

Kurt Koffka and the Expedition to Central Asia

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In 1932, the German Gestalt Psychologist Kurt Koffka, accompanied a psychological expedition led by Alexander Luria to Central Asia. This was the second of two expeditions Luria had conceived with his colleague Lev Vygotsky (who was presumably too ill to make the journey himself). In the wake of the First Five Year Plan, in late 1929, Vygotsky and Luria decided to conduct experiments in Soviet Central Asia or the Caucasus.¹ They hoped to trace the changes in thought they assumed would accompany the changes in labour and education wrought by the Plan, hoping that this moment of rapid social change would provide them with the material to support their theoretical insistence on the historical contingency of human thought. These experiments should not be viewed in isolation, however, and were part of a brief flare of interest in cross-cultural analysis in Soviet Psychology. Thus, just two years before first Luria's expedition a series of expeditions to the Far East of Russia took place in spring-summer 1929. Alexander Zaporozhets, a former student of Vygotsky and Luria at the 2nd Moscow State University and their close associate thereafter, also participated in this 1929 expedition. Unlike the experiments led by Luria these studies focused on children. Although the experiments were addressed to Soviet educational policy, they did not have a specific emphasis on the impact of collectivization. In addition, a range of studies on national minorities were conducted during the period of industrial and cultural revolution in the Soviet Union in 1928-1932 by scholars affiliated with educational and research institutes in national republics. Quite clearly the research on the psychology of national minorities during this period became one of the most fashionable—yet, in retrospect, fairly short-lived—field of studies in psychology and allied sciences in the Soviet Union.²

¹ For the contacts between the members of Vygotsky Circle and German-American scholars of the Gestalt tradition see Yasnitsky, A. (2012). К истории культурно-исторической гештальт-психологии: Вygotskii, Luriiia, Koffka, Levin i dr. *PsyAnima, Dubna Psychological Journal*, 5(1), 60-97. Available online at <http://www.psyanima.ru/journal/2012/1/2012n1a2/2012n1a2.1.pdf>

² See, the set of thematic publications in Soviet journal *Pedologiia*, issue 2, 1930. For English materials see special issue of *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology* devoted to these cross-cultural experiments, Volume 31, Number 1 / January-February 1993. For a thematic bibliography of Soviet research and selected publications on cross-cultural psychology and psychology of national minorities that came out in the Soviet Union and abroad during this period see the special publication in this issue of the journal.

In contrast to the expeditions of 1929 that had been launched during the very beginning of the period of the First Five-Year Plan, Luria described their experiments as: ‘a statement of the fundamental shifts that had occurred in human consciousness during a vigorous realignment of social history – the rapid realignment of a class society and a cultural upheaval creating hitherto unimagined perspectives for social development’.³ In the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, which came into being in 1924,⁴ they identified the simultaneous co-existence of groups at various ‘stages’ of development. Here Vygotsky and Luria followed the Communist Party line, conceiving of their work in explicitly anti-imperialist terms.⁵ A loosely Marxist conception of history as advancing teleologically through an inevitable series of economic stages, was combined with the Leninist conviction that such development could be artificially accelerated, conforming to what Francine Hirsch describes as ‘state-sponsored evolutionism’.⁶ According to Vygotsky, expressing himself in well-worn Soviet rhetoric: ‘Instead of the colonial approach to the cultural development of backward peoples adopted... in the capitalist world, this proposes completely new conditions for the development of a single socialist culture in different national forms’⁷ that would propel supposedly ‘backward’ people forwards, to make a ‘leap of centuries’⁸.

Koffka's scattered reminiscences and notes from this expedition provide an outsider's perspective both on the psychological experiments themselves and the historical circumstances in which they were undertaken. Koffka acknowledges that the express purpose of the expedition was to 'study the dependence of the mental functions of people upon the historico-economic conditions of their country,'⁹ in attempt to disprove the conclusions of a psychological expedition undertaken in the Tsarist-era, which concluded that Uzbeks were fundamentally incapable of

³ A.R. Luria, *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations*, trans. by Martin Lopez-Morillas and Lynn Solotaroff (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 19.

⁴ From 1918-1924 the region visited by Luria's expedition was formally part of the Turkestan Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1924, the Soviet map was re-drawn along supposedly ethnic lines and the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic came into being. See, Arne Haugen, *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan; 2003).

⁵ According to Edward Said: ‘Every empire... tells itself and the world that it is unlike all other empires, that its mission is not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate.’ ‘Blind Imperial Arrogance, Los Angeles Times, July 20th 2003, <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/jul/20/opinion/oe-said20>, Accessed September 24 2012.

⁶ Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY; Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 96.

⁷ Vygotsky, ‘K voprosu o plane nauchno-issledovatel'skoĭ raboty po pedagogii natsional'nykh men'shinstv’, *Pedologiya*, no. 3, 1929, pp. 367-377 (my translation).

⁸ Luria, *Cognitive Development*, p. 164

⁹ Kurt Koffka 'The Russian-Uzbekistan Expedition', Holly Harrower ed., *Kurt Koffka: An Unwitting Self-Portrait* (Gainesville, FL; University Presses of Florida, 1983), pp. 143-161, p. 161.

being educated. The fact that the results of these experiments were subsequently suppressed¹⁰ should not obscure the extent to which they were carried out with the express purpose of underlining the benefits of collectivization, and were conducted under the auspices of a range of Soviet institutions.¹¹ As Koffka remarks: 'I suppose that the Moscow government were willing to spend considerable sums of money on this enterprise because they expected formal proof of the beneficial effects of their policy on the intellectual and moral status of their citizens.'¹² Koffka's accounts of the expedition describe his interactions with various high-ranking Uzbek officials, indicating the extent to which the psychological expedition was conducted in collaboration with the Party-elite in the Republic.

Uwe Gielen and Samvel Jeshmaridian have criticised Vygotsky and Luria's experiments in Central Asia, juxtaposing harrowing sections from Robert Conquest's controversial *The Harvest of Sorrow* with some of the psychologists' more explicitly ideological statements to suggest the psychologists were in some sense complicit with Stalinism, in a tone of Cold War hysteria that casually equates Marxist theory with totalitarianism and mass murder.¹³ But from a simple experiential perspective, it is vital to note that these experiments were not conducted in Ukraine and Kazakhstan, the areas most acutely affected by famine during collectivization, and

¹⁰ The (possibly apocryphal) story goes that having conducted research on imagination and visual perception, Luria excitedly telegraphed Vygotsky who stayed in Moscow saying simply – 'The Uzbeks have no illusions!' This message was intercepted and interpreted as a negative comment on collectivization. Luria was met in Moscow by secret service, OGPU, agents and taken in for questioning. See, E. D. Homskaya, *Alexander Romanovich Luria: A Scientific Biography*, trans by David E Tupper (New York, NY; Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2001). This episode appears historically questionable. The claim that Uzbeks have no optical illusions (see discussion of this controversial topic in this issue) took place during the first expedition of 1931; see the discussion of these findings as Luria presented them in his research reports 2, 3, and 4, in Vygotsky's letters of June 20, July 11, and August 1, 1931 in Rückriem, G. (2008). *Lev Semënovič Vygotskij. Briefe/Letters. 1924–1934*. Berlin: Lehmanns Media and in Vygotsky, L. S., & Puzyrei, A. A. (2004). Pis'ma k uchenikam i soratnikam [Letters to students and collaborators]. *Vestnik MGU. Series 14. Psychology*, (3), 3–40. Despite this, the first expedition was followed by a larger state-sponsored expedition in 1932. Only after the second expedition was over, a special commission was formed in order to investigate the scholarly findings and, particularly, the political motivations of Luria's team. See Elena Luria, *Moi Otets A.R. Luria* (Moscow; Gnosis, 1994). Their work in Central Asia was subsequently denounced as 'pseudoscientific, anti-Marxist and class-hostile', Razmyslov, 'O Kul'turno-istoricheskoi teorii' Vygotskogo i Lurii' *Kniga i proletarskaia revoliutsiia*, 1934, no. 4.

¹¹ The experiments were organized by Moscow State University, the Psychological Section of the Ukrainian Psychoneurological Academy of Kharkov, and the Pedagogical Academy of Samarkand, with backing from the People's Commissariat of Education of the Uzbek Socialist Republic and the Government of Uzbekistan. See, Alexander Luria, 'The Second Psychological Expedition to Central Asia', *Pedagogical and Seminary Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 44, 1934, pp. 255-259, p. 255. Although, as Anton Yasnitsky discusses, Luria was initially investigating the possibility of obtaining additional funding from Western institutions. Anton Yasnitsky, Kurt Koffka: 'U uzbekov EST' illuzij!' *Zaochnaja polemika mezhdur Luriej i Koffkoi*, p. 9 (this issue).

¹² Harrower, p. 161

¹³ Uwe Gielen and Samvel Jeshmaridian, 'Lev Vygotsky: The Man and the Era', *International Journal of Group Tensions*, vol. 28, no 3/4, 1999.

those discussed by Conquest.¹⁴ This is not to downplay the brutality of collectivization, but as foreign outsiders visiting for a short period, with chaperones organized by the Uzbek government, Luria and his collaborators were unlikely to have witnessed the kinds of devastating scenes described by Conquest. As Koffka's reflections indicate, the horrors of Stalinism that can be retroactively and systematically described by historians were not necessarily legible to contemporaries.

The eventual denunciation of this research points to little more than the capriciousness of the Stalin-era. As Raymond Bauer discusses in his seminal study *The New Man in Soviet Psychology*, the wild accelerationist pace of the First Five Year Plan ushered in a sudden intolerance for any acknowledgement of a huge gap between the imperfect present and utopian future that was clearly demonstrated in the works of the great many psychologists and pedologists who studied the 'natsmen' (national minorities) during this period¹⁵. Both Vygotsky and Luria were enthusiastically attempting to trace positive changes in consciousness that accompanied collectivization, and even succeeded in demonstrating how, in the common Marxist parlance of the time, just within a few months the change in the socio-economic 'basis' of society resulted in the radical change of the 'superstructure' such as psychological performance of people. Yet, their findings still described Communism as a work in progress, whereas psychologists' findings were now expected to describe the already realized ideal New Soviet Person.¹⁶ However, perhaps the main reason for peer criticism and suppression of the publication of Luria's studies—apart from the controversial findings of the second expedition of the 1932¹⁷—was the development in the international affairs and their impact on propaganda and the internal policy in the Soviet Union. The rapid growth of popularity of the National-Socialist Party in Germany with its ideology of the Nordic (Aryan) race supremacy, and the subsequent Nazis' ascent to power in early 1930s had triggered in the Soviet Union the campaign of harsh criticism of any theories suggesting race or national inequality that was launched around 1932

¹⁴ On collectivization across the Soviet Union see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance & Survival in the Russian Village After Collectivization* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1994); Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹⁵ On the "ethnographic" research of pedologists see Yuri Slezkine, "The Fall of Soviet Ethnography, 1928-38," *Current Anthropology*. 32, no. 4 (1991): 476-84.

¹⁶ Raymond Bauer, *The New Man in Soviet Psychology* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1952), pp. 107-114.

¹⁷ On the finding that, contrary to what was believed to be Luria's first expedition's sensational discovery, Uzbeks still demonstrated optical illusions and Koffka-Luria controversy on this matter see a paper by Yasnitsky followed by a series of polemical publications (this issue).

and resulted in a series of critical “anti-racist” and “anti-fascist” publications in official, popular and scholarly press. Indeed, as Luria reminisced much time later, as a result of a critical investigation of the work of the second expedition of 1932 and its public discussion, “I was accused in all mortal sins, even in racism, and I had to quit Institute of Psychology”¹⁸.

Although Koffka and Luria's approaches were both biologically anti-essentialist, they differed in the relative emphasis placed on the centrality of history to development. These experiments were thus an explicit attempt to undermine the assumption, central to Gestalt psychology, that universal structures govern psychological processes. Indeed, *the* fundamental difference between the Gestalt approach and Vygotsky and Luria's 'cultural-historical' psychology was precisely the latter's insistence on the primacy of social and cultural factors in determining psychological processes. Although drawing much inspiration from the Gestalt approach to psychology and praising its materialism, Vygotsky rejected the Gestalt insistence on the universality of structure. Gestalt, he argued, risks suffocating particularity under a homogeneous conceptual blanket. In his Preface to Koffka's *Osnovy psikhicheskogo razvitiya* published in Russian translation shortly after the expedition, in 1934, though generally laudatory of Koffka's work, Vygotsky clearly outlines his reservations with the Gestalt approach, claiming that in attempting to understand humans and apes using a single principle, in seeking to demonstrate common structures between human and animal, Koffka neglects to probe what *distinguishes* the two. For Vygotsky, difference rather than similarity is the central question at stake. As such, he deems Gestalt theory too generalized, as it crucially 'ignores the historical nature of human consciousness'¹⁹ Koffka characterizes development as natural and uniform, but, according to Vygotsky, the richness and specificities of human problems refuse to be straight-jacketed in this manner, offering 'fierce resistance to the naturalistic attempt to interpret them [they] attempt to tear the cover of this single undifferentiated Gestalt to pieces.'²⁰

Based on the fragmentary evidence available, it does appear that Koffka's experimental methods and the results he obtained differed in fundamental ways from those of Luria and his Soviet team. Luria claimed that he did not want the psychologist's questions to interrupt habitual activities, but to make the experimental situation as 'natural as possible'.²¹ He was suspicious of

¹⁸ «Меня обвинили во всех смертных грехах, вплоть до расизма, и мне пришлось уйти из Института психологии» in Elena Luria (1994), ;Moi otets', p. 66.

¹⁹ Vygotsky, 'Preface to Koffka', *Collected Works of Lev Vygotsky, Volume 3*, Robert W. Rieber ed. (New York and London, Plenum, 1997) pp. 195- 232, p. 216.

²⁰ Vygotsky, 'Preface to Koffka', p. 216.

²¹ Luria, p. 27

standardized tests and of introducing elements alien to people's normal environments. As such, conversations took place 'in the relaxed atmosphere of the tea house'.²² Luria developed experiments based on objects and examples drawn from his subjects' immediate surroundings, concluding that environmental factors, including new forms of labour and literacy levels, had a marked impact on psychological processes.

Koffka, on the other hand, employed a range of standardized tests used in European experiments. He concluded that his Uzbek subjects responded to optical illusions in much the same way as Western Europeans, emphasizing common structures at the root of thinking. But although Koffka's scientific conclusions might suggest an outlook based on assumption of fundamental similarities between different people, his professional emphasis on universal thought structures was combined with a cultural attitude typical of the period. Orientalist tropes abound in his letters to Molly Harrower from Central Asia: 'this vast expanse of night and scent, of softness and mystery'.²³ He frequently expresses disappointment that Uzbekistan does not conform to his ideal romantic stereotype of the 'East': 'Often in my youth had I dreamed of a journey to the East, of lying in the harbour of Port Said, the gate to all wonders of Asia. This was different. No proud ships, no glamorous Eastern port; a very commonplace car in a drab landscape of stunted firs and sand'.²⁴ He even penned a poem in English for inclusion in the expedition's newspaper entitled 'Nights in Palman'.²⁵

Of more historical interest, however, are his reflections on the political outlook of the people he encountered. Luria's work is understandably more circumspect on this point. Due to the suppression of his findings in the Soviet Union, a book-length account of the experiments did not emerge until the mid-1970s, more than forty years after the expeditions had taken place. Luria obediently but dispassionately concludes *Cognitive Development* by remarking: 'In the past forty years, a backward and remote region has become an economically and socially developed part of our socialist state'.²⁶ But the political moment of Brezhnevian stagnation and relative stability, was a stark contrast to the years of rapid and violent change ushered in by Stalin's 'Great Break'. Koffka's accounts, capture some of the enthusiasm he encountered in the Soviet

²² Luria, p. 32

²³ Harrower, p. 158. Koffka was not alone in making these characterizations. Luria's personal impressions of Central Asia also talk of 'whimsical' music, exotic smells and bustling bazaars which he compares to Baghdad and the Arabian Nights. Sections of Luria's diary are included in Elena Luria, *Moi Otets A.R. Luria* (Moscow; Gnosis, 1994).

²⁴ Harrower, p. 157

²⁵ Harrower, p. 153. Also, see online: <http://psyhistorik.livejournal.com/70774.html>

²⁶ Luria, *Cognitive Development*, p. 164

Union in the early 1930s. He mentions watching Sergei Eisenstein's paean to collectivization, 'The General Line' upon arrival in Moscow in late May 1932 (Eisenstein, a friend of Luria's, who had just on May 9, 1932 returned from his prolonged foreign voyage of 1929-1932, was in attendance and also attended Koffka's lecture²⁷). He also notes that as the first foreign scientist to visit the Uzbek Republic, he was greeted with much excitement. This implies that the insularity and suspicion of foreigners that came to characterize Stalinist science during the period of the Cold War was not yet in full force.²⁸

In his reflections on the expedition, he remarks upon the atmosphere of optimism for the revolution he encountered upon his arrival in Moscow, which he claimed was 'extremely lively and optimistic... everybody proud of what has been achieved, and is being done, now, and planned for the future.'²⁹ Koffka also remarks upon the amazing 'uniformity of outlook' between the various people he encountered on his trip, noting their shared lexicon, historical narrative and ideological outlook: 'The uniformity of intellectual and emotional outlook is one of the strongest memories I carried away from my six weeks' visit to the Soviet Union... To have built this wall in a relatively short time is one of the greatest achievements of the Soviet government.' He is struck by the oppressive qualities of this tendency, but notes that these strangely homogeneous utterances were all the more surprising for they seemed to be made in earnest, not out of fear: 'what confounded me most was that they all were honest yet uniform.' Although Koffka is hesitant to conclude that all Soviet people think and feel in the same way, he does note that the people he encountered were not selected on purpose to impress and convert him. On the night train to Tashkent, for example, he met a group of passengers from various Soviet Republics and backgrounds who 'toasted each other and the world revolution.'³⁰ Here his scientific observations, which hinge on the universality of underlying psychological structures, contrasts with his personal narrative, which emphasises how different he feels from his Soviet counterparts (both Russian and Uzbek).³¹

²⁷ Harrower, p. 145, 147.

²⁸ See Nikolai Kremontsov, *Stalinist Science* (Princeton University Press, 1996), who traces a shift in the early 1930s away from the internationally outward-looking and generally autonomous science of the 1920s to much greater insularity. This was briefly ameliorated by the Second World War, only to return, with even greater force, in the late 1940s, with the onset of the Cold War.

²⁹ Harrower, p. 146

³⁰ Harrower, p. 159

³¹ '...they are different people. Different from me, I mean, that, even without the language difficulties, I do not feel quite at home with them.' Harrower, p. 148.

Koffka's remarks also shed a different light on Luria's conclusions. Although Luria does consider new forms of collective labour and exposure to new technologies as factors in psychological development³², in practice most of his conclusions hinge on literacy. The more literate a person, according to Luria, the more conceptual their thought processes and thus the more capable they are of thinking beyond the confines of the immediate situation. But despite his insistence on the importance of historical and cultural specificity, language is treated by Luria as a structure existing outside of time and space. Indeed, it is unclear from reading his findings exactly what dialect his experimental subjects were literate in. And this is not merely a lexical or semantic question; language in Soviet Central Asia was a highly charged ideological issue. The Soviet campaign to eradicate illiteracy was profoundly ideological—pivotal to the consolidation of Soviet power and the attempt to create new Soviet people with specific national identities. Many languages and dialects were spoken in imperial Turkestan. As part of the creation of distinct national republics, the Soviets imposed 'Sart' (an Uzbek dialect from Samarkand) as the national language, standardizing and codifying the language to create new national norms. At the time of the revolution, Uzbek was written in various Arabic scripts. In 1928, the Soviets replaced Arabic with the Latin alphabet (which was replaced by Cyrillic in 1940). Uzbek spelling was codified in 1929. This Enlightenment zeal for standardization and simplification was also tied to the suppression of Islam.³³ Koffka mentions that the language of instruction in schools and universities was both Uzbek and Russian, but his notes convey some of the chaos of the educational system in this period, a chaos not properly acknowledged by Luria in his conclusions.³⁴

³² That Luria and his associates truly believed that the change of social formation directly affects psychological functioning is clearly reflected in the design of his study: on a number of occasions he compared groups of experimental subjects comprised of “illiterate peasants from remote villages” as opposed to “collective-farm activists (barely literate)”; see, e.g., Luria, *Cognitive Development*, p. 78 or Luria’s letter to Wolfgang Köhler of December 3, 1931 (scan of the fragment published in Yasnitsky, Kurt Koffka: ‘U uzbekov EST’ illjuzij!’ *Zaochnaja polemika mezhdur Luriej i Koffkoi*’, p. 12 (this issue). These statements were not confined to Soviet publications, as Luria noted in his report on the 1931 expedition: ‘The expedition was particularly interested in the mental changes caused by collectivisation in Central Asia. This, the chief subject, will be further studied by an expedition in the summer of 1932.’ Luria, A. R. (1932). [Report from] Russia. *Character and Personality*, 1(1), 82.

³³ Although focussed on Russia a useful overview is provided by Charles E. Clark, *Uprooting Otherness: The Literacy Campaign in NEP-Era Russia* (Selinsgrove; Susquehanna University Press, 2000). See also, Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1985).

³⁴ See Kurt Koffka, Koffka Papers, Box M379, folder 'Lectures Misc.', Archives of the History of American Psychology

Luria treats 'language' as the kind of universal structure Vygotsky identifies as a key component of the Gestalt approach, which similarly risks (despite his declarations to the contrary) downplaying the specificities of human development. But Koffka's informal observations, contra his official scientific conclusions, indicate how language and thought in the Soviet Union was related not only to its form, but also to its *content*. Contra Vygotsky and Luria's rather utopian declarations about the emancipatory potential of abstract thinking,³⁵ increased literacy did not automatically lead to increased personal freedom, but provided the new regime with an effective way of constructing the new Soviet imagined community.

The specificities of the historical moment that Luria and his team set out to investigate and celebrate contributed, in a bitter twist of history, not only to their findings being suppressed for four decades, but also to the suspension of many productive collaborative endeavours between Soviet and Western scientists, like the relationship between Gestalt and Soviet 'cultural-historical' psychology. Only after the death of Stalin in 1953 would Luria begin to re-forge these terminated connections. And he did so in earnest, ensuring that the works of his mentor and colleague Vygotsky did not fade into obscurity. However, many of his former associates, correspondents, and collaborators among German-American Gestaltists did not survive until then³⁶. Koffka's records of his experiences in Central Asia thus shine an important light on this long-overlooked intellectual cross-pollination.

³⁵ Vygotsky explicitly stated that 'thinking in concepts is connected with freedom' and an interest in 'higher' stages of development unites his diverse strands of research. Vygotsky, 'Imagination and creativity of the adolescent' (in *Pedologiya podrostka*, vol. 3, 1931; written not later than the end of 1930), online: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/works/1931/adolescent/ch12.htm>

³⁶ See Yasnitsky, A. (2012). K istorii kul'turno-istoricheskoi geshtal't-psikhologii: Vygotskii, Lurii, Koffka, Levin i dr. *PsyAnima, Dubna Psychological Journal*, 5(1), 60-97. Available online at <http://www.psyanima.ru/journal/2012/1/2012n1a2/2012n1a2.1.pdf>

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