

A History of Cultural-Historical Gestalt Psychology: Vygotsky, Luria, Koffka, Lewin, and others¹

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The interrelations between Soviet psychologists of “Vygotsky Circle” (Yasnitsky, 2009, 2011) and German-American Gestalt psychologists and similarities of their theories were noted in a few studies (e.g., Chaiklin, 2011; e.g., Scheerer, 1980), but systematic investigation of the history and the substance of these connections have never been done. This study addresses this gap in scholarship and attempts to investigate the huge network of Soviet, German, and American scholars that is described here under the umbrella term “Cultural-Historical Gestalt-Psychology” (Yasnitsky, 2012a).

This study is based on the analysis of the archival documents found in the archives of Kurt Lewin, Kurt Koffka, Molly Harrower, and Fritz Heider (all in the Archives of the History of American Psychology, University of Akron, AHAP), Tamara Dembo (Clark University archives); and documents previously published in a number of scholarly works and memoirs (Harrower, 1983; King & Wertheimer, 2005; Lück, 2001; E. A. Luria, 1994; Marrow, 1969; Métraux, 2002; Rückriem, 2008; Vygotskaya & Lifanova, 1996; Vygotsky & Puzyrei, 2004, 2007).

The paper leads its reader through several episodes that characterise the stages in the development of the interrelationships between the Soviet and the Western scholars and their gradual convergence on a number of theoretical and methodological issues. The key events and processes of the history of the “beautiful friendship” are organized chronologically:

1925: European trips of Vygotsky and Luria, made independently and on different occasions, in summer 1925. During their trips both visited Berlin, specifically, the Institute of Psychology and got personally acquainted with Gestalt scholars (E. A. Luria, 1994; Van der Veer & Zavershneva, 2011, 2012).

1929: IX International Congress of Psychology that among many others was attended by Luria, a Soviet scholar of Vygotsky Circle (Yasnitsky, 2012c), and, on the other hand, Wolfgang Köhler, Kurt Lewin, and Kurt Koffka, German-American scholars and the leaders of Gestalt movement. The encounters between the two groups renewed with considerable force and intensity: at the congress Luria and Lewin presented their papers at the same session on child development, whereas after the congress Luria stayed in the United States for another month or so and made a “round trip” along the East Coast, during which he and Koffka joined and, apparently, even shared accommodation in Worcester. Several collaborative projects between the “Vygotskians” and the “Gestaltists” were conceived during this North American trip or, through mail correspondence, soon thereafter.

1930-31: several former students of Kurt Lewin of Russian origin (Gita Birenbaum, Nina Kaulina, and Bluma Zeigarnik) for different reasons finished their graduate studies in Berlin and migrated to the Soviet Union, where they immediately continued their work in close association with Lev Vygotsky and Aleksander Luria, which led to even further theoretical, methodological, and interpersonal convergence of the two groups.

¹ This paper is a considerably abbreviated version of the original Russian paper, see (Yasnitsky, 2012b) .

1929-1932: a series of trips to the Central Asia took place in this period, and major international psychological expeditions were planned in continuous negotiations between Luria and, on the other hand, his Western peers. Personal invitations were sent to Wolfgang Köhler, Kurt Lewin, and Kurt Koffka, of which only Koffka participated in one expedition to Central Asia that took place in late spring-summer of 1932. In his studies, conducted independently in the course of Central Asian expedition, Koffka obtained results that conflicted with and contradicted to Luria's findings of his studies during expeditions of 1931 and 1932 (see Koffka's independent report in A. R. Luria, 1934). This might be the reason why Luria did not publish the results of his studies in Central Asia for several decades (A. R. Luria, 1974, 1976), and even in these most delayed publications never mentioned either Koffka's findings or even his participation in the expedition. Another, the largest of all, expedition was planned for 1933, but for a number of reasons of political nature the planned expedition never took place.

1933: on his way back from a half-year stay at Stanford, in California, when Kurt Lewin was returning home when the Nazi took power in Germany. His journey westwards included a stay in Japan and, then, a railroad trip through the whole of Soviet Union. While in Moscow, Lewin gave several presentations on his scholarly work, and met with a number of Soviet psychologists, including his former Berlin students, Luria and Vygotsky, with whom Lewin was particularly close and whose Moscow address he provided in his correspondence as his contact address.

1930-1936: in the first half of 1930s Vygotsky's theory underwent massive transformation under the influence of Lewin's methodological works such as his study on "Aristotelian" as opposed to "Gallileian" thinking in sciences. In addition, a series of experimental studies were done in Soviet Union on the footsteps of Kurt Lewin and his research associates. Vygotsky's group was arguably the most notable among those replicators of Lewin in the Soviet Union in 1930s. Besides, the members of Vygotsky Circle organized a series of Russian translations of the books and articles of Gestaltist scholars such as Köhler (1930) and Koffka (1932, 1934). All these were translated, edited, and prefaced by the members of the Vygotsky Circle.

1934-1936: after Vygotsky's death in the summer of 1934 Luria was organizing a memorial volume with contributions from major Western scholars. Out of ten foreign scholars invited to contribute to this volume, five were representatives of German-American group of Gestalt psychologists and their associates: Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka, Kurt Lewin, Kurt Goldstein, and Adhémar Gelb. According to Luria's correspondence, it was the paper from Kurt Lewin that he believed to be the most important of these, the one that he received the last. However, the publication of Vygotsky Festschrift never took place.

1936: the highest point in the convergence of the two groups, those of the Gestaltist and "Vygotskian" scholars is marked by the plans for preparing a Russian translation of Kurt Lewin's book "Principles of Topological Psychology" (Lewin, 1936) and organizing, by analogy with similar scientific meetings of the scholars of Topological Group in the United States, a "topological meeting"—in Luria's words, a "Topologische Meeting"—in Moscow or Kharkov in 1936. A number of "topological" studies conducted in the Soviet Union were planned to be presented at this hypothetical meeting. Unfortunately, neither translation of Lewin's book nor the meeting ever took place.

The study concludes with characterization of the converging streams of Soviet and German-American research as "cultural-historical Gestalt-psychology" that was rapidly evolving until 1936. Since then, quite likely as a result of the Great Terror of 1936-1938 in the Soviet Union and the

interruption of a great deal of international contacts between these two groups of scholars in the late 1930s, the project of “cultural-historical Gestalt-psychology” was also transformed and, having lost much of its characteristically Vygotskian and Lewinian ideas and terminology in exchange for quasi-Marxist slang acquired in late 1930s—early 1940s, and, on the other hand, enriched by some domestic achievements of Soviet scholars—such as physiology of activity of Nikolai Bernstein—ultimately by early 1960s occupied the top of the nomenclature scientific hierarchy in the Soviet Union under the name of psychological “activity theory” (cf. Keiler, 2012).

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