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When the World Stood Aside – The Allied Reaction to Jan Karski’s Report from Hell

by

Frank JACOB

Introduction

When historians look at the Syrian case today, where thousands of people were killed, they are reminded of the case of Jan Karski, who told the Allied powers in 1942 about the destruction of the European Jews. When the Obama Administration was discussing whether it is worse to be killed by gas or by bullets, one was reminded of the Allied discussion in winter 1942/43 regarding whether these reports from a Polish non-Jew were real or if he had overestimated the killings in Poland. Today we are able to see again what will happen when the world stands aside; when political considerations are determining the fate of innocent people, including women and children.

In 1942 Karski tried to persuade the Allied powers to believe him; he begged for their help for the sake of humanity. The destruction of the European Jews was an ongoing process since the Germans had started their Barbarossa campaign against the Soviet Union in June 1941. A lot of prominent people, such as politicians, intellectuals, artists and religious leaders, had been informed by the Polish officer of the underground army, but even if they carefully listened to his reports, they did nothing. In 1944 Karski published his experiences in his well-known book *Story of a Secret State*, of which 400,000 copies were sold almost instantly, even if it might have been censored by the British and American administrations as well (Karski once told this one of his students at Georgetown University). “We did not know about the Jewish fate in Europe” is therefore just the alibi of a world which definitely knew what happened. Even if one didn’t know the exact numbers of Jews killed; that they were systematically killed by the Germans was known.

In Karski’s own words, “the human race experienced a second fall of mankind”. Alexander J. Groth explained it very simply, because for “Hitler to have succeeded in his policy of murder ... he needed the acquiescence and assistance of a world external to his control.” Consequently, the “man possessed by the demon of destruction, a man bent on violence, war, and conquest” was simply tolerated by the world community too long and this community was not eager enough to rescue the dying Jewish population of Europe. It was not willing to rescue the Jews before the Second World War; a fact traceable by analyzing the Allied policies before the outbreak and during the war. The governments of several countries

were not willing to disburden Jewish emigration as a consequence of political reasons and an existing anti-Semitism. The Evian conference proved to be what Carole Fink has called “a failure to solve European Jewry’s desperate plight.” While Raul Hilberg has provided a rather short discussion of the Allied position due to his first opus *The Destruction of the European Jews* in 1961, he went on to clarify this perspective in his writings on *Perpetrators, Victims, [and] Bystanders* of the Holocaust. Walter Laqueur discussed the issue of silence with regard to the Allied reaction to the Holocaust again in 1986 (*Breaking The Silence*) and in 1989, Michael R. Marrus edited volume on the Bystanders of the Holocaust was published. However, there still seems to be the need to deal with role of the Allied Powers and their influence on the censorship of the Holocaust during the Second World War, a fact that is underlined by Michael Fleming’s recent publication of *Auschwitz, the Allies and the Censorship of the Holocaust* (CUP, 2014). Especially the research on Jan Karski, as one of those who delivered reports on the cruelties that happened in Europe, will also help to understand why his depictions of the Holocaust were not received and discussed in a sufficient way.

The following paper will try to answer the pressing question we have all asked ourselves more than once: Why did the world stand aside? Why did the Allied powers not help the Jewish population in several possible ways? How were the Allied politicians able to sleep, knowing about the Jewish fate in Poland? To answer these questions, I will first highlight the work of Karski in London and Washington to show that the Allied powers and their decision-makers knew about the Holocaust in Poland. Next, I will try to highlight the different reasons of the Allied powers and the international Zionist community for not engaging significantly with the Jewish question. While this will explain their positions and motivations or reasons, it should never offer an excuse for the lethargy of the Allied powers in dealing with the death of millions of men, women and children.

Karski reports

Jan Karski was a non-Jewish eyewitness to the things that happened in the death camps, especially Belzec. He had seen how Jews were killed by bullets, by electricity and by gas. He was ordered to travel to London to report on the Polish underground state and the Jewish situation. He had met the Jewish elders of the ghetto of Warsaw. Due to this, his report had the needed authenticity to persuade even the last disbeliever. Karski left Poland, crossed Germany, France and Spain, arrived at Gibraltar and was brought to London by plane. There

he informed the Polish government in exile and the British government. On November 25th he told his story to A. L. Easterman, the political secretary of the British section of the Jewish World Congress. He described the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto, the deportations and the killings he had witnessed. Karski repeated this report many times to other politicians and influential persons. He described this process as a repeating pain:

It took a lot of time to produce my report about all aspects of the political underground and the situation in Poland. The ease of finally being a free man in a foreign country did not last for long – just as long as I had to start writing my reports [for the Polish government]. From this moment onwards I felt like all my thoughts and feelings returned to Poland. And this remained the same during my future work. Every time when I was occupied by reporting my knowledge about the happenings in Poland, I inevitably felt like living through these events again, as I entered the atmosphere of the Polish underground, which was affected by corpses, and became hunted by the Gestapo again.

Karski reported that between July and September 250,000 Jews had been killed in the ghetto of Warsaw and he provided details of the methods for mass killing which were used by the Germans in the camps. He also reported about a Polish pamphlet, which stated that by the end of 1942 one million Jews had been killed in Poland. Silverman requested a declaration of the Allied powers to save the Jewish population by threatening the German perpetrators. The Polish ambassador Count Raczynski supported this request, but the British officials, like Frank Roberts of the Central Department of the Foreign Office, were doubtful, because they were not sure of the authenticity of Karski's reports and did not know if the Jewish world community was interested in a broader publicity with regard to this topic. Despite this, the British section of the Jewish World Congress published a bulletin "Destruction of the European Jews" which stated that two million Jews had already been killed in Eastern Europe. The bulletin also named Treblinka, Belzec and Sobibor as death camps, where the Germans systematically killed the Jewish population.

Due to this and to Karski's ongoing reports to the political, cultural and religious elites of Great Britain, the news about the situation of the Jews under German occupation spread. General Sikorski ordered Karski to report the whole truth, and the officer did. He finally was ordered to the United States, where he repeated his reports to ministers like Stimson, Berle, and Biddle, and even President Roosevelt "wished to receive detailed and exact information about every topic" (Karski). With regard to all this detailed information – Karski's report was not the only one the Allied powers received – it seems strange that almost nothing happened to change the fate of the European Jews. But why was there almost no reaction?

Allied reaction

On December 13th 1942 Goebbels noted in his diary that, “[t]he question of Jewish persecution in Europe is being given top news priority by the English and the Americans ... At bottom, however, I believe that both English and the Americans are happy that we are exterminating the Jewish riff-raff.” For sure, the Germans could believe that this was exactly the case, because even if the Allied powers knew about the systematic killings in Eastern Europe they did not seem willing to intervene. Historians like Breitman, Wyman, Laqueur, and recently Flemming have found out that London and Washington had been conscious of the events since 1941 and knew about the mass killings, because even the press in both countries had reported about the German measures against the Jewish population in detail in December 1942. The only Allied reaction was the London Declaration of December 17th, 1942 in which the powers condemned the German policy. If the Jews had seen this declaration as a spark of hope, they were disappointed, because no action followed.

While Polish citizens were dying in gas chambers, General Sikorski negotiated with the British about the Polish-Soviet post-war borders. He wrote a memorandum for Eden which “seemed to represent a more rigid attitude on the part of the Polish Government” (Anthony Eden to Sir Cecil Dormer: Dispatch (Extracts), London, January 22nd, 1943, F.O. 371. C910/258/55, quoted in Antony Polonsky, ed. *The Great Powers and the Polish Question, 1941-1945* (London: LSE, 1976), 115-116), but he did not request direct actions from the British to save the Polish Jews. The Polish government was not able to apply pressure to save its own population; this was not a consequence of the anti-Semitism which had been part of Polish history as well – one could mention the first Madagascar Plan of 1937 at this point, but a tremendous consequence of British pressure on the Polish government in exile. However Anti-Semitism determined the British and American position as well.

Furthermore, the Allied powers were not able to intervene directly in 1941 and 1942 because these two years were the worst in the whole war from an Allied perspective. After the loss of France in 1940 Hitler had declared war against the Soviet Union in 1941 and the Barbarossa Plan seemed to be successful. While Stalin’s troops had to retreat, the British were bombed and the air battle for England had begun. Furthermore, cooperation between the Allied powers was not yet working well, because – as Karski stated later – “[f]rom 1941 to 1942 Stalin may have feared that the Allies would conclude a separate peace with Germany.” This disadvantageous situation led to “[t]he most widely invoked defense of Allied attitude in the face of the Nazi extermination of European Jews” (Groth); namely, “that the Allied

leaders wanted – and implicitly needed – to concentrate their efforts on the defeat of Nazi Germany” (Groth). The support or rescue of the European Jews would have needed resources which were seen to be more important on the front line, where they could be used to fight the Wehrmacht. Roosevelt, who had to fight against the Japanese forces before entering the war in Europe, and Churchill, who had recently won the literary fight against the Germans on the beaches, the landing grounds, the fields, the streets and hills, wanted to end German rule before even thinking about helping the Jewish population of Eastern Europe.

Next to this pragmatic point the Allied powers feared that they would support the German propaganda by overemphasizing the Jewish question. In Germany the propaganda claimed the bombardment of their cities to be a “Jewish war against civilians”. Due to this, the Allied powers were sensitive about naming the Jews or their fate too openly while fighting against the Germans. They did not want to be seen as advocates of Jewry. They should not be a central topic of the Allied war campaign, not even after 1942 when the public knew about the Jewish fate, because especially in the United States a lot of the common people were not interested in the fortune of Jews in Eastern Europe. They fought the war against the Japanese and German aggressors; not for the Jewish victims.

Another aspect was World Zionism. If the Zionist Community had asked for a more intense approach to the Jewish question and a stronger attempt to save the Jews in Eastern Europe, the Allied powers would have been forced to negotiate with the Nazis, which could have been fatal in two ways. First, the Zionists would have seemed like controllers of the Allied powers, maybe leading to another anti-Semitic wave in the Allied countries; and secondly, Stalin would have feared a separate peace between the Western allies and Germany in the case of such negotiations. Furthermore, the World Committee did not expect such consequences for the Jewish population. They knew that there would be a catastrophe, but the dimension of the Holocaust was even bigger than the expected suffering. Additionally, from the Zionists’ perspective a public discussion about a large number of victims of Nazi rule in Europe would have been adverse to the Zionists’ ambitions with regard to the foundation of a Jewish nation state in Israel. To put it simply; why should the allies be willing to create a Jewish nation state if almost all European Jews had been killed in Nazi death camps? As a consequence, the Zionist organizations were not as empathic as they could have been with regard to the death of the greater part of the Jewish community in Europe.

Consequences

The situation for the Jews in Eastern Europe did not change. Until the liberation of the last survivors in 1945 more than six million Jews were killed while the world stood aside watching. The British and American politicians and the public community knew about what was happening but they did not do anything to save the lives of the Jewish population of Europe. Some people could not stand this lethargy. Szymon Zygielbojm, the Jewish deputy to the Polish National Council in London, committed suicide on May 12th, 1943 to protest against the Allied policy of non-intervention. In his suicide note he stated that the whole human race was responsible for the events. Not only the German perpetrators, but even the Allied bystanders were guilty. The governments of Britain and the United States were not willing to become agents of the Jewish people who suffered in a way words alone will never be able to describe.

With regard to these facts, Jan Karski was a messenger who brought the necessary information. He provided the reasons for the actions, he had the proof of the cruel rumors with him and he had seen what had happened to the Jewish population. But he failed. He was not able to persuade the Allied powers, whose representatives were possibly unwilling to be persuaded. For Karski himself, the situation must have been hopeless. He described the worst things that could happen on earth but no one was willing to save the lives of the innocents.

It seems ironic that the world community is facing a similar situation today. Again people are being killed by their government. Again the world community has detailed information. Again political considerations, geostrategic ideas and concerns of foreign policy are determining the fate of countless people, who are just suffering. Again the world is standing aside and watching what will happen next. If history should repeat itself, we will have to answer the questions of our descendants; why did we not do something? We cannot say we did not know about the events, or even that we did not know about the consequences. Due to the history of the Holocaust, Jan Karski and the destruction of the European Jews, we know what will happen if the world community is not willing to intervene for the lives of suppressed and humiliated people. The history of Jan Karski's report from hell and the reactions to this report are very important in the present day as well, because they should remind us of the failures of the past: the failures of nonexistent solicitousness and nonexistent action.

