**The 'Psychoanalyst' from Kazan: Alexander Luria's Search for “Real” Psychology**

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**Abstract**

Along with the advances in neuroscience research over the past decade, efforts have been made to combine psychoanalysis with neuroscience, creating a new field of neuropsychoanalysis. Leading proponents of neuropsychoanalysis have turned to Alexander Luria's scientific legacy to uncover links between Freudian psychoanalysis and neuropsychology. Luria, a prominent Soviet neuropsychologist, was one of the primary figures of the short-lived Russian psychanalytic movement during the first decade after the Bolshevik revolution. This article presents an historical analysis of the rise and decline of Luria's interest in psychoanalysis. Luria's initial interest in the subject was partial and heterodoxic, and eventually, for complex social and intellectual reasons, he turned his attention to other theoretical frameworks. Therefore, contrary to claims made in the neuropsychoanalytical literature, Luria’s legacy is far more complex, and it is historically inaccurate to describe Luria's later neuropsychological research as rooted in Freudian tradition.

**Introduction**

In recent decades, neuroscience has been at the forefront of contemporary scientific research, both in terms of investment in (e.g., time and money) and the intensity of the research (Andreasen, 2001; Kandel, 2006; Rose and Abi-Rached, 2013; Vidal and Ortega, 2017). With significant developments in the study of the brain itself, neuro-disciplines have become increasingly prevalent, and it is therefore not surprising that brain research has had a profound influence on the field of psychology.

Yet, neuropsychology is distinct from all other new neuro-disciplines. In the mid-twentieth century, after decades of relative separation between neurology and psychology, neuropsychology emerged as a defined discipline. Neuropsychology was greatly influenced by the works of scientists such as Karl Lashley, Donald Hebb, Kurt Goldstein, Karl Pribram, Alexander Luria and others. Now one of the core disciplines of neuroscience, neuropsychology deals with the neurological basis of psychological processes. In the past, most of the processes studied were cognitive ones, but over the years, neuropsychology has also begun to address questions beyond the cognitive realm. As a result, a new field of neuropsychoanalysis has emerged to meet wider challenges.

Neuropsychoanalysis attempts to expand upon neuropsychology by exploring the neurological basis of unconscious psychological processes and the neurological correlates of psychoanalytic concepts (Solms and Turnbull, 2002). This attempt to combine psychoanalysis and neuroscience has sparked lively debates among supporters and opponents of such integration (Blass and Carmeli, 2007; Ramus, 2013; Yovell, Solms and Fotopoulou, 2015). A critical assessment of neuropsychoanalysis is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, the primary question examined here is how the leading proponents of neuropsychoanalysis have interpreted the scientific legacies of past scientists in order to justify their work in this new field, with a particular focus on Alexander Luria as a central figure, along with Freud, both serving as the intellectual foundation for today’s work in the field.

Mark Solms, one of the founders of neuropsychoanalysis, definitively considered Luria part of psychoanalytic tradition (Solms, 2000). According to Solms, Luria, who was involved in the Russian psychoanalytic movement, abandoned psychoanalysis solely as a result of ideological-political pressure. Moreover, Solms claimed that Luria was a crypto-Freudian and that his neuropsychological work had psychoanalytical origins. Solms based his conclusion on a number of components: the specific, totalitarian model of Soviet science (in which scientists had no agency in their relations with the party-state); Luria's later references to Freud; Luria's reliance on the clinical-anatomical method in his neuropsychological studies; and the influence of Hughlings Jackson's approach to the localization of psychological functions.

However, in examining the full and complex nature of Luria's engagement with psychoanalysis, it appears, instead, that his engagement with psychoanalysis was unique and partial from the very beginning. In addition, I argue that Luria’s subsequent distancing from psychoanalysis was due to a combination of socio-political and personal-intellectual factors.

**The Beginnings in Kazan**

Alexander Romanovich Luria was born in 1902 in Kazan, an old Tatar city on the Volga river, to an assimilated Jewish family (Luria, 1994, 5–15). His father, Roman Luria, was a physician and his mother, Evgenia (born Haskina), was a dentist. The Lurias, who also had a daughter named Lidia, were a typical, educated, urban, middle class, *intelligentsia,* family. They represented a small segment of Russian Jewry that was a product of a somewhat reluctant and inconsistent "selective integration" of Jews into Russian society (Nathans, 2002). The Russian Revolution was a crucial turning point for all of Russian society, and for the lives of the Luria family in particular. As educated Jews who suffered from social discrimination, they had much to gain from the revolutionary change. However, revolutions are rarely smooth and peaceful, and a brutal civil war broke out in 1918, which brought with it not only violence and upheaval, but also a severe deterioration in basic living conditions. In was under these circumstances that Alexander Luria began his higher education studies at Kazan University in 1918.

The situation of Kazan University, as in other institutes of higher education, was difficult and complicated (Litvinov, 2003; McClelland, 1989). Many of the faculty members left the city. The new Ministry of Education, *Narkompros*, tried to introduce structural reforms, but these actually caused numerous problems (Fitzpatrick, 1970, 68–88). Attempts to diversify the class origin of the students, abolish entry exams and promote the Marxist approach in higher education caused dissatisfaction among members of the faculty. Even if they wanted to enact change, nobody, not even the ideologues of the party, could describe what it would mean to apply the Marxist approach to various fields of knowledge. Nonetheless, these conditions of uncertainty and instability enabled, and even promoted, students' independent activity. Self-education within informal circles was very common. In addition, the revolutionary atmosphere led to public activism among students beyond the confines of the campus. For example, Luria was one the founders and elected chair of the Association for Social Science in Kazan in 1919. He also published his translation of an essay by Ludwig Joseph Brentano on the theory of needs (Brentano, 1921).

It was during this period that Luria became increasingly interested in psychology. However, as he recalled years later, classical experimental psychology, which he considered dry and detached from reality, did not satisfy him. In the spirit of the more expansive viewpoint of those days, he sought far-reaching change by confronting the “old” psychology with the "real” psychology, which he asserted must be based on new foundations (Luria, 1982, 8–9). Luria even tried to draw general outlines of this "real” psychology in his early, unpublished essay entitled, “The Principles of Real Psychology” (Luria, 2003 [1921]).

Luria was very impressed with the conventional division of sciences that neo-Kantian philosophers (Wilhelm Dilthey, Heinrich Rickert, and Wilhelm Windelband ) espoused. They separated the sciences into categories of nomothetic or generalizing, and idiographic or individualizing. According to Luria, the field of psychology was split between two tendencies, nomothetic and idiographic, and it had to find its specific way between these two distinct approaches.

Luria’s essay was mainly a critical discussion of classical experimental psychology. First, he argued that experimental psychology tended to regard the psyche as a mosaic of simple elements. Another problem, in Luria's opinion, was the over-tendency of the field to generalize and focus on recurring phenomena. In doing so, psychology constructed an "ideal," artificial, research “object,” and failed to study the concrete features of personality and individuals’ mental states.

The concrete description of what the “real” psychology should be (rather than what was wrong with the “old” psychology) was much less clear in Luria’s writings. Luria believed that insights into the problems of psychology, leading to a new, “real” psychology, could be drawn from practical fields such as psychiatry, education, and even literature, as these fields dealt not with abstractions, but with concrete individuals. Luria vaguely alluded to the importance of social context — collective cultural experience and social division of labor — in the field of psychology, as well as the fundamental importance of (mainly biological) needs and drives. The best path to understanding the concrete and real, existing mind, he wrote, was through the "casuistic" analysis of psychiatry, in particular, the psychoanalytic method.

Despite Luria’s emphasis on psychoanalysis, when he wrote this essay, Luria worked at the local Institute for the Scientific Organization of Labor, which was but one expression of the Bolshevik project’s strong belief in modern science. This movement for the scientific organization of labor resulted in the creation of a broad field of knowledge and the development of numerous practices addressing managerial-technical (Taylorism and Fordism) and psychological issues, primarily in the area of industrial psychology (psychotechnics) (Joravsky, 1989, 342–345; Noskova, 33–38; Stites, 1989, 146–149). Luria worked in the psychology laboratory of the above-mentioned local Institute for the Scientific Organization of Labor and engaged in preliminary studies on the psychotechnical examination of job applicants, as well as the psychophysiology of exhaustion (Luria, 1922; Luria, 1923a; Luria, 1923b). In addition, as the institute's academic secretary, he initiated the establishment of a new and short-lived journal, *Voprsy psikhofiziologii, refleksologii i gigieny truda* (*Psychophysiology, Reflexology and Occupational Health Issues*), on which he collaborated, at least officially, with Vladimir M. Bekhterev (Anonymous, 1923). Thus, despite his critique of classical experimental psychology, Luria did not appear to have rejected on it completely. Nonetheless, Luria's more significant project during this period involved psychoanalysis.

**The "Psychoanalyst" from Kazan**

In September 1922, Luria founded the Kazan Psychoanalytic Society and informed Sigmund Freud of its establishment (Luria, 1982, 11–12). Notice of its establishment was published in *Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse (International Journal for Psychoanalysis)*, the main psychoanalytic journal at the time, and Luria's reports on the activities of the Kazan Society began to appear regularly in the journal, up until the Kazan society’s merger with the Moscow psychoanalytic group (Luria, 1922b; Luria, 1923c; Luria, 1923c). Most of the Kazan society’s members, 15 out of 22, were physicians or medical students, not a surprising number given that the author of the first Russian textbook in neuropathology, Liverii Darkshevich, a leading member of the Kazan medical school faculty, was personally acquainted with Freud and, although critical of Freud's method, recommended it in some cases (Etkind, 1994, 110–112).

The majority of the Kazan Society’s meetings were devoted to reviews of psychoanalytic literature. While none of the members were trained as psychoanalysts, they sought to learn the basics of psychoanalytic theory. One of the first publications of the Kazan Psychoanalytic Society was “Psychoanalysis in Light of the Tendencies in Modern Psychology” (Luria, 1923e),[[1]](#footnote-1) which contained Luria’s overview of psychoanalytic literature. In addition to focusing on reviewing the literature of the field, some Society meetings were devoted to analyses of original works or social and cultural issues. Most of the original works were medical case studies, but we have very few details about them.[[2]](#footnote-2) Far less discussed were cultural issues although among one example was Luria's lecture, “Towards the Psychoanalysis of a Costume” (Luria, 2003 [1922]). These two texts may provide insights into Luria's perception of psychoanalysis during this early stage of his intellectual development.

Luria’s purpose in his costume lecture was to expose individuals’ personal motives for wearing specific clothing, and to explore the bio-social significance of these clothing choices (Luria, 2003 [1922], 38). He pointed to unconscious sexuality as the source of these motives. Luria recognized the biological origin, or at least the biological analogy, of feminine dress in Darwin's notion of sexual selection (Luria, 2003 [1922], 40–42). The purpose of feminine clothing, Luria claimed, was to attract men by emphasizing one’s sexuality and areas that symbolize it. This is a fundamental, unconscious drive, which is limited by the "censorship" mechanism that exists among civilized people. However, one can bypass this censorship by transferring sexual meaning to secondary areas and leaving room for imagination, or by expressing sexuality in specific socially-acceptable ways, such as dancing. In contrast, according to Luria, masculine clothing was used, to express an aggressive drive for power (Luria, 2003 [1922], 43–46). Here, too, Luria noted a biological source, seeing the clothing as an attempt to intimidate or threaten a potential competitor in the struggle for mates. This motive was reflected, in Luria's opinion, in Nietzschean’s "desire for power" and in Alfred Adler's "aggression drive." Freudian "censorship" is relevant to masculine clothing as well. Therefore, we see the clearest expressions of these aggressive tendencies in military uniforms across different societies and epochs. For Luria, cases that did not conform with this typology, such as Russian female revolutionaries wearing "masculine clothes" and having a "masculine appearance," were an expression of a neurotic structure of the psyche; essentially, women who did not conform were thought to be dissatisfied with their sexual nature and depressed, trying, consciously or not, to become men.

Luria gave sexuality a broader meaning, without distinguishing between sex and gender. He stereotypically classified women as passive and family-oriented, and men as much more socially-oriented. Certainly, such stereotypical views of human gender roles were quite common, including in the psychoanalytic movement. It appears that Luria was not aware of, or did not fully realize, the great changes that were taking place in the early Soviet period regarding sexuality, women's rights, the institution of marriage, and more. In general, the question of psychological differences between men and women did not concern him, most likely because Soviet society had returned, to some extent, to more conservative views and values with regard to gender issues.

A brief review of psychoanalytic theory that Luria published in Kazan provides another window into his interpretation of psychoanalysis. First, he placed psychoanalysis on the "new" side of the divide between the "old" and "new" psychology, viewing it as a school of thought that focuses on "the whole human personality and its dynamics." Surprisingly, this new psychology included distinct and incompatible theories, such as behaviorism and Gestalt psychology (Luria, 2003 [1923], 11–15).

Generally, it appears that Luria accepted the basic premises of Freud's theory. He believed that drives, especially the libido, underlaid all mental activity, though many times in sublimated form. In his attempt to understand the functions of, and interactions between, the libido and the I-drive (i.e., the self-preservation drive), Luria declared that the pleasure principle and reality principle could be used to scientifically describe and explain the lives and behavior of human individuals (Luria, 2003 [1923], 15–22). Moreover, it seems that Luria even accepted the sociological and anthropological implications of psychoanalysis, suggesting that only those laws governing individuals’ lives could advance the scientific understanding of society (Luria, 2003 [1923], 22–6).

These texts demonstrate Luria's openness toward and great interest in psychoanalysis and, at the same time, his fairly flexible understanding of it. Like many other proponents of Russian psychoanalysis, Luria was not strictly Freudian. Heterodoxic psychoanalytic ideas were easily incorporated into his arguments along with other strains of thought. Yet, Luria viewed psychoanalysis as an area of study that had great intellectual promise. It is noteworthy that even to this day, there has been no attempt to link psychoanalytic thought with Marxism, which is remarkable given that no field of human science would have been allowed to exist over time in the Soviet Union without such a link, even if superficial.

While intellectually, the activity of the Kazan Psychoanalytic Society remained somewhat limited, in terms of the organization, it was indeed a success. The Kazan Psychoanalytic Society was the first Russian psychoanalytic group to be internationally recognized, and it joined the International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA). Luria's regular reports in *Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse* placed the Kazan’s relatively amateur circle alongside more professional psychoanalytic societies in Europe. The Society’s activity also received domestic attention. In January 1923, at the first All-Russian Psychoneurological Congress that was held in Moscow, Luria delivered his costume lecture (Luria, 1923c, 114; Stoiukhina and Mazilov, 2013). At this meeting, he had the opportunity to meet the members of the Moscow Psychoanalytic Society, as well as many leading scientists from Moscow and Petrograd. One of the scientists was probably Otto Schmidt, a prominent mathematician, polar explorer, scientific organizer and political functionary. At that time, Schmidt was the head of the State Publishing House (*Gosizdat*) and one of the leaders of the Moscow Psychoanalytic Society. According to Luria, he enthusiastically helped distribute Luria's booklet on psychoanalysis (Luria, 2003[1974?], 262).

Eventually, Luria's extensive activities in Kazan led him to Moscow. The simultaneous organization of the Moscow Psychoanalytic Society and its attempt to join the IPA created the ideal conditions for merging the Moscow and the Kazan Societies, as the latter had already been invited to join the IPA. It was a solution that worked for the benefit of all parties. For Luria and two of his colleagues who had moved with him to Moscow, the merger created opportunities for new career options in the political and cultural center of the country. For the Moscow group, it was a chance to demonstrate to politicians and state authorities, the only possible patrons for science in Russia, that psychoanalysis was a growing and dynamic field. The merger also enabled the Kazan and Moscow groups to resolve internal concerns and rivalries with respect to the IPA, which recognized the united group as the Russian Psychoanalytic Society (Etkind, 1994, 189–190). During that time, Luria joined the Institute for Psychology, which was affiliated with Moscow State University. The institute’s new director, Konstantin Kornilov, invited him to join, probably due to Luria's participation in the first All-Russian Psychoneurological Congress. Luria thereby found himself at the center of the movement to consolidate Soviet psychology.

**Objective Psychoanalysis or Reactology of Affect?**

As noted, the move to Moscow represented a great professional promotion for Luria. He simultaneously joined two institutions — the Psychoanalytical Institute and the Institute for Psychology — as their academic secretary. Both were part of the burgeoning of psychological research, and science in general, during the 1920s. This is because science, in its broadest, Russian sense as *nauka*, or knowledge, was generously supported by the new government, as it was an important component of the government’s ideology and identity (Etkind, 1990; Krementsov, 1997, 16–30).

The Psychoanalytic Institute had been established as the research division of the Russian Psychoanalytic Society (Etkind, 1994, 190–192). Its most important project was an experimental psychoanalytic kindergarten, run by Vera Schmidt. Two other institute projects were the publication of the psychoanalytic library series, edited by the head of the Psychoanalytic institute, Ivan Ermakov, and a training program in psychoanalysis for physicians, psychologists, and educators (Luria, 1924a). The training program was based mainly on the professional authority of three people: Sabina Spielrein (the most well-known professional analyst, who had returned to Russia with Freud's encouragement), Ivan Ermakov, and Moshe Wulff. Luria was supposed to teach a course on the study of mental complexes, a subject that was the starting point of his first significant research project (explained in more detail below). In addition to regularly reporting on the activities of the Russian Psychoanalytic Society (Luria, 1925a; Luria, 1926a; Luria, 1926b; Luria, 1927a), Luria was also involved in another workplace, the Moscow Institute of Psychology.

The Moscow Institute of Psychology was founded in 1914 by the philosopher and psychologist, Georgy Chelpanov, and was funded on a philanthropic basis (Serova, Guseva and Kozlov, 2013, 9–29). It was a well-equipped institute built in accordance with the model of Wilhelm Wundt's institute in Leipzig. In 1923, Konstantin Kornilov, Chelpanov's former disciple, launched a campaign for "Marxist psychology" (Bogdanchikov, 2014; Joravsky, 1989, 219–230;). Kornilov was not the first, nor the only one, to call for the development of Marxist psychology, but he was the one who succeeded, causing Chelpanov's removal and then replacing him by creating an institutional base for himself. Kornilov promoted his own "reactology," a purported synthesis of Wundtian psychology and Pavlovian physiology, which then became known as "the" Marxist psychology.

The debates about "Marxist psychology" were part of a broader discussion about the relationship between Marxism and science. Marxism, in its emerging Soviet version, gained the status of an "official ideology," and became the only legitimate philosophy upon which scientific theories could be based (Graham, 1987; Joravsky, 1961; Todes and Krementsov, 2010). During the 1920s, Soviet Marxism was still developing and different groups presented their own notions about the relationship between Marxism and science. In addition, many psychologists used Marxism to advance their scientific agendas. Luria joined the discussion with his article, "Psychoanalysis as a System of Monistic Psychology" (Luria, 1925b), which appeared in the edited volume of *Psychology and Marxism* (Kornilov, 1925).

Luria generally accepted that Marxism was based on two assumptions — monistic materialism and dialectics. For him, this meant that the psyche was a product of organic human activity, influenced by environmental and social factors. Furthermore, he believed that mental phenomena were dynamic and contradictory processes, rather than static forces. Despite a general mention of dialectics, Luria's main argument was that psychoanalysis was consistent with Marxist demands that psychological theory should reflect Marxist materialistic theory. The Marxist approach was interested in the whole, concrete person and his or her driving forces, drives and needs. Therefore, in Luria’s own words, "instead of high-flown speculations about the essence of psyche and its relationship to body, a monistic approach be employed in the study not of ‘mind in general,’ but of the concrete psychoneural activity of the social individual as manifested in his behavior" (Luria, 1925b, 58).

Psychoanalysis, as the "organic psychology of the personality" (Luria, 1925b, 59), which explains psychic phenomena by deep, primal factors, was perceived as materialistic because it ceases to link psyche with consciousness. Personality, according to Luria's interpretation of psychoanalysis, was "an organized whole that reacts to numerous external and internal stimuli" (Luria, 1925b, 62). Defining the issue of psychoanalysis in terms of reactions brought psychoanalysis closer to Kornilov's reactology. In this interpretation, psychoanalysis deals primarily with internal stimuli, which Luria connected to the notion of drives in psychoanalytic discourse. Luria emphasized the organic, biological nature of drives, relying on references to both Freud and Adler. Psychoanalysis, Luria argued, reflected the unity of all mental functions and placed the psyche in a broad, organic context. What was left, then, was to place the mind within the broader context of social influences. However, Luria's first research project was not an attempt to integrate the social dimension into psychological research, but was rather an attempt to combine several different psychoanalytic ideas into the psychophysiological approach and within the context of Kornilov's reactive theory.

The research project that Luria launched at the Institute of Psychology concerned the study of affect and affective reactions. Luria defined affect as a behavior characterized by particularly sharp changes in the activity of an organism; these changes were then subjectively experienced as a strong and turbulent emotion (Luria, 1926c). In his work, he chose to utilize the Jungian version of an associative experiment — a series of words (verbal stimuli) to which the subject is supposed to react with the first spontaneous association that comes to mind (Jung, 1910). Luria combined this experiment with a simple motor reaction task — a simple finger pressing task, in which the participant presses on a special device that records the pressure intensity as a function of time; Luria called this procedure the "combined motor method." The motor reaction task, which the subject was asked to perform simultaneously with the word association task, was intended to serve as a simple model of affective behavior.

In 1924, Luria conducted his first published study of affective reactions (Luria and Leontiev, 1926). The purpose of the study was to find a suitable affective situation — a type of "natural experiment" — and to conduct experiments using the combined motor method procedure. Luria found the opportunity to conduct this "natural experiment" during the "purge" (*chistka*) of the higher education system in the spring of 1924. During the purge, a committee examined students' academic achievements as well as their class origins. The purpose was to alleviate the burden on the higher education system, and students could easily find themselves expelled either because of their inferior achievements or because of their dubious social status. Luria and his team recruited their subjects directly from the line to the committee meetings and conducted their experiments using neutral and critical words that were related to the ongoing purge.

The results showed that subjects’ reaction times to affective stimuli were longer than to non-affective stimuli and that the association content was more superficial. In addition, the motor reaction that accompanied the critical words appeared to be completely disrupted, in contrast to the smooth motor reaction to the neutral words. Luria and Leontiev concluded that these experiments brought them closer to the formulation of the "reactological theory of affective behavior." According to their interpretation of the results, affective states lead to disturbances in nervous system processes, and these disturbances are caused by individuals’ inability to respond appropriately. In this disturbed state, the excitation process must seek other ways to be released, through other systems. Finally, they suggested that there were similarities between their experiments, in which affective reactions in the second trial subside, and the catharsis process of psychoanalytic therapy.

All things considered, it appears that there is not much psychoanalysis in this work of Luria, in which he attempted to use an associative experiment — which is not unique to psychoanalysis (Wertheimer, et al., 1992) — to research affect through a reactology approach and to formulate an experiment using mechanistic and physiological concepts, which is much closer to physiological psychology and behaviorism than to psychoanalysis. However, this study did not mean that Luria had lost interest in psychoanalysis. In the other experiments he conducted from 1924–1926, Luria tried to create what he called "experimental psychoanalysis," through the use of hypnosis and the creation of artificial affective complexes.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In these experiments, Luria and his collaborators used hypnosis to suggest unconscious affective memories to their subjects (Luria, 1932, 128–68). Then, the subjects underwent the associative experiment, according to the combined motor method. The results were similar to the previous study, with the only difference being that subjects’ affective reactions were more concentrated, i.e., without conscious affective background. The results persuaded Luria to declare that they had succeeded in creating an experimental model of hysteria. The detachment of the affective complex from consciousness, in his opinion, demonstrated the mechanism of repression. In addition, Luria showed that, after a series of free associations, the artificial affect reaches consciousness (*osoznaiotsia*) and obtains catharsis, which to him appeared to illustrate a model on which one could base psychoanalytic treatment.

The years 1924–1925 represented the peak of Luria's involvement in the psychoanalytic movement. In addition to the regular reports of the Russian Psychoanalytic Society, Luria published two review articles during this period in the *Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse* (Luria, 1925c; Luria, 1926d). In these reviews, he pointed to the development of an "objective psychology" in the Soviet Union, and its great influence on Russian psychoanalysis. In another article, Luria expanded on the connection between the developing study of physiology in the Soviet Union and psychoanalysis, and pointed to some similarities between certain physiological findings and psychoanalytic concepts.

All of this suggests that Luria's approach to psychoanalysis emphasized the biological basis of the mind and the physiological mechanisms behind psychoanalytic concepts. His approach was very consistent with prominent trends in early Soviet culture and its approach to science and philosophical mechanisms. Mechanistic materialism, reductionism and, more implicitly, positivism represented the dominant concepts among Soviet scientists, philosophers, and ideologues in the first half of the 1920s (Joravsky, 1961, 93–106). Even political figures, such as Leon Trotsky and Nikolai Bukharin, who were from opposing sides of intra-party controversies, shared similar views about the position of the natural sciences within the Marxist worldview (Sheehan, 1985, 168–175). This perception also helped scientists obtain support, or at least positive attitudes, from the new regime.

Mechanistic conceptions were also prevalent in Luria's main place of employment. Despite Kornilov's Marxist rhetoric, his approach, which emphasized the "stimulus-response" model, was very close to behaviorism and the Pavlovian approach. In retrospect, Luria described it critically but, at the time, he sincerely advocated for Kornilov's reactological approach (Luria, 1982, 18). Nonetheless, it must be noted that Luria was simply focusing on a certain aspect of psychoanalysis. Mechanistic models, based on contemporary neurological knowledge, appeared in Freud's writings, especially in his early years. While these models allowed for the possibility of a mechanistic and physiological interpretation of his theory, Luria’s intellectual interest in them was only temporary. With time, his involvement in the Soviet scientific community and personal connections with foreign scientists created new scientific horizons for him.

**Moving Away from Psychoanalysis** — **The Soviet Context**

During the second half of the 1920s, Luria cultivated a wide circle of formal and informal collaborations and connections. Although beyond the scope of this article, the most important contact professionally was with Lev Vygotsky. They met in 1924, and Luria played an important role in bringing Vygotsky to Moscow, soon after which they became close friends (Lamdan, 2019; Yasnitsky, 2016). Their joint research project on the cultural development of the child, which was the first phase of what later became known as "cultural-historical psychology," began only in the late 1920s. Meanwhile, Luria expanded the study of affective reactions to various experimental and social contexts and became involved in three other institutions: the Academy of Communist Upbringing, the Clinic for Nervous Diseases in Moscow State University and a special laboratory that he established at the Moscow District Attorney's Office. In all of these institutions, Luria applied the associative experiment for various purposes, most often in relation to the study of affect.

At the Academy of Communist Upbringing, where Luria headed the psychological laboratory, he used the classic associative experiment to examine how the ability to form verbal associations develops, as well as how this process differs across children from different social backgrounds (Luria, 1927b; Luria, 1930a). In the clinic, Luria and Mark Lebedinskii applied the combined motor method to study patients who suffered from various diseases, such as hysteria, neurasthenia, aphasia and Parkinson's disease (Luria and Lebedinskii, 1928). In their study, they tried to show that the combined motor method could help them diagnose patients with such conditions, on the assumption that each disease had unique behavioral symptoms. Additionally, they wanted to show that the pattern of symptoms could reveal something about the disease's neuropsychological mechanisms.

In the laboratory established by Luria in the Moscow District Attorney's Office, he tried to apply the combined motor method to criminology (Luria, 1927c; Luria, 1928a). The aim of his work there was to develop ways to identify types of involvement in crime, especially in situations of attempts to conceal facts regarding crimes, which typically have an affective qualities. The combined motor-associative experiment was intended to distinguish between general affect, related to the investigation, and a specific affect that arose from the affective complex that was related to the crime situation. Luria's method could have potentially provided a "technological" solution to problems that troubled the Soviet juridical system (Solomon, 1996) because the use of simple technology could provide an "objective" and "instrumental" solution for situations in which experience and intuition usually had to be applied. However, this project ended with no practical results, beyond their inclusion in Luria's theoretical considerations later on. The reasons for this remain unknown. There was nothing in the study that would have threatened the existing order. As might be expected, Luria was not as interested in the causes of crime as he was in its psychological and sociological roots. And yet, given the difficult and compromising scenarios that Luria described, it is possible that the results of the project could have embarrassed the authorities. Serious crimes committed by ordinary people could have been seen as evidence of the country’s failure to establish a new, just and egalitarian order.

This expansion of the scope of Luria's study of affect did not, in itself, indicate a move away from psychoanalysis. However, Luria did depart from using psychoanalytic theory as a significant theoretical reference point for his research, due to a number of personal and social factors. On the personal level, psychoanalysis did not provide Luria with an adequate framework for his aspirations to engage in experimental science. Furthermore, many among Luria's intellectual milieu had become critical of psychoanalysis. On the broader social level, psychoanalysis in Russia had been on the decline since the mid-1920s. The combination of these circumstances paved the way for Luria to distance himself from Freudian theory and concepts.

Starting in the mid-1920s, psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union declined almost as rapidly as it had earlier ascended (Miller, 1998, 69–92). The main activity of the Psychoanalytic Institute was operating the experimental kindergarten (Etkind, 1994, 192–205; Schmidt, 1924). However, the kindergarten faced many difficulties and criticisms. Responding to rumors that the kindergarten was carrying out experiments on children's sexuality, several investigatory commissions were launched within a short period of time. This threat was compounded by the challenges of finding sufficient numbers of professional cadres. Ultimately, it was decided that the kindergarten and the Psychoanalytic Institute were to be closed.

An important factor that determined the fate of psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union was the support, or absence of it, from the political establishment. The rapid rise of the field of psychoanalysis was made possible, to a great extent, by the mobilization of support from political entities. Otto Schmidt, a senior member of the Russian Psychoanalytic Society, was a senior official and activist in the Ministry of Education under Anatoly Lunacharsky. The Psychoanalytic Institute was a state institute, and the psychoanalytic literature had been published by the state publishing house. Above all, however, the most senior patron of psychoanalysis in Soviet Russia had been Trotsky (Etkind, 1994, 215–247). Trotsky's decline in power and influence also affected the ability of Russian psychoanalysts to mobilize support from the corridors of power. The psychoanalysts’ identification with Trotsky, who had gradually become the greatest demon of the Soviet political world, certainly undermined the reputation of the field of psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union. However, there were also other factors that contributed to the decline of psychoanalysis, at least for Luria.

During the second half of the 1920s, an ideological debate arose concerning psychoanalysis. Interestingly, psychoanalysis’s strong emphasis on sexuality as the main motivating force of psychic life was criticized even by those who were considered its supporters. This focus on sexuality was a major drawback in post-revolutionary Russia. In the turmoil of the Bolshevik revolution, the "sexual revolution" received much attention in the early 1920s (Bernstein, 2007; Carleton, 2005). Equal rights for women, the abolition of religious marriage, the legalization of abortion and the decriminalization of homosexual relationships encouraged a significant minority, especially among young people, to speak out and promote a sexual revolution within the wider social revolution. Eventually, however, the more conservative majority, who preferred traditional conceptions of sexuality, prevailed. This was due, in large part, to the medical establishment, which preferred more conservative models of sexuality and had a different perception of sexuality’s relation to mental and physical processes.

Many physicians introduced a conservative model of "healthy sexuality" in order to address some of the serious social problems of the 1920s, such as the spread of venereal diseases, prostitution, the abandonment of young mothers by their partners and more. These physicians viewed "unhealthy sexuality" — i.e., any sexual expression outside the heterosexual normative family — as one of the leading causes of the large increase in the rate of neurasthenia. Unlike psychoanalysis, most Soviet physicians who dealt with sexuality in the 1920s perceived it as something external, a kind of behavior that could be controlled relatively easily. An interesting example of this approach was demonstrated by Aron Zalkind, who was associated with two of the institutions in which Luria worked, the Institute of Psychology and the Academy of Communist Upbringing.

Aron Zalkind was a neurologist, psychologist and communist activist, whose main interests ranged from mental hygiene to paedology (the study of children). As a physician and psychologist, Zalkind became interested in psychoanalysis as early as the 1910s, and was involved in psychoanalytic circles in both pre- and post-revolutionary Russia. In the 1920s, he also joined the debate on the relations between Marxism and psychoanalysis (Zalkind, 1924). Although Zalkind was critical of Freudian "pan-sexualism," he viewed the idea of ​​sublimation positively, albeit according to a different model. For Zalkind, life energy (libido) was always scarce, so it was necessary to "spend" it wisely, on socially beneficial goals. The most well-known expression of this approach was Zalkind's "twelve sexual commandments of the revolutionary proletariat" (Zalkind, 1926, 47–59). This text preached sexual moderation and rather conservative sexual behavior. The main purpose of such conduct, he proclaimed, was to preserve as much energy of the revolutionary proletariat as possible for social activity and the building of communist society, which in turn could also prevent the harm of unbalanced sexuality.

Criticism of psychoanalysis had also appeared in Luria's closest circle. Lev Vygotsky, Luria's close colleague and friend, had become very critical of psychoanalysis, despite some initial interest. In 1925, they co-authored the preface to Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Luria and Vygotsky, 1925). They greatly appreciated this work of Freud and emphasized its materialistic and even dialectical nature, but their understanding of this dialectic was distinct from Freud's (Proctor, 2016). Freud emphasized the tension between the Eros and the death drive, and the inability to resolve this tension definitively in any way other than in the realization of death. On the other hand, Luria and Vygotsky viewed this dialectic from the perspective of overcoming conservative biology (both drives) through an external factor — social living conditions — or through a progressive social dimension. Despite the promise of a Freudo-Marxist synthesis, Vygotsky presented increasing critiques of psychoanalysis and the attempts to combine it with Marxism. In his *Psychology of Art*, Vygotsky argued that psychoanalysis fails to explain both the creation and perception of art because it tries to do so only through the sublimation of the sexual drive (Vygotsky, 1998 [1925], 89–108).[[4]](#footnote-4) In addition, Vygotsky stressed the importance of consciousness in mental life, although he recognized the significance of the unconscious and the value of psychoanalysis in raising the notion of the unconscious. Later, in his unfinished psychological manifesto, *The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology*, Vygotsky sharply criticized psychoanalysis, arguing that it was essentially an idealistic, ahistorical, and static theory, and that it attempted to explain all higher psychological processes through primitive, pre-historic, and pre-human factors (Vygotsky, 1982). Therefore, any attempt to combine psychoanalysis with Marxism, as Luria had done, was artificial and doomed to fail.

Such criticisms likely influenced Luria, and psychoanalysis gradually lost its appeal for him. However, Luria continued to use some psychoanalytic findings when they were consistent with his new theoretical thinking. In 1927, Luria retired as secretary of the Russian Psychoanalytic Society, and the movement continued to decline without him (Schmidt, 1927). Although it may appear that Luria was passively pushed out of psychoanalysis, in fact, his departure from psychoanalysis was also the result of his growing interest in another theory and area of psychology, Gestalt psychology.

**Affect as "Disorganization of Behavior"** — **Luria's Dialogue with Gestalt Theory**

In 1925, Luria joined his father on a professional journey to Germany and the Netherlands (Luria, 1994, 43–44). This trip, especially in Germany, was a significant experience for Alexander Luria, representing his first opportunity to establish an international network of colleagues. Of particular importance was his visit to Berlin and the Institute of Psychology, where the Gestalt school of thought was flourishing at the time (Ach, 1995, 203–322).

Gestalt psychology, though less well-known to the layperson than psychoanalysis, was an important school of thought that emerged in Germany in the early 20th century, and that evolved from discussions about philosophy and experimental psychology in Germany involving the works of Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler and Kurt Koffka in diverse fields such as perception and animal behavior (Ash, 1995, 103–200; King and Wertheimer, 2005, 63–110). Gestalt theory emphasized the importance of the "whole" over its parts and explained psychological processes as irreducible organized structures imbued with internal meaning, in contrast to the atomism and associationism of the classical approach and behaviorism (Koffka, 1922).

Luria came to Berlin when Gestalt psychology was already an influential school of thought with a journal representing this school of thought, *Psychologische Forschung* (*Psychological Research*), already being published. At that time, Kurt Lewin's research team was active in Berlin, and Luria met him personally during his visit and remained in contact with him for many years afterward. Lewin's group experimentally studied different aspects of personality, such as will, intention, needs, and affect. His approach offered a completely different theoretical framework for examining the problems that interested Luria (Lewin, 1926). According to Lewin's dynamic theory of personality, an intention or motive for action was rooted in needs and quasi-needs, and was understood within the framework of a system of tension or of non-equilibrium. This dynamic system operated within an environment, as it was perceived by the individual, i.e., the psychological field, in which various repulsion and attraction forces were exerted on a person according to his or her needs. During Luria's visit, Tamara Dembo, one of Lewin's students of Russian-Jewish origin, was studying anger. Bluma Zeigarnik, another famous student of Lewin's, who later returned to the Soviet Union and became a central figure in Soviet psychology, remembered that Luria was even a subject in Dembo's experiments (Iaroshevskii, 1988). Lewin's research style apparently greatly impressed Luria, which made sense given Luria's interest in the "whole personality" and his appreciation of the experimental approach.

Upon his return home, Luria became one of the proponents of a fruitful dialogue with Gestalt theory in the Soviet Union. He presented a sympathetic, if not enthusiastic, attitude towards it in the philosophical-ideological journal, *Pod Znamenem Marksizma* (*Under the Banner of Marxism*)(Luria, 1926d), which was later expanded into a short book (Luria, 1928b). In his article, Luria argued that Gestalt theory made it possible to overcome the atomism of behaviorism and reflexology, which he still valued ​​due to their objective approach, because of its emphasis on the holistic nature of mental processes. This perspective, Luria argued, fit well with the dialectical approach because, with each increase in complexity, a "new closed system" was obtained and created a "new qualitative unity." Complex behavior was first and foremost goal-oriented, a "meaningful" adaptation to the environment. Luria's methodological conclusion from this was that a psychological experiment should be designed in terms of a "meaningful action," and that it should be developed in a way that recreated natural conditions as closely as possible.

In another paper, Luria proposed a classification of behaviors (Luria, 1928c), defining behavior as "a system of unstable equilibrium between the organism and its environment, which uses the reaction mechanism to return each time to an equilibrium." Interestingly, the concept of reaction in this context referred to an organized behavioral pattern, and not necessarily a reflex-like reaction. Affect was now perceived as special type of behavior that occurs in a "super-complex" situation; that is, a situation to which an individual fails to response adequately, which subsequently leads to a "disorganization of behavior."

That same year, Luria published a methodological article in German in *Psychologische Forschung* (Luria, 1928d; Luria, 1929a). In this paper, Luria comprehensively presented his experimental methodology. One of the interesting aspects of the article was the way in which Luria justified the inclusion of a voluntary motor response in the associative experiment. Luria argued that in order to reflect on the process taking place in the central nervous system (the verbal reaction) by way of the peripheral process (the motor reaction), they must be combined into a unified system. The verbal associative process, along with the voluntary movement, created a system that Luria called, "motor gestalt," and he argued that the active nature of the movement was dominant in comparison to other motor processes, similar to the prominence of form against the background in the study of perception.

More concretely, Lewin's work directly influenced Luria's study of affect. This was reflected clearly in Luria’s book, *The Nature of Human Conflicts* (Luria, 1932), which presented an exhaustive discussion of XX; however, a more detailed account of the book is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it should be noted that the book was Luria's attempt to combine affect research with his and Vygotsky's research program, which was known as "cultural-historical psychology." Additionally, in this book, Luria presented the first version of the concept of functional systems, which was the basis of his later neuropsychological work.

Luria adopted Lewin's concept of conflict and used it to explain the mechanism of affect formation. Conflict, according to Lewin, was a collision between forces acting on a person in his or her psychological field at a particular time, which then influenced the individual’s behavior (Marrow, 1969, 62). Luria’s meaning of conflict was quite similar, positing that conflict was a collision between tendencies to action or between particular intentions (Luria, 1932, 251–252). Using this concept, Luria constructed a series of experiments that, in his view, constituted an experimental model of conflict which would elicit an affective reaction (Luria, 1930b; Luria, 1932, 205–328). The main idea was to create a task, using his associative-motor method, that would evoke contractionary tendencies in the subject's behavior. Another option, as in Tamara Dumbo's experiments, was to create a contradiction between a task and the subject's ability to perform it. In both cases, a “behavior" was incorporated into a motor-associative experiment under different kinds of conditions and restrictions.

In all of these experiments, the influence of Lewin's methodology was not only noticeable, but also explicitly acknowledged. In fact, in all of his explicit references to Lewin's approach, Luria described it as close to ideal in terms of conducting experimental work in psychology. Lewin’s impact on Luria, along with Luria’s adoption of “organization” as a key concept in psychology (Luria, 1932, 3–39), as well as the search for whole structures in the associative-motor experiment, marked Luria's recognition of Gestalt psychology as the most appropriate model for psychological research.

**Heights Psychology — Society, Culture and Brain**

In light of all the forgoing, it may be asked whether Luria was a (crypto-)Freudian. From the outset, Luria's use of psychoanalysis was limited and heterodoxic. Furthermore, his departure from the psychoanalytic conceptualization was complex and did not stem solely from external pressures. However, it is also difficult to claim that Luria was simply "converted" to Gestalt psychology, even though some readers of *Nature of Human Conflicts* identified this school of thought with him (Hartmann, 1935, 226–227). If Luria's work must be associated with any particular approach, it is safe to say that his approach was more Vygotskian than anything else. Luria was Vygotsky’s close associate in developing a theory, even if it did remain unfinished (Yasnitsky, 2018; Yasnitsky and van der Veer, 2016).

Since the late 1920s, Vygotsky and Luria had been engaged in researching uniquely human psychological processes or, what they called "high psychological functions," and their cultural development (Luria, 1928e; Vygotsky, 1929; Vygotsky and Luria, 1930). This approach was based largely on Marxist ideas about "human nature" and its evolution (especially Engels's Dialectic of Nature) and were part of the Soviet discourse on the creation of "the new man" (Yasnitsky, 2019). A key concept in their initial work, which dealt mainly with cognitive processes, was "signs" or "psychological tools,” which were analogous to working tools. Signs were supposed to help humans to control their own behavior, and tools were to help them interact with and master the physical nature.

In *The Nature of Human Conflicts*, which Luria completed in the summer of 1930, Luria presented the first version of his conceptualization of functional systems, according to which the organism is not a mosaic of separate functions, but rather an organized whole, in which certain systems play a dominant regulatory role (Luria, 1932, 3–14). Among humans, speech (or language) — a system of signs — played this regulatory role. Later, especially between the years 1932–1934, Luria and Vygotsky turned to the problem of sense, and began to develop the principle of the semantic structure of consciousness (Zavershneva, 2015a; Zavershneva, 2015b). Early formulations of their principle can be found in their essay entitled, "Tool and Sign in Child Development" (Vygotsky and Luria, 1994 [1932–1933]).[[5]](#footnote-5) Vygotsky and Luria used the concept of field, which was also a result of Lewin's influence, to explain this principle. The basic idea was that language creates a special field, the semantic field, which allows for a representation of reality that detaches the person from concrete situations — the immediate field of action — and allows the individual to "stand outside of it:" the very field that makes human activity free. This was Luria's entry point into neuropsychological work and, together with Vygotsky, they aimed to test their hypotheses in situations of disintegration of higher psychological processes.

Therefore, it is difficult to conclude that Luria's interest in the clinical method stemmed from his early interest in psychoanalysis. Clinical tradition is a much broader matter in scientific culture. On a personal level, Luria grew up in a family of medical professionals, he himself worked in a clinic, and he even formulated preliminary ideas about the importance of combining clinical and experimental methods (Luria, 1929b). His attraction to clinical case studies had probably been strengthened by Kurt Lewin's methodological approach, which emphasized the importance of qualitative causal analysis of individual cases (Lewin, 1931). Both his family background and Lewin’s work were important factors that influenced Luria's attempt to combine "classical" and "romantic" science (Luria, 1982, 167–181; Sacks, 1990).

Regarding the narrower question of localization of brain functions, Luria was certainly influenced by the Hughlings Jackson’s model. His growing interest in neurology in general, and aphasia in particular, led him to examine works of various scientists; among the most influential were Henry Head, Kurt Goldstein and Anton Grünbaum (Luria, 1930c, 84–8; Luria, 1932, 370–371). However, Luria was far from reducing psychological processes to brain activity. In his understanding, human consciousness, i.e., man's relation to reality, was historically shaped by language and social relations, and played a central role in psychological processes. Luria argued that the mind was not the source of consciousness, but that it mediated and represented psychological processes (Luria, 1936).

Through this prism of systemic structure of the psyche and semantic structure of consciousness, Luria also reformulated his understanding of affect (Luria, 1939). He made a clear distinction between animals' affect and that of humans. He noted that animals were motivated by drives, that their behavior was unmediated and aimed at satisfying immediate needs. Further, he argued that animals’ affect was limited in time to the situation at hand. Luria contrasted these with human needs, which he argued were mostly social. Conscious processes created a hierarchical system of needs and "drives," and some of them were aimed toward the attainment of a greater goal. Human activity was dependent upon an inner field that represents this hierarchical system of needs, a life plan, and a worldview. Therefore, human affective life, he argued, was continuous and permanent.

This conception of consciousness, which I briefly and schematically presented, is in many ways completed contrary to Freud's conception. For Luria, consciousness, not unconsciousness, was the center of the system. Although Freud also argued that language and culture played an important role in mental life, he additionally emphasized that society and culture primarily played a repressive role; Freud’s emphasis on repression was in contrast to the constructive role attributed to it in Luria's approach. Vygotsky, echoing Freud's depth psychology, called his and Luria’s approach “heights psychology” (Vygotsky, 1982, 166). The question of whether, and how, the works of Freud and Luria can be combined is beyond the scope of this paper (Zavershneva, 2016; Zavershneva, 2017). However, what I have attempted to illustrate in this article is that it would be historically inaccurate to view Luria's work as the neuroscientific incarnation of Freudian heritage.

1. Republished in 2003 (Luria, 2003[1923]). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In addition to the brief reports in *Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse*, Luria mentioned, in his autobiography, that he tried to use the method of free association in the psychiatric clinic of Kazan with Dostoevsky's granddaughter (Luria, 1982, 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On the missing paper [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. First published posthumously in 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. On the problematic history of this essay, see Yasnitsky, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)