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Helmut Schmidt was one of the outstanding political leaders of modern Germany and Chancellor from 1974 to 1982. He was born in 1918 and died in 2015. As Haeussler points out, this means that his main experience before 1945 had been as a schoolboy and soldier in the Third Reich (429). Unlike Konrad Adenauer (born 1876) or the first post-war leader of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Kurt Schumacher (born 1895), or even Willy Brandt (born 1913 and in Scandinavian exile during the Nazi period), Schmidt had no real experience of other regimes with which to compare the Third Reich. He emerged in 1945 from the collapse of the world he had known, suspicious of all ideologies, a sober pragmatist who had seen too much to be easily fooled, but also from his North German Hamburg home outward looking and at the same time formidably intelligent. Against this background, it is easy to see how his subsequent career would be contrasted with that of the committed protagonists of European integration, Adenauer and subsequently Helmut Kohl, as also with the passionate anti-Adenauer, and sometimes anti-Allied, stance of Schumacher. It was also easy to contrast Schmidt as a sober realist with the visionary quality of Brandt’s Ospolitik, which held out hope of German unification in some, as yet undefined, future. Schmidt once said in jest (and not about Brandt) that ‘If you have visions, you should see a doctor.’

Haeussler does not challenge the general picture of Schmidt’s personality and career but he does offer a sustained criticism of one interpretation. That is the view that Schmidt was consistently pro-American and sceptical of European integration until, as Chancellor, he clashed with President Jimmy Carter, when he turned instead to cooperation with the French President, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, in devising the European Monetary System, thus becoming in the words of one historian a “Reluctant European.”1 Rather, Haeussler argues that Schmidt’s ideas were remarkably consistent, seeing German foreign policy as committed to the two pillars – Europe and the United States – as both fundamental for the Federal Republic’s welfare and

security in the Cold War. He was throughout hard-headed, like many of his generation, but this did not make him a lesser European or indeed a lesser ‘Atlanticist.’ ² He is better understood as a ‘Cold War European’ who sought to maintain both relationships, balancing the tensions between them, though from 1979 that became increasingly difficult and ultimately helped to bring about his fall from office.  

In making this argument, Haeussler shows (partly from papers in Schmidt’s private archive) how from the late 1940s Schmidt was one of a small minority of SPD politicians who criticized the party leadership for its opposition to placing the Ruhr coal basin under international control which led eventually to the Schuman plan for the European Coal and Steel Community. Schmidt argued that France had legitimate security concerns and, as a recent graduate in economics from Hamburg University, that practical schemes for economic cooperation were the best way to advance West European unity (430-32). By the 1960s the terms of the German debate had changed as a result of the nuclear stalemate between the super-powers. Schmidt, by now his party’s leading expert on security, rejected the views of German ‘Gaullists’ who thought Europe could pursue a policy more independent of the United States based on a Franco-German axis and French nuclear weapons. Schmidt thought that any concept of security outside NATO was wholly unrealistic for West Germany and argued instead for strengthening European conventional forces within NATO, in line with President John Kennedy’s idea of an Atlantic Community with both an American and a European pillar. Schmidt was also one of the early architects of Ostpolitik, but, like Brandt, he argued that it could be successful only with the support of the United States and Germany’s European neighbours, particularly France (433-36).  

When he became Chancellor in 1974, Schmidt had established his reputation as an ‘Atlanticist’ but that, it could be argued, was more because General Charles de Gaulle wanted to force a choice on West Germany between his concept of Europe and the American alliance, rather than because of any change in Schmidt’s own views which had always emphasized that both were vital. When Giscard d’Estaing became President of France, almost immediately after Schmidt’s own appointment, the situation was transformed. Both saw the urgent need for European economic cooperation to manage the multiple shocks of a dramatic increase in the price of oil, rapid inflation, and currency instability. And, crucially, both looked for cooperation with the United States, not competition, an attitude that was reciprocated by President Gerald Ford. Schmidt remained a realist, looking to inter-governmental cooperation between heads of government in the new European Council rather than a supranational framework. This also suited his preference for leading gently so that Germany would not be accused of wanting ‘to behave like Wilhelm II’ (438).  

That benign period when both the European and Atlantic pillars of Schmidt’s policy were in harmony was cut short by the election of President Carter in 1977. This change brought new tensions to German-American relations. Carter’s willingness to challenge the Soviet Union over human rights appeared to threaten the achievements of détente, in which the Federal Republic had invested so heavily through Ostpolitik. At the same time, the adoption of the European Monetary System in 1978 was widely seen as a move to make Europe more independent of the United States, though Haeussler argues that its novelty has been exaggerated and that it was essentially a defensive measure designed to increase European stability not to undermine the dollar as a reserve currency, and its wider benefits were even recognized within the Carter administration (440-42). Finally, and most important for Schmidt’s Chancellorship, as an acknowledged security expert and former 

² There was nothing unusual in supporting European integration out of national self-interest. See, for example, A. Milward, The European Rescue of the Nation State (London: Routledge, 1999).
Minister of Defence, he became concerned at the Soviet Union’s deployment of intermediate-range nuclear ballistic missiles (the SS-20s) which were excluded from the arms control negotiations between the superpowers (443). Largely as a result of his pressure, NATO agreed in 1979 to deploy an equivalent weapons system unless the Soviet Union agreed to dismantle the SS-20s. This was entirely in line with Schmidt’s long-held view that West German security depended on its interests being properly represented in the NATO alliance. It exposed him, however, to increasing criticism from the left wing of the SPD and the peace movement. That gathered strength when Carter was succeeded by President Ronald Reagan in 1980 with his new Cold War rhetoric and rearmament plans. The increasing strains between Schmidt and his party undermined the coalition government which forced his resignation in October 1982.

It is always tempting for a historian to find consistency in the career of a major politician. But in the example of Schmidt, Haeussler makes a strong case. That is partly because of the kind of man he was, both an intellectual and a realist. He thought deeply and his ideas developed from strong foundations. He also understood the constraints on West Germany’s freedom to make policy during the Cold War. Having reached the obvious conclusion early that West Germany needed both a secure place in Western Europe and a secure place in the Atlantic alliance, he did not deviate from either assumption. Indeed that was more or less common ground between the political leaders of the Federal Republic during the Cold War and it would have been surprising had it been otherwise. That basic consensus was masked, as Haeussler suggests, by the contemporary debate between ‘Europeanism’ and ‘Atlanticism,’ which neglected the many links between them (447). Maintaining both pillars, however, did require balancing the tensions between them and that meant sometimes leaning to one side or the other.

One is left then with the question of why Schmidt was perceived as a natural ‘Atlanticist’ rather than a natural ‘European.’ Part of the answer is Hamburg. He did not share the Rhineland or South German perspective of Adenauer or Kohl. He did not hark back to an imaginary Carolingian empire in Western Europe (433). He saw European cooperation rather as an economic necessity, and a task in which Germany had to restore and maintain the trust of its neighbours. His approach to Europe was pragmatic and he rejected Gaullist ideas of distancing West Germany from NATO. Once having acquired the label of ‘Atlanticist,’ it was natural that his sharp differences with Carter over détente, economic policy, and defence would be seen as a change of direction towards a ‘European’ policy with Giscard. And it should be added that he was not always the soul of tact (to put it mildly) in these differences which added to the sense of a break. The irony was that in his attempt to shore up NATO’s European defence over intermediate range missiles, he undermined his own domestic position.

This is an impressive article and part of a wider reassessment of Schmidt’s reputation. It can now be read in conjunction with a new book by Kristina Spohr which also argues that Schmidt had major achievements to his credit. Whereas Haeussler is chiefly concerned to correct the view that Schmidt was first and foremost an ‘Atlanticist’ and only a ‘European’ faute de mieux, Spohr focuses on his role in managing the global economic shocks of the 1970s and in framing NATO strategy.³


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