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The intellectuals from Russia's peoples of the North: from obedience to resistance

Eva Toulouze

It is time for the historians to recognise what was very clear to Russian historians in the 1920s and the early 1930s (Drabina 1930: 33, 45-48) – that the territory of Russia as well as of what was called for some decades the "Soviet Union" was achieved through quite brutal colonial processes. This analysis is most recognised by non-Russian scholars but fails yet to be accepted in Russia. Still, it is not difficult to identify the trace of colonial phenomena in several social and cultural aspects of everyday life. I shall concentrate here on one peculiar aspect of colonial societies – the creation *ab nihilo* of a new social group – and examine how it has functioned and how it is functioning.

The new power, which started in 1917 to rule Russia, did not rely on massive support all over the country. The Northern areas, which had enriched the former regime mainly through the export of furs, were "terra incognita" for the new leaders of Russia, whose personal experience was urban and linked to the working classes. Therefore, those regions were at first neglected by the central power. But soon their importance as economic resources grew, including the importance of then Arctic Ocean as a way of transportation, while the country had to face international isolation. The present demographic situation, in which indigenous peoples in Western Siberia (the Khanty, the Mansi and the Nenets), have been reduced to be small minorities on their traditional territories, must not make us forget that, at the beginning of the 20th century, they represented more than half of the population (Ivanov 1928: 33). They could not be ignored, although nobody knew how to deal with them. The Soviet power needed to have mediators, who would be able to fulfil a double role, i.e. to ensure communication in both directions: to give information about their home region and its inhabitants as well as to transmit the Soviet messages.

This is the main political source of the emergence, in the 1930s, of a definite new social category – the indigenous intellectuals.

Still, it is not the only reason. Another parallel source is to be found in a less egoistic approach, which is concomitant and not really disconnected from the first. Because of both their inability to deal competently about the North and the understanding that something had to be done, the conceptual approach of the indigenous peoples was delegated to a committee composed both by politicians (older Bolsheviks) and by scholars who had the knowledge of local conditions (Budarin 1952: 127; Slezkine 1994: 151). These people, as well as some of the politicians – who had prior experience with the so-called peoples of the North – looked with extremely friendly eyes towards them and were honestly devoted to their welfare. Most of them considered it to be their task to lead the indigenous communities to modernity without transforming their identity. Their answer to this challenge was the only one they could imagine: train individuals, from each people, who would be able to partake in the political life, to represent and therefore to promote the interests of the ethnic groups they belonged to in the highest spheres. Mediators were required, if the indigenous peoples wanted to have their share of power about the decisions concerning them. Therefore, like in other Russian regions, the appearance of the intellectuals was not as much the answer to an internal need as a necessity for the Soviet authorities and the only reasonable path for development their friends could imagine.

Having presented the political context in which this policy was to be held, I shall hereafter focus on the people forming this category, on their deeds and their mentality as well as on the changes that occurred in their relationship to the rulers, from the starting point up to the present experience.

1. "Their master's voice"

The very existence of intellectual forces in the Russian North is thus merely due to a political decision. The idea was expressed at the beginning of the 1920s, when the Commissariat for the Affairs of Nationalities declared that indigenous peoples had to be taught in their mother tongue and emphasised the importance of education (Vdovin 1959: 287). The main question – and it is a central one – concerns the timetable of this policy. Any changes through education are supposed to take time. Although the principle of teaching children in their own language was quite friendly, on the practical level there were no teachers at all wishing to work in the North and even fewer who had some knowledge of their pupils' languages (Gorodenko 1995: 171). So, the process could last for one or two generations. But time was not what the Bolsheviks thought they had. They wanted to get results very quickly. They hurried the tempo. The reason was certainly the lack of sensitivity and therefore of respect for differences in culture and worldview, the Bolsheviks' mistrust about any kind of classification criteria not directly based on Marxist principles, first of all on the class struggle. All this was certainly also was linked to the wish to quickly achieve the unification of the country and to keep it under ascertained control.

The clearest expression of this hurry is the way younger and fewer individuals from the indigenous peoples were trained practically starting from nil. In 1925, under the guidance of Vladimir Bogoraz-Tan and Jan Koshkin (Alkor) (Voskoboynikov & Nikulin 1967: 72), 19 persons were gathered in Leningrad, at the Workers' University, in order to be educated and to get different qualification skills. Most of them were not literate. Some did not even speak Russian. They all came from their traditional environment and discovered urban life. Some were still children; some were over 30 years old (Bogoraz-Tan 1927: 52, 62). They were supposed to be the pioneers of the North. The ones we are informed about are those who resisted – for there were numerous obstacles to their adaptation. Their teachers were highly respected Russian intellectuals. The trainees were to become the first indigenous writers, linguists, physicians, veterinarians, economists and lawyers from the Arctic regions. I shall concentrate here on the fate of the intellectuals in the humanities.

a) A free choice

Usually, they had chosen for themselves the way they were following. Most of them certainly did not understand what their choice meant in practice, neither were they aware of their own abilities to face the actual conditions. Not all the inhabitants of the North wished to quit their region and to live in the Russians' towns. The people who made this choice were often marginalised in their own society: among them, there were many orphans, to whom society did not provide any real way out, young men who were

irritated by the elders' refusal to understand the new world. In their societies, younger people were not empowered to have any influence on their communities, for age and experience, and not youth, were recognised social values. They were impatient and wished to achieve a better life sooner, and believed it was possible with this new power that seemingly shared their views. For the representatives of the lower classes, the communists offered the opportunity of coming out of a world that condemned them to poverty.

As I mentioned, there were numerous obstacles to their adaptation: the language the knowledge of which was either completely unknown or weak, the unfamiliar urban environment with high buildings covering the horizon, new rules and expectations. This aspect is strongly emphasised by Slezkine (Slezkine 1994: 180-181). Still, there is an aspect to which he does not pay much attention, although it seems to me that it was certainly strong encouragement to these young people: their teachers were able and willing to support them both in the acquisition of knowledge and on the human and moral level. They were acquainted with their students' original environment and culture, they respected and loved it and often they were also skilled in the indigenous languages, for several of them had been exiled during the late tsarist period in those remote Siberian areas and had dedicated their research to them. We have proof of that through the testimony of people who studied in Leningrad in later times[1], but with teachers who had already worked with indigenous groups before World War II. Thanks to them, they experienced behaviour different from those that were general in the regions, where most of the leaders of the Party did not understand the need to spend time, energy and money for peoples who were not interested in what they were proposed (ibidem). Thus, their own experience, of the representatives of Soviet power, gave them a peculiar image being a much friendlier one than that of their fellow countrymen were accustomed to in the regions.

We may therefore suggest that this first generation of people grew within a tragic misunderstanding about the nature of the new regime. They owed to it their very existence, their status and training and they acknowledged it with sincere gratitude. Seeing what had been done for them, they believed the rulers' implicit promise, in regard to their peoples' future, and they expected it to be at the same time modern, prosperous without any lost of identity nor cultural values. These were the ideas that were transmitted through the Soviets' political discourse and these first intellectuals were the living proof of its good faith. They were loyal to their master. They were enthusiastic about it. A good example of this enthusiasm may be found in the first Nenets writer's, Nikolay Vylka, poems: "Lenin's sun shines on the tundra" (Vylka 1970: 15-27), Vylka adapts a popular Nenets legend, according to which the "bad guys" (here, the rich, the merchants and the shamans) had stolen the sun and the poor Nenets had to live in darkness. But Lenin recovered the sun and the Nenets started to live a comfortable, modern life in the tundra. Lenin is presented as a Nenets traditional hero, a "shyudbya" riding on a sledge dragged by reindeer and speaking Nenets. Thus, Vylka in his vision integrates Lenin and the Party within the framework of his traditional worldview. This is

[1] I am thinking of personal conversations with elder intellectuals, the Even academic Vasili Robbek (Moscow, February 1997), with the Mansi Matra Pankratyevna Vahrusheva (St. Petersburg, June 1997) and with the Nenets writer Prokopi Yavtysyi (Saransk August 2000).

an excellent example of how the first intellectuals could not expect the total alienation, which the Soviet regime was about to impose upon them.

Nikolay Vylka's works are really less political than those of some other intellectuals. Actually, Nikolay Vylka was the nephew of one of the rare literate individuals among the peoples of the North, Ilya Vylko (whose first name was, in Nenets, Tyko), who had the unique opportunity, thanks to his friendship with the Russian explorer Vladimir Rusanov, to dedicate one year in Moscow to study with private teachers all kind of sciences and arts (Košetškin 1980: 39). Both Tyko and Nikolay came from the island Novaya Zemlya, where sparse population was recent (Aleksandrova 1937: 79, Tyko 1965: 62, Kuratov 1925: 39-41) and where "class struggle" was very difficult to find. His approach might be called synchretic: he melts Soviet values and traditions, seeing in the new world the possibility of getting rid of the problems his people were experiencing. His short stories took advantage of personal and family experiences and focus mostly on one tragic feature of the Nenets' everyday life – alcoholism, which led the indigenous people to misery and allowed exploitation (Toulouze 1998a).

Not all the members of this newborn intelligentsia were as accommodating as Vylka. Some of them became enthusiastic local party leaders and were active during all of the 1930s. For example, Ivan Noho: he became second secretary of the Party organisation in the Yamal Peninsula. Thus, he actively participated in the campaign against shamans and against the indigenous people's elite (Ogryzko 1998: 522-523). Noho has written two plays – theatre is seen as a tool for winning popular support for the party's understandings. His first play is called "The Shaman" (1937) and it is a mere illustration of the Party's approach, expressed by Bogoraz-Tan and Suslov at the beginning of the 1930s (Suslov 1931; Bogoraz-Tan 1932: 142-143). The interesting point about Noho's texts is the attempt to express ideas connected with the new world with pure Nenets words: there are practically no borrowings from Russian, except the word for Party (Toulouze 1998b). He dedicated his second plays to "Vauli Nenyang" (1940), a kind of Nenets' Robin Hood, who was supposed to rob the rich in order to distribute their reindeer to the poor. Vauli Nenyang was the ideal "Soviet" hero, for his "struggle" was not based on ethnic identity but on "class struggle". I write these terms with quotation marks, because this is the Soviet discourse about Vauli. In the Nenets folklore there are two interpretations of Vauli, as a hero supporting the poor against the rich, or as a bandit. This, as well as Noho's political choices, may rely on his personal experience. Noho was an orphan who happened at a quite young age to study at the missionaries' school in Obdorsk. He had such no experience of living in the tundra, had been educated according to the missionaries' spirit – hostility to local beliefs and certainty that children had to be taught in their mother tongue. Unlike what would happen later, in the Soviet period, the missionaries had tried to write translations and handbooks explaining their doctrine in the vernacular languages in a way understandable to the population. Noho was encouraged by the missionaries to study further. Later, he worked for a Russian merchant in Obdorsk and could experience the tragedy of the "half-caste", who does not belong to any community – he wasn't a Tundra Nenets any more, but the Russians did not accept him as their equal (Ogryzko 1998: 522-523).

The missionaries' influence is also noticeable in the case of the third Nenets' writer of the thirties, Anton Pyrerka (Lebedeva 1958). Unlike the others, Pyrerka is also

known as a scholar, a linguist who took part in the process of creating literary languages. He is the author of one single novel "Vedo's youngest son" (1940), which is mostly autobiographical. Like Noho, he was an orphan; he had been rejected by his relations and lived the desperate life of a street child in the villages. Once he saw a school – certainly connected with the Orthodox Church, because there were no other schools in that region, and for the sake of curiosity joined the other children. Thus, he got familiar with literacy. Later, he went back to the tundra, but lived there a miserable life, for he had no reindeer of his own. In this context, the arrival of the "Reds" was an event that gave hope for a better life, and Pyrerka supported the new regime and became the first Nenets' scholar.

Finally, I must present a Mansi writer, Panteley Yevrin, who was the first to use Mansi in a short novel called "Two Hunters". Yevrin came from the Konda River basin, which was already one of the most russified areas in Western Siberia. He wrote his novel, not in the newly created Mansi literary language (whose basis was the dialect spoken in the Sosva River basin), in his own Southern dialect. "Two Hunters" is probably the best literary work written by a Western Siberian native at the end of the thirties: the heroes are interesting characters, an old Mansi hunter and a younger Russian. They spend one week hunting together and discovering one another. There are several aspects of this quite complex process that are not treated directly as political, but as cultural shocks for both – wherefore it remains an pleasant read even seventy years later (cf. also Toulouze 2003).

So, the first intellectuals to assert their personality before World War II were enthusiastic about the exciting adventure they felt they were about to live: most of them looking at life from Leningrad, they imagined radical improvements in the life of their people. Few of them could ever imagine the radical negation of native cultures that indeed had already started: at the beginning of the 1930s, as in Leningrad scholars and students tried to develop languages and literary expression, the local authorities launched a resolute campaign against the shamans. It started with a theoretical article by Suslov (Suslov 1931) and this line was confirmed by the prominent voice of Vladimir Bogoraz-Tan (Bogoraz-Tan 1932: 142-143). The official ideology discovered that there was a class struggle even in the tundra and in the taiga: the first natives that suffered repression were the richest reindeer herders (Slezkine 1994: 193). Thus, the most solid culture-bearers in the arctic communities were systematically excluded from social life and even physically annihilated. They were the ones to resist this brutal sovietisation – not the small intellectual circles that still believed in the promises of the regime that had already given them so much personally.

b) A narrow path

For the Arctic peoples of Russia, World War II is certainly a turning point. Firstly, unlike what was the rule in the tsarist period, for the first time young men, from the taiga and from the tundra, were called to military service. From the point of view of the State, it is a way of creating a coherent body of Soviet citizens having all the same duties, all privileges having been abolished (Forsyth 1992: 347). But most of the conscripts weren't physically and morally prepared for their new environment and for

war conditions. Most of them died, actually not only simple people coming from the tundra but also some of the abovementioned intellectuals. (Pyrerka, as well as his teacher G. Prokofyev and his Russian colleague specialist on Nenets - G. Verbov died either on the front or during the blockade, Vylka probably starved to death). Like the whole of the overall population in Russia, the Arctic peoples suffered greatly from the war: all the fish and the reindeer were confiscated for the needs of the army and local people were left with no food.

From my point of view, the most relevant impact of the war was the reality and the feeling that Russia was starting completely anew. As I previously mentioned, most of the skilled intellectuals were gone. Actually, Noho died in 1947; we do not know anything about Yevrin after 1944 (Ogryzko 1998: 522-523; 1999: 398). Their texts disappeared – they were no longer published and they became bibliographical rarities. People easily forgot the pre-War period, because their late personal experience was more present and rewarding. The Latin alphabet, in which the Arctic peoples' languages were written between 1932 and 1937 (cf. Toulouze 1997: 66-77), was completely forgotten. New persons, new writers and new leaders had to be trained from the very beginning.

But the context also had changed. The post-war period was for Stalin's Russia a time of triumph. Behind euphoria, Russia and the whole of the Soviet Union were more and more thoroughly under control. The intellectual landscape was closed: there was no room for individual expression, the themes allowed to writers and journalists were quite limited. There was little room for non-political literature: the old world was forgotten with the literature it had given birth to, writers and poets were supposed to exalt Russia's victory, its heroic resistance, the five years plans, the achievements of socialism. If socialism, with its ideals, was still a dream, or a goal before the war, it has now become a reality – it had won the war and beaten all its enemies. The only freedom, still preserved, was the freedom to praise Stalin in all languages. From the end of the war up to the sixties new writers emerged, and produced texts according to the official ideology. After the war, it is possible to read, in Khanty poetic praise, of the best doers and the production of milk (original text in Nyemysova 1996 I: 30-31).

On the one hand personal expression was not accepted. Even if the writer had wished to express a wider range of ideas and emotions, for example to express the perplexity of their communities facing the intrusion of an alien worldview, it would have not been socially accepted. I doubt, however, whether they could have even thought of a critical approach: they had become familiar with written expression through the Russian model, the only one available, and through the prism of a very clearly defined ideology. Their languages had no experience of literacy; there was no previously traced path they could follow. They had been shaped by the all-soviet common experience of war and by highly ideological education: I do not imagine how the mere idea of resistance to the main stream could have come to them. They had a function: they were the heralds of power, a gratifying position both socially and individually.

I shall mention here three representatives of this second generation, which in some way was a new beginning. Grigori Lazarev (1917-1979) actually had started writing, before the war, poems to Lenin and Stalin. After the war, he wrote both poetry and children's literature based on native legends, his first post-war edition was published in 1949 and he was published continuously since, some of his poems several times throughout the decades. He is actually the first Khanty writer – literacy for Khanty had

been very hard to establish, as the differences between dialects are such as to hinder mutual understanding. There had been attempts to choose one dialect or another as the basis for literary language, but none of them had been really successful (Toulouze 1999: 73). Grigori Lazarev was the first to try to put Khanty in a written form. Lazarev was definitely a Soviet writer, as some of his poems show:

> "My country shines
> Under a sun of happiness and freedom
> The Russians, the Khanty – all the peoples
> Live friendly, as one single family.
>
> The Russians, the Khanty, the Nenets are all brothers
> We are equals in our rights
> We are all happy
> In the embraces of our mother-country"
>
> (in Nyemysova 1996 I: 17).

Still, there are other poems in which he concentrates on landscape. Some of his stories were dedicated to work in collective farms (but this was the reality of their lives); but most of them are tales about animals. Actually after the war, Lazarev dedicated himself mostly to politics and was a regional Party leader (Ogryzko 1998: 381).

Ivan Istomin (1917-1988) is a more professional writer. Actually, like all those who wrote before the war, he is also a marginal figure: he came from the Yamal peninsula and was ethnically a Komi, even if he preferred to write in Nenets. He played an important role in the literary process in Western Siberia as an editor, for thanks to his knowledge of the local languages, he could publish several Khanty and Nenets authors. He was a dedicated communist, whose novels are inspired by class struggle, express the Party's approach, and bear the builders', the pioneers' way of thinking (cf. Ogryzko 1998: 233).

The third writer I would like to mention is a Mansi, Matra Pankratyevna Vahrusheva (1918-1999)[2]. She did not write much literature, only a short story, "On the Shores of the Small Yukonda" (*На берегу Малой Юконды*), published in 1963, whose genre is very similar to the texts written before the war: it is an autobiographic story, reporting her coming back to her home village after having graduated from university. But while the first writers expressed, with a naive sincerity, the contrast between a difficult past and the hopes for a sunny future, now it is the present that is suggested as an ideal world, where the author follows and experiences the achievements of socialism. Its impact is completely different – although I am not sure the author was less sincere. Vahrusheva did not write anything after this text. She was called to the Institute of the Peoples of the North in Leningrad, where she taught both Khanty and Mansi.

The first generation, to which very little time was given, was sincere and probably had no time to be disappointed in its hopes. I think this is the first generation to have lived a kind of schizophrenic experience – as all further generations. The intellectuals are torn between two contradictory worlds: they are both part of their native world, which

[2] She is the only representative of this generation I had the chance of meeting personally in 1997.

they know from inside, and part of the establishment, a world based on Russian, Western[3] values, on a completely different worldview. At the same time, they do not belong entirely to any of them. They have to find a compromise between them, which would allow them to create a balance, to survive.

The way literature developed in this crucial period, when the first potential readers having learnt at school to read in the indigenous languages was emerging, led it to deadlock. What was offered to the readers in Khanty, Mansi or Nenets was a literature that had nothing to say to its readers. There was nothing that one could not find in Russian literature, while in Russian there was much more choice available. Therefore, people wishing to learn developed their abilities to read in Russian and not in their own language.

2. The path towards independence

Until the new period, which starts in the 1960s, the Arctic intellectuals are truly "their master' voice" – it is their function, the reason of their very existence, to be the spokespersons of Soviet rule. Their role was going to change, albeit very slowly. The precondition to this change was a reduction of the pressure put on the intellectuals by Soviet power.

The first period of release from pressure starts in the 1960s. It is not unrelated to the overall changes in the country's intellectual atmosphere, but its forms are peculiar. This liberalisation is expressed through a larger freedom given to the authors in their choice of themes. While before, as I mentioned, the range of possible subjects was extremely narrow, now non-social writings are accepted. Poets are no longer compelled to express themselves about political and economic issues, they may treat themes like love or landscape or connections between the people and their home region. They can write literature touching for their people. Still, this did not mean political emancipation. The writers remained faithful to their masters and probably did not even imagine the possibility of adopting critical attitudes. They may write about their native tundra or taiga, but it is still a Soviet landscape.

There are some poets whose work is absolutely not connected to political themes. In the 1960s, a new generation of Khanty poets appeared. Most of them were Khanty some from the Shuryshkar region, as Roman Rugin[4], Prokopi Saltykov (1934-1994) or Mikul Shulgin (1940), from the Kazym River as Maria Vagatova (1936) or from the Khanty-Mansiisk region as her husband Vladimir Voldin (1938-1971) – all from the Northern Khanty area, writing in the Northern dialect. They are all lyric poets, who do not write any prose, and whose poetry goes from forms very close to folk poetry to lyrics inspired by Russian poetry – praising the Ob, the trees, the Khanty language or their people. None of them is interested by social themes. Alongside with them, I must mention the Nenets poet Leonid Lapcuy (1932-1982), who is considered as the most talented Nenets poet of his generation. While singing poems – Lapcuy always sang his poems (Ogryzko 1998: 393) – about his native country, the Yamal peninsula, Lapcuy expressed his faith in his people's right future under the guidance of the Party. According to Ogryzko, at the end of his life he wanted to write an epic poem about Vauli Nenyang, a

[3] In this context, Russian culture belongs clearly to a "Western" model.
[4] I could find nowhere Roman Rugin's year of birth. He is still alive and lives in Salehard.

kind of Nenets Robin Hood, whose role in the years 1839-1849 is still not very clear: was Vauli a hero, embodying the Soviet idea of class struggle, or purely a Nenets robber, who brutally stole reindeer from the Nenets herders, as some legends present him? This contradiction disturbed Lapcuy very much and he did not finish his poem… (Ogryzko 1998: 395).

Anyhow, whether they praised the power in their writings or not, all were convinced communists. All were members of the Party, some of them were even leaders at the regional level. All were a recognised part of the establishment. None of them dreamed of questioning, even less of revolting.

Neither did Yuval Shestalov. Among the intellectuals of this generation, he is the most celebrated. He is a Mansi, from the Northern groups, with strong roots in traditional culture and devotion to the socialist State. Hundreds of thousands, even millions of copies of Shestalov's works were published between 1966 and 1988: he represented the Soviet achievements in the North. Shestalov is indeed the highest symbol of his period: coming from a very small number of people, he was able to write texts that touched masses of Soviet readers. Moreover, and perhaps, more seriously, he introduced in the Arctic peoples' literature a new dimension, by transforming the Soviet projects in a new mythology, based on Mansi folklore. Shestalov attempts, with real aesthetic success, to integrate modern phenomena into traditional frameworks. Nowadays, unfortunately, it is difficult to take seriously what then was totally convincing: in spite of the author's undoubted sincerity, the Soviet dreams have vanished in a bubble and the sad reality of the Northern areas forbids the reader to be entirely convinced by Shestalov's vision. It is always easier to accept utopian views than those that were based on propagandistic lies.

This new stage – creative freedom in spite of political docility – was certainly a necessary step for the intellectuals' maturation. Actually, it is the prelude to more actual emancipation.

The next period is actually characterised by a total change of paradigm: even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newest generation of Arctic writers no longer felt connected with the Party and the Soviet regime. They felt free to break the beautiful image shaped by their predecessors. And what comes out of it is quite tragic. Before commenting on their behaviour and their literary works, I must attempt to explain some of the possible reasons for this change.

3. The reasons for revolt

A major change occurred in the Northern areas starting from the 1960s: the achievement of colonisation. There had been, for several centuries, limited points of contact between indigenous cultures and newcomers: during the tsarist period those were towns, villages, churches and fairs. During the Soviet period colonisation penetrated deeper and deeper into the native's territories, new villages were built, the communities, living scattered in the taiga, were forced to live a sedentary life and gathered into collective production unities, the children were sent to school and the men to the Army. Still, there were remote places in which it was still possible to escape (Toulouze 1998c: 146-147, 159-160). In the decades following 1960, the whole of the areas inhabited by indigenous peoples were occupied by the oil industry. The presence of huge oil fields was discovered at the end of the fifties. Since then, Siberian oil has given Russia most of its

currency resources. The territory has been literally covered with derricks and pumps. I remember how, at the beginning of the nineties, while flying by helicopter in Western Siberia, the eye was caught all the time by gas flames and derricks, there was no single moment when only forest was to be seen.

There were two consequences of this industrial development.

The first keyword is pollution. Oil exploitation was due to bring the State quick and substantial profit. The Soviet production model did not take security and environment into account. Huge amounts of oil were dumped in the rivers and the taiga, causing irrecoverable damage fish and game – and through this, to the people that still depended on them. The second keyword is immigration. Thousands and thousands of oil industry workers came to these hard and unknown regions in order both to earn "long rubles" and also to achieve something great for their country. It was a kind of invasion. Suddenly, the natives were no more masters of their territory; their home was full of strangers, who ignored their existence and the ecosystem they were destroying.

The indigenous peoples were the losers in the bargain: Russia gained currency and oil workers' welfare, but the indigenes lost the security of their homes, they lost pastures, game and fish. This new challenge for survival revealed how vulnerable the so-called Soviet achievements were, and this appeared even more clearly with the collapse of the Soviet Union and of its economic structures. Schooling, that had been so highly praised, had just been able to annihilate the traditional transfer of knowledge, creating a gap between the generations, without giving actual tools to the younger to integrate into the industrial world. The virtues children had learnt at school were in contradiction to the values of their original environment, so that they were indeed in-between, unable to adapt to both opposite worlds.

While, until the end of the Soviet era, the people in the villages were employed in collective units, with the collapse of the latter unemployment spread all over the North. The result is just tragic: most of the Khanty or the Nenets are unable to be employed in the oil industry, most of them survive with social aid and compensation from the oil companies for the use of their traditional lands, alcoholism spreads and touches almost the whole of the male population and only slightly less among the females. Moreover, the oil workers are mainly younger men, whose need for women has provided an immediate occupation for native girls.

There is an atmosphere of despair, people have the feeling – and the intellectuals share it – they are in a deadlock. That is what the Khanty writer, Eremei Aipin, expressed in 1994 with the following words:

> My father keeps silent. He knows his land well.
> If you go North – you'll arrive to the oil pumps.
> If you go East – you'll arrive to the city.
> If you go West – you'll get to the road
> If you go South – you'll get down to Samotlor[5].
> (Aipin 1994: 26-27).

The intellectuals from the Arctic peoples could not keep on having their eyes closed to the fate of their families, of their closest acquaintances, of their villages, of their

[5] One of the biggest oil fields in Western Siberia.

peoples. For the first time, they felt responsible for them and chose to represent them not only "cosmetically", but to transmit their unhappiness, their protest. They did it both though artistic expression and through personal involvement in politics. This is the theme of the last part of this article.

3. The impact of art – everyday life and political power

While, until the end of the seventies, no critical hints ever appear in the Arctic writer's fundamentally conventional productions, some bolder voices start then to emerge. In the first decade, these new voices are cautious: I am thinking about two novels that announce a change in tonality. The Tundra Nenets Anna Nerkagi (1952) is the first to express in her short novel "Aniko from the clan of Noho" (*Анико из роды Ного*) (1977) the tragedy of educated natives, who do not belong entirely either to their traditional world or to the modern Russian urban world, who are not able to be happy in either place. Two year later, another novel appears that does not show everyday reality as a paradise: it is Eremei Aipin's "Waiting for the first snow" (*В ожидании первого снега*) (1979). It is not a very aggressive or shocking text, as some of Aipin's later stories or novels are, but it presents a real problem: a Khanty young man, who is a student, decides to work in the oil industry during his summer vacations. During that summer, he experiences personally all the difficulties of coexistence between the oil workers and the indigenous communities, the oppositions in worldview, the conflict of interests. The Soviet achievements are not presented exclusively from the sunny side; the hero, in some ways, gives voice to the Khanty' complaints. In spite of the individuals' sincerity and good will from both sides, they face contradictions they are not able to solve. Aipin does not accuse, he reports. It is the first appearance, in the Arctic peoples' literature, of a tragic rift: how can the people live in an environment that is not compatible with their worldview and from which there is no escape? There are no answers in Aipin's text, just a dramatic question.

All those problems, the ones that Aipin and Nerkagi present to the reader, are not new ones. They were familiar, but they were not spoken of. The most dramatic were hidden: for decades, the survivors of the Kazym tragedy[6] kept silent about its very existence to their children and their grandchildren. Others were a cause of shame and suffering individuals did not share their troubles with others. Probably, many were just ignored, and people living with them did not acknowledge them and perhaps were not aware of them. The problems, exposed in these two novels, express the essence of the Northern peoples' life at the end of the 20th century, and this has not changed at the beginning of the 21st: they live in a rift situation between two cultures – one partly lost, the other not completely assimilated.

Until the late eighties, the writers remain relatively neutral: they ask questions and express anguish. The second period, which starts one or two years before the collapse of the Soviet Union, leads to some intellectuals going further, to criticise and even to accuse. They do that in two ways – through writing and through personal action. From this point of view, there are three most interesting intellectual personalities in Western Siberia – the two writers I just mentioned and the Forest Nenets Juri Vella. I shall now dwell on their fate and writing.

[6] A Khanty and Nenets uprising against the Soviet rule in 1933-34, which led to brutal repression.

In his further work, Aipin is bolder and bolder. His epic novel "The Khanty, alias the Morning Star" (*Ханты или звезда утренной зари*)" (1990) was for years refused by several publishing houses that did not dare to accept such a text[7]: it is a kind of Khanty family saga throughout the Soviet period, with a most impressing report of how the Siberian indigenous peoples were treated during Stalin's period, how brutally all the bases of their existence were systematically destroyed. This novel was clearly a turning point: the writer's task is now to be the mouth of his people, to express its claims up to the highest levels of society. It is a total change. Aipin's last novel, "God's Mother on Bloody Snow" (*Божья матерь в кровавых снегах*) (2002) is certainly the most iconoclastic of all: he develops one tragic episode of the thirties, the uprising of the Khanty and Nenets, from the River Kazym, against Soviet rule in 1933-34, which was followed by severe repression. The men arrested and condemned have still not been rehabilitated. Aipin presents this event as a fight by the natives against colonial rule, a view that is totally refused by the Russian establishment.

Another interesting aspect of Aipin's impact is his choice to be a politician. He was elected member of the last Supreme Soviet and carried on his mandate throughout the first State Duma. In 1995, he was not re-elected in confused conditions[8]. After this experience, living in Moscow, Aipin continued his political activities by being, for some years, President of the Association of the peoples of the North (RAIPON) and after 1997, by belonging to Boris Yeltsin's staff in Western Siberia. Now he is the president of the Parliamentary assembly of Indigenous peoples in the region of Khanty-Mansiisk.

His attitude as a politician differs substantially from what he expresses in his literary texts. Aipin is not an emotional politician. He has chosen to develop the legislative protection of the peoples of the North: he is mostly responsible for the numerous legislative acts that have been adopted in the last decade in favour of the Arctic minorities. At the same time, he has constantly been connected with the rulers, being an active supporter of Boris Yeltsin, to whose staff he belonged. So the protest, expressed in his books, does not appear as protest on the political field: Aipin is not an opposition writer.

Anna Nerkagi is completely external to politics. She has written some anguished texts but it is also, by her example, that she wants to transmit a message, a message of hope. Anna Nerkagi is one of the two prominent writers having chosen to live a traditional life. Although the experience reported in "Aniko from the clan of Noho" is a transposition of the experience of her family, she later learned to live in the tundra, married a reindeer herder and lived as the Tundra Nenets traditionally lived, recognising still that she was "not good": "I could live in the tundra as a writer, but it was much more difficult to survive as a human being" (Ogryzko 1998: 510). Anna Nerkagi had a terrible crisis, which led her to Christianity, when her adopted little girl died, and, at the end of the eighties, she lived some time in the town. Later she returned to the tundra, and now she leads a "faktoria" – which is in Siberia a company that reaches the remotest settlements in the tundra, buys their meat, furs or berries and sells them all the necessary products they can not find on the spot. Anna Nerkagi's life is among the Nenets: she shows it is possible to be modern and to live a traditional way of life.

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[7] As a remembrance of the context, Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* were published in Russia in 1987.

[8] At the very last moment, his candidature was withdrawn under a formal pretext. This event is reported life in Valentin Kuik's film "Voices" (Hääled 1995-1996).

This is also the message Yuri Vella tries to transmit to his kin. Yuri Vella and Eremei Aipin were born the same year in the same village, Varyogan, where Eastern Khanty and Forest Nenets coexist. It is perhaps not by mere chance that it has given birth to two such personalities: this village is situated on one the richest oilfield complexes in Russia and all its life now ruled by the oil industry. Partly like Anna Nerkagi, Yuri Vella's main weapon is not really literature. He published his first collection of poems "News from the settlement" (*Вести из стойбище*) in 1990. He has since published five books, but most of them contain the same poems with few additions. He writes rarely and his texts are usually short, concentrated and luminous. His lyric is partly universal: he has beautiful poems about love; but he also expresses anguish and pain as a result of the damage done to his kin and to his land. Literature is for him a way to express deep personal emotions, not mainly to transmit political messages.

Actually, it is more as an intellectual than as a writer that Yuri Vella plays a major role in the Khanty-Mansiisk region; he is seen as a "disturber of the peace", whom both political administration and the oil industry beware. Like Anna Nerkagi, he has chosen to live a traditional life in the tundra, becoming, being aged over 40, a reindeer herder pasturing his herd on the traditional lands of his grandmother after having grown up and having been educated in the village. In the taiga, he experienced the everyday conflict between native peoples trying to preserve their way of life and the oil industry expanding on their pastures. His political activity is in the field, not in the Duma's corridors or in towns. He interacts permanently with the oil industry leaders, trying to protect his neighbours and relatives from their intrusion. He uses his deeds and his word as a weapon in the most different forms. Living in the forest, he occasionally leaves it to deliver speeches or to organise international conferences in San Francisco, Helsinki or in Estonia (cf. Liivo Niglas' article in this volume).

In this new period, which is still lasting, the Arctic intellectuals' word has finally found its emancipated function – to give voice to the native communities. It is not always simple to achieve this task: these strong personalities are often marginal in their own environment. Aipin inspires no confidence in the Eastern Khanty and has difficult relations even with his sisters; Aipin is rejected, because he is a city prominent, because he does not deal personally with his reindeer, because he is suspected to have good relations with the oil drillers. Vella is also isolated among the Varyogan population, because of his attempts to build a future not disconnected from tradition, in a way his fellow villagers do not understand; he is marginalised also because he does not drink and he does not approve of people drinking. He is respected, but not loved.

The three of them are still connected to traditional life by deep roots. They all know and are able to write in their mother tongue. Anna Nerkagi has hundreds of pages of oral texts she collected herself in the Yamal peninsula; Aipin's second novel, "In the Shadow of the Old Cedar" (*В тени старого кедра*) has been published in 1981, both in Khanty (Eastern dialect) and in Russian, and he has later written small texts in Khanty; Juri Vella started in 1990 to publish a paper in Forest Nenets (a language without official literary language); he has some poems in Nenets and has started to use it more and more often. Still, all of them have written their main works in Russian.

I think this is specially to be noted by Aipin and Nerkagi. Vella's poetry is an individual expression and it is not surprising that Vella, whose mother tongue is not a written one, wrote mainly in Russian. But Aipin and Nerkagi's prose is a message prose.

And this message is transmitted in Russian. It shows clearly enough that the addressee is not first of all to be found within the Khanty or Nenets community, it is the Other, the one who destroys the basis of their life without even being aware of what he is doing. It is to awake the Russians' awareness that Russian has become the main tool for this generation of intellectuals.

Thus, fifty years were necessary for the Arctic peoples' intelligentsia to get free from the role for which it had been created. All this time, the intellectuals from the North lived in a deeply schizophrenic condition: they were not strangers to their own culture, but they were conditioned by their Russian environment, which on the one hand "gave" them Western culture, considering it to be the only acceptable cultural model, and on the other hand expected them to spread it – along with the Party's policy – in their communities. They still were familiar with the knowledge necessary to survive in extreme conditions, as those they were accustomed to live in, but they weren't able any more to live this less comfortable life. At the same time, towards the outer world, they presented themselves as representatives of their kin living in the forest or in the tundra. It seems that the dramatic situation of the indigenous peoples, who are on the threshold of disappearance, has stimulated them to get really closer to their peoples. Still, the gap between "city" natives and communities preferring the traditional way of life (or at least living closer to it, in smaller villages) has not disappeared. Some more time is certainly necessary in order to conquer confidence and even so, this confidence will be surely easier to obtain if the intelligentsia comes at least partially back to traditional life, as Yuri Vella and Anna Nerkagi have done.

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