

Chapter 7 – Why Did it Happen?

I, as a Lithuanian, am obliged to speak about the guilt of Lithuanians. Sadism and robbery, scorn and shameful indifference to people cannot be justified. Worse than that, they cannot be explained, they exist in such dark corners of individual and national consciousness that to seek rational reasons for them is a fruitless exercise.

Tomas Venclova⁵¹³

There are two means to unite a people – common ideals and common crime.

Adolf Hitler (1923)⁵¹⁴

The fundamental change on nation building during the first half of the twentieth century created an environment that very much stimulated the extermination of large ethnic groups and the development of a policy of ethnic cleansing. The major states in Central Europe at the end of the nineteenth century had been multi-ethnic states, in which nations lived side by side and people usually did not have a one-dimensional understanding of their own ethnic background. An inhabitant of the Austro-Hungarian Empire could be Hungarian, or Czech, or a combination of the two (or of more nationalities) but was, first of all, an Austrian-Hungarian. This perception started to change especially after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the First World War, and the idea that one ethnic group had the right to its own state – and thus exclude other ethnicities from equal rights within that state – became a dominant factor in European politics. In particular, the totalitarian Soviet and Nazi regimes strengthened the concept of “nationality” (even though the Soviets claimed to be internationalists and that nationality as such was to be a secondary factor). During the ethnic cleaning programs in the Second World War and afterwards, Soviet or Nazi internal passports often determined one’s fate.⁵¹⁵

In the case of Lithuania, the situation was further complicated by the fact that the joint Polish-Lithuanian past resulted not only in many frustra-

513. From an article of Tomas Venclova, published in 1976 in the Moscow Jewish samizdat journal *Evrei v SSSR*, issue 12.

514. Quoted in Kühne, Thomas: *Belonging and Genocide*, p. iv

515. For a full, enlightening and well-written account see Snyder, Timothy: *The Reconstruction of Nations*.

tions but also in a lack of clarity as to who belonged to which ethnicity (or combination of ethnicities). In fact, Belarus was the heartland of what had been the Lithuanian-Polish (or Polish-Lithuanian) Commonwealth and, for a long time, it seemed more logical that Vilnius would become part of Belarus as the natural successor state.⁵¹⁶ Both Marshal Piłsudski and General Zeligowski, whose army occupied Vilnius in 1920 leading to its unification with Poland, considered themselves to be Lithuanian.⁵¹⁷ For instance, after his death in 1936, Piłsudski was buried in Kraków but his heart was buried in Vilnius next to his mother's grave. Even the famous Polish poet, Adam Mickiewicz, considered himself to be Lithuanian. Schoolchildren in independent Lithuania in 1919-1940 learned his masterwork, *Pan Tadeusz*, in a censored format, in which all references to Polish and Poland were cut out.⁵¹⁸ The "father of the nation," Antanas Smetona, had a Polish wife and was very fluent in Polish himself. All in all, this mix of nationalities never was an issue until the twentieth century, when it led not only to complications and people having to choose their "nationality," but also to massive bloodshed and eventually mass murder and ethnic cleansing. The Holocaust was, in that sense, definitely not the only case of extermination and mass killing.⁵¹⁹ Before and after the Holocaust, ethnic groups excelled in killing each other *en masse*; the big difference with the Holocaust being the fact that basically all turned against the Jews – there was nobody who wanted them or was willing to risk his/her own existence by defending them.

According to Vygantas Vareikis, a Klaipėda-based historian, the Holocaust in Lithuania was the result of a combination of five factors. In the first place, the rise of anti-Semitism and various anti-Semitic incidents led to a devaluation of the Jew in the eyes of his Lithuanian neighbors and, thus, a first step had been set to devalue him further to the level that extermination became possible. Secondly, Jews were considered to be almost

516. The initial plan of Stalin was to give the city to Belarus as part of the Belarussian SSR, only later changing it to the plan to give it to Lithuania in exchange for Soviet troops on Lithuanian soil. See *The Reconstruction of Nations*, pp. 80-81.

517. *The Reconstruction of Nations*, p. 69

518. *The Reconstruction of Nations*, p. 78

519. In his book *The Reconstruction of Nations*, Timothy Snyder gives a number of figures that show how effective these killing operations were: in Polish Volhynia (now Volyn district in Ukraine), 98% of the Poles were either killed or expelled, in Galicia a 92% reduction of Poles was achieved by force. In the parts of Galicia that remained part of Poland after the Second World War, 95% of the Ukrainians were either killed or removed. In both regions, 97% of the Jews were murdered, in Volhynia this figure even reached 98.5%, higher than in Lithuania. See *The Reconstruction of Nations*, p. 203