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Christian Wicke’s study of the (West) German chancellor Helmut Kohl is a ground-breaking exploration of the personal ideology driving an “anti-ideological” leader. In his book, Wicke sets out to demonstrate how Kohl, harnessing his own personal nationalism to his political agency, strove to forge a new, mainstream nationalism in Germany that would allow a positive ownership of past and present.

The organization of the book takes its cue from Wicke’s concept of “personal nationalism.” After an introduction to concepts of nationalism, Wicke devotes subsequent chapters to specific dimensions of Kohl’s personal nationalism, reflecting on Kohl as a Catholic nationalist, a liberal nationalist, a romantic nationalist, and a nationalist historian, before concluding with a synthesis of these dimensions. The dimensions are not merely descriptive, but are analytically grounded and applied consistently throughout the work.

Kohl’s personal nationalism was an embodiment of the leading normative consensus of the young Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) founded in 1949. It reflected the FRG state aims of regaining the integrity of the nation-state on a Western, liberal paradigm and rehabilitation with the international community. At a social level it reflected a rejection of radical ideology in favor of economic success and a conservative outlook, a strong integrative impetus, and a belief that through security and legality the German nation’s “natural order” might be restored. Kohl’s personal commitment to these leading values enabled him to perform as a statesman “the embodiment of the all-clear [die verklärte Entwarnung].”[1] signaling to the world that any danger from (West) Germany lay in the past. This was the basis of his drive for “normalization” for Germany and his role as the Chancellor of Unity.

Kohl represented his accession to power in 1982 as a “spiritual-moral” challenge to the postnational values of the left-liberal 1968 generation and set out to defend the values of the 1950s. Leaving the politics of atonement to others, Kohl’s ambition was to cement a path to normality consistent with a conservative-liberal concept of German memory. In this, Wicke attributes him both with sustaining the tensions that fueled the major historiographical debate of 1986 known as the Historians’ Dispute and with cementing his own vision of “normality” for future governments (pp. 5-6, 215).

Wicke’s work makes substantial contributions to scholarship in historiography, nationalism studies, German studies, memory studies, and leadership studies. In marrying biographical method with nationalism studies, Wicke successfully trials a new research methodology that, in its many potential applications, will be certain to interest all scholars of nationalism. Wicke also makes a major contribution to our conceptual understanding of nationalism, its resilience and its mutability. Kohl’s example demonstrates that religion, political ideology, generation, region, education and profession are integral to constructions of nation. “Nationalism is a discursive phenomenon, but one that is permanently penetrated by other discursive phenomena” (p. 8). Moreover, Kohl’s personal nationalism manages to synthesize types of nationalism often believed to be fundamentally opposed to one another. From a theorist’s perspective, Kohl’s romantic nationalism, manifested in his
notion of Germany, implicates elements of the völkisch (ethno-cultural) tradition in German nationalism that sit uneasily with his conviction that the (West) German nation state was located irrevocably in the West. Kohl achieved a synthesis of these apparently contradictory positions by subordinating (and thereby rehabilitating) his cultural and ethnic understanding of Germany to an overarching hegemony of Christian, liberal and Western values (p. 212). In doing so, he followed a hierarchy of values set by the FRG’s first chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, working towards “normality” through embeddedness in the West. For Kohl, then, the realization of Germany’s national destiny was not at odds with Western liberalism; rather, these two elements of his personal nationalism were mutually constitutive. Wicke’s biographical nationalism perspective promises to lend new depth to leadership studies. In this scholarly, thoughtful work, Kohl the self-proclaimed “anti-ideological” chancellor, frequently characterized as the ultimate pragmatist, is revealed as a man driven by a complex and consistent world view.

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