

Kissinger: 1923-1968: The Idealist

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‘This is a biography of an intellectual, but it is more than just an intellectual biography because, in the evolution of Kissinger’s thought, the interplay of study and experience was singularly close. For that reason, I have come to see this volume as what is known in Germany as a *bildungsroman* – the story of an education that was both philosophical and sentimental. The story is subdivided into five books. The first takes Kissinger from his childhood in interwar Germany through forced emigration to the United States and back to Germany in a U.S. Army uniform. The second is about his early Harvard career, as an undergraduate, a doctoral student, and a junior professor, but it is also about his emergence as a public intellectual as a result of his work on nuclear strategy for the Council on Foreign Relations. The third describes his first experiences as an adviser, first to a candidate for the presidency – Nelson Rockefeller – and then to a President – John F. Kennedy. The fourth leads him down the twisted road to Vietnam and to realization that the war there could not be won by the United States. The fifth and final book details the events leading up to his wholly unexpected appointment as national security advisor by Nixon’ (pp. 31–2).

Henry Kissinger is one of the most quoted, most written about and for a good number of years, was the most hated man in America and indeed the world (topped perhaps only by Richard Nixon), as the widely viewed architect of American foreign policy during the Nixon-Ford Presidencies (1969–77), responsible for (among other ‘state crimes’) the American bombing of Cambodia, the prolonging of the American war in Vietnam, and (allegedly) the overthrow of the Allende government in Chile. For the likes of the one-time left-wing writer Christopher Hitchens these all formed part of a charge sheet titled ‘The trial of Henry Kissinger’ (1), a book which was quickly transformed into a popular film. Not surprisingly, Kissinger has been the subject of a numerous serious books dealing with both his private life before his years in power (Walter Isaacson’s treatment was until now the very best), and his official one (Jussi Hanhimaki’s still the best of the many available). (2) The news that the prolific polymath, British émigré historian Niall Ferguson, now at Harvard University, had been commissioned to write the official biography by Kissinger himself rose more than a few eyebrows. First, Ferguson had never written a conventional biography, nor even written extensively about the role of the individual in history. Second, Ferguson, especially in his more ‘serious’ historical treatments (I do not count herein those BBC-related books, which I frankly believe are a disservice to both the reader and to Ferguson’s own great talents as a historian), has never written extensively about American history. And in particular 20th-century American history.

The book keeps to the chronology that Ferguson promises in his introduction. And while it is arguable that some of the material included in his text may not be either necessary, nor particularly important (such as the ten pages that Ferguson devotes to discussing the New York neighborhood of Washington Heights in which Kissinger and his family first resided in the United States), for the most part the narrative flows to where Ferguson wants to take his reader, with manifold insights into the what, where and whys of Kissinger’s career. How did the lowly research fellow at Harvard’s Political Science department, with a specialization in 19th-century diplomatic history become within the space of a few years, (in Ferguson’s words) ‘one of the foremost American experts on nuclear strategy’ (p. 331)? In Ferguson’s telling it was a simple matter of a despondent and discouraged Kissinger (Harvard had refused him tenure) writing a private memorandum on a subject on which he was not by any means an expert to Arthur Schlesinger, which Schlesinger’s private network of Democratic Party notables then gave full publicity to in the halls of power. And soon enough, within six months Kissinger had penned a series of articles on the subject of the possible uses of nuclear weapons in ‘limited wars’. Where to my mind Ferguson falls short in recounting Kissinger’s career as public intellectual, and policy advisor to New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, as well as on a part-time basis to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson is in his inability or unwillingness to show how consensual Kissinger’s thinking was. Examples include his belief in the non-existent ‘missile gap’, as well as Kissinger’s advocacy for several years in the mid-to-late 1950s of the potential employment on a limited basis of tactical nuclear weapons. Ferguson is quite content to show that true experts in the field of nuclear strategy (like William Kaufmann, Bernard Brodie and Stefan Possony) regarded with some degree of contempt what Possony referred to as Kissinger’s ‘Academic Blimpism’ (p. 377). Similarly within the consensus mode of establishment thinking was Kissinger’s dismissal of George Kennan’s call in 1957 for mutual pullback by the Western powers and the Soviet Union from Central Europe.

Ferguson’s recounting at length (at well over 100 pages one-seventh of the entire book), Kissinger’s frustrating relationship with the Kennedy Administration and in particular with his former superior at Harvard, McGeorge Bundy, is a tour de force of narrative exposition, analysis and insight. Without necessarily providing the reader with anything new by way of, say, the Berlin crisis of 1961–2 or the Cuban Missile crisis, Ferguson demonstrates in detail how Kissinger’s interaction with the Kennedy Administration chimed with the overall scope of American policy, showing this reader at any rate how deeply conflicted Kissinger was in wanting to exercise power without giving up his role as chief foreign policy advisor to Rockefeller. While the 100 plus pages devoted to Kissinger’s part-time advisory role in the Kennedy administration might strike some as unnecessary padding and or an exercise in minutiae, Ferguson tops it by devoting 250 pages of text to the Vietnam War, the origins of American involvement and Kissinger’s own role in the years prior to his appointment as National Security Advisor in January 1969. How does Ferguson carry it off? Aside from some questionable *obiter dicta* (such as the statement that the overthrow of the

Diem Government in November 1963, committed the United States to the defense of South Vietnam), Ferguson is able to take the reader into the morass (in more sense than one) of the war in Indochina, and distill the resulting nightmare. As for Kissinger's role, in the self-same morass, it is Ferguson's view that Kissinger, while a public defender of American policy in the Johnson Administration, was in private: 'a scathing critic' (p. 583). Insofar as Ferguson makes this claim in the context that Kissinger was from the very beginning critical of American overt military involvement and an adherent of a negotiated solution, then indeed Kissinger could be said to not have been a backer of American policy in the Johnson years. However, the very same thing could be said of almost every civilian policymaker in the Johnson administration with the exceptions of Walt Rostow and President Johnson himself.⁽³⁾ That being said, Ferguson does give the reader a close, analytical look at Kissinger's various roles in Lyndon Baines Johnson's war, from public cheerleader of the war effort in 1965–6, with several trips back and forth between South Vietnam and the USA, to unsuccessful secret negotiator with the North Vietnamese in Paris. A 'negotiation' which as Ferguson aptly puts it had more to do with Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot' than with true diplomatic negotiations of any sort. In one of his few forays into historiographical controversy which is not directly related to his subject, Ferguson argues cogently and with great insight that the so-called 'Marigold' and 'Pennsylvania' negotiations were nothing more than a North Vietnamese exercise in 'psychological warfare' (p. 733).

Finally, in the penultimate chapter, Ferguson takes the reader into why exactly President-elect Richard Nixon chose Dr. Henry Kissinger as his National Security Advisor, on the surface at any rate a singularly odd choice given the fact that Kissinger had chosen to ally himself not only in 1960 and 1964, but even in 1968, with Nixon's prime opponent Nelson Rockefeller. Contrary to the long-running allegations that Kissinger helped to scuttle a potential breakthrough in the Paris peace negotiations during the 1968 election campaign and that this helped win the election for Nixon, Ferguson counters that: a) Nixon was not in fact reliant upon the sparse information that Kissinger was privy to as per the Paris negotiations; b) that Nixon did not win the election because of the failure of the negotiations. Ferguson explains that Nixon's choice was mostly due to the quite coincidental fact that Kissinger was running a Harvard Study group on presidential transitions and presidential control of foreign policy, emphasizing that while presidential control of foreign policy could be readily assumed, this should be done via a revived National Security Council (seriously diminished in importance in the Kennedy & Johnson years), with a Special Assistant to supervise it. Ferguson is quite apt in stating that Kissinger had: 'coauthored one of the most sophisticated job applications in American History' (p. 850).

What can one say then about Niall Ferguson's voluminous, nay grandiose, first-of-two-volume official biography of 'Super K'? Mainly that it is a superbly written book, one which shows a deep immersion into both the available (in the case of Kissinger's own papers, only 'available' to Ferguson himself) primary sources as well as the mountainous secondary literature. He has, regardless of any minor errata that the book contains, written the definitive first half of Kissinger's vita. Which is an especially impressive achievement considering that 20th-century American history is not by any means Ferguson's natural terrain as a historian.

So, with that being said what does Ferguson make of Kissinger and what does the reader make of Ferguson's Kissinger? That Ferguson's Kissinger is a man to be viewed to a certain extent positively and with none of the venom that the likes of Christopher Hitchens employs. That in many ways, Kissinger was a part and parcel of the 'Greatest Generation', the generation of men who were adolescents during the Great Depression, fought in the Second World War, and subsequently went off to university due to the GI bill and were the pilots in charge of the ship of state when it ran aground in that shoal called 'Indochina' in the 1960s and 1970s. In the case of Kissinger, he appears to have come through a particular set of life experiences: being a Jew in Nazi Germany; an intelligence soldier (not an officer), in the midst of the hard battles of the Western Front from mid-1944 to the spring of 1945; and a Jew again in a liberated Germany who witnessed at first hand the abysmal horrors of the concentration and death camps, though with virtually no psychological trauma or scars. Indeed, au fond, Kissinger gives the appearance, because no doubt it is true, that he is that species called the American 'type-A' immigrant, someone for who the usual emotional difficulties that immigrants suffer in America were merely phases and experiences to be gotten over and

passed-through, not the stuff that one goes to an analyst to 'discuss' and then ponder and psychologically wrestle with. Especially illuminating (at least to this reader) is a letter that Kissinger pens to his father in May of 1945, in which he argues that American policy in Germany must consist of showing the Germans that the Americans were in Germany for positive reasons and not merely as mere victors over the vanquished.

In contrast to the usual stereotype of Kissinger as a European émigré intellectual, a combination of Dr. Strangelove and Humbert Humbert, he was in fact an American to his fingertips in both his allegiances and his intellectual background. So much so that as he admitted to his ex-Harvard colleague (and my old Professor) MacGeorge Bundy, in the early 1960s, his German vocabulary:

'is not good enough to speak extemporaneously on a complicated subject. Because my secondary and higher education was in English, all my thinking on international and military affairs has been in English also' (p. 487).

One point that should be made is that it was President Kennedy's dismissal of him as 'ponderous and long-winded', rather than as Ferguson paints it, Bundy's maneuvering, which prevented Kissinger from obtaining a permanent appointment in the Kennedy administration.(4) With this in mind it is not altogether surprising that Kissinger's student career at Harvard would be under the wings of the eccentric, conservative, southerner William Y. Elliott rather than his fellow German-Jewish emigre Carl J. Friedrich.

The Jamesian stance of a George Kennan about the United States, its domestic polity and its foibles in world affairs is conspicuous by its absence in Kissinger's case.(5) Indeed, as per Ferguson, Kissinger gives the appearance of being a whole-hearted Cold Warrior, in a way that would have been inconceivable to Kennan. Similarly, contrary to John Lewis Gaddis statement that Kissinger was the natural heir to Kennan's concept of containment, with its stress on the importance of concentrating on the important zones of England, Western Europe, North America and Japan, there is nothing in Ferguson's opus to indicate anything of the sort.(6) Indeed, unlike say Hans J. Morgenthau, Kissinger does not (in Ferguson's reading) appear to have given any deep thought to the fact that based upon any 'realpolitik' analysis, the entire American commitment to South Vietnam circa 1954 onwards was nonsensical in the extreme. Indeed, despite his private pessimism about the eventual success of the American military and political effort, it is quite apparent from Ferguson's account that Kissinger was indeed a 'true believer' as it pertains to the nominal American 'mission' in support of the Government in Saigon, which highlights a point that Ferguson brings up constantly in his narrative: namely that contrary to most of the commentary on Kissinger, in fact Kissinger was not an adherent of realpolitik or machtpolitik. Following in the path of Peter Dickson, Ferguson makes a good argument that it was Kant and not Metternich or Bismarck who influenced his thinking on international relations. Evidence of this for Ferguson is found in Kissinger attacking the American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles for not 'projecting the deeper things that we stand for'.(7) How plausible is Ferguson's thesis of 'Kissinger the Idealist', and that the first half of Kissinger's life was akin to the playing out of a 'bildungsroman'? On the face of it, and regardless of the manifold evidence that Ferguson is able to bring forth, I find both concepts to be of questionable validity. There is little to differentiate Harvard Professor Kissinger circa the 1950s and 1960s from almost every other academic at the time who was eager (and in the case of Kissinger extremely anxious) to climb the road to power. Otherwise, how can one possibly explain the many instances of Kissinger stating one thing in public (like his support for the Johnson administration's Vietnam policies) and another in private (his oft proclaimed skepticism of the self-same policies). In terms of the contents of Kissinger's pre-1969 writings, John Bew has made a very strong case, that while Kissinger had little in common with typical academic adherents of realpolitik, it would be more accurate to describe him as having a 'strong element of American exceptionalism', incorporated into own peculiar version of realpolitik.(8) Additionally, Ferguson fails to discuss an important leitmotif throughout Kissinger's academic and official career, which to my mind seriously undermines the concept of 'Kissinger the Idealist': a bizarre sort of hero-worship (if one wishes to characterize it as such) by Kissinger of such figures as Zhou En-Lai, Stalin and Mao, something which of course became much more transparent in his diplomacy diplomatic career in the 1970s, and indeed in his memoirs covering the same

and his other writings afterwards. The requisite quotation (significantly not quoted in this enormous book) is as follows:

‘Whatever the qualities of the Soviet Leadership, its training is eminently political and conceptual. Reading Lenin or Mao or Stalin, one is struck by the emphasis on the relationship between political, military, psychological and economic factors, the insistence on finding a conceptual basis for political action and on the need for dominating a situation by flexible tactics and inflexible purpose. And the internal struggles in the Kremlin ensure that only the most iron-nerved reach the top. ... As a result; the contest between us and the Soviet system has had many of the attributes of any contest between a professional and an amateur’.(9)

One can only hope that this is a theme which Professor Ferguson will discuss at some length in the next volume of what is in many ways already a superb biography.

Notes

1. Christopher Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*. (New York, NY, 2001).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: a Biography*. (New York, NY, 2005); Jussi Hanhimaki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy*. (New York, NY, 2004).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For this point, see: David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War*. (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 360–70, 448–65; Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC and Vietnam*. (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 189–226; Gordon M. Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam*. (New York, NY, 2008), pp. 202–16.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. On Kennedy's negative view of Kissinger, see: Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos and Vietnam*. (New York, NY, 2000), p. 68.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See: Walter Hickson, *Cold War Iconoclast* (New York, NY, 1988). David Allen Mayers, *George Kennan and the Dilemmas of American Foreign Policy* (New York, NY, 1988). Anders Stephanson, *Kennan and the Art of Foreign Policy* (New York, NY, 1989). In the latter (p. 215), there is a revealing quote in which it is noted that: ‘he [Kennan] toyed with the idea, the drastic alternative of exile, along the lines of Henry James and T. S. Eliot, to a more organic society’, comments which are conspicuously absent from Ferguson's text re Kissinger, of course. Kennan's own memoirs are full of similar sentiments.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. For Gaddis' assertion see *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security During the Cold War* (New York, NY, 2005), pp. 279–81 and passim. For an explanation of Kennan's concept of Containment, see Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration and the Cold War*. (New York, NY, 1992), pp. 175–181, 355–60 and passim.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. For a typical example of this, see: ‘Kissinger's dissertation, which gained him a Ph. D. in May 1954, was also a statement of the author's worldview. He was, and would remain, a firm believer in realpolitik, in the primacy of geopolitics and the balance of power’. In Hanhimaki, op. cit., p. 7 and passim. For Peter Dickson's study, see Peter W. Dickson, *Kissinger and the Meaning of History*. (New York, NY, 1978).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. John Bew, *Realpolitik: A history* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 262.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. See Henry A. Kissinger *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*. (New York, NY, 1957), pp. 434–5. For equally illuminating examples of Kissinger's near sycophantic interaction with both Mao & Zhou, see William Burr, *The Kissinger Transcripts: the top secret talks with Beijing and Moscow*. (New York, NY, 1999), pp. 86–110 and passim.[Back to \(9\)](#)

Other reviews:

Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/15/kissinger-1923-to-1968-the-idealist-niall-ferguson-review-biography> [2]

Independent

<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/kissinger-1923-1968-the-idealist-by-niall-ferguson-book-review-a-case-for-the-defence-10494182.html> [3]

New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/04/books/review/niall-fergusons-kissinger-volume-i.html> [4]

Financial Times

<https://www.ft.com/content/0a69b8b8-5c73-11e5-9846-de406ccb37f2> [5]

Evening Standard

<https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/books/kissinger-19231968-the-idealist-by-niall-ferguson-review-a3085961.html> [6]

Irish Times

<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/kissinger-1923-1968-the-idealist-review-new-look-at-an-amoral-realist-1.2376064> [7]

Foreign Affairs

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/2015-10-19/kissinger-1923-1968-idealist> [8]

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[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/15/kissinger-1923-to-1968-the-idealist-niall-ferguson-review-biography>

[3] <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/kissinger-1923-1968-the-idealist-by-niall-ferguson-book-review-a-case-for-the-defence-10494182.html>

[4] <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/04/books/review/niall-fergusons-kissinger-volume-i.html>

[5] <https://www.ft.com/content/0a69b8b8-5c73-11e5-9846-de406ccb37f2>

[6] <https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/books/kissinger-19231968-the-idealist-by-niall-ferguson-review-a3085961.html>

[7] <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/kissinger-1923-1968-the-idealist-review-new-look-at-an-amoral-realist-1.2376064>

[8] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/2015-10-19/kissinger-1923-1968-idealist>