

LUCY DAWIDOWICZ: DISPASSIONATE HISTORIAN AND BOLD DEFENDER OF JEWISH INTERESTS

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An engaging and revelatory new biography is a necessary reminder of the Jewish historian's important place among 20th-century American intellectuals.

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In any given generation, there are only a handful of thinkers who can cogently challenge every unthinking piety and every conventional foolishness that passes for wisdom, and yet are neither cranks nor curmudgeons. For post-World War II American Jewry, Lucy Dawidowicz was just such a figure; and rarer still, she was at the same time a rigorous and gifted historian. She witnessed and chronicled the last year of Jewish Vilna, helped return one of the greatest collections of Jewish books and documents to Jewish hands, aided Jewish refugees in post-war Europe, wrote one of the landmark accounts of the Holocaust, and anticipated many of the ideas of the neoconservative movement.



From the cover of *From Left to Right: Lucy S. Dawidowicz, the New York Intellectuals, and the Politics of Jewish History* by Nancy Sinkoff.

Dawidowicz's unorthodox perspectives stemmed in part from a fierce independence of thought, and in part from her exposure during her formative years to the rich mental world of East European Jewry and the time she spent in Europe just before and just after the Holocaust. Now, in a new biography [*From Left to Right: Lucy Dawidowicz, the New York Intellectuals, and the Politics of the Jewish History*](#), Nancy Sinkoff, a professor at Rutgers University, tells the story of Dawidowicz's intellectual evolution.

Like many of the New York intellectuals lionized in scholarly and popular accounts, Dawidowicz was born in an economically precarious immigrant family in the Bronx, just before World War I. She attended New York's free public colleges, in her case, Hunter. And she was immersed in the world of socialism. By the time she died in 1990 at the age of seventy-five, she had written several books that had attracted wide attention, most notably *The Golden Tradition: Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe* (1967) and *The War against the Jews, 1933-1945* (1975), and published more than 50 articles in *Commentary* on themes ranging from American Jewish politics to the role of religion in American life.

Notwithstanding this rich intellectual legacy, Dawidowicz has been largely ignored in accounts of her generation of Jewish thinkers. In Sinkoff's view, she "lacked the academic pedigree, the universalist bona fides, and the requisite 'feminine capital' to be accepted into the inner circle" of the New York intellectuals for many years. As Sinkoff shows, this omission is undeserved. Not only does her subject's scholarly work remain necessary reading for layman and expert alike, but her trenchant observations of the contemporary American Jewish scene are strikingly relevant for American Jewry today.

In contrast to the liberal cosmopolitanism of her contemporaries, she emphasized Jewish particularity and continuity, and had a gnawing skepticism about the consequences of the Enlightenment—not to mention socialism or mid-century American liberalism—for the survival of the Jews.

Not until the rise of the New Left in the 1970s and the new anti-Semitism and hostility to Israel it engendered did her focus on Jews attract the attention of her peers. But that very particularity put her at odds with a new sensibility taking root among American intellectuals that downplayed the uniqueness of the Holocaust, redefined Jews as "whites" who had benefited from, and even contributed to, American racism, and insisted on comparing Israel to Nazi Germany. Her refusal to yield an inch to such arguments cost her many old friends and allowed others to dismiss her singular contributions.

Dawidowicz's political journey, from a flirtation with the Young Communist League while in college to the milieu of Jewish socialism, then to New Deal liberalism and finally to support for Ronald Reagan, was similar to that of several of her friends. Yet, as Sinkoff documents, her experiences in Eastern Europe on the eve of World War II and in occupied Germany in its aftermath, not the radical eruptions of the New Left in the late 1960s and early 1970s, were the raw material that enabled her to articulate themes that would later come to be called neoconservatism.

Sinkoff credits Dawidowicz's childhood immersion in the Sholem Aleichem schools, camps, and youth movement—vibrant, socialist-tinged, secular, and Yiddishist—with inoculating her against Communism. She was selected to study for a year in Vilna (then Polish Wilno, now Lithuanian Vilnius) at the headquarters of the Jewish Research Institute, better known as YIVO, and set off in August 1938. Studying for a year in the heart of the Ashkenazi Jewish world in the moment before its destruction, she experienced directly both the virulent anti-Semitism of Polish society and the desperate efforts of Jewish intellectuals to preserve Jewish national cohesion in the face of attacks from both a nationalist right that regarded the Jews as an

existential challenge to national identity, and a Communist left that saw them as impediments to international solidarity.

For the next 50 years, she would wage an unrelenting battle against the two totalitarian ideologies that could not abide a thriving independent Jewish presence: the first, a hideous direct assault on Jewish lives motivated by racial anti-Semitism and the second, a universalistic demand that Jews abandon their culture and religion.

She left Poland just days after war broke out, travelling by train through Germany and boarding a boat for America on September 16, 1939, a week after the Red Army had occupied Vilna. Working for YIVO in New York during the war, she and her coworkers were focused on the fate of friends and colleagues caught in Poland. Many did not survive, and those who did “had lost children, wives, parents, their dearest friends.” Among them was her future husband Szymon, whose first wife and two children perished in the Warsaw Ghetto. But Dawidowicz chafed at being treated more as a clerk than as a scholar in her own right, and she resigned from YIVO at the end of the war. Sinkoff also suggests that her “strong personality” impeded “cordial and productive relationships with her coworkers.”

In 1946 Dawidowicz went to Germany to work with Jewish refugees for the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). Among those she aided were passengers on the *Exodus*, a ship filled with concentration-camp survivors attempting to evade the British blockade of Palestine, who were turned back and interned in Germany. But much of her time was spent trying to get portions of the YIVO archives and library recovered from Nazi storage facilities repatriated to New York. Her doggedness and refusal to kowtow to Allied occupation officials and competing supplicants for the material were essential to the eventual transfer of the bulk of it to YIVO’s new library and archive in New York. Despite her crucial role in this endeavor, YIVO leaders conspicuously avoided giving her credit, and Sinkoff confesses puzzlement about the snub.

From 1949 to 1969 she worked as a researcher at the American Jewish Committee (AJC), where she developed strong attachments to Milton Himmelfarb, Nathan Perlmutter, and Norman Podhoretz, all of whom would later share her growing unease with the comfortable liberal, secular assumptions that characterized the organized Jewish community for two decades after the end of the war.

Anti-Communism was one of her core commitments. Afraid that the perception that Jews favored Communism would encourage anti-Semitism—just as it had in Europe—Dawidowicz, with her expertise in Yiddish, led the AJC’s battle to isolate the Yiddish-speaking Communists, fought efforts in the Jewish community to defend the Rosenbergs, and publicized all manifestation of Soviet anti-Semitism. Sinkoff ably summarizes the concerns in the American Jewish community about the Rosenberg case and credits Dawidowicz with accurately analyzing their guilt and their own responsibility for their death sentences, since they preferred to be martyrs. In a rare misstatement, however, Sinkoff adds that their co-defendant, [Morton Sobell](#), pleaded guilty and received a lesser sentence. He did not, and escaped the death penalty largely because he was not implicated in atomic espionage.

Her second research focus was black-Jewish relations. While the AJC allied with other liberal organizations to oppose segregation, ensure voting rights, improve economic conditions, and provide better housing and schools for American blacks, Dawidowicz's careful studies and reports for the organization warned that issues surrounding affirmative action, quotas, and school integration were creating tensions between the two minorities, while the growth of black nationalism was bringing anti-Semitic rhetoric into the public domain and the growing violence in American cities after 1965 was threatening Jewish safety.

Still another issue of concern was the role of religion in American life. While the AJC, like many Jewish organizations, had applauded the idea of an iron wall between church and state, Dawidowicz had growing reservations about the wisdom of such a position—once quipping that she “would prefer to see a crèche on West 42nd Street than to look at what’s there now”—even as she was assailed by doubts that the secular Yiddish culture in which she had been immersed for all her life could ensure a viable Jewish future.

It was not a new worry. As far back as her year in Vilna, one of her mentors there had been doubtful that secularism and Yiddish would be enough to sustain Jewish continuity. American Jews, she concluded, were losing their connection to Jewish culture and the Jewish past. The secular culture on which she was raised had myriad connections to Judaism. Even as they rejected religion, secular Jews were still nourished by Judaism's language, rituals, and historical culture. But, after a generation or two, with the roots shriveled, she feared the plant would die. As she put it, with her characteristically pungent prose:

We have witnessed the rise and fall of at least two generations of Jewish secularists. They have lived off the capital of traditional Judaism and have by now exhausted their patrimony. It may be my own idiosyncratic view, but I believe that it is no longer sufficient to be a Jew just by supporting Israel (though that is a *sine qua non* for being a good Jew) or by being sentimental about Yiddish or by attending a bagels-and-lox UJA meeting.

That insight led Dawidowicz to embrace Judaism, regularly attend an Orthodox synagogue, and keep a kosher home, even as her husband remained a steadfast secular Bundist. He consented to their holding a two-person seder, but resolutely refused to attend communal religious services. How they successfully navigated such basic disagreements remains a mystery—a fact that Sinkoff attributes to Dawidowicz carefully guarding her privacy. Their devotion to one another never slackened, and she tenderly cared for him until his death from stomach cancer in 1979.

Her first book and her growing reputation as a public intellectual led to her leaving the AJC for a chaired professorship at Stern College of Yeshiva University, where she soon began to teach one of the first courses on the Holocaust in American higher education. *The War against the Jews*, her seminal book on the subject, took issue with the dominant academic interpretation of the Holocaust that saw the eradication of the Jews as a byproduct of Nazi totalitarianism. In sharp contrast to the political scientist Raul Hillberg and the philosopher Hannah Arendt—who saw an impersonal state embracing genocide for largely bureaucratic reasons—Dawidowicz emphasized Hitler's ideological fervor and insisted that his chief aim in World War II was to destroy Jews at all costs.

Precisely because she came to her study of the Holocaust from a deep devotion to European Jewish civilization, Dawidowicz was unsparing in her criticism of those who attempted to blame Jewish leaders, either in Europe or the United States, for their actions or inactions. Some members of the Jewish councils in occupied Europe might well have behaved badly, she argued, but their reaction to an unprecedented catastrophe deserved empathy and understanding. She was particularly harsh about Arendt, whose scorn for East European Jews permeated her widely read account of Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem that argued the Jews had collaborated in their own destruction.

Dawidowicz was also scornful of efforts to romanticize East European Jewish life such as *Fiddler on the Roof*, insisting that the popular musical contributed to the misconception that it was "forever frozen in utter piety and utter poverty," and ignored just how remarkably variegated Jewish civilization in Eastern Europe was. Among other points she made was that the easy identification of Jews with liberal values was a vast oversimplification of the complexity of East European Jewry. With her anthology *The Golden Tradition*, she provides a powerful corrective, allowing this lost Jewish world—from proto-Zionist intellectuals to ḥasidic journalists to secular Yiddishist polemicists—to speak to an English-language audience in its own voices.

Dawidowicz was engaged in virtually every controversy that roiled the Jewish community beginning in the 1960s. As Sinkoff shows, she was fiercely independent and unafraid to stand alone. She was the only member of the 34-person Holocaust Commission established by President Carter and chaired by Elie Wiesel to refuse to sign the final report. Her resignation from the Commission was prompted by a concern that efforts to universalize the Holocaust and equate the non-Jewish victims of World War II with the campaign to exterminate Jews distorted what had happened.

Her conclusions, often controversial, sometimes were mistaken. Her experiences in Europe had left her with a lifelong suspicion of populist movements, and an appreciation for the decisions of Jews to turn to legal authorities for assistance. Together with her admiration for Franklin Roosevelt, this inclination led her to attack harshly the efforts of Peter Bergson to press FDR into doing more to save European Jews and to defend Rabbi Stephen Wise, accused of allowing his friendship with the president to mute his own voice. While Sinkoff defends Dawidowicz, noting that she was correct about the relative powerlessness of the American Jewish community, she errs in claiming that her defense of FDR "has also been largely accepted by the most recent books on the subject." The most [recent](#), by Rafael Medoff, makes a powerful case that the president so beloved by American Jews harbored nasty anti-Semitic views that influenced some of his key decisions, costing many Jewish lives.

By the late 1980s Dawidowicz had abandoned a projected account of Jewish life in America for which she had accumulated copious research notes. She was instead engaged in completing her haunting account of her years in Europe, *From That Time and Place: A Memoir, 1938-1947*, published in 1989, just a year before her death. Her reflections on her approach to writing this book say much about her attitude to her work as a whole:

In trying to bridge that abyss between past and present, the memoirist is obliged to arm himself against sentimentality, to guard against nostalgia. I was constantly aware of the desire to idealize that destroyed world, but I tried to discipline myself to portray Vilna as it was, without retouching, without removing the warts and blotches of historical reality.

At the same time, she insisted that “it was indeed possible, in writing about one’s own people, for a historian both to maintain critical objectivity and to hold fast to an inner perspective, an empathetic understanding of their trials and travails, their passions and ambitions.” It was her constant effort to walk this tightrope between the rigors of scholarship and her personal investment in the fate of the Jews that was the source of Dawidowicz’s genius. In one essay, she asked “What is the use of Jewish history?” Her writings themselves might be the best answer.

Sinkoff’s engaging and revelatory biography is a reminder of Lucy Dawidowicz’s important place among 20th-century American intellectuals. She may have been forgotten by intellectual historians, but her works should, and hopefully will, continue to find their place on the shelves of those who care for the truths of the Jewish past and who want to strengthen the prospects of the Jewish future.