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Jan Karski, *Story of a Secret State: My Report to the World*. Washington: Georgetown Univ. Press, 2013. Pp. xxxi, 414. ISBN 978-1-58901-983-6.

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“Memoir,” “World War II,” “Holocaust,” “Intelligence,” and “Espionage” were the descriptors assigned to *Story of a Secret State* when it was first published sixty-nine years ago. It was a bestseller and Book of the Month Club selection in the midst of the war. Its author, Jan Karski, the alias of Jan Koziński, born in Łódź in 1914, trained in the Polish artillery and the lower levels of the diplomatic service. Called up as a junior officer when the Germans massed on the Polish frontier, he never got to fire a shot. After the Third Reich’s Blitzkrieg invasion and the Soviet Union’s advance from the east, he survived both Soviet and German prisoner of war camps. This means he barely missed the NKVD massacre of some four thousand Polish officers in the Katyn Forest. He also escaped, with a friendly heave-ho, from a German freight car transporting him to another POW camp. While working as a courier for the Polish government-in-hiding, he was captured by the Gestapo in Czechoslovakia on his way to France; he was tortured by Gestapo and SS personnel and tried to commit suicide to avoid further brutal interrogation and certain execution. He was rescued from the SS prison-hospital by partisans, who told him “We were given two orders. The first one was to save you at any price; the other, to shoot you in case we did not succeed” (366).

That was just the beginning of a harrowing underground government career that earned Karski Yad Vashem honors as one of the “Righteous among the Nations,” and, posthumously, the “Presidential Medal of Freedom,” awarded by Barack Obama, and the second Wallenberg Prize for unmatched heroism and integrity (1991). The Wallenberg medal is bestowed in the wishful belief that “one person can make a difference.”

In a very grave sense, however, Karski failed utterly in the astounding assignment that brought him to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Anthony Eden in England and President Franklin Roosevelt in the United States. His mission, undertaken at the behest of Władysław Sikorski, Prime Minister of the Polish government in exile, and frantic representatives of the Polish Jews, was to report what he had seen with his own eyes: the German rape of the Polish people, who refused to cooperate with an occupational government that regarded them as serfs, and the systematic genocide that the German civil and military authorities were perpetrating against the Jews. Karski volunteered, at risk of his life, to observe in person the horrific abuse and murder. At this time, most people simply could not believe the (accurate) reports and rumors of such atrocities that reached the rest of the world. Karski saw starving men, women, and children shot for sport in the Warsaw Ghetto. He entered a concentration camp at Izbica Lubelska. This filthy collection site, an annex of the death camp Belzec, was itself the scene of starvation, beatings, and killings. The Germans and their Ukrainian staffs packed barely living survivors of Izbica into freight cars for transport to the killing camps. The railway car floors were thickly covered with quicklime, a caustic chemical agent. Karski describes the “chaos, corruption, and panic” he observed while disguised in the uniform of what he calls an “Estonian” camp guard.

The Polish Underground Government hoped to impel, provoke, or embarrass the Allies to do something, anything, to impede or halt the killing of the Jews (and many others) in Nazi-occupied Europe, especially in the highly efficient, industrialized death camps of Poland. It chose Karski, for his linguistic skills and photographic memory, to journey from Warsaw to London via Berlin, Brussels, Paris, Barcelona, and Algiers (October–November 1942). Having had several of his teeth smashed out and fingers broken while he was in captivity, he now traveled with a cyanide pill and microfilm in a razor-handle; the word “hero” does little justice to this modest witness capable of self-deprecating humor.

Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, herself a refugee from Nazi- and Soviet-occupied Czechoslovakia, provides the book's Foreword, and Timothy Snyder, the eminent author of *Bloodlands*,<sup>1</sup> contributes a Biographical Essay of Jan Karski. There are also notes, a glossary, a bibliography, one grossly inadequate map of Karski's confusing travels in central Europe, and a brief two-page but personally revealing Afterword by Zbigniew Brzezinski.

*Story of a Secret State* appeared in November 1944, its author having previously served in Free Poland's covert propaganda organization (e.g., 196). Long out of print, Karski's exciting but self-effacing account of his brave service to the Free Polish "Secret State" in many capacities and missions has not lost its freshness. The text understandably exaggerates Polish unity in the face of Nazi terror—no collaborators here, or only a few tried and executed by the "secret government" if found guilty. However, we must be cognizant that the memoir's entirely admirable author had motives beyond recording his own experiences. He intended to win sympathy in the West for the distant and abandoned Poles and to stir the Allies to meaningful action on behalf of the brutalized people of an expropriated nation. In both regards, the book was a failure. Audiences abroad could not credit Karski's eyewitness accounts of the crimes committed against his countrymen by fiendish German gangs of thieves and sadists, in particular, their plan to exterminate a religious minority to the last child. Thus Jewish and Catholic Poles continued to suffer humiliation, robbery, torture, and death by gassing or bullets. The magnitude of these horrors is such that even now, despite millions of testimonies, documents, and photographs, Holocaust deniers live among us.<sup>2</sup> Karski, shaken by what he had seen and overwhelmed by his mission, was distraught at his inability to persuade the Allies to change their strategy in time to save millions of innocents.

The question of Catholic Poles' complicity in the macabre German "Final Solution" of the Jewish question remains a contentious one. Tadeusz Piotrowski<sup>3</sup> has argued that all Polish groups—Jews included—both committed and endured treasonous and criminal acts. This is a complicated issue to judge, given a context in which all non-German life and property were considered cheaper than bullets. But no one denies the determination and moral probity of Jan Karski, this good man who "tried to stop the holocaust."<sup>4</sup>

Karski remained in the United States after the war, while yet another generation of Poles endured the cruel governance inflicted by their Russian conquerors. The Soviets and their minions imprisoned, among many others, the top sixteen representatives of the Independent Polish Government, who had survived in hiding during nearly six years of Nazi oppression. These men were Karski's friends, superiors, and fellow freedom-fighters (or "terrorists and bandits," from the German Occupational Authorities' perspective). Poland, Karski realized before his friends did, had lost the war, no matter who won. At the Teheran Conference (28 November–1 December 1943), Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill acceded to their ally Josef Stalin's territorial demands, perhaps because, in this instance, they had no choice.

Karski did not return home for more than thirty years. Ironically, he lost his standing as a spokesman for the dead republic and its government, for three reasons: first, the violent Communist takeover of Poland; second, outrageous Soviet-inspired slurs implying that he, a Polish Catholic aristocrat, was an anti-Semite; and third, new and dispiriting disclosures about the extent of Polish complicity in the Final Solution. Forgotten in the decades following the war, Karski retreated in bitterness from the public eye and became a US citizen in 1954 (under his pseudonym); he earned a doctoral degree and became an influential professor of International Studies at Georgetown University (1953–84). The French filmmaker Claude Lanzmann interviewed Karski for his 1985 Holocaust documentary, *Shoah*; though Lanzmann made only selective use of the interviews in the finished film, the viewer can clearly see the suffering of a ravaged soul.

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1. Subtitle: *Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (NY: Basic Books, 2010); review at *MiWSR* 2011–023.

2. See Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (NY: Free Press, 1993).

3. *Poland's Holocaust: Ethnic Strife, Collaboration with Occupying Forces and Genocide in the Second Republic, 1918–1947* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998).

4. To quote the straightforward wording of the subtitle of E. Thomas Wood and Stanislaw M. Jankowski's *Karski: How One Man Tried to Stop the Holocaust* (NY: Wiley, 1994); this biography complements Karski's memoir with significant information and arrièrè-pensées unpublishable or unknown at the time of Karski's writing.

The man had told the truth and the world had continued as before, Germans killing Jews in death camps and Allied bombers flying over Auschwitz en route to targets “more valuable” to the war effort.

Karski died in 2000, but the republication of his richly annotated *Report to the World* will keep his memory alive. He was a shrewd observer with ties to friends and active resistance workers at all levels. His heartbreaking efforts to alter Polish and Jewish history are indictments of both Allied complacency and the eager, order-obeying perpetrators across Europe who joined in crimes against humanity at Majdanek, Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, and other ghastly depots of death, with their unspeakable “shooting galleries” and gassing facilities. Anyone seeking an accurate picture of the terrifying debasement of life in Nazi-occupied Poland should read this book.