

Lucy Schildkret Dawidowicz (June 16, 1915 – December 5, 1990) was a prominent American [historian](#) and [author](#). She wrote books on modern [Jewish](#) history, in particular books on [the Holocaust](#).^[1]

Life^[edit]

Dawidowicz was born in [New York City](#) as Lucy Schildkret.^[2] Her parents, Max and Victoria (née Ofnaem) Schildkret were secular-minded Jews with little interest in religion. Dawidowicz did not attend a service at a [synagogue](#) until 1938.^[3]

Dawidowicz's first interests were [poetry](#) and [literature](#). She attended [Hunter College](#) from 1932–36 and obtained a [B.A.](#) in English. She went on to study for a [M.A.](#) at [Columbia University](#), but abandoned her studies because of concerns over events in [Europe](#). At the encouragement of her mentor, the historian [Jacob Shatzky](#), Dawidowicz decided to focus on [history](#), especially [Jewish history](#). Dawidowicz made the decision to learn [Yiddish](#), and, at Shatzky's urging, she traveled to [Wilno, Poland](#) (present-day [Vilnius, Lithuania](#)) in 1938 to work at the Yiddish Scientific Institute (known by its Yiddish acronym as the [YIVO](#)). With the help of Shatzky she became a research fellow there.^[3]

Dawidowicz lived in Wilno until August 1939 when she returned to the [United States](#). During her time at the YIVO, she became close to three of the leading scholars there, namely [Zelig Kalmanovich](#), [Max Weinreich](#) and Zalmen Reisen. Weinreich escaped [the Holocaust](#) because he went to New York to establish a branch of the YIVO there before [World War II](#), but Kalmanovich and Reisen perished. Dawidowicz had been close to Kalmanovich and his family, whom she reportedly described as being her real parents.^[3] From 1940 until 1946, Dawidowicz worked as an assistant to a research director at the [New York](#) office of the YIVO. During the war, like most Americans, she was aware of the Nazi persecution of the Jewish people in Europe, although it was not until after the war that she became aware of the full extent of the Holocaust.^[3]

In 1946, Dawidowicz traveled back to Europe where she worked as an aid worker for the [American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee](#) in the various Displaced Persons (DP) camps. During this period, she involved herself in the search for various looted books in [Frankfurt](#) and their retrieval for YIVO.^[3] She realized that the world of Eastern European Jewry that she had encountered and lived among in Poland before the war had been destroyed forever, and all that was left of it were the emaciated survivors she was working with and her own memories. She was involved with providing aid for Holocaust survivors in Europe, where she helped Jewish survivors of the war to re-create schools and libraries, and she recovered vast collections of books seized by the Nazis.^[4]

In 1947, she returned to the U.S. and on January 3, 1948, she married a Polish Jew, Szymon Dawidowicz. Upon her return to the U.S. she worked as a researcher for the novelist [John Hersey](#)'s book *The Wall*, a dramatization of the 1943 [Warsaw Ghetto Uprising](#). From 1948 until 1960,

Dawidowicz worked as a historical researcher for the [American Jewish Committee](#). During the same period, Dawidowicz wrote frequently for [Commentary](#), the [New York Times](#) and the [New York Times Book Review](#).^[3]

An enthusiastic [New York Mets](#) fan, Dawidowicz lived the rest of her life in New York. In 1985, she founded the Fund for the Translation of Jewish Literature from [Yiddish](#) and [Hebrew](#) into [English](#). A fierce [anti-Communist](#), Dawidowicz campaigned for the right of Soviet Jews to emigrate to [Israel](#). She died in New York City in 1990, aged 75, from undisclosed causes.^[4]

Public criticism of and by Dawidowicz

Dawidowicz's major interests were [the Holocaust](#) and [Jewish history](#).^[5] A passionate [Zionist](#),^[6] Dawidowicz believed that had the [Mandate for Palestine](#) been implemented as intended, establishing the Jewish State of [Israel](#) prior to the [Holocaust](#), "the terrible story of six million dead might have had another outcome".^[7] Dawidowicz took an [Intentionalist](#) line on the origins of the Holocaust, contending that, beginning with the [end of World War I](#) on 11 November 1918, Hitler conceived his master plans, and everything he did from then on was directed toward the achievement of his goal,^[8] and that he had "openly espoused his program of annihilation" when he wrote [Mein Kampf](#) in 1924.^[8]

Dawidowicz's conclusions was: "Through a maze of time, Hitler's decision of November 1918 led to [Operation Barbarossa](#). There never had been any ideological deviation or wavering determination. In the end only the question of opportunity mattered."^[8]

In her view, the overwhelming majority of Germans subscribed to the [völkische antisemitism](#) from the 1870s onward, and it was this morbid [antisemitism](#) that attracted support for Hitler and the Nazis. Dawidowicz maintained that from the [Middle Ages](#) onward, German Christian society and culture were suffused with antisemitism and there was a direct link from medieval [pogroms](#) to the [Nazi death camps](#) of the 1940s.^[3]

Citing [Fritz Fischer](#), Dawidowicz argued there were powerful lines of continuity in German history and there was a [Sonderweg](#) (*Special Path*), which led Germany inevitably to [Nazism](#).^[9]

Dawidowicz criticized what she considered to be revisionist historians as incorrect and/or sympathetic to the Nazis, as well as German historians who sought to minimize German complicity in the [Nazi era](#) attempt to annihilate Europe's Jews.^[citation needed]

For Dawidowicz, [National Socialism](#) was the essence of *total evil*, and she wrote that movement was the "... daemon let loose in society, Cain in corporate embodiment."^[10] Regarding foreign policy questions, she sharply disagreed with [A. J. P. Taylor](#) over his book [The Origins of the Second World War](#). In even stronger terms, she condemned the American [neo-Nazi](#) historian [David Hoggan](#) for his book, *War Forced on Germany*, as well as [David Irving](#)'s revisionist [Hitler's War](#), which suggested Hitler was unaware of the Holocaust.

In her view, historians who took a functionalist line on the origins of the Holocaust question were guilty of ignoring their responsibility to historical truth.^[11]

Disputes with Arno Mayer^[edit]

Dawidowicz was a leading critic of the American historian [Arno J. Mayer](#)'s account of the Holocaust in his 1988 book *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?* arguing that Mayer played up anti-communism at the expense of antisemitism as an explanation for the Holocaust.^[12]

Dawidowicz titled her review of *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?* in the October 1989 edition of [Commentary](#) as "Perversions of the Holocaust".^[13] Dawidowicz argued against Mayer that the historical evidence shows that Hitler was not convinced that the war was lost as early as December 1941, and that Mayer's theory is anachronistic.^[14]

Dawidowicz commented that the [Einsatzgruppen](#) had been massacring Jews since the beginning of Operation Barbarossa in June 1941, and that Mayer's claim that the Jews were only surrogate victims due to Germany's inability to defeat the Soviet Union was, in her opinion, rubbish.^[15]

Dawidowicz attacked Mayer for saying that more Jews died at Auschwitz from disease than from mass gassing, and for supporting Holocaust denial by writing that Holocaust survivor testimony was highly unreliable as a historical source.^[16]

Dawidowicz questioned Mayer's motives in listing the works of [Arthur Butz](#) and [Paul Rassinier](#) in his bibliography.^[17]

Dawidowicz ended her review of *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?* by accusing Mayer of excusing German racism, rationalizing the Nazi dictatorship, of portraying Soviet Jews as better off than they were under the Soviet dictatorship, and by presenting the Holocaust as due to reasonable political goals instead of, as she believed, being an ideological decision fueled by fanatical antisemitism.^[18]

Other^[edit]

She accused the British historian [Norman Davies](#) of seeking to whitewash Polish [antisemitism](#) and of being an [anti-Semite](#) himself.^[19]

During the same period, Dawidowicz denounced the work of the philosopher [Ernst Nolte](#), whom she accused of seeking to justify the Holocaust.

In her [The War Against the Jews 1933-1945](#) (1975), she writes that antisemitism has had a long history within [Christianity](#).^[20]

In her opinion, the line of "anti-Semitic descent" from [Martin Luther](#) to [Adolf Hitler](#) was "easy to draw". She wrote that Hitler and Luther were both obsessed by the "demonologized universe" inhabited by Jews, and that the similarities between Luther's anti-Jewish writings and modern anti-Semitism are no coincidence, because they derived from a common history of [Judenhass](#).

Criticism of Dawidowicz

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[Raul Hilberg](#) criticized Dawidowicz for her work 'The War Against The Jews' stating that it builds "largely on secondary sources and conveying nothing whatever that could be called new," and then going on to say in regards to Dawidowicz portrayal of Jewish resistance and resisters that she included "soup ladlers and all others in the ghettos who staved off starvation and despair." Hilberg suggests that "nostalgic Jewish readers [would find here] vaguely consoling words, [which] could be easily clutched by all those who did not wish to look deeper." He then goes on to list over twenty key authors on the subjects that Dawidowicz covers, that she did not use as reference in her own work. Hilberg ends on the subject of Dawidowicz stating "To be sure, Dawidowicz has not been taken all that seriously by historians".^[21]

Books by Dawidowicz

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Her books include [*The War Against the Jews 1933-1945*](#), her best-selling 1975 history of the Holocaust, and [*The Holocaust and the Historians*](#), a study of Holocaust [historiography](#).

A collection of her essays relating to Jewish history, *What Is the Use of Jewish History?*, was published posthumously in 1992. Dawidowicz wrote *The Golden Tradition: Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe* to document Jewish civilization in Eastern Europe prior to its destruction during the Holocaust.^[22]

In *On Equal Terms: Jews in America, 1881-1981*, Dawidowicz wrote an account of Jews in the United States that reflected an appreciation for her American citizenship, which saved her from being a victim herself in the Holocaust.^[23]