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Biography and the Contested Past: The Karski–Lanzmann–Haenel Controversy[1]

Abstract

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The objective of this article is to analyze the contested construction of the past through the debate involving Jan Karski, Claude Lanzmann, and Yannick Haenel. It aims to demonstrate how competing discourses about the past shape contemporary perceptions of Karski and how their confrontation relates to the relationship between history and memory.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The main research problem concerns the tension between testimony, its narrative framing, and its fictional reinterpretation. The study examines how each actor (Karski, Lanzmann, and Haenel) shapes historical meaning. The method consists of a comparative analysis of each actor's different textual discourses. Historiographical sources are reviewed to contrast the debate, and recent studies of the same issue are related to this work.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The article first mentions Yannick Haenel's *Jan Karski* (2009) and why Claude Lanzmann reacted against it. It then analyses the director's critique, based on his film *Shoah* (1985), which included an interview with Karski. Lanzmann's argument is contrasted with the conflict between testimony and narrative and with Karski's view of *Shoah*.

1 This article adapts, actualizes, and translates a segment of the doctoral dissertation by J.A. Fernández Meza, *Historia y ficción en la novela Jan Karski de Yannick Haenel*, PhD dissertation, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2023, developed between 2017 and 2023 thanks to the support of the former Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (currently Secretaría de Ciencia, Humanidades, Tecnología e Innovación) and the Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes.

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The argument shows how each figure questions the others' representations as they negotiate the meanings of the past.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The analysis reveals that neither testimony nor historical narrative is monolithic. Karski's own testimony was adapted to different circumstances; Lanzmann's editing in *Shoah* constructs a specific narrative; and Haenel's fiction poses new questions about how we relate to the past. The study demonstrates that the dispute itself exposes the multiplicity of "Karskis" produced across diverse discourses, showing that the past survives in a plurality of voices and interpretive layers rather than in a single authoritative account.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS: The article contends that a single, definitive image of the past limits historical rationality. Instead, recognizing the polyphonic nature of historical discourse. The analysis proposes considering the concrete conditions under which testimonies are generated and the narrative frameworks that structure them, which is connected to the dispute between historical writing and fiction. While fictional accounts of history inevitably involve risks, they may also contribute to the study of the past.

Keywords:
Jan Karski, Claude Lanzmann, Yannick Haenel, Historical fiction, History and fiction.

INTRODUCTION

The French writer Yannick Haenel (1967–) published the novel *Jan Karski* in 2009 (in the original version in French), which won the Prix du roman Fnac and the Prix Interallié. Its title is the name regularly given to Jan Kozielewski (1914–2000), a Pole well known in his native country, France, and the United States for his role during the Nazi invasion of Poland as a messenger for the Polish Government-in-Exile. His biography has been documented by various authors, among whom this article will mainly refer to E. Thomas Wood and Stanisław M. Jankowski. Haenel's novel draws on some historical sources, but in a distinctive manner.

His work is divided into three parts: in the first chapter, he summarizes and comments on an interview that the French filmmaker Claude Lanzmann (1925–2018) conducted with Karski for the documentary *Shoah*, released in 1985. In the second chapter, Haenel uses

the book that Karski himself wrote while World War II was still ongoing, when he was in New York in 1943, after his memorable journey from Warsaw to London in 1942; the book was entitled *Story of a Secret State* and was originally published in English in 1944. The third chapter of *Jan Karski* (Haenel, 2012) is a fiction, narrated in the first person by the character Jan Karski, which means that Haenel uses the name of the Polish messenger to tell a story which, while appealing to real circumstances, does not retrieve phrases that one can attribute to Karski, some of which are highly controversial.

This publication generated significant media and academic controversy in France, which this article will partially revisit to analyze its manifestations and theoretical implications for the relationship between history and historical fiction. While a comprehensive review of all commentary on this case or an extensive biography of Haenel or Karski will not be provided, it is important to say that by the time *Jan Karski* was published, its author was already well known in France. He also maintained a close relationship with Gallimard's editor, Phillipe Sollers (1936–2023), who also collaborated with Lanzmann.

Haenel's novel diverges significantly from a moralizing or didactic project that merely recounts the messenger's biography or transmits historical facts. Instead, it explores broader questions that go beyond the story of one person. Several specialists did not accept his work, including historians such as Annette Wieviorka, Jean-Louis Panné, and Richard J. Golsan (Golsan, 2010; Golsan, 2013; Panné, 2010; Wieviorka, 2010). However, in this article, the focus will be on Lanzmann's critique of the novel, his interview with Karski, the Pole's response to the documentary *Shoah*, and what Haenel said about the two. None of them is a historian, but they participate differently and even contest the construction of the memory of the Second World War. We aim to confront their discursive interventions to analyze the edification of the past.

RESEARCH TOOLS

Regarding Claude Lanzmann, we will revisit two writings: first, his negative response to Haenel's novel (2010), and second, his account of his 1978 interview with Karski for the making of his film (2009).

Concerning the Polish messenger, we will revisit an article (1986) in which he analyses Lanzmann's film in general terms and, in particular, the way his testimony was recovered in it. Finally, we will comment on Haenel's novel (2012), along with some reflections she publicly expressed on Lanzmann and his own literary work. Wood and Jankowski's biography (2014) will serve as the central guide to Karski's life and his relationship with Lanzmann, although we will also consider the research of Adam Puławski (2021) and the analysis of Szymon Rudnicki (2015). Finally, this essay aims to reflect on recent essays on Haenel's novel, specifically those of Maja Velcic-Canivez (2020) and Beate Müller and Vice Sue (2024). However, we also take into account the earlier work of Manuel Bragança (2015), who laid the foundations for interpreting the debate between Lanzmann and Haenel.

FAKE FICTION

Claude Lanzmann recounted receiving an early morning phone call one day from his friend Philippe Sollers, who at the time directed the publishing house Gallimard, where *Les Temps Modernes* was published, a review founded by Jean-Paul Sartre and edited by Lanzmann from 1986 to 2018. Sollers called to inform the filmmaker about the publication of a novel in the "L'Infini" collection, which Sollers himself edited. This novel was intended as a tribute to Lanzmann's documentary *Shoah*. The author of the novel was unknown to him, and he immediately regarded the idea as absurd (Lanzmann, 2010, p. 3).

Sollers, in a brief journalistic note, asserts that he did not inform Lanzmann of the novel by telephone, but instead through a letter sent from Gallimard's offices on 24 March 2009. According to the publisher's website, *Jan Karski* was published on September 3 of the same year, following its printing on May 19th. Sollers claims that he sent a copy to Lanzmann in May. The editor concludes his article by stating:

> Cette lettre et l'envoi du livre en mai sont restés sans réponse, et Lanzmann, dans nos nombreuses conversations, n'y a jamais fait allusion. Mais voilà: le roman d'Haenel, ensuite, a eu beaucoup de

> succès, et tout à coup Lanzmann se déchaîne. Je n'en dirai pas plus, ayant pour règle de dire le moins de mal possible de mes anciens amis (Sollers, 2010).

A similar statement by the editor can be found in Thomas Wieder's account of the affair (Wieder, 2010).

Lanzmann asserted his own authority over any work concerning Karski, proclaiming that he had already addressed all the vital inquiries:

> [...] je lui ai posé toutes les questions capitales sur ses rencontres avec les leaders politiques, intellectuels ou religieux de Grande-Bretagne et des Etats-Unis et qu'il y a répondu, avec droiture et même enthousiasme, devant ma caméra (Lanzmann, 2010, p. 4).

He also maintained that a figure such as Karski should not be subject to fictionalization. Furthermore, he accused Haenel's work of plagiarism, arguing that the first chapter of *Jan Karski* merely summarized *Shoah* through extensive paraphrasing: "Certains appellent «hommage» ce parasitage du travail d'un autre. Le mot de plagiat conviendrait aussi bien." (Lanzmann, 2010, p. 3).

A central argument in these statements is that Karski cannot be fictionalized and that *Jan Karski* should not be categorized as a novel. Lanzmann asserts that the Polish messenger could not have held the thoughts attributed to him by Haenel's Karski, and consequently regards this portrayal as a manipulation of the historical figure and a distortion of History, to use the capital letter the filmmaker uses. Based on his two-day interview with the messenger in Washington, DC, Lanzmann finds it impossible that Haenel's Karski could even remotely approach the truth of the case, disparaging *Jan Karski*'s third chapter with strong adjectives. Gaëlle Labarta, in her doctoral dissertation, examined the adjectives used in early critiques of the novel, including those by Lanzmann, to analyze these condemnations within a moral framework (Labarta, 2019, p. 147 ff.).

The director contrasted Haenel's fictionalized account of Karski with Karski's statements from his interview for his documentary. By doing so, he challenged the novel's authenticity, arguing that it failed to reflect the genuine voice of the witness, who was transformed into a fictional character. This distinction underscores the perceived

irrefutability of testimony, particularly that of the messenger, and suggests a condition of a-historicity in testimony as a source of truth that resists future reinterpretation. However, this idea could not be entirely coherent with the need to adapt the testimony to a concrete format or narrative project: Lanzmann interviewed Karski over two days, yet not all the recorded material was included in the final version of *Shoah*; the content Karski shared on the second day was excluded because the interviewer evaluated it as anecdotal and not directly relevant to the film's primary objective of documenting the annihilation of the Jews of Europe.

> […] j'ai tenu à protéger Karski, contre lui-même peut-être. Il fut si différent entre la première et la seconde journée […] : dans la description de ses rencontres, en particulier avec Roosevelt, il semblait se rengorger de fierté, soulagé peut-être de n'avoir plus à se mobiliser intérieurement comme il l'avait fait la veille pour son évocation inoubliable du ghetto. Il devenait mondain, satisfait, théâtral, parfois cabotin et cela contredisait le tragique qu'il incarnait jusque-là (Lanzmann, 2010, p. 5).

The above quote also suggests a complex relationship between Lanzmann and Karski. Wood and Jankowski recounted that, in the late 1970s, Karski was reportedly hesitant to discuss specific wartime experiences, particularly those concerning the extermination of the Jewish community. Nevertheless, Lanzmann maintained correspondence with Karski for a year through letters and phone calls to persuade him to participate in the interview. Ultimately, Karski agreed, and they met in October 1978. The memories triggered by the interviewer revived emotional distress for both Karski and his wife, Pola, who chose to leave their home while the interview lasted.

The biographers report what Lanzmann promised Karski, when he invited him to participate in the documentary, that he insisted it was his historical duty to give his testimony, and what the film's focus was. The cinematographic project was presented as a "[…] story of the Holocaust as it had never been told, relying solely on the testimony of witnesses, victims, and perpetrators […]" (Wood & Jankowski, 2014, p. 226), and Karski was only expected to share what he had witnessed without discussing political issues. Still, Wood and Jankowski point out that the documentary showed many images of

Polish anti-Semitism, which caused Polish and Polish American communities to consider *Shoah* biased and unable to distinguish between Nazis and Poles. It should be noted that, when Lanzmann was trying to convince Karski to participate in his film, he sent him a letter (July 1978) stating that he did not hold any anti-Polish views.

For his part, Karski assessed the documentary as the most important film ever made about the Jewish tragedy. "Nul autre n'a su évoquer l'holocauste avec tant de profondeur, tant de froide brutalité et si peu de pitié or le spectateur […]" (Karski, 1986, p. 112). According to the messenger, the film was so powerful that no one could ever forget it. This is an interesting statement considering he had reached the point of needing to forget, or at least to remain silent about his war experience:

> Jan […] was consumed with bitterness over the futility of his wartime efforts. He coped with his suppressed rage, and with the psychological trauma brought on by the horrors he had experienced […] he would never again speak about the war unless there was a compelling reason to do so, and that he would remain forever silent about his experiences involving the Jewish Holocaust (Wood & Jankowski, 2014, p. 217).

Shoah was that compelling reason to speak out again. Although not solely attributable to the interview, Karski shifted his focus after this, increasing his lectures, participating in interviews and forums, and receiving awards, as Müller and Vice (2024, pp. 8–10) have also noted. According to Wood and Jankowski, this renewed impetus to speak led to a conflict with Lanzmann: Karski signed a contract with the director, granting him the right to use the interview in exchange for a small payment. He also agreed not to speak publicly about his experiences until the film's release. However, it did not happen for several years, making the witness anxious.

By 1981, Karski was becoming impatient with the delay. His perception of the past had changed. Karski was deeply troubled by the rise of revisionist historians. At the same time, he was rechanneling his bitterness against those who had ignored his pleas on behalf of the Jews: instead of remaining silent about the past, he began to consider speaking out as a form of revenge. In a letter, Karski complained about the contractual restrictions that prevented him from speaking publicly. He also believed that participating in the film had

significantly impacted both his and his wife's lives, as Wood and Jankowski report (2014, p. 217):

> In a letter, listing several national publications and television programs that had approached him, Karski pressed for a lifting of the restrictions that were "muzzling" him. Lanzmann responded with fury. "[Y]ou have not the slightest idea of the magnitude of this enterprise," the filmmaker fumed in a November 1982 letter. "Writing that I am muzzling you, you insult me, and I ask you to apologize. This is my prerequisit[e] for any further discussion between us".

This information should be compared with Lanzmann's own account in his memoir. He stated that while making his documentary, he never gave in to pressure from time, money, or other people. Like Wood and Jankowski, he explained that Karski requested payment for the interview, and they signed the exclusivity contract. However, Karski was still allowed to give interviews and write articles or books. After that, they lost touch, but Karski's letter arrived, and Lanzmann responded. After that, they lost touch, but then Karski's letter arrived, and Lanzmann (2009, pp. 707–709) responded:

> […] Je répondis […] d'une façon aussi civilisée que je le pouvais, lui expliquant, pour la première fois, je crois, la dimension unique que je voulais donner à mon travail, tentant de lui faire éprouver ce qu'il pouvait y avoir de hors normes et même de révolutionnaire dans un pareil projet, qui prétendait tout embrasser et montrer ce qu'avait été, du point de vue des Juifs eux-mêmes, le eux-mêmes, le désastre. […] J'aimais Karski, je savais de quel courage il avait fait montre sous la torture et je lui garantissais que, quel que soit le temps qu'il me faudrait pour terminer, et si long qu'il le trouvât, il ne le regretterait pas. Au bout du compte, le film serait gagnant, j'avais plus de foi en moi qu'en tous les professionnels de l'audiovisuel et, d'abord, pour une très puissante raison : j'avais la force de prendre mon temps.

Apparently, after this incident, the conflict did not escalate. What stands out, especially in Wood and Jankowski's description, is the end of Karski's silence and how his past and memories affected his present. This is also shown in his wife Pola's negative reaction to his public exposure. She, who carried deep pain from her wartime experience, went so far as to say to Karski: "You did what you had to do. Now shut up. You shouldn't blow your own horn. You've turned

into an actor, worse even than Reagan" (Wood & Jankowski, 2014, p. 230). Pola died in July 1992 after jumping from the ninth floor of her flat. Wood and Jankowski mention a serious conflict connected to the trauma of World War II, when she lost many relatives. Her case, which has not been studied sufficiently, could offer a complex view of how remembering shapes the lives of war survivors (Wood & Jankowski, 2014, pp. 234–235).

BETWEEN MEMORY AND OBLIVION, THERE IS A BATTLEFIELD

The interaction between memory and oblivion constitutes a central tension within this debate. The historical relationship between Karski and Lanzmann serves as a battlefield where this conflict is enacted, both through the *Shoah* memorial project and the complexities of memory and forgetting that shape Karski's postwar experiences. In the specific case of Lanzmann, Dominique LaCapra (1998, pp. 95–138) made a fundamental analysis of the work of trauma and the process of remembrance in the documentary *Shoah*. However, this essay emphasizes the construction of the cinematic narrative as a deliberate shaping of a particular story, in this case, Karski's. This perspective supports the argument that recorded testimony, when fragmented through film editing, becomes subject to the director's interpretive framework. Consequently, the testimonial record remains open to divergent interpretations and is shaped by the specific moment of its production. This dynamic reveals a dual historicity: one defined by the context of its creation and another that, as a historical product, enables subsequent reinterpretations.

The eight hours of interviews Lanzmann had with Karski were condensed to 40 minutes in *Shoah*. For Karski, this is justified by the director's intention, who was interested in "[…] sensibiliser le spectateur à ce que l'holocauste juif fut un phénomène unique qui ne peut être comparé à aucun autre […]" (Karski, 1986, p. 112). It is clear that there is a discursive project in the interviewer's work pointed out by the messenger, who reflects on the person who testified for Lanzmann's camera and how that same person, years after the interview, perceives himself in the movie as someone different.

Karski questions whether the entire world abandoned the Jewish community: "Les juifs ont été abandonnés par les gouvernements, par ceux qui détenaient le pouvoir politique et spirituel. Ils n'ont pas été abandonnés par l'humanité." (Karski, 1986, p. 112-113). He mentions the secret network that, in Poland, helped the persecuted: "[…] il me semble nécessaire que les spectateurs, notamment les jeunes, juifs ou non, sachent que de tels hommes ont existé" (Karski, 1986, p. 113). In other words, he points out a flaw in the film's discourse: although it achieves its intended purpose, it does not adequately respond to the historical demands the case warrants, for example, by failing to consider the past's complexity as an open interpretive instance for the future. Hence, the Pole emphasized the need to remember those who helped or tried to help:

> Cela est nécessaire aux uns afin qu'ils ne perdent pas espoir en l'humanité et ne doutent pas de leur place dans le concerte de nations, aux autres afin qu'ils comprennent jusqu'où mènent l'intolérance, l'antisémitisme et la haine, et ce que peut faire l'amour du prochain (Karski, 1986, p. 113).

For Karski, Lanzmann was unable to include everything in *Shoah* that the Pole considered important in his interview, particularly the fact that he arrived in England and the United States, reported his urgent messages, but, even so,

> Cela prouve que les gouvernements alliés qui seuls avaient les moyens de venir en aide aux juifs les ont abandonnés à leur sort. En dehors de moi, personne ne pouvait le dire. […] Les gouvernements des nations soit menaient l'extermination des juifs, soit, quand ils ne collaboraient pas, y sont resté indifférents. Mais des milliers de gens ordinaires ont sympathisé avec les persécutés et leur sont venus en aide (Karski, 1986, p. 114).

In addition to taking a stance on Lanzmann's film, Karski's reflection holds significance for two primary reasons. First, it relates to the historiographical category of bystanders, referring to the Allies, a term popularized in 1992 by Raul Hilberg, although used before by the historian Michal Marrus and, even before, by the playwright Rolf Hochhuth (Hilberg, 1992; Marrus, 1987; Schlott, 2019, p. 38), an issue that, according to Manuel Bragança (2015, p. 36), was not

adequately addressed in the debate between Lanzmann and Haenel, among other things, because of the poor argumentation regarding concepts such as truth, fiction, and history. Second, there is a notable similarity between his commentary and the reflections of Haenel's (2012, p. 152 of 208) fictional Karski:

> Some may say that I am unjust, and that measures were beginning to be taken. But, right until the end, the Allies refused to bomb the gas chambers of Auschwitz, or the rail tracks that led there, under the pretext that their objectives were primarily military, and that such actions would occupy resources that were needed elsewhere. And yet, in 1944, air raids built up in the region of Auschwitz and, on two occasions, American heavy bombers even attacked industrial sites which were just five miles away from the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

We can consider this relation between the quoted passage and Karski's article either a coincidence or proof of Haenel's accurate interpretation of the messenger's voice. Nonetheless, this article's aim is not so much to evaluate the quality or precision of the novel, but rather to examine how Karski has been constructed within a choral spectrum of different voices, including his own. A clear example is the tension between testimony and editing that can be found in the passive quarrel between Karski and Lanzmann, disputed in letters, articles, and books, but also evident in their interaction in *Shoah*'s interview.

Added to this is the debate over truth and testimony that generated the filmmaker's confrontation with Haenel. In his article, Lanzmann argued that the person he interviewed could never have said what the fictional Karski claimed in the novel, but the Pole argued that *Shoah* did not express the entirety of his testimony, that it did not satisfy what he considered necessary from a historical perspective, and, therefore, that the film was insufficient, although complete within its own parameters. That means the editing of the interview complied with the limits set by the cinematographic project itself, but these limits were exceeded by history, so much so that, after the controversy with Haenel, he had to re-edit the interview with Karski in 2010 to present a new film called *Le rapport Karski*. This new edition, compared with the edition in *Shoah*, is, for Bragança (2015, p. 39), an example of Lanzmann's narrative construction.

Karski's article questions *Shoah* not because the film lies, but because it does not tell the whole story. This results from the narrative project it follows. For this reason, the documentary should not be seen as definitive as its creator intended. The editing constructed a particular voice for Karski, adapting the testimony to the film's discourse, selecting what was important to the director and omitting what was not (Lanzmann, 2010, p. 5). In other words, the director incorporated Karski's account into the film's overall narrative, constructing an image of his witness and modifying it through editing to align with the film's narrative objectives. The question is whether it is possible to infer that he turned him into a character.

If the answer is affirmative, it should be emphasized that he is a character, not because he was invented, but because he exists within a narrative. Although testimony is present, it is situated within a narrative whose internal logic delimits, shapes, and conditions its content. We should consider the importance of distinguishing between characters in documentary films and those in works of fiction, and clarify why, according to Lanzmann's statement, Karski cannot be regarded as a fictional character. The explanation should not rely on the French director's assertion that Haenel's Karski is dissociated from the so-called "real Karski", especially since the latter distanced himself, in his 1986 article, from Lanzmann's editing. Notably, neither party is being deceptive: Karski does not claim that *Shoah* is untruthful but rather that it is historically insufficient, and Haenel does not mislead anyone by creating a fiction, as this is explicitly acknowledged in the novel's opening note.

Lanzmann's (2010, p. 5) interpretation relies on the duality of lies and truth: "Les scènes qu'il imagine, les paroles et les pensées qu'il prête à des personnages historiques réels, et à Karski lui-même, sont si éloignées de toute vérité […]". The very title of his article confirms it. He alone claims to possess the truth about Karski's past, even more than Karski himself: "Par ailleurs, j'ai tenu à protéger Karski, contre lui-même peut-être". As Marta Cichocka (2016a, p. 61; 2016b, p. 451) pointed out on more than one occasion, Lanzmann, considering himself the 'owner' of Karski's testimony, accused Haenel of manipulating the history. That possession of the truth depends on what Karski said in front of the camera, so the interview is the ground of Lanzmann's argument, which Karski himself nevertheless questions. It implies a substantial contradiction.

THE POLYPHONIC PAST

We can summarize that Lanzmann criticized Haenel's novel for lacking any connection to the truth regarding Karski and, to support his criticism, argued that he had obtained all possible information from the witness, understanding Karski even better than Karski himself. This is confronted with Karski's perspective, as he questioned the editing of *Shoah*. Despite the debate between the novelist and the director, Haenel drew on Lanzmann's work as a central reference for *Jan Karski*, and explicitly stated that his novel was intended as an homage to the film (Haenel, 2010). Haenel was transparent in declaring that the third part of his novel was fictional, regardless of the sources consulted, but Lanzmann was pertinacious about his possession of truth.

This article has tried to underscore the complex relationship among these three individuals, characterized by a persistent interrogation of the past: Lanzmann questioning Karski; Karski questioning Lanzmann; Haenel renewing—through literature—the relationship between the director and the witness; Lanzmann criticizing Haenel; and Lanzmann re-editing the interview with Karski to produce *Le rapport Karski*. This tripartite relationship can be explained chronologically, as each participant's discursive participation occurred on specific dates. However, it may also be understood as a form of dialogue, albeit a fictional one, since the three never met in person. The connection between their public interventions forms the foundation of this dialogue, particularly regarding the question of the past. The impulse to inquire links their interventions rather than any shared conception of an answer. Therefore, it is the logic of the question, rather than the logic of the answer, that provides a framework for analyzing these voices from the past. The logic of the question is open to the diversity of answers.

Lanzmann's (2010, p. 5) argument for representing the past appears to contradict the previously stated idea, as he claims to possess the ultimate truth and all the answers. Nevertheless, a phrase in his article could contradict his own position:

> Yannick Haenel est sans doute trop jeune pour savoir que le plus grand des hommes peut avoir plusieurs visages, être double ou triple

> ou plus encore et son Karski inventé est tristement linéaire, emphatique donc, et finalement faux de part en part.

That diversity of faces is explained in the present essay as a diversity of voices. Those faces, which can also be considered masks, are constructed by those who elaborate the discourse about the past, in this case, one of a particular person. Karski himself participated in this construction even when giving testimony, as memory is unsettled and the discourse depends on its practical context: as Szymon Rudnicki (2015, p. 28) argues, what Karski could say about his experience differed significantly during the war (when he published *Story of a Secret State*) from when he was a professor at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, or when he responded to Lanzmann's questions, or when he became a renowned witness to the war. Lanzmann believed he had revealed the true face of Karski, unveiling all those masks. However, we want to argue that, instead, he participated in the construction of this multidimensional character we all call Jan Karski, who was a real person but also a name in multiple texts. As Rudnicki (2015, p. 33) posits:

> I would also warn against describing him as someone who carried out a specific mission. He did what he was ordered to, and what he saw as his duty. It can only be called a 'mission' after the Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* (1985). His role as a reliable witness, a cool analyst and a firsthand witness to the fate of the Jewish community under German occupation cannot be overestimated. Initially, the Jewish fate was not the most important problem for Karski. As a courier, he was primarily supposed to report about what was happening in occupied Poland.

Karski's status as a reference point in the history of the Nazi invasion of Poland does not accurately represent the origins of his involvement in the Polish resistance or the instructions he received to travel outside occupied Poland, although it does not ignore it either. The name Jan Karski, or its variations, is the subject of multiple disputed discourses. Over time, they widen and extend beyond the person, as has already been stated in a previous work (Fernández Meza, 2024). Both Lanzmann and Haenel, along with many others, contribute to the accumulation of signification that the name Karski embodies. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that Haenel's approach is more open to the idea that the biography of this Polish witness is a more constant

construction than what Lanzmann posited. This is not without risk, as has been pointed out by Maja Velcic-Canivez (2020, p. 38), because when Haenel's narrative voice replaces Karski's, it might erase the original witness's voice; however, it is necessary to ask whether Karski's testimony can be considered a stable unit, given the variations in his statements throughout his life, and, therefore, how the notion of originality fits in with such diversity.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this article is to present the multidirectional debate among Karski, Lanzmann, and Haenel, demonstrating that the past constitutes a contested space. The attempt to elaborate a univocal idea of Karski is counterproductive to historical research, insofar as it is itself historical (i.e., diverse) and, as such, ignoring the polyphony of voices that the past entails would contradict the very notion of historicity. Müller and Vice (2024, pp. 10-15) explores the various representations of Karski and, notably, detail how Karski adapted his discourse as a World War II witness, which can be related to Adam Puławski's research (2021, p. 296), in which he has reviewed aspects of Karski's role during World War II that are often repeated but not always accurate: the route Karski took to London in 1942, the exact dates of his trip, the information he carried and who received it, the goals of his mission, and his meetings with Allied leaders. For Bragança (2015, p. 43), these contradictions in the testimonies are common and not something for which they should be dismissed, with which we agree.

The content and delivery of Karski's messages were adapted to the circumstances: his role differed significantly as a wartime messenger for the resistance movement, as the author of a book promoting Poland's image internationally, as an interlocutor for a filmmaker investigating the Shoah decades later, as a guest speaker invited by Eli Wiesel to recount his experiences: before *Shoah* in 1985 was released, but after the 1978 interview with Lanzmann, Elie Wiesel asked Karski to speak at the 1981 International Liberators' Conference in Washington, DC. This event brought Karski wider recognition as a witness to the Holocaust and as a Christian who tried to help the

Jews. Subsequently, he was honored as a Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem, an award given since 1963 to those who risked their lives to help Jews during the Holocaust.

The variation in form and content in Karski's interventions is not a subject of criticism in this essay. Instead, it aims to underscore the contradictions within Lanzmann's critique of Haenel, not to focus on the director himself but to use him as a reference point for a position deemed detrimental to historical reflection. This stance denies the plurality of past voices and the historicity inherent in historical interpretation, which, in the context of oral sources, also encompasses the historicity of testimony. Historians must recognize this complexity to avoid adopting an uncritical discourse that constructs monolithic representations of the past, thereby perpetuating a sterile narrative. From this perspective, historical fiction is considered less harmful than hagiographic, patriotic, or chauvinistic portrayals of figures like Jan Karski.

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