

# From Left to Right: Lucy S. Dawidowicz's Political Life

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**In December 1984**, Lucy S. Dawidowicz (1915-1990), the well-known historian of East European Jewry and the Holocaust, gave the "State of World Jewry Address" at New York City's 92nd Street YW-YMHA. Established in 1980, the address was an influential public forum for "a discerning Jewish leader to assess the spiritual, political, and social condition of the Jewish people in Israel and throughout the Diaspora." Dawidowicz followed Abba Eban, Israel's Ambassador to the United Nations; Stuart E. Eizenstat, Chief Domestic Policy Adviser under President Carter; Gerson Cohen, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America; and Norman Podhoretz, editor of *Commentary* magazine. She was the only woman to give the address. Dawidowicz's talk was subsequently published in *Commentary* in February 1985 ("Politics, the Jews, and the '84 Election") and posthumously in *What is the Use of Jewish History?* (1992) as "The Politics of American Jews."

Voicing her identification with neo-conservatism, Dawidowicz argued that contemporary American Jews needed to unhinge themselves from their fealty to the Democratic Party and its conception of liberalism. Her analysis anticipated a future shift of Jews aligning themselves with the Republican Party, even as it courted Evangelical Christians. Given that 74 percent of American Jews supported Democratic President Obama in the last election, Dawidowicz has been proven wrong. But what had transpired in the post-war years among the Jewish intelligentsia in New York to anoint Dawidowicz, author of *The Golden Tradition: Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe* (1965) and *The War Against the Jews: 1933-1945* (1975), as an authority on Jewish political behavior?

In my biography of Dawidowicz, I argue that through her life we can see how Jewish neoconservatism in postwar America belongs to the long history of diasporic Jewish political culture. Rather than regarding neoconservatism



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Address:  
Lucy S.  
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Kaufmann Concert Hall  
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as a heretical betrayal of Jewish liberalism, I view the rise of Jewish neoconservatives in postwar American politics as one iteration of the encounter of an East European Jewish literary elite with the modern world. This encounter remained an integral aspect of East European Jewish life and in the immigrant settlements of the Diaspora because of the slow pace of modernization and the tenacity of traditional Jewish culture well into the 21st century. In this typological encounter, Jewish intellectuals negotiated and renegotiated their commitments to universalism and Jewish particularism as they became part of modern society. Dawidowicz's political trajectory from left to right mirrored that of her more famous male peers, the "New York intellectuals," such as Lionel Trilling, Daniel Bell, Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, and Nathan Glazer, who emerged as anti-Stalinists in the 1930s, became "cold warriors" in the 1950s, and fostered the rise of neoconservatism in the 1970s. Yet

Dawidowicz's disillusionment with leftist politics and cosmopolitanism and her commitment to neoconservatism and Jewish particularism derived from different sources. Her singular life experience, which took her to and from Europe twice in the fateful period before and after World War II, gave her a European perspective on Jewish politics and insecurity in the 20th century that distinguished her from the New York intellectuals. They would come to respect her distinctiveness in the postwar years.

Reared in the immigrant milieu of interwar New York City, Dawidowicz (then the unmarried Lucy Schildkret) was drawn to Communism as a student at Hunter College in the mid-1930s. Simultaneously, she also received a formal Yiddishist education in the supplementary schools of the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute. In August 1938, she made the bold decision to become a graduate student affiliated with the Vilna (then in Poland) YIVO. There she met, befriended, and studied with an extraordinary group of Jewish intellectuals, historians, and Diaspora Nationalist ideologues in a historic Jewish community. Schildkret fled Poland shortly before the Nazi invasion, returned to New York, and spent the war years working at the New York YIVO. When she went back to Europe to work with Jewish DPs in the American zone of occupied postwar Germany, the prewar world of Polish Jewry had been annihilated. The reality of genocidal Nazi anti-Semitism henceforth informed every aspect of her worldview, to which she soon added anti-Communism.

Schildkret's pre-war friendship with Zelig Kalmanovich, a Diaspora Nationalist who had fled the Soviet Union in the 1920s, her knowledge that YIVO activists Avrom Sutzkever and Shmerke Kaczerginski had been unable to protect Yiddish cultural treasures from the Soviets in occupied Lithuania after the war, and

her 1948 marriage to Szymon Dawidowicz—an anti-Bolshevik Bundist—sealed her anti-Communism. The repression of Jewish culture evidenced by the murders of the Soviet Yiddish cultural elite and the Rudolf Slansky Trial in Czechoslovakia in 1952 affirmed her worst fears about the incompatibility of utopian universalism with Jewish particularism. Working for the American Jewish Committee for two decades after the war, Dawidowicz became a central architect of efforts to dissociate American Jews from left-wing politics that championed universalism.

The political, social, and cultural turmoil of the 1960s challenged the relationship of some New York Jewish intellectuals to liberalism and the Democratic Party. They accused the New Left radicals of being naïve about the threat to American liberalism posed by the Soviet Union and other Communist-inspired regimes. While most New York intellectuals opposed the Vietnam War, many soon became disenchanting with certain New Left groups' use of violence and tactics of "direct democracy," strategies informed by the militant "Black Power" movement. And when some young radicals championed the Palestinians' cause against colonial power and equated post-1967 Zionism with racism, liberal intellectuals of Jewish origin felt threatened as Jews. The New Left's "adversary politics" came to represent an unleashing of social forces powered by an unrestrained "mob" that threatened societal stability at the same time that there was a discernible shift in Holocaust consciousness that emphasized Jewish particularity. The neoconservatives began to defend bourgeois values, such as individual merit and responsibility, traditional authority, and religious practice, as part of a reassessment of the balance between universalism and Jewish particularism.

Defending Israel also became central to their foreign policy positions after the Six-Day War. As Dawidowicz wrote to Irving Howe in 1983 in the wake of the First Lebanon War:

Israel is surrounded by enemies who wish to destroy her. Among the nations, only the United States is friendly. That friendship has continually to be encouraged by American Jews, who are Israel's only loyal and consistent friends. American Jews who care about Israel—and I don't mean the political character of the government, but Israel as the embodiment of Jewish civilization and the Jewish will to survive—have an obligation to support it as it fights for its existence.

Eugy Dawidowicz to Irving Howe, Jan. 6, 1983.

Box 76, folder 7, The Lucy S. Dawidowicz Papers, American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

By the late 1970s, Dawidowicz had become an influential Jewish public intellectual due to the success of *The War Against the Jews: 1933–1945*. Her direct experience with the glory of East European Jewish culture that had come to be celebrated by the New York intellectuals in the postwar years as part of their process of reclaiming Jewish particularism gave Dawidowicz a gravitas they lacked. The book earned her an imprimatur as an authentic interpreter of the European catastrophe. Dawidowicz's personal knowledge of European anti-Semitism authenticated her political suspicions about the Democratic Party's leftward drift. Thus, by the early 1980s Dawidowicz had become a kind of symbolic political oracle among New York's Jewish intellectual elite, which is why she was asked to deliver the "State of World Jewry Address."