

# HENRY KISSINGER

---

*and the* AMERICAN CENTURY

JEREMI SURI

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The convictions that leaders have formed before reaching  
high office are the intellectual capital they will  
consume as long as they continue in office.

—*Henry Kissinger, 1979*

*Introduction:*  
*The Making of the*  
*American Century*

The Cold War was very good to the United States. Emerging from a debilitating economic depression and a bloody world war, American society quickly amassed more wealth and power than any peer in recent memory. Ordinary citizens consumed more cars, clothes, movies, and especially food than anyone could have imagined just a few years earlier. Ordinary citizens also conceived of themselves as global leaders—spreading a gospel of political reform and economic openness to “old” societies like Germany and Japan and “new” nations like India, Israel, and Vietnam. Wealth and power were not shared equitably within the United States, but even those groups subject to discrimination lived better than they had before. Although ethnic and racial minorities continued to experience violence and exclusion, they also benefited from unprecedented social mobility. The decades between the onset of the Second World War and the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 were a period of grand expectations and grand achievements. The United States became—as Henry Luce, the founder of *Time* magazine, predicted—“the dynamic center of ever-widening spheres of enterprise,” the “training center of the skillful servants of mankind,” the self-proclaimed global “Good Samaritan.” This was the “American Century.”<sup>1</sup>

This was also Henry Kissinger’s century. His career tracked the transformations of this extraordinary period. His rise to power followed broader social and political currents that he could not control. His conceptualization of policy reflected the traumas and triumphs of his rise. Kissinger echoed Luce when he explained: “I believed in the moral significance of my adopted country. America, alone of the free countries, was strong enough

to assure global security against the forces of tyranny. Only America had both the power and the decency to inspire other peoples who struggled for identity, for progress and dignity.” Kissinger’s words reflected his personal despair during the 1930s, “when the democracies faced the gravest danger,” and his personal mission during the succeeding decades, when the nation towered as the “embodiment of mankind’s hopes,” including his own. Kissinger was a product of his times, a child of the American Century.<sup>2</sup>

Kissinger shaped the larger forces around him. His influence, however, was not traditional. It did not draw on the standard sinews of power in American society—electoral politics, business success, or elite-born families. Kissinger worked through the new sources and circumstances supporting the American Century. He was part of a pioneering generation that populated new military institutions built to destroy fascism and to occupy enemy territory, new academic programs designed for postwar challenges, new expert circles charged to formulate global grand strategy, and new policymaking bodies empowered to fight the Cold War. The growth of American power meant the distribution of influence among a broader range of U.S. actors. Kissinger contributed to the American Century, operating through the new power centers.

Observers generally view Kissinger as a larger-than-life figure—a hero or a villain, a savior or a war criminal. He was, in fact, none of these things. Kissinger did not transcend his times like some Olympian “great man.” Instead, he adapted to changing circumstances and seized unpredicted opportunities as they arose. His career, like the American Century as a whole, was not inwardly driven. It was deeply affected—sometimes distorted—by external factors. These included military conflicts far from North America, the collapse of foreign societies, and the emergence of aggressive regimes. The American Century was a response to international transformations; it was a global century.

It was also a century of extremes. “Our paradoxes today,” Luce wrote, “are bigger and better than ever. . . . We have poverty and starvation—but only in the midst of plenty. We have the biggest wars in the midst of the most widespread, the deepest and the most articulate hatred of war in all history. We have tyrannies and dictatorships—but only when democratic idealism, once regarded as the dubious eccentricity of a colonial nation, is the faith of a huge majority of the people of the world.” For all the optimism implied by the phrase “American Century,” these were also what

Kissinger identified as “tired times.” Leaders had to reconcile limitless expectations with limited capabilities.<sup>3</sup>

This historical context mattered enormously. Kissinger responded to strong social and political pressures. He did not resist these pressures so much as he channeled them for what he regarded as useful purposes. He attempted to build upon them, rather than get embroiled in them. “Leadership,” Kissinger explained, “is the art of bridging the gap between experience and vision. This is why most great statesmen were less distinguished by their detailed knowledge (though a certain minimum is indispensable) than by their instinctive grasp of historical currents.”<sup>4</sup>

Kissinger led by instinct and experience, not a rigid model or an all-encompassing theory. This was Kissinger’s genius as a strategist. He held to a series of core beliefs, but he was flexible in their application. He creatively adapted his thinking to changing circumstances. For all his titanic ambitions, he recognized the constraints on individual action. Kissinger did not

Henry Kissinger working on an airplane between meetings. Kissinger made his career through tireless international travel, extensive networking, and long hours of hard work. (Courtesy of National Archives, Washington, D.C.)

seek to design a new sea for his life's voyage. He sailed along the existing currents, tacking nimbly to catch the wind in his sails. He navigated through the tidal waves of Weimar democracy, Nazi Germany, Depression-era America, the Second World War, European reconstruction, the Cold War, Vietnam, and Watergate. He survived all these storms with the scars to show their lasting effects.

This book is not a traditional biography of Henry Kissinger or a standard history of Cold War America. It is a narrative of global change, a study of how social and political transformations across multiple societies created our contemporary world. Kissinger was directly connected to many of these transformations from his early days as a schoolboy through his years as a White House official. His life offers a window into the complex international vectors of the period. It is a natural focus for understanding the intersection of different, seemingly contradictory, developments. Kissinger's career is about the rise of fascism, the Holocaust, and democratic responses. It is also about ethnic identity, education, and social networking. His activities shed important light on state institutions and definitions of citizenship. His thinking exemplifies the role of ideas, memories, and prejudices in daily life. Kissinger was a German, a Jew, and an American. He was an idealist and a realist; an internationalist and a patriot. He was the mixture of familiar and exotic ingredients that made the American Century.

The main argument of this book is that we must understand the experiences of Henry Kissinger and American power as processes of *globalization*—the interpenetration of ideas, personalities, and institutions from diverse societies. Globalization revised what it meant to be a citizen, a leader, a democrat, and a person of faith. Globalization also redistributed power among nations and people. American political and cultural assumptions shaped the formation of postwar Europe, and they did so through young men like Henry Kissinger. European “Old World” perspectives, however, gained a greater hold on American society—also through young men like Henry Kissinger. Influence was unequal, but it was multidirectional and multidimensional. It involved the politics of elite officials and the daily lives of local citizens; it included refined learning and popular knowledge. Most fundamental, influence traveled in the words and actions of bridge figures—especially Kissinger—situated by attitude and experience between

different societies, as well as between different groups within societies. Henry Kissinger was an agent of globalization, but his influence came from the social margins of a changing world, not from the traditional centers of “established” authority.

Many writers have commented, often critically, on Kissinger’s qualities as a thinker and a policymaker. Few, however, have attempted to understand him in his global context. A focus on the details of Kissinger’s White House decisionmaking, while valuable, has contributed to a narrow perspective. As one examines the endless documentary record of his daily activities—including shining examples of brilliance and dark moments of self-serving lies—the reader quickly loses the forest for the trees. Why did Kissinger pursue particular policies in Vietnam, China, and the third world? How did he conceive of power? What were his ultimate aims? What was his grand strategy? What is Kissinger’s contemporary legacy?

The more we read, the more difficult it becomes to answer these questions. Kissinger’s memoirs alone run to more than 3,500 pages. Historians have followed suit with their own hefty tomes. Although this book is based on a deep immersion in the documentary record (as well as numerous interviews with Kissinger and others), it is not a chronicle of actions. I focus not on what Kissinger did, but on *why* he did it. This approach involves also asking *how* Kissinger came to a position where he could do what he did—*why* so many people invested this German-Jewish immigrant with so much power.<sup>5</sup>

These are the crucial questions that we must answer if we are to make sense of our recent past and think intelligibly about our future. The intricate details of Kissinger’s conversations with foreign leaders are, in fact, less important than how the nature of global power changed during his career. Interpretations of Kissinger that focus on his morally questionable deeds—and there was no shortage of these—lead us to conclusions that are too superficial. Of course the brutalities committed in Vietnam, Cambodia, Chile, and Angola during Kissinger’s time in office deserve condemnation. Of course his policies in these areas frequently failed to limit, and sometimes exacerbated, local suffering. These are easy judgments, particularly for those writing about events with the benefit of hindsight.

Why did Kissinger adopt particular policies? Why did so many people go along? These are the tougher nuts to crack. These are the questions about motivation, perception, and circumstance that surround any serious

analysis of behavior. These are the questions about meaning and purpose that linger long after the fires of prior wars have been extinguished.

Critics of Kissinger have often resorted to labels like “evil” and “war criminal.” In attempting to explain why he acted as he did, and what that tells us about broader social and political changes, these labels are intellectually bankrupt. They assume a preexisting, almost genetic, explanation for misdeeds. They remove the causes of behavior from analysis, and they absolve everyone but the perpetrator from criticism. We can all feel better about ourselves if we can find Kissinger alone responsible for thousands of deaths. The rest of us have proven our moral fiber by condemning him.

This is much too simplistic. If only evil men and women committed bad deeds, then we could easily eliminate the bad apples from our basket of potential leaders. The fundamental issue is why good men and women com-

Henry Kissinger and Mao Zedong in November 1973. Kissinger had little expertise on Asia, but he saw China as a natural regional power that could work with the United States. Kissinger’s thinking about an “opening” to China grew from his political and strategic considerations before he entered the Nixon administration. (© Bettmann / CORBIS)

mit bad deeds—why the “best and the brightest,” in David Halberstam’s memorable words, sometimes produce the worst results. Leaders must be accountable for outcomes, but outcomes alone do not explain the leaders’ behavior or their character. We must avoid reading history as a simple moral tale, devoid of context and complexity. We must place the individual, even the most empowered individual, in his larger social and political setting.<sup>6</sup>

Good men made policy during the American Century, and Kissinger was one of them. Their accomplishments and failures were not genetic. They were rarely personal. Policy reflected ideas, pressures, and perceptions rooted in shared international experiences. The circumstances of the Cold War, and the common understandings of those circumstances, encouraged good men to make particular decisions—for better and for worse. They were not tools of their times, but they were powerful products of it. We can understand why men like Kissinger acted as they did only if we examine how they reacted to the hopes and fears of their era. They formed their convictions, as Kissinger admits, before they entered office—in the crucible of common and disorienting experiences. The American Century grew from a few key formative moments and the shifts they elicited in dominant views of power.

### Democratic Weakness

The American Century began with the collapse of Weimar democracy. Germany in the 1920s was one of the most vibrant, sophisticated, and diverse societies. It boasted the best minds of the era—Thomas Mann, Martin Heidegger, Theodor Adorno, Bertolt Brecht, and Albert Einstein, among many others. It also had a wealth of political parties—social democrats, conservatives, centrists, communists, and national socialists—representing a broad spectrum of opinion throughout the country. Weimar Germany was at the center of Western civilization and the democratic hopes of the twentieth century. In comparison, the United States was still a backwater.

The rise to power, with little resistance, of a genocidal Nazi regime exposed the hollowness of these hopes. Sophisticated citizens supported hatred and violence. Good democrats failed to resist brutal dictatorship. Foreign societies pledged to humane principles of government—including

Great Britain, France, and the United States—failed to act against the Nazi onslaught until something more than their principles was at stake.

Witnessing these events firsthand, Henry Kissinger could only conclude that democracies were weak and ineffective at combating destructive enemies. They were too slow to act, too divided to mount a strong defense, and too idealistic to make tough decisions about the use of force. This was the central “lesson” of appeasement—the appeasement of the Nazi party within the Weimar system, the appeasement of Nazi Germany within the international system. Democracies needed decisive leaders, and they needed protections against themselves. The solution was not to jettison democracy as a whole, but to build space for charismatic, forward-looking, undemocratic decisionmaking in government. This was precisely the route that Great Britain and the United States took, under the leadership of Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt, when they finally went to war with fascism. This was precisely the model of heroic politics for Kissinger and many others of his generation.

The United States was a savior—a “haven,” as Kissinger put it—not because it was a democracy, but because it possessed enormous power that it was willing to deploy, however belatedly, for the defense of humanity and Western civilization. Although American society was filled with prejudice, violence, and injustice, it valued basic freedoms that fascism denied. For Kissinger and many other Europeans, the United States was a necessary protector, not an idealistic beacon. It had a mandate to destroy dangerous threats, not to remake the world in its image.<sup>7</sup>

Countless citizens of Europe, Asia, and other parts of the world looked to America for refuge and encouraged its influence in their societies against worse alternatives. This was the consensual basis for the American Century. One might even call it the foreign “invitation” for an American Century. Kissinger certainly thought in these terms. In the years around the Second World War, the United States expanded its reach in response to local pressures and often against its own contrary inclinations. This was not an empire designed in Washington.<sup>8</sup>

It also was not an empire of democracy. The primary urge for American expansion was protection—physical protection, protection of basic freedoms, and protection of an imperiled Western civilization. Too much democracy, on the model of Weimar democracy, was the problem, not the solution. Many observers feared that in countries like Germany, Japan, and

Italy democracy would bring communists and other enemies to power. The United States took the global lead to prevent this occurrence. It frequently sacrificed democracy abroad and at home to combat perceived threats. This was a reaction to the apparent weakness of democracy, evident in the collapse of Weimar Germany and the rise of Nazi power. It was a source of the skepticism about democracy, and the desire to curb its excesses through firm leadership, that underpinned policymaking in the Cold War.<sup>9</sup>

The American Century reflected a turn away from democratic idealism and a turn toward the “realism” of strong, authoritative “statesmen.” This shift reflected the influence of actors at the social and political margins of power, particularly citizens in societies threatened or overrun by fascism. Although it heightened U.S. global power, this “realism” challenged assumptions about good governance. It set a new tone for American relations with foreign countries, as well as for political behavior within the United States. The language of democracy proliferated, but the practice of democracy narrowed.

Henry Kissinger with Egypt's Foreign Minister Ismail Fahmy in August 1975. Kissinger's “shuttle diplomacy” transformed the Middle East and set the trajectory for contemporary politics in the region. Kissinger's Jewish background was an ever-present issue in his negotiations. (Courtesy of David Hume Kennerly / Getty Images)

Kissinger came of age with a generation that defined growing American power in terms that challenged bedrock democratic beliefs. Calling for the United States to “temper its missionary spirit,” Kissinger emphasized the limits on ideals in the American Century. On the basis of his own personal experience in Weimar Germany, he warned: “Righteousness is the parent of fanaticism and intolerance.”<sup>10</sup>

### Jewish Cosmopolitanism

The American Century was not a democratic century, but it was a Jewish century. Many people, including Kissinger, are uncomfortable with this statement, but it is nonetheless true. With remarkable speed and breadth, Jews moved from the margins to the centers of global power. In the United States and other countries before the 1930s only a very small number of Jews attended elite universities, directed public corporations, or made government policy. These walls of Jewish exclusion crumbled in the decades after the horrors of the Holocaust and the Second World War. By the 1960s Jews had achieved extraordinary success in mainstream society, with a powerful presence in universities, corporations, and government offices. They continued to face prejudice and exclusion, but Jews were prominent players in the American Century.<sup>11</sup>

Henry Kissinger was part of this story. His career reflected major shifts in popular attitudes and professional needs that not only allowed Jewish mobility, but often encouraged it for instrumental purposes. Kissinger’s German Jewish identity limited his opportunities for becoming a doctor in the U.S. Army, but it facilitated his ascent into counterintelligence, his return to Germany in American uniform, and his assumption of high-level occupation duties. Desperate to manage the vast territory it held in Europe at the end of the Second World War, the Army privileged Kissinger’s German-language skills and his knowledge of European society. Despite his own short time in the United States, Kissinger’s Jewish background ensured that he would not sympathize with the Nazi enemy.

This pattern of combined exclusion and privilege continued throughout Kissinger’s career. He gained admission to Harvard University after the Second World War, when American higher education sought to accommodate military veterans and showcase the openness of a free society. Students like Kissinger displayed the country’s commitment to “Judeo-

“The fateful question for the human species,” Sigmund Freud wrote in 1930, is whether civilization can master the “human instinct of aggression and self-destruction. . . . Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man. They know this, and hence comes a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness, and their mood of anxiety.”<sup>1</sup>

Freud was hardly alone in his premonitions of disaster at a time when the world had entered a severe economic depression and fascist demagogues were preparing to seize power across Europe. The decade since the end of the First World War had witnessed a remarkable expansion in *both* democracy and violence. This was especially the case in Germany. Under the February 1919 constitution signed in the town of Weimar, Germany had a vibrant political system of multiple parties, a directly elected president and legislature (the Reichstag), and even a bill of rights guaranteeing equal freedoms. German society in the 1920s was a mecca for experimental literature, arts, and life styles. With the dissolution of the imperial regime at the end of the First World War, Germany had become one of the most democratic societies in European history.

Hand-in-hand with democracy, Weimar Germany became a site of pervasive violence. Paramilitary groups operated throughout the country, often engaging in street battles and attacks upon political figures. The Nazis were only one of many parties to maintain their own militia for the purposes of intimidating enemies, bullying citizens, and, on occasion, attempt-

ing to seize government power. Paramilitary groups also used rhetoric designed to incite violence. Through newspapers, beer hall meetings, and public speeches, they encouraged citizens to embrace extreme racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism. Demagogues used the democratic process to call for the murder of the alleged internal enemies who had “stabbed Germany in the back” during the First World War.

Democracy in Weimar Germany allowed a culture of violence to flourish. Freud recognized this when he wrote of the “aggression” and “self-destruction” that challenged contemporary civilization. His analysis also anticipated the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, through a combination of elections, political maneuvering, and violence. The Nazi party rejected basic democratic assumptions of individual freedom, but it exploited democratic protections for dissent to build a base of public support. This was not only a German story, as Freud recognized. Throughout continental western Europe after the First World War, fascist parties emerged as powerful forces within the most civilized and democratic societies—Italy, Republican Spain, France, Austria, and Germany. These violent threats to democracy were, paradoxically, creatures of democracy.<sup>2</sup>

Historians have complicated this assessment of the Nazi rise to power, but the association between Weimar democracy and fascist violence remains strong in the minds of many, especially those who remember the horrors of the 1930s. Hannah Arendt, a refugee from Nazi Germany, famously argued that the breakdown in the old aristocratic order in Europe, and the emergence of an atomized “classless society,” allowed for violent “totalitarian” regimes to acquire mass support. “Totalitarian movements,” Arendt wrote, “use and abuse democratic freedoms in order to abolish them.” Theodor Adorno, also a refugee from Nazi terror, was highly critical of Arendt’s writings, but he concurred with her assessment of violence in mass society. In the shadow of the Second World War, Adorno contributed to a landmark study that deciphered an “authoritarian personality” lurking beneath the rhetoric of individual freedom in the United States and other countries—an inclination to repression and violence among citizens that undermined democracy from within.<sup>3</sup>

A deep apprehension about democratic weakness accompanied this fear of democratic violence. Democracies, according to this view, often enable extremism and prevent effective government responses. This was also a lesson that many observers internalized from the experience of the 1930s.

Confronted with consistent aggression from the fascist powers in Europe and Asia, the more powerful democratic states—especially Great Britain, France, and the United States—failed to respond. Fascist leaders were remarkably open about their long-term expansionist aims, but democratic societies were unwilling to use necessary force. Focused on their internal needs, distrustful of the military, and fearful of fighting another world war so soon after the cataclysm of 1914–1918, they capitulated to fascist aggression through a weak-kneed policy of appeasement. Japan seized Manchuria without serious sanction. Italy attacked Ethiopia in complete disregard for the League of Nations. Germany remilitarized the Rhineland, persecuted its own Jewish population, and seized first the Sudeten region and then all of Czechoslovakia without any military resistance from the major democratic states. It is not surprising that on the eve of the Second World War Hitler viewed Great Britain and the United States as cowardly societies.

As with accounts of the Nazi rise to power, historians have complicated this assessment of appeasement. Surely, France, Great Britain, and the United States confronted many limitations on their ability to deploy military force in the context of economic depression and internal unrest. Nonetheless, the glaring fact for men and women who lived through this period was the absence of any effective democratic response to fascism until it was too late for the millions who suffered. Nazi Germany's neighboring states could have defanged the regime without too much difficulty in the mid-1930s, when the nation still commanded limited economic and military resources. Instead, democratic citizens chose the path of least resistance, assuming postures of moral righteousness in the nonuse of force and hoping, without any evidentiary basis, that their adversaries would moderate themselves if only they received kind treatment. Winston Churchill spoke for much of the generation that witnessed appeasement's failure when he recounted "how the malice of the wicked was reinforced by the weakness of the virtuous; how the structure and habits of democratic states, unless they are welded into larger organisms, lack those elements of persistence and conviction which can alone give security to humble masses."<sup>4</sup>

Despite the skepticism about democracy evident in these comments, the leading American foreign-policymakers after the Second World War were Churchillian in aspiration, and often in rhetoric as well. Churchill's warnings about the perils of appeasement and democratic weakness in the face

of determined enemies provided a framework through which Cold War presidents and their advisors analyzed foreign threats. Instead of tolerating the perceived aggression of an adversary—especially the Soviet Union—in faraway places, American leaders acted to bolster U.S. capabilities and to deter the enemy with shows of strength. Maintaining what one historian describes as a “preponderance of power” across modes of force and regions of conflict would prohibit communist expansion before the threat grew beyond manageable proportions.<sup>5</sup>

This was the essence of containment—holding the line against enemy advances through actions that rejected both appeasement and a headlong rush to war. George Kennan, one of the most influential architects of U.S. containment doctrine, famously articulated this approach when he called for a commitment to “confront the Russians with unalterable counterforce at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interest of a peaceful and stable world.” Contrasting “intelligent long-range policies” with the “momentary whims of democratic opinion,” Kennan counseled “patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.” Containing communism, in the eyes of Kennan and America’s other leading Cold War strategists, would require “moral and political leadership” that extended beyond the normal “indecision” and “disunity” of democracy.<sup>6</sup>

The nature of containment, and the judgment of democracy implied by this doctrine, contributed to an unprecedented centralization of power in institutions like the Department of Defense, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Office of the President after the Second World War. The United States did not become a “garrison state,” but the institutions of political and military power extended far beyond the democratic limits assumed by earlier generations of citizens. Never before did the U.S. maintain such a large permanent war-fighting capability in peacetime. Never before did American society devote itself on such a scale to permanent international commitments of military force and economic aid. This strategic transformation constituted, according to one historian, a “revolution” in the structure and assumptions of American democracy.<sup>7</sup>

Henry Kissinger’s career was a product of this revolution. From the perspective of 1930, no figure was less likely to rise to the top of American society. From the perspective of the twenty-first century, no figure appeared more firmly rooted in the upper echelons of power. Understanding this

transformation in Kissinger's status reveals how fundamentally the structures and assumptions of international authority changed from the demise of Weimar Germany through the Cold War. In an era that made democracy the touchstone of political legitimacy, pervasive distrust of democracy anchored the professional maturation of Kissinger and many of those around him.

Kissinger's biographers consistently criticize their subject for being out of touch with a common American democratic sensibility. There is certainly some truth to this claim. Kissinger, however, was not unique in this characteristic. Placed within his historical context, it becomes clear that his profound misgivings about democratic influences on society and foreign policy were, in fact, quite common. The experiences of Weimar Germany's collapse, the Nazi rise to power, and the Second World War convinced an entire generation of observers, including Henry Kissinger, that democracy had a very dark side.<sup>8</sup>

Politicization of the citizen body contributed to instability and violence at home. It also motivated inaction and cowardice when confronting foreign threats. Forced into exile by the failures of Weimar democracy, and witnesses to the flaccid nature of democratic responses to fascism during the 1930s, young men and women of Kissinger's milieu could not help but search for some alternative to mass politics. This was more than just an intellectual issue; it was a matter of deep emotion for people violently uprooted from their homes and threatened with death while their neighbors passively looked away. Where was the democratic resistance to Hitler? It was sparse and ineffective within the "civilized" world. Freud anticipated this when he described the aggression and self-destruction that underpinned modern societies. Kissinger and his generation never forgot this painful lesson.

### A Bavarian Jewish Background

When Nazi officials began to track the Kissinger family in the early 1930s for eventual elimination, they noted that Louis Kissinger, Henry's father, was of "Bavarian" citizenship. They recorded the same citizenship for Henry and his younger brother, Walter. A Bavarian political identity did not, of course, preclude German loyalty, but it did indicate an important set of historical peculiarities. The Nazis described many of the citizens they ob-

served, including Jews, as “Germans.” They made a special effort to single out Jewish families like the Kissingers as “Bavarian.”<sup>9</sup>

The Nazis recognized something obvious, but generally forgotten by historians of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Bavaria’s long history of independence and its frequent antagonism with other major German states, particularly Prussia, had a lasting impact on political and social development in this central European region. After 1800 the kingdom of Bavaria expanded its territorial holdings as part of Napoleon’s imposed reorganization of the German states. King Max Joseph allied himself with France, and benefited accordingly. The expansion of his kingdom involved the acquisition of territories heavily populated by Orthodox Jews. A more centralized Bavarian monarchy implemented new laws for civil equality, but it also maintained strict restrictions on Jewish mobility. The new Bavarian state was a mix of Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment ideals. It navigated between French and Prussian influences.<sup>10</sup>

Bavarian political uniqueness, especially with regard to Jews, became particularly pronounced during the nineteenth century. Like many of its

Kissinger’s parents celebrating the Jewish holiday of Purim with friends in Fürth, Germany, 1930. Last row, second from left: Louis Kissinger. Second row, first from right: Paula Kissinger. (Courtesy of Miriam Kühnberg)

counterparts, the state pursued a series of rapid “modernization” programs, but the major reforms differed in important ways from those instituted in the rest of what became a single Germany. These historical particularities had a lingering influence on Henry Kissinger, especially as he witnessed the collapse of Weimar democracy and the rise of Nazi power in his youth.

Efforts to create an urban industrial economy, a standardized educational system, and an efficient system of bureaucratic administration—all touchstones of modernity in the nineteenth century—followed in Bavaria from the actions of a highly centralized monarchical government. In 1813 Maximilian I signed a “Jewish Edict” that gave this small and repressed minority a new status for the purposes of strengthening the economy and bringing social stability to his state. The edict continued to restrict Jewish residence and marriage rights, and it was filled with limitations on religious observance. It did, however, grant Jews standing as Bavarian citizens, subject to protections from the monarchy. In place of their previous legal status as foreigners, the Jewish Edict made this minority population a legitimate part of a modernizing society.<sup>11</sup>

Maximilian II, ruling Bavaria during the turbulent revolutions of 1848, prohibited the implementation of reforms for more representative and democratic governance throughout the kingdom. He did, however, seek to expand the legal protections for Jewish citizens. The legislation written by Maximilian II’s government promised Jewish emancipation from residential, marriage, and other legal restrictions. It would, at least in theory, guarantee Jews full legal equality before German law. This initiative reflected the efforts of the monarch to improve Bavaria’s foreign image and to strengthen the region’s economy, which was partially dependent on Jewish traders. Maximilian II and his advisors used their considerable power to force the lower house of the Bavarian parliament to endorse unprecedented freedoms for Jewish citizens.<sup>12</sup>

Jewish emancipation was imposed from above by a centralized and absolutist Bavarian monarch. It followed the will of an authoritarian leader. Citizens, in contrast, expressed their opinions through widespread and often violent resistance to expanded Jewish rights. Grassroots activism ran strongly in the direction of anti-Semitism. Avenues for democratic expressions of popular opinion—especially political clubs and daily newspapers—

became highways of hatred and intolerance. As one historian explains, “democratic forms were used for non-democratic purposes.”<sup>13</sup>

Much of the resistance to Jewish emancipation came from apparently liberal groups that had pushed, especially in 1848, for democratic openings in Bavarian society. In 1849 and 1850 more than 1,700 local organizations petitioned the government to reject Jewish emancipation. These organizations included many of the “democratic clubs” that had formed in earlier years to advocate general political reforms. Only three communities, including Kissinger’s future hometown of Fürth, petitioned in support of emancipation. The municipal council in the village of Hirschau was more representative of common Bavarian beliefs:

Although as Christians we have the duty to extend our love also to our Israelite brethren and intend to exercise that duty to its full extent, we find ourselves nevertheless compelled by the equally sacred duty of self-preservation to protest most energetically against the emancipation of the Jews. . . . we consider the proposal to grant equality absurd because in many of the circumstances of civil life, for example, in the observance of religious holidays, in marriages, and so on, they [Jews] can under no conditions ever be part of our community.<sup>14</sup>

Popular opinion and democratic activism in Bavaria forced the government of Maximilian II to rescind its promises of Jewish emancipation. Opposition throughout the kingdom created a powerful backlash that undermined progressive authoritarian reforms. Among the thousands of grassroots activists at the time, very few individuals and organizations stepped forward to defend Jewish rights. The governing elites of Bavaria were a crucial and ultimately ineffective brake on the spread of mass intolerance. The majority of citizens probably did not wish any harm to the Jewish population, but they were apathetic, and sometimes explicitly supportive of anti-Semitic social movements, long before Adolf Hitler came on the scene.<sup>15</sup>

Bavarian Jews like Louis Kissinger and his son Henry were certainly aware of this history. They could see its effects around them everyday in the residential and recreational isolation that continued to characterize the Jewish community in the region, even after the First World War. They had also witnessed enough popular manipulations of anti-Semitic sentiment to

know that democratic activism could not be trusted to bring tolerance and progressive reform. Quite the contrary: popular opinion in Bavaria had frequently motivated expressions of hatred and violence. This was the case even in relatively tolerant cities like the Kissingers' own Fürth.

For Bavarian Jews faith in democracy did not come easily. As a very small religious and cultural minority, they had a lot to lose from governance by popular opinion. At the same time, they had also long suffered under the yoke of intolerant authoritarian regimes. This situation created a dilemma with few simple solutions. The Kissinger family appears to have reacted as one might have expected: they eschewed Marxist-inspired movements that promised liberation through the empowerment of the masses. They similarly refrained from joining any of the countless rightist parties in early twentieth-century Germany that advocated a return to absolutist government.<sup>16</sup>

Henry Kissinger grew up in a household that, like many contemporary Bavarian Jewish families, generally avoided politics. Louis Kissinger appears to have favored conservative nationalists who promised to improve life for all German citizens through strong and effective leadership rather than reliance on mass action. Henry remembers that his father voted for the Center (Zentrum) party, which emphasized civil equality and rejected both socialist collectivism and liberal individualism. The Center pledged to preserve authority and tradition, infusing politics with a strong moral impulse. It sought to build an enlightened antirevolutionary government with wise leaders. This vision drew extensive Jewish and Catholic support in Bavaria, as well as in other parts of Germany. It survived the onslaught of Nazism and the Second World War to become the basis, after 1945, for Christian Democracy in West Germany and the powerful leadership of Konrad Adenauer.<sup>17</sup>

Conservative nationalism differed markedly from the democratic idealism and distrust of centralized government so common throughout Europe during the early twentieth century. In the history of Bavarian Jewish emancipation, centralized government policies were more progressive than democratic opinions. Reformers around the globe looked to "the people" for positive change, but the peculiarities of Bavaria created a strong bias against popular rule. One should not be surprised to find that a young man coming out of this milieu focused his intellectual energies on the actions of governing elites, not those of grassroots activists. For Henry Kissinger,

progress was born in the palaces of the most powerful statesmen, not among the rowdy rabble in the street. Circumstances in Weimar Germany furthered this sensibility, just as they offered new opportunities for economic and social advancement.

### The Weimar Experience

Kissinger began his life as a witness to democracy's brightest hopes and its darkest despairs. Born on 27 May 1923 to a respected teacher, Louis Kissinger, and the daughter of a prosperous merchant family, Paula Kissinger (née Stern), he grew up in a culturally dynamic and relatively wealthy German community. Kissinger's hometown of Fürth, located just west of Nuremberg in the relatively flat Middle Franconia section of Bavaria, was a trading hub for farmers and small-scale industry. The town had a modest population of about 70,000 residents at the time of Kissinger's birth, 2,500 of whom, including the Kissingers, were Jewish. In a setting that was almost 75 percent Protestant, the small Jewish community had seven synagogues. Like the population of Fürth as a whole, the town Jews had strong ties through family, religion, and trade to rural Jews, as well as to those residing in larger urban settings, particularly Nuremberg and Munich.<sup>18</sup>

Fürth was, in many ways, a model of democratic politics at work during the Weimar years. From 1920 to 1932 more than 80 percent of the town's population voted in each election for the Reichstag, a higher proportion than elsewhere in Bavaria or in Germany as a whole, not to mention other Western countries. At least four different parties—some representing the extreme right, some the extreme left—received more than 5 percent of the vote in each election. Although the Social Democratic party (SPD) was the largest political organization in Fürth until 1932, it never dominated the town the way single parties did in the United States at the time. Even when support for the Nazi party grew across Germany in 1932, the SPD and other parties (including the Communist KPD) continued to draw competitive voter totals. Citizens of Fürth—Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish; male and female—actively participated in politics. Democracy nurtured a truly diverse and representative spectrum of opinions.<sup>19</sup>

Kissinger recalls that his family was part of the comfortable “middle class” during his early years. Neither elite nor impoverished, they had access to education, modest financial resources, and high culture. Louis and