

Record of Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Margaret Thatcher

March 30, 1987, Moscow

The conversation took place at the Kremlin, in a narrow circle including only advisers and interpreters.

Gorbachev. Where should we begin? First of all I welcome your visit to the Soviet Union. I think it can be considered important and necessary for many reasons. Firstly, there has not been such a high-level visit [from Great Britain] to Moscow in the last 12 years.

Thatcher. It has been even longer according to my calculations, because the last conservative Prime Minister visited the Soviet Union 20 years ago.

Gorbachev. There, you see, your calculations only confirm my idea. I don't mean to say that there is no contact between our countries and the leadership of the USSR and Great Britain. We have a political dialogue, our relations are developing with all of their upturns and downturns, and there are visits at various levels. The fact that they have been supplemented by this visit can be considered quite normal.

Secondly, and this is more essential, your visit comes at a crucially important time for the development of international relations, at a turning-point. I have spoken about this many times, and I will repeat it now: we believe the world is at a crossroads. People in the East and the West are trying to better understand and analyze what ways lead to an improvement of the situation in the world, to stronger relationships between states. Frankly, this process is not an easy one. The situation in the world remains tense, and the circles interested in tensions and the arms race continue to influence the world processes. But we see that governments and societies are making an effort to look for ways to approach the future. This is a positive phenomenon. Naturally, the great powers should play a major role in this, including the USSR and Great Britain. Our countries are nuclear states and permanent members of the UN Security Council. They have a heightened responsibility for what is happening in the world.

The significance of your visit is also emphasized by the fact that our countries are old partners. Russia and England exchanged ambassadors back in the XVI century, which means something. Of course, many things have happened during the course of our relations, but in general we are still partners. I think that our conversation today will take place in a spirit of responsibility, an understanding of the importance of the issues we are discussing, and frankness. In a word, I welcome your arrival in Moscow.

Thatcher. Thank you, Mr. Gorbachev. We also understand the importance of this visit and recognize the responsibility that lies with Great Britain and the Soviet Union. My goal is to discuss as deeply as possible our countries' positions and try to find solutions to the problems we are facing in international relations. I am certain that this will be easier to do if in the course of our discussions we talk not only about what each side wants to do, but also why it wants to do it. This is the only way to find ways to approach the future. It seems to me that the key issue here is security. Each side has to recognize the equal right to security for the other side, the other system, the other nation. It is necessary to maintain security in all stages of development; otherwise it would be impossible to ensure trust, and in order to move forward we have to strengthen trust between nations. That is the only way, in my opinion, to achieve substantial arms reductions—which is what we all want. Thus, the key elements are—equal right to security, a lower level of arms, and trust.

We also have to look for answers to the events occurring not only in our bilateral relations, but in the world as a whole. This world is full of conflicts, and both you and we feel their echoes. That is why I came to Moscow, with the understanding that I have a great opportunity to discuss all these issues in a free and friendly atmosphere, while at the same time maintaining a firmness that would allow us to find approaches to the future.

I don't know whether we should adhere to some kind of agenda. All of the issues are very interesting. But I would emphasize the subject of arms control. A great amount of work has already been done in this area, on all planes, so to speak—between the USSR and the U.S., between the West and the East. But these are very complex questions and a misunderstanding could easily arise why one or the other side takes a certain position. Perhaps we could proceed in this format?

Gorbachev. I welcome the fact that you put the issues of security, equal security, at the forefront. I agree to discuss the questions of arms limitation and reduction in detail, above all nuclear arms. But first I would like to make one or two remarks.

To be frank, we familiarized ourselves with your March 21st speech in Torquay, which took place a week before this visit. The Soviet leadership sensed a whiff of the spirit of the 1940s-1950s, Churchill's Fulton speech, and the Truman doctrine. We welcomed the Prime Minister's intention to come to Moscow and were ready to discuss the main international and bilateral issues in a friendly and sincere tone, in the spirit of mutual understanding. But what did we see? Again Communism and the Soviet Union were presented as the "evil forces;" again the same words about the need to grow a position of power in the West. We were very surprised. Frankly, we even thought that the Prime Minister may cancel her visit.

Thatcher. No, you can't have thought that! Nobody thinks that the Soviet Union is weak. The Soviet Union has enormous power. You have superior intermediate-range weapons and strategic offensive weapons, if we count warheads, as well as chemical and conventional arms. You are very powerful, not weak. We do not expect anyone to be weak in protecting their country. I am sure that you would not respect us if we were weak. In the speech you mentioned I did not attribute any evil intent to you. Moreover, I said that Mr. Gorbachev wants to do things frankly and in the spirit of cooperation, just like we do. But you have the superiority in practically everything, maybe with the exception of computers and some scientific research. The Soviet Union adheres to the doctrines of communist world domination, the Brezhnev doctrine. I did not mention it in that speech, but naturally such policies cause concern in the West. Of course we have to have ideological battles, it is only natural. But we have to do it the appropriate way. Instead, we see communism is striving to dominate everywhere. Take for example Yemen, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Angola, Nicaragua, Cuban troops in some African countries. And Vietnam? As soon as the American troops left it immediately attacked Cambodia, instead of addressing its own internal affairs. And Afghanistan? That is why we say that communism's foreign policy is aimed at world domination.

Some impressive processes have occurred inside the Soviet Union recently. I wonder, will the domestic developments have an impact on foreign policy? If not, then we will need to take it into account. Other countries have to understand how the political changes inside the Soviet Union will affect them. All of this needs to be discussed. You see things differently than we do. You may not know our precise point of view, so we need to find the right basis for a

conversation. Of course, every country has the right and obligation to defend its system. And we are not just talking about the great powers or major military alliances. There are other dangers.

In the last 20 years we have been lucky in the sense that the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons prevented the emergence of new nuclear powers. But in the next 20 years we may not be as lucky. Other countries could create nuclear weapons, and not all of them will be as responsible as the member-countries of military alliances. We have to pay close attention so the conflicts in various parts of the world do not evolve in a way that would have consequences for the entire world.

I mentioned the internal processes in the Soviet Union. In England, we are watching your work with great interest. I read your January speech at your Party's Plenum very carefully. It was a tremendous speech because it touched on some monumental issues. It took me eight years to turn my country towards change, though of course on a different basis.

That is why I would like to understand your approach to managing the changes in your country, to the change of pace of its development. I very much hope that if you can achieve the things you mentioned in your speech, your approach to the idea of communist world domination will change. But I mention this briefly, not to take a lot of time away from other issues.

[....]

Thatcher. One last point. You spoke of capitalism as an economic system. But if you think about it, each state is a capitalist state, in the sense that it administers capital, invests it and makes a profit. There is only the difference between the capitalist-state and the economy based on private enterprise. In the second case we have an open society, a free society, which gives freedom to the initiative of individuals. On the other hand, under a capitalist-state the initiative and incentives are absent; it is more difficult to create a free society and free enterprise. Therefore capitalism is not a sufficient prerequisite to create a free society. In a word, we never politically differentiated capitalism and socialism. One should rather make a distinction between total centralized control and total control of the economy, and an economic system in which people have freedom within the framework of laws established by the central government. This is provided by the Parliament, various government bodies, and an independent judicial apparatus. By the way, in your January speech you also emphasized the importance of these institutions.

In our system, the independent court system plays a crucial role in ensuring society's freedom. As for the principle of one person-one vote, it appeared in England rather late, in 1928; however, the foundations of democracy were set earlier by the legal system. I am saying this by way of illustration, because in your society things could have developed differently. What I am saying is that it is not only important to do something in your society, but also to make sure that others interpret it correctly.

Gorbachev. Once again I want to emphasize that the most important thing is to remain grounded in reality, otherwise we will all be in grave danger.

Thatcher. It is very important for us that you give up the doctrine of communist world domination.

Gorbachev. We never proclaimed such a doctrine. There is the Truman Doctrine, the Eisenhower Doctrine, the neo-globalist Reagan Doctrine. All of these doctrines were publicly proclaimed by presidents. But you will not find our statements about "planting the domination of communism" because they do not exist. They were just attributed to us.

Thatcher. Your representatives made statements. We can provide quotes.

Gorbachev. Provide them... There is philosophy, and then there is politics and reality. In order to understand this reality we have to listen to each other, try to understand the other side and be understood as well. I recall our conversations in Chequers in 1984. We agreed that it is the job of every nation to make its choice and defend it. You are committed to your system, and we are loyally committed to ours. You are not going to make me a conservative, just as I do not expect to make you a communist. We have to recognize the reality.

[...]

Gorbachev. You talk so much about freedom that I am forced to switch to this topic now, even though I would have liked to do it later.

Thatcher. We have similar personalities. Each one of us wants to have the final word.

Gorbachev. Do not put me in a position where I have no freedom to choose.

I do not want you to have the impression that we completely deny the significance of Western democracy. We duly appreciate the contribution of the bourgeoisie to the historical process. It is you who does not acknowledge socialism's contribution, or even its historical right to exist. With this we emphatically disagree.

What is our main objection against bourgeois freedom? It is the fact that it exists only for the interests of the ruling class, the wealthy, the people who hold key positions in the economic sphere and, consequently, in the political and all other spheres of society. Of course, we know that it's not crude; we see that over the decades of capitalism the powerful class created a sophisticated mechanism, in many ways no less elegant than the ballet that you and I saw yesterday. But it is a game of political forces. Pluralism does not deceive us. We know the true picture of life in the West. But if the English people recognize their system and are attached to their democracy, we respect their choice.

[...]

Gorbachev. We are ready to participate in these processes in a spirit of realism. Now there is another important question. We have no intention of going to war with the United States, or with Great Britain, or France, or anyone else. We are for reducing the level of military confrontation everywhere in the world and especially in Europe. We are for control over disarmament, especially nuclear disarmament. We put forward a number of practical suggestions about this, and we are entitled to an answer. So far we have not received an adequate response from the West to our initiatives. Western Europe, led by Mrs. Thatcher, is questioning our philosophy of political realism, which offers a balance of interests to the exclusion of military force.

The West is focused on other things. How many signals we receive each day that in various Western capitals, including London, the only thing on people's minds is how to disrupt our initiatives and prevent the process of finding real disarmament. Just today I received a message from Vienna, where the discussion of reductions in conventional arms and armed forces in Europe is taking place right now. One statesman there said: "If the Soviet Union is so interested in disarmament, so let them disarm, that's their business." Quite a symbolic statement.

I would like to thoroughly discuss this question with you: Is the West ready for real disarmament, or is its engagement on the subject forced under the pressure of public opinion in

its own countries? I would be glad if you could clarify this issue. Because consider what is happening. For over two years we are observing the same thing: as soon as something akin to a positive solution to some aspect of disarmament appears, immediately in Washington, London, Paris, and Bonn there is activity aimed at seeking out reasons for doubt, reasons to slow down the process while referring the Soviet Union's "superiority," and the process is driven into a dead end. As for the "superiority"—we, you, and President Reagan have data on the real balance of forces. It is not only unnecessary to deceive each other, it is impossible. We have to decide how we are going to build the bridge of disarmament.

Thatcher. I want to say right away that we want success in the disarmament negotiations. We adhere to a defensive doctrine on all types of disarmament—nuclear and conventional. NATO countries have made a commitment—the alliance was and will continue to be defensive, no NATO weapons will ever be used except in response to an attack. This concerns not just nuclear weapons not being used except in response to an attack. It concerns all weapons. We want to prevent any war, we need peace in order to do the things we need to do in our society.

We do not believe that it is possible to ensure peace for any considerable amount of time without nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons are the most powerful and most terrible guarantee of peace that was invented in the XX century. There is no other guarantee. Before World War II, the Soviet Union had more weapons than Hitler, but this did not stop Hitler from attacking the Soviet Union and causing terrible destruction. We believe in nuclear containment and consider the elimination of nuclear weapons impractical. We can dream of a nuclear-free world in the future, but in the present circumstances the absence of nuclear weapons could lead to war with conventional weapons. Moreover, it would lead to a new arms race among currently non-nuclear nations. Everyone would try to be the first to obtain nuclear weapons again. It is another matter that there are too many nuclear weapons in the world right now, more than we need for containment. We do not seek to buildup nuclear weapons.

[...]

Gorbachev. You see, Mrs. Thatcher, your position on nuclear weapons hinders negotiations; it hinders the start of the process of real disarmament. When you solemnly assure us that nuclear weapons are good, that the USSR and U.S. should reduce their nuclear arsenals while England will stand by, it immediately becomes clear to everybody that we are talking to an ardent supporter of nuclear weapons. Suppose we start the process of disarmament, we remove the intermediate-range missiles from Europe, we reduce the strategic offensive arms by 50 percent or some other number, while you build up your nuclear forces. How will you look in the eyes of world public opinion, have you thought about that?

I consider it my duty to remind you that England was a member of the trilateral negotiations on the comprehensive nuclear test ban, but later lost interest in these negotiations. We have observed a moratorium on nuclear explosions for over a year and a half, while Mrs. Thatcher avoided addressing this fundamental issue. You could have played a major political role in ending nuclear testing, but you did not. On the contrary, you used all the arguments and details in order to slow down the process of disarmament.

[...]

Thatcher. That's good. But another question. Historically, the situation in Europe is such that conventional weapons could not prevent war. Nuclear weapons prevent war. Without

nuclear weapons we risk being dragged into a conventional war, and that war would be terrible. We risk being dragged into a race in which many countries would try to be the first to create or regain a nuclear weapon. It would not be difficult to do, because the scientific knowledge on how to build these weapons is available. All of this must be taken into account in the negotiations.

We have to also consider who may end up with nuclear weapons. In the 1930s, Hitler tried to create an atomic bomb. We were able to stop him by bombing the research centers and the heavy water plants in Germany. But if he had created such a weapon, he would have used it, and we would not be sitting here today. Nuclear weapons are the best deterrent. We in Western Europe have suffered too much from the war to let a new war happen.

Gorbachev. But we need to think not about how to keep the weapons, but how to stop the arms race, how to lower the level of military confrontation. We can't think that a nuclear weapon is not a weapon, but something else.

Thatcher. We are talking about different things. You are advocating nuclear disarmament, while I am advocating guarantees of peace. What is better: a small number of nuclear weapons, or the risk of a terrible war in the absence of nuclear weapons?

Gorbachev. So what should we do, leave one atomic bomb each?

Thatcher. The principle is important here. One, two, or several—that is not the point. What matters is that anyone could go to the U.S. Library of Congress and read about the technology of creating a nuclear bomb.

I have heard the opinion, in particular from Kissinger and Rostow, that the Soviet Union's proposals for the gradual elimination of nuclear weapons from Europe by the "salami tactics" can be very dangerous. They would eventually leave Europe defenseless in the face of the Soviet Union's superiority in chemical and conventional weapons, and would create an opportunity to threaten Europe without it being able to give any kind of adequate response. In a word, as Bismarck said, "War? I do not want war. I want to win."

You accused me of being afraid of something, that I am scared. Such accusations are not warranted. We are not driven by fear, but by the desire to be able to defend our country, and under certain circumstances we cannot do it without nuclear weapons. It is not that we are preventing nuclear disarmament. We want disarmament, including in conventional weapons, where the Soviet Union has superiority.

As for the ban on nuclear testing, in Reykjavik we agreed to solve this issue through a phased approach. The thing is that some low-powered nuclear explosions are difficult to verify, and this has to be addressed very carefully. Furthermore, the issue is not so fundamental since it would be an illusion to think that a total ban on nuclear testing could stop the advances in nuclear weapons. After all, the most important thing is their means of delivery; the missiles would not be affected by this measure. The missiles will remain and they can always be easily equipped with a nuclear warhead.

In short, we support the reduction of nuclear weapons, and we would be happy if this year marked the start of a process that in 5-6 years would result in significant nuclear weapons reductions. The entire world would be grateful. Our planet is overfilled with sophisticated types of nuclear weapons. They are valuable because they give us the ability to preserve peace, but we have too many weapons. I've never been a proponent of the strategy of mutual assured destruction, I believe in the doctrine of unacceptable damage. Increasing the number of nuclear

weapons increases the risk of all kinds of accidents, the consequences of which can be very severe. We witnessed this in the Chernobyl disaster, which showed that radiation spreads much faster and to much greater distances than we previously thought. I believe that the prospects discussed in Reykjavik of a second 50 percent reduction, i.e. total elimination of nuclear weapons, were never realistic. If we had destroyed all ballistic missiles, as the Americans proposed, they would have been replaced by cruise missiles, and the buildup of nuclear weapons would have continued. I discussed this in detail with the Americans, asking them if they seriously thought that Congress would allow them to destroy ballistic missiles. Could they consider it a success if the result was that they would need to spend three times more money and build three times as many submarines to replace ballistic missiles with cruise missiles for deterrence?

[...]

Thatcher. But the U.S. is far away across the ocean, while the Soviet Union is in Europe. And it is much easier for the Soviet Union to transfer troops by rail or other means than it is for the United States to cross the ocean. Plus, we have to take political factors into account as well. Soviet troops did not hesitate to enter Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, and then Afghanistan. So why would they hesitate before they go somewhere else. And what do we have to rely on? On our and French nuclear weapons? This is a completely different question. That is why I say that your military superiority in a nuclear-free Europe would threaten the balance.

Gorbachev. In a word, what is that “damned Russian bear” planning to do!

Thatcher. I just want you to know how we feel. Once we misjudged your actions in relation to Czechoslovakia. We thought that you would not invade, because it would damage your prestige in the world. But we were wrong. We do not want to make that mistake again.

Gorbachev. What about your actions in the Falklands? Or French actions in Chad?

Thatcher. The Falkland Islands are British territory inhabited by British people. It was occupied, and we removed the invaders.

[...]

Thatcher. I gave you more recent examples that give us reason not to trust Communism. Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1979. You sent troops to Afghanistan, which undermined the ratification of SALT-2. You signed the Helsinki Agreement and imprisoned those who tried to monitor adherence to the Agreement in the Soviet Union. I know that now you have released many political prisoners, and the West is grateful to you for it. I spoke with many representatives of Jewish and other religious organizations. They hope that under the new conditions in the Soviet Union these groups of people will have more rights, which would lead to increased trust. But when it comes to matters of defense, there we cannot allow even the smallest mistake, because it could be fatal.

Gorbachev. But that is why we are proposing to move to a less armed world—to avoid fatal mistakes.

[...]

Thatcher. You supply weapons to Libya, from where they go to Iran. You supply weapons to Syria, which supports terrorism around the world.

Gorbachev. You are helping to bomb a country, which is quite another matter. As for Afghanistan, the Afghan government appealed to us eleven times to introduce our troops according to the UN Charter and agreement between our countries. Of course, Afghanistan is a serious problem for us. We are sustaining losses there, but we cannot just drop everything and leave, that it would result in slaughter and the whole country would drown in blood. Just the other day, one of the Afghan guerrilla leaders spoke in London. He openly said that he will physically destroy everyone who is in any way associated with the government. The Parliamentary Deputy Foreign Secretary of Great Britain Eggar, who was present, wished him success. If this is your position, then things will take an entirely different turn. We know that the U.S. does not want a political settlement with Afghanistan, and they are restraining Pakistan from doing that. We, on the other hand, are in favor of such a settlement; we want to see Afghanistan neutral and non-aligned. It is not a platform for us, it is a country we want to help.

Thatcher. It is too bad that you got involved in Afghanistan at all. It cost you dearly in terms of declining prestige in the eyes of the non-aligned Muslim countries. Americans were never in this region, so there was no rivalry between you. As for the government, we noticed that as soon as you entered Afghanistan, you changed one regime for another, and then a third.

Gorbachev. Do you really think that it is so easy for us to change the government in Afghanistan?

Thatcher. Afghanistan is an occupied country. If my country was occupied, I would be a guerrilla fighter and would fight for its freedom. I would like to remind you once again of the example of Rhodesia, where we were able to put a stop to bloodshed peacefully, and achieve the creation of an independent state through general elections. I do not know what you will do with Afghanistan, but we support the creation of a neutral and non-aligned Afghanistan. I recall that in 1980 Carrington addressed you with a similar proposal. To some extent it was similar to the idea of Austria's independent statehood.

Gorbachev. Yes, I remember that. We are also for a neutral and non-aligned Afghanistan. Let us look for a political settlement of the issue.

Thatcher. But there are occupation forces in Afghanistan.

Gorbachev. Are you in favor of the bloodshed that could happen in that country?

Thatcher. I am in favor of replacing the occupation with elections. Afghanistan is not an easy country. We had big problems there in our time. They are a proud people, looking for their own way. They want to preserve their history, their customs and traditions. They want to sort out their problems themselves. There would be no issue here if it were not for your troops in Afghanistan.

Gorbachev. You said that our prestige in the developing world declined because we sent troops to Afghanistan. But right now, when the process of a political settlement in Afghanistan is looming, we are receiving many complaints of a different kind. We are told that if we just leave Afghanistan, our prestige in the developing world will fall. They will think that the USSR abandoned Afghanistan, left it to the capitalist countries. If we do that, capitalism will feel free to wreck any developing country anywhere, as it pleases. This is what people think. Do not assume that you are the only ones who understand everything, while we see nothing.

[Source: Archive of the Gorbachev Foundation, Fond 1, Opis 1.
Translated by Anna Melyakova for the National Security Archive]