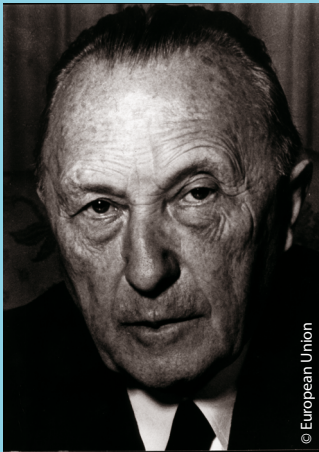


Konrad Adenauer: a pragmatic democrat and tireless unifier



Konrad Adenauer 1876 – 1967

The first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, who stood at the head of the newly-formed state from 1949-63, changed the face of post-war German and European history more than any other individual.

Like many politicians of his generation, Adenauer had already realised following the First World War that lasting peace could only be achieved through a united Europe. His experiences during the Third Reich (he was removed from office as the Mayor of Cologne by the Nazis) served to confirm this opinion.

In the six years from 1949-55 Adenauer realised far-reaching foreign policy goals to bind Germany's future with the western alliance: membership of the Council of Europe (1951), foundation of the European Coal and Steel Community (1952), and Germany's entry into NATO (1955).

A cornerstone of Adenauer's foreign policy was reconciliation with France. Together with French President Charles de Gaulle a historic turning point was achieved: in 1963 the one-time arch-enemies Germany and France signed a treaty of friendship, which became one of the milestones on the road to European integration.

German politics

Born in Catholic Cologne on 5 January 1876 Konrad Adenauer's family was of humble background, but also one of order and discipline instilled by his father. His marriage in 1904 to the daughter of an influential Cologne family brought him into contact with local politicians, leading him to become active in politics as well. Taking full advantage of his political talent, as a member of the catholic 'Zentrum' party his career took flight and he became Mayor of Cologne in 1917. This post included involvement in large projects such as the building of the first ever highway in Germany between Cologne and Bonn, and he became known as a determined and decisive personality. Steering clear from the extreme political convictions that attracted so many of his generation, Adenauer was committed to instilling diligence, order, Christian morals and values into his fellow citizens.

From the late 1920s the Nazi Party began a slander campaign against Adenauer. He was accused of having anti-German sentiments, wasting public funds and of being sympathetic towards the Zionist movement. When in 1933, after the Nazis had taken power, Adenauer refused to decorate the city with swastikas for a visit by Hitler, he was dismissed from office and his bank accounts frozen. He was now jobless, homeless and without income, dependent on the benevolence of his friends and the church. Although he lay low for the duration of the war, he was nevertheless arrested on several occasions. After the failed assassination attempt on Hitler in 1944, Adenauer was imprisoned in the notorious Gestapo prison in Cologne Brauweiler.

After the war, Adenauer was reinstated as Mayor of Cologne by the Americans but removed shortly afterwards by the British, when Cologne was transferred into the British zone of occupation. This gave Adenauer the time to devote himself to the setting up of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) which he hoped would unify Protestant and Catholic Germans in one party. In 1949, he became the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany). Initially, it was thought that Adenauer would be Chancellor for only a short time, as he was already 73 years old by this time. However, despite this belief, Adenauer (nicknamed 'Der Alte', or 'The Elder') went on to hold this position for the next 14 years, making him not only the youngest ever mayor of Cologne, but also the oldest chancellor Germany has ever seen. Under his leadership, West Germany became a stable democracy and achieved a lasting reconciliation with its neighbouring countries. He managed to regain some sovereignty for West Germany, by integrating the country with the emerging Euro-Atlantic community (NATO and the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation).



Adenauer shaking hands with French President Charles de Gaulle in 1961.

Contribution to European integration

Adenauer's experiences during the Second World War made him a political realist. His views on Germany's role in Europe were strongly influenced by the two world wars and the century-long animosity between Germany and France. He therefore focused his attention on promoting the idea of pan-European cooperation.

Adenauer was a great proponent of the European Coal and Steel Community, which was launched with the Schuman Declaration on 9 May 1950, and also the later treaty for the European Economic Community in March 1957.

Adenauer's opinions on Europe were based on the idea that European unity was essential for lasting peace and stability. For this reason he worked tirelessly for the reconciliation of Germany with its former enemies, especially France. Later, in 1963, The Élysée Treaty, also known as the Treaty of Friendship, set the seal on this reconciliation. With it, Germany and France established a firm foundation for relations that ended centuries of rivalry between them.

As a result of his political talents, his determination, pragmatism and clear vision for the role of Germany in a united Europe, Adenauer ensured that Germany became, and remains to this day, a free and democratic society. This is now not only taken for granted, but also deeply integrated into modern German society.

Konrad Adenauer is one of the most remarkable figures in European history. European unity was to him not only about peace, but also a way of reintegrating post-Nazi Germany into international life. Europe as we know it today would not have been possible without the confidence he inspired in other European states by means of his consistent foreign policy. His achievements are still recognised by his fellow-Germans as, in 2003, they voted him 'The greatest German of all time'.