A JEWISH FEMININE MYSTIQUE?

JEWISH WOMEN IN POSTWAR AMERICA

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Lucy S. Dawidowicz (1915–1990), the American Jewish historian known for her work on East European Jewry and its destruction, was a fierce political animal in the postwar years. Her interests included the history of Jewish politics and the role of the leaders of the formal Jewish community as stewards of Jewish communal life. Late in life, while working on a history of American Jews, she wrote to historian Robert Dallek: “For some years now I’ve been engaged in research for a broad-gauged history of Jews in America. Politics is one of the many aspects of Jewish life I want to write about—Jews in politics, as office holders, and in relation to men in power.” Although her youthful political education had begun on the left, by the 1970s Dawidowicz had firmly entrenched herself in the emergent neoconservative camp, a vocal critic of the New Left and of the social movements associated with 1960s radicalism. Like that of many other Jewish neoconservatives, Dawidowicz’s politics were fueled by an unrelenting anticommunism. Already in the 1950s, when she wrote several major articles on communism for liberal anticommunist popular journals like *Commentary* and *The New Leader*, Dawidowicz had begun to develop a public persona as a cold warrior.

Although passionate ideological feuding informed the anticommunism of the group of primarily male intellectuals associated with *Partisan Review* and *Commentary*, later dubbed the “New York intellectuals” by Irving Howe in his *Commentary* article of 1968, “The New York Intellectuals: A Chronicle and a Critique,” Dawidowicz’s rejection of communism was also based in her life-long involvement with modern Yiddish culture. Educated in the interwar years in the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute schools, Dawidowicz (then Schildkret) went to Vilna, Poland, in 1938 as a graduate fellow (*aspirant*) of the YIVO Institute. During the war years, she worked for New York YIVO’s director Max Weinreich, returning to Europe in 1946 as an employee of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee’s educational department to focus on the educational needs of Jewish refugees. In 1948 she married Szymon Dawidowicz, a Warsaw Bundist, and the marriage solidified her intimate connection to Yiddish and to
Poland. Balancing her Yiddishist and American selves, Dawidowicz's journey to becoming a New York intellectual and a cold warrior coursed through the brutal torrents of the European twentieth century that destroyed and dislocated the heartland of East European Jewry. Her connection to her experiences in Europe before and after the war, as much as the broad social, economic, and intellectual changes informing postwar American Jews, shaped Dawidowicz's life and career.

The historiography on postwar American Jews has emphasized their distance from their European origins. Increasingly "at home in America," the children and grandchildren of European Jewish immigrants are characterized as having moved out of densely populated urban neighborhoods, embraced a suburban lifestyle and the expectations of separate gendered spheres, discarded Yiddish, and created an Americanized Judaism. Yet Dawidowicz's life challenges this complacent image of postwar Americanized Jews. Always living within the municipal boundaries of New York City, working for pay outside the home, and remaining connected to Yiddishist circles, Dawidowicz brought a European persona and perspective to her politics and her attitudes toward American society. Although she lived and wrote in New York City, prewar Poland, particularly the city of Vilna, was always on her mind.

Like Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, Daniel Bell, and Irving Howe, Lucy Schildkret hailed from an immigrant home in New York City, attended a public school, and went on to one of the city's free public colleges. In contrast to these men, however, she also went to a supplementary Yiddish afternoon school, a _shule_, and to a Yiddish summer camp, Camp Boiberik, through her high school years. At Hunter College, the women's college equivalent to the more famous City College of New York, incubator of the "New York intellectuals," Schildkret took classesmati and faculty by storm. Majoring in English, she contributed to Hunter's literary magazine, _Echo_, becoming editor in 1935, and joined the school's chapter of the Young Communist League (YCL). Soon thereafter, the Seventh Congress of the Communist Party initiated the Popular Front, an international campaign of cooperation with noncommunists, including members of bourgeois and socialist parties. From 1935 to 1939, the Communist Party actively cultivated ethnic and national cultures, previously considered suspicious bourgeois expressions of parochialism. In her memoir and in supporting archival material, Dawidowicz reported that the Popular Front line tested her politics and personality. The Hunter College YCL rejected both the rapprochement with bourgeois parties and the autocratic demand for compliance demanded by the Comintern; nevertheless, the latter order spurred Schildkret's exit from the YCL. After college, she found herself marginally employed and personally adrift. To fill her time, she immersed herself in secular Yiddish culture through the Sholem Aleichem Yung Gezelshaft (SAYG), the youth organization affiliated with her earlier Yiddish school movement. Although SAYG tended to lean to the left, its political autonomy reflected the beginning of Schildkret's own political independence.

As Adolf Hitler consolidated power in Germany in the 1930s, Yiddish-speaking American Jews became acutely aware of the looming crisis in Europe, and in Poland in particular. In 1935, Roman Dmowski replaced the deceased Józef Piłsudski as president of the Republic of Poland, auguring a shift in that nation's political climate that turned open anti-Semitism into government policy. As literary scholar Anita Norich has shown, interwar American Yiddish writers, while inhabiting the same space as their Anglo-Jewish peers, differed from them in cultural outlook. The former still looked to Europe, and created works that presupposed a transnational secular Jewish cultural world. They expected to be read on both sides of the Atlantic. Youth in the Yiddishist world engaged equally with Europe and America. Lucy Schildkret wrote for and edited _Shrift_ (Writing), the organ of the SAYG, which devoted regular columns to developments in Europe. A 1937 editorial, "You Will Not Drive Them Out," saluted the efforts of a Jewish deputy to the Polish Sejm, Emil Sommerstein (1883–1957), who rejected the call for Jewish emigration from Poland. _Shrift_'s pages cried out: "The Jews of the world stand with you to build a free and renewed Poland. For us American Jews, there is only one way—unity in our support for Polish Jews. The Jewish Congress should continue to lead American Jewry in huge demonstrations and protest cries against the murderers who are attacking our brothers in Poland. We will not let you drive the Jews out of Poland!"

Urged by her _shule_ history teacher Jacob Shatzky to continue her study of modern Yiddish at the YIVO institute in Vilna, Schildkret set off for Poland in the summer of 1938. At the Vilna YIVO, she met and befriended the luminaries of modern secular Yiddish culture: Elias Tcherikower, Chaim Grade, Avrom Sutzkever, Zalman Reisen, Zelig Kalmanovich, and Max Weinreich. These relationships proved to be not only personal for Schildkret, but also represented to her the vitality, diversity, and resilience of Polish Jewish culture, and these aspects of that culture would later inform her historical and public writings. Paradoxically, though, Schildkret's ambivalence toward secular Yiddish culture began in Vilna, the imagined urban apotheosis of Jewish secularism. Her Vilna year also proved decisive in extinguishing any positive feelings toward communism that she had had.

Schildkret's deep connection to Riva and Zelig Kalmanovich, the latter of whom had fled Bolshevik Russia in 1921, permanently shaped her hostility to communism. Zelig Kalmanovich, a Diaspora nationalist and a Yiddishist, became a member of the Jewish Socialist Workers Party, which advocated Jewish cultural autonomy within the future socialist Russian state, and wrote for the party's journal, _Di folkshtime_ (The People's Voice). After World War I, he ended up in the Soviet Union, where he witnessed the radicalization of Yiddish culture in war-ruled Ukraine. Soon recoiling from Bolshevik ideological constraints on Yiddish culture, he fled, his hatred of the Bolsheviks severing any kind of socialist leanings from his Yiddishism. His 1931 Yiddish essay, "Perspectives for Yiddish Culture in the Soviet Union," argued against the possibility of a Yiddish
future in the Soviet Union since the proletarian goals of the Yevsektsiya, the Jewish section of the Communist Party, reduced Yiddish to a utilitarian means of inculcating Bolshevism among Jews; Yiddish as an autonomous expression of modern Jewish culture was considered dispensable. By 1934, Kalmanovich had settled in Vilna, becoming central to the operation of the YIVO, which he believed offered the best hope for bolstering secular Jewish culture and the Yiddish language in the new independent nation states that had emerged after World War I. His mistrust of any kind of political litmus test for Yiddish culture was to have a lifelong effect on Schildkret.

Riva Kalmanovich, aware that Schildkret possessed an American passport that would allow her safe passage back to the United States, insisted that the young woman leave Poland in late August 1939. After about a year in Albany, Schildkret joined Max Weinreich, who had managed to leave Europe, at the New York branch of the YIVO, located on the Lower East Side. Throughout the war years, Schildkret worked at this skeletal branch, the only remnant of its Vilna forebear. She and Weinreich would be among the few YIVO employees who had known the Vilna institution. In these years, the war in Europe was never far from their minds, and her memoir details the agony of watching it unfold at a distance.

The Hitler-Stalin pact initially spared Vilna’s Jews from Nazi brutality, as the city fell to the Soviets in September 1939. At the end of that October, Lithuania wrested itself from Soviet rule, but this respite proved short-lived; by mid-June 1940, the Soviets again occupied Lithuania. Quickly, the YIVO became Sovietized, a process that transformed once ideologically varied and independent Jewish schools into state-run Marxist Yiddish institutions.59 Moyshe Lerner, a YIVO staff member with Bolshevik leanings, now ran the institute; Zalman Reisen and his son, Saul, had been earlier arrested, and many suspected they had been killed; and the YIVO began to offer courses in Marxism. According to Dawidowicz’s memory, “Kalmanovich, who had never concealed his dislike for communism and Communists, had been dismissed, along with other staff members.”

A continuous encounter with refugees from war-torn Europe solidified Schildkret’s pessimistic views of the future of Jews and Yiddish culture across the Atlantic. In 1940, a small group of Polish Jewish refugees, including Raphael Mahler, Elias Tcherikower, Yudel Mark, Jacob Lestchinsky, and Shmuel Zygielbaum, who had sojourned in New York before returning to Europe, received political visas for the United States and made their way to the YIVO.60 Daily contact with East European Jews who spoke Yiddish, along with reading the Yiddish press, gave Yiddishists like Schildkret access, before other Americans, to developments in Europe regarding the Jews. By June 1941, they knew that the worst had transpired: abrogating the Hitler-Stalin pact, the Nazis had invaded Soviet-occupied Poland and begun the brutalization of its Jewish population.

The news of deportations, ghettoization, and murder flowed through the Yiddish press throughout 1942 and 1943. Schildkret and the others found particularly shocking the revelation that two leaders of the Bund, Henryk Erlich and Viktor Alter, whom William Green, head of the American Federation of Labor, had been reassured were still alive in 1942, had in fact been murdered by the Soviets. On March 30, 1943, Schildkret attended a protest meeting organized by David Dubinsky and the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union.61 The event was hotly contested by many in the American labor movement because of the Soviet alliance with the United States, but, for Schildkret, Jewish oppression under the Soviet sickle was beginning to seem like Jewish oppression under the Nazi boot.62 In April of that year, reports about Auschwitz-Birkenau and of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising appeared. The leveling of the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw struck deeply at many of YIVO’s employees. As Dawidowicz wrote, “The people I knew had lost children, wives, parents, their dearest friends.”63 An article in October 1943 from the Jewish Telegraphic Agency reported that the remaining Jews of Vilna had been murdered, news that shocked the YIVO world to its core. Knowledge of the fate of Zelig and Riva Kalmanovich came later. Dawidowicz devotes pages 271–273 in her memoir to a lament for her beloved Vilna friends; this was her own personal elegy. The world and people she had known in 1938 had been completely destroyed.

Although the Red Army aided in the defeat of Hitler, Soviet reentry into Vilna did not assure the safety of the Jewish cultural treasures hidden during the war by YIVO activists, who were known as the papir brigade (Paper Brigade).64 Avrom Sutzkever and Szmerke Kaczerginski, who survived the war on Soviet territory, found upon their return that the YIVO building had been demolished and many, but not all, of their secret hiding places completely destroyed.65 Working with the Ministry of Culture of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic, Sutzkever and Kaczerginski believed they could reconstitute some kind of institution devoted to Jewish culture in the city now called Vilnus. But by mid-1945 they lost hope, and Sutzkever started to mail materials to New York; Kaczerginski, who had been an ardent communist, also aided in the smuggling. Kaczerginski later recalled, “We, the group of museum activists, had a bizarre realization—we must save our treasures again, and get them out of here.”66 Both he and Sutzkever fled Lithuania, leaving behind many of YIVO’s holdings.

Schildkret herself returned to Europe after the war to work with Jewish refugees, the so-called displaced persons, in the American and British zones of occupied Germany. Hired in July 1946 as an education officer of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJDLC), she helped salvage those remnants of YIVO’s library that had been pillaged by the Nazis and later stored at the Offenbach Archive Depot (OAD).67 By July 1947, the books arrived in New York. Schildkret later described her role in transporting YIVO’s library to New York as a symbolic response “to the obsessive fantasies of rescue which had tormented me for years.”68 Although the transfer of YIVO’s books to the United States closed Schildkret’s work relationship with the YIVO, her professional, political, and personal life
remained bound to Polish Jewry. Hired in January 1949 as a researcher at the American Jewish Committee (AJC), the now-married Schildkret, or Lucy Dawidowicz, worked at this oldest Jewish defense organization in the United States for almost twenty years and was one of the few women on its permanent staff. The AJC position gave her an important institutional home from which to express her research interests and politics. She covered, among other topics, communism, Jewish anti-Semitism, and the role of religion in American politics. Already in her post–Popular Front years, she began to articulate fervent support for the American government. Her anticommunist writings, which dominated her work in the 1950s, through their concomitant fealty to the American state and its governmental agencies reflected Dawidowicz’s embrace of a longstanding trend within Diaspora Jewish politics, the imperatives to uphold the law of the gentile hosts, a principle known colloquially by the rabbinic principle dina dinim lekhui dina, and to align the Jewish community with the highest authority within the gentile state. In her anticommunist writings, Dawidowicz strove to convince the American Jewish public that dissociating Jews from the socialist left in general and from communism in particular lay in the Jewish community’s best interests. Supporting the American state’s system of electoral politics, rather than aspiring to a revolutionary politics that rejected the authority of those in power, Dawidowicz believed, best served Jewish communal life in America.

Although raised in the socialist zeitgeist of modern secular Yiddish culture, Dawidowicz had become a Roosevelt Democrat before the war. The victory of the Allies over the Nazis under Franklin D. Roosevelt’s stewardship only confirmed her loyalty, and, despite her political shifts toward the right in her later years, she staunchly and consistently defended Roosevelt’s behavior during the war, throughout her life. This attachment to Roosevelt, which characterized the sentiments of many American Jews, became another element in her anticommunism. Not only had the American government defeated the Nazis, but her American passport had enabled her to leave Europe on the eve of the war, and the United States had accepted the Polish-Jewish refugees who came to YIVO in 1940. Moreover, the American army and the federal Library of Congress expedited the transfer of the YIVO’s library from Offenbach. Indeed, when describing her work in the OAD, in a manuscript draft of her memoir, Dawidowicz typed, “And so, in a strange turn of fate, the books which Avrom Sztuzkever and his colleagues had sorted under the Germans went through my hands,” adding in pen, “under the protection of the American Army.” All of these factors represented many of the tangled roots of Dawidowicz’s insistent anticommunism during the cold war.

Smitten with communism’s allure as a young woman, Dawidowicz well knew about the Jewish romance with the left. Yet her prewar experience in Vilna, friendship with Zelig Kalmanovich, awareness of the Nazi use of the canard associating Jews with Bolshevism, and knowledge of Stalin’s purges in the

1930s made Dawidowicz acutely sensitive to the ways communist universalism imperiled Jewish life and to how Jewish radicalism could awaken conservative, anti-Semitic forces in society. Moreover, as someone intimately tied to the European stage in the immediate postwar period, Dawidowicz focused upon the volatility of the Jewish association with communism in the postwar Soviet bloc. After the war, many individuals of Jewish origin became prominent in the new bureaucracies in Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. Indigenous non-Jewish populations, resentful of the imposition of Soviet rule, projected their animosity upon those members of these new bureaucracies who were of Jewish origin. Further, as Joseph Stalin realized that Soviet control of the satellite states required local support, not merely obedience, he replaced loyal communists of Jewish background with communists born to the majority culture. Many of these new bureaucrats used anti-Jewish sentiment as a tool to gain political power, often exploiting new eruptions of the local urban violence that had characterized anti-Jewish sentiment before the war. In the postwar period, Jewish survivors returning to Poland, for example, felt vulnerable and powerless—particularly after the pogroms in Kraków in 1945 and Kielce in 1946 that claimed roughly one hundred Jewish lives—while the native Polish population saw them as privileged beneficiaries of Soviet patronage. Official Soviet anti-Semitism expressed itself in the notorious 1937 “Doctors Plot,” when Stalin mounted a campaign to purge officials of Jewish origin from the Soviet bureaucracy—a scheme to discredit and destroy Soviet Jewry stayed only by Stalin’s death. These events on distant shores did not seem so distant for someone like Dawidowicz who so thoroughly identified with the suffering of East European Jewry.

In the United States, meanwhile, political conformity provided the watchword of the increasingly suburban and middle-class Jewish community in the postwar period. Eager to assert the loyalty of the Jewish community to the American government, during this time of cold war, Jewish defense organizations, such as the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, and the American Jewish Congress, cooperated to varying degrees with McCarthyist demands to expel communists and their sympathizers. As historian Michael Staub has argued, the cold war brought about an “analogy shift” among the Jewish defense organizations. In the 1930s, systemic expressions of American racism, such as Jim Crow legislation, were compared by Jewish organizations to Nazi racial legislation, most notably to the Nuremberg Laws; yet, during the cold war, this analogy diminished, replaced by an analogy between Stalinist and Nazi totalitarianism. In fact, the American Jewish Committee’s research wing, strongly oriented toward the social sciences, published The Authoritarian Personality in 1950, eliding the distinction between Nazi and Soviet authoritarianism. In the tense environment of the 1950s, the liberal Jewish defense organizations defined their missions as working against the forces in society that could lead to an embrace of authoritarianism, whether originating on the left or on the right.
The AJC’s Library of Jewish Information (LJI) generated and fostered the committee’s liberal campaign against communism in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The LJI provided the research by which the Domestic Affairs Committee of the AJC and the AJC leadership justified their purge of communists from Jewish communal life, focusing in particular on the Jewish People’s Fraternal Order (JPFO), the 50,000-member Jewish branch of the International Workers Order (IWO). On June 27, 1950, the Domestic Affairs Committee adopted a policy toward communist-affiliated and communist-led organizations, characterized as upholding an ideology “so inimical to the welfare of the American community and to Jewish needs and problems to make impossible any collaboration in the solution of those problems or the filling of those needs.” The Communist Party, the memo continued, sought the establishment of a political dictatorship and an authoritarian society; the memo posited this totalitarianism as analogous to that of the “Fascist Right” and utterly incompatible with “the security and free development of Jewish life no less than the survival of democratic civilization.” The memo concluded that, in the future, “membership in Jewish communal institutions should be denied to any organization which, despite its apparent purpose or functions, is demonstrably Communist-affiliated or Communist-led.” This meant ousting the JPFO from Jewish community councils nationwide, as well as disaffiliating Jewish organizations from the Social Services Employees Union, a procommunist union that the CIO had expelled in 1950. The LJI also sought to unmask the anti-Semitism of the Soviet Union, with the hope of ending any attraction communism might have to American Jews and to disassociate from the American public’s mind any connection between the Jewish community and communist politics—even though, as committee members conceded, public opinion in the 1950s did not necessarily assume such a connection.

Cooperating with McCarthyism had its perils, however. Demagoguery could foment latent anti-Semitic forces within American society. As Stuart Svonkin has shown, the battle against communism compromised the civil liberties commitments of the AJC and of the Anti-Defamation League, as well as, to a lesser degree, of the American Jewish Congress.

For Dawidowicz, who played a central role as a researcher for the LJI’s studies exposing communist activities, the authoritarian illiberalism of communism and Soviet anti-Semitism trumped the threat, in McCarthyism, to civil liberties, as well as the fear of stimulating anti-Semitism on American shores. She became secretary of the LJI’s Staff Committee on Communism in December 1950, and later a full-fledged member of the committee. Her knowledge of Yiddish and of the Yiddish left proved assets for the committee; so too did her expertise in the press. She quickly became the point person for research into the JPFO, the Jewish Fraternalists (the Jewish youth associate of the JPFO), the Yiddish communist newspaper, Frayhayt, and Frayhayt’s English-language magazine, Jewish Life. By this time, Dawidowicz equated Stalinist and Nazi totalitarianism, even if the former subordinated its anti-Jewish aims to broader political goals while the latter had, from its very origins, as she insisted, singled out the Jews for destruction. In October 1950, she authored a research memo, “The National Jewish Youth Conference (NJYC): Example of Communist United-Front Policy in Action,” examining the efforts of the Jewish Fraternalists to circumvent the expulsion of the JPFO from the major Jewish organizations by working from within the NJYC, an umbrella organization of Jewish youth movements under the auspices of the mainstream Jewish Welfare Board (JWB). Relying on an article in Political Affairs, a communist journal, “For a United Front Policy among the Jewish People—Sharpen the Struggle against Bourgeois Nationalism,” which called for communist work within the NJYC, Dawidowicz’s memo drew a line between the Jewish Fraternalists and other left-oriented Jewish youth movements. For Dawidowicz, the Fraternalists’ views, in particular their opposition to the Marshall Plan, their support for Soviet-directed Yiddish culture, and their criticism of Zionism and Judaism in the Soviet bloc, derived not from an autonomous evaluation of the political issues but from rigid subservience to the Soviet line, thus delegitimizing the group.

Dawidowicz’s memos continued to focus on exposing communist tactics. The memo “Communist Approach to Jews: A Study of Communist Periodicals of July to October, 1950, Relating to Jews” bore Dawidowicz’s initials, examining and then seeking to debunk five ways in which the communists shaped their rhetoric to appeal to the Jewish community. These included the assertion that Jews, special victims of hatred during World War, had an “especial” desire for peace; the assertion that the Soviet Union had a historically positive attitude toward Jews; the claim that only fascist regimes produced anti-Semitism; the charge that Western Germany harbored anti-Semitism and, supported by the British, French, and U.S. governments, presented a danger to peace; and, last, the argument that although the State of Israel needed peace, Ben-Gurion’s government courted disaster by its alliance with the United States. A November 1950 memo, “The National Committee of the Communist Party of the U.S.A. on Work among the Jews,” emphasized that the Communist Party, recognizing the decline of official Yiddish communism in the United States, had decided to turn to the English-language communist Jewish press to attract Jews; Jewish Life, edited by Morris Schappes, who had recently been dismissed from City College due to his communist membership, had become, she noted, the party’s semi-official Jewish organ. In “Communist Propaganda on Germany,” Dawidowicz tackled the thorny problem of the West’s leniency with regard to German war criminals reentering West Germany society, and attempted to show that war criminals had also made their home in East Germany, concluding that “pacifists and others who for legitimate reasons are opposed to some of the activities of the American government in reference to Germany, Korea, etc., must be careful to avoid exploitation by those whose purpose is to further Communist ambitions.”
Dawidowicz found particularly galling the way in which communist rhetoric depicted its opponents as Nazis, a point she stressed in her October 1950 memo. There, she cited a July 24, 1950, editorial from Frayhayt urging support of the Stockholm Peace Conference, depicted as the only hope to rescue Jews from “the terror of the Maidaneks, Buchenwalds, and Oswiecims, which were the fearful price Jews paid in the Second World War.” The piece characterized the West as pogromchiks, perpetrators of violence against Jews in Poland and Russia, which they rhymed with atomchiks, supporters of atomic war. She also cited an October 10, 1950, Frayhayt editorial that exhorted: “Jews must be the first to fight against the war-mongers, against the crusaders for a war against the Soviet Union. They have paid with six million sacrifices in the second world war, and the lives of all remaining Jews are in jeopardy in case of a third world war.” In the black-and-white world of Jewish cold war polemics, both the communist and anticommunist sides used the Holocaust to anathematize their opponents.

The Rosenberg trial, perhaps more than any other event, gave full expression to the exploitation of the Holocaust analogy among American Jews in the postwar years. As Deborah Dash Moore has astutely argued, because Jews constituted all the parties involved with the case, including the defendants, the prosecution, and the defense, the Rosenberg case “became a definitional ceremony in which opposing versions of American Jewish identity competed for ascendancy.” Dawidowicz stood at the forefront of exposing what she believed to be the hypocrisy of communist support for the Rosenbergs at the same time that Rudolf Slansky and other Czechoslovak communists had been driven out of the communist world because of their Jewish origins. Besides writing internal memos for the IJI, Dawidowicz went public with her views, publishing anti-communist articles in Commentary, The New Leader, and The Reconstructionist.

Dedicated to exposing communism’s danger to Jews, Dawidowicz argued that communist atheistic authoritarianism could not tolerate any kind of ethnic or religious distinctiveness; communist universalism needed to be seen as, at its very root, inimical to Jewish particularism. In its efforts to win adherents among Jews, communist strategy had, she wrote, occasionally allowed for expressions of Jewish culture, as during the Popular Front and after June 1941 when allied with the United States against the Nazis, but this utilitarian use of Jewishness should not be confused with real freedom for Jewish expression. The defense of the Rosenbergs on Jewish grounds, which claimed that anti-Semitism had inspired the charges against them, should be seen as a crass appeal to postwar Jewish fears, she added; the Jewish communist press manipulated terms like Judenrat and pogroms to depict the actions of the American state. In the Commentary article, she condemned the tactics of the National Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case for its assertion that the Rosenbergs’ Jewish origins led to their death sentence. She directly accused the communist defenders of the Rosenbergs of fomenting anti-Semitism, rather than combating it, by their insistence that the

Figure 2.1: Flyer comparing the Rosenberg case to the Dreyfus affair, featuring the communist journalist William A. Reuben, founder of the Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case. Dawidowicz condemned the language and tactics used by the committee. Courtesy of the Tamiment Library at the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, William A. Reuben Collection Folder 47, Box 12, Tamiment 289, New York University.
sentence against the Rosenbergs was because of their Jewishness, thus heightening the association of anti-American radicalism with the Jewish community. To Dawidowicz, this was tantamount to assigning Jewish collective guilt for the couple’s deeds: “It is well to be on guard; we have seen how similar campaigns of identification and accusation have strengthened the hands of anti-Semitic forces elsewhere.”

The use of the concept of guilt by association, according to Dawidowicz, not only amounted to a dangerous anti-Semitic ploy, but, in the context of the almost simultaneous show trials in the Soviet satellite of Czechoslovakia, also constituted a blatantly hypocritical and calculated act of political deflection and manipulation. On April 30, 1953, Dawidowicz prepared the memo “The Reaction of American Communists to Soviet Antisemitism” on the Slansky case. She detailed the initial denial of the Jewish origins of the defendants and the acceptance of their guilt in the pages of the Daily Worker, Frayhayt, and Jewish Life, and the party’s later admission of the trial’s anti-Jewish tenor, evidence of its political zigzagging. In her published essay on the Slansky case, Dawidowicz drew an explicit comparison between the anti-Semitism of Hitler and that of the Soviet Union and its satellites:

Thus a whole generation of Jews was on trial because of their origin, because they or their parents were merchants or artisans or self-employed workers, because they were doomed by their origin and early training to be “enemies of the working class.” . . . Jews were on trial in Prague and their crime was that they were born Jews. . . . Slansky and his ten Jewish co-defendants had no vestige of all Jewishness, either secular or religious, nationalist or internationalist. Yet, the fact that they were born Jews was the most serious charge against them. . . . Hitler believed in the racial impurity of some people because they were born Jews. The result was that six million Jews were murdered by the Germans. For some years now Stalin has been trying to establish the political impurity of some people because they were born Jews. The result is that Jews in the Soviet Union have been removed from positions of leadership in the Communist Party, in the government, in the arts. The “homeless cosmopolitans,” against whom a ruthless campaign continues to be waged, are merely Jews under a transparent disguise.

In Dawidowicz’s political consciousness, which always took Polish Jewry and its tragic fate as its point of reference, the anti-Semitism of the Soviet Union and its bloc equaled that of the Nazis. For Dawidowicz, there could be no “ordinary Communists,” individuals of goodwill who saw the party as a legitimate expression of American or Jewish radicalism. To Dawidowicz, American communism could not be detached from the Soviet Union, whose postwar incarnation of state-sanctioned anti-Semitism she believed analogous to Nazism—and as dangerous, because it resembled as a utopian ideology devoted to universalism. Communism’s universalism had attracted Jews since the Bolshevik revolution, and the peril was proven by the murders of Jewish leftists, even stalwart Stalinists, in the Soviet Union in the interwar years and beyond. A responsible Jewish communal leadership therefore had to expose Soviet anti-Semitism and disabuse Jews of the attractiveness of all universalist ideologies.

Dawidowicz held on to the Soviet–Nazi analogy to the end of her life. She concluded her memoir’s preface, written in the period of the cold war’s final thaw: “When the Soviets first occupied Vilna in 1940, they Sovietized it, destroying its historic identity and its Jewish particularity. The Germans who followed destroyed Vilna altogether, murdering nearly all of its 60,000 Jews—men, women, and children. . . . Hardly anything has remained of its buildings. . . . What little the Nazis had left standing, the Soviets, who returned after the war, erased.” Although invoking the destruction of the European Jewry she loved most, Dawidowicz composed these words to warn her American audience of the danger of left-wing forms of universalism, which she believed inevitably led to communal assimilation. She now identified as a neoconservative, favored religious over secular forms of identity, and argued that Jewish communal interests were best served by allegiance to the highest gentile authority generally, and to the American state in particular, even as it shifted rightward politically.

This political move was out of step with the mainstream American Jewish community’s liberal political orientation, but in keeping with Dawidowicz’s singularity. In contrast to most postwar American Jewish women, Dawidowicz had already, by the 1950s, pursued a public career, had remained in an urban environment, and had worked tirelessly to remind American Jews of their historical and cultural roots in Eastern Europe. Yet, ironically, even as she positioned herself in political opposition to her liberal peers, she shared with them the anxieties about the authenticity and assimilation of postwar American Jewish culture.

NOTES
1. Lucy S. Dawidowicz to Robert Dallek (author of Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932–1945, 1979), February 26, 1984, in papers of Lucy S. Dawidowicz, P-675, Box 8, folder 3, collection of the American Jewish Historical Society, Newton Centre, Massachusetts and New York. Hereafter, papers in the collection will be noted as AJHS.
5. As a boy, Nathan Glazer attended a Talmud Torah, not a Yiddish shule, in East Harlem; neither Norman Podhoretz nor Irving Kristol had formal Yiddish instruction; Irving Howe
relates in his autobiography that his father forbade his going to the Workmen’s Circle shule in his East Bronx neighborhood. In Glazer, e-mail correspondence with author, October 8, 2008; Podhoretz, e-mail correspondence with author, October 8, 2008; Kristol, e-mail correspondence with author, October 13, 2008; Irving Howe, Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1982), 3.


7. In Lucy S. Dawidowicz, From That Place and Time: A Memoir, 1938–1947 (1990; rpt. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 18–19. Dawidowicz writes that her friend Evelyn Konoff, who had remained in the YCL, later told her that she had been expelled, while Dawidowicz’s letter to Konoff only mentions her resignation from which was then under the wing of the Communist National Student League (Lucy Schildkret to Evelyn Konoff, February 1936 [?]. Dawidowicz Papers, Box 54, folder 5, AJHS).


11. Dawidowicz, From That Place and Time.


16. Dawidowicz, From That Place and Time.

17. Szymon Dawidowicz, who had left behind a family in Warsaw, was one of these refugees.


20. In the typically restrained style of the memoir, Dawidowicz hesitated to mention that two of the murdered were her husband’s children, to whom she dedicated The War Against the Jews. See Dawidowicz, From That Place and Time, 243–244, and Lucy S. Dawidowicz, The War Against the Jews, 1933–1943 (New York: Bantam Books, 1975).


22. Ibid., 11.

46. Svonkin, Jews against Prejudice, 135.


48. Dawidowicz’s archives contain a two-paged typed list of her anticommmunist materials, prepared by Helen Ritter, an AJC archivist. The list, below, is verbatim.

American Federation of Polish Jews (see also Landsmanschaften)

Antisemitism: CP Position

Bick, Abraham

Communism and Assimilation

Communists and Civil Rights

Communist Party

Communist Party—18th National Convention

DPOW (District 69)

Emergency Civil Liberties Committee

Emma Lazarus Federation [See also JFFO]

International Workers Order (IWO) [See also JFFO]

Israel

Jewish Community—CP Position

Jewish Life

Jewish Music Alliance

Jewish People’s Fraternal order (JPO) (See also IWO)

Jewish People’s Fraternal order (JPO) Schools

Jewish Young Fraternalists [See also JFFO]

Jews and Investigations

Jews Against Communism

Kinderland Camp [See also JFFO]

Labor and CP

Landsmanschaften (Communist Dominated) [See also American Federation of Polish Jews]

Novick, Paul

“Peace”—Organizations and Activities

Schappes, Morris

Sobell Case

Social Service Employees Union

Soviet antisemitism—CP Position

Soviet Union Death Penalty for Economic Offenses

Yiddish Kultur Farband (YKUF)

Box 8, folder 11. Dawidowicz Papers, AJHS. See, also, The American Jewish Committee, Library of Jewish Information, “Jewish People’s Fraternal Order of the International Worker’s Order,” November 27, 1950, in Box 8, folder 12, Dawidowicz Papers, AJHS. Dawidowicz’s initials are at the end of the memo and her full name is handwritten on the front cover.

49. Library of Jewish Information, American Jewish Committee, Staff Committee on Communism, October 12, 1950. Dawidowicz’s authorship of this memo can, as with many, be affirmed by her initials, LSD, on the last page.