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Published on: June 17, 2017

IN MEMORIAM

Helmut Kohl (1930-2017)

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Kings get monuments when they die. Democratic leaders usually slink off into obscurity once they are out. Helmut Kohl deserves the former fate.

Kings get monuments when they die. Democratic leaders usually slink off into obscurity once they are out. (Or they go to work for Gazprom like former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder.) Yet Helmut Kohl, who ruled for 16 years and died on Friday at the age of 87, deserves a place in history, as do Konrad Adenauer, who anchored his (half-) country in the West, and Willy Brandt, who achieved reconciliation with the East.

Like the heroes of myth, Kohl became a tragic figure once he was pushed aside by his protégée Angela Merkel in a classic instance of parricide. She would rise to the chancellorship six years later. Engulfed by a party financing scandal, Kohl soon fell ill, bound to a wheel chair and almost unable to speak. His wife killed herself, his son turned against him, his nation forgot the “Chancellor of Unity.” Yet he will be assured a seat in the Pantheon of German history—right alongside Otto von Bismarck.

The “Iron Chancellor” unified Germany with “blood and iron” in 1871. Kohl pulled off Unification 2.0 in 1990 without a shot being fired. Bismarck left behind a tottering European house that would implode in World War I. When the Berlin Wall fell, Kohl instinctively grasped that Germany would always be too weak to go it alone, but too strong to be left alone, and he acted with prudence and foresight.

So when East Germany collapsed into the arms of its rich brother, Kohl proved wiser than Bismarck. He knew that Berlin's neighbors had to be reassured and compensated. The price of power was *more* European integration, including a common currency, plus the strengthening of NATO that anchored the U.S. in Europe as a counterweight to Berlin and Moscow.

Indeed, if in 1983, Kohl had not succeeded in hosting U.S. intermediate-range forces (cruise and Pershing II missiles) in the face of million-fold protest sweeping his country, NATO might never have recuperated from the blow. And the Soviets, who had deployed such "Euronukes" first, would have scored a historic victory. Kohl's courage, we should conclude, was the beginning of the end of the Cold War—and the Muscovite empire in Europe. The Wall collapsed in 1989, and so did the Soviet Union just two years later.

End of empire, end of Europe's partition with its barbed-wire fences and minefields running straight through Germany. Plus another windfall: Kohl was blessed with George H.W. Bush who cleared the path to reunification by cajoling Germany's angst-ridden European allies and coaxing Moscow. Kohl added billions in ransom money paid to Moscow.

Recasting Europe without war, as Bismarck could not, Kohl implanted a peaceful order that will outlast the "Iron Chancellor's" precarious construction. Kohl and Bush the Elder should have received the Nobel Peace Prize for reuniting Europe and Germany in total peace. They were certainly more deserving than Yassir Arafat or Barack Obama.

Yet history will deliver the far bigger prize. There is no "Fourth Reich," as so many worried back then. Helmut Kohl, who rose from provincial pol to all-but-eternal chancellor achieved the impossible: a strong, indeed preponderant Germany, yet a power house safely "socialized" in a myriad European and Atlantic institutions.

The threat to that wondrous order now emanates not from Germany redivivus, not even from Vladimir Putin, but from Donald Trump who would "make America great" again by gnawing away at the bonds that have tied the U.S. to Europe for 70 years.

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