

THE QUIET GERMAN

The astonishing rise of Angela Merkel, the most powerful woman in the world.

BY GEORGE PACKER

Among German leaders, Merkel is a triple anomaly: a woman (divorced, remarried, no children), a scientist (quantum chemistry), and an Ossi (a product of East Germany). These qualities, though making her an outsider in German politics, also helped to propel her extraordinary rise. Yet some observers, attempting to explain her success, look everywhere but to Merkel herself. “There are some who say what should not be can’t really exist—that a woman from East Germany, who doesn’t have the typical qualities a politician should have, shouldn’t be in this position,” Göring-Eckardt, another woman from East Germany, said. “They don’t want to say she’s just a very good politician.” Throughout her career, Merkel has made older and more powerful politicians, almost all of them men, pay a high price for underestimating her.

Merkel was born in Hamburg, West Germany, in 1954. Her father, Horst Kasner, was an official in the Lutheran Church, one of the few institutions that continued operating in both Germanys after the postwar division of the country. Serious and demanding, he moved the family across the frontier just a few weeks after Angela’s birth—and against his wife’s wishes—to take up ecclesiastical duties in the German Democratic Republic. That year, almost two hundred thousand East Germans fled in the other direction. Kasner’s unusual decision led West German Church officials to call him “the red minister.” Joachim Gauck, a former East German pastor and dissident, who, in 2012, was elected Germany’s largely ceremonial President, once told a colleague that people in the Lutheran Church under Communism knew to stay away from Kasner, a member of the state-controlled Federation of Evangelical Pastors. By most accounts, Kasner’s motives were as much careerist as ideological.

Angela, the oldest of three children, was raised on the outskirts of Templin, a cobblestoned town in the pine forests of Brandenburg, north of Berlin. The Kasners lived in the seminary at Waldhof, a complex of around thirty buildings, many from the nineteenth century, belonging to the Lutheran Church. Waldhof was—and remains—home to several hundred physically and mentally disabled people, who learned trades and grew crops. Ulrich Schoeneich, who managed the estate in the eighties and knew the Kasners, described Waldhof under the East Germans as a grim place, with up to sixty men crammed into a single room, and no furniture except cots. Merkel once recalled seeing some residents strapped to benches, but she also said, “To grow up in the neighborhood of handicapped people was an important experience for me. I learned back then to treat them in a very normal way.”

Merkel’s upbringing in a Communist state was as normal as she could make it. “I never felt that the G.D.R. was my home country,” she told the German photographer Herlinde Koelbl, in 1991. “I have a relatively sunny spirit, and I always had the expectation that my path through life would be relatively sunny, no matter what happened. I have never allowed myself to be bitter. I always used the free room that the G.D.R. allowed me. . . . There was no shadow over my childhood. And later I acted in such a way that I would not have to live in constant conflict with the state.” During her first campaign for Chancellor, in 2005, she

described her calculations more bluntly: “I decided that if the system became too terrible, I would have to try to escape. But if it wasn’t too bad then I wouldn’t lead my life in opposition to the system, because I was scared of the damage that would do to me.”

Being the daughter of a Protestant minister from the West carried both privileges and liabilities. The Kasners had two cars: the standard East German Trabant, an underpowered little box that has become the subject of kitschy *Ostalgia*, and a more luxurious Wartburg, their official church car. The family received clothes and food from relatives in Hamburg, as well as money in the form of “Forum checks,” convertible from Deutsche marks and valid in shops in large East Berlin hotels that sold Western consumer items. “They were *élite*,” Erika Benn, Merkel’s Russian teacher in Templin, said. But the Church retained enough independence from the state that the Kasners lived under constant suspicion, and during Angela’s childhood religious organizations came to be seen as agents of Western intelligence. In 1994, an official report on repression in East Germany concluded, “The country of Martin Luther was de-Christianized by the end of the G.D.R.”

Angela’s mother, Herlind, suffered the most in the family. An English teacher who imparted her passion for learning to Angela, Herlind wrote to the education authorities every year asking for a job, and every year she was told that nothing was available, even though English teachers were in desperately short supply. “She always felt oppressed by her husband,” Schoeneich, the Waldhof manager, told me.

Angela was physically clumsy—she later called herself “a little movement idiot.” At the age of five, she could barely walk downhill without falling. “What a normal person knows automatically I had to first figure out mentally, followed by exhausting exercise,” she has said. According to Benn, as a teen-ager Merkel was never “bitchy” or flirtatious; she was uninterested in clothes, “always colorless,” and “her haircut was impossible—it looked like a pot over her head.” A former schoolmate once labelled her a member of the Club of the Unkissed. (The schoolmate, who became Templin’s police chief, nearly lost his job when the comment was published.) But Merkel was a brilliant, ferociously motivated student. A longtime political associate of Merkel’s traces her drive to those early years in Templin. “She decided, ‘O.K., you don’t fuck me? I will fuck you with my weapons,’ ” the political associate told me. “And those weapons were intelligence and will and power.”

When Angela was in the eighth grade, Benn recruited her for the Russian Club and coached her to compete in East Germany’s Russian-language Olympiad. During skits that the students practiced in the teacher’s tiny parlor, Benn had to exhort her star student to look up and smile while offering another student a glass of water in Russian: “Can’t you be a *little* more friendly?” Merkel won at every level, from schoolwide to countrywide, a feat that she managed three times, to the glory of Frau Benn, a Party member with small-town ambitions. In her tidy apartment in Templin, Benn, who is seventy-six, proudly showed me a victory certificate from 1969. “I have the Lenin bust in the cellar,” she said. Not long before Horst Kasner died, in 2011, he sent a newspaper clipping to a colleague of Benn’s, with a picture of Merkel standing next to Russia’s President, Vladimir Putin. To Benn’s delight, Putin was quoted expressing his admiration for the first world leader with whom he could converse in his mother tongue.

In 1970, an incident exposed the fragile standing of the *bürgerlich* Kasner family. At a local Party meeting, the Russian Club’s latest triumph was announced, and Benn expected praise. Instead, the schools supervisor observed acidly, “When the children of farmers and workers win, *that* will be something.” Benn burst into tears.

Merkel studied physics at Leipzig University and earned a doctorate in quantum chemistry in Berlin. She was allowed to pursue graduate studies, in no small part because she never ran

afoul of the ruling party. Ulrich Schoeneich, who became Templin's mayor after reunification, expressed bitterness to me that Merkel hasn't been challenged much on her accommodation with the East German system. Schoeneich's father, Harro, was also a Protestant minister, but, unlike Kasner, he openly dissented from the state. Ulrich Schoeneich refused to join the Free German Youth, the blue-shirted "fighting reserve" of the ruling party which the vast majority of East German teen-agers joined, including Angela Kasner, who participated well into adulthood. "Not just as a dead person in the files but as the officer responsible for agitation and propaganda," Schoeneich told me, referring to a revelation in a controversial recent biography, "The First Life of Angela M." He added, "I'm convinced that she could get her doctorate only because she was active in the Free German Youth, even in her postgraduate days. Most people say it was forced, but I demonstrated that you didn't have to join it." Merkel herself once admitted that her participation in the Free German Youth was "seventy per cent opportunism."

Schoeneich wasn't permitted to finish high school, and he spent much of his early life in the shadow cast by his family's principled opposition. Angela Kasner had other ideas for her future, and became, at most, a passive opponent of the regime. Evelyn Roll, one of Merkel's biographers, discovered a Stasi document, dated 1984, that was based on information provided by a friend of Merkel's. It described Merkel as "very critical toward our state," and went on, "Since its foundation, she was thrilled by the demands and actions of Solidarity in Poland. Although Angela views the leading role of the Soviet Union as that of a dictatorship which all other socialist countries obey, she is fascinated by the Russian language and the culture of the Soviet Union."

Rainer Eppelmann, a courageous dissident clergyman under Communism, who got to know Merkel soon after the fall of the Wall, refuses to criticize her. "I don't judge the ninety-five per cent," he told me. "Most of them were whisperers. They never said what they thought, what they felt, what they were afraid of. Even today, we're not completely aware what this did to people." He added, "In order to be true to your hopes, your ambitions, your beliefs, your dreams, you had to be a hero twenty-four hours a day. And nobody can do this."

After 1989, when the chance came to participate in democratic politics, these same qualities became useful to Merkel, in a new way. Eppelmann explained, "The whisperer might find it easier to learn in this new life, to wait and see, and not just burst out at once—to think things over before speaking. The whisperer thinks, How can I say this without damaging myself? The whisperer is somebody who might be compared to a chess player. And I have the impression that she thinks things over more carefully and is always a few moves ahead of her competitor."

In 1977, at twenty-three, Angela married a physicist, Ulrich Merkel, but the union foundered quickly, and she left him in 1981. She spent the final moribund decade of the G.D.R. as a quantum chemist at the East German Academy of Sciences, a gloomy research facility, across from a Stasi barracks, in southeastern Berlin. She co-authored a paper titled "Vibrational Properties of Surface Hydroxyls: Nonempirical Model Calculations Including Anharmonicities." She was the only woman in the theoretical-chemistry section—a keen observer of others, intensely curious about the world.

People who have followed her career point to Merkel's scientific habit of mind as a key to her political success. "She is about the best analyst of any given situation that I could imagine," a senior official in her government said. "She looks at various vectors, extrapolates, and says, 'This is where I think it's going.'" Trained to see the invisible world in terms of particles and waves, Merkel learned to approach problems methodically, drawing comparisons, running scenarios, weighing risks, anticipating reactions, and then, even after making a decision,

letting it sit for a while before acting. She once told a story from her childhood of standing on a diving board for the full hour of a swimming lesson until, at the bell, she finally jumped.

Scientific detachment and caution under dictatorship can be complementary traits, and in Merkel's case they were joined by the reticence, tinged with irony, of a woman navigating a man's world. She once joked to the tabloid *Bild Zeitung*, with double-edged self-deprecation, "The men in the laboratory always had their hands on all the buttons at the same time. I couldn't keep up with this, because I was thinking. And then things suddenly went 'poof,' and the equipment was destroyed." Throughout her career, Merkel has made a virtue of biding her time and keeping her mouth shut.

"She's not a woman of strong emotions," Bernd Ulrich, the deputy editor of *Die Zeit*, said. "Too much emotion disturbs your reason. She watches politics like a scientist." He called her "a learning machine." Volker Schlöndorff, the director of "The Tin Drum" and other films, got to know Merkel in the years just after reunification. "Before you contradict her, you would think twice—she has the authority of somebody who knows that she's right," he said. "Once she has an opinion, it seems to be founded, whereas I tend to have opinions that I have to revise frequently."

Every morning, Merkel took the S-Bahn to the Academy of Sciences from her apartment in Prenzlauer Berg, a bohemian neighborhood near the city center. For several stretches, her train ran parallel to the Wall, the rooftops of West Berlin almost in reach. Sometimes she commuted with a colleague, Michael Schindhelm. "You were confronted every day, from the morning on, with the absurdity of this city," he told me. Schindhelm found Merkel to be the most serious researcher in the theoretical-chemistry section, frustrated by her lack of access to Western publications and scientists. Whenever her colleagues left the building to cheer the motorcade of a high-profile guest from the Communist world on its way from Schönefeld Airport, she stayed behind. "She really wanted to achieve something," Schindhelm said. "Others just liked sitting in that comfortable niche while the country went down the drain."

In 1984, Schindhelm and Merkel began sharing an office and, over Turkish coffee that she made, became close. They both had a fairly critical view of the East German state. Schindhelm had spent five years studying in the Soviet Union, and when news of Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika policy seeped into East Germany, through West German television, Merkel questioned him about the potential for fundamental change. They both felt that the world on the other side of the Wall was more desirable than their own. (Years later, Schindhelm, who became a theatre and opera director, was revealed to have been coerced by the Stasi into serving as an informer, though he apparently never betrayed anyone.)

One day in 1985, Merkel showed up at the office with the text of a speech by the West German President, Richard von Weizsäcker, given on the fortieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Weizsäcker spoke with unprecedented honesty about Germany's responsibility for the Holocaust and declared the country's defeat a day of liberation. He expressed a belief that Germans, in facing their past, could redefine their identity and future. In the West, the speech became a landmark on the country's return to civilization. But in East Germany, where ideology had twisted the history of the Third Reich beyond recognition, the speech was virtually unknown. Merkel had procured a rare copy through her connections in the Church, and she was deeply struck by it.

Being an East German meant retaining faith in the idea of Germany even though many West Germans, who needed it less, had given up on reunification. As East Germany decayed, its citizens had nothing else to hold on to, whereas Westerners had been taught to suppress feelings of nationhood. "People were really lacking identity—there was an enormous vacuum to making sense of your existence," Schindhelm said. Merkel's excitement about the speech

showed that “she had a very particular passion for Germany as a country, its history and culture.”

The next year, Merkel was granted permission to travel to Hamburg for a cousin’s wedding. After riding the miraculously comfortable trains through West Germany, she returned to East Berlin convinced that the socialist system was doomed. “She came back very impressed, but she came back,” Schindhelm said. “She stayed not out of loyalty to the state but because she had her network there, her family.” Merkel, in her early thirties, was looking forward to 2014—when she would turn sixty, collect her state pension, and be allowed to travel to California.

Merkel’s second life began on the night of November 9, 1989. Instead of joining the delirious throngs pouring through the Wall, which had just been opened, she took her regular Thursday-evening sauna with a friend. Later, she crossed into the West with a crowd at the Bornholmer Strasse checkpoint, but instead of continuing with other Osis to the upscale shopping district of Kurfürstendamm she returned home, in order to get up for work in the morning. Her actions on that momentous night have been ridiculed as a sign of banality and a lack of feeling. But, in the following months, no East German seized the new freedoms with more fervor than Merkel. Few irreducible principles have been evident in her political career, but one of them is the right to the pursuit of happiness. “There aren’t many feelings that she’s really into, but liberty and freedom are very important,” Göring-Eckardt, the Green leader, said. “And this is, of course, linked to the experience of growing up in a society where newspapers were censored, books were banned, travel was forbidden.”

A month after the Wall fell, Merkel visited the offices of a new political group called Democratic Awakening, which were near her apartment. “Can I help you?” she asked. She was soon put to work setting up the office computers, which had been donated by the West German government. She kept coming back, though at first hardly anyone noticed her. It was the kind of fluid moment when things happen quickly and chance and circumstance can make all the difference. In March, 1990, the leader of Democratic Awakening, Wolfgang Schnur, was exposed as a Stasi informer, and at an emergency board meeting Rainer Eppelmann, the dissident clergyman, was chosen to replace him. Merkel was asked to handle the noisy crowd of journalists outside the door, and she did it with such calm assurance that, after the East German elections that March, Eppelmann suggested Merkel as a spokesman for the country’s first and last democratically elected Prime Minister, Lothar de Maizière.

“She was *fleissig*—the opposite of lazy,” Eppelmann recalled. “She never put herself in the foreground. She understood that she had to do a job here and do it well, but not to be the chief. Lothar de Maizière was the chief.” De Maizière already had a spokesman, so Merkel became the deputy. “The No. 1 press speaker showed off while she did all the work,” Eppelmann said. In this way, she earned de Maizière’s trust, and he brought her with him on visits to foreign capitals. He once described Merkel as looking like “a typical G.D.R. scientist,” wearing “a baggy skirt and Jesus sandals and a cropped haircut.” After one foreign trip, he asked his office manager to take her clothes shopping.

In the early nineties, Volker Schlöndorff began attending monthly dinners with a small group that included Merkel and her partner, Joachim Sauer, another scientist. (They married in 1998.) Some participants were from the East, others from the West; at each meal, the host would narrate his or her upbringing, illuminating what life was like on one side of the divide. Schlöndorff found Merkel to be an earnest but witty conversation partner. One evening, at the extremely modest country house that Merkel and Sauer had built, near Templin, she and Schlöndorff went for a walk through the fields. “We spoke about Germany, what it is going to

become,” Schlöndorff recalled. “I was trying irony and sarcasm, which didn’t take with her at all. It was as if she were saying, ‘Come on, be serious, matters not to be joked about.’ ”

Merkel’s decision to enter politics is the central mystery of an opaque life. She rarely speaks publicly about herself and has never explained her decision. It wasn’t a long-term career plan—like most Germans, she didn’t foresee the abrupt collapse of Communism and the opportunities it created. But when the moment came, and Merkel found herself single and childless in her mid-thirties—and laboring in an East German institution with no future—a woman of her ambition must have grasped that politics would be the most dynamic realm of the new Germany. And, as Schlöndorff dryly put it, “With a certain hesitation, she seized the day.”

Reunification really meant annexation of the East by the West, which required giving East Germans top government positions. Merkel’s gender and youth made her an especially appealing option. In October, 1990, she won a seat in the new Bundestag, in Bonn, the first capital of reunified Germany. She got herself introduced to Chancellor Helmut Kohl, and de Maizière suggested that Kohl bring her into his cabinet. To Merkel’s surprise, she was named minister of women and youth—a job, she admitted to a journalist, in which she had no interest. She wasn’t a feminist politician, nor was economic parity for the former East her cause. She had no political agenda at all. According to Karl Feldmeyer, the political correspondent for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, what drove Merkel was “her perfect instinct for power, which, for me, is the main characteristic of this politician.”

Kohl, then at his height as a statesman, presented Merkel to foreign dignitaries as a curiosity, belittling her by calling her “*mein Mädchen*”—his girl. She had to be taught how to use a credit card. Cabinet meetings were dominated by Kohl, and though Merkel was always well prepared, she seldom spoke. But inside her ministry Merkel was respected for her efficient absorption of information, and feared for her directness and temper. According to her biographer Evelyn Roll, she acquired the nickname Angie the Snake, and a reputation for accepting little criticism. When, in 1994, Merkel was given the environment portfolio, she quickly fired the ministry’s top civil servant after he suggested that she would need his help running things.

In 1991, Herlinde Koelbl, the photographer, began taking pictures of Merkel and other German politicians for a study called “Traces of Power.” Her idea was to see how life in the public eye changed them in the course of a decade. Most of the men, such as Gerhard Schröder, a Social Democrat who became Chancellor in 1998, and Joschka Fischer, who became his foreign minister, seemed to swell with self-importance. Merkel remained herself, Koelbl told me: “in her body language, a bit awkward.” But, she added, “You could feel her strength at the beginning.” In the first portrait, she has her chin slightly lowered and looks up at the camera—not exactly shy, but watchful. Subsequent pictures display growing confidence. During the sessions, Merkel was always in a hurry, never making small talk. “Schröder and Fischer, they are vain,” Koelbl said. “Merkel is not vain—still. And that helped her, because if you’re vain you are subjective. If you’re not vain, you are more objective.”

Democratic politics was a West German game, and Merkel had to learn how to play it in the methodical way that she had learned how to command her body as a “little movement idiot” of five. She became such an assiduous student that some colleagues from the former East found it unsettling. Petra Pau, a senior member of the Bundestag from Die Linke, once caught Merkel saying “we West Germans.” But what made Merkel a potentially transformative figure in German politics was that, below the surface, she *didn’t* belong. She joined the Christian Democratic Union after Democratic Awakening merged with it, ahead of the 1990 elections; the C.D.U. was more hospitable than the Social Democrats were to liberal-minded

East Germans. But the C.D.U. was also a stodgy patriarchy whose base was in the Catholic south. “She never became mentally a part of the C.D.U., until now,” Feldmeyer, of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, said. “She is strange to everything in the Party. It is only a function of her power, nothing else.”

Alan Posener, of the conservative newspaper *Die Welt*, told me, “The things that motivate the heartland of the C.D.U. don’t mean a thing to her”—concerns about “working mothers, gay marriage, immigration, divorce.” The same was true of the transatlantic alliance with America, the cornerstone of West German security: Posener said that she studied its details in “the C.D.U. manual.” Michael Naumann, a book publisher and journalist who served as culture minister under Schröder, said, “Her attitude toward the United States is a *learned* attitude.” Dirk Kurbjuweit, a biographer of Merkel and a correspondent for *Der Spiegel*, said, “Merkel really is a friend of freedom, because she suffered under not being free in the G.D.R. But in the other way she’s a learned democrat—not a born democrat, like Americans.”

West German politicians of Merkel’s generation were shaped by the culture wars that followed the upheavals of 1968, which didn’t touch her at all. Over dinner one night in the mid-nineties, Merkel asked Schlöndorff, a former radical, to explain the violence perpetrated by the Baader-Meinhof Group. He told her that young people had needed to break with the authoritarian culture that had never been repudiated in West Germany after the defeat of the Nazis. The more he explained, the less Merkel seemed to sympathize—she wasn’t against authority, just the East German kind. What did kids in the West have to protest about? She didn’t always hide a feeling that West Germans were like spoiled children.

For all the catching up Merkel had to do in her political education, being East German gave her advantages: she had learned self-discipline, strength of will, and silence as essential tools. Feldmeyer said, “The G.D.R. shaped her in such an extreme and strong way as no one who grew up in the Federal Republic can imagine. Everything was a question of survival, and it was impossible to make errors if you wanted to succeed.”

Early in her career, Merkel hired a young C.D.U. worker named Beate Baumann to run her office. Baumann, who remains her most influential adviser, was the perfect No. 2—loyal, discreet to the vanishing point, and, according to some insiders, the only aide who addressed the boss with complete candor. “Baumann could not be a politician, and Merkel didn’t know the West,” Bernd Ulrich, of *Die Zeit*, who knows both women well, told me. “So Baumann was her interpreter for everything that was typically West German.” Fed up with Kohl’s smug bullying, the two women practiced a form of “invisible cruelty”: they played hardball but relished their victories privately, without celebrating in public and making unnecessary enemies. Their style, Ulrich said, is “not ‘House of Cards.’” On one rare occasion, Merkel bared her teeth. In 1996, during negotiations over a nuclear-waste law, Gerhard Schröder, two years away from becoming Chancellor, called her performance as environment minister “pitiful.” In her interview with Herlinde Koelbl that year, Merkel said, “I will put him in the corner, just like he did with me. I still need time, but one day the time will come for this, and I am already looking forward.” It took nine years for her to make good on the promise.

In 1998, amid a recession, Schröder defeated Kohl and became Chancellor. The next summer, Volker Schlöndorff, at a garden party outside his home, in Potsdam, introduced Merkel to a movie producer, half-jokingly calling her “Germany’s first female Chancellor.” Merkel shot Schlöndorff a look, as if he had called her bluff—*How dare you?*—which convinced him that she actually wanted the job. The producer, a C.D.U. member, was incredulous. Schlöndorff said, “These guys whose party had been in power forever could not imagine that a woman could be Chancellor—and from East Germany, no less.”

In November, 1999, the C.D.U. was engulfed by a campaign-finance scandal, with charges of undisclosed cash donations and secret bank accounts. Kohl and his successor as Party chairman, Wolfgang Schäuble, were both implicated, but Kohl was so revered that nobody in the Party dared to criticize him. Merkel, who had risen to secretary-general after the C.D.U.'s electoral defeat, saw opportunity. She telephoned Karl Feldmeyer. "I would like to give some comments to you in your newspaper," she said.

"Do you know what you want to say?" Feldmeyer asked.

"I've written it down."

Feldmeyer suggested that, instead of doing an interview, she publish an opinion piece. Five minutes later, a fax came through, and Feldmeyer read it with astonishment. Merkel, a relatively new figure in the C.D.U., was calling for the Party to break with its longtime leader. "The Party must learn to walk now and dare to engage in future battles with its political opponents without its old warhorse, as Kohl has often enjoyed calling himself," Merkel wrote. "We who now have responsibility for the Party, and not so much Helmut Kohl, will decide how to approach the new era." She published the piece without warning the tainted Schäuble, the Party chairman. In a gesture that mixed Protestant righteousness with ruthlessness, Kohl's *Mädchen* was cutting herself off from her political father and gambling her career in a naked bid to supplant him. She succeeded. Within a few months, Merkel had been elected Party chairman. Kohl receded into history. "She put the knife in his back—and turned it twice," Feldmeyer said. That was the moment when many Germans first became aware of Angela Merkel.

Years later, Michael Naumann sat next to Kohl at a dinner, and asked him, "Herr Kohl, what exactly does she want?"

"Power," Kohl said, tersely. He told another friend that championing young Merkel had been the biggest mistake of his life. "I brought my killer," Kohl said. "I put the snake on my arm."

In 2002, Merkel found herself on the verge of losing a Party vote that would determine the C.D.U.'s candidate for Chancellor in elections that fall. She hastily arranged a breakfast with her rival, the Bavarian leader Edmund Stoiber, in his home town. Disciplined enough to control her own ambitions, Merkel told Stoiber that she was withdrawing in his favor. Schlöndorff sent her a note saying, in effect, "Smart move." By averting a loss that would have damaged her future within the Party, Merkel ended up in a stronger position. Stoiber lost to Schröder, and Merkel went on to outmaneuver a series of male heavyweights from the West, waiting for them to make a mistake or eat one another up, before getting rid of each with a little shove.

John Kornblum, a former U.S. Ambassador to Germany, who still lives in Berlin, said, "If you cross her, you end up dead. There's nothing cushy about her. There's a whole list of alpha males who thought they would get her out of the way, and they're all now in other walks of life." On Merkel's fiftieth birthday, in 2004, a conservative politician named Michael Glos published a tribute:

Careful: unpretentiousness can be a weapon! . . . One of the secrets of the success of Angela Merkel is that she knows how to deal with vain men. She knows you shoot a mountain cock best when it's courting a hen. Angela Merkel is a patient hunter of courting mountain cocks. With the patience of an angel, she waits for her moment.

German politics was entering a new era. As the country became more "normal," it no longer needed domineering father figures as leaders. "Merkel was lucky to live in a period when macho was in decline," Ulrich said. "The men didn't notice and she did. She didn't have to fight them—it was an aikido politics." Ulrich added, "If she knows anything, she knows her

macho. She has them for her cereal.” Merkel’s physical haplessness, combined with her emotional opacity, made it hard for her rivals to recognize the threat she posed. “She’s very difficult to know, and that is a reason for her success,” the longtime political associate said. “It seems she is not from this world. Psychologically, she gives everybody the feeling of ‘I will take care of you.’ ”

When Schröder called early elections in 2005, Merkel became the C.D.U.’s candidate for Chancellor. In the politics of macho, Schröder and Fischer—working-class street fighters who loved political argument and expensive wine, with seven ex-wives between them—were preëminent. The two men despised Merkel, and the sentiment was reciprocated. According to Dirk Kurbjuweit, of *Der Spiegel*, Schröder and Fischer sometimes laughed “like boys on the playground” when Merkel gave speeches in the Bundestag. In 2001, after photographs were published of Fischer assaulting a policeman as a young militant in the seventies, Merkel denounced him, saying that he would be unfit for public life until he “atoned”—a comment that many Germans found strident. During the 2005 campaign, Fischer said in private talks that Merkel was incapable of doing the job.

At the time, Schröder’s Social Democrats ruled in a coalition with the Greens, and the public had grown weary of prolonged economic stagnation. Through most of the campaign, the C.D.U. held a large lead, but the Social Democrats closed the gap, and on Election Night the two parties were virtually tied in the popular vote. Alan Posener, of *Die Welt*, saw Merkel that night at Party headquarters—she seemed deflated, flanked by C.D.U. politicians she had once disposed of, who didn’t conceal their glee. Merkel had made two near-fatal mistakes. First, just before the Iraq War—unpopular in Germany, and repudiated by Schröder—she had published an op-ed in the *Washington Post* titled “Schroeder Doesn’t Speak for All Germans,” in which she stopped just short of supporting war. “One more sentence for Bush and against Schröder, and she would not be Chancellor today,” Ulrich said. Second, many of her advisers were free-market proponents who advocated changes to the tax code and to labor policies which went far beyond what German voters would accept. After fifteen years, she still didn’t have a fingertip feel for public opinion.

On Election Night, Merkel, Schröder, Fischer, and other party leaders gathered in a TV studio to discuss the results. Merkel, looking shell-shocked and haggard, was almost mute. Schröder, his hair colored chestnut and combed neatly back, grinned mischievously and effectively declared himself the winner. “I will continue to be Chancellor,” he said. “Do you really believe that my party would take up an offer from Merkel to talk when she says she would like to become Chancellor? I think we should leave the church in the village”—that is, quit dreaming. Many viewers thought he was drunk. As Schröder continued to boast, Merkel slowly came to life, as if amused by the Chancellor’s performance. She seemed to realize that Schröder’s bluster had just saved her the Chancellorship. With a slight smile, she put Schröder in his place. “Plain and simple—you did not win today,” she said. Indeed, the C.D.U. had a very slim lead. “With a little time to think about it, even the Social Democrats will come to accept this as a reality. And I promise we will not turn the democratic rules upside down.”

Two months later, Merkel was sworn in as Germany’s first female Chancellor.