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**MARGARET THATCHER, THE FOREIGN OFFICE  
AND GERMAN UNIFICATION**

(Translation: Antoine Capet)

Helmut Kohl curtly put an end to his first extended meeting with Margaret Thatcher, in August 1984. To the great surprise of the British Prime Minister, who had come to Kohl's holiday resort on the Wolfgangsee, the Chancellor explained to her after a conversation which had been going on for about an hour that he had yet another important appointment and that much to his regret he therefore had to take his leave from her. A few moments later, the 'Iron Lady', indignant, saw the plump Chancellor joyfully devouring a big piece of cake in one of the cosy tea-rooms of St Gilgen. Similar episodes, as when Kohl interrupted the Prime Minister's flow of words during a later meeting by saying that she had talked enough now and that it was his turn to speak, did not contribute to an improvement of their personal relations. Even though these stories have been blown up over the years with a good dose of imagination, they nevertheless aptly characterise the personal tensions between Kohl and Thatcher. Very soon, they were reinforced by deep political differences over the modernisation of the Lance type short range missiles predominantly stationed on West German soil. Over the whole of the eighties, Anglo-German relations were bad.

This was made particularly obvious during the eventful months of 1989-1990. Thatcher made it unambiguously clear that for her reunification was not on the agenda. Even after the fall of the Wall on 9 November and Kohl's ten-point plan of 28 November 1989, the Prime Minister was not weary of explaining that there was no question of a modification of European frontiers. Instead, she spoke in favour of the maintenance of the political autonomy of a democratised GDR. Early in 1990, even after Mikhail Gorbachev himself had given his consent to the principle of a reunification, Thatcher continued to refuse to approve it as before. Instead, she publicly envisaged an extended period of transition, about 10 to 15 years, and speculated on the difficulties of integrating the GDR into the European Community. She also supported the cumbersome mechanism which led to getting the consent of all thirty-five member States of the ECSC for reunification. While Thatcher had

always shown a great sympathy for the dissidents and liberation movements of eastern Europe, she hardly ever mentioned their equivalents in the GDR, and never went there. Germany had to remain partitioned.

Of course, behind the British Head of Government's deep mistrust of the German national character and Thatcher's fears of the emergence of a fourth German Reich there was more than the sorry sight of a cake-eating Chancellor on the Wolfgangsee or the relatively short-term irritation over political differences. In fact, it was profound personal and political convictions which made Margaret Thatcher bold enough to try to prevent German unification, or at least to delay the process as much as possible. Like many other problems in Anglo-German relations, Thatcher's mistrust dated back to her experience during the Second World War. When war broke out, Margaret Roberts was almost fourteen years old. Her home town, Grantham, was the target of twenty-one Luftwaffe raids altogether, because of the proximity of a munitions factory and a Royal Air Force airfield. The town also suffered from recurring difficulties in food and electricity supplies. Above all, however, it was her father's patriotic stories and the excruciating narratives from Edith, the Jewish girl, which influenced Margaret a lot. Edith was the daughter of a family of friends in occupied Vienna, and she was put up for some time by the Roberts family during the war. She told them about the painful conditions of living of the Jews under the Nazis, which she had herself experienced, but also of the terrible events in the camps, of which she had heard. Both left a deep mark upon the future Prime Minister.

This also influenced her thinking after the war, the more so as almost a quarter of the voters in her later constituency in the London district of Finchley were of Jewish origin. Many of them had managed to flee Germany during the Nazi period. When she ran for the Parliamentary seat of that constituency for the first time in 1959, she only had repulsion, out of electoral tactics, but also out of her own personal convictions, for the partly open antisemitic policy of the local Conservative Party. Many of the leading lights of the party had taken part in the decision by the Finchley Golf Club around 1957 to refuse membership to Jews. After her election to the seat, Thatcher studiously nursed the Jewish vote in her constituency. This continued when she eliminated Edward Heath as Leader of the Conservative Party by a political coup inside the leadership, and when she became Head of Government in 1979. She always showed herself extremely well informed on the situation in the Middle East, and she had the greatest understanding for Israel's policy. Disregarding the traditional pro-Arab tendencies of British policy, she was also the first British Head of Government to pay Israel an official visit, in 1986.

In the 1980s and in 1989-1990 Thatcher's views on Germany were therefore strongly impregnated with the Holocaust and her experience of the Finchley constituency. On top of that, there were her over-developed patriotism, her profound belief in a close Anglo-American 'Special Relationship' and her conception of the important role which, as in the past, Britain continued to play on the world scene. Thatcher's convictions in European politics further fuelled her mistrust of the Germans, who seemed determined to build a federal European superstate. Thatcher considered that a close economic co-operation between the European states on the basis of a Europe of sovereign nations made good sense, but her inner convictions made her reject a European political union. Fundamentally, Thatcher followed a Churchillian foreign policy, which clung as always to the old concept of the balance between the Great Powers, was above all oriented towards the United States, and held the cultivation of bilateral links for particularly important. Thus it was the North Atlantic Alliance, and in no way the European Community, which represented Thatcher's ideal international organisation. In the final analysis, NATO did not rest on a supranational foundation and, instead of irritating Washington with divergences on trade policy like the European Community, the Alliance bound the United States to the lot of Europe in matters of security policy. Moreover, Britain, which only took an outsider's position inside the European Community in the 1970s and 1980s, was able to play an enhanced role in NATO because of its close co-operation with the Superpower, the United States.

Still, the Prime Minister's attempts, inspired by her deepest convictions, failed to uphold the status quo of the Cold War, and thereby the partition of Germany. Essentially, three factors proved decisive in this respect: the lack of support which Thatcher found for her position from British public opinion and from British MPs; the far-sighted policy of the United States, and later also of France and the USSR, which undermined Thatcher's position; and last but not least the action of the foreign policy experts in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. By and large, public opinion in Britain was in favour of reunification. Leaving aside a widespread mistrust of the Germans in large sectors of the population due to the experiences of the past, many Britons had a great sympathy for the wish to restore the national unity of Germany. Struck by the opening of the Wall on 9 November 1989, a full 71 percent of polled Britons supported reunification. In spite of the Prime Minister's anti-German warnings, there was on average a constant and impressive 61 percent of the population in the 1990s to welcome reunification. Simultaneously, however, almost half of all Britons (predominantly from the older generation) nourished apprehensions regarding the economic potential of a reunified Germa-

ny. Many also feared the return of Fascist tendencies in German politics. A similar acquiescence to reunification with a simultaneous uneasiness over its consequences for Britain characterised the debates in the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The vast majority of British MPs (including a large part of older Members, influenced by the war) declared themselves convinced by the change in the political culture of the Federal Republic and the well-anchored democratic character of the West German system. The opinion was also widespread that the three Western Allies' constant affirmations for the last forty years that their aim was unification should now be made concrete. Otherwise, their own credibility and friendly relations with the Germans would be put at risk. Whereas there was a large consensus among MPs over the necessity to have a unified Germany stay in NATO, the intensification of the European integration process was rejected. Only a small minority of Members were convinced that the expected higher potential strength of the new Germany could be neutralised by even closer union in the European Community.

Together with the reunified Germany remaining in NATO, which Thatcher evidently supported, the deepening of European integration was precisely the element, however, which appeared as the solution to President Bush and the French Head of State, François Mitterand. Thus the thorn of the potential destabilisation of the post-war European order by the German reunification would be removed and Germany's neighbours would immediately be reassured. Besides, President Bush recognised in December 1989 that the course of events set in train in the summer and autumn of 1989 by the East German population would irresistibly lead to German reunification. Instead of showing resistance and thereby durably antagonising the Germans without being in any way able to alter the result, President Bush and his advisers – and then in January-February 1990 also Mitterand and Soviet President Gorbachev – decided to gracefully bow to the inevitable process. Whilst the United States were no doubt the only Great Power which effectively supported reunification, Mitterand and Gorbachev, as well as political leaders from countries like Poland and the Netherlands had first to overcome their deep reservations and fundamental opposition to reunification.

For Thatcher, it was impossible to put her own ideological suspicion aside. Her thinking remained much too rigid and visionless, within the framework dictated by the Cold War. At the same time and in the same way, her lack of understanding of European politics and her wrongly-understood British patriotism prevented her from consenting to the further development of the European Community into a genuine European Union. With his totally different approach, Bush earned a renewal of the deep thankfulness and

attachment of the Germans for his country. Gorbachev received considerable financial payments and an enormous personal esteem, which continued after his retirement. Mitterand's price for French consent to the reunification consisted mainly in the reaffirmation of Kohl's consent, already obtained in December 1989, to the realisation of European Monetary Union, and with it, as far as possible, to the end of German monetary domination in Europe. In contrast, Thatcher clung far too long to a purely negative position, until she had no option left but to retreat in view of the policy followed by the United States, France and the Soviet Union. The British Prime Minister had wasted too much time, however, to be able to obtain any gain in the process. She said that German reunification was on the cards for the first time on 6 February 1990 in a speech in Parliament. Yet, in actual practice, she sought to further delay the coming of that event and to fall back on another line of attack. In particular, she was concerned that Kohl was not ready to recognise the western frontier of Poland.

Thatcher's anti-German conceptions were made public by two main events in the middle of 1990. The unfortunate Ridley Affair broke out in July 1990 after an interview with the then Minister of Trade and Industry, Nicholas Ridley. He explained in outspoken language that thanks to the financial policy of the Bundesbank the Germans were set to take up the leadership of Europe. The French would follow them on this course like poodles with no will of their own. Only the British remained in a position to put a stop to German ambitions. Moreover, Ridley did not hesitate to put Kohl on the same level as Hitler. In spite of a few cautious attempts on Thatcher's part to protect her minister from the indignant reactions to his declarations, he was eventually forced to resign. Nevertheless the substance of Thatcher's thinking largely agreed with that of Ridley. This was confirmed not later than in 1993, when her unusually frank memoirs appeared.

Almost simultaneously with the Ridley Affair, in mid-July 1990, a secret memorandum about a week-end seminar at Chequers, the Prime Minister's country residence, was made public. There are indications that in all likelihood the Foreign Office was responsible for the leak. In March 1990, Thatcher had invited a handful of British and American historians to analyse the German national character and the transformations in German politics with her and a few advisers. In the summary prepared by Thatcher's confidant Charles Powell it was conceded that a radical re-orientation of German politics had taken place after the war. Yet the author was not afraid to define the unchanged German national character with words like 'aggressiveness, assertiveness, bullying, egotism, excessive exaggerations, inferiority complex, self-pity, sentimentality'. In spite of soothing declarations that the memorandum was only

an oversimplification of the seminar's discussions, it was impossible to overlook the memorandum's anti-German content. Anyhow, there was also heavy criticism of the British Prime Minister's impudence in holding such a seminar on a friendly ally of Britain.

Still, Thatcher's efforts were in vain. In September 1990, in the final document signed during the 'Two-plus-Four' talks in Moscow, the four Allied Powers, including Britain, gave up all their rights and duties towards Germany and Berlin. Also, among the factors influencing Thatcher's retreat, there was the policy of her own Foreign Office, which the Prime Minister held in the deepest distrust because of its supposed pro-European tendencies. Indeed, the position of the Foreign Secretary, Hurd, and of the diplomats of King Charles Street, London, regarding German reunification was clearly more accommodating than that of the Prime Minister. In particular, their declarations were notably more conciliatory than those of the often disrespectful and abrasive Mrs Thatcher. Already in October 1989 – before the fall of the Wall, therefore – many British Foreign Office officials had acquired the conviction that German unification was not to be prevented. London should use its influence to guide the event onto the correct track through the Four Powers' formal discussion forums on the settlement of the international aspects of reunification. The short-lived revival of the Allied Control Council in Berlin on 11 December 1989, which met with so much criticism in Bonn, and later the institutionalisation of the 'Two-plus-Four' talks, decided upon in Ottawa in mid-February 1990 first and foremost on the initiative of the United States, was in conformity with these objectives. On 22 February Foreign Secretary Hurd explained in the House of Commons that the British Government was glad that the partition of Germany was coming to an end. The Foreign Office hoped that, with the help of the 'Two-plus-Four' process, the widest possible solution of the German question would be arrived at. This included frontier settlements, like the confirmation of the Oder-Neisse frontier, but also the question of the unrestricted continued membership of NATO of a united Germany. Like Thatcher and most British MPs, the Foreign Office also considered the latter as absolutely necessary. Without Germany, the continued existence of NATO and thereby the anchoring of the United States to Europe was hardly guaranteed. It is only with the greatest ill will that London consented in September 1990 to a compromise with time limits on the non-stationing of NATO forces and strongly restricted organisation of NATO manoeuvres on the territory of the former GDR. Contradicting President Bush, Thatcher had declared herself in favour of the unlimited stationing of Soviet forces in East Germany.

The aim was also to prevent the emergence of a neutral Germany, as was propounded at the time not only by Gorbachev, but also by sections of the SPD and many of the East German demonstrators. Because of the ill-famed 'Rapallo syndrome', the Foreign Office and Downing Street were afraid of the conclusion of a bilateral German-Soviet agreement and the creation of a power vacuum in Central Europe. Like the Prime Minister, the Foreign Office had little inclination for a deepening of the European Community and the development of a common European currency. Instead, they spoke in favour of the enlargement of the European Community towards eastern Europe: the addition of new members should contribute to prevent a supranational deepening of the European Community. There were therefore many extremely important areas of accord between the Foreign Office and the Prime Minister.

Yet, the Foreign Office diverged from the Prime Minister on a decisive point. Whereas Thatcher was long convinced that Moscow would never consent to reunification because Gorbachev's position on the Soviet political scene would further deteriorate, the Foreign Office supported a totally different opinion. There, one had very soon recognised that the Western media gave an exaggerated picture of the Soviet population's emotional opposition to reunification. The Foreign Office drew the conclusion that Gorbachev's reformist stance and his dramatic rapprochement with the West would eventually allow him to drop the GDR. In the end, he had absolutely no sympathy for the Honecker regime, which entertained good relations with his political opponents at home. Also, if Gorbachev did not want to lose his international credibility he could not take the risk of sending forces to East Berlin to prevent the dissolution of the GDR. The British Foreign Office therefore militated very early for Moscow's full integration in the institutional framework for the settlement of the German question. This should facilitate Gorbachev's decision to consent to the Western model of reunification and reinforce him against the hardliners in the Soviet camp.

In contrast, Thatcher still needed until the New Year of 1990 to recognise the dramatic developments in the Soviet policy towards Germany. The greater realism of the British Foreign Office officials contributed to the evolution of Mrs. Thatcher, who gradually, and largely because she was impressed by the elections to the People's Chamber of the GDR on 18 March, modified her policy and started to consent reluctantly to the unification in the following weeks. Fundamentally, however, she continued to plead for the continuation of German partition in order to prevent the development of a reinforced and therefore dangerous Germany. If Thatcher had been able to foresee the economic and social consequences of reunification, and the

resulting economic weakening of the Federal Republic after 1990, her position on the events of 1989-90 might well have been less negative, and perhaps she would even have welcomed them. Until her resignation in December 1990, she never managed to overcome her profound personal dislike of Helmut Kohl. The 'Iron Lady' had indeed still not pardoned him for once preferring a relaxing piece of cream cake to abrasive conversation with her.

Both have one thing in common, though: their former high standing in their respective countries has now gone down considerably. Whereas Helmut Kohl's prestige has enormously suffered from the continued absence of real explanations concerning the donations and corruption scandal of his Chancellorship, Thatcher has been blamed for failures in domestic policies. The miserable condition of the National Health Service, of British infrastructures and of the country's education system is commonly attributed to the drastic economy measures which public authorities introduced during her Premiership. Towards the end of 1999, Thatcher's provocative visit to the former Chilean dictator Pinochet, who had in his time helped her during the Falklands War, then under house arrest in Britain, made even many of her admirers doubt about the ex-Prime Minister's political judgment. This was in tune with the assessment of Thatcher's line over the question of German reunification. Only a very narrow minority of the British population is still convinced that Thatcher's policy in 1989-1990 was the right one.