West European communist parties

October 9 1989: excerpts

Yesterday M.S. got back from the GDR. It appears from the
speeches and the TV interviews that he navigated the situation successfully. At the airport, Shakhnazarov and Raisa Maksimovna were describing how it went? As M.S. and Honecker walked together, a continuous roar in the air: ‘Gorby! Gorby!’ emanated from the thousands, or hundreds of thousands of people. Nobody paid attention to Erich. At the meetings there were posters in Russian: “Gorbachev—you are our hope!” Besides Gorbachev, there were around 20 various leaders in attendance (Zhivkov, Ceausescu, Nicaraguan Ortega, etc.), but nobody gave them much heed. All the festivity concentrated on Gorbachev’s presence in Berlin.

He came back satisfied. The recognition and support he receives ‘over there’ encourages and reassures him, in contrast to the worthless treatment he gets from his own people. Krenz said to Falin: “Our Erich sees everything, but does not want to admit anything.”

On October 10, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany will have a Plenum? They might overthrow Erich. Otherwise, it will soon come to a storm on the Wall. In any case, the Prague-Dresden-FRG refugee trains passed through a row of exalted greetings, were showered with flowers, etc. The policemen waved at the Russians?

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All of Europe is raving about M.S. in Berlin. And everybody in Europe is whispering in our ear: it is good that the USSR has delicately expressed its stance against German reunification.

Zagladin traveled all around France and met with everybody – from Mitterrand to mayors. He has buried Moscow with records of his conversations (with gusto! There is nothing he likes better). They all say in unison – nobody wants a unified Germany. Attali (Mitterrand’s adviser) brought up the possibility of restoring a serious Soviet-French alliance, including military “integration,” but camouflaged as a joint
use of armies to fight natural disasters.

Thatcher, when she asked to go off record during the conversation with M.S., expressed her views decisively against Germany’s reunification. But, she said this is not something she can openly say at home or in Nato. In short, they want to prevent this with our hands.

October 11 1989

Record of conversation with Honecker? when speaking with me and Shakhnazarov, M.S. called him an asshole. M.S. said, “He could have said to his people that he has had four operations, he is 78, he does not have the strength to fill his position, so could they please ‘let him go’, he has done his duty. Then, maybe, he would have remained an esteemed figure in history.” Shakhnazarov and I were doubtful that he would get a place in history if he did this right now. Two or three years ago, maybe. Right now he is already in a position similar to Kadar’s. He has been cursed by the people.

(...)

The day before yesterday, Kohl tried to speak with M.S over the phone. Yesterday I reminded M.S. about this, but he brushed it aside – he did not want to. Today he called me and said: “go ahead, put the call through?” As soon as I reached for the phone, he called again: “Should I? The results of the Berlin PB are not clear yet. And in general?”

I told him that he should, otherwise it would be awkward. Plus, I am sure that he is calling to disassociate himself from his statements regarding reunification (in connection to the flight of GDR citizens to the FRG).

The conversation lasted 17 minutes. Kohl promised to help in Hungary and Poland, planned a visit to Warsaw, and most importantly – assured M.S. that he will not destabilize the GDR. M.S. replied: “This is a very important statement. I will
take it into consideration.” They talked about bilateral economic ties in the follow up to M.S.’s visit to Bonn.

**A Politburo discussion about [Egon] Krenz (who replaced Honecker)**

*November 3 1989 (eight days before the Wall was opened): excerpt*

Kryuchkov:

Tomorrow 500,000 [people] will come out on the streets of Berlin and other cities?

Gorbachev:

Are you hoping that Krenz will stay?

We won’t be able to explain it to our people if we lose the GDR. However, we won’t be able to keep it afloat without the FRG.

Shevardnadze:

We’d better take down the Wall ourselves.

Kryuchkov:

Will be difficult for them if we take it down.

Gorbachev:

They will be bought up whole? And when they reach world prices, living standards will fall immediately.

The West does not want German re-unification but wants to use us to prevent it, to cause a clash between us with the FRG so as to rule out a possibility of a future ‘conspiracy’ between the USSR and Germany.

I told Krenz: “when selecting people look not only at the Central Committee but at the society at large, otherwise they
will themselves force you to take on unacceptable [candidates].”

We will deal with the FRG in a ‘triangle’, i.e. together with the GDR, and openly.

Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and US President George Bush in their first one-to-one meeting in Malta

December 2 1989: excerpts

Gorbachev:

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First, I would like to say that the direction of changes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union moves us closer and that it is the main thing. However, there is also something else which is important. I can’t accept when some American politicians say that the moves to prevent a split in Europe should be based on Western values. It looks as though if in the past we were accused in ‘exporting the revolution’, today it is about the export of American values. I think this does not comply with the spirit of current changes and could complicate ongoing processes. I wanted to tell you this although I know that your position is different.

In this connection, [I would like to move on to] the ‘German question’. Our impression is that Mr Kohl is hurrying, fussing, acting irresponsibly, not approaching things seriously. Wouldn’t it just be possible that the theme of reunification be exploited for electioneering, that momentum would become more important than strategic factors. Talking of which, there is a difference in opinion on this question in the FRG, both within the governing coalition and Social Democrats. However, we must make it clear to everyone that certain actions can harm positive processes and, moreover, put under question very important and serious issues, including trust to the FRG government.
So what will be? Will united Germany be a neutral country, not belonging to any international military or political groups, or will it be a member of Nato? I think we should make it clear that both options are too early to discuss now. Let the process take its course, let’s not push it.

It is not us who are responsible for the division of Germany, this was up to history. Let history decide this issue in the future too. I think we understand each other on this.

Bush:

I think that Helmut Kohl is largely driven by emotions in reaction to the developments. The same could be said about [Hans-Dietrich] Genscher. Yes, in the three point programme one can sense some influence of electioneering. However this wave of emotion must be considered.

Kohl knows that some Western allies, whilst publicly supporting re-unification given that is the will of the German people, are actually concerned about it.

Gorbachev:

Yes, I know this. And this point of view has been relayed to him. However, unlike you or your allies I tell you straight: two German states appeared in the course of history. Let the history decide this process and its results in the context of the new Europe and new world. Kohl said many times that he understands his responsibility and that he will comply with the understanding we both reached in Bonn. This is a case when we have to act with utmost care so as to avoid any blow to those changes which have recently started.

Bush:

I agree. We will not do anything rash in order to speed up the question of re-unification.

If you speak to Kohl, you will see that he agrees with my
approach and if some of his public statements do not always confirm this, that is due to the peculiarities of his political system, as well as the emotional side. Particularly the latter. They speak about this topic with tears in their eyes.

Gorbachev:

I would like to stress that the changes leading to normalisation of contacts, higher co-operation and better trade links between two German states are seen by us as positive.

Bush:

As strange as it would seem but on this question you are in the same boat with our Nato allies. The most conservative of them welcome your approach. At the same time, they have to think about that time when such concepts as the FRG and the GDR will become part of the past. In this question, I will be acting with great care. Let our Democrats accuse me in being timid but I am not going to jump on the wall because there is too much at stake here.

Gorbachev:

Yes, a president should not be jumping on the wall. (Laugh)

(?)

Bush:

I would like to clarify one point. You expressed your concern regarding Western values. This would have been understandable if our commitment to certain ideals led to difficulties in the USSR or Eastern Europe, stood in the way of their progress. However, we have never pursued such objectives. Every discussion of Western values at Nato or other Western organisations is absolutely natural and not destructive. After all, what are Western values? They are transparency,
pluralism, openness, free debate. In economic terms, it is the engine room of progress, free market. These values are not something new or opportunistic, they have been shared for a long time by us and people in Western Europe, they unite the Western world. We welcome changes in the Soviet Union or Poland and do not set them against Western values. Therefore I would like to see your point of view as well as possible so as to avoid any misunderstanding.

Gorbachev:

The main principle which we have adopted and which we follow as part of our new thinking is the right of each country to choose, including the right to reconsider and change its original course. This is a very painful process, however this is a fundamental right. The right to choose without interference from outside. The USA are committed to a particular social and economic system chosen by the American people. Let people of other countries also decide which, let’s say, god they want to pray to.

It is important for me that the new tendency for a renewal in Eastern and Western Europe moves towards closer convergence. The result will not be a copy of Swedish, British or Soviet model. No. What will come out will be something that answers the requirements of the current stage in the development of human and European civilisation.

We know that people do not now fear when faced with a choice of either one of the systems. They are looking for their own version which will provide them with better life. When this search is free we can only say: good for you.

Bush:

I don’t think that we differ here. We welcome self-determination [of states] and debates that accompany it. I would like to see our approach in positive light: Western values do not mean forcing our system on to Romania,
Czechoslovakia or even the GDR.

Jacques Attali [French President’s adviser] said the following to Vadim Zagladin [a senior Gorbachev aide] in a short meeting in Kiev

December 6 1989: excerpt

A firm position of non-interference in internal matters of brother nations shown by the USSR during the events in the GDR have puzzled the French leadership. On the one hand, the French sincerely and with pleasure welcomed that fact that the ‘Brezhnev doctrine’ has become a thing of the past. However, on the other hand, the French leadership raised a question whether this meant that the USSR has made peace with the prospect of a united Germany and will not take any steps to prevent it? This has caused a fear approaching panic.

France by no means wants German re-unification, although it realises that in the end it is inevitable. Therefore, François Mitterrand took heart in that the USSR shared his position when he was assured of the latter by Gorbachev in the course their conversation.

Discussion on the German question held at the Kremlin

January 26 1990: excerpt

Ryzhkov:

We should be realistic. We can not stop this process. All we can do is chose our tactics because we will not be able to preserve the GDR. All barriers have been destroyed. The country’s economy is imploding. All state institutions are
dissolved. We can not hope to preserve the GDR. However, a confederation is a different thing and we must propose our condition for a confederation. It is not right to be leaving [all initiative] to Kohl. If we do this then in 20 or 30 years Germany will start another world war.

Gorbachev:

Our process taking place in Eastern Europe is based objective factors and it is already much overheated. The shock was worse where the process touched the strongest links, such as the GDR, Czechoslovakia, Romania. We should learn our lesson, we should not be left behind, be realistic all the time.

Our people, even given all the criticisms that they are hearing, do not want to end the perestroika. They would rather reject its opponents. Our society in its current state is the most rotten of all those similar to us and nothing will save it. We ourselves started to change it and we must continue to do so, move forward, without losing initiative. We must not stall.