Sir Malcolm Rifkind | Contrasting, Comparing and Evaluating Margaret Thatcher and Mikhail Gorbachev

- Thank you Emily and good evening everyone. And tonight we have a very special presentation from Sir Malcolm Rifkind. This is part of this week where we are looking at leadership. We're looking at icons. We're looking at heroes. And Sir Malcolm is going to look, compare and contrast and evaluate Margaret Thatcher and Gorbachev. He is an peculiarly interesting person to do so because of course he was foreign minister at that time. He's also served as Minister of Defence. He was also Chair of the Intelligence Security Committee, which of course oversaw MI5 and GCHQ. Today, he is now the visiting professor of war studies at King's College London. So thank you very, very much for giving up your time and over to you.

- Well, thank you very, very much indeed and thank you for this opportunity to speak this evening. I have to start with a mild but accurate correction. I was not Foreign Secretary at the time of Margaret Thatcher's meeting with Mr. Gorbachev. I was a Minister of State. I was number two in the Foreign Office. I didn't become Foreign Secretary for another 13 years. But small detail but a rather important one. Let me go straight to the point. So we all know that this meeting took place and it was a very historic meeting. Before I go into that, just let me give... because it's relevant to what I'm about to say, a little bit about my own personal background and how I got to be at Chequers when this meeting took place in the first place.

When I was at university, I read law and I then did a master's degree in political science. And my special subject was actually African politics, but my interest had really become the world as a whole. And when I tried and decided I'd like to be a member of parliament, it wasn't so much for reasons of domestic politics, it was foreign policy. That was the subject that all was fascinated me. So it was very, very specially important for me when in 1982, at the time of the Falklands War, you may remember Lord Carrington, the foreign secretary resigned and two of his junior ministers resigned when the Argentinians occupied the islands. And so there was a reshuffle.

And to my pleasant surprise, Mrs. Thatcher, her office rang me. I was at that time a junior minister in the Scottish office but I was known to be interested in foreign policy. I'd made my maiden speech on foreign policy and had been involved in some other aspects of that. So I was asked by the prime minister, would I move to the foreign office? And I did move and the way the foreign office functions, the foreign secretary who at that time was Francis Pym and then it became Sir Geoffrey Howe. They had the overall responsibility, but there were four junior ministers, each of whom as it were, had a different part of the world. They had responsibility for on a day-to-day basis, answering to the foreign secretary, and through the Foreign Secretary to the Prime Minister. I was the most junior of the four, both being the youngest but also the newest as a minister. And to my astonishment, I was asked to take responsibility for our relations with the Soviet Union as it then was and the communist countries of Eastern Europe. And I couldn't believe my good fortune because it was obviously an extraordinarily important and fascinating subject.

It wasn't actually a to be a compliment. The reason why I was asked to take this on by the Prime Minister and by the Foreign Secretary was exactly the opposite. That I was only a parliamentary under secretary and the other junior ministers were ministers of state at that time. And normally, when a foreign country hears which British minister it is looking after relations with them, they expect it to be someone relatively senior like a minister of state, not a mere parliamentary under secretary. But so poor were our relationships with the Soviet Union at that time. They had recently invaded Afghanistan and Britain, America and other western countries were cold shouldering them the fact that they might be upset that they only had a mere junior minister. Well, that was too bad. That was part of our expression of disapproval of the way they'd been behaving. So that's a bit of the background.

So in the foreign office, as a minister and answering to Mrs. Thatcher, of course she was a pretty powerful lady. So let me just say a couple of words about Mrs. Thatcher generally, and about Mikhail Gorbachev generally. And then I'll go to how the two of them actually came together. Now, when Margaret Thatcher first became leader of the opposition, leader of the Conservative Party, her whole background had been domestic politics. She'd been education secretary in Heath's government and she didn't know that much about foreign policy. Indeed, there was a memorable and true story that when she became leader of the opposition, Jonathan Aitken, who was a member of parliament, became a minister in John Major's government, he was asked at a private dinner, "What did Margaret Thatcher know about foreign policy?" And he didn't realise there was a journalist in the room, so he thought it was a private comment. And he said she knows so little about foreign policy that she believes that Sinai is the plural of sinus. Now, as you can imagine, when this was reported in the newspapers the following day, Mrs. Thatcher was not very impressed.

But the truth of the matter is she knew very little about foreign policy, but by God she learnt fast. And even before she became Prime Minister, she had absorbed herself in the foreign policy issues and in particular, 'cause we were going through the Cold War at that time, in the Soviet Union and everything that represented there, and she was pretty tough, pretty hard line on how the Soviet Union should be treated so much so that a speech she made had been so critical of the Soviet Union that an army newspaper in Moscow reported her as being so hard line and they called her "The Iron Lady" and they weren't meaning that as a compliment. When she was told about this, she said, "That's a marvellous title. I rather like that. I think I’m quite happy to be called "The Iron Lady."" And that's how she became known and how she was remembered both in regard to, well, foreign policy in particular, but also domestic issues.

People sometimes say that she was too rigid, she didn't have any flexibility in her position. Well, there's some truth in that. I was present once when one of my colleagues asked her, "Prime Minister, do you believe in consensus as a way of reaching decisions?" Now, we all knew she didn't. She thought consensus was for wimps. It was trying to reach agreement, the lowest common denominator and all that sort of thing. But to our surprise, she said, "Yes, I do believe in consensus." "You do?" "Yes", she said. And then she added, "I believe there should be a consensus behind my convictions." In other words, "Everyone should agree with me."

She had a habit of interrupting people when they were trying to explain to her about policy. And shortly after the Falkland Islands were invaded, Sir Anthony Parsons, who was then our ambassador at United Nations and a grand old ambassador of the old school, was invited to come back to London to report to her whether we would get a unanimous vote at the security council condemning Argentina. Very important question. And he'd prepared a presentation for her and he started reading out his presentation and within 30 seconds, she interrupted him. And he wasn't used to being interrupted. He was a rather grand ambassador, but he was very polite and he tried to deal with that point and they started getting going again and she interrupted him again, and then a third time, and on the fourth occasion, he stopped, the ambassador, and he said, "Prime Minister, if you did not interrupt me so often, you might find you didn't need to." She didn't interrupt him again, not a single time for the rest of his presentation, and six months later, she appointed him her foreign policy advisor.

So what I'm illustrating is that once she realised you might know more about a subject than she did, she not only listened, she sometimes allowed her views to be changed quite considerably if she was impressed by the arguments. So there was a flexibility with the Iron Lady, but not on the basis of this will be too difficult or unpopular. It had to be good, solid reasons of policy why she should change her position.

Now, this was very relevant to the subsequent meeting she had with Mikhail Gorbachev. Few words about Gorbachev. At the time Gorbachev joined the politburo and the politburo was the central body that ran the Soviet Union, he was by far the youngest. Most of them were getting on in years. Brezhnev never had been president for about 20, 25 years. When he died, he was succeeded by a Andropov who was already very sick and he died after about a year and a half. And then Chernenko who was almost geriatric, really unable to handle it. So Gorbachev was by far the youngest. He was a mere 53, 54 when he met Mrs. Thatcher. But by Soviet standards, he was a young man and he was a communist. He was a convinced communist. He was not somebody who was planning secretly to dismantle the Communist party or end the Soviet Union. That was never part of his plan.

I remember he said in one of the meetings I had with him. He said he felt the mistake… that why the Soviet Union had gone the wrong way and needed reform. It was not because they were communists but it was because of Stalin. He thought that Lenin for some bizarre reason was okay and Marxism was okay, but Stalin as a dictator had taken things too far and that is when the Soviet Union had begun to lose its way and had never really got back from that. I think within himself, he was beginning to question that. But that was his public position in private conversations as well as in public speeches. So that is worth bearing in mind. But the fact that he was younger makes a big difference because he was a product of a different generation.

He gradually, I think he'd once been to the West before he came to see Mrs. Thatcher. He had been very briefly when he was minister of Agriculture in the Soviets Union. He'd gone to Canada and he had seen the extraordinary prosperity that ordinary Canadians seemed to be enjoying in a supermarket, what was available for ordinary people, people of modest incomes,

was the sort of thing you had to be in the senior echelons of the Communist Party with access to special luxury shops to have any chance of enjoying in the Soviet Union. Somebody once said that Communism only worked either in heaven where they didn't need it or in hell where they had it already. And of course, the difference in the standard of living. It was the single most important reason why Gorbachev came gradually to the view that you needed fundamental reform and not just because the West was doing so much better, but because the people in the Soviets Union increasingly were getting to know that and wondering why their own system could not provide comparable standard of living and so forth. So that is part of the background.

So let us go now to 1983 and I'd become a foreign office minister in 1982. I'd been once to the Soviet Union during that first year. And when Geoffrey Howe took over as foreign secretary after the 1983 general election, he and I were of the view that it was very important, if at all possible, to start having real contact with the younger members of the politburo. There were two, one was Gorbachev and one had the marvellous name of Romanov as if he was one of the czars family. He wasn't, but that happened to be his surname. He soon disappeared as 'cause he wasn't very able guy. Gorbachev became the one that we were really interested in and it was the foreign office themselves. I remember who said to me and to Geoffrey Howe, "We should be trying to cultivate links with this guy because one day..." He wasn't yet the leader of the Communist Party, "...but one day he's likely to be, and for the sooner we get contact, the better."

So that was put to Mrs. Thatcher, to the Prime Minister, and at first, she wasn't very keen on this idea because she thought it was a bit naive to believe that one individual would make all that much difference. But she called a special seminar at Chequers, a seminar, whole day, prime minister, several cabinet ministers, Michael Heseltine was the defence secretary. Geoffrey Howe was foreign secretary. I was there. Two or three others were there. And there were also a number of academics who were specialists in the Soviet Union who were around the table and also some senior diplomats who knew about the Soviet Union. And that was in the morning, there was very good discussion. She listened. She contributed. And then we had lunch, and then the academics and the diplomats disappeared. And it was the ministers around the table who'd were coming to a view as to whether there should be a change in British policy towards cultivating links with the Soviet Union. And eventually Mrs. Thatcher was persuaded and she said, I remember she said, "Right Geoffrey, I have no objection. If you want to try and invite this Mr. Gorbachev, feel free to do so." And then she said, "But one thing I want to make clear, I will never visit the Soviet Union," she said.

When she said that, I muttered, she didn't hear me, but I muttered to Geoffrey Howe, she might go for one of their funerals. I wasn't trying to make a prediction. What I was basically saying was, as far as she was concerned, the only good communist was a a dead communist. But there we are, as it happens, when Brezhnev, Andropov, Chernenko died, she went actually as did other Western leaders to two of the funerals 'cause it was obvious we were about to see a whole new period beginning. But when Gorbachev came to the UK, it is important to remember he was not yet leader of the Communist Party. He was not yet in charge of the

Soviet Union. He was simply one member of the politburo, but one who was expected to be the likely next leader as indeed turned out to be true.

So when we decided to invite him, there was a slight problem because on what basis should we issue this invitation, because he was not a member of the Soviet government. He wasn't the president, or the Prime Minister, or the foreign minister. He was a member of the politburo. And the politburo was actually more powerful than the government, but the politburo was the senior committee of the Communist Party. And in communist countries, the party organisations rather like China at the moment, the communist party is more important than the government. So, well, as you can imagine, the British Conservative Party did not have fraternal links with the Soviet Communist Party, so we couldn't invite them on a party to party basis but the foreign office came to the rescue. They said two or three years before that, there had been a British parliamentary delegation consisting of members of Parliament who had gone to Moscow, and in terms of the normal protocol, it was time we could present this as the time had come to invite a Soviet parliamentary delegation from the Supreme Soviet to visit London and we could invite Gorbachev, would he be interested in leading that delegation?

And that is effectively what then happened. The invitation was sent to him, but he was told in a separate message by our ambassador in Moscow that if he was interested in coming, we could promise him that it would not be treated like a parliamentary delegation. As soon as they arrived in the UK, the rest of the delegation would be meeting members of parliament, but he personally would be invited to meet the Prime Minister, senior cabinet ministers, and be treated, in his own right, as the most important person who needed to be met and so forth. And so we then waited to see what would happen and for several months, we didn't hear anything. And then suddenly, out of the blue, and round about October of 1983, and we get a message from Gorbachev's office saying he has decided to come and he wants to come in December. Literally, eight weeks after the message. And he was intending to bring his wife, Raisa Gorbacheva, with him as well.

That itself was very unusual because in those days, you had very little knowledge about the families of the leaders of the Soviet Union, of the members of the politburo, and they wouldn't talk very much about their families. They would only converse about the formal business. So when I'd gone as a junior minister to Moscow a couple of years earlier, I had met my counterpart to the minister, but he was not interested in any small talk, even in the evenings, even when we were having dinner, very little conversation about anything other than business. Now, here was Gorbachev saying he wanted his wife to come as well. And this was quite important because it changed the whole tone of the meeting that they were coming jointly.

We then had to work out the details of where the meeting would take place, and it could have been in 10 Downing Street. That would've been the normal thing. But the advice from the foreign office, it was good advice, was it's much better to have a meeting of this kind, first time they've met, we want to make it as informal as possible. And they said, why not have it at Chequers, which is the Prime Minister's official country residence. So this was Chequers, of course, the Russians had never heard of. So it was described to them as being the prime

minister's dacha, dacha being where Russian elite go at the weekends as sort of like a cottage in the Cotswolds kind of idea.

So he was invited to come to the dacha, and then of course the Prime Minister had to be briefed on the what he might raise, and what she might say, and we can now share, I mean it's been in the public, but it wasn't in the public at that time, that the person who gave her part of the briefing was in an extraordinary situation. He was a gentleman called Gordievsky who was to the Soviet Union what Kim Philby was to the United Kingdom. Although he was head of the KGB delegation in the Soviet Embassy in London, he was actually a British spy. He was spying for the United Kingdom and had done so for several years or, and he'd been promoted during that period and he lives in Britain now. He eventually was able to get out of the Soviet Union.

And of course, he was in the extraordinary situation that when Mrs. Thatcher was being briefed, he was one of the people who was very secretly passing information as to what Gorbachev was like, what subjects he might be interested in, what are the sort of questions that might be raised in the first meeting, and of course, he was not only advising Mr. Thatcher as to what she might say. Think about it. Mr. Gorbachev had to get advice as to what he might say to Mrs. Thatcher, and who would be one of the people advising him? The head of the KGB at the Soviet Embassy in London. The same Mr. Gordievsky. So this is a rather unusual phenomenon and obviously not one that got known publicly to a good number of years later.

Now, let me take you now to the day itself, and on the day they arrive, and I'm going to show you a photograph that was taken. It's the only thing I'm going to show you on the screen, and this is at Chequers. [*A photograph is held up to the camera.].* I hope you can see that. And you'll see that is Mr. Thatcher and Gorbachev shaking hands with each other. And on my right is Dennis Thatcher and Mrs. Gorbachev, and behind Gorbachev is Geoffrey Howe, behind Geoffrey Howe, you can just see Michael Heseltine and you can see me in the back row looking ridiculously younger than everybody else. But that was just before we went into lunch at Chequers, and they had lunch together, and although we were all round the table, Gorbachev of course did not speak English so there needed to be an interpreter, and Mrs. Thatcher basically had them to herself, and because I was sitting directly opposite with the Soviet ambassador, I could hear bits of the conversation and at one stage, Gorbachev was talking, talking, talking as was she. I mean they immediately engaged in a lot of conversation and then Mrs. Thatcher, who could be a little bit bossy at times, noticed that he'd hardly eaten anything from his plate, and so she said through the interpreter, "Mr. Gorbachev, perhaps you would like to eat a little bit more." And he looked at her as if to say... Well, what he did say, I heard him saying it was, he said, "No, no, no, some people eat to live, others live to eat." And he made it clear that the eating part was far less important than the conversation, and so it went on.

Now after the meeting, Gorbachev, after the lunch, Gorbachev and Mrs. Thatcher then went to have what's called a tete-a-tete, just the two of them, plus the interpreter obviously, and that went on for a couple of hours. It was a getting to know you and nobody else was present, although we've been able to see the record since then of what was said. And I was asked,

would I look after his wife and show her round Chequers? And Raisa Gorbacheva was not a typical Soviet wife. Most of the Soviet wives in those days were uneducated, peasant background, not terribly interesting conversation. She was a philosophy graduate. She was what in this country would've been known years ago as a bit of a blue stocking, rather serious, very intelligent, student of philosophy, but also dressed very elegantly, certainly by Soviet standards, well dressed.

And I was showing her the library at Chequers and Iain Sutherland, who was the British ambassador, was doing the translation and she was looking at various books in the library. Very good library. And she picked out a book and then she turned to me, and I've never forgotten this, and she said through the interpreter, "I am so delighted to be in England. I've always wanted to be in the country of Hobbs and Locke." Wow. Here is the wife of a Soviet politician talking about two 17th century English philosophers who had distinctly liberal views for the time they lived in. And that was, I mean we'd already been told these people were different, but here I was getting absolutely directly a remark that couldn't conceivably have come from the Mr. Brezhnev's wife, from Mr. Andropov's wife, or indeed the two individuals themselves so that was something revealing and quite interesting.

Then couple of days later, 'cause they stayed for several days, and it is a tradition to have something lighter in the evenings for your visitors, and my late wife and I were asked to look after the Gorbachevs the following evening, and we took them to Così Fan Tutte at the English National Opera. And when we went in, we were all going to be sitting right in the centre of the Grand Circle, and Mrs. Gorbachev through the interpreter asked me, "Where does the queen sit when she comes?" Well, the honest answer was I hadn't the faintest idea, but I decided to be very diplomatic. I said, "Madam, she sits where you'll be sitting." So that was a very good point in our favour. And then later on, we were having a supper party at Lancaster house, and my late wife and I, and the Gorbachevs, there was tables of four people. There were 20 people altogether, and we had them to ourselves plus the interpreter.

And the reason I'm mentioning this is because Gorbachev then started talking very informally about his childhood. And he said how he'd been born, brought up, I should say, at a time during the Second World War, and his father was away fighting the Germans, and he and his mother, I presume, was staying with his maternal grandparents who lived in Ukraine. I don't think they were Ukrainians, but they lived in Ukraine and they were peasants. And he said, "In the house in which we lived..." I hadn't been asking him. He was volunteering this. He said they were… they were religious, his grandparents. They believed in the Orthodox Church and they had religious icons on the wall. This is in the Soviet Union. And then he smiled, he said, "but they also believed in insurance." And on the other wall of the house, they had portraits of Lenin and Stalin. And then he said, "when I met Raisa," his wife, and they decided to get married, they were not believers. And so they were getting married in a civil ceremony. And when he told his grandmother what he was going to do, that they were marrying not in a church, but in a civil ceremony, his wife said, "Misha," That's Mikhail. "Misha, you have forgotten God, but I shall pray for you."

Now, what was extraordinary was not that this had happened, but that he was telling me about it. You know, in those days in the Soviet Union, if you were a leading member of the Soviet Communist Party, you didn't reveal even to your friends that your parents or your grandparents were religious believers, had icons on the wall and all this sort of thing. But Gorbachev was a youngish, modern guy, and he was speaking like a western politician chatting about his youth, just as I might have chatted about my own. So I'm using these anecdotes 'cause they're true, I experienced them personally, but they illustrate why the Gorbachevs were different. And so when Mrs. Thatcher then said, "He's a man with whom we can do business," this was not because they had reached agreement as a result of their several periods of discussion. They didn't agree at a single thing. We know that from the record. She was the Iron Lady. He was head leading member of the Communist Party. But they were sparring. They were enjoying. They were curious about each other. They were curious about where they came from. And they were enjoying the verbal exchanges which were very serious, but they were enjoying the stimulation and were learning about each other.

And two things were happening during these rounds of discussion in that first meetings over a couple of days. They began to like each other as people. But even more important, they began to trust each other. And the most crucial point I'm going to say today is that trust does not depend on two people agreeing with each other. You trust someone, and I'm talking about in the political and diplomatic world, you trust someone when perhaps two things are satisfied. First of all, you think you can trust that what they're saying is what they believe in. What they're saying reflects their actual opinions. But secondly, that if they make a promise, they will deliver it. Now, if you have that kind of relationship, that can result in something that you can call trust. Sadly, that it's the exact opposite of what we have with Putin today because he has lied so often because he's done all the terrible things that have already happened.

So when Mrs. Thatcher came out of Chequers and said, "I believe he's a man with whom we can do business," that was not because they'd reached agreement, but because there was a liking. There was a belief that this man said things as they were and that he might very well be prepared to deliver if as part of some wider agreement. Now, Mrs. Thatcher, by herself, couldn't have changed the world, but then she was very close to Ronald Reagan, the President of the United States, and she immediately told Reagan her judgement about Gorbachev. The Americans wanted to know about. They'd never met him. And coming from anybody else, Reagan would've been very sceptical. We can't do business with Soviet leaders. They're all ghastly. But when Mrs. Thatcher, the Iron Lady was saying, "I believe we can do business with this guy." Reagan sat up. He admired Mrs. Thatcher. He trusted her judgement and he said to his people, "Well, if Margaret Thatcher believes we can do business with this guy, it's worth us finding out, us making contact."

And that is effectively what led to the Cold War ending with Hardier shot being fired. It led not only to the end of communism in Russia. It not only led to the end of the Cold War. It of course, indirect, and this was not part of Gorbachev's plan, it led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. When Yeltsin came into power immediately after Gorbachev, he said, "Soviet Union should no longer exist. It's the Russian Empire. And all the various countries, including Ukraine,

of course, should now be, if they wish to be, they should now be independent states." So that is essentially Margaret Thatcher's contribution, which was profoundly important. And it didn't end then because of course the transform, when Gorbachev did become leader of the Soviet Union, and that was about a year or so later, he then slowly began a process of change. It was called "Glasnost" and "Perestroika". Glasnost meant openness. We must tell the truth to the Soviet people about what has gone wrong and what needs to be done. That was glasnost, and Perestroika meant reconstruction. We must reconstruct the country. And what he intended and hope would happen is that it would remain the Soviet Union run by the Communist Party.

But it would be what if you remember in Czechoslovakia when they had Dubcek, what they were trying to achieve was communism with a human face. Well, dictatorships are not like that. They're fragile and much more fragile than they ever admit. And once you start dismantling parts of it, the whole process collapses. It is because of what happened in the Soviet Union. That Xi Jinping in China is determined not to relax control in China because he does not want a repetition of what happened and what used to be the Soviet Union and when the whole system collapsed, and the whole country collapsed in a way that was not part of the original plan. So you'll recall that then of course what happened and simultaneous with what was going on at that time was the fragmentation of the rest of what was the Soviet Empire, which were the communist states of Eastern Europe. They had communism imposed on them after 1945.

And so you had in Poland, which I had visited just a month after the meeting with Gorbachev. The Government General Wojciech Jaruzelski had tried to ban solidarity and that had failed. And I actually was in Warsaw as a minister and without telling the British government, I had at a meeting in the British Embassy with four of the leaders of solidarity. People who might not heard of before, but one of them was Tadeusz Mazowiecki, who became the first non-communist prime minister of Poland. One was Bronisław Geremek who became the Foreign Minister, and one who became a friend of mine Janusz Onyszkiewicz became the Minister of Defence. So things were changing in Poland. In Hungary also, I remember being told by a Hungarian minister, communist minister, at a time when the Berlin Wall was still standing. He had a great sense of humour, this guy. It was a private conversation. He said, "Mr. Rifkind, can you tell me what is the definition of an East German string quartet?" I said, you tell me, "what is it?" He smiled, he said, "it is an East German orchestra that has just returned from a tour of West Germany." In other words, you know, most of them are defective as soon as they've got across the border. So what happened in the Soviet Union was matched by the disintegration of the communist system in Poland where of course at that time there was a Polish Pope.

You will all remember. First time ever, and that had a huge impact in weakening the communist structure in that country. But Hungary, Czechoslovakia with Václav Havel, the Baltic states breaking away and becoming independent as they had been before the Second World War. So this was an extraordinary period in our history. A sort of annus mirabilis. 200 years after the French Revolution in 1789, the Berlin War came down in 1989. Now, when we look at all the terrible things, my final points before we moved to questions from yourselves, when we say to ourselves, "Oh, isn't it all terrible? What's happening?" And so forth. Putin with the war in

Ukraine. It is terrible. No question about it. It's an awful, terrible ghastly war. But that's not the same as saying we're back to where we were at the time of the Cold War. First of all, most of Europe, virtually, all of Europe today are democracies. Up till 1989, the Kremlin controlled not just the Soviet Union, but Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, half of Germany, half of Berlin was effectively controlled by the Kremlin. Now, that has all changed dramatically. All these countries are members of the European Union, members of NATO, are a strong democracies, as are the Baltic states. So Ukraine is a tragedy, but you know, the Soviet Union controlled half of Europe right up to Berlin until 1989. Now, they don't even control what used to be part of the Soviet Union itself. Not just Ukraine, but the Baltic states, Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and so forth. So it's a very different situation.

And I think on that note, I will conclude my remarks and let us now move today to discussion with your audience. Thank you very much.

Q&A and Comments

- Thank you very much. I'm going on to gallery if I can do it. That was absolutely fascinating. We've had quite a few questions about personal issues like for example,

Q: Did the Gorbachevs ever meet the Queen?

A: Certainly not at that time in that visit because he was a member of the politburo. The protocol, he was too junior for something of that kind and it wouldn't have been appropriate anyway because it was meant to be a working visit. I can't say, shortly after that, I was promoted to the cabinet as Secretary of State for Scotland. So I was not involved in the subsequent meetings that he had with Mrs. Thatcher. I'm pretty certain at some stage, he would've had a private meeting with the Queen, yes. Or I'm 99% certain that would've happened but I can't say I specifically recall it or was involved in it.

- [Trudy] I mean, some of the details you gave were absolutely extraordinary. I think particularly the comments you made about (*indistinct*)… absolutely marvellous. Now, we've had quite a few questions like this.

Q: Why did Russia sell off their assets at such knockdown prices when as communism collapses?

[Sir Malcolm] When you say they're assets, do you mean literally they're economic assets?

- [Trudy] Yes, yes. I believe that's what.

Q: [Sir Malcolm] I think this question I'm not entirely certain what the question is means, but if the question is why did the oligarchs appear?

- [Trudy] Yes, I think that's really it, isn't it?

A: This was not Gorbachev. This was Yeltsin, and what happened was when they banned the Communist party and effectively communism disappeared as the Orthodox, as the controlling body. They wanted to replace it with market economics, essentially with capitalism, with private enterprise. But all the industry at that time was owned by the state because it had been a communist state. And the problem they had was that if they simply offered it, privatised it in the way that we did do in various ways in Britain and in other Western countries, there were no capital markets in the Soviet Union, or in what was now Russia. There was no stock exchange. There was none of the structure of people who pension funds, and other investment companies who could buy private company that was being privatised. And what Yeltsin could not contemplate was allowing these companies, these parts of the Russian industry to be bought by foreigners, by America, or Germany, or Britain or France. That would be politically unacceptable in Russia, and so what he decided to do, and he wanted to get them sold as quickly as possible so that the Communist Party couldn't make a comeback. So it had to be privatised and they concluded the only way they could do that was by, there were already were entrepreneurs in Russia. They'd all emerged. People who were quite often quite young people, very good businessmen, and they were offered these businesses at rock bottom prices so that the privatisation would be still owned by Russians citizens. They would not be owned by foreigners. They would then grow under the new private management and the people who had got these companies now called "oligarchs" were incredibly wealthy and they did create major businesses. Some of them very successful ones. Some of them obviously not so successful. But it basically meant that Russia became a capitalist state without its industry being owned by people from the rest of the world, which was not politically acceptable. But that's broadly what why it was done.

Q: [Trudy] You've had three or four questions about the relationship of him with the Jews in Russia and whether he was in favour of them immigrating to Israel. Do you have any knowledge of this from him?

A: [Sir Malcolm] Most of this is, no, this is not so much Gorbachev because the policy had already been relaxed slightly earlier. I remember when I first went to Moscow as a junior minister in the foreign office, and that would've been about 1983, having a meeting with my counterpart, the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister. And one of the issues I raised with him were the Refuseniks. "Why are you not allowing your citizens, in this case, mostly Jewish Russians who want to leave? Why you are being so difficult and allowing them to leave?" And he's slightly bridled at that. And he said, "Mr. Rifkind, you are sharing significant interest in Soviet immigration policy. You say it as very controversial, how would you like it if I started asking you questions about British immigration policy, which I believe is also very controversial?" And I said, "Please feel free to do so. But there is a big difference, you know, between the two." And he said, "What is the difference?" I said, "In our case, people are trying to get in, in your case, they're trying to get out." He changed the subject. But within a few months they realised they had to liberalise. And so that's when not everyone but very large numbers were able to leave and were not physically prevented from doing so. So by the time Gorbachev came to par, it wasn't a big issue.

Q: [Trudy] There's an interesting question from Goldie, how's Gorbachev remembered in Russia 40 years later?

A: [Sir Malcolm] Good point. It's sometimes said that people are not necessarily treated as heroes in their own country. I mean, Margaret Thatcher was idealised throughout the world, but she remained a divisive figure in the United Kingdom. Why? Because in your own country, you're very much judged on the basis of your domestic policy, and that is where issues are much more likely to create hostility. Foreign policy, most people are interested in it, but it doesn't create anger or adoration, whereas other countries is other way around. So we tend to think of Gorbachev, I certainly think of Gorbachev as one of the most important and impressive statesmen of the last hundred years. I think Gorbachev, Mandela, you know, there are people in a class of their own. That's not how he was seen in Russia for two reasons. First of all, when communism collapsed, he'd already handed over to Yeltsin by then. But when it did collapse, the immediate consequence was economic chaos, high inflation, and although the Soviet system had been pretty pathetic, it had guaranteed minimum security. Everybody had a job poorly paid, but everybody had a job. Everybody had basic food and requirements. And suddenly, that security disappeared and was being replaced by a system meant to be similar to the West, but without the infrastructure yet existing. And combined with that was the collapse of the Soviet Union because a lot of Russians, and Putin himself has said that the single most important disaster of his life was when he witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union. And he didn't mean communism. He meant what was actually the Russian Empire. You know, the country had disintegrated into 15 countries and whether that was historically right or inevitable, it's not the point. There was a feeling of, you know, this is a national, from a Russian perspective, many Russians felt this was a national disaster for them even if it's something that it was right that it happened. We had a British empire, but our empire was overseas. It was not part of the homeland as it were. So the emotions were not as strong.

Q: [Trudy] And there's a question here from Lena, further to your comment, wouldn't you say the number of current European democracies are quite fragile, and at risk of losing their democratic status?

A: [Sir Malcolm] Right. Okay, good question. I think you have to, first of all, to put this in historical perspective. What happened in 1989 and a few years after that was pretty well, every single country in Europe became democratic and introduced rule of law, and market economics and so forth. Almost without exception, even Russia under Yeltsin had a genuine election, a choice, people of Russia, several candidates and they were able to vote freely. So that was a sort of annus mirabilis. Now, many of these countries were too fragile to sustain that kind of system. They wanted strong leadership which would deal with them the high inflation, and so forth. Now, the vast majority of them have become stable democracies. If you look at all the countries that were part of the communist block, the exceptions are Russia and Belarus. Now, Hungary and Poland, people are worried about whether they are losing their freedom. The truth of the matter, I think is that, yes, there are serious damages been done to the rule of law in Hungary and to civic society, less so in Poland, but also some disturbing

issues there. But what remains the case in Poland and Hungary is rather like Erdogan's Turkey. They still have genuine free elections and just as when Erdogan won, I was rather disappointed, but he won, and there's no serious allegation that that was not a free election. There might have been some things that went wrong, but he basically won because more people voted for him. And that happened to Orban in Hungary. He remains popular with mostly people in the rural areas and not in Budapest, but he did win that election and was entitled to win it. So as long as you have that fundamental freedom, yes, we can be anxious that some of the... like Israel today. That's what people in Israel fear. Not that they won't have the right to vote for their own government, but the rule of law, the rule of independent judges and these sort of issues will be eroded. So these are challenges, but compared to where we were in 1989, we are hugely, massively better in terms of democracy and freedom than we have been since at any time since before the first World War.

-[Trudy] I love your optimism.

-[Sir Malcolm] Somebody once said to me the difference between the optimist and the pessimist. The pessimist is someone who believes things couldn't be worse. The optimist is someone who knows they could be.

Laughing

-[Trudy] Okay.

- [Sir Malcolm] I am an optimist.

- [Trudy] There's a personal question here. I don't know if this is from a student or his parents.

Q: From your own personal experience, what qualities and what kind of character traits lead a young student to political science and a career in government?

A: [Sir Malcolm] Okay, well the answers are different. Sure. It varies from person to person. Sometimes you have politicians or people in public life saying, "I became a politician to improve the country and to serve the country," and all this sort of thing. And I'm sure for some people it's a hundred percent true. For many, it just is thought to sound better. I'm not going to claim that. If all you wish to do is to serve the country, that's usually important. There's lots of ways you can do that. You don't have to go into parliament to serve your country. There's 101 other occupations that are similarly important. I'll tell you in my own personal case, I went into politics for two reasons. First of all, I was excited about it. I had been introduced to debating at my school, and then at university. And when you're involved in debating as a teenager, this was in the 1960s in my case, the issues you debate are the ones that are essentially the political issues of the day. So it was capital punishment. It was abortion. It was nuclear weapons. Apartheid in South Africa. And so you are already maturing at that age and then you are required to actually speak in debates. So you're taking a more serious interest, and you sometimes have external speakers, particularly at university and some of them are members

of parliament and some of them you're very impressed by. And some of them you're not quite so impressed by. And you think cranky, if he or she can be an MP, maybe it's not quite as impossible as one might have otherwise thought. Now, I was always interested in more in foreign policy than domestic issues, but I could have tried to become a diplomat, an ambassador. I didn't want to do that because ambassadors, diplomats spend most of their career living abroad. That's the nature of the job. I didn't want to live abroad. I prefer to live in Britain. I love travelling. I loved going to these countries. I didn't want to live in them. And so I thought, well, you know, if the opportunity presents itself of a a parliamentary life and that might, if I'm very lucky 'cause you can't plan these things. It's up to the prime minister of the day, whether you're in the government at all, in which department it might be. But my great aspiration was to serve in the foreign office and I was incredibly fortunate the way things worked out. That's exactly what I did for a pretty big chunk of my ministerial life. Not just the foreign office but also the Ministry of Defence, which is linked to that. And then of course after I left government, I had five years chairing the Intelligence and Security Committee, which has oversight of MI6 and GCHQ and so forth. So that aspect of the political world took up most of my time in government and in parliament.

- [Trudy] You've obviously had such a fascinating career-

-[Sir Malcolm] I'm very lucky. There's not a lot of luck in politics. A lot of luck being in the right- Your party has to win elections. The day I was elected as an MP, so was Robin Cook from the Labour Party. Both of us were Edinburgh constituencies. In 1979, I became a minister of which I served as a minister uninterrupted for 18 years. During this whole 18 years, Robin who was a very bright able guy, didn't have a sniff of being in government 'cause his party couldn't win elections under Michael Foot and Neil Kinnock. And the day Tony Blair won, the day I seized being Foreign Secretary, Robin succeeded me as foreign secretary. It was like Cain and Abel in the Jeffrey Archer novel.

-[Trudy] But thinking back, if you were starting out today, do you think there's the same kind of passion in politics?

- [Sir Malcolm] Yeah. We all tend to think though there was a period when politicians were all statesmen and you had these great figures. Lloyd George, Churchill, Margaret Thatcher. Where are they now? Well, the truth of the matter is when we look at any previous age, people we remember are not the whole cabinet or the whole government. We remember the one or two individuals who stood out at that time. And sometimes it's an accident of history that they become as great as they became. I mean, if Churchill became Prime Minister in 1940, six months earlier, the odds of him ever being Prime Minister was seemed to be very, very poor. Now, he'd already had a remarkable career, but he hadn't become the global historic figure that needed the second World war for that to happen. Margaret Thatcher was not as dramatic as Churchill, but the Falklands turned her into a global stateswoman, in a way that would not have happened and might never have happened but for these circumstances, as did the meeting with Gorbachev, you know, you have people who have a latent ability. Sometimes they don't even know about it themselves. And they're then fortunate enough of being in

circumstances when their skill, their ability, their commitment, their passion can really come to the fore and they become great figures. And there could be somebody at the moment in the government who in five years time, 10 years time in, in either party could not just prime minister, but could actually be one of the great prime ministers of our time. We just don't know and they don't know.

-[Trudy] There's quite a few questions asking about your own memoirs. Have you written them is the question?

- [Sir Malcolm] Yeah, I have. Yes. I, about six years ago when I retired from Parliament in 2015 and a publisher came to me and said, "You haven't written your memoirs. We would like to publish them if you are willing to write them." And I said, "Well, I've always thought at sometime in the dim and distant future, I might want to do that. And he said, "I hope you don't mind me pointing out that the dim and distant future may have arrived." I just don't.. So I was persuaded and it's called "Power and Pragmatism" and it can be ordered through Amazon so they tell me. I very much enjoyed it. It's more a personal memoir. It's not a history of our time. It is about my own life and what made me interested in the questions you were asking me earlier, what made me interested in politics and so forth. And I travelled to India when I was a student and I'd worked in what is now Zimbabwe. It was then Southern Rhodesia. I did my postgraduate master's degree there, and so I was already getting to know the world well before I became a member of parliament. And that's a good training because you shouldn't go straight from university into, into British politics and without being very boring.

Q: [Trudy] There's a whole bank of questions about Putin. One even asking whether he should be arrested as a war criminal. Are there cracks in his regime? Do you think there's any chance of a dialogue between Russia and Ukraine? There's a whole bank asking your opinion.

A: [Sir Malcolm]- Okay. Well, wars come to an end in one of three ways. Either somebody wins and somebody loses like the Falkland Islands or the first Gulf War when Kuwait was liberated. There were specific objectives. They were realised and the other side were defeated. So that's not going to happen in quite that way on this occasion. Second way, wars come to an end is when both sides are exhausted. Both sides want a compromise. Both sides are prepared to make concessions in order to resolve the issue. We're not there. We might one day, but we're certainly not there at the moment. The third, which is most likely at the moment, is what's called a "frozen conflict". It's where you stop the fighting, you stop killing each other, but the armies are still facing each other and it could break out again. You have that between North and South Korea for 50, 60, 70 years. You have it between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. You have it in Cyprus. You could say you have it between Israel and the Palestinians. These are frozen conflicts as the phrase it is used. That is, I'm afraid the most likely. But you will be in a much clearer position in the next two or three months because the Ukrainians and the Russians will have a far better awareness of what is possible. The Ukrainians are about to start a counter offensive if they win back more, they've been extraordinarily impressive over the last year, if they're winning able to win back either all the territory or some of the territory that they lost that they have not yet won back, that will strengthen them in any diplomatic

negotiations that might take place. And they will know two or three months by now how likely it is that they can win back more territory. Equally, the Russians have for all practical purposes, Putin's given up the original plan, which was to control the whole of Ukraine. He controls about 17% of it. Ukrainians control over 80% of their own country, but not the other part. He's now in a defensive situation. Nobody has any expectation that the Russian army can move forward. The question is whether they can hold what they've currently got and they will know whether that's likely in the next two or three months as well. So if it becomes clear that both may have reached the maximum military capability that they have, then the pressure for some form of deal will become much stronger. Will Putin be willing to respond to that? I don't know. The evidence so far is not very encouraging. And yet he has been rational. For example, when he withdrew his troops from Kiev, that was great because he realised he couldn't take Kiev. That was a humiliation. But he was advised, move them to the Donbas where they'll be more use. And when he introduced constriction, which he'd not wanted to do, and he knew it'd be very unpopular, which it was with the Russian public. Half a million young Russians left Russia to avoid conscription. But in both cases he was acting rationally at that time. So I don't go along with those who say he is mad. His reasoning is different from ours. It's a very harsh reasoning. It's a very foolish in many ways, but he's not some raving lunatic. He's not a Hitler. When Hitler was defeated at Stalingrad, he said, "We will fight inch by inch." And he did all the way to the Berlin Bunker in 1945. Putin so far as we can tell, is not in that situation, nor would the Russians around him alone to be even if he wanted to be. So we'll see.

-[Trudy] Anyway, thank you so much for an absolutely fascinating hour. We've had so many compliments on the presentation already. It's always a pleasure to hear you. You're a brilliant I can tell. So thank you and come back again, please.

- [Sir Malcolm] Well, thank you very, very much indeed. I've enjoyed it and thanks to your audience for the privilege of I've had of them listening to my remarks.

- [Trudy] Thank you and good night everybody. Bye.

- [Sir Malcolm] Thank you.