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Angela Merkel's Last Days

Cultural compilations such as James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* are rich with these accounts: the high priest or leader of a tribe, whose lengthy tenure is wearing thin, is set for the sacrifice, either through ritual or being overthrown by another member. The crops have failed; a drought is taking place. The period of rule has ended; the time for transition and new blood replacements have come. Since 2005, Angela Merkel's Chancellorship has been one of the most stable and puzzling, a political stayer ruthless in durability and calculating in survival.

Swords and daggers are being readied. The Christian Democrats (CDU) and Social Democrats (SPD), bound by a tense partnership, have been getting a battering in Germany's state elections. Poor showings in Bavaria and Hesse are proving omens of oracular force. The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) now finds itself with a presence in all 16 regional parliaments. The Greens have been polling strongly, while the Left Party and Free Democrats have doggedly maintained their presence. The day after the poor showing Hesse, Merkel announced that she would not be seeking re-election as leader of the Christian Democrats in December. Nor would she be running again as Chancellor in 2021.

Other European states will view her with the sort of respect that is afforded the German national football team: dislike and fear in a jumble with respect and admiration. At times, she let various cabinet members get ahead of themselves – Herr Schwarze Null, the darkly obsessive figure of balanced budgets and punitive financial measures, Wolfgang Schäuble, for too long coloured the age of austerity.

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For such figures, including Merkel, thrift became dogma and mission, a goal of its own separate from social goals and cute notions of sovereignty. The vile god of monetary union needed to be propitiated; Greece needed to be sacrificed, its autonomy outsourced to external financial institutions. Making states seek bailouts while repaying crushing debts, many of them the result of unwise lending practices to begin with, seemed much like requiring the chronic asthmatic to do a hundred metre dash without a loss of breath. As a result of such policies, the European Union has edged ever closer to the precipice.

Throughout her chancellorship, abrupt changes featured. Having convinced the Bundestag that phasing out nuclear energy born from the Red-Green coalition of 2001 was bad (an extension of operating times by eight to fourteen years was proposed), Merkel proceeded to, in the aftermath of Fukushima, order the closure of eight of the country's seventeen nuclear plants with a despot's urgency. This became the prelude to the policy of [Energiewende](#), the energy transition envisaging the phasing out of all nuclear power plants by 2022 and a sharp shift to decarbonise the economy.

For sociologist Wolfgang Streeck, [she is](#) “a postmodern politician with a premodern, Machiavellian contempt for both causes and people.” Educated in the old East Germany (DDR), she mastered the art, [claimed](#) biographer and Der Spiegel deputy editor-in-chief Dirk Kurbjuweit, of governing by silence, being cautious, and at times insufferably vague, with her words. “She waits and sees where the train is going and then she jumps on the train.”

In 2003, she pushed her party into the choppy waters of deregulation and neo-liberal economics, a move that almost lost her the election to Gerhard Schröder, that other market “reformer” who arguably fertilised the ground she then thrived in. After becoming chancellor, she proceeded to, with the assistance of the Grand Coalition comprising the remains of the Social Democratic Party, clean the party stables of neoliberals and become a new social democrat.

Merkel the shifter and shape changer was again on show during the crisis which is being seen as the last, albeit lengthy straw of the camel's back. With refugees pouring into Europe, Merkel initially showed enthusiasm in 2015, ignoring both German and EU law mandating registration in the first country of entry into the EU before seeking resettlement within the zone. Refugees gathered in Budapest were invited into Germany [as part of](#) “showing a friendly face in an emergency”; it was a move that might also serve useful moral and humanitarian purposes, not to mention leverage against other, seemingly less compassionate European states.

Ariot characterised by rampant sexual assault at Cologne Central Station on New Year's Eve in 2015, a good deal of it captured on smartphones, served to harden her approach to the new arrivals. She promised more deportations and reining in family reunification rules. Wir schaffen das – we can do it – has since become something of a hefty millstone. “The German government did a good job reacting to the refugee crisis,” observed Karl-Georg Wellmann of the Christian Democrats. “But repeating ‘we can do it’ over and over again sends out the wrong message.” The far-right AfD duly pounced, reaping electoral rewards.

Her enemies have amassed, though the line between groomed successor and opportunistic Brutus is not always clear. Critics long cured by a vengeful smoke – the likes of Friedrich Merz, who once led Merkel's parliamentary caucus only to be edged out, and Roland Koch, formerly minister president of Hesse – have been directing salvos of accusation. Within hours of Merkel's announcement of eventual political retirement, Merz, who never had much time for grand coalition antics, returned fire with a promise to bid for the party leadership.

The caravan of potential replacements features the likes of “mini-Merkel” Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, currently the Christian Democrats party secretary-general and the calculatingly anti-Merkel and youthful Jens Spahn, health minister who has bruised his way to prominence attacking the 2015 refugee policy. Occupying the middle ground, and risking falling between two stools, is the more conciliatory Armin Laschet.

The current grand coalition is neither looking grand nor much of a coalition, and the party operatives from the CDU and SPD are attempting to wriggle out, though neither Merkel nor SPD counterpart Andrea Nahles wishes to dissolve the union yet.

Like Merkel's mentor, Helmut Kohl, staying power is never eternal. Kohl tasted eight years of power as chancellor of West Germany before leading a united Germany for another eight. “Fatty's got to go” was the prevailing sentiment in the dying days of his rule, and it transpired that, in time, power had done its bit to corrupt the hulking politician in his twilight days. A million marks in donations had found their way into a reward scheme for cronies and friends instead of going to his party. Kohl attempted to keep mum on the whole matter.

It is worth recalling who it was who laid the final, cleansing blow to this holy of holies: a certain Angela Merkel's December 1999 contribution to the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung calling for her former patron's resignation and necessary banishment. “I bought my killer,” reflected a rueful Kohl. “I put the snake on my arm.