

Angela's ashes

Angela Merkel sets out to restore her reputation

But her new memoir is unlikely to change her critics' minds



Photograph: Alamy

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Freedom. By Angela Merkel. *St Martin's Press*; 720 pages; \$40. *Macmillan*; £35

Few world leaders have left office as lauded as Angela Merkel. When she stepped down as chancellor in 2021, [after 16 years](#), Germany's economy was the envy of Europe. Mrs Merkel had saved the euro and guided her nation through the pandemic. Her style of politics set an example, too. In an age of increasing demagoguery, fake news and partisanship, "Mutti"—or Mum, as Germans affectionately called her—was low-key and empirical. Instead of demonising her opponents, she was the architect of compromises that had something for everyone.

How rapidly [her legacy has turned to ashes](#). Under Mrs Merkel, Germany got cheap energy from Russia, sold expensive cars to China and outsourced its security to America. Today, all of those policies look like strategic mistakes. The economy is in a mess. China dominates electric vehicles. Vladimir Putin is threatening Europe and, under Donald Trump, America will no longer be willing to pay full freight for nato. As Germany prepares for an election in February 2025, its centrist parties are being squeezed by the unMerkel-like extremes on the left and right.

"Freedom" is Mrs Merkel's attempt to [restore her reputation](#). Over around 700 pages, she and her long-time confidante, Beate Baumann, chronicle her life in East Germany, her entry into politics after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and her career as Germany's first female chancellor. Mrs Merkel is eminently reasonable and modest. But she fails to mount a persuasive defence of her good name. Regrettably, the most striking question this book raises is: why cannot she better defend her legacy?

As a memoir, "Freedom" does not soar. Mrs Merkel is a shrewd judge of character but uninterested in gossip and too discreet to break confidences. She is also a doer, rather than a thinker. Her book's title reflects her fundamental beliefs, but freedom is not a theme she explores in any depth, despite having lived the first 35 years of her life under Communism.

Fortunately, Mrs Merkel was assiduous about keeping a diary. Unfortunately, it listed her appointments, not her reflections. Readers learn a great deal about her travel schedule and her meetings with the likes of the Association of German Cities. But too often she cannot remember details. The reader is in the room where it happened only in a handful of dramatic encounters that lodged in her mind, as when she first grasped the magnitude of the euro zone's financial problems in February 2010, or the tortured ceasefire negotiations between France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine in Minsk in February 2015.

The politician who emerges from these pages has strengths. Mrs Merkel is a Stakhanovite with a rare ability to navigate technical and political complexity. Somehow, in 2010, while on a visit to Moscow, she managed to organise a fund to help stabilise the euro, even as her own coalition was rebelling. She is also blessed with uncanny timing—withdrawing, for example, from her first run for the chancellorship in favour of Edmund Stoiber in January 2002. Mr Stoiber lost the election, which was the making of her.

These virtues will not silence Mrs Merkel's critics. They say, for example, that she should not have blocked Ukraine's path to nato membership in 2008. She rebuts them with the argument that accession would have taken years and, in the meantime, Mr Putin would have aggressively tried to forestall it.

However, if Mrs Merkel so clearly understood the threat from Mr Putin, why did she increase Germany's dependence on Russian gas by closing the country's nuclear power stations? And why did she tolerate defence spending of just 1.33% of gdp when she stepped down, far below the 2% she had agreed to at a nato meeting in 2014? Her suggestion that her coalition partners were to blame is feeble.

That gets to the heart of the matter. Compromise is all very well in a politician. But without a vision, it can easily become the art of splitting differences. In "Freedom" Mrs Merkel assures readers that she always got the best deal possible. She is asking them to take a lot on trust. ■