

The Inevitability of Tragedy: Henry Kissinger and His World

Barry Gewen (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020, 452 pages)

Reviewed by Tahir Mehmood*

This book is a reminder that the ideas of Kissinger are more relevant today. He is more than a figure of history; he is a philosopher of international relations. For this reason, the book is more about the ideas of Henry Kissinger (p. xvii). The author attempts to contextualise the ideas of Kissinger vis-à-vis international politics by detailing the ideas of three other German-Jewish emigres to the United States: Hans Morgenthau, Leo Strauss, and Hannah Arendt. These three political scientists provide window to the world of Kissinger. Escaping the persecution of Nazi Germany, they all share something common in relation to their worldview: pessimistic view of history, distrust of democracy and incredulity in the idea of progress. However, the author believes that Kissinger's thinking is discomfoting to the adherents of liberal hegemony. To think in Kissinger's line is to be un-American (p. xiv). This book essentially invites readers to rethink and be un-American.

The book is divided into seven chapters with a prologue in the first person. The first chapter demonstrates the Kissinger's brand of Realism where national interest coupled with balance of power calculation has predominance over abstract moralism and wishful thinking. The case study is coup d'état of 1973 against Salvador Allende, the democratically elected president of Chile. Chile had, in the author's view, no importance for the security of America until Fidel Castro of Cuba entered the scene. Castro brought the Cold war into the Western Hemisphere. Allende considered Castro as his ideal and said that "Cuba in the Caribbean and a Socialist Chile in

* Tahir Mehmood is an MPhil Scholar at the Department of History, Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad.

the Southern cone will make the revolution in Latin America” (p. 12). This was a disturbing sign for the policymakers of America who were resisting the Castro’s Cuba, the satellite state of Soviet Union. The formula was simple: Allende=Castro=Communism=Soviet domination (p. 20). To Kissinger, Allende will seek to eliminate the US influence in South America while increasing the influence of Cuba and the Soviet Union (p30). Therefore, resisting Allende in Chile was the official policy of America after 1963. Millions of dollars were poured in by America for propaganda and to strengthen opposition and army against Allende. The result was a coup d’état by a faction of Chilean Army against Allende on 11 September 1973. However, Barry Gewen tries to establish that the United States had no ‘direct involvement’ in September 11 episode (pp. 33-34). The authoritarian Allende marginalized the opposition, judiciary and army through his extraconstitutional methods, and thereby, paved the way for coup d’état against himself. However, it is an established fact that America did help in ousting democratically elected Allende through covert means or to say diplomacy by violent means. For Kissinger, the reason was provided by Allende himself who wanted ‘a diminution of American power and a corresponding increase in Soviet power’, and that in the Cold war (p. 43).

The second chapter deals with the rise of Nazism and portrays Hitler as a pope of secular religion. Hitler was able to provide Germans what other religions could no longer provide: the belief in a meaning to existence beyond the narrowest self-interest (p. 89). Hitler rose within a democratic set-up and he often proclaimed that ‘we National Socialist are the better democrats” (p. 54). It is true that violence was a favourite tool of Hitler for advancing political interest. However, Hitler, later abandoned violence and resorted to legalism. He was a democrat but a democrat with quotation marks. The rise of this democrat with quotation marks proved painful not

only to Kissinger family but also taught two lessons to Henry Kissinger. First, that democracy by itself is no safeguard against the rise of a tyrannical fanatic. Second, intentions matter little in international politics. The optimistic policy of appeasement by Western democracies failed because it was a foreign policy built on quicksand that disregarded actual power relationship and relied on prophecies of another's intentions. Kissinger family, with the help of a cousin, escaped to the United States in August 1938 (p. 58).

Other two German-Jewish escapees to the United States were Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt. In the author's view, Strauss and Arendt (Kissinger's first cousins), were existential political thinkers whereas Kissinger is an existential political statemen (pp. 114-115). Freethinking individualism defines the contours of their outlooks, opposed tyranny but suspicious of democracy, they were against quantitative method of empiricism in modern social science that American social scientists cherished in 1950s. Moreover, in Gewen's view, it would be better to call them a democrat, nondemocrat or at worst undemocratic but not antidemocrat (p. 110). The principal cause in their suspicion against democracy was the rise of Hitler. They had watched the rise of Hitler within democratic set-up; it was a democracy, in their view, that facilitated the rise of Hitler. To Strauss: 'Hitler was the empirical refutation of the idea of progress' (p. 120). The Nazi movement was a moral protest against the open societies. The whole third chapter summarizes the ideas of Arendt and Strauss.

But the thinker who profoundly influenced Henry Kissinger was Hans Morgenthau, another German-Jewish emigre to the United States. Morgenthau himself felt toward Kissinger like a brother. To Gewen, Morgenthau was the bridge between Kissinger and Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt: 'He was Kissinger's mentor, Strauss's colleague, and Arendt's friend' (p. 175). Kissinger believes that

teachers of international relations had to begin with Morgenthau's ideas (p. 167). Morgenthau belongs to an old school of international relations. He disapproved the behaviourism or dictates of mathematics to the subject international relations. Certainty in international relation is rare. Political perspective is shaped and influenced by values and goals; therefore, it cannot be quantified (p. 180). The totalitarianism taught Morgenthau a different lesson that people not only strive for freedom but also for order as well (p. 189). Human existence is shaped by biological impulses and spiritual aspiration together with reason. Reason could never dictate alone. The purpose of Morgenthau's argument is to show the limit of reason, and not to abandon it. Morgenthau learned another lesson from his favourite anti-philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. The lesson was that the drive to dominate is universal in time and space (p. 204). The idea of balance of power is as old as political history itself. Construction of balance of power, however, require human agency; it is a function of diplomats to make careful arrangements for successful balance of power (p. 213). And lastly, ideology must not dictate the solution to specific problems of international politics.

The episode of Vietnam War, however, soured the intellectual relationship of Henry Kissinger and Hans Morgenthau. The disagreement became sharpest after Kissinger had entered government service. Morgenthau opposed the war, whereas Kissinger's position was ambiguous. In public, he supported the war, in private gatherings he opposed it. Gewen writes "by 1968, everyone knew where Morgenthau stood on the war. The same couldn't be said about Kissinger" (p. 260). Albeit, too late, but the arguments of Morgenthau were accepted in relation to Vietnam War. Morgenthau criticized the Vietnam policy of United States for two reasons. First, an abstract 'Domino Theory' was applied to actual conditions of Vietnam episode (p. 239). Where it was

thought that the fall of Vietnam to communists will not be limited to Vietnam alone but Japan, Philippines, and even Australia would be threatened to 'Red Menace'. Second, the American policy makers saw communism as a monolithic force and overlooked the division within communist world (p. 248). He was against Vietnam War, not for moral considerations, but for strategic and political reasons. To Morgenthau, naked power bereft of legitimacy would do no good. Nonetheless, in the early 1970, Nixon's government issued a report on US foreign policy—Kissinger was the author—where the polycentric character of communism was acknowledged. 'One could hear Kissinger but also Morgenthau in those words' (p. 258).

The last two chapters present the ideas of Kissinger in power and out power. Kissinger during Nixon administration wanted to achieve global stability. This could be possible with *détente*. This policy argued for co-existence of two rivals of Cold war; it was the Realists' balance-of-power strategy by another name (p.319). This policy was a process and not a goal—a pragmatic concept of coexistence (p. 320). The purpose of *détente* to produce stability by accepting the legitimate interest of the rival. This policy, however, was hard to fathom by conservatives and leftists Americans. The neoconservatism, the Wilsonian idea of steroid, believing the superiority of democracy, however, was antithetical to *détente*. The adherents of neoconservatism, they rose to prominence after Kissinger, wanted to spread democracy by military force (p. 341). Ronald Reagan, the hardliner representative of neoconservatism, ended the policy of *détente* (p. 345). This approach, championed by Reagan, however has no limits. It will turn America into a hegemon and hegemony, Kissinger argued, is not in the American interest (p. 363). Balance of power, and not hegemony, should define the foreign policy of America (p. 365).

The book, however well written, devotes one third of its space to other thinkers than Kissinger. The readers would want to hear about Kissinger and his ideas. The Kissinger himself, ironically, declined to be interviewed for the book. The author failed to observe that realists have the element of moralism in their thinking, just their definition of morality is different from liberals; and morality always serve power. The chapter on Chile is drawn from, for the most part, secondary sources; the primary sources are rarely touched. However, few demerits aside, the author has brilliantly presented the thoughts of Henry Kissinger and its implications for international politics. The policymakers, scholars, academicians, historians, and general history enthusiast will find the book interesting.