

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Armin Laschet speaking at the congress to elect a new leader



Assad fan will lead Germany's biggest party

BY LIAM HOARE

► GERMANY'S BIGGEST political party, the centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU), has elected a supporter of Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad as its new leader. Armin Laschet, 58, governor of Germany's most populous state, North Rhine-Westphalia, beat Friedrich Merz and Norbert Röttgen in the race to succeed defence minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, who announced her intention to resign in February 2020 after an underwhelming two years in the leadership role.

Mr Laschet's victory makes him one of the frontrunners to be the CDU's candidate to replace Angela Merkel as chancellor when Germans go to the polls on September 25.

The CDU will select its chancellor candidate in the spring. Mr Laschet has previously described the Syrian dictator as a protector of religious minori-

ties in the country and an opponent of extremist organisations like ISIS and Al-Nusra Front. "Assad was fighting against ISIS and [John] Kerry tried to weaken Assad in this fight", Mr Laschet has said.

Had Britain and the United States decided to bomb Assad's troops in 2013, he argued in 2014, "ISIS would be in Damascus today in the vicinity of Israel".

However, Mr Laschet, an ally of Mrs Merkel, favours the centrist course charted by the long-serving chancellor who values the security of Israel.

Mr Laschet's first major overseas trip as governor was to Israel in 2018. He cultivated close economic, scientific and cultural ties between North Rhine-Westphalia and Israel, opening a representative office in Tel Aviv in March.

Mr Laschet has spoken of his admiration for Israel as the 'start-up nation' and of its capabilities when it comes to

fighting terrorism.

In North Rhine-Westphalia, Mr Laschet initiated a programme of joint visits to Auschwitz by Christian, Jewish, and Muslim young people aged 16 to 24 and ruled out cooperation between his party and the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD).

The Reform Union of Progressive Jews in Germany honoured Mr Laschet in March with the Israel Jacobson Prize, describing him as a "dependable friend and longstanding partner of the Jewish community in Germany and the State of Israel".

On the Middle East, Mr Laschet, like Mrs Merkel, favours the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the Iran nuclear deal adopted in 2015. After the United States pulled out of the JCPOA in 2018, he argued the agreement had "made the world safer" and that Germany, along with Britain, France, Russia, and China must "save the deal".

Belgian region pays tribute to fascists

BY ROB HYDE

► TWO FASCISTS who helped the Nazis track down Jews and send them to death camps have been honoured by a regional parliament in Belgium.

The Flemish regional parliament marked its 50th anniversary by funding a Dutch-language supplement in the Belgian magazine "Newsweek". The supplement featured 14 figures for their "popular emancipation" of Flanders. They included fervent Nazi sympathis-



Both men worked with the Nazis to persecute German Jews*

ers August Borms and Staf De Clercq.

Both men not only embraced the Third Reich's occupation of their country but worked with the Nazis to persecute Belgian Jews.

The Coordinating Committee of Belgian Jewish Organisations (CCOJB), said it was outraged and horrified by the state-funded brochure. CCOJB president Yohan Benizri said: "You can't effectively fight hate speech while celebrating such a shameful legacy. Belgium should shed light on the role of the collaborators and accomplices of the Nazi regime during the Second World War."

Many young Belgians do not know the history of their country.

August Borms is described in the brochure as a "teacher and figurehead of activism during the First World War".

Borms had already worked hand in hand with the German occupiers during the First World War. When the war ended he was sentenced to death, though later pardoned.

After founding the Front Party, Borms was elected to the Belgian parliament in 1928.

When WW2 broke out, he collaborated closely with the Nazi regime and was even paid for his support of Germany during WW1.

After WW2, he was again sentenced to death but this time the sentence was carried out and he was executed by a firing squad in 1946.

Staf de Clercq was an ardent admirer of Hitler. He became leader of the Front Party in 1932. By 1933 it had become the Flemish Nation Union.

De Clercq rejoiced in the Nazi occupation of Belgium and made it his mission to replace the Belgian state with a 'Greater Netherlands' for the Flanders and the Dutch.

He helped the regime identify and track down Belgium Jews, who were later shipped to death camps. As a result of his co-operation with the Nazis, tens of thousands of Flemings were also drafted into Nazi organisations such as the Waffen SS.