# Summitry as intercultural communication

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In one of his last essays before his premature death in 1972, Martin Wight described international conferences as 'the set pieces punctuating the history of the European states-system, moments of maximum communication'.[1] Here is one of those numerous epigrammatic phrases that give his writings their enduring power. Wight did not discuss summit conferences per se, but I want to take this phrase 'moments of maximum communication' as my text for the reflections that follow, because I think it takes us to the heart of summit diplomacy—both its opportunities and its dangers.

The term 'summit' was coined by Winston Churchill, a wordsmith as well as a practitioner of international relations, who also popularized the terms 'special relationship' and 'iron curtain' which, like 'summits', have become features of modern diplomatic discourse. In February 1950, in the depths of the Cold War, Churchill suggested that nothing would be lost by what he called 'a parley at the summit' and in May 1953 he repeated his call for 'a conference at the highest level', appealing for a will to peace 'at the summit of the nations'.[2] The meeting of the leaders of the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and France at Geneva in July 1955 was billed as a 'summit' by the media and thereafter the term became commonplace, applied to face-to-face encounters from Richard Nixon's visits to Beijing and Moscow in 1972 to plenary meetings such as the November 2008 G20 conclave of world leaders to discuss the global economic crisis.

Despite the importance of summit meetings in international relations, summitry as a diplomatic genre has received surprisingly little attention from diplomatic historians or political scientists.[3] Even in studies of individual summits

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[1] Martin Wight, *Systems of states*, ed. Hedley Bull (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977), p. 32.
[2] David Reynolds, *Summits: six meetings that shaped the twentieth century* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 3. This volume provides more detailed material on the subject of the present article.
[3] The principal exception is David H. Dunn, ed., *Diplomacy at the highest level: the evolution of international summitry* (London: Macmillan, 1996), but these essays concentrate on recent summitry. Keith Eubank, *The summit conferences, 1919–1960* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), was a brief historical survey written before any archives were open. G. R. Berridge's standard textbook *Diplomacy: theory and practice* (3rd edn: Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005) contains a brief account and analysis of summitry in ch. 10. Henry Kissinger's classic, *Diplomacy* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), refers briefly to several of these meetings, but it is interesting that 'summits' and 'summitry' do not appear as conceptual entries in the book's index. There is a succinct essay on Cold War summitry by the former West German diplomat Wilhelm G. Grewe, *Die amerikanisch–sowjetischen Gipfeltreffen seit Roosevelt und Stalin* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1987).

the focus has been on personalities or on the power-political issues at stake. In this article I want to move away from narrowly biographical or 'realist' approaches to summitry, taking seriously—as did Martin Wight—the interpenetration of power and culture in international relations. In doing so, I draw on some of the fertile writing both by practitioners of the new 'cultural international history' and by theorists of 'intercultural communication'. I believe that this work can enrich our understanding of these 'moments of maximum communication' at the summit of world affairs.

To take the historians first: some scholars have appropriated the 'cultural turn' in historical studies since the 1980s to help rejuvenate the discipline of diplomatic history—once at the centre of historical scholarship but by then pushed to its periphery.[4] Arthur Marwick, in his survey *The nature of history*, published in 1970, asserted that diplomatic history had 'the reputation of being the most arid and sterile of all the sub-disciplines, with a particularly piddling expertise of its own'.[5] Yet more recent international historians have taken seriously the cultural dimensions of diplomatic interaction. Of particular interest here is the application of the concept of otherness or alterity, popularized by Edward Said in his polemical critique of European *Orientalism* (1978). Some international historians have applied Said's concept to American policies in the Middle East since 1945; others, deploying the term 'Balkanism', have detected a similar set of enduring western stereotypes about south-eastern Europe.[6] The visual dimension of otherness has been explored by John Dower in his study of the racial dynamics of the Pacific War, where he presents some of the cartoons used by Americans and Japanese to stigmatize each other as subhuman.[7] Otherness has also been used to analyse the process of national self-definition, for instance by Linda Colley in her account of the construction of British identity as anti-French and anti-Catholic. Similarly, it has been argued that a sense of identity in America, one of the most ethnically diverse western nations, has depended historically on the recurrent 'articulation of danger through foreign policy'—a thesis that has relevance not only for Cold War struggles against the 'evil empire' but also for the more recent 'war on terror'.[8]

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[4] I have discussed these issues more fully in my chapter 'Culture, discourse and policy: reflections on the new international history' in David Reynolds, *From World War to Cold War: Churchill, Roosevelt and the international history of the 1940s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 331–51. See also the stimulating essays in Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht and Frank Schumacher, eds, *Culture and international history* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2003), and Patrick Finney, ed., *Palgrave advances in international history* (London: Palgrave, 2005).

[5] Arthur Marwick, *The nature of history* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 93.

[6] Andrew J. Rotter, 'Saidism without Said: Orientalism and US diplomatic history', *American Historical Review* 105: 4, Oct. 2000, pp. 1205–17; Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: the United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Patrick Finney, 'Raising Frankenstein: Great Britain, "Balkanism" and the search for a Balkan Locarno in the 1920s', *European History Quarterly* 33: 3, July 2003, pp. 317–42.

[7] John Dower, *War without mercy: race and power in the Pacific War* (London: Faber, 1986). See also Christopher Thorne, *The Far Eastern war: states and societies, 1941–1945* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1986); Ben-Ami Shillony, *Politics and culture in wartime Japan* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981).

[8] Linda Colley, 'Britishness and otherness: an argument', *Journal of British Studies* 31: 4, Oct. 1992, pp. 309–29; David Campbell, *Writing security: United States foreign policy and the politics of identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992). See also Ragnhild Fiebig-von Hase and Ursula Lehmkuhl, eds, *Enemy images in American history* (Oxford: Berghahn, 1997).

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Equally relevant to the study of summitry is recent work in the field of intercultural or cross-cultural communication produced by scholars treading the borderlands between anthropology, psychology and even business studies.[9] Also a product of the 1980s, this work was originally prompted by the challenges of negotiating with the Japanese and has been reinvigorated by current concerns about China as a twenty-first-century superpower. For instance, Raymond Cohen argued in his book *Negotiating across cultures* (1991) that there exists a dominant international style of diplomacy based on 'Anglo-Saxon' values and warned that this creates problems when dealing with other cultures, especially Asian, whose norms are very different. On his reading, the Anglo-Saxon approach is direct and individual-centred. It prizes 'getting to the point' and 'speaking straight from the shoulder'; its goal is to make person-to-person deals based on a western model of the legal contract. By contrast, cultures that are relationship-orientated are more oblique in their use of language and keener to maintain social courtesies; they tend to proceed by indirection. Deal-making is more complicated because of the need to preserve 'face' and standing.[10] This contrast between 'individualist' and 'relational' cultures is obviously fairly crude. Since Cohen's pioneering work, the picture has been filled out both at the theoretical level and through case-studies of specific negotiations. What matters here is simply to note the basic thrust of all this work: that 'culture matters' in international negotiation.[11]

Although both cultural international historians and theorists of intercultural communication have focused on encounters between the West and Asia, I would argue that their insights are applicable to all forms of summitry. To develop this point, I want to offer three examples drawn from twentieth-century history.

## Chamberlain's perceptions of Hitler's mentality

I begin with Neville Chamberlain and his three face-to-face meetings with Adolf Hitler during the Czech crisis in September 1938, which illustrate that summitry is rooted in perceptions and misperceptions. Although it was Churchill who, as noted above, popularized the term 'summit', personal meetings between leaders had occurred on many occasions in the past. But they took on a new salience and drama in the age of air travel, when it became possible to meet relatively easily and at relatively short notice. This modern phase of summitry was pioneered by Chamberlain when he took to the air on 15 September 1938 to beard the German dictator in his Alpine lair near Berchtesgaden.

9 One textbook defines intercultural communication as 'communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event': Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter, *Communication between cultures*, 2nd edn (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995), p. 58.

10 Raymond Cohen, *Negotiating across cultures: international communication in an interdependent world* (Washington DC: US Institute of Peace, 1991), esp. ch. 3.

11 See e.g. Peter Berton, Hiroshi Kimura and I. William Zartman, eds, *International negotiation: actors, structure/ processes, values* (London: Macmillan, 1999); Hannah Slavik, ed., *International communication and diplomacy* (Malta: DiploFoundation, 2004); Wilfried Bolewski, 'Diplomatic processes and cultural variations: the relevance of culture in diplomacy', *Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 8: 1, Winter/Spring 2008, pp. 145–60.

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Despite the stereotype of a naive Birmingham businessman, out of his depth in continental politics, Chamberlain did have a clear idea, right or wrong, of what he was doing. The German leader was at once a demagogic orator and a political recluse, rarely meeting with official diplomats; but Chamberlain believed that he could not so easily fob off a fellow head of government. The Prime Minister's repeatedly stated belief that Hitler might be some kind of 'lunatic' underpinned his wish to meet the dictator face to face.[12] Not only would he thereby be able to form his own judgement of Hitler's sanity, he might also penetrate the wall of malevolent advisers, notably Joachim Ribbentrop, the anti-British foreign minister, and divert the German leader from some crazy act.

At stake, Chamberlain believed, was not merely the peace of central Europe but the fate of thousands of his own compatriots, because it was assumed that if Germany and Britain went to war London would be pounded by massive aerial bombing. As we now know, British intelligence in 1938 greatly exaggerated the range and power of the Luftwaffe—not the last time that Whitehall got it wrong about weapons of mass destruction—but this was the assumption on which Chamberlain's diplomacy rested. Only a lunatic, he thought, would launch a devastating war over a relatively minor issue of ethnic boundaries; hence the need to form his own estimate of the Führer's mental state.

Face to face, Chamberlain was not impressed. Although not repeating the *faux pas* committed a year before by Lord Halifax—who initially mistook Hitler for a footman, ready to receive his hat and coat—Chamberlain told his sisters that Hitler looked 'entirely undistinguished. You would never notice him in a crowd, and would take him for the house painter he once was.' To the Cabinet the Prime Minister was even blunter: 'the commonest little dog I have ever seen'.[13] However, Chamberlain also decided that, common or not, the dog was not mad. He told the Cabinet he had seen 'no signs of insanity but many of excitement', concluding, in what he called 'a point of considerable importance', that Hitler's objectives were 'strictly limited'.[14]

This remained his judgement even after Hitler raised his demands at their second meeting at Bad Godesberg on 22–23 September. According to the Cabinet minutes a few days later, Chamberlain said:

Herr Hitler had a narrow mind and was violently prejudiced on certain subjects; but he would not deliberately deceive a man whom he respected and with whom he had been in negotiation, and he [Chamberlain] was sure that Herr Hitler now felt some respect for him. When Herr Hitler announced that he meant to do something it was certain that he would do it . . . The crucial question was whether Herr Hitler was speaking the truth when he said that he regarded the Sudeten question as a racial question which must be settled, and that the object of his policy was racial unity and not the domination of Europe. Much

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[12] The word 'lunatic' is used in Neville Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 11 Sept. 1938, NC 18/1/1068 (Chamberlain papers, Birmingham University Library).

[13] Neville to Ida, 19 Sept. 1938, NC 18/11/1069. The 'dog' reference is recorded in Sir Thomas Inskip's diary notes, 17 Sept. 1938, INKP 1 (Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge). See also Lord Birkenhead, *Halifax: the life of Lord Halifax* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1965), p. 368.

[14] Cabinet minutes, Cab 38 (38), 17 Sept. 1938, in CAB 23/95, fo. 72 (National Archives, Kew, Surrey).

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depends on the answer to that question. The Prime Minister believed that Herr Hitler was speaking the truth.[15]

Chamberlain had no doubt that he was dealing with a profoundly alien mentality, but his trips to Germany persuaded him that he now understood it. Having started out in fear that he was dealing with a lunatic, he concluded that Hitler was a determined, difficult and volatile opponent but someone who entertained limited aims and would keep his word—in short, a man with whom he could do business. Now, it remains possible that Chamberlain took this line with his Cabinet because he had been sucked into a damaging series of concessions and needed to sound positive about the outcome. Yet my essential point here is that Chamberlain's summit diplomacy was explicitly predicated on assumptions about the Other.

The Prime Minister was, of course, engaging in amateur psychology. He had no experts to advise him and, on his first trip, did not even take his own interpreter or note-taker. Chamberlain was winging it, solo, when he flew to the summit; for his hubris Britain (not to mention Czechoslovakia) would eventually pay a high price. The notorious piece of paper, on which he and Hitler pledged that their countries would settle their differences peacefully, testifies to the cultural dimension of summitry.

## Kennedy's misunderstandings about Khrushchev's ideology

This dimension is also evident in President John Kennedy's encounter with the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna in June 1961. Their meeting came at a time when the Soviet Union seemed to be gaining the upper hand in the Cold War—having beaten the United States into space—and after Kennedy's botched attempt to topple Castro in the Bay of Pigs landing earlier that year. The latter, in particular, was a personal humiliation for the macho president, for whom winning was an article of faith in the family creed. Like Chamberlain, Kennedy saw a parley at the summit as an essentially personal encounter—a chance for him to get the measure of his Cold War adversary, and vice versa. Since 1938 the apparatus of summitry had become more sophisticated: the State Department and CIA had, for instance, prepared some hefty briefing books to give the President background on Soviet policies and leaders. Yet the meeting was almost as disastrous as Munich: a total collision of opposites that left Kennedy surprised and shaken.

We may surmise that part of the problem was Kennedy's physical state. Already on a cocktail of drugs for various ailments—ranging from urinary tract infections to adrenal insufficiency—at Vienna he was also operating on round-the-clock injections of amphetamines because of acute back pain. This regime cannot have enhanced his performance during the gruelling two-day summit which followed a state visit to Charles de Gaulle, never a relaxing experience. More fundamental than health, however, was cultural misunderstanding. Kennedy genuinely wanted

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[15]   Cabinet minutes, Cab 42 (38), 24 Sept. 1938, CAB 23/95, fo. 179.

to defuse Cold War tensions. Back in 1959 he declared that 'it is far better that we meet at the summit than at the brink' and said he discerned in Khrushchev's speeches the 'germs' of some 'potential common interests', among them preventing nuclear war and reducing the 'crushing' economic burden of the arms race.[16] And, at a time of escalating tension over Berlin, he was anxious to remind Khrushchev that crises could easily get out hand, as had happened in 1914.

So Kennedy—in that can-do Anglo-Saxon mode noted earlier—wanted to have what he considered a rational conversation with his Soviet counterpart about common interests and common dangers. But, despite all the briefing books, he simply failed to appreciate the political culture from which Khrushchev viewed these apparently shared problems. The notoriously pugnacious Soviet leader seized the initiative as soon as the opening courtesies were over. The West must recognize one fact, he asserted: 'Communism exists and has won its right to develop.' Kennedy hit back, arguing that the Soviet Union was trying to eliminate free governments allied to the United States and said this was a matter of 'very serious concern'.

And so the two men launched into an ideological argument, conducted through lengthy speeches. Khrushchev hammered on about the Soviet belief that communism would triumph not by force of arms but as a law of historical development. Just as capitalism had displaced feudalism, so communism was now challenging capitalism. The United States could not regard all this as historical inevitability, Kennedy insisted: 'our position is that people should have free choice'. Khrushchev suggested America 'wanted to build a dam preventing the development of the human mind and conscience', likening this to the Spanish Inquisition. Kennedy tried again to explain the US position, emphasizing the danger of 'miscalculation' on both sides, but this triggered an explosion from Khrushchev about the way the United States wanted the Soviet Union to 'sit like a schoolboy with his hands on his desk'.[17]

'Is it always like this?' Kennedy whispered to Llewellyn Thompson, his ambassador to Moscow, over a late lunch. 'Par for the course' was the reply, but privately Thompson was shaken by the fact that Kennedy seemed to be taking one hit after another from the Soviet leader.[18] Yet instead of getting off ideology and on to specifics, after lunch the President said he wanted to 'come back to the general thesis' about historical change. When 'systems are in transition', he stated, 'we should be careful, particularly today when modern weapons are at hand'. This time Khrushchev did not flare up but turned Kennedy's points to his advantage. The President, he said, seemed to believe that 'when people rise against tyrants, that is a result of Moscow's activities' but this, Khrushchev insisted, was not true. In Iran, the people were so poor that the country had become 'a volcano' and profound changes were 'bound to occur sooner or later'. By supporting the shah, the United

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[16] John F. Kennedy, *The strategy of peace*, ed. Allan Nevins (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), pp. 10–12.
[17] This summary follows the transcript in US Department of State, *Foreign relations of the United States, 1961–3* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1998), vol. 5, docs 83–5.
[18] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr, papers, box W-3: Berlin notes (John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Massachusetts).

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States generated hostility towards itself and 'favourable feelings' towards the Soviet Union. Likewise in Cuba, US support for the 'oppressive' Batista regime had created anti-American feeling, paving the way for Castro's revolution. Kennedy was pushed back on the defensive, saying that the shah needed to reform and that he personally held no brief for Batista, but Khrushchev warmed to his thesis that America supported 'old, moribund, reactionary regimes'. Moving around the world, he kept Kennedy on the back foot, arguing that in the Congo, Angola and Algeria, America was supporting European colonial powers against the people's struggles for freedom.

The afternoon meeting ended after three and a half hours. Kennedy had been advised beforehand by aide 'Chip' Bohlen that 'ideological topics' and the 'general threat of communism' should 'not be dealt with *per se*' at Vienna but 'in relation to Soviet state policy'.[19] Instead the President had not merely allowed himself to get into an ideological debate with a diehard Marxist/Leninist but had persisted in the afternoon as well as the morning, even though driven on to the defensive by Khrushchev's hard punching. Thompson admitted later that 'there hadn't been worked out any very clear scenario' in advance for the discussions and regretted that Kennedy had got into ideology, on which Khrushchev could not have yielded even if he wanted to: 'I don't think that the President quite appreciated the fact.'[20] In short, Kennedy failed to understand the mental framework within which Khrushchev operated: a Marxist/Leninist vision of a world in which communism now seemed to be catching up with capitalism.

Did this failure of 'intercultural communication' matter? I believe it did—on both sides. Khrushchev left the Vienna summit convinced, as he told advisers, that Kennedy was 'very inexperienced, even immature'. By comparison, he added scathingly, Dwight Eisenhower—JFK's golfing, gaffe-prone predecessor—was 'a man of intelligence and vision'.[21] These perceptions inspired the most dangerous gamble of Khrushchev's reckless career: installing nuclear missiles in Cuba. Although what he called the idea of throwing 'a hedgehog down Uncle Sam's pants' did not take shape till the spring of 1962 and its denouement came only in October of that year, it was rooted in Khrushchev's conclusions at Vienna in June 1961. But in the missile crisis Kennedy kept his nerve, striking a balance between firmness and provocation: he rejected hawkish advice for air strikes on Cuba and instead implemented a blockade of the island which gave Khrushchev time and diplomatic room to remove the missiles. The two superpowers had come eyeball to eyeball and Moscow blinked first. Khrushchev's bluff had been called: he knew that his nuclear arsenal was vastly inferior to Kennedy's—220 warheads compared with about 4,000. Only after the Cuban crisis, as Khrushchev's aide Oleg Troyanovksy noted, did the Soviet leader stop doubting the President's 'will and intellect': at

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[19] Charles E. Bohlen, 'Line of approach to Khrushchev', 1 June 1961, *Foreign relations of the United States, 1961–3*, vol. 5, doc. 80, p. 165.
[20] Llewellyn Thompson, oral history, 27 April 1966, p. 36 (John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Massachusetts).
[21] Oleg Troyanovsky, 'Making of Soviet foreign policy', in William Taubman, Sergei Khrushchev and Abbott Gleason, eds, *Nikita Khrushchev* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), ch. 9 at p. 231.

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last, bullying gave way to the kind of negotiation that Kennedy had hoped for at
Vienna. By then, however, it was too late. Khrushchev's colleagues knew he had
been humiliated in the missile crisis and this was a major reason for his overthrow
in October 1964.[22]

Vienna also shaped Kennedy's policy. After the summit the mood on Air Force
One was silent and depressed: one aide said it was 'like riding with the losing
baseball team after the World Series'.[23] Kennedy himself told James Reston of the
*New York Times* that the meeting with Khrushchev was the 'roughest thing in my
life'. Speculating about the Soviet leader's motives, the President went on to say,
according to Reston:

I think he did it because of the Bay of Pigs. I think he thought that anyone who was so
young and inexperienced as to get into that mess could be taken, and anyone who got
into it, and didn't see it through, had no guts. So he just beat hell out of me. So I've got a
terrible problem. If he thinks I'm inexperienced and have no guts, until we remove those
ideas we won't get anywhere with him . . . [N]ow we have a problem in trying to make our
power credible, and Vietnam looks like the place.[24]

Reston subsequently modified his account, claiming that the remark about
Vietnam was his own inference, not Kennedy's exact words,[25] but the President
undoubtedly drew a line in Vietnam, identifying the country as the prime Cold
War battlefield of the 1960s and committing 16,000 American military 'advisers'.
Although aware of the risks of escalation, he did treat Vietnam as the place to try to
make America's power credible, and this was in large part because of his need after
June 1961 to prove that Khrushchev could not push him around. At the very least,
Kennedy made it much harder for himself or his successor to pull out of Vietnam.
So the Vienna summit marked an important step into America's quagmire.

## Reagan and Gorbachev: the summit as catalyst

In both of these examples, summitry turned on underlying cultural assump-
tions as much as on the specifics of policy or negotiation: Chamberlain's fluctu-
ating estimates of Hitler's mental state, Kennedy's misunderstandings of Soviet
ideology. My third case-study is, however, more positive—though you would
not have anticipated this when Ronald Reagan first met Mikhail Gorbachev in
Geneva in November 1985. The American President was a notorious cold warrior
who had lambasted the 'evil empire'; the young, reformist Soviet leader, though
clearly an improvement on the gerontocrats of the Brezhnev era, was nevertheless

[22] For argument and quotations see William Taubman, *Khrushchev: the man and his era* (New York: Norton, 2003),
esp. pp. 506, 541, 583. On nuclear arsenals see Steven Zaloga, *Target America: the Soviet Union and the strategic arms
race, 1945–1964* (Novato, CA: Diane, 1993), p. 213.
[23] Michael R. Beschloss, *The crisis years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960–1963* (New York: Edward Burlinghame,
1991), p. 225.
[24] David Halberstam, *The best and the brightest* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1972), pp. 96–7. Reston later told a
similar story, in somewhat different words, to biographer Richard Reeves: see Reeves, *President Kennedy: profile
of power* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), pp. 172–3.
[25] David Kaiser, *American tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap
Press, 2000), pp. 101–2.

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still a convinced Marxist whose slogan was 'Back to Lenin'. The first morning of the summit did not go well: over lunch Gorbachev complained to his staff, 'This man is a real dinosaur.'[26]

In the afternoon the two got into a set-piece confrontation about Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative—the anti-ballistic missile defence system known as Star Wars. Reviewing the transcript a few years later, Gorbachev said it read like 'the "No. 1 Communist" and the "No. 1 Imperialist" trying to out-argue each other'.[27] Geneva seemed almost a replay of Kennedy and Khrushchev in 1961. But then Reagan suddenly defused the tension by suggesting they take a walk outside. This had been planned beforehand for just such a moment. Strolling down to the lake, they chatted about Reagan's Hollywood movies, and in the poolhouse by the shore, around a roaring fire, they resumed their debate about Star Wars—but also agreed on future summits in Moscow and Washington to carry on the dialogue.

When the two men parted at the end of the day, they 'locked hands and eyes with real affection', according to Reagan's official biographer: 'I have rarely seen such mutuality.' Gorbachev recalled a 'spark of electric mutual trust which ignited between us, like a voltaic arc between two electric poles'. In the morning, the Soviet leader told his aides, he had seen only 'blank, uncomprehending eyes' as Reagan 'mumbled certain banalities from his paper'. But by the end of their talk in the poolhouse, he said, they had managed a human conversation. He also recognized Reagan's sincerity about SDI, even though convinced that the project was misguided and dangerous. The President, for his part, enjoyed the Soviet leader's passion and directness: most western leaders, apart from Margaret Thatcher, treated him like a rather embarrassing elderly relative. 'You could almost get to like the guy', the President told his chief of staff, Don Regan. 'I keep telling myself I mustn't do it, because he could turn.'[28]

Geneva was the first of four Reagan–Gorbachev summits—each of which had its ups and downs, not to mention frigid periods in between. But the personal rapport from that first afternoon proved strong and enduring. On the face of it the chemical bond between the two men seems surprising but, with hindsight, I think we can see that its essential elements were present beforehand; and they were cultural in nature.

Reagan, although renowned as an anti-communist, was also a passionate opponent of nuclear weapons who believed that the Cold War policy of deterrence based on mutually assured destruction—MAD—was truly insane. In July 1979 he was shown round the top-secret command centre in Colorado that would coordinate US defences in the event of a nuclear war. It was a vast underground city, carved out of the Rocky Mountains and protected by steel doors several feet thick. Yet when its commander was asked what would happen if a Soviet

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[26] Gorbachev interview, 3 Oct. 1995, quoted in Edmund Morris, *Dutch: a memoir of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Modern Library, 1999), p. 563.
[27] Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (London: Doubleday, 1996), pp. 405–6.
[28] Morris, *Dutch*, pp. 568–9, 823. Gorbachev's post-summit comments are noted in the diary of Anatoly S. Chernyaev, 24 Nov. 1985, translation available on the National Security Archive website 'To the Geneva summit' at http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/, accessed 4 Dec. 2008.

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missile landed outside, he shrugged: 'It would blow us away.' Reagan was appalled that even the nerve centre of America's defences was defenceless against nuclear missiles, and this reinforced his desire to replace mutual destruction with shared survival.[29] However naive or Machiavellian SDI seemed to the Soviets and to European critics, Reagan was absolutely sincere in March 1983 when he declared that his goal was to 'render these nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete'. His closest advisers in the White House doubted that he would have been willing to launch America's nuclear weapons even if the country were under attack.[30]

This side of Reagan is less well known. Critics mocked his black-and-white view of the world, his vagueness about details, his tendency to nod off in meetings and to relate stories and jokes when awake. 'I *am* concerned about what is happening in government,' he told reporters, 'and it's caused me many a sleepless afternoon.' And again: 'It's true hard work never killed anyone but I figure, why take the chance?'[31] Opponents dubbed him 'the acting president'—a Hollywood cast-off who had exploited his name and face to secure 'the role of a lifetime'.[32] But Reagan's self-image was very different. Throughout his life, his mind kept returning to summers as a teenage lifeguard on the Rock River in Illinois. Enthroned on an elevated wooden chair commanding the beach, his tanned, well-toned body made him a cult figure, and on his own reckoning he plucked 77 people from near-death in the river. The lifeguard became the abiding motif of Reagan's inner life.[33] Robert McFarlane, one of Reagan's national security advisers, noted that he had 'enormous self-confidence in the ability of a single heroic figure to change history'. Another national security adviser, Frank Carlucci, believed Reagan was 'convinced he could change the "evil empire" to a "good empire" through force of persuasion'.[34]

Moreover, during the course of his presidency Reagan's cultural perceptions of that empire shifted sharply. A catalyst for change was the panic in Moscow in November 1983 when the Kremlin misinterpreted a NATO exercise (codenamed Able Archer) as a sign that US bases had been placed on full alert. The war scare was not mere official propaganda: the leadership genuinely believed it, and panic spilled over into the public at large, with Reagan depicted in the Soviet press as the man willing and able to push the nuclear button, even a modern version of Hitler.[35] When the President learned this from intelligence sources, he was genuinely

[29] The story is told, for instance, in Martin Anderson, *Revolution: the Reagan legacy*, 2nd edn (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1990), pp. 80–3.

[30] Speech of 8 March 1983: see Robert Lettow, *Ronald Reagan and his quest to abolish nuclear weapons* (New York: Random House, 2005), pp. 35, 133.

[31] James T. Patterson, *Restless giant: the United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 160.

[32] The titles of two biographies. See Bob Schieffer and Gary Paul Gates, *The acting president* (New York: Dutton, 1989); Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: the role of a lifetime* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).

[33] Even when Alzheimer's disease clouded his memory in the final years, Reagan kept coming back to that story: see Morris, *Dutch*, p. 667; Michael Deaver, *A different drummer: my thirty years with Ronald Reagan* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 2001), pp. 21–2.

[34] Don Oberdorfer, *From the Cold War to a new era: the United States and the Soviet Union, 1983–91*, 2nd edn (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 22; William Wohlforth, ed., *Witnesses to the end of the Cold War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 46.

[35] Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *Instructions from the Centre: top secret files on KGB operations, 1975–1985* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991), ch. 4; and Vladimir E. Shlapentokh, 'Moscow's war propaganda and Soviet public opinion', *Problems of Communism* 33: 5, Sept.–Oct. 1984, pp. 88–94.

shocked. For years he had been saying that the Soviets would stop at nothing, even war, to advance their ends. Now he discovered that they apparently believed exactly the same about him.[36]

In response, the President delivered his most conciliatory speech to date on 16 January 1984. In a special TV broadcast he insisted: 'The fact that neither of us likes the other system is no reason to refuse to talk. Living in this nuclear age makes it imperative.' And, in a folksy ending he wrote himself, he mused about what would happen if an American couple 'Jim and Sally' could sit and chat with 'Ivan and Anya' from Russia. They would soon discover everyday interests in work, hobbies, families and, above all, peace that transcended nation and ideology. 'They would have proved', declared the President, 'that people don't make wars'—wars were the fault of governments.[37]

The following day Reagan met Suzanne Massie—author of *Land of the firebird*, a vivid cultural history of pre-revolutionary Russia. White House advisers knew that their boss absorbed information more effectively when it was packaged in anecdotal form, with plenty of human detail; and so much the better if it was delivered not in a dry memo but by a charming and articulate woman. Reagan and Massie hit it off: this was the first of 22 meetings over the remaining five years of his presidency. The author was passionate about her cause. 'The Russians are human beings, for heaven's sake,' she would say. 'And they are very human beings.'[38] This new sense of Russians as people strengthened Reagan the Lifeguard's desire to save humankind from nuclear madness. By 1985, in short, he was culturally disposed to find a partner at the summit.

But why was Gorbachev ready to respond? His mindset was still Soviet; he still believed that the country had to throw off the relics of Stalinism and get back to the supposedly pure milk of Leninism. But, born in 1931, he did not share the insular, often paranoid, xenophobia of the Brezhnev generation, 30 years his senior, whose mentality was formed by the Stalin years and the Second World War. As a young regional leader he had visited Western Europe, including West Germany— an eye-opening experience that helped him see through Soviet propaganda stereo- types about capitalism and communism—and his ideas shifted dramatically as a result of meeting western leaders during his short but important term as deputy party secretary in 1984–5.

His trip to London in December 1984 was a milestone, helping erode his stereotypes about the East–West divide. Margaret Thatcher, the 'Iron Lady', was notorious in Moscow as an even fiercer cold warrior than Reagan, yet she and Gorbachev engaged in genuine, if spirited, dialogue. 'I like Mr Gorbachev',

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[36] Diary entry quoted in Ronald Reagan, *An American life* (New York: Pocket Books, 1992), p. 585. The impact of these events in late 1983 on the President's policies is highlighted by Beth A. Fischer, *The Reagan reversal: foreign policy and the end of the Cold War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), ch. 5.

[37] Reagan, address on US–Soviet relations, 16 Jan. 1984, The American Presidency Project website, http://www. presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/, accessed 4 Dec. 2008.

[38] *New York Times*, 26 Sept. 1985, p. B8. See also Massie's website at http://www.suzannemassie.com/index. html, accessed 4 Dec. 2008; and National Security Council Coordination Office files on meetings with Suzanne Massie, in boxes 90876, 90912, 91210, 91948, 91962 and 91968 (Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, California).

Thatcher famously told the BBC. 'We can do business together.'[39] Meeting Reagan at Camp David a few days later, she said that Gorbachev was 'an unusual Russian … much less constrained, more charming, open to discussion and debate'—though she added that 'the more charming the adversary, the more dangerous'.[40] Thatcher's briefing helped alert Reagan to Gorbachev's significance, while the surprising tractability of the Iron Lady showed Gorbachev that real discussions were possible across the Iron Curtain. These experiences, on top of his earlier openness to the West, inclined him to find common ground with Reagan at Geneva. Just as Reagan arrived at Geneva culturally disposed to see the Russian leader as a human being, so Gorbachev came prepared to engage with an accessible American. The summit meeting proved a catalyst.

## Not lost in translation

These three examples—from Munich in 1938, Vienna in 1961 and Geneva in 1985—illustrate how summitry is, in part, an intercultural act. But, for there to be real interaction, a summit must also involve effective communication in the purely technical sense. It is therefore worth noting that the meeting in Geneva of 1985 was the first superpower summit at which there was simultaneous translation. Previously such meetings had been interpreted consecutively: while one leader spoke, his interpreter took notes and then, at a suitable break, rendered those words into the other language. The result was a very precise translation but also great wastage of time. Although simultaneous interpreting dates back to the 1920s, it made its mark in international relations only with the Nuremberg trials of 1946. The practice was adopted at the United Nations but not at international conferences, and the US government did not try simultaneous interpreting for bilateral meetings between the president and any head of government until 1981.[41]

At Helsinki in July 1985 Secretary of State George Shultz persuaded his Soviet counterpart Eduard Shevardnadze to try the simultaneous method, wearing headphones and listening to interpreters in soundproof booths. 'How did you like it?' asked Shultz afterwards. 'We got eight hours' work done in four', was the reply. When Shultz met Shevardnadze in Moscow in early November, the room had been set up for simultaneous interpreting: 'I hope you like this bit of technology transfer', said Shevardnadze with a smile. They agreed to use it for plenary meetings at the Geneva summit, though one-to-one meetings between the two leaders were still interpreted consecutively. Sergei Tarasenko, Shevardnadze's senior aide, observed later that simultaneous interpreting set the conduct

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[39] For background see Archie Brown, 'The change to engagement in Britain's Cold War policy: the origins of the Thatcher–Gorbachev relationship', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 10: 3, Summer 2008, pp. 3–47, quoting from p. 33.

[40] Reagan–Thatcher meeting, 22 Dec. 1984, memcon, NSC European and Soviet Affairs Directorate: Thatcher Visit, Dec. 1984 [1], box 90902 (Ronald Reagan Library).

[41] For background see Igor Korchilov, *Translating history: the summits that ended the Cold War as witnessed by Gorbachev's interpreter* (London: Aurum, 1997), pp. 21–2, 48; Pavel Palazchenko, *My years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze: the memoir of a Soviet interpreter* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), pp. 31–3.

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of Soviet–American relations 'on a completely new road'.[42] It was not just the time saved, though that was important; simultaneous translation also allowed the listener to connect the speaker's words with his tone and body language—essential elements of a real conversation. Technology therefore played a part in making the Geneva summit—to use that phrase from Martin Wight—'a moment of maximum communication'.

## Conclusion

This article has sought, in a modest way, to show how diplomatic history can learn from historians and sociologists of culture, and that leads me in conclusion to a larger point. In recent decades the explosion of academic scholarship makes it ever harder to keep abreast of work in one's own specialist area. As a result we have to make a real effort to read outside our own period, let alone our own subdiscipline. One of many lessons we can learn from Martin Wight's polymathic œuvre—spanning history and international relations, philosophy and theology, academia and journalism—is the need for eclecticism, for cross-fertilization. A discipline shapes and trains one's mind, but it should not become an intellectual prison. In this age of increasing specialization and fragmentation, the aim of what is aptly called a university must remain the wholeness of all knowledge. Like summitry, it should be an arena of 'maximum communication'.

[42]  George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and triumph: my years as Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner's, 1993), pp. 573–4, 587; for Taransenko, see Wohlforth, *Witnesses to the end of the Cold War*, p. 19.