



Michail Gorbachev's election in March 1985:

The beginning of the end of the Cold War?

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On March 10, 1985, Konstantin Chernenko became the third General Secretary of the CPSU to die in three years, after Leonid Brezhnev in 1982 and Yuri Andropov in 1984. On the very next day, the youngest member of the Politburo, Mikhail Gorbachev, was elected General Secretary. In retrospect this date seems to us today like one of the turning points in the history of the Cold War. Yet, how did contemporaries view Gorbachev? On January 18, 1985, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher told German Chancellor Helmut Kohl she had been very impressed by the conduct of the promising Politburo member she had received at Chequers, her country residence, in December 1984. The files of Germany's Foreign Office include her remark that Gorbachev "is an attractive person. She said he is natural and engaging. During talks he did not stick to a script, she said." Yet Thatcher also noted, "that in all domestic political issues, Gorbachev was very strongly marked by ideology, she said. He responded to questions on the topic spontaneously with ideological slogans, she said." ([Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1985](#), S. 64 f).

On March 11, 1985, the Foreign Office in Bonn likewise had a less-than-euphoric response. Its files expressed satisfaction that this 54-year-old



and obviously healthy General Secretary held out the promise of a long tenure. The sophistication he had acquired during his various trips abroad was thoroughly acknowledged. Yet a warning was also raised: "Gorbachev has won much advance praise in the West. Like Andropov before him, he is preceded by the reputation of a potential 'reformer.' This could be a case of confusing style with substance." (Ibid, p. 336) Helmut Kohl also expressed fear that the engaging manner might simply camouflage an ideological hardliner, who would therefore be more dangerous than his predecessors, to US presidential adviser Paul Nitze in October 1985. "We must take into account that Gorbachev is cleverer than his predecessors," the Foreign Office quotes Kohl as saying. And according to the German Chancellor, Gorbachev "presented himself to the television world as a young, intelligent politician with a young attractive woman, and some people already saw a liberal" (ibid, p. 1416).

It is a telling detail that the "young attractive woman" at the General Secretary's side – Gorbachev's wife Raisa Gorbacheva, born 1932 – was regarded as part of the camouflage, thereby further raising the level of suspicion. Margaret Thatcher's conclusion with an eye to Mrs. Gorbachev was: "As we know, the more charming the Communist, the more dangerous" (ibid, p. 65). Speaking to Nitze, Kohl continued, as quoted in the files: "This point makes clear the proximity of wishful thinking and political reality. We cannot discount the possibility of political seduction" (ibid, p. 1416). This shows that the references to Gorbachev and Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels in the same breath (regarding their appreciation of PR) in Helmut Kohl's [Newsweek-Interview](#) of October 1986 did not come out of the blue, but were based



on a previous history of suspicion. The ice age between Bonn and Moscow caused by this "Goebbels comparison" would last for months and was ended only by the state visit of German President Richard von Weizsäcker to the USSR in the summer of 1987.

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