

# Gordon Arthur Ransome Oration: “From Spitfire Summer to Europe Reborn — 1940–1990”

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Master, First Deputy Prime Minister, Distinguished Guests, Officers and Members of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore, Members of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow, Ladies and Gentlemen.

May I begin this Gordon Ransome Oration by thanking my old and good friend Dr Gopal Baratham for his witty and totally undeserved introduction. I will not respond by citing Gopal’s curriculum vitae. I will merely say that he is unique in my experience: a neurosurgeon who is also a writer; a writer who is a neurosurgeon. My best memories of him and his family go back to Britain in the mid-1960s when he was a young, newly qualified, registrar. He and his wife Pauline lived with their young sons in a variety of draughty, rented houses. Gopal was as hard worked as all young registrars invariably are, sometimes driving up to 50 miles at short notice in the middle of the night to perform emergency operations. But there he was the next day, full of good stories, prepared to further extend his already comprehensive knowledge of the pubs of south-east London, although never to the detriment of his work or his family. British medical politics fascinated him and one typical report from the battle front will stand for many more. St. Thomas’s Hospital was then beginning to modernise its 19th century buildings, redolent of Florence Nightingale. The costs were enormous, running into the millions, but somehow the money was found. Gopal once asked a mighty consultant, deeply involved in the quest for funds, how this was done: “I walk in the corridors of power” was the lofty and accurate answer. It is with me still.

The corridors of the Academy’s magnificent building reflect a different ethos. They speak of the space and elegance of the Edwardian era. The Academy of Medicine is surely one of Singapore’s finest works, created, as we all know, by a modest officer in the Royal Engineers. The Academy itself epitomises Singapore’s place as one of the world’s great centres of medicine. All who live and work in Singapore today should honour its founder, Sir Gordon Ransome. “GAR”, as he was universally known, practised medicine here — a spell of war service in Burma apart — for 42 years. He was described by Dr Peter Yeo in 1979 as “the father of modern medicine in Singapore . . . thorough and wise . . . generous and totally unselfish”. A man who “treated all patients equally, irrespective of race, religion and social standing”. This Academy is a monument to his memory.

“GAR”, a man to whom nothing human was alien, would, I believe, have understood the purpose of my memorial oration today. He was essentially a man of peace. But as a member of one of the British Army’s medical teams which fought malaria along the Burma/Assam border in 1943 and 1944 he knew war at close quarters. He saw Britain’s “forgotten army”, the 14th, in action before returning to Singapore in 1945 with then Lord Louis Mountbatten. He would have appreciated that the study of war is not some kind of aberration or diversion to be ignored by serious historians but rather a discipline which is at the very core of modern history. I also hazard the guess that he would have shared my view, rejected by the social historians intent on tracing broad movements of opinion, or the slow evolution of societies and economies, that a close attention to what happened on particular dates and in particular places is crucial to a proper understanding of our times.

In the light of these remarks, you will not be surprised that I have chosen to focus initially on three dates and three places. What dates? 15 September, 1940; 12 July, 1943; and 12 March, 1985. Which places? The skies over southern England; the fields around the small Byelorussian town of Prokhorovka; and the main conference room of the Kremlin.

Why 15 September, 1940? Those British people in the audience will need no further explanation. But that day, just over fifty years in the past, is perhaps less well-known to younger Singaporeans. It marked the climax of the long air battle — the “Spitfire Summer” of my title — over southern England between Goering’s Luftwaffe and Royal Air Force Fighter Command, once described as “the gayest company who ever fired their guns in anger”. I was a small boy at the time, living in south west London. I still recall the white vapour trails 30,000 feet above my head. Occasionally a Spitfire, an ME109 or a JU 88, would fall slowly out of the sky. Sometimes a small figure, no larger than the

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head of a pin, would detach itself and a white parachute would float peacefully to earth. It all seemed like a long, warm, unclouded, dream. But it was bloodily and brutally real to the young pilots on both sides and to the commanders in their bunkers, above all, Sir Hugh Dowding, the 58 year-old head of RAF Fighter Command, a laconic, unflamboyant man, who looked like a slightly irritable vicar, and was known to everyone in his command as “Stuffy”. Dowding realised as he watched the girls on shift at RAF Fighter Command Headquarters, Stanmore, Middlesex, moving their markers across the plotting table, that the climax of the battle was at hand: defeat on 15 September would mean imminent and overwhelming invasion, with only one end.

Happily, the Spitfires and Hurricanes, outnumbered, pressed to the final limits of exhaustion, increasingly flown by young men with only a few weeks of training, proved victorious. By the end of the day over a thousand German aircraft had been forced to turn tail, never to return in strength in daylight. Hitler, faced by his first failure in the West after a string of unbroken victories, abandoned his plans for invasion and turned eastwards. The invasion barges concentrated in every port along the French, Belgian and Dutch coasts were dispersed, never to come together again.

I hope you will forgive me if I say that a newsreel picture of a group of RAF pilots running to man their aircraft, or a glimpse of Her Majesty, The Queen Mother, visiting the bombed-out citizens of the East End of London, even now — much to my wife’s chagrin — brings tears to my eyes. Plain prose cannot do justice to that day, that summer. I will only quote the English poet, C Day Lewis, writing of Dowding’s pilots in 1943:

“Speak of the rough and tumble in the blue  
The mast-high run, the flak, the battering gales  
You that, until the life you love prevails  
Must follow death’s impersonal vocation  
Speak from the air, and tell your hunters’ tales.”

The legacy of 15 September was long delayed in its effects. Victory meant that Hitler would ultimately be beaten and that his crazed plan to establish a ‘Thousand Year Reich’ would never succeed. But it was not clear in the early autumn of 1940 how the Second World War would end. It was faith, hope, and Sir Winston Churchill’s “blood, toil, tears and sweat” which kept Britain going in late 1940 and early 1941. Only in May and June 1941 did the British Government discover from intelligence sources within Germany that Hitler intended to invade the Soviet Union on 21 June 1941. By mid-1943, Operation ‘Barbarossa’ had reached a crucial phase. Much ground had been won and lost. The Wehrmacht had failed to take either Moscow or Stalingrad. Yet Hitler’s armies were still strong, his officers and men confident, his generals proud of their skills. The swastika might still, he believed, fly in Vladivostok, Cairo and New Delhi if one more decisive victory could be achieved. Hitler staked all on a massive stroke by 34 divisions with 2,700 tanks, supported by 1,800 aircraft. His target was the Kursk salient, south-west of Moscow.

The battle (Operation “Citadel”) was launched by the German Ninth and Fourth Armies, facing the Soviet Bryansk and Central Fronts, at 4.30 am on 5 July 1943. Day after day, armadas of German and Soviet tanks moved through furnaces of fire. Field Marshal Hoth’s Ninth Army, led by some of the Wehrmacht’s finest divisions, SS “Liebstandarte”, “Das Reich” and “Totenkopf”, was, by 11 July, close to a breakthrough. The climax came the next day, when the greatest tank battle of the Second World War took place around the small town of Prokhorovka. By nightfall, the “Prokhorovskoe poboische”, the “slaughter at Prokhorovka”, had ended with more than 300 German tanks, 70 of them Tigers, lying wrecked on the Steppes. More than half the Soviet Fifth Guards Tank Army lay shattered in the same area. But the Germans could move no further. Operation “Citadel” was over.

The German Army never recovered. Hitler quickly acknowledged defeat: “That’s the last time I will heed the advice of my General Staff”, he told his adjutants on 13 July. I suspect that even in his own mind he now knew that the war was finally lost. This second turning point in the Second World War meant, in time, Yalta and the division of Europe into two camps: western — broadly free, democratic, capitalist; and eastern — communist, unfree, and wedded to a command economy.

The defeat at Prokhorovka meant, in sum, that for forty-four years, from 1945 to 1989, the western democracies would be faced by an implacable empire, bent on world domination, led in its initial post-war phase by a tyrant fully equal to Hitler, if shrewder in his calculations and better at concealing his intentions. It is not my intention now to describe the mighty clash of ideas and of arms between East and West, post-Yalta. The paradox is that both the Soviet Empire and the ideology which underpinned it seemed so superficially strong and were yet so fundamentally weak. To take a personal example, my wife and I first encountered this seemingly impregnable monolith in Poland between April, 1968 and May, 1970. I travelled hopefully to Warsaw as a floppy western liberal willing to give the system the benefit of the doubt. I returned a Texan capitalist, my convictions confirmed in Vietnam 15 years later. Why this

radical conversion? Basically because the contrast between the authorised version and the real facts was too great. The posters spoke of mighty Socialism; effigies of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin glowered above massive, smoking, steel furnaces; the press and television were full of targets achieved, industrial victories won. The West was being steadily left behind. “We shall bury you”, boasted Krushchev.

The reality was very different. Nobody, not even the members of the Polish establishment, the “nomenklatura”, believed in Marxism. They believed only in power which gave immediate access to wealth. At a time when German cars were forbidden in Poland, the Prime Minister drove a large Mercedes. When private property was not permitted, he owned a large villa alongside a lake. When foreign travel was only allowed on Party or State business, he was to be found on Lake Lugano each year with his hairdresser mistress.

Everyone knew that the economy was essentially bankrupt. One late night, both of us primed with vodka, I asked the Head of the Polish Planning Commission, the country’s supreme economic body, what he would do if he were really free to act. “I would bring in Volkswagen and other West German firms and allow them to do whatever they liked: manage every Polish company as they wished, hire and fire, pay whatever salaries seemed best. But how would we then explain the history of the last twenty years to the Polish people?”

Given this total lack of confidence in the system, this gnawing rot at the centre, the whole ridiculous edifice should logically have collapsed at a touch. We often asked ourselves in the Embassy in Warsaw why it did not do so. Our Ambassador, Sir Thomas, now Lord, Brimelow, the wisest of men and a fluent Russian speaker who had spent the whole war in Moscow, rebuked us for our naivete. The Soviet Empire, including Poland, would not, he said, fall until there was change at the top in Moscow. Who could quarrel with him in the summer of 1968 when the Red Army’s tanks rolled into Czechoslovakia and all my wife and I could do in the way of protest was play the informal Czech national anthem, Smetana’s “Ma Vlast”, on our hi-fi set at its loudest volume so that the Polish inhabitants of our battered block of flats would know where our hearts lay.

After Prague, 1968, all hope of change in eastern Europe seemed lost. But the termites of truth and the worm of inefficiency continued to sap the Soviet structure. By the early 1980s it was close to collapse, although few of us then knew it. Which brings me to my last date and place: 12 March 1985, the main Kremlin Conference Room. It was on that date and in that place that Mikhail Gorbachev was elected General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It remains a mystery how this man of destiny from Stavropol in the northern Caucasus managed to come to power.

The area is little known to the outside world. It is no Leningrad, possessed little in the way of an intelligentsia and had no radical reputation. One recent story encapsulates Stavropol. It is told by an English writer, Colin Thubron, in his marvellous account of travel in the Soviet Union (“Among the Russians”) in 1983. He recounts a conversation with a farmer living not far from the city. The farmer ransacks his memory for any fact about, or image of, England: “England . . . England . . . Ah yes! Churchill.” He poured more wine from a huge earthenware jug. “I’ve seen your Queen, Mrs Churchill, on our television. She had white hair and was very beautiful but her head was sticking out of a tank.” Thubron dimly recognised Mrs Thatcher, whose photograph when inspecting a British tank regiment had recently been published in the Soviet press, thus confirming her status as the warlike “Iron Lady”. “I don’t approve’’, said the farmer circumspectly, “of women driving”.

So much for the well-informed citizen of Stavropol. But perhaps I am being unfair. In any case, Gorbachev was, and is, clearly different, an exception to all rules, in Stavropol or anywhere else. In his own person and in his own life he exemplifies the truth that only those who hold power within a dictatorial system can change it since it is only they who know how truly awful it is and are capable of breaking the mould. We must give thanks to Gorbachev for he, more than any other living man has been responsible for the final collapse of the Soviet system. Yet even he could not, I suspect, have predicted when he began in 1985 how quickly and completely it would crumble.

So quickly indeed that we have all to our surprise been thrust into a totally new era. But before I try my hand on what this may mean, I hope we can all recall for a moment how much effort was needed to preserve the non-communist world during the forty-four years since 1945. It needed constant unity. It needed money, men, sacrifice. It needed organisation, forward planning and imagination. It needed men like President Truman, General Marshall and Ernest Bevin to set up the Marshall Plan and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Men like President Reagan to persuade the Soviet leadership that they could never outbuild the United States militarily — this was indeed one of the major factors which led to the fall of the Soviet imperial system.

The clash of arms between the communist and non-communist world was, as you know, most intense in Asia. Let us recall the conflict in colonial and immediate post-colonial Malaya and Singapore, both threatened by communist world revolution most violently between the late 1940's and the early 1960's. Few now mention the Malayan Emergency. But think of the young men who fought and died in the jungles of Selangor and Pahang between 1950 and 1957. Many were British national servicemen, one our own best man. As a young soldier posted to Egypt, I watched the troop ships steaming silently through the Suez Canal in 1951, bound for Singapore or, in some cases, Pusan. The men they carried fought alongside brave soldiers in the Malay Regiment and members of all communities in the Malayan Police. 1,800 members of the security forces and over 2,500 civilians, again from all communities, were killed during this savage struggle. We should surely pay tribute to their memory in this 25th year of Singapore's independence.

But to return to the present day. Where do we now stand? Where does the world stand? I believe we must first recognise that the analytical framework on which we grounded all our certainties in the years since 1945 is of no further use. Let us consign it to the dustbin of history. We also need to clear our minds of those journalistic clichés which have absorbed far too much newsprint over the past few decades: "Cold War"; "North/South"; "Third World"; "Iron Curtain"; "Eurosclerosis"; the "British — or any other — Disease". Let us eschew instant commentaries by well-paid pundits whose cramped historical imaginations stretch back no more than a few weeks or a few months.

These chores completed, what do we see? We see a Soviet Union where Marxism is no longer a guide to action but where there is no agreement on what is to replace it. We see 53 national communities in 15 disintegrating republics, many determined to obtain independence. We see an economy bereft of both saleable products and rational prices. We see some of the lowest productivity in the world: "They pretend to pay us while we pretend to work." We see President Gorbachev on the verge of instituting a new economic programme which may succeed only in wrecking the old command economy without putting anything viable in its place. This may provoke even greater civil disorder than in the immediate past and may even lead to ultimately uncontrollable conflict.

We see a China coping with massive problems of overpopulation, suffering from an immense, apparently unbridgeable, gap between its intellectuals and its rulers. Here again, Marxist doctrines are no more than a ball and chain on real progress: the debased language of ritual Marxism, repeated by rote, cannot begin to satisfy the complexities of real life. Yet many Chinese believe that they have somehow escaped western influence. I recall one official telling me proudly in 1977 that China, unlike most other countries in Asia, constituted a "beacon in the East", untouched by "corrupt western ideas". I had to remind him that Marxism, a theory originally enunciated by two 19th century Germans who spent most of their lives in the reading room of the British Museum or the back streets of Manchester, was the ultimate western heresy, the bastard offspring of another western idea, early capitalism. China had succeeded only in swallowing this heresy hook, line and sinker. He did not, could not, reply.

I suspect that like so many other communists, he had also failed to grasp that technology cannot be imported without the ideas that go with it: the two are inextricably linked. Nor can an economy progress in the absence of free politics since all major economic decisions are ultimately political decisions. They require to be considered, made and implemented in a climate of open debate, based on openly available and comprehensive information. All options need to be exposed, all possibilities discussed and a consensus ultimately reached. But this, of course, requires an open political system in which individuals are free to express their opinions equally openly. Until this is fully understood and accepted, the pace of economic development is bound to falter. Nevertheless, all of us must surely hope that, as the heirs of one of the world's greatest civilisations, the Chinese Government and people will ultimately find a way out of their difficulties.

If the Soviet Union and China face massive problems, much of Latin America, Africa and the Middle East are not far behind. Here again, the continuing battle is often between political liberalism and the open market and various forms of autocracy, coupled with an increasingly discredited "socialism". The current crisis in the Middle East is both symptomatic of, and exacerbated by, this conflict. But Saddam Hussein also speaks the language of militant Islam and it is the future of Islam which is perhaps the greatest uncertainty as we gaze into our collective futures. All the ideas of the modern world blow across the "Arab Nation's" deserts and jostle in its urban centres, while in the holy cities of Iran, zealots still plot the downfall of the "Great Satan".

Yet I cannot believe that militant Islam will win the day. I prefer to place my hopes in another equally valid Islamic tradition, that exemplified by the Muslim Kingdoms of late medieval Spain, the learning of men such as Averroes and Avicenna and the glories of Granada. Or the great court of Shah Abbas in seventeenth century Persia.

The world is, in sum, a very turbulent place and will remain so as far ahead as we can look. The only certainty is uncertainty itself. We will continue to face many perils. But the West has major assets to call on. First, the power of

our ideas. It was these ideas, above all the concept of the free individual acting in a free society, and of the open market, which have given us victory in the long contest since 1945. They inspired, and continue to inspire, the “prison graduates” of eastern Europe, men such as Adam Michnik in Poland and Vaclav Havel in Czechoslovakia. Both are children of what the ‘Economist’ has recently called the ‘RRE’: the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment, the three interconnected upheavals of the fifteenth, sixteenth and eighteenth centuries which have shaped our own times.

We can also rejoice in a revived United Nations with a Security Council at last acting as intended by its originators; a United States which has shown in the last few weeks under President Bush’s leadership why it remains the best hope of the world and the strong shield of liberty; an east and south-east Asia increasingly economically prosperous, moving rapidly toward even greater prosperity during the next decade; and a revived Europe — the “Europe Reborn” of my title — centred around a dynamic, and increasingly economically integrated, Common Market of 320 million people which will soon, if all goes well, be joined by the new democracies of the liberated east.

I end where I began. In 1940, Britain saved not only itself but the very possibility of freedom across much of the globe. What contribution will Britain make to resolving the problems and exploiting the opportunities of the new, post-Marxist, world of 1990? It has been fashionable for some years to denigrate Britain and to argue that the only two states, besides the sole remaining super-power, which really count are Japan and Germany. I would not for one moment wish to deny the formidable economic prowess of either. I salute the fact that Germany will at last be united in some 630 hours from now, on 3 October. This will be a great day not only for Germans but for all men of goodwill. A united Germany will make an immense and, I am sure, fruitful contribution to the stability and prosperity of the new Europe stretching from Galway to Brest Litovsk and, perhaps eventually, beyond.

But do not forget the other Europeans. Not only Britain. But France, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands. Collectively and individually they remain extraordinarily important. I obviously cannot speak for them but I will speak for my own country. We are, of course, used to being written off, just as we are accustomed to being insulted by experts: Saddam Hussein is only the latest in a long line. In 1783 with the loss of the American Colonies, all seemed hopeless. Yet Adam Smith of Kirkcaldy had published “An Inquiry into the nature and causes of the Wealth of Nations” only seven years before. As you all know, his work was the primer of modern capitalism and Britain went on to pioneer the first industrial revolution. Napoleon called Wellington a “Sepoy General”, incapable of defeating elite European troops such as his indomitable Imperial Guard, only hours before fleeing the field at Waterloo. The British Expeditionary Force of seven divisions which landed in France in August 1914 was labelled by both friends and foes a “contemptible little army”. But it was “Haig’s boys”, as they were called, most of them under 19 years of age, who manned the 60 British divisions which finally broke the German Army on the western front in middle and late 1918.

In late December 1941, Sir Winston Churchill, baffled by Japan’s decision to go to war a few days earlier, asked the United States Congress, “What kind of people do they think we are?” Well, what kind of people are we? I am, of course, biased, but I will hazard one generalisation, tested by history. We are certainly capable of error, sometimes inclined to foolishness, guilty of complacency. But we are equally a people able to learn from our mistakes, and to throw off our complacency when we must. As in 1940, we react best when we see a clear challenge and the challenges we face at the moment are, I believe, well understood. Being understood they will be overcome. First, Europe. We want the European Community to be a success. We are determined to play a full part in creating the conditions for this success. We seek a Community which is open to the outside world; a Community of independent sovereign states; and a decentralised Western Europe, albeit one with a fully integrated economy. Further ahead, we seek the closest of partnerships with the other newly liberated Europeans to the east, including, ultimately, their incorporation in a wider Community.

Beyond Europe, we seek an open trading system and will continue to support all those countries which live by the market and practice, each in its own way, representative government. We shall work with others to resolve those immense, as yet unresolved, problems which face us all: a threatened environment; illegal mass movement across frontiers; the scourges of AIDS and narcotics; and international terrorism. Our ability to play our part effectively rests on the radical changes which the present British Government has pushed through in the past eleven years, with many more to come; it rests on a new confidence within the British people; and on an education and training system now in the early stages of a complex and far reaching revolution.

In an era where the level of gross domestic product and of exports, while still obviously is a major element in assessing economic performance, is increasingly being overshadowed as the most significant measure of economic strength by the ownership of global assets and the presence of world-class companies, Britain is better placed than at any mo-

ment since 1945. Better placed indeed than at any moment since the high Edwardian noon. Our share of overseas investment as a percentage of gross domestic product is second only to that of Japan and Britain's net overseas assets are higher than those of all major nations as a proportion of GDP. Britain is by far the largest overseas investor in the United States, with a total investment of over US\$120 billion, 30 per cent of all foreign holdings and almost twice as great as that of Japan. In a recent survey of the efficiency of the 250 largest firms in Europe, based on a wide range of indicators, 28 of the top 50 performers were British.

I will not subject you to further statistical bombardment. I merely wish to emphasise that now, as in the past, only those who fail to understand us properly will be foolish enough to write us off.

Master, First Deputy Prime Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is time to close. I spoke earlier of the turbulence and unpredictability of the new age. The coming weeks and months will be particularly uncertain. We must all hope that sanctions will prove effective and war in the Middle East avoided. We must collectively do all we can to ensure that they are effective and Singapore is already playing a full part in this task. But nerves will be tested to the full at every moment. Although a Nuclear Armageddon seems happily unlikely given the broad unity of purpose between the Soviet Union and the United States, many lives may be lost if a conflict finally breaks out. In any event this will be a time for courage, a time for resolution, especially in the United States, whose President and people we must all wish well. I therefore, make no apologies for quoting Sir Winston Churchill a third time. He was after all unique in this century in his ability to mobilise the English language in the service of liberty. Churchill's words, addressed to the British people in 1933, as so often mix hazard with hope; challenge with response. Drop only the word "English" and substitute "word" for "country" and they speak for all of us:

"The very problems and dangers that encompass us ought to make all English men and women of this generation glad to be here at such a time. We ought to rejoice at the responsibilities with which destiny has honoured us and be proud that we are the guardians of our country in an age where her life is at stake."