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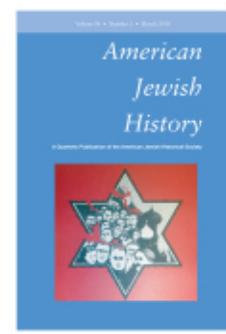
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## **Running Commentary: The Contentious Magazine that Transformed the Jewish Left into the Neoconservative Right, and: Norman Podhoretz and Commentary Magazine: The Rise and Fall of the Neocons (review)**

Nancy Sinkoff

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## Review Essay

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*Running Commentary: The Contentious Magazine that Transformed the Jewish Left into the Neoconservative Right.* By Benjamin Balint. New York: Public Affairs, 2010. xi + 290 pp. *Norman Podhoretz and Commentary Magazine: The Rise and Fall of the Neocons.* By Nathan Abrams. New York: Continuum, 2010. viii + 367 pp.

It appears that we can't get enough of the political lives of the so-called New York intellectuals, the young men of CCNY's famous alcoves who encompassed communism, anti-Stalinism, Roosevelt New Dealism, Cold Warriorism, New Leftism, and postwar neoconservatism. In the week that I completed this review, Daniel Bell died at the age of 91, meriting international obituaries; Irving Kristol's book *The Neoconservative Persuasion* was published and widely reviewed; and the *New York Times* magazine ran a short piece about Martin Peretz, a complicated son of Jewish neoconservatism in his own right.<sup>1</sup>

Two main lines of inquiry should inform a history of neoconservatism. First, what were its effects on postwar liberalism and American politics generally, and second, to what degree was neoconservatism "Jewish" and where does it fit in the history of Jewish politics? Many of the books on neoconservatism assume a relationship between these two lines of inquiry because of the prominence of *Commentary* magazine, the feisty periodical published by the American Jewish Committee for most of its history. While both works under review seek to assess the Jewishness of postwar neoconservatism, only Balint provides a historical argument about that relationship. *Running Commentary* makes a smart and lively argument that *Commentary*'s pages reflected a process of Jewish acculturation to America. Balint states that the magazine "registered Jews' negotiations with America and the expectations and conundrums thereof" and

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1. Justin Vaïsse and Arthur Goldhammer, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2010); Jacob Heilbrunn, *They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons* (New York: Anchor, 2008); Michael Staub, *Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Murray Friedman, *The Neoconservative Revolution: Jewish Intellectuals and the Shaping of Public Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Mark Gerson, *The Neoconservative Vision: From the Cold War to the Culture Wars* (New York: Madison Books, 1996); Gary Dorrien, *The Neoconservative Mind: Politics, Culture, and the War of Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

marked the transition of a group of alienated (male) immigrant children from deracinated outsiders to rooted insiders who, after World War II, “thrust themselves from the margins to the innermost hubs of American politics and letters” (xi, 203). Nathan Abrams’s biography *Norman Podhoretz and Commentary Magazine* is, unfortunately, so preoccupied with relegating most of his subject’s decisions to bald political and social opportunism that he barely engages in any serious discussion of how or if Podhoretz’s political trajectory informs any understanding of modern Jewish political culture.

Proceeding chronologically, both books survey the well-worn ground detailing the City College and later Columbia College—in the case of Norman Podhoretz—origins of the Jewish neoconservatives; their prewar anti-Stalinism and postwar Cold War liberalism; Elliot Cohen’s brilliant stewardship of *Commentary* during the 1940s and 1950s and Podhoretz’s precocious ascension to editor in 1960; the latter’s turn toward political radicalism in the mid-1960s; *Commentary*’s opposition to the Vietnam war, but its revulsion against some elements of the New Left; the support of these former leftist Democrats for Reagan in the 1980 presidential campaign; their disorientation at the Cold War’s end; and, finally, the reassertion of neoconservatism and its typological thinking in what Podhoretz called World War IV, the fight against “Islamofascism.” Its readership peaking in the late 1960s, *Commentary* seemed to speak for American Jewish liberals, but something happened in the aftermath of the Six Day War and the rise of the New Left to put the magazine on a crash course with its own political past. *Commentary* gradually turned right and Republican, yet most American Jews stayed liberal and Democratic. What happened, and why has this political turn garnered so much scholarly attention?

It is critical to emphasize that many prominent non-Jews, such as James Q. Wilson, Michael Novak, Francis Fukuyama, Peter Berger, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Jeanne J. Kirkpatrick, Fred Barnes, and Bruce Bartlett were neoconservatives, so the phenomenon of neoconservatism cannot be considered solely a Jewish affair. Yet if one is interested in the Jewish aspects of neoconservatism—as these books are—then it is necessary to push Balint’s integrationist argument beyond its twentieth-century U.S. concerns. I would like to suggest that we view postwar Jewish neoconservatism as part of two currents: diasporic Jewish politics generally and East European Jewish politics specifically.

A long view of Jewish politics must acknowledge that diasporic Jewish politics has been characterized by conservatism, not liberalism or radicalism, from its very beginnings. By conservatism, I mean that the communal, political, and religious leadership of the diaspora’s variegated

Jewish communities aligned themselves with the highest authorities among the gentile majority in order to protect Jewish religious and communal autonomy. The rabbinic adage “*dina d’malkhuta dina*” (“the law of the land is the law”)—originally related solely to taxation—became an apposite political stratagem. While diasporic Jewish politics may have been surprisingly variable in terms of strict ideological definitions and historical contexts, it was always characterized by an overarching concern with Jewish security and societal stability.

An understanding of postwar Jewish neoconservatism must proceed from this observation and then emphasize the East Europeanness of the immigrant generation and the continuities as well as the ruptures of its politics with those born in Eastern Europe. One must remember that radical East European Jewish politics, nurtured wherever there were diasporic immigrant settlements, was historically conditioned by the disappointment Russian-Jewish intellectuals felt about the possibilities of integration into the Russian state and the proletarianization of the Jewish community in the rapidly industrializing Pale of Settlement in the late nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Together, many members of these two groups rejected the liberal rule of law and demanded, often in revolutionary, socialist terms, the overthrow of the powers that were and an alignment with other disenfranchised groups rather than the highest gentile authority that had shaped diasporic Jewish politics until then. This historically specific response to the status of Jews in the East European diaspora remained a powerful part of the worldview of the densely populated, transnational, working-class, Yiddish-speaking immigrant ethnic enclaves in the first third of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> But these populations migrated geographically, economically, and linguistically in the interwar and postwar years and already by Roosevelt’s presidency had adopted a liberal politics in alignment with the paternalistic integrationist state. Political radicalism, while powerfully resonant in the collective memory of the American children and grandchildren of the immigrants, actually reflected a minority view among Jewish Americans by World War II.

The war itself, not only the victory over the arch-enemy of the Jewish people, but also conscription of so many young male American Jews into the ranks of the host country’s army, portended postwar integration. Yet once integrated, leaving behind their poverty, immigrant neighborhoods and, crucially, the perceived limited cultural expectations of the world

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2. Ezra Mendelsohn, *On Modern Jewish Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

3. Nancy Green, ed. *Jewish Workers in the Modern Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

of their fathers and mothers, the sons of the immigrants renegotiated their relationship to Jewish and American culture and politics. Middle-class, professionally ensconced either in universities or in the editorial boardrooms of English-language journals, and confident in the American state's morality, some of these men nonetheless felt apprehensive as Jews.<sup>4</sup> The initial shock to their integration came with the publication of the first horrifying examples of Holocaust testimonies—many of which were published in *Commentary*—but then more forcibly with the controversy surrounding Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), only to be exacerbated by the domestic upheavals of the late 1960s that coincided with the vulnerability felt about Israel's security in the wake of the Six Day War.

Balint and Abrams concur that New Left politics threatened the middle-class foothold in American society that the immigrant sons had only recently gained. When the New Left attacked the institutions of American liberalism, particularly universities, as incarnations of imperialism, privilege, and racism, Jewish intellectuals felt deeply threatened. The New Left's sympathy with militant anti-colonial radicalism and its view that Israel was a racist outpost of American imperialism increased the vulnerability felt by many Jewish intellectuals. The "Movement's" turn to direct action and physical violence alienated Jewish intellectuals, prompting Nathan Glazer, a younger member of the *Commentary* family, to chastise white intellectuals, which, he noted, meant "in large measure Jewish intellectuals," for teaching, justifying, and rationalizing violence.<sup>5</sup> Reacting intuitively and perhaps not fully consciously to an understanding that social upheaval had historically made Jews its targets, many Jewish intellectuals now supported the American state's right to enforce domestic stability, distancing them from their former liberal bedfellows and certainly from militant radicals.

There is yet a third component that links postwar Jewish neoconservatism to older patterns of East European Jewish politics and history: the emergence of a modern intelligentsia distinct from the communal and rabbinic leadership who became self-appointed spokesmen for the modernization of their brethren as they encountered the West. In European Jewish historiography, these individuals are called *maskilim*

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4. For an earlier example of this paradox, see Moshe Rosman, "Jewish Perceptions of Insecurity and Powerlessness in Sixteenth-Eighteenth Century Poland," *Polin* 1 (1987): 19-27.

5. Nathan Glazer, "Blacks, Jews, and the Intellectuals," *Commentary* 47:4 (April 1969): 33-39 and Milton Himmelfarb, "Negroes, Jews, and Muzhiks," *Commentary* 42:4 (Oct. 1966): 83-86.

(enlightened Jews), and we find them among them Naftali Herz Wessely, Joseph Perl, Jacob Tugendhold, and Judah Baer Levinson, to name some of the more prominent. The tenacity of American exceptionalism in the writing of American Jewish history has obscured the typological similarity between a Joseph Perl and a Norman Podhoretz. Both, rooted within East European culture, sought to integrate into non-Jewish general society. Both appealed to their fellow Jews—and waged a mutually hostile verbal *Kulturkampf* with them—to align themselves with the gentile government as being in their best political interests. Significantly, Perl wrote memos to the Habsburg authorities in Vienna in order to modernize Polish Jews. He wanted them to participate in civil society, yet the Hasidim against whom he wrote were committed to an anti-modernist worldview. Podhoretz and other Jewish neoconservatives began to work directly within U.S. government circles in the 1980s when the immigrant community had already become modern. His memos—in the form of *Commentary* editorials—urged American Jews to align themselves with the Republican government and to reject their support of the Democratic Party, which he believed had been corrupted by the New Left. Jewish political history’s long view supports the claim that *Commentary*’s embrace of the Republican Party in the wake of the fallout from the New Left represented a reassertion of an ideological commitment to the imperative to uphold the law of the gentile state. The neoconservatives argued that the New Left abetted anti-Americanism, political extremism, and social unrest, all of which were anathema to the Jewish community’s best interests.

Evidence that postwar American Jewish neoconservatism bears continuity with the ideological struggles of modernizing East European Jewish intellectuals can also be found in the frequency with which the word “betrayal” is used by the actors themselves regarding their opponents’ attitudes toward their fellow Jews, and implied by the contentious historiography about Jewish liberalism and neoconservatism.<sup>6</sup> Political opponents of the Jewish turn to the Republican Party often assume—as does Abrams—that there was an eleventh commandment bequeathed to Jews at Sinai, “Thou Shalt be Liberal.” Yet Judaism is not synonymous with one set of political views. The much-vaunted “Jewish Liberal Tradition” was historically conditioned, there were always Jewish conserva-

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6. Jack Newfield, in a famous 1980 *Commentary* symposium on Jews and liberalism, wrote that he felt “great pain . . . not caused by liberals betraying Israel, but by Jews betraying liberalism.” Notably, a sense of betrayal also informs the neoconservative reaction to the persistence of Jewish liberalism. See Ruth Wisse, *If I Am Not For Myself. . . The Liberal Betrayal of the Jews* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

tives, and the internal Jewish “culture wars” were standard fare of East European Jewish political culture from the dawn of the modern period.

While there is much to gain in reading Balint on the dialectical engagement of Jewish intellectuals with American culture in the twentieth century, his book and Abrams’ biography would be more satisfying to historians were they better rooted in the *longue durée* of diasporic Jewish politics and East European Jewish history.

*Nancy Sinkoff*  
Rutgers University