

Germany: the career of Christian Democratic Union leader Angela Merkel

Part 1: East Germany—youth and political beginnings

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This is the first of a two-part article on the political career of Angela Merkel, leader of Germany's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and chancellor candidate of the "Union"—the conservative bloc of the CDU and Christian Social Union—in the federal elections expected to take place this September. The concluding part was posted July 9.

The CDU recently named Angela Merkel as its candidate for chancellor in the federal elections expected this autumn. Merkel is often described as a “phenomenon” in German politics. Such a portrayal is partly based on her personal characteristics—she is a divorcee who has remarried, is childless, is a Protestant and is from East Germany—which are generally regarded as untypical and an obstacle to a career in this conservative party. On the other hand, she likes to present a public image of herself—ably enhanced by her political mentors—as someone who was a “nobody” before the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989—a blank page without political connections who has risen sensationally into the top ranks of German politics.

Merkel has undoubtedly enjoyed an unparalleled career since she became a CDU member 15 years ago, a rise to prominence that has also made her numerous enemies inside the party. Unlike almost all other leading CDU representatives, Merkel's rise did not follow the usual path of decades of party work in the west German party organisation—the youth movement, local party groups and regional associations, slowly building up connections and getting noticed, being proposed for a CDU slate and winning a position. Instead, Merkel was fast-tracked into the party leadership, overtaking her time-served west German party colleagues, until finally she was named as the CDU candidate for chancellor.

Merkel, who was a physicist by profession, only joined a political party following the collapse of the Berlin Wall. However, her time in “Democratic Awakening” (DA) was brief. After four months, she became a spokeswoman for the East German CDU government under Lothar de Maizière. Following German reunification in 1990, Chancellor Helmut Kohl brought the 36-year-old Merkel, who had only been a CDU member for six months, into his cabinet. The 1998 defeat of the CDU in federal elections meant that Merkel lost her ministerial office, but the same year, she was appointed as CDU general secretary.

A year later, following revelations of a scandal concerning party donations, she actively sought the removal of the party's honorary chairman and her former mentor, Helmut Kohl. In April 2000, she then assumed the party presidency. In the 2002 federal elections, she ceded the chancellor candidacy to Edmund Stoiber, leader of the CDU's smaller sister party in Bavaria, the Christian Social Union (CSU). However, since then, she has consolidated her position inside the “Union” (CDU/CSU) and overshadowed her political competitors, leading to her unchallenged selection as chancellor candidate.

How is the rapid political rise of Angela Merkel to be explained? What

where the qualities that enabled her to become a minister after only six month s' party membership? The attempts of biographers and magazine columnists to explain her career as a matter of good luck, or due to personal characteristics such as assertiveness and an instinct for power are unconvincing because they ignore political and social interests and the conditions under which her ascent took place.

Merkel certainly did not enter politics after the fall of the Berlin Wall as a political novice. Through her father, she had access to influential circles inside the church, which in turn maintained close links with leading government figures in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). Since the 1950s, the church had played a particularly important role in the GDR by ensuring that political opposition to the Stalinist regime was kept under control. In the period leading up to the collapse of the GDR, the church was central to keeping the mass protest wave that swept over the country in safe hands that eventually brought about the restoration of capitalism in East Germany and its *Anschluss* (annexation) by West Germany.

Her upbringing in GDR church circles

Born in Hamburg as Angela Dorothea Kasner, Merkel grew up as a pastor's daughter in Templin, in East Germany. Following his theological studies in the West in 1954, her father Horst Kasner returned to East Germany, where he led the “Waldhof,” an evangelical education centre for ministers and priests, which also hosted a nursing home. This was well suited to establishing links with GDR church circles. At Waldhof, Merkel would have come to know Rainer Eppelmann, the later founder of Democratic Awakening, the organisation in which she launched her political career after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Merkel's father ranked among those church representatives who argued for a policy that combined loyalty to the regime and the church, known as “the church in socialism.” In the early 1950s, the Stalinist leadership of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) had conducted a “struggle” against the influence of the church. However, following the anti-Stalinist uprising by East German workers in 1953, the Ulbricht government adopted a more conciliatory course, which sought to integrate church institutions into the state and utilise them as a means of stabilising SED rule. In particular, the “Weissenseer working group,” in which Horst Kasner participated, was the mechanism by which the Evangelical Church soon moved closer to the regime, and from 1971, officially defined itself as “the church in socialism,” thereby attaining a level of influence that was unparalleled throughout the Eastern Bloc.

The growing convergence of state and church, and the increasing economic and domestic political crisis inside the GDR, meant that the church not only played a key role in helping to stabilise the situation at home, but it was also involved in discrete diplomatic relations between the two German states. Since the early 1960s, the church had provided the mechanism for organising prisoner exchanges with the West, as well as facilitating substantial financial transfers. Later, this very important East-West political contact certainly helped GDR church circles secure a role in all-German politics.

Inside the GDR, the church and state maintained their own representatives to conduct negotiations and mediate conflicts between the two. In this, a prominent role was played by the high-ranking Evangelical Church functionary Manfred Stolpe, one of the political architects of “the church in socialism,” and by the Undersecretary of State for Church Affairs Klaus Gysi, father of Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) leader Gregor Gysi. Under Klaus Gysi, the relationship between state and church was substantially consolidated, and the church was granted numerous privileges including church broadcasts in the media, state financial support and the building of new churches.

Other important intermediaries were legal attorneys, who represented the Christian groups in their dealings with the state. At the same time, many were also informers for the Stasi (Secret Police), including Lothar de Maizière and Wolfgang Schnur, who were not only active Christians and informants, but later Merkel’s first political mentors.

Growing up in such circles, Angela Kasner already enjoyed connections that she could later use to her advantage. In his authorised biography, Wolfgang Stock reports the fact that Merkel’s high school class had wanted to annoy their unpopular teacher by not preparing a contribution for the school’s mandatory cultural programme, instead giving an improvised presentation. The pupils were to be punished, but an intervention by the Kasners gave the whole thing a new twist: “A petition was written that Angela personally presented to Manfred Stolpe, the highest church attorney in the GDR.... Thanks to church involvement, ‘Berlin’ intervenes: Angela’s teacher is disciplined, ...the pupils are ‘only’ given a reprimand at ‘school assembly.’”

After graduating from high school, Angela Kasner studied physics, married and was accepted at the Berlin Academy of Sciences, where she attained a doctorate in 1986. While a student, she was secretary for agitation and propaganda in the FDJ, the East German youth organisation loyal to the SED regime, a position that she now tries to portray as merely that of a “cultural representative.”

A Stasi informer at the Institute who was primarily there to spy on the son of dissident Ulrich Havemann also provided information about his office colleague Merkel. In the reports of this Stasi source, there is no trace of the “internal resistance” to SED rule, which Merkel touts in her authorised biography and in interviews about her history. *Stern* magazine investigated the archives and found that an “unofficial” informant had “nothing politically explosive to report [about Merkel], quite the opposite, another time emphasising Angela’s ‘positive political views.’ Otherwise, he reports mainly about private and personal matters. Concerning her limited, cosseted life.”

Initially, Merkel seemed disinterested in the growing protest and resistance movement in the GDR in 1989. “Oh, just look at what is happening outside,” is how she is reported answering a colleague at the Institute who could not understand how someone could not be interested in attending a political meeting or demonstration at that time. Only after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the SED’s loss of power was inevitable did she begin to seek a new political orientation and go looking for a party.

Faced with mass protests against SED rule, the Evangelical Church and its representatives played a key role in preventing an open rebellion, channelling opposition along safe lines to ensure an orderly transfer of power from the thoroughly discredited regime. Under church moderation,

the so-called “Round Table” was established to make the regime change possible without the working class being able to call to account the Stalinist thugs and establish its own independent organisations. The church called for non-violence and above all ensured the keeping of the social peace.

Thus it not only provided a last service to the SED, in the context of the long-established church-state collaboration, but also acted in the interests of the West German bourgeoisie and their political parties. The latter used their good contacts with representatives of the East German church to swiftly settle the fate of the GDR in favour of West German capitalism. Despite all the differences between the political leaders in East and West Germany, there was a fundamental view they both shared with the church: a profound antipathy to any independent popular movement based on their fears of an uncontrollable revolutionary development of the working class.

Church representatives or those with close links to the church were largely responsible for founding the new parties that emerged in the GDR in 1989. At the same time, those with church connections also came to the fore in the former state parties of the GDR as they sought to renew their leading personnel.

The beginnings of a political career

In December 1989, Angela Merkel joined Democratic Awakening, which had been founded by the clerics Rainer Eppelmann and Friedrich Schorlemmer, as well as Wolfgang Schnur, the trusted attorney of the Evangelical Church in the GDR. Two months later, she was promoted to press spokesperson for DA, which supported the rapid introduction of capitalism into East Germany and was politically aligned to the West German CDU.

In the GDR parliamentary elections of spring 1990, the DA participated on a joint slate with the East German CDU initiated by Helmut Kohl under the motto “Alliance for Germany.” The East German CDU had been largely discredited as one of the so-called “bloc parties” that had supported the Stalinist regime in East Berlin, and so the support of the DA was important to provide the appearance of a break with this old tradition.

The unmasking of Schnur as a long-time Stasi agent just prior to the election meant the DA only attained 0.9 percent of the vote. However, against expectations, its ally the East German CDU became the strongest party. Lothar de Maizière, the party leader, became prime minister of the last East German government, which regarded its most important task as facilitating the dissolution of the GDR state and unification with West Germany.

De Maizière was a long-standing member of the East German CDU, who had only taken on the party leadership shortly before the election. In the last SED-led government under Hans Modrow, the attorney de Maizière was minister for church affairs; he also enjoyed excellent contacts with the political elite in West Germany. His uncle Ulrich de Maizière was largely responsible for overseeing West German rearmament after the Second World War, also holding the highest military office as General Inspector of the Federal Armed Forces.

So it was probably more than a lucky coincidence that on the day of the East German elections, Merkel swiftly left the DA in order to participate in the celebration of the CDU. There she approached Thomas de Maizière, cousin to Lothar and son of Ulrich, and asked to be assigned a position in the new government. “You should count your luck that you have such fine people as us from ‘Democratic Awakening’ in the ‘Alliance for Germany,’” she told the representative of a family with influence in both east and west Germany. “I hope this will be taken into consideration when forming the government,” she said to Thomas, who himself later became a

minister for the CDU in the Saxony state legislature. Lothar de Maizière, who also knew Merkel's father, fulfilled her wish for high office and made her his government spokeswoman.

Democratic Awakening was dissolved in August 1990 into the East German CDU, which itself was dissolved into the West German party following German reunification in October of that year. Merkel's job disappeared along with the GDR, but those few months were enough for her to develop and strengthen her contacts. She belonged to the close circle around Lothar de Maizière, along with Günther Krause, who as a parliamentary state secretary had negotiated the currency and economic union with West Germany. Recommendations from Krause and de Maizière brought an invitation to visit Kohl in his Bonn chancellery. As CDU regional chairman in Mecklenburg Western Pomerania, Krause provided Merkel with a safe seat in the first all-German elections to the *Bundestag* (Federal Parliament) in December 1990.

To be continued



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