



# The Photographic Narrative of Henrietta Swope

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## ABSTRACT

After the invention of cameras and photography, photographers gained a new ability to document the practice of science and advances which scientists made. Many earlier historical accounts of scientists and scientific practice emphasized what white males had achieved--shaping a narrative that white men and science were synonymous. Marginalized groups were neglected--not only their findings, but how they were represented. Could historical photographs tell richer and more encompassing stories, and reveal the contributions of women and minorities? To understand the lengths of the lack of representation of minorities, specifically women, I decided to investigate the life and career of Henrietta Swope, an astronomer at the Harvard College Observatory. Through a close examination of detailed notes and letters regarding Swope's professional and personal life, and the photographs she made of colleagues, I provide a case study-like analysis of the neglect women faced when being represented in historical photographs in the early decades of the twentieth century. Additionally, analyzing photographs in which she appeared demonstrates that oftentimes men were prioritized in these images, further reinforcing the narrative that science was male-dominated. Swope's own photographs stand in contrast to those produced by her male colleagues and provide evidence for an alternative narrative of discovery and participation in science in which women enjoyed more active, professional roles.

## METHODS

Gathered archival and published photographs with Swope present

Gathered detailed notes and letters relating to Swope's personal and professional life

Noted the ratio from men to women in these photographs, examined how she (and her work) was portrayed, and analyzed how she was depicted in images from her time

## RESULTS

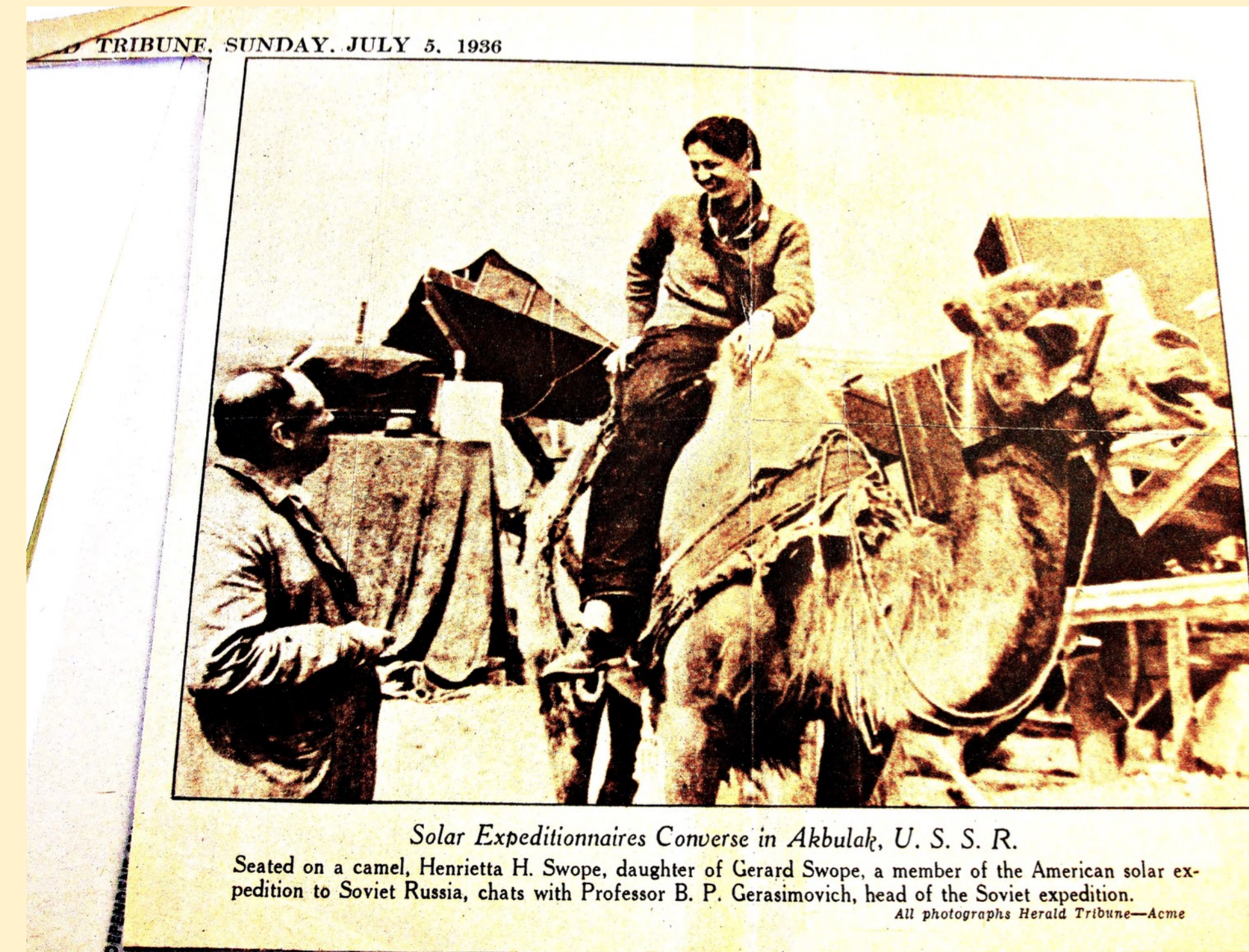
- Photographs captured Swope in consistent positive mood, often smiling
- Published images of her appear light-hearted rather than serious or focusing on working (in contrast to male astronomers at the time)
- Was often photographed with other women or as one of few women pictured among men

## CONCLUSION

- Male photographers made conscious decisions to capture Swope, as well as other female astronomers, in moments of leisure, minimizing their ongoing research contributions
- Poses a challenge to narratives about field sciences research depicting male scientists hard at work or concentrated—setting up a false contrast with their female colleagues
- Despite major achievements--such as aiding in creating LORAN during WWII and developing “Yardstick of the stars,” Swope remains largely unknown in the history of U.S. astronomy

## REFERENCES

- Swope collection, Radcliff College Archives
- Swope, Henrietta. 2015. Henrietta Swope oral history interview by David H. DeVorkin, at <https://www.aip.org/history-programs/niels-bohr-library/oral-histories/4909>.



LEFT  
Henrietta Swope pictured in a newspaper article on camel back during a solar eclipse expedition in South Central Asia in 1936.



LEFT  
Henrietta Swope Talking with the wife of her male colleague at the 1936 Siberian eclipse expedition.



RIGHT  
Swope, appearing happy and relaxed, sitting surrounded by instruments amid the solar eclipse expedition.



ABOVE  
Henrietta Swope (far lower left) being honored at the Weizmann Institute in Israel in the 1950s, joining a group of 16 male scientists.