

I recently read *From Left to Right: Lucy S. Dawidowicz, the New York Intellectuals, and the Politics of Jewish History* by Nancy Sinkoff ([amzn.to/34txqQh](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B084TXQ9H)) and would like to share a few thoughts. This biography gives an excellent understanding of how a group of pre-World War II liberal Jewish college students morphed into neo-conservatives in the latter part of the 20th century. It just won the 2020 Natan Notable Book Award from the Jewish Book Council (bit.ly/2HHPkP).*

While it focuses on Lucy Dawidowicz (pronounced Da-Vid-Q-Vich), it paints a full picture of the life and times of a group of second generation Jews who were shaped by the Depression and the problems facing Jews in Germany in the nineteen thirties.

On the central theme of the book — the move to the political right — Robert King writes in *Commentary* (bit.ly/2TqKTSt) “Dawidowicz became one of the first of the “neoconservatives,” former liberals and socialists who had turned to the right, having been “mugged by reality,” as Irving Kristol put it. Sinkoff devotes several chapters to this move from left to right. She writes: When Dawidowicz rejected the liberal tilt of American Jewish politics in the 1970s, she did so from within a tradition of Jewish conservatism deeply informed by her experiences in Europe, her lifelong involvement with Yiddish culture, and her commitment to Jewish cultural autonomy. Her life and work challenge the myth of the Jewish liberal “tradition,” whose adherents believe that political liberalism is synonymous with Jewishness and rejection of it a kind of heresy.”

King continues, “The work for which she will be best remembered is her bestselling book *The War Against the Jews 1933–1945*, published in 1975. In it she argued that Hitler’s supreme obsession in World War II was to eradicate the Jews—eliminate them completely, exterminate them physically. True, he wanted Lebensraum for German colonization in Eastern Europe, of course he wanted the wheat of the Ukraine, yes, he wanted the oil of Romania, he wanted a lot. But above all, Dawidowicz argues in *The War Against the Jews 1933–1945*, he wanted to kill every Jew his minions could get their paws on. She remains the leading representative of the “intentionalist” theory of Nazism—Hitler waged war intentionally to annihilate the Jews—in opposition to the “functionalist” theory: that Hitler wanted to gain a lot of things in going to war, and the Jews of Poland

and Eastern Europe just happened to be in the way.”

We all know that nowadays many people seem to be interested in reading only about people, programs, and events that make them feel comfortable politically and culturally. But living in a silo of one view that reinforces a certain outlook doesn't promote understanding of other positions. This is a good book for liberals (like me) to read to understand more about intellectually honest different opinions.

* From the Jewish Book Council press release: “Twice a year, Natan Notable Books recognizes recently-published or soon-to-be-published non-fiction books that promise to catalyze conversations aligned with the themes of Natan’s grant-making: reinventing Jewish life and community for the twenty-first century, shifting notions of individual and collective Jewish identity, the history and future of Israel, understanding and confronting contemporary forms of antisemitism, and the evolving relationship between Israel and world Jewry.

In making the Fall 2020 selection, Natan is recognizing not only Professor Sinkoff’s work of wide-ranging, diligent historical scholarship, which emanates from a deep understanding of a century of Jewish history in America and Eastern Europe; but also the life, work and intellectual contributions of an under-appreciated and nearly-forgotten historian and public intellectual, Lucy S. Dawidowicz (1915–1990).

The parallels between today’s Jewish and American conversations and those that Dawidowicz navigated in the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s are uncanny. The list of subjects she tackled in her scholarship, writing and public speaking could be those of any courageous thinker today: struggling with ways of expressing, retaining, and educating for Jewish particularism in an America that prizes universalism; the place of religion in the American public square and the negotiation of “church-state” relations for particularist communities; the complex relationship between Black people and Jews in America; the increasingly widespread acceptance on the left of criticism of Zionism as “racism” and of Israel as a “genocidal” state; the universalization of both antisemitism and the Holocaust as expressions of “hate” and “bigotry” rather than of specific, intentional animus toward the Jews as a particular group; and the challenges of commemorating, understanding and deriving lessons from the Holocaust.

The Natan Notable Books committee is proud to shine a spotlight on Dawidowicz's steadfastness, mental acuity, practical intelligence, and courage in expressing forthright, controversial — yet highly educated and researched — views. As Sinkoff so brilliantly documents, Dawidowicz's experiences, scholarship, and political evolution not only illuminate the critical issues of 20th century Jewish life, but they also offer guidance for navigating our own complicated times as Jews in America in the 21st century.

Finally, in an era of pithy Tweets and “hot-takes,” when evidence and data often seem in short supply, Sinkoff offers us a model for a life devoted to complexity, rigor, and careful thinking. In naming Sinkoff's work the Natan Notable Book for Fall 2020, Natan is proud to echo the sentiments that Dawidowicz herself offered to a fellow historian in 1975: “I am very grateful to you, for you are among that small company of scholars that take ideas seriously.”