

Foreign Policy

There is no lack of studies of Adenauer's foreign policy. Many of these examinations are polemic, others apologetic, some are superficial or profound, boring or pithy – at any rate, this literature can already fill a large library. This is not surprising at all, as this is not just about the figure of the founding Chancellor, who shaped his country's destiny; this is always also about the fundamental foreign policy orientation of the Federal Republic.

Since some of the paths leading to Adenauer's foreign policy are already well-worn, let's approach this contested topic from a different angle. As is well-known, Adenauer has been compared to Bismarck every now and again, naturally mostly to highlight their differences.¹ Adenauer himself had fewer reservations regarding the foreign policy of the founder of the Reich than some of his critics or adherents wish to believe. This may be astonishing today. As mentioned above, "a great politician for foreign and a very bad one for domestic affairs..." was Adenauer's assessment of Bismarck which Cyrus L. Sulzberger received confidentially just before the 1957 elections.² It's worth quoting verbatim why Adenauer considered Otto von Bismarck, the founder of the Reich, "a very bad politician for domestic affairs": "He persecuted the Catholics, and he persecuted the Socialists, and thereby he prevented the development of a large liberal party in Germany. Thus it has been my opinion for many years that the German people were not strong enough politically on the inside to bear the power that they received so suddenly. This was ultimately the reason we broke down." A year earlier, Adenauer had told the American diplomat Charles Thayer:

“Regarding foreign policy, he was truly a great master, and was also very moderate on foreign policy ...”. Apparently moderation played a decisive role in this surprisingly positive assessment of Bismarck. Adenauer pointed to the fact that Bismarck had prevented the army from marching into Vienna after the victorious war of 1866 – “something that the victorious generals would have loved to do”.³

The fundamental differences between Adenauer and Bismarck are generally well-known – their respective personalities, the respective international situation at the time, their potential at handling power, their mentalities and concepts.

Quite correctly Adenauer has been interpreted as the virtual antipode of Bismarck, the founder of the Reich:

- not a class-conscious and proud aristocratic Junker, but rather a similarly proud bourgeois, in whom the German city bourgeoisie with its roots in the Middle Ages found its modern incarnation, perhaps for the last time;

- no “Ur-Prussian” (Ernst Engelberg) or as Treitschke characterised the Prussian type: “Hard were they, and weather-proof, steeled by toil on a niggardly land, fortified too by the unceasing combats of a frontier life”, rugged, incisive, non-committal, endowed with the “contempt of a dominant race”;⁴ instead a similarly proud and sometimes gruff, but simultaneously smart, witty Rhinelander, who had learnt to muddle through somehow and leave many seemingly unsolvable problems up in the air during the uneasy first half of the 20th century and also knew that it is also possible to advance one’s own interests by joining them to those of others;

- no royalist, whose main domestic enemies were at the royal court and included most of the family of the monarch, instead a democrat, for whom party pluralism, incessant parliamentary manoeuvring to secure power, the struggle with the “rule of the lobbies” (Theodor Eschen-

burg) and tireless public relations work had become second nature;

– no “white revolutionary”, as Lothar Gall has called Bismarck, instead in some ways a figure more comparable to Metternich (also a Rhinelander, but not of the puritan sort), who after 1815 saw it as his main mission to quieten the Germans and agitated Europe after the revolutionary decades;

– no statesman of a great power victorious in three wars, instead the Federal Chancellor of an initially entirely impotent state, in this respect comparable to Talleyrand at the Congress of Vienna (even if France in 1814/15 was not in water as hot as the Federal Republic of Germany was in 1949).

One could continue in this fashion – opposites abound! But there are also similarities – a similarity of approaching problems with *Realpolitik*, similarities in the defence of the interests of one’s own state, but also similarities in the flexibility and ability to find reasonably sustainable solutions despite all the conflicting objectives.

It is unnecessary to underline that certain similarities are most visible if one compares Adenauer with Chancellor Bismarck during the more peaceful years between 1871 and 1890 when he considered the German Reich “saturated” and, despite not being able or wishing to exclude the possibility of war, generally engaged in diplomacy with the goal of keeping the peace – a “Course of Abstinence”, as the historian Klaus Hildebrand has called it.⁵ A “Course of Abstinence” – *cum grano salis* one could say the same of Adenauer, especially regarding his reserved policy concerning the problem of the division of Germany.

A deeper understanding of Adenauer’s foreign policy within the context of German modern and contemporary history cannot leave out the comparison with Bismarck. The latter has repeatedly been referred to as a revolution-

ary – a revolutionary within the contemporary system of European states. But Adenauer too has been rated as a revolutionary in the field of foreign policy. The political scientist Christian Hacke refers to the fundamental reorientation of the German core state towards the Western democracies (thus foregoing any see-saw policy between East and West) as “a foreign policy revolution”⁶.

Revolutionaries are distinguished by three fundamental dispositions: They are convinced that the traditional system has no future, they are coolly resolved to push that which will eventually fall anyway, and they have (more or less) clear conceptions about a new order – mostly though, less clear conceptions.

In this sense Adenauer was a revolutionary since his return to the political arena in 1945. Ergo, let’s take a look at the post-War system as he saw it; then, let’s ask about how he perceived the political weight, dangerousness and intentions of the major powers and their compatibility to German interests, always with side glances to Bismarck; finally, let’s sketch his respective conclusions for European and Germany policy. From today’s perspective in the early 21st century, a more appropriate view of Adenauer’s foreign policy emerges than was possible during the years of the East-West-Conflict and German Partition.

The history of the Cold War can now be viewed as a closed chapter. Three phases of up and down during which the danger of World War Three was acute can be discerned in the relations between East and West: the phase between 1948 and 1953 (from the Berlin Blockade to Stalin’s death), a second phase between 1959 and 1963 (the Berlin Crisis set off by Khrushchev, American-Soviet clashes in the Third World, the Cuba Crisis), and the final phase of confrontation between 1980 and 1985.

Adenauer’s Chancellorship thus encompassed two of the most dangerous phases of the Cold War.