

Preface

“One of our best” is the judgement of a majority of Germans when they remember Adenauer. And this is not just valid for the many viewers who called in for a 2003 televote for the “greatest German”. Since 1950 Allensbach, the public opinion research company, has asked the same question every year: “In your opinion, which great German has achieved the most for Germany?” Despite many poets, thinkers or even revolutionary geniuses to choose from, few name Goethe, Schiller, Martin Luther or Karl Marx, the niche hero of the GDR. Since 1958 Adenauer continuously figures as number one, both in the “old” Federal Republic as well as in today’s reunified Germany. He leaves Otto von Bismarck, a long past giant, far behind. Hitler is not mentioned at all today. Later chancellors such as Helmut Kohl, Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt were also unable to achieve the same level of fascination.

Such a remarkable degree of continuity transcending all antagonisms between the political camps poses questions. What makes this life so fascinating? What accomplishments are remembered? How are once hotly contested decisions of this great polariser viewed today? And how is Adenauer’s rank measured in the course of recent German history? But also: What remains of Adenauer after the change of 1989/90?

A quarter of a century ago Sebastian Haffner’s “The Meaning of Hitler” was published, covering the – still irritating – negative great figure par excellence. Haffner’s method of a thematically ordered discussion is also suited for a decryption of Adenauer, in whom many, including young Germans, see something of a positive role model in

view of the hardly inspiring political treadmill today. The thematically grouped examination is not only supposed to illuminate his accomplishments, but also recall the controversies surrounding him and shed light on the dark complexity of this character. Perhaps this is the reason why one senses an insufficiency in the greats of today because – unlike Adenauer – they not only subscribe to consensus apprehensively, but also because one cannot sense any depth in their souls, which instead only exhibit subagency. Finally, studying this now far removed George Washington of the Federal Republic is so attractive because it provides for standards of comparison.

Compared to the German version published with Pantheon in 2007 under the title “Anmerkungen zu Adenauer”, “The Meaning of Adenauer” has been slightly updated. Readers who wish to read a comprehensive account of Adenauer can refer to my two volume Adenauer biography published in English in 1995/97 and in Spanish in 2003. The tomes are voluminous, but well worth reading – Adenauer’s life is as thrilling as a detective story. His biography simultaneously allows for the study of the forces, ideas and persons which affected the early history of the Federal Republic, the repercussions of some still influence us to the present day.

I gladly took up the kind suggestion of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung to make the present study accessible to interested English-speaking readers. I thank all those who were charged with this task, namely the editor Ms Elisabeth Enders. My main thanks goes to the translator, Giles Wesley Bennett.

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Hans-Peter Schwarz