A German Giant-The Political Legacy of Helmut Kohl

Part 1: The Political Legacy of Helmut Kohl

He was the chancellor who reunited Germany and advanced European unification. He governed longer than any other German leader before him and became a global statesman who dedicated his life to his country, even if scandals threatened to obscure parts of his legacy.

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Photos
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Helmut Kohl pushed Germany forward. On top of that, he gave Europe the decisive boost for deeper integration and understanding. He was a great statesman, whose services to the country are little diminished by the relatively trivial, self-created scandal shortly after his time in office.

He had almost always found success in his political career -- he was almost always the youngest and at 1.93 meters tall (six feet, four inches), always one of the tallest. When he joined his party, the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), at 16, he became its youngest member. Later, he would be the youngest person to serve as the head of the CDU's party caucus in his state parliament. Then he became the youngest governor before rising to become the country's youngest chancellor. He remained chancellor for 16 years unchallenged, until the voters finally wielded their power over him -- pushing aside a man whose primary political currency had been power.

His career outside of politics, was an altogether different story. In terms of career preparation, Kohl was something of a late bloomer. He didn't finish high school until the age of 20 in his cherished hometown of Ludwigshafen and he balanced out extremely poor grades in mathematics with nearly perfect ones in German. Of course, school wasn't really about being a talented speaker (grade: poor) or possessing management qualities (grade: satisfactory) nor persistence (excellent). After 16 semesters at the universities in Frankfurt and Heidelberg, he graduated with a cum laude doctorate in history. He was 28 years old at the time -- and had already been a member of the board of the state chapter of the CDU in his home state of Rhineland-Palatinate for three years.

**Kohl's Life Goal: To Never Experience War Again**
But it wasn't just his drive for politics that slowed the start of his career -- it also had to do with World War II and the turmoil of the postwar period. If it were possible to formulate a life goal for the young Kohl, then it would be this: He never wanted to experience another war.

Shortly before his older brother Walter fell in the war, he had made Helmut promise that he would always take care of their mother. But even more formative for Kohl were the periods shortly before and after the war. During a celebration on his 15th birthday, he was sworn in at a Nazi facility in Berchtesgaden as a member of the Hitler Youth. Five weeks later, the German Reich, Hitler and all the other authorities would disappear.

Basically still a child, Kohl, together with a group of comrades of the same age, began wandering without money, without food and really without any hope for almost two months on foot through a southern Germany destroyed by the ravages of war until they finally caught a glimpse of their hometown across the Rhine River from Mannheim. But the Rhine Bridge had been blown up and the young men had no ID papers. After all the exertion they had gone through, the American military officials only let them return to their parents on the other, French-occupied side of the river several days later. It was an awful time.

Kohl didn't have to decide to become a politician -- the adverse conditions drove him to it. At school, he soon became his class- and later school president because he quickly gained the trust of fellow students and showed talent for organizing good parties, field trips or school lunches. It had a knock-on effect: The pride he found in his achievements provided him with the boost he needed for his next task.
At the time he got involved in the CDU, it was still a party of gray-haired conservatives from the Weimar Republic generation. But he familiarized himself with every current within, and facet of, the party and he quickly adopted one of the basic principles of democracy -- that all that one does for society can also turn out to be beneficial to oneself. As a young university student, he likewise realized that embedding personal relations within a fixed network was vital to a successful career. It was the only way to continue climbing the rungs on the ladder of success -- it was how you rose from the district level to the regional level and then to the state level.

With incredibly hard work and a Lambretta scooter he had saved up to buy with money from his student job as a stone polisher at BASF, he soon began his slow rise within the party, initially working his way up through regional party committees, where he first got to know his later role model Konrad Adenauer (from afar). He put up posters and urged fellow residents of the Palatinate region, who lacked experience with democracy after the years of Nazi dictatorship, from a truck with a loudspeaker to get out and vote. This is how he rose, at the age of 23, to membership in the local party board in the Palatinate region. It was already an early breakthrough for the budding politician.

### Establishing the Kohl System

Yet even then, it was possible to discern what would develop into a reliance on personal connections to stay in power as head of the national party. He had discovered the "Kohl System," which holds that, if you know a lot of people, there are a lot of people you can rely on -- people who can then benefit from having provided that help.
Kohl deftly applied his youthful drive in areas like education. At the time, the older generation still clung to the outmoded teaching style of traditional village schools, over which the local priest constantly held a protective hand. He also rallied against the ossification in party leadership positions, targeting the state's governor at the time, the authoritarian Peter Altmeier. As he did so, he continually sought out support from newfound friends. When an unnerved Altmeier stepped down in 1969 after 22 years in office, he offered an exhaustive thanks to his chauffeur but didn't dedicate a single word to his successor, Helmut Kohl.

By that point, Kohl no longer needed that kind of attention anyway. The youngest head of a state government in Germany, he already had his sights set on the national level. That same year, 1969, he was elected as the deputy chair of the national CDU party and also announced his candidacy a year later for party chair after the election loss suffered by former Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger in the 1969 Bundestag election.

**Kohl at the Peak of His Power Nationally**

But then, the man whose political career had only known one direction to that point lost his first important vote. In October 1971, Rainer Barzel, opposition floor leader in federal parliament, was chosen to lead the CDU, garnering twice the number of votes as his challenger Kohl. He overcame the shame it brought only two years later after Barzel spectacularly failed in his effort to topple center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD) Chancellor Willy Brandt with a confidence vote in parliament. Barzel stepped down from his leadership role and 86 percent of the party's delegates voted Kohl in as the CDU's chairman -- an initial high point in his aim to secure national power.
Germany's conservatives at the time were still having trouble getting used to their new role in the opposition after being voted out of power in 1969. For years, Kohl would face bitter and even malicious adversary Franz Josef Strauss, the chairman of Christian Social Union -- the Bavarian sister party to the CDU that often acted more like a squabbling sibling than a partner. Strauss also had his sights set on the Chancellery and he worked tenaciously to try to derail the possibility of a Kohl candidacy, telling people he was "totally incapable" and even threatening to end the decades-long partnership between the two parties and transform the Bavarian party into a national one. This all happened in 1976 at a time when Kohl achieved an impressive election result (with 48.6 percent of the votes) and just barely missed obtaining an absolute majority in parliament.

Kohl then moved to the West German capital of Bonn to become opposition floor leader and, in a clever tactical move, yielded the next chancellor candidacy to Strauss who, as widely predicted, suffered a worse defeat in the 1980 election. This paved the way for Kohl to assume the unchallenged leadership role over Germany's conservatives.

Now all Kohl had to do was wait until then Chancellor Helmut Schmidt of the SPD lost the trust of the left-wing of his own party and, thus, his majority in parliament. With his brash personality and his NATO rearmament policies, Schmidt had strained his relations with leftist SPD members to the point that many preferred to go into opposition than remain in power. After 13 years, SPD rule had come to an end.

**Election as Chancellor**

Kohl reached his goal in autumn 1982. The Free Democratic Party (FDP), which had been the SPD's junior coalition partner, switched its allegiance to the CDU and parliament elected
Helmut Kohl as West Germany's sixth chancellor. At first, Kohl faced considerable headwinds from the media he liked to call the "Hamburg opinion mafia" -- German public broadcaster ARD, Der Spiegel, Stern and Die Zeit -- but also from those intellectuals who were still clinging to their vision of a leftist, socially liberal society. For its part, the FDP had long since abandoned that vision. In 1983, Chancellor Kohl and his coalition government were re-elected for the first time, completing the transition to a socially conservative government.

During his election campaign, he had brashly called for a "spiritual and moral renewal," which many progressives took to mean the end of all reforms and a relapse to the gray, staunch-conservativism of the Adenauer era. Yet despite all indications to the contrary, the CDU chancellor proved to be a pragmatist. He stayed true to the reforms that his two predecessors had undertaken and he maintained their détente-oriented policies with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. He even assigned an important role to his eternal adversary Strauss in the form of a multibillion mark contract with East Germany, which was in economic dire straits. In 1987, he was re-elected, despite a pair of scandals.

**Part 2: The Scandals That Threatened Kohl's Legacy**

There wasn't much he could have done about one of the scandals. Using the skimpiest of pretexts, his defense minister at the time, Manfred Wörner, had forced the German military's highest-ranking general into early retirement. There had been unproven and unprovable rumors that the senior military official had engaged in same-sex relations, leading the government to believe he could be a security risk. When the truth came to light, Kohl didn't dismiss his defense minister, who was a friend of his, even though he had offered his
resignation. Indeed, Kohl, as he would later reveal in his memoirs, also initially shared the belief that there was something to the rumors that had been raised by the military's intelligence service.

Far worse for the chancellor was the role he played in the party donations scandal. In that affair, Kohl worked together with other party leaders in his effort to obtain amnesty for all those donors -- but especially for those who received donations in the party's headquarters -- who had been giving or obtaining illegal donations and violating tax laws for years.

Kohl was particularly groveling on behalf of the donors who, he said, had only wanted to help the party and had unknowingly violated the law. "They should pay their back taxes, but they should not be prosecuted," he argued. Fifteen years later, he would ask that the same approach be applied to himself.

In fact, Kohl had his party's treasurers in mind, whom amnesty would have protected from prosecution. And that's precisely why the audacious plan failed after Kohl's own ally in the party, former German Constitutional Court President Ernst Benda, accused the party of trying to become its "own judge and jury."

The Miracle of Bremen

The repercussions of the party donor scandal persisted for a long time to come. When Otto Schily, at the time a member of the Green Party in parliament, sought legal action against the chancellor, accusing him of falsely testifying before a parliamentary subcommittee, then-CDU Secretary-General Heiner Geissler tried to cover for Kohl with the strange claim that the chancellor had suffered a brief "blackout." It turned out to be the ultimate insult to Kohl, who never forgave Geissler.
But voters didn't seem to care much about this and other shortcomings on the chancellor's part. They seemed to think he just needed to practice a little more. But Kohl had also been making some foreign policy gaffes at the time -- when, for example, he sought to proclaim the innocence of his generation -- born in 1930 -- in the Holocaust with his flippant remark that they had the "mercy of late birth." Or when he compared Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev -- just as he was beginning to restructure his ossified state -- to Nazi propagandist Josef Goebbels, a man he said also had a good understanding of PR. Then he forced U.S. President Ronald Reagan to visit a military cemetery in the city of Bitburg, even though members of the SS had been buried there.

Within the party, support for Kohl only began to slip when, at the end of the 1980s, the CDU began losing ground in important elections and a serious adversary emerged from within the ranks -- the very same CDU Secretary-General Heiner Geissler that Kohl had brought into politics.

In September 1989, Kohl then experienced and celebrated the threefold "Miracle of Bremen." At a party conference held in the West German city, the revolt Geissler had initiated swiftly collapsed after the chancellor announced the imminent opening of the Iron Curtain along the Austrian border as a result of secret talks with Hungary. He did not, as Geissler had hoped, get voted out as party chief -- and neither did he get replaced with the desired candidate, Lothar Späh. Kohl had attended the conference in poor health and under high doses of pain medication because he had delayed a needed prostate operation.

He was then able to watch miracle number three from his sick bed as he anxiously followed the erosion of the Eastern Bloc. First Hungary, then Poland and later Czechoslovakia were suddenly able to determine their own futures after Gorbachev
renounced the Brezhnev doctrine of limited sovereignty for Soviet satellite states. Many East Germans were quick to sense the shift that was happening. Thousands of them traveled to other Eastern European countries and sought protection in the buildings of West German embassies there. But Kohl and his most important adviser Horst Teltschik were likewise sensing what Willy Brandt had prophetically told the Bundestag in September 1989: "I will openly express my feelings that an era is coming to an end" -- an era of arms buildups and the Cold War and, for Germany at least, one of the Berlin Wall and barbed wire. Shortly before its 40th anniversary, Eastern Germany was teetering on the brink. Thousands of its citizens had occupied the West German Embassy in Prague.

Chancellor Kohl, still bedridden, wanted to personally facilitate their departure on site, but doctors forbade him from traveling. Which explains why it was left to his deputy, Foreign Minister Hans-Dieter Genscher, to speak from the embassy balcony in Prague, uttering what is likely the most famous unfinished sentence in history: "We have come to you in order to inform you that today, your departure..." It would remain Genscher's most important contribution to the reunification process. Because from that point on, up to and after the fall of the Wall, which happened while Kohl was in Poland, the chancellor took over control: unflinchingly and with both conviction and diplomatic finesse. It was the performance of his lifetime.

According to his own telling of events, he realized following his visit to Dresden in mid-December that reunification could not be stopped. "The people want it." Concurrently, then-East German Prime Minister Hans Modrow requested 15 billion deutsche marks in aid from West Germany. Kohl considered the sum to be grotesquely exorbitant. He would rather, he told his adviser Teltschik at the time, send the money to the Soviet Union in order to win over Moscow's support for unification.
Resistance in the West

Half a year later, as he and Gorbachev met both in Moscow and in the Caucasus Mountains to negotiate the size of reunified Germany's future military as well as its alliance loyalties, Teltschik was busy figuring out how much reunification would cost. According to his calculations, 15 billion deutsche marks would have to be paid to the Soviet Union -- but to Moscow, and not to East Germany, so as not to prolong the country's existence.

Kohl, of course, couldn't simply buy East Germany from his Soviet counterpart. He also had to overcome significant resistance in the West -- from Margaret Thatcher in London, for example, and François Mitterrand in Paris, but also from several smaller neighbors who feared an enlarged Germany for historical reasons. The chancellor was able to do so because he linked German unification tightly with the process of European unity, ultimately producing unification on multiple levels: the German and the European, embedded in a currency union in addition to regulations for an internal market free of customs and border controls. "That is why," Kohl would write in his diary not long later, "I tied the introduction of the euro to my own political destiny."

It is useless to ask if German reunification would have come about without the promised discarding of the D-mark: The euro is here and the common currency has benefited eurozone member states more than it has hurt them. It is also useless to consider the question, hypothetical as it is, as to whether a different chancellor would have done the same thing: Helmut Kohl was at the right place at the right time -- and he made but few mistakes as he grasped for the cloak of history.
Back home in Oggersheim, he dictated to his wife Hannelore the 10-point roadmap that would lead to reunification just one year later. In the development of the roadmap, the Ramstetter brothers acted as his advisors -- one of them was a pastor and the other a teacher in Ludwigshafen. The two had helped Kohl previously with the formulation of his Christmas address. Kohl, the man of the people, was both eager and able to avoid groups of experts or advisors from ministries, political coalitions or academia. From that point on, he was his own adviser, convinced he knew what the people wanted. And he was usually right.

The most serious error underlying reunification and the Unification Treaty between the two parts of Germany, as we know today, was rooted in a vast deceit. East Germany and its state statisticians had invented economic numbers to cover up the country's impending bankruptcy. And nobody except for those who had produced the numbers knew anything about it.

Even in September 1990, an economic research institute predicted that reunification would not prove deleterious to either the East or the West and would actually result in a profit within two years. The Unity Treaty likewise includes a reference to "revenues" generated by the agency formed to privatize East German enterprises (the Treuhandanstalt), from which East German citizens were to receive a share. Despite the rosy predictions, however, the project quickly produced billions in debt. And Chancellor Kohl made the mistake in the first post-reunification election campaign of categorically ruling out tax increases. It allowed him to win the election easily, but things quickly went downhill from there. Even German President Richard von Weizäcker, traditionally a largely ceremonial position that keeps away from day-to-day politics, openly criticized Kohl's generosity: "Unifying means learning to share," he said.
Kohl Had No Real Plan for Future in Final Term

It was only four years later, following his fourth re-election, that Kohl suddenly realized that there was a need to change course, criticizing German society by saying that the country's people lived in a "collective amusement park." People were retiring, he complained, "at a younger and younger age, staying in university longer, working for fewer years over the course of their lives and taking more vacation." He did nothing, however, to address the issues he had identified.

Even as politicians and analysts were complaining about the necessity of reforms, Kohl and his last cabinet bumbled along with neither political élan nor a plan. Behind the scenes, though, Kohl was working during this period on the fulfillment of the promise he had made to Germany's European neighbors in 1990 in exchange for their approval for reunification. He wanted to push European unity forward with a common currency and strengthen integration in the hopes of removing the fear of an overly strong Germany.

One part of his concept was successful: The euro was introduced and border controls within Europe now seem like something out of the European Middle Ages. But it was left to Kohl's successor Gerhard Schröder to push through necessary reforms in the form of his package of social welfare cuts known as Agenda 2010. It was voted into law with the approval of all parties represented in parliament, but has since come to be intimately associated with Schröder's Social Democrats, and the party has been punished by voters ever since as a result.

It is interesting, though, to briefly consider the question: What would have happened if Kohl had, shortly before the retirement he had planned for himself, attempted to push through similar social reforms? He and Wolfgang Schäuble, who Kohl had
designated as his successor, would have gone down in history as the "chancellors of reform" -- and it seems likely that Chancellor Schäuble would have been re-elected.

**That Darn Pledge**

Kohl, though, proved adept at preventing such a scenario. He was always the chancellor of campaign promises, not a man of reforms or of insight into harsh societal realities, such as falling birth rates or the financial shape of pension and health care funds. And he certainly didn't trust his hand-picked successor.

Kohl did not, as had been internally agreed, step down prematurely to make way for Schäuble. It was left to the voters to push him out of office in 1998, likely because they were yearning for a new face and new ideas. And so Kohl cleared the way for his successor Schröder, but left only hurdles in the path of Schäuble, who took over leadership of the CDU.

When arms lobbyist Karl-Heinz Schreiber reported a donation he had made to the CDU and state prosecutors began taking an interest in the party's finances, Kohl gratuitously admitted that he had made a "mistake" and had accepted more than 2 million deutsche marks from a benefactor, but said that he had given his word to never reveal where the donation had come from.

The result was an earthquake in the CDU of unforeseen strength. At the insistence of former party allies, he resigned from his position as honorary chairman and Schäuble withdrew from all official party functions -- clearing the way for the rise of then-CDU General-Secretary Angela Merkel.

**From Then On, Kohl Avoided the Public Eye**

Indignant, bitter and disappointed, Kohl withdrew from day-to-day politics -- weakened by two knee operations and a bad fall,
ill and limited in both his motor functions and verbal articulation. Before doing so, however, he collected private donations in order to compensate for the damage his illegal activities had done to the party.

From then on, he avoided the public eye even more -- and he stayed away from the media, which he had never held in high regard. It seemed as though he was waiting for a form of rehabilitation: He, the chancellor of reunification, the European statesman, did not want his legacy sullied by slush funds and dirty deals -- and seemed to think he could wait it out.

In October 2010, Kohl once again found himself at the center of global attention. He was considered to be a favorite for the Nobel Peace Prize that year, but the committee in Oslo ultimately opted for Liu Xiaobo of China. Kohl, though, was unperturbed: It wasn't the first time he had been on the list, he said.

In the final years of his life, media attention was primarily focused on Kohl due to his private life: the suicide of his wife Hannelore, who suffered from an incurable allergy to light; his second marriage to Maike Richter-Kohl, a former Chancellery employee who was 34 years his junior; and the estrangement from his two sons, Walter and Peter. All of it had the elements of a vast family drama, in which the public at large had great interest.

And then Kohl also engaged in a legal battle with his former biographer Heribert Schwan. A former journalist with German public broadcaster WDR, Schwan had recorded around 600 hours of interviews with Kohl shortly after the party donation scandal and published portions of the discussions in a book in fall 2014. Kohl was furious, particularly given that he, in his interviews with Schwan, had made extremely disparaging
remarks about Angela Merkel and other politicians from both the CDU and opposition parties.

Until the very end -- even after a bad fall from his wheelchair in 2006 and despite his poor physical state and extreme difficulties speaking -- Kohl sought to defend his political legacy with the help of his second wife. In 2014, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, he didn't just arrange for the republishing of a book in which he described the path to German reunification. That same year, he also released a slim volume called "Out of Concern for Europe."

Now, Helmut Kohl has died. Historians, journalists and party allies will likely spend the next several days saying that, while he made some mistakes, he always wanted the best for his party, his country and, of course, for his legacy. In that order.

It would, however, have been even better if the party soldier had thought a bit less about his party and a bit more about his country. In his book about Europe, he wrote: "Trust is just as valuable as it is fragile. It can't be bought, it can't be forced, it must be earned -- over and over again." It seemed as though Kohl were passing judgment on himself, a man whose donation scandal eroded many people's trust in politics.

But there is no such thing as a perfect chancellor. And one thing is certain: When it comes to the unity of Germany and Europe, Helmut Kohl was a great statesman.

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