

Hans-Dietrich Genscher: Trailblazer for German great power politics

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“Power broker” is one of the most common terms used in the obituaries for long-serving German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who died Thursday night at the age of 89. Genscher never shied away from the political limelight, but his most important political activities were concealed from the public eye. They remain shrouded in secrecy to this day.

His role in the bringing down of Social Democrat (SPD) Chancellor Willy Brandt in 1974, and his successor Helmut Schmidt, remains controversial. At the initiative of Genscher, the post of chancellor and the policies of the government were changed twice, including one change of government coalition, without a federal election. Equally notorious is Genscher’s role in triggering the war in Yugoslavia, in which he played a major role with his speedy recognition of Croatian and Slovenian independence.

Genscher’s ability to intrigue behind the scenes, conceal open conflicts, as well as his enigmatic remarks, which characterise the term “Genscherism,” had their origins less in his personality than with Germany’s position after World War II.

As the legal successor of the Third Reich, which had left half of Europe in ruins and carried out the greatest genocide in history, the Federal Republic could not conduct its global political and economic ambitions in an arrogant and blustering manner, as Kaiser Wilhelm and Hitler had done. It was forced to adopt a policy of “modesty,” be on good terms with everyone, manoeuvre carefully, establish networks and create relationships so as to re-join the ranks of the global powers.

Despite suffering severe illness at a young age, Genscher pursued this goal with great determination and energy. He represented the Federal Republic for 18 years as foreign minister and possessed the arts of deceit and tactical manoeuvre like no other before or after him. It is revealing that in his office there hung a picture of Gustav Stresemann, a foreign minister during the Weimar Republic for many years, and not a portrait of Bismarck, as was the case with other ministers. Although Genscher was constantly travelling around the world and building relationships and ties, his enemies as well as his friends mistrusted him.

Germany’s reunification in 1990, to which he contributed significantly as foreign minister, was viewed by Genscher as the crowning achievement of his life’s work. In his eyes, Germany had thereby returned to the rank of a world power and obtained full legal sovereignty.

FDP career

Hans-Dietrich Genscher was born on March 21, 1927, in a village near Halle, where he also grew up. He was six when the Nazis took power. At 15, he was called up to the air force and experienced the last two years of war as a soldier. After the war, he completed school in the Soviet-occupied zone before studying law at university. In 1952, three years after its founding, he left the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and moved to the Federal Republic, where his rapid political ascent began.

Genscher joined the Free Democratic Party (FDP), which united liberal advocates of the free market with nationalists and former Nazis. The FDP was, and remains to this day, a pliant tool of finance capital and banking circles, which supported it with large, often illegal, donations and rescued it from bankruptcy on many occasions. Although it rarely secured more than 10 percent of the vote, the FDP was in government for 41 of the first 50 years in the Federal Republic and played a major role in determining policy.

From 1956, Genscher occupied leading positions within the federal FDP. In 1969, the party carried out a change of course. Although until that point it had stood to the right of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), governing in coalition with it from 1961 to 1966, the FDP decided to support the SPD and thus helped it appoint a chancellor for the first time since 1930.

As a result, some national liberals left the FDP and joined the CDU. Genscher remained and became interior minister under SPD Chancellor Willy Brandt. In contrast to the obstinate cold warriors in the CDU, Genscher understood that Brandt’s highly contentious “Ostpolitik” (eastern policy) secured much-needed new markets for German industry and would lead in the long-term to the undermining of the Stalinist regimes rather than their strengthening.

As interior minister and head of the intelligence agencies, Genscher played a decisive role in 1974 in the downfall of Brandt. Brandt brought the student revolt and a strike wave under control in 1969 by promising social and democratic reforms. But he was now no longer capable of managing the expectations that he had awoken. In the winter of 1973-74, public sector employees successfully fought for an 11 percent wage increase in a two-week strike in the midst of the oil crisis.

Leading members of the SPD and FDP subsequently intrigued to bring about Brandt’s replacement. Although Genscher was already aware that Brandt’s personal secretary Günter Guillaume worked for GDR (East German) intelligence, he permitted the unsuspecting chancellor to take a summer holiday with him. When Guillaume was later exposed, Brandt handed in his resignation.

In Helmut Schmidt, a figure associated with the right wing of the party assumed the position of chancellor. Genscher became vice

chancellor and foreign minister.

However, Schmidt was also unable to trust Genscher. When hundreds of thousands protested in the early 1980s against the stationing of Pershing II mid-range nuclear missiles advocated by Schmidt and Genscher, the newly founded Greens won a section of SPD voters and the trade unions announced large demonstrations against Schmidt's austerity policies, the FDP switched sides once again.

Led by Genscher and economics minister Otto Graf Lambsdorff, who was later criminally prosecuted for tax evasion in the Flick affair, the FDP brought down Schmidt in a vote of no confidence in 1982 and elected Helmut Kohl (CDU) as his successor. Schmidt accused Genscher in parliament of acting immorally, declaring, "Your action is legal, but it has no internal, moral justification."

Foreign minister

As was the case with Genscher's predecessors, several former Nazis served under him in leading foreign ministry positions. Frank Elbe, his chief of staff for many years, provoked controversy in 2005 when, long after Genscher had retired, he opposed a decision by Green foreign minister Joschka Fischer to no longer honour former NSDAP (Nazi Party) members for their work in the foreign ministry.

Genscher continued under Kohl to pursue a "policy of compromise," which he conceived of as providing the opportunity to bring about system change in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. With the election of Mikhail Gorbachev to the post of general secretary in 1985, this became increasingly likely.

Although Genscher evaded a direct confrontation with the United States government, he was always focused on building global ties for German politics and business interests that stood in conflict with the United States. This goal was pursued with his intensive diplomatic travels. He was the first Western European foreign minister to visit the Iranian capital Teheran, which was being strictly boycotted by the U.S., following the Islamic revolution of 1979.

Genscher had a major hand in the restoration of capitalism in the GDR and Eastern Europe. To this end he exploited his close friendship with Gorbachev's foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze, who subsequently became president of Georgia. When numerous GDR citizens gathered in the German embassy in Prague and demanded the freedom to travel to the Federal Republic, it was Shevardnadze who made this possible. Genscher, who personally delivered the message to the waiting crowd, was afterwards hailed as a hero.

Genscher also played a significant part in the realisation of the two-plus-four agreement, which provided the international seal of approval for German reunification.

Genscher then tested out Germany's newly won foreign policy independence in Yugoslavia—with horrific consequences.

Since the 1970s, the German foreign intelligence agency (BND) had built up close ties to Croatian separatists, which in part went back to the links with the fascist Ustasha during World War II. The German foreign ministry now encouraged tensions in Yugoslavia by demanding its breakup, which directly led to a war with hundreds of thousands of casualties.

As separatist tendencies consolidated during 1991, Berlin pushed for

the immediate recognition of Slovenian and Croatian independence. Under conditions where there were no generally agreed upon borders and no agreement on how the rights of the minorities—the Serbs in Croatia, the Croats in Serbia, the Croats, Serbs and Muslims in Bosnia—should be protected, a catastrophe was unavoidable.

Genscher was repeatedly warned of the consequences. The British Foreign Minister Lord Carrington warned him in a letter to postpone the recognition of Croatia, because Bosnia-Herzegovina would otherwise demand independence and go up in flames.

UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar stated in a letter to the EU, "I am deeply worried that any early, selective recognition would widen the present conflict and fuel an explosive situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina and also Macedonia, indeed serious consequences could ensue for the entire Balkan region."

But Genscher brushed aside such concerns and the catastrophe ran its course. While hundreds of thousands died in Yugoslavia, Germany's foreign ministry used the Yugoslavia crisis after Genscher's departure to revive international military interventions. In 1999 the Bundeswehr's first international military deployment took place in Yugoslavia, this time under Green foreign minister Joschka Fischer.

Retirement

In May 1992, Genscher abruptly left the government after 23 years of service. But he remained politically active, appearing regularly in public and issuing statements. In 2013, he secured the release of Russian oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky in personal talks with President Vladimir Putin.

Genscher continued to pull the strings in the FDP. Guido Westerwelle, who led the party between 2001 and 2011 and pursued a strict neo-liberal course, was considered Genscher's pupil. Under Westerwelle, the FDP achieved the best electoral result in its history with 14.6 percent—albeit because CDU voters backed it in order to bring the grand coalition with the SPD to an end. Westerwelle became foreign minister, and the decline of the FDP could no longer be prevented. In 2013, it failed to win enough votes for representation in the Bundestag and in many state parliaments.

At the end of his life, Genscher ruled politically over a heap of ashes. This has not prevented media obituaries from praising him in the highest tones. In the final analysis, he played a key role in laying the groundwork for the return of German great power politics and militarism.



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