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***Dni* by V.V. Shul'gin (1922) and the Role of Witnessing in the Construction of the Anti-Semitic Myth: from History to Self Writing and back again**

Abstract

The paper focuses on the text *Dni*, written, already in exile, by V.V. Shul'gin, a famous Kievian journalist and political figure, known for his nationalistic and anti-Semitic views. In the conviction that it is possible “through alpha (1905) to determine omega (1917) of Russian revolution”, the author narrates the first days in Kiev after the publication of the October Manifesto and the Jewish pogrom that followed, and skips then to the events connected with the February revolution. The text, typical of testimonial literature, intertwines individual and collective levels. I will focus on the second: the interpretation of Russian events and the question of Jewish responsibility, issues that were central to *émigré* debates, in order to create the *émigré* official History.

Self writing is a consistent chapter in the history of the Russian diaspora, as effectively demonstrated by the recently published four volume index of memoirs by Russian *émigrés* (Tartakovskii 2003). Such an abundance of autobiographical material is entirely comprehensible in a context of historical turmoil such as the revolutions and civil war, events that often trigger a need for comprehension and a confusion to which the act of writing can provide an answer. It is a known fact that memory plays a key role in the construction of identity, whether individual, collective, or national. The diaspora further underlines the centrality of collective memory in the con-

struction of a common identity that risks to be diluted into a new one, fading and even disappearing after the bond with the landscapes, language and customs of the native culture is weakened. This holds true even more so for those diasporas which S. Dufoix defines as ‘exopolities’, i.e. political communities in exile, who are opposed to the government of their homeland, which they consider illegitimate (Dufoix 2003). These “national and at the same time trans-national” entities (Dufoix, 2003: 72) foresee the existence of two opposing national identities, that battle for the control of their country. As noted by E. Garetto, in such conditions the

memory – individual and collective – takes on an even more important role:

В таких условиях индивидуальная и коллективная память приобретают важнейшее значение. Главной целью становится фиксация того сложного процесса, который привел к революционной катастрофе, и попытка понять его, объяснить себе и грядущим поколениям. Эмиграция осознает себя единственной хранительницей духа русской культуры (Garetto 1996: 101).

It is also true that memory is not only subject to use, but to abuse too (Todorov 1995; Ricoeur 2000). The core of this brief article is a case of memory manipulation, written in a memoir published during emigration, which will be analysed in order to understand its purposes. The text in question is that of Vasilii Vital'evich Shul'gin, a well-known publicist and Member of Parliament, notorious for his support of the monarchy and nationalists and also for his political anti-Semitism (see Babkov 2008; Budnitskii 1999: 374-442; Repnikov, Khristoforov 2009 and, par-

ticularly, Shul'gin's text *Chto nam v nikh ne nravitsia*, 1929). Shul'gin was born in Kiev. During the civil war he became one of the ideologists of the White movement. He had by then lived in various Russian emigration centres in Europe. Shul'gin finally settled in Yugoslavia. While in exile he continued to work as a journalist, collaborating with journals such as «Russkaia Mysl'», «Vozrozhdenie» and «Novoe vremia». Particularly famous is his journey through Soviet Russia, described in his book *Tri stolitsy* (Shul'gin 1927)¹. The autobiographical production of Shul'gin's is vast, however in this discussion we will concentrate on the first part of *Dni*, published in «Russkaia Mysl'» (Shul'gin 1922). The author firstly narrated the episodes of Kiev after the publication of the October Manifesto and then turned to the February revolution, the Provisional Government and the

¹ The journey had been organized by the Monarchist Union of Central Russia, known as *Trest*. It was later found that it was an organization infiltrated by OGPU, see Pipes 1980: 379, 388; Fleishman 2003. The book *Tri stolitsy* presents a mix of personal impressions and real facts with particular regard to the Jewish question, showing here too the manipulation of the witness made by Shul'gin. The Russian *émigré* circles noted this (see, for instance, the article *Sentimental'noe puteshestvie*, «Poslednie Novosti», 1927, 3 March).

abdication of Nicholas II, which the protagonist witnessed. The very structure of the narrative reflected the belief of the author that one could “по альфе (1905) определить омегу (1917) русской революции” (Shul’gin 1922: 137), which lent special importance to the description of the first revolution for those readers who, just after the October Revolution, took the road of exile.

Apparently fully ascribable to the genre of memoirs, *Dni* is therefore characterized by a dense interplay between an individual dimension and a historical-collective dimension, expressed in a game of reciprocal cross-references. The author himself emphasizes the presence of a double level of interest in the brief introduction:

В жизни каждого человека есть дни, которые следовало бы записать. Это такие «Дни», которые могут представлять интерес не для него одного, а и для других. Таких дней набралось некоторое число и в моей жизни. Так, по крайней мере, кажется мне, хотя я сознаю, что не легко угадать общий интерес из-за сбивающейся сетки собственных пережива-

ний. Если я ошибся, буду утешать себя тем, чем льстят себя все мемуаристы: плохие записки современников – хороши для потомков (Shul’gin 1922: 136).

This “hybrid” aspect complicates the question of the distinction between autobiography and memoirs, as the protagonist of the text is both the individual history and political ideas of the author, and the events that generated the community of readers that he referred to (for the distinction between the two genres, see Todorov 1978; D’Intino 1989). The category of testimonial literature, on the contrary, helps to grasp the peculiarities of the text, which weave “in unprecedented ways the subjective components of an autobiography with the collective historical memory of an entire community” (Violi 2009: 2).

In regards to the individual aspect of the work in question, I will limit myself to remarking that this individual aspect solely concerned the description of Shul’gin’s political career and his need to explain to the monarchists – who highly criticized him because of this episode – the reasons that pushed him to accept the abdication of the Tsar: the aim of the text seems

therefore “to conceal the possibilities of choice” (Bruner 1993: 39). I will instead focus on the collective aspect, a central aspect, as highlighted by the foreword, attributable to the pen of P. Struve, who defined the text “первостепенный человеческий и исторический документ [который] будет, во всей его значительности, оценён и современниками и стремящейся к живой правде историей” (Shul’gin 1922: 136). Shul’gin’s text, counting on the “pact with the reader” (Lejeune 1975), presented itself as a reflection on personally witnessed events, suggesting therefore total sincerity. As a testimony, the text was considered to have given precious contribution to the construction of a ‘History that aspires to the truth’ and seemed to become a link between the micro-history of the author’s life and the Russian history.

Under the historical point of view, Shul’gin’s interpretation was based on the question of the Jewish responsibility in the Russian revolution, a question that he believed to be fundamental in order to comprehend the events. Describing that which he saw in the streets of Kiev in October 1905, he presented the turmoil in the main squares caused principally by the Jews:

Я вышел пройтись. В городе творилось нечто небывалое. Кажется, все, кто мог ходить, были на улицах. Во всяком случае, все евреи. Но их казалось ещё больше, чем их было, благодаря их вызывающему поведению. Они не скрывали своего ликования. Толпа расцветилась на все краски. Откуда-то появились дамы и барышни в красных юбках. С ними соперничали красные банты, кокарды, перевязки. Все это кричало, галдело, перекрикивалось, перемигивалось. Но и русских было много. Никто хорошенько ничего не понимал.

И вдруг многие поняли... Случилось это случайно или нарочно – никто никогда не узнал... Но во время разгара речей о «свержении» царская корона, укреплённая на думском балконе, вдруг сорвалась или была сорвана и на глазах у десяти тысячной толпы грохнулась о грязную мостовую. Металл жалобно зазвенел о камни...

И толпа ахнула.

По ней зловещим шёпотом пробежали слова:

- Жиды сбросили царскую корону... (Shul'gin 1922: 140-43)

In this first passage the intent of the author to isolate a group of Jews from the rest of the protagonist demonstrators in the square is already evident. The Russian are in a festive mood, "по Высочайшему повелению" (Shul'gin 1922: 144), and it is only the episode of the crown that reveals the demonstration's anti-government character. While in this first passage, as biased as it is, the narration is rather openly subjective, in the passage that immediately follows, the line between seen and heard becomes purposely concealed, referring to an allegedly well founded Historical truth:

Это многим раскрыло глаза. Некоторые стали уходить с площади. Но вдогонку им бежали рассказы о том, что делается в самом здании думы. А в думе делалось вот что. Толпа, среди которой наиболее выделялись евреи, ворвалась в зал заседаний и в революционном неистовстве изорвала все царские портреты, висевшие в зале.

Некоторым императорам выкалывали глаза, другим чинили всякие другие издевательства. Какой-то рыжий студент-еврей, пробив головой портрет царствующего императора, носил на себе пробитое полотно, истступлённо крича: Теперь я – царь! (Shul'gin 1922: 143)

Following, Shul'gin continued to report episodes of anger towards the Jews and progressively insinuated the idea that the pogrom of Kiev was 'inevitable'. I will leave aside the other passages dedicated to the description of the pogrom and Shul'gin's role in the repression of such movements as a young officer, which enlist also what he called his first political speech. I will therefore just underline the underlying ideology of such texts: the revolution was seen as 'an assault on the historical Russia' by the Jews in the first place. The pogroms, in this view, were precisely the response of Russia to her assailants and, as the author condemned popular violence as an unacceptable answer, he did not feel the need to conceal the reasons of *pogromshchiki*. He wrote:

Ведь идёт грозная борьба, борьба не на жизнь, а на смерть. Вчера начался штурм исторической России. Сегодня... сегодня это её ответ. Это ответ русского простонародного Киева – Киева, сразу, по «альфе», понявшего «омегу»... Этот ответ принял безобразные формы еврейского погрома, но ведь рвать на клочки царские портреты было тоже не очень красиво... А ведь народ только и говорил об этом... Только и на языке:

– Жиды сбросили царскую корону (Shul'gin 1922: 154).

As these examples show, the text presented the prevalence of Jews in the crowd in revolt and their 'provocative behaviour', while the episode of 'the red-haired Jew' was placed as an event that really happened that justified the people's fury.

The short controversy that followed in the Russian émigré press revealed how the events narrated by Shul'gin were far from being universally recognized as historical facts and disclosed the manipulation operation conducted by the author. The very fact that intellectuals

had felt compelled to counter argue publicly Shul'gin's reconstruction suggests that the importance of the role of testimony in the process of building an historical heritage of the diaspora community was well understood. To further emphasize how the political beliefs of Shul'gin were not being questioned, while it was more important the conflict for the prevalence of one historical version to another, we must note that the replicas were mainly directed to Struve and not the author. The cadet M. Vinaver renewed the gesture he had made in 1909 during a debate on national issues (Vinaver 1909), and wrote an open letter to Struve, in which he recalled how, at the time of the events, none of the *intelligentsiia* members – including Struve – doubted that the pogroms were organized in advance and agreed on the falsity of the popular anecdotes about Jews:

Всюду процессия с царским портретом, всюду "еврейский студент" (неприменно рыжий или чёрный) рвущий этот царский портрет и всюду [...] внезапный "взрыв народного гнева": еврейские трупы, пух из еврейских перин, а главное

– бесшабашный грабёж еврейского добра. Эта картина давно для всех стала “живою правдой истории”. О ней свидетельствуют целые томы погромных материалов. Она была по-видимому, такой правдой и для Вас. А теперь Вы прозрели и с радостью аттестуете перед человечеством другую шульгинскую правду (Vinaver 1922).

The tones used by Vinaver clearly show how the witnessing “before humanity”, and the “construction of history” was the real issue at stake: Shul’gin’s political beliefs were in fact well known, while the support given to him by Struve was a significant element, because one of the founders of the Russian liberation movement confirmed the version provided by the author of *Dni*. The second reply was also addressed to Struve: it was written by the historian I.O. Levin, one of the future authors of the famous collection *Rossiiā i evrei* (Berlin, 1924)². He challenged the value of the memoirs as witness. Levin found the text “nei-

ther truthful nor honest”, as they were instead defined by Struve. The author suggests that “можно было требовать от него, чтобы он [...] воздержался от повторения слухов, во всяком случае не проверенных” (Levin 1922). He then quoted some passages, “the authenticity of which” he believed was “questionable”, but that fed the most general representation of the pogroms of Russia as a spontaneous response to the Jewish attacks. The protests against Shul’gin’s alleged testimony also received support in the pages of «Za Svobodu», where a text written by another political figure of emigration was published, Ulianitskii³, who at that time had conducted an investigation into the events in Kiev and, contradicting the statements about the red-haired Jew and the thesis of a popular discontent in general, condemned the use of facts that were not just “uncontrolled or dubious”, but even “rejected”, a feature, that in the opinion of the author, was typical of the anti-Semitic arguments:

Антисемитизм есть особое свойство души, особая неустрашимая по-

² I.O. Levin, already a collaborator of «*Ruskaia mysl'*» in Russia and of *Rul'* and *Russkie Zapiski* during immigration, he was deported in a concentration camp where he died.

³ Probably it was V.V. Ulianitskii, a member of the *Russkii politicheskii komitet* and a collaborator of B.V. Savinkov.

требность, идущая далеко за пределы отрицательной оценки национальных качеств того или другого народа. И не приходится удивляться тому, что антисемиты охотно пользуются фактами сомнительными или непроверенными. Но совершенно недопустимо пользоваться фактами отвергнутыми (Shul'gin i Struve 1922: 6).

Provided that the facts narrated by Shul'gin in the memoirs were not the result of direct observation – a thesis further confirmed by the fact that the author never responded to such critics – but are rather 'mythical' elements of fiction, inserted into the plot of a testimonial text, there arises a fundamental question: how are we to explain such a manipulation of memory? The review which was published in the «Novoe Vremia» journal helps to provide an answer. It was noted how the memories of Shul'gin "had made a lot of noise" ("вызвали большой шум"). There was also stated, that the mission of «Russkaia mysl'» was to "gather and join the forces of Russian intellectuals" ("собирать и объединить русские умственные силы"), and that for this purpose it was essential to

have "an extraordinarily alive ideal" ("необычайно яркий идеал", N.R. 1922). It seems that for the journal such an ideal could be the myth of the Jewish Bolshevism (see Gerrits 2009), which however was widely spread throughout its pages.

The review published in «Novoe Vremia» suggested that the task of the remodelling of the witness statements seemed to be aimed at the strengthening of the anti-Semitic interpretation of the revolutions as an action organized by the Jewish. Such an interpretation could act as the 'glue' of the diaspora, facilitating the definition of their identity through the opposition of another group, held responsible for the destruction of the homeland and for the subsequent exile. In fact, while the compactness of this diaspora system was reinforced by a shared opposition of the ruling regime in Russia and by the sharing of a common language and culture, it is equally true to say that it was the product of the collapse of a multi national empire (cf. Gousseff 2008). This way the diaspora itself was multi-national and multi-confessional. Besides, the diaspora was also heterogeneous in terms of its political make-up. In other words, the diaspora presented subsystems that could be carriers of conflicting memo-

ries that could result in a memory war. Those of Shul'gin therefore could not be 'simple' memories as they had been presented, but an attempt to pass a specific interpretation of the events in Russia. Within some areas of Russian emigration a silent but vicious fight for the diffusion of the anti-Semitic thesis that interpreted the October Revolution as a foreign (i.e. Jewish) conquest (Budnitskii 1999; 2006) was taking place. Shul'gin's 'testimony' – as it was defined by the same Struve – therefore went beyond the boundaries of individual history and the autobiographical genre by establishing itself in History writing. Through life writing a project of 'historical engineering' came about, whose intention was to promote a certain reading of the events that could become a heritage to be shared by the community of the Russian diaspora.

There remains the problem of understanding if and how such manipulation was conscious: was it a case of a response to a cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957) – in which the author with an unconscious process 'adapted' the individual episodes to his own global framework – or was it rather a lucid attempt to influence the reader and the construction of history? An an-

swer can hardly be provided, and would not change much. If it was or not a conscious operation, Shul'gin's manipulations demonstrates how self-oriented texts can play a leading role in the creation of historical narrative, in this specific case, the anti-Semite myth, which was fundamental in the political debate of the time. The uses and abuses of memory therefore reveal the existence of a conflict, an attempt to silence another version. Reconstructing these conflicts allows us to avoid an idyllic view of the diaspora and its history. To quote D. Boyarin: "Attention must be paid to the powers exercised "within" diasporic communities. [...] Evaluating diaspora entails acknowledging the ways that such identity is maintained longer through exclusion and oppression of internal others and external others" (2002: 7).

To conclude, the small 'case' that arose around the first episode of *Dni* is interesting in many respects. Firstly, the authors of the replies recognized the potential ability of memoirs to build a historical truth, thanks to the implicit pact with the reader who is then led to believe the veracity of the narrative. Reacting, they unveiled the dynamic between reality and fiction proposed by the text and

broke the illusion of its authenticity, giving the history a second and discordant version. In addition, the fact that, other than Ulianitskii, the replies came only from intellectuals of Jewish origin was highly significant to the state of Russian-Jewish relationship within emigration in the early twenties:

Shul'gin's truth had become convincing to Struve, and not for him alone, and through self-oriented writing was attempting to become an official history for emigration.

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