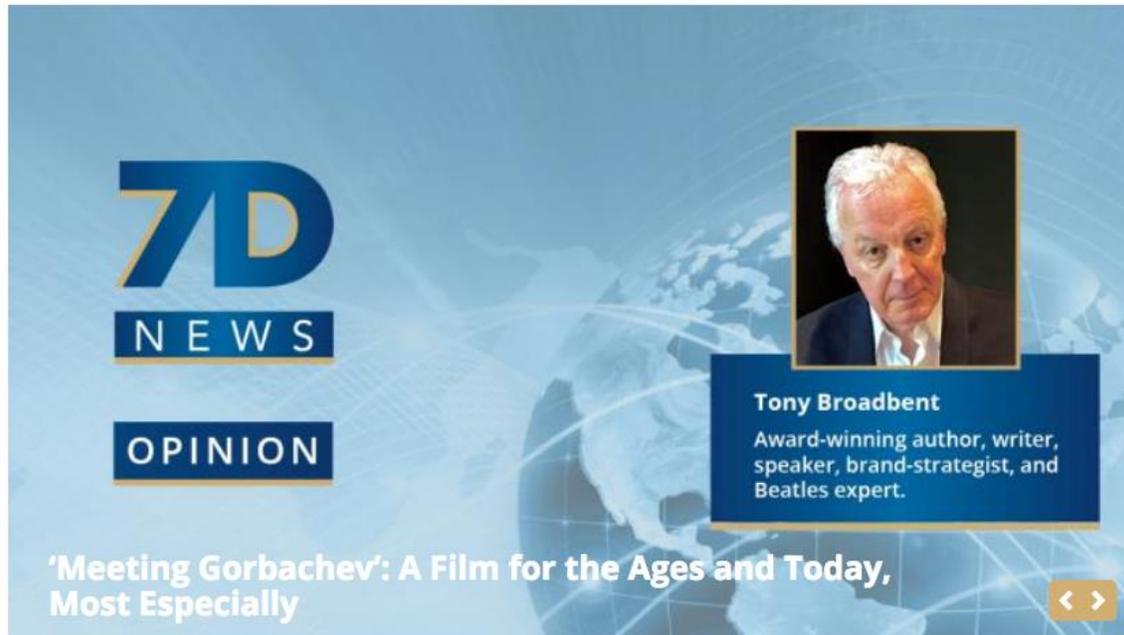


► Opinion



## ‘Meeting Gorbachev’: A Film For The Ages And Today, Most Especially

Media & Culture | Tony Broadbent | 19 May 2019

‘Meeting Gorbachev’ the new documentary film by Werner Herzog and André Singer about the life of the former General Secretary of the U.S.S.R., the visionary Mikhail Gorbachev, has just started showing here at art-house cinemas. Drawn, largely, from three extended face-to-face interviews between Mr Herzog and Mr Gorbachev, interspersed with archival footage, and running a mere 90 minutes, it’s a film for the ages. Or, at least, for anyone, of any age, who ever thought that the world might be reduced to ashes and dust-to-dust at any moment.

Anyone, that is, for whom the idea of ‘The Cold War’ still exists as more than just a period of history deserving of capital letters. Myriad nicotine-stained fingers on myriad big red buttons; nuclear launch codes ever close to hand on both sides of the Iron Curtain; the U.S.-Soviet ‘Hotline’; the U.K.’s ‘4-minute warning’; ‘Dr Strangelove’; “Armageddon,” and all that.

Here, in the U.S., the defining moment of 'The Cold War'; at least, if frequency as TV documentary or 'anniversary' event news programme is anything to go by; is the Cuban Missile Crisis, of October 1962. The 13-day white-knuckle confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union initiated by the American discovery of Soviet ballistic missile deployment in Fidel Castro's communist Cuba. There's scant mention of the 1949 Berlin Airlift; the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ending of which was on Sunday, May 12th. I'm sure it was reported, somewhere, in the States, this last week, but I saw little or nothing about it on the main news channels.

Even the fall of the Berlin Wall gets comparatively short shrift, unless there's sufficient occasion for it to be coupled with speeches made by two former U.S. Presidents in West Berlin: John F. Kennedy, on June 26, 1963, when he declared: "Today, in the world of freedom, the proudest boast is 'Ich bin ein Berliner!'" And Ronald Regan's June 12, 1987 speech, when he demanded: "Mr Gorbachev...tear down this wall!"

Both make for wonderful video-clips and sound-bites, but their very prominence suggest to me that, in the U.S., the larger issues surrounding the fall of the Berlin Wall are seen, primarily, as being uniquely European matters and thus of little or no continuing interest to most Americans. Which is a huge pity, as it robs them of being able to understand or even appreciate just what Mr Gorbachev helped bring about in the six, short years of his Premiership: The first real negotiations with the U.S. to reduce nuclear weapons; the ending of Soviet control of Eastern Europe and the subsequent reunification of East and West Germany; and the ensuing dissolution of the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc; three of the most remarkable, if not pivotal accomplishments of the Twentieth Century.

For me, born in England, of a father who served in the Armed Forces both before and during the Second World War, and with an uncle who served in the post-war British Army on the Rhine, I grew up with the spectre of massed formations of Russian Red Army tanks cutting swathes through Western Europe to get to the Channel ports in less than three weeks. With

little or nothing to stop them, save for the deployment of tactical battlefield 'atomics'. Thankfully, a solution considered 'verboten' by both sides; justly, afraid of what might then be unleashed. The realities and, yes, fantasies of the Cold War ever present. The surge in popularity of spy-novels; from Ian Fleming's 'From Russia With Love' (known to be a favourite book of none other than J.F.K.), to John Le Carré's 'The Spy Who Came In From The Cold', and Len Deighton's 'The Ipcress File' all, only, adding fuel to the flame.

For many, the great "unmentionable" of 'The Cold War' the existentialist horror that Western Europe and Great Britain were viewed as being entirely expendable by successive relays of U.S. of Pentagon planners. The fact U.S. nuclear-armed aircraft regularly took off from U.S. Air Force bases, all over the U.K.; over twenty of them, in the immediate post-war years; rendering it an all too chilling possibility.

Little wonder that, for me, citizen of "Airstrip One," as George Orwell called Great Britain in his masterwork, '1984', the defining moment in 'The Cold War' was when the Berlin Wall finally came down. I wasn't there, in Berlin, when it happened and neither did I ever manage to get hold of a piece of 'The Wall', but I was there, in spirit, utterly jubilant at the implausibility; nay, seeming impossibility; of the event.

I'd read all I could about the policies of 'Glasnost' (openness) and 'Perestroika' (restructuring) Gorbachev had introduced and how his subsequent reorientation of Soviet strategic aims made possible the ending of 'The Cold War'. So it wasn't President Regan or Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher I was cheering for; both of whom made it very clear they could "do business with this man"; I was waving my Giant's baseball cap in the air for Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of U.S.S.R.

As Werner Herzog says in his voice-over narration; a key and very effective element of the film; "The forces that Gorbachev unleashed triggered independence movements in all colonies of the Soviet block."

And in answer to one of Herzog's often surprisingly pointed, on-camera questions, Gorbachev says: "We and the Americans knew what nuclear war would really mean: The death of civilization." To which he then quietly adds: "Everything I did was aimed at transforming our society."

Gorbachev says later: "There are those who don't understand the importance of cooperation. There should be no place for such people in politics." No wonder that at one point, Werner Herzog, unable to contain his admiration for the man, exclaims: "We all love, you. I love you."

After all, Gorbachev's ideas for change became real when and where they mattered most, when it was clearly a matter of life and death for Germany and Europe, not to say, the rest of the world.

Given he was then effectively removed from office by a military coup in Moscow, while away on vacation with his family, it comes as little surprise, that Mikhail Gorbachev is not fêted in Russia, these days. And that he's cast as the misguided politician whose reach exceeded his grasp and the man wholly responsible for dismantling Russia's greatness. The assault on truth as pervasive, there, as it is these days in the good old U.S. of A.

A number of film reviewers have lamented the fact that Herzog didn't dig deeper, that he wasn't more assertive, his documentary more penetrating. Yet, for my part, I'm profoundly grateful the film was made, at all. It's certainly not, as some have suggested, a mere hagiography; it's much more a work of intense regard and respect, and all the more important for that. Someone needed to say: "Thank you, Mr Gorbachev, for all you did and all you tried to do." And I for one salute Werner Herzog for doing so.

At the end of the film, he asks Gorbachev what should be written on his gravestone. "I tried," answers Mr Gorbachev, with no sense of irony.

The film left me with an overwhelming case of: "What if?" What if Mr Gorbachev had been allowed to see his vision of a comprehensive, mutually

beneficial Pan-European-Soviet partnership through to completion? How much better would the world have been?

It's a mistake to discount the importance of leaders with humanitarian values and an inspiring, all-encompassing vision. Would that the world had more of them, today, to lead it into the future. We can but live in hope.

In 1988, in his last year in office, Ronald Reagan was asked, at a press conference in Moscow, about the role he'd played in the great drama of the late 20th century. For once, eschewing that self-deprecating little nod and smile he always did so supremely well, he described himself, for once, as but a supporting actor. "Mr. Gorbachev deserves most of the credit," he said, "as the leader of this country." And even though I was never a big fan of his, I have to say: "Nicely said, Ronnie."

The Soviet Union, as it was, before he came to power, may have been, as is now widely believed, eventually doomed to failure, but everyone has Mr Gorbachev to thank for the fact that "the evil empire" (Ronald Regan, again) came to an end without involving Western Europe or, indeed, the rest of the world in bloody conflagration.

For which I am eternally grateful. And I think if you get a chance to see 'Meeting Gorbachev' that you will be, too.

With nothing left for me to say, now, but: "I love you, too, Mr Gorbachev." And I don't give a damn who knows it.

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