

The cult of Helmut Schmidt

Peter Schwarz
13 November 2015

News of the death of Helmut Schmidt on November 10 had hardly emerged before the German media went into overdrive eulogizing the former chancellor, who would have turned 97 on December 23. He was praised as a “guide of the century”, a “world economist”, a “guiding spirit” and even as a “philosopher”.

The enthusiasm for the former chancellor, who left office 33 years ago after a vote of no confidence, springs more from the despair with the present governmental personnel than from his own political record. Schmidt’s canonization, which began several years before his death, is an expression of the longing for a “man of action”, who will lead the country through economic shocks and international crises with an iron fist and without regard to public opinion.

In the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which Schmidt joined in 1946 and to which he remained loyal until his death, he was always part of the extreme right-wing. That means something in a party that, even considered by social democratic standards, is regarded internationally as right-wing.

Schmidt was never a socialist and only a democrat in a very limited sense. He did not join the SPD because it presented a vision of a non-capitalist world, but because it seemed more appropriate in realising his idea of order and discipline than the post-war Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Free Democratic Party (FPD), which were riddled with former Nazis. “Whoever has visions should go to the doctor”, was one of his most quoted sayings.

Ideologically, he based himself neither on Karl Marx nor on August Bebel or Ferdinand Lassalle, but on Max Weber and Karl Popper. Throughout his life he was proud of his narrow-minded pragmatism. “At a time of mounting global problems, we are focusing on the essentials with realism and soberness, and leave aside all else”, he began his inaugural speech as chancellor in 1974.

By “reason”, which he so frequently invoked, Schmidt did not understand the intellectual penetration of a complex reality and a corresponding far-sighted action, but a pragmatic response to immediate problems based on common sense, i.e. on the prevailing prejudices. “He was a man of action, a pragmatist; not one who anticipated long-term economic or social developments and drew this into his decision-making”, *Spiegel Online* summarized.

Wehrmacht officer

Schmidt’s personality was marked by the nearly eight years he served in Hitler’s Wehrmacht (Army). In 1937, he was called up at the age of 19 and was then recalled to duty two years later with the onset of World War II. He spent much of his time in the Wehrmacht in ministries, but also saw action on the Eastern and on the Western Fronts. In Russia, he participated in the blockade of Leningrad and was awarded the Iron Cross 2nd Class. When he became a British captive at the end of the war, the 26-year-old held the rank of first lieutenant.

Schmidt always stressed that he was a loyal officer but had never been a Nazi. Among other things, this was for family reasons. His father was the illegitimate son of a Jewish banker, which the family was able to conceal during the Nazi dictatorship. But Schmidt was not an opponent of the Nazis, even if he faced difficulties towards the end of the war as a result of a derisive remark about Göring.

“Nothing in his life has probably influenced Helmut Schmidt more than the war and his time in the military”, wrote the editor of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Kurt Kister. His brash behaviour, his intolerance and his “military, authoritarian style of leadership” were due to this. “His first profession was as an officer and he remained this throughout his life.”

On the international level, Schmidt always harbored a fondness for authoritarian politicians. For 40 years he was a close friend of Henry Kissinger, the US Secretary of State and mastermind of the bloody military coup in Chile, and of Lee Kuan Yew, who ruled Singapore for 30 years with an iron fist. In May 2012, Schmidt undertook the arduous journey to Singapore to pay his friend “Harry” Lee one last visit.

Schmidt was elected to the Bundestag (federal parliament) in 1953. However, his rise to national prominence began in 1962, when a devastating storm surge hit Hamburg and much of the city sat under water. Schmidt, who was responsible for the police in the government of the Hanseatic city, coordinated the rescue efforts. He used his contacts in NATO and the Bundeswehr to request helicopters, boats and more than 20,000 soldiers. In the end, 347 people died in the floods. Initially, up to 10,000 victims had been feared.

Even then, Schmidt showed his willingness in an emergency to defy laws and the constitution, which did not allow the use of the military domestically. “I did not look at the constitution in those days,” he commented later. “I was not put in charge of the soldiers, I took control over them.”

Parliamentary party leader and minister

In 1966, Schmidt played a key political role at a federal level for the first time. He took over the leadership of the SPD parliamentary group in the grand coalition of the CDU/CSU and SPD. From the outset, the grand coalition was confronted with violent social upheavals. In 1963 in Baden-Württemberg, the employers had responded to an engineering workers strike by locking out hundreds of thousands. In the Ruhr area, the miners fought against pit closures. And the first signs of radicalization began to appear among students.

It was under these circumstances that the SPD was included in government for the first time since the founding of the Federal Republic following the war. SPD leader Willy Brandt became vice chancellor and foreign minister under the CDU Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger, a former NSDAP (Nazi Party) member. The main task of the Grand Coalition was to adopt highly controversial emergency laws suspending basic democratic rights.

Schmidt was given the task of bringing the SPD parliamentary deputies on board, who came under heavy social pressure, mainly due to the student revolts of 1967-68. He succeeded.

However, the intensification of the international economic crisis led to a further growth in the class struggle. In September 1969, hundreds of thousands of steel and metal workers spontaneously downed tools. The trade union bureaucracy lost control. Under these circumstances, the FDP, which had hitherto stood on the right-wing of the political spectrum, helped the SPD to form a government majority. Following the general election in 1969, Willy Brandt became chancellor in an SPD-FDP coalition. Helmut Schmidt took over the post of defence minister. In 1972, he moved to the head of the finance ministry.

Brandt, who had sought to appease the wave of strikes and protests through concessions and a massive expansion of the public sector, could no longer contain the spirits he had summoned. In the early 1970s, the end of the post-war monetary system and an Arab oil embargo destroyed the two basic pillars of the German economic miracle: the undervalued Deutsch Mark and cheap oil. In the midst of an incipient recession, twelve million workers began a wages struggle in 1973-74. The union representing public sector workers achieved an eleven-percent wage increase. Brandt agreed, without previously informing his finance minister, Schmidt.

After this, Brandt was no longer a tenable chancellor in the view of the ruling class. SPD parliamentary leader Herbert Wehner and FDP leader Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the then interior minister, worked closely together to bring about a change. Although they already knew that Brandt's personal aide Günter Guillaume worked for the East German secret service, they sent him on holiday with Brandt. When Guillaume was publicly unmasked, Brandt was forced to resign.

Chancellor

In May 1974, the Bundestag elected Helmut Schmidt as the fifth chancellor of the Federal Republic. He regarded his main task as putting a halt to the offensive of the working class and initiating a wave of social cuts and job cuts, particularly in the steel industry. He worked closely to that end with the unions, and a number of leading trade union officials joined his government.

This rightward shift by social democracy and the trade unions, which occurred in a similar form in many other leading industrial countries, was the beginning of a development that continues to this day: the permanent attack on wages, social rights and jobs with the support of social democracy and the trade unions. The third and so far last Social Democratic chancellor of the Federal Republic, Gerhard Schröder, continued this course with the Agenda 2010 policies and the Hartz laws.

In the greatest crisis of his chancellorship, Schmidt again demonstrated his authoritarian inclinations. In 1977, when a Red Army Faction commando group kidnapped the chairman of the Federation of German Industries (BDI), Hanns Martin Schleyer, to force the release of the imprisoned RAF founders, Schmidt responded with unyielding harshness and refused to make any concessions.

When another terrorist commando group hijacked a Lufthansa passenger plane with 86 hostages, forcing it to fly to Mogadishu, Schmidt ordered them freed by the GSG-9 special forces unit in a highly risky and legally questionable action. The next morning, three leading members of the RAF lay dead in their cells—they had allegedly committed suicide in the heavily guarded high-security wing.

Schmidt anticipated many methods that have since become routine in the so-called "war on terror" and run counter to every legal framework.

Schmidt's reputation as a world economist comes from his time as chancellor. To try and prevent Europe and the world slipping into a currency war, he introduced the European currency "snake in the tunnel" in 1973, a precursor to the later common currency. Together with French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, he organized the first G-6 Summit at Château de Rambouillet in 1975 to coordinate economic policies internationally.

However, Schmidt's policies proved to be extremely short-sighted. Despite the increase in public debt from 9.5 to 40 billion Deutsch Marks in the course of his tenure, unemployment and poverty increased massively. When, following the coming to power of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, Britain and the United States massively raised interest rates and triggered a global recession, Schmidt was at his wits' end.

Social discontent grew. The trade unions were forced to call for mass demonstrations in several major cities against the policies of the Schmidt government in the autumn of 1982. When these took place, however, Schmidt had already been deposed.

Again it was Genscher and the FDP that brought about the change of the head of government. In early September 1982, Economics Minister Otto Graf Lambsdorff (FDP) presented a provocative economic paper that was impossible for the SPD to accept, and so initiated a change in coalition. Three weeks later, the Bundestag elected CDU chairman Helmut Kohl with the votes of the FDP to succeed Schmidt as chancellor. Genscher became vice chancellor and foreign minister. Kohl remained in power for 16 years.

Schmidt had further weakened the electoral base of the SPD by repelling the rebellious students who had supported Willy Brandt at the start of the 1970s, by his determination to expand nuclear power and implement the NATO Double-Track Decision. In the late 1970s, many of the student leaders formed the Greens and came back together again with the SPD only in 1998—having become rich, conservative and militaristic—when they joined the first SPD-Green Party coalition government at federal level.

A massive protest movement with hundreds of thousands of supporters arose against the NATO Double-Track Decision—the stationing of American medium-range nuclear missiles on German soil while simultaneously engaging in disarmament negotiations with the Soviet Union. The movement also included parts of the SPD.

Journalist

After his fall as chancellor, Schmidt exercised no public functions and focused on journalistic activities. As publisher of the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* and author of numerous books, he regularly took a position on political issues.

Inside the SPD, he was initially heavily isolated. In 1983, at a party congress in Cologne, only 14 of 400 delegates supported the NATO Double-Track Decision. Only following Schröder's Agenda 2010 did Schmidt and his party move back closer together. Schmidt praised the Agenda 2010 policies, but he said they did not go far enough. He called for a further tightening up of the eligibility criteria for the unemployed and a freeze of the Hartz IV benefit rates.

In 2011, Schmidt spoke as a celebrated guest of honour at the SPD party conference in Berlin. The SPD has reconciled itself with its former chancellor because his right-wing course had since become the official party line.

The cult that is now being established around the late chancellor is an expression of the deep crisis of capitalist society and its ruling elites. Faced with growing social, domestic and foreign political tensions, they

long for a better past that has never existed.

Above all, Schmidt is revered as a politician who in emergencies had no qualms about disregarding prevailing laws and existing majorities. Given the current campaign by the ruling elite to revive German militarism, to dominate Europe as its disciplinarian and close the borders against refugees, this must be taken as a warning to the working class.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact