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## Editor's Introduction

### Criticizing Vygotsky

To be and remain a professional psychologist in the Soviet Union of the 1920s and 1930s required considerable skills, flexibility, and luck. In all the books about the history of Soviet psychology (e.g., Graham, 1987; Joravsky, 1989; McLeish, 1975; Rahmani, 1973), we can read about the orchestrated debates that dominated the scientific agenda (e.g., on reductionism, dialectic, dualism, practice). Individual psychologists had to take the right stance on these issues or risk suffering the consequences. In the 1930s in particular, the ideological pressure turned into genuine state terror, and no scholar could be sure that he or she had expressed the one and only “correct” viewpoint on a particular topic. Unfortunately, the infallible official viewpoints on these topics shifted repeatedly. That is why many intellectuals were prepared for the worst and always had a packed suitcase ready in case the secret police should arrest them (they invariably came during the night).

It is instructive to look at Vygotsky's antecedents from the secret police's perspective, so to speak, to realize what potential risks he ran during the 1920s and 1930s and what risks he would have run in the 1940s, bearing in mind that any allegedly negative feature in one's biography might be used against one, though it not necessarily always was (which, of course, increased the general atmosphere of confusion and insecurity). The following is a nonexhaustive list of charges that might have been leveled against Vygotsky:

—Vygotsky had a suspicious social background: his father was a bourgeois “banker,” and persons with a “bourgeois” or religious background were arrested in great numbers in the late 1930s.

—Vygotsky had the wrong ethnic background or “nationality,” as the Soviets

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called it: he was a Jew; and although anti-Semitism was less overt after the October Revolution, it still existed and at times became much more virulent, e.g., during the campaign against “cosmopolitanism” in the 1940s (see McLeish, 1975).

—Vygotsky had been an enthusiastic follower of several persons who subsequently fell from grace. Most important among these persons was Leon Trotsky, whom Vygotsky repeatedly and approvingly quoted in his major works. In republications of his writings, these citations were suppressed. Trotsky, as is well known, became Stalin’s archenemy, and was eventually murdered by Soviet agents. Another persona non grata to whom Vygotsky for some time referred enthusiastically was Alfred Adler. Adler was a social democrat and as such was particularly repellent to the Soviet ideological gatekeepers. Many positive references to Adler were likewise omitted in the republications of Vygotsky’s writings.

—Vygotsky never became a Party member, and his pre-Revolutionary political views were suspect. According to his childhood friend Dobkin, in 1917 Vygotsky published several brochures exposing the views of different political groups without committing himself to any of their views (see Feigenberg, 1996. Pp. 52–53). Thus, there are grounds to believe that Vygotsky’s political beliefs were leftist, but not communist. At any rate, he did not display the necessary “partisanship” in discussing the various political views.

—Vygotsky repeatedly and approvingly quoted foreign psychological authors and even corresponded with them. This also indicated a lack of “party spirit,” a deplorable inclination to “objectivism” and to subservience to bourgeois thinkers that became suspicious already in the 1930s, when Zhdanov claimed that “The eradication of vestiges of capitalism in people’s consciousness means struggle against every vestige of bourgeois influence”—and definitely impossible in the 1940s, when Zhdanov added that “Materialism includes, so to speak, partisanship, i.e., the obligation when estimating any event to adopt directly and frankly the viewpoint of a definite social group” (McLeish, 1975. Pp. 185–87).

—As a boy Vygotsky had mastered Esperanto and had corresponded in that language. Philatelists and Esperantists were arrested in great numbers by the end of the 1930s. It was suspected that their correspondents were foreign agents thirsty for knowledge about the Soviet Union and its secrets (Medvedev, 1974. P. 681).

—Vygotsky was involved in psychoanalysis. He had, for some time, been a member of the Russian Psychoanalytic Society and displayed a critical interest in its ideas. Psychoanalysis, like Gestalt psychology and behaviorism, had become completely unacceptable by the mid-1930s (see Chapter 5 in Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991).

—Vygotsky was closely involved with people whose arrest demonstrated that they were “enemies of the people.” These included the famous poet Osip Mandel’shtam, arrested in May 1934, and Vygotsky’s cousin David Vygotsky, arrested in February 1938. Both died in concentration camps. David Vygotsky was no doubt one of the persons who was both intellectually and emotionally very close to Vygotsky. For a very revealing account of the life of this remarkable man

and the general atmosphere of that time, one should consult Fatkhullina, 1992.

—Vygotsky was involved in dubious scientific practices. He was one of the most visible pedologists in the country, and pedologists encouraged massive intelligence testing of children for the purpose of streaming and screening. Pedology was discredited by the Pedology Decree in July 1936. (Incidentally, by that time reactology, reflexology, industrial psychology, social psychology, and forensic psychology had also fallen into disgrace.) Moreover, Vygotsky and Luria investigated and published works on Soviet minorities. They even went so far as to investigate the local population of Kazakhstan and to characterize its traditional inhabitants as limited and concrete thinkers (see Chapter 10 in Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). This led the authorities to send a commission to the Institute of Psychology to investigate the ideological premises of Vygotsky's and Luria's work. The negative conclusions reached by that commission—the Moscow Inspection Commission of the Workers and Farmers Inspectorate, or MKKRKI (*Moskovskaia Kontrol'naia Komissiiia Raboche-Krest'yanskoy Inspektsii*)—were published as the Razmyslov paper presented below (see Khomskaia, 1992).

These are some of the accusations that a diligent officer of the secret police might have made against Vygotsky. In a period when people were arrested and sentenced to “ten years without the right of correspondence” (the official euphemism for execution) on grounds of having planned to dig a tunnel from Moscow to Great Britain, any of these accusations would have been more than sufficient. However, the fact is that Vygotsky was not arrested.

What saved him? Not his close connections to Lenin's wife, Krupskaiia, for not even being a relative of Stalin himself could save one's life in the late 1930s. Nor do I think that any other connections or activities could have saved Vygotsky had he been arrested. And we shall not know what happened backstage until the KGB archives are fully accessible, something that is unlikely to happen in a time when the head of state tries to prove his machismo by showing off his skills in judo and posing as the pilot of a fighter jet.

We know very little about Vygotsky's ideological situation at that time (see Chapter 16 in Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). From Vygotsky's private correspondence we know that a public debate about cultural-historical theory was already in the making in 1931. The format of such meetings was simple: colleagues and Party officials (the categories overlapped) would deliver a series of speeches critical of some theory. Then the author of the theory had the final word and could either recant or defend his views. Naturally, most recanted: it was a dangerous time to have independent views. Judging by his private correspondence, Vygotsky seems to have been determined to defend his views; but we do not know whether such a public meeting actually took place. Nor do we know much about other political pressures on Vygotsky and his colleagues (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991).

This means that our most reliable source of information about Vygotsky's ideological situation at that time are the published critical accounts of his writings. Of these we have gathered the most important ones in this special journal issue. To-

gether they provide an excellent picture of the intellectual atmosphere of the period.

Talankin's (1931) criticism was voiced in a long talk about the "turnaround" on the psychological "front." Talankin vehemently attacked the theories of Kornilov, Frankfurt, and others, but was relatively mild in his passage about Vygotsky and Luria. One gets the impression that Talankin actually rather liked their work, and that his critique that their conception of tools was not in accord with Marxism was somewhat perfunctory. One should also note that Talankin and all other contemporary critics of cultural-historical theory attributed this theory to Vygotsky and Luria, not to Leontiev.

Feofanov's (1932) paper was much more negative. He particularly belabored the point that a child grows up in a specific social-class environment and criticized Vygotsky for uncritically using metaphors taken from biology. He also dismissed Vygotsky's distinction between "natural" and "cultural" factors in child development and concluded that Vygotsky's approach was an unhappy ("eclectic" was the catchword of the time) mixture of several bourgeois theories (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991. Pp. 378–80).

Abel'skaia & Neopikhonova's (1932) review linked [*Studies in the history of behavior*] (Vygotsky & Luria, 1930) and [*Pedology of the adolescent*] (Vygotsky, 1931) with the work of Heinz Werner, notably with the first German edition of his *Comparative psychology of mental development*. Following Talankin, they criticized Vygotsky's and Luria's concept of a "cultural tool" for its non-Marxist character, divorced from production relations, etc. They also repeated Feofanov's critique that Vygotsky and Luria uncritically borrowed concepts from biology. Finally, Abel'skaia & Neopikhonova criticized the tendency present in both Werner's and Vygotsky's books to look for formal similarities between the development of animals, savages, and Western children (see Jahoda, 1999).

As noted above, the paper by Razmyslov (1934) was the report written by a commission established to investigate the ideological nature of Luria's investigations in Uzbekistan (see Chapter 10 of Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). Its core was, of course, the criticism of Luria's conclusions regarding the Uzbeks' thinking. Vygotsky and Luria had posited that different cultures (different types of schooling) cause different modes of thinking, and their Uzbek findings confirmed this hypothesis.

But these findings raise several questions. First, it is unclear whether the refusal to transcend concrete situations reflects an inability to do so. Second, it is unclear whether we should interpret different modes of thinking as levels of thinking, as Vygotsky and Luria were inclined to do. Third, it can be argued that people think concretely in one situation and abstractly in another, so general qualifications of their mode or level of thinking might be misleading. These questions are still with us.

With some effort Razmyslov's paper can be seen as a first, albeit crude, way to raise these issues. His other criticisms obviously served the sole purpose of discrediting Vygotsky and Luria as genuinely Marxist thinkers (e.g., by observing that early statements by Vygotsky and Luria were not in agreement with recent

Party decrees), that is, he wished to demonstrate that Luria's wrongdoings in Uzbekistan were not accidental, but reflected Vygotsky's and Luria's basically anti-Marxist and therefore politically harmful beliefs.

Kozyrev & Turko's (1936) article and Rudneva's (1937) pamphlet were unique in that they appeared several years after Vygotsky's death. Kozyrev & Turko worked at the Herzen Pedagogical Institute, where Vygotsky had been working. They focused their criticism on the ideas that Vygotsky developed in his Leningrad period and on the remaining Vygotsky enthusiasts at their institute. They argued that Vygotsky's analysis of the different roots of thinking and speech were not in accord with Engels's, and that his notion of the zone of proximal development smuggled in the notion of sensitive periods in development. The notion of sensitive or optimal periods for learning seemed to deny the possibility of adult education and was hence condemned as completely unscientific. They further noted that Vygotsky uncritically imported "laws" from other disciplines and went on to argue that pedology was not, and could not be, a genuine discipline (this was inspired by the 1936 Pedology Decree, which banned pedology as a science).

Finally, Kozyrev & Turko attacked Vygotsky's students Zankov and Konnikova because they adhered to several of Vygotsky's ideas and referred positively to him. In general, what is striking in Kozyrev & Turko's article—apart from the deliberate distortions of Vygotsky's position—is its sinister tone, its use of words such as "class vigilance," "fascism," "enemy," and "self-criticism." These formulations showed that Soviet psychology as a science was rapidly approaching its twenty years' long dormancy.

Rudneva (1937) repeated much of the earlier criticism and added some vicious insinuations of her own. The suggestion that Vygotsky (who together with other Jewish scientists had attacked Jaensch's fascist ideas—see Chapter 13 of Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1994) deliberately introduced Jaensch's fascist ideas into Soviet psychology is an example. Like the earlier critics, she attempted to demolish Vygotsky's approach by demonstrating that it was not in accord with the Marxist classics, recent Party decrees, casual remarks by Stalin, and so on. But on the whole, in her pamphlet it is still more difficult to unearth valuable critical remarks (if there are any) behind the smoke screen of ritual accusations: theories are said to be "harmful"; "bourgeois" psychologists are "faithful servants of exploiting classes"; children of workers are slandered; and so on. In sum, Rudneva's paper is an excellent example of Stalinist criticism.

Taken together these publications sketch a disheartening and hair-raising picture of the development of ideological control in Soviet psychology in the 1930s. It is clear that ultimately the question of whether a theory was acceptable or true had become equivalent to the question of whether that theory was in accord with statements made by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, or the latest decisions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. And to decide whether a theory was in agreement with these classics or decisions, the critics had recourse to the hermeneutics familiar from scholasticism and religion.

Evidently, for the critics of Vygotsky the question of the agreement of his theory with the prevailing ideological views was more important than providing an alternative view. They endlessly talked about taking into account social class and labor, about class struggle and production; but none of them proved able to rise above this level of ritual criticism to provide an alternative theory. This made it more difficult to see that several of the points these contemporary critics made (e.g., the distinction between “natural” and “cultural” mental processes, the distinction of “levels” of mental functioning in different cultures) deserved, and still deserve, to be discussed, albeit at a somewhat higher level.

The publications also make clear that Vygotsky’s position had become increasingly difficult by the time of his death. The posthumous criticisms and additional circumstances (e.g., the search of his widow’s house by the secret police and the confiscation of his books, the disappearance of his publications from libraries) strongly suggest that he would not have been able to continue his work after 1936. Moreover, had he lived on, he might have been arrested and perished in the Gulag Archipelago. It is probable that his death from tuberculosis in a way saved him from a more horrible death. In that respect his situation in 1934 was reminiscent of that of Kafka ten years earlier: “Kill me,” Kafka said to his doctor when he lay dying of tuberculosis, “else you are a murderer.” Vygotsky faced similar, but even more horrible, options and was lucky to die of a natural disease in the company of his relatives. The disease killed him; otherwise he might have been murdered.

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