

Konrad Adenauer

Europe's elder statesman

SUMMARY

Konrad Adenauer was born at the end of the 19th century in imperial Germany. Growing up in relatively humble surroundings, he adopted Prussian values and a Christian faith that guided him throughout his life.

Adenauer first took up political office in 1906, as city councillor of his home town of Cologne. In 1909, he became president of the city council. He was then elected Lord Mayor of Cologne in 1917 – at the age of just 41. With the end of the First World War, Adenauer made efforts to promote transnational cooperation with Germany's neighbours to the West on several occasions – a progressive move at that point in time.

When, in February 1933, the newly elected German Chancellor Adolf Hitler visited Cologne, Konrad Adenauer refused to receive him – a decision that saw him removed from his position as Lord Mayor. Forced into political exile – even incarcerated at one point – he spent the following 12 years with his family at his home in Rhöndorf.

After the defeat of Nazi Germany, Adenauer was determined to establish a political platform that would unite people around core Christian and democratic values and it was on this basis that he was elected as the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany in September 1949.

Throughout his 14 years as Chancellor of Germany, Konrad Adenauer remained determined to integrate Germany into a value-based European political system. Therefore, reconciliation, rapprochement and cooperation with France became the central goals of Adenauer's foreign policy, ultimately shaping German policy up to the present day.



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The imperial era – early life

Konrad Adenauer was born on 5 January 1876 in Cologne as the third of five children to Johan Conrad and Helene Adenauer. Brought up in relatively humble surroundings, Konrad adopted the Prussian values his parents exemplified: obedience, discipline and, above all, dutiful service. While the Catholic faith was always of prime importance for the Adenauer family, his religious beliefs did not predetermine his political actions; rather they acted more as a philosophy that guided his moral compass. These virtues as well as his experiences with the Prussian authorities during the 'Kulturkampf' (the conflict between the German imperial government and the Roman Catholic Church) would determine Adenauer's political stance for decades to come.¹



Konrad Adenauer as a student (first from right).

Source: Robert Krewalts, Stiftung Bundeskanzler-Adenauer-Haus (StBKAH).

In 1894, on a modest stipend from the City of Cologne, Adenauer began studying law at the University of Freiburg. After a short stay in Munich, he completed his first state examination in Bonn in 1897 and his second in Berlin in 1901. Having completed his studies, he began working as a junior prosecutor at the Cologne Regional Court before joining a law firm in 1902. There, he came into contact with local politics, as his boss, Hermann Kausen, was the Chairman of the Zentrum Party in the city council.² Zentrum was a major political party that represented political Catholicism during both the imperial and the [Weimar](#) eras. Eventually, his Catholic background led Adenauer to join this party in 1905. In 1906, aided by his new wife [Emma Weyer](#) and her

family background, bringing him into contact with the Rhineland's social and political elite, Adenauer ran successfully for a city councillor post in Cologne.³ Three years later, in 1909, he was elected president of the council, becoming deputy Lord Mayor at just 33 years of age. In this position, Adenauer was in charge of organising the food supply for the city of Cologne during the First World War. He proved resourceful as well as dutiful in his responsibility for the wellbeing of over 600 000 inhabitants, signing several agreements with local farmers and thus ensuring a steady food supply for Cologne.⁴ Eventually, in 1917, Adenauer was elected Lord Mayor of Cologne, at just 41 years of age.⁵

Yet, with professional and personal success came personal tragedy – a pattern that was to trouble the politician repeatedly. In 1906, just three days after his election as city councillor, Adenauer's father died of a heart attack. In 1910, his first son was born – but the delivery brought medical complications for his wife that worsened over time. Emma died in October 1916 leaving her husband and three young children. Just weeks later, Adenauer survived a car accident that left him with facial injuries that marked him throughout his life.⁶

A political figure in Weimar Germany

After the First World War, Adenauer's influence grew beyond his home region of the Rhineland. As the youngest mayor in Germany, he became President of the Prussian State Council (the Prussian Upper House in which the regions were represented). He modernised Cologne to a significant degree and was repeatedly mentioned as a possible candidate for the chancellorship in government circles.⁷

It was in these circumstances that his ambitions in transnational policy seemed to emerge for the first time. As Mayor of Cologne, Adenauer was eager to promote cross-border cooperation on political and economic issues with France, Belgium and the Netherlands.⁸ Additionally, his perception of Prussia and the issue of compensation for France made Adenauer a key figure in the



Konrad Adenauer as Mayor of Cologne, date unknown.

Source: Unknown, Stiftung Bundeskanzler-Adenauer-Haus (StBKAH).

'[Rhineland Problem](#)' during the early 1920s. To prevent the annexation of the Rhineland by France, the pragmatic Adenauer saw autonomy as the best compromise – an attitude that was interpreted as separatist and unpatriotic by many of his contemporaries.⁹

It was in this progressive, transnational spirit that Adenauer met [Alcide de Gasperi](#) for the first time. In 1921, the two politicians held [talks](#) about forming a Christian Democratic international union in Cologne. Although both stood for the same values, transnational cooperation between conservative parties seemed unfeasible at the time. It was a long 30 years before they were to meet again, with one common goal in mind: lasting peace in Europe.

Political demise – Adenauer under Nazi oppression

In February 1933, Adenauer refused to receive the newly appointed German Chancellor Adolf Hitler in Cologne. To the further annoyance of the Führer, the Mayor ordered the removal of NSDAP flags that had been raised by the Sturmabteilung (SA, Assault Division) on a main bridge.¹⁰ Affronted, the Nazi Party seemed determined to destroy Adenauer's reputation by portraying him as a traitor in his role in the 'Rhineland Movement' of the 1920s. Additionally, rumours of a planned terrorist attack against him made his life increasingly dangerous. Fed up with living in constant fear, Adenauer left Cologne in March 1933 to issue a formal complaint with the Interior Minister in Berlin. Upon departure, the newspapers announced the immediate dismissal of the Mayor. Three days later, Adenauer returned to learn that a Nazi official had replaced him.¹¹ Adenauer did not give up on all fronts however; he fought for his pension rights, and in 1934 settled with the municipality of Cologne out of court. From the financial settlement he won, Adenauer built a family home in nearby Rhöndorf.¹²

'The charges against you made public so far are just the beginning, [...] You are a criminal to the people who had put their trust in you [...] You are a criminal against the city you have ruined [...] You are a criminal, guilty of crimes against your family and your wife [...] You are guilty of crimes against our Lord God and against those who have come in contact with you. You are the accused; I am your accuser; the people are your judge'.

Günter Riesen to Konrad Adenauer, 21 March 1933

Source: V. Martín de la Torre, *Europe, a leap into the unknown – A journey back in time to meet the founders of the European Union*, P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2014, p. 116.

Unable to continue in politics, he was forced to spend the years of the Nazi regime in exile. When war broke out, he had to send his two eldest sons to sign up. He chose not to be involved in any subversive activities, but in July 1944, two men approached him with details of a plan to overthrow the regime. The assassination attempt failed and Adenauer was jailed by the Gestapo for several months, escaping a transfer to the concentration camp at Buchenwald thanks to the help of close friends. He was released in October 1944, and spent the rest of the war with his family in Rhöndorf.¹³

Post-war Germany

In May 1945, just weeks after the liberation of Cologne, Konrad Adenauer was appointed Mayor of Cologne by the Americans. He was part of a 'white list' of personally untainted people who were considered fit for political office. In June 1945, control over Cologne passed to the British military, and in October 1945, just five months after his appointment, Adenauer's second term as mayor of his home town came to an end, as he was dismissed by Brigadier John Barraclough, the military governor of the Cologne region, on grounds of 'incompetence'.¹⁴

The 'founding' of the CDU

After being sacked by the British authorities, Adenauer did not refrain from political activity despite a clear instruction to do so. Ironically, it may have been this incident that led Adenauer to be even more eager to establish the political platform that would shape the future of his region and subsequently of Germany as a whole. The CDU was founded out of many local organisations that united around the same core Christian, democratic and federal values to form the Christian Democratic Union.¹⁵ Adenauer understood that whoever controlled the British Zone CDU would certainly control the organisation throughout West Germany, because of the strategic and economic importance of the British Zone with the industrial area of the Ruhr and Cologne and the North Sea ports. With this in mind, he quickly made every effort to prevent overall control of the British Zone CDU from moving to Berlin and thus slipping out of his own hands.¹⁶ Subsequently, on 5 February 1946, Adenauer was elected Chairman of the CDU Party in Rhineland and by March 1946

'I was born on 5 January 1876,
so I am probably the oldest person here.
If nobody objects, I will regard myself
as president by seniority'.

Konrad Adenauer claiming the position of chairman at the first meetings of the British Zone CDU, Herford 1946.

Source: Williams C., Adenauer - The Father of New Germany, Wiley, 2001, p. 312.

he was Chairman of the CDU of the British Zone. As leader of the Rhineland CDU, Adenauer served on the Zonal Advisory Council as well as the Rhine Province Provincial Committee. With the establishment of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia in October 1946, he became the chairman of the CDU's parliamentary group in its state assembly. At the first state elections in 1947, he won his electoral district by an absolute majority.¹⁷

Throughout this politically turbulent time, the health of his second wife, Gussi, began to deteriorate rapidly. Gussi died in March 1948, marking another stroke of fate for Adenauer amidst the professional success. The 'German Question' meanwhile, was still under consideration at the London Six-Power Conference.¹⁸ Eventually, under the [London recommendations](#), the three Western military governors made recommendations to the minister presidents of the German states to convene a constitutional assembly to found a democratic state. In August 1948, all of the eleven western German states chose to send delegates to this 'Parliamentary Council'. As one of the delegates sent from North-Rhine Westphalia, Konrad Adenauer played an integral part in the talks on a new democratic constitution.

From chairing the Parliamentary Council to chancellorship

Despite his achievements for the city of Cologne and his political influence in Weimar Germany at national level, Konrad Adenauer only stepped into spotlight of a broader national public role on 1 September 1948, when he was elected President of the Parliamentary Council. It is worth mentioning, however, that this position did not pave the way for any future political leadership. It was rather a position that required non-partisanship and the ability to keep order in the plenary.¹⁹ As it turned out, Adenauer excelled in this position and acted as communicator with the minister presidents of the [Länder](#) as well as the military governors. He therefore became the [spokesperson](#) for the emerging Federal Republic of Germany, earning him recognition in the public eye. With the adoption of a free and democratic constitution, the first elections of democratic Germany took place.

As party leader of the CDU, Konrad Adenauer entered the campaign strengthened by the prestige he had gained as President of the Parliamentary Council. The CDU won these first elections by a small margin of just 2% over its main rival, the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD). Subsequently, at the Bundestag's first assembly on 15 September 1949, Adenauer was elected as the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany by a mere one-vote majority, at the age of 73.²⁰ Konrad Adenauer was re-elected three times as Chancellor of Germany and held office for 14 years – as long as the lifespan of the Weimar Republic – until his resignation in 1963.

(Re-)integrating Germany in the West

Although Konrad Adenauer's political actions were characterised by pragmatism in many ways, he was led by one political vision in particular: the (re-)integration of Germany into the West. Adenauer's determination on this issue was, just as for the other 'founding fathers' of Europe, a clear result of his experiences under Nazi oppression and during the Second World War.²¹ For Adenauer, it was also a necessary consequence of the misled policies of Germany since its establishment as a nation state in 1871. Germany had always pursued its own particular path to serve its own national interest, thus antagonising its neighbours to the East and the West and eventually driving itself into isolation.²²

The idea of building a partnership with the West seemed difficult at first, as Nazi Germany had brought the horrors of the Second World War to the whole of Europe just years before Adenauer claimed the chancellorship. Germany was simply not trusted to be peaceful. The Occupying Powers put several plans into action to prevent the formation of a strong German state. In 1947 alone, the Saarland was split from Western German territory ([the Saar question](#)) to cut off its capacity for coal production and the signing of the [Treaty of Dunkirk](#) served as an anti-German alliance between France and the UK.

At this point, in 1949, Germany was caught up in the middle of what turned out to be the next conflict: the [Cold War](#) between West and East. Adenauer was forced to decide where to place his nation on the political landscape – which, in turn, gave the new-born Federal Republic political leverage in some ways. For Adenauer, who had serious doubts about communism, only a united Europe was strong enough to counterbalance the USSR on the European continent. Adenauer was keen to peg the Federal Republic to a European project that would protect Germany from any form of Soviet invasion by sending a sign of unity. For him, the European states on their own did not seem strong enough to fend off a powerful USSR.²³

The Stalin notes – an opportunity for German reunification

On 10 March 1952, a little less than three years after the Federal Republic of Germany was founded, the leader of the USSR Josef Stalin issued a [note](#) that had the potential to disrupt the still fragile political order in Europe. The idea of Stalin's note was quite simple: re-unification of Germany in exchange for permanent neutrality of a unified Germany. In other words, the exact opposite of what Adenauer thought was best for Germany's future. In line with Adenauer, the rest of the Allies (France, the United Kingdom and the United States) insisted that if Germany were to be reunified, it could only happen by a people's vote, and that a unified Germany should be trusted to choose neutrality rather than be obliged – unacceptable conditions for the USSR. For Adenauer, the Soviet proposal seemed like an attempt to intervene in the upcoming completion of the negotiations on a European Defence Community (EDC), possibly delaying or preventing it. Additionally, a neutral Germany would put an end to the European integration project indefinitely. With this pragmatic view, Adenauer preferred integration with the West to the reunification of Germany.²⁴

This was a difficult yet smart decision for the future of West Germany, given the circumstances of the Republic of Austria. Following the [Moscow memorandum](#), Austria had to adopt a status of neutrality as a prerequisite for ending occupation by the allied forces in 1955. This meant that

Austria was unable to enter [negotiations for accession](#) to the European Community for over 30 years, and was only able to join the European Union in 1995, almost 40 years after its foundation.

Adenauer and the European project

Throughout all the efforts to unite Europe in peace, the personal relationship between Konrad Adenauer, Jean Monnet, Alcide de Gasperi and Robert Schumann in particular helped to foster trust between the parties and therefore led ultimately to the success of their endeavour. As Adenauer and [Alcide de Gasperi](#) shared a common political ideology, the Italian was the first to congratulate Adenauer as early as 1946 on his election as Chairman of the British Zone CDU. For Adenauer, de Gasperi's election as Italy's prime minister was in turn a sign of the strength of their common political beliefs. In his role as prime minister, de Gasperi fought for equal treatment for Germany and its readmission to the European community of nations. De Gasperi also contributed consistently to rapprochement between Germany and France. For Adenauer, [Jean Monnet](#) was a genuine man of peace. Monnet helped not only to improve France's relations with Germany, but also to build a trusting relationship between the US administration and Adenauer. Both Adenauer and Monnet essentially agreed that it was necessary to overcome hereditary German-French enmity by using economic interdependence as an incentive for future political unification in Europe, and that the UK should not refrain from joining this project. [Robert Schuman](#) and Konrad Adenauer shared similar origins and experiences. Schuman had grown up in Luxembourg and spoke German fluently, but later [changed nationality](#). Both men had witnessed the woes of two world wars in border regions (the Rhineland and the Alsace). Additionally, just like Adenauer, Schuman was a man of faith. When Schuman shared his ideas of organic economic integration between Germany and France, he immediately struck a chord with Adenauer.

With firm convictions on the future of Europe in mind, Konrad Adenauer worked relentlessly for European unity over the course of his chancellorship. Although Adenauer had already proposed a [customs union](#) between France and Germany in early 1950, the [Schuman plan](#) of 9 May 1950 is considered to be the point at which European integration was born. Essentially, French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman offered German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and Western Germany what the USSR had refused: cooperation on an equal basis under a supra-national umbrella.²⁵ [Schuman's proposal](#), which was based on an earlier idea of French economist Jean Monnet, read:

'The French Government proposes that the entire Franco-German coal and steel production be placed under the control of a joint high authority, within the framework of an organisation which other European countries can join'.²⁶

Over the course of a year of negotiations, six nations joined this ambitious project, and founded the [European Coal and Steel Community \(ECSC\)](#) in April 1951. Despite an unsuccessful attempt to form a European defence community in 1954, Europe achieved deeper integration over the decade progressed by forming the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom) with the [Treaties of Rome](#) in 1957, creating the basis for today's European Union (EU).



Konrad Adenauer (second from right) after signing the Treaties of Rome, Rome 1957.

Source: AP Images, European Parliament.

A special relationship with France

Reconciliation, rapprochement and cooperation with France were central to Adenauer's foreign policy. With this mind set, every single step along the way to European unity seemed viable. Several actions, such as the French-German statute on the Saarland, the Franco-German cultural accord and



Konrad Adenauer and Charles de Gaulle, 1961.

Source: European Communities.

Adenauer's solidarity amidst the Suez crisis, [created trust](#) and deepened understanding between the two nations. This in turn paved the way for consultations on economic cooperation and allowed the signature of the [Paris Treaty](#) (ECSC) as well as the Treaties of Rome ([EEC](#)).

However, Franco-German relations became even stronger from 1958, when former General Charles de Gaulle became President of France. Adenauer, who was at first suspicious of the war hero, swiftly began to form a genuine and trusting personal relationship with De Gaulle. For the first time in centuries, the two countries appeared to be true partners, even friends.²⁷ With the ceremonial signing of the [Élysée Treaty](#) on 22 January 1963, this newly formed friendship found its legal and institutional basis while at the same time establishing a Franco-German 'engine' for European integration – an idea that was [revisited](#) by French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel in January 2018 on the occasion of the 55th anniversary of this treaty.

In November 1961, just one year after Adenauer was elected chancellor for the fourth time, the infamous [Spiegel affair](#) threw his government into crisis. After the German weekly *Der Spiegel* issued a highly critical article about German military capabilities, several members of the magazine's staff were arrested. With the emergence of details of the affair, Adenauer's public image began a rapid decline. In March 1963, the majority of his party demanded his resignation and by October 1963 he had stepped down.²⁸ Konrad Adenauer died on 19 April 1967, surrounded by his children in his home in Rhöndorf.

Adenauer's determination, political pragmatism and his clear vision of a united Europe led Germany to become a free and democratic state. For his work in the service of European integration he was awarded the Charlemagne Prize in 1954. To this day, German society remains strongly rooted in its genuine friendship with the French and its firm European values.

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ENDNOTES

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