

What Remains?

The grand figures of politics mostly disappear from public memory quickly. Nobody knows which Federal Chancellors will still be considered memorable in a 100 or 150 years time. Even though his Chancellorship ended almost fifty years ago, Adenauer at any rate has remained amazingly vivid in the collective German consciousness. This became clear in 2003 when the ZDF TV station asked the viewers to choose "The Greatest German" among 100 figures, mimicking an English television event.¹ Surely, the predetermined list of candidates was highly absurd: Next to Albrecht Dürer, Johann Sebastian Bach, Goethe or Ludwig van Beethoven there were contemporary non-entities such as Herbert Grönemeyer or the "*Tote Hosen*" punk rocker Campino (Andreas Frege), next to Martin Luther, Alexander von Humboldt, Friedrich Nietzsche, Otto von Bismarck or Gustav Stresemann there were Rudi Dutschke, Dieter Bohlen and Beate Uhse. The lack of standards in public television could not have been made any clearer.

Yet it became apparent surprisingly quickly that the viewers possessed a much securer sense of importance than the ZDF editors. In the end an interesting trio won the race. With quite a bit of distance Adenauer made first place, followed by Martin Luther and Karl Marx. A viable interpretation was that our pluralist public divided its respect towards historical figures between one conservative statesman and two revolutionaries (one religious, the other secular-atheist).

Anyone who wondered why Adenauer left the rest of the pack far behind him had neglected to take note of the opinion polls of the preceding four decades. As mentioned



Konrad Adenauer left the rest of the field far behind: During the ZDF TV-show "Our Best – Who is the greatest German?" (2003) a clear majority of the viewers voted for the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic. The reformer Martin Luther and the philosopher Karl Marx came in second and third place respectively.

above, these resulted in large majorities for Adenauer as the figure who had done the most for Germany since 1958. Generally Federal Chancellors, if they are lucky, at first tend to rise in the list after their retirement or death, only to drop subsequently. In 1971 Adenauer reached his peak with 47 %, subsequently sinking to 28 % in the Länder of the old Federal Republic in 2000 (in the new Länder – formerly part of the GDR – only 7 % consider him the greatest). Nevertheless he is still clearly ahead of comparable political heavyweights in reunited Germany with 24 %. Helmut Kohl was named by 19 % of those questioned in 2000, while Willy Brandt was referred to by 11 %. Bismarck only received 7 %. Ludwig Erhard and Goethe both got 5 %, Helmut Schmidt 4 %. Martin Luther and Karl Marx figured similarly at 1 %.² Hitler was no longer even named by respondents. These general trends are also con-

firmed in the latest available poll commissioned in January 2009 where he leads the list of “the most important Chancellors in the history of the Federal Republic so far”: In Germany as a whole and West Germany, he leads at 64 % and 70 % respectively, while in East Germany, he is tied with Helmut Kohl (both at 38 %) behind Willy Brandt (47 %) and Helmut Schmidt (43 %). Similarly Adenauer leads a February 2009 list of “politicians which in your opinion shaped Germany quite decisively during the last six decades” at 80 % in Germany as a whole (and 83 % in West Germany, if only 65 % in East Germany in third place behind Helmut Kohl and Willy Brandt at 70 % and 67 % respectively).³ Thus it is not surprising that Adenauer made first place in the ZDF show since he consistently figured in this position in opinion polls over decades.

It is not easy to explain why long dead Adenauer who had been active during the early days of the Federal Republic was able to hold his place so remarkably well. Does he embody the time of youth for many older Germans? Do many younger Germans name him because they are equally impressed by him based on hearsay evidence from their parents and grandparents about the steep rise of the Federal Republic under his leadership, while the contemporary big-wigs hardly make any headway – with a resulting loss of status for Germany internationally? Does the population perhaps indeed possess a quite secure feeling for historical accomplishments and greatness?

There is an indication regarding the motives behind respondents’ high esteem of Adenauer in a survey made in 1995 which included the possibility to include multiple answers from a predetermined list of Adenauer’s accomplishments. The results show that there is no large difference between the assessments made by the general public and those made by historians and political scientists. 62 % of respondents picked “that the Federal Republic became a sov-

oreign state". 55 % considered it Adenauer's greatest accomplishment "that he turned the Federal Republic into an ordered and stable democracy" and (with an equal percentage) "that he regained international reputation and prestige for Germany". Others follow: "Reconciliation and friendship with France" (45 %), "Commitment to a Social Market Economy" (41 %), "Accession of Germany into NATO" (37 %), "The foundation of a large catch-all party, the CDU" (35 %), "Reconciliation with Israel, Compensation for the Jews" (30 %), "Efforts towards a politically united Europe" (29 %).⁴

The population continues to value "the return of the German prisoners of war from the Soviet Union" most highly (59 %). The admiration and emotion connected with this accomplishment formed a sort of innermost core of the Adenauer Myth since the mid-1950s. The voice of the people is certainly not the voice of God. One only needs to remember that even in 1990 a whopping 26 % answered "yes, he would have been" to the question whether Hitler would have been one of the greatest German statesmen if it had not been for the War. 67 % however replied "No, he would not have been".⁵ Yet in the case of Adenauer's accomplishments, a differentiated power of judgment showed itself.

This is also apparent in the question about Adenauer's characteristics. Here too opinion polls reveal similar assessments to those about which historians, the writers of memoirs and journalists have achieved a certain consensus. It is striking that the characteristics ascribed to Adenauer in the mid-1990s are not that different from those of the end of the 1950s. From the point of view of 1995, the most mentioned attributes are overwhelmingly positive: "clever" (62 %), "determined" (57 %), "ambitious" (57 %), "persistent, tenacious" (53 %), "diplomatic" (52 %), "dutiful" (49 %), "educated" (47 %), "industrious" (46 %), "smart,

crafty” (43 %), “likeable” (40 %), “obstinate” (34 %), “devout” (31 %), “ingenious” (14 %), “kind” (11 %). It is remarkable how rarely the formerly so heavily criticised negative assessments are articulated now: “domineering” (10 %), “ruthless” (7 %), “petty” or “cold” (6 %), “un-sympathetic” (4 %), “malicious” or “false” (2 %), “wasteful” (1 %)⁶.

As in many other questions, there is a strong difference in the assessment of Adenauer between Western Germany and the New Länder. Adenauer’s cleverness and kindness were ranked lower in the former GDR, his coldness was ranked higher, and a large majority considered Helmut Kohl, the Chancellor of German Unity, a much greater German than Adenauer. Willy Brandt also receives better marks there. Does this surprise anyone? For decades, the GDR mostly pushed two bogeymen: America and Adenauer.

In any case West Germans and thus a large majority in reunited Germany fondly remember Adenauer as an outstanding patriarch. His legacy no longer seems to be controversial between the political parties. Negative characteristics are being faded out. Will this continue and is this founding Chancellor on his way to become something of a George Washington of the Federal Republic?

In historical research and in journalism, the earlier contentiousness of the figure Adenauer has been replaced by a respectful assessment. The historical controversy about Adenauer has subsided. Of course there are still individual authors who consider the supposed reunification policy of this Federal Chancellor one fat lie and thus mostly blame him for the suffering caused by division. If one approaches Adenauer with this certainty, one will always find documents which affirm this position as long as one blends out the historical context. Overall though, a more relaxed point of view has prevailed. One has learned to ap-

preciate the complexity and alterations of this man who was never quite pinned down as well as the factual constraints of the respective constellation.

A critical analyst once tried to describe the profile of the enigmatic and overall unpleasant American President Nixon as a layer cake. Adenauer can probably only be adequately understood if one appreciates that his political will also interconnected diverse layers with each other: The Rhineland Adenauer, the Federal Chancellor full of pride and simultaneously sceptical of the German nation, the “good European”, the statesman of the “free”, i.e. the Atlantic world, the Chancellor aligning himself with America and the Chancellor who finally went for the bilateral alliance with France (even if both contained caveats), the federalist or only confederalist European, the champion of the Social Market Economy (with an emphasis on market economy and a de-emphasis of the adjective “social”), the traditionalist with protectionist tendencies as soon as coal and agriculture were affected, but also the pig-headed Adenauer (thoroughly anti-Communist, unreservedly pro-Western) and the flexible, sometimes volatile Adenauer. One could continue in this fashion.

Complexity and tensions between almost irreconcilable contradictions. Every layer had its own genesis, its specific hue and its specific taste, but was insolubly connected with many other layers.

Like many other important statesmen he is fascinating in his decisiveness on the one hand, but also in his changeability and contradictions on the other hand. Golo Mann, a good observer and master of nuances, put it this way: “He was greedy for power, though relaxed, jovial, cynical and with a sense of humour which hid the hard core. Although a religious man he distinguished between the things of this world and the next like a Lutheran; while fundamentally modest and opposed to theatrical poses he was cunning

and impudent when it concerned the leadership of his party which he secured, almost usurped.”⁷ Currently it seems as if research is generally reaching this unified view of Adenauer by many paths and detours.

One of the main reasons for the overall more relaxed handling of the historical Adenauer is doubtlessly the caesura of 1989/91 and the resulting political sea-change. All relevant political parties had sooner or later adopted the fundamentals of Adenauer’s Western policies. Already in 1976 on the occasion of Adenauer’s hundredth birthday Willy Brandt, who was always the right man for simultaneously generous as well as ambiguous appreciations, rightly observed: “We all are the heirs of this important person, of his assets and liabilities.”⁸ This is true to this day, even if there is currently a tendency to emphasise the assets more than the liabilities.

When reunification eventually started off helter-skelter, awakening unfounded phobias of a Renaissance of pretensions of a so-called “Fourth Reich”⁹ on the left, it seemed as if quite a few Social Democrats had internalised Adenauer’s emphasis on the German West as the centre of German politics. This may explain the resistance of many on the left against transferring the government from Bonn to the former capital of the Reich in Berlin. Finally even the Greens jumped on the band-wagon of the Western policies initiated by Adenauer.

While the Greens had been socialised by the 1968 student rebellion and thus had nothing good to say about the Adenauer Era and its Christian-Democratic leader previously, they have now turned into admirers of Adenauer. Their disturbed relationship with the state and the German nation caused them to understand Adenauer as a protagonist of “post-national” convictions and of the dissolution of the German state in a federal European state. It is thus not surprising that a Foreign Minister such as Joschka Fischer



On the occasion of Adenauer's centenary in 1976, Willy Brandt declared: "We are all heirs of this important man." The picture shows Adenauer together with Federal President Theodor Heuss (centre) and Willy Brandt, at the time Governing Mayor of Berlin, in 1958.

spoke and acted like a legitimate heir of Adenauer when speaking about the European Union and the friendship with France. While great men have often had illegitimate sons and grandsons in history, this phenomenon remains noteworthy.

There is thus such a thing as an "Adenauer Left", which also explains why the debate about Adenauer's supposed "treason" towards the German nation has subsided. New political traditions have always only finally taken root when the former opposition seems to believe in it or even pretends to always have been in favour of it.

Also after the collapse of the Eastern Block, there is now no alternative to membership in the convoy of Western democracies, especially since the community of democracies has extended to the Baltic States, to Poland and the

Balkans. It is no longer necessary to proclaim the insoluble affiliation to the “free world” – one is in the middle of it and cannot even imagine anything else.

Precisely for this reason, the question “What remains of Adenauer?”¹⁰ is more complicated than at first sight. Adenauer’s political program of an insoluble bond to the West has exhausted itself in total victory – does the West even exist today? Do not certain fault lines between the Western democracies currently reappear after the – perhaps only temporary – withdrawal of the Russians behind the Dnieper and to the gates of Saint Petersburg, forcing German foreign policy to choose between undesirable options, so that the problems resulting from Germany’s central position once again play a role, even if they have taken a new form and so far do not cause any serious security problems?

Of course it makes sense to call the insoluble localisation of Germany in the community of the democracies one of the most important of the Adenauer traditions. This is what he meant when he pronounced the following during the last year of his Chancellorship: “Since 1925 at the latest, the guiding star of my political behaviour has been accession to the West.”¹¹ If one takes this just as seriously today as he did at the time, some delimitations would be possible and even in order.

On the field of Germany’s Eastern policy for instance, the continuation of Adenauer’s tradition in Western policy would mean that a half- or three-quarter-authoritarian state such as Russia or Ukraine would have to be kept at a distance, as difficult as that would be.

But the fundamental decision to keep the German ship-of-state in the middle of the convoy of the democracies also includes the option of an encompassing Atlantic-European community. A differentiation on principle between the United States on the one hand and the European democra-

cies on the other hand would in fact not be compatible with such a concept.

In this regard we are experiencing a sort of *déjà vu* from Adenauer's late period. Once again Germany is torn between America and France – the well-known quarrel between the “Atlanticists” and “Gaullists” is revived, but in a much more complicated Europe and is therefore even more difficult to solve. Today just as at that time England does not know where it belongs: Does it want to be America's junior partner or does it want to be “at the heart of Europe”?

The question whether the European democracies can stand up to current and future dangers without America is just as current today as it was during de Gaulle's time. But what can actually be understood as Adenauer's tradition in these controversial questions? Is it the more Atlantic tradition of the Adenauer of the 1950s who in cases of conflict usually followed Washington, especially when concerned with vital security questions? Or is it the tradition of an Adenauer who after his forced retirement from the Chancellery became the high priest of the German “Gaullists”?

The CDU and all Adenauer fans in journalism, as well as, by the way, the newly constituted “Adenauer Left”, make it much too easy for themselves if they just repeat the old mantras: Orientation towards the West, no German *Sonderweg*, Europe. Today it is unfortunately becoming apparent that many intra-Western contradictions with which even Adenauer had to struggle are opening up again and are putting the community of democracies into question.

The “good European” Adenauer was also everything but non-ambiguous. All attempts to claim him for a specific tradition of European policy can only succeed at the price of reducing his complexity. As we have sketched above, this Proteus of the European Idea pursued quite het-

erogeneous goals between 1947 and 1967. He started as a federalist and ended as a confederalist at de Gaulle's side. One can claim him as a supporter for a supranational Europe just as well as pointing out that he readjusted towards a "Europe of the Nations" (i.e. the nation states) at the end of the 1950s when he entered de Gaulle's gravitational pull. At that time he denied the Commission in Brussels the right to govern the Europe of Six and he went back to the old game with the politics of equilibrium with France and the Federal Republic of Germany as the foremost powers at the core of Europe. Similarly it is also not difficult to identify him as the realistic champion of an Atlantic Europe on the one hand, but on the other hand also of a Europe which not only sought a gigantic European single market, but in the medium term and together with France even what he called a "European foreign policy and security identity". So which Adenauer tradition is one supposed to adhere to today? His early federalist approach of a West European Community of Six with a strong Atlantic foundation – even if the current EU now encompasses 27 states, most of which do not want a European core state and do not agree on the relationship with the United States? Or could perhaps that other Adenauer tradition be applied: an in principle supranationally organised Common Market as the focus of integration efforts, in which however the states still call the shots outside of the ECC-rules – by the way, once again in an Atlanticity rooted system? Today however the ECC concept of the years 1955 to 1959 would be an inconceivable regression. Since the 1980s the original Europe of Six of the Common Market has developed into a pre-federal system due to far-reaching cessions of sovereignty and the development of the European Parliament. This system permeates many core areas of the former nation states, even though the manageable Community of Six has now been replaced with an entity

which is almost impossible to steer with 27 states acting together and against each other.

And even if the tapped upon lines of tradition are not convincing: Should we not recognise his final will and the tradition which should be followed in the French-German Core Europe which he doggedly pursued after 1960, since we are in a fix and do not know how to go on in a much too large EU? Adenauer had only half reluctantly, half of his own choosing embarked on this course of a Europe of nation states under Franco-German patronage and with an obvious anti-American slant as favoured by de Gaulle, and the contradictions of this course towards the other goals of Adenauer's foreign and security policy are just as obvious today as they were at the time.

The fixation on so-called "European identity" while accepting the French claim to leadership and opening up a front against the United States provokes the resistance of all those who primarily expect protection and leadership from America; this course is thus more a project designed to split Europe. The German-French bilateralism which steered the European Community during previous decades has lost its efficiency. During the period of the Red-Green coalition in Germany the German-French tandem once again regained some of its lustre, with Chirac steering and Schröder scampering behind. But this reprise has created so much bad blood in the EU that it has a deterrent effect. Additionally, it did not serve well understood German interests. Today at the beginning of the 21st century this line of tradition from Adenauer seems even more daunting than during his lifetime.

It is certainly one of Adenauer's most important bequests that he wanted to closely unite free Europe somehow. Still it cannot be disputed that there is also an Adenauer tradition in which the democratic state is the highest order of reference. Just like in domestic policy Ade-

nauer was decisively keeping developments under his firm control, even if he had to allow or voluntarily allowed various projects of *construction européenne* (as it is called in the French usage) to go forward. This founding Chancellor of the Federal Republic who never rested until he left the mark of his will on his own state and got it into shape was not disposed to just hand over all he had accomplished with so much hard work to European bodies or voting procedures. As almost every chapter of his memoirs shows, he successfully developed the Federal Republic from a state of foreign domination to the level of a sovereign state. In a certain way his attitude to transfers of sovereignty was akin to the mentality exhibited by the democracies of Eastern Europe after they regained their sovereignty and as they entered the EU. They recognised its usefulness, hoped to be admitted to a large Common Market and Community of Western, Northern and South European democracies, they hope for protection and help, but simultaneously they want to restrict exterior domination after just being liberated from the Soviet grip. Adenauer's visible insistence on self-determined democracy as the unit of foreign policy action (despite the development of an integrated common market and extended cooperation between closely connected states) was not just a compromise with de Gaulle, but also expressed his genuine understanding of the role of the state and of democracy.

Since Adenauer was not fixed on one single concept of Europe permanently, instead manoeuvring constantly, there is no such thing as a specific tradition of his European policy, quite apart from the fact that Europe at the beginning of the 21st century no longer has any similarities to the European system of states in the mid-20th century. While he did not always avoid presenting a visionary program, he proved to be a pragmatist when it came to the realisation of airy ideas. With a combination of willpower and a

sensitive grasp for the opportune, he was never someone who chose simplistic solutions and steadfastly retained certain concepts, come what may. Sometimes he emphasised this, then the other – always taking the possible as his yardstick and always being open to compromises and variants, even though these sometimes led quite far from the original goals.

Those who put the label “visionary” on him overlook the empirically supported pragmatism of this great realist. “Do you know which book I would put on spot no. 1 in the Index?” he is supposed to have said once. “Faust!”¹² He was no Faustian, but rather an experimental European. If there is any Adenauer tradition of European policy, then it is the sober sense for reality while foregoing the drafting of utopian plans. One of his principles was: “One should never commit oneself to such a degree that one cannot choose to do something else.”¹³ Still, it is sure that Adenauer wanted to get Europe together somehow. Somehow, without the future form and extent of Europe already being visible.

When the Swiss historian and journalist Jean Rudolf von Salis visited Adenauer in August 1966, three quarters of a year before his death, he was told: “As a historian, you know that foreign policy is determined by the most crass egoism.”¹⁴ This was Adenauer’s penultimate utterance on the matter of the “free world” and Europe before speaking about them for the last time at the Ateneo in Madrid. There he presented a European creed full of optimism.¹⁵

And what remains of the concepts of Adenauer’s domestic policy? It is not necessary to emphasise that Germany exists in a quite different and not necessarily better world in the early 21st century. At least there are a remarkable number of continuities, so that the question whether a therapy of the German disease with Adenauer’s medicines would be feasible.