***The Transnational History of Soviet Psychology: The case of Alexander Luria's Neuropsychology in the Cold War Era.***

Research proposal

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This research proposal deals with the transnational history of Soviet psychology, especially Soviet neuropsychology, and its dissemination during the Cold War Era within the context of psychology’s and the neurosciences’ cognitive turn in the English-speaking countries (UK and North America). It is largely a continuation and extension of my PhD dissertation which deals with Alexander Luria's early intellectual biography. Luria is well known among psychologists and neuroscientists for his groundbreaking neuropsychological work in the field of aphasia. These studies were part of an attempt to establish an integrative science of mind, brain and culture based on ideas jointly developed by Luria and his close friend and colleague Lev Vygotsky. Their approach, sometimes referred to as "cultural-historical psychology," emphasized the social and cultural origins of human consciousness and psychological processes and was based on two fundamental principles that developed during their collaborative work in the 1920s and 1930s.

The first principle is the principle of the systemic structure of the mind, in which the key concepts are organization and functional system. According to this principle, the human psyche, as well as the brain structures that mediate them, is built from hierarchical and organized functional systems. The second principle of Luria's approach to neuropsychology – the principle of the semantic structure of consciousness – refers to the role of speech in the systemic structure of the mind. For Vygotsky and Luria, speech has become the main functional system that has the regulatory role in human behavior and activity. Furthermore, the symbolic activity of language creates a new field, the semantic field, through which man frees himself from the immediate situation and acts according to motives that are aimed at the future and originate in the social system.

Luria's scientific project can be best understood in a dual context: the local cultural and socio-political context and the transnational scientific-intellectual context. In the local dimension, his scientific project was deeply rooted in Soviet discourse and influenced by political and social events during the formation of the Soviet Union. His conception of humanity, which is essentially cultural and social, was rooted in the Marxist worldview and the discourse of the "New Soviet Man" prevalent in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s. At the same time, it is impossible to understand Luria's scientific project without its transnational dimension. Luria, from his earliest days as a researcher, understood science as a universal human activity and sought contacts with his Western counterparts. Psychoanalysis, and later the Gestalt school, were sources of inspiration and dialogue for Luria. This dialogue with Western thought positioned Luria within a group of Soviet scientists and intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s that served as a bridge between the Soviet scientific community and their Western counterparts.

In my future research, I would like to explore the opposite flow in the circulation of ideas and knowledge in neurology and psychology, i.e., from the Soviet Union to the West, mainly the US and UK.[[1]](#footnote-1) Before the 1950s, Western interest in Soviet psychology remained sporadic and non-systematic. An interesting example of this sporadic interest is the translation in 1934 of Vygotsky's article on the thinking of schizophrenics and similar study conducted by Eugenia Hanfmann and Jacob Kasanin. A significant turning point occurred in 1955, when a group of British educators and psychologists, including historian of education and British Communist Party member Brian Simon, visited the Soviet Union in order to study its education system. As a result of this visit, Brian Simon edited a volume of articles by Soviet psychologists, while Simon's wife, Joan, edited and co-translated Luria's case study of twins' research on the role of language in the development of psychological processes.[[2]](#footnote-2) Interestingly, the person who wrote a short introduction to Luria's book was Oliver Zangwill, one of the most prominent neuropsychologists of the 20th century. Finally, Luria himself visited Britain in 1958 and his lectures at University College was published in 1961.

Another British scientist who participated in Simon's project and became an important broker of Soviet psychology in the West was Neil O'Connor. O'Connor worked at the Psychiatric Institute of the Medical Research Council (MRC) and investigated mental retardation and the learning potential of people suffering from these conditions. O'Connor edited another volume of Soviet authors in 1962, and in 1966 published an edited volume of articles by Western psychologists dedicated to different segments of Soviet psychology.[[3]](#footnote-3) Later on, O'Connor, along with his partner Beate Hermelin conducted groundbreaking studies in psychopathology of cognitive development in general and autism in particular.

In addition to the British avenue, Western scientists' exposure to Soviet psychology was also a result of American scientists' activity. Regarding Luria's neuropsychology and Vygotskian ideas, one of the most important figures in North America was Jerome Bruner. Bruner, who was one of the prominent figures of the so-called "cognitive revolution" in psychology, was interested in thought processes, learning processes, children's cognitive development and language acquisition. These issues were also at the core of Vygotsky's and Luria's research, so Bruner was naturally interested in their ideas.[[4]](#footnote-4) Luria and Bruner met during one of Luria's first postwar trips to the US and established an intellectual and personal connection. Luria also had close contacts with another prominent neuropsychologist, Karl Pribram. Pribram, known for his groundbreaking work on defining and understanding of the limbic system, was interested in the role of the frontal lobes, a topic that Luria investigated since the mid-1930s. Pribram first met Luria at a congress in Brussels in 1957, a meeting that evolved into a long-term collaboration.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Luria, as a senior Soviet psychologist, played a central role in the "export" of ideas and knowledge from the Soviet Union to the West. I propose to examine this network in its intellectual, political and social context on both the Soviet and the Western sides. In the early years of the Cold War, from the late 1940s to Stalin's death in 1953, an anti-Western and isolationist policy was introduced in the Soviet Union, including in the fields of science and culture. The situation began to change after Stalin's death and the beginning of the "thaw" period in Soviet history, a period that culminated in the hesitated de-Stalinization led by Nikita Khrushchev. Did the Soviet political leadership regard the controlled relations between Soviet scientists and their Western colleagues as a form of scientific and cultural diplomacy that might raise the prestige of the Soviet Union in the world? For Luria and other Soviet scientists this, of course, was an opportunity to expose themselves and their ideas to the transnational scientific community. But was it also their way of fighting for prestige and positions at home, within the Soviet scientific establishment? And did these connections play a role in the attempt of some Soviet neurologists, psychiatrists and psychologists, including Luria, to fight against the Pavlovization of psychopathology and neuropsychology that began in the late Stalinist period?

Similar interesting questions arise regarding the "importers" of Soviet psychology. A central postwar political project in the West was to position itself as a liberal democratic society, in opposition to both left and right totalitarianism. A corollary of this was the establishment of a welfare state (especially in the British context), which was to abate the failures of capitalism on the one hand, and to respond to the Soviet challenge on the other. In this context we can ask whether, and to what extent, did the interest in Soviet psychology stem from sympathy toward socialist ideas? What political and professional goals did the "import" of Soviet neuropsychology serve in the field of mental health? And finally, what intellectual currents did Soviet psychology reinforce within the Western scientific community? For example, did the ideas of Soviet psychologists, and especially Luria's neuropsychology, play a role in the rising tide of cognitivism in its battle against behaviorism?

An additional avenue of research concerns the similarities in the scientific content on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Many scholars agree that the intellectual and socio-political dimensions of the scientific activity, especially in the human sciences, are closely related. As some recent publications show, the cognitive turn and other developments in psychology and neurosciences in the West were closely related to views regarding human nature, especially a desired liberal "open-minded self".[[6]](#footnote-6) On the other side of the divide, Soviet psychology had its own ideal notion of man, man as "personality" (*lichnost'*). The notion of personality in Soviet psychology includes characteristics such as independence, activity, consciousness and creativity. At first glance, while this may sound surprising, it doesn't look very different from the liberal "open-minded self". To what extent is this initial impression correct? Did it actually help to establish a fruitful dialogue between Soviet psychologists and their Western counterparts? What is the source of this similarity? And finally, what it means for an understanding of mental health and pathology?

There are several different sources on which I intend to base this research project. First are the relevant publications of the scientists mentioned in this proposal. Second, a variety of archival material found in collections in the US, UK and Russia. These include accessible personal collections of scientists, archival collections of relevant institutions such as the Russian Academy of Medical Science Archive, the Russian Academy of Science Archive and archives of relevant British and US institutions. The last sort of sources is the various secondary literature that will help to contextualize the issue within the broader historical reality.

1. For a preliminary study on this issue see: René van der Veer and Anton Yasnitsky, "Translating Vygotsky: some problems of transnational Vygotskian science," in *Revisionist Revolution in Vygotsky Studies*, eds. Anton Yasnitsky and René van der Veer (London: Routledge, 2016), 143-174. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Brian Simon, ed., *Psychology in the Soviet Union* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957); Alexander R. Luria and Faina Ia. Yudovich, *Speech and the Development of Mental Processes in the Child* (London: Staples Press, 1959). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Neil O'Connor, ed., *Recent Soviet Psychology* (London: Pergamon Press, 1961); Neil O'Connor, ed., Present-Day Soviet Psychology: A Symposium by Seven Authors (London: Pergamon Press, 1966). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jerome Bruner, *In Search of Mind: Essays in Autobiography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1983), 143-145; Elena A. Luriia, *Moi otets A. R. Luriia* (Moskva: Gnoziz, 1994), 170-175. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Luriia, *Moi otets*, 182-183; Karl H. Pribram and Alexander R. Luria, eds., *Psychophysiology of the Frontal Lobes* (New York: Academic Press, 1973). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jamie Cohen-Cole, *The Open Mind: Cold War Politics and the Science of Human Nature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014); Erika Lorraine Milam, *Creatures of Cain: The Hunt for Human Nature in Cold War America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)