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Written by Maureen Younger

IN THE NEWS

The most powerful woman in the world

She started out as a physicist specialising in quantum chemistry in the communist DDR and went on to become the most successful politician in modern German history. *Maureen Younger* takes a look at how Angela Merkel did it.

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Angela Merkel photo by FNDE, shared under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons.

Considered by some as the de facto leader of the EU and the most powerful woman in the world, a series of firsts have led to the irresistible rise of Angela Merkel.

In 2000 she became the first woman leader of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party. In 2005 she became the first female Chancellor of Germany. Ten years later she's still in power.

As such, not only is she, according to Forbes, the longest-serving elected EU head of state, but also the most powerful woman in the world for a record 10th time and, once again, the world's second most powerful person per se. Vladimir Putin might have beaten her to the top spot, but it's still the highest position ever achieved by a woman.

Oh yeah, she's also the current leader of the G7 and has chaired the G8: Merkel and Thatcher being the only women to ever do so.

It's interesting to note that both Merkel and Thatcher rose to the top of conservative parties, neither of which are particularly known for being at the vanguard of the feminist movement. The CDU and especially its sister party, the CSU, have strongholds in the rural, conservative and Catholic parts of Germany.

Merkel, however, grew up in communist East Germany. Her father, a Lutheran minister, moved the family there from the West at a time when hundreds of thousands of East Germans were desperate to go in the opposite direction. Her entry into politics came with The Peaceful Revolution, which shook the political cornerstones of East Germany and finally led to German reunification; she joined Democratic Awakening, one of the political civic groups that were then evolving. She went on to volunteer to work for Lothar de Maizière, East Germany's first and only democratically elected prime minister, later becoming deputy spokesperson for his government.

"When the Berlin Wall fell, Merkel did not rush to join the crowds tearing it down but instead went to her regular Thursday-night sauna instead. When she finally did cross the border, she had one beer and went home, because she had to get up early the next morning for work."

Following German reunification in 1990, Merkel joined the CDU, and was elected to a safe seat in the Bundestag (German parliament). A year later, Chancellor Helmut Kohl appointed Merkel Minister for Women and Youth and in 1994 she was promoted to Minister for the Environment.

Kohl may have been Merkel's political patron but he was also patronising, referring to her as "*mein Mädchen*" ("my girl"). He was just one of many male politicians to woefully underestimate her and who would pay a heavy price for doing so. As former US Ambassador to Germany John Kornblum told George Packer of *The New Yorker*, "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."

For starters, as Minister for the Environment, Merkel had no hesitation in firing the ministry's top civil servant after he had the temerity to suggest she might need his help in running things. By late 1999 it was Kohl's turn. Kohl had resigned the previous year as party leader having lost the general election. With his position within the party already weakened by this and by financial scandal, Merkel wrote an unprecedented letter to *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, one of Germany's leading newspapers, suggesting that for the good of the party it should sever all ties with Kohl.

Up until then Kohl had been regarded within the party as sacrosanct. Whether this move was an act of political bravado, ruthless political patricide or both, one thing's for sure: Kohl realised too late that in underestimating Merkel he had made a serious political miscalculation.

When Kohl's successor, Wolfgang Schäuble, was likewise caught up in the same financial scandal and had to resign, the way was open for Merkel to become party leader – much to the horror of the political old guard. Dirk Kurbjuweit, one of her biographers, notes that people (including him) thought she'd be a stopgap solution until one of the men took over.

Fortunately for Merkel her rivals were too busy arguing among themselves for anyone in particular to pose a serious threat, and in the end she picked them off one by one. It's noteworthy that, with the exception of Schäuble, none of the old guard are active either in the party or government today.

Merkel has managed not only to eliminate political rivals within her own party but has also vitiated the opposition by adopting some of their more popular programmes as her own. A cool political operator, she is also a pragmatist. She makes no bones about the fact she joined the East German communist youth organisation Free German Youth, simply because if she hadn't, access to higher education and a decent job within East Germany would have been impossible.

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Perhaps even more indicative of her innate common sense is that on the momentous occasion of the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989, Merkel did not rush to join the crowds tearing it down but instead went to her regular Thursday-night

sauna instead. When she finally did cross the border, she had one beer then went home, because she had to get up early the next morning for work.

Part of Merkel's success seems to be due to her background as a scientist and her status as an outsider. As the former, Merkel is used to analysing data, thinking through all possible options and their likely results. She has learned to approach problems methodically, weighing up the pros and cons, and then letting a decision percolate before taking action. Her sharp, analytical mind and her ability to play the waiting game and be one step ahead of her rivals has been clearly evident in her climb to power.

As an inveterate outsider, Merkel isn't thrown by being the odd one out, even in the almost exclusively male world of international politics. After all, in the conservative CDU with its strong Catholic base, Merkel is a childless, Lutheran, East German divorcee (now remarried). She is in fact the complete antithesis to who you think would lead such a party. As someone who was an outsider all her life, this clearly doesn't daunt her.



Let's not forget, she was the only woman in the theoretical-chemistry section in the East German Academy of Sciences. As a child, she belonged to a West German family living in East Germany with a father who was a pastor in a country where religion was regarded with deep suspicion by the State.

It's precisely *because* she was an outsider and a woman that Merkel was able to take full and repeated advantage of people making assumptions about her – and invariably underestimating her in the process.

Moreover, having grown up in a country where the media was censored and citizens were spied on, Merkel has learned to keep her cards close to her chest, to bide her time, and above all hone a keen sense for survival.

Will Merkel run for a fourth term in 2017? Who knows? Maybe she'll go on to some other firsts. Some suggest she may end up the first female secretary-general of the UN. One thing is certain: I wouldn't put it past her.

Merkel at the Munich Security Conference in February 2015 by Müller MSC, shared under [CC BY-SA 3.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons.

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