Vygotsky: An Intellectual Biography

Anton Yasnitsky
The most famous Russian psychologist, whose life and ideas are least known?
A pioneer of psychology who said virtually nothing new?
A simple man who became a genius after he died?

This fundamentally novel intellectual biography offers a 21st-century account of the life and times of Lev Vygotsky, who has long been considered a pioneer in the field of learning and human development. The diverse Vygotskian literature has created many distinct images of this influential scientist, which has led many researchers to attempt to unearth ‘the real Vygotsky’. Rather than join this quest to over-simplify Vygotsky’s legacy, this book attempts to understand the development of ‘the multiple Vygotskies’ by exploring a number of personae that Vygotsky assumed at different periods of his life. Based on the most recent archival, textological and historical investigations in original, uncensored Russian, the author presents a ground-breaking account that is far from the shiny success story that is typically associated with ‘the cult of Vygotsky’.

This book will be an essential contribution to Vygotskian scholarship and of interest to advanced students and researchers in history of psychology, history of science, Soviet/Russian history, philosophical psychology, and philosophy of science.

VYGOTSKY

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Anton Yasnitsky
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Только змеи сбрасывают кожи,
Чтоб душа старела и росла.
Мы, увы, со змеями не схожи,
Мы меняем души, не тела.

Николай Гумилев

Only serpents shed their skins forever
So that their souls would age and grow.
We are not like serpents, all that clever,
We change not our bodies, but our souls.

Nikolai Gumilev
Jewish “Prophet” at the outskirts of an Empire
student in gymnasium and university
Godless daydreamer without a job or profession
Bolshevik activist at the time of avant-garde, jazz and “new men”
revolutionary Russian psychologist
repenting doubter, furious critic, and criticized scholar
holist, dissenter, and self-destructing revisionist
“Genius”
OUVERTURE

Each great man’s life story is simple unless one wants to make it great. Each simple man’s life story is great unless one wants to make it simple. This story is about a genius. So they say. But the person did not become genius until after his death. So, this story is simple and great at the same time.

The name of the protagonist is Lev Vygotsky. He is the most famous and the most admired Russian psychologist. He lived a short life and died young. Some people love him and his ideas. Other people don’t know him. In fact, neither those who love him, nor those who have never heard of him really know him. This is why the story of his life had to be typed up, carefully proofread, corrected for spelling errors, and published as a book. This is the book.

This book is a biography. So, this is a life-story of a man. I want you to know Vygotsky as well as I know him, and to love him, for he was a really nice guy. As happens with legendary and much admired people, while reading the memoirs of his affectionate friends and former colleagues it is difficult to learn what kind of person Vygotsky was. Those who knew him well described him as tall and small, precise and unpunctual, sharp-minded and superficial, erudite and unschooled, a systematic thinker and an academic failure, a brilliant genius and an unoriginal borrower. Well, nobody’s perfect. One might wonder how it is possible that there were so many people hidden within one man. At least, I, the author of this book, did wonder. And this was probably the main reason why this book was finally typed up, carefully proofread, corrected for spelling errors, and published.

Yet, while reading the book one needs to keep in mind that this is, as the title of the book says, an intellectual biography, or more or less a history of ideas. All of us have lots of ideas about life, the world and our place in it. More often than not, none of these ideas are our own but have been borrowed from somebody else at some point or another. But this means that I had to be highly selective in my work. One of the toughest challenges I faced while writing this book was the
problem of making a choice of the points to discuss, always on guard for those that I believe are the most important and essential for this story. Somebody will certainly disagree with my choice. Well, nobody’s perfect.

Finally, this is a biography – an intellectual biography – of an historical figure of a man who lived in a country that was very different from the ones we are all living in now, and who died a very long time ago. This means that it is difficult to understand the man, his life and work, unless we know really well the time, the country, and its history. Not only is nobody perfect, but also nobody can know everything. *Nemo nostrum possit omnia scire*, as those old Romans would say, and we can only hope they did not die out because of this. In any case, in order to write this book – and to do this best – I had to read a great many other books. And I did. I borrowed a lot from these great books especially when I had to tell the reader about what we need to know about the country and the history, and the culture of Russia and the Soviet Union of the 1920s and the 1930s. In fact, this is the time and the place in which Lev Vygotsky lived most of his life. The list of the titles and the names would be too long, so I would like to thank all those great authors, the so-called revisionist and post-revisionist historians, who wrote their thick, meticulously researched and well-thought-out books. I owe a lot to them. Probably, my book can count as a revisionist one too, because of all this.

Finally, I need to confess that I do not believe that a definitive biography of a man is possible as such. We hardly know who we are ourselves, not to mention how little we know of who all these people around us are. Even less do we know of the people who we have never personally met, with whom we have not talked nor even looked into their eyes. Any person who ever lived or who is yet to be born is so vast, irrational, and amazing that a biography – and even the best researched and the most beautifully written life story – is bound to be selective, fragmentary, and superficial. This book is not entirely a work of fiction: this is a scholarly book. It emerged out of thinking about the piles of obscure archival documents, memoirs, and other publications. Yet, the book that you are holding in your hands now is, nevertheless, a subjective construction and reconstruction of the life of a man who happens to be its main character.

This means that history is never done. It keeps being written all the time – even right now as you are reading these lines – and new books might come out some day that far surpass this story. As with any good book, this story must start with “in the beginning”. So it does.

In the beginning there was Gomel. In fact, more precisely, in the beginning there was Orsha – a small town at the western outskirts of the Russian Empire, now in Belarus – where Vygotsky was born. Yet, within a year of his birth the Vygotsky family left Orsha for another larger town, about two hundred and fifty kilometres to the south – about three or four hours’ drive in our days, depending on how fast one drives. And that was Gomel, a relatively small provincial town of roughly forty thousand inhabitants at the end of the 19th century. It was populated mostly by Jews (over half of those who lived there), Russians, and Belarusians. But, as confusing as it appears, Vygotsky was not Vygotsky yet, in any sense. Well, let us start all over again …
The Gomel years (1896–1913)

In the beginning there lived the Vygodskii family in the western province of Russian Empire that is nowadays known as Belarus. Yet, back then, at the end of 19th century this was all Russia. Furthermore, these territories would not become part of Belarus – more precisely, Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic – until the mid-1920s, which means that the Vygodskiis virtually always lived in Russia.

The Vygodskiis were Jewish, by nationality and religion. They were, first and foremost, Simkha Leibovich (1869–1931) – alternative, Russified, name Semen L’vovich – and Tssetsilia (Tsilia) Moiseevna (1874–1935). The Vygodskiis were a wealthy family, a bank manager and his wife, who moved to Gomel in 1897 with their two small children – their daughter Anna-Haia (born in 1895) and son Lev (born in 1896) – and occupied the whole two-floor building with a five-room apartment on the second floor. The father’s office – a private insurance company – was on the ground floor. The Vygodskii family quickly grew in numbers and eventually another six children were born, which was, according to the memoirs of their contemporary, quite unusual and impressive even by the standards of their time.

Gomel, a relatively small town with a population of about 40,000 people (as of 1897), was located within the borders of the so-called Jewish Pale of Settlement. This was the western and south-western part of the territory (roughly four percent of the country) where officially discriminated Jewish populations of the Russian Empire were allowed to settle without any limitations. Major restrictions on Jewish residency were imposed in the rest of Imperial Russia, including its capital St. Petersburg and major cities, such as Moscow, Kiev, Kharkov, or Kazan. Gomel was very densely populated by Jews: according to the Russian Imperial Census of 1897, more than one-half of the population of the town was Jewish. The Vygodskiis were among them.
Russia, the largest country in the world (then and now), in the Imperial times occupied most of the territory of the contemporary Russian Federation (and well above that) and in many ways resembled the Russia of the 21st century. Yet, there were also a few features that made it very different from contemporary Russia and the industrially developed countries of our days.

First, Russia at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was a monarchy: the Greek word meaning the “power of one”. The one was the Emperor (from the early 18th century Russia was an Empire), more commonly known as the Tsar. Furthermore, the regime of the Russian Empire was an autocracy, from the Greek word meaning “ruling by himself”. This means that not only was the Tsar the supreme ruler of the state, but also that he (or she, as occurred in a number of instances during the long history of Russia) was the sole and virtually unrestricted ruler of the country. The autocratic rule was carried out through the whole class of state bureaucrats, the topmost of which were appointed personally by the Tsar. Unlike other European monarchies of our time, the Russian Empire had no Constitution or a Parliament even in the early 20th century. No other democratically elected body of power existed that could counterbalance the power of the Tsar and his chief appointees in the Imperial Ministries, Councils, and other administrative bodies of power. The concentration of so much power in the hands of one person (and, indirectly, members of his family and their formal and informal advisors) created numerous acute problems.

Second, the Imperial power and the Church (as a social institute) were not separated in Russia, and the slogan of unity – “Autocracy, Russian Orthodox Church, and the People” – was the core of the official, conservative ideology of the state.

Third, the Russian Empire, despite its proclaimed ideology – faith, culture, language, people, etc. – was in fact a multi-nation state. Only half of the country’s population was composed of Russian nationals. It included over a dozen contemporary independent states such as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, a part of Poland, and semi-autonomous Finland in the West; the countries of the Caucasus region between the Black and Caspian seas – Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia; and the whole of Central Asia with its contemporary independent republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Fourth, despite rapid industrial development and increasing modernization of Imperial Russia, the country remained mostly agrarian. This means that the overwhelming majority of its population – four in five of its citizens – were peasants who lived in village communes, the peasants’ villages with collective ownership over the land. The main items of the country’s export were grown in the field, mainly grains. The Russian village commune was very traditional and conservative. Despite a few reforms and efforts to break down economically backward communes and establish a class of independent land-owners (individual farmers), the modernization of the early 20th century virtually never reached the Russian countryside.
The early 20th century was the era of the Silver Age, the economic and cultural “Renaissance” of Russia. However, this was also the time of major social and political unrest with frequent violent campaigns against the Jewish population (the so-called pogroms), a range of social movements, and intense illegal political activity. These tensions within national politics, the economy, demographics, culture, and ideology eventually led to the First Russian Revolution of 1905–1907. The revolution triggered the release of the Tsar’s Manifesto of October 1905 that for the first time officially gave the green light to the legal establishment of political parties in Russia, the first ever national elections, and first Russian Parliament (called the Duma).

It is hard to say how the combination of these multiple social and cultural events, forces, and processes impacted the personal and intellectual formation of the Vygodskii family children and their peer friends in Gomel. For instance, some of them might have witnessed the famous Gomel pogrom of 1903 that was followed by another one, in 1906. No doubt, that would have been a traumatic experience. What we do know, though, is that the oldest boy, nicknamed among his friends and family members as “Beba” Vygodskii, was a child of his time and can be described as a somewhat dreamy, art-minded, and ethnically aware youth with interests in literature and poetry, languages, history, and Jewish cultural tradition. For unclear reasons he did not attend elementary school and received elementary education with a private tutor at home. Yet, the diploma of a secondary school, a gymnasium, was a prerequisite for university admission. In early 1911 he was admitted at a private Jewish gymnasium, passed through the sixth, seventh and eighth years of studies, and successfully graduated with excellent grades and a gymnasium gold medal, awarded to him in 1913.5

A Jew admitted to the Imperial Moscow University

Graduation records of the applicant virtually guaranteed him admission to the famous Imperial Moscow University. The main problem for Vygodskii – as with any other university applicant of Jewish origin – was the so-called “Jewish quota” that had been introduced in the Russian Empire at the end of the 19th century. The Jewish population constituted roughly four percent of the total population of the Empire, but their representation in universities in the second half of 19th century considerably exceeded this figure. The quota was imposed under the pretext of providing equal opportunities for the representatives of different ethnicities, according to the proportion of specific minority within the make-up of the entire population of the country. In effect, it limited primarily the number of Jewish students accepted to the state universities and other state educational establishments of higher learning. Thus, for instance, in 1886, just a year before the ruling on the Jewish quota was issued by the Imperial Ministry of Education, Jewish students constituted twenty-eight percent of all students of one of the most prestigious universities outside the Jewish Pale of Settlement, the Imperial Kharkov University. Moreover, their numbers at the Medical Department of this university remarkably exceeded forty percent of all students. As a general rule, for the Imperial capital
St. Petersburg and the second largest city (and the old capital of the country before the 18th century) Moscow, the quota constituted three percent of the total number of those admitted. For a few large cities outside the Jewish Pale like Kharkov or Kazan this was five percent. Finally, for the educational establishments within the borders of the Pale the quota was established at ten percent. Yet, the rules of the game would be different and kept changing all the time, depending on the specific institution, concrete circumstances and the historical moment. Needless to say, the introduction of the quota was a major blow to Russian Jews’ hopes and aspirations, significantly cut their numbers in Russian universities and, thus, curtailed their career opportunities in the Russian Empire.

For the teenager Lev “Beba” Vygodskii his gymnasium gold medal meant quite a lot. It meant that young Beba would fit the discriminatory “Jewish quota” of three percent and allowed him admission to one of the country’s oldest and most prestigious universities. This was the Imperial Moscow University, established in the middle of the 18th century by its founder Mikhail Lomonosov. Yet, to his utter disappointment, the basic principle and the entire logic of future students’ selection had changed right before his planned entrance to the university. The merit-based system of selection that took into consideration academic excellence was substituted with a blind ballot, in other words, mere chance. This made his gold medal irrelevant and considerably undermined the reality of his admission. And yet, as the fate would have it, Lev Vygodskii did apply and, to his enormous surprise and excitement, was one of those randomly picked for admission to the University.

In Imperial Russia Jews were discriminated in a number of ways. They had no legal right to join the ranks of state bureaucracy or occupy other administrative positions without having first denounced the faith of their fathers and converting to Russian Orthodox Christianity. This meant that only a few middle-class vocations were available to them. These jobs would entail a private practice. Typically, these were the professions of a university-trained medical doctor or a lawyer that were – after the jobs in finance and business that did not necessarily require prior university training – perhaps the two most profitable occupations in Russia accessible to Russian Jews.

In the fall of 1913, following his father’s expectations of his older son eventually getting a decent and well-paid job, Lev Simkhovich Vygodskii started his studies at the age of seventeen in Moscow as a student of the Faculty of Medicine. Yet, the future vocation of a medical doctor did not appear very fitting to the humanities-minded teenage Vygodskii. Within just a few months of his admission, he transferred to the Faculty of Jurisprudence. And yet, something was apparently missing. This explains his next major life choice. From 1914, in parallel with his full-time course of studies at the Imperial Moscow University as a future lawyer, Vygodskii started attending courses at the Historical-Philosophical Faculty of the first Russian private (non-degree-granting) Moscow City People’s University, named after its chief sponsor and founder, an industrialist A. L. Shaniavskii (1837–1905). The University was founded in 1908 as one of a great many other privately funded educational establishments of higher learning in Imperial Russia. These
private educational institutions flourished in the country from the end of the 19th century – frequently despite considerable resistance of the Imperial bureaucracy. They would eventually allow these new educational projects due to immense pressure of the middle-class representatives of the rapidly developing civil society in Russia. Shaniavskii Moscow City People’s University was the first university (as opposed to various societies, stations, museums, courses, or institutes) that was established in Russia as a private – although necessarily state-endorsed – enterprise. The Shaniavskii University was well known for its democratic admission policy that gave access to education to the many, regardless of the applicants’ social origin and status, gender, ethnicity and religion, in the spirit of freedom of thought, conscience and faith. It was popularly considered as a “progressive” undertaking that attracted numerous students from diverse strata of society. By the time Vygodskii started his studies at the Shaniavskii Moscow City People’s University its history was extremely short. Yet, in 1911, following a major conflict between the politically conservative Imperial Minister of Education, Lev Kasso, and the elite of the Imperial Moscow University (the so-called “Kasso case”) over one hundred of the University’s professors and privat docents resigned. Subsequently, many of these academically prominent and politically liberal Russian scholars of the time found employment and taught at the “progressive” Shaniavskii Moscow City People’s University.

In the summer of 1914 the First World War broke out, and, in August Imperial Russia entered the War on the side of the United Kingdom, France and their numerous allies and against Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and their allies, such as the Ottoman Empire. Subsequently, the Imperial Russian Army got deeply involved in the military action in Europe. These developments had no direct impact on Vygodskii, who was not drafted, but continued his university studies without any interruption until the fall of 1917.

Literary criticism (1914–1916)

As a student at the Department of Jurisprudence of the Imperial Moscow University, Vygodskii studied for a future career in Law and Legal Studies, but was apparently considerably more interested in literature, history and related disciplines that he was taught at the Shaniavskii University. His earliest surviving completed written work – unlike other drafts or even book projects – was a study that Vygodskii the student produced in 1915–1916 as a research paper for some of his courses at Shaniavskii University. Quite possibly this paper was prepared as an assignment for a course taught by his teacher at this university Yulii Aikhenval’d (1872–1928). This was a major critical essay on Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” that constituted his largest known work on literary criticism.

In this essay Vygodskii followed Aikhenval’d and contemporary Russian literary scholar Arkadii Gornfel’d (1867–1941), who were strong advocates of a highly subjectivist approach to art and literature. According to these scholars, depending on the genre (theatre, music, or literature) the individual observer, the member of the audience, and the reader are co-creators of the piece of art. Obviously, the
reader is not entirely free to interpret art in any way they wish: they are restricted by the plot, the characters’ development, the style, etc. And yet, the act of personal interpretation of a written story equals the act of individual creation of the story anew, but within certain limitations that are imposed on the reader by the author. From this perspective a life story of the author or the social context of artistic creativity are irrelevant and unimportant to a literary scholar. What matters for research, as such, is text. The method is a close reading of a literary text and the meticulous analysis of its style, vocabulary, and structure. When we read fiction, the text provokes the individual reader’s feelings and associations, and leads the reader’s interpretations. Therefore, the goal of a literary analysis is the search for those cues and unique characteristics of a particular book – a novel, short story, fable, or poem – that trigger the subjective reactions within the reader and cue his or her individual interpretations. Vygodskii analysed Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” using this method that he referred to as “the reader’s critique” (chitatel’skaia kritika). In his essay on “Hamlet” the young Vygodskii advocated for the individual reader’s freedom of interpretation and enthusiastically supported symbolist mysticism and irrationalism that were characteristic of a number of literary and artistic movements of the so-called “Russian Silver Age”.

Vygodskii’s student essay on “Hamlet” was never published during his life time. His first publications were brief notes, book reviews and short essays that came out in 1916–1917 in a few newspapers and journals in Moscow and Petrograd. A couple of his book reviews appeared in late 1916 in “Letopis” (Chronicle), a Petrograd leftist and pacifist monthly journal of Russian intellectuals interested in the topics of culture, science, and contemporary society. Several other reviews came out in this publication in early 1917. The last, the fifth, paper that the novice literary scholar submitted for publication in this journal was scheduled to come out at the end of February 1917. This would be his first experience of a theatrical review, but the publication did not happen. Only the proofs of the paper survived. An event of an enormous magnitude in terms of its role in the history of the entire Russian Empire prevented this journal issue from being released – the Russian Revolution of 1917–1918.

Beba Vygodskii: the “young Jewish prophet”

The interests of the teenage Vygodskii (1909–1915) were diverse and, in addition to the arts, literature and history, included collecting stamps, playing chess and corresponding worldwide in Esperanto – the artificial language created in the second half of the 19th century with the hopes of introducing a new means of international communication. Yet, perhaps the most long-lasting and all-embracing passion of the young Vygodskii was the culture and the history of Jews, their identity as a nation and their future as a cultural entity. During his two years of study in Gomel gymnasium Vygodskii led a group – a kruzhok (circle) – of his younger, mostly female, peers from local Jewish youth, enthusiastic about the issues of national history and culture. The meetings and group discussions of the circle were interrupted by their leader’s departure to Moscow in 1913.
Subsequently, in Moscow in 1916–1917 Vygodskii continued his involvement with the Jewish cultural movement when he was employed as a “technical secretary” at the journal “Novyi put” (New way), a Moscow Russian-language journal of and for Jewish intellectuals. The edition was secular and promoted the agenda of the so-called Haskalah – the Jewish movement for the Russian Jews’ enlightenment and involvement in the political and cultural life of the contemporary society.

Apart from administrative duties, Vygodskii contributed a dozen essays on the issues of Jewish life and culture. Vygodskii’s publication record reflected the editorial policy. His publications included several articles that creatively combined his two passions – the arts and the Jewish culture. Apparently, the interest in Jewish issues prevailed in the young man’s mind. Unlike his brief one-page reviews for “Letopis”, his essays that came out in “Novyi put” are longer, detailed papers that reveal their author’s genuine involvement with a wide array of topics and problems of Jewish life and identity in Imperial Russia. Even his analyses of the classics of Russian literature and modern authors were presented through the lens of Jewish issues. In 1916 he published a couple of literary criticism essays, three essays on the topics of Jewish culture and identity, and a Russian translation of a short story in Hebrew.

Lev Vygodskii’s active participation in these editions in Petrograd and Moscow might deceive and mislead one into thinking that he would associate himself with the leftist socialist ideas or Jewish enlightenment movement. His published articles present only the tip of the iceberg, though. Vygodskii’s personal archive contains a wealth of various writings of the time that give us a perspective on what was on his mind at the time. Perhaps it may seem unusual for our contemporary, a teenager of his age, but Vygodskii was a prolific and very daring – albeit somewhat unsystematic and hardly disciplined – author and thinker from his youth. He started writing relatively early and his first known manuscript to survive – Tragikomedia iskanii (“Tragicomedy of strivings”) – is dated 1912, the year when Vygodskii turned sixteen. A number of other manuscripts were mostly drafted in 1915–1917. With the only exception being his literary essay of Shakespeare’s “Hamlet”, none of these were finished – at least not to the extent that they could be submitted for publication – and all of them were entirely devoted to the search for the solution to the “Jewish question”. These documents reveal Vygodskii as an ambitious young author, who audaciously attempted writing, one after another, major speculative – theoretical and philosophical – books of immense scope and importance. The titles of these book projects included “The Book of Fragments”, and “On the New Jewry”, and a few smaller works were entitled “Judaism and socialism”, “Spiritual Zionism (on Ahad ha’Am)”, and “On Zionism”.

In these invariably unfinished manuscripts their author characterized the state of the culture of contemporary Jewry in Russia as a deep cultural and historical crisis. He unhesitatingly shrugged off the option of Jewish cultural assimilation and overviewed the three ways of the solution of the problem of Jewish identity that were fiercely debated among the Jewish intellectuals of the time:

First, Zionism and the idea of Jewish immigration to the “historical motherland” in the Middle East leading to the eventual formation of the national state (i.e. what
would later become the contemporary State of Israel). Second, Jewish immigration to other potentially attractive and promising territories outside the Middle East (for instance, to some countries of South America, Africa, or other localities that allowed the establishment Jewish ethnic settlements or colonies there). Third, the greater involvement of Jews in the social life in the countries and territories of their actual residence and participation in legal political struggle for their rights as an ethnic minority.

Quite characteristically, the young Vygodskii severely criticized all these and radically rejected the three options as only partial or superficial solutions. He advocated for the fourth way, instead. He envisioned the only possible way to restore Jews as a cultural and historical entity: the return to the historical Judaism and its original, immaculate values and mystical revelations as opposed to formal, rationalist and dogmatic treatment of God’s word in Orthodox Judaism and its everyday practice in the Jewish Pale. The critique of left-wing political movements occupied a special place in Vygodskii’s thinking and writings of 1916–1917. As strange as it may seem for an author with a record of publications in liberal and leftist editions, Vygodskii in his unpublished writings fiercely criticized socialism and preached for the Judaism in its archaic forms:

First of all, Judaism provides a religious solution of a social problem. It is in each and every part directed to God … not human society, left to itself, but a society before God. Hence, the commandment – the earthly task – “be holy”. Each community stands firmly in the name of God, but only in the name of God. That is, human society cannot be realized as an anthill. Socialism is the mechanical leveling and equalizing of a human society that is left to itself. It is entirely in the plane of sociology. It calls for organization, for planning: the “proletarians of all countries, unite” it sets against the commandment about holiness: whereas Judaism creates something new, which not yet existed either in [the teachings about] the sabbath, or in chiliasm, or in holiness, socialism fundamentally provides nothing new. … Judaism goes through the heart and soul of the person. Socialism is an “anthill”, because it satisfies the natural, animal nature of man; Judaism is not about bread; it satisfies man’s paradisaical nature. Socialism is the positivistic and abstract-rationalistic solution of a social problem: a self-contained, restricted social problem, it has no solution and develops in isolation; its “orientation is sociological and not cosmic”. In the teachings about the sabbath the social problem is connected “with other worlds”. And the call of the pauper – the pathos of Judaism, is dead in socialism … Socialism is permeated with optimism, it believes that organization cures all of humanity’s concerns, it promises that humanity will be arranged in such a way that satiety, justice and equality form the basis of human wellbeing on earth. But Judaism, according to the prophets’ pledges, waits for “the great and dreadful day of the Lord”.

The elevated and ornamental style of his writing is apparent here. Such manner of writing is generally very characteristic of Vygodskii’s style of his meditations on the topics of Jewish culture and history. A remarkable feature of Vygodskii’s thought is notable in this fragment, too. He proclaimed Judaism as the only pathway for Jewish survival as a distinct and unique socio-cultural entity. Yet, he never concerned himself with the explication of how exactly these ideas could be practically implemented in concrete social reality.

Not really a philosopher or a pragmatic social thinker, but rather Vygodskii the “prophet” emerges in these writings on the fate of the Jewish people, in his criticisms of the “New Jewry”, socialism, and his messianic call for the Jewish return to the traditional values of the nation. Indeed, his inflammatory writings are highly elevated in style and abound with biblical allusions, references and quotes (including those in Hebrew, which he knew well enough to read in the original). Against this background, it is understandable why his Gomel friend would astutely—although somewhat ironically—describe Vygodskii the teenager as “Beba the young prophet”.13

The Russian Revolution (1917–1918)

In Russia, the first major change took place in early 1917. A series of military failures during the First World War, age old social conflicts and tensions, increasing wartime pressure on the national economy, and the growing dissatisfaction with the power within Russian society eventually led to the major social turmoil of early 1917. These events were subsequently termed the February Revolution in Russia. Following the social unrest, mass protests, popular uprising, and the conspiracy of the national civil and military elites, in early March 1917, Russian Tsar Nicolas II abdicated. He officially resigned in favor of his younger brother Mikhail, who, in turn, refused to assume the responsibilities of the new Russian Tsar. As a result of the Tsar’s abdication, the Russian monarchy fell and the Russian Empire ended. The monarchy was replaced with a strange combination of the dual power of the centrist-liberal-socialist Provisional Government that was nominated by the Russian parliament, the Duma, and the democratically elected workers’ councils, the Soviets. Yet, despite such a tectonic change in the makeup of the former Empire, the state borders of the country remained largely intact (except for the territories populated mainly by the Polish and Lithuanian nationals that the Empire lost during the war in 1915). This was remarkable, given the growing tension between the two branches of political power in the country and the nationalist sentiments of the non-Russian ethnic minorities, which at the beginning of the 20th century constituted roughly one-half of the Empire’s population.

The major social cataclysm came about a few months later. The Provisional Government in Russia’s capital, Petrograd (formerly known under the “foreign” name of St. Petersburg, but renamed soon after the beginning of the First World War), was ousted in a coup launched by the ultra-left Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party in what was to become widely known as
the *October Revolution* of 1917.14 The coup effectively ended the dual power in favor of the Bolshevized Soviets and a few of their governing bodies such as the All-Russian Congresses of Soviets, the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (the VTsIK, the highest legislative, administrative, and revising body of power), and the Council of People’s Commissars (the SNK, the highest executive body).

The logical conclusion of this truly dramatic year in the history of Russia followed soon. In November 1917 the All-Russian Constituent Assembly was freely and democratically elected in to establish the legislative foundation of the new Russian state and create the first ever Russian Constitution. The Party of Bolsheviks was anticipating that the election would demonstrate an increase in their popular support, but the results of the election were definitely not in their favor. Although the Bolsheviks finished second, the outcome was really disastrous for their aspirations to hold legitimate power: the agrarian Socialist Revolutionary Party (the SR) surpassed them in a landslide victory with well above one-half of the seats and outnumbered the Bolsheviks roughly two to one in the newly elected Constituent Assembly. For the Bolsheviks, who had just violently seized power and even started ruling the country by issuing their first Decrees immediately after the coup, this situation definitely posed a tremendous challenge. Unwilling, and possibly unable, to give up power, they could not tolerate the newly elected Constituent Assembly.

In mid-January 1918 the Constituent Assembly was finally summoned for its first meeting, but did not last more than one day: under the pretext that “the guard is tired” the meeting of the Assembly was closed down at the end of a very long session that continued well after midnight. Never again did it reconvene. A few days later the Ukrainian People’s Republic (declared in June 1917 as a part of post-Imperial Russia) proclaimed its independence – from Russia or any other state. This happened precisely at the time when the Third All-Russian Congress of Soviets – led by the alliance of the overwhelming majority of the Bolsheviks (the workers’ party) and the left faction of the Socialist Revolutionary Party (the peasants’ party) – proclaimed the previously unrecognized state the sovereign “Republic of the Soviets of Workers’, Soldiers’, and Peasants’ Deputies”, or, in brief, the Soviet Russian Republic, and legitimized the new regime and its new institutes of power.

These events between February 1917 and January 1918 constitute the Russian Revolution of 1917–1918. The Revolution, in turn, directly triggered the collapse of the state, the formation of a number of independent states on the territory of the former Russian Empire, and the brutal Civil War. In the fear that Russia’s capital, Petrograd, located within dangerous proximity to the country’s north-western border, would be occupied by rebels or foreign intervention, the Bolsheviks transferred the capital to Moscow in March 1918. Also in March 1918 the Russian Socialist Democratic Labor Party (Bolsheviks) was renamed the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks). The last episode of this Revolution, extended over a year and a half, is dated July 1918, when the only non-Bolshevik political party that remained legal by that time, the members of the Left Social Revolutionary Party (the Left SR), organized an uprising in Moscow. The revolt failed, the leadership of the
party was arrested, the party members were ousted from the power, and eventually the Left SR was banned. Since then there has been no opposition to the Bolshevik (Communist) Party in the country. A one-party political system was established.\textsuperscript{15} The country’s first Constitution was adopted by the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets on 10 July 10 1918. This Constitution renamed the country the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (the RSFSR).

**Lev Vygodskii during the Russian Revolution**

The revolutionary events of 1917 caught off guard the entire country, which only four years before had gloriously celebrated the 300th anniversary of the dynasty of the Romanovs, the Russian Tsars from 1613. In 1917 the royal dynasty fell.

Vygodskii, then a twenty-year-old student of the Department of Jurisprudence at the Imperial Moscow University, was also hardly prepared for this course of events. His first ever theatrical review was scheduled to appear in the forthcoming February issue of the “Letopis” (Chronicle), but due to the onset of the Revolution it did not. Somewhat later in the year another half a dozen of Vygodskii’s publications in the Jewish weekly “Novyi Put” came out against the background of the First World War and major social transformations in Russia. Vygodskii’s publications of the period clearly reflect this major social shift (see above).

The publications of 1916 and early 1917 are mostly essays on the topics of literature and culture. In contrast, between March and September 1917, Vygodskii published— a handful of brief reports on social and political topics, all in Jewish periodical “Novyi Put”. These included his impressions of the changing Moscow and the news from Gomel (March); the celebratory paper on the abolition of the Pale of Settlement in March 1917,\textsuperscript{16} characteristically entitled in Hebrew “Avodim hoinu” (We were slaves—April); and the “provincial reports” on the elections to the Gomel municipality (July) and the local conference of the social-democratic party (September).\textsuperscript{17} The shift in the themes of Vygodskii’s publications reflected the change in popular demand and the editorial policy rather than their author’s thinking and mindset: the readers were concerned about social issues such as the political parties and their activities, elections, or the situation in the close to the frontline western provinces of the country. His unpublished notes and manuscripts, on the other hand, reveal that Vygodskii was apparently not so much involved in the political life of the country. He continued meditating on the greater issues of the Russian Jewry’s destiny and human history sub specie aeternitatis, that is, from the perspective of eternity. The elevated, biblical style of his writing betrays his unshaken “prophetic” stance throughout the revolutionary years of 1917–1918.

For unclear reasons, in the fall of 1917 Vygodskii spent some time in the Russian city of Samara, located several hundred kilometres to the east of Moscow.\textsuperscript{18} He later returned to Moscow and, in December 1917, he obtained the travel document that allowed him as a student of Moscow University to legally make a trip back home. Without this document, he would have been denied such a trip under the old Imperial laws and according to the University’s regulations. Thus, in late 1917
or early 1918 Vygodskii left Moscow and returned home to his family in the post-Revolutionary Gomel under the rule of local Soviets.

**The First World War (1914–1918) and its aftermath**

Vygodskii was admitted to the major national university in 1913 in a somewhat backward, but peaceful, economically fast-developing and prosperous country. Just a year later everything changed. The First World War started in August 1914 and continued for over four years, until November 1918. The war itself and its end brought about major changes in the world, in Russia, in Gomel, and in the life of Lev Vygodskii.

For Russia, the victory of the Bolsheviks’ *October Revolution* of 1917 meant the inevitable end of the country’s involvement in the war. Indeed, the first Decree of the Bolshevik Government issued the day after the successful coup was the Decree on Peace that declared the immediate withdrawal of Russia from any military actions. This Decree meant the launch of the negotiations that, in theory, would lead to a fair peace in the interests of toilers and laboring classes of all countries. In practice, though, it triggered a series of hardly predictable events. These included a few months of separate peace talks between Russia and Germany; an ambiguous negotiation strategy adopted by the Russian delegation under the leadership of one of the most prominent Bolshevik leaders Leon Trotsky; the Bolsheviks’ miscalculations and diplomatic mistakes; a German ultimatum and rapid military advancement to the East; further occupation of the western regions of the former Russian Empire (in addition to those that Russia lost to Germany during the disastrous campaign of 1915); and, eventually, the so-called “shameful peace” of early March 1918. As an outcome of these events, the Bolsheviks had to agree to peace at the cost of the territorial losses that included a part of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, the western regions of Belorussia, and the whole of Ukraine, which they then recognized as an independent state, the Ukrainian People’s Republic (the UNR). Thus, for Soviet Russia, the “Great War” was – painfully and expensively – over in early 1918. For the rest of the belligerent nations, the war effectively ended in November 1918 with the fall of the alliance of Germany, Austro-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria.

In the rest of the world, the major outcome of the war was the collapse of four Empires in Europe and the Middle East: the Russian Empire (in early 1917), and the German, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires (all three fell following the end of the war in late 1918). Subsequently, as a result of a series of peace treaties and partitioning of the former empires the whole map of Europe and Asia was redrawn. Several new states emerged. These included the five truncated republics out of the four Empires – Russia, Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Turkey – and a number of new internationally recognized states, such as the Republic of Finland, the Ukrainian People’s Republic (shortly thereafter renamed the Ukrainian State), the Republic of Czechoslovakia, the Republic of Poland, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, the Republic of Armenia, the Azerbaijan Democratic
Republic, and the Democratic Republic of Georgia. The existence of some of these independent states was short-lived: under different circumstances Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan were invaded by Soviet Russia in 1919–1921, turned into Socialist Soviet republics, and subsequently, in December 1922, along with Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic and Belorussian Socialist Soviet Republic joined together as the founding members of the newly formed state: the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (the USSR).

In retrospect, the October Revolution was often described by the later generations as an enormous historical rupture and the decisive break between the “Imperial Past” and the “Socialist Future”. Yet, in reality for the contemporaries this was not quite so. The Bolshevik governance was established at the end of 1917 in the two Russian capitals – Petrograd and Moscow – and some fraction of the European part of the country. The rest of the territory of the former Russian Empire was divided between various, almost countless, forces and local governments such as foreign military rule and a wide range of monarchist, nationalist, socialist and anarchist armies, movements and provisional governments. The Civil War started in late 1917 and lasted until late 1922 with continuous military action between these numerous forces and the Bolshevik Red Army fighting their enemies in order to finally get control over the vast expanses of the former Empire and put full power in the hands of the new revolutionary government. Fortunately, Gomel never saw the whole range of the horrors of the Russian Civil War.

In late 1917 the Bolsheviks and their Soviets instituted themselves throughout the former Empire, including Gomel. Yet, this time the power of the Bolsheviks in the town did not last long. It was in February 1918 that a considerable amount of territory along the western borders of the former Russian Empire was occupied by the German Army. A peace treaty between Soviet Russia and Germany that was signed in early March 1918 officially established the status of German occupied lands until the end of the First World War in November 1918 when the German Empire ceased to exist as a state. Under the German occupation a part of the territory of contemporary Southern Belarus, including Gomel, was merged into the newly established Ukrainian State and remained relatively stable under the local German-supported Government for another eight months.

The life of Lev Vygodskii – as probably the life of virtually any person in the times of historical events of such magnitude – appears minor and insignificant against this background. Not much is known about Vygodskii during this period. There is anecdotal evidence that he made a trip south across Ukraine with his mother and sick younger brother David (Dodik). This trip’s ultimate goal was to get to Crimea in order to bring the boy to the Black Sea with its healthy climate that would help them cure (or at least alleviate) his tuberculosis. Yet, the journey turned out too risky for the child’s fragile state and, after a medical consultation and treatment of the boy in Kiev, the capital of the Ukrainian State, the Vygodskii...
had to return home. In Gomel the younger Vygodskii boy soon died. Soon the family lost Lev Vygodskii’s other brother, according to a family legend, due to the outbreak of typhus. It seems that it was during this time that Lev Vygodskii himself contracted tuberculosis, the nemesis that would torment him until his very last days.

And yet, family tragedy notwithstanding, the year of 1918 appeared relatively stable and uneventful, especially against the background of the turmoil of the early months after the 
*October Revolution* in Gomel and the large-scale historical processes that unfolded in the rest of the territory of the former Russian Empire. The Civil War manifested itself in state-sponsored terror, the Bolshevik policy of “war communism”, private property confiscations, hunger, strikes, and the depopulation of the two capitals of Russia – Moscow and Petrograd. In contrast, in Gomel as well as in the rest of the territory of the Ukrainian State, all private property that had been taken away by the revolutionary government in the first months after the Revolution was duly returned to their owners after the German occupation. All private businesses and the jobs in the private sector of the economy were restored. Thus, after the brief shock of the dramatic change in their social status after the Revolution, the Vygodskii family returned to their more or less normal life after the Bolshevik Government was gone.

For Lev Vygodskii, though, this was not entirely the return to his life as it was before the Revolution. Indeed, in 1913–1917 he mostly lived in the large city of Moscow with all its metropolitan glitter, social opportunities and temptations of various sorts. His return to the traditional and, in all senses provincial, Gomel was definitely a major “downshift” to him. Then, his social status dramatically changed after the move. During his Moscow years he was a busy student of two universities, an activist of Jewish journalism, a theatregoer and an eager participant of the cultural life of the second largest city of the Russian Empire. In Gomel, none of these was available to him. Even worse, his studies in both universities were finished, but neither brought him a desired status of a university graduate. He finished the course of studies at the Shaniavskii Moscow City People’s University, but this was a private educational establishment that was not entitled to officially grant a university degree in the Imperial system of higher learning. In contrast, the Imperial Moscow University did award degrees, but Lev Vygodskii apparently failed to formally graduate: he left the university in December 1917 with a statement of his unfinished course of studies there, and there is no evidence he graduated from the Faculty of Jurisprudence. 21

Nevertheless, in 1918 Vygodskii, full of energy and career aspirations, was destined to stay away from Moscow, outside of Russia, in the Gomel of his youth, but a part of the Ukrainian State then. With no university degree, under the sort of regime of the older, pre-Revolutionary type (such as that of the German-supported Ukrainian State) his career opportunities were limited. Employment with local periodical press 22 and private lessons seemed to be the main career options available to him at the time. The friend of his youth Semen Dobkin remembered this period as a difficult time for Vygodskii. Dobkin described Lev Vygodskii in 1918 as a person frustrated by the inability to apply his knowledge in any meaningful and
productive way, surrounded by incidental and not particularly bright young men of roughly his age, and immersed in endless and pointless conversations during their regular meetings. Not a single piece of Vygodskii’s writing was published in 1918. Frustration, boredom, and the feeling of wasted time seemed to last forever. 23

And then, quite suddenly, everything changed. That was the beginning of a new era, at least for Lev Vygodskii and his peers in Gomel.

Notes
1 Generally, the sources on this period of Vygotsky’s life (i.e. before 1918) are relatively scarce. The main and the most reliable source is the memoir of Lev Vygotsky’s childhood friend from Gomel, Semen Filippovich Dobkin (1899–1991) whose reminiscences were recorded in early-mid-1980s and published under the names of the editors, Karl Levitin (1982) and Iosif Feigenberg (2000). Another important source was a series of works by Ekaterina Zavershneva, who did archival research and published Vygotsky’s previously unpublished documents. These documents in many ways considerably changed our view on Vygotsky’s intellectual development as a teenager and in his early 20s. For an overview and a couple of representative publications see Yasntsksy & van der Veer (2016) and Zavershneva & van der Veer (2017). All these materials were used in this book and were trusted as relatively reliable first-hand sources on the history of Vygotsky’s life of the period of 1900–1918.

2 Lev Vygotsky left Gomel in early 1924 and settled in the capital of the country, Moscow. All members of his extended family did the same in 1920s and moved either to Petrograd (renamed Leningrad in 1924) or Moscow, too, so that by the late 1920s none of them lived in Gomel.

3 In sum, the Vygodskii family children included Anna-Khaia (born in 1895), Lev (born in 1896), Zinaida (born in 1898), Ester (“Esia”, born in 1899), Klavdia (born in 1904), David (born presumably in 1905, died in 1917 or 1918) and, the youngest, Maria (born in 1907). Another Vygodskii boy was reported by the memoirist Semen Dobkin, but no known documents were preserved or have been discovered that could reveal either his name or the year of his birth. Given that, according to Dobkin’s memoirs, their mother would deliver a child every one to two years, it is relatively safe to assume that another Vygodskii boy was born in the interval between 1900 and 1903. In all likelihood, the child died (allegedly of typhus) hardly ever reaching adolescence.

4 For the distinctly Jewish aspect of cultural life in Gomel and its impact on the formation of Vygotsky see Kotik-Friedgut & Friedgut (2008).


6 This is exactly how his name was indicated on his graduation record issued in Gomel at the Jewish gymnasium of A. E. Ratner in 1913 and his student’s card issued at Moscow University in 1914 (Vygodskaya & Lifanova, 1996, pp. 34, 36).

7 The official title was “ordinary professor”. The two academic ranks, “ordinary professor” and “privat docents”, were established following the German model and were roughly equivalent to contemporary “full professor” and “assistant professor” in North America.


9 The paper was not published until one hundred years later. See the 16 February 1917 publication of “Letopis’” proofs in Vygotskii, L. S. (1917). Teatral’nye zametki (pis’mo iz Moskvy), cited in Sobkin (2015).


Representative titles include: Iudaizm i sotsializm (Judaism and socialism), O sionizme (About Zionism), Kniha fragmentov (The Book of fragments), and Protiv novoevreistva (Against new Jewry). For the texts and the discussion of these archival manuscripts see Yasnitsky & van der Veer (2016) and Zavershneva & van der Veer (2017).

From the letter by Aleksandr Bykhovskii (LSV-FA); see Zavershneva (2012a) p. 85.

The Bolshevik uprising took place in early November 1917, but due to the differences in calendars in Imperial Russia and the rest of the industrially developed world, this was still the end of October in Russia. Soon after the Revolution, the new Government launched a reform process and adopted a new calendar, synchronized with that of the country’s neighbors.

Strictly speaking, all opposition parties were legally prohibited in 1921. Yet, a de facto one-party system existed in Russia (later, in the Soviet Union) from mid-1918.

On 20 March 1917 (2 April, new style calendar), the Pale and the discrimination against non-Orthodox populations was abolished by the Provisional Government Decrees on the Abolition of Confessional and National Restrictions; it was soon followed by the Decree on the Freedom of Conscience of 14 July 1917.


See Zavershneva & van der Veer (2017), pp. 73–74

Strictly speaking, there were four founding members of the Soviet Union. These included the Soviet republics of Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia and the unified Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic. In December 1936 it was divided into three Soviet republics within the Soviet Union: the Armenian, Azerbaijan and Georgian Soviet Socialist Republics.

In early 1918 the capital of the country was moved from Petrograd (formerly St. Petersburg before 1914, later renamed Leningrad after the death of the Bolshevik Party and Soviet Government leader Vladimir Lenin in 1924) to Moscow.

Furthermore, there is evidence to the contrary. Thus, a document issued in Gomel in 1923 unambiguously stated that Lev Vygotsky “finished” (okonchil) his studies at Shaniavskii University and “audited” (prolushad) a course of studies at the Department of Jurisprudence of the Moscow University; LSV-FA, Udostoverenie 1600, Gomel’skii pedagogicheskii tekhnikum, 8 November 1923, published in Vygodskaya & Lifanova (1996), p. 64. For further discussion see Zavershneva (2012a).

According to Vygotsky’s own statement, in the period before the restoration of Soviet rule in Gomel (i.e. between the German occupation of the town in February 1918 and early 1919 when the Bolshevik forces retook it) he was employed at the local newspaper “Poles’e”; GAGO, Anketa Gomel’skogo gubernskogo otdea narodnogo obrazovaniia, dated 11 October 1920.

Gomel during the Russian Civil War

At the end of 1917, following the revolutionary events in Petrograd and Moscow, the Bolsheviks took control of Gomel for the first time. Yet, this period did not last long and in early 1918 the town was invaded by German troops, still at war with Russia. In November 1918 – following the revolution in Germany and its military defeat – the First World War was over. The Second German Empire fell. In accordance with the armistice, the German army retreated from all occupied territories at the end of 1918. After a brief period of unrest, the so-called Bolshevik Red Army entered Gomel on 14 January 1919. Soviet Russia denounced all previous agreements with Germany, and, in early 1919, invaded not only the Gomel region, but also then sovereign Ukraine. This move was enthusiastically supported by local Bolsheviks.

Throughout 1919 all of Ukraine was involved in continuous conflicts between different military forces of the Bolsheviks (the Red Army), monarchists (the so-called White Guard), anarchists, Ukrainian nationalists and socialists, and numerous disjoined apolitical peasant groupings (the so-called Green Armies). Eventually, by the end of the year, most of Ukraine was occupied by the alliance of the Red Army from Russia and local Bolsheviks. The Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic (later renamed Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic) was proclaimed in Kharkov in 1919, Ukraine’s new capital.

Fortunately, all these turbulent and bloody developments passed by Gomel virtually unnoticed. Soon after the Bolshevik takeover of the town it was made a capital of the newly established Gomel Region within Soviet Russia and subordinated to the central Government of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic. A bloody, but short-lived anti-Bolshevik military uprising in the town in March 1919 was a minor episode in comparison to the full-scale military action in many other regions.
of the former Russian Empire during the Civil War. A year later, during the 
Soviet-Polish war (1919–1921), Polish troops made notable advancements towards 
Gomel in April and May of 1920, but this attack was repelled by the Red Army, 
and yet again the town was not involved. Thus, early 1919 can be described as the 
beginning of radically new life under Bolsheviks, who had seized Gomel in order 
to firmly keep it thereafter.

The Bolsheviks’ victory in the Civil War on the military and political fronts – at 
least in the European part of the country – was obvious by the end of 1920. This 
victory allowed the Bolsheviks to begin a war on a third front: the “cultural front”. 
In Gomel, which had remained uninvolved in major calamities of the time, the 
war on the cultural front started as early as 1919.

The “cultural front”, Marxism, and the “new man”

The concept of “culture” is too vague and vast. In Russian tradition there is a 
tendency of equating “cultured” with “sophisticated”, “art-minded”, “polite”, “well-bred”, or “educated”. Thus, “culture” is often equated with “high culture” and “cultural front” stands for “forced enlightenment”. It would be incorrect and unfair to say that the Bolsheviks were the first to open the struggle on the “cultural front”. In fact, the war for the “culture” in Russia started over half century before 
the Revolution of 1917–1918. Russian Tsar Alexander II initiated a series of liberal 
reforms in the 1860s, among which was the remarkable reform of the local self-
governments, the zemstvos. According to these reforms, a great deal of power and 
responsibility for decision-making was transferred to the elites in some (but not all) 
localities in the Russian Empire, in a lot of spheres of social life, including “culture”, as diverse and vague as it is. In order to illustrate what the “cultural 
front” meant in practice before Bolshevik rule it is worthwhile to zoom in on 
public education alone.

The self-governance in Russian regions and provinces that was released by the 
Tsar’s reforms empowered a vast network of local activists, university-trained pro-
fessionals, provincial city and town councils, representatives of industry, business, 
banking system, and many others, who cumulatively would fit the ill-defined 
notion of Russian intelligentsia. The developing Russian civil society of the second 
half of the 19th century eagerly responded to the Tsar’s reforms and initiated a 
number of educational projects of various kinds. Yet, this was not an easy task.

The Tsar’s liberating reforms offered opportunities to middle-level elites, but in 
fact often provided minimal or none support to them. At the same time, the 
Government strictly controlled how these opportunities were implemented in 
practice. The Russian Empire was always an autocracy, that is, such system in which 
the majority of decisions were made by the Tsar personally or his appointees to the 
highest bureaucratic positions in the country. Obviously, local initiatives did not 
land immediately on the desks of the highest decision-makers in the country but 
had to pass through the whole bureaucratic chain of steps from lower-level governmental clerks to the very highest-level officials.
Virtually any democratic initiative required official approval by the authorities, but, under the circumstances, such projects were met with suspicion and even open resistance. For instance, the vast majority of new initiatives in public education dealt with opening new educational establishments of various kinds – ranging from private universities or specialized professional institutes, courses, and colleges to lower-level schools that taught basic literacy skills among the poorest and the underprivileged population of the country. Yet, Russian bureaucracy traditionally considered public education politically suspicious and even subversive activity with potential threat to the conservative ideology of the Imperial Russian state and society.

A local democratic initiative could have been vetoed virtually at every step of the bureaucratic ladder. Despite the Tsar’s liberal reforms, the state of mind and the entire ideological framework of the regime was traditional and conservative (as opposed to modernist and progressive). Besides, the regime of Russian tsarism was also chauvinist, oppressive, and restrictive, and quite a few social groups in Russia in the 19th and early 20th centuries knew that all too well.

These social groups were females, ethnic and religious minorities, and lower socio-economic strata of society. In other words, this was the majority of the country’s population. All these were typically excluded from the whole range of social opportunities for personal development and social mobility accessible to the minority of the ethnically Russian, Orthodox Christian, male, and economically well-off population of the country. This is a cumulative portrait of the social group that was considered the most loyal to the tsarist regime, and even these individuals, like other citizens of the country, were not entitled to the privilege of basic liberal values and freedoms such as freedom of speech and the press (consider the official censorship in publishing and media), or freedom of political involvement in the life of the country (no political parties were legally permitted in Russian Empire until 1905).

Alexander II, who introduced the liberal reforms of the second half of the 19th century and was nicknamed “The Liberator”, was assassinated in March 1881 by the members of the terrorist wing of the revolutionary group “People’s Will” (Narodnataia Volya). The successor to the throne, Alexander III immediately implemented the counter-reforms that considerably enforced the conservative trend within Russian Empire. Thus, the end of the 19th century, despite the rapid economic and industrial development in the country, was also a period of the growing tension in its political and cultural life. This apparently aggravated the situation in the sphere of public education.

Tremendous energy and persistence was needed in order to overcome the legal restrictions and bureaucratic prohibitions. For example, despite the enormous funds and the private mansion in the centre of the city that the late Alfons Shaniavskii bequeathed to the future educational establishment, it took three years between 1905 and 1908 for his widow to fight and overcome the considerable resistance of the Russian bureaucracy tempted to prohibit the new initiative as such rather than permit the foundation of the Moscow City People’s University. And this example is only one illustration of what the “cultural front” looked like throughout the
entire Russian Empire – somewhat more liberal in St. Petersburg and Moscow, but notably more conservative in the provinces. This is what the fight for culture and education meant before the Revolution of 1917–1918. After the Revolution, the meaning of the “cultural front” dramatically changed.

The Bolsheviks were the chief political representatives of the industrial workers, the proletariat. Yet, the majority of the party and especially its leadership was comprised of the intelligentsia – the diverse social group that had been struggling on the “cultural front” since before the Revolution. True, the Bolsheviks and their majority in the Soviets were clinging to power and were not willing to give it up to the Constituent Assembly or any other political force. They waited for too long and now that they were in power they wanted to rule the country. A radical leftist party, the Party of the Bolsheviks would stop at nothing to reach their goals by way of dictatorship. Yet, they had their agenda: beliefs, convictions, and biases. Indeed, a dictatorship their rule was, but, according to the ideology of this political movement, this was a dictatorship of the proletariat, that is, the working class of Russia.

The word “proletariat” for the social group (and a proletarian for an individual representative of this group) is a part of very specific vocabulary and system of thought – philosophy, social theory, and ideology. It originated in the writings of Karl Marx (1818–1883), a German thinker of the 19th century, and his closest ally and co-author Friedrich Engels (1820–1895). They were both prolific authors and their intellectual legacy is known as Marxism. So, Russian Bolsheviks were the followers of Marx and Engels. They were Marxists.

Historically, Marxism was solidly grounded in the voluminous and pedantically developed philosophical, sociological, and economic thought and theories of the Western Europe, such as, first and foremost, classical German philosophy, utopian writings of the socialist thinkers of France (and, to a smaller extent, England), and classical political economy. Yet further, a multitude of volumes have been written in Marxist tradition over the last century or so. Marxism is an extremely complicated system of thinking that, in turn, includes major divisions called historical materialism and dialectical materialism. All these operate a set of idiosyncratic terms that are used for very particular meanings. A few examples include “social class” and “class consciousness”, “class struggle”, “hegemony” and “dictatorship”, “means of production”, “mode of production”, “productive forces”, “relations of production”, “exploitation”, “surplus product”, “surplus value”, “base” and “superstructure”, “working class”, “feudalism”, “communism”, “capitalism”, “proletariat”, “bourgeoisie”, “commodity”, “fetishism”, “reification”, “alienation”, etc.

The entire system of Marxist socio-political and philosophical thinking in all its complexity, however, is beyond the scope of this story. What we need to know for now is that Marxism as it was imported into Russia was a well-developed system of historical, economic, sociological, and philosophical thought that critically scrutinized the entire history of the humankind and presented it as a logical chain of the succession of specific historical stages. Each of these stages produces larger groups of people, the classes, that uniquely characterize this specific era. Thus, for example, Marx and Engels described the contemporary societies of the industrially
developed countries of the Western Europe of the 19th century as capitalist system. This social order is represented by two main classes: the capitalists (or, using the French word, bourgeoisie) and the proletariat (the working class). According to the Marxist postulates, due to the numerous tensions and contradictions of the social system at this stage of development, it will inevitably – sooner or later – transform into socialism and, yet further, communism, a new classless society of the distant future. The idea of the Communism as the social order of the future would be established on the principle of “from each according to their ability, to each according to their need”. In other words, under Communism everybody gets whatever they want and as much as needed, provided that everyone productively, creatively and unselfishly works to the maximum of their capacities. The idea was so attractive, radical, and exciting (at least for some people) that the whole system of thought and political movement of Marxism is up to now often equated with Communism, and the words are used interchangeably, one instead the other.

All Marxists agreed on the historically sequential change of the eras and were certain that socialism would eventually overtake capitalism. Yet, there was no agreement on when and how exactly this would happen. For example, Russian Marxists – the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDRP) – had two radically different views on the process of transition to socialism. The right faction of the party, the Mensheviks, allowed for the evolutionary, bloodless, democratic, and non-violent transition, whereas their opponents, the Bolsheviks, insisted on revolutionary social development, which required violent seizure of power and, later, the establishment of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” in the interests of the laborers and the underprivileged. Another important point of contention between the two groups was their understanding of the logic of the transition from stage to stage. The Mensheviks argued that capitalism needed to firmly establish itself in Russia before the preparation of further transition to socialism would be possible. The Bolsheviks argued that, on the contrary, there was a possibility of the transition to socialism even in the underdeveloped capitalist country. Furthermore, they would insist that a socialist revolution would be a relatively easier task to achieve in the country, where capitalism was weaker and, thus, had fewer resources and powers for active resistance. This was a definite stumbling block for the two factions of Russian Marxists, who were “co-travelers” in their political fight against “bourgeois” parties until some point, but sooner or later were doomed to split. The split did happen, so by the time of the Revolution of 1917–1918 the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks developed as two separate and in a few respects hostile to each other Marxist parties.

All Bolsheviks believed in the Communism, a new socio-economic order to come in the future. Yet, the idea of future Communism was vague, too distant, and, frankly, too fantastic even to the most radical of the believers in the bright future society. A more practical and manageable task was the establishment of a socialist society. That required, as a first step, the liquidation of virtually all private property and its nationalization, which in practice meant that all private enterprises – such as banks, factories, institutes, hospitals, and schools – were legally taken away
from their owners and transferred into state property, all controlled by the new government. No compensation was paid to the previous owners, domestic and foreign alike. A series of further economic, political, and social measures needed to be taken next in order to radically change, in Marxist parlance, the economic “base” of society, which involved its “means of production”, “mode of production”, and “productive forces”. These changes in the economic base would immediately trigger the change in the “relations of production”, raise “class consciousness” of the “proletariat”, boost the “hegemony” of the “working class” over other “social classes”, enforce the “dictatorship of the proletariat”, overcome the “exploitation” and “alienation”. All these developments would constitute the dramatic transformation of the “superstructure” of society (its ideology, culture, mode of thinking, and the system of shared values) that was, according to Marxist creed, superimposed over its economic “base”.

The next step would be the establishment of the “new society” – the socialism – that would be based on the guiding principle of “from each according to their ability, to each according to their work”. This somewhat idealistic task was further aggravated by the multitude of immediate acute economic, social, and military problems of post-Revolutionary turmoil and social life disruption to be resolved in the present, in order to build a “new society” of socialism. Yet, the resolution of these problems in virtually all cases heavily depended on the “cultural front”. In other words, the success of the Bolsheviks’ socio-economic project was hardly conceivable without the success of the other dimension of their revolution – the “cultural revolution”. As strange as it might appear these days, this required the eventual transformation of the whole population of the country into the collectivist, unselfish, and cultured “new men” of the socialist future.

The idea of a “new man” was not, in fact, entirely new or specific to the Bolsheviks. Indeed, the proposal of a “new man” would from time to time emerge and re-emerge in the minds and writings of various thinkers over roughly half a millennium before the Bolsheviks. Yet, they were the first to pose it as a real, immediate, and concrete problem of the cultural transformation of such scale and magnitude. The “new man” was a desirable ideal to achieve, but nobody knew what precisely that meant and how exactly the future people would look like. That is understandable: nobody had seen or met the “new men” yet. Moreover, nobody could say how exactly to organize the transition from the people of the actual present to the people of the ideal future: no technology of mass production of such “new men” existed. In practical terms, the task of the creating a “new man” fell mainly within the area of expertise and responsibilities of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkomat prosveshchenia, or the Narkompros), a major administrative body, roughly an equivalent of a Ministry of Education, Arts, Culture, and Science. All these spheres of human activity seemed to be instrumental to producing a new generation of the socialist people with the skills and powers previously unknown or marginally known to the humanity. How exactly this would happen remained a total mystery yet.¹
Lev Vygotsky in Gomel in 1919–1921

The Bolsheviks occupied Gomel in January 1919 and retained their reign over the town thereafter. This brought great changes in the entire social order in the town. In the life of Lev Vygodskii the change was quite dramatic too. This is the time when “Lev Vygodskii” disappeared, and there emerged a new “Lev Vygotskii” instead. A traditional English spelling of the name is “Lev Vygotsky”. For simplicity’s sake, we will call him by this name from now on.

In April 1919 Gomel became an administrative centre of a newly established region within Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (RSFSR). The upgrade to the status of the regional capital created new jobs in the town, which attracted many young people to occupy important positions in the new administrative and governmental bodies. Some of these young people included the immediate circle of Vygotsky’s friends and relatives, who would typically become the representatives of the new regime in the regional People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment, the Narkompros. Examples include Vygotsky’s cousin – a literary scholar, critic and translator – David Vygodskii, who became the head of the Department of Literary Work (podotdel LITO Gubnarkomprosa); a “proletarian poet and writer” and one of the editors of local newspaper “Polesskaia Pravda” G. Lelevich; a painter and the head of the Department of Visual Arts (podotdel IZO Gubnarkomprosa) Aleksandr Bykhovskii, and several others. Vygotsky was among these young men.

It was just in September 1917 that Vygotsky mentioned revolutionary Bolshevism as one of the acute contemporary problems of the federal scale among other urgent matters such as famine, black market speculation, or the issue of power. It is curious how his mindset and his attitude towards the Bolshevik regime dramatically changed just a little more than a year later. Vygotsky was not a Bolshevik – a member of the Russian Communist Party – in 1919. In fact, he never joined any other political party. Yet, the year of provincial wilderness in Ukrainian Gomel in 1918 under the German occupation played its role in his gradual conversion from a promising literary essayist and Jewish “prophetic” dreamer into a pro-socialist activist and enthusiastic supporter of revolutionary transformations of social and cultural life after the Revolution. Vygotsky’s personal transformation was not immediate, though.

The new regime was suffering from the shortage of qualified intellectuals of the older generation, who often boycotted or sabotaged the numerous initiatives of the Bolshevik government. Besides, the whole social hierarchy of the Imperial Russia after the Revolution was disrupted and mixed up. Thus, Vygotsky as an educated young man without formal graduation record, but enthusiastic about the change in his social status and professional life trajectory was an ideal candidate for the numerous new career opportunities. In 1919–1920 he briefly worked as the head of the statistics department at the Gomel regional workers’ cooperative (Gubrabkoop). The lower-level governmental jobs apparently did not pay well, and Vygotsky used every occasion to take paid work in teaching and lecturing in numerous schools, colleges, courses for workers, and clubs. All private property was nationalized after the Revolution, so that Vygotsky’s father lost both a job of a
private bank manager and his real estate and turned into a modestly paid employee of a state-owned bank. Thus, the socio-economic standing of the family of a private bank manager and a house-owner before the Revolution could hardly compare to their new post-Revolutionary status and lifestyle. Apparently, Vygotsky’s contribution to the family income was important and truly indispensable. The Bolshevik order gave Vygotsky an exciting career opportunity and the promise of a relatively good salary, in the long run.

And yet, it seems there was much more to Revolution for Vygotsky than merely income or a career opportunity. In 1919, after a year-long break, Vygotsky published an essay that testifies to that. This essay came out as a chapter in a book titled “Poems and Prose of the Russian Revolution” that included the poetry of a number of renowned Russian leftist artists such as Aleksandr Blok, Andrei Belyi, Maksim Gor’kii, Sergei Esenin, and Vladimir Maiakovskii. Lev Vygotsky was the author of the essay “Theatre and Revolution”. This paper sheds some light on its author’s mindset and his intellectual evolution during this period.

At the end of the year of his Gomel wilderness and meditations on the destiny of the Russian Jewry a new Vygotsky emerged with considerable interest in social issues and the revolutionary transformation of Russian culture. In his essay Vygotsky made a critical remark on the Bolsheviks’ government, who had restored censure in the Soviet Russia after roughly half a year of revolutionary freedom of press that had passed since the beginning of the Revolution in February 1917. However, censure did not appear of much concern to Vygotsky at that time. Considerably more important to him was the issue of the interrelation between Russian theatre and the Revolution and their possible mutual impact. During the French Revolution of the 18th century, theatre played an enormous role in the propaganda of revolutionary ideas. Unlike in France, Vygotsky noted, theatre in Russia had had nothing to contribute to the Revolution. And, vice versa, the Russian Revolution had had minimal impact on theatre that, according to the shared opinion of Russian intellectuals of early 20th century, was in a state of deep crisis. The discrepancy between the revolutionary transformation of Russian society and the conservatism of Russian theatre appeared of major concern for Vygotsky. He argued that even the most progressive artistic innovations – such as the renowned Konstantin Stanislavsky’s Moscow Art Theatre with its naturalistic method – could not resolve the problem and did not lead theatre out of its systemic crisis. A true revolution was needed in order to modernize the theatre, and Vygotsky was hoping that the social revolution would eventually pave the way to an artistic revolution. This revolution would create a truly new theatre: instead of the traditional drama “for rooms” and concert halls, a new drama was needed “for city streets and squares”, a drama as a mass performance for democratic audiences in the open spaces. That was the way that the Revolution was urging the performing arts to follow. Vygotsky predicted that this would be the direction, in which the Russian theatre would eventually develop after the Revolution.

In 1919 Vygotsky was not yet fully and entirely converted to the new “Bolshevik creed”. Nevertheless, he eagerly participated in the cultural projects generously
sponsored and supported by the new Government. One of such projects was a short-lived publishing house “Veka i dni” (Ages and days) that operated in Gomel in 1919. It was founded and directed by the Vygodskii cousins, David Isaakovich and Lev Semenovich, and their younger peer Semen Dobkin. They made a decision to launch a series of publications of the classics of world literature and contemporary authors. Full of ambitious plans, this team of provincial publishers, still in their early twenties, had managed to release two small books – rather, brochures – before the representatives of the central Government discovered the reason that made these publications possible: the considerable repositories of paper that remained in Gomel on the premises of a local paper mill, formerly private, but nationalized by then. Paper, as with virtually any other market commodity, was scarce during the Civil War, and the authorities transferred it to the country's new capital, Moscow. This delivered a vital blow to the Vygodskii brothers’ publishing house, which closed down soon thereafter.

In 1920 Vygotsky’s activities were interrupted by his first major outbreak of tuberculosis and he was prescribed bed rest for several months. On the verge of death, desperate to survive, he requested that his Gomel friend Semen Dobkin preserve his manuscripts and pass them to Yulii Aikhenval’d, his former professor at the Shaniavskii University in Moscow, for publication after his death. Dobkin promised to do that and did indeed pass the manuscripts to Aikhenval’d, who was sympathetic to the request of the dying young man and promised to do his best. However, Vygotsky survived, and the manuscripts were not published.5

After this relatively short break, Vygotsky’s involvement in the activities and the agenda of the new Government consistently increased. In October 1920 he got a new bureaucratic job. This was the position of the head of the Department of Theatres within the “political enlightenment” department of the regional branch of People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (podotdel TEO of Gubpolitprosvet of Gubnarkompros).6 Since then he became an active participant of numerous committees and group meetings of the Artistic Council (khudsovet) of the local branch of the Narkompros. The khudsovet supervised and controlled all art-related activities in the region including the issues of professional qualifications, artistic quality, media coverage, ideological and political correctness, employment, and funds distribution. A year later Vygotsky quit the job, but his involvement with the issues of theatre and the new art remained considerable. Vygotsky eventually became a well-known and frequently published local expert on theatre and a theatrical critic.

New Economic Policy (NEP) and the birth of the Soviet Union

By the beginning of 1921 the Civil War and foreign military intervention were largely over. The problems of the reconstruction of the national economy came to dominate the agenda of the political leadership of the country. The Bolshevik leadership realized one simple, but very important truth: they were unable to manage a national, state-run, economy. They could not properly feed or dress the entire population of the country. The problem was becoming increasingly acute
and apparent in early 1921. The famine of 1921–1922 started, aggravated by increasing peasant and military riots and the political struggle within the only recognized force in the country: the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), the RKP(b). This was the end of the Civil War’s military campaigns all over the country and the Bolsheviks had nothing or nobody else to blame for the mismanagement of economy. A new wave of local peasant rebellions was anticipated and violent practices and policies of the Civil War needed to be abolished. The situation required finding the middle ground between the dogmatic Marxist postulates of the elimination of private property and, on the other hand, the concrete challenges of the struggling and failing economy.

The leadership of the party made a decision to revise the rigor of the revolutionary reconstruction of the country and concede to the needs of the population. Thus, in March 1921 the central Government in Moscow adopted the so-called New Economic Policy (NEP). That meant that, first, they abolished the forced requisitions of private and personal property (for instance, agricultural produce) characteristic of the preceding period of the so-called “military communism” of the Civil War. Second, they allowed private ownership of small to medium-size businesses and enterprises. Theoretically, from the perspective of Russian communists, this was a step back: they came to power in order to abolish all private property and create the first ever collectivist society in which, ideally, everything would belong to everyone. Therefore, the economic policies of the NEP looked like the betrayal of the ideals of the Revolution, to some. Yet, the new liberal policy in practice proved quite successful and considerably boosted individual initiative and entrepreneurial activities of the population of the country. Relatively soon the shortage of most vital consumer goods like food and clothing was overcome. Furthermore, during the NEP period a great many new local and private initiatives in a wide range of spheres of public life could materialize in concrete projects. Such projects apparently were not limited by food or clothes production. Many new projects under the NEP also directly concerned the non-material domains of social life, such as arts, literature, education, culture, and even scientific research.

Less than two years of the NEP seemed to be enough for the Russian Communists to restore their confidence and faith in their abilities to manage the country. In 1921 they invaded and imposed their rule over the Transcaucasus region. This led to the establishment of the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic in early 1922. The republic was constituted by formerly independent states, the republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the Georgian Democratic Republic. Later in the year, in late December, the four Soviet republics of the former Russian Empire – the Russian and Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republics (RSFSR and ZSFSR respectively), and the Ukrainian and Bielorussian Socialist Soviet Republics (UkrSSR and BSSR respectively) – formed a political union. The new state – the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (the Soviet Union, or the USSR) – was born on 30 December 1922.
Vygotsky as a publisher, political activist, and theatrical critic (1922–1923)

In 1922 Vygotsky found a new job: he became the head of the editorial department of the Gomel region’s specialized state-owned publishing house run by the Government and the Communist Party. During the subsequent two years he was deeply involved in various publishing related activities such as editing, proofreading, managing typesetting and production, writing, and supervising the work of the local Museum of Press. In fact, the Museum was a state library (perhaps, even closer to a community centre) for the minimally educated population that offered to its members not only books, journals, and newspapers, but also occasional public lectures on the topics of literature, art, and popular science.

Another initiative of the local intelligentsia was the launch of a local journal that would specialize on the topics of art and literature. The first issue of the Gomel journal “Veresk” (“Heath”) came out in May 1922. The journal was chiefly managed by Lev Vygotsky, Vygotsky’s cousin David, David’s wife Emma Heifetz, and their friend Vladimir Uzin. Each of these talented provincial young people would later become a prominent figure of the cultural revolution and Soviet Enlightenment: David Isaakovich Vygodskii (1893–1943) is relatively well known, mostly in the Spanish-speaking world, as a literary critic, a prominent translator of Spanish and South American literature into Russian, and a charismatic activist of a large-scale international cultural exchange; Vladimir Samoilovich Uzin (1887–1957) subsequently became a literary scholar and translator from Spanish; Emma Iosifovna Vygodskaya (née Heifetz, 1899–1949) graduated in 1922 from Historical-Philological Department of the Moscow State University and became a popular fiction author in the genre of action and adventure books for children and adolescents. “Heath” proved a short-lived publication project: only the first issue of this provincial journal has survived and been preserved, and at least one other was reported to have ever been released.

The outcome of these activities was not only the release of a couple of issues of the journal “Heath”, but also about seventy short reviews and sketches on theatre, literature, and cultural life that Lev Vygotsky as an art expert published in local periodical editions “Nash Ponedel’nik” (“Our Monday”) and “Polesskaia Pravda” (“The Truth of Polesie”). All these essays and reviews continued Vygotsky’s reflections on the Revolution and Soviet theatre that, contrary to Vygotsky’s prediction of 1919, did not make it to the streets, squares, and other open spaces. Furthermore, Soviet theatre never really became a democratic and mass performance for the majority of peasant population and industrial workers: theatre was largely attended by the minority of the educated and “cultured” elite, and drama remained mostly as conservative as it was before the Revolution.

It is likely that these very publications were the reason for Vygotsky to change his last name from “Vygodskii” with a “d” to “Vygotskii” with “t”. He had two cousins: David and Lev, both active in the publishing world. David Vygodskii alone would be enough to create a great deal of confusion, but the existence of the
second cousin further complicated the matter: his name was also “Lev Vygodskii”, and the only distinguishing feature between them was their patronymic. According to Russian tradition, *patronymic* is a middle name that is used mostly as a token of respect to the interlocutor. It is formed from the given name of the person’s father. So, in the case of the two cousins bearing the name of “Lev Vygodskii” the only difference between them was just one letter. It was “S.” for “Semenovich” (meaning: “the son of Semen”) for “our Vygotsky” as opposed to “I.” for “Isaakovitch” (meaning: “the son of Isaak”) for his cousin. An alternative explanation that Lev Vygotsky gave for his family name change was the unconfirmed toponym “Vygotovo” – presumably, a name of a small village in Eastern Europe where his ancestors allegedly came from. According to anecdotal testimony, he believed this was the origin of his family name. Whatever the real reason was, it was around 1922 that first occurrences of the name of “Lev Vygotskii” appeared in some of his documents and publications, and under which fame eventually came to him.

The intellectual evolution of Lev Vygotsky in the early post-Revolutionary years in Gomel can be described as a gradual but dramatic drift from the anti-socialist, anti-Marxist, and the Jewish prophetic and messianic mindset of his youth, to the increasing sympathy towards the Bolshevik revolutionary values, lifestyle, course of actions, and pro-socialist attitude. It seems that his activity at the local Government of the Gomel region was instrumental in his conversion into socialism and, later, Marxism. Thus, for instance, in December 1921 Vygotsky was one of the active participants of a public meeting of a local branch of Poalei-Tsion (Poale-Zion), a Jewish Marxist group. Vygotsky was scheduled to give a talk on the atheist founder of this political movement Ber Borokhov and his militant God-fighting (*bogoborochestvo*). For some reason the event did not take place.

Thus, from 1922 Lev Vygotsky was employed as an editor and a head of department in the Communist Party’s publishing house. Judging by his later Gomel newspaper publications, he became very enthusiastic about the Revolution, its political leadership (including the Communist Party leaders Leon Trotsky and Vladimir Lenin), and the Bolshevik call for the “new life”, “new country”, “new culture”, and “new man”. Yet, his prophetic stance after the Revolution was not gone, but notably transformed. During this period Vygotsky developed his second persona, that of a “Bolshevik”, which he would preserve until the final days of his life. The Jewish messianism of his youth gradually transformed into the Bolshevik belief in the “new society” and a “new man” of the Communist future. Also, during this period, possibly as a symbolic act of self-creation as a “new man”, Lev Simkhovich Vygodskii changed his original name into Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, which would remain with him until his final days, and beyond.

Following the end of the Civil War and the beginning of NEP, a wealth of new exciting opportunities opened for socially active young people all over the country, but especially in the largest cities such as Moscow, Petrograd, Kharkov, Kiev, Odessa, and Kazan. Many of Vygotsky’s peers started leaving Gomel in the early 1920s, most typically, for one of Russia’s historical capitals: Moscow or Petrograd.
Thus, for instance, his cousin David, a graduate of Petrograd Imperial University, and his wife Emma moved to Petrograd. Other friends – future book publisher and memoirist Semen Dobkin, painter Aleksandr Bykhovskii, and poet G. Lelevich – moved to Moscow. Soon Vygotsky followed them.

Notes

1 The literature on the Russian Revolution and the Cultural Front is enormous. For introductory reading see Fitzpatrick (1992), Fitzpatrick (1994), and Smith (2002). For more advanced and diverse reading see Leatherbarrow & Offord (2010), and Suny (2006).


4 Vygotsky is far from original here. The origin of this conception of theatre in the modern era dates back to German composer Richard Wagner’s (1813–1883) artistic project of synthetic art, the Gesamtkunstwerk, and the related writings of another German intellectual, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). On Russian soil these ideas were further developed before the Revolution by Russian symbolists in the first two decades of the 20th century, perhaps most notably by Russian symbolist, poet, and philosopher Vacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949). For further discussion of the Dionysian festivals and “mass spectacles” see Kleberg (1993) and Rudnetsky (1988).

5 See Feigenberg (1996), pp. 78–79. There may still have been a chance for the publication of Vygotsky’s manuscripts on literary criticism in the early 1920s, but in late 1922 – along with several other Russian intellectuals and socially prominent figures – Akhienval’d was exiled from the Soviet Russia for his opposition views and potential subversive activities; he lived in Germany thereafter. The fate of Vygotsky’s manuscripts that Dobkin reportedly sent to Akhienval’d is unknown.


7 Vygotsky occupied the positions of the head of the publishing department of Gompechat’ in 1922–1923, then literary editor of Polespechat’ (both were government jobs), and an editor at Gomel’skii rabochii publishing house in 1923–1924. LSV-FA, Spravka 534, Upravlenie partiino-sovetskoi pechati i gosudarstvennoi tipolitografiei Gomel’skoi pechat’, izdatel’stvo Gomel’skii rabochii, 9 February 1924 (Vygodskaya & Lifanova, 1996, p. 60); GARF, f. A-2306, op. 42, d. 49, l. 12. Anketnyi listok, Narkompros, 1924.

8 In June 1921 Vygotsky’s cousin David Vygodskii, the head of the Department of Literary Work (podotdel LITO), initiated the publication of the journal at a session of the local Artistic Council (khudsovet) of the Narkompros. GAGO, Protokol zasedaniia kollegii podotdela iskusstv, Doklad D.I. Vygodskogo, 10 June 1921.


11 “Semenovna” and “Isaakovna” would be the patronymics for females, meaning “the daughter of Semen” and “the daughter of Isaak”, respectively.

12 It is curious to note, though, that all his other relatives, including his daughters, officially, from legal standpoint, preserved the original spelling of his last name, “Vygodskii”: his two daughters’ names were Gita and Asia Vygodskaya (born in 1925 and 1930, respectively). This fact is particularly interesting given that the birth of the children took place after 1922, when the name change presumably took place. This suggests the conclusion that Vygotsky never legally followed all necessary procedures for the change of his last name and lived most of his professional life under some kind of pen name, or pseudonym.


15 This transformation is remarkable, but far from exceptional. The literature on this topic is immense, but for an introductory reading on Bolshevik messianism and the secular equivalent of the belief in salvation see Halin (2000).
Vygotsky teaches and lectures

In early 1924 Lev Vygotsky, like many of his peers from the smaller towns of the former Russian Empire, moved to Moscow to pursue a better, more promising career than he could make at home. Yet, before we follow Vygotsky in his transition to the capital, we need to have a closer look at another of his preoccupations in the provincial Gomel. This activity paved his way to Moscow and precipitated not only his academic career, but also, eventually, his posthumous fame.

After Vygotsky returned to Gomel in late 1917 he was involved in teaching. During the period of German occupation and the Ukrainian State in 1918 he was teaching privately. Bolsheviks retook Gomel in early 1919. After that, concurrent with his other government jobs and social activities, Vygotsky held several official jobs in numerous newly founded educational establishments. These included professional schools for workers, evening courses for the illiterate, courses for peasant activists of the “cultural front”, and summer schools for minimally trained kindergarten and elementary school teachers with basic literacy skills. All these were part-time or temporary positions and paid miserably, therefore he had to compensate the insufficient pay with the number of jobs he took at the same time. The subjects that he routinely taught in Gomel were Russian (language and literature studies), aesthetics, theory of art, introduction to philosophy, logic, and foundations of psychology.¹

In addition to his teaching, Vygotsky was actively involved in giving public lectures to the democratic masses. Here are some of his lecture titles: “Psychoanalysis as a scientific method of the research on subconsciousness”, “The teaching on internal reflexes”, “On the psychology of examination”, “Scientific prerequisites of school assessment of the students”, and “New pedagogic books”.²

None of these courses apparently posed a problem for Vygotsky who had studied most of these subjects before: in the gymnasium in Gomel, at the Imperial Moscow
University, or at Shaniavskii Moscow City People’s University. However, one of the jobs was different in a number of respects. This was the position of instructor and the head of the “Kabinet of Psychology” at the Gomel Pedagogical Tekhnikum, an educational establishment for future elementary and secondary school teachers.

Vygotsky’s entrance into psychology

The Gomel Pedagogical Tekhnikum was established in 1921 and Vygotsky was hired there in late 1922. The courses that he taught at the Tekhnikum were logic and a number of specialized subjects in psychology: general psychological theory, and developmental, pedagogical, and experimental psychology. Besides this, he was the head of the Cabinet of Psychology. This “kabinet” nowadays would be called a “psychological laboratory”. The main function of this laboratory was conducting auxiliary psychological studies as illustrations and demonstrations of the theoretical subjects taught in Tekhnikum. The management of the laboratory required experience and special skills in experimental psychology. The variety of specialized psychological courses was a great challenge: during his university years Vygotsky never received sufficient formal training or practical skills in all these subjects. The lack of formal training was further aggravated by the absence of psychological laboratory equipment at the Tekhnikum. Thus, all these multiple issues needed to be resolved first and considerable effort was needed in self-education, educational administration, and the instruction of future teachers.

There was no experimental research facility in the Tekhnikum before Vygotsky was hired. By the end of the 1922/1923 school year, in May 1923, he initiated the launch of the Cabinet of Psychology that he positioned as an ambitious undertaking. Vygotsky prepared and presented a project proposal. In this document, he projected that the cabinet would be instrumental in the demonstration of psychological experiments and teaching practicum classes in experimental pedagogy and psychology for the students of the Tekhnikum and all other educational establishments in the town. In addition, it was to become a major research center for the experimental studies on children for a wide range of educational, medical and social work projects outside the Tekhnikum. Finally, Vygotsky argued that the Cabinet of Psychology would become an administrative hub for supervision and scientific coordination of the work of schools and educational establishments of all kinds. The results of this work, according to Vygotsky’s proposal, were to be presented at the forthcoming All-Russian Psychoneurological Congress.

One might wonder how all these ambitious plans could materialize given that the cabinet’s staff, according to Vygotsky’s project, would consist of only four specialists. These included the head of the cabinet (Vygotsky himself), a consulting medical doctor and two minor technical specialists. Besides, in order to launch the project from scratch Vygotsky requested from the administration of the Tekhnikum an office, furniture, research equipment, an experimental psychology library, and a psychological council that would be formed by the instructors of psychology. Yet,
in an overly optimistic fashion characteristic of both Vygotsky and of the spirit of the post-Revolutionary time, the project was approved. By the end of May 1923 necessary funds were allocated and the realization of the project began.

There is no clarity as to how exactly the project developed after that. Slightly more than four months later, in October 1923, Vygotsky presented the first results of the work of the cabinet to the Tekhnikum’s pedagogical council (pedsovet). Vygotsky reported on the work that was mostly done during the summer months of school vacation and, possibly, in September 1923. According to Vygotsky’s report, the cabinet achieved a number of project goals. These included twenty-one demonstrations of psychological experiments in a wide range of educational establishments; twenty-two studies that were conducted by the students of the Tekhnikum; thirty-eight “short studies” of school children; and several laboratory classes in psychology based on the experimental methods of Russian researchers and practitioners such as Rossolimo, Lazurski, and Nechaev. In addition to all these activities Vygotsky claimed to have done research on children’s abnormal development, studied the “impact of speech rhythm on breathing curve” (vliianie rechevogo ritma na dykhatel’nuu krivuu), developed a “new method of memory research”, and conducted an interview-based study of school children’s experiences of their coeducational activities and their “mental attitudes” (umstvennoe ili dushevnoe nastroenie shkol’noi molodezhi). The report concluded with even more optimistic and ambitious projections of the future large-scale contribution to pedagogical, experimental, theoretical and social work that Vygotsky’s cabinet would make in the Gomel Pedagogical Tekhnikum and other local educational institutions.

The pedagogical council of the Tekhnikum authorized Vygotsky to represent the Gomel Department of People’s Enlightenment at the forthcoming All-Russian Congress of Pedology, Experimental Pedagogy, and Psychoneurology. This was the second event of its kind, the First Congress had been held just less than a year before, in January 1923. The Congress was, perhaps, better known by its alternative title and for simplicity’s sake most commonly referred to as the Psychoneurological Congress. It was scheduled to take place in Petrograd in early January 1924. Vygotsky prepared three presentations. They were based on his experiences as an inexperienced researcher and instructor in the Tekhnikum. Two of these were his talk on how psychology instruction should be organized in educational settings and another one that presented the “results of the questionnaire on the attitudes of the students of the last grades of Gomel schools in 1923”. The third was a brief presentation of an experimental study that Vygotsky did using the “new method of memory research” that he designed and conducted in Gomel. The purpose of this presentation was to give an illustration for his discussion of the “methodology of reflexological research in its application to the investigation of the psyche”.

Vygotsky’s entrance into the world of psychology was rapid, overconfident, and steep. Time was scarce and precious: the novice researcher made progress over less than half a year and felt confident enough to publicly present the findings. For his first ever performance at an academic congress he had to prepare several scholarly papers. Yet, he was missing a psychological theory on which to base his ideas. A
theory needed to be “borrowed”, and Vygotsky found one: an ambitious and self-proclaimed new scientific discipline of “reflexology”.

Teaching about reflexes: Pavlov’s and Bekhterev’s research methods

“Reflexology” often means the teaching about reflexes of physiologist Ivan Pavlov (1849–1936) and psychiatrist and neurologist Vladimir Bekhterev (1857–1927). The word “reflex” was certainly well known to biologists, physiologists, and medical doctors long before Pavlov and Bekhterev. There was nothing new or original in the way Russian scholars treated “reflex” as such. It was used to describe a physiological reaction of an organism to the irritation of a specific spot or an organ. An example is pupillary light reflex: the constriction or dilation of an eye’s pupil as a reaction to the increase or decrease of the intensity of light respectively. Another example is newborn babies’ sucking reflex that makes them suck any object that comes into contact with the roof of their mouth. Reflexes are biological: humans and animals have them. Such reflexes are inborn, involuntary, and unconscious: we are born with them, we reproduce them without wanting to do so, and in most cases we are not aware of them.

The original Russian contribution to international scholarship was the idea and, subsequently, the theory of the so-called “conditional reflexes” (as opposed to “unconditional reflexes” and widely known, erroneously, as “conditioned reflexes”). The unconditional reflexes are inborn, involuntary, and purely physiological. Unlike the unconditional ones, conditional reflexes are acquired: they form in animals and humans under certain conditions during their lifetime. This is why they are called “conditional reflexes”. This notion originates in the work and writings of the noted Russian physiologist, the Nobel Prize winner in physiology and medicine, Ivan Pavlov. Pavlov was internationally known and awarded the Nobel Prize for his work in the physiology of digestive system in 1904. Yet, at the turn of the century he dramatically changed his research program and switched to the study of the nervous system.

Pavlov studied physiology using dogs as his experimental subjects. In his ingenious research on the digestive system (specifically, in his experiments on the salivary, gastric, and pancreatic glands) Pavlov and his co-workers noticed that in certain instances the organism started producing gastric juice, pancreatic juice, and saliva not only as a reaction to direct irritation of bodily organs, but in anticipation of feeding. In other words, the digestive system of “Pavlov’s dogs” would react to the sight or even the thought of food exactly as if they actually smelled or ate it. That was an interesting observation.

Pavlov distinguished such instances from purely physiological secretion that was caused by the taste of the food and its effects on the sensory organs in the mouth of the animal. In his early works he referred to this phenomenon as “psychic secretion”. Thus, Pavlov observed that certain digestive processes in the organism, while remaining strictly physiological, at the same time had something psychological in
their nature: they resulted from previous experiences, relied on visual perceptions, memories, emotions, anticipations and interpretations of the current situation.

In order to capture the major distinction between the unconditional and conditional reflexes (using the case of saliva production) Pavlov proposed that “in physiological experiments the animal is irritated by the essential, unconditional qualities of the subject, by those related to the physiological role of saliva”. These are the instances of an unconditional reflex. In contrast, in the conditional reflex the irritation originates from “the qualities of external objects that are inessential or even completely accidental in relation to the work of the salivary glands”. Pavlov firmly believed that associations that develop in life experiences constituted the psychological mechanism that underlies the connection between psychology and physiology. In 1903, for the first time ever, Pavlov publicly pronounced his new research agenda that encompassed the three decades of scientific research thereafter. Pavlov’s main subjects of his experimental laboratory investigations were dogs. Yet, as he made it perfectly clear at the onset of his new cycle of studies as early as 1903, his work on the nervous system was to eventually illuminate the extremely complex nature and the interplay between physiological and psychological factors in the origin and development of essentially human characteristics, including the mind and the consciousness:

Science will sooner or later bring the obtained objective results [of physiological experiments] to our subjective world, and will at once brightly illuminate our mysterious nature, will explain the mechanism and vital meaning of that which most occupies Man – our consciousness and its torments.

Pavlov, quoted in Todes (2014), p. 251

Pavlov acknowledged that he did not understand the conditions of formation, the mechanisms of operation, and the balance of the physiological and psychological factors of “conditional reflexes” at the time. It was exactly this new mystery of nature that made him switch from his work on digestion to the systematic investigation of the nervous system using the conditional salivary reflex method of research. Thus, dogs salivating for food and associated external stimuli would become the topic of his research for decades to come. The first results of this research were published in the early 1900s and the 1910s. They became widely known as the Pavlov’s theory of higher nervous system. Overall, the research on the higher nervous system and conditional reflexes extended over more than three decades of Pavlov’s life and represented his main claim to fame among specialists in human sciences. Yet, it was Vladimir Bekhterev, who coined and introduced the term reflexology in order to distinguish his overarching integrative science of human mind and brain from other scientific theories and disciplines. Like Pavlov, Bekhterev established his theory on the basis of the foundational concept of reflex. In many ways, Pavlov’s and Bekhterev’s thinking and scientific work developed along similar lines. Yet, there were a number of essential differences.
Bekhterev was a psychiatrist and neurologist. Furthermore, he was a practicing medical doctor. From the perspective of a clinical practitioner and researcher, Pavlov’s research method was unacceptable for a number of reasons. First, Pavlov studied animals (primarily dogs) in laboratories, but not humans in the natural settings of their lives. Second, the experimental subjects in Pavlov’s experiments were immobilized: they needed to be firmly strapped and were kept still during the whole multi-hour experiment. Third, Pavlov’s conditional salivary reflex method required vivisection: an operation on live animals that would expose their salivary glands. A method better suited to clinical practice and neurological research on people was needed, and after a series of trials and errors Bekhterev’s enormous team of associates and collaborators (the “Bekhterevians”) eventually designed such a method in the 1900s. They referred to it as the method of “associated reflex” (sochetatelnyi reflex), or “(artificially) associated motor reflex”.

Here is the essence of the method. Pavlov’s method was based on an unconditional salivary reflex that occurs at the time an animal thinks about or sees, but does not eat, food. Bekhterev’s group also established their method on an unconditional reflex, but chose a different kind of reflex. This reflex occurs when a living organism is hit with a moderate electric charge and reacts with a reflexive defense movement. In order not to seriously harm the animal, they applied the electric charge to a very sensitive area on its body: the skin of an experimental dog’s paw. Then, in order to study the conditional, or associated, reflex, a psychological association was developed between the electric charge and another external stimulus. As a result, the experimental animal would react to this external stimulus with defensive movement of its paw even without experiencing the electric shock. Bekhterev’s student Viktor Protopopov designed the method, applied it in his doctoral research, and defended doctoral dissertation in 1908. Subsequently, in other studies of the Bekhterevians this method was developed and extended to human subjects. The electric shock was applied to the soles of their feet and even, in the most developed and sophisticated variation of the method, to the skin of their hands.

The key point of both Pavlov’s and Bekhterev’s experimentation was to develop an acquired conditional reflex. This would be possible when another external stimulus was repeatedly presented to their experimental subjects so that the association between such external stimulus and the intended physiological reaction would be established. As an outcome, Pavlov’s dogs would famously start salivating at the sound of an electric buzzer (commonly, but erroneously, known as the “ring of the bell”). In Bekhterevian studies, a reaction of limb retraction in the subjects would be triggered by a range of external stimuli. No electric charge would eventually be needed. This would constitute the “conditional” or “associative” reflex in its purest form. Apparently, the nature and specific characteristics of the external stimulus as such were of almost no importance from the perspective of the animal. The stimulus was merely a signal, or sign, of an impending electric charge, therefore, it could be chosen randomly.

In 1923 an important publication took place. This was Ivan Pavlov’s book characteristically titled “Twenty Years of Experience in the Objective Study of the
Higher Nervous Activity of Animals” that powerfully presented his argument in favor of this line of objectivist research. The book immediately became the hit of the season and was subsequently reissued several times until the end of the 1930s. It was soon published in translation into German and in English, in 1926 and 1928, respectively. The book also made a considerable impression on the novice researcher in human psychology such as Vygotsky. Comparable (if not even greater) influence on Vygotsky was the Bekhterevian experimentation, particularly, the subsequent research of Bekhterev’s former student Protopopov, who, also in 1923, published his work. This was a scholarly article, in which, as long as reflexological research on human subjects was concerned, Protopopov advocated for the use of a stimulus that was specific only to people: language, speech, word. Vygotsky was particularly interested in this opportunity and took it immediately.

**Vygotsky’s new method: “Double Stimulation”**

For the Psychoneurological Congress of 1924, Vygotsky prepared a presentation on the “new method of memory research” that he designed and applied in his experiments in Gomel. His actual presentation dealt mainly with theoretical issues of the interrelations and the dialogue between Bekhterev’s “reflexology” and experimental psychology as two different scientific disciplines. The presentation was titled “The method of reflexological investigation in application to the research of the psyche”. There was also a paper on the empirical part of his psychological laboratory work in Gomel that Vygotsky at some point wrote in relation to his conference report. He titled the paper “Experimental investigation of the new verbal reflexes development using the method of conjoining them with the complexes (of logical memory)”. Vygotsky may have intended to publish this empirical study that he referred to as an immature pilot investigation, but the paper remained unpublished during his lifetime.

In his presentation at Gomel Pedagogical Tekhnikum in October 1923 Vygotsky announced the original yet unnamed “new method” of psychological research. In fact, it was hardly new or original. Various techniques and mental strategies that aid remembering were discovered as early as in Antiquity. For a long time this had been common knowledge about remembering. These techniques and strategies for associating something we need to remember with something else that we already know are called mnemonics (or mnemonic techniques). A lot of publications on mnemonics had come out before Vygotsky, and he certainly knew about at least some of them. Yet, he proposed his method as an innovation. By that he meant that he had allegedly turned mnemonics from merely a memory device into a ground-breaking research method that would be instrumental in bridging the gap between the traditional psychology and Bekhterev’s reflexology. This was the key message and the essence of his 1924 Congress presentation.

Apparently, Vygotsky’s goal in his study was very different from that of Pavlov and Bekhterev: he was not a physiologist and did not investigate conditional or associative reflexes. He was interested in the psychology of remembering and the
development of “logical memory”. In other words, Vygotsky’s perspective was purely psychological. Yet, as he argued in the theoretical part of his conference presentation, the goals and the methods of psychological and physiological (reflexological) research were gradually merging. Thus, Vygotsky made considerable use of the physiological concept of reflex in his psychological research.

This is how Vygotsky designed his study. The participants in the experiment were given the task of remembering a long list of unrelated Russian words. Let us think about this list as a “words list”. The task proved difficult for them. In order to facilitate remembering, Vygotsky designed an artificial technique that would help them to achieve the goal. Another list of words was given to the participants in the study. This was the list of the names of Russian poets and fiction writers, ordered chronologically, by their years of life and work. Let us call this list a “names list”. Participants knew well all the names and the order of their appearance on the list. They were students of the Gomel Pedagogical Tekhnikum and had studied the lives and works of these authors in the chronological order, as they were presented in the course on the history of Russian literature. The second list of words was supposed to help them memorize the first one. In order to do so, the participants were given some time to think of possible connections between each pair of the words from the two lists. This way they would deliberately establish an association between, say, first name and first word, then, second name and second word, on the “names list” and “words list”, respectively. The associations between the “names” and the “words” would help them in remembering the given verbal material. These associations would also be instrumental in recollecting the words correctly and exactly the order they had been presented. Following the Bekhterevians, Vygotsky referred to these associations as “verbal reflexes” and interpreted the process of associations’ development in the spirit of Bekhterev’s reflexological tradition. Therefore, at the risk of coining a new phraseological expression and following Bekhterev’s terminological conventions, we might classify Vygotsky’s method as research on “artiﬁcially associated memorization”.

Indeed, some similarities between Vygotsky’s and Bekhterevian methods are notable. First, both used human subjects. Second, they allowed the use of verbal stimuli and understood the words of human languages as “secondary conditional reflex” (Protopopov) or even “super-reflex” (Vygotsky). Third, both believed that these auxiliary verbal stimuli were random, meaningless, and totally arbitrary, and that the nature of these stimuli that were used to form the associations with was not particularly relevant: these words were merely signals, or signs, of other, main stimuli such as electric charge (in Bekhterevian method) or “words” to be remembered (in Vygotsky’s method). Fourth, Vygotsky appeared to share the Bekhterevian belief that human beings can be understood and represented as machines, whose behavior is driven (and can be explained) by a set of simple physiological elements. In Bekhterev’s case these were the purely physiological, innate, and the acquired associated reflexes. The belief that a human being can be represented as a machine is called mechanism (or mechanism). Then, the belief that all human behavior can be reduced to and explained by the work of a set of simple
basic elements is referred to as reductionism. Thus, Bekhterev’s (and Pavlov’s) teaching about reflexes can be characterized as mechanist and reductionist. As long as Vygotsky followed Bekhterev or Pavlov and shared their foundational principles and beliefs he too could be legitimately characterized thus. From the early 1920s, Vygotsky would remain under the spell of mechanicism and reductionism in their simplistic beauty until the beginning of the 1930s, when he referred to mnemotechnic remembering as an “artificial” or “instrumental” act, and compared human being with a machine:

We should not conceive of artificial (instrumental) acts as supernatural or meta-natural acts constructed in accordance with some new, special laws. Artificial acts are natural as well. They can, without remainder, to the very end, be decomposed and reduced to natural ones, just like any machine (or technical tool) can, without remainder, be decomposed into a system of natural forces and processes.

_Vygotsky (1997e), pp. 85–86._

The major feature of Vygotsky’s method that distinguished it from Pavlovian and Bekhterevian studies is that in order for his method to work the participants in Vygotsky’s research had to be active and conscious of what they were doing. In other words, they would want to remember and voluntarily use the mnemonic technique. In contrast, in experimental studies on “conditional” or “associated” reflexes the activity and awareness of the animal or even human subjects was not required.

In early 1924 Vygotsky did not yet have a name for his “new method” of memory research. Somewhat later, he extended it from memory research to other “psychological processes” (for instance, attention) and coined the phrase in order to describe his method. He called it the “method of double stimulation”. The reference to “stimulation” is not incidental here. Indeed, like in Pavlovian or Bekhterevian tradition, Vygotsky used stimuli of two kinds. First, there were the stimuli that would cause the direct effect. Second, there were stimuli that caused indirect mediated effects, such as Pavlov’s “conditional”, Bekhterev’s “associative”, or Vygotsky’s “verbal” reflexes. Thus, as of the early 1920s, in his professional psychology-related activities, Vygotsky was totally immersed in thinking about people in terms of “reflexes”, “stimuli”, and “reactions”, and eagerly applied the stimulus–reaction theoretical framework in order to discuss various issues of human psychological functioning and performance.

In retrospect, in a talk that he gave in 1930, Vygotsky further discussed this research on remembering. He referred to non-mnemotechnic remembering as “natural memory” and clarified that “in natural memory a direct associative (conditional reflex) connection A-B is established between two stimuli A and B”. In contrast, in “artificial, mnemotechnic memory” a sign X was used, and instead of one direct associative (conditional reflex) connection A-B, two such connections were established: first, between stimulus A and sign X (associative, or conditional,
reflex A-X) and, second, between sign X and stimulus B (associative, or conditional, reflex X-B). Vygotsky believed that “just like the connection A-B, each of them is a natural conditional reflex process, determined by the properties of the brain tissue”. Then, the whole process of “artificial”, “mediated”, “cultural”, sign-assisted remembering would fit the reflexological formula A-X → X-B. Thus, from the early 1920s this formula would dominate Vygotsky’s thinking for the most part of his subsequent professional career as a psychologist.

Vygotsky and reflexology

It is not entirely clear why exactly Vygotsky chose reflexology as his theoretical framework at the end of 1923, but it is apparent that he did not pick it among other options entirely at random. Several factors were at play and most likely some combination of them had an impact on his decision.

First, in his experimental studies at the Gomel Pedagogical Tekhnikum Vygotsky strongly relied on the achievements of the Bekhterev’s school. In his October 1923 report Vygotsky mentioned the three names of those, whose research, methods, and experimental techniques he applied in his work: Rossolimo, Lazurskii, and Nechaev. Two of the three – Nechaev and Lazurskii – were most closely associated with Bekhterev: the scholar, practitioner, and scientific entrepreneur. At the turn of the century and in early 20th century Bekhterev initiated, launched or supported an enormous network of various research and educational institutes, medical clinics, learned societies, courses, scientific journals, etc. These were located mostly in the country’s capital St. Petersburg (renamed Petrograd in 1914, then, a decade later renamed Leningrad), but their influence was well perceived across the entire country. Perhaps the only exception was Moscow, where local scientific elites were strong enough to compete with the Bekhterevian influences in the field of psychoneurology. Thus, from a social standpoint, Bekhterev was a really powerful magnate; his school was strong and widely spread geographically.

Second, after the Revolution, Marxism as a system of thought was a very fashionable political and intellectual trend. It was becoming the dominant trend within human and social sciences in the Soviet Union. By the mid-1920s Bekhterev positioned his reflexology as an overarching materialist and Marxist biosocial objective science of human mind and body. Bekhterev (and Pavlov) viewed human being as a very complicated mechanism, driven by a range of various reflexes. Bekhterev’s mechanicism was supported by a powerful group of Marxist philosophers who advocated for mechanicism as the guiding framework for truly Marxist natural sciences. This claim was contested by another, equally powerful, group of Soviet philosophers, who advocated for a “dialectical” approach. Yet, as of the mid-1920s, the philosophical battles between the two camps were ongoing, and mechanicism appeared one of the two possible alternatives for the Marxist natural and social sciences.

Finally, the location of the Psychoneurological Congress should be taken into account. The Congress was held in Petrograd – the stronghold of both Pavlov’s
and Bekhterev’s followers at the time – and the majority of the participants in the Congress were local specialists. For a novice researcher aspiring to make a career in academia this factor might have also played its role. Virtually the entire group of Vygotsky’s friends and associates from Gomel had left the town by then. His cousin, David Vygodskii, with his wife Emma, had already settled in Petrograd. We might speculate that Lev Vygotsky was also anticipating his transition from provincial Gomel around that time. In order to make such a move and secure a place in academia he would need the sympathy and support of local scientific authorities and intellectual elites. Thus, it is not unlikely that to some extent Vygotsky chose the reflexological theoretical framework under the influence of the specific social circumstances of his anticipated presentation, and in order to please his intended audience.

Second Psychoneurological Congress as a landmark

On 6 January 1924 Vygotsky made two presentations at the Congress. Considering the multiple factors at play it is not surprising that Vygotsky chose reflexological stance in order to discuss his ideas on the two topics of his presentations: how psychology was to be taught and his views on the methods of reflexological research. Vygotsky firmly promoted the reflexological agenda in his presentations at the Congress. Thus, in his presentation on the ways of teaching psychology he stated that “a course [of psychology] must be based on the foundations of reflexology as the teaching about the interrelated activity – that of a human being and the environment, physiology and comparative psychology”.¹⁸ Vygotsky’s involvement with reflexology is even more evident in the second presentation at the Congress on that day. In his talk he asserted that “reflexology is one of the methods of psychology” and argued in favor of the full merger of these two disciplines.

Vygotsky’s flirtation with Bekhterev’s “psychoneurology” and “reflexology” as such, however, appeared fairly short-lived. Vygotsky’s presentations at the Congress did not go unnoticed and, as a result, he got an invitation to join the ranks of the Institute of Psychology in Moscow. The Institute was led by Konstantin Kornilov (1879–1957) – the Institute’s new director (from November 1923) and chief proponent of reactology. The new scientific discipline of reactology was the brainchild of Kornilov, who positioned it as yet another incarnation of an objectivist and Marxist discipline within the psychoneurological segment of human sciences. Thus, Kornilov was Bekhterev’s major rival in the competition for the unofficial title of leader of the politically and scientifically correct Marxist psychology (or its substitute).

After the Congress Vygotsky moved to the “new old” capital of the country – Moscow – in order to pursue a career in the local Institute of Psychology affiliated with his alma mater, the Moscow State University. This appointment effectively put an end to his persona of a “reflexologist” and consequently led to notable changes in his conceptual and theoretical outlook.
Notes

1 GAMO, f. 937, op. 3, d. 49, s. 2; cited in Vygodskaya & Lifanova (1996), p. 47.
3 For the curriculum of the Historical-Philosophical Faculty of Shaniavskii Moscow City People’s University see Volya (2016).
5 This study, or a very similar follow-up experimental study, was subsequently published as a brief four-page paper: Vygotskii, L. S. (1926). O vliianii rechevogo ritma na dykhanie. In K. N. Kornilov (Ed.), Problemy sovremennoi psikhologii: Shornik statei sotrudnikov Moskovskogo gosudarstvennogo instituta eksperimental’noi psikhologii, pp. 169–173. Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel’stvo.
7 These are Vygotsky’s presentations titled “How we need to teach psychology now” (Kak nado seichas prepodavat’ psikhologii) and “The results of the survey on the learners’ attitudes in the graduate classes of Gomel schools in 1923” (Rezultaty ankety o nastroeniakh uchashchikhsia v vypusknykh klassakh gomel’skih shkol v 1923 godu). According to the published program of the Congress, he made these two presentations on 6 January (at the joint session of the sectors of psychology, reflexology and pedology) and 10 January (at the joint session of the sectors of pedology and experimental pedagogy), respectively.
10 On Pavlov’s life and scientific legacy see Todes (2014); on Pavlov’s distinction between unconditional and conditional reflex see specifically pp. 247–251.
11 There is not much clarity on the intellectual priority in the discovery of the conditional/associative reflex, and the two opposite accounts in favor of Pavlov’s and Bekhterev’s priority exist in the literature written by historians and the representatives of the two rival schools. For a discussion of the rivalry between Pavlov and Bekhterev see Babkin (1949) and Todes (2014).
12 Perhaps a better translation of Russian phrase “sochetatel’nyi refl eks” would be “correlative reflex” or “conjoined reflex” since the Russian term gives no straightforward reference to associations as a psychological mechanism of such reflex formation. Yet, the phrase “associated reflex” is preserved here mostly for historical reasons. For an overview of Bekhterev’s theory and research tradition by the time of Bekhterev’s death in 1927 see Schniermann (1930).
14 Pavlov’s 1923 book’s title in the original: “Dvadtsatiletnii opyt ob”ektivnogo izucheniia vysshei nervnoi deiatel’nosti zhivotnykh”.
16 In fact, Vygotsky did not use the formula as such, but illustrated this idea with the help of an image of the triangle AXB; see Vygotsky (1997e), p. 86.
17 See Joravsky (1961).
Alexander Luria: Vygotsky’s alter ego

As we know, Vygotsky’s presentations at the Second Psychoneurological Congress in Petrograd in 1924 did not go unnoticed. The provincial researcher from Gomel made a good impression on several people in the audience. Yet, one of them was particularly important and became even more important in the subsequent life and career of Lev Vygotsky. His name was Alexander Luria.

Alexander Luria was born in 1902 in the Russian city of Kazan to a Jewish family: the prominent medical doctor Roman Albertovich Luria (1874–1944) and his wife Evgenia Victorovna Luria (née Khaskina, 1875–1951), a dentist. Both had their own private medical practices. Alexander Luria experienced the Revolution in Kazan as a gymnasium student. The Revolution removed all obstacles for minorities’ participation in public life and allowed indiscriminate access to education to all, regardless of religion, gender, or ethnicity. In 1918, because of revolutionary events, Luria prematurely graduated from the gymnasium after six (instead of the full eight) years of studies and effortlessly entered Kazan University’s Department of Social Sciences. By his own admission,¹ he found both his gymnasium and university education incomplete, unsystematic, and insufficient. His studies were disrupted by the Revolution, post-revolutionary turmoil, and confusion that these dramatic social changes brought about among the population of teachers and professors. Particularly disturbing and frustrating was the situation in the fields of the social studies and humanities. The pre-Revolutionary curricula and university courses proved dated and out of place, but in most cases the professors of the older generation were unable to update and modernize the way they taught. During these tumultuous years the students, Luria’s university peers, had only a minimal amount of time for academic studies. New forms of the students’ activity – peer circles, group meetings, and students’ associations, each focused on the discussion of all
sorts of contemporary political and social problems – occupied most of their time. Young people in Kazan eagerly participated in the new Government’s initiatives on the “cultural front”. For instance, in 1919 Alexander Luria, still a university student and a teenager, served as an instructor at the “extra-curricular sub-department of the city branch of Narkompros”. In 1921 he graduated from the University.

Luria was a very bright and an extremely proactive young man. Fascinated by Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis, he founded the Kazan Psychoanalytic Society in 1922. Not only did Luria found the Society, but he also informed Freud, in Vienna, about it. To his surprise and excitement, Freud responded to his letter: he approved of the new Society and gave Luria his permission for the translation and publication of a few of his works in Russian. In September 1922 the first meeting of the Kazan Psychoanalytical Society took place. At that time, the Society comprised a group of ten members. Luria was present as its founding member and remained the Secretary of the Society thereafter.

On another occasion Luria initiated the foundation of a new journal, in 1922. The original title of the journal was “The problems of the psychophysiology of labor”. In order to boost the prestige and visibility of the new scholarly edition, a decision was made to invite Vladimir Bekhterev to assume the position of the journal’s co-editor. To that end, Luria made a trip to Petrograd, where he met Bekhterev and managed to convince the maître. The sole condition Bekhterev set was that the word “reflexology” would be added to the title. The condition was accepted, and the first issue of the journal, “The problems of the psychophysiology of labor and reflexology”, was published in Kazan in 1922. A local scholar was also listed as a co-editor, but neither of the two co-editors actively participated in the work of the edition. Thus, it operated mostly under the supervision of the journal’s Secretary, Luria.

In 1923 Luria left Kazan for Moscow where he continued his involvement with psychoanalysis, but as the member and the Secretary of the Russian Psychoanalytic Society. He also accepted a new leadership position at Moscow’s Institute of Experimental Psychology in November 1923. Soon thereafter, Luria was hired by the Institute’s new Director Konstantin Kornilov as the Institute’s Scientific Secretary, a position roughly equivalent of a Deputy Director. This position would give him direct access to the Director and a certain amount of influence in the issues of hiring new personnel. Thus, Luria was instrumental in inviting Vygotsky to join the ranks of the Institute. In 1924, upon Kornilov’s invitation, Vygotsky left Gomel for Moscow. This was “the beginning of a beautiful friendship” and a long-time collaboration between Vygotsky and Luria. Eventually, they got so close as scholars and friends that in many ways Luria became “the other I” of Vygotsky, his alter ego.

**Vygotsky’s return to Moscow**

Upon arrival in Moscow Vygotsky found himself in a very different world. This was neither Moscow of the years of his university studies, nor the dynamic life in post-Revolutionary, yet still very provincial Gomel.
The new Moscow of the 1920s was a place where seemingly boundless career perspectives were open for the young scholar and social activist such as Vygotsky. The formal reason for his move to Moscow was the invitation that he received from the Institute of Experimental Psychology. In early 1924 Vygotsky was hired as an assistant at the Institute, which roughly corresponded to a combined position of research assistant, junior instructor, and postgraduate student. The job did not pay well, and Vygotsky would need additional sources of income. Apparently supported by his academic superiors at the Institute, Vygotsky was hired and started teaching in a handful of Moscow educational establishments.2

Another important step in Vygotsky’s career was his appointment to the position at the Narkompros of RSFSR: a huge administrative body that is best understood as a Ministry in charge of issues in education, scientific research, cultural work, propaganda, and public entertainment. Vygotsky had previously been employed by the Narkompros in Gomel, where he managed local affairs within Gomel region only. In Moscow, he got a position in the Narkompros of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (RSFSR) that supervised the People’s Enlightenment throughout Soviet Russia. The full official title of this position was the “Head of the sub-department of upbringing and educating physically defective and mentally retarded children” within the department of “Social and legal protection of minors” (SPON) of the “Main administration of children’s social upbringing and polytechnic education” (Glavsotsvos).3 In other words, Vygotsky took a bureaucratic ministerial position at the fourth level of Narkompros’ hierarchy, and only three handshakes separated him from the top-most figure in this huge administrative body: Anatolii Lunacharskii, Narkom of Enlightenment of Soviet Russia. The position was authoritative, but hardly lucrative: Vygotsky was hired part-time and earned only one-quarter of the regular salary of a full-time job. Yet, he was the highest-ranking Narkompros person in charge of the “defective children” in Russia.

All these sources of income were important to Vygotsky. In mid-1924 he briefly returned to Gomel to marry Roza Noevna Smekhova, who would be the mother of his two daughters, Gita (born in 1925) and Assia (born in 1930). The Moscow of the 1920s (and later) was very busy and extremely overcrowded. For the lack of better options, the newly married couple temporarily occupied a room in the basement of the Institute of Psychology. In the mid-1920s, the rest of the Vygodskii family left Gomel for Moscow. Later, they all moved into a three-room apartment in Bol’shaia Serpukhovskaia Street, where Vygotsky, his wife and their two children occupied one room out of the three.

From the onset of his work in the Narkompros Vygotsky became deeply and enthusiastically involved in a wide range of administrative activities. Vygotsky was an ardent advocate of the new Narkompros policy of “social upbringing” that was to replace pre-Revolutionary traditional individualistic pedagogy. Instead, a “new pedagogy” was to be built. Yet, there was no clear understanding of how this goal could be reached. Particularly, there was no clarity on the ways of implementing “social upbringing” in the sphere that was traditionally shared between pedagogy, education and medicine: the upbringing of children with physical and mental
abnormalities, psychological trauma, emotional and cognitive deficit, and delays in development. All these cases roughly qualify under the general umbrella term “special education” in the present day but in the Soviet Union in the 1920s the word “defectology” was used instead. The children were considered as having “defects”, or “defective”.4

As a newly appointed Narkompros bureaucrat, its chief spokesman and agent, Vygotsky focused on the activities and policies related to the mentally and physically handicapped children and youth. Vygotsky communicated the message of “social upbringing” as his vision of the “new defectology” while speaking at various gatherings and meetings, organizing conferences, publishing papers, and editing volumes, such as the 1924 book “Some issues of the upbringing of the blind, the deaf-mute, and mentally retarded children”.5 His primary goal was to convert into the new creed of the “social upbringing” the older generation of educational and medical specialists, researchers, and practitioners. This proved a difficult task and pre-Revolutionary specialists were reluctant to adopt the Narkompros’ new policies. There were two main reasons for that. First, Vygotsky had no professional reputation and was not a figure of any authority in this field of knowledge and practice: he had no relevant practical work experience, no known research, and no publications in the field by the time of his Narkompros appointment. His inflammatory speeches and writings on the topics of the “social upbringing of defective children” were passionate, but unrealistic and utopian. Second, the idea of social upbringing in practice meant that all children would receive equal treatment in educational settings without separating them into normal and abnormal, or pathological, cases. The idea might appear progressive and humane. Yet, the ways of implementing it in practice were far from clear. For example, blind-deaf children require personal, intimate, and extremely time-consuming measures that will eventually allow them to learn social conventions and communicate with the others. The difficulties of social upbringing in cases like these were obvious to the well-established professionals with considerable experience and knowledge. Sceptical of Vygotsky’s proclamations about the social upbringing of the “defective children”, they would often ignore Vygotsky and sabotage the policy. One of Vygotsky’s associates, Aleksandr Shcherbina, corresponded with him on this matter. In one of his letters Shcherbina discussed Vygotsky’s “memorable appearance” at the Second All-Russian Congress on the Social and Legal Protection of Minors in November, 1924.6 This is how he described the situation at the end of 1924:

The Congress is over and obviously nothing is happening. We need to face the truth. While you were giving your highly interesting and substantial lecture, the audience decreased visibly and the gallery emptied almost completely. No doubt, that has a considerable meaning. These facts show that in the education of the blind, deaf-mutes, and mentally disabled the philanthropic perspective on the “invalids” cannot be rapidly overcome, because even the most active workers in the field of education do not get beyond this point of view.7

At the Congress, Vygotsky made an enthusiastic and optimistic presentation on the topic of “The state of the art and the goals of educating and upbringining mentally retarded and physically defective children”. In turn, the older generation of Russian defectologists treated the ideas of social upbringing of the “defective children” as yet another social utopia: a fantastic project of an imaginary future, beautiful in theory, but unfeasible in practice.

Vygotsky’s visionary utopianism is characteristic of his post-Revolutionary thinking and surfaced with particular force in the mid-1920s. Most notably it can be seen in his prophetic writings on the social status of the blind and the deaf in the “new society” of the future:

Achieving the religious miracle of mankind’s eternal dream – giving sight to the blind and speech to the deaf – is the task of social education as it emerges in the greatest era of the final reconstruction of mankind … Thanks to eugenic measures, thanks to an altered social structure, mankind will arrive at different healthier conditions of life. The number of the blind and the deaf will decrease incredibly. It may be that deafness and blindness will disappear altogether. But long before that happens, they will be conquered socially. Blindness and deafness will still exist on earth for a long time. A blind person will remain blind and a deaf person deaf, but they will cease to be defective because defectiveness is only a social concept … Social education will conquer defectiveness. When this occurs, probably no one will understand us if we say that a blind child is defective; instead, they will say that a blind person is blind and a deaf person is deaf and nothing more.\footnote{\textit{Vygotskii (1924)}}

Similarly, Vygotsky proclaimed the need in a radically new scientific theory. He predicted that sooner or later a “new psychology” of the future would be built.\footnote{\textit{Vygotsky (1997c), p. 61}}

The current task was to create a revolutionary way of psychological thinking:

Such a system [of knowledge] has not yet been created. We can say with confidence that it will not arise out of the ruins of empirical psychology or in the laboratories of reflexologists. It will come as a broad biosocial synthesis of the theory of animal behavior and societal man. This new psychology will be a branch of general biology and at the same time the basis of all sociological sciences. It will be the knot that ties the science of nature and the science of man together. It will therefore, indeed, be most intimately connected with philosophy, but with a strictly scientific philosophy which represents the combined theory of scientific knowledge and not with the speculative philosophy that preceded scientific generalizations.\footnote{\textit{Vygotsky (1997c), p. 61}}

Vygotsky’s closest associate at that time, Alexander Luria, in his memoirs of the 1970s wrote: “Our aim, overambitious in the manner characteristic of the times, was to create a new, comprehensive approach to human psychological process”\footnote{\textit{Psychologist}}}.
Marxist practicality and the “new science”

In his daydreaming about social upbringing and the “new psychology”, Vygotsky clearly followed the main stream of the gigantic reconstruction of the entire society in virtually all spheres of life: in industry, culture, education, healthcare, and welfare system. After the Bolshevik Revolution the economy was nationalized, which in effect meant the end of privately funded scientific research in the country. Almost all scientific research was then funded by the state. The Bolsheviks were perfectly aware of the tremendous potential of science in the restoration of the economy after years of revolution and Civil War. They had always thought about science as the major vehicle for the modernization of society and the economy. Among their main slogans was the call for the scientific and rational organization of the whole world. Besides, academic success stories like that of Ivan Pavlov’s Nobel Prize Award (1904) and his subsequent research on higher nervous activity were instrumental in the international propaganda of the Soviet project on the socialist transformation of Russian society.

Science was an extremely important element of the new social order. The Bolshevik Government had their vision of the “new science” and generously supported it by offering funds and resources to scholars. They particularly favored those petitions for budgetary and administrative support from politically loyal scholars. These scholars explicitly expressed their commitment to the “new science”. The two basic principles characterized the Bolshevik model of science that gradually emerged after the Revolution. These were to be followed in earnest.

First, the principle of the Marxism of science\textsuperscript{13} required that scientific research in the Soviet Union be rooted in the philosophy of Marx, Engels, and their followers. Soviet Marxists turned the awareness of Marxist philosophical foundations into a requirement and a methodological principle. In practice, this principle was somewhat problematic for two main reasons: the multitude of Marxist philosophies and the lack of clarity as to how exactly philosophical ideas could be productively translated into empirical scientific research. Apparently, some disciplines and scientific fields such as liberal arts, humanities, or social sciences, might be predisposed to Marxist, or, for that matter, any other philosophical ideas. Others, such as natural or exact sciences, would not readily reveal how exactly Marxists ideas of alienation, class struggle, economic formations, or social progress could be productively used in their conceptual or methodological framework. This created numerous controversies and heated debates among Soviet scholars and philosophers in the 1920s, and, with even greater force, in the early 1930s.

In the early 20th century psychology as a scientific discipline was a relatively new outgrowth of philosophy. Even though the ties between psychology and philosophy were traditionally strong, the idea of Marxist philosophy as the methodological foundation of their research posed a considerable problem for Soviet psychologists. They had relatively few problems connecting their discipline to other scientific disciplines within biological, medical, or social sciences. Yet, a “broad biosocial synthesis of the theory of animal behavior and societal man” that
Vygotsky announced in his paper of 1925 had remained but a programmatic statement. There was no agreement on how (and if) the philosophy of Marxism was capable of bringing together all those scientific disciplines and bridging the theoretical gap between the sciences of the mind, society, and the body.\textsuperscript{14}

The second principle directly followed from the first. According to one of Marxism’s programmatic statements, “philosophers have hitherto only \textit{interpreted} the world in various ways; the point is to \textit{change it}”.\textsuperscript{15} Thus, the other fundamental principle was the practicality (\textit{praktichnost’}) of science. The principle of practicality declared that all science be not a purely intellectual “ivory tower” enterprise, but also a practical activity that aims to eventually change the world. According to this principle, research must be applied in order to solve specific practical tasks of importance to the state and society. This requirement was universal: even the most abstract and general theory was expected to contribute to social practice if not directly, then with the help of other, lower level, theories and applied research. Apparently, not every scientific project could reveal the ways of its immediate implementation in social practice. Still, scholars’ willingness and ability to communicate the practical aspects of their studies was often instrumental in helping them get institutional, administrative, and financial support from the multiple organs of state power that sponsored science in the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{16}

The two principles constituted the core of the “new science”, and Soviet scholars were expected to follow them. Many of them did. This appeared as strict adherence to the Communist Party policies and subordination of scientific research to politics. This might be true, but not entirely so. In practice, the demonstrative obedience to the authorities often meant that Soviet scholars gradually learned the art of manipulating the party leadership in order to reach their goals, which were not necessarily the same as those of their political leaders. To that end, Soviet academics mimicked the Bolshevik propagandist jargon and developed specific “scientific newspeak” that was rich with special ritualistic phrases, statements of loyalty to the party and the Revolution, and quotations from the founders of Marxism (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels) and their followers.\textsuperscript{17}

**The variety of “new psychologies”**

Vygotsky’s activism and work for \textit{Narkompros} went hand in hand with his scholarly research and writing. During his first years in post-Revolutionary Moscow Vygotsky’s research activities were primarily associated Vladimir Bekhterev’s \textit{reflexology} and Konstantin Kornilov’s \textit{reactology}. Yet, the list does not end here: Vygotsky was also involved in a number of other new disciplines. These included \textit{defectology}: a cross-disciplinary field of knowledge and social practice in educating and upbringing physically and mentally retarded and handicapped children. Defectology, in turn, was a sub-discipline of the eclectic “science of the child”, \textit{pedology}. On a few occasions he also briefly contributed to \textit{psychotechnics}, a combination of the psychology of industry, labor, and professional selection. Finally, he was deeply involved with \textit{psychology} both as an employee of the Institute of Psychology and a conscious
self-identified psychologist. The multitude and vagueness of these exotic “new psychologies” requires a clarification.

Before the Revolution, the status of psychology in Imperial Russia was unclear. Psychology as a field of knowledge was very old if one thinks about the psychological ideas of Russian intellectuals, thinkers, and fiction writers. Yet, psychology as a scientific discipline was very young: no professional psychologist was a member of the Imperial Academy of Sciences, no department of psychology existed in Russian universities, and academic courses in psychology were taught by professors of philosophy. Psychology was considered a sub-field of philosophy. Psychology was speculative (that is, not based on experimental, empirical studies) and theoretical (that is, not applied in social practice). This is how it was until the end of the 19th century when Russian psychology started changing in a number of ways.

In an opposition to the speculative, “idealist” philosophy, a new kind of psychology appeared and rapidly developed. It was based on empirical, concrete data that were collected in the experimental settings of a psychological laboratory. Its proponents saw psychology as an independent scientific discipline within the Natural Sciences, along with physics, chemistry, biology, and physiology. They borrowed special equipment from physiologists’ or physicists’ laboratories. These scientific tools were used to investigate psychological processes and warranted the rigor, rational approach, measurable outcome, and strictly scientific status of this nascent field of knowledge. Vladimir Bekhterev, a key advocate of “objective psychology”, opened the first laboratory of experimental psychology in Imperial Russia in Kazan in 1886. This initiative was soon followed by other researchers throughout the Empire in the 1880s and 1890s, who founded psychological laboratories in Moscow, Kiev, Derpt (Tartu), Odessa, and St. Petersburg.

Another major influx of ideas for psychology came from social practice, mainly in education and healthcare. The two professional groups – teachers and medical doctors – realized that a system of knowledge about human psychological functioning and the inner world of people was needed. A wide range of interdisciplinary projects was launched across the country. These included founding various research and educational establishments, journals, clinical departments, and specialized institutes in the fields of “psychology” and “psychoneurology”. Perhaps the two largest and most famous institutes of this kind were Psychoneurological Institute (founded in St. Petersburg in 1907) and the L. G. Shchukina Psychological Institute (established in Moscow in 1912; subsequently renamed the Institute of Experimental Psychology). All these public initiatives were officially approved by the Imperial bureaucratic system, but in most cases they were funded privately.

By 1917 there were three main overlapping groups of intellectuals and professionals who promoted psychology in Imperial Russia: speculative philosophers, experimental researchers, and professional practitioners. Experimentalists were likely to form alliances with the other two groups, while academic philosophers tended to be hostile towards the practitioners. The Revolution changed the status of psychology. The new regime put particularly strong emphasis on the large-scale Marxist transformation of all society and the practical issues of the modernization of
the economy. Theory came to practice, and practice turned into theory. Politics, administration, the economy, scientific research, and social practice got blended to such an extent that one could hardly tell the difference between them.

In the domain of human and social sciences new theories, scientific disciplines, intellectual movements, and social practices proliferated. Along with traditional “pedagogy”, “medicine”, or “psychology”, new blended terms and expressions appeared, such as “social upbringing”, “social hygiene”, “industrial hygiene”, “psychohygiene”, “psychotechnics”, and “scientific management of labor”. These words and phrases described the hybrid fields of knowledge and practices that were created across several spheres. In addition, new labels were coined for new social movements or even new scientific disciplines: “experimental pedagogy” and “pedagogical psychology”, “pedology”, “reflexology”, “reactology”, and “defec-tology”. In many cases these innovative ideas and social practices had been imported to Russia from Western Europe and North America before the Revolution. Then, these innovations were often suppressed by the conservative Tsarist bureaucracy or received limited, insufficient funding from philanthropic organizations and private donations. In contrast, the Soviet regime enthusiastically supported these initiatives, and eagerly provided resources and funding for their development.

Obviously, these labels did not appear by themselves. They reflected the activities of large groups and networks of interrelated individuals. The roles of these individuals were different. The majority of these professionals often acted in their personal interests and pursued their own goals. The actual labels did not really matter to them. The minority, though, were the visionaries, spokespeople, and administrators of different kinds, who advocated for specific labels to be used to describe the activities of the “silent majority”. These individuals were the proponents of innovative ideas, new theories, or new scientific disciplines. Typically, they were the originators of these new labels. The most successful of them would get recognition and power. In practice, these lucky few would become the leaders of intellectual movements, journal editors, heads of academic departments, and directors of institutes. These academics competed for resources, funds, and power. Then, they distributed these resources among their followers and associates. They were the official leaders of Soviet human sciences and their names were often attached to certain labels. For example, reflexology was directly associated with Vladimir Bekhterev, reactology with Konstantin Kornilov, psychotechnics with its Soviet chief Isak Spielrein, pedology with Aaron Zalkind. The opposite was also true: a label was strongly attached to the spokesperson, therefore, massive critique or, even worse, forcible removal of the label would often entail considerable losses in the social status and privileges for the individual, in the worst case scenario, the end of a career. The rest of the community of scholarly researchers and practitioners were often relatively indifferent to the labels, and operated within several niches and under several labels at the same time.

The labels that the spokesmen used in order to promote their specific and allegedly unique scientific contributions depended on the concrete circumstances
and could change in the course of life of the same very person. The example of
Vladimir Bekhterev is quite telling. Throughout his career Bekhterev used at least
three different labels for his scientific work. First, as a neurologist, psychiatrist and
medical doctor, Bekhterev and his associates promoted “psychoneurology” (and a
derivative adjective “psychoneurological”) in order to describe a circle of inter-
twined and allied human sciences studying the human mind and behavior – normal
and pathological alike – such as psychology, psychiatry, neurology, anthropology,
education (under the labels of pedagogy and pedology), defectology, psycho-
technics, etc. The first use of this notion in Bekhterev’s discourse dates back to the
end of 19th century. Second, during the first decade of the 20th century Bekhterev
introduced and actively promoted his vision of “objective psychology”, based on
the notion of acquired associative (conditional) reflexes. Third, after the Revolution
of 1917 Bekhterev abandoned the vocabulary of “objective psychology” and
militantly declared his “reflexology”. This new scientific discipline, according to
Bekhterev, would eventually overtake all pre-Revolutionary disciplines studying
the human mind and brain in their normal state as well as in pathology. It is
interesting that scientific research in Bekhterev’s larger group of his associates con-
tinued unaffected by the changes and regardless of the labels that their academic
boss attached to their work.

The case of Vygotsky was curious. On the one hand, he acted as a regular rank-
and-file researcher and eagerly followed a leader or an intellectual trend. He was
involved in several fields of knowledge such as theoretical psychology, the studies
of normal children, or applied work on the pathological cases of the children’s
development. His contributions can be found under the different labels of reflexology,
reactology, pedology, defectology, and psychology. On the other hand, he had the
ambition of a prophetic visionary, an intellectual leader in science, and claimed
work in progress on a “new psychology”. Should he have succeeded in formulating
a really new psychological theory, this innovation would distinguish his unique
ideas from the rest of the world of psychology at that time. Then, a label for this
“new psychology” would be needed. Yet, as of 1924–1925 this challenge was still
on his current agenda. The distinctly “Vygotskian” label was not yet born.

The trip to London and its aftermath

Lev Vygotsky was one of the official leaders of the new Soviet defectology. He
compensated the lack of knowledge and experience with his enthusiasm, and the
utopian vision of the new social order and the new psychological science, his loyalty
to the ideas of social upbringing, and the tremendous energy and effort that he
contributed to the advancement of the socialist cause. As a Narkompros official, he
was sent on a state-funded trip to Europe to represent the Soviet Union at a con-
ference on the education of the deaf in London in the summer of 1925. Vygotsky
was to give a programmatic talk on the “Principles of social education for deaf and
dumb children in Russia”, but for reasons unknown the presentation never took
place; the paper was published in English in the conference proceedings instead.22
This trip would ultimately be Vygotsky’s only travel abroad.\(^{23}\) During the trip he made a series of personal notes. These notes present him as a young man who left his home and young wife, Roza, with a child: his first daughter, Gita, was born in May 1925. He cared about his wife and daughter very much and reacted emotionally to their temporary separation. On the other hand, he had few doubts about the importance of his social mission abroad. According to his private notes that he took during the regular sessions at the conference, Vygotsky was firm, confident, and professional as the representative of his country:

> In essence Russia is the first country in the world. The Revolution is our greatest cause. Only one person in this room knows the secret of the true education of the deaf-mutes, and that person is me. Not because I am more educated than others, but I was sent by Russia and I am speaking for the Revolution.\(^{24}\)

*Vygotsky, quoted in Yasnitsky & van der Veer (2016), p. 101*

During his foreign visit Vygotsky’s health dramatically worsened, and upon his return home in September 1925, he was prescribed bed rest.\(^{25}\) Due to his severe illness, Vygotsky could not even attend the public defense of his own dissertation, the “Psychology of Art”. Vygotsky’s boss and the director of the Institute of Experimental Psychology, Konstantin Kornilov was excited by his dissertation work. In his letter in October 1925 Kornilov wrote that Vygotsky’s application of Kornilov’s principle of “monophasic energy expenditure” in the domain of emotions was exceptionally good, and that he had not thought about such an interpretation of the application of the principle.\(^{26}\) Kornilov regretted that due to Vygotsky’s health the public defense of his dissertation could not be organized. Yet, this appeared a minor obstacle. The decision was made to consider the dissertation defended *in absentia*, without its author’s presence, in October–November 1925.

Otherwise great news for Vygotsky, the defended dissertation was not of much consolation to him at that time: in November 1925 Vygotsky was hospitalized after an outbreak of tuberculosis and stayed in the hospital for almost six months until the late spring of 1926. In the winter of 1925–1926, in an overcrowded and noisy hospital room that accommodated five other terminally ill patients, Vygotsky was literally struggling for life. As Vygotsky wrote to Alexander Luria from the hospital on 5 March 1926:

> I feel somewhere outside of life, or more precisely between life and death; I have not despaired yet, but I have abandoned hope. For this reason, my thoughts somehow cannot focus on matters pertaining to my future life and work.

*Vygotsky (2007), p. 17*

Miraculously, Vygotsky survived and was discharged from the hospital in May 1926. On the eve of his release, physically and morally exhausted, Vygotsky wrote a note in his private notebook:
I have absorbed so many impressions of death during the six months spent in this building, where death was as routine and common a phenomenon as breakfast and the doctor’s rounds, that I feel drawn toward death the way a tired person is drawn toward sleep.27

Vygotsky, quoted in Zavershneva (2010a), p. 26

The disease took its toll: unable to move independently and with a lingering disability as evidenced by his medical and employment records, for medical reasons Vygotsky was deemed legally incapacitated, invalid, and remained out of work for the entirety of 1926.

Vygotsky’s three books

Vygotsky’s hospitalization and subsequent continuous bed rest marked the end of his career as a government official at Narkompros. Yet, the year proved to be very productive: Vygotsky continued working on several manuscripts and by the end of 1926 he was the author of three books of his own. However, very different was the fate of each of these.

The first of Vygotsky’s books, titled “Pedagogical Psychology. A Brief Course”, was based on the course he taught in the Gomel Pedagogical Tekhnikum in 1922–1923. It is likely that Vygotsky wrote the original manuscript while still in Gomel, but it was not released until 1926.28 This is definitely a monument to Vygotsky’s flirtations with reflexology. Page by page the author overwhelmed the reader with statements such as “the theory of conditional reflexes is the basis upon which a new psychology will be built” and that “upbringing is always ultimately the process of developing conditional reflexes in children”. Vygotsky, apparently, heavily edited the book upon his move to Moscow, and Kornilov’s reactological influences are also quite notable. The words “reflex” and “reaction” occur about one thousand times in this teachers’ handbook on pedagogical psychology.

In his second book, “Psychology of Art”, Vygotsky summarized the work that he had done before his arrival in Moscow. It was based on his literary essays that he wrote and partly published during the preceding decade. In Moscow, though, he considerably revised and reinterpreted his earlier writings in the fashion of Kornilov’s reactology. As a result, Vygotsky discussed literature’s impact on the readers in terms of “aesthetic reactions”. The book does not truly qualify as a psychological treatise, though. The “Psychology of Art” reads like a literary study, abound with analyses of the classics of Russian and world literature and critical discussion of other thinkers’ views. Extended psychological theorizing in the proper sense can be found on a dozen pages of the book at best. Vygotsky mentioned Bekhterev’s reflexology on a few occasions, but mostly in the context of its critical discussion. Unlike his reflexological “Pedagogical Psychology”, Vygotsky’s “Psychology of Art” in its strictly psychological core is a manifesto of Kornilov’s reactology. Kornilov’s reaction to the book was immediate and unambiguous. In a letter in October 1925, Kornilov gave his most positive assessment of Vygotsky’s “Psychology of Art”: 
What especially surprised me is that you and I simultaneously raised the question of the explosive reactions. While you arrived at these explosive reactions from purely theoretical considerations about art, I myself, as you know, arrived at this question purely experimentally, as a direct continuation of the investigation of reactions of a more complex order … It was this coincidence of results, using completely different methods that surprised me so much: it is the best proof of the ideological affinity between us. And for the first time I clearly realized that if we were to succeed in working together for a few more years, we would no doubt form an ideologically exceptionally close-knit collective. And somehow I thought that no one other than you, with your creative mind, might organically grow into this collective, while at the same time preserving all of your rich individuality … I studied your work for a week, learning from you how to deal with the aesthetic reaction, how to treat it from our position. You did a tremendous job and I am extremely glad that I have such a strong comrade to work with.29

Kornilov, quoted in Yasnitsky & van der Veer (2016), pp. 106–107

Vygotsky completed the manuscript, prepared it for publication, and submitted it to the State Publishing House (GIZ) in late 1925. For unknown reasons, however, this publication was not released during his lifetime.30

The third book differed from the other two in several ways. This was Vygotsky’s methodological work on the foundations of psychology that he discussed in terms of the fashionable idea of the “crisis” in psychology.31 Unlike the other two that were written (or at least initiated) in Gomel, he started his work on this project in Moscow, most likely after his release from hospital in May 1926.32 In this work on the crisis in psychology Vygotsky still remained a loyal “Kornilovian” and “reactologist”. He claimed that:

the works of Kornilov are the beginning of [new] methodology, and anyone who wants to develop the idea of psychology and Marxism further will be forced to repeat him and to continue his road. As a road this idea is unequalled in strength in European psychology.

Vygotsky (1997d), p. 332

Vygotsky compared a reaction to a biological cell and claimed that “he who can decipher the meaning of the cell of psychology, the mechanism of one reaction, has found the key to all psychology.”33

Vygotsky provided an overview of the psychologies of the time, focused on several of the most important trends in psychology such as Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis, William Stern’s personalism, Vladimir Bekhterev’s reflexology, and Gestalt psychology of the Berlin-Giessen-Frankfurt circle of psychologists, and criticized all of them. Vygotsky argued that an all-embracing general psychology was needed and made an explicit and strong pronouncement of his goal to create a Marxist psychology that he considered the only possible way of
establishing a truly scientific psychology. Vygotsky’s personal statement of intent is quite telling:

I do not want to learn what constitutes the mind for free, by picking out a couple of citations, I want to learn from Marx’s whole method how to build a science, how to approach the investigation of the mind … We do not need fortuitous utterances, but a method; not dialectical materialism, but historical materialism.

*Vygotsky (1997d), p. 331*

On the other hand, Vygotsky warned against using the word “Marxist” in application to psychology, arguing that any rigorously scientific psychology would be Marxist by definition; therefore, no special indication of its Marxist foundation would be needed:

A Marxist historian would never use the title “Marxist History of Russia.” He would regard this as self-evident. “Marxist” is for him synonymous with “truthful” and “scientific.” Another *history* than a Marxist one he does not acknowledge. And for us it should be the same. Our science will become Marxist to the degree that it becomes truthful and scientific. And we will work precisely on making it truthful and to make it agree with Marx’s theory. According to the very meaning of the word and the essence of the matter we cannot use “Marxist psychology” in the sense we use associative, experimental, empirical, or eidetic psychology. Marxist psychology is not a school amidst schools, but the only genuine psychology as a science. A psychology other than this cannot exist. And the other way around: *everything* that was and is genuinely scientific belongs to Marxist psychology. This concept is broader than the concept of school or even trend. It coincides with the concept *scientific* per se, no matter where and by whom it may have been developed.34

*Vygotsky (1997d), p. 341*

Vygotsky continued the work throughout 1926–1927. At a certain point he wrote a draft of the work and sent it to a reviewer. The reviewer severely criticized it and left numerous notes in the margins of the manuscript. This criticism must have played a crucial role in the fate of this scholarly treatise: in 1927 Vygotsky abandoned it. The only surviving manuscript, unlike the other two books, did not include proper references and scholarly bibliography. In its final form the manuscript definitely did not meet publication standards of the time. This is a strong indication that Vygotsky neither finalized it, nor intended to publish it as such. Indeed, this study was never submitted for publication during Vygotsky’s lifetime.35 This unedited, somewhat repetitive, and, according to the reviewer’s assessment, flawed manuscript is known nowadays as Vygotsky’s work on the “(Historical) meaning of the crisis in psychology”.36 Instead of publishing the manuscript, Vygotsky published several shorter papers, in which he substantially revised his reasoning and improved his
argument, succinctly formulated the key points of his analysis of the disciplinary crisis, and tentatively suggested some possible solutions. In sum, by the mid-1920s Vygotsky had produced three books, and only one of these he saw published. Each of these very different books might well be of merit in its own right, but what is of primary interest is what the three works had in common. Surprising as it may seem, each of these works was concluded with virtually identical discussions and a reference to a “superhuman”, or a “superman”.

**Psychology as a science about the superman**

The idea of a superman is neither new these days, nor was it new at the time of Vygotsky. In various forms it goes back to the origins of Western civilization, but in the modern era it is most closely related to the ideas of German poet, linguist, psychologist, and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). Nietzsche wrote his famous “Thus spoke Zarathustra” in German in 1883, in which he proposed that “man is something that shall be overcome”, “man is a rope, tied between beast and overman – a rope over an abyss”, and “what is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end”. In his writings Nietzsche used the German word Übermensc, which is more adequately translated as “Overman”, in the sense the author meant it. Nietzsche was an extremely poetic, obscure, provocative, contradictory, and controversial author, which makes him one of the most widely interpreted and grossly misunderstood thinkers in the history of humanity. Nietzschean ideas were very popular among different layers of Russian intelligentsia at the turn of the century. They acquired particular popularity among Russian revolutionaries of all kinds, including the Bolsheviks, who moulded their variation of a “superman” out of Nietzsche’s “overman”. Vygotsky certainly read Nietzsche’s “Zarathustra” and his other books. But the image of a “superman” migrated into his speeches and writings from another visionary: a “prophet” of the Russian Revolution and a leader of the Bolshevik party Lev Trotskii, better known as Leon Trotsky.

Indeed, three of Vygotsky’s major works – “Pedagogical Psychology”, “Psychology of Art”, and “Meaning of Crisis in Psychology” – and several of his scholarly articles of the mid-1920s include a lengthy quote from Leon Trotsky, which suggests how important these ideas were for Vygotsky at the time. The fragment that Vygotsky invariably quoted on the last pages of these books comes from the highly influential Trotsky book “Literature and revolution” (1923), and the first of Vygotsky’s references to these ideas date back to January 1924: his first public presentation as a novice researcher at the Psychoneurological Congress in Petrograd. Depending on specific Vygotsky texts, the quote typically included a somewhat longer or shorter version of the following prophetic and inflammatory text:

Man at last will begin to harmonize himself in earnest. He will make it his business to achieve beauty by giving the movement of his own limbs the utmost precision, purposefulness and economy in his work, his walk and his play. He will try to master first the semiconscious and then the subconscious
processes in his own organism, such as breathing, the circulation of the blood, digestion, reproduction, and, within necessary limits, he will try to subdivide them to the control of reason and will. Even purely physiologic life will become subject to collective experiments. The human species, the coagulated *Homo sapiens*, will once more enter into a state of radical transformation, and, in his own hands, will become an object of the most complicated methods of artificial selection and psycho-physical training. This is entirely in accord with evolution. … Man will make it his purpose to master his own feelings, to raise his instincts to the heights of consciousness, to make them transparent, to extend the wires of his will into hidden recesses, and thereby to raise himself to a new plane, to create a higher social biologic type, or, if you please, a superman. It is difficult to predict the extent of self-government which the man of the future may reach or the heights to which he may carry his technique. Social construction and psycho-physical self-education will become two aspects of one and the same process. All the arts – literature, drama, painting, music and architecture – will lend this process beautiful form. More correctly, the shell in which the cultural construction and self-education of Communist man will be enclosed, will develop all the vital elements of contemporary art to the highest point. Man will become immeasurably stronger, wiser and subtler; his body will become more harmonized, his movements more rhythmic, his voice more musical. The forms of life will become dynamically dramatic. The average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise.41


One might wonder how it is possible that the three works of the same author, but as different as a scholarly treatise on the psychology of art, a handbook on pedagogical psychology for pedagogical colleges, and a theoretical-methodological study of the crisis in psychology can be, end in virtually the same manner, moreover, with a quote of this kind. It is interesting to see how the main three passions of Vygotsky meet together in this very quote from Trotsky.

Vygotsky’s earlier fascination with theatre, literature, and the arts, – furthermore, his concern about what social revolution gave to the theatre, and what theatre can give to the Revolution – all these topics can be found in Trotsky’s text. Yet, Trotsky went a step further in the strictly Marxist spirit: art has a purpose, and it is not merely for leisure and entertainment, nor is it for passive observing and experiencing. Art is a most powerful instrument for actively changing human nature as a species. In his “Psychology of Art” Vygotsky echoed Trotsky (and like-minded thinkers) when he discussed art “as a method for building life” and even claimed that “without new art there will be no new man”. Yet, the role of art is not limited to the progress of the entire human species: art is a powerful tool in the life of an individual. Art is ultimately used for self-control and self-regulation. Vygotsky stated: “Art is the organization of our future behavior. It is a requirement that may never be fulfilled but that forces us to strive beyond our life toward all
that lies beyond it.”\textsuperscript{42} The idea of the transformative power of art was extremely popular among the great many representatives of a wide range of artistic movements of the renowned Russian \textit{avant-garde}. Furthermore, this powerful idea was among the foundational principles of the post-Revolutionary left-wing Russian \textit{avant-garde} movement as such and, specifically, applied to art, industrial design, constructivism, and futurism.\textsuperscript{43}

Vygotsky also shared Trotsky’s idea of the virtually boundless flexibility and plasticity of human nature. This plasticity allows for a controlled evolution of the species. The optimistic spirit of the possibility of reshaping human nature permeates entire Vygotsky’s “Pedagogical psychology”. Yet, here Vygotsky made an attempt to discuss this issue in purely scientific terms. In pedagogical writings of his Gomel period Vygotsky chose the reflexological framework. In Moscow, he revised it in favor of Kornilov’s reactological terminology. Another important idea shared by Trotsky and Vygotsky: plasticity as such is necessary, but not sufficient. Conscious and goal-directed effort is required in order to overcome nature. Human nature is not an exception. That is why a “new psychology” as the field of knowledge about the potential human being and the science of the future man is needed. Only on the basis of this knowledge can a technology of mass production of the improved and advanced variation of the Communist people be designed. Such technology would require understanding the mechanisms of conscious awareness, self-control, and the ways of mastering psychological processes.\textsuperscript{44}

This idea migrated further into Vygotsky’s manuscript on the crisis in psychology of 1927. In this work Vygotsky also followed Trotsky and prophesied:

\begin{quote}
The new society will create the superman. When one mentions the remoulding of man as an indisputable trait of the new mankind and the artificial creation of a new biological type, then this will be the only and first species in biology which will create itself.
\end{quote}

\textit{Vygotsky (1997d), p. 342}

This idea was no doubt extremely important for Vygotsky, and in a later paper, published in 1930, Vygotsky went as far as to proclaim the “remoulding” of the human race as a “socialist alteration of man”.\textsuperscript{45}

There is yet another feature that made Trotsky’s ideas on art and the new man particularly appealing to Vygotsky: their orientation toward the future and Trotsky’s prophetic stance. The former “Beba”, the “young prophet” of his Gomel youth, Vygotsky appeared sensitive to a similar attitude that he discovered in Trotsky’s contagious enthusiasm about the future of the humanity under the socialism. Trotsky’s vision, however, was not the only source that influenced Vygotsky’s views on what a post-Revolutionary “superman” would be and what kind of psychology was needed in order to account for the “new man”. The utopian thinking of different sorts permeated the whole intellectual environment of Russia before the Revolution. The Nietzschean-Marxist variation of social utopia forged by the Bolsheviks was only one idea of a few that were shared by the Russian
educated minority, the *intelligentsia*. Peasants had their utopia rooted in a dream about the abundance of their own arable land (*zemlia*) and anarchistic freedom (*volia*). State bureaucracy shared a very different kind of utopia: a conservative dream about the inseparable unity of the Tsar’s unrestricted autocracy, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the loyal people (the slogan *samoderzhavie, pravoslavie, narodnost’*, respectively). After the Revolution, the Bolshevik collectivist utopia became the mainstream, quite at odds with the other survivor of the Revolution: the peasants’ individualistic utopia. The tensions between the two created, perhaps, the main contradiction of the entire socialist project as it was further developed in the Soviet Union for the decades ahead.

Vygotsky’s utopia was definitely a part of the larger Bolshevik worldview. Yet, his utopia was of a special kind: this was a *scientific utopia*. For many contemporary scholars the utopian vision of the new, better society and of the superhuman powers of the “new man” quite naturally transformed into purely scientific enterprise. This was definitely characteristic of science in the Soviet Union at large, but utopian projects also occurred in international scholarship, including psychology. The cohort of the psychological “prophets” and utopian thinkers of the time included a few visionaries and most renowned pioneers of psychology in Western Europe and North America such as Granville Stanley Hall (1846–1924), Hugo Münsterberg (1863–1916), William McDougall (1871–1938), John B. Watson (1878–1958), Max Wertheimer (1880–1943), Otto Gross (1877–1920), Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957), Erich Fromm (1900–1980), and Burrhus Frederic “B. F.” Skinner (1904–1990).

Vygotsky was no doubt one of those visionaries. Yet, he was a distinctly *Marxist* visionary in his version of the “psychology of superman”. Perhaps, he was not the first and certainly not the only one to express this idea, but he was definitely a prominent advocate of this idea, which is his major claim to fame. For instance, in his work on the crisis in psychology he wrote:

> in the society of the future psychology will truly be a science of a superman. Without this the perspective of Marxism and the history of science would not be complete. But this science of superman will still be psychology; we are now holding a thread leading to it.  

*Vygotsky, quoted in Zavershneva & Osipov (2012a), p. 82*

Furthermore, the visionary “science of a superman”, from Vygotsky’s perspective, was attainable, and he was going to contribute to its establishment and development. In 1927 Vygotsky signed a book contract from the State Publishing House. The contract gave Vygotsky an opportunity to express his ideas on the history of human development. Apparently, Vygotsky intended that the book would follow the developmental progression from apes to the “primitive people”, then, to children, and only then to the potential people of the socialist and the communist future. As he triumphantly wrote in his letter to Luria, “I feel boundless joy about this commission. It is an opportunity to write about psychology in the light of culture and the superman”.  

*46*
Vygotsky’s invocation of a superman makes perfect sense from a purely logical and methodological standpoint. As we know, in his methodological writings he proclaimed: “I want to learn from Marx’s whole method how to build a science, how to approach the investigation of the mind”. In Marx’s writings Vygotsky discovered such a method of rational investigation for use in psychological research. According to Marx, we do not learn about contemporary society from the ancient societies or about human beings from the animals, but the other way round:

Bourgeois society is the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production. The categories which express its relations, the comprehension of its structure, thereby also allows insights into the structure and the relations of production of all the vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up, whose partly still unconquered remnants are carried along within it, whose mere nuances have developed explicit significance within it, etc. Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape. The intimations of higher development among the subordinate animal species, however, can be understood only after the higher development is already known.

Marx (1973), p. 105

Generously quoting Marx and Engels, Vygotsky discussed the methodology of research, according to which a later, more advanced, and developed form of any phenomenon is the key to understanding its earlier, underdeveloped and more primitive forms. This way, argued Vygotsky, Marx was able to explain earlier economic formations such as slavery or feudalism, by means of the analysis of the historically later and economically more advanced forms such as capitalism. Similarly, in other fields of knowledge only the later stages of evolution can potentially give us understanding of the earlier ones such as, respectively, the study of the humans versus the apes, the civilized societies versus “primitive” societies, the adults versus the children. Furthermore, the utopian idea that educated and civilized adult is not the final, but rather a transitory stage in human evolution towards an evolutionary higher, genius-like human type leads to an utterly important methodological conclusion: the genius as the superhuman in potential is the key to understanding the contemporary cultured adult. And yet, even the geniuses that the history of humanity has produced are only a slight approximation to what, according to Trotsky and Vygotsky, the species of the Homo sapiens will evolve into under socialism.

Thus, the logic of studying a superman of the future advanced society is exactly this: only the more advanced and better developed forms – such as the psychological phenomena and processes in the “superpeople” – might provide a researcher with sufficient knowledge about the contemporary psychology of a relatively underdeveloped people of our days. Here is a big problem, though. Vygotsky did not acknowledge – or preferred to ignore – the logical contradiction between the utopian “new psychology of the superhuman” of the future that he proclaimed to
emerge in his writings, the methodological principles of genuinely Marxist science, and the actual realities of mundane empirical research.

Apparently, an empirical study of a superman of the Communist future is not an easy task. The main reason is that such a superhuman has not appeared yet. A superman is not available for observation and scholarly investigation. Still, in the absence of an available “superhuman” to study, Vygotsky needed a concrete object of empirical psychological research. One option was to do research on the “geniuses”. This triggered Vygotsky’s and Luria’s interest in supernormal psychological, artistic, and creative abilities, in extraordinary psychological phenomena that exceeded the powers of an average individual. A talent, even a genius, is the most natural object for such interest. In his article on genius, Genial’nost’, that he wrote for the first Soviet edition of the “Great Medical Encyclopaedia”, Vygotsky defined the characteristics of a genius as “the highest degree of giftedness that reveals itself in the maximal creative productivity of utmost historical significance to the social life”. Quite in line with Trotsky’s prophetic vision of the future of humanity, in this very article its author speculated about a “specific structure of the personality of genius whose incredible force and tension of creative powers to enormous extent exceed those of a normal person”. Furthermore, Vygotsky speculated that “genius must be an evolving, progressive variation of a human type”.

Genius attracted Vygotsky not only from purely speculative standpoint. Luria and Vygotsky had investigated supernormal human abilities in their research laboratory ever since the mid-1920s, when Moscow journalist Solomon Shereshevskii asked them for a consultation about his extraordinary memory. Eventually, Shereshevskii quit his journalist job and performed in front of large audiences as a professional mnemonist. Shereshevskii’s phenomenal memory was subjected to numerous observations and studies and was described in several publications by the members of the Vygotsky–Luria Circle. Another person with extraordinary mental abilities that attracted Vygotsky’s interest was Roman Arrago, a mental calculator, who was well known in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s. Furthermore, according to the memoirs of his daughter, apparently inspired by the phenomenal memory of Shereshevskii, Vygotsky developed a special mnemonic that allowed him to remember up to one hundred items and reproduce them in random order. In her memoirs, his daughter recalled the great local success of small “home performances” by her father.

Yet, the geniuses were scarce, hard to single out and identify, and, if identified, even harder to access. Therefore, the other option was to study children in their normal and pathological development. This choice obviously runs contrary to the whole line of reasoning about the Marxist methodology of research from the more advanced stages to the less developed ones. Yet, this was the option that Vygotsky, Luria, and their collaborators pursued in their experimental studies of the 1920s.

The Vygotsky–Luria Circle: people and institutes

There were only three research traditions that were most well known internationally by the mid-1920s as the leading Russian schools of psychology: Ivan
Pavlov’s theory of higher nervous activity, Vladimir Bekhterev’s reflexology, and Konstantin Kornilov’s reactology (that he presented abroad under the label of a “Marxist psychology”). Each of the three individuals was a major scholar with his own ideas and research discoveries that constituted the core of their innovative scientific theories. Also, each of them was an important administrator: a director and a scientific manager in charge of a large research facility with a number of researchers, who worked under the supervision of their boss and realized his research program. An innovative research program, a corresponding label for the theory as a scholarly brand, access to material resources, and a group of research assistants – this was the key to success for a visionary in science. Vygotsky was definitely a visionary. Furthermore, he had some ideas and the goal of establishing a “new psychology”. As a newcomer in Moscow in 1924, he had no like-minded associates and collaborators. Throughout the 1920s the situation considerably changed.

The first and most obvious associate that Vygotsky worked with in Moscow was Alexander Luria. It was Luria who noticed Vygotsky at the Psychoneurological Congress in Petrograd in 1924 and got excited about the man and his presentation. Then, Luria convinced his superior and the director of the Institute of Experimental Psychology to invite Vygotsky to Moscow and hire him as a junior researcher. This was the beginning of a strong research alliance and the birth of the informally interconnected group of researchers that is known as the Vygotsky-Luria Circle. 

In the 1920s Luria headed several academic departments in various educational and research institutes in Moscow, where he pursued the research program that he initiated before forming his alliance with Vygotsky and independently of him. One such research project resulted in a series of journal and book publications in Russian, German, and English, including an English book that was published in the USA in 1932. All these publications and, particularly, the English book brought Luria an international reputation as one of the brightest Russian researchers in psychology in the Soviet Union. Some of Luria’s collaborators on these projects subsequently joined the Vygotsky-Luria Circle. Perhaps the two most prominent researchers to do so were Mark Lebedinskii and Aleksei Leontiev. Another bright individual that Luria brought into their psychological laboratory was movie director Sergei Eisenstein, the prominent international cinematographer and the famous innovator of Soviet art. Luria was also extremely open-minded and energetic as far as scholarly correspondence was concerned. He would write fast, easily, and copiously. Furthermore, he had no difficulty with scientific communications in at least three languages: Russian, German, and English. He could also read in French. Thus, some of Luria’s international correspondents eventually became peripheral members of the Circle. These included German-American Gestalt psychologists Kurt Koffka and Kurt Lewin.

Vygotsky, unlike Luria, did not have a well-developed network of scholarly and artistic contacts and connections in Soviet Russia or abroad. Still, due to his various activities in the Institute of Psychology, Narkompros, and other educational
institutions in Moscow, he attracted a few young people, who would join him in his work and research. After his period of unemployment, in early 1927 Vygotsky returned to the Institute of Experimental Psychology and was hired back. It was in this Institute that Vygotsky formed a small research group of his graduate students. These were Leonid Sakharov, Boris Varshava, Leonid Zankov, and Ivan Solov’ev. Two of them died in their twenties: Varshava in July 1927 and Sakharov in May 1928. The other two remained close collaborators of Vygotsky until the last days of his life.

Konstatin Kornilov, the director of the Institute and Vygotsky’s benefactor in 1925, was not always his supporter. Kornilov eventually changed his opinion of Vygotsky’s scientific work as it progressed in 1927–1928 as a project that was increasingly turning into Vygotsky’s own psychological “instrumental” theory, independent of Kornilov’s reactology. By the end of 1928 the tensions between them developed into an open conflict when Kornilov accused Vygotsky of “idealism” and a “detour from Marxism”. Vygotsky, in tum, submitted an official complaint to the collective administrative body of the Institute, its Kollegija, with a demand to mediate the conflict between him and the Institute’s director.60 It is not clear how exactly the conflict unfolded. Vygotsky never quit his job at the Institute, but he terminated all his projects there. Then, he transferred the research activities of his group into another institution, the Academy of Communist Upbringing,61 where Luria headed the psychological laboratory from the mid-1920s. Here a group of five of Vygotsky’s and Luria’s undergraduate students joined their research team in the late 1920s. These were Lidia Bozhovich, Roza Levina, Natalia Morozova, Lia Slavina, and Aleksandr Zaporozhets. All of them studied in the Second Moscow State University, just across the street from the Academy. Aleksei Leontiev also joined the group, in which he was working on his doctoral research and supervised the studies of the undergraduates. The work of this group as a research unit came to an end in 1930–1931, when the students graduated and left Moscow in order to pursue their careers all across the Soviet Union.

There was another important institutional base for Vygotsky in Moscow where he succeeded in accumulating considerable research forces. This was the Medical-Pedagogical Experimental Station of the Glavsotsvos of the Narkompros. The history of this Station began in 1908 when Vsevolod Kashchenko (1870–1943), the unsung hero of Russian “defectology”, a medical doctor and pedagogue, privately founded an institution and a boarding school for “defective” and gifted children in Moscow.62 After the Revolution, when all private property was nationalized, Kashchenko welcomed the new regime and was appointed the Director of the school. In 1921 the school was subordinated to the Glavsotsvos of the Narkompros. Kashchenko was openly skeptical about the Glavsotsvos’s doctrine of “social upbringing”, but in the early 1920s experienced high-level professionals were scarce, and Kashchenko continued his work as the director. Furthermore, on the basis of the school and under the auspices of the Narkompros, Kashchenko successfully founded and managed two new organizations: the Pedagogical Institute of Children’s Defectivity, and the Museum of Children’s Defectology. The Institute and the Museum were major educational and research institutions, respectively;
Kashchenko was in charge of both. Yet, in December 1927 Kashchenko was suddenly dismissed from all his administrative positions in these organizations. Vygotsky, the advocate of the social upbringing of the “defective children”, was appointed the new director of the Medical-Pedagogical Station of the Glavsotsvos of the Narkompros. Less than one year later, in October 1928 he resigned, but was rehired soon after when, in 1929, the Medical-Pedagogical Station was reorganized into the Experimental Defectological Institute and its new leadership and Vygotsky’s old-time associates – Israil’ Danishevskii (the director of the Institute) and Leonid Zankov (the deputy director) – invited him to be a scientific consultant and a part-time chief of the Institute’s research unit. A series of clinical studies on “defective children” were made at the Institute under Vygotsky’s supervision by his new collaborators, including Lia Geshelina, Maria Eidinova, and Ksenia Veresotskaia, as well as his former students Zankov and Solov’ev.

Thus, by the end of the 1920s Vygotsky was well positioned as a visionary thinker of the “new psychology”, but on very rare occasions had official control over research as a scientific manager and administrator of a research unit. Yet, the network of scholars, the institutional support, and research program was there. The first tangible results of this research were obtained by the end of 1927.

“Instrumental Psychology”

The first results of Vygotsky’s and Luria’s experimental research were publicly presented at the First All-Russian Pedological Congress held in December 1927 and early January 1928 in Moscow. Judging by the title, the Congress was focused on pedology as the discipline focusing on children and, thus could have been limited in its scope and importance. Yet, it definitely was not. In fact, the Congress was the direct heir to the All-Russian Psychoneurological Congresses of 1923 and 1924 as the major gatherings of a wide range of specialists in the human sciences in the Soviet Union.

For the Congress Vygotsky prepared two papers. One of them was on the development of “problematic children” that was presented at the section of “problematic childhood”. The majority of other presentations in this section constituted the works of the defectologists. Vygotsky’s defectological presentation was more or less typical of his presentations of that kind and not innovative in any sense. Yet, the other Vygotsky’s paper, titled “Instrumental method in pedology”, is of much greater interest. This paper, along with its twin – Luria’s talk “On the method of instrumental-psychological research” – was the first public presentation of their collaborative theoretical and methodological innovation. Another of Vygotsky’s associates, Leonid Sakharov, made his presentation titled “On the methods of research into concepts”. The presentations at the Congress were soon followed by Vygotsky’s, Luria’s and Sakharov’s publications. Sakharov died just a few months after his January 1928 presentation. His article came out two years later. Vygotsky and Luria published their articles in 1928–1929, uniformly titled “The problem of the cultural development of the child”, in Russian and English.
A longer exposition of the new ideas was Vygotsky’s book “Pedology of the school age” that he wrote in 1927–1928 and published in 1928.\textsuperscript{66} Strictly speaking, though, the book was not a theoretical treatise, but a handbook for correspondence students of the pedological department at the Second Moscow State University. Yet, it was here that the basics of the new theory in the making were published and, for lack of anything better, this publication became the standard point of reference for Vygotsky, his students, and his collaborators in the 1920s and early 1930s.\textsuperscript{67}

In order to work out the foundations of his “new psychology” in the field best known to him, defectology, in the mid-1920s Vygotsky borrowed ideas from the psychological theory of Alfred Adler (1870–1937), an Austrian psychiatrist and a rebellious former student and follower of Sigmund Freud. His other sources of inspiration were Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Marx. Adler came from Freudian tradition but was one of the first Freudian dissidents who parted with the teacher and introduced a post-Freudian theory of his own. Adler opposed Freud and differed from him in two major respects. First, politically, he identified himself and was identified by his contemporaries as a socialist and a Marxist. Second, theoretically, in contrast to Freud, he strongly advocated for the importance of the communal and social factors in human life and development.

Among other interesting and highly influential ideas Adler introduced the concept of overcompensation. Adler’s investigation of the personal feeling of inferiority – that was termed an \textit{inferiority complex} – led him to propose the idea of psychological compensation and, in some instances, overcompensation. According to Adler, this happens when the person with some kind of inferiority psychologically compensates for the deficiency of this ability or skill with excess, above the norm.\textsuperscript{68} Adler’s theory attracted Vygotsky’s attention in the context of his defectological practice. The idea of compensation and even overcompensation for a defect was very appealing for Vygotsky. The connection between Vygotsky’s “psychology of superman”, Adler’s “overcompensation”, and Nietzsche’s ideas is quite clear. Thus, both Nietzsche and Adler used the same German prefix \textit{über-} in order to discuss the “overman” and “overcompensation” – \textit{Übemensch} and \textit{Überkompensation}, respectively. Similarly, Vygotsky, who borrowed from the two thinkers, used the same prefix \textit{sverkh-} in his discussion of the “superman” and the “overcompensation”: \textit{sverkh-chelovek} and \textit{sverkh-kompensatsiia}, in Russian.

Vygotsky enthusiastically played around with the idea of the overcompensation for a while, but gradually developed a skeptical attitude towards it. The reality of defectological practice and clinical observation did not support the bold claim that patients with physical and mental deficiencies developed the mechanisms of overcompensation that would allow them to supersede individuals without such deficiencies. Yet, the more modest notion of compensation proved quite right for “defectology”. Vygotsky used this idea and carried it over into his thinking about the “psychology of superman” in the making, where the idea of compensation was merged with the ideas of cultural development, self-control, and the leading role of art in distinctly human psychological functioning.
Here is Vygotsky’s logic. On the one hand, art may serve an instrumental function in bringing about distinctly human ways of thinking and feeling. Art will be instrumental in creating a new human type of the future. On the other hand, the blind or visually impaired individuals are able to compensate their physical deficiencies with artificial tools such as the Braille system for reading or canes for walking. Similarly, argued Vygotsky, not only physical, but also psychological deficiency can be compensated for with the use of specific auxiliary “psychological instruments”, or “tools”.

Children with psychological and physical abnormalities using artificial “psychological instruments” develop differently from normal children. The handicapped children need to use artificial tools consciously and voluntarily in order to compensate for their deficiencies. The normally developing children also use “instruments” as they grow and mature into “cultured” adults, but they are not aware of that. A great many artificial “psychological instruments” have already been created and are inseparable from the culture to which we belong. According to Vygotsky, these cultural tools range from such relatively simple ones as the alphabet, mnemonics, graphic charts, visual learning aids, and systems of counting, to very complex systems: language, literature, and art. All these count as “instruments”, as Vygotsky believed in the late 1920s. Then, Vygotsky postulated that the key to understanding human development was in the investigation of how children use these various and diverse “cultural instruments” and with their help master their own behavior and psychological functioning:

In the process of their development children acquire not only the content of the cultural experience, but also the means of cultural thinking, the techniques, and the forms of cultural behavior. The functional use of specific cultural signs is in the foundation of these techniques. It is safe to assume that exactly this process is in the basis of the child’s cultural development and cultural improvement of the child’s performance. Along with physiological and intellectual age of children, their cultural age should also be distinguished in pedology.

Vygotskii (1928a), p. 158

In order to experimentally investigate the “cultural” psychological phenomena in their development, Vygotsky, Luria, and their research team modified Vygotsky’s “new method”, the prototypical “method of double stimulation”, that he first presented in 1924 at the Psychoneurological Congress. Typically, an experimental situation would include several basic components. First, these were a set of objects that required some kind of activity with them. Second, there was an explicit goal of this activity that the experimenters formulated as the problem that the participants in their studies needed to solve. Third, there were auxiliary objects that the study participants were expected to use as auxiliary instruments for solving the problem. Each experiment included two parts. In the first part, the problem was to be solved directly, without facilitating instruments; in the second part, the same
problem was solved with the mediation of these auxiliary instruments. Most of these experiments typically involved only a few participants, therefore, by the contemporary standards of rigorous scholarly research they would qualify as mere pilot studies.

A good example of the studies of this kind is perhaps the most fundamental project of all: the doctoral research of Aleksei Leontiev. The actual research under the supervision of Vygotsky and Luria was conducted by Leontiev and his assistants in 1927–1929, but the work was published later. It came out in 1931 as Leontiev’s book “The development of memory”. The book proved to be the most important and the most detailed theoretical book published on Vygotsky’s “instrumental psychology” of the 1920s. In fact, this is the main source on “instrumental psychology”: Vygotsky never wrote such a book himself. In this well-known study the subjects of different ages were given a set of cards with pictures of simple everyday objects on them. The task was to memorize the pictures. The subjects were asked to recall the images on the cards. This would qualify as an action of direct voluntary remembering.

Then, in the second part of the experiment, the participants in the study were simultaneously given two sets of cards: the first set of cards similar to those in the first part of the study along with an auxiliary set of cards that were to help solve the problem of remembering. In order to do so, the participants were to form an association between the images on the two sets of cards. Then, the participants were allowed to use the auxiliary cards in order to recall the images on the first set of cards. In Vygotsky’s terminology, this would qualify as a case of mediated (as opposed to direct, unmediated) voluntary remembering.

Therefore, in terminology of the method of “double stimulation”, the second set of stimuli, the auxiliary cards with pictures, according to Vygotsky’s theory of the “instrumental period” was used as “instruments” (or “psychological tools”) that helped the participants to voluntarily master their own psychological processes (remembering, in this case) and, thus, overcome the limitations of age and actual level of development. Vygotsky referred to these auxiliary stimuli as mediators, and those new functions that evolved with the help of these mediators were called mediated psychological functions.

Leontiev presented the results of this study as a figure with two curves indicating recall rate in three age groups of children and adults in situations of “direct” and “mediated” remembering. Quite predictably, both curves on the chart showed considerable growth of recall rate with age. However, interestingly enough, while younger children and adults remembered the cards virtually equally well (rather, equally bad, in case of the younger children) in both experimental conditions of mediated and non-mediated remembering, the middle-school children demonstrated a tremendous difference in their remembering abilities in the situation of facilitated and mediated remembering, approaching that of the adult subjects. The figure formed by the two curves on the chart – starting and ending virtually in the same points and diverging in the middle – resembled a parallelogram. Vygotsky and Leontiev famously referred to this figure as the “parallelogram of development”.

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A similar method was applied in other studies of voluntary remembering and voluntary attention (in which special tokens were used in order to control and master attention). An interesting modification of this research was a study that Luria did on the artificial, facilitated emergence of writing in children. In this study its participants were given a task to create their own signs – half-pictures, half-letters: the pictograms – that would help them in remembering. As an outcome, the children had to invent their original systems of making written records of words, images or events. Another series of studies focused on the use of tools and instruments in practical activity of the children. These studies on “practical intelligence” were modeled on the classic research on apes using various tools in order to get their bananas. The original study was designed by renowned German-American psychologist Wolfgang Köhler, who conducted it during the First World War in Tenerife, an island in the Atlantic Ocean.

**Unexpected discoveries: word meaning, dialogue, and inner speech**

The range of “instrumental psychology” studies of Vygotsky’s and Luria’s research team went smoothly and produced the results that the researchers predicted: “psychological instruments” were essential in the children’s cultural development. Also, these auxiliary “instruments” boosted psychological development in the artificially created experimental studies on problem-solving. Two studies, though, produced unexpected results that were to dramatically change the course of subsequent research. These were the studies initially conducted by Leonid Sakharov and Roza Levina.

In Sakharov’s experiments, the researchers attempted to investigate thinking. More specifically, their research goal was to study the processes of concepts formation in children. In order to do this, Sakharov modified an experimental technique of yet another German scholar, Narziss Ach (1871–1946), and used a special set of three-dimensional figures of various shapes, forms, sizes, and colors. On the bottom of each figure there was an artificially created and meaningless word that would identify the artificial concept for a figure with a specific set of characteristics such as a specific combination of size, shape, and color. For example, word “bbut” meant a small and short figure (regardless of its colour and shape), while “ddekk” would mean a small and tall figure, and so on. The participants of the study did not know what the characteristics were, and, furthermore, which of them were relevant. Thus, it might well have turned out during the experiment – or, from the child’s perspective, during the game – that, for instance, the size or the color of the objects did not matter. As in Bekhterevian studies, the experimenters used words as mere triggers. The children that participated in the study were told that all these objects were children’s toys of a different, unknown civilization. Then, the experimenters gave them a play-like task to learn what each of these words meant in a foreign, unknown language. In order to do so, they needed to sort together the figures that they believed might have had the same name. Only then could they run a check on whether they grouped the objects correctly, under
the same word-token. The researcher participated in the experiment as a supervisor and a consultant, who would provide some hints that could in his opinion help in solving the problem. Time after time the child would group the objects together, and then the adult would demonstrate the mistake. Then, they would discuss the results, and the child would gain group the figures. After that the procedure would repeat again and again, in cycles. Thus, the child would gradually better understand what specific characteristics of the objects were relevant and could realize the correct meanings of the words.75

The researchers interpreted the words as meaningless signs, or tokens, and viewed the situation as the psychological process of concepts development. Yet, to their great surprise, they discovered that the participants of the study did not act as Vygotsky and Sakharov expected they would. The meaning of the words was essential to the children. They did not use the presumably meaningless words purely instrumentally, as tools that would help them develop their conceptual thinking. Instead, they treated the words as meaningful and were trying to understand what these words actually meant. From a psychological standpoint, this was apparently a very different psychological process from what the researchers expected to take place, but Vygotsky did not realize this until after Sakharov’s death in 1928. Vygotsky initially failed to see that words meant different things for different people. Furthermore, the meanings of the words were not static, but changed with time for one and the same individual. By Vygotsky’s own admission, all these findings contributed to an important personal discovery that had a considerable impact on his thinking and predated the ideas that Vygotsky did not express until the publication of the third part of his textbook “The Pedology of the Adolescent” in 1931:

Like with Sakharov: we unwittingly, spontaneously got what is in “[The Pedology of the] Adolescent”. He died without suspecting it. We should not proceed that way, but the problem of meaning and system was forced upon us by this study.76

Vygotsky, quoted in Yasnitsky & van der Veer (2016), p. 122

Vygotsky’s occasional collaborators Kotelova and Pashkovskaia continued Sakharov’s research after his death. This line of research proved productive and further led to the dramatic shift of focus onto the topics of word meaning, sense, and the dynamics of their change.

Like many thinkers before him – for instance, Pierre Janet (1859–1947), James Mark Baldwin (1861–1934), or George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) – Vygotsky cherished the idea of the social and cultural origin of the human mind and consciousness.77 The idea of the centrality of labor, tools, and instruments in human culture and practice of humankind is not unique to Vygotsky’s thought. It can be found elsewhere in the writings of his predecessors, perhaps most notably in the works of Marx and Engels. However, the social dimension of tools and instruments – so clear in the philosophical works of Marx and Engels – is somewhat obscure in Vygotsky’s “instrumental psychology” research. In most of these experiments, like
in Sakharov’s interactive research, the participants in the study were closely observed by the experimenter beside them. So, they typically were not left alone to solve a problem with the help of a set of auxiliary “instruments”. Furthermore, in many studies the experimenter actively participated in the situation of problem-solving as the children’s informal partner and consultant, who might have interfered with some hints and clues. And yet, Vygotsky and his team never investigated in depth the social aspect of psychological functioning properly. Furthermore, there was no special terminology in Vygotsky’s conceptual toolkit of the 1920s that would account for the social dynamics of personal interaction. An incidental observation of what initially looked like a curious phenomenon considerably changed the course of studies of the Vygotsky–Luria research team and provided an impetus to a second important line of Vygotsky’s theorizing.

Roza Levina, one of a few of Vygotsky’s students and junior collaborators, made an important observation in her experimental studies on problem-solving in children that she conducted in the late 1920s in Vygotsky and Luria’s research laboratory at the Academy of Communist Upbringing. Levina noticed that in particularly difficult situations the children, who participated in the study would start talking to themselves. This phenomenon of children’s self-directed speech was not new: it had been discovered and described by the prominent Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget (1896–1980) and was variably referred to as “egocentric” or “autistic” speech. However, what distinguished the children that Levina observed from the participants of Piaget’s studies was that the children’s speech in a problem-solving situation was not a monologue (like in the studies of Piaget), but a dialogue. The researchers paid a close attention to this phenomenon and analysed this dialogue. They discovered, to their great surprise, that in this dialogue two voices were distinctly heard: those of the child and the knowledgeable other, for instance, an adult or a peer. It appeared as if the children re-enacted dialogues that they had previously heard or in which they had participated before. The other voice in these dialogues was instrumental in helping the children organize their behavior and direct it to the efficient solution of the problem. In the older children, a dialogue would disappear as an outward talk, but still seemed to be performed, possibly in a condensed form, in the children’s minds. This kind of verbal expression was called the “internal”, or “inner speech”.

This observation excited Vygotsky and Luria so much that they prepared a report on their studies of “egocentric” speech in order to announce their allegedly ground-breaking discovery of the social origin of children’s thinking and speech. The paper was in English, intended for the international audience of the Ninth International Congress of Psychology that was held in the USA in September 1929. The paper was not preserved, but the abstract was published in the congress’s proceedings. The abstract went like this:

1. By a series of investigations a specific stage in the development of child speech was found, a stage which Piaget characterized as “egocentric speech”. It was supposed that this term of verbal behavior was only an expression of the
general autistic attitude of the child. This form of speech, as was shown by some investigators, disappears with the development of the social behavior. The function of egocentric speech and the psychological mechanisms responsible for its evolution were still unclear.

2. Our experiments, concerned with the problem of the function of egocentric speech, showed that this form of verbal behavior always appeared very frequently when the child was confronted with a difficult situation. By making the performance of an activity difficult we obtained on the part of the child an explosion of egocentric speech reactions; these reactions, however, were not merely a process accompanying the main activity of the child, but were directed towards the solution of the problem. The child was trying first to solve the problem verbally, in order to organize its subsequent activity. These experiments show that egocentric speech is not merely a kind of accompanying process, but has a specific organizing function, which distinguishes it from other processes in the child’s behavior.

3. By observing the development of egocentric speech we find that this function does not simply disappear, being replaced by a socialized form of verbal behavior. Its planning functions are taken by specific pauses which have an intellectual character and are filled by internal speech. The qualitative analysis of the exteriorized internal speech shows that egocentric speech becomes internal in its evolution, remaining as a specific function directed to the organizing of the child’s own behavior.

4. On the strength of our experiments we consider it possible to change the traditional scheme of the verbal evolution of explicit speech, viz., external speech – internal speech, into external speech – egocentric speech – internal speech. We thus consider egocentric speech as one of the most important processes having a specific function in the evolution of the cultural behavior of the child.

Vygotsky & Luria (1930), pp. 464–465

In 1929 Vygotsky and Luria were triumphant and apparently believed that they made a ground-breaking discovery of a previously unknown psychological phenomenon. Furthermore, they apparently believed that they had found a scientific refutation, or at least a major correction, of the theory of the renowned specialist in children’s development, Jean Piaget. Yet, very soon they made another important discovery: their allegedly new and ground-breaking psychological discovery was neither new, nor ground-breaking. Vygotsky acknowledged this in his subsequent publication by stating:

In their time, [James Mark] Baldwin [1861–1934] and [Eugenio] Rignano [1870–1930] expressed the idea that true thought is nothing other than discussion or argument carried on within an individual. Piaget was able to substantiate this idea genetically and to show that a conflict of opinions, an argument, should arise early in a children’s collective, so that thought might
later develop among children of that collective as a special process in inner activity which would be unknown to a child of an earlier age. The development of reflection is begun in argument, in the conflict of ideas; such is the fundamental conclusion of this research. And, in fact, as Piaget has very wisely expressed it, we readily take ourselves at our own word. In the process of individual thought, the very task of checking, demonstrating, disproving a known position, and motivating confirmation cannot take place. Demonstrating the accuracy of one’s thoughts, raising objections, presenting reasons – all of this occurs through a task of adaptation and can arise only in the process of children arguing with each other. “This is my spot,” said a child whom Piaget observed. “You must give it to me, because I always sit there.” “No, it’s mine,” objected the other, “because I got here first and took it.” The seeds of future reflection – an understanding of causation, proof, and so on – are already contained in the most primitive of children’s quarrels.

Vygotsky (1993a), pp. 196–197

Thus, Vygotsky and Luria were far from the first to postulate the social origin of human psychology. Yet, this line of reasoning about the dialogic nature of our thinking (and, generally, of our psychological functioning) subsequently triggered their interest in and research on the closely interrelated topics of language, speech, thinking, and transitions between them in the norm and pathology. These topics eventually brought international acclaim and reputation – albeit for different reasons and via different pathways – to both Vygotsky and Luria.

The outcomes of the 1920s

In retrospect, the second half of the 1920s was the most stable and productive period in Vygotsky’s career, which is evident in his rapid progress as a Narkompros bureaucrat, researcher, and author. During this period Vygotsky was an active participant in the revolutionary transformations of Russian society. Vygotsky worked in the field of education and social work with the physically, mentally, and socially handicapped. He taught in a great many institutions in Moscow and Leningrad. He was also active as an ambitious theoretician and practitioner in several fields of human sciences such as defectology (often understood as a stream of research within pedology, the science of the child) and psychology. He made a career at the Institute of Psychology in Moscow progressing from a junior employee to a professor.

During this period – 1924–1929 – Vygotsky the “prophet” and the “Bolshevik” forged his new persona as a “psychologist”. He was a loyal “reactologist” and followed the general “reactological” trend of the Institute of Psychology until his conflict and, in December 1928, eventual break up with Konstantin Kornilov, the Institute’s director and the chief proponent of “reactology”. Vygotsky and Luria then conducted their experimental research at the Academy of Communist Upbringing.
Vygotsky wrote profusely on “stimuli” and “reactions”, about his utopian dream of transforming the current *Homo sapiens* into the “new species” of “supermen”, and his “instrumental psychology”. Vygotsky improved the experimental method of “double stimulation” and applied it in experimental studies of “higher psychological functions” such as voluntary remembering, voluntary attention, and writing.

The luck and success seemed to last forever. But nothing lasts forever.

**Notes**

1. An abbreviated version of Alexander Luria’s memoirs and original diaries and notebooks of 1920s and 1930s were published by his daughter Elena in 1994: Luria, E. A. (1994). *Moi otets A. R. Luria* [My father A. R. Luria]. Moscow: Gnozis. A longer version of Luria’s self-censored and edited memoirs was published in the USA (Luria, 1979) and in the Soviet Union (Luria, 1982).

2. Besides the position at the Institute of Psychology, Vygotsky’s first jobs in Moscow were in the Academy of Communist Upbringing, the First Moscow State University, and the Higher Scientific Pedagogical Courses, all from January 1924. See Vygotsky’s *Anketnyi listok* (autobiography) of 11 July 1924, GARF f. A-2306, op. 42, d. 499; and Vygotsky’s autobiographical questionnaire in *Lichnyi listok po uchetu kadrov* signed 13 March 1931 at GARF f. A-482, op. 41, d. 644.

3. In Russian, these are, respectively: “zaveduiuschii podotdelom vospitaniia i obrazovaniia fizicheski defektivnykh i umstvenno ostalych detei”; “otdel sotsial’no-pravovoi okhrany nesovershennoletnikh” (SPON); and “glavnoe upravlenie sotsial’nogo vospitaniia i politekhnicheskogo obrazovaniia detei” (Glavsovtsov).


6. The materials of the Congress were published: Materialy ko Vtoromu Vserossiskomu S’ezdu sotsial’no-pravovoi okhrany detei i podrostkov i detskikh domov, 26 noiabria 1924 g. M., 1924.

7. The letter from Shcherbina to Vygotsky on 22 December 1924.


9. Emphasis in the original; first published in 1924. Quoted here in the English translation with several necessary corrections of “handicap” into “defect”; all corrections are italicized, see Vygotsky (1993c), pp. 83–84).

10. In fact, there was nothing really new in the proclamations of a “new psychology”, and numerous “new psychologies” had been pronounced by the mid-1920s. For some more or less contemporary examples, see the “new psychology” of Edward Wheeler Scripture, Scripture (1897) or the discussion of an array of “new psychologies” in Edwin G. Boring’s “A history of experimental psychology” (Boring, 1929).


In Russian: *markisistskost’*. In the 1930s this principle was complemented with the principle of *partiinost’* (Party-ness). See discussion on this in Krementsov (1997).

For Vygotsky’s discussion of the major tensions between psychology’s need to create its own *Das Kapital* (one of the largest and the most famous Marx’s works) and the complexities of translating Marxist psychology into psychological terms, see chapters 13 and 14 of Vygotsky’s manuscript on the meaning of the crisis in psychology, originally written in the mid-1920s and abandoned in 1927 (Vygotsky, 1997d).

From the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach (‘Theses on Feuerbach’), 1845. In original German: ‘Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden interpretirt; es kommt aber darauf an, sie zu verändern’. For discussion of the place of Marxism in Soviet science, see the classics (Graham, 1972 and Joravsky, 1961).

The importance of these principles and, respectively, their weight in scholarly discourse increasingly grew throughout the 1920s until they finally became a part of normative academic rhetoric of Soviet science from the early 1930s onwards. For discussion of Soviet science in general, see the classics of the genre (Krementsov, 1997); see also Kojevikov (2004).

For discussion of Soviet academic discourse see Gerovitch (2002).

A discussion of the three groups of psychologists and their “psychologies” in Imperial Russia was first presented at considerable length in Yasentsky (2015).

On the Western roots and the interplay between Soviet and foreign innovations in science and social practice see Hoffmann (2011).

Contrary to the widespread, but erroneous opinion, the critical debates about scientific mistakes in the Stalinist Soviet Union did not lead directly to persecution by the secret service, imprisonment, or death of scholars. In other words, even the orchestrated critical campaigns in science in the era of High Stalinism in the 1930s through to the 1950s might have triggered further accusations of political mistakes and criminal charges, but in many cases they did not. For just a few illustrative examples, make a note of the fluctuations in the careers of the many renowned Soviet scholars and even official leaders of Soviet science – specifically, in psychology, Kornilov, Kolhanovskii, or Rubinstein.


On Vygotsky’s trip to London see van der Veer & Zavershneva (2011).

From Vygotsky’s private notes.

See Vygotsky’s letter to Shcherbina dated 18 November 1925 (Rückriem, 2009).


From Vygotsky’s private note “Before departure, 5.18.26”.


From Kornilov’s letter to Vygotsky dated 12 October 1925.

The contract for publication was signed in November 1925 (see the document in Vygodskaya & Lifanova (1996), p. 91). However, the book would not come out until the 1960s. The first publication of “Psychology of Art” in Russian was in 1965 (a second, extended edition, was released in 1968). It was published in English in 1971 (Vygotskii, 1965; Vygotskii, 1968; Vygotsky, 1971).

The literature on psychology’s “crisis” is enormous. For a representative collection of papers on the crisis in psychology, see a special issue of the journal *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 1 December 2011, 43(2).

Contrary to popular – and legendary – belief about Vygotsky working on what might have become his last work during his stay at the hospital, between life and death, it seems this beautiful and romantic story is not quite correct. According to the studies of
his archival documents, there are no traces of his systematic involvement with this work until second half of 1926 (Zavershneva, 2012b).


34 Emphasis in the original.

35 For discussion of the manuscript, marginal notes, and related Vygotsky publications see Zavershneva (2012b). In the early 1980s this manuscript was published in the Soviet Union under the title “Historical Meaning of Crisis in Psychology” [Istoricheskii smysl psikhologicheskogo krizisa]. For discussion of editorial interventions, omissions and distortions of the original text during its first publication in 1982 see Zavershneva & Osipov (2012a) and Zavershneva & Osipov (2012b).

36 The alternative titles of the work are discussed in Zavershneva & Osipov (2012b).


38 See excellent and authoritative discussion of Nietzsche’s legacy and the idea of the Übermensch by Walter Kaufmann in any edition of his classics, e.g. Kaufmann (1974).


41 See also Trotsky, L. (1924). Revolutionary and Socialist Art, online: http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/ch08.htm.


43 For a representative selection of texts, artistic manifestos, and scholarly comments see Bowlt (1979) and Ioffe & White (2012).

44 On the idea of the nature’s boundless plasticity and changeability as the mainstream conception and the Zeitgeist of the post-Revolutionary era see Boris Gasparov’s marvelous case study of the views of the notorious Soviet biologist Trofim Lysenko (Gasparov, 1996). On the revolutionary biomedical experiments in the Soviet Union in the quest for immortality, rejuvenation, and extended life see Krementsov (2013).

45 See Vygotskii (1930) and Vygotsky (194b).

46 The classic work on Russian utopia is Stites (1989).

47 On Western “prophets” and utopianism in psychology see Altus & Morris (2009); Braune (2014); Morawski (1982); Pekkola (2010); Pietikainen (2007); Ross (1972); and Wertheimer (1980).

48 Quoted from the fragment of Vygotsky’s manuscript that was deleted in the published version of the text, but restored in Zavershneva & Osipov (2012a).


51 On the tradition of psychological and psychiatric research on genius (primarily, literary creative genius) in Imperial and Soviet Russia, and specifically on the post-Revolutionary project of an Institute of Genius, see Sirotkina (2002).
54 See, for instance, Leontiev (1931) and Luria (1968).
55 Vygotsky met with Arrago in April 1934, and the notebook with detailed notes taken during their conversation is presently kept in the Vygotsky Family archive. See Yasnitsky & van der Veer (2016), p. 121.
57 See, for instance, Leontiev (1931) and Luria (1968).
58 See Yasnitsky (2011b) and Yasnitsky (2016b).
59 See Luria (1932).
60 Vygotsky’s letter to Kollegia of the State Institute of Experimental Psychology dated 19 December 1928 (LSV-FA).
61 In Russian: Akademiia Kommunisticheskogo Vospitania; sometimes it is translated, not quite correctly, as “Academy of Communist Education”.
62 The role of Kashchenko in the history of Soviet special education has been downplayed until quite recently. On the life and activities of Vsevolod Kashchenko within Russian and Soviet “defectology” (the term that he seems to have coined) see Byford (2018).
63 See Vygotskii (1928a); see also Luria, A. R. (1928). K metodike instrumetal’no-psikhologicheskogo isledovaniia. Both in A. B. Zalkind (Ed.). Osnovnye problemy pedologii v SSSR (po tezisam pervogo vserossiiskogo pedologicheskogo s’ezda 27/XII-1927 g.–3/I-1928 g.). Moscow: Izdanie Orgbiuro S’eza. Sakharov’s presentation abstract was not published in the conference proceedings of 1928, but, according to a footnote in a later 1930 publication of the whole presentation, Sakharov participated, along with Vygotsky and Luria, in the section on research methodology and gave a talk on 1 January 1928 (issledovatel’ski-metodologicheskaiia sektsia). The next footnote indicated the date of Sakharov’s death as 10 May 1928.
66 See Vygotskii (1928b).
67 Russian title: Pedologiia shkol’nogo vozrasta; see Vygotskii (1928b). The book, however, remains largely unknown to contemporary readers. It has never been republished in full since 1928, nor was it ever translated. For discussion see van der Veer & Yasnitsky (2016).
68 On Adler and the intellectual climate of psychological Austria in the 1920s and 1930s see Gardner & Stevens (1992).
69 See Leontiev (1931).
70 See Leontiev (1931).
72 See Luria (1929), and Luria (1977).
73 The studies of this type were initiated by Leontiev’s proposal of a “new method” of research on the so-called “practical intelligence” of pre-schoolers and mentally handicapped children. Leontiev, A. N. (1929). Novyi prosteishii test dlia isledovaniia “prakticheskogo intellekta” doshkol’nikov i umstvenno-otstalykh detei. In Voprosy marksistskoi pedagogiki. Trudy AKV. Tom 1. Issledovaniia po pedagogike, pedologii, psikhologii, pp. 204–210. Moscow: Uchebno-Pedagogicheskoe Izdatel’stvo.
Words spelled in Cyrillics such as “but” and “dek” are totally meaningless in Russian, but have some meaning in English. In order to avoid ambiguity, the spelling of these words as Sakharov used them was slightly changed and the first letters of these imaginary words were doubled in their English rendition here.


Emphasis in the original. Vygotsky made this retrospective confession in late 1932 at the research meeting with his closest collaborators. See also in Russian in Zavershneva & van der Veer (2017), p. 320).

On the wide range of psychological theories that tended to explain human development in terms of the influence of the social environment – also referred to as the “socio-genetic” theories in psychology – including Vygotsky’s, see Valsiner & van der Veer (2000).


For discussion of the topics of the inner form, the dialogic, and inner speech see Bertau (2014a), Bertau (2014b) and Werani (2014).

Stalin’s Great Break and the Cultural Revolution

By the end of the 1920s, the political leadership of the country was in the hands of one man: the leader of the Communist Party, an ethnic Georgian Iosif Dzhugashvili, much better known by his party nickname as Joseph Stalin. If one thinks about another revolution in the Soviet Union between the early 1920s and 1991, when the “Soviet Empire” collapsed, it would be Stalin’s Great Break, announced in November 1929 on the 12th anniversary of the October Revolution. In part, this move was triggered by political factors: the struggle for absolute power in the Soviet Union after the demise of Stalin’s major political rival, Leon Trotsky. Although Trotsky was living in exile, a great many of his supporters, not to mention other members of the Party who were very critical of Stalin, remained in the country. A major social turmoil would give Stalin an opportunity to finally defeat the opposition and establish the political regime of his unlimited personal rule. Yet, this was the hidden motive behind the Great Break, if not the primary motive. In any case, officially, the main idea of Stalin’s Great Break was the forced and accelerated modernization of the country. It comprised three major components: industrial revolution, collectivization, and cultural revolution.

Industrial revolution was one of the most important goals of the Revolution in 1917–1918, but its realization had to be postponed. Due to the atrocities of the Civil War a partial restoration of private property was introduced in 1921. This was the beginning of the New Economic Policy (NEP). At the end of the 1920s, though, Stalin made the decision to end the NEP and finally liquidate the market economy and private property. The centralized planned economy was installed instead. The First Five-Year Plan was launched in October 1928. The ideology of centralization and planning gradually penetrated the sphere of academic research, too. From an economic standpoint, this meant increasing scientists’ accountability
for their budgets and the use of material resources. From an administrative perspective, this required increased control over academic research and related activities. Thus, the first “plans of scientific work” were introduced to that end. These “plans” included statements of intent, reports of accomplished work and other related documentation that researchers were urged to submit to the state budget-granting authorities in the written form.

Collectivization was another important constitutive element of Soviet modernization. Traditionally, Imperial Russia had always been a predominantly agrarian country. Agriculture was the major source of national income: the economy of the country was based on the export of agricultural produce. Despite a series of reforms in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Russian agriculture remained economically and technologically backward. Furthermore, demographic factors played a role: the majority of the country’s population were peasants with their backward individualist mentality, as the Bolsheviks believed. This conflicted with the goal of industrialization: Soviet industry of the period of the First Five-Year Plan increasingly required a factory-based workforce. Collectivization – the forcible liquidation of private property among peasants and the establishment of collective farms instead – was proclaimed the solution to these age-old problems and evils.

Cultural revolution was yet another component of the Great Break. As we know, the Bolshevik struggle on the “cultural front” started during the earliest post-Revolutionary years. For various reasons, the achievements of this struggle in the 1920s were not as impressive as the Bolshevik leadership had expected. In part, this was due to the NEP that preserved the free market, and considerably compromised the spirit of collectivism and the ideology of the new socialist society in the making. The future “new man” of the Revolution turned into a “NEPman” of the present. This posed a considerable problem to a number of hard-line Bolsheviks. They perceived the NEP as a betrayal of the Revolution and were hostile to the NEPmen “bourgeois” and individualistic lifestyle as opposed to the proletarian (workers’) collectivist and unselfish Revolutionary culture and ideology. The cultural revolution of the Great Break period spread in a number of directions.

From an administrative standpoint, the change on the cultural front was quite notable: in September 1929 the old-time Bolshevik and the head of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros), Anatolii Lunacharskii, was released from his post, the position he was appointed to during the Revolution immediately after the Bolshevik coup in October 1917. A new Commissar launched a large-scale reorganization of educational, scholarly, and cultural establishments in Soviet Russia. A series of decrees and orders were issued that regulated new policies in public education, increased state control, and established strict accountability of teachers and school authorities.

For scholars the Great Break arguably started with philosophical discussions in 1929–1930, when the two main rival groups of Soviet Marxist philosophers were criticized and marginalized. Stalin personally declared his critique and labelled the two groups the “mechanists” and the “menshevizing idealists”. A series of
theoretical and methodological discussions of what would constitute rigorously Marxist science duly followed in the field of academic and applied research. Psychology was no exception: the chaotic multitude of ideas, theories, and scientific disciplines had to be organized and put into some sort of order.

The interconnected social issues of a political, economic, ideological, and cultural nature – aggravated by the complexities of the interrelations between different scientific disciplines – constituted the historical context of the life, career, and scientific work of Vygotsky in the 1930s. These were the last five years of his life.

Vygotsky’s life and career at the turn of the decade

Stalin’s pronouncement of the Great Break reached Vygotsky amidst the turmoil of hectic activities and exciting new prospects. A few months earlier he had made a short trip with his wife to Central Asia, the Soviet Republic of Uzbekistan, where he briefly taught at the local Central Asian State University in Tashkent. After about a month he and his wife returned home in May 1929.

In the fall of 1929 Vygotsky took his first job in the system of the People’s Commissariat of Healthcare (Narkomzdrav): until that time all of Vygotsky’s professional appointments had been under the auspices of the Narkompros. This was a junior position, an assistant on the issues of children’s psychoneurology and experimental psychology, at the Clinic for Nervous Diseases at the First Moscow State University. The new job reflected Vygotsky’s growing interest in the issues of the pathology of human development and his increasing involvement with clinical practice in the Experimental Defectological Institute as its part-time consultant and the head of the psychological laboratory in charge of research at this institution. Vygotsky’s career at the Clinic for Nervous Diseases proved short-lived, but rapidly progressing: he resigned in the spring of 1931, having been promoted to the position of the head of the psychological laboratory.

In any case, due to this job and the experience he gained at the Clinic and the Defectological Institute, Vygotsky gradually earned a reputation among the traditionally conservative healthcare professionals and scholars in the medical sciences. Vygotsky’s recognition grew as a leading expert in the science of the child, pedology, in which (unlike in traditional pedagogy) medical specialists were represented in great numbers. Thus, it was in January 1930 that Vygotsky acted as one of the official heads of the pedological section at the First All-Union Congress on the Study of Human Behavior. The Congress was held in Leningrad as the direct logical heir to the two All-Russian Psychoneurological Congresses of 1923 and 1924 and the Pedological Congress of 1927–1928.

At the end of the 1920s Vygotsky was actively involved in teaching, learning, and the production of educational materials for correspondence students, most notable of which was a three-volume series of introductory textbooks titled “The Pedology of the Adolescent”. The first two volumes of the series were published in 1929 and 1930. Due to his increasing involvement with biomedical issues, Vygotsky made a decision to get formal training in the field and in the fall of 1931,
he, along with Luria, applied and was admitted as a medical student in one of the educational establishments in Kharkov, the capital of the Soviet Ukraine at that time.

The beginning of the 1930s was also the time of Vygotsky’s most active involvement with political issues. In 1929 he became a member of the highest council, the Prezidium, of the Society of Materialist Psychoneurologists of the Communist Academy. Also, at the Institute of Psychology, he acted as a representative and a local head of the unit of the All-Union Association of Workers in Science and Technology for Advancement of Socialist Construction (VARNITSO). In 1930 he published an article on the “socialist alteration of man” in the journal of this organization, “VARNITSO”. In 1931 Vygotsky became a member of the representative power, the Soviets. He was elected a deputy of the Frunze district of the Moscow Soviet of Workers’, Peasants’ and Red Army Soldiers’ Deputies.

In parallel with his domestic achievements, Vygotsky made attempts at promoting his research among scholars outside the Soviet Union. A report with a summary of the activities of his and Luria’s research group was presented in French at the Sixth International Congress on Psychotechnics in Barcelona in April 1930. Vygotsky did not attend, so it is likely that it was his associate, leading Soviet specialist in industrial psychology (psychotechnics) Solomon Gellerstein, who attended the Congress and presented the paper. In addition, from Vygotsky’s correspondence with Luria’s American associate and long-time friend, Horace M. Kallen, we know about Vygotsky’s plans to publish a book in English. “I hope to finish the work on my book in the nearest future, and I shall send it to you and the editor immediately upon ending,” wrote Vygotsky to Kallen in a letter in August 1930. Yet, apparently, nothing came out of this endeavor: he ultimately failed to finish the book, thus, he never published it either in English or in Russian.

Vygotsky’s family life also appeared to develop fairly well: in 1930 his second daughter, Assia, was born. From a professional standpoint, the new baby gave Vygotsky an excellent opportunity for observation and reflection on his ideas about infants and toddlers, which were also undergoing considerable revision in the early 1930s.

### Ninth International Psychological Congress and its impact

In early September 1929, the Ninth International Congress of Psychology took place for the first time across the Atlantic Ocean. Until then all international Congresses of psychologists were organized in Europe. The Congress of 1929 was held at Yale University, USA, and attracted a great many of American and international scholars. Alexander Luria was among them. After the Congress Luria spent a couple of months in the USA and Western Europe, where he became acquainted with a great many of foreign scholars, familiarized himself with the state of the art in psychology, and learnt about the cutting-edge research in the field. In addition, during the trip Luria signed a book contract with a leading New York publisher: the Russian manuscript of the book was subsequently translated into English and was published in the USA in 1932. Luria returned from the trip...
excited and wrote two reports on the Congress. These reports were published in the Soviet Union in 1930.\textsuperscript{16}

In these articles, Luria overviewed the state of the art in international psychology as it was presented at the Congress and criticized contemporary American psychology for its eclecticism, fragmentation, the lack of grand theories, ignorance of systemic thinking, and disinterest in the in-depth understanding of psychological phenomena – in favor of measuring them and correlating the isolated factors. Luria claimed that American psychology was predominantly mechanist and described this situation as the crisis in this scientific discipline. Yet, Luria then argued that new trends in international psychology demonstrated the seeds of a new psychology that would be able to overcome its mechanism and other related drawbacks. Specifically, Luria referred to the new studies and contemporary scientific theories of German and American scholars such as Wolfgang Köhler, Karl Lashley (whom Luria characterized as “the greatest American psychoneurologist”), George E. Coghill, and Kurt Lewin:

All these investigations create a new conceptual system that is considerably different from that habitual to the authors, whose work is grounded in the mechanistic worldview. The notion of behavior as the result of a combination of isolated reflexory acts is substituted in these new studies with a different understanding of behavior that is based on the conception of complex dynamic changes, always more or less integral and structurally different at different developmental stages, distinctly differentiated, but necessarily dynamic. This worldview that is apparently overtaking the primitive mechanistic worldview in psychology and physiology has not fully developed yet. However, the scientific findings that keep coming from various disciplines – from physiology and neurodynamics, genetic [i.e. developmental] and pathological psychology – lead us to a conclusion that international psychoneurology is undergoing a serious crisis and, moreover, that it is starting to overcome this crisis.

\textit{Luria (1930), pp. 95–96}

Luria’s publication came out after the First All-Union Congress on the Study of Human Behavior, thus, he concluded his paper with a comparative analysis of the two Congresses – the international in the USA and the domestic in Leningrad – and expressed his judgement in favor of the centralized and planned Soviet science in the era of the First Five-Year Plan. Regardless of possible political influences that Luria might have experienced and expressed in his assessment of the state of the art in international psychology, the message based on his first-hand experience abroad was clear: the “new psychology” was coming and it would be not simplified, mechanistic, and fragmented, but “complex”, “integral”, and “dynamic”.

**Towards a new psychological theory**

Luria left for the Ninth International Congress of Psychology in August 1929. In the meantime, Vygotsky stayed in the Soviet Union and in the summer of 1929 he
was finalizing a long-overdue project. This was the book that Vygotsky was contracted to write back in 1927 and that was to become his *opus magnum*, his major work, on “psychology in the light of culture and the superman”. Finally, the book was complete. But no traces of a “superman” can be found in it. Furthermore, it proved to be a popular scientific book for a general reader that related the results of psychological studies mostly of foreign scholars, and only at the very end were the works of the Vygotsky-Luria research team modestly presented. The book, titled “Studies on the History of Behavior: Ape. Primitive. Child”, comprised two virtually equal parts. Vygotsky wrote the first part that consisted of two chapters on the psychology of apes (mostly the exposition of the experiments of Wolfgang Köhler) and the ethnographic studies on the “primitive people” (the works of several Western scholars). Luria wrote the second part, of one chapter, on the psychology of children (a variety of sources were used, including the work of Jean Piaget). In a private letter to his associate, Vygotsky wrote about his experience of editing the final version of the book, which he, by the first word of the subtitle, disrespectfully refers to as “ape”, or “monkey”:

I am correcting the 2nd part of the “ape”. Goodness, the 1st section is written wholly in the spirit of the Freudians (not even according to Freud, but according to Vera Schmidt (her materials), Melanie Klein, and other second-rate stars). And then the impenetrable Piaget, who is overrated beyond all measures; and over and above all that, tools and signs are mixed together, etc. etc. This is not Aleksandr Romanovich’s [Luria] personal fault, but that of the entire “era” of our thought. We must ruthlessly put an end to that. What is not yet clear from our view, how it should be transformed so as to become an organic component of our theory – all that should not be allowed to be part of the system. Let us wait then … And, therefore, we should structure the same external organizational regime so that the errors of the “monkey” become impossible.

Vygotskii (2004), p. 18

Vygotsky was apparently disappointed with their achievement. The book on “culture and superman” obviously did not work out as planned. From theoretical standpoint, a new psychological system was still needed. Around the end of 1929 Vygotsky restarted developing what he hoped would eventually become his distinct psychological theory. Core concepts of such a theory were needed. Vygotsky decided on the “higher psychological functions” and “higher psychological processes” as candidates for such key notions of his theory in the making.

The “higher” functions and processes are those psychological phenomena that, according to Vygotsky, were artificially created with the help of signs and other cultural tools during an individual’s development. Thus, he distinguished the “higher” phenomena from their counterparts: the “lower”, “elementary”, and “natural” psychological functions and processes, as Vygotsky called them. Unfortunately, in his entire career Vygotsky never defined these “lower” psychological
(but not physiological) phenomena and failed to clearly delineate the border between them and the “higher” ones. This definitely added to the confusion surrounding his emergent theory among his contemporaries.

Vygotsky underlined the importance of understanding these “higher” phenomena as “higher psychological” functions and explicitly warned against the misuse of the terminology. Physiological functions were studied by a different field of knowledge: physiology. Studying the alternative – the individual “psychical” (mental, or cognitive) phenomena – would qualify as a profound methodological error. This would qualify as the idealism and the disregard of the body (i.e. the physical organism) and, on the other hand, the social world. In contrast, argued Vygotsky, psychology as a distinct discipline must not separate the body from the mind, and needs to consider these two aspects in their unity, as an indivisible whole:

Dialectical psychology … does not mix up the mental and physiological processes. It accepts the distinct qualitatively unique nature of the psyche, but it just claims that psychological processes are unitary. We thus arrive at the recognition of unique psycho-physiological unitary processes. These represent the higher forms of human behavior, which we suggest calling psychological processes, in contradistinction to psychical [i.e. cognitive, mental] processes and by analogy with what are called physiological processes.¹⁹

Vygotsky (1997a), p. 113

Like many other theoretical innovators before him (such as his compatriots Ivan Pavlov, Vladimir Bekhterev, and Konstantin Kornilov), Vygotsky realized that a new theory required a new name. This name could have been used as a label that would identify the theory and distinguish it from the others. Thus, Vygotsky could have socially positioned and effectively marketed his ideas as a theoretical innovation. Yet, creating such a label was not an easy task. The more he tried to find a distinctive descriptor for his theory, the better he understood that he was lacking a unique key word or a phrase. Indeed, until 1929 in his written works and oral presentations he was discussing “signs”, “culture”, “cultural development”, “tools”, and “instruments”. All these had seemed quite adequate descriptors of his unique approach in psychology. However, in the early 1930s Vygotsky was far from confident about all these notions. Furthermore, his effort to find a distinctive label for his theory brought him to a realization that it was easier to identify negatively what his theory was not about, rather than to pinpoint affirmatively what this theory was focused on. Vygotsky was struggling painfully against the resistance of the language and his own limited understanding of human nature and behavior. In his private notes from the early 1930s he left such a record with extensive underlining throughout the handwritten text:

NB! We are missing a name, a designation …
Not instrumental, not cultural, not significative,²⁰ not structural, etc.
Not only because of the blend with other theories but also because of the internal lack of clarity, e.g. the idea of analogy with instruments = only scaffolds, dissimilarity is more essential. Culture: but where is culture itself from (it is nonprimordial, and this is hidden). So:

1) for the method the designation

method of double stimulation.

2) for theory as a whole

a) psychology of higher functions, i.e.
b) historical psychology or

b) historical theory of higher psychological functions.

Because the central concept for us is the concept of higher function, it contains a theory:

a) of its development; b) of its psychological nature; c) of the method of its investigation.  

Vygotsky, quoted in Zaershneva (2010a), p. 30

Around 1930 Vygotsky was working on a manuscript on “higher psychological functions”. This was a major attempt at putting together all that his group had achieved in order to establish a general psychological theory. Yet, due to an increasing number of problems of a terminological, theoretical, and personal nature, the manuscript was never finished: Vygotsky abandoned it around 1930–1931. This manuscript reflected Vygotsky’s struggle for an adequate descriptor that would render the meaning of the transition from social interaction to psychological phenomena. In search of a “scientific” word or phrase to describe the social origin of psychological processes, the best Vygotsky could come up with was a vague metaphor of “internalization” that he borrowed from the works of “bourgeois” Western psychologists such as Pierre Janet (1859–1947). He realized, though, how unsatisfactory the word was and in a couple of his published works where it occurred he used this alien borrowing in quotation marks. An example of such work is the third volume of his introductory textbook “The Pedology of the Adolescent”, released in 1931. This was to become Vygotsky’s last published book that he would hold in his hands.

Throughout 1930 Vygotsky was struggling with the notion of the “higher psychological functions” that he had chosen as the core concept of his emergent system. Yet, this concept did not resist the critical attitude that he developed towards his theoretical work. In a talk that he gave to his colleagues at the Clinic for Nervous Diseases of the First Moscow State University in October 1930, Vygotsky stated in the opening:

In the process of development, and in the historical development in particular, it is not so much the functions which change (these we mistakenly studied
before). Their structure and the system of their development remain the same. What is changed and modified are rather the relationships, the links between the functions. New constellations emerge which were unknown in the preceding stage.

Vygotsky (1997b), p. 92

Vygotsky concluded his talk with a statement that leaves no doubt that a new core concept for his theoretical system in the making had emerged. This new concept would dramatically change the course of their research in a new exciting direction:

Today I wanted to elucidate whether this main idea, which I nourished during a number of years but hesitated to express fully, is confirmed by the facts. And our next task is to clarify this in the most business-like and detailed manner. Relying on the abovementioned facts, I would like to express my fundamental conviction that the entire issue resides not just in the changes within the functions, but in the changes in the connections and in the infinitely diverse forms of development that develop from this. It resides in the development of new syntheses in a certain stage of development, new central functions and new forms of connections between them. We must take interest in systems and their fate. Systems and their fate – it seems to me that for us the alpha and omega of our next work must reside in these four words.

Vygotsky (1997b), p. 102

Thus, at the end of 1930 Vygotsky denounced his cherished idea of “psychological functions” and proposed to investigate not functions as such, but the systems of functions. This was not the only idea that he would openly denounce at that time.

The demise of “reactology”

Ever since he settled in Moscow in 1924, Vygotsky was affiliated with its Institute of Experimental Psychology and progressed there from an assistant to a professor. He was officially granted the title of professor by the State Scientific Council in September 1927.24 His relations with the Institute’s director Konstantin Kornilov gradually evolved from extreme sympathy to open hostility, when in December 1928 Vygotsky turned to a collective administrative body of the Institute, its Kollegium, with a request for mediating the conflict between him and the director. The problem was eventually resolved, since Vygotsky did not resign and remained one of the leading specialists at the Institute. His “reactological” interests considerably declined as he was progressing towards his own theory in psychology, but reactological terminology was preserved in his and his associates’ writings well into 1930. This is when a major change took place. This change concerned the administrative make-up of the Institute of Psychology and the psychological parlance of the Institute’s employees alike. This is how this happened.
The planned economy that was introduced in the Soviet Union in late 1928
required control from above and accountability from the bottom of the social
pyramid. Scientific organizations were not top of the priority list, yet their time
had to come sooner or later. For the Institute of Experimental Psychology the time
was in early May, 1930. This is when the Commission of Workers’ and Peasants’
Control arrived in the Institute to inspect the administrative activities, budgets,
expenditure, and the management at this organization. After a month of inspection,
the Commission drew its conclusions, which were then publicly discussed at the
meeting with the Institute’s personnel.\(^{25}\) The Commission’s conclusion was abso-
lutely disastrous: the management was terrible, the official documentation was in
disarray, funds were misused, and hiring policies were inefficient. Six months later,
an administrative decision was made: in November 1930 director Konstantin
Kornilov was found responsible for the mismanagement of the Institute and was
removed from his position. A new director was appointed, and the Institute
was reorganized and renamed the State Institute of Psychology, Pedology, and
Psychotectonics.\(^{26}\) This episode in the history of the Institute might have ended at
this point, but it did not. In fact, this is a good illustration of how densely inter-
twined and interdependent the multiple spheres of social life were in the Soviet
Union: the economic, the political, the scientific, and the cultural (to mention but
а few). The inspection of Kornilov’s management of the Institute was followed by
the revision of his scholarly “reactological” legacy in early 1931.

The revision of Kornilov’s scientific work appears to have been initiated by
scholars themselves: Kornilov’s colleagues, peers, and associates.\(^{27}\) The historical
context is crucial for understanding this episode. This was the time when great
philosophical discussions between the two rival groups of Soviet Marxists came to
an end in the Soviet Union. Instead, the struggle on the two fronts against the
rightist and the leftist deviations in Marxist philosophy (also known under the
labels of “mechanism” and Joseph Stalin’s coinage “menshevizing idealism”) was
officially announced by a programmatic decree of the highest collective body of
power in the Soviet Union, the Politburo of the Communist party. This was the
famous decision in the main Soviet philosophical journal “Under the Banner of
Marxism”; the decree was issued in late January 1931.\(^{28}\) Soon after, the call spread
from the exclusively philosophical realm to other spheres of public life, primarily to
Soviet academia.

Simply put, the question could be formulated this way: which intellectual
movements and ideas would have passed as perfectly Marxist? For Soviet psychologists,
the answer proved to be alarming, to say the least: none of their scientific theories
could have withstood the rigorous philosophical critique of their foundations. In
other words, any psychological theory would have qualified as a “mechanist” or
“idealist” or even as a combination of both. Action was required. In practice, the
procedure was carried out in the form of an open public discussion, during which
the opponents pronounced their critiques. Then, the subjects of the critique would
have a word in their defense. Yet, the outcome of such discussion was predictable,
and the procedure is best understood as a ritual with fixed rules and social roles for
all parties involved. Quite often, according to the ritual, the subjects of critique were expected to acknowledge the fairness of criticism and to admit their errors in an act of self-criticism and repentance.\textsuperscript{29}

The “reactological” discussion at the Institute of Psychology started roughly one month after the release of the Politburo decree, in early March 1931. On 1 March 1931, the new administration of the Institute promoted Vygotsky from the 1st rank scientific worker to full member of the Institute, the highest position for a rank-and-file employee.\textsuperscript{30} On the next day, Vygotsky, Kornilov’s former ally, was taking part in the critical discussion of Kornilov’s reactological theory. Obviously, Luria (the Institute’s former Secretary under Kornilov and his former right-hand man) and many other employees of the Institute and Kornilov’s formerly closest associates also participated. All of them were taking turns to speak in order to publicly criticize reactology and admit their own reactological mistakes of the past. This is when both Luria and Vygotsky publicly denounced “reactology” and the study of reactions during their “instrumental period” in the 1920s. In his comment Luria succinctly summarized their position this way:

When we came to the Psychological Institute several years ago we all no doubt constituted the unitary front, which with all certainty should now be assessed as mechanistic. What was our main mistake back then? All the Institute’s research employees were trying to establish psychology as a natural, but not a social science. This was the basic assumption that we all shared for many years. This assumption must be assessed today as erroneous. Human behavior is a product of complex historical development and cannot be expressed in terms of natural science. Qualitatively new forms of behavior emerge in humans’ historical development. These new forms are social by their origin and they surpass the primitive organic forms of behavior. Psychology is the science that explains how the social restructured the biological in human behavior and how as a result of historical development new psychological categories emerge. If this is correct – and I suppose that human psychology is foremost the science of those forms of behavior that emerge in the process of historical development – then this is what determines the place of psychology among other scientific disciplines, its specific contents, and its methods. It is absolutely obvious that the investigation of reactions will not occupy the central place in our psychological system.\textsuperscript{31}

\textit{Luria, quoted in Reaktologicheskaia (1994), p. 27}

The outcome of the discussion was predetermined: “reactology” as a scientific theory and program of research was proclaimed an erroneous deviation from truly Marxist psychology and denounced in June 1931, by the decision of the Institute’s local cell of the Communist party.\textsuperscript{32}

A new director was hired, followed soon by another one, but neither lasted long in the role: the second appointment ended in December 1931. Viktor Kolbanovskii (1902–1970) was then appointed as the new director of the Institute in 1932.
Kolbanovskii was an open supporter of Vygotsky, considered himself Vygotsky’s follower, and was an active advocate of his scientific work. Shortly after, Vygotsky launched a new research project that he publicly presented in March 1932. It was then that Vygotsky, for the first time, announced his intent to produce a book titled “Thinking and speech”. Indeed, such book under Vygotsky’s name would eventually be released in the Soviet Union under the editorship of Kolbanovskii at the very end of 1934. However, Vygotsky would never see it published.

Criticizing Vygotsky

Not only was Vygotsky a critic of others’ theories, but his own theories also came under fire from peer critiques in the early 1930s. Unlike Kornilov’s “reactological theory” in 1931, Vygotsky’s theoretical work was never properly discussed in public in full accordance with the ritual, therefore, it was never decisively revealed as “bourgeois”, “mechanistic”, or “menshevizing idealistic”. Vygotsky’s theory was never definitively refuted and banned as such. Yet, his ideas and work were repeatedly criticized by his peers on a number of occasions, such as research meetings and scientific conferences. Furthermore, several journal publications critical of Vygotsky’s work were published in the 1930s.

An example of such publication was that of Aleksandr Talankin. Vygotsky’s and Luria’s colleague, a prominent member of the Institute of Psychology, the head of the Institute’s Hiring Department (otdel kadrov), and the secretary of the local Communist Party organization, Talankin was also one of the initiators of the “reactological discussion” of 1931 and similar critical campaigns in Soviet psychology in the early 1930s. Talankin’s criticism of Vygotsky and Luria should be considered moderate by the standards of the time, and in comparison to Talankin’s critique of other scholars. His criticisms can be succinctly formulated in two general statements. According to Talankin, Vygotsky and Luria, first, uncritically and eclectically borrowed “bourgeois” theories from the West; and second, focused on the abstractly understood instrumental use of psychological tools and, thus, neglected the real social world in its complexity. In other words, they grossly oversimplified the psychology of a social individual by reducing it to mechanical worldview.

These criticisms would often reoccur in critical discussions of the work of Vygotsky and his research team in the publications of that time.

In early 1932 another critical publication was released. The author of the paper was Mikhail Feofanov, who was, like Talankin, Vygotsky’s and Luria’s colleague from the Institute of Psychology in Moscow. Feofanov’s paper was published in 1932 in the journal “Pedologiia”. It presented a massive and targeted critical analysis of Vygotsky’s and Luria’s theory. Feofanov’s paper was released with an introduction, in a footnote. The footnote stated that editorial board was of the opinion that the so-called “theory of cultural development” required the harshest possible Marxist-Leninist critique. The reason was that under the slogan of “historical development” the proponents of this theory “smuggled” idealistic and subjectivist ideas combined with certain elements of “behavioristic” (povedenchskoi) theory. The
anonymous “editorial board” further expressed their conviction that the article by Feofanov would be only a first step in the direction of further critiquing of this theory and, thus, presented only certain key problems of this “culturalistic” (kul'-turnicheskaia) theory. The “editorial board” concluded their introduction to Feofanov’s article by bluntly stating that a number of the article’s phrasings and definitions were incorrect, and that critique was insufficient. In sum, the introduction set the scene: the paper was clearly and unambiguously biased. Its appearance was orchestrated by some anonymous yet powerful forces operating from behind the curtain. Subsequent critical publications were to follow.

In his critique of Vygotsky and Luria, Feofanov went further than Talankin. Feofanov’s paper abounded with characteristically Marxist terminology, invoking references to social classes and formations, economic bases and superstructure, ideology, labor, etc. Feofanov’s critique was harsh, but not impeccable. The paper was published under the misspelled title “The Theory of Cultural Development in Pedology as an Electric41 Conception, etc.” where the word “electric” was supposed to have been “eclectic”. The title added unintended ironic flavor to the outright militant and, otherwise, devastating message of the paper. Yet another time the title was corrupted in the table of contents of the journal, which rendered it as “The Theory of Cultural Development in Pedology as an Electric42 Conception, etc.”, whereas the name of the author was rendered in the feminine form, “Feofanova”. As if to finally devalue and ridicule the militant polemical message and the elevated accusatory style of the article, the very first page of this publication provided the discussion of the three lines of development in Vygotsky’s works: evolutionary, historical, and “antogenetic” (antogeneticheskii) – instead of “ontogenetic”. The anonymous editorial introduction and numerous spelling mistakes must have created a mixed impression with the reader: a combination of the ignorance of the author with the orchestrated and severely biased critique. Indeed, on a number of points the author’s incompetence, selective unfair criticism, and misunderstanding of Vygotsky’s and Luria’s texts were evident in this publication.

Yet, despite the mishaps and the faults with Feofanov’s criticism, he managed to capture several of Vygotsky’s and Luria’s real weaknesses in his analysis of their theorizing. One of these was Vygotsky’s radical separation between the “higher” and the “lower” psychological processes. As such, the “lower” and the “higher” processes constituted the two levels, or, in Vygotsky’s terminology, two “floors” in human development. Yet, the founders of the theory, Vygotsky and Luria, never defined these “higher” and, especially, the “lower” processes, and did not provide a thorough analysis and convincing discussion of the interactions between the two levels or the mechanisms of the upward transition from the “lower” to the “higher”. Another critique related to the procedure and methodology of experimental practice of the Vygotsky–Luria group was that all their studies that investigated the processes of cultural development were done in laboratory settings. This kind of research design was traditional for the older experimental psychology that was deliberately isolated from the larger social environment and its influences. For cultural developmental psychology, in contrast, the neglect of the cultural environment and the lack of conceptual apparatus that would account
for social influences was a serious methodological flaw. Feofanov also revealed a further weakness of Vygotsky’s “instrumental” theory: the lack of clarity in the distinction between the external tools as physical objects and psychological instruments proper. Another problem with Vygotsky’s scholarship, as Feofanov’s critique demonstrated, was Vygotsky’s unclear and ambiguous position on the interrelation between biological and social factors in human development.

Yet another critique of Vygotsky and Luria appeared in a paper written by two Leningrad psychologists, Abel’skaia and Neopikhonova. This article followed Feofanov’s and was published in the fourth – and final – issue of the journal “Pedologiia” in 1932. This critique makes a strange impression. The paper was formally a review of the book by the German developmental psychologist Heinz Werner (1890–1964) “Comparative psychology of mental development”, published in 1926. In its first part, the paper presented a detailed, balanced, and stylistically neutral overview of the book. Yet, it also included a second part that critically discussed Werner’s theory and its influence on Soviet pedology and psychology. The authors presented a series of accusations in “deliberate and principled formalism”, ignorance of the real social-historical environment and its interplay with human development. Then, in a somewhat unexpected twist, the paper shifted to the discussion of the relative merits of Werner’s and Soviet developmental psychology. Soviet science was presented here as superior in virtually any respect. However, even Soviet psychology was not free from flaws and mistakes. It is in this context that the authors invoked the names of Vygotsky and Luria as examples of both the superior Soviet science and, at the same time, the object of their peer critique. Abel’skaia and Neopikhonova drew a number of parallels between Vygotsky and Luria’s book “Studies on the History of Behavior: Ape. Primitive. Child” and Werner’s work. In their presentation, like in Talankin’s critique that emphasized Vygotsky’s and Luria’s dependence on Western scholarship, the two theories – Werner’s and Vygotsky-Luria’s – appeared intricately interwoven and shared several mistakes. The most prominent mistake was formalism and abstract theorizing. In Vygotsky’s and Luria’s case the authors pinpointed the formalistic approach to the psychological functioning of tools and instruments in real social-historical conditions:

These “auxiliary means” – instruments, tools, signs – are considered by these authors in isolation from production relations in different sociohistorical environments and from the concrete labor of an adult and the practical activity of a child developing in a specific social-class environment; hence they have the same formal character as Werner’s undivided wholes.


Another issue that earned the authors’ relatively moderate and superficial criticism was the inconsistent differentiation between biological and psychological processes as they were presented in Vygotsky’s third volume of his textbook for correspondence students titled “Pedology of the Adolescent” from 1931.
The paper in all likelihood was perceived as insufficiently critical, according to another editorial note that was placed just below the last words of Abel’skaia’s and Neopikhonova’s review. This note acknowledged the depth of the analysis of Werner’s work. At the same time the editorial board of the journal objected to the idea that Vygotsky’s and Luria’s theory of “cultural development” was representative of “Soviet pedology and psychology” in general. The anonymous “Editors” (Redaktsiia) accused Abel’skaia and Neopikhonova of methodological flaws and announced that further critique of Vygotsky’s and Luria’s theory would be published in the subsequent issues of this journal.

These two papers that came out in the journal “Pedologiia” appeared to have launched a forced and orchestrated critical campaign. Perhaps, a widespread campaign would have followed regardless. Yet, there are all too many predators in the social jungles, especially at a time of great and rapid historical change. As fate would have it the journal would be shut down by the supreme powers at the end of 1932 and not one more issue was released. This effectively stopped what would have possibly become an avalanche of further criticism directed at Vygotsky, Luria and their associates, not to mention a great many of their contemporary Soviet scholars active in the fields of psychology and pedology. Indeed, Vygotsky and Luria were far from exception as objects of harsh peer critique during this period. Even the cult figure of the Bolsheviks’ “new science” of the international fame, the Nobelist Ivan Pavlov, at certain points became the object of peer critique for his undisguised and militant mechanism in physiology. Psychologists also harshly criticized each other. The list of the “usual suspects” would include not only former high-level figures, and the leaders of Soviet psychology and allied sciences, Kornilov and Bekhterev, but also other first-rate scientific celebrities such as M. Ia. Basov, P. P. Blonskii, S. S. Molozhavyi, A. A. Smirnov, I. A. Sokolianskii, A. B. Zalkind, and A. S. Zaluzhnyi, to mention but a few.

So, the campaign was orchestrated, biased, and politically motivated. On the other hand, the peer critique of Vygotsky and Luria was not altogether as groundless as it might have appeared, and it addressed a number of real weaknesses and flaws in Vygotsky’s theorizing in his publications that had been published by the beginning of the 1930s. In Vygotsky’s defense, one could argue that he considerably changed his theoretical outlook several times throughout his career. Numerous inconsistencies and self-contradictions can be found in his texts that reflect different phases in his ideas’ fast and dramatic evolution. Perhaps this is true of any thinker. However, Vygotsky’s ambiguity on a number of issues also resulted from the nature of Vygotsky’s publications. Vygotsky was a prolific author that did not produce too many accomplished theoretical works. Instead, he generously published scientific popular texts for the general reader and quite a few compilations that were materials for introductory undergraduate instruction. These textbooks and learning materials were intended to present the multitude and diversity of contemporary views and theories rather than original, comprehensive, and coherent theoretical framework. In these textbooks Vygotsky would often fail to rigorously refer to his sources. This made it difficult
to distinguish his own ideas and views from those of the authors of the works that he would overview.

In sum, several serious conceptual problems of Vygotsky’s theory notwithstanding, it is also likely that critical reviews of Vygotsky’s research were based on the selection and juxtaposition of his publications of different periods and instructional materials for undergraduate or general audience. The discrepancies between Vygotsky’s texts and his careless dealing with the sources might have provided additional grounds for the accusations in eclecticism and systematic uncritical borrowings from Western, “bourgeois” authors.

**Vygotsky criticizes... Vygotsky**

In the early 1930s, despite his previous apparent success as a social activist and a scholar, Vygotsky appeared distressed, frustrated, and disoriented. Stalin’s Great Break and the social turmoil resulting from the introduction and realization of the First Five-Year Plan caught him unprepared for change. Following his dissatisfaction with his own theorizing, domestic peer criticisms, and breakthroughs in contemporary international science, Vygotsky became a “revisionist”.

In numerous published works and archival documents we see Vygotsky repeatedly criticizing himself and his associates for the mistakes they made during the previous, “instrumental” period of their work. Vygotsky was painfully looking for better ways to create a “new psychology” – both in theory and in social practice. Following the principle of the practicality of science, any such new theory was supposed to meet the demands of national healthcare, education, and the economy.

Perhaps, the tide of Vygotsky’s self-criticism started as early as mid-1929, when he was involved in the editorial work on the manuscript of the collaborative book “Studies on the History of Behavior: Ape. Primitive. Child”. The criticism is understandable: the cherished ground-breaking idea of the psychology of the “superman” apparently did not work out as originally planned. Even worse, the book did not appear original and ground-breaking in any sense. Yet, his self-criticism did not stop there but continued further into the 1930s. Vygotsky was not of a particularly high opinion of his publications of that time. Consider, for instance, Vygotsky’s assessment of his recently published work that he shared in a private letter with Vladimir Vagner at the end of 1930:

> The book … has come out; I have not yet received and read it, but have heard bad opinions about it. It had been planned as a large, broad anthology, comprising all directions and branches of modern psychology in a popular presentation. I wrote two essays – extremely basic and popular.\(^{47}\)

*Vygotsky, quoted in Rückriem (2009), p. 250*

Each of us has ups and downs. Not all our work is of equal quality and importance. Yet, Vygotsky’s disappointment with his achievement had particularly deep roots.
Six months later, in the summer of 1931, Vygotsky again shared his dissatisfaction with his work, the way it had progressed, and the direction it was taking:

I am still beset with thousands of petty chores. The fruitlessness of what I do greatly distresses me. My scientific thinking is going off into the realm of fantasy, and I cannot think things through in a realistic way to the end. Nothing is going right: I am doing the wrong things, writing the wrong things, saying the wrong things. A fundamental reorganization is called for – and this time I am going to carry it out.\(^{48}\)

\textit{Vygotsky} (2007), p. 36

Vygotsky’s frustration with his professional work must have been aggravated by the concurrent developments in the life of his extended family, all members of which resided in their apartment in Bol’shaia Serpukhovskaia Street in Moscow. His father had been seriously ill and in October 1931, the disease took its toll, and Semen L’vovich Vygodskii died.

All this accounts for Vygotsky’s frustration, utter disappointment with his work, and professional disorientation. A new impetus was needed to give him an intellectual and emotional boost and to provide an influx of ideas in order to enforce the psychological theory in the making that was clearly falling apart.

\textbf{Expeditions to Central Asia in 1931 and 1932}

In the summer of 1931 Vygotsky was frustrated by his continuous yet desperate and fruitless efforts at creating a new psychology. He was frantically pulling together the loose ends of different lines of his team’s research, looking for the right words to talk about his work, and creating adequate, system of concepts, terminology, and a theoretical system that would explain all the data. Everything changed with a letter.

In fact, the provenance of this letter dates back to 1929, when Vygotsky with his wife made a trip to Central Asia to teach a course at the local university in Soviet Uzbekistan. The trip was short, but in his free time Vygotsky conducted several pilot studies that produced interesting results. In the summer of 1931 Luria also made a trip to Central Asia. He went there as a researcher in order to investigate the psychology of local populations in the time of rapid social change. The change was triggered by Joseph Stalin’s Great Break: the forcible collectivization, industrialization, and cultural revolution. There is no clarity as to what extent Vygotsky participated in the planning of this expedition and in designing its experimental part, but there is no doubt that he was familiar with what Luria was going to investigate during the trip.

Luria’s expedition meant a lot to both Vygotsky and Luria. It was the first major “field study” that they would do outside a psychological laboratory and it was expected to bring about new research data and provide substantial input to their thinking about a theory of cultural development. In his publication in the highly
prestigious international scholarly journal “Science” in October 1931, Luria briefly reported about the expedition and declared that its aim was to:

investigate the variations of thought and other psychological processes in people living in a very primitive economic and social environment, and to record those changes which develop as a result of the introduction of higher and more complex forms of economic life and the raising of the general cultural level.

_Luria (1931), p. 383_

The order in which Luria presented the two factors that allegedly have an impact on human psychological processes is not incidental and is quite telling. Luria mentioned the economy and culture twice, and the economy came first in both cases. Luria claimed to be a Marxist. From Marxist standpoint this is entirely correct: material factors, such as the economy, labor, and technology (that is, the *mode of production*), are those that bring about or, at least, impact other non-material factors, such as social relations, culture, and ideology. That is why the change in the mode of production triggers other social changes.

Luria followed this logic and assumed that the “introduction of higher and more complex forms of economic life” would result in the “raising of the general cultural level”. Luria understood the “primitive economic and social environment” to be the social order in which the population of Central Asia had lived before the Revolution. According to Marxist hierarchy of social orders, local society had not reached the stage of capitalism, but was lagging behind most industrially developed countries or, for that matter, the rest of the Soviet Union. It seems that, according to Luria’s interpretation of Marxist social theory, the pre-Revolutionary Uzbekistan was still at the stage of feudalism (or even at an earlier stage of development), therefore, it allegedly qualified as a “primitive” society. The forcible transition from feudalism directly to socialism caused by Stalin’s Great Break would therefore mean by-passing one social stage in between, the stage of capitalism. This would be the unique case of exceptionally rapid social development. In Luria’s own words, in the course of their investigations, “special attention was given to those socio-historical factors which influenced the development of the various stages of culture, and especially those changes which came as a result of the economic renascence of Central Asia”.

For comparison’s sake, Luria studied two general groups of local population: first, the “primitive” group of people, who lived “under primitive nomadic conditions”; and, second, the inhabitants of the “control territory … which has a very active cotton-raising industry and highly developed collective farming, but a population still backward culturally”. Despite their cultural backwardness, the representatives of the second group that lived under the conditions of the socialist mode of production were expected to demonstrate not only merely different worldviews, but also more advanced, progressive psychological performance in comparison to the “primitive” group.

Luria launched his field studies in Central Asia in May 1931 and his first research reports reached Vygotsky in June of that year. The first of Luria’s letters was met
with somewhat restrained enthusiasm, but the second one produced a tremendous effect on Vygotsky and brought him excitement and boundless optimism. Vygotsky emotionally replied, generously underlining his handwriting for emphasis:

Your report number 2 was just brought to me. I read it with immense pleasure and hurry to give you a quick answer. Everything you say is infinitely important and interesting. This is now the best part of our work – and the new part in the best meaning of the word. In other words, it does not repeat our earlier thoughts, but takes all the work forward and brings the older research to a higher level.\(^50\)

*Vygotsky, quoted in Rückriem (2009), p. 262*

After a lengthy discussion of the specifics of Luria’s experiments, the interpretation of their results, and an analysis of their meaning and importance, Vygotsky finished his letter with a most laudatory conclusion:

That’s all. Simply fabulous! The best of the year. A path into the future. A justification for the loss of half of this year. This is the wealth of our experiments, which we can access with the theoretical key. Work and write to me. I’ll read the letter to everyone. This is a fabulous letter\(^51\)

*Vygotsky, quoted in Rückriem (2009), p. 264*

And Luria did work and did write, again and again. Vygotsky again responded to him, and was again in utter excitement, or *emphase*, if one prefers the word that Vygotsky used in his letter to emphatically describe his feelings:

I am literally writing to you in *emphase* – in an enthusiastic state that one does not often experience. I received report number 3, the research protocols. I can’t remember when I had such a bright and happy day lately. It’s literally a key that opens us the first-rate significance of the experiments. Our new path has been conquered for us (by you), not just as an idea, but also in practice – in the experiment … For us, a new chapter in psychology has opened up – tangible, in the light of the thought-out whole the operations with respect to the individual functions appear in a new perspective. I am full with gratitude, joy, and pride.\(^52\)

*Vygotsky, quoted in Rückriem (2009), p. 264*

More letters from Luria, with new reports, followed. Vygotsky responded again, with ever increasing joy, pride, and enthusiasm. In his new letter to Luria Vygotsky compared his studies in Central Asia with internationally renowned studies of Wolfgang Köhler that he did on apes’ “practical intelligence” on the Spanish island Tenerife. Vygotsky even went as far as to predict Luria’s international fame for his research in Soviet Uzbekistan:
I have already written to you to Samarkand and to Fergana about the incomparable impression that your reports and protocols made on me. For our research, this is a huge decisive step forward and a pivotal change to a new point of view. But this expedition would also be an event for any context of European research. This research will be your trip to Tenerife. I feel enthusiastic – literally – comparable to a great inner success. I received report number 5. It is – like the other ones (report number 1 left me somewhat indifferent) – an event. Until now, no one has accomplished, from any perspective, a systematic research of systemic relationship in historical psychology, in the living phylogenesis. In addition to our clinic and our child research, this is a new, unexpectedly (for me, I admit) rich, and brilliant chapter. 53

Vygotsky, quoted in Rückriem (2009), p. 266

Several points are interesting in this letter. These are: Vygotsky’s increasing excitement, his newly discovered optimism, and a curious prediction of the world fame that Luria would gain with his experiments. Yet, another issue is of great interest too. The word “phylogenesis” (or “phylogeny”) means historical “evolutionary development” of a species or an organ. As of the summer of 1931 Vygotsky seemed to believe that Luria’s experiment in Central Asia demonstrated the possibility of qualitative development of the human species that occurs as a result of human actions. Vygotsky apparently detected such qualitative change in the “progressive”, the “socialist” (as opposed to the “primitive”) group of the native population of Soviet Uzbekistan. Then, the human action that caused that change was, of course, the conscious collective effort towards the collectivization of local agriculture and the transition from the “lower” social order of “nomadic feudalism” to the “higher” social order of socialism.

Vygotsky’s considerations about Luria being witness to the “living phylogenesis” in the socialist population of Soviet Uzbekistan is very reminiscent of Leon Trotsky’s earlier prophetic words that “human species, the coagulated Homo sapiens, will once more enter into a state of radical transformation” and, totally in accordance with the principles of biological evolution, will “create a higher social biologic type” that Trotsky referred to as “a superman”. The reference to the “living phylogenesis” also recalls Vygotsky’s earlier words about “the artificial creation of a new biological type” and his assertion that “this will be the only and first species in biology which will create itself”. 54 Several years after his first pronouncement about the artificial evolution of human beings under socialism and about a “superman” as a higher human type of the socialist future, Vygotsky seemed to still firmly believe in these ideas in 1931.

In early August 1931, from a rented countryside cottage (datcha), in his letter to an associate Vygotsky summarized their own research developments in Moscow compared with the outcome of Luria’s 1931 Central Asian expedition:

The outcomes of the year are more than lamentable, the perspectives for the next year are more than misty. The picture is coloured only by the
extraordinary, unexpected, most fortunate success of A.R. [Luria], who succeeded to achieve more than we all did over the whole year.\(^{55}\)

\textit{Vygotskii (2004), p. 35}

Yet, the story of Luria’s adventures in Central Asia does not end here. In 1932 Luria made another trip to Soviet Uzbekistan. The second expedition was virtually a carbon copy of the first one. Luria left Moscow and went to Central Asia in May. There, he met a group of his local collaborators in Tashkent and Samarkand, the two historical capitals of Soviet Uzbekistan. There, he would carry out a series of field studies and send reports to Vygotsky. Yet again, Luria discovered that “still backward culturally”, but economically progressive human types of pro-socialist activists and uneducated members of collective farms psychologically outperformed the “primitives” of nomadic pre-socialist economy. Thus, they yet again demonstrated the benefits of socialism and its role in building a new, advanced, and progressive human type on the way towards the “superman” of the Communist future. In exchange, Vygotsky would mail his replies, enthusiastic and excited, in July–August 1932, just like the year before. One cannot get rid of the feeling of \textit{déjà vu}, while reading Vygotsky’s letter that he sent to Luria at the conclusion of his expedition in mid-August, 1932:

\begin{quote}
At this very moment, report number 6 was brought in and left me enthusiastic. Even if only the results of the two expeditions were published in a systematic and intelligible form for scientists in a European language, they would have gained a worldwide fame: I am sure about that. It is a matter of the external perspective. I have talked to you about the internal assessment more than once; I keep thinking and I will continue to do so for as long as I am not convinced of the contrary that you (with factual data, which is richer than in many other ethno-psychological researches and more accurate and more correct than those of \cite{Lévy-Bruhl}) have proven, in experiments, the phylogenetic existence of a layer of complex\cite{Lévy-Bruhl} thinking, and, dependent on that, distinct structure of all basic systems of the psyche and of all main forms of activity and – in perspective – even that of consciousness. Is this really that meagre that you are dissatisfied with the results of the two expeditions?\(^{56}\)

\textit{Vygotsky, quoted in Rückriem (2009), pp. 274–275}
\end{quote}

Everything looked just the same but for Vygotsky’s mention of Luria’s dissatisfaction with his research and his hint at a contrary perspective on Luria’s, in his opinion, extraordinary work. Despite many similarities, apparently, not everything was the same as a year before. The renowned German-American psychologist, the stellar expert in the field of the psychology of visual perception, Kurt Koffka of Smith College (Northampton, Massachusetts) took part in the second expedition of 1932 upon Luria’s invitation along with his Soviet peers, and it was Koffka’s opinion that ran contrary to Vygotsky’s assessment of the
importance of Luria’s research, and its role in the context of international psychological science.\textsuperscript{57}

In his second report in the journal “Science” in September 1933, Luria wrote about the expedition of the summer of 1932. Luria argued that “Central Asia is of exceptional interest on the account of the residuals of primitive economic conditions which are now undergoing tremendous industrial, political, and cultural transformation”. Like a year before, Luria did not conceal his \textit{economic determinism} – that is, his belief that the change in the economic make-up of a society or a community must directly lead to a change in the psychological performance of its members. Thus, Luria further argued about the transformation of the primitive economic conditions that “this change gives opportunity not only for studying of the peculiarities of psychological processes under various conditions, but also, what is more important, the very dynamics of the transition from the more elementary psychological laws to the more complex processes”.\textsuperscript{58}

Kurt Koffka, a specialist in perception, had a special role in the expedition, and, by Luria’s own admission, Koffka, together with his local assistant G. Ashrafý, was pre-occupied with the “investigation of perception in various historical cultural phases”. It was Koffka’s report that ruined virtually everything that Vygotsky had praised as Luria’s claim for international fame. Koffka sent his conclusion on his specialized segment of visual perception studies, independently of Luria, to the translator of Luria’s report, who in turn included it in a subsequent publication in 1934. Koffka’s conclusion was firm and unambiguous:

The following results may be considered as proved: With very few exceptions the men and women examined by us succumbed to the optical illusions – just as we do … The exceptions, which were very rare in this expedition, but had been much more frequent in the first, are easily explained by the attitude of the testees towards the experimenter.

\textit{Koffka, quoted in Luria (1934), p. 257}

In his report Koffka totally refuted Luria’s earlier sensational, albeit startling, findings that, allegedly, “primitive” Uzbeks do not succumb to visual illusions. Contrary to Luria, Koffka found that, if properly administered, the experiments on visual illusions in all groups of native populations of Soviet Uzbekistan produce the same or, at least, adequately comparable results. These results would not allow a conclusion of any difference in psychological performance between the two groups of Luria’s subjects: the “primitives” and the allegedly advanced group of the “still culturally backward” “pro-socialism activists”.

Furthermore, Koffka noticed the extreme fear and anxiety in the group of the “primitives” as their distinctive feature and suggested this as the reason for their differences – notable, but insignificant – with the group of the progressive socialist collective farmers and the like. The source of their fear and anxiety, in turn, may be explained by the fact that a military convoy of the notoriously brutal state security authorities participated in the expedition to the areas populated by the
“primitive” Uzbek shepherds in order to protect the members of the Soviet psychological expedition from local Islamist rebels, still very active in the area.

The difference is interesting and telling: what the Soviet founders of cultural-historical psychology, Luria and Vygotsky, perceived as the natural state of affairs and, therefore, insignificant from scientific standpoint, Kurt Koffka, a foreigner and psychologist raised in German culturally-sensitive tradition, identified as the key problem in the entire design of their studies, at least as long as perception research was concerned. In other words, Vygotsky and Luria – in theory, the advocates of the notions of meaning, significance, and value as the key concepts of psychological research – did not understand the meaning, significance, and value of the concrete experimental situation to their “primitive” Uzbek subjects. In contrast, Koffka did.

Koffka’s conclusion was doubtlessly if not entirely a fiasco for the whole expedition, then definitely a call for further investigation that was needed in order to clarify the situation. Yet, due to a combination of political reasons the follow-up third expedition that Luria started planning in 1932 never took place.

An attempt at a scientifically rigorous and compelling resuscitation of Vygotsky’s and Luria’s “psychology of cultural development” failed at the very onset, in 1932.59

Revisionist conclusion

By mid-1932 Vygotsky became critical of the very core of their theoretical and experimental work. Such attitude can be found in some of his archival documents of that period, such as a private note from mid-1932 titled “Consciousness without word”:

Our deficiency is not a deficiency of facts, but the untenability of the theory: in the analysis of our crisis this is the main difficulty, but not a departure from facts … Consequently: salvation is not in the facts but in the theory. We introduced the systemic point of view too late … Now I understand all this more deeply.60

Vygotsky, quoted in Zavershneva (2010b), p. 54

Finally, by the end of 1932 the unstable and shaky construction of Vygotsky’s scientific theory seemed to have fully fallen apart. This is how Vygotsky described this situation in the personal notes that he prepared for a presentation in December 1932, a year and a half before his death:

1. The necessity of a new stage of inquiry does not stem from the fact that a new thought has occurred to me or a new idea has caught my interest, but from the necessity of developing the research itself – new facts prod me into searching for new and more intricate explanations. The narrowness, bias, and schematism of the old mindset led us to the wrong assessment of the essential principles that we mistook for the secondary ones:
interfunctional connections. We focused attention on the sign (on the tool) to the detriment of the operation with it, representing it as something simple, which goes through three phases: magical – external – internal. But the knot is external and the teenager’s diary is external. Hence we have a sea of poorly explained facts and a desire to delve more deeply into the facts, i.e. to evaluate them theoretically in a different way.

2. The higher and lower functions are not constructed in two tiers: their number and names do not match. But our previous understanding was not right, either[, according to which] a higher function is the mastery of the lower ([for instance,] voluntary attention is the subordination to it of involuntary attention) because this means exactly – in two tiers. Vygotsky, quoted in Zaershneva (2010b), pp. 41–42

Vygotsky was eager and desperate, but he had lost his way. He had virtually no choice. He needed somebody else’s pathway to follow.

And there was such a pathway, as a matter of fact.

Notes

1 Stalin’s Great Break has always been a controversial topic; for some introductory reading see Fitzpatrick (1994) and Shearer (2006). For further reading on the leader of the Soviet Union see the two volumes of Stephen Kotkin’s excellent biography on Joseph Stalin (Kotkin, 2014, and Kotkin, 2017).

2 On the discussion of the cultural revolution of 1928–1931 and its distinctions from the broader social movement for the people’s Soviet Enlightenment and the fight on the cultural front after the Revolution see Fitzpatrick (1978).

3 See Fitzpatrick (1979).

4 For an in-depth discussion on the topic of Marxism in the sciences in the Soviet Union during the 1920s and 1930s see Jarovsky (1961) and Todes & Kremensov (2010).

5 The university’s title in Russian: Sredne-Aziatskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet (SAGU).


7 Detailed discussion of the Communist Academy and other related, distinctly Marxist, institutions of research and higher learning (such as the Sverdlov Communist University, the Institute of Red Professors, the Russian Association of Scientific Research Institutes of Social Sciences, and the Society of Militant Dialectical Materialists) and their rivalry with the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union can be found in David-Fox (1997) and Vucinich (1984).


9 GARF, f. A–482, op. 41, d. 644, l. 8; see also Vygodskaya & Lifanova (1996), pp. 135, 231–232.


11 For an example of the Vygotsky-Gellerstein collaboration see Vygotski, L. S. & Gellerstein, S. G. (1931). K voprosu o pedologo-psikhotehnicheskom isledovanii problemy
politeknizmizma. In Na psikhotekhnicheskom fronte. Materialy k Pervomu s’ezdu Vsesoiuznogo obschestva psikhotekhnik i prikladnoi psikhofiziologii. May 1931. [Part] I. Tezisy dokladov 20–21 may, pp.35–40. Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe social’no-ekonornicheskoe izdat’stvo. (Vygotsky’s is the second part of the joint presentation subtitled: Vygotsky L. S. Prakticheskaia deiatel’nost’ i myslenie v razvitii rebenka v sviaz’i s problemoi politeknizmizma, pp. 38–40.)

12 For the list and discussion of Vygotsky’s lifetime published works see the Appendix and chapter 4 in Yasnitsky & van der Veer (2016). For discussion of the interrelations and correspondence between Kallen, Luria and Vygotsky see Yasnitsky & Lamdan (2017).

13 The history of International Psychological Congresses is well covered in Rosenzweig, Holtzman, Sabourin, & Bélanger (2000).

14 For a detailed reconstruction of Luria’s foreign trip in 1929 see Yasnitsky (2012a), and Yasnitsky (2012b).

15 See Luria (1932).


17 See Vygotskii & Luria (1930) and Vygotsky & Luria (1993).

18 From Vygotsky’s letter to Leontiev dated 23 July 1929.


20 By “significative” Vygotsky means “related to sign”.

21 Underlining in the original.

22 As strange as it may appear, the manuscript was subsequently censored and considerably edited so that, contrary to Vygotsky’s explicit declarations, all “psychological functions” were changed into “psychical functions”. Then, the falsified text in five chapters was published in Russian in 1960 under the title “The history of the development of higher psychical functions” (Vygotskii, 1960). The title repeats verbatim the first words of the very first chapter. This suggests that the work was never titled so by the manuscript author, but rather the title was posthumously created by the editors and the publishers of the manuscript. In a subsequent Soviet publication in 1983 the text was even further falsified. An extra ten chapters were added to the previously published ones. These chapters were taken from a completely different, but also unfinished, somewhat earlier Vygotsky manuscript on children’s normal and pathological development. According to the editors of the volume, this addition comprised the previously missing yet newly discovered chapters of the same theoretical treatise. The total of fifteen chapters was proclaimed the most updated version of the text, which is obviously a false claim. For discussion see Yasnitsky (2011a).

23 In the posthumous publications these Vygotsky texts were censored and edited again so that these quotation marks were removed.


25 GARF f. A-406 op. 12, d. 2505. Published in Kostrigin (2017a) and Kostrigin (2017b).


27 ARAO f. 82, op. 1, d. 11: Materialy reaktologicheskoi diskussii. Stenogramma sobraniia, 2 March 1931.

28 Decree “About the journal ‘Under the banner of Marxism’”. (Approved and issued by the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR on 25 January 1931), online: http://istmat.info/node/51509.
For a description and discussion of this and other rituals of the Soviet “Stalinist science” see Kremens’ov (1997).

30 LSV-FA, Trudovoi spisok (trudovaia knizhka) professora Vtorogo MGU – MGPI im. A.S. Bubnova L’va Semenovicha Vygotskogo. 1931 g.; l. 8, item 24.

31 ARAO, F. 82, op. 1, d. 11.

32 Itogi diskussii po reaktologicheskih psikhologii. Rezoliutsiia obshchego sobraniia iacheiki VKP(b) Gosudarstvennogo instituta psikhologii, pedologii, i psikhotekhniki ot 06.06.1931 r. Psikhologiya, 1931, 4–6, pp. 2–3.

33 See Leontiev & Yaroshkevich (2013).

34 The notes that Vygotsky made for the talk (LSV-FA) were published in Vygodskaya & Lifanova (1996), pp. 136–137.

35 Vygotskii (1934). This 1934 book was published so late in the year that in fact it did not reach its readership before early 1935.

36 See the special issue of journal for Russian and East European Psychology, 2000, 38(6).


38 See Tal’kin (2000), pp. 10–11. This publication is a stenographic report of a talk that Tal’kin gave in the summer of 1931 in Kharkov, the capital of Soviet Ukraine then. He also gave similar talk in Moscow. The original publication came out in a specialized local journal: Tal’kin, A. A. (1931). O povorote na psikhologicheskom fronte. Sovetskaiia psikhonevrologiia, 2–3, p. 8–23.

39 For the original publication see Feofanov, M. P. (1932). Teorii kul’turnogo razvitiia v pedologii kak elektricheskaia [sic] konsepsiia, imeushchaia v osnovnom idealisticheskie komi [The theory of cultural development in pedology as an electric [sic] theory that has mainly idealistic roots]. Pedologiia, 5(1–2), pp. 21–34.

40 See Feofanov (2000).

41 In Russian: elektricheskaia.

42 In Russian: eleklicheskaia.


44 The authors refer to Werner’s German book, Einführung in die Entwicklungspychologie [Introduction into developmental psychology], published in Hamburg in 1926. It underwent several revised editions in German in the 1920s and 1930s, and was later released as Werner’s first English publication. See Werner (1940).

45 See Todes (2014), especially chapter 43, “Pavlov’s Communists”.


48 From Vygotsky’s letter to Luria dated 12 June 1931.

49 From Vygotsky’s letter to Luria dated 20 June 1931.

50 From Vygotsky’s letter to Luria dated 20 June 1931.

51 From Vygotsky’s letter to Luria dated 11 July 1931.

52 From Vygotsky’s letter to Luria dated 1 August 1931. Underlining in the original.

53 From Vygotsky’s letter to Luria dated 1 August 1931. Underlining in the original.


55 From Vygotsky’s letter to Leontiev dated August 1931.

56 From Vygotsky’s letter to Luria dated 17 August 1932. Underlining in the original.
For Koffka’s impressions of the trip to Central Asia in 1932 see his letters and diaries published in Harrower (1983).

See Luria (1933), p. 191.

For a detailed discussion of this historical episode see Lamdan & Yasnitsky (2016).

Author’s own emphasis. The full record “Consciousness without word” was published in Zavershneva & van der Veer (2017), pp. 319–322.

The challenge of totality: holistic Gestalt psychology

In the fall of 1929 Luria returned from his trip to the Ninth International Psychological Congress. Luria was excited by his encounters with his foreign peers and their scientific achievements. As a result, he imported to the USSR the “new psychology” that he witnessed abroad. In his reports of the Congress he associated the new wave of psychological studies with several scholars, half of which were representatives of the same research tradition: German-American Gestalt psychology. It originated in Germany in the 1910s, but in the early decades of the 20th century its key representatives gradually migrated across the Ocean, to the USA. The German word “Gestalt” can mean many things: image, form, shape, structure, or an organized whole. This is too many for a scientific term to be translated into another language without the loss of at least a part of its meaning. This is how it happened that the word is still being used in its German original form in the present day. At the most general level, “Gestalt” is associated with the ideas of holism, wholeness, and structural unity.

Theoretical considerations were certainly an important factor that attracted Vygotsky’s and Luria’s interest in holism in its gestaltist variety. Yet, this interest developed gradually and was supported by personal acquaintances and informal contacts between the members of the Vygotsky-Luria Circle and their peers abroad, the scholars of the Gestalt group. The first of these contacts took place during the course of the international trips in the mid-1920s. Soviet researchers and their Western counterparts visited each other and established personal relationships. Both Vygotsky and Luria, independently of each other, travelled to Western Europe in 1925; subsequently, German gestaltist Kurt Gottschaldt paid a visit to the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1920s.

The gestaltist movement was founded by Max Wertheimer (1880–1943), Wolfgang Köhler (1887–1967), and Kurt Koffka (1886–1941) in the first two
decades of the 20th century, and further developed in the works of these German scholars, their students and associates. Gestalt theory was originally conceived in the studies on visual perception but grew into a major intellectual force and a program of research well beyond the confines of the psychology of perception. Gestalt psychology gradually spread into areas as diverse as child psychology (Koffka), the psychology of animals (Köhler), emotions, will and action (Kurt Lewin and his students), productive thinking (Wertheimer), and clinical psychology (Kurt Goldstein and Adhémar Gelb). These later developments contributed considerably to the expansion of the Gestalt theory, although at the same time often in a somewhat unpredictable, unorthodox, or even critical manner.\(^1\) Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) of the Berlin Institute of Psychology, and each of the scientific duo of Kurt Goldstein (1878–1965) and Adhémar Gelb (1887–1935) in Frankfurt, used gestaltist terminology and shared some principles with the mainstream gestaltist tradition. However, they diverged from this intellectual movement on a number of experimental, methodological, and theoretical issues, and, thus, worked on its margins.\(^2\)

The continuous contacts and exchanges between the two groups of scholars – the German gestaltists and the Soviet group of Vygotsky–Luria – were boosted by the influx of the Berlin Institute of Psychology graduates, who relocated to the Soviet Union in the early 1930s. There was a considerable group of Russian speakers in Berlin, who pursued their studies at the Berlin Institute of Psychology in the 1920s. They were Gita Birenbaum, Tamara Dembo, Nina Kaulina, Maria Ovsiankina (later, Rickers-Ovsiankina), and Bluma Zeigarnik. In Berlin they pursued their doctoral research, mostly under the supervision of gestaltist Kurt Lewin. In the early 1930s three of them – Birenbaum, Kaulina (both in 1930), and Zeigarnik (in June 1931) – moved to Soviet Russia and continued their work in close contact with Vygotsky, Luria, and their associates. Lewin briefly came to Moscow in April–May 1933 on his return trip from Japan to Germany, but he left the Soviet Union in order to eventually settle in the USA.

Two more of Lewin’s Russian students – Dembo and Ovsiankina – also left Germany in the early 1930s and ultimately settled in the USA, where they teamed up with another female scholar of Russian descent and a graduate in psychology from a German University, Eugenia Hanfmann. By the mid-1930s there was a considerable group of gestaltist professors in the USA. It included Kurt Koffka, Max Wertheimer, Kurt Lewin, Wolfgang Köhler, and Kurt Goldstein, most of whom were Jewish and had emigrated from Germany after Adolf Hitler, the leader of the openly Anti-Semitic National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP, the Nazi Party), was appointed the leader of the German Government, the Reichskanzler, in late January 1933.

Overall, there was a dense personal and professional network between the scholars in the Soviet Union, Germany, and the USA, a budding transnational Soviet–German–American research project, and the beginning of a truly “beautiful friendship”.\(^3\) The sustained transnational collaboration of these research groups might have eventually brought about a new and exciting integrative and holistic psychology. Unfortunately, for a number of personal and political reasons this
project was never realized. Nevertheless, as of the early 1930s the impact of the
gestaltists’ work on Vygotsky and Luria was immense, and they were enthusiastically
integrating the gestalt perspective into the core of their theorizing. In other words:
Vygotsky and Luria were desperately trying to salvage and hold together their
fragmented and inconsistent views and discoveries with the help of the ideas of
holism and the rigorous gestalt theoretical and methodological framework.

The ideas of holism, of the precedence and the superiority of the whole over the
parts, were widely spread among German and Austrian psychologists, whose
reputation remained extremely high among Russian and Soviet psychologists in
the 1920s and 1930s. Despite the rise of a great many of national traditions of
psychological research all over the globe at that time, most notably in the Soviet
Union and the USA, Germany remained the dominant influential force in the
fields of experimental and theoretical psychology. This group of German gestalt
scholars were among the most vocal advocates of holism in psychological research.

Gestaltism emerged in response to the weaknesses and perceived deficiencies of
the numerous psychological theories of their time. Most notably, gestaltists
opposed atomistic conceptions that viewed all psychological phenomena consisting
of basic elements, or atoms, and, thus, proposed research based on the analysis of
complex wholes decomposed into their constitutive elements. In his famous talk in
December 1924 the founder of the theory, Max Wertheimer, thus emphasized the
sharp contrast between the atomistic and the holistic approach:

The fundamental question with which we wish to deal simply, clearly and
strictly remains the same: is the meaning of a part derived from the intrinsic
structure of its whole, or are the happenings of the whole a mechanical, piecemeal,
accidental, blind consequence of the happenings in the single parts?\(^5\)

\textit{Wertheimer (1944), p. 93}

Wertheimer formulated the “basic thesis of gestalt theory”, according to which
this theory dealt with complex phenomena and was primarily preoccupied with
the wholes:

The basic thesis of gestalt theory might be formulated thus: there are contexts
in which what is happening in the whole cannot be deduced from the
characteristics of the separate pieces, but conversely; what happens to a part of
the whole is, in clear-cut cases, determined by the laws of the inner structure
of its whole.

\textit{Wertheimer (1944)}

Wertheimer referred to this statement as a formula, and added that he “could really
stop here, because this is gestalt theory, no more or less”.\(^6\)

The theories of the past often discussed elementary sensations as the building
blocks of the human psyche. According to one explanation, these elements were
joined together by mere laws of mechanistic association. This would qualify as the
theory of associationism. Gestaltists criticized associationism and argued that basic psychological elements, the atoms, were a mere abstraction and never occurred in nature as such, but existed only within more complex processes and phenomena. This extreme was also labelled mechanist, reductionist, or materialist. A typical example of a physiological reductionist approach would be reflexology of Vladimir Bekhterev or Ivan Pavlov’s theory of higher nervous functions.

An alternative explanation of what holds elementary sensations together was the agency of supreme prime forces within animals or human beings. These forces might be attributed to the acts of a spirit or some mysterious biological energy, the energy of life. The theories that employed such notions were labelled spiritualism and vitalism, respectively, and qualified as idealism. Gestaltists objected to this extreme, too. Wertheimer warned against the potential pitfalls of the idealist worldview and, generally, against the radical separation between the two extremes:

People speak of idealism as opposed to materialism, thereby suggesting something beautiful by idealism and by materialism something gloomy, barren, dry, ugly. Do they really mean by consciousness something opposed to, let us say, a peacefully blossoming tree? When one considers what one finds repellent in materialism and mechanism, and what seems great in idealism, does one find the material properties of the elements to be the issue? Frankly, there are psychological theories and even plenty of psychological textbooks which, although they speak continuously only of conscious elements, are more materialistic, dryer, more senseless and lifeless than a living tree which has probably no consciousness in it at all. It cannot matter of what materials the particles of the universe consist; what matters is the kind of whole, the significance of the whole, the meaning of the whole, the nature of the whole.

Wertheimer (1944), pp. 95–96

Psychology deals with the physical body and the mind, which cannot be separated from each other, but must be treated as a whole in their indivisible unity: “Think of someone dancing. In his dance there is joy and grace. How is that? Does it represent on the one hand a display of muscles and movement of the limbs, and on the other hand psychic consciousness? No.”

These holistic ideas made a great impression on Vygotsky, who either quoted or alluded to these lines on a number of occasions. Wertheimer’s firm stance on the unity of the body and the mind deeply influenced Vygotsky’s theoretical thinking about “psychological functions” as an inseparable unity of the physiological and the psychical.

Another key idea also originated in the gestaltist holism. For Vygotsky, it was particularly important, since it superseded his cherished notion of isolated “higher psychological functions”. This was the idea of the “systemic” approach that Vygotsky expressed in terms of the “system of functions” and first introduced in October 1930, as the beginning of a new research program.

Then, also under the influence of the gestaltist holistic perspective, Vygotsky radically revised his view on the method of scientific analysis. Thus, in his first
publications on the “instrumental method” or the “psychology of cultural development” Vygotsky clearly compared a human being with a machine and advocated for such an analysis that would break down the object of research into natural elements:

Every cultural method of behavior, even the most complicated, can always be completely analyzed into its component nervous and psychic processes, just as every machine, in the last resort, can be reduced to a definite system of natural forces and processes. Therefore, the first task of scientific investigation, when it deals with some cultural method of behavior, must be the analysis of that method, i.e. its decomposition into component parts, which are natural psychological processes. This analysis, if carried out consistently and to completion, will always give us the same result. This proves precisely that there can be no complicated or high method of cultural reasoning which did not in the last resort consist of some primary elementary psychological processes of behavior.\(^8\)

\(Vygotski (1929)\), pp. 418–419

Under the influence of gestaltism Vygotsky migrated from the idea of analysis by elements that he defended in the 1920s to the method of analysis by units in the early 1930s. These units would preserve the qualities of the whole. Vygotsky borrowed an example from chemistry and compared such units to molecules. For instance, the molecule of water contains the atoms of oxygen and hydrogen, therefore, it requires that a researcher analyses it as a whole, as a unit; otherwise, if treated by the elements it comprises, this would not be water anymore, but a mere sum of two distinct substances. The units were not universal and depended on the object of research. Thus, for the study of the interdependence of speech and thinking Vygotsky proposed word meaning as a unit of analysis that would combine the linguistic and the psychological as an undivided whole. Another unit of analysis would be required for the investigation of personality in its totality. Vygotsky yet again followed German psychological tradition and discussed a “lived-through experience” (his version of the German word \textit{Erlebnis}) as such a unit that preserved all qualities of a whole human person.\(^9\) This discussion remained a mere speculation: no research on personality was done, and no methods of analysis of this unit were established.

\textbf{Kurt Lewin’s “Galileian” psychology}

In the 1930s Vygotsky was also under the strong influence of Kurt Lewin and specifically his thinking about the methodology of psychological research. Lewin expressed his methodological ideas in his work “The conflict between Aristotelian and Galileian modes of thought in contemporary psychology” and several other studies that were published by the early 1930s. In a series of papers on the methodology of psychological research Lewin drew parallels between the history of natural and human sciences. Lewin described the crisis in psychology in terms of
the conflict between two dramatically distinct modes of thinking in scientific research. According to Lewin, physics as a scientific discipline at certain point in its historical development underwent the transition from the ancient model of science to the contemporary one. Lewin referred to the ancient model as “Aristotelian”, and he labelled “Galileian” the modern model by the name of the famous Italian physicist Galileo Galilei (1564–1642). Lewin argued that psychology was lagging behind physics, and that it would need to make a similar transition to a “Galileian” model if it were ever to become a modern science in the full sense.10

In order to implement his “Galileian” model of psychology, Lewin and his numerous students designed a series of experimental studies on actions and emotions that they conducted in Berlin in the 1920s and early 1930s. The studies transcended the boundaries of traditional psychological laboratory research in a number of respects. First, they were not only meticulously designed as almost theatrical performances, but also repeatedly rehearsed and re-enacted among Lewin’s colleagues and students in their numerous pilot studies. The theatrical, dramatic element allowed Lewin’s group to study not what was openly declared as the purpose of the research, but those psychological processes that were hiding behind human actions. Concealing the real goal of research would become the trademark of Lewin’s method of experimentation. Second, the researcher was deeply involved in the study, not as external and an “objective” detached observer, but as an actor and an active participant of the “drama”, too. This meant that the conclusions of the researcher were not final and universally acceptable, but equally subjective and in need of further reflection. Third, Lewin’s method heavily relied on a combination of quantitative (statistical) and qualitative (observational) methods of investigation. This way, the statistical analysis of the quantitative data was done in parallel with the interpretation of behavior observation data.11

Vygotsky was fascinated by Lewin’s theoretical ideas and, even more so, by his methods of experimental research. In a letter to Luria in June 1931 that Vygotsky sent from Moscow to Central Asia he wrote in excitement:

Zeigarnik has arrived. At the laboratory meeting on the tenth [i.e. 10 June 1931], she presented a report on some new studies ([the study of Lewin’s student Ferdinand] Hoppe’s success and nonsuccess, Sättigung, the switching of Spannung to other pathways – the problem of Ersatz in satisfying needs). It was good. Refined. Clever. A bit of a woman’s needlework. Very much in the style of Lewin. She’s going to present another report to us tomorrow.12

Vygotsky (2007), p. 35

Vygotsky was familiar with many of the “Lewin Circle” studies.13 His original Russian letter conspicuously abounds with German words. This feature of this particular letter was increasingly becoming characteristic of his entire way of thinking and writing in 1931 through to 1934. Lewin’s terminology swiftly penetrated Vygotsky’s work. Notably, for the lack of adequate Russian translations, Vygotsky frequently used these Lewinian German terms in their original form.14
Influenced by Lewin’s group’s research, Vygotsky detected another major problem with his thinking and studies as accomplished by that point. He realized that he had overestimated the role of intellectual processes and neglected emotions. In order to rectify this bias of his theory, he worked on a large manuscript on the psychology of emotions. Like a number of other of Vygotsky’s manuscripts, this work was never finished: Vygotsky wrote a draft of the first, critical, part, and then abandoned it altogether. Yet, Vygotsky launched a series of experiments in Lewin’s footsteps. Vygotsky’s associate, Ivan Solov’ev, was in charge of a series of replications of Lewinian studies in the early 1930s. These replications were curious, though. Vygotsky and Solov’ev repeated the design of Lewin’s students’ studies. Yet, in their discussion of the results they merged together Lewinian focus on the situation (the “psychological field”), the action, and the dynamics of emotions flow, with another “Vygotskian” dimension: the reflection on the sense and the meaning-making that occurred during the experiments. The gestaltists were not that far from the “Vygotskian” interest in such matters as “value”, “significance”, and “attitude”. By Kurt Koffka’s own admission, these notions constituted “one of the deepest roots of gestalt theory, one which has been least openly brought before the English-speaking public”. Furthermore, Koffka argued that:

The positivistic interpretation of the world and our knowledge of it is but one possibility; there is another one. The question is: Which is really true? Meaning, significance, value, as data of our total experience give us a hint that the latter has at least as good a chance of being the true one as the former. And that means: far from being compelled to banish concepts like meaning and value from psychology and science in general, we must use these concepts for a full understanding of the mind and the world, which is at the same time a full explanation.

Koffka (1935), p. 21

In his interpretation of gestaltism Vygotsky might have missed this very important point and failed to notice the deeply cultural aspect of this intellectual movement. Thus, he might have overestimated the added value of his research to gestaltist psychology. Ivan Solov’ev continued his “Lewinian” studies during the early 1930s, but this line of research was abruptly terminated after Vygotsky’s death.

The impact of the works of Gestalt theorists and their students and associates on Vygotsky was increasing throughout the entire decade of his career in Moscow (1924–1934). In the draft of his unfinished methodological work of 1926–1927 on the meaning of the crisis in psychology Vygotsky critically discussed several major contemporary theories and made a number of critical remarks about Gestalt psychology, too. Yet, evolution of his views is notable in his later publication of 1930, in which he gave a favorable overview of the gestaltist theory of the Berlin Institute of Psychology (presented under the label of “Structural psychology”) and dropped many of his earlier criticisms. Even further evolution of his views on Gestalt theory is evident in the last chapter of his book “Thinking and speech”
where he characterized Gestalt theory as the “most progressive of all contemporary psychological strands”\textsuperscript{20}. These lines were written a few months before Vygotsky’s death.

**The Vygotsky–Luria Circle in the 1930s**

The Great Break disturbed and reshuffled virtually all spheres of the economy and social life in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s. Specifically, in science a number of universities and institutes were reorganized, closed down or merged into larger centres of teaching and research. An example of such institutional transformation was the Institute of Experimental Psychology in Moscow that was inspected, audited, reorganized, and renamed. Another example was the Second Moscow State University where Vygotsky taught and some of his collaborators studied. In 1930 this university was reorganized and closed down. Three new institutes were established instead. The former Department of Education of the University became the Moscow State Pedagogical Institute, named after the new Narkom of Enlightenment, Andrei Bubnov, who was appointed to this position in 1929. This administrative decision had no effect on Vygotsky, who continued his work in this new institute. Yet, this was a teaching job that did not require research activities. A major research hub of the Vygotsky–Luria group was the Academy of Communist Upbringing, located just across the street from the Pedagogical Institute. During the course of the institutional reorganization, in 1931 the Academy’s Laboratory of Psychology was closed down. Vygotsky’s former students, all graduates by then, were dispersed. New research hubs were needed. And they were created.

The year of 1930 was a new landmark in the history of the Vygotsky-Luria Circle. It was in the 1930s that the members of this research group transcended the boundaries of Moscow and spread across several geographical locations in the Soviet Union. Three major research centres were established in the largest and most important cities such as Moscow, Leningrad, and Kharkov.

In Moscow, Vygotsky continued his work in the Experimental Defectological Institute along with old collaborators (Zankov, Solov’ev, and R. Levina) and new, including Maria Pevzner, Vera Schmidt, Roza Averbukh, and Rakhil’ Boskis. Two of Kurt Lewin’s former students – Gita Birenbaum and Bluma Zeigarnik – worked at the Clinical Department of the Institute for Research in Higher Nervous Activity (IVND) in 1931–1932 and later moved to the All-Union Institute of Experimental Medicine (VIEM) in 1933. All these individuals worked in alliance with Vygotsky and carried out research in clinical settings or in the field of special education of children with anomalies of development.

In Leningrad, Vygotsky established a new informal research group. Apparently, he failed to find a position in Moscow that could compensate his family for the loss of income from the Academy of Communist Upbringing and other sources. Thus, he took a position in Leningrad at the Herzen State Pedagogical Institute, and Vygotsky would frequently commute between Moscow and Leningrad in the 1930s. It was in Leningrad that he met new like-minded scholars such as Danil
El’konin, Mira Levina, and Zhozefina Shif. Very soon they would become his associates and collaborators. This group was primarily interested in educational issues and the psychology of child development. For instance, in 1932–1933 Shif conducted a graduate research study on the development of thinking in children. Vygotsky left a lengthy discussion of this research project that constituted a large part of chapter six in Vygotsky’s “Thinking and speech”. After her graduation in Leningrad, Shif moved to Moscow and joined Vygotsky’s group at the Experimental Defectological Institute.

Finally, another research centre was established in the capital of Soviet Ukraine, Kharkov. Upon the invitation of local Narkomzdrav, Luria, Leontiev, and Lebedinskii moved there in order to found this new research unit. Eventually, this research centre was intended to grow and become an Institute of Psychology at the local All-Ukrainian Psychoneurological Academy. This Academy was a major newly established institution for clinical practice and medical research that was created by the merger of several smaller research institutes, educational establishments, and clinics in the fields of psychiatry, neurology, and biomedical studies. Vygotsky was also considered for a position in Kharkov, but this plan was never realized. Instead, Vygotsky’s and Luria’s former students, Zaporozhets and Bozhovich, moved to Kharkov in order to take junior research positions. Finally, several locals (including Piotr Gal’perin, Piotr Zinchenko, and Vladimir Asnin) joined the team that would constitute the Kharkov group. In Kharkov, Luria pursued his studies as a medical student (along with Vygotsky, who was taking a correspondence course). Luria was appointed head of the Psychology Department at the Academy, which included the units of clinical, developmental, and general psychology. Luria, with a relatively small group of his co-workers, pursued psychological research in clinical settings. Leontiev chose a different path: a natural born leader and an ambitious person, he formed a group that, under his supervision, focused on psychological research on child development.\(^{21}\)

Most of Vygotsky’s associates were absolutely fascinated by him: his personal charm, thought, contagious enthusiasm, and exceptional verbal giftedness. Yet, the influx of new cadres also brought the seeds of doubt. For instance, this is how the Kharkovite Piotr Gal’perin, medical doctor by training, remembered his encounters with Vygotsky:

> I met him several times casually, in Kharkov. On one occasion he gave a lecture on one of Luria’s patients, and I was present. Afterward, everybody left the hall; and at the door, I met Luria, who thought it was a “fantastic lecture.” To my own surprise, I had, however, to note that I did not feel that sort of enthusiasm at all … You can simply say that Vygotsky enchanted everybody; but I – regrettable as it may be – did not have that experience.

Haenen & Galperin (1989), p. 17

This remark reveals something new that for a while remained hidden below the surface of his followers’ usual fascination with Vygotsky: the increasing dissent
among the “Vygotskians”. This dissent subsequently generated a critical attitude towards his work and thought. Thus, the Vygotsky–Luria Circle in the 1930s was not as united as it used to be in the 1920s – both geographically and intellectually.

**Major theoretical reconstruction and new experimentation**

Dissatisfied with the flaws and deficiencies of his theory, Vygotsky waged his own war on two fronts: from outside inside, and from inside outside.

The movement inside was triggered by Vygotsky’s growing interest in the inner side of the observable human behavior. He had realized that behind virtually anything that we can observe there must be a certain cause and explanatory principle. Were it not so, argued Vygotsky (simultaneously following both Kurt Lewin and Karl Marx), no research and no analysis whatsoever would be needed: scientific discovery would be sufficient by merely describing appearances. This applied to anything we can observe: behavior, words, instruments, signs, or even Vygotsky’s long-time favorite, culture. But none of these, argued Vygotsky, could serve as either an explanatory principle or the real cause of distinctly human psychology.

First, Vygotsky introduced the idea of a word’s “meaning” as a new unit of analysis. Yet, he soon realized that meaning was too narrow and limited for explaining the whole range of psychological phenomena. It seemed to be applicable to the analysis of thinking and mind only. A new proposal was “sense” as a unit of analysis. Such unit promised to work well with a wide range of psychological and behavioral phenomena. At some point, Vygotsky announced a method of analysis of “sense” that he dubbed “emic” (or “semantic”) analysis, but he failed (or never cared) to clearly identify the distinct procedures and specific operations such analysis would entail.

The opposite direction, from the inside out, was likely inspired by the peer critique of his theory. Among other things, Vygotsky was criticized for abstract theorizing that was not related to real life, to the tasks of truly Marxist “polytechnic education” (that would equally focus on theoretical knowledge and practical social activities, such as engineering and industrial production), and the actual goals of the rapid socialist reconstruction of the country. Then, he made a few steps towards integrating his system of ideas into the social context, everyday practice and the social situation of a child’s development. Perhaps the most famous example of such an attempt was Vygotsky’s discussion of the “zone of proximal development”. The idea was developed on the basis of observations by Western scholars and educators, such as the American specialist in language development in young children, Dorothea McCarthy (1906–1974), and was inspired by Kurt Lewin’s “field theory” and “topological and vector psychology” that he explicated in several books of the 1930s. Curiously, in Vygotsky’s various texts the “zone” meant several different things depending on where and when it occurred.

In the context of learning, it meant that children’s actual level of development could be understood only as a combination of the level of children’s individual unassisted performance and the extent to which they could surpass themselves if
helped by knowledgeable others – peers or adults. In the context of developmental research, it would mean a principle according to which children’s development was to be studied as a continuous process, in its potential development during the course of the social dynamic of children’s interactions with adults. The alternative to this is the research of the children’s static actual development at a certain point. Finally, as a method of assessment, Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development was to be measured as an indicator of the anticipated future progress as opposed to the measuring of actual performance, which is typical of educational assessment to this day.23

All these diverse lines of thinking were to be put into a certain order. In December 1932 Vygotsky organized an “internal conference” – a research meeting with his closest collaborators – and announced a new research program. This meeting proved a landmark from both a theoretical and a personal standpoint. A new theory of consciousness was needed, argued Vygotsky. A theory of consciousness had always been on Vygotsky’s mind ever since his first public appearance as a novice scholar at the Psychoneurological Congress of 1924 with his talk on consciousness. Back then, he discussed consciousness in terms of “reflex of reflexes”. In the early 1930s Vygotsky’s thinking on the topic had evolved considerably, and by the end of 1932 he understood consciousness to be a dynamic system, and described it as a “semantic structure”. The novelty in Vygotsky’s proposal of December 1932 was that the theory of consciousness would become another main focus of their scholarly work and research activities.

In his presentation, Vygotsky discussed other popular psychological theories of the day such as behaviorism and psychoanalysis that he referred to as “surface” and “depth” psychologies, respectively. In contrast, their original psychology would be a “peak psychology”. The reference to “peak”, “summit”, or the highest point is yet again very reminiscent of Vygotsky’s earlier attempt at the “psychology of superman”. In fact, this was the same old idea, but in a somewhat new disguise. Indeed, it followed exactly the same logic: distinctively “Vygotskian” psychology would focus on human performance in the highest, brightest, and extraordinary episodes of life, above the average, outside the everyday routine, beyond the confines of the usual. According to the notes that his team members were taking during the December 1932 meeting, Vygotsky did not explicitly mention a “superman” or a “genius”. Yet, his proposal to focus on the “peaks of a personality” definitely followed the same logic of his earlier futurist and utopian call for a “new psychology”. Indeed, the ideas of the “peak performance” and the consciousness worked well together: a conscious, deliberate effort would be needed in order to progress towards the higher human type, and one did not seem to be possible without the other.

From a theoretical perspective, Vygotsky proposed that from that time his research team would redesign the whole program of their studies and reorient themselves towards creating a new theory of consciousness that would account for what they had been dealing with in their research to that point. To Vygotsky, the call for a new psychological theory of consciousness might have seemed a
breakthrough proposal and an exciting opportunity to create a psychological system after all.\textsuperscript{24} From a personal standpoint, though, this meeting bordered on disastrous. Vygotsky’s associates possibly did not entirely understand his ideas, but certainly disagreed with him. This was the first case when Vygotsky’s team openly entered a stand-off and there was no apparent resolution of the situation. By December 1932 Leontiev had built a solid research team in Kharkov that focused on “practical intelligence” and children’s actions that involved instruments and physical objects. The mere idea of a departure from practical activity and a turn to the study of consciousness appeared to them a radical step back in a theoretical sense, not to mention a strong “idealist” flavor in Vygotsky’s new proposal. This was not a breakup, but something important definitely changed with respect to scholarly work and interpersonal relations alike. Their communications continued throughout 1933 and 1934, but this conflict of beliefs, ideas, and personalities at the end of 1932 overshadowed their subsequent scientific collaboration.

In 1933 Vygotsky continued to work on his “theory of consciousness”, but nothing of substance came out of this effort: he abandoned the manuscript on emotions and left a great many short handwritten notes with somewhat cryptic discussions of sense and consciousness, including several plans for a book on the topic. But he even never started writing such a book.\textsuperscript{25}

In parallel with his theoretical work, Vygotsky never ceased his practice and research at the Experimental Defectological Institute. In contrast with his effort towards the announced new theory of consciousness, these activities proved very fruitful. Vygotsky was reflecting on his findings and was trying to combine them in a theoretical system. Yet, practice remained mainly separated from a theory of his own. In part, it was so because Vygotsky’s collaborators and Kurt Lewin’s former students, Gita Birenbaum and Bluma Zeigarnik, dominated in this field and contributed a great wealth of ideas that they borrowed from the gestaltist scholarship of Lewin and Goldstein. Clinical practice was a particularly promising field of Vygotsky’s studies. These were largely supported by Luria’s studies in clinical settings that his team was forcefully developing at the Ukrainian Psychoneurological Academy in Soviet Ukraine in 1932–1933. A series of potential publications was anticipated. In one of his letters in 1933 from Moscow to Kharkov, Vygotsky shared his achievements with Luria and discussed a future project that, unfortunately, was never to materialize:

Finally, about the series: If it actually and periodically is to be published (at all costs from issue to issue), we must take it into our own hands with full responsibility. I have already: (1) the classification of aphasias, (2) Birenbaum and Vygotsky: aphasias and dementia, (3) Birenbaum and Zeigarnik: agnosia, (4) Vygotsky: written speech in brain lesions, (5) Vygotsky: grammatical dysfunction, etc. etc. \textit{ohne Zahl},\textsuperscript{26} as our patient answers when asked about the number of fingers she has on one hand. By the middle of December[, 1933] I will have prepared my first article and we will prepare three or four others in advance. A general title for all papers, as in \textit{Gestalttheorie}, Lewin, etc., is a must.\textsuperscript{27} …
The title for the series (options):

1. psychological [crossed out] investigation of the higher psychological functions in development and disintegration;
2. investigations in clinical psychology;
3. experimental and psychological [crossed out] clinical investigations in psychopathology;
4. investigation of thinking and speech in pathological dysfunctions;
5. psychological investigation of nervous and mental diseases;
6. psychological Clinic for Nervous and mental diseases.  

*Vygotsky, quoted in van der Veer & Yasnitsky (2016), p. 87*

Vygotsky’s involvement with clinical research and his reputation among medical specialists earned him an exciting new offer that he received from the highest healthcare agency, the *Narkomzdrav*, in early 1934. A new larger institute, the All-Union Institute of Experimental Medicine (VIEM), was being established in Moscow, and Vygotsky was invited to found a local Department of Psychology.  

Vygotsky was thrilled by this extraordinary opportunity to finally head a major research unit where he would launch a full-blown research project of his liking. Clinical psychological research would constitute the core of the Department’s activities, yet it seems it also allowed for relatively marginal studies in developmental, general, and theoretical psychology. Luria’s Psychological Department at the Ukrainian Psychoneurological Academy in Kharkov would serve as a perfect model for the new department at the VIEM in Moscow. In early 1934, full of plans and expectations, Vygotsky was busy corresponding with his past and future co-workers at the VIEM in the hope of launching the new research unit at the earliest opportunity. In the meantime, he participated in the new Institute’s activities: he wrote an accusatory and politically charged chapter for a book titled “Fascism in Psychoneurology” and gave several talks on clinical and neurological topics at the VIEM in April–May 1934. The Department was launched, and quite quickly, but Vygotsky would never head it.

**“The threshold of a new theory”: the pessimistic finale**

The hopes and excitement proved short-lived: mortally ill from the late 1910s, Vygotsky died in June 1934, without having ever established a major research unit of his own and leaving his ever emergent integral theory unfinished.

Vygotsky first stated his intent to produce a book on the interrelations between thinking and speech in March 1932. Two years later the book was more or less ready. In fact, the newly written manuscript comprised roughly half of the book. The other half was a collection of earlier papers of Vygotsky’s “instrumental psychology” period, composed in 1928–1930 and published in 1929–1932.  

It was in these later manuscripts of February–March 1934 that Vygotsky gave a summative assessment of his achievement in psychological theory to that point. The image of a
“threshold” is as clear as it is pessimistic. In the Prologue of the book Vygotsky wrote:

We perfectly well understand the inevitable imperfection of that first step in the new direction that we tried to make in this work. But we see its justification in the fact that it, in our firm belief, moves us ahead in the investigation of thinking and speech in comparison with that state of this problem that had formed in psychology when we began our work. It uncovers the problem of thinking and speech as the key problem of all psychology of man and directly leads the researcher to a new psychological theory of consciousness. However, we touch upon this problem only in the few concluding words of our work and interrupt the investigation at its very threshold.

Vygotskii (1934), p. 3

The psychology of consciousness was the main topic of Vygotsky’s theoretical effort of the last two years of his life. His goal was to create a new theory of consciousness.31 At the very end, on the last page of the book, Vygotsky briefly discussed this theory. Vygotsky clearly confessed to the failure:

In conclusion of our investigation, we cannot but dwell in a few words upon those perspectives that unfold beyond its threshold. Our investigation leads us closely to the threshold of another, even vaster, even deeper, even more grandiose problem than the problem of thinking – the problem of consciousness.

Vygotskii (1934), p. 318

In early May 1934, Vygotsky’s health dramatically deteriorated. On 9 May of that year, his daughter’s ninth birthday, he was brought home with an outbreak of chronic tuberculosis. The doctors insisted on bed rest, and he spent a month in bed fighting the disease. Yet, it was in vain. In the last note that he scribbled before his death Vygotsky compared himself with the Jewish prophet Moses who saw the Promised Land, but had to die without ever entering it:

This is the final thing I have done in psychology – and, like Moses, I will die at the summit, having glimpsed the Promised Land but without setting foot on it. Farewell, dear creations.
The rest is silence.32

Vygotsky, quoted in Yasnitsky & van der Veer (2016), p. 88

After another outbreak he was hospitalized. On 11 June 1934 Vygotsky died. This is the point where the story of the life of Lev Vygotsky ends. This is the point where the posthumous story of the genius begins.
Notes

1. Literature on Gestalt theory is vast. For biographies on Koffka see Harrower (1983), on Wertheimer see King & Wertheimer (2005), and on Lewin see Marrow (1969).
5. Originally published in German in 1924.
6. See Wertheimer (1944), p. 84.
7. See Wertheimer (1944), p. 96.
8. From the original English publication in 1929; see also a later and more accessible republication (Vygotsky, 1994a, pp. 59–60). This is a revised version of a Russian paper that was published a year earlier in the Soviet Union in the first issue of the journal “Pedologiia” (Pedology): Vygotskii, L. S. (1928). Problema kul’turnogo razvitiia rebenka. Pedologiia, 1, pp. 58–77.
9. For the German Erlebnis, Vygotsky used a Russian word: perezhivanie.
10. Most of Lewin’s core methodological works had been published in the 1920s in German. Several of these works, such as his programmatic paper on Aristotelian and Galilean modes of thinking in sciences, were published in English. See Lewin (1935).
11. For the first-hand recollections of Lewin and his experimental practices see the reminiscences of his students and direct co-workers Vera Mahler and especially Tamara Dembo (Dembo, 1993 and Mahler, 1996).
12. From Vygotsky’s letter to Luria dated 12–16, 18 June 12–16 1931; for more lengthy discussion see Yasnitsky (2016a).
13. For a description, discussion, and English publications of some these studies see de Rivera (1976) and Marrow (1969).
14. For instance, see Vygotsky’s private notes (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2017).
15. The unfinished manuscript was published posthumously. See, in English, Vygotsky (1999).
17. See discussion in Vygotskii & Dauishevskii (1935); available in English (Vygotsky, 1993b).
20. See Vygotskii (1934), p. 265. This phrase was censored and removed by the editors in the second, post–Second World War edition of the book that was published in the Soviet Union in 1956 and was never reinstated in later Soviet editions. Thus, it cannot be found in Minick’s generally more preferable translation of 1987 (Vygotsky, 1987), yet it was preserved in the shortened and authorial translation Kozulin; see Vygotsky (1986), p. 215.
21. For details on the Kharkov group and, generally, the evolution of the Vygotsky–Luria Circle see Yasnitsky (2016b) and Yasnitsky & Ferrari (2008).
22. See Lewin (1935), Lewin (1936) and Lewin (1938).
23. For further discussion see Kozulin (2014).
24. For discussion on the evolution of Vygotsky’s viewpoint on consciousness as the object of psychological research see Zavershneva (2014).
25 These notes were published in Zavershneva & van der Veer (2017).
26 German, literally “without count”, meaning here “in large numbers”, “beyond any count”.
27 Here Vygotsky refers to a cycle of journal publications by Kurt Lewin’s graduate students that was published in German and English in the 1920s and early 1930s in *Psychologische Forschung*. Only a few publications of Vygotsky and his team were actually released, all in Russian, mostly after Vygotsky’s death: Birenbaum, 1934; Birenbaum & Zeigarnik, 1935; Samukhin, Birenbaum, & Vygotskii, 1934; Zeigarnik, 1934; Zeigarnik & Birenbaum, 1935.
28 From Vygotsky’s letter to Luria dated 21 November 1933.
29 This large organization in Moscow, in retrospect, ultimately served as an institutional prototype of the Academy of Medical Sciences of the Soviet Union that was inaugurated in Moscow in 1944. Its contemporary successor is the Russian Academy of Medical Sciences, founded in 1992.
30 See van der Veer & Yasnitsky (2016) and Yasnitsky (2011a).
31 For a discussion of Vygotsky’s continuous effort at a theory of consciousness throughout the last decade of his life and, particularly, in 1932–1934 see Zavershneva (2014).
32 “The rest is silence” is a quote from Shakespeare’s “Hamlet”. The last record of Vygotsky’s work was published in Russian in a collection of his handwritten notes (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2017, p. 568).
During his lifetime, Vygotsky was a prophet, a Bolshevik, a reflexologist, a psychologist, a revisionist, and a holist. After his death he became a genius. So they say.

Perhaps it would not be so important to know who all these numerous “they” are, were they not so numerous and so authoritative. Yet, in 1934, when Vygotsky died, there were neither so many of them, nor were they of much authority.

The origin of the story about the genius of Vygotsky dates back to a time when his admiring students and followers would earnestly discuss how much of a genius Vygotsky was. Piotr Gal’perin (1902–1988), a contemporary, a psychologist, and a “Vygotskian”, recalled in his memoirs:

I remember [an] incident from my own personal conversations with Leontiev. We had been sitting [and] talking one evening, and we decided to take a short walk. Outside we got into a long discussion about the question of whether or not Vygotsky was, in all respects, a genius. It is, of course, with hindsight, ridiculous that two adult men were carrying on a heated discussion, outside on the street, on the degree of Vygotsky’s genius. But from this incident it is very apparent that he made a great impression on others.

Haenen & Galperin (1989), p. 15

And this impression was great indeed. Even several decades after Vygotsky’s death, in his memoirs Alexander Luria would bluntly state:

Vygotsky was a genius. After more than a half a century in science I am unable to name another person who even approaches his incredible analytic ability and foresight. All of my work has been no more than the working out of the psychological theory which he constructed.

Luria (1979), p. 38
Luria’s affection is absolutely apparent in these lines as well as in his gross overestimation of Vygotsky’s role in his own professional development as a brain specialist; Luria is widely acknowledged as a classic and one of the founders of the scientific discipline of neuropsychology.

Gal’perin provided an explanation of this psychological phenomenon and recalled an important episode in the lives and careers of the Vygotsky-Luria Circle that was, perhaps, utterly essential for the fate of the “Vygotskian” tradition in psychology:

Vygotsky was an exceptional person, especially in terms of his influence on others. I remember a few remarkable events. The first one: at the start of the thirties, on Stalin’s orders, so-called “free” discussions were organized. These discussions were established to silence prominent authorities on a particular subject. This took place as follows. The person was given an opportunity to be the first to expound his scientific premises. Subsequently, others were called upon to speak who had prepared themselves beforehand and whose task it was to crush the victim. That was the end of his scientific authority. Such a discussion was also announced concerning the views of Vygotsky. However, things went differently. Vygotsky delivered his lecture and held the whole hall under his spell. Everybody was disconcerted, and nobody knew how to proceed. An announcement was made that there would be no more lectures that day and that the proceedings were postponed. Those proceedings, however, never took place. Such a thing had never happened before.


Apparently, the spell of Vygotsky’s charisma, charm, and gift of persuasion worked miracles not only with his friends, but also with his foes. Here is a curious illustration of a mesmerizing affect that Vygotsky had on his followers:

Leont’ev told me about another minor event. Leont’ev and Luria had, at a given moment, a discussion about Vygotsky’s theory. Feelings were running quite high, and they decided to put the problem to Vygotsky himself, so that he could cut the Gordian knot. Vygotsky received them, and they sat talking for three hours. When they again stood outside Vygotsky’s apartment, they realized that they had forgotten all about the problem and had talked about something quite different. They had been totally engrossed by him; but to return was, of course, impossible.

Haenen & Galperin (1989), p. 15

Indeed, the impression Vygotsky made on some of his students and associates was absolutely exceptional and profound. As his former student and collaborator remembered as late as the end of 1980s:

Even if there was anything funny about him, we never took it as funny, because nothing related to him could have been funny. We never judged him
by human standards. He was a genuine spiritual father to us. We trusted him in everything without any limit. We related to him as disciples to Christ.¹

*Vygodskaya & Lifanova (1996), p. 256*

Immediately after his death, Vygotsky’s numerous former associates plunged into a great deal of diverse activities in order to commemorate their adored Teacher: they wrote obituaries (Luria, Leontiev, Kolbanovskii), edited and published Vygotsky’s books and papers as book chapters (Kolbanovskii, M. Levina, El’konin, Shif, and Zankov), issued their own studies either dedicated to his memory or with a posthumous indication of his collaboration and supervision (Birenbaum, Samukhin, Zeigarnik, R. Levina, Zankov, Solov’ev), organized a major volume in the memory of Vygotsky with collected works of specially invited internationally renowned scholars (Luria, Birenbaum, Zeigarnik), and so on. They produced numerous laudatory written accounts of his life, delivered oral memorial presentations, and in the atmosphere of uncritical cultist excitement about the socialist state, the Communist Party leadership, including the Secretary of the Party Joseph Stalin personally, they all cumulatively moulded the posthumous image of Lev Vygotsky, the Teacher and the Leader. This is how it happened that the persona of “Vygotsky the genius” emerged in the mid-1930s in the Soviet Union.

Twenty years had passed after the death of Vygotsky. The Second World War (1939–1945) was over. The two superpowers, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the USA, had emerged on the political map of the world and the Cold War between them had started. Yet, following the death of the Soviet Communist leader Stalin in 1953, the process of the gradual “thawing” of the previously utterly rigid and constrained social mores in the Soviet Union began to unfold. In the mid-1950s first post-war contacts between the Soviet scholars and their Western peers resumed after a long break. By that time several key figures of the former “Vygotskians” had come to prominence and authority. Most notably, these were Aleksei Leontiev and Alexander Luria. Both joined the Communist Party of the USSR in the 1940s. This was an important social move, a prerequisite to a successful career in the Soviet Union. Their career trajectories differed slightly, though. Leontiev pursued administrative success, and eventually he became the Dean of the Department of Psychology at the Moscow State University. Luria, on the other hand, became increasingly active in domestic research and international scholarly communications. Eventually, at some point these two paths merged, and Luria became known as a first-rate scholar, internationally acknowledged as a living classic.

This is when the story of “Vygotsky the genius” migrated across the borders. In their communications with Western scholars, Leontiev and, especially, Luria promoted the late Vygotsky as an important figure in Russian psychology. They did their best to publish his works in translation. Their motives were not clear and might have differed considerably. Yet, it is certain that the publication of Vygotsky’s book abroad would boost their professional standing – as Vygotsky’s “best students” and scientific heirs of the Genius – in the eyes of the Soviet peers and their
Communist patrons at home. On the other hand, that would have been a major token of respect to Vygotsky, whom Luria considered his teacher for the rest of his life and whose publications in the West, in Luria’s opinion, were long overdue.

Luria was instrumental in promoting Vygotsky’s work internationally and in bringing about the first of Vygotsky’s books to be translated into English. He managed to accumulate an impressive taskforce on the project that included the luminaries of international science such as the prominent American linguist of Russian origin, Roman Jakobson (1896–1982), and the classic of American psychology, Jerome Bruner (1915–2016), both in Boston, Massachusetts at that time. In his memoirs Bruner remembered:

Vygotsky’s book finally appeared in English in 1962. I was asked to write an introduction to it. By then I had learned enough about Vygotsky from accounts of his work by Alexander Romanovich Luria, with whom I had become close friends, so that I welcomed this added goad to close study. And I read the book not only with meticulous care, but with growing astonishment. For Vygotsky was plainly a genius. Yet it was an elusive form of genius, his.

Brüner (1985), p. 23

This is precisely the kind of the image of Vygotsky that was imported to North America (and, by extension, from the USA to the rest of the world) and rooted among American educators and, to a lesser extent, psychologists. The aura and charisma of the late “genius” provided Vygotsky’s followers with the authority they needed. The “genius’s elusiveness”, though, prevented them from pinpointing what exactly his scientific achievement was. A whole new genre of scholarly writing subsequently evolved in an attempt at “understanding Vygotsky” (or, perhaps more precisely, understanding the “versions of Vygotsky”). Vygotsky became a celebrity and a superstar. This is how it happened that his following nowadays is as numerous as it is authoritative.

Habent sua fata libelli, as an old Latin saying goes. This means that books have their own destinies, separate from their authors’ destinies. The life story of a man ends at some point. The stories of books seem to continue endlessly and sometimes in very strange ways. Sometimes, simple people live their lives in order to become great men after death. Sometimes, great men live their lives in order to become simple men when they die.

Each great man’s life story is simple unless one wants to make it great.
Each simple man’s life story is great unless one wants to make it simple.

Notes
1 From Natalia Morozova’s recollections recorded on 11 November 1988.
2 See the memoirs of French Marxist psychologist René Zazzo (1910–1995), who recalled and related his encounters with Aleksei Leontiev and other Soviet psychologists around

3 See Vygotsky (1962).

4 For an overview of critical literature see, for instance, Yasnitsky (2012c). For the classics on the “understanding Vygotsky” genre see van der Veer & Valsiner (1991).
1896, 17 November (Russian Old Style calendar: 5 November): Lev Simkhovich Vygodskii was born
1913–1917: Vygodskii studied in Moscow
1914–1918: First World War
1917, February–early 1918: the Russian Revolution
1918: Lev Vygodskii lived in German-occupied Gomel in the Ukrainian State
1919–1923: Gomel under the rule of the Bolsheviks; Vygotsky became involved in “cultural revolution” activism
1922, fall: Vygotsky was hired as a psychology lecturer at the Gomel Pedagogical Tekhnikum
1922, December: the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, the Soviet Union) was established
1923, winter–spring: Vygotsky initiated and organized a psychological “cabinet” (laboratory) at the Gomel Pedagogical Tekhnikum
1923, summer: Vygotsky’s first psychological experiments took place; Pavlov’s book on the twenty years of his research into higher nervous activity was published
1923, fall: empirical studies ended and the preparation of presentations for the Psychoneurological Congress began; Leon Trotsky’s articles on “literature and revolution” were first published
1924, January: Vygotsky participated in the work of the Second Psychoneurological Congress in Petrograd; following the conclusion of the Congress Petrograd was renamed Leningrad after the late Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin
1924, winter: Vygotsky moved to Moscow from Gomel and was appointed an assistant (graduate student and junior researcher) at the State Institute of Experimental Psychology; the Director of the Institute was Konstantin Kornilov
1924, July: Vygotsky was hired as the main administrator of the defectological practice at the Narkomat of Enlightenment of the Russian Socialist Federative
Soviet Republic (RSFSR) responsible for the “social upbringing” of the blind, the deaf, and children with developmental pathologies; he was dismissed in 1926 due to ill health, as an invalid

1924, late November: the Second Congress on the Social and Legal Protection of Minors took place in Moscow; at the Congress Vygotsky for the first time publicly announced the turn to the social upbringing in defectology; Vygotsky edited a collection of articles on defectological issues

1925, May: Gita, Lev Vygotsky’s first daughter, was born

1925, summer: Vygotsky made his first and only foreign trip – a visit to London where Vygotsky took part in a conference on the education of the deaf; on the way to and from the United Kingdom he passed through Germany, where he met with local psychologists

1925, fall: due to an outbreak of chronic tuberculosis, Vygotsky was prescribed bed rest and could not attend the public defence of his dissertation on the “Psychology of Art”

1925, November: Vygotsky’s dissertation was accepted and his degree granted by the State Institute of Experimental Psychology in the absence of the researcher; the contract for publication was signed, but the book was not published during his lifetime

1926: Vygotsky’s first book was published, a textbook titled “Pedagogical Psychology”

1927, January: the end of the temporary unemployment for medical conditions; he was rehired at the Institute of Experimental Psychology and undertook other part-time teaching jobs in Moscow and Leningrad

1927, September: the scientific-pedagogical department of the State Scientific Council (GUS) officially approved Lev Vygotsky as a Professor

1927, December: Vygotsky was appointed the Head of the Medical Pedagogical Station, in Moscow; in October 1928 Vygotsky stepped down, but in 1929 he was rehired as a part-time scientific consultant and the Head of the psychological laboratories at the newly established Experimental Defectological Institute (the reorganized Medical-Pedagogical Station)

1928: first publications were issued in the spirit of original psychological theory on the basis of experimental studies with the use of the “instrumental method”; a series of journal articles were published in Russian and English on the cultural behavior and development of the child; Vygotsky’s second book was released, a textbook “The Pedology of the School Age”
1928, December: Vygotsky openly conflicted with the director of the Institute of Experimental Psychology, Konstantin Kornilov; Vygotsky relocated all research activities of his group to the psychological laboratory of the Academy of Communist Upbringing (the Head of laboratory from 1927 was Luria)

1929, April: Vygotsky briefly lectured in Tashkent, returning to Moscow in early May the same year

1929, fall: a new step in Vygotsky’s career – he took his first job under the Narkomat of Health of the RSFSR, followed by a series of progressive appointments as an assistant up to the Head of the Psychological Laboratory at the Clinic for Nervous Diseases of the First Moscow State University); he was dismissed in early 1931

1929, September: the Ninth International Congress of Psychology took place at Yale University, Connecticut, USA; Luria participated and presented two papers, including one in collaboration with Vygotsky

1929, November: the leader of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin, declared the Great Break and the launch of the forcible collectivization, industrialization and cultural revolution

1930: Vygotsky’s second daughter, Assia, was born; “Studies on the history of behavior” (in collaboration with Luria) and a series of textbooks, “Pedology of the Adolescent” (parts 1 through 3 in 1929, 1930, and 1931, respectively), were published

1930, 25 January–1 February: the First All-Union Congress on the Study of Human Behavior took place; Vygotsky participated as a member of the Prezidium of the Congress and one of the leaders of the pedological sector; the Vygotsky-Luria group prepared a series of reports of the “studies of the cultural development of the child” as systematic empirical research in the spirit of “instrumental psychology” of the Vygotsky-Luria Circle

1930, 23–27 April: the Sixth International Congress on Psychotechnics was held in Barcelona; Vygotsky’s overview of their united studies of the children’s normal and abnormal development was presented in French

1930, summer: Kurt Lewin’s former graduate students Nina Kaulina and Gita Birenbaum moved from Berlin to Moscow and started their work in collaboration with the members of the Vygotsky-Luria Circle; this marked the beginning of the full-scale revision of “instrumental psychology” as a research program and a gradual convergence of Vygotsky’s and Luria’s theory with German-American gestalt psychology

1930, 9 October: Vygotsky gave a presentation on “psychological systems” at the Clinic for Nervous Diseases of the First Moscow State University; a new research program was established; the investigation of isolated “psychological functions” such as memory or attention was denounced

1931, 1 March: Vygotsky was promoted from the position of scientific researcher of the first degree to full member of the State Institute of Psychology, Pedology, and Psychotechnics (formerly the Institute of Experimental Psychology)
1931, March: reactological discussion at the State Institute of Psychology, Pedology, and Psychotechnics; Vygotsky and Luria publicly denounced reactology and the mechanism of their “instrumental period” of the 1920s
1931, May–August: Luria made his first psychological expedition to Uzbekistan; another of Lewin’s students, Bluma Zeigarnik, moved from Berlin to Moscow and joined the Vygotsky-Luria Circle
1931, fall: Vygotsky and Luria started their undergraduate studies in medicine, by correspondence, in Kharkov
1931, October 22: Vygotsky’s father died
1932, March: Vygotsky gave the first presentation of his research and book project on “Thinking and Speech”
1932, summer: Luria made his second Psychological Expedition to Uzbekistan; Kurt Koffka participated and was responsible for research on optical illusions
1932, December: Vygotsky gave a presentation on the consciousness for the inner circle of his collaborators; another new research program was announced; the Kharkov group of his collaborators, led by Aleksei Leontiev, dissented
1933, 30 January: the leader of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP, the Nazi Party), Adolf Hitler, was appointed the head of the German Government
1933, April–May: during Lewin’s visit to Moscow, on his way from the USA via Japan and the Soviet Union to Germany, he met with Vygotsky
1934, January–February: Vygotsky was invited to organize and head a specialized department of psychology at Moscow’s All-Union Institute of Experimental Medicine (VIEM)
1934, 9 May: following an outbreak of tuberculosis, Vygotsky was assigned to bed rest
1934, 11 June: Vygotsky died
AKV  Akademiia Kommunisticheskogo Vospitaniia (Academy of Communist Upbringing)
ANL-FA  Aleksei Nikolaevich Leontiev papers in the Leontiev Family Archive
ARAO  Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Akademii obrazovaniia (Archive of the Russian Academy of Education)
ARL-FA  Luria papers in the Luria Family Archive
ARL-MGU  Luria papers in the Moscow State University (MGU)
GAGO  Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Gomel’skoi oblasti (State archive of the Gomel’ region)
GAMO  Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Moskovskoi oblasti (State archive of the Moscow region)
GARF  Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (State archive of the Russian Federation)
Glavsotsvos  Glavnoe upravlenie sotsial’nogo vospitaniia i politekhnicheskogo obrazovaniia detei (Main administration of children’s social upbringing and polytechnic education)
GIEP  Gosudarstvennyi Institut Eksperimental’noi Psikhologii (State Institute of Experimental Psychology)
GIZ  Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo (State Publishing House)
Gubnarkompros  Gubernskii Narkompros (Regional [department of] Narkompros—see below)
Gubrabkoop  Gubernskii rabochii kooperativ (Regional workers’ cooperative)
Gubpolitprosvet  Gubernskii [otdel] politicheskogo vospitaniia (Regional [department for] political enlightenment)
GUS  Gosudarstvennyi uchenyi sovet (State Scientific Council)
Khudsovet  khudozhestvennyi sovet (Artistic Council)
LSV-FA  Vygotsky papers in the Vygotsky Family Archive
LSV-Puz  Vygotsky papers in the Andrei Puzyrei collection
MGU  Moskovskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet (Moscow State University)
Narkom  Narodnyi Kommissar (People’s Commissar)
Narkompros  Narodnyi Kommissariat Prosveshcheniia (People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment)
Narkomzdrav  Narodnyi Kommissariat Zdravookhraneniiia (People’s Commissariat of Healthcare)
NEP  Novaia ekonomicheskaia politika (New Economic Policy)
Politburo  Politicheskoe biuro (Political Bureau)
RKP(b)  Rossiiskaia kommunisticheskaia partiia (bol’shevikov) (Russian Communist Party—Bolsheviks)
RSDRP  Rossiiskaia sotsial-demokraticheskaia rabochaia partiia (Russian Social Democratic Labor Party)
RSFSR  Rossiiskaia Sotsialisticheskaia Federativnaia Sovetskaia Respublika (Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic), in 1918–1936; renamed in 1936 as Rossiiskaia Sovetskaia Federativnaia Sotsialisticheskaia Respublika (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic)
SAGU  Sredne-Aziatskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet (First Central Asian State University, in Tashkent)
SNK  Sovet narodnykh komissarov (Council of People’s Commissars)
Sotsvos  Sotsial’noe vospitanie (Social upbringing)
SPON  Sotsial’no-pravovaia okhrana nesovershennoletnikh (Social and legal protection of minors)
SR  Sotsialist-revoliutsionery (Socialist Revolutionary [Party])
UNR  Ukrain’s’ka Narodna Respublika (Ukrainian People’s Republic)
UPNA  Ukrain’s’ka Psykhonevrologichna Akademiia or Ukrainskaia Psikhonevrologicheskaia Akademiia (Ukrainian Psychoneurological Academy)
USSR  Union of Soviet Socialist Republics; alternatively, the Soviet Union
VARNITSO  Vserossiiskaia assotsiatsiia rabotnikov nauki, iskusstva, tekhniki dlia sodeistviia sotsialisticheskoui stroitel’stvu (All-Russian Association of the Workers of Science, Art, Techniques for the Support of Socialist Construction)
VIEM  Vsesoiuznyi institut eksperimental’noi meditsiny (All-Union Institute of Experimental Medicine)
VKP(b)  Vsesoiuznaia kommunisticheskaia partiia (bol’shevikov) (All-Union Communist Party—Bolsheviks)
VTsIK  Vserossiiskii Tsentral’nyi ispolnitel’nyi komitet (All-Russian Central Executive Committee)
We are all constrained by social conventions. Social conventions are such rules and norms that make our lives easier in some sense and also at the same time difficult in a great many respects. This might look like a contradiction, but that is fine. Quite often we do not realize these conventions. In some cases, they need to get clarified and explained. This is exactly the case. I wrote the book following a few conventions. Here are some of them.

All titles of publications (articles, journals, books) that occur in this book “Vygotsky: An Intellectual Biography” appear in the text in double quotation marks.

All Russian names traditionally associated with Cyrillic spelling come out transcribed into Latin characters in accordance with the United States Library of Congress style. A few exceptions were made for the names that are well known in their traditional Latin spelling such as Luria (instead of Luriia) or Trotsky (instead of Trotskii). Similarly to “Luria” (but not “Luriia”), for simplicity’s sake all Russian female names ending with “ia” after a vowel are rendered here with just “a”. Thus, “Evgenia” (not “Evgenia”), “Maria” (not “Mariia”), “Lia” (not “Liia”), “Lidia” (not “Lidiia”), “Natalia” (not “Nataliia”), and “Ksenia” (not “Kseniia”). Finally, the author could not resist the temptation to proudly spell the given name of Daniushevskii as “Israil” rather than more correct “Izrail”.

Vygotsky (instead of “Vygotskii”) is always “Vygotsky”, whenever he is not “Vygodskii”. Yet, in the Bibliography the spelling “Vygotskii” is retained for his Russian-language publications. In one instance, it is “Vygosti” for his publication in English, rendered exactly the way it occurs on the pages of this edition.

As it always happens with books, this book is also about other books. Those other books can roughly be divided into two groups: those that I read in order to write this one, and those I mention. Quite often, the two groups overlap. However, whenever I mention a book, I use a footnote to give the reader its title and other information that might help find it. What one needs to keep in mind is that
not all of these mentioned books made it to the Bibliography at the end of the book. If they all did the Bibliography would contain a pile of occasional and unimportant publications, mainly the smaller and not substantial Vygotsky’s Russian works. Thus, these can be found in footnotes only. However, for all those interested in having the full and the most up-to-date list of Vygotsky’s publications that came out during his lifetime (and slightly after his death) I would like to direct you to the list of “Vygotsky’s published works: a(n almost) definitive bibliography” by René van der Veer and Anton Yasnitsky. This bibliography came out in our book titled “Revisionist Revolution in Vygotsky Studies”, co-edited by Yasnitsky and van der Veer (2016).

In this book I necessarily used a few words that I considered special or somewhat more scientific than I would wish to use under normal circumstances. This also applies to some foreign words or phrases in Russian, German or even Latin and Hebrew. In all these instances in order to highlight these words and phrases I used italics, as if to excuse myself for using them.

A note on toponymy spelling — special words for geographical locations. In most cases I followed the common English spelling and, when in doubt, consulted Wikipedia. Thus, what we have here is Moscow (not “Moskva”, in Russian), Gomel (but not “Gomel”), Kharkov (but not “Khar’kov” or, perhaps, more precise and politically correct “Kharkiv”, in Ukrainian), and so on. No politics affected my choice of spelling, and in most cases I made a choice in favor of the traditional way for this language.

I also used a few abbreviations here and there, but did not do so very often. A list of Abbreviations can be found at the end of the book.

In issues of style I did my best to follow the highest standard of composing that was set by the classics of the genre, the excellent “The Elements of Style” by William Strunk Jr. and its contemporary complement for the field of humanities and social sciences, the exciting “Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences” by Michael Billig. I might have been a good student, but still there is definitely a lot to learn. Perhaps, the author’s own success in the Social Sciences to date is a good indicator of that. For some people in our post-postmodernist world, mediation, in-growing, perezhivanie, and internalization require too much effort in order to digest this stuff. My sincerest regrets to all those who had to suffer because of that.

Finally, some acknowledgements are due. Making an acknowledgment, in other words, means to say thank you. In other books of mine I have never done so, but I feel like doing it this time. Many people contributed to this book, and the full list of the names is indeed enormous. I am most grateful to all of them. Therefore, keeping in mind all those in the “silent majority”, I would like to mention a few individuals, whose professional help in many ways made this book happen or become better. These are Nikolai Krementsov, Ekaterina Zavershneva, Eli Lamdan, Ekaterina Semenova, Athanasios Koutsoklenis, Clay Spinuzzi, Stella Medvedeva, Erica Burman, Ian Parker, Aaron Vuglusker, Efraín Aguilar, Andrii Kyrychenko, Fernando Luis González Rey, Wagner Luiz Schmit, Luciano Nicolás García, Anna Thomas, and last but not least, Lucy Kennedy of Routledge. Many thanks to you all!
Archival Materials

**In the Russian Federation, state and institutional:**


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Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Moskovskoi oblasti [GAMO]

**In the Russian Federation, private:**

Vygotsky papers in Vygotsky Family Archive (LSV-FA)
Vygotsky papers collection of Andrei Puzyrei (LSV-Puz)
Luria papers in Luria Family Archive (ARL-FA)
Luria papers in Moscow State University—MGU (ARL-MGU)
A.N. Leontiev papers in Leontiev Family Archive (ANL-FA)
**Outside the Russian Federation:**

**In Belarus:**

Gosudarstvennyi arkhiiv Gomel’skoi oblasti [GAGO], Gomel
Arkhiiv Gomel’skogo kraevedcheskogo muzeia, Gomel

**In the USA:**

Center for the History of Psychology [CHP UA] (The Drs. Nicholas and Dorothy Cummings Center for the History of Psychology at the University of Akron), Akron, OH: Kurt Lewin papers, Kurt Koffka papers, Molly Harrower papers, Fritz Heider papers
American Philosophical Society [APS], Philadelphia, PA: Wolfgang Köhler papers
New York Public Library [NYPL], New York: Max Wertheimer papers
Clark University Libraries Archive [ClarkULA], Worcester, MA: Tamara Dembo Papers
YIVO Institute for Jewish Research [YIVO], New-York: Horace M. Kallen Papers
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Johns Hopkins Medical Archives [JHMA] (The Alan Mason Chesney Medical Archives of The Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions), Baltimore, MD: W. Horsley Gantt papers, Adolf Meyer papers
Harvard University Libraries Archive [HarvardULA] (Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine, Center for the History of Medicine): Walter B. Cannon papers

**In Europe:**

Arxiu Històric de la Diputació, Barcelona, Spain: Mira y Lopez Papers
Archives Nationales, Site de Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Paris, France: Cote 360AP/28/A (2 lettres de Alexander Luria à Henri Wallon; 1936)

**Memoirs, Obituaries, and Letters**

**Memoirs (ordered chronologically; years of life and the date/year of the interview, presentation, or publication in brackets):**


Levina, R. E. (1908–1989) (second half of the 1960s): recollections of experiments from the 1920s; published in Russian and in English translation as Levina (1968) and Levina (1981)


Luria, A. R. (25 March 1974): doklad (presentation) at the zasedanie Moskovskogo otdeleniia obschestva psikhologov, Moscow, Institut obschei i pedagogicheskoi psikhologii APN SSSR (NII OPP APN SSSR); published in Luria (2003b); see also publications in English and in Russian (Luria, 1974; Luria, 1979; and Luria, 1982)

Leontiev, A. N. (11 March 1976): presentation at the zasedanie problemnogo soveta po teorii i istorii psikhologii pri Prezidiume APN SSSR at the Institut obshei i pedagogicheskoi psikhologii APN SSSR (NII OPP APN SSSR) in Moscow; published as Leontiev (1986)


**Obituaries:**

Kolbanovskii (1934)

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Luria (1935a), Luria (1935b) (in English)

Anonymous (possibly, Zankov or Daniushevskii) (1935)
Letters:

Vygotskii’s correspondence has largely been preserved in Andrei Puzyrei’s archive of Vygotsky’s documents (LSV-Puz), and was published in Russian (Vygotskii, 2004), English (Vygotsky, 2007), and bilingual German-English editions (Rückriem, 2009). Kornilov’s letter to Vygotsky is kept in the Vygotsky Family Archive (LSV-FA), and was published in Yasnitsky & van der Veer (2016), pp. 106–107.

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