

On Einstein's Rise to Fame

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Biographers of Einstein have long pinpointed the immediate events associated with his sudden rise to public fame. In November 1919, British astronomers announced the results from photographs taken during a total solar eclipse that occurred earlier that year. These findings seemed to confirm Einstein's prediction that light beams passing near the sun would be deflected by a precise, but very small amount due to the sun's gravitational field. This announcement was treated with great fanfare by the British and American press, whereas in Germany the reception was highly mixed, reflecting the political orientation of the newspaper that reported on it. There soon followed various widely publicized debates that took place in a highly charged atmosphere.

Although relativity was controversial from the beginning, these new developments acted to politicize Einstein's theory as well as his name and reputation. Among both the advocates and critics of relativity there were a good number of so-called crackpots, but certainly one could find reputable physicists who found the theory problematic. The public clamour grew louder, though, and this was a factor that widened an already serious divide within the German physics community. The post-war context throws much light on the confusion and dissonance that surrounded these debates, which reflected an inherent conflict. On the one hand, the often sensationalized public discourse was based on superficial or even faulty ideas about relativity, on the other, there was a strong tendency to regard Einstein's theory as utterly esoteric, and hence something that could only be understood by a handful of experts. After setting the stage, we will focus on Einstein's own role in these dramatic events.