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The Man Who Saved Europe the Last Time

Konrad Adenauer restored democracy to Germany and helped unify a devastated Continent.

by Henry A. Kissinger

The attribute of greatness is reserved for leaders from whose time onward history can be told only in terms of their achievements. I observed essential elements of Germany's history—as a native son, as a refugee from its upheavals, as a soldier in the American army of occupation, and as a witness to its astonishing renewal.

Only a few who experienced this evolution remain. For many contemporary Germans, the Adenauer period seems like a tale from an era long transcended. To the contrary, they live in a dynamic established by Konrad Adenauer, a man whose lifespan, from 1876 to 1967, covered all but five years of the unified German national state first proclaimed in 1871.

Devastated, impoverished, partitioned, the Federal Republic came about after World War II by the merger of the American, British and French zones of occupation, containing just two-thirds of Germany's prewar population. Five million refugees from Germany's prewar territories needed integration; they agitated for the recovery of lost territories. The Soviet occupation zone, containing 18 million people, was turned into a communist political entity.

The Federal Republic's advent capped a century of discontinuity. The Empire after Bismarck had felt beleaguered by the alliances surrounding it; the Weimar Republic after World War I had felt abused by an imposed peace settlement; Hitler had sought an atavistic world domination; the Federal Republic arose amid a legacy of global resentment.

The newly elected German Parliament chose Adenauer as chancellor by a margin of just one vote on September 15, 1949. Shortly afterward, on November 22, 1949, he signed the Petersburg Agreement with the three Allied high commissioners, conferring the attributes of sovereignty on the Federal Republic but withholding its premise of juridical equality. The center of its mining activity, the Ruhr, remained under special Allied control, as did the industrial Saar region along the French border. Adenauer's acquiescence to these terms earned him the sobriquet from his opposition "Chancellor of the Allies."

In his first formal encounter with the three high commissioners, on September 21, 1949, Adenauer demonstrated that he would accept discrimination but not subordination. The high commissioners had assembled on a carpet; to its side, a place for Adenauer had been designated. The chancellor challenged protocol by stepping directly onto the carpet facing his hosts.

From this posture, Adenauer heralded a historic turning point. The new Federal Republic would seek, in his words, “full freedom” by earning a place in the community of nations, not by pressure or by seizing it. Calling for an entirely new conception of foreign policy, Adenauer proclaimed the goal of a “positive and viable European federation” to overcome “the narrow nationalistic conception of the states as it prevailed in the 19th and 20th century...in order to restore the unity of European life in all fields of endeavor.”

Adenauer’s conduct reinforced his rejection of European history. Tall, erect, imperturbable, his face immobile from an automobile accident in his youth, he exuded the serenity of the pre-World War I world that had formed him. Equally distinctive was his sparse speaking style. It conveyed that unobtrusiveness and performance, not exhortation or imposition, were to be the operating style for the new Germany.

Winston Churchill had made a comparable proposal for Europe two days before in Zurich, but Churchill was not in office then. Governing amid defeat and division, Adenauer had proposed an indefinite (possibly permanent) partition of his country while integrating into a nascent European structure. The country whose nationalism had precipitated two world wars would henceforth rely on partnership with its erstwhile enemies.

The turn westward proved fundamental. The choice of Bonn as the new capital, located in the westernmost part of Germany, with close links to Western Europe, was symbolic. Adenauer convinced the Parliament to select Bonn because, as he said sardonically, he wanted the capital to be in the wine region, not amid potato fields, and not least because his home village of Rhöndorf (population of about 1,000) was not suitable for a capital.

It required all of Adenauer’s personality and stature to implement these visions. Opposition came largely from the Social Democratic Party, which, while pro-democracy, insisted on a national policy of neutrality. The opposition included vestiges of German conservatives, one of whose spokesmen was Heinrich Brüning, the chancellor whose overthrow in 1932 had opened the way for Hitler.

Adenauer proved adamant. He made democratic regeneration his first priority as the precondition to integration into Europe. A renewed reputation for reliability was essential. Maneuvering between the superpowers would destroy confidence and repeat historical tragedies.

Adenauer’s foreign policy was founded on the moral imperative of democracy. He envisaged a relentless progression towards the twin goals of a security partnership with America and political integration with Europe.

The Petersburg Agreement of 1949 was followed by negotiations over European defense, spurred by the Korean War and the Soviet military buildup in Central Europe. A NATO was forming, Adenauer urged the European nations to pool their efforts into the European Defense Community. After the French Assembly rejected this concept, Adenauer in 1954 agreed to the Paris Accords, which ended West Germany's occupation, affirmed its sovereignty, and opened the way to its national membership in NATO. The culmination was Adenauer's 1955 visit to Washington. When the German national anthem was played as he visited the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Adenauer described it as the most moving moment of his life.

European integration followed a comparable, in retrospect inevitable, sequence. From France and Germany's 1951 agreement to establish the Coal and Steel Community to the Treaty of Rome in 1957, which established the European Economic Community, Adenauer, working with wise French leaders, overcame one of world history's once-hereditary national animosities.

Within the space of six years, Adenauer had moved his country from an outcast to an equal member in political and security arrangements unprecedented in European history. This was made possible by a spirit of American creativity which, in the Marshall Plan and the origination of NATO, overcame America's pre-World War II isolationism.

The U.S. became Germany's principal link to security through NATO, and to economic recovery through the Marshall Plan. France, as the link to the European Community, played a comparable role. In America, John Foster Dulles symbolized the relationship; in France, President Charles de Gaulle. They both represented to Adenauer elements capable of stabilizing the inevitable storms the future might hold. In that sense, Adenauer viewed Europe as a potential corrective to the fluctuations into which global responsibilities and a certain inherent restlessness on occasion drew the U.S. When, in 1956, Guy Mollet, France's prime minister, stressed a gap between the obligations of NATO and American conduct in the Suez crisis, Adenauer defended the existing structures as flexible enough to recover shared vitality: "Europe will be your revenge," he said.

I had the privilege of hearing Adenauer's vision in several conversations with him over a 10-year period. His courtesy and serenity were his most remarkable traits. Our first meeting took place in 1957, shortly after a Soviet ultimatum threatening Berlin. Adenauer concentrated on the nightmare of everyone privy to nuclear planning: whether any U.S. president would actually bring himself to unleash the catastrophe on which NATO nuclear strategy was based. Since the official was formal but the actual one would depend on unknowable contingencies and personalities, he raised the question at every subsequent meeting.

Another major issue preoccupying Adenauer was geopolitical evolution. Did I realize that a break between China and Russia was imminent? The West should prepare for that contingency and not provide too many temptations to its adversaries by its divisions. He construed surprised silence as assent and, on his first visit to the White House in 1961, repeated the prediction, adding, to an astonished President Kennedy: "Professor Kissinger agrees with me."

In 1962, as part-time consultant to President Kennedy, I was asked during a crisis to reassure Adenauer about America's determination and capacity to defend Berlin and support Germany. I had been briefed to present details of some nuclear capabilities and deployments on a personal, presidential basis – information which, at that time, was shared only with the U.K.

As I began my presentation of the political issues, Adenauer interrupted: "They have already told me this in Washington. If it did not convince me there, why would it convince me here?" I replied that I was an academic, and a government employee only a quarter of my time. Adenauer was non-plussed. In that case, he replied: Let us assume you will convince me three-quarters of the way.

But when I presented the military briefing, Adenauer was transformed – partly because of the enormous gap in the West's favor that it demonstrated, but above all of the confidence President Kennedy had shown in him. It turned into the warmest of all my meetings with him.

A moving aftermath followed some decades later. I received a letter whose sender I did not recognize. He had served as an interpreter during that conversation (though German is my native language, I generally conduct official conversations in English because my vocabulary is more precise, especially on technical matters). Adenauer has given me his word of honor not to distribute the nuclear information I shared with him. The interpreter informed that he had, in fact, given a full record of my briefing to Adenauer, who had instructed me to destroy the nuclear portion out of respect for his word of honor.

The historic German-American partnership that began with the Adenauer chancellorship proceeded from almost diametrically opposed starting points. Adenauer assumed office at probably the lowest point of German history. The U.S. was at the zenith of its power and self-confidence. Adenauer saw his task as rebuilding Christian and democratic values through new designs for traditional German and European institutions. America had equally grand objectives and, at times, pursued them with insistent certainty. For Adenauer, the reconstruction of Europe was the rediscovery of ancient values; for America, the implementation of prevailing tones. For Adenauer to succeed, it was necessary to stabilize the soul of Germany; for America, to mobilize existing idealism. Occasionally there were strains, especially when American optimism overestimated the scope for more-fragile structures and divergent historic memories.

The Atlantic relationship between Bonn and Washington transformed, however, the shattered world it inherited and helped create a half-century of peace between major powers.

This system is now under stress from simultaneous upheavals on several continents. Can it heal a fractured world by rediscovering the conviction and creativity with which was built?

Mr. Kissinger served as national security adviser and secretary of state under Presidents Nixon and Ford. This is adapted from an April 25 speech to the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

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