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'Keep Calm and Carry On!': Angela Merkel and Her Chancellorship

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pour l'histoire du temps présent

In December 2021, an era came to an end. After 16 years in office, Angela Merkel handed over the Chancellery to her successor, Olaf Scholz. Had she stayed in office just two more weeks, she would have been the longest serving chancellor of post-war Germany. Now, she ended up a very close second to Helmut Kohl (chancellor from 1982-1998). Arguably, throughout the four consecutive terms she held, the world had undergone transformative changes: the financial crisis, the rise and fall of ISIL, the Syrian refugee crisis, the invasion of Ukraine and the Russian occupation of the Crimean Peninsula, growing awareness of the climate emergency, and Covid-19. Merkel has worked with four US and French presidents, five British prime ministers, and eight Italian heads of government. The fact that everybody aged 16 or younger has only known her as the chancellor has led some to satirically wonder whether a man could actually be federal chancellor too (the apparent puzzle of this question is more striking in German: 'Kann ein Mann auch Bundeskanzler~~in~~ sein?'). Merkel was the first woman and first East German in this position. She managed to weather many domestic and international storms and secured four terms in office (and probably would have won the last one, had she run again). What, then, was the secret to Merkel's success, and what is her legacy?

Angela Merkel: The Unexpected Chancellor

Merkel showed one of her most remarkable personal traits again at the very end of her political career: she did not make a fuss. Certainly, there was the now-traditional military ceremony marking her farewell, but ever since she handed over the keys to the Chancellery to Scholz, Merkel disappeared from the public stage. No interviews, no comments from the off, and no more membership in parliament. When UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres asked her to chair a high-calibre advisory board, [Merkel politely declined](#). It is this contrast to her predecessor, Gerhard Schröder (chancellor from 1998-2005), that explains to some extent her success. Amongst the qualities Germans liked most about Merkel, competence, leadership, credibility, and likeability were at the [top of the leader board](#). People in Germany do not seem to like overly flamboyant or noisy politicians. The fact that Olaf Scholz's style is a carbon copy of Merkel's supports this observation. It was in Merkel's nature to be calm and cool-headed, and this appealed to the electorate often rolling their eyes at the likes of Nicolas Sarkozy, Donald Trump, Silvio Berlusconi, or Boris Johnson. Moreover, Merkel is a Frau Doktor. While in other countries, academics striving for political offices might be viewed sceptically, accused of being out of touch with the common people, or over-educated, having a PhD as a politician in Germany is certainly a huge advantage.¹ It gives the air of seriousness, expertise, and reliability – all of which being qualities Germans appreciate. Historically speaking, chancellors who exuded a certain 'unexcitedness' (some might call it 'boringness') – pragmatism, credibility, status quo politics and an absence of greatly reformatory agendas – fared better in a country that preferred longer-lasting chancellorships in any event: Dr (!) Helmut Kohl (16 years), Helmut Schmidt (8 years), and Konrad Adenauer (14 years) all stood for continuity, reliability, seriousness, and expertise. Chancellors advocating more 'radical' changes, on the contrary, stayed in office for shorter periods: for instance Willy Brandt (5 years), or Gerhard Schröder (7 years). In this sense, thus, Merkel was a constant in German politics.

Where she differed from all her predecessors was in her personal history: Angela Dorothea Kasner was born in Hamburg (West Germany) in 1954. Shortly after her birth, her father, a Lutheran pastor, relocated the family to East Germany, where she grew up. She studied natural sciences and was married to Ulrich Merkel from 1977-1982. In 1986, she graduated with a PhD in physics and, since 1998, has been married to Joachim Sauer, a retired chemistry professor who she knew since the 1980s. When the GDR regime toppled in 1989, Merkel joined the *Demokratischer Aufbruch*, which fused into the *Allianz für Deutschland* and became a predecessor of the new and democratic East German CDU. When they won the – first and only democratic – Volkskammer elections in 1990, the *Allianz's* leader Lothar de Maizière became prime minister of the GDR and Merkel his deputy spokesperson. After unification in 1990, Merkel successfully ran for the Bundestag in the Rügen constituency, a position she had held for more than 30 years until her retirement



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°1 | January 2022

from parliament in 2021. Upon her election in 1990, Helmut Kohl appointed her to the cabinet and made her Minister for Women and Youth. Over the next few years, Merkel strengthened her position within the party, became the party leader in the state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in 1993 and advanced to the higher-profile cabinet position of Minister for Environment in 1994. Upon the victory of Gerhard Schröder and his SPD in the 1998 federal elections, and in the aftermath of revelations that Kohl and others in the CDU accepted dodgy donations, Merkel rose to the position of the party's General Secretary in 1999 and CDU Leader in 2000. She stayed in the latter position until 2018, when she stepped down against the backdrop of the CDU losing in regional elections. Back in 2005, Gerhard Schröder faced growing domestic criticism over his welfare reforms ('Agenda 2010') and called for early elections. His governing coalition of SPD and Greens lost their majority and Merkel managed to become chancellor of a new 'grand coalition' of CDU and SPD. Over the next 16 years, she moulded four consecutive governments (a CDU-FDP coalition 2009-2013, and grand coalitions with the SPD from 2013-2017, and 2017-2021). As leader of the CDU, she succeeded in placing loyal allies in central positions and outmanoeuvred challengers from within the party. Her skilful navigation of party dynamics thus helped secure her power for almost two decades. Ultimately though it also led to a situation where no heir was apparent. One of her protégées, the former minister of defence, Ursula von der Leyen became EU Commission President in 2019 and her other favourite successor, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer did not manage to gain enough support (both for herself within the party and for the CDU at regional elections) to build the power basis needed to be nominated as candidate for the chancellorship. Ultimately, Armin Laschet led the CDU into the federal elections in 2021; and lost. While he was closer to Merkel politically than some of the other contesters within the CDU, during the election campaign, he tried to distance himself politically from Merkel and pronounced a more conservative agenda. His inability to gain support amongst the electorate and several PR mistakes led him to preside over the lowest electoral results for the CDU at a federal election ever; and paved the way for Olaf Scholz and his SPD-Greens-FDP coalition to form a new government. In the 2021 election campaign, Merkel was not running again for her Rügen constituency and took a back seat in campaigning.

She stood out again from her predecessors when she left the office. She was one of only two post-war chancellors who left office of their own volition (the other one was Adenauer), and not as a result of being either voted out in elections (Schröder, Kohl, Kiesinger), a breakdown of the governing coalition (Schmidt, Erhard), or a major scandal (and probably, fatigue: Brandt).

The last years of her chancellorship were marked by her handling of the Covid-19 crisis. Here, her personal traits that led her into four successive chancellorships were a strength again: her background as a natural scientist, her experience, credibility, and determination to find feasible solutions. As one amongst several factors, it made Germany weather the first waves rather well, compared with other countries. However, in the final months of her chancellorship, Merkel was more reluctant to lead. That is somewhat inevitable in a transitional period. Merkel, now, was a 'lame duck' as outgoing, and then caretaker, chancellor and thus in a poor position to push through new measures that would be controversial, and stood to have had a serious impact upon the country and her successor. Possibly also, Merkel understood her position to be really just that of a caretaker. It might have been her pragmatism that led her to realise that the serious political battles (within her party, in a new Bundestag with new majorities, and importantly with the leaders of the Länder all wanting different things) necessary to implement new measures were not hers to fight anymore. The lack of controversy and the orderly handing over of affairs to the next government, though it should be normal in democracies, is still noteworthy against the backdrop of tumultuous scenes around the final days of Trump in early 2021. She thus left office in a very Merkelian way: calmly rather than with a big brouhaha. Merkel finished her job, she handed over the keys, and then she silently left the stage.

The Recipe For Success: Keep Calm And Carry On

A major factor for Merkel's success was the very reason she was often criticised abroad (and within Germany by the opposition): she was not one for great new visions, emotional policies, or quick policy-making. She preferred pragmatism, caution, and problem-focussed solutions, over actionism or activism. Merkel's approach was to lead from behind rather than pompously declaring grand new strategies. In that sense she followed the tradition of former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (1974-1982), who once proclaimed that those who have visions should go and see a doctor. Against the backdrop of a global political climate that was shifting towards populism and nationalism (Brexit, Trump), policies of fear-mongering (around refugees or immigrants, for instance), and breaking with long-term traditions, Merkel's policy appeared as a beacon of stability and continuity in an otherwise rough environment. When the old international order of multilateralism, cooperation, and European integration appeared most at stake, Merkel was seen by many as the [last bastion of the old liberal world order](#) based on Western values, and she was declared the [leader of the 'free world'](#). Against the domestic turmoil many Western nations were facing, Merkel was perceived as a guarantor of stability and achieved [remarkably high global approval ratings](#). At the same time though, and to the dismay of some, her approach also meant that she



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°1 | January 2022

often shied away from theatrics or the fuelling of conflicts. Vis-à-vis Russia and China for instance, her policy was one of ongoing dialogue despite all crises, which was greeted with criticism abroad. Her determination to keep a dialogue open also applied to people that showed a great deal of hostility towards her, such as Donald Trump. This meant that politics under her were less impulsive and emotional than under her predecessors – with Gerhard Schröder, for instance, being much more openly hostile to then US President George W. Bush. Merkel's resistance to openly show much emotion in her dealings with other leaders gave her politics an air of professionalism and, again, pragmatism, and stood in contrast to openly displayed affections and 'Männerfreundschaften' broadcast by Gerhard Schröder (with Vladimir Putin) or Helmut Kohl (for instance in his dealings with Boris Yeltsin or François Mitterrand). Merkel successfully managed to convey the image that during her chancellorship *raison d'état* trumped over other more personal considerations.

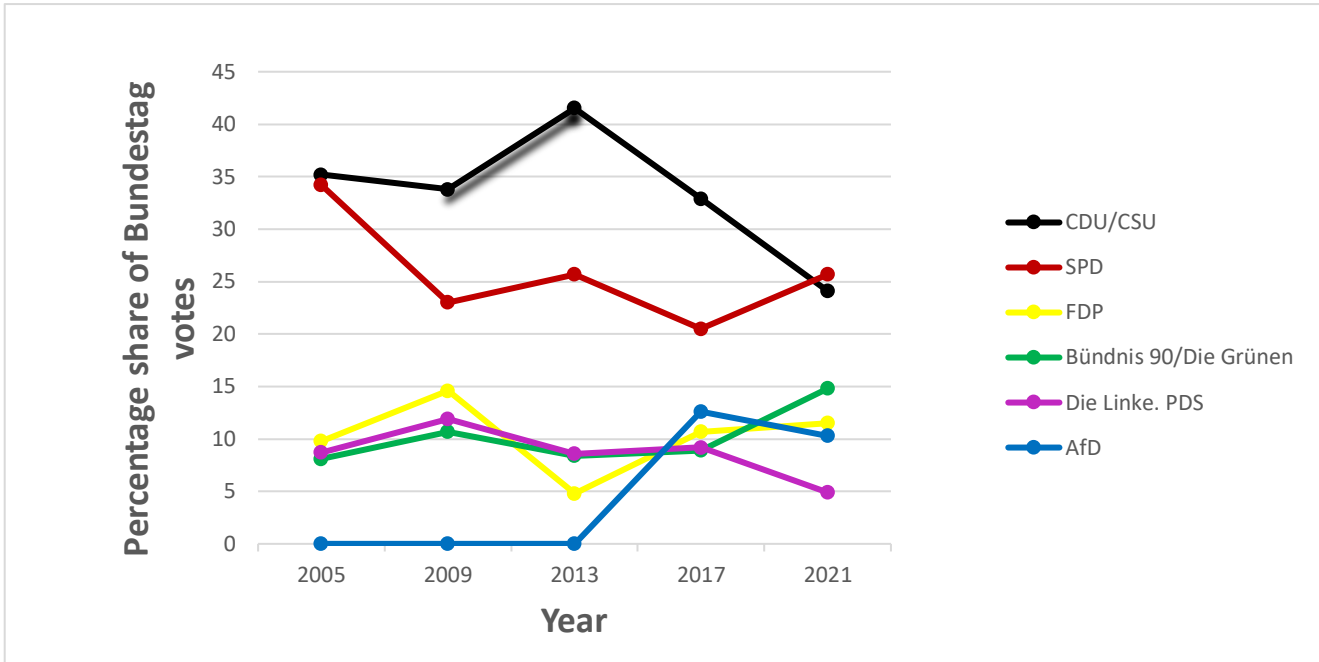
However, the lack of visionary politics, her occasional hesitation, and the reluctance to lead with initiatives also earned her a great deal of criticism. During the Euro crisis, for instance, European partners including [Poland](#) called upon Merkel to show more leadership. A few years later, French President Emmanuel Macron was openly frustrated when his plans to revive European integration received only a [lukewarm reception in Berlin](#). Across her chancellorship, Merkel was [reluctant to assume leadership](#) in Europe: she reacted rather than leading proactively. But she could also show resolve: during and after the Russian invasion of the Crimean Peninsula, she orchestrated a united European response.² Then again, as far as climate change was concerned, many people within Germany and abroad expected more direction from Merkel, who had served as Minister For Environment prior to her chancellorship. One of her earlier trips as chancellor took her to Greenland and made for [very photogenic scenes](#) in front of a glacier, but hopes for a strong German leadership against global warming were disappointed. In general though, Merkel's unpretentious policy of pragmatism, predictability, and stability appealed to the electorate. It was the moment when she departed from her normal style and made a rather spontaneous and arguably emotional decision (albeit for all the right moral reasons), that posed the biggest threat to her chancellorship: when she allowed Syrian refugees into Germany, without much prior consultation with domestic and European partners alike, in the autumn of 2015. This sudden policy isolated Germany within the EU, and upset even close allies. It also dented her popularity domestically and alienated more conservative sections of the electorate. Although this was not the only break with conservative policies, it was the most spectacular one.

Long-term though, her decisions to phase out nuclear power (days after the Fukushima incident in 2011), to end conscription (2011, technically it is currently only paused), and not to oppose the introduction of gay marriage (2017) all signposted how Merkel had moved her party further to the political centre. This was another secret of her success. Rather than opting for polarisation and positioning herself strongly vis-à-vis the major opposition party, the SPD, Merkel diminished the gap between political platforms and osmotically adopted SPD policies. This upset the right-wing of her own party, but it did get her (re-)elected. It also played to the deeply engrained desire for political stability within the country: for why risk voting in a new chancellor when the sitting one is a well-known variable and supports more or less the same policies anyway?³ This, in fact, posed a major challenge for the SPD, which struggled (and arguably still does) to define (and defend) its political niche. At a time when, globally speaking, populism and polarisation were on the rise, in Germany, political agendas between both major parties appeared to converge. This was a trend other parties benefitted from, whether on the left – with the Greens – or on the far right with the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD).



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°1 | January 2022



As far as the general electorate was concerned, however, her strategy worked well for Merkel: even after the end of her chancellorship, she remained the [most popular politician in Germany in January 2022](#) and the CDU might well have won the 2021 federal elections again with her as the candidate instead of Armin Laschet.

The Legacy

After 16 years at the helm of Europe's most powerful country, Merkel certainly left her mark on Germany, and the continent. Domestically, the farewell to nuclear power, the end of military service, the refugee crisis as well as the related rise of the AfD will have a legacy beyond Merkel. Though not the only factor, Merkel's centrist policy contributed to a stronger fragmentation of the German political landscape and was the lifeblood that far-right political vampires needed to reinvigorate themselves. However, her refusal to flirt with populism and 'easy answers' kept the political culture largely intact in Germany, as opposed to countries such as the UK and the US. It appears that her successor as CDU leader, Friedrich Merz, might change that strategy and [give in to temptations](#) that other politicians have succumbed to elsewhere. In any event, it will be likely that the CDU under him will move further to the right again. This does not, per se, mean havoc for the German political system. On the contrary, a more pronounced conservative CDU might attract back voters from the right-wing fringes and re-integrate them into the mainstream parties. This could mean fewer votes for extremist parties such as the AfD. But this is a serious gamble with fire of course and the Tories in the UK show just too clearly how this policy might backfire and inadvertently move the whole party to the extremes. After 12 years of grand coalitions, however, a more clearly defined political landscape and a proper opposition party, will breathe new life into the Bundestag, the CDU, and possibly even the SPD.

Discontinuity might be less obvious in government policies than in the CDU. In character and policies, Scholz does not differ too strongly from Merkel – in fact that was one of his [strongest selling points](#) in his election campaign – and it remains to be seen to what extent his new three-way coalition will break with former policies. In the larger policy strategies though – a commitment to Europe, to multilateralism, to the transatlantic relationship, to German exports, and to ongoing dialogue with Russia and China – no major rifts will appear. The changes might be more noteworthy domestically, for instance in terms of green politics. But in foreign relations, Merkel's long shadow – which was itself a continuation of traditional German policies – will continue to loom large.

Europe was a major concern and issue for Merkel throughout her entire chancellorship. With the Euro crisis, the support for anti-integration parties on the rise across Europe, the refugee crisis, Brexit, and Covid-19, the European project more than once looked like it might fall apart. It was largely, though certainly not entirely, thanks to Merkel's crisis diplomacy, negotiations, and zeal for



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°1 | January 2022

compromises that the European boat was kept afloat. Her policies earned her a great deal of criticism abroad and at home, but they kept the EU together at a time when forces pulled at it from all ends and delicate balances had to be struck. Take the Euro crisis as an example. While some countries, like Greece, Italy and France wanted a softening of the Euro criteria, and end to austerity, and ideally a communitisation of debt, others such as Germany, Austria, the Benelux states, and the UK were strongly opposed. In Germany, for instance, selling this southern European wishlist to the electorate would have been politically suicidal for anybody and would have led to a massive uptick for anti-EU movements. This, in turn, could have spelled disaster for German politics and the future of the EU. Therefore, and while the compromises reached were not perfect (compromises never are) – and were criticised by almost everybody as either going too far or not far enough – they kept the Euro and the EU alive. This result was not a given at the time. Similar developments occurred at almost all EU negotiations during Merkel's terms as chancellor. Compromises were reached that everybody could live with; and almost nobody liked. In sometimes endless rounds of negotiations, Merkel helped keep the EU together. Her approach was to lead from behind – pragmatically, calmly, and often stubbornly. The European project lives off concessions, and certainly, Merkel was the master of compromise. It remains to be seen who will fill the void left by her departure.

Yet compromising also meant that sometimes Germany had to swallow bitter pills itself. One such bullet Merkel had to bite, the importance of which one can hardly overstate, was the European Recovery Fund, also known as 'Next Generation EU'. Agreed in 2020, this was a remarkable break with tradition and the past. For the first time, the EU was allowed to issue its own bonds and to raise 750 billion Euros from capital markets to help member states fight the effects of Covid. This was quite a blatant communitisation of debt, one the richer states were more likely to pay for than the poorer ones if things were to go wrong. Yet, Germany and other 'frugal' states agreed to it. Next Generation EU was arguably a significant step forward in European integration. It broke with a German taboo and will make any further policies in this direction easier to sell for future governments. So, Merkel's legacy on Europe will not only be to have kept the project together, but in her last years she might have well given it the impetus it needed to adapt to new realities and challenges. Certainly, Merkel did not breathe a new vision into Europe, much to Macron's dismay. But she assisted with saving the EU to begin with; and she might well have – slowly and pragmatically – helped provide the basis for more ambitious developments in the future.

Globally, her legacy is certainly her commitment to multilateralism and liberal Western values. Against the tides of Trumpism and Brexitism, she continued to press for international cooperation and dialogue, and thus helped keeping the Western alliance together. She also stood up to bullies trying to undermine the rule of law, human rights and Western values (whether they were in Washington, Moscow, Budapest or elsewhere). She did so not as noisily as many wished, but consistently, and thus perhaps more effectively. Through all this, she [increased Germany's global profile](#), improved the [country's global image](#), and helped carry the 'old international order' into the arguably safer harbour of the Biden presidency.

However, there were also instances when Merkel promoted genuinely German policies despite international criticism. EU-policies aside, Germany's objection to the military intervention in Libya in 2011 was one such case where Merkel did not join her Western allies. Nord Stream 2 is another example and one that will transcend Merkel's chancellorship. The plans to build new pipelines from Russia to Germany preceded her term but most of the key decisions were taken during her chancellorship. Transporting gas through the Baltic Sea by bypassing eastern European countries harnessed criticism there. However, it was also dismissed by NATO allies and has become an irritant in the transatlantic relationship at least since the Russian invasion of the Crimean Peninsula. The reasons for the quarrels are perhaps mostly symbolic; but politics is about appearances after all. Nord Stream just looks bad, and it presented a dilemma for Merkel and continues to do so for the new government. On the one hand, there is an argument to be made for continuing to engage with Russia and economic entanglement might be effective in preventing a drastic escalation of tensions. Moreover, there is a huge hunger for gas in Europe, and the current rise in prices will only contribute to it further. Environmentally even, Russian gas might be the lesser of two evils, when the alternative is gas gained from fracking elsewhere. On the other hand, though, there are the aesthetics of it; and they do not look good. At a time of rising tensions between the West and Russia it is undoubtedly unwise to have such an exclusive deal that bypasses Poland and Ukraine, deprives them of income from transit fees, and makes them less strategic in securing European energy supplies. Better diplomatic (and historical) judgment might have been needed here. For, without reevoking the spirit of Rapallo (and certainly less so of Molotov-Ribbentrop),⁴ Germany and Russia making deals amongst themselves arguably at the expense of the states in between them, is ignorant of regional experiences, sensitivities, and fears, and it has a bad historical aftertaste. It will be one of Merkel's less pragmatic and possibly more damaging legacies.

Her lack of global leadership on countering climate change will also be one of the more negative legacies. Certainly, it was not an easy international environment for action on global warming. While it became more and more obvious – to scientists and ordinary people alike – that the environment was changing, international action was hesitant. Some leaders, like Donald Trump, denied man-made climate change altogether as he withdrew the US from the Paris Agreement. Other countries, such as China and India were reluctant to support any binding global commitments as they feared economic disadvantages. Tackling this crisis will also come at significant cost to people across the globe who will have to break with dear habits, so it might prove to be unpopular domestically.



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°1 | January 2022

At the same time, Germany was certainly actively involved in setting up global climate action. But Merkel, as a scientist, a former Minister for Environment and as chancellor of an influential and environmentally-conscious country, would have been in a good position to seek a stronger global response to the crisis.

In sum though, Merkel's is an overall positive balance sheet: she proved (again) that women can succeed in, and leave a mark on, politics just as much as men can. She concluded German unification at least symbolically, by putting an East German at the helm of the united country.⁵ And she was a proponent of a style of political culture that favoured rationalism, cooperation, pragmatism, and compromise (with an eye to realities and feasibilities), over populism, unilateralism, open nationalism, polarisation, and polemics. She kept the EU alive and helped pave the way for its future while also supporting international institutions and Western cooperation. At a time when forces were pulling from all ends, she supported the old Western liberal democratic order. In her final year as chancellor, Germany had been voted '[best-regarded country](#)' in a row for five years, proving that Merkel's legacy did not only result in her own positive global perception, but greatly improved the global image of her country, too. She was one of the longest-serving statespeople in Europe, had a huge amount of experience, and a style of negotiation that proved successful more often than not. Her political results were certainly important, but the way she achieved them might be what really set her apart. There is little doubt that her calm, pragmatic, and often 'boring' ways will come to be missed in tumultuous times ahead.

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Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°1 | January 2022

¹ Almost [20% of the members of the last Bundestag](#) had a doctorate, which is a considerably higher proportion than the [1.2% of the German population](#) with a PhD.

² See for instance Judy Dempsey, 'Merkel Is the Unsung Hero of Ukraine Crisis', Carnegie Europe, 23 February 2015, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2015/02/23/merkel-is-unsung-hero-of-ukraine-crisis-pub-59161>; Elizabeth Pond, 'Germany's Real Role in the Ukraine Crisis: Caught between East and West', *Foreign Affairs* 94 (2015): 173–77.

³ This was in fact highly successful election strategy before: in 1957, then chancellor Konrad Adenauer ran on a platform of 'keine Experimente wagen' ('no experiments') and secured a major electoral victory for his party.

⁴ In the Rapallo Treaty of 1922, Germany and the Soviet Union – both international pariah states at the time – agreed to establish friendly relations and to cooperate, amongst others, militarily. It is sometimes seen, though not rightly so, as the beginning of German-Soviet collusion that would culminate in the splitting up of Eastern Europe into Soviet and German zones of interest via the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

⁵ Between 2012 and 2017, the two most important positions in Germany, that of chancellor and of federal president, were actually held by East Germans, when Joachim Gauck was Federal President.