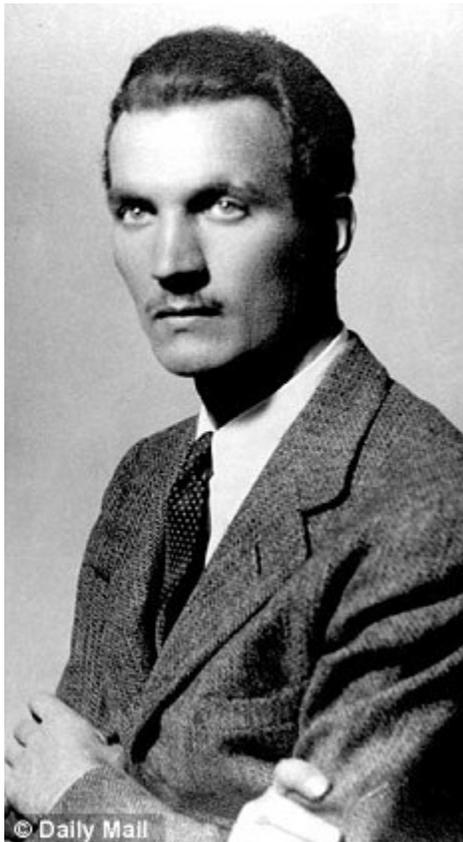


MailOnline

Eyewitness to genocide: He was first to warn of the Holocaust but no one believed him. How many lives could have been saved?

By [Tony Rennell](#)

Last updated at 10:13 PM on 4th May 2011



Testimony: Despite telling London and Washington, no one believe Jan Karski's claims of genocide

The Polish Resistance fighter nervously crawled through the dank underground tunnel in desperate wartime Warsaw. But Jan Karski was not an escaper on his way to freedom. Quite the opposite.

When he emerged into the sunlight of a summer's day in August 1942, he was inside an unimaginable hell-hole — the walled-up Jewish ghetto in Nazi-occupied Poland's capital.

He had crossed, he would recall with horror, from 'the world of the living to the world of the dead'.

The patrician young man — a devout Catholic and a high-flying diplomat before the war — had gone there of his own free will. He was smuggled inside to see the Warsaw Ghetto for himself, an eyewitness to the Holocaust long before that epithet was widely used or the full extent of Hitler's genocidal ambitions grasped.

What he saw that day would make him one of the first outside observers to witness Hitler's evil plan to exterminate the Jews in action.

His intention was to report his findings to a world that was sceptical of rumours that such a massive atrocity was really happening under its nose.

Sadly, not much notice was taken. When the brave and resourceful Karski escaped to the West and, drawing on his photographic memory, told his gruesome story in London and Washington, he was greeted with polite interest . . . but also disbelief.

There was none of the outrage he expected his account to stir up. His pleas that the Allies should take strong action — such as warning the German people that they would collectively be held responsible for the atrocities sanctioned by their leaders — were ignored.

Saving the Jews from genocide was not made an official Allied war aim. A moment in history when something just might have been done to halt or at least slow a massive crime against humanity came and went.



Jews from the Warsaw ghetto surrender to German soldiers after the uprising

Karski went, too, from a brief interval of celebrity into the relative obscurity of a university professorship in the post-war United States.

But now, 70 years after his failed attempt to unmask Nazi Germany's genocidal secret, his exploits are being recognised. A book by him is out today — a reprint of the one he wrote in 1944, now viewed as a classic insider's account of the Resistance in occupied Europe.

And there are plans for a film of his life. The producer of Oscar-winning *The King's Speech* is reported to have acquired the film rights, with Ralph Fiennes, who played a brutal SS officer in the Holocaust epic *Schindler's List*, tipped to play Karski.

A decade after his death in 2000, the former army lieutenant from the city of Lodz in central Poland — real name Jan Kozielski — is about to reclaim his place in history.

After all the harrowing descriptions of Holocaust horrors there have been over the years from survivors of Auschwitz, Belsen and Ravensbruck, Karski's vivid account of what he saw back in 1942 is still deeply moving. We feel his shock and incredulity that this could really be happening in 20th century 'civilised' Europe.

Karski was used to suffering. The Polish people had been brutally repressed by the Nazis since the invasion of their country had started the war in 1939. Millions of Poles had also been forced into exile in Siberia by Stalin as part of the Soviet leader's

land-grabbing pact with Hitler as the two monsters divided Poland between them.



Karski spoke to Anthony Eden, pictured, who took the claims seriously - but action was not taken

After Germany and Russia invaded Poland, Karski narrowly escaped Stalin's Katyn massacre of the Polish officer corps — and began his remarkable wartime career in the Polish underground.

He joined the embryo Home Army, Europe's first anti-Nazi resistance, and was employed as a courier dodging in and out of the country.

Once, he was captured and severely tortured by the Gestapo. Recuperating in hospital, he was smuggled out by the resistance and spirited away. The Polish government-in-exile then gave him the mission of finding out what was really going on in German-occupied Poland and reporting on it to the outside world.

Now the 25-year-old arranged to visit the Warsaw ghetto, guided by members of the Jewish underground through a secret tunnel that ran from the basement of a house outside the wall to a basement on the other side.

That day as he stepped out into its narrow, rubble-strewn streets the entire population of around 400,000 seemed to be crammed into the streets. 'There was hardly a square yard of empty space,' he recorded. 'Everywhere there was hunger, misery, the atrocious stench of decomposing bodies, the pitiful moans of dying children, the desperate cries and gasps of a people struggling for life against impossible odds.'

But, as he shuffled through the streets of the Ghetto, disguised in ragged clothes and wearing a Star of David, he could see with his own eyes that what was being done to the Jews was even worse than he feared. He watched appalled as 14-year-old boys of the Hitler Youth — 'all round, rosy-cheeked and blue-eyed' — hunted down human beings and killed them for sport.

One of them took aim with a pistol and fired through the window of a house. From inside came the terrible cry of someone in agony. The boy shouted with joy and his friend clapped him on the back in congratulation. Here was a place where every semblance of decency, dignity and humanity has gone.

'Everyone seemed enveloped in a haze of disease and death,' recalled Karski. 'We passed a miserable replica of a park, a

little square in which a patch of grass had managed to survive. Mothers huddled closed together, nursing withered infants.

'Children, every bone in their skeletons showing through their taut skins, played. "They play before they die," my guide said, his voice breaking with emotion.

'I don't see many old people,' he whispered to the Jewish guide. 'Do they stay inside all day?' 'No,' said his guide, in a voice that seemed to issue from the grave. 'Don't you understand the German system yet? Those still capable of any effort are used for forced labour. The others are murdered by quota. First come the sick and aged, then the unemployed. They intend to kill us all.'



Jan Karski, pictured here at UN in 2000, will now have his story made into a film. He died in the same year that this picture was taken

To ram home the point, the Jewish underground arranged for him to infiltrate one of the places where this 'final solution' was happening. He entered a forest camp wearing the borrowed uniform of one of the Ukrainian guards, to find 'a dense, pulsating, throbbing noisy human mass' held behind barbed wire, starved, stinking, many of them half-insane from hunger, thirst and fear.

They were Jews from Warsaw and had been brought 120 miles crammed into cattle trucks. Here they were stripped of all their belongings before being whipped back onto the trucks, which Karski could see had now been lined with quicklime and chlorine. 'The whole camp reverberated with a tremendous volume of sound, in which hideous groans and screams mingled with gunshots, curses and bellowed commands.'

Once the doors were slammed shut, the deadly, flesh-consuming lime would do its work as the train with its screaming and dying cargo slowly made its way to the death camp at Belzec, where those still alive would be gassed.

Karski saw sights of brutality and suffering 'that I, if I lived to be a hundred, I would never forget'. For days after fleeing the camp he could not stop vomiting.

He was not to know that what he had seen was just a partial glimpse of the full horror — that at Auschwitz, Treblinka and Sobibor as well as Belzec, the Third Reich was revving up its killing machine to an industrial, conveyor-belt scale. But as he struggled to take in horrors beyond civilised imagining, he knew many people would choose not believe him. 'They will think I

exaggerate or invent. But I saw it and it is not exaggerated or invented. I have no proof, no photographs. All I can say is that I saw it, and it is the truth.'

His escape to the West was an epic in itself. Ingeniously, he had a dentist inject a drug to make his jaw swell visibly so he would have an excuse not to be drawn into a conversation with policemen or fellow train passengers. His teeth, smashed by the Gestapo, added authenticity to his condition.

On forged travel documents, he passed through Berlin, the wolf's lair itself, and German-occupied Brussels and Paris. Then it was a hard trek over the Pyrenees to Spain, a boat to Gibraltar and a plane to London. He had documentary evidence — reports of others — on a roll of microfilm, which was welded inside a hollowed-out house key that he never let out of his sight.

In London, he was taken to see the British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, who seemed sympathetic. After hearing Karski out, Eden seemed convinced that a policy of extermination — as opposed to random atrocities — was being carried out in Germany. He subsequently told the House of Commons that 'those responsible for these crimes shall not escape retribution'.

Karski had a dentist inject a drug to make his jaw swell visibly so he would have an excuse not to be drawn into a conversation with policemen or fellow train passengers

The MPs rose to their feet and stood in silence as a mark of respect for the suffering Jews — but there the action stopped. There would be no targeted bombing, no air-drop leafleting of Germany to warn the populace that they could be the ones held to account, nothing to make the Third Reich re-think.

Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda chief, was openly contemptuous. Jews were calling down Old Testament curses on his head and the Fuhrer's 'but so far I haven't noticed any effect on me,' he bragged.

A disappointed Karski now took his account of the atrocities he had witnessed to Washington, where one of the first eminent men he met, a justice of the Supreme Court, told him bluntly: 'I am unable to believe you.'

That the man was himself a Jew horrified Karski, but it was not unusual. There were Jews on both sides of the Atlantic who clung to the belief that reports like Karski's were exaggerated because contemplating the truth was too horrible.

In the same way, Jews in Europe had refused to grasp what was happening to them even as they were being rounded up. It is one of history's awful ironies that the first Holocaust-deniers were the victims themselves.

So why did Karski's crucial message fail to hit home? The answer is that everyone of importance to whom he related his story had an agenda that was different from his.

His Resistance superiors in Warsaw had sent him on the perilous trip to London for a specific purpose — to tell the Polish government-in-exile and the Allied leaders precisely how thoroughly the Resistance was organised and how well it was operating clandestinely despite the German occupation. (Hence the otherwise inexplicable title of his book, *Story Of A Secret State*.)

It has always been a vexed question of what the Allies knew about the Holocaust and when, what they might have done and why they stayed their hand. They waited until the incontrovertible truth emerged with the liberation of the camps — and by then it was too late

The fate of the Warsaw Jews was not the prime issue for them. This was Karski's personal and heart-felt addition to the story but his visit to the ghetto and the death camp took up just two of his book's 33 chapters. Much of the rest was a blueprint of how to run a successful underground movement — and it was this that those he reported to seemed more interested in.

When he briefed Franklin D. Roosevelt at the White House, Karski barely had a chance to mention genocide as the president quizzed him on partisan activity, techniques for sabotage and so on. He was curious about 'the very climate and atmosphere of underground work and the minds of the men engaged in it', Karski recalled.

He gave Roosevelt the sort of first-hand dare-devilry that Allied leaders — Churchill, for example — always revelled in. There

was no more than a passing reference to 'the practices against the Jews'.

Karski was frustrated but, as he said years later: 'I was a young man, a little guy, merely a courier. I had no leverage talking to these powerful men.' The problem was that those men of power had agendas that superseded his.

A major difficulty with his report and another reason for it being sidelined was that it impinged on their global politics. It detailed how a free Polish state was already in existence to take over the running of the country once the Germans were ousted and doubted if it would be able to co-operate with Soviet-backed partisans.

This assessment did not sit happily with Allied leaders, who were even then doing a backdoor deal with Stalin — now their much-needed ally against Hitler — to hand a post-war Poland over to his sphere of influence.

Karski, deeply anti-communist and determined that a free Poland would emerge from the wreckage of the war, was in danger of upsetting their carefully constructed apple cart for the future of eastern Europe.

Poor Karski. He had two big warnings to give to the world — about Hitler's slaughter of the Jewish people and Stalin's evil intentions towards Poland. On both he was right, on both he was ignored, while others played politics with millions of lives.

It has always been a vexed question of what the Allies knew about the Holocaust and when, what they might have done and why they stayed their hand. They waited until the incontrovertible truth emerged with the liberation of the camps — and by then it was too late.

If only, one has to wonder, they had heeded the brave Karski's words — 'I saw it, and it is the truth' — something could have been done to stop the extermination of six million.

Story Of A Secret State: My Report To The World by Jan Karski is published by Penguin Hardback Classics today at £20. © 1999 Jan Karski. To order a copy for £16.99 (incl p&p), call 0845 155 0720.

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"Karski had a dentist inject a drug to make his jaw swell visibly . . ." Yeah, right. - Peter, Macclesfield, 05/5/2011 05:10 You are absolutely right. It was not a drug but a chemical compound, not unlike Mannitol, which does not harm the body, but draws water to itself. It is hygroscopic. The body itself will then naturally get rid of the chemical compound over a period of time. So

yes, you were right it is not a drug. But your premise was wrong. My mother was a liaison girl during the war in Poland. received the cross of valour for bravery, and she assisted Karski, She was attached to the HQ Polish Home Army at the time, In the ORBIS company. She told me many years ago that she had accompanied Karski for a part of the way. And yes, he had a badly swollen jaw and could not talk. Over to you, Peter.

- George, Stansted, 05/5/2011 11:44

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I have heard first hand the harrowing stories of Auschwitz from a Channel Islander where he was a prisoner for 5 years, and was shipped there with Eddie Chapman who became a double agent. Another friend of mine escaped Poland with his friend and was shot in the back on the Spanish Pyrenees border, his father was a prominent Banker and is buried next to Chopin in Paris (his Heart was interred in a column in Warsaw, which was a symbol of resistance). Perhaps the most profound summary was given to me by the late Dr, Professor Aime Van Santen (Molitor) Prof linguistics, Dr Philosophy who said " the Germans were 'Guilt Ridden' they took on this mantle by the things they did, a lot of falsehoods were told about the Germans in the first World War that were, not true but were believed in the second World War the same tales were told but were TRUE and WORSE.

- George, Netherlands, 05/5/2011 10:02

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Hitler youth wandering around the Warsaw ghetto ? That part of the story is doubtful.

- Mark, Hildesheim, 05/5/2011 09:55

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Excellent article - thank you. It is true the Allies knew exactly what was going on in Auschwitz as early as 1940, when Witold Pilecki deliberately got himself arrested and after 2 days torture by the Nazis was sent there. He smuggled out detailed reports of what was going on to Polish resistance which was in turn passed on to London and Washington. Operations to disrupt what was known to have been going on in Auschwitz and other camps would have cost very little in terms of manpower and resources. We will never know how many lives a single bomb on the railway track to Auschwitz could have at least delayed or even saved.

- Jeremy, London, England, 05/5/2011 09:10

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While it would have been great to have done something the simple reality is that we could have done nothing at the time, we didn't have the resources and at the time Jan Karski told his story we were still 2 years away from Overlord. This is a very interesting what if and in a world where there truly was some form of benevolent god or something then it would have been achieved. However it just couldn't have been at the time, the focus was to liberate the WHOLE of Europe from the Nazis, any effort to realistically do something about this would have severely hindered the greater plan, I don't mean to be insensitive but war is about numbers and 6 million Jews, Gypsies, Poles and others is less than the hundreds of millions under enforced Nazi rule. Would I have liked to have seen the holocaust stopped before it got into full swing, yes of course, but not at the expense of us losing the war or extending it for years, years in which Hitler would've developed his nukes and jets etc

- Dave, Birmingham, 05/5/2011 08:59

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People have been trying to talk about Stalin's mass murders for almost ninety years. But we never hear about them. How about an article on the "Holodomor" - Stalin's deliberate starvation of 11 million Ukrainians ?

- Peter West, Orihuela, Spain, 05/5/2011 07:30

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