

# Kissinger

Niall Ferguson's first volume of Henry Kissinger's biography, which deals with his formative years, is masterful. It's a difficult read, heavy with research and documentation. Kissinger was without doubt a brilliant man. Perhaps the most influential political advisor in the USA of the late twentieth century. He served across the divide as advisor and Secretary of State, employed most notably by John F. Kennedy, Nelson Rockefeller, Richard Nixon, and Gerald Ford. After he left government, he established his own consultancy to the world's leaders. He is, as is anyone who takes a stand, both admired and reviled.

As Jews we would like to claim him as one of ours. But his whole career seems to have been a rejection of everything Jewish. The Nixon tapes have recorded him remaining silent as his master excoriates Jews in general. When he returned from the war in Europe, he told his father, "Certain ties bound in convention mean nothing to me. I have come to judge men on their merits." It sounds to me as if he is implying that Jews do not judge others on their merits and that that is why he is rejecting Judaism. A pretty poor, if not dishonest, excuse. One almost feels sorry for someone who tried so hard to escape his heritage and yet the name stuck like a shadow regardless.

Ferguson has explored Kissinger's Orthodox religious background in Germany before the family managed to get out. He was forced out of public school into a Jewish one when laws were passed against Jews attending. In his teens he joined Ezra, the Orthodox youth movement, where he wrote a paper on the recondite subject of Muktzah on Shabbat (what objects one may or may not move on the holy day), that would have done a yeshivah bochur proud. Almost as soon as he arrived in the States, like so many others at a time when anti-Semitism was so embedded in American academic, social, political, and commercial life, he turned his back on his Jewishness in the hopes of gaining acceptance and rising to heights of American society.

We will have to wait for the next volume to discover if during the Yom Kipur War it was Kissinger who persuaded Nixon to send the arms that virtually rescued Israel from catastrophe. In his nineties he has for the first time attended a Holocaust event, something he avoided like the plague for most of his life. He even supported Reagan's visit to the Bitburg cemetery where the SS elite are buried. One can perhaps understand a person wanting to forget the discrimination and humiliation he and his family suffered at the hands of the Nazis.

Kissinger devoted himself completely to his adopted country. It was historically his blessing and curse to reach the political heights during President Nixon's terms of office. Much of his positive achievements as a negotiator and have been colored by the venality of his patron and his own cloying sycophancy towards him. Regardless of the merits of the cases for and against, there is no doubt that he equaled many of the achievements (and compromises) of the Court Jews of seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe.

Kissinger's critics accuse him of being an unprincipled pragmatist. Ferguson makes a persuasive case that he did indeed have ideals but that he realized that without pragmatism those ideals could and would be subordinated and undermined, as now seems to be the fate of liberal European and American idealism.

Kissinger admired Immanuel Kant, whose idealistic view of the human capacity for moral decision-making was reinforced by his important idea of the Categorical Imperative. Kissinger's Harvard thesis, still the longest ever submitted, morphed into his book *A World Restored*, which examined the contributions of the nineteenth century European powerbrokers Bismarck, Castlereagh, and Metternich. It argued for stability and practicality over revolution and uncontrolled idealism. His early contribution to the political debate was the concept of limited use of the nuclear option if it helped prevent a far greater catastrophe. He insisted that the US had to stand firm and show strength to tyranny and totalitarianism.

Amongst the many points he makes in his sweeping overview of modern political affairs is the paradox that: "Those ages which in retrospect seem most peaceful were least in search of peace. Those whose quest for it seems unending appear least able to achieve tranquility." In a speech in 1957 he said, "It is the characteristic of a policy which bases itself on purely military considerations to be immoderate in triumph and panicky in adversity." How true of American policies then and recently. In 1958 he said, "Most Americans are like spectators at a play that does not concern them...we are losing the cold war." Such words are even more appropriate today where a failure to act often opens the doors to worse alternatives.

His greatest challenge was the resolution of the Vietnam War after President Johnson allowed it to escalate. Perhaps his most significant diplomatic achievement was the Nixon rapprochement with China. In Israel he was not liked because he was perceived as putting more pressure on Golda Meir than on the Arab states and the Palestinians. In Israel at the time, jokes at his expense were legion. Here is one I remember:

Golda Meir took him to the Western Wall and invited him to say a prayer. Kissinger turned to the wall and began, "Lord I want to thank you for enabling me, a refugee from Nazism, to rise to one of the most important positions in the United States of America." And Golda said "That is a very nice prayer Henry."

Kissinger continued, "And Lord I ask you to look favorably on my patron, Richard Milhous Nixon, and enable him to survive the challenges to his position and fulfill his role as a great President of the USA." Again Golda said, "That's a lovely prayer Henry."

Kissinger turned back to the wall and continued "And finally Lord help me persuade the Israeli government to make concessions in the interests of a lasting peace."

And Golda turned to Kissinger and said, "Henry you realize that's only a wall you are talking to."

Kissinger's moderation between idealism and pragmatism is, in fact, a very Jewish position. Judaism allows its principles and laws to be sacrificed to save life, except in three cases: one cannot murder an innocent, commit adultery, or curse God. Survival trumps all the rest. The biggest challenge to the Western world today is the threat to its culture through the very idealism of concern for refugees and the persecuted, even when it may well mean the ultimate betrayal and defeat of Western values, by both the fascism and the religious barbarism.

Ferguson does an excellent job describing his subject's brilliance and achievements in his rise on the world stage. What is clear here is that Kissinger deserves a much closer look and greater recognition of his ideals as much as his pragmatism. It would be wrong to say he was a crafty Machiavellian, devoid of moral values and ideals. I am looking forward to the next volume to see if Ferguson can maintain his thesis.