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A balance sheet of Angela Merkel's 16 years of rule in Berlin

On Wednesday, Angela Merkel's chancellorship came to an end after 16 years. After 5,860 days in office, she missed the record of her fellow Christian Democratic Union (CDU) chancellor Helmut Kohl by only 10 days. The tenure of the other six German chancellors since 1949 was considerably shorter. An objective examination of the balance sheet of her chancellorship shows that the axis of German politics has shifted far to the right under Merkel.



Merkel at the Chancellor's Office in February (AP photo/Markus Schreiber, pool)

Socially, Germany is more deeply divided than at any time since the 1930s. The DAX stock index has tripled from 5,000 to 15,000 points since Merkel took office. While the richest 10 percent owned on average 50 times as much wealth as the lower half of the population at the beginning of her term, they can now call 100 times as much their own.

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On the other hand, never before have so many worked for so long for such low wages. Even a full-time job is often no longer enough to live on. In 2019, one in five children and one in six inhabitants of Germany were living in poverty, a total of 13.2 million people. The chances of escaping poverty are slim. Among the 26 OECD countries, Germany is fifth from the bottom in this regard. In addition, there are dilapidated infrastructure, broken schools and hospitals, falling pensions and unaffordable rents and heating costs.

In domestic politics, too, the country has moved far to the right under Merkel. Four years ago, an extreme right-wing party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), entered the Bundestag (federal parliament) for the first time. Since then, it has set the tone in refugee and domestic policies and is courted by all other parties.

For six years, the head of the federal secret service, Hans-Georg Maaßen, was an AfD sympathizer who declared the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) to be an object of surveillance on the grounds that the demand for an “egalitarian, democratic and socialist society” violated the constitution. As under Bismarck and Hitler, socialist politics are again being suppressed.

The powers of the police and secret services have been massively expanded. The state apparatus is riddled with right-wing extremist networks. Even after extensive arms caches had been dug up, kill lists found, violent coup plans discovered, district president Walter Lübcke murdered and a synagogue attacked in Halle, the ringleaders have remained at large.

The right of asylum has been practically abolished and Europe turned into a fortress under German leadership. Tens of thousands of refugees were locked up in inhumane camps or left to drown in the Mediterranean so that none would reach European soil.

In foreign policy, 75 years after the fall of the Nazi regime, Germany is again pursuing a great power and war policy. Under Social Democratic Party (SPD) leader Gerhard Schröder, “Germany took its first steps out of the culture of military restraint, in the Balkans, in Afghanistan. Under Angela Merkel, Germany is assuming its leadership role in Europe,” writes *Der Spiegel*.

What this “leadership role” means was first felt by the workers of Greece, Portugal, Spain and Italy, on whom the German government imposed a brutal austerity programme after rescuing the banks from self-inflicted bankruptcy.

In order to impose Germany’s imperialist interests worldwide, military spending was massively increased; rising from \$33 billion to \$53 billion during Merkel’s tenure, with the lion’s share of the increase occurring in the last five years. The relationship with nuclear powers Russia and China has been systematically undermined through support for the pro-western coup in Ukraine, the NATO build-up against Russia and US provocations against China. A third, nuclear world war is a real danger.

The political shift to the right under Merkel found its sharpest expression in the coronavirus pandemic. Her government sacrificed the health and lives of millions to corporate profits. While stock prices reached new record highs thanks to billions of dollars in coronavirus aid, over 6 million people were infected and more than 100,000 died.

Merkel’s government flatly refused to close workplaces and schools and impose other lockdown measures that might have reduced the flow of profits, even though they were strongly recommended by scientists. Currently, a systematic policy of the deliberate mass infection of children and young people is taking place in nurseries and schools, with incalculable long-term health consequences.

The end of the German Democratic Republic

To understand Merkel’s chancellorship, one has to look back not 16 but 32 years. There is no other political figure whose career is so closely linked to the end of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the former East Germany, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union as that of Angela Merkel.

The end of Stalinist rule in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union was not the result of democratic revolutions, as is often portrayed, but the end point of a counterrevolution that had begun in the Soviet Union in the 1920s with Stalin’s rise.

The socialised property relations created by the 1917 October Revolution in Russia and extended to Eastern Europe and Germany after the Second World War represented progress, despite the Stalinist degeneration of the political regime. They provided the basis

for rapid industrial development, a degree of social security and wide-ranging education and health systems. The working class in the capitalist countries also benefited. The very existence of a social alternative forced governments to make social concessions.

The initiative for the restoration of capitalism finally came from the Stalinist bureaucracy itself, which chose Mikhail Gorbachev as its leader in 1985. Leon Trotsky, the leader of the Left Opposition and founder of the Fourth International, had already warned of such a development in the 1930s. If the working class did not overthrow the bureaucracy, he wrote, the bureaucracy would secure its privileges by restoring capitalist property relations.

This was confirmed in 1990. In the GDR, the dictatorship of the Socialist Unity Party (SED, the Stalinist party of state) was not replaced by the democratic rule of the people, but by the dictatorship of the West German banks and corporations, which introduced capitalist exploitation, looted state property, broke up over 8,000 enterprises and drove millions into unemployment and poverty. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Stalinist SED, renamed the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), and the newly formed “democratic opposition” had immediately come together at various “Round Table” talks to prepare for the unification of Germany on a capitalist basis.

Only the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter (Socialist Workers League, BSA), the predecessor to the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party), called at that time for the formation of workers’ councils and the overthrow of the regime on a socialist basis. Outside the alternative of “bourgeois democracy or the dictatorship of capital on the one hand, or revolution, workers’ democracy and socialism on the other,” there was no way forward for the working class, stated an appeal that the BSA distributed in large numbers at the mass demonstration against the SED regime in East Berlin on November 4, 1989.

Capitalist restoration, which in addition to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union also affected China, where the Communist Party introduced capitalism without giving up power, has had reactionary consequences in every respect.

In the working class, it led to confusion and disorientation. The social democratic parties and the trade unions, which had already been moving away from their policies of social reform since the late 1970s, now turned openly into bitter opponents of the workers—a

development most clearly embodied by British Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair and his German colleague Gerhard Schröder. The bourgeoisie hailed its own triumph, believing there were no longer any barriers to its unrestrained enrichment and attacks on the working class.

Imperialist strategists raved about a “unipolar moment” and imagined that the global domination of US imperialism and its European allies could be secured forever through military force. Since then, entire countries and regions—such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria—have been militarily devastated and the world is approaching a third world war.

Under these circumstances, Angela Merkel rose to become Germany’s leading politician.

Merkel’s political ascent

Merkel came from those middle-class layers which had received an excellent education and led a relatively carefree existence in the GDR and now enthusiastically welcomed the introduction of capitalism because they expected better career opportunities from it.

Born in 1954 and raised in a priest’s household in rural Uckermark, Merkel had never been politically active until the age of 35. She had a successful academic career as a physicist, was a member of the state youth organisation FDJ and was repeatedly allowed to travel abroad for academic meetings, once also to West Germany. This would not have been possible if even the slightest suspicion of oppositional activity had weighed against her.

She did, however, meet later civil rights activists in her father’s parsonage. At that time, the traditionally state-loyal Lutheran church offered the only free space in which political discussions were possible outside the official structures. In return, the church ensured that opposition to the SED regime was kept within narrow limits. Many of its leading representatives later turned out to be informers for the Stasi (state security).

This was also true of Angela Merkel’s first political supporters. For example, the chairman of Demokratischer Aufbruch (Democratic Awakening), Wolfgang Schnur, who was in close contact with Merkel’s father Horst Kasner in the GDR and “discovered” Angela for politics, worked as an unofficial Stasi collaborator from 1965 to 1989.

Merkel herself joined Demokratischer Aufbruch only in December 1989, when the Berlin Wall had already fallen, and experienced a meteoric political rise. Although Demokratischer Aufbruch only received 0.9 percent of the vote in the GDR's parliamentary elections in March 1990, Merkel became press spokesperson for the last GDR prime minister, Lothar de Maizière (CDU). In this capacity, she was involved in the negotiations for German reunification and was present at the conclusion of the "Two Plus Four Treaty" in Moscow, which sealed the end of the GDR.

After German unification, Chancellor Helmut Kohl brought her into his government, first as Minister for Women and Youth and later as Minister for the Environment. When Kohl lost the 1998 federal election to the SPD and the Greens, Merkel proved that she had learned from her patron, a master of backroom deals and intrigue. She used a donation scandal to push Kohl and his crown prince Wolfgang Schäuble from the throne and take over the CDU leadership herself in 2000.

In contrast, in the 2002 federal election she had to relinquish being chancellor candidate to Edmund Stoiber, leader of the CDU's Bavarian sister party, the CSU. Stoiber lost the election to incumbent chancellor Gerhard Schröder.

The CDU's Leipzig Party Congress the following year, at which Merkel consolidated her leadership of the party, was a celebration of neo-liberalism. It decided on a radical departure from its previous social policy. Capitation fees in health policy and a radical tax reform were to smash up all mechanisms of social equalisation. Kohl's long-time Labour Minister Norbert Blüm, who spoke against this at the party conference, was booed. Merkel also backed US President George W. Bush's war preparations against Iraq.

However, she quickly realised that such a course of social confrontation would trigger massive resistance, and the radical plans disappeared into the drawer. Instead, as leader of the opposition, Merkel worked closely with Gerhard Schröder's SPD-Green Party government in drafting and passing "Agenda 2010." The CDU approved these legislative changes—including Hartz IV, introducing major "reforms" in welfare and employment law—in the lower and upper chambers of parliament.

This remained Merkel's preferred approach during her chancellorship.

Many commentaries on Merkel's time in office praise her calm and pragmatic style. The "Tagesschau" news programme calls her the "antithesis of populist machos like Trump, Putin or Erdogan." The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* writes that she was not a "visionary" but a "crisis manager." The "role of moderator in the middle and a policy of small steps were enough for her. The grand plan, the 'historical project,' was not her thing. Ideologies of all kinds are suspect to her."

Merkel managed without the ideological fanaticism and aggressiveness of a Margaret Thatcher or a Donald Trump because she realised her right-wing policies with the help of the SPD, the trade unions and the Left Party (successor to the SED/PDS), which spared her an open confrontation with the working class. She governed three out of four terms in a grand coalition with the SPD. Only from 2009 to 2013 did she form an alliance with the Liberal Democrats (FDP) instead, which subsequently was eliminated from the Bundestag, failing to clear the 5 percent hurdle required for parliamentary representation.

Merkel used the SPD and its close ties to the trade unions to push social attacks on the working class. The birthday party she threw for then IG Metall union boss Berthold Huber in the chancellery in 2010 is infamous. In addition to trade union colleagues, the heads of several large corporations were among the invited guests.

During the 2008 financial crisis, Merkel and then finance minister Peer Steinbrück (SPD) worked together like a well-rehearsed team to hand out billions to the ailing banks, which were then squeezed back out of the working class through social cuts. The same thing was repeated in the coronavirus crisis with Finance Minister Olaf Scholz, now the new chancellor.

Alongside the SPD, the Greens also merged ever more closely with Merkel's CDU. In Baden-Württemberg and Hesse, they have governed together for a long time. In the federal government, they had negotiated a ready-made coalition agreement in 2017, which only fell through because the FDP, the third coalition partner, pulled out at the last second.

The Left Party also played an important role in protecting Merkel's back. Although it has not governed together with the CDU at federal and state levels, because the CDU has always refused to do so, it has supported the social attacks and militarism of Merkel's government practically and lent it political backing.

For example, Left Party parliamentary group leader Dietmar Bartsch expressly welcomed the great power policy of the grand coalition. “It is high time that the cowering towards the United States stopped, that Germany wants to play a role in the world, in the European framework, with self-confidence,” he declared in 2017.

It is significant that on Wednesday in the plenary hall of the Bundestag, members of the Left Party joined members of the CDU/CSU, SPD, Greens and FDP in a standing ovation in Merkel’s honour. Only the representatives of the AfD remained seated.

The “traffic light” coalition

The new government, which was sworn in yesterday, follows directly on from Merkel’s right-wing policies. The “traffic light” parties of the SPD, FDP and Greens have all worked closely with Merkel in one form or another during her 16 years in office.

However, the conditions under which Merkel could implement her right-wing policies without open confrontation with the working class are over. Three decades after the end of the GDR, the confusion is beginning to subside. Workers are taking courage again. Protests and strikes are mounting all over the world, mostly—as at Volvo Trucks and John Deere in the US—in opposition or open rebellion against the unions.

In Germany, industrial action and protests have taken place this year on the railways, in hospitals, the public sector and in numerous metalworking companies. Anger at the murderous coronavirus policies and resistance to wage cuts, increasing work pressure and layoffs are growing. Sooner rather than later, this will lead to open class confrontations with the traffic light coalition.

In the Bundestag, no party remains—apart from a much reduced Left Party—that is nominally to the left of the traffic light coalition and could divert the growing opposition. And the Left Party, which governs in four federal states together with the SPD and the Greens, fully supports the policy of the traffic light coalition. The working class will look for a new orientation. This makes the building of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei, which fights for an international socialist perspective, the most urgent political task.

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