



**Stefan Kornelius, *Angela Merkel.*  
*The Chancellor and her world*  
Richmond: Alma Books, 2013**

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With Angela Merkel favoured to win the German election again, several political books about the German chancellor were published during 2013. Both in Germany and abroad, observers puzzled over the reasons for the on-going success of Mrs. Merkel, the scientist from East Berlin who became an internationally honoured stateswoman. One book stood out because of the label ‘authorized biography’ on the cover: *Angela Merkel. The Chancellor and her world*, written by Stefan Kornelius. Whether Merkel asked Kornelius, head of the international section of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, to write a book about her political career and vision, or just commented and approved a book Kornelius had written independently, is not mentioned. However, the fact is that Kornelius’ book is the first biography for which Merkel gave her consent. The question is: what new light does this authorized biography shed on the person behind the politician? And what does the book reveal about how Merkel wants to represent herself?

Kornelius – in a lively account of Merkel’s life – states that anyone who spends time observing Angela Merkel will soon be able to understand and categorize this remarkable woman: with Merkel what you see is what you get (62). The author first met Merkel in 1989 when she was spokeswoman for the Democratic Awakening, a party that merged in 1990 into her current political party: the Christen Democratic Union (CDU). Since 2000, Kornelius has been responsible for foreign policy reporting of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and has therefore been in close contact with the Chancellor and her main advisers. This position provided Kornelius with the opportunity to write about Merkel’s style of politics and current worldview from an insider’s perspective, which has resulted in an interesting addition to the historiography about Merkel.

If one thing, as can be expected of an authorized biography, Kornelius' book substantiates and reconfirms Merkel's status as internationally respected stateswoman. *Angela Merkel. The Chancellor and her world* is therefore the perfect advertisement for a politician on the eve of election. Whereas earlier studies about Merkel, such as biographies by Jacqueline Boysen (2001) and Gerd Langguth (2005), mainly focused on Merkel's childhood, college days and earlier days in politics, Kornelius' book does not offer extensive insights in the impact of Merkel's protestant father or her first marriage to Ulrich Merkel on her personality. Aside from an incidental remark, her private life is left discreetly aside. This was presumably Merkel's will, and this also expresses the authorized character of this biography. Kornelius instead focuses on how Merkel came to power and how her norms and values shape, and have shaped, her political *modus operandi*. Smoothly and vividly Kornelius outlines Merkel as a talented woman, razorsharp, humorous and passionate. He states that Merkel is correctly described by the media as a woman with an enquiring mind, always keen to learn, who shapes her worldview in an analytical way. Although most people suspect that there is another, different woman behind the Merkel that the public sees, the first female German Chancellor apparently reveals her sensibilities and idiosyncrasies in a relatively open way.

However, the plea about Merkel's greatness would have been of more significance had Kornelius been more specific about the opposition she has had to overcome. With regard to the important events in Merkel's career, both at the beginning of her rise to prominence and during the last years of her largely unchallenged rule, Kornelius leaves out the political and historical context, as well as the criticism among both her opponents in Germany and those in other countries. Merkel seems to have completely won over Kornelius, since the biography lacks critical analysis and deeper reflection. For those who have read more about Merkel, and expected this insider biography to reveal new insights into her personal life, Kornelius' biography is somewhat disappointing. Apparently, according to Kornelius, the answer to the question why one of the most powerful women in the world is so remarkable is due to her calculative approach. No ideologist, Merkel would rather find a compromise than give her personal opinion. Kornelius calls her a 'consummate tactician', restricting herself to what she does best: debate and discuss. This portrait of Merkel that Kornelius outlines is the well-known image of Merkel, resembling the image put forward by the media. Apparently Merkel wants herself to be depicted this way, and Kornelius just abided himself by her wishes. Although this is telling about Merkel's self-representation, it is also somewhat unsatisfactory.

One of the themes Kornelius does reflect on is freedom as the driving force behind Merkel's values. In chapter four, "Questions of Belief",

Kornelius elaborates on how Merkel considers freedom less a political dogma than a personal experience (78).

She once stated that freedom is the happiest experience of her life and that there is nothing that fills her with more enthusiasm, drives her farther, and makes her feel more positive than the power of freedom. Kornelius states that: "...to Merkel, values are something very personal, so it is not surprising that – given that she is always sparing with details of her private life – she has never tried to capitalize on her GDR past" (78). He also notes that this symbolic notion of Merkel has predominantly been imported from abroad and that it is striking to see how powerful Merkel's narrative is, especially outside of Germany. Americans were particularly touched by her life story, and this American sympathy resulted in Barack Obama awarding Merkel the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011. Having lived under the GDR-regime for thirty-five years, Merkel's experience in a totalitarian state has lent her an air of credibility regarding matters of freedom. Thus, freedom became a leitmotiv in her foreign policy.

Foreign affairs became the central issues of Merkel's chancellorship during the re-election year, and as a result Merkel's foreign policy is a recurring theme in Kornelius' biography. He discusses Merkel's personal relations with international counterparts like Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin in a lively way. The reader learns that Merkel and George W. Bush got on well, even on a personal level, while Merkel's relation with Barack Obama has been, and probably will stay, cool, because of similarities in their introverted characters and temperaments (127). Kornelius also points out that Merkel loves Russia, its culture and its language, but struggles with the hyper-masculine image that president Vladimir Putin conveys. In an amusing anecdote, Kornelius describes how Merkel, who has been afraid of dogs ever since she was attacked by one in 1995, managed to keep up appearances when Vladimir Putin confronted her intentionally with a dog two times (181). Interestingly, in the English translation of the German biography, the translators added a chapter about Merkel's relationship with British leaders. Kornelius points out that Merkel greatly admired Tony Blair when he was prime minister and that Gordon Brown's personality resembles Merkel's own. However, this chapter elaborates mostly on the on-going debate about the role of Great Britain within Europe, as characterized by its title, "The British Problem: Keep Them In".

An important part of Kornelius' analysis of Merkel's foreign policy concerns her role in the European Union. Kornelius contextualizes how the European Union influences German politics and how Merkel attempts to strike a compromise between domestic and foreign policy. As Kornelius states in his introduction: "Success and failure are measured not only by

a coalition's stability, voter satisfaction or the frequency of international visits. The right parameters are crucial events." (4–5). For Angela Merkel, the banking crisis, which mutated into a full-blown world economic crisis and finally became the euro crisis, is the event that will determine the success or failure of her chancellorship. After all, quoting the text on the biography's back cover, "the entire world is anxiously looking to Germany to play its part in Europe's rescue". If we may believe Kornelius, Merkel will do everything in her power to respond to these expectations.

Kornelius concludes his biography with the statement that the secret of Merkel's power is that she will only get involved in an argument if she knows that she will win it (276). This seems a very poor remark about someone who has overcome criticism at home and abroad and is known for her consistency, reliability, and strength. Apart from this, Kornelius fails to reflect on the theme he introduces in the last chapter: Merkel as the "post-political" politician, which he defines as "not committing yourself, not letting yourself drift, having few or no convictions, always being flexible, waiting for the right moment" (274). According to Kornelius, someone who is close to Merkel and understands her well, who wishes to remain anonymous, said the chancellor is the perfect post-political politician. This is not only because she initially leaves critical matters to other politicians and prefers an awaiting, logical approach, but also because she manages to convince people and to gain trust. Moreover, Kornelius does not reflect on Merkel's position as the first female chancellor of Germany. The question is: Why not? Merkel is after all at the moment internationally the most honoured stateswoman. Considering the on-going debate about the lack of female representatives in Europe it would have been interesting if Kornelius had elaborated on Merkel's success as a woman politician, especially since she was minister for Women and Youth from 1991 until 1994. More reflection on these topics would have made Kornelius' book more valuable.

However, as Kornelius points out several times in his book, Merkel prefers to have complete control in any situation. Had Kornelius expanded with reflection and analysis, Merkel would perhaps have never authorized his work. With this in mind, the overall conclusion with regard to Angela Merkel that can be deduced from this authorized biography is that Merkel wants the public to believe that she is in fact a sober, analytical, tactical politician and nothing more. The authorized biography emphasizes that Merkel does not want to be judged by her gender or favoured because she is a woman, and that she will never give insight into her private life in order to gain more votes. Merkel wants to let it know that she prefers content above status or display. Merkel also wants to be regarded as a sincere, capable and trustworthy politician, the perfect candidate to

rule Germany for a third term, and to manage affairs in Europe for that matter. From this perspective, Kornelius succeeded in his job, writing an interesting, entertaining political book, enlivened with anecdotes and appealing to a broad public. *Angela Merkel: The Chancellor And Her World* is ultimately the perfect advertisement for Merkel, who in 2014 is still at the zenith of her power.