

Marcin Czepelak: Holocaust – the crime the world ignored

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It was 80 years ago. On a cold day of 20 January 1942, a group of fifteen representatives of Third Reich authorities and high functionaries of the SS convened for a meeting in Wannsee, near Berlin, under the leadership of Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Security Police, Security Service (SD) and the Reich Security Main Office. The main point on the agenda was to coordinate the actions taken by the German administration in occupied territories to destroy the European Jews. The talks did not result in any order or public statement but the participants did arrive at a consensus to continue and intensify the extermination of the Jews in Europe, a policy that, from then on, would become more systematic, extensive and efficient. The world was not supposed to know.

Devil's council

The meeting in Wannsee was truly a devil's council. The Germans started to implement the policy of persecuting the Jewish population in the occupied territories right after the outbreak of the war in September 1939, but the practices became even more brutal and large-scale with the attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941. In August, Task Forces of the Police and Security Service massacred 24,000 Jews in Kamianets-Podilskyi; between September and October, over 30,000 Jews were murdered in Babi Yar on the outskirts of Kiev; the executions on 30 November and 8 December took the lives of more than 30,000 Jews from the ghetto in Riga. That same autumn, work was started on the construction of death factories: the extermination camps in Sobibor and Belzec. It was there, among other such places, that defenceless Jews were transported from all over occupied Europe to be murdered in gas chambers. All this happened in dead silence.

To the rescue

Pursuant to the agreement reached in Wannsee, German decision-makers began carrying out the "final solution" in the territories of occupied Poland. March 1942 saw the launch of Operation "Reinhardt" managed, on Himmler's orders, by Odilo Globocnik, head of the SS in occupied Lublin. By November 1943, Globocnik units murdered 2 million Jews.

German-occupied Poland not only had an armed resistance movement, but also civilian and military structures of a genuine Underground State reporting to the internationally recognised Polish government-in-exile which was based in London. In the face of growing persecution of the Jewish population, Polish underground authorities decided to help their Jewish citizens. In September 1942, they set up the Provisional Committee to Aid Jews, transformed on 4 December into the Council to Aid Jews financed by the Polish London-based government. Operating within the structures controlled by the government-in-exile, it was the only underground organization in Europe that was run jointly by Jews and non-Jews. Even though Poland had limited room for manoeuvre, attempts were made to find shelter for Jewish citizens,

forge their documents and provide them with food, regardless of the fact that such actions were ruthlessly punished by German occupiers as a capital offence.

Jan Karski's mission

In addition to providing aid on the ground, the Polish Underground State also took steps to inform the world about the tragic fate of the Jewish population. In the autumn of 1942, a courier of the Polish Underground State named Jan Karski arrived in London with reports on the situation of the Jews and their destruction by German occupiers. To gather reliable information, Karski sneaked into the Warsaw ghetto and also infiltrated a transition camp in Izbica dressed as a German soldier. He thus had first-hand information. The written account of what he had seen was handed over in London to the governments of the UK and the United States. However, it failed to raise much interest anywhere. It was only the *New York Times* that published a short text on page 10 on 25 November 1942 about Himmler's plan to murder 250,000 Polish Jews. Only as much, and yet so much.

Upon the initiative of the Polish government-in-exile Karski went to the USA to bear testimony to the crimes he had witnessed. On 28 July 1943, he was even received by US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. His account was met with disbelief and indifference. He also had a number of other meetings, including with Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, American Secretary of State Cordell Hull, head of US foreign intelligence agency William Joseph Donovan, archbishop of Chicago Samuel Stritch and the influential rabbi Stephen Wise. Reactions were similar: Karski's testimony was not believed and there was no will to take action. Faced with the crime of the Holocaust, the free world was silent.

Raczyński's note

Before Jan Karski left for the USA, the Polish government made use of all the materials he had brought from Poland during its talks with the UK authorities. The Polish foreign minister Edward Raczyński discussed the desperate position of the Jewish population with his UK counterpart, Anthony Eden, during a meeting on 1 December 1942. He also suggested holding a multilateral conference to raise awareness of the crimes. As there was no reaction from the British, the Polish government decided to send a note to the signatories of the Declaration by United Nations.

Issued on 10 December 1942, the note contained data on the current situation of the Jews in occupied Poland and identified German crimes. It also listed the steps taken by the Polish government to denounce the atrocities and called on the Western states to stop them. In the final paragraphs, the Polish government urged the signatories not only to condemn the murders and punish the perpetrators, but also to take actions that would prevent the use of mass-destruction methods.

Besides sending the official note, the Polish authorities also tried to draw the public attention to the genocide of the Jews in occupied Poland by publishing a special booklet in English that was distributed in large numbers by Polish diplomatic and consular outposts, among others.

The publication was entitled “The Mass Extermination of Jews in German Occupied Poland” and is now available online.

https://www.iwp.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/20131119_PLtotheUNontheHolocaust.pdf).

Silence

Jan Karski’s reports were later confirmed by the accounts provided in 1943 by Witold Pilecki who volunteered to be imprisoned in Auschwitz-Birkenau in order to start a resistance movement inside the camp and describe the crimes that were being committed there. Similar testimonies were also given by two Jewish fugitives from Auschwitz – Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler – who managed to escape in April 1944. However, when the Polish government-in-exile called for action to stop the Holocaust in 1942, its appeals fell on deaf ears. The architects of the crime planned in Wannsee were yet hidden behind a veil of silence.

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