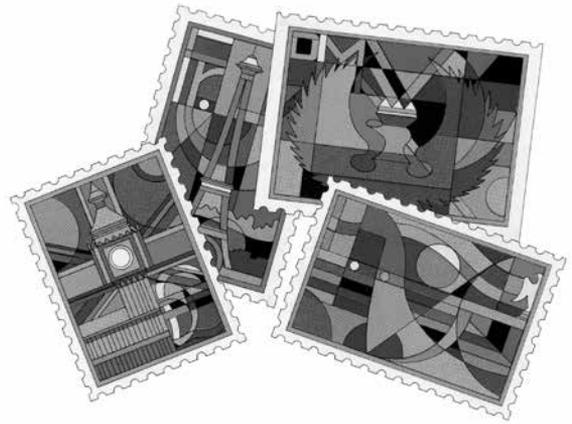


LETTER FROM BERLIN

An Impressive Failure



Angela Merkel bows out.

BY KLAUS C. ENGELEN

On October 29, 2018, a day after the Christian Democrats in the State of Hesse suffered double-digit election losses, German Chancellor Angela Merkel told a meeting of the CDU executive council that she would not stand again as candidate to head her party. She later went before the national press and explained that she intended to stay on as chancellor until 2021 when her term ran out and would not stand for another seat in the Bundestag, nor aspire to any other political position.

“Angela Merkel is the first post-war German chancellor who managed to succeed where most politicians fail: to end her extraordinary career at a time of her own choosing, neither failing at the ballot box nor being pushed out by impatient internal rivals,” notes Henning Hoff from *Internationale Politik Quarterly*.

Merkel led and shaped the party for eighteen years. Only Helmut Kohl served longer as head of the CDU. But when making the decision to end her extraordinary political career—with

three decades as a member of the Bundestag and winning four national elections for her conservative Christian Democrats and their Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union—Merkel probably did not anticipate such a turbulent and bitter end to her long chancellorship. Admired at times as the most powerful woman leader in the world, her record of managing to stay on top of so many crises and upheavals didn’t help her in the end.

MERKEL WARNS OF LEFTIST COALITION

On September 7, 2021, when the German parliament held its last session prior to the federal elections, Merkel for the first time abandoned her position above the campaign fray. She sharply attacked her Social Democrat deputy and finance minister Olaf Scholz, who was leading in the polls. Apparently deeply worried that the CDU’s Armin Laschet, governor of North Rhine-Westphalia, wouldn’t catch up before election day a few weeks later, Merkel pitched for her center-right candidate as standing for “stability, reliability,



Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany 2005–2021.

moderation, and centrality.” She appealed to the voters: “Either there is a government consisting of the SPD and the Greens, who accept support by the Left or at least don’t rule it out, or a government led by CDU and CSU under a Chancellor Armin Laschet, a government that leads our country into the future with moderation.”

As the analysts at Eurointelligence pointed out before the election, “The German electorate faces an unusual dilemma in these elections that could end up producing shifts beyond statistical error margins. A majority wants

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Olaf Scholz to be chancellor, but they also reject a red-red-green coalition, a coalition option Scholz needs to keep alive. We expect that many voters will resort to tactical voting by splitting their votes across two parties.”

In its September 11, 2021, issue, *The Economist* observed that Germany’s conservative party “is used to success: it has occupied the chancellor’s office for fifty-two of the seventy-two years of the republic’s existence. It has never polled lower than the 31 percent it won in the first post-war vote. But it is now facing the real prospect of being booted out of power. ... What happened? Many believe that the CDU/CSU committed a cardinal error when it picked Mr. Laschet, the wishy-washy state premier of North Rhine-Westphalia, as its can-

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didate for chancellor, instead of Markus Söder, the forceful boss of Bavaria.”

The Economist then quoted Manfred Güllner, head of the Forsa polling institute. “The party had the choice between winning with Söder and losing with Laschet.” He blamed CDU apparatchiks, who feared a takeover of their party by Söder and the Bavarians.

At press, the Social Democrats led election results with 25.7 percent of total votes, their best result since 2005. Merkel’s CDU/CSU recorded their worst ever result with 24.1 percent. The Greens achieved their best result in history at 14.8 percent. Coalition negotiations are ongoing.

A DISGRACEFUL END

With a calm leadership style characterized as matter-of-fact and unpretentious, Merkel—with her background in science—overcame never-ending challenges and crises in the domestic and international arena. But her penchant for foot-dragging—meaning a failure to act with the needed promptness or vigor—is a darker side of her legacy.

It appears that Merkel’s wait-and-see strategy guided the highest echelons of Berlin decision makers in their response to the timeline of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. The German government needed to safeguard not only nationals but also the thousands of local helpers for the German military, diplomats, and German aid organizations.

“Berlin turns to blame game amid Afghanistan chaos,” headlined Matthew Karnitschnig in *Politico*. “As Germany’s military struggled to ferry the country’s remaining nationals and local staff out of Kabul on Tuesday, Berlin devolved into a war of words over who to blame for what all agreed was an unmitigated fiasco.”

In June, Merkel’s coalition government rejected a Green party motion in parliament to ease the evacuation of local staff in Afghanistan to Germany by speeding up the granting of visas to the thousands of local helpers. At the time, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas took the position before the Bundestag that he “continued to believe that the peace process between the Taliban and Afghan government had a chance to succeed,” according to *Politico*.

In their “A Chronicle of German Failures in Afghanistan,” *Der Spiegel* reported that on August 14, diplomats at the German Embassy in Kabul, while driving through the Green Zone, the secure government and diplomatic quarter of Kabul, by chance noticed that the Americans had quietly withdrawn their protective forces—“hundreds of them.”

Eventually, Merkel admitted: “Now we are witnessing difficult times, now we must focus on the rescue mission.”

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She pointed out that “those needing evacuation included 2,500 Afghan support staff as well as human rights activists, lawyers, and others whom the government sees as being at risk if they remained in the country, up to 10,000 altogether,” according to Reuters.

“The disaster in Afghanistan is also Merkel’s disaster,” concluded *Der Spiegel*. “The chaotic, dramatic images from Kabul will remain associated with her—as an inglorious conclusion to her term of office.”

TAKING STOCK OF THE MERKEL YEARS

As expected, looking back on sixteen years of Merkel’s unique role in post-war German history were big business for the media and for the world of experts.

The story of how a woman scientist specializing in the field of physics in East Germany, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and in the process of the turbulent German reunification, made an extraordinary political career in Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s CDU is detailed in a *Der Spiegel* biography that was published in August 2021.

The September 6, 2021, issue of *Der Spiegel* was devoted to “The Era of Missed Opportunities—A First Look at Angela Merkel’s Legacy.” It began: “Angela Merkel’s sixteen years as German chancellor have been characterized by crisis after crisis, most of them global in nature. Her intellect has been a critical tool in addressing those challenges, but her follow through left a lot to be desired.”

Coordinated by staff member Dirk Kurbjuweit, who has covered Merkel for the last twenty years, the magazine began by doling out compliments: “Angela

Merkel had much to recommend her as the perfect chancellor for such an era, the potential to be a godsend of history. In her first life, she worked as a scientist, as a woman of numbers, tables, and curves. She is extremely intelligent and imbued with rationality. Unseen menac-

CDU apparatchiks feared a takeover of their party by Markus Söder and the Bavarians.

es aren't enough to frighten her because she is able to discern their true nature and understand the facts behind them."

Merkel's tenure has been largely shaped by seven catastrophes and crises: the 2008 financial crisis; the 2010 euro crisis; the consistent threat presented by Russia's President Vladimir Putin; the huge influx of refugees in 2015; U.S. President Donald Trump, whose name is synonymous with the attack on liberal democracy as a whole; climate change; and the coronavirus pandemic.

One of the major conclusions of the magazine after exploring Merkel's leadership role in the financial and euro crises was that "the financial shock completely robbed the chancellor of her appetite for reform. ... Merkel, whose path to the Chancellery was paved with neoliberal notions, instead moved to expand the welfare state with a minimum wage, improved pensions for women who had temporarily left the labor market to raise children, and parental leave benefits. These policies were certainly beneficial, for Merkel as well, since it secured her re-election, but an urgently needed major reform of the pension system failed to materialize."

BEST YEARS WASTED

In late August, Germany's business and financial daily *Handelsblatt* set out to draw up an economic balance sheet of the Merkel era. Sixteen charts gave a compact overview of how sixteen years of Merkel has shaped the German

economy. Five noted economists graded Merkel for budget, innovation, foreign trade, social policy, and environment. What the *Handelsblatt* team found it put into the headline: "Economic balance sheet of the Merkel era: A country in torpor."

The Merkel years "were the best time Germany has ever had economically. The prosperity in Germany has never been greater. No country among the G7 has grown faster in the past sixteen years. Unemployment, one of the most pressing issues when Angela Merkel took office in 2005, is practically irrelevant at the end of her term of office. Instead, there is now a shortage of skilled workers and, increasingly, of auxiliary staff."

In the view of *Handelsblatt*, Germany's best years were also wasted years. The paper takes into account that Merkel "had to manage four major crises during her term in office: the financial crisis, which then grew into the euro crisis, the refugee crisis and now the Corona crisis." While she guaranteed Germans their savings during the

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financial crisis of 2008–2009, her supporters note she "forgot to use the economically strong years for important reforms."

Under Merkel's chancellorships, Germany became a high-tax country, *Handelsblatt* notes. "In terms of corporate tax rates, Germany is now in the top group of all industrialized countries."

BIG POLITICAL RISKS ONLY ON RARE OCCASIONS

Looking back, one could conclude that Merkel only on very rare occasions in her outstanding political career took extraordinary political risks.

As the CDU's party general secretary during the donation scandal,

she wrote a "divorce letter" to former Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who refused to name his donors, in December 1999. By this, she effectively sidelined the then-dominant CDU figure and improved her chances for the chancellorship.

In the wake of the 2011 nuclear catastrophe in Fukushima, Japan, Merkel as chancellor made a U-turn on the nuclear issue and decided within a few months to shut down eight nuclear plants and phase out the operations of the remaining nine by 2022.

By far the biggest political risk she took was when she decided in 2015 to allow refugees stranded in Budapest

Merkel only on very rare occasions took extraordinary political risks.

to continue on to Germany. Her words "Wir schaffen das!" ["We can do this!"] were meant to express confidence in the face of a daunting task. The refugees came mainly from Syria, but also from Iraq, Afghanistan, and northern Africa.

As *Der Spiegel* concluded: "It was a moment informed by her temperament, her love of freedom, her disdain for walls, her Christian background, particularly through her father, who was a pastor."

Nearly half a million people applied for asylum in Germany in 2015, and another 750,000 the following year. Merkel's decision changed Germany's political landscape. "The right-wing radical Alternative for Germany," argues *Der Spiegel*, "grew from being a fringe phenomenon to a power to be reckoned with, and became a serious and continuing risk to liberal democracy."

As Germany's election weekend approached, *The Economist*, in their cover story, didn't look back kindly at Merkel's sixteen years. Their headline? "The mess Merkel leaves behind—As a much admired chancellor bows out, her successors will face big unresolved problems." ♦