

“A Power Politician without Ifs or Buts”: Obituary for Helmut Kohl (June 26, 2017)

Abstract

The death of Helmut Kohl in June 2017 made headlines worldwide. Praise for his leadership during German unification and in furthering European integration was universal. He made his mark as one of the most important German chancellors although he was often underestimated at the beginning of his career.

Source

Unification was his masterpiece

Helmut Kohl was underestimated by many in his political life. He was a power politician without ifs or buts.

In retrospect, people like to assign historical greatness to statesmen. But according to the cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt, only those whose actions influenced the course of world history deserve this distinction. That applies without question to Helmut Kohl, the sixth federal chancellor, who held the office from October 1982 to September 1998. Of course, many, especially foreign politicians, saw in Kohl merely a transition chancellor, a lightweight. Only Willy Brandt (SPD) said after the Bundestag elections in March 1983 that the CDU/CSU was likely to hold power until the end of the millennium. He was almost right.

Everyone underestimated Helmut Kohl. That may also have had something to do with the fact that it was not easy to figure him out, in spite of his immutable principles in foreign and domestic politics. He embodied many things in a single person, but the somewhat pejorative term “generalist” is hardly suited to describe him. Kohl, a man of the middle, was not a nationalist but a patriot, he hated political extremism from the right and the left, he was simultaneously conservative, liberal, and modern, he embodied bourgeois sensibilities yet was cosmopolitan, he could be jovial and brusque, but he also approached people and understood how to win them over, and he liked to have company around him.

An acute sense for talent: this set him apart in many ways from the suspicious loner Konrad Adenauer (CDU), even though he claimed him as a role model, surely because of his strong leadership. Already during his time as the Minister President of Rhineland-Palatinate, Kohl had begun to gather around himself a group of followers. After his election as party chairman on June 12, 1973, at the latest, he continuously expanded that circle. Many politicians were subsequently recruited out of that environment, and they were well aware that they owed their rise to Helmut Kohl. In addition, he possessed an infallible instinct for talented individuals, to whom he made a political career an attractive prospect. These included Rita Süßmuth or Klaus Töpfer (CDU), both of whom gave a face to new fields of politics. The Federal Environment Ministry was created in 1986, and the Ministry of Family Affairs was expanded with the addition of women’s issues. But anyone who criticized the person or politics of the future chancellor soon faced the end of their career. Kohl could give, but he could be vindictive in the face of ingratitude.

Unlike any of his predecessors, Kohl’s chancellorship was based on his successful party work. One cannot gauge his 25-year era at the head of the CDU solely by the balance sheet of his years in office. In contrast to Adenauer, Kohl accorded a very different importance to the state party, and the first thing he

did together with Kurt Biedenkopf (CDU) was to modernize it. He turned the old-fashioned organization for choosing the chancellor into a modern party that opened itself up to all social strata. Kohl imparted to it the feeling of broad participation. He knew the CDU down to its tiniest ramifications. The surprise replacement of Heiner Geißler (CDU) in the late summer of 1989 therefore did not come as bolt out of the blue for insiders – after all, that nimble social policy maker had acquired too much power in his role as secretary general and he regarded himself as a kind of managing party chairman. Helmut Schmidt (SPD), too, only realized at the end of his chancellorship that it had been a mistake not to have replaced Brandt as head of the party in 1974. If you want to be a powerful chancellor, you must always ensure the party's unwavering support.

The beginning of the Kohl era in 1982 was by no means smooth and it was marked by a number of small scandals. That was also the fault of the chancellor, whose actions were sometimes ill-considered. All too often he got lost in emotional realms and in the process lost the keen sense for historical connections, somewhat unusual for a person who was considered exceedingly well-read. But Gorbachev soon forgave him the comparison to Goebbels. Kohl was also not an exceptional speaker. His rhetoric seemed flat, indeed, at times awkward and labored. There was no great speech, with the exception of his attention-grabbing road map to German unification on November 28, 1989. Instead, he was a man of gesture, and he understood the power of images. The photograph of him holding hands with François Mitterrand in front of the ossuary in Verdun in 1984 has made it into the history books. He was profoundly shaped by his own war experience. The death of his brother Walter in 1944 was alive in his memory, and as someone born along the Rhine he knew like no other leading politician that the continuation of the good relationship with France is the sustaining foundation of European unification.

Kohl always had to live with the fact that his party was more popular than he was. Moreover, from the beginning of his national political career he had to struggle against being dismissed as the “uncle from the provinces” not only by the powerful, left-liberal Hamburg press empire. The unease already began with his name, ignorant of the fact that it was derived from the occupation of the collier. The campaigns against Kohl, which came to a halt only at the time when reunification was on the horizon, fell back upon those who waged them. One of the biggest mistakes of the journal *Spiegel* in recent years, Augstein later admitted, was having underestimated this chancellor from the beginning. In the meantime, his critics failed to realize that in mocking Kohl, they were also mocking millions of Germans. In the end, Rudolf Augstein had been converted: “Hats off, Chancellor,” he exclaimed in July 1990.

Serene statesman: during the second half of his 16-year long chancellorship, the Germans got to know a head of government who had changed. A man who seemed rather dry, awkward, and often testy, which revealed itself above all in his rude style towards journalists, at the height of his power became a serene statesman. Worlds separate Helmut Kohl the Minister President of Rhineland-Palatinate who barely lost out as a candidate for the chancellorship in 1976, and the Chancellor who was voted out of office in 1998. And Kohl's once staid language had given way to sometimes witty rhetoric, especially in press conferences. But he did not become really popular until he avoided the abrasiveness in his speeches. After 1990 he was known around the world and he was more popular abroad than at home. The way he appeared there was *not* how people imagined the typical German. Charming, personally modest, reserved in his private life, and possessing none of the coldness or know-it-all attitude of an Adenauer or Schmidt. The small European countries were thankful for it. He treated Luxembourg as a world power, we now read in a eulogy. The man who invited his state visitors to regional specialties in the Palatine province sold power politics as a cozy bourgeois sensibility. In so doing, he came across as reliable and affable. Europe believed his deeply-held affirmation of a united continent liberated from all borders. Kohl's critics had never expected how little German politics would in fact gain from the accrual of unification.

Nevertheless, Helmut Kohl, who coped well with being the most underestimated leading politician of the

country – a fate Angela Merkel (CDU) shared initially – was a power politician without ifs and buts. He eclipsed all his predecessors and was a man of great assertiveness. That he was able to demonstrate patience along the way seems surprising, a gift that his early rivals Rainer Barzel and Franz Josef Strauß (CSU) did not possess. [...]

Reunification, essentially brought about by Kohl's bold and astute politics, was his masterpiece. Taking into account international consideration, he quickly realized that the more relaxed state of the world since 1985 could make the unification of the two German states possible. He made resolute use of the brief moment in time for doing so; he had been "fortunate," as he liked to say, and in the process he had also advocated for the political future of the continent. Moreover, overcoming the division of Germany into two states also put an end to the division of Europe. Kohl the visionary had achieved his goal. His decisions that emerged at the time, sometimes solitary ones, revealed one of his most prominent traits. If he was convinced of the rightness of an issue, he would let nothing and no one deter him. It is said that the true greatness of statesmen shows itself in doing the right thing at the right moment. More so than any of his predecessors and successors, Kohl had an unerring feeling for moods.

Turned toward Europe: but after 1990 it was precisely this that he could no longer rely upon. The "people's chancellor" had underestimated the dramatic consequences of the economic collapse of the former GDR. He would have been better advised to predict blood, sweat, and tears in the years ahead rather than thriving landscapes. Increasingly turning his attentions toward Europe after reunification was another mistake.

In the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, Kohl yielded to pressure from France's President Mitterand to introduce the Euro in return for Paris approving reunification – in view of the permanent crisis surrounding the common currency, this could negatively impact the historical assessment of Kohl's legacy. At any rate, Kohl was unable to muster the energy for major domestic political reforms in the 1990s, let alone for handing power over to a successor. A memorable era came to an end with the Bundestag elections in September 1998.

The post-chancellor period was accompanied by tragedy. The CDU party funding scandal, the fierce dispute it engendered in his own party, the death of his wife Hannelore in 2011, the break-up of his family, and not least his own protracted illness caused him to withdraw from the public sphere, not without bitterness. That he did not burnish his own reputation, like former chancellor Helmut Schmidt, is something he could probably get over. Helmut Kohl – a late shining light, unthinkable. The majority of Germans will remember him as the chancellor of unity and freedom, as well as the towering, decisive, and influential statesman on the road to European unity.

Source: Bernd Haunfelder, "Die Einheit als Meisterstück" (Nachruf), *Das Parlament*, No. 26, 26. June 2017, p. 9.

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