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Helmut Schmidt, the Elder World Statesman: Chancellor, Commentator, and Cigarette-Lover

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Introduction

On the morning of Tuesday, 10 November, Helmut Heinrich Waldemar Schmidt passed away at the age of 96 in his home in Hamburg, Germany. Even up to his final days, he remained an interested, informed, and provocative commentator on current events. While critically seen during his term as German chancellor between 1974 and 1982, he gained considerable esteem after his chancellorship and was recently voted 'Germany's coolest man'. Although his chancellorship was not associated with any of the threshold events of German history – unlike his predecessor Willy Brandt's policy of *Ostpolitik* and his successor Helmut Kohl's luck in being the chancellor of unification – Helmut Schmidt nevertheless left his mark on German, European, and global events. His legacies are not only the images of an elderly man wilfully ignoring the smoking ban in public places, but also the summit diplomacy that still marks international politics today, Germany's rigid policy of not giving in to terrorist demands, current financial European integration, and his contributions towards a more positive global view of Germany as a reliable democracy after the horrors of World War II.

The early years

Helmut Schmidt was born to a lower middle class family in Hamburg in 1918, a month after the end of World War I. Like many of his contemporaries, he was intrigued by the promises of comradeship and adventure of the Hitler Youth, which he joined and then left in the mid-1930s. According to his own statements, his flirtation with National Socialism came to an end when his mother revealed to him that he had a Jewish grandfather, a fact Schmidt's father managed to hide from the authorities until the end of the Third Reich. At the beginning of the Second World War, Schmidt was drafted into the Wehrmacht and served in the eastern and western theatres of war, among others. At the end of the war, Schmidt was arrested by the British and held in a prisoner of war camp, until his release in late August 1945. Upon his return to civilian life, Schmidt studied economics and started his political career for the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Hamburg.



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The man who thrived in crises

From 1953 to 1962 and then again from 1965 to 1987, Schmidt was a member of the West German parliament, the Bundestag. From 1961 to 1965 he had a short yet important role as senator (read: minister) for the interior in Hamburg. It was here that Schmidt's reputation as a crisis manager was first established. During the dreadful flood of 1962, Schmidt assumed control of the local police and fire brigades and integrated them into the rescue efforts, in conjunction with – in a fashion that was legally speaking anti-constitutional at the time – the federal army. His resolute handling of the crisis recommended him for more notable jobs in Bonn, the capital.

During the first grand coalition of Social Democrats and Christian Democrats that ruled the country between 1966 and 1969, Schmidt led the SPD parliamentary group, a challenging position in a coalition government. He managed, however, to keep the government together and was rewarded for this when the SPD won the election in 1969 led by Willy Brandt. Schmidt was given the post of First Minister of Defence and then, in 1972, he became the Minister of Finance. He gained respect in both positions by introducing a fundamental reform of the armed forces and by dealing efficiently with the oil crisis. When Willy Brandt had to step down from the chancellorship in 1974 – after it was revealed that one of his closest aides, Günter Guillaume, was an East German spy – it was Helmut Schmidt who succeeded him in office.

Schmidt's chancellorship was marked by three important challenges: the economic crisis of the 1970s, domestic and international terrorism, and the NATO Double-Track Decision of 1979. Schmidt successfully navigated Germany through the turmoil of global recession and, together with his French counterpart and friend Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, laid the groundwork not only for an integrated European currency through the European Monetary System but also for global macro-economic coordination of the economic powers by means of the G7 summits.

When the Federal Republic encountered the worst excesses of domestic and international terrorism, committed by the Red Army Faction (RAF) and their Palestinian comrades, in the mid- to late 1970s, it was Chancellor Schmidt who decided to take a hard-line approach to terrorism, which had as its basic principle the conviction that the government would not give in to the political demands of terrorists. This policy was highly controversial especially in the midst of the 'German Autumn' of 1977 when the industrialist Hanns Martin Schleyer was kidnapped by terrorists and a Lufthansa jet was hijacked with roughly 90 people on board. Schmidt decided that the terrorist demands would not be met and instead ordered that a commando operation, executed by the counterterrorism unit GSG 9, be carried out to free the plane in Mogadishu. Yet in response to the successful GSG 9 operation, the RAF killed Schleyer. Schmidt later said that this made him feel guilty, but that he



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ultimately did not regret the decision to end the hijacking crisis by means of a commando operation. The Germans rewarded him for this crisis management and in the immediate aftermath of the 'German Autumn' he had the highest popularity ratings of any chancellor. The Mogadishu events also marked the turning point in German terrorism, which – while not disappearing until the early 1990s – never again reached the same intensity (or popular support).

The third challenge, the issue of ballistic nuclear missiles in Germany, marked Schmidt's third legacy but also the issue that would contribute to his fall in 1982. Faced with an increase in Soviet medium- and intermediate range ballistic missiles in Europe, Schmidt lobbied NATO to match this development through the deployment of new American nukes in Europe (mostly on German soil). In the ears of the emerging peace movement, as well as the left wing of his own SPD party, this was an unpopular decision. Schmidt feared that Western weakness regarding these missiles might make a – limited – nuclear war in Europe more likely, especially as the American commitment to the nuclear defence of Europe might weaken if there was the possibility that nuclear war could be limited to Europe (the Soviets kept their inter-continental nuclear arsenal at the same level and thus did not pose an aggravated threat to America). Consequently, from a European perspective, to maintain MAD – the concept of Mutually Assured Destruction – the West would have to follow suit and upgrade its nuclear intermediate missiles in Europe to once again balance the situation. Schmidt advocated this policy and it was finally implemented in 1979. While there was a negotiation element to the strategy – the West gave the Warsaw Pact the option to reduce its nuclear ballistic systems and would only deploy the Pershing II missiles if the Soviets failed to oblige – Schmidt was accused of being a warmonger and of risking détente. Quite the opposite is true, however. Faced with growing superpower tensions in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the chancellor successfully managed to keep European and German détente, and thus *Ostpolitik*, alive.

He was not as successful in economic and domestic terms: when economic problems in the early 1980s worsened, Schmidt decided against severe economic and welfare reforms and thus lost the support of his liberal coalition partner, the FDP. Publically damaged by the Double-Track debates, and facing a continuing loss of support from his own party, in addition to new economic challenges and the withdrawal of his coalition partner from the government, Schmidt faced a vote of no-confidence in 1982 – and lost. The FDP had changed camps and supported the Christian Democrat Helmut Kohl, who succeeded Schmidt in office. It was the first time in German history that a chancellor was ousted by a vote of no-confidence. The SPD would remain in opposition for 16 years until Schmidt's self-proclaimed political heir (although quite fierce opponent in the 1970s and early 1980s) Gerhard Schröder won back the chancellorship for the social democrats in 1998.

Retired chancellor, active commentator



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History can be unpredictable and especially so in the case of Helmut Schmidt: he only obtained a high level of popularity and respect from the German population once he was a retired politician, not during his chancellorship. He remained in Parliament until 1987, but had already joined the editorial board of the weekly *Die Zeit* in 1983, a position he held until his death. From his Hamburg office he remained a critical observer of domestic and international politics and maintained his network with other elder statesmen such as Gerald Ford, Henry Kissinger, Giscard, but also academics such as the historian Fritz Stern. His critical voice, normally coming out of a cloud of cigarette smoke, remained a constant phenomenon in German media and contributed to his almost pop star-like popularity among all strata of the German population (and beyond). He published scores of books, continued to write articles, and despite the death of his wife of 68 years, Loki, in 2010, remained a public figure.

Helmut Schmidt's legacies

What remains of Helmut Schmidt? He was judged an average chancellor at the time and none of the significant political ruptures in German post-war history are related to his name. Maybe that was his biggest legacy: in times of crisis he provided stability, reliability, and a feeling of security to the Germans. Through his handling of terrorism, he passed the litmus test for the German democracy and indeed for the rule of law in the country that still bore the stigma of National Socialism. While he was prepared to go to the limits of what was legally allowed in dealing with terrorism, he would not go beyond the constitutional barriers – a demand that was often raised by others in the 1970s. He proved to the Germans and their neighbours that a severe crisis could be dealt with from within the existing legal framework and that there was no need to resort to other solutions. One can only hope that contemporary decision makers will follow this approach in their dealings with terrorism. Likewise, he steered the Germans through the stormy days of the global recession in the 1970s. After the social upheavals of the late 1960s – ‘1968’ serves as a symbol for that – and the economically troublesome days of the end of the Bretton Woods gold-based system coupled with the oil crisis, Schmidt allowed the Germans to calm down and settle into the new era. He did not impose new significant reforms on his fellow men and women. Yet, especially the end of his term was marked by new uproars caused by the anti-nuclear energy and peace movements. In the collective memory of the German people, however, Schmidt will most certainly remain the chancellor that contained terrorism.

Then again, Schmidt also left his mark on international politics, through the G7 summits, for instance, which were an attempt to bring world leaders together, in informal settings, to have them discuss and (ideally) resolve some of the pressing issues for the global economy, and progressively also, global politics at large. This idea of summit meetings was successful and continues, in various shapes, today.



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Through his leadership role in the G7 process, the NATO Double-Track decision, as well as, for instance, in fields such as antiterrorism policies at the UN, Schmidt (re-)established Germany's position as an important, influential, and respected equal amongst the leading powers in the world. He led Germany into a new, more independent and more globally active era.

In his later years, his comments on current affairs offered informed and thought-provoking, albeit often controversial, analysis of current policies and problems. Although they were not – and could not – always be taken into account (it is the advantage of an elder statesmen that he does not have to pay too much attention to opinion polls, national interests, maintaining friendly relations with various states, and other aspects that put their limitations on the conduct of politics), they certainly offered different perspectives to decision makers and the informed public. While he was an important political leader during his active political career, his reputation as an elder world statesman only emerged after he left office.

Helmut Schmidt offered stability in turbulent times, both as chancellor and as a political commentator afterwards; but his actual political legacy in terms of concrete events and outcomes remains modest in comparison with his predecessor and successor. Nevertheless, his critical, informed, and contentious voice will certainly be missed – and probably (and secretly) even his notorious cigarettes.

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