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The Chancellor and Her World
Merkelmania

The Chancellor’s New Power

In the eighth year of her chancellorship, Angela Merkel has reached the zenith of her power – again. She has now been at the head of the greatest and richest economy in Europe for two parliamentary terms. She is the undisputed leader of her party and faces almost no opposition. She presides over a cabinet of mostly loyal and obedient ministers. She has tamed her second coalition partner, putting to rest the initial negative impression of her government. She treats the opposition with disdain. Publicly, she enjoys a great deal of respect – no chancellor before her had been able to call on such high approval ratings in their seventh year of government. Economically, her country is not in a bad shape – compared to its neighbours. Nor is Germany troubled by any major problems at home.

Angela Merkel has risen to a position of power and worldwide influence. She is one of a small group of heads of state who can look back on a similarly long period in office. In the European Union she is the last of her generation of leaders: apart from that perennial, the Prime Minister of Luxembourg, no one has been in power longer than she has. The President of the European Commission took office the year before her – but only with her help. Merkel is working with the second American President of her
time in office, and she had dealings with their predecessor. She is engaged in a kind of hare-and-tortoise race with the President of Russia as to who will stay in office longest. In China Merkel has so far seen only one change of leadership: she eagerly anticipated her meeting with the new leaders, wishing to compare the new politicians in power with their familiar predecessors.

She has contributed to the peace process in the Middle East. She has an intense and sometimes even emotional relationship with Israel, partly because of German history of course, but also because of the kind of personal feelings that she seldom allows to interfere with international relationships. The intensity of the events in the Arab world also caught her off guard. With a certain degree of sceptical apprehension, she is monitoring the developments in the Middle East and in those societies, now in turmoil, that wanted freedom but ended up being cut off from power. Merkel knows something about freedom: she has a story of her own to tell on that subject, although she seldom does, because she dislikes any excess of emotion. In her view, freedom is a very individual matter: the yearning for unfettered development, a wish to push one’s limits, discover new ground, understand and master a subject – all of which can be used to describe the personal quest for freedom of a woman who had to hide her ambitions and her talent for thirty-five years. And it seems as if her hunger is not yet satisfied.

It has been said at various points that she has reached the peak of her career. But Merkel does not believe in linear progression. To her, politics is a zero-sum game – an accumulation of positives and negatives, a constant stringing-together of success and failure. And this is where the problem begins: success and failure are measured not only by a coalition’s stability, voter satisfaction or
the frequency of international visits. Those are the wrong parameters. The right parameters are events: asked by a journalist what could throw a government off track, the British prime minister Harold Macmillan once replied, “Events, my dear fellow, events.” Angela Merkel also carries a historical burden, the economic crisis – and it is this event alone that will determine the success or failure of her chancellorship.

She did not seek out the crisis: it was the crisis that came to her. It came first in the form of the banking crisis, then mutated into a full-blown world economic crisis – and finally it became the euro crisis. There are several problems lurking in its shadow that could do untold damage: a debt crisis, problems with growth and competitiveness and, ultimately, the collapse of the euro. The possible consequences are terrifying: a run on the banks, insolvency, the demise of entire sectors of the economy, a fall in exports, high unemployment, social tension, the rise of radical parties – and the political disintegration of Europe. When we look at these scenarios, we can appreciate the historical significance of the crisis.

Angela Merkel has been forced to confront this event and try to avert its potentially destructive effects. Unlike Helmut Kohl, she does not have the advantage of governing during a relatively easy period in German history. Kohl made the most of the favourable circumstances and the positive dynamics of European movements of political emancipation, and with a sure instinct led Germany to unification and Europe to a new era of prosperity. Merkel, on the other hand, is fighting a defensive war: she is battling against potential ruin. She cannot promise flourishing landscapes – she can only strive to prevent Europe from becoming a place of desolation.
The defining theme of Merkel’s chancellorship, then, is Europe’s crisis. Konrad Adenauer firmly anchored the Federal Republic in the West, and he carried through a political model which provided social reconciliation and a market economy. Willy Brandt began to ease the country’s relationship with the East. And Helmut Kohl has gone down in history as the chancellor who achieved the reunification of Germany. Merkel has now found her own historical mission, and this makes her position stronger. It must be admitted that the crisis has been beneficial to her career. Without it, her chancellorship would be considerably less relevant from a historical point of view. She now has the opportunity of joining the ranks of the great heads of state. Her decisions are momentous not just for Germany, but for Europe as a whole.

This elevation in her stature is not felt so much in Berlin as in the European political arena – for example in Brussels, at summits with the French President, or on visits to Athens. She is now a towering European figure – but in the process she has become something of a political loner.

There has been an increased focus on her personality, as if it were only up to her whether or not the Continent can overcome its problems. Her new status is confirmed by the many visitors to Berlin, the attention paid to her in Washington or Beijing, as well as the distortions and demonization that she has to endure.

Merkel became the protagonist of the current-affairs magazines during four crisis-ridden years. “The Mystery of Angela Merkel”, “The Lost Leader”, “Frau Europe”, “Mother Discourage”, “Achtung, It’s Angela” – no caricature, no cliché went unused. Sometimes she laughs at the headlines or the cartoons – for instance the one in The Economist, which shows a ship called
The World Economy sinking far below the surface and onto the seabed, while a plaintive voice on the bridge enquires, “Please can we start the engines now, Mrs Merkel?”

Such gentle humour, however, is the exception. As a rule the cartoons show Merkel with a Hitler moustache; Merkel topless, suckling the Kaczyński twins; Merkel with blood dripping from her shoulders; Merkel as a dominatrix treading the Spanish premier under her boots as he pleads for mercy. The imagery reached new heights on the cover of the New Statesman, where the Kanzlerin was given the face of a Terminator and a robotic eye. The story inside – besides containing the predictable comparisons with Hitler – described her as a greater danger to the stability of the world than Kim Jong-un of North Korea or President Ahmadinejad of Iran. Merkel was either depicted as a bully or as Nero fiddling while Europe burned.

The conservative French newspaper Le Figaro suggested the following scenarios: either France would join the German-dominated north of Europe, or it would “become part of the peripheral countries derided by the pan-Germanists as PIGS”. By pan-Germanists the paper presumably meant Germany and its vassals. The socialist economist Daniel Cohen called Germany “the China of Europe”. And the Spanish writer Javier Cercas made sure that Merkel became the pantomime villain in southern Europe: “The economic terms she is forcing on us cannot be met, and arouse feelings of resentment and humiliation comparable to those aroused in Germany after the First World War, when the victorious Allies dictated its economic programme.”

So Versailles all over again, but with the roles reversed? Germans underestimate the degree to which the economic strength of their
country and Merkel’s political power are resented by its neighbours. The American financial guru George Soros, a particularly vocal opponent of the German euro-rescue policy, warned Merkel that the rest of Europe would not love or admire Germany as an imperial power: “There will be hatred and resistance, because it will be perceived as an oppressor.” And that has been one of the less severe warnings. Far more dangerous was the revival of old conspiracy theories: it was claimed that after unification Germany threw all its weight behind the euro because it planned to rule the Continent through its monetary policy. What had failed twice in military terms was now to succeed in peacetime with the aid of the euro and the cent – Teutonic imperialism, a brilliant master plan.

Is all of this just ideological hyperbole? Or fanciful hysteria? Chancellor Merkel was sure to be at least aware of the tensions. The mismatch within Europe in terms of economic capacity and competitiveness had given Germany an unbeatable advantage. In addition, its exports machine ran so well because the Federal Republic profited from the vast single market and because Germany’s powerful industry allowed no chance to competitors from southern Europe for instance, where the cost of labour was higher. Thanks to its economic strength, Germany also enjoyed the favour of the financial markets: credit had never been so cheap, and it had never been so easy to find takers for government bonds. Germany was seen as profiteering in a time of crisis, and Merkel as the orchestrator of an unprecedented master plan. Thanks to the Schröder government’s rigorous social reforms and a moderate wage-scale policy, Europe’s economy had shifted to the middle of the Continent. New markets were opened up in Asia and Russia.
France had lost its traditional political and economic balancing role: in a Europe of twenty-seven nations, the political centre of power had shifted from Paris to Berlin.

The crisis gave Angela Merkel many advantages. Firstly, from the German viewpoint her rescue policy was both urgent and conclusive, so she encountered very little resistance from the opposition at home. Secondly, she was governing at a decisive moment for the executive. It was a time when heads of government in Europe – not the European Commission or national parliaments – were taking the lead. And thirdly, no road can bypass the Chancellor of the strongest economy in Europe; anyone wishing to save the euro would have to do so in conjunction with Merkel. Initially, therefore, the crisis put Merkel in a winning position, but she also bore a heavy responsibility. If the rescue operation went wrong she would be deeply implicated, even if she had done everything in her power to avert disaster. All eyes in Europe were focused on her. If Europe failed, then Merkel would have failed.

The Chancellor’s special position was something entirely new in the history of the Federal Republic. Never before had a chancellor played such an important role in foreign policy. Even in Helmut Kohl’s time it was accepted that he was steering the ship in Germany’s interests at a favourable moment in history – but no more than that. Inadvertently, unintentionally, Germany has acquired an international significance that is alien to its nature, and which over the past few decades it has declined to assume.

History teaches us that Europe doesn’t gladly tolerate the presence of a loner in its midst. The instant revival of ancient prejudices
shows how delicate the Federal Republic’s special position in Europe actually is. The country was ready and willing to share its power in Europe and fit into a post-national collective. The German Constitution and the history of its global alliances since the Second World War are evidence of the many safeguards that have been put in place to control this colossus. This was why Helmut Kohl gave a guarantee that Germany would be firmly anchored in Europe in return for unification. The Maastricht Treaty was signed in 1992 and the Deutschmark abandoned in favour of a European currency for the same reason. Suddenly the constants of post-war European history changed. The emphasis shifted.

It was at this moment that Angela Merkel became the focus of attention. Who was this woman who for so long had kept quiet, and who in only a few years had taken control of Germany’s conservative party? Who was this politician who rose almost unnoticed to lead the leaders of Europe? The Germans have been pondering over the mystery of Merkel for many years, trying to interpret her character and the inner workings of her mind. But now the whole world wants to know: how did she get into politics? What is her worldview? What are her values, her yardsticks? Merkel enjoys an interest in her as a person that rarely wanes – yet another reason why she has once more conquered the summit. This time she has come under scrutiny in her capacity as a stateswoman, a foreign-policy expert. What will she do if Germany’s objective increase of power is perceived as a threat? She has managed to make Germany’s dominance seem tolerable so far – but will it stay that way?

Yes, Merkel bears a heavy burden – and naturally she relishes this new-found assertiveness, because she is convinced that the
blend of regulations and structural changes she has prescribed will be good for Europe. But she has not yet found an answer to the dilemma described by Bismarck: Germany is too small to exercise hegemony in Europe, and yet too large for its equilibrium. Or, to rephrase this in modern terms: Germany is too strong to be absorbed into the structures of Europe, and too weak to impose what it believes are the right policies on other nations. Historians refer to this as semi-hegemony – not a comfortable position for any country.

So here she is, catapulted into the leadership of Europe, constantly fending off the accusation that her sole aim is to make Europe more German. The future of the historical European project, the overcoming of former hostilities, is in her hands. Perhaps these thoughts crossed her mind as she sat in the City Hall in Oslo and watched as the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Europe.

Arnold Schwarzenegger, who has seen better days, once called her the most powerful woman on the planet. If further evidence of the German Chancellor’s new power were required, this was provided by the Mattel toy company, who designed a Barbie doll modelled on her – claiming that Merkel was a role model for girls who dreamt of being able to become “whatever they wanted”. Merkel herself doesn’t much care for role models. In her office there is only one picture: a silver-framed portrait of Sophie von Anhalt-Zerbst, later known as Catherine the Great. As ruler of Russia, Catherine pursued policies very much in the spirit of the Enlightenment, but she was also assiduously imperialist. She loved to play with power, converted to the Orthodox Faith, took a Russian first name, made use of men – all with the aim of expanding her
authority. Merkel was given the picture by a journalist, and it has been in her office ever since. She tends to dismiss excessive interpretations – she admires Catherine as a woman and a reformer, nothing more. Not only that, the Tsarina ruled for thirty-four years – a period of time that will not be granted to Angela Merkel.
Youl Angela Kasner’s world was quite straightforward. It consisted of her mother, father, brother and sister, the Waldhof and its various businesses, and the road outside. Sometimes Angela crossed the road to go to the nearby shop and wait for her father, who was usually out and about. “I didn’t venture any farther,” she said. As a little girl she didn’t go to a crèche or kindergarten, and was afraid of horses – these are Angela Merkel’s earliest memories. The Waldhof, a complex of residential and farm buildings, storehouses and workshops, was like an island in the idyllic little town of Templin. In 1957 her father, Horst Kasner, was asked to set up a college for Church administration, later known as the Pastoral College, and act as its head teacher. Curates and pastors would visit the Waldhof for several weeks to train or attend seminars on preaching. The Waldhof was an important institution for the Protestant Church in the State of Berlin-Brandenburg – it could be claimed that every pastor in the Church at the time would have been taught by Horst Kasner at some point in his life.

Herlind and Horst Kasner had married in Hamburg, where their first child, Angela, was born on 17th July 1954. Her mother’s parents, Gertrud and Willi Jentzsch, also lived in Hamburg, having moved there from Danzig after the war. Grandmother Jentzsch
ANGELA MERKEL

seems to have come from Glogau in Silesia, known today as Glogow, and Grandfather Jentzsch from the area of Bitterfeld. Merkel’s mother Herlind was born in 1928 in Danzig, at the time known as the Free City of Danzig and under the aegis of the League of Nations. Why nearby Elbing is frequently mentioned as Herlind’s birthplace is a mystery. Merkel’s grandparents had lived there for only a few years.

Her father, Horst Kasner, was originally from Berlin. His family background is more complex, and his forebears were quite severely affected by the troubled history of the area, where the borders of Germany and Poland were constantly shifting. Horst’s father Ludwig, Angela’s grandfather, was born in Posen in 1896 – although not as Ludwig Kasner, but Ludwig Kazmierczak. Like most inhabitants of the province of Posen, the Kazmierczaks had Polish roots, and since the second partition of Poland, the city and surrounding region had seen several boundary changes and various different rulers. At the time of Ludwig Kazmierczak’s birth, Posen was part of the German Empire, so Merkel’s grandfather was officially a German citizen. The family nonetheless had remained faithful to its Polish origins, although Ludwig clearly didn’t share those sentiments. As a result he made a decision that was to have far-reaching consequences. In 1919, after the First World War and the Treaty of Versailles, Posen once again became part of Poland. In the years that followed, much of the German minority emigrated from the region – including those who didn’t want to return to Poland. Ludwig Kazmierczak was one of those who left his native land and part of his family behind and set off for Berlin, where he met his future wife Margarethe. Their son Horst was born in 1926. But it wasn’t until 1930 that Ludwig Kazmierczak
decided to adopt the German version of his surname and began calling himself Kasner. Having worked as a police officer in the Pankow district of Berlin, he died in 1939. Angela, who was five at the time, has no clear memories of him. However, young Angela would often visit her grandmother Margarethe, who aroused her interest in art and music.

In 1995, at a Church congress in Hamburg, Angela Merkel said that one of her grandfathers was originally from Poland. She repeated the statement in 2000, describing herself as “one quarter Polish”. There was great excitement over this apparently new revelation – especially in Poland, where a Friends of Angela Merkel group was immediately set up.

While little is known about her grandparents, more research has been done into her parents’ background. A few weeks after Angela’s birth in 1954, young Pastor Kasner and his family left Hamburg and moved to East Germany – his first parish was the village of Quitzow, in the Prignitz district of Brandenburg. Three years later the family moved to Templin. This was to be Angela Merkel’s childhood home, the centre of her early life, the place which defined her youth. Templin is an hour and a half’s drive north of Berlin, a hidden gem of the Uckermark district. Lakes, rivers, canals, the vast sky above, the old buildings – Templin retains its charm to the present day. The Waldhof had been founded in 1852 as a home for young people with learning difficulties, and had seen much upheaval – it was in a particularly bad state in the year when Pastor Kasner was setting up his seminary. It ceased to operate as an educational establishment under the East German Social Services. Instead, the Church used the large complex to house mentally disabled people, who could work in
the vegetable garden and the forge, weave baskets or pursue one of the other crafts or trades. It was a remarkably modern concept for its time: the mentally disabled lived freely as part of society; they could take up gainful employment and were encouraged to do so. For Angela Merkel, mixing with them was part of everyday life.

There are few accounts of the Kasners’ home life, but there is little doubt that Angela Kasner grew up in a politically engaged and open-minded household. For all the restrictions of the GDR system, Pastor Kasner and his wife still preserved their intellectual freedom, and their daughter Angela reaped the benefits. Her interest in the world was aroused and stimulated early in life, and the pastor’s household provided protection from the regimentation of the system. Years later, in an interview with the photographer Herlinde Koelbl, Merkel said that “no shadow had darkened her childhood”, that the Waldhof was an environment that a child could easily absorb and understand. Merkel said she had always been fascinated by people “who were at peace with life”, such as the gardener who became a friend and confidant when she was a child, and who was a model of self-confidence and composure compared to her father. All her childhood memories are of security and intimacy. Horst Kasner, who died in 2011, said in one of his rare interviews: “The GDR itself was enough of a constraint. At home we gave the children space.” Even in the 1970s, Kasner himself made use of this freedom to travel to London and Rome.

And yet there is something of a veil over Merkel’s past – because many in the West find it difficult to imagine her early life in East Germany as picturesque and peaceful. Even the name Waldhof – forest court – has a fairy-tale ring to it, suggesting
the good old days. Life in the parsonage, the sheltered idyll, intellectual brilliance – this conjures up the German intellectual bourgeoisie of the Biedermeier period, the rapid industrial expansion of the late nineteenth century in Germany, evoking safety and security.

Even if the political system sometimes disturbed the peace of the parsonage, Angela Kasner was never really aware of it. She enjoyed the luxury of not having to identify with the State. “I never felt that the GDR was my natural home,” she told Herlinde Koelbl, “but I always made use of the opportunities that it provided.” She was a fervent supporter of Lokomotive Leipzig football club, but to this day she can still get in a rage about the deciding goal scored by Sparwasser in the defeat of West Germany by East Germany in the 1974 World Cup – or so she says. Sparwasser’s shirt now hangs in the Museum of German History in Bonn.

Among the more exotic aspects of Templin was the Soviet garrison stationed in Vogelsang, just outside the town. After Wünsdorf, Vogelsang was the largest Soviet military base outside the Soviet Union. The 25th Armoured Division and many other units were based there. Members of the garrison often came into Templin, and Angela Kasner took the opportunity to practise her knowledge of Russian on the occupying troops. She probably inherited her gift for languages from her mother Herlind, who had been a Latin and English teacher, but wasn’t allowed to exercise her profession in the GDR because she was married to a Protestant pastor. After the fall of the Wall, however, she returned to teaching and found a job at the Berlin Mission House for church workers. Her daughter did not wish to become
a teacher, as she did not want to be a conduit for ideology of the regime.

Angela was unrivalled at school in Russian and mathematics, and even in her early teens was good enough to compete in the national Russian-language Olympiad, which was intended for pupils at the Polytechnic Secondary School two years above her. Despite her young age, she was selected as the third-best Russian-language student in the GDR, winning a trip to Moscow, where – irony of ironies – she bought her first Beatles record and, as she later confessed, was asked about her views on German unification. That was something she hadn’t expected. Two years later, when she was in Year Ten, she won the Russian competition. It was already clear that she would go on to study at a senior grammar school and take the Abitur, the German equivalent of A Levels.

Angela Kasner was an excellent pupil and naturally got top marks in the Abitur. Later, the journalist Evelyn Roll found a telling comment on Merkel’s attitude to Russian language and literature in the Stasi file on her: “Although Angela tends to see the leading role of the Soviet Union as something of a dictatorship to which all other socialist countries are subordinated, she is enthusiastic about the Russian language and the culture of the Soviet Union.” The same thing can essentially still be said of her today.

Angela Kasner already had a great passion for travel and meeting new people. As a child she spent part of her school holidays with her grandmother in Berlin. “Those were wonderful times, complete childhood happiness. I was allowed to watch television until ten in the evening, and I rushed out of the house at nine o’clock every morning and systematically visited all the museums one by one.” The family hardly ever watched GDR television,
Merkel would later claim, “except for sports programmes”. In Berlin, too, Angela was on a journey of discovery – and seems to have been especially fascinated by foreigners and their lives. “I met Bulgarians, Americans and British people – at the age of fifteen I went out for a meal with some Americans and told them everything I knew about the GDR.” But she was honest enough to admit that she “wouldn’t be quite so trusting today”. Unfortunately, the people with whom she had that conversation have yet to be traced. Presumably the girl who was to become Chancellor must have made quite an impression.

Until she was in Year Ten, the Kasners – Angela’s brother Marcus was born three years after her, and her sister Irene was ten years younger – always went on holiday together. Merkel remembers two trips in particular. Just before the 13th of August, the day the building of the Berlin Wall began, the family were on their way back from Bavaria. Angela’s maternal grandmother from Hamburg was also with them in their VW Beetle – it was to be her last holiday with her daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren. As they were driving home on the Friday, Horst Kasner saw that large quantities of barbed wire were being stored in the woods, and noticed that there was an unusually large number of soldiers around. He was filled with feelings of unease. On the Sunday the border was closed and construction of the Wall began. Angela Merkel has vivid memories of that 13th of August. Her mother cried all day, prayers were said in church, and young Angela was overcome by a sense of powerlessness – she wanted to help, but there was nothing she could do.

Although the Kasners now shared the fate of so many Germans, and the extended family was split between the two countries – the
first time Angela went to the West was in 1986 – the spirit of a united Germany remained alive within the family. Angela’s parents were unable to come to terms with the partition of their country, and as a child she wanted nothing to do with the new State. She followed West German politics with passionate enthusiasm, and remembers listening to the election of Gustav Heinemann as President of the Federal Republic on her transistor radio in the school toilets. She knew the names of the West German cabinet off by heart, and at home in the Waldhof they always watched the news on Western television.

But there was a price to be paid for this way of life: silence and discretion were a precondition for survival in a nation of State informers. The dangers were discussed openly in the parsonage, and although Horst Kasner’s political role in the church hierarchy has been interpreted in markedly different ways by her biographers, Angela Merkel has always said that she had little to do with the system. When she had finished her physics studies and Stasi agents tried actively to recruit her, she reacted as she had learnt to do at home: she put on a show of innocence, pretending to be frank and claiming that she couldn’t keep secrets. These tactics soon put an end to any attempt to enlist her services. If there is one thing that Merkel is particularly good at, even to this day, it is keeping quiet. “Yes, learning when to keep quiet was a great advantage in the GDR period. It was one of our survival strategies,” she said many years later.

In another trip, in the summer of 1968, which was to have a great impact on Angela’s political world view, the Kasner family visited Czechoslovakia, staying in Pec pod Sněžkou at the foot of the Sněžka mountain on the border with Poland. Leaving their
children with the owners of the rooms they were renting in the Krkonoše mountain range, her parents went to Prague, where they witnessed at first hand the mood of change and open discussion in that year of the Prague Spring. For once there was a sense of freedom in the air. But on 21st August the Red Army moved in and crushed the democratic movement. Angela was just fourteen at the time, and remembers the fervent debates that she helped organize at her school in Templin. Not that the school authorities showed any interest in debating the matter, as she soon realized; Dubček’s proposed reforms never came to anything, and Angela Kasner knew that it was best to keep a low profile.

The consequences of that journey manifested themselves more than thirty years later, when the reunified Germany was involved in an acrimonious debate over past events in its Western half, brought about by the publication of some photographs of Joschka Fischer. Fischer was Foreign Minister at the time, and was confronted with pictures showing him wearing a helmet and attacking a police officer during a student riot in Frankfurt. As leader of the opposition, Merkel denounced his behaviour and demanded an apology for his stone-throwing, as a form of act of repentance in which Fischer would confess to his formerly subversive views. The crowning moment for Merkel was when she suggested the exact phrase which Fischer should recite for his apology: “This was not the right approach, and I must recognize that and atone for it.”

Merkel is still annoyed with herself for using the word “atone”, but she must nonetheless be thankful for what she learnt from the rest of this episode. The country was outraged at her angry outburst, and SPD and Green politicians who had taken part in the riots of 1968 refused to comment on the internal affairs of