

Draft Biography for Supplement to the Modern Encyclopedia of Russian, Soviet, and Eurasian History

## **EIGENSON, MORIS SEMENOVICH**

(21 January 1906 – 15 August 1962)

Soviet astronomer and astronomical spokesman for the Communist party

In the course of his life Eigenson compiled a total of some 200 publications, but he is most prominent for having supported, first, the purge of academic astronomers of 1936, and then the campaign against modern cosmology which accompanied the intellectual isolation and suspicion of the following decades.

Eigenson, who was born in Dnepropetrovsk in the Ukraine and who graduated the university of Leningrad in 1927 in the physical sciences, began his scientific career during a period both of political and scientific revolution. In 1934 he was appointed to a position of docent at the university of Leningrad in the physical-mathematical faculty, and to that of the secretary of the Communist Party chapter at the Central Astronomical Observatory at Pulkovo, 20 kilometers west of Leningrad.

Until 1928 the direction of astronomical work in the Soviet Union was decided by participants in the Russian Astronomical Union, which included virtually all active Russian astronomers. By 1931 direction of research lost this democratic structure, and was now centralized, in a reorganization which paralleled the political centralization connected with the implementation of the dramatic First Five-Year Plan, in the Scientific Department of the People's Commissariat for Education. This affected Eigenson's career.

The decade of the 1920s has been called the "silver age" of Russian astronomy. Among its accomplishments was the partial solution, in 1922, of the equations of the general theory of relativity by the university of Leningrad mathematician Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Freidmann (1888-1925). The accomplishment involved (twice)

politely telling Einstein he had made a mathematical error. Once the political authorities in the Soviet Union promoted scientific work in astronomy that would correct Western science, there were repeated calls for similar correction of the observed expansion of the universe, documented by Edwin Hubble and Milton Humason in 1928 from observations at the large telescope on Mount Wilson in southern California. M. S. Eigenson's doctoral dissertation was in just that topic, with the title "The Statistical Study of Extragalactic Nebulae," completed in 1938.

By that year, however, both the directors of the Pulkovo Observatory, Boris Petrovich Gerasimovich (1889-1937), and the founder and first director of the Leningrad Astronomical Institute Boris Vasilevich Numerov (1881-1941), had been arrested. Twenty-seven other astronomers – in an astronomical community of less than 200, in all of the Soviet Union – had been arrested as well. There is evidence that Eigenson initially supported Gerasimovich, but subsequently condemned the "sabotage" performed by his director. The political repression was highly concentrated: twelve of the arrested astronomers worked at Pulkovo and seven at the Astronomical Institute; the 30-year-old Eigenson was fortunate to have survived.

For example, the *Leningradskia Pravda* of 27 August 1936 had accused the Party group itself at Pulkovo of doing "too little too late." Less than a month later Eigenson supported the investigation of Numerov initiated by a graduate student whose examination in celestial mechanics he had failed.

In any case in 1938 Eigenson assumed direction of the Solar Service at the Central Astronomical Observatory, a position he retained until 1951. Begun in 1932 as a means of supporting the national economy by predicting the variations in solar activity, the Solar Service had been a focus of dissension within Pulkovo, as a result of which all of its astronomers had been arrested. Eigenson published a number of papers, followed by a 1948 book, *Solar Activity and its Terrestrial Effects* (Solnechnaia aktivnost i ee zemnye proiavleniia), on the research conducted in that area.

From 1932 until 1952 he served as Astronomy Editor of the journal *Nature* (*Priroda*), consistently casting doubt on the growing evidence for universal Hubble-law expansion. From 1953 he served as professor of physics at the university of Lvov, as well as (until 1959) director of its astronomical observatory. In 1960 his book *Extragalactic Astronomy* (*Vnegalakticheskaia astronomiia*) summarized his work on what had been his initial choice of research focus, as well as the primary topic of his semipopular journal articles.

In the national and international astronomical communities, Eigenson held membership in the Astronomical Commission of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR from 1947 on, and was selected as a member of the International Astronomical Union in 1948. He is however not listed in the standard biographical listings of prominent scientists, nor are there citations to his papers.

This last circumstance is not the result of resentment at his role in the Stalinist purge of astronomers. Others led the attacks and have become since prominent internationally. The task of proving, however, that Lenin's premature denunciation of the idea of a finite age to the universe was quite astute, and obtaining this proof without the observational resources to compete with the giant Mount Wilson and Mount Palomar telescopes, was quite impossible and led to the conclusion that the author of these attempted proofs was only by dint of political connections deemed an astronomer.

***Bibliography:*** The most informative source for this article was the eulogy in *Astronomicheskii tsirkuliar*, 232, 1963, 29-31, without personal attribution but datelined "Lvov Astronomical Observatory". The English-language literature on the Stalinist purge includes John Edward Haley, "The Confrontation of Dialectical Materialism with Modern Cosmological Theories in Soviet Russia" (Ph.D. diss.,

University of California, Santa Barbara, 1980); Robert A. McCutcheon, "The 1936-1937 Purge of Soviet Astronomers," *Slavic Review*, 50, No. 1 (Spring, 1991), 100-117; Efthymios Nikolaidis, "Astronomy and Politics in Russia in the Early Stalinist Period (1928-1932)," *Journal for the History of Astronomy*, 21, part 4 (November, 1990), 345-351; Alina Iosifovna Eremeeva, "Political Repression and Personality: The History of Political Repression against Soviet Astronomers," *Journal for the History of Astronomy*, 26, part 4 (November, 1995), 297-325.

The high value given to Friedmann's work is evident in Yuri Tatarinov, "Theory of the Expanding Universe," *The History of Science: Soviet Research, vol. I. Problems of the Contemporary World No. 114*, 1985, 146-166, which discusses him almost exclusively, without a sense of the irony in the longstanding opposition of Soviet scholars to the theory of the expanding universe.

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