

11 Thatcherism and the Cold War

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On 26 June 1979 Margaret Thatcher's plane made a brief refuelling stop in Moscow on its way to a summit in Japan. A group of Soviet leaders, led by Alexei Kosygin, came out to the airport to have a late supper with the British Prime Minister. The encounter was good-humoured – perhaps because the Russians had already been to a banquet earlier in the evening and were, one assumes, well lubricated by toasts to 'international friendship'. Discussions ranged widely and at one point Thatcher asked whether the Soviet Union would face problems because of Islamic unrest in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Official notes of the meeting record dryly that Kosygin – who must already have been planning the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that was to take place on Christmas Day 1979 – 'made no comment'.¹

All this reminds us how much the world has changed in the three decades since 1979 and, in particular, how much of that change is due to the end of the Cold War. Thatcherism coincided with a particular phase of the Cold War, between the fall of Saigon – on the very day that Ronald Reagan wrote his first letter to Margaret Thatcher² – and the fall of the Berlin Wall. The subsequent reunification of Germany and its accompanying upheavals helped to bring Margaret Thatcher down. This was a period that began when the West – weakened by Vietnam, Watergate, the oil crisis and the aftermath of internal upheavals in the late 1960s – seemed on the back foot and when the clients of the Soviet Union seemed, in Vietnam and Angola, to be on the march.

In some ways the whole notion of Thatcherism was born out of the communist/anti-communist divide. *Red Star*, the journal of the Soviet armed forces, coined the term 'Iron Lady' in response to Thatcher's speech at Kensington Town Hall in January 1976.³ Stuart Hall launched the systematic use of the word 'Thatcherism' in an article for *Marxism Today*, published by the Communist Party of Great Britain, in January 1979.⁴ References to the Cold War pervaded British politics during the early 1980s – perhaps the time when nuclear annihilation seemed most likely and when debates over the British possession of nuclear weapons

were most intense. General Sir John Hackett's novel on *The Third World War* was first published in 1978 and set in 1985.⁵ By 1984, it had sold three million copies. Philip Sabin argues that 1980, the first full year of the Thatcher government, was the year in which the 'Third World War Scare' reached its peak: 'The sheer variety of the year's developments in defence and international affairs meant that everyone could see his own particular nightmare coming true.'⁶

In spite of all this, the Cold War does not feature much in discussions of Thatcherism. Hall's seminal article barely mentioned defence policy, foreign affairs or the Soviet Union. At the other end of the political spectrum, Nigel Lawson gave two different definitions of the philosophy that he himself expounded – one, delivered in 1981, emphasised monetarism and one (featured in his memoirs of 1992) ranged more widely over issues such as privatisation, Victorian values and 'nationalism'.⁷ At neither point did he mention anti-communism or attitudes to the Soviet Union.⁸

Conservatives in the United States saw the end of the Cold War as a victory, and sometimes presented Thatcher, alongside Reagan and Pope John Paul II, as a heroic crusader against communism. The end of the Cold War also mattered to many in continental Europe. Its importance was greatest in those countries that had actually lived under communist rule, but it was also taken seriously in France precisely because so many French intellectuals, especially historians, had at some point been members of the Communist Party. The fall of the Soviet Union therefore facilitated the tradition of *autocritique* that had begun with Edgar Morin in 1959⁹ and that ended with François Furet's *Le passé d'une illusion* in 1995.¹⁰ Historians in continental Europe, however, were generally uninterested in and/or unsympathetic to Thatcherism. Their accounts of the end of communism focused heavily on disillusion among left-wing intellectuals, rather than on the policies pursued by right-wing politicians who had never, in this context at least, had many illusions.

For British writers, by contrast, the end of the Cold War did not have the same resonance: it was neither an occasion for gloating nor one for self-criticism. In addition to this, the way in which Thatcherism is studied has tended to discourage attention to any relations that it might have had with the Cold War. British scholars of Thatcherism focus on economic and social policy rather than on international relations. Even Andrew Gamble's influential analysis, which, in recent years, has made much of 'Anglo-America', views that relationship mainly in terms of attitudes to liberal economics and neo-conservative morality rather than in terms of attitudes to the Soviet world.¹¹ British writers stress

the coherence and unity of Thatcherism, emphasising the qualities that distinguished it from, say, 'the post-war consensus' or 'One-Nation Conservatism'. They are chiefly interested in the place of Thatcherism within a British political tradition – on the ways in which it might be seen as the heir to nineteenth-century liberalism or the Powellism of the 1960s.

Looking at the Cold War gives us a slightly different version of Thatcherism. First, it is a version that lays more emphasis on response to events rather than ideological coherence. Second, it is one that locates Thatcherism more firmly in a particular time and plays down the extent to which it can be understood in terms of similarity with earlier political movements. Third, the Cold War is an area in which Thatcherites are not always easy to distinguish from other Conservatives or, perhaps, from other members of the British establishment generally. Fourth, and related to this point, the study of the Cold War reminds us that it is possible to make too much of the extent to which the right was the only moving part of the British political system during the 1980s. Often the most dramatic transformations occurred on the left. Indeed, there were some areas in which Thatcherites were defenders of a post-war consensus rather than its enemies.

This chapter will be divided into three parts. The first will deal with defence policy; the second with concerns about internal 'subversion'; the third with the way in which the Cold War related to Thatcherite foreign policy, particularly in its dealings with Europe and the United States.

Thatcherism and defence policy

The 1979 election did not bring any sharp change in policy, which continued to revolve around nuclear weapons, NATO membership and the American alliance, and few voters identified defence as an important issue.¹² The Callaghan government of 1976 to 1979 had been particularly hawkish on matters of defence, and it is hard to think of any four ministers in post-war British history who had better relations with the armed forces than Callaghan himself, Denis Healey, David Owen and Roy Mason. The Thatcher government was responsible for the decisions to upgrade Britain's submarine-based nuclear weapons system to Trident and to allow the deployment of American cruise missiles at bases in the UK. These decisions evoked protest and were opposed by the Labour Party, which had turned to the left after the election, but they did not mark a sharp departure from policies pursued by the previous government. After 1979, Denis Healey and James Callaghan

continued to support submarine-based strategic missiles while those former Labour ministers who had joined the Social Democratic Party supported cruise missiles but not Trident. The continuity between successive governments was not surprising. Defence had been seen, ever since 1945, as an area in which there should be a high level of consensus between the parties. In any case, because it was an area in which policy depended on specialised and sometimes secret knowledge, politicians were dependent on advice from officers and civil servants.

There was clearly a potential conflict between a commitment to free market economics and a reduction in public spending, on the one hand, and traditional British defence policy, which was both expensive and prone to foster a protected sector of the economy, on the other. Some thinkers who influenced Thatcherism appreciated this conflict. Samuel Brittan, for example, had a low opinion of the whole defence industry.¹³ In opposition, Thatcher's Treasury team had been worried by the Labour government's commitment that British defence spending should rise at 3 per cent per annum in line with that of her NATO allies.¹⁴ However, the Conservative Party in opposition had not denounced this commitment and the Conservative government honoured it. The Thatcher government did eventually make some efforts to cut, or contain, defence spending. John Nott, the only hard-core Thatcherite to hold office at defence, instituted a review that was designed to cut naval spending – though its impact, blunted in any case by the aftermath of the Falklands War, was rather smaller than might have been supposed from the vociferous protests of senior naval officers. In any case, the Defence Review was largely about the relative allocation of defence spending rather than its overall size.

There was not, in fact, a particularly distinctive Thatcherite policy with regard to defence. The Thatcherite *domaine réservé* was mainly concerned with economics and it was in the Treasury that Thatcherite ministers exercised most power. Thatcher's first Secretary of State for Defence, Francis Pym, was a conspicuously un-Thatcherite figure, as was Peter Carrington, Thatcher's first Foreign Secretary. Thatcher herself expressed pious admiration for the armed forces, but she had never worn military uniform (a rare position in the almost exclusively male establishment of the late 1970s), never held a defence portfolio and never taken a particular interest in military matters. Some of the abuse directed at Thatcher came from the notion that there was something intrinsically incongruous about a woman taking responsibility for matters of war, and perhaps the idea that absence of military experience disqualified her from any high office. Just as there was not a distinctively Thatcherite position on defence, so there was not

a distinctively anti-Thatcherite position. Unlike economic policy, this was not a matter on which the Cabinet could be divided into wets and dries. Those who felt most sceptical about Margaret Thatcher's leadership of the Conservative Party rarely disagreed with her on military questions, and such questions do not seem to have created divisions within the government. The Nott Defence Review of 1981 produced only one resignation – that of a junior minister.¹⁵ As for the flamboyant departure of Michael Heseltine as Secretary of State for Defence in January 1986, this was a dispute about industrial policy, Europe and the future leadership of the Conservative Party. No one imagined that it really had anything to do with defence.

There was, of course, a group of Conservative MPs – which included Alan Clark, Julian Amery, Stephen Hastings and Winston Churchill junior – who took a deep interest in defence during the 1980s. Many of these men admired Margaret Thatcher and believed that she returned their admiration. They were, however, Thatcherians rather than Thatcherites. They were often either uninterested in, or sceptical about, the government's economic policy, while they tended to be right-wing on matters relating to race, South Africa and Rhodesia (matters on which most prominent Thatcherite ministers were either indifferent or liberal). Most importantly, none of these men ever attained significant office under Thatcher – though she seems to have found it convenient to let some of them think that they might do so.

The real innovations of the 1980s on matters of defence came from the left rather than the right. It was the Labour Party that broke most sharply with the post-war consensus, by turning away from the British independent nuclear deterrent. This divided Labour leaders from each other (Callaghan was openly hostile and Healey was evasive), and it helped Labour to lose the 1983 election. Precisely because Labour activists were keen to emphasise that opposition to nuclear weapons was not the same as pacifism, they flirted with an extraordinary range of policy options during this period. Neil Kinnock seems to have been perfectly serious when he talked about 'taking to the hills' in the event of Soviet invasion. It was during the 1980s that the ideas of Tom Wintringham, who had fought in Spain and subsequently tried to turn the Home Guard into a People's Army, were resurrected.¹⁶ Len Scott, an aide to Denis Healey, claims that the reintroduction of conscription was even discussed.¹⁷

The most important military event of the Thatcher government was, of course, one that seemed at first glance to have little to do with the Cold War. The Falkland Islands lie in the South Atlantic, thousands of miles from the potential Cold War battlefields of Germany and Norway. The

British operation to retake them in the spring of 1982 involved a war with the anti-communist Argentine dictatorship. The Soviet Union did not use its veto in the UN Security Council, and the most influential opponent of the British position was Jeane Kirkpatrick, the American ambassador to the United Nations, a ferocious anti-communist who, in other contexts, attracted admiration from Thatcher.¹⁸ Some senior army officers, unlike their colleagues in the navy, regarded the Falklands as a sideshow.

In spite of all this, the Falklands was clearly related to the Cold War, as any military operation in the early 1980s was bound to be. Support for Britain came partly from the perception that it would not look good if a key member of NATO were to be humiliated – this seems to have had a particular influence on Britain's staunchest supporter, François Mitterrand. The war was also important in changing the whole relationship between Thatcherism and military patriotism. It made Thatcher's personal position in the Conservative Party stronger and it helped the Tories win a large majority in the 1983 election. This electoral influence seems to have sprung from the fact that the 'Falklands factor' intersected with popular thinking about the Cold War. The Falklands War itself was not evoked much in specific terms during the election, but defence more generally was important in the campaign. Victory in the Falklands coincided with an apparent increase in the Soviet threat during the 1980s and with the Labour Party's move to unilateral nuclear disarmament. Over half the electorate believed that Britain would not be adequately defended under a Labour government and about half of voters believed that the Conservatives had the best defence policy. Butler and Kavanagh wrote that 'Not since 1964 had defence loomed so large as an election issue'.¹⁹

Thatcherism, the Cold War and internal subversion

The Cold War cut across countries as well as dividing them from each other. Some members of the ruling class had always expressed concern about internal 'subversion' by people who were sympathetic to Britain's political enemies abroad; and, during the 1970s, political discussion sometimes acquired a paranoid air. Robert Moss published a spy novel about communist subversion that was marketed with the claim that the truth was so shocking that it could only be told as fiction.²⁰ Left-wingers worried about the prospect of a military coup. Events in Chile interested both sides – the former worried about Allende and the latter about Pinochet.²¹ Peter Jay wrote in *The Times* that Britain's problems might bring an end to democracy.²²

How much influence did all this have on Thatcher's Conservative Party? A group of men with links to Thatcher were certainly prone to talk about communist subversion: this group included Robert Moss, John Gouriet and Brian Crozier (the first of whom helped to write the 'Iron Lady' speech). Crozier's Institute for the Study of Conflict examined internal subversion. Some of the Conservative MPs who supported Thatcher, notably Airey Neave, belonged to that peculiar world where right-wing politics, Western intelligence agencies, business associations and special forces overlapped. In opposition, Thatcher and some of her frontbench colleagues attended a 'Shield Committee' to study 'security questions'.

It was not, however, obvious that any of this was specifically Thatcherite. Often the men who worried most about the communist threat were old-style Conservatives with military backgrounds – the kind of people who were not particularly interested in radical free-market economics or monetarism. The Shield Committee included Keith Joseph (certainly a Thatcherite, though of a particular kind) but also Whitelaw and Carrington. Most of the Thatcherites associated with the making of economic policy were notably uninterested in subversion. Nigel Lawson alluded to communist infiltration of the Labour Party in a note to Thatcher – but he seems to have assumed that this was a matter of purely electoral concern. As such, it was an opportunity rather than a threat, because it would allow the Conservatives to discredit the Labour Party.²³

Concern about internal subversion was not limited to the British Conservative Party. It tied British Conservatives into an international network. Part of this was constituted under the aegis of the CIA, but it also involved a variety of right-wingers and Christian Democrats from continental Europe. Antoine Pinay, the former Prime Minister of Fourth Republic France, ran a 'cercle' that took in some of Thatcher's advisors. Concern with communist infiltration also expanded beyond the Conservative Party in Britain itself. A senior civil servant apparently believed that trade union activists were being trained in East Germany during the 1970s.²⁴ Labour leaders were worried by communist influence in the trade unions and in their own party – Conservatives were sometimes unsure about whether they should be seeking to embarrass Labour leaders or to make common cause with them against extremists in their own ranks.²⁵

It is unclear how seriously to take all this. Moss, Gouriet and Crozier were eccentric figures, whose colourful writings sometimes caused amusement even among their own associates.²⁶ Whitelaw (who had been deeply bruised by the troubles of the Heath government) was

worried about subversion, but Carrington sometimes fell asleep in Shield meetings. David Stirling featured in many left-wing fantasies about the prospect of a counter-revolutionary coup – though when he came to see Tory frontbenchers, his concern seems to have been a written constitution rather than martial law.²⁷ Nicholas Ridley, a backbench Thatcherite MP, prepared a report in late 1977 that is sometimes seen as the blueprint for how the Thatcher government would eventually defeat the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). Two years earlier, however, he had talked to people who contemplated more radical ways of dealing with union unrest. These people included Walter Walker, a retired general who seems, for a time, to have seen himself as a possible English Pinochet. Walker recalled that Ridley 'talked in riddles' and that 'it seemed to me that what he was trying to convey, but hadn't the guts to say openly, was that the only hope for this country was a military coup'.²⁸ Senior Conservatives, who knew about Ridley's propensity for extreme statements and tasteless jokes, would probably have paid less attention to such blimpish mutterings.

Thatcherism rose at a time when the nature of the British extreme left was changing. The left-wingers who emerged from the student radicalism of the 1970s rarely supported the Soviet Union. The Heath government still worried about communist influence in the trade unions, but the most direct threats that it had to confront came from new kinds of political movements – from Palestinian terrorism or from the Provisional IRA. Left-wing infiltration of the Labour movement was increasingly likely to come from Trotskyists rather than members of the Communist Party. Changes in trade union leadership during the late 1970s and early 1980s reduced the power of those who were seen as close to communism. Jack Jones, who was believed to have discreet links with the Soviet Union, retired as leader of the Transport and General Workers Union in 1978. Joe Gormley's manoeuvres ensured that the communist Michael McGahey was unable to become leader of the NUM. The post passed instead to Arthur Scargill, classified by MI5 as 'an unaffiliated subversive'.²⁹ The Heath government had been worried by the extent of communist infiltration of the NUM. The Thatcher government seems to have been less exercised by the matter during the strike of 1984–5. Far from being covert manipulators of union strategy, members of the Communist Party were now often overt critics of that strategy.

Conservatives did not necessarily understand the implications of all this; nor did they draw clear distinctions between different kinds of left-winger. Keith Joseph, a man prone to apocalyptic visions that linked many different elements of decline and crisis, argued that

Labour support for violent picketing at the Grunwick Film Processing Laboratories was linked to the 'fraternal relations' it enjoyed with parties in the Soviet bloc.³⁰ Some argued that left-wing agitation of any sort was part of a much wider process by which 'Western values' were being undermined in ways that would serve the interests of the Soviet Union.

It is, however, certain that there was a change in Thatcherism's attitude to internal subversion after the 1979 election. Once the Conservative Party was in government, many of the right-wing advisors who had been influential, or at least allowed to imagine that they were influential, in opposition were marginalised. This was particularly noticeable in the case of those men who had been associated with anti-communism. Brian Crozier's project to establish a 'Counter subversion executive' came to nothing and he was discreetly removed from the Institute for the Study of Conflict that he had helped to found.³¹ Just after the election, Whitelaw, the Home Secretary, told the head of MI5 that Thatcher had derived much of her information about subversion from 'people who know little or nothing of our work'. Instead, he wanted briefings that would counter 'some of the rather extreme advice' that the Prime Minister had received up to then.³²

There was also a sense in which the attitude of Thatcherism in power to anti-communism tied in with the longer-term change in the nature of the left. Up until the mid 1970s, it was still possible for some right-wingers to believe that Soviet sympathisers had infiltrated the British establishment. Some even believed that Harold Wilson was a Soviet agent. Walter Walker had told his audience of retired officers, City businessmen and conservative priests in St Lawrence Jewry in February 1975 that there were 'Burgesses and Macleans in every branch of the British state'.³³ (He failed to realise that communists had infiltrated his own movement, which was how these words came to be recorded.) In fact, however, fear of Soviet infiltration diminished during the later 1970s. The exposure of Anthony Blunt in 1979 stimulated a bout of interest in people who might have spied for the Soviet Union, but this affair was in the past. No one seriously imagined that the KGB was still recruiting undergraduates and Blunt himself did not suggest that spying for the Soviet Union had been a good idea. Indeed, for much of the 1980s, Thatcher and her ministers were being advised by senior intelligence officers who knew perfectly well that the KGB station chief in London was not recruiting British citizens, because he had himself been recruited as a spy by them.³⁴

The curious symbiotic relation between Thatcherism and *Marxism Today* also contributed to the new view of British communism. Some

of the opinions expressed in the journal were to the right of those expressed by the official leaders of the Labour Party. By the late 1980s, a number of influential Conservatives had been interviewed in *Marxism Today*, and Thatcher herself had quoted the magazine in public. It was hard to associate a glossy magazine full of lively and open debate with the notion that the Communist Party of Great Britain was a dark and threatening force.

Thatcherism, the Cold War and the world order

Thatcherism is often identified with particular alliances and enmities. It is seen as being intensely Atlanticist – favourable to alliance with America in general and so close to the politics of Ronald Reagan during the 1980s that some commentators write of British and American politics as though they were parallel tracks towards the same 'revolution'. Thatcherism is also seen as being anti-European. Indeed, after her political demise, Thatcher and her admirers often talked as though all foreign policy roads had led to Bruges. Loyalty to the memory of Margaret Thatcher became associated with Euroscepticism, and Thatcher famously remarked that 'During my lifetime most of the problems the world has faced have come ... from mainland Europe.'³⁵

During her time in office, Thatcher did sometimes play up the notion of herself as being close to America and hostile to, or at least exasperated by, Europe. When she met Reagan and American officials at Camp David in December 1984, she praised America and congratulated Reagan on the extent of his recent electoral victory. She then went on to contrast America's mood with that of Europe. According to American records:

She opined that the overall political situation in Europe is not especially encouraging. There is a socialist government in France; neither Holland or Belgium seem to be able to get their act completely together; Germany is a question mark; and the Italians lack guts. There is a socialist government in Spain; Greece is a pain in the neck and certainly no friend of the US.³⁶

However, anti-Europeanism was not a consistent feature of Thatcherism. During the 1970s the Conservative Party (or at least the Conservative front bench) was strongly in favour of British membership of the European Community. It may be that Thatcher personally was less sympathetic to European unity than some of her colleagues, but it would have been hard to guess this from statements that she made at the time. It was certainly possible for people like Geoffrey Howe, who regarded themselves as true Thatcherites, to feel a strong emotional

attachment to the European project.³⁷ Conservative pro-Europeanism had many roots: party interest and a desire to embarrass the Labour Party had something to do with it, as did admiration for West European economic performance. Many believed that Britain would benefit from closer association with France and West Germany. However, the Cold War also played a role. Early steps towards European unity had, after all, been taken under the American aegis and as part of a strategy to contain the Soviet Union. During the 1970s, Thatcher often presented support for Europe and support for the West in the Cold War as interrelated. Her speech to the Chelsea Conservative Association in July 1975 (usually considered to be a speech primarily about the Soviet threat) began with a reference to the recent referendum on British membership of the EEC:

This year, we've seen some dramatic changes in world affairs. Here in Britain the question of our membership of the European Community has been clearly and dramatically settled. The policies we have pursued over the past years have been overwhelmingly supported by the British people. Membership is no longer an issue.³⁸

Thatcher's relations with other West European leaders owed much to the Cold War. She admired Helmut Schmidt's support for the stationing of American intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe and contrasted his 'robustness' with the 'meanderings of US foreign policy under Jimmy Carter'.³⁹ She also had good relations with François Mitterrand. France was not a member of NATO's combined command structures but it was a power that had built its foreign policy on the independent possession of nuclear weapons. Mitterrand himself was, in many ways, the most articulate opponent of unilateral nuclear disarmament. It was he who gave currency to the phrase: 'the pacifists are in the West but the missiles are in the East'.

The Atlanticist element in Thatcherism can also be overstated. The Thatcherites supported NATO membership and the American alliance but this did not, in fact, take them out of the mainstream of Conservative traditions, or indeed of post-war British politics generally. In the early part of her career as leader, Thatcher was particularly keen to present her American policy in terms of continuity and stressed that her admiration for Macmillan sprang partly from the fact that he had rebuilt the Anglo-American friendship after Suez.⁴⁰ It is true that the British government had made rather less of the 'special relationship' under Heath, but this was not an area in which Thatcher's election brought an immediate reversal. Indeed, Thatcherism emerged at a time when the American capacity to exercise leadership in the

West seemed particularly problematic. America had been weakened by Vietnam, Watergate and the oil shock, but also by a sense of internal crisis (especially to do with issues of race, inner cities and education) that evoked particular concern among British Conservatives. Far from being a relationship of mutual support during Thatcher's early years as leader of the Conservative Party, the relationship between America and Britain often seemed to be one of thinly disguised mutual disdain. Henry Kissinger briefed Gerald Ford in these terms on 8 January 1975: 'Britain is a tragedy – it has sunk to begging, borrowing, stealing, until North Sea Oil comes in.'⁴¹

Relations between Thatcherites and the American leadership improved when Ronald Reagan entered the White House. There was a touch of show business in the way that both Reagan and Thatcher presented this relationship, and it evoked much sneering among Thatcher's British enemies. America and Britain were not, however, completely aligned on Cold War policy during the 1980s. American leaders continued to doubt Britain's value as an ally, especially as the Thatcher government's economic policy (very different from that of Ronald Reagan) appeared to fail in the early 1980s. In July 1981, the American ambassador in London told the President that 'Thatcher has lost her grip on the political rudder ... with no British leader seeming to have a clear idea of where or how to go, some political turbulence is likely, with adverse effects on the country's reliability as a US ally.'⁴² There were specific disagreements about the American intervention in Grenada in 1983, and about the American attempt to impose sanctions against the Soviet Union after the invasion of Afghanistan. Thatcherite concern with the rule of law and with sovereignty also meant a particular distaste for American 'extra-territoriality'.

There was a more important difference between Reagan and Thatcher. Reagan was a visionary. He had spent the early part of his career in Hollywood and he was good at taking a simple idea and presenting it in dramatic terms. Thatcher had spent the early part of her career holding a succession of unglamorous ministerial posts. She was used to dealing with detail and working her way around complicated realities. In the context of the Cold War, Reagan's two simple ideas were: first, that the Soviet Union was an 'evil empire' and the world would be a better place if it did not exist; and, second, that the prospect of nuclear war was terrible and politicians should work to abolish nuclear weapons. One writer describes Reagan's interventions in Cold War strategy thus:

There were occasions during his presidency when Reagan rose up like some twentieth-century Gulliver and, casting aside the constraints of politics, diplomacy and of his own ignorance, forced upon his administration and indeed the

whole world a vision of the future of nuclear weapons that was uniquely his and that was deeply at odds with the policies of his administration.⁴³

Thatcher and most of her allies seem to have regarded many of Reagan's ideas with polite scepticism. They were concerned by plans for a Strategic Defence Initiative, because they feared that it would leave Europe unprotected and/or because they simply regarded it as expensive and impractical. As for the collapse of the Soviet Union, this was a prospect that a few of the more intellectually adventurous people in Thatcher's entourage seem to have considered. Keith Joseph certainly made much of Soviet abuses of human rights (he also, for that matter, cared about human rights under right-wing regimes), and he suggested that Conservatives should protest about the visit by Brezhnev to the United Kingdom in 1976.⁴⁴ He was interested in the work of dissidents from the Soviet bloc, including Andrei Amalrik, who had published *Will the Soviet Union Survive until 1984?* in 1970.⁴⁵

The most important Thatcherites, however, seem to have approached the Soviet Union with hard-headed realpolitik. In opposition, even Joseph had been careful to distinguish between political parties, which should stay clear of Soviet associations, and states, which had to deal with governments as they stood.⁴⁶ Thatcher and her ministers certainly raised the question of human rights when they met Soviet leaders, but Thatcher's main contact with Soviet dissidents seems to have come via Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and this contributed to her pessimistic assumption that the Soviet Union was here to stay, and might indeed outlive the Western democracies.⁴⁷ Ministers in the Thatcher government generally regarded their Soviet counterparts with cynicism rather than moral outrage. The Thatcherites invested hope in long-term reform of the communist system rather than in its imminent demise, and they had very little faith, at first, that reform was even possible in the Soviet Union. This explains the interest that Thatcher took in Kadar's Hungary, the most economically liberal of the communist states.

A conversation with Mitterrand in 1983 shows how far Thatcher took the continued existence of the USSR for granted as a basis for international relations:

[T]he system is so rigid that one cannot change it. There is no more faith in the system, but there will be no change for a long time, because the survival of the leaders is at stake. If, for example, the Soviet leaders sought to show more flexibility, as the Hungarian leaders do, they would undermine the basis of their own power. For this reason, we have to live with the regime.⁴⁸

In the same conversation, Thatcher did allow for the possibility that some very long-term change might come in the Soviet system from

younger leaders – though she added that the Canadian Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau, had been disappointed by his recent meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev, 'one of the young men that Andropov brought in'. Eventually, of course, Thatcher herself met Gorbachev and began to invest hope in him as a Soviet reformer. This hope, however, always involved change within the Soviet system, not the overthrow of that system.

This emphasis on finding ways to live with the Soviet bloc distinguished Thatcher both from the British left, which, in the early 1980s, spent much time thinking about how NATO and the Warsaw Pact might be disbanded, and from Ronald Reagan. The gulf between Thatcher and Reagan was revealed during a telephone call after Reagan's Berlin speech of 12 June 1987. Reagan recounted his speech and told Thatcher how he had 'called for the wall to come down'. There was a brief embarrassed pause and then Thatcher asked after Nancy.⁴⁹

The end of the Cold War

The Berlin Wall was torn down in November 1989 and Thatcher's own political fall came just over a year later. How were the two events related? Ministers and civil servants were certainly struck by the speed with which events moved in international affairs and the extraordinary change that had come over Europe since Thatcher took power. Some associated the two, linking changes in world politics with developments in Britain. Nicholas Ridley noted that the key moves leading to Thatcher's overthrow occurred 'when the true leader was abroad, signing a treaty bringing the Cold War to an end, an achievement for which she was in large measure responsible'.⁵⁰ Thatcher's fall owed much to her increasingly hostile attitude to European unification, and this in turn owed something to the fact that European unity was no longer needed to resist the Soviet threat. The prospect of German reunification, opened up by the fall of the Wall, caused Thatcher particular agitation.⁵¹

Events between 1988 and 1990 raised particular questions about the personal role of Margaret Thatcher – something rather different from the role of Thatcherism. Thatcher's intervention in matters of foreign policy had been relatively limited during the early years of her government, when she had focused on the economy. Some initiatives (the Rhodesian settlement of 1980, for example) seem to have involved the delegation of power to her ministerial colleagues. Even during the

Falklands War, Thatcher was part of a team – implementing decisions taken by defence chiefs rather than devising policy on her own. The last stages of the Cold War, however, coincided with a period during which Thatcher saw herself increasingly as an international statesperson rather than as a domestic politician. Personal idiosyncrasies played an ever larger part in her attitude to world affairs. She regretted Reagan's departure in 1988 and felt that relations with his successor were less good. She liked Gorbachev, she trusted Mitterrand and she felt an increasing personal antipathy towards Helmut Kohl. She had grown to political maturity during the Cold War and its certainties had provided her with common points of reference with other members of the British establishment. As the Cold War came to an end, Thatcher seems to have reverted to views that had been formed before 1945. In particular, her experience of the Second World War was important. Having experienced the war as a civilian seems to have made her more conscious of the special qualities of Nazism, and especially of the murder of the Jews. She had always been philo-semitic and, in particular, keen that the lessons of the Holocaust should not be forgotten. It is hard not to believe that there was some link in her mind between her opposition to the reunification of Germany and her support at the same time for a British War Crimes Bill.

To some extent, as the Thatcherite ministers who helped to depose her argued, all this merely reflected Thatcher's increasing eccentricity. The end of the Cold War, however, undermined Thatcherism in broader ways. Thatcherism had always been built on the assumption that Britain should be a great power. Thatcher admired Switzerland, but never suggested that Britain itself ought to become a prosperous and independent country that exercised no significant influence beyond its own frontiers.

A belief in great power status was not, of course, unique to the Thatcherites. It was a part of the whole post-war consensus – which was why Enoch Powell denounced it with such fervour. In this context, Thatcher was very much a part of that consensus. Nicholas Henderson's valedictory despatch of 1979 as British ambassador in Paris, on 'British Decline: Its Causes and Consequences',⁵² presented the capacity to exercise influence beyond its own frontiers as a necessary attribute of Britain, and saw economic success as a means to secure this influence rather than as an end in itself. The document expounded orthodoxies that had dominated British foreign policy since Bevin, and much of it could have been written by Edward Heath,⁵³ but it was also picked up with enthusiasm by Thatcher and her ministers.

The Cold War and great power status fitted together in odd ways. On the one hand, it showed that Britain was now overshadowed by America and the Soviet Union. On the other hand, however, the Cold War conferred special status on those European countries, Britain and France, that possessed a level of military power that exceeded their economic power. Jacques Attali was to refer to those countries that had independent nuclear weapons and permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council as the five '*rois thaumaturges*' of the modern world. Just as French Gaullism in the 1960s had been built on the capacity to persuade the French that their country was still capable of exercising power around the world, so Thatcherism in the 1980s drew some of its drama, electoral success and self-image from its apparent ability to restore British 'greatness'.

Conclusion

Thatcherism is often presented as a sharp break with the mainstream of post-war British politics, for reasons that owe as much to historiographical tendencies as to the Thatcher governments themselves. In the first instance, studies of Thatcherism have tended to focus on opposition, because the majority of archival sources so far released relate to the pre-1979 period. Some Thatcherites also thought of themselves as returning to opposition after 1990, when they saw themselves as hostile to the direction in which John Major took their party. Second, studies of Thatcherism have tended to emphasise what was *said* rather than what was *done*. This tendency is exacerbated by the fact that the public statements of Margaret Thatcher and her key associates are, courtesy of the Thatcher Foundation website, so easily accessible. Third, historians of Thatcherism have tended to give much attention to extra-parliamentary advisors, such as Alfred Sherman, John Hoskyns or Robert Moss. These men probably enjoyed most access to Thatcher herself before the 1979 election – after this date her advice was more likely to come from civil servants. It is not surprising that advisors have become so important to historians. Their job was to conjure up plausible overall interpretations and to express those interpretations in striking passages – the kind of passages that historians find quotable. Conversely, some ministers are under-represented in accounts of Thatcherism. Many books, for example, do not contain a single quotation from, say, Willie Whitelaw or Peter Carington.

Nothing epitomises all these tendencies more than the impact of Thatcher's 'Iron Lady' speech of 19 January 1976. This was written

by one of her extra-parliamentary advisors without, apparently, much consultation of her frontbench team. It was delivered in opposition and it contained a striking statement of intent against the Soviet Union – made all the more resonant, as was often the case, by the way in which Thatcher's enemies responded to it. It certainly contributed to the tone of Thatcherism, with its 'sense of imminent danger', that so struck some commentators in the late 1970s.⁵⁴

In terms of policy, however, the speech was deceptive. It bore almost no relation to anything that Thatcher did once in government. The 'Iron Lady' speech stressed the threat posed by the Soviet navy; but the Thatcher government's first real intervention in defence policy (the Nott Review of 1981) involved cuts to the British surface fleet. Robert Moss, who had helped write the speech, exercised little influence once Thatcher was in government. On matters of defence and foreign policy, ministers (often from the 'non-Thatcherite' wing of the party) and civil servants exercised a particularly strong influence after 1979. This does not mean that Thatcher renounced all contact with extra-parliamentary advisors or that she abandoned radical rhetoric. On the contrary, Thatcher's political success came partly from her ability to talk the talk of radicalism while walking the walk of pragmatism. The most revealing aspect of George Urban's recollections of having advised Margaret Thatcher is not his insistence on the moral clarity of her vision but the separation conveyed by his book between the speech-writing and Chequers seminars, in which he was involved, and the real business of policy formation.⁵⁵

In their attitudes to the Cold War, the Thatcher governments were notable for the extent to which they fitted into an establishment consensus. Thatcherism went with support for the American alliance, NATO and, at least in the early years, European unity. It also went with a restrained and unsentimental view of the Soviet Union that did not expect, or want, dramatic change. It is true that Thatcher made some dramatic speeches as Leader of the Opposition, but the very fact that she often wrote these speeches without consulting her frontbench colleagues suggests an awareness that the mood they expressed (like some of her speeches on crime or immigration) would not be taken into government.

The absence of radicalism in Thatcherite policy towards the Cold War is highlighted by five comparators. The first is François Mitterrand. It is often suggested that Thatcher had few real affinities with other European leaders, or that her apparently cordial relations with the French President sprang from his capacity to flatter. There were, however, more hard-headed reasons for Thatcher and Mitterrand to feel

that they had things in common. Jacques Attali reports the following exchange between the two:

Mitterrand: I too would be against nuclear weapons, if the USSR and the United States were as well.

Thatcher: No, at the moment, I would be against conventional weapons.

Mitterrand: But of course, that is because you are a realist!⁵⁶

Second, Enoch Powell, sometimes seen as the intellectual ancestor of Thatcher in terms of economic policy, was at odds with Thatcherism over the Cold War. Powell was dubious about nuclear weapons, against European integration and violently hostile to the United States. His vision of foreign policy was utterly removed from that of Margaret Thatcher. It is, perhaps, indicative of the way in which the end of the Cold War changed Thatcher's personal approach, and also marginalised her in the Conservative Party, that Enoch Powell welcomed the Bruges speech and apparently offered to rejoin the Conservative Party if Thatcher was re-elected as leader in 1990.⁵⁷

Third, it was the British Labour Party that broke with the post-war consensus on defence and foreign policy after 1979. The gulf between the two parties that played such a role in the 1983 election owed much more to change on the left than to change on the right.

Fourth, Ronald Reagan's vision of a world that would be free of nuclear weapons and even of the Soviet Union was alien to the modest ambitions of the Thatcher governments.

Fifth, and most revealingly, Thatcher's position can be compared to that of Tony Blair. Blair is often seen as seen as Thatcher's heir – he accepted much of Thatcher's social and economic legacy and, like Thatcher, was a 'presidential' leader who held power for a long time. On matters of foreign policy, however, the Blair government was conspicuously different from the Thatcher government. Blair came to power with an almost Gladstonian commitment to a 'moral' foreign policy, which was given its most famous expression in his Chicago speech of 1999. Blair's foreign policy involved intervention that was designed to make the world a better place, culminating in the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Some of Thatcher's ministers (notably Kenneth Clarke) openly disapproved of this invasion. Thatcher herself, during the run-up to the first Gulf War of 1991, had apparently insisted that 'regime change' could not be a legitimate aim for such operations.⁵⁸ Blair and his front bench were the first generation of politicians to come to power after the Cold War, and their view of the world owed much to the optimism that went with its end. Thatcher, by contrast, had grown

up during the Cold War and her politics was overshadowed – until almost the end – by the sense that the Soviet Union was a great and immutable presence in world affairs.

The Cold War played a particularly large part in British internal politics in the early 1980s. This was partly because of the shift in Labour Party policy, partly because of the apparent increase in Soviet aggression and partly because the Falklands War, rather unexpectedly, associated Thatcher with military success. All of these things did a great deal to pave the way for the Tory election victory of 1983 and hence for the high Thatcherism that went with privatisation, the crushing of the NUM and the liberalisation of the City. The end of the Cold War also played a part in British politics. This was partly because it raised questions for all British politicians about the extent to which Britain could claim to be a great power in a multi-polar world: a world in which power, in Europe at least, now had less to do with military force.

- 59 Anglo-Irish Agreement, Article 2 (b).
- 60 W. H. Cox, 'From Hillsborough to Downing Street – and After', in P. Catterall and S. McDougall (eds.), *The Northern Ireland Question in British Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 186.
- 61 E. Delaney, *An Accidental Diplomat: My Years in the Irish Foreign Service, 1987–1995* (Dublin: New Island, 2001), p. 289.
- 62 *Fortnight* (April 1990), p. 18.
- 63 Thatcher, answering questions from cadets at the Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, Virginia, 24 January 1992: in J. S. Thompson and W. C. Thompson (eds.), *Margaret Thatcher: Prime Minister Indomitable* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), p. 321.
- 64 *Belfast Telegraph*, 29 January 1990.
- 65 B. Mawhinney, *In the Firing Line: Politics, Faith, Power and Forgiveness* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), p. 109; emphasis in original.
- 66 Unemployment had neared 20 per cent for males by 1986, and 40 per cent in some Catholic areas. Though it later declined, republican areas remained blighted. B. Rowthorne and N. Wayne, *Northern Ireland: The Political Economy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), pp. 85–6.
- 67 F. Gaffken and M. Morrissey, *Northern Ireland: The Thatcher Years* (London: Zed Books, 1990), p. 205.
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- 70 D. Bloomfield, *Political Dialogue in Northern Ireland: The Brooke Initiative, 1989–92* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 181.
- 71 *Irish News*, 23 February 1990.

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- 2 Reagan to Thatcher, 30 April 1975, MTFW 110357.
- 3 Speech at Kensington Town Hall, 19 January 1976, MTFW 102939.
- 4 S. Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show', *Marxism Today* (January 1979), 14–20.
- 5 Sir J. Hackett, *The Third World War: A Future History* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1978).
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- 8 N. Lawson, speech to Zurich Society of Economics, 14 January 1981, MTFW 109506.
- 9 E. Morin, *Autocritique* (Paris: René Julliard, 1959).
- 10 F. Furet, *Le passé d'une illusion: essai sur l'idée communiste au XXe siècle* (Paris: Laffont, 1995).
- 11 See Andrew Gamble, Chapter 12 in this volume.
- 12 D. Butler and D. Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1979* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980).

- 13 For Brittan's views, see S. Brittan, *Against the Flow: Reflections of an Individualist* (London: Atlantic, 2005).
- 14 G. Howe, *Conflict of Loyalty* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), p. 144.
- 15 K. Speed, *Sea Change: The Battle for the Falklands and the Future of Britain's Navy* (Bath: Ashgrove, 1982).
- 16 Peter Tatchell, the Labour candidate in the 1983 Bermondsey by-election, praised Wintringham in his pamphlet, *Democratic Defence, A Non-Nuclear Alternative* (London: GMP, 1985). Wintringham acquired a certain cult status in the 1980s and the term 'People's War', originally coined by him, became an important part of the anti-Thatcher vocabulary.
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- 18 Thatcher later read and admired an article by George Urban and Jeane Kirkpatrick for *Encounter*. G. Urban, *Diplomacy and Disillusion at the Court of Margaret Thatcher: An Insider's View* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), p. 35.
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- 22 P. Jay, 'How Inflation Threatens British Democracy with its Last Chance Before Extinction', *The Times*, 1 July 1974.
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- 24 Centre for Contemporary British History witness seminar, 'The Civil Service Reforms of the 1980s', 17 November 2006.
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- 36 Record of Thatcher/Reagan meeting, 22 December 1984, dated 28 December 1984, MTFW 109185.
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- 38 Speech to Chelsea Conservative Association, 26 July 1975, MTFW 102750.
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- 43 S. Head, 'Reagan, Nuclear Weapons and the End of the Cold War', in C. Hudson and G. Davies (eds.), *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s: Perceptions, Policies, Legacies* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), pp. 81–101, at p. 82.
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- 47 Thatcher, *Path to Power*, p. 364.
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