

On the death of former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl

Peter Schwarz
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The praise for a politician has rarely been as overblown and unanimous as it has been for Helmut Kohl (Christian Democrats, CDU), who served as German Chancellor from 1982 to 1998 and died at the age of 87 on Friday.

German Chancellor and CDU chairwoman Angela Merkel described Kohl as a “great German,” “great European” and the “Chancellor of unity.” Social Democrat (SPD) chancellor candidate Martin Schulz praised him in exactly the same words.

Both Green Party leaders and their parliamentary group leaders wrote, “Helmut Kohl was a great European, who knew that peace can only exist in a united Europe.” And even the Left Party’s leadership quartet stated, “Helmut Kohl influenced the Federal Republic prior to the turn of the millennium more than most other political personalities. Beyond all political differences, today there is sadness at the loss of a great European.”

European Union (EU) Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker ordered the flags to be flown at half-mast in Brussels and announced a European state ceremony—an historical first—for Kohl. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg described Kohl as the “embodiment of a united Germany within a united Europe.” And French President Emmanuel Macron enthused over the “master of a united Germany and the German-French friendship.”

Russian President Vladimir Putin and the last president of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, spoke from Moscow. Putin praised Kohl’s “wisdom” and stated that he played a key role in ending the Cold War and reunifying Germany. Gorbachev honoured him as the “Chancellor of German unity” who left a definite mark on world history.

These hymns of praise have little to do with the real Kohl and much more with the current requirements of the ruling class and their political representatives. They are celebrating Kohl and declaring him to be a symbol of the return to great-power politics for Germany and Europe.

Workers who experienced Kohl politically have a very different recollection. They saw him as a political and social reactionary, who set in motion the redistribution of income and wealth to the rich that continues to this day, and who promised “blooming landscapes” to East Germans before organising a program of unprecedented industrial and social destruction.

Kohl’s rise to office

Kohl was the first German chancellor who had not experienced the end of the Nazi regime as an adult, but as a youth. Born in Ludwigshafen in 1930, he joined the CDU as a 16-year-old student and rapidly made a career for himself in the Rhineland-Palatinate state party. Kohl’s most significant financial and political supporters included the industrialist Fritz

Ries (Pegulan), who made his fortune during the Third Reich thanks to the Aryanisation of Jewish businesses and the exploitation of Jewish forced labour.

Kohl would later attempt to rely on his belated birth to draw a line under the reckoning with the Nazi past—but this proved unsuccessful. International protests erupted in 1985 when he laid a wreath with then-US President Ronald Reagan at a soldiers’ cemetery in Bitburg, where members of the Waffen-SS are buried.

In 1969, Kohl was elected as Minister President in the Rhineland Palatinate at the age of 39. In the same year, the CDU lost power at the federal level for the first time. The grand coalition under ex-Nazi Kurt Georg Kiesinger was replaced by a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the pro-business Free Democrats (FDP) under Willy Brandt. This had been preceded by the student revolts and a wave of militant strikes, which Brandt sought to bring under control with democratic and social concessions.

In the internal party conflicts following the CDU’s loss of power, Kohl ultimately prevailed against several rivals. Many viewed him as a backward provincial politician. But his strength lay in his ability to draw on political networks. Kohl was seen during his lifetime as a politician who rewarded loyalty and never forgave his opponents.

In 1974, Helmut Schmidt replaced Brandt as chancellor, again in coalition with the FDP. Although unemployment shot up as a result of the global economic crisis, the Schmidt government began the process of overturning the social reforms of the previous years. This resulted in a deep crisis within the SPD, which only intensified as hundreds of thousands took to the streets to protest the stationing of US Pershing II nuclear missiles in Germany, which was supported by Schmidt, and the Greens emerged as a competitor to the SPD.

In 1982, Kohl managed to persuade the Free Democrats to break their alliance with the SDP and to form a new coalition with the CDU, which elected Kohl as chancellor following a vote of no confidence, without a parliamentary election. He subsequently won the 1983 federal election against a weakened SPD.

Kohl’s rise was bound up with an international offensive by the bourgeoisie. Thatcher in Britain and Reagan in the United States launched brutal attacks on the working class. Kohl pursued the same course. But due to the close cooperation of the trade unions with his government, this did not lead to major workers’ struggles.

Despite this, Kohl’s time in government appeared to be drawing to a close in the late 1980s as militancy rose among workers. The collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) saved him.

German reunification

It is a myth to describe Kohl as the architect of German unity. He was no less surprised by the events in the Soviet Union and GDR than any other politician. If he had been told in the autumn of 1988 that he would be Chancellor of a united Germany within two years, he would have dismissed this as crazy talk.

The driving force behind the reintroduction of capitalism was not Kohl, but the Gorbachev regime in Moscow and the SED (Socialist Unity Party) bureaucracy in East Berlin. Gorbachev embodied the wing of the Stalinist bureaucracy which responded to rising opposition in the working class, expressed above all in the Solidarnosc upheaval in Poland, by moving to restore capitalist property relations.

The SED set a course for German unity when it became clear that it had lost Gorbachev's support. Longstanding party leader Erich Honecker was swiftly removed. Hans Modrow, the new prime minister, suggested a treaty between East Germany and West Germany as early as November 17, 1989, eight days after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Modrow wrote in his memoirs of this period, "According to my view, the path to unity was unavoidably necessary and had to be pursued decisively." Only afterwards, and following Gorbachev's assent to German unity, did Kohl present his famous ten-point plan.

The Bonn government then pressed ahead energetically towards German unity. Thousands of nationalist agitators flooded the east. Kohl appeared at election rallies in the GDR, which remained a sovereign state, and promised everything under the sun. With his overly hasty introduction of the deutsche mark, he established facts on the ground. He brushed aside warnings of how this would have devastating consequences for industry in the GDR.

Reunification resulted in a social catastrophe. The states in eastern Germany are today a low-wage area. Entire regions have been deserted. Hundreds of thousands were forced to emigrate in search of work.

Kohl also played an important role in the privatisation and destruction of the economy in the Soviet Union. His close relationship with Gorbachev was followed by a friendship with Boris Yeltsin, with whom he worked out political plans during joint trips to the sauna. Yeltsin represented the oligarchs who plundered the Soviet Union by resorting to criminal methods and shattered the social achievements of decades.

Maastricht and the European Union

What about Kohl's role as a "great European?"

With the passage of the Maastricht Treaty in February 1992, which he forced through in the face of resistance in his own ranks, Kohl undoubtedly played an important role. The treaty laid the basis for the transformation of the European Economic Community into the European Union, the expansion into Eastern Europe and the introduction of a common currency, the euro.

However, this had nothing to do with Kohl's love of peace. Rather, he was convinced that Germany could not, as before the first and second world wars, become isolated in Europe and face a conflict on two fronts. He therefore sought to establish close relations with French President François Mitterrand.

Mitterrand convinced himself that a common currency would curb Germany's overwhelming economic superiority—which would prove to be a misguided hope. In reality, Germany has profited from the euro more than any other country and thereby expanded its economic hegemony in Europe.

This is the reason why all the political parties of the German bourgeoisie are overflowing in their praise for Kohl. They all support the drive to make Germany the hegemon of Europe and a world power with the

assistance of the EU—a policy whose basis was laid by Kohl. With Britain's departure from the EU, rising tensions with the United States and the election of French President Emmanuel Macron, the chances of realising this appear to have increased.

However, the great-power plans for Germany and the militarism bound up with this face widespread opposition among the German population. Europe is itself being shaken by political crises and social tensions. This is an additional reason for the enthusiasm among ruling circles for the political and social reactionary Helmut Kohl.

Kohl's demise

Kohl's era drew to a close at the end of the 1990s. Germany was seen as the "sick man of Europe." The economy was stagnating and Kohl appeared to have lost the ability to adopt new initiatives. Opposition to him grew and there were even calls in business circles for a change of government to break out of the stagnation.

This task was taken on by the SPD and Greens after their victory in the 1998 federal election. They prepared the way for foreign military interventions by the German army and introduced the greatest social counterrevolution in the post-war era with the Agenda 2010 reforms. Not only the Social Democratic Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, but also and above all his deputy Joschka Fischer, fully embraced Kohl's foreign policy legacy.

Kohl had to give way within the CDU, which had become completely dependent upon him as an individual, in order to enable the party to adopt a new orientation. The task of replacing him was assumed by his most talented pupil, Angela Merkel, whom he had discovered in the GDR in 1989 and politically promoted. Merkel made use of a second-rate fundraising scandal to isolate Kohl in the party, for which he never forgave her. Long before he almost lost the ability to speak due to a fall in 2008, he was politically isolated.

He spent his final years in his family bungalow, shielded by his second wife, Meike Kohler-Richter, in the Oggersheim district of Ludwigshafen. The last international politician he hosted there a year ago was the far-right Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán—a clear affront to Merkel, who had fallen out with Orbán over refugee policy.



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