

Germany, Merkel and the Danger of Self-Confidence

by George Friedman - September 28, 2021

Germany held an election to replace Angela Merkel, who led the German government for 16 years – through much of the implementation of the European Union, the economic crisis of 2008 and the immigration crisis of 2015. Compare her tenure with that of Konrad Adenauer. He presided over the redemption of the German soul, accepting German responsibility for the Holocaust but making certain that the Holocaust was not the final word on Germany. He changed the reality and perception of Germany from the incarnation of evil to another nation, part of the West and part of the force confronting the Soviet threat. In short, Adenauer returned Germany to the family of nations.

Above all, Merkel maintained. She oversaw the transformation of Germany into the dominant power in the European Union, a region that had been the heartland of world economic and military power. Under her stewardship, Germany became the fourth-largest economic power in the world, the arbiter of Europe and the engine that drove its economy. Perhaps most important, she did so without conjuring more than the inevitable unease about the reemergence of Germany as a European boogeyman. She helped make Germany merely another, if singularly powerful, European country. She exercised power without generating the utter terror Germany had evoked a few years before she was born.

She deserved much credit, but some of it is misplaced. We tend to think of leaders as if they personally shepherded nations to greatness, horror or mediocrity. Nations are vast enterprises, consisting of many people and many factions, dancing a complex dance. Had Adenauer not lived, Germany would have emerged from its crimes. Its people would not accept the burden for generations, because indeed, the crimes a nation commits cannot be blamed on those who were not alive or in power at the time. And that generation would have sought and found the solution of Adenauer and crafted Germany back into humanity, with different personalities remembered. So too with Merkel, under whose leadership Germany again became the most powerful nation on the Continent. But she was less a shepherd than a passenger on a journey that included nations we won't forget and names already forgotten. History writes itself, and then someone takes credit for the words.

Still, the end of the Merkel era is important. There was an election, although it is unclear what if any

meaning it will have. Two parties, far less different than they pretend, came in as a virtual tie. Neither will be powerful enough to redefine German history, and German history, for the moment, will not tolerate revision. Germany fears military power and basks in economic power. And like any sort of power, it imposes itself on Europe's economy because it is in its interest to do so. Merkel's successors will continue to do this, acting as if this was an act of genius on their part. Perhaps history will shift and permit them to shift. If not, then their names will be forgotten along with those of most other leaders. Politics is cruel, and you can go from a household name to a figure of no consequence as history works its impersonal game.

Germany's historical game is war and calamity. There was always a Germanic people, but a German nation did not emerge until 1871, alongside a minor war that France won. A united Germany was stunning to behold. What had been scattered principalities emerged by the turn of the century as the greatest economic power on the Continent, and one challenging Britain, a global economic giant. Why a united Germany could do something a divided Germany could not dream of is a long story, but it did. And it caused the rest of Europe to fear it. Britain and France had their own empires to import raw materials from and to export their products. Germany did not. But it had Eastern and Southern Europe, so unlike Britain and France, it had to exert its force in Europe. The details are beside the point here, but the surge of German power coupled with a surge of German insecurity led to the First World War, a conflict in which Germany was crushed and left in an economic depression, which lasted through the 1920s until Hitler emerged, reuniting Germany in rage against the rest of Europe with a sense of victimization. Once again, Europe was terrified by the extraordinary power of Germany. In a few years, it had gone from a cripple to an economic and military miracle.

World War II was a German war of rectification, a war intended to recover the German dominance in Europe that it nearly achieved in 1913. But this time, Germany went from being a European power that could be understood in European terms to a sphere of madness. Europe could be understood in normal terms. The Germans selected an abnormal understanding of Europe, whereby Jews controlled both communism and capitalism and represented an enemy with whom there could be no peace. The Nazis believed Europe could be cleansed only by total war against the conspirators. Germany had set itself a goal that couldn't be achieved, and if achieved, couldn't solve its problems, plunging it into a war against all of Europe and, in a final act of madness, the United States. It fought a war it could not win without mystical powers, which it had only in its mind.

Germany went from war to failure, to war, to another failure. And it may well have won World War II had it acted with reason and prudence. But its appetites were as extreme as its madness. When it

emerged from its madness in 1945, it realized what it had done, above all to itself. Like a junky with an unlimited amount of their drug of choice, it hit rock bottom and was left with a choice between death and going straight. Adenauer presided over the latter, and Merkel presided over the results of an economic miracle so improbable that it required the Brothers Grimm to be the author. And once more Germany sought to gather Europe into a German world, this time with the eagerness of the Europeans and a lack of malice.

But in the last years of Merkel's rule, the idea that all of Europe was simply one entity with a common desire and common values, committed to peace and prosperity, began to slip. 2008 raised questions about perpetual prosperity. The immigration crisis raised questions about perpetual peace. The bitterness against the immigrants and the bitterness about the powers that compelled them to come raised questions about a common European identity. Yes, Europe had achieved peace, but only if the Balkans were regarded as something other than European. About 100,000 were said to have died in that war. The EU became the self-assurance of its righteousness in the face of reality. When the U.K. left the bloc, the EU sought to trivialize it.

We understand what Germany is in the context of a united and aligned Europe. It resumes its economic supremacy, foregoes a significant military and abandons its vices for something more virtuous. But the EU is under enormous stress as its different members have different interests. Germany does not want to carry Italy, it does not want to allay Polish fears of Russian pipelines, and it does not really appreciate the importance of France or the significance of Britain. The safe place that Germany wanted to build is fraying. It is not fraying enough to excite deep German fears, but enough to create German irritation.

The future of Germany depends on the future of the EU. If the EU breaks, Germany will not collapse. On the contrary, it will have no choice but to increase its fears and powers. But a Germany that is afraid and strong is the brew that in the distant – or not-so-distant – future can make Europe a different place. The EU was intended by Germany above all to end history in blissful comfort. What happens if the EU fragments with more countries leaving or refusing to submit?

Merkel managed the EU well during an era in which it began to fragment. The EU does not want to fail, and Merkel did well in avoiding what was not wanted. Now that age is gone, and Merkel, the very sigil of that age, has left as well. The new period will be about satisfying the contradictory needs of nations in the EU. This will require the use of German power because Germany is the economic heart of the EU. Germany has feared exercising the power it so carefully resurrected. So in a way, the situation is almost a concern driven by the fact that there is a common belief that Germany will manage it. Merkel created a new dimension of German self-confidence. But historically, Germany

has handled its power better than its self-confidence.

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