

## **KISSINGER: 1923–1968: THE IDEALIST**

(NIALL FERGUSON)

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Did you know that Henry Kissinger is still alive? I didn't, until I looked it up. (He's ninety-seven years old.) Is he forgotten? I suspect so, by most people. Was he important to American history? I hate to break it to the Baby Boomers, but no, he wasn't. He was important to them in their youth, as a condensed symbol of their hatred of decent America, and he seemed important to most at that time, but as with so many men who seem crucial in the moment, history will not judge Kissinger as good or bad, just irrelevant. Nonetheless, Niall Ferguson, a great admirer of Kissinger (as is evident from some of his other books), offers his wide readership this massive biography. But I can't recommend it except to those with a particular interest in the person or the time.

This is the first of two projected volumes, although there is no indication the second is coming out anytime soon, and this was published in 2015. It is nearly a thousand pages, and it weighs nearly four pounds. It is blurbed by a Who's Who of elite has-beens: James Baker, Condoleezza Rice, John Lewis Gaddis. Its writing is clear and precise. Yet it is strangely unsatisfying. It's so unsatisfying, it took me more than two years to read, because I kept finding excuses to not return to it.

I wondered why I found it unsatisfying. I think, upon reflection, it's not only that the reader suspects that Kissinger isn't all that important. It's that the book is unidimensional. It is all foreign policy, all the time, in endless detail. You will find little here about Kissinger's personal life as an adult, except in passing, or for that matter anyone else's personal life, except as it bears on foreign policy. And, although I certainly admit this is not true for everyone, I find discussion about American foreign policy in the 1950s and 1960s boring. Books on it tend to be too detailed—probably because so much information is available that it all gets thrown in, without adequate parsing. And though those details mattered very much to those who lived through them, they matter very little to us today, unless we have some special interest in the period. We want to know about the broader strokes of history, not endless specifics about some unimportant meeting among ambassadors.

But you have to respect Ferguson for putting in the work. He's a busy guy; he's a public intellectual. Now, that term is today debased—Ibram X. Kendi is a public intellectual, too; my dog would be as well, if he could bark "I'm anti-racist!" and "I hate white people!" I've read every one of Ferguson's books, and I feel a bit sorry for him, because he sails an unstable path, between the Scylla of cancellation and the Charybdis of irrelevancy. He's conservative, or what passes for that among our elites, but a member of, and dependent on, our loathsome ruling class of "global citizens." He always risks being cancelled, because he's based in reality. As his class departs more and more in its thoughts and habits from reality, such men of the in-between twilight have less and less room for maneuver.

What results, for example, is that Ferguson must castigate Donald Trump in ludicrous, deceitful terms, as in a recent Bloomberg piece, either because that's what he really thinks, meaning he is not a conservative in any meaningful sense, or because he has to pretend that's what he thinks, to prevent being cancelled. It's embarrassing to watch either way. He actually, in print, with his name attached, posits an imaginary center ground, and then tells us it's occupied by—Joe Biden. Ferguson, sadly, risks becoming a joke. His next book, due out in May, is titled *Doom: The Politics of Catastrophe*. We'll see if he takes an honest approach. None of this matters, though, for his biography of Kissinger, since talking about foreign policy of the past is reasonably safe political ground, and anyway 2015 was an eternity ago in modern political terms.

*Kissinger* is not precisely an "authorized biography," but Ferguson was given access to all of Kissinger's papers, and granted multiple interviews with Kissinger himself. "Not only has this book been written with Henry Kissinger's cooperation; it was written at his suggestion." Ferguson's judgment of Kissinger is highly positive, not really surprising, for Kissinger is precisely the kind of man Ferguson admires, because he sees himself in the mirror—someone who was honored in the councils of the powerful, and was himself extremely knowledgeable about history, or at least a slice of history. And when a man's life is the explication and execution of grand strategy, it is always easy to find an event that could have gone better, so Ferguson properly avoids criticism on that basis. Nor does he find the faults in him the Baby Boomers do. Any faults he ascribes to Kissinger are minor and the result of circumstance.

Why is Kissinger an object of hate to the Boomers? Some of it is his role in the Vietnam War, connected to his service of the Devil, Richard Nixon, which causes them to babble about war crimes and similar stupidity, but more broadly, it is a combination of Kissinger's realism and what flowed from that, anti-Communism. We should not forget, and Ferguson reminds us, that moral equivalence was the bedrock principle of the American Left during the entire Cold War. When in doubt, Communism was to be preferred, though usually not openly. Kissinger was not having any of that. He was, to be sure, an inconstant anti-Communist, but the Boomers run on emotion, not logic. As the Boomers die off, though, interest in Kissinger is sure to wane, until he's just a footnote, like some functionary who worked for Metternich whom nobody but specialists remember.

Pulling back the lens, nothing comes out more in these pages than that the America of 2021, as represented by its ruling class, is not a serious society. Every single man (there are no women of any relevance here) in the period 1945 to 1968, the pertinent period for this book, was a paragon of knowledge, about history and human nature, compared to the very best of those in power, or connected to power, today. As a matter of course, they referred to history and engaged in complex, sophisticated analyses. Many, perhaps most, had served their country in war. Few were ideologues (the Communists and quasi-Communists very prominent under Franklin Roosevelt were mostly gone); they were intent on doing the best they could for the country, and they brought talent and education to bear. Sure, they were often enough wrong, and they did things we today, using hindsight, view as unwise, such as constantly threatening global thermonuclear war. But they were serious men, who would have viewed today's clownish, uneducated, ideological elite with total contempt, combined with astonishment that such people could actually be the ruling class.

But let's talk about the subject of the book. Kissinger was born in 1923, in Fürth, in Bavaria. He has disclaimed any importance of his childhood to his life, and in Ferguson's telling, Fürth was a dull, provincial backwater, although certainly the 1920s were years of turmoil even there. Fürth had a large Jewish community, split between Reform and Orthodox; the Kissingers were Orthodox. As with most German Jews, the Kissingers were largely assimilated, committed to the Reich.

His father, Louis, did not fight in World War I, but several uncles and cousins did. Louis worked as civil servant, a high school teacher, so the economic turmoil of the 1920s hit the family hard.

Bavaria was not the center of National Socialist support, but the Jews of Fürth were clear that things were not on the right track. When Hitler came to power, overt acts targeting Jews increased there, as everywhere in Germany. Louis Kissinger was fired in 1933, and started teaching outside the state educational system to earn his living. In 1938 the family chose to emigrate; they were able to go to America because Kissinger's mother's cousin lived in America and was able to promise to support the Kissingers if they arrived, a requirement for immigrants then (which should be reinstated, but that's another story). The family left right before Kristallnacht. By the war's end, only forty Jews were left in Fürth; around five hundred of the two thousand who lived in Fürth in 1933 were killed, while the rest emigrated.

Ferguson does an outstanding job of describing the New York of the 1930s, Jewish and otherwise. Here, at least, foreign policy detail does not overwhelm the book. The young Kissinger worked hard, both at studying and at earning money for the family, among other things working in a brush factory. Drafted into the Army in 1943 after his nineteenth birthday, Kissinger became a United States citizen after basic training, then was sent to study engineering as part of an Army training program for high-IQ soldiers. The program was shut abruptly, however, and Kissinger went for further training as a grunt of the 84th Infantry Division, in 1944. There he met Fritz Kraemer, whom both Ferguson and his subject rate as a huge influence on Kissinger. Kraemer was also German, an elitist conservative fifteen years older than Kissinger, and an expert in international law, who was assigned to teach young draftees what they needed to know about Germany. The story goes that Kraemer recognized Kissinger's genius, and became a friend and mentor to him. Ferguson emphasizes Kraemer's influence a great deal, calling him "Mephistopheles to Kissinger's Faust"; I don't know enough about Kissinger to say if this is a new angle, or standard.

In November 1944 Kissinger shipped out to England. He served in the waning days of the war, on the Siegfried Line, and in the Battle of the Bulge—not on the front lines, but at divisional headquarters, as "special agent" in the "Counter-Intelligence Corps," the CIC. Mostly this

meant paperwork and evaluating captured German soldiers, as well as German civilians, as to their usefulness and threat potential. The 84th liberated the Ahlem concentration camp, near Hanover, giving Kissinger first-hand exposure to the Holocaust. Kissinger remained in Germany after fighting ended. Until 1946 he in essence helped to administer the Allies' denazification program, not just the paper aspects, but using informers to smoke out supposedly important Nazis. Then he took a civilian teaching position at an Army intelligence school in Bavaria, and came back to the States in June 1947.

Kissinger then proceeded to Harvard (in part on the strength of a recommendation from Kraemer, now working in government); he graduated in 1950. In the late 1940s, Harvard's infrastructure was shambolic and the campus overcrowded, but the quality of its education was arguably at its peak. Many important men for the coming decades were graduating at this time, and Ferguson again does a good job of conveying the flavor of the times—unbridled optimism and pride in America, often undercut with a Messiah complex, along with the fears of the early Cold War. Kissinger's talent was recognized by the important and powerful, so although he made few fast friends his own age, he made the right connections with professors, and thus the beginnings of connections to the East Coast elite that directed the course of America.

In part under the influence of William Yandell Elliott, Kissinger was drawn to work in government. Ferguson spends inordinate time on Kissinger's approach to, and philosophy of, history, for which "realism" is an oversimplification, though "idealist" is also a tough sell. Most of all, he was anti-utopian, assuming that even if, for any given period of time, peace might be achieved, it could never be permanent. Yet, as I say, the reader does not really get a sense for Kissinger as a person. Maybe, however, that's because there is not much there; maybe Kissinger was just an Analytical Engine. One doesn't get the sense that Kissinger lacked social skills, quite the contrary (he was always fairly successful with women), but that what mattered to him was the analysis of any given matter. The Cold War provided the perfect field for a man such as this.

He stayed at Harvard, getting a Ph.D. in 1954, but also running the International Seminar and ostentatiously starting a quarterly magazine, *Confluence*. It was in that magazine (which does not seem to be available online; it was only published three times) that Ernst Jünger published

an article that was later developed into the book *The Forest Passage*, an article that proved highly controversial, both for its author and for Jünger's unique take on the challenges facing the modern West. Even more controversially, Kissinger also published an article by German rightist Ernst von Salomon, discussing (apparently) German resistance to Hitler. (Ferguson incorrectly identifies Salomon as a "convicted murderer"; he was in fact nothing of the sort, rather convicted of being a mere accessory to the murder of Walther Rathenau, for providing an automobile to the murderers.) As a result, Kissinger was attacked, among others, by members of the Ford Foundation, which was funding him, and defended himself by pointing out that understanding men like Salomon was important. One suspects, though, that an ambitious man such as Kissinger thought any such publicity was good publicity.

Kissinger involved himself in various other groups and efforts. The reader notes that he always thought for the long term, beyond the struggles of the day, though he had very much to say about those (his first book was *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*). In 1951, for example, he presumed that America would triumph over the Soviet Union, but worried that "within a generation [we may] find ourselves in a world in which we must supply our challenges from within ourselves. This is a real issue for long-range thinking, and its solution requires a profound doctrine." Very true, though it's obvious now we've failed to meet the challenge.

In 1955 he began to enter the public eye, while working for the Council on Foreign Relations, with an article in *Foreign Affairs* analyzing military policy that endorsed the tactical use of nuclear weapons. He became a public intellectual. But if anyone could do that job well, it was Kissinger; it is later people who have degraded the role. He wrote articles; he wrote books, and it became received wisdom that his writings were influential on government figures, although Kissinger himself did not work for the government, and his degree of influence is often hard to tease out now. The Soviet launch of *Sputnik* accelerated his rise, and in 1957 he appeared on *Face the Nation*, making him practically a household name. In 1960, he was granted a tenured professorship at Harvard, giving him some degree of security.

This is half the book. The second half, until 1968, covers Kissinger's growing formal and informal roles in government. True, Kissinger

had no official government position until Nixon made him National Security Advisor in 1968, with which Ferguson ends this volume. But in the decade before, Kissinger was often an informal advisor, advising, either on request or on his own initiative, a wide variety of public figures on a wide variety of foreign policy topics. His influence on John Kennedy was less than many thought at the time; in particular, he was mostly uninvolved in Kennedy's botching of Cuba. But during this time, Kissinger was deeply involved in the "German Question"; i.e., how to respond to Soviet pressure on Berlin. He frequently travelled to places, from Berlin to Delhi to Saigon, where big happenings were afoot—but as a private citizen, thus both he and those in government he was advising could disclaim his words (sometimes necessary since Kissinger was fond of talking, and the press was often eager to distort his words). He maintained contacts with a wide range of relevant people, including Russians acting in a similar role. Still, he wasn't a particularly powerful man, and he craved power.

Early on, seeking that power, he began a long and mutually beneficial relationship with Nelson Rockefeller, who noticed his work and started hiring him for projects that shined up Rockefeller's image. Attaching himself to Rockefeller was not an inspired choice (Kraemer, still mentoring Kissinger, frowned on it), given that Rockefeller never attained power, and in retrospect was never going to. Kissinger nonetheless worked hard for Rockefeller to gain the 1960, 1964, and 1968 Republican nominations. He ghost-wrote for Rockefeller and prepared position papers, and pushed him to adopt a "realist" position on Vietnam, meaning one dialing back United States commitment.

Beyond scribal work, though, Kissinger was also deeply involved in the mechanics of the 1964 Republican nomination process, where Rockefeller lost the nomination to Barry Goldwater, due to a grassroots revolt. Kissinger's, and Ferguson's, hostility to anything that could be characterized as social conservatism is on full display here. Kissinger heaped, and Ferguson heaps, obloquy on anyone who dared to support Goldwater; they both endorse Rockefeller's fact-free phrase, "goon squads and Nazi methods," to characterize Goldwater supporters. I suppose little has changed in the past sixty years in the Republican Party, whose leaders always default to accomodating the Left. Goldwater lost largely because of the enormous mendacious propaganda campaign

waged against him; again, little has changed, other than that Johnson had to pay for his own propaganda, such as the infamous “Daisy” ad, and technology makes the propaganda far more ubiquitous.

The last two hundred pages of the book center on Vietnam, in excruciating detail. Kissinger became deeply involved in Vietnam, still as a private citizen. He maintained contacts with the Russians and North Vietnamese as well as many in the American government. What comes through most clearly in the endless discussions of one peace initiative or another is how all the Americans, even Kissinger, were easily manipulated. They thought, or convinced themselves, that their opponents were acting in good faith, whereas the Communists knew all too well that the Americans were divided and that many in America, even at this relatively early stage, wanted the Communists to win—thus, they had only to hold on, which they did. I occasionally think I should learn more about the Vietnam War, and maybe I should, but I am not sure it holds any earthshattering lessons, other than “never get involved in a land war in Asia” and it’s hard to win faraway wars with no clear immediate benefit.

And that’s it. Maybe Ferguson’s second volume will come out someday; I’ll probably buy a copy. But it’ll likely sit on my shelf, gathering dust, until I’m dead.