The greatest discoveries are made
not by individuals but by their age.
(Goethe 1823)

It is Petrograd, 6 January 1924 at the Second All-Russian Congress of Psychoneurology. At the First Congress a year earlier, Konstantin Kornilov had deposed Georgy Chelpanov, the father of Russian psychology and Director of the Institute of Psychology, and dedicated the Institute to the creation of a Marxist psychology. Everyone looked to one or another variety of behaviorism in which the concept of ‘consciousness’ was understood variously as unscientific, illusory or an epiphenomena of behavior and/or brain physiology. All the sciences were in the midst of such cultural revolutions. There would have to be a revolution in art, in geology, in agriculture, in every domain of social life, including psychology. Russia already boasted world-renowned figures like Bekhterev and Pavlov, so the dominance of behaviorism seemed assured.

To the rostrum steps an unknown young teacher from Gomel, Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky speaks with fluency and confidence, at length and without the benefit of notes (Cole, Luria & Levitin 2006; Kozulin 1990; Levitin 1982). He uses the language of Pavlov’s and Bekhterev’s Reflexology, but calls for consciousness to be given its place as the key concept of psychology (Vygotsky 1997). If everything was a reflex, then consciousness was not a reflex but the organization of reflexes, a process with a social origin, and which the subject themself can control. He advocated such a broadening of the subject matter of psychology which would make untenable the current practices of the science of psychology.

To many listening, this must have sounded very much like the restoration of Chelpanov’s dualistic and idealistic psychology, but this was a young man “who would have to be listened to” (Luria 2006: 38).

---

1 I use “behaviorism” in a generic sense which will be further elaborated later.
Vygotsky was invited to Moscow to take up a position at the Institute and soon formed a research group (the ‘troika’) with two of Kornilov’s young assistants, Alexander Luria, at the time an advocate of psycho-analysis, and Alexei Leontyev.

The Russian Revolution was more than a regime change; every area of social and intellectual life in Russia was subject to protracted, traumatic and repeated transformation. It certainly transformed Vygotsky’s life.

_Lev Vygotsky_ was raised in Gomel, within the Jewish Pale in Tsarist Russia. He was a brilliant student, reading avidly in history and philosophy, running a reading group amongst his school friends around issues of Jewish history (Levitin 1982). His reading evidently included the writings of the founder of Russian Marxism, Georgi Plekhanov. Being a Jew, even as a ‘gold medal’ student, he was lucky to be admitted to university in Moscow to study law in 1913.

During his time in Moscow, Vygotsky was involved in ideological struggles within the domain of aesthetics and literary criticism, in which Symbolists and Formalists did battle with Futurists and Constructivists. Deeply engaged with problems of hermeneutics and semiotics as they were being fought out on the European stage, this was a formative period in his intellectual life, and culminated in the writing of “The Psychology of Art.”

Graduating in 1917, and after taking a course in psychology and philosophy at the “People’s University” of Shanyavsky, he returned to Gomel to teach literature and psychology at the school there. He also conducted classes at a drama studio and delivered lectures on literature and science. Moved by the plight of orphans and disabled children in the wake of the Revolution, he organized a psychology laboratory at the Gomel Teacher’s College where he participated in the preparation of a new generation of teachers, and wrote a manual for teachers called “Educational Psychology,” a somewhat eclectic overview of the main issues and approaches to the subject at the time.

_Alexander Luria_ was born in Kazan in 1902. His father, Roman Albertovich, wanted him to become a doctor, but Alexander Romanovich preferred the law. Luria’s family had compensated for the restrictions placed on Jews in Russia by frequent travel to Germany where they were able to obtain an education and imbibe European culture. German was the second language in the Luria household, and Luria retained a lifelong interest in the ‘Romantic Science’ of Goethe, von Humboldt and others. To appease his father, Luria also continued medical training.