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Karl Hugo Pruys. *Kohl, Genius of the Present: A Biography of Helmut Kohl.* Chicago: Edition Q, 1996. xiv + 402 pp. $26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-883695-10-1.

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Helmut Kohl has become the longest-serving Chancellor in postwar German history–a European heavyweight, as *The Economist*'s title page last October ambiguously phrased it. He is the only political actor still in office from the events of 1989/1990 which led to the end of the East-West Conflict and to Germany's unification. Although it may be too early to write a definitive biography about the "Chancellor of unity," one welcomes attempts to depict the person behind the politics, to illuminate Kohl's less-known aspects, and to give a more objective and overall picture than do oftentimes partisan periodicals. Is Pruys's biography up to this challenge? Does he give us a biography of Kohl without succumbing to what MacCauley once named *Lues Boswelliana*, the disease of admiration? Pruys was press secretary to the CDU in the 1970s and has been a political correspondent ever since, apparently with close ties to the political establishment in Bonn. Moreover, the rather presumptuous title would also indicate a lack of detachment and a publication more in line with the duties of a press secretary than an "objective" observer.

Fortunately, Pruys only displays mild symptoms of *Lues Boswelliana*. He is duly impressed by Kohl, but he also mentions character faults and obvious political blunders. We learn that Kohl has no real friends and that he has been driven by a passionate ambition to climb the political ladder. We also learn of major blunders such as the disastrous Duesseldorf party conference in 1971, Kohl's premature quest for party leadership the same year, the Bitburg episode in 1985, Kohl's "blackout" during his testimony to the committee on party contributions, his gross misjudgment of the economic consequences of unification, and more. Yet the book on the whole conveys a positive appreciation and even hints at familiarity when Pruys refers to some of the major players by their nicknames–"Helle", "Der Lange" and "Black Giant" for Kohl; "Bieko" (Biedenkopf); "Schrecki" (Schreckenberger); "Pepe" (Peter Boenisch); "Don Philippo" (Jenninger); "Dr. Carbonara" (Ackermann)–names which sound more like childrens' characters than the inner circle of German politics.

Pruys profits from his long professional experience as a journalist in Bonn. His biography is full of sometimes hilarious anecdotes. For instance, Pruys reports that the reason Kohl's relation with Margaret Thatcher soured–apart from Thatcher's opposition to German unification–stems from an incident at a EU conference: "Kohl tried to avoid a private conversation with her, saying he had 'appointments which could not be broken.' As luck would have it, Maggie Thatcher saw her 'friend Helmut' shortly afterward sitting at a cafe and happily eating cake with no sign at all of stress from the conference. This unplanned confrontation was said to have been the end of the friendship" (p. 290). Unfortunately, most of these episodes have not been footnoted, and we must rely solely on Pruys for their veracity.

Pruys is well aware of the restrictions of his task. The biography "does not purport to be a global analysis of the political achievements and failures of the first chancellor of the united Germany, nor is it intended to be a comprehensive appreciation of his historical significance" (p. xiii). This seemingly prudent self-restraint indicates at the same time one major problem of the biography. It is largely descriptive; Pruys does not intend to give the larger picture. His reference to sources is incomplete and sometimes even misleading. The acronym BKA, for example, probably refers to the to the *Bundeskanzleramt* rather than the *Bundeskriminalamt*.

The book concludes with an essay by Jean-Paul Picaper on German-French relations. Whatever induced Picaper to introduce this essay by paralleling Kohl with Claudia Schiffer as Germany's best advertisement abroad escapes me. He writes: "Both of them achieved success through their looks, embodying the new German friendliness despite their majestic appearances. Claudia and Helmut made Europe's most beautiful love story come true. The 'soft giants from Germany' are respected, as one expects of Germans. What is new about them is that no one needs to be afraid of Germans anymore. They

are even calming and unproblematic." The book could have verywell done without this embarrassment, even though the essay comes more to the point in the remaining twenty-eight pages.

Pruys's book is certainly no definitive study. It may be useful–like Werner Maser's 1990 *Helmut Kohl: der deutsche Kanzler*–as a starting point for future biographers. Though it is readable with many photographs which add value, it would seem that the "Genius of the Present" still awaits a biographer of his caliber.

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