Born in Germany in 1923, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger immigrated to the United States with his family in 1938. He served in the 84th Infantry Division and in Counter Intelligence during World War II. A faculty member at Harvard University, specializing in international relations, in the 1950s and ’60s, Mr. Kissinger was a consultant to the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. National security adviser and secretary of state to Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, Mr. Kissinger was acclaimed and vilified as the master practitioner of “Realpolitik” in foreign policy. He sought detente with the Soviet Union, opened up diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China, negotiated the Paris Peace Accords that ended the Vietnam War, and enlisted the CIA to help engineer the overthrow of Salvador Allende, the president of Chile.

In “Kissinger: The Idealist, 1923-1968,” Niall Ferguson, a professor of history at Harvard University and the author of “The Great Degeneration,” “Civilization,” “Colossus,” “The Ascent of Money” and “The War of the World,” draws on diaries, letters and personal papers made available to him by his subject as well as archives from around the world, to provide a massively detailed account of the first 45 years of Mr. Kissinger’s life (a second volume will follow). A political conservative and a contrarian, Mr. Ferguson insists that Mr. Kissinger was not a ruthless foreign policy “realist,” interested only in advancing national self-interest, and willing to make power an end in itself. He was an idealist who believed that values, including freedom and self-determination, were worth fighting for.

Mr. Ferguson’s analysis of Mr. Kissinger’s “education through experience” is fascinating. And the biography is full of insights about Mr. Kissinger’s mentors/patrons: Fritz Kraemer, “Mephistopheles with a monocle” and army fatigues; Harvard professor William Y. Elliott; McGeorge Bundy, John F. Kennedy’s national security adviser; and Nelson Rockefeller, governor of New York and aspirant for the Republican nomination for president. At every stage, Mr. Ferguson writes, Mr. Kissinger learned...
something about foreign policy; the “leitmotif of his life” was that most strategic choices are made in “situations of extraordinary ambiguity,” among existing or potential evils, which may or may not be commensurate with one another, where a will to act must be summoned “to maintain at least an equilibrium of power.”

When Mr. Kissinger actually wielded power (a subject reserved for volume two), Mr. Ferguson suggests, he was ready to recognize that realism was a better guide than idealism to Vietnam (and to relationships with America’s ideological adversaries, the Soviet Union and China). And he began to think and act more and more like Otto von Bismarck, the unifier and “Iron Chancellor” of Germany in the late 19th century.

Mr. Ferguson’s claim that the young Kissinger was an idealist, however, is not persuasive. He does not sufficiently take into account the advice given to him by the historian Gaddis Smith that idealism and realism should be viewed “not as the biographical equivalent of positive and negative electrical charges — either one or the other — but rather as the opposite ends of a spectrum along which we act as circumstances require.”

And Mr. Ferguson undercuts the authority of his biography by gratuitously insulting some of Mr. Kissinger’s contemporaries. John Kennedy, he writes, was “a consummate cheat,” whose “compulsive infidelity to his wife was only one of his many deceptions.” Kennedy won the presidency “by fighting dirty, state by state,” assumed the Cold War “had to be fought the same way,” and was “enthusiastic about assassination as an instrument of policy.”

Mr. Ferguson is rather more charitable with those he likes.

“Kissinger” ends with the response of Mandell Creighton to Lord Acton’s assertion in 1887 that “power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” The actions of men in power to conscientiously maintain the social order, Creighton maintained, “require special consideration. ... They may be accused of an intellectual mistake, not necessarily of a moral crime.” After all, “who am I that I should condemn them?”

Mr. Ferguson, no doubt, is setting the stage for volume two.

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