

Historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler's Assessment of the Schröder Era (November 17, 2005)

Abstract

Liberal historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler takes stock of the Schröder chancellorship. According to Wehler, his government undertook many important domestic policy projects. His appraisal is more critical, however, when it comes to Germany's relationship with the United States and Germany's role in Europe.

Source

What Remains of Schröder?

The departing chancellor tackled important domestic policy issues, especially reforms to the social welfare state. But his foreign policy was full of errors.

Word is getting around that, in 2009, a publication commemorating the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Federal Republic will appear and that a contemporary historian is going to write an essay on the Schröder era for it. After the smoke surrounding the conflicts of 1989 to 2005 has cleared, what could he, with the benefit of historical distance, write about this chancellor?

After the bleak stagnation of the final Kohl years, Schröder managed to successfully end protracted debates in three areas of domestic policy. A new citizenship law finally replaced the sacrosanct principle of *jus sanguinis*, which had applied since 1913, with the principle of *jus soli*, which predominates in all Western countries (that is, recognition of citizenship on the basis of birth in this country or commitment to it, rather than ethnic descent). At the same time, the accompanying regulatory framework acknowledged the fact that the Federal Republic – between 1950 and 2000 the country with the highest relative immigration rate worldwide! – had long since become an immigration country and that, from that point on, like most immigration countries, it would require admissions quotas in keeping with its own interests. Also, the depressing debate on material compensation for forced laborers in the Third Reich was finally brought to an end. With a fifty-year delay, survivors received a payment that, at least in symbolic if not financial terms, adequately acknowledged the slave labor they performed.

Thus, in light of these successes in the first five years of the Schröder government, one cannot generally refer to this period as lost time, as critics have called it. However, it was indeed wasted time in view of the challenges. Misguided domestic developments and globalization made reforms to the social welfare state, the labor market, and the health-care system inevitable. Blinded by a growth fetishism that has proliferated in the land of the economic miracle, the real burden is a lack of flexibility. When Schröder – five years too late – did in fact tackle these reforms in an attempt to stay in power, he made an astonishing mistake in the course of his very impressive efforts. In 1933, when Franklin Roosevelt expected Americans to accept the transition to a social welfare state as part of his New Deal, he regularly explained the need for such a change in his famous “fireside chats” on the radio. His nimbus, which won him the presidency another three times after that, derived not least from this patient soliciting of voter approval. Schröder has done none of that! Instead of making resolute weekly use of the even more effective medium of television on public and private TV networks, instead of using listener-friendly language to tirelessly remind a profoundly skeptical electorate that has been pampered by success – including members of his own party – of the inevitability of deep cuts, he limited himself to rather casual comments on the reform package. The “media chancellor” had to pay a painful price for this abstruse

restraint: grumbling or even indignant defensiveness in broad circles of the populace, the rapid erosion of the SPD as a mainstream party that did not feel “included,” and somewhat later even the rise of the Left Party. Nevertheless, Schröder’s most significant political achievement remains his tackling of the reform issue and his attendant creation of a configuration that has paved the way for continued reform work. Anyone who agrees with Max Weber’s description of politics as drilling through thick boards with sound judgment and passion will acknowledge that Schröder has started drilling through hardwood with undeniable success.

On the other hand, his foreign policy leaves an ambivalent impression. In Kosovo and Afghanistan, Schröder opposed traditional objections and asserted that Germany was acting like a “normal” middle power [by engaging militarily] – and in view of pacifist undercurrents in the SPD and among the Greens, this was certainly not child’s play. On the other hand, there was no sweeping argument to support Germany’s participation in Bush junior’s Iraq war. Keeping his distance, of course, had to lead to grave problems in relations with the hegemonic power.

In this situation, it violates the rules of political wisdom to risk taking the lone path of a brusque “no,” solely with an eye to election results, without carefully discussing the issue in the government and with one’s allies. Rather than advancing a spontaneous German go-it-alone approach that was fixated on voter approval and that would only later prove to be a competent strategy, it would have been advisable to mount a coordinated effort among European countries under the leadership of France with the goal of asserting a more broadly based rejection [of the Iraq war]. The bizarre alliance with Russia and China was certainly inappropriate. While skeptics from the days before the outbreak of the war have turned out to be mostly right, Berlin’s relationship to Americans in high places, regardless of their party preferences, has suffered some breakdowns with long-term effects as a result of Schröder’s style.

Schröder’s Policies on Europe are among the Weakest

In the area of European politics, Schröder is among the weakest of all who have worked on the project of European integration since [Robert] Schumann and [Konrad] Adenauer. During his term, the accession of ten new EU member states was carried out, but the institutional and financial prerequisites that would allow the EU to function properly are still lacking.

Financial reform failed as did the constitutional treaty, to say nothing of the unspeakable agricultural policies. In particular, however, the capacity of the European Union to absorb new members was called into question, in principle, by Schröder’s resolutely envisaged goal of Turkish membership. For one thing, ten or fifteen years after the Eastern expansion, the EU can accept a major country in Asia Minor with 90 million Muslims only by risking internal collapse. Furthermore, and more importantly, the EU should finally acknowledge Europe’s historical boundaries and consequently not accept some non-European states such as Turkey, Ukraine, or Morocco as full members, but instead find another way to treat them as carefully as possible. The constitutional treaty failed in some countries [i.e. France and the Netherlands] on account of resistance to this overburdening of all European resources or, to put it more trenchantly, because it represents a betrayal of the genuine European project and of European identity. In some other countries, public opinion polls have shown that a stable two-thirds majority opposes this enlargement.

Turkey in the European Union? A Case of Wilhelmine Megalomania

In order to justify red-green policies on Turkey in the face of such opposition, Schröder invented – verbosely supported by Foreign Minister [Joschka] Fischer and EU Commissioner for Enlargement [Günter] Verheugen – a new kind of EU “finality” that is legitimized by no domestic German discussion and no agreement in Brussels. Up to now, this goal consisted of speaking out for economic and legal unity, and in the long term also for joint European political actions. But now with the accession of

Turkey, the EU is allegedly supposed to rise to become a world power with a base from the North Cap to Kurdistan. This was a classical case of Wilhelmine megalomania, and its vocabulary was everywhere reminiscent of the squadrons of 1914. This goal appeared in similar form in [Germany's] aspirations to gain a permanent ejection seat on the UN Security Council. This quest was doomed to fail from the outset on account of the international power configuration, and elementary political reason should have prevented its pursuit to begin with.

As the contemporary historian will conclude in 2009, after tormenting discussions, the EU talks with Turkey did not lead to the goal of a “world power of a new type.” In view of its re-Islamization, Turkey could not and did not wish to become more European as quickly as expected, and instead the Kemalist elites asserted themselves anew with their call for autonomy. In this respect, Schröder's most spectacular move in Europe ended with the defeat of excessive expansionist policies. After wasted time, the slogan is now: Farewell to a world power of a new type, and onward with the integration of Europe. If we draw up a balance sheet of domestic and foreign policy achievements, it is impossible to identify a successful “Schröder Era” that is worthy of the name. What remains is his significant role as an impetus for the start of domestic reforms.

Hans-Ulrich Wehler is one of the most renowned German historians. From 1971 to 1996, he was Professor of Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History in Bielefeld.

Source: Hans-Ulrich Wehler, “Was bleibt von Schröder?“, *Die Zeit*, November 17, 2005.

Translation: Allison Brown

Recommended Citation: Historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler's Assessment of the Schröder Era (November 17, 2005), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-3798>> [May 19, 2024].