

Henry Kissinger Turns 100 With His Magnificent Brain as Sharp and Wise as Ever



Secretary Kissinger, left, and President Nixon at the Oval office on October 16, 1973. AP, file

by Conrad Black

One hundred years ago today, May 27, Heinz Alfred Kissinger was born at Furth, Germany. This past week he made headlines throughout the world with his reflections on the shifting geopolitical realities of Central Europe.

It was as if he chose to send the world a centennial birthday greeting that he remains, as he has been for 70 years, an outstandingly lucid and perceptive authority on the strategic balances and constantly shifting correlation of forces between the major powers of the world.

What an astonishing century he has had. No one could possibly have imagined in Henry Kissinger's early youth that the European state most accommodating of its Jewish population would a decade later be governed by a genocidally antisemitic and totalitarian dictatorship.

When young Kissinger and his parents and his brother, all of whom would live well into their 90's, departed Germany a few months before the infamous *Kristallnacht* of November 1938, and arrived at New York on the famous liner *SS Île de France*, it would have been hard to imagine that he would return to Germany in just seven years. And as a 22-year-old sergeant in the United States Army would be the military governor of a town approximately as large as that, 200 miles away, where he was born.

When Henry Kissinger was in his late teens, working in a New York toothbrush factory and attending school at night and struggling to master English, it would have challenged credulity to think that he would develop an extraordinarily fluent and sophisticated articulation in English, while retaining a German accent so pronounced that he sometimes sounds like one of the Marx brothers imitating Kaiser Wilhelm II.

When he launched his academic career, it would have been conceivable but hugely unlikely that within ten years he would achieve such an eminence as a lecturer and as an author in foreign policy matters that he would have a substantial, if not universally approved, influence on the foreign and strategic policy of the greatest power in the world, where he had not long been resident.

This was the impact of his seminal book "Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy," which was brought out in 1957 and suggested the development of median alternatives to the Eisenhower policy of massive retaliation. Improbable though it was that a young academic fugitive from the Nazis would have such an

influence in the United States so soon, it was much more improbable that he would, 15 years later, play a decisive role in negotiating the greatest arms control agreement in the history of the world, one that, incidentally, restored American nuclear superiority.

His first book, "A World Restored" (also issued in 1957), an extraordinarily precocious success as the publication of his Harvard PhD thesis, demonstrated how the Austrian foreign minister and then chancellor for a total of 39 years, Metternich, the convener of the Congress of Vienna that generally stabilized Europe for a century, though he deployed less power by normal measurements than France, Britain, Prussia, or Russia, made himself the "Coachman of Europe" for a whole generation.

The ramshackle Habsburg Empire, pulling and pushing an unwieldy congeries of cultures and ethnicities, an incomprehensible "costume party in a decaying country house" as Metternich described it, yet managed by artistically shifting its influence in the center of Europe between the other great powers, gave Metternich a profound but subtle influence over all Europe more durable than that achieved by any other statesman.

It would have been difficult to imagine that this recent immigrant and factory worker would, while still in his mid-30's, become the principal foreign policy advisor to the wealthiest family in the world; that he would start writing position papers for Nelson Rockefeller, twice a contender for the Republican presidential nomination, and 15 years later would serve, in an administration with Rockefeller as vice president, as Secretary of State.

The only other foreign-born foreign minister of a major power in centuries is Ioannis Kapodistrias, a Greek who, between 1816 and 1822, served as Russian foreign minister. In traditional European great power terms of conducting intricate

negotiations closely adapted to particular regional circumstances and leading to important and durable conclusions, Mr. Kissinger's career is really only comparable to those of Richelieu, Talleyrand, Metternich, and Bismarck.

Of those statesmen, Talleyrand was the only one who was not also the head of the government asserting autocratic authority in the name of a comparatively passive monarch. Mr. Kissinger is the only prominently successful foreign minister of a great power who achieved his office not by politics or the legal profession or the armed forces, but by his academic renown as a historian of great power relations and a persuasive public foreign policy advocate.

No one else has been so successful as both an academic foreign policy theoretician and historian and as the foreign minister of a great power. He and Richard Nixon, the president who brought him into government and with whom he principally served, were entirely different personalities, brought together by their shared knowledge of foreign policy and strategic issues and their aversion to the sluggish groupthink of foreign ministry bureaucracies.

Except for Charles de Gaulle, no comparably important statesman of the last hundred years, not even Winston Churchill who won the Nobel Prize for literature, is as elegant a memoirist and writer of history as Mr. Kissinger, and no prominent statesman except Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, has been so durably important entirely because of his personal knowledge and always perceptive and original appreciation of international relations.

More than 60 years after he arrived at New York as a fugitive from the Nazi pogroms, Mr. Kissinger was the initial chairman of the commission to investigate the Islamic suicide terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. When he was a director of our company in the 1990's, we filed the SEC director's form and in the box requiring the occupation of the director, it was

always sufficient simply to reprint his name.

Mr. Kissinger's book "Leadership," published last year, was of the same high quality of scholarship and style as the book on Metternich published 65 years before. After he retired from government in 1977, large numbers of government leaders and foreign ministers visiting New York for the United Nations General Assembly in the autumn would call upon him and have continued to call upon him in increasing numbers in all the subsequent years.

Through it all, Mr. Kissinger has had a piercing sense of humor: when asked by a reporter as he arrived at the bar mitzvah of the son of the Israeli ambassador in Washington if it reminded him of his own bar mitzvah in Germany, he instantly replied: "Actually, von Ribbentrop wasn't able to come to mine."

Though a number of his successors have been talented secretaries of State and national security advisers, the United States has paid a heavy but incalculable price for not recalling him to high office.

Having had the great privilege of being his friend for more than 40 of these hundred years, it is an inexpressible pleasure to wish him continued good health and every happiness and success on his centenary, and to record that he carries into his second century the respect and the good will of the whole world. He will retain it always.

First published in the [*New York Sun*](#).