Margaret Thatcher’s memoir

*Return to Moscow*

Written 16 March 1985
This memoir came to light in the Thatcher MSS only after MT had finished writing *The Downing Street Years*. MT seems not to have annotated or added to it at any point after composition, suggesting she may not even have re-read it.

Chernenko’s funeral took place on Wednesday 13 March 1985. The memoir was written at Chequers that Saturday, 16 March. MT spent the day there alone, apart from an appointment with her dressmaker.

Christopher Collins

Margaret Thatcher Foundation
4 June 2015
Return to Bassam

On Monday's early morning news - B.B.C. I heard that military music was being broadcast in Bassam and that the previous night broadcasting had closed down without giving details of programmes for the following day. Most unusual - we had had military music before, but not the other thing. A few days previously Mr. Ghasi had been made to appear on television at some event to 'reassure' the people. He looked ghastly - his actions were mechanical and watery. One felt that he was scarcely there.

We had not long to wait. I was having a meeting in the Cabinet Room when at about 11 a.m. the news came through that Mr. Ghasi had died. Shortly afterwards - that Mr. Khasi had been put in charge of the funeral preparations. So it seemed that he had been appointed leader for following Mr.
On Monday’s early morning news – B.B.C. I heard that military music was being broadcast in Moscow and that the previous night’s broadcasting had closed down without giving details of programmes for the following day. Most unusual – we had had military music before, but not the other thing. A few days previously Mr Chernenko had been made to appear on television at some event to ‘reassure’ the people. He looked ghastly – his actions were mechanical and watching, one felt that he was scarcely there.

We had not long to wait. I was chairing a meeting in the Cabinet room when at about 11 a.m. the news came through that Mr. Chernenko had died. Shortly afterwards – that Mr. Gorbachev had been put in charge of the funeral preparations. So it seemed that he had been appointed leader for following Mr.
Andropov's death Th. Cherevich had similarly been in charge of his funeral. Before the day was out Th. Ch's appointment as Tending Leader was confirmed and the funeral fixed for Wednesday.

Very soon telephone calls were coming in from Opposition parties to say they would like to come on the plane.

We decided that we could just complete Questions on Tuesday afternoon and still get to Moscow in reasonable time. I took 'Questions' in a very busy, unrehearsed fashion giving short replies - without us for through a record number of supplementary - in 15 minutes. Dr medica told for Wellington branch, where a helicopter was waiting to take us to Heathrow. The Russian Ambassador was there to see us off. We greeted the New Zealand High Commissioner who was coming with us.
Andropov's death Mr. Chernenko had similarly been in charge of the funeral. Before the day was out Mr. G's appointment as Secretary-General was confirmed and the funeral fixed for Wednesday.

Very soon telephone calls were coming in from Opposition parties to say they would like to come on the plane.

We decided that we could just complete Questions on Tuesday afternoon and still get to Moscow in respectable time. I took ‘Questions’ in a very busy business like fashion giving short replies – indeed we got through a record number of supplementaries, 18 in 15 minutes. We made a dash for Wellington barracks where a helicopter was waiting to take us to Heathrow. The Russian Ambassador was there to see us off. We greeted the New Zealand High Commissioner who was coming with us
to represent his Government in Norway.

On the plane I read and analysed
Dr. Gorbachev’s Pressurised Speech—[no decision for
soldiers’ future but more individual needs—then
fundamental dilemma! ]—and also a speech he had
recently made elsewhere. All confirmed the impres-
sion gained at the new the previous December, that even if
he wished to change matters he couldn’t know how
to become a viable Communist system was the only
one he had ever known.

We landed in Norway at 10.30 p.m., and were
met by a deputy foreign minister, a battery of
cameras and a fleet of cars. They gave me a very large
one and as the Ambassador climbed in beside me
I reached to hold his hand in the car. It was
the car likely to be “blugged.” He nodded and
the conversation proceeded carefully!
to represent his Government in Moscow.

On the plane I read and analysed Mr. Gorbachev’s Acceptance speech [no deviation from settled policies but more initiative needed – their fundamental dilemma!] – and also a speech he had recently made at Kiev. All confirmed the impression gained at Chequers the previous December, that even if he wished to change matters he wouldn’t know how to because a rigid Communist system was the only one he had ever known.

We landed in Moscow at 10.30pm, and were met by a deputy foreign minister, a battery of cameras and a fleet of cars. They gave me a very large one and as the Ambassador climbed in beside me I signalled to him circling my hand in the air, was the car likely to be ‘bugged’. He nodded and the conversation proceeded carefully!
It is a long journey into Devon along a very straight road. There was still a lot of snow and it had not melted for very long. There were not many lights in the shops as we went down Conduit Street, but then there were that number of shops even though it is the main shopping centre. We all joined into the residence where miraculously the meal was at that point. Mrs. Mohott had everything prepared. We ate hurriedly and normally we were quite a crowd. On one previous occasion I had taken our menu of fresh vegetables and fruit and English cheese because that is what they wanted most.

The residence is what perfectly opposite the mansion on the other side of the river. It is a magnificent house, built by a Dutchman who married into the aristocracy and built a middle house for such a bride. The story goes that the architect asked him what style he preferred: "something
It is a long journey into Moscow along a very straight road. There was still a lot of snow and it had got very dirty. There were not many lights in the shops as we went down Gorki street [sic], but then there aren’t that number of shops even though it is the main shopping centre. We all poured into the residence where miraculously the staff even at that short notice had everything prepared. With secretaries and security we were quite a crowd. As on a previous occasion I had taken over masses of fresh vegetables and fruit and English cheese because that is what they wanted most.

The residence is cited [sic] perfectly – opposite the Kremlin, on the other side of the river. It is a magnificent house, built by a sugar baron who married into the aristocracy and built a suitable house for such a bride. The story goes that the architect asked him what style he preferred: “Something
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THE PRIME MINISTER

Of everything came the reply! And so some in Flemish, some German, some French, some Italian - but all
lavish and large and superb cordialities. The
bedroom I have has an enormous bedroom/dressing
room all panelled heavily in dark wood and
parqueted heavily into bedroom area, with a
large wardrobe cabinet, massive linen cupboard, and
another shallow cupboard that opens out into mirror.

Friends are great occasion for meeting other
leading government, and was a three interested
dinner been arranged for the morning. Because I had
done nothing on Wednesday night it had been just
a rest at 7.15 pm with R.C.

Our first duty on Wednesday was to go
to the Trooping of the Colour and lay a wreath. The procedure
is quite different from any I have known elsewhere.
Two soldiers preceded us each carrying a wreath, the
of everything came the reply! And so some in Flemish, some German, some French, some Italian – but all lavish and large and superb craftsmanship. The bedroom I have has an enormous bathroom/dressing room all panelled heavily in dark wood and partitioned heavily into bathroom area, toilet in a large square cubicle, massive linen cupboard, and another shallow cupboard that opens out into mirrors.

Funerals are great occasions for meeting other heads of government, and two or three interviews had already been arranged for the morrow. Because I had to get back on Wednesday night we had been given a slot at 7.15pm with Mr. G.

Our first duty on Wednesday was to go to the lying-in-state and lay a wreath. The procedure is quite different from any I have known elsewhere. Two soldiers preceded us each carrying a wreath, the
From H.M. the Queen and the other from me.

The crowd of people waiting to pay their respects
are stopped as senior politicians go into the main
room. There the body, fully embalmed, is surrounded
by banked flowers. Queen is playing quietly and the
2 soldiers just hand holding the wreath while the
Ambulance 2. Just the embalmed figure standing
silently for a minute or two. As the protocol other
come forward, we bow to the Queen and then go
to see the family who are sitting at the side of the
room - some in tears and all deeply griefed. It is really
a lovely ordeal for them. The Chancellor is such a
nice woman. I shook hands with her and she
pointed to her neighbor who was crying, saying in
English "his sister" and then "daughters." Even the
head of a community who has no sympathy for
those who disagree, nevertheless her a family who sorrow
for him.
first from H.M. The Queen, and the other from me. The queues of people waiting to pay their respects are stopped as visiting politicians go into the main room. There the body – fully embalmed – is surrounded by banked flowers. Music is playing quietly and the 2 soldiers just stand holding the wreath while the Ambassador & I face the embalmed figure – standing quietly for a moment or two. As the protocol officer comes forward, we bow to the open coffin and then go to see the family who are sitting at the side of the room – some in tears and all deeply grieved. It is really a terrible ordeal for them. Mrs. Chernenko is such a nice woman. I shook hands with her and she pointed to her neighbour who was crying, saying in English “his sister”, and then “daughters”. Even the head of a communist country who has no sympathy for those who disagree, nevertheless has a family who sorrow for him
THE PRIME MINISTER

Slowly we left the room and found the waiting room.

Slowly the President did arrive at our location and we talked of the problem of the Afghan people of the increased number of Soviet soldiers – up to 150,000 – in their country in a ruthless effort to put down all opposition. That if done they will not succeed. As long as the Resistance can obtain supplies and equipment they will go on resisting.

The official ceremony did not begin until 10. - hence we had to leave at 12.15 to take up our appointed places. There is a large space allocated for heads of state immediately to the left of Queen, behind or you face it. It is carpeted, but there are no chairs in place. Some snow had fallen overnight so everywhere looked neat and clean. The blue was grey. It was terraced down.
Slowly we left the room and past the waiting queue.

Shortly after President Zia arrived at our Embassy and we talked of the problems of the Afghanistan refugees, of the increased numbers of Soviet soldiers – up to 150,000 – in that country in a ruthless effort to put down all opposition. But of course they will not succeed. So long as the Resistance can obtain supplies of food & equipment, they will go on resisting.

The official ceremony did not begin until 1pm but we had to leave at 12.15 to take up our appointed places. There is a large space allocated for heads of government immediately to the left of Lenin’s tomb as you face it. It is carpeted, but there are no chairs, we stand. Some snow had fallen overnight so everywhere looked nice & clean. The skies were grey, it was several degrees
THE PRIME MINISTER

The first person I saw was Mr. Peter de Cillian [5.45 p.m.] and I had a smile cord with him about the Cyperm baths which were being recovered under his auspices. President Kyominson had been to see me and I had urged him to accept the S.D.'s document. Mr. Wilkie, the Norwegian P.M., was standing close by and said he was disappointed that we had
below freezing and felt very raw. I do not possess a fur coat so made myself as warm as possible in a wool coat and fur-lined boots. In my pockets I carry warm packs which help a little. Our cars park inside the Kremlin & we walk through the Kremlin Gate to the Red Square to take up our position. I recalled the previous occasion when we had come to Mr. Andropov’s funeral. As I had passed through the Gate I saw Mrs. Gandhi and we walked together to our places. Alas neither of us could have foreseen that she would no longer be with us because of the assassin’s bullet.

The first person I saw was Mr. Perez de Cuellar (S.G. of U.N.) and I had a quick word with him about the Cyprus talks which were being reconvened, under his auspices. President Kyprianou had been to see me and I had urged him to accept the S.G.’s documents. Mr Willoch, the Norwegian P.M., was standing close by and said he was disappointed that we had
not preceded by any speeches. I moved forward, spoke
to President Beneš of Czechoslovakia and found myself
in the front row by the side of the Italian delegation
(P.M. Enrico Mattei) who congratulated me warmly on
the end of the Prime Minister's visit. I was astonished how
much they knew about us.

We still had about 35 minutes to wait or
was cold, very cold. Soon President Khrushchev and his
came to join us. We could see George Bush and Charles
Roth in the crowd. President Koivisto of Finland stood
often he knew many we didn’t.

On the perimeter in front of us about a
line of Russian Army Officers opened about 6 or 7 feet
apart. They looked very young men, unlike
balding grey beards, white gloves, black boots, grey
jean jackets. They didn’t move a muscle. They were relieved
by a new guard just before the ceremony began.

Fuming up the other side of the road we had
headed by waves of well ordered people. Last men on front!
not proceeded to buy Sleipner Gas. I moved forward, spoke to President Banana of Zimbabwe and found myself in the front row by the side of the Moroccan delegation (P.M. & Foreign Minister) who congratulated me warmly on the end of the miners’ strike. I was astonished how much they knew about it.

We still had about 35 minutes to wait & it was cold, very cold. Soon President Mitterrand & Mr Dumas came to join us. We could see George Bush and Chancellor Kohl in the crowd, President Koivisto of Finland, several others we knew & many we didn’t.

On the pavement in front of us stood a line of Russian Army Officers spaced about 6 or 7 feet apart. They looked very fine young men, superbly tailored grey greatcoats, white gloves, black boots, grey fur hats. They didn’t move a muscle. They were relieved by a new guard just before the ceremony began.

Facing us, the other side of the road was the band flanked by rows of well ordered people (all men as far as I
I could see] with many in uniform scattered among them. There were barriers up. Mr. Chancellor of
frequent visitors. Otherwise there were no crowds,
just everyone standing silently in his appointed place, in
tidy awesome all in fine hats.

Just before 1 p.m. the band began to
play a funeral dirge. The Prime Minister and a
few others appeared on the balcony or the gun carriage
and escort came into view. The coffin lid of the
coffin — all covered in gathered red silk — was removed
and the coffin itself placed on the catafalque, lamp
stilled towards the balcony. At the same time a
crown of 25 others each carried a medal one
scarlet cushion moved to flake the catafalque.
Two others held a large portrait of Mr. Chancellor.
The family some 30 or so moved with portion
fump the balcony and lives thankful to see that
could see) with many in uniform scattered among them. There were banners of Mr. Chernenko at frequent intervals. Otherwise there were no crowds, just everyone standing silently in his appointed place, in heavy anoraks, all in fur hats.

Just before 1p.m. the band began to play a funeral dirge. The Politburo and a few others appeared on the balcony as the gun carriage and escort came into view. The coffin lid of the coffin – all covered in gathered red silk – was removed and the coffin itself placed on the catafalque, facing & tilted towards the balcony. At the same time a dozen or so officers each carrying a medal on a scarlet cushion moved to flank the catafalque. Two others held a large portrait of Mr. Chernenko. The family some 30 or so moved into position facing the balcony and I was thankful to see that
chair is now brought for the ladies to sit on.

When I first attended a Communist funeral [Tito's] it had been a shock to realise that it contained no religious element whatsoever. Of course one knew that intellectually but just a funeral political ceremony - it seemed comfortless and mütten fest. The Communist funeral had a let's get it over overconcern quickly about it. Except for the family for whom the ceremony may have been some comfort.

The speeches began. The voice and command of the barber was such strong contrast with the harried and retired sounds of the Cherniak's a year previously at the Andropov funeral. Then we went from other speakers, one from a member of the police and some from someone's name in agriculture, a third from the breeding of successes and a fourth representing the Comintern. We all
chairs were brought for the ladies to sit on.

When I first [illegible] attended a Communist Funeral (Tito’s) it had been a shock to realise that it contained no religious element whatsoever. Of course one knew that intellectually but just a final political ceremony – it seemed comfortless and matter of fact. Mr. Chernenko’s funeral had a let’s get it over conveyor quality about it. Except for the family for whom the ceremonial may have been some comfort.

The speeches began. The voice and command of Mr. Gorbachev in such striking contrast with the hesitancy and muffed words of Mr. Chernenko’s a year previously at Mr. Andropov’s funeral. There were four other speeches, one from a member of the politburo another from someone in agriculture, a third from the Academy of Sciences and a fourth representing the Komsomol. We all
TURNED and faced the balcony once listened, uncomprehending of the actual words but catching something of the personality and demeanour of each speaker. On the previous occasion [Dr. Andrews' funeral] I had been struck by oratory of Dr. George - a lovely speaking voice and a rumbled and authoritative. We had never seen him before like that before. This time he did not speak, but stood next to Dr. Corrander, still an obviously influential figure.

The speeches took half an hour or so. Then the coffin was moved to the space behind the building for the internment, which we could not see. The band played the same dirge over and over again finishing with the anthem as the Pointons reappeared on the balcony.
turned and faced the balcony as we listened uncomprehending of the actual words but catching something of the personality and demeanour of each speaker. On the previous occasion (Mr. Andropov’s funeral) I had been struck by the oratory of Mr. Gromyko – a lovely speaking voice and a natural air of authority. We had never seen him quite like that before. This time he did not speak, but stood next to Mr. Gorbachev, still an obviously influential figure.

The speeches took half an hour or so. Then the coffin was moved to the space behind the building for the interment, which we could not see. The band played the same dirge over and over again finishing with the anthem as the Politburo reappeared on the balcony.
Then, the mood over the mood changed sharply as the band played up for the march past - and very impressive it is - all other marches in full step (which we had become if somewhat but which they still adopt) each now melted perfectly in height. The guard in front of us on the pavement was augmented for the march past. And then it was all over save for filing past the grave.

We moved slowly round from our enclosure, scribbled and talking to other colleagues [our friends from Holland, the deputy Prime Minister, and the van den Broek] relieved that we could move at last and get the blood circulating. A pace, a hop to the front then back in a long winding file into the Kremlin and towards St. George's Hall for the reception.

President Perón of Italy was just ahead of us looking very frail and supported by 25 others as he walked
Then, the funeral over, the mood changed sharply as the band struck up for the march past – and very impressive it is – all officers marching in goose step (which we hate because of its connections but which they still adopt) each row matched perfectly in height. The guard in front of us, on the pavement was augmented for the march past. And then it was all over save for filing past the grave.

We moved slowly round from our enclosure – seeing and talking to other colleagues (our friends from Holland, the deputy Prime Minister and Mr van den Broek) relieved that we could move at last and get the blood circulating. A pause, a bow to the grave then back in a long winding file into the Kremlin and towards St. George’s Hall for the reception. President Pertini of Italy was just ahead of us looking very frail and supported by two others as he walked
slowly in the bitter cold.

Dr George's hall is unbelievably beautiful, lofty, all in white with the most magnificent chandelier augmented by hundreds of electric candle light, masterly in continuous wax just below the cornice. And not a single bell had rung! Every one was awake! The fit filled slowly up the long stair case giving a rather wonderful picture when addressing a Youth prayer at the top.

Before we got to that point, the protocol officer had come to me (as on a previous occasion of Mr. Andreopoulis friends) and said 'leader first' - come along Mr. T we must move you forward. Redman and the delayer he also picked out. So we entered and the delayer. He also picked out. He then jumped right into St. George's hall feeling a little funny for, we British don't like queen-jumps, we all shook hands with the reception party, Mr. Corcoran, the Queen Mother and Mr. Gromley. Once you
slowly in the bitter cold.

St George’s Hall is unbelievably beautiful. Lofty, all in white with the most magnificent chandeliers dominated by hundreds of electric candle lights marching in continuous line just below the cornice. And not a single bulb had gone! Every one was working! The file wound. climbed slowly up the long stair case [sic] passing a rather wonderful picture of Lenin addressing a Youth Congress at the top. Before we got to that point, the protocol officer had come to me (as on a previous occasion at Mr. Andropov’s funeral) and said ‘Ladies first’ – come along Mrs. T we must move you forward. Madame Marcos and her delegation he also picked out. So we ‘queue jumped’ right into St. George’s Hall feeling a little guilty for we British don't like queue-jumping. We all shook hands with the reception party. Mr. Gorbachev, the Prime Minister and Mr. Gromyko. Once again
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he expressed appreciation that I had come clearly they were pleased, as they had been a year earlier. Knowing I was to see the Chancellor later I conveyed my words to condolences and congratulations for the waiting queue was long. Then we cross the room—all on a way well with red carpet, how to a portrait of Mr. Chancellor the Joint Secretary, pass the press and out again. In the venue we greeted George Bush, George Schuller and Chancellor Kohl all with a way to go. We said and held a word with Chancellor Hunnen and returned quickly to the Whipping for lunch. It was now about 2.40 p.m. and we were told to

hungry!
he expressed appreciation that I had come – clearly they were pleased, as they had been a year earlier. Knowing I was to see Mr Gorbachev later I confined my words to condolence and congratulation for the waiting queue was long. Then we cross the room – all on a way well indicated by red carpet, bow to a portrait of Mr. Chernenko, the final farewell, pass the press and out again. In the queue we greeted George Bush & George Schultz [sic] and Chancellor Kohl, all still with a way to go. We saw and had a word with Armand Hammer and returned quickly to the Embassy for lunch. It was now about 2.40 p.m. and we were cold & hungry!