

Heavy nuclei at the end of the cosmic-ray spectrum?

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(Received 10 March 1999; published 25 October 1999)

We provide an account of the possible acceleration of iron nuclei up to energies ~ 300 EeV in the nearby, metal-rich starburst galaxy NGC 253. It is suggested that particles can escape from the nuclear region with energies of $\sim 10^{15}$ eV and can then be reaccelerated at the terminal shock of the galactic superwind generated by the starburst, avoiding the photodisintegration expected if the nuclei were accelerated in the central region of high photon density. We have also made estimates of the expected arrival spectrum, which displays a strong dependence on the energy cutoff at the source. [S0556-2821(99)03020-9]

PACS number(s): 96.40.-z, 13.85.Tp, 98.70.Sa

I. INTRODUCTION

The discovery of extensive air shower events with energies above 100 EeV (see Ref. [1] for a recent survey) confirms that the cosmic ray (CR) spectrum does not end with the expected Greisen-Zatsepin-Kuz'min (GZK) cutoff [2]. The origin of this GZK cutoff is energy degradation of the CR particles (usually assumed to be nucleons and nuclei) by resonant scattering processes with the diffuse background radiation that permeates the universe. The observed tail of the spectrum could, consequently, originate from a bunch of nearby sources [3].

Preferred sites for proton acceleration are astrophysical scenarios where large-scale shocks occur, such as, for instance, in the hot spots of powerful radio galaxies [4]. It could appear that, because the high-energy cutoff of shock acceleration increases with the charge number of the nucleus, heavy ions would be nice candidates for ultrahigh-energy CRs. However, active galactic nuclei (AGNs) and radio galaxies are widely thought of as regions of very low metallicity and, in addition, it is well established that above 200 EeV nuclei should be photodissociated by the 2.73 K photon background in a few Mpc [5]. Thereupon, nuclei acceleration up to the highest energies within astrophysical environments is seldom considered in the literature.

Nonetheless, there has been a recently renewed interest in the propagation of heavy nuclei [5–9]. This renewal is mainly sustained by two facts: (i) a medium-mass nucleus is the particle that provides the best fits of the shower development of the highest-energy CR event [10], and (ii) the arrival direction of such an event roughly points towards the nearby metal-rich galaxy M82 [11].

Despite the aforementioned studies on nuclei propagation, it is far from clear whether iron or other heavy nuclei can be accelerated up to energies ~ 300 EeV in starburst galaxies such as M82. One could naively expect that, since the size scale of the starburst region is of the order of the gyroradius

of 300 EeV ($Z=26$) nuclei, strong shocks could diffusively accelerate these ions to ultrahigh energies. But this hope fades away as soon as one notices the large photon energy densities (mostly in the far infrared) measured in the central regions of these kinds of galaxies: iron nuclei are photodisintegrated long before they can reach the required Lorentz factors.

We shall argue in this paper that, despite the mentioned problem, iron nuclei can be actually accelerated in nearby starburst galaxies up to energies ~ 300 EeV if a two-step process is involved. The crucial point is that for energies above $\sim 10^{15}$ eV, acceleration occurs in the terminal shock of the starburst superwind, well outside the problematic nuclear region. Since NGC 253 is a southern object which has been scarcely discussed in relation to CRs (for a brief discussion of M82 as a CR accelerator see [11]), we shall focus on it for our quantitative estimates. However, we emphasize that due to the similarity between both galaxies, our conclusions will be correct to M82 within the order of magnitude. Let us start with a recapitulation of some observational features of NGC 253.

II. STARBURST GALAXY NGC 253

Starbursts are galaxies undergoing a massive and large-scale star formation episode. Their characteristic signatures are strong infrared emission (originating from the high levels of interstellar extinction), a very strong HII-region-type emission-line spectrum (due to a large number of O- and B-type stars), and a considerable radio emission produced by recent supernova remnants. Typically, the starburst region is confined to the central few hundreds of parsecs of the galaxy, a region that can be easily 10 or more times brighter than the center of normal spiral galaxies.

NGC 253 has been described as the archetypal starburst galaxy by Rieke *et al.* [12] and as a prototype of superwind galaxy by Heckman and collaborators [13]. This object, whose distance is estimated to be in the range 2.5–3.4 Mpc [14,15], has been extensively studied from radio to γ -ray wavelengths [16–18]. More than 60 individual compact radio sources have been detected within the central 200 pc of

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the nuclear region of NGC 253 [19], most of which are supernova remnants (SNRs) of only a few hundred years old. According to estimates from observations at different frequencies the supernova rate is as high as $0.2\text{--}0.3\text{ yr}^{-1}$ [19,20].

The central ~ 80 pc of the galaxy contain around 24,000 O and 3,000 red supergiant stars [20], in addition to the SNRs and numerous HII regions. This means that the massive star formation rate is $\sim 0.1 M_{\odot}\text{ yr}^{-1}$. Strong (Fe II) emission has been also detected with a total [Fe II] ($1.644\text{ }\mu\text{m}$) luminosity of $\sim 2.8 \times 10^{39}\text{ erg s}^{-1}$, which reflects the very rich iron production in the supernovas and their associated shocks [21].

In the light of such a concentrated activity it is not surprising that strong physical, morphological, and kinematic evidence for the existence of a galactic superwind has been found in NGC 253 [22,13]. Galactic-scale superwinds are driven by the collective effect of supernovas and massive star winds. The high supernova rate creates a cavity of hot gas ($\sim 10^8\text{ K}$) whose cooling time is much greater than the expansion time scale. Since the wind is sufficiently powerful, it can blow out the interstellar medium of the galaxy, avoiding remaining trapped as a hot bubble. As the cavity expands a strong shock front is formed on the contact surface with the cool interstellar medium. Shock interactions with low- and high-density clouds produce x-ray continuum and optical line emission, respectively, which has been directly observed [22]. In addition, kiloparsec regions well outside the disk present double emission-line profiles with line splitting of $200\text{--}600\text{ km s}^{-1}$, clear evidence of mass motion. The morphology of the optical emission-line nebulae indicates that the outflowing gas is located along the walls of a cone that is limb brightened, typical of a superwind in a blowout phase.

The shock velocity can reach several thousands of kilometers per second and ions such as iron nuclei can be then efficiently accelerated in this scenario up to high energies ($\sim 10^{20}\text{ eV}$) by a Fermi mechanism as we shall discuss in the next section.

III. CR ACCELERATION AT NGC 253

We suggest that the iron nucleus acceleration in NGC 253 occurs through a two-step process. In a first stage, ions are diffusively accelerated at single supernova shock waves within the nuclear region of the galaxy. Energies up to $\sim 10^{15}\text{ eV}$ can be achieved in this step [23]. Fe nuclei are not photodissociated in the process despite the starburst's central photon density being much larger than that of the Milky Way. The continuum spectrum of NGC peaks in the far infrared at $\sim 100\text{ }\mu\text{m}$, with a luminosity of $\sim (3 \times 10^{10}) L_{\odot}$ [24] and a photon energy density of $U_{\text{ph}} \sim 200\text{ eV cm}^{-3}$ [13]. For such values is straightforward that the nucleus interactions with the blueshifted ambient photons are quite below the photodisintegration threshold. Energy losses through pair production are also negligible.

On the other hand, interactions with the rich interstellar gas in the center of the galaxy might disintegrate the ions if the escape from the starburst region is dominated by diffusion. Multiwavelength molecular line observations of the

central region show that the average density of the molecular clouds is $\sim 10^5\text{ cm}^{-3}$, with a filling factor $< 10^{-3}$ [25]. This means an average gas density (mainly H_2) in the active region within the range $30\text{--}300\text{ cm}^{-3}$ [17]. The cross section for Fe- H_2 interactions ($\sigma \approx 1463.7\text{ mb}$) can be estimated from Rudstam's parametrization of proton-induced spallation, $\sigma = 50 A_t^{2/3}\text{ mb}$ (where A_t is the mass number of the target nucleus) [26]. The mean free path for the iron nuclei is then $\lambda \sim (n \sigma_{\text{Fe-H}_2})^{-1}$, which results in the range $738\text{--}7380\text{ pc}$ when the upper and lower limits of the particle density are considered. The central starburst region can be modeled as a disk, 70 pc thick, with a radius $R \approx 300\text{ pc}$ [17]. Since the gyroradius of the Fe nuclei is $\sim 10^{-3}\text{ pc}$, they certainly cannot be driven out from the starburst by diffusion.

However, because of the nature of the central region in NGC 253, the escape of the iron nuclei is expected to be dominated by convection. In fact, the presence of several tens of young SNRs with very high expansion velocities ($\sim 12000\text{ km s}^{-1}$ [27]) and thousands of massive O stars (with stellar winds of terminal velocities up to 3000 km s^{-1}) must generate collective plasma motions of several thousands of km per second. Then, because of the coupling of the magnetic field to the hot plasma, the magnetic field is also lifted outwards and forces the cosmic-ray gas to stream along from the starburst region.

The relative importance of convection and diffusion in the escape of cosmic rays from a region of disk scale height h is given by the dimensionless parameter

$$q = \frac{V_0 h}{\kappa_0}, \quad (1)$$

where V_0 is the convection velocity and κ_0 is the cosmic-ray diffusion coefficient inside the starburst [28]. When $q \lesssim 1$, the cosmic-ray outflow is “diffusion dominated,” whereas when $q \gtrsim 1$ it is “convection dominated.” Assuming for the central region of NGC 253 a convection velocity of the order of the expanding SNR shells (i.e., $\sim 10000\text{ km s}^{-1}$), a scale height $h \sim 35\text{ pc}$, and a reasonable value for the diffusion coefficient of $\kappa_0 \sim 5 \times 10^{26}\text{ cm}^2\text{ s}^{-1}$ [29], we get $q \sim 216$, and convection clearly dominates the escape of the particles. The residence time of the iron nuclei in the starburst results, $t_{\text{res}} \sim h/V_0 \approx 10^{11}\text{ s}$. Most of the nuclei then escape through the disk in opposite directions along the symmetry axis of the system, the total path traveled being substantially shorter than the mean free path.

Once the nuclei escape from the central region of the galaxy with energies of $\sim 10^{15}\text{ eV}$, they are injected into the galactic-scale wind and experience further acceleration at its terminal shock.¹ The scale length of this shock is of the order of several tens of kpc (see Ref. [13]), so it can be considered as a local plane for calculations. The shock velocity v_{sh} can

¹CR acceleration at superwind shocks was first proposed by Jokipii and Morfill during the 1980s [30] in the context of our own Galaxy.

be estimated from the empirically determined superwind kinetic energy flux $\dot{E}_{\text{sw}}$ and the mass flux $\dot{M}$ generated by the starburst through

$$\dot{E}_{\text{sw}} = \frac{1}{2} \dot{M} v_{\text{sh}}^2. \quad (2)$$

The shock radius can be approximated by $r \approx v_{\text{sh}} \tau$, where τ is the starburst age. Since the age is about a few tens of 10^6 years, the maximum energy attainable in this configuration is constrained by the limited acceleration time arising from the finite shock's lifetime. For this second step in the acceleration process, the photon field energy density drops to values of the order of the cosmic background radiation (we are now far from the starburst region), and consequently, as we shall discuss in the next section, iron nuclei are again safe from photodissociation while the energy increases from $\sim 10^{15}$ to 10^{20} eV.

In order to estimate the maximum energy that can be reached by the nuclei in the second stage of the acceleration process let us consider the superwind terminal shock propagating in a homogeneous medium with an average magnetic field B . If we work in the frame where the shock is at rest, the upstream flow velocity will be v_1 ($|v_1| = v_{\text{sh}}$) and the downstream velocity v_2 . The magnetic field turbulence is assumed to lead to isotropization and consequent diffusion of energetic particles, which then propagate according to the standard transport theory [31]. The acceleration time scale is then [32]

$$t_{\text{acc}} = \frac{4\kappa}{v_1^2}, \quad (3)$$

where κ is the upstream diffusion coefficient which can be written in terms of perpendicular and parallel components to the magnetic field, and the angle θ between the (upstream) magnetic field and the direction of the shock propagation:

$$\kappa = \kappa_{\parallel} \cos^2 \theta + \kappa_{\perp} \sin^2 \theta. \quad (4)$$

Since strong turbulence is expected from the shock, we can take the Bohm limit for the upstream diffusion coefficient parallel to the field, i.e.,

$$\kappa_{\parallel} = \frac{1}{3} \frac{E}{ZeB_1}, \quad (5)$$

where B_1 is the strength of the preshock magnetic field and E is the energy of the Z ion. For the $\kappa_{\perp}$ component we shall assume, following Biermann [33], that the free mean path perpendicular to the magnetic field is independent of the energy and has the scale of the thickness of the shocked layer ($r/3$). Then,

$$\kappa_{\perp} = \frac{1}{3} r (v_1 - v_2) \quad (6)$$

or, in the strong shock limit,

$$\kappa_{\perp} = \frac{rv_1^2}{12}. \quad (7)$$

Since the upstream time scale is $t_{\text{acc}} \sim r/(3v_1)$, we rewrite Eq. (3) as

$$\frac{r}{3v_1} = \frac{4}{v_1^2} \left(\frac{E}{3ZeB_1} \cos^2 \theta + \frac{rv_1^2}{12} \sin^2 \theta \right), \quad (8)$$

and then, using $r = v_1 \tau$ and transforming to the observer's frame, we get

$$E_{\text{max}} \approx \frac{1}{4} ZeBv_{\text{sh}}^2 \tau \quad (9)$$

or

$$E_{\text{max}} \approx \frac{1}{2} ZeB \frac{\dot{E}_{\text{sw}}}{\dot{M}} \tau, \quad (10)$$

in terms of parameters that can be determined from observations.

The predicted kinetic energy and mass fluxes of the starburst of NGC 253 derived from the measured IR luminosity are 2×10^{42} erg s $^{-1}$ and $1.2 M_{\odot}$ yr $^{-1}$, respectively [13]. The starburst age is estimated from numerical models that use theoretical evolutionary tracks for individual stars and make sums over the entire stellar population at each time in order to produce the galaxy luminosity as a function of time [34]. By fitting the observational data, these models provide a range of suitable ages for the starburst phase that, in the case of NGC 253, goes from 5×10^7 to 1.6×10^8 yr (also valid for M82) [34]. These models must assume a given initial mass function (IMF), which usually is taken to be a power law with a variety of slopes. Recent studies have shown that the same IMF can account for the properties of both NGC 253 and M82 [21]. Here we shall assume a conservative age of $\tau = 50$ Myr. Finally, the radio and γ -ray emission from NGC 253 are well matched by models with $B \sim 50 \mu$ G [17]. With these figures we obtain a maximum energy for iron nuclei of

$$E_{\text{max}}^{\text{Fe}} \sim 3.4 \times 10^{20} \text{ eV}, \quad (11)$$

a value quite lower (more than two orders of magnitude) than the limit imposed by the synchrotron losses [35].

Regarding the spectral slope of the particles, it is expected that they emerge from the central region of NGC 253, where there are strong stellar winds from the massive star population, with an energy index $\gamma = 2.4$ [33], which is in fine accordance with the observed radio spectrum $\propto \nu^{-0.7}$ observed in the individual SNRs within the starburst [19]. After the particles leave the nuclear region, diffusive losses tend to steepen the spectrum at the terminal shock of the galactic superwind, where reacceleration takes place. The final index will depend on some not well known parameters as the Mach number of the terminal shock. In what follows, we shall study the propagation of the nuclei from NGC 253 to the Earth in models with $\gamma = 2.4, 2.5$, and 2.6 .

IV. PROPAGATION EFFECTS

The basic interactions between the universal background radiation and nuclei of extremely high energy were first discussed in detail by Puget *et al.* [36]. Heavy nuclei with energies above a few EeV get attenuated mainly by photodisintegration off the microwave background radiation (MBR) and intergalactic infrared (IR) background photons.²

The photodisintegration process is dominated by a broad maximum designated as the giant dipole resonance which peaks in the γ -ray energy range of 10–30 MeV (nucleus rest frame). In the initial absorption process, the photon energy may be given to a single nucleon (although almost always is shared with others), so the decay process might involve the emission of one (or more) nucleons. The disintegration rate of a nucleus of mass A with the subsequent production of i nucleons reads [37]

$$R_{Ai} = \frac{1}{2\Gamma^2} \int_0^\infty dw \frac{n(w)}{w^2} \int_0^{2\Gamma w} dw_r w_r \sigma_{Ai}(w_r), \quad (12)$$

where $n(w)$ is the density of photons with energy w in the system of reference in which the MBR is at 2.73 K. In the formula, w_r is the energy of the photons in the rest frame of the nucleus, Γ is the Lorentz factor, and σ_{Ai} is the cross section for the interaction. The total cross section of the photonuclear interaction is well known [38]. As usual, the MBR is described by a Planckian spectrum of 2.73 K. For the diffuse IR radio background (photon energies between 2×10^{-3} and 8×10^{-1} eV) we shall use the estimate given in Ref. [39],

$$\frac{dn}{dw} = 1.1 \times 10^{-4} \left(\frac{w}{\text{eV}} \right)^{-2.5} \text{ cm}^{-3} \text{ eV}^{-1}. \quad (13)$$

With these figures at hand it is straightforward to compute the energy loss time of iron nuclei (displayed in Fig. 1). It is clear from these calculations that the universal background radiation would not affect iron acceleration in NGC 253 up to a few thousands of EeV. Moreover, because of the nearness of the starburst galaxy, just the interaction with the MBR becomes relevant in their travel to Earth. The fractional energy loss as a function of the MBR energy (Lorentz factor) has been already parametrized [8],

$$R(\Gamma) = (3.25 \times 10^{-6}) \Gamma^{-0.643} \exp(-2.15 \times 10^{10}/\Gamma) \text{ s}^{-1} \quad (14a)$$

if $\Gamma \in [1.0 \times 10^9, 3.68 \times 10^{10}]$ and

²Actually, the pair creation process due to interactions with the MBR as well as disintegration with the optical background photons also attenuates the nuclei energy. However, these processes are not essential for the discussion presented in this paper. For details of these interactions the reader is referred to Ref. [5].

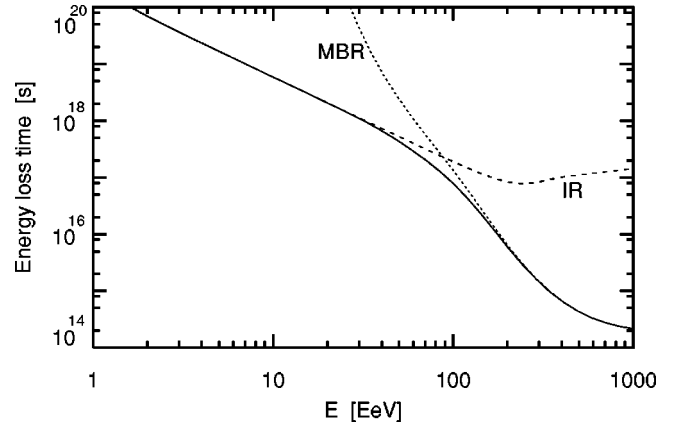


FIG. 1. Effective energy loss time for iron nuclei photodisintegration through the 2.73 K and IR photons. Adapted from Epele and Roulet [7].

$$R(\Gamma) = (1.59 \times 10^{-12}) \Gamma^{-0.0698} \text{ s}^{-1} \quad (14b)$$

if $\Gamma \in [3.68 \times 10^{10}, 1.0 \times 10^{11}]$.

It is noteworthy that the possible disintegration histories computed using Eqs. (14a) and (14b) are in very good agreement with Monte Carlo simulations when the sources are located near the Earth (distances $\lesssim 10$ Mpc) [40].

Using the formalism sketched in [8], it is easy to obtain the evolution of the differential spectrum $Q(E_g, t) = KE_g^{-\gamma} \delta(t - t_0)$ of the iron nuclei injected by NGC 253 at t_0 . The number of surviving fragments with energy E at time t is given by

$$N(E, t) dE = \frac{KE_g^{-\gamma+1}}{E} dE, \quad (15)$$

where E_g denotes the energy at which the nuclei were emitted from the source, related to the energy detected on Earth by $E = E_g e^{-R(\Gamma)t/56}$ (recall that the Lorentz factor $\Gamma = E_g/56$ does not result in being modified during the propagation).³

In Fig. 2 is shown the energy degradation for different flying time scales arising from different propagation regimes. The energy spectrum of the surviving fragments is degenerate. For instance, for a propagation distance of 3 Mpc, the composition of the arrival nuclei changes from $A=55$ (for $\Gamma \approx 3 \times 10^9$) to $A=44$ (for $\Gamma \approx 6 \times 10^9$). If a maximum energy of 340 EeV is attainable in the source, the relation between the injection and arrival energies is a monotonously decreasing function. At this stage, we conveniently introduce the modification factor η , defined as the ratio between the modified spectrum and the unmodified one. Notice that once the nuclei have energy enough to undergo photodisintegration

³Notice that the (Z, A) dependence of R is roughly cancelled by dividing by A in the exponent. This implies that R can in fact be integrated down to lower, spallated A values and still be reasonably accurate [36].

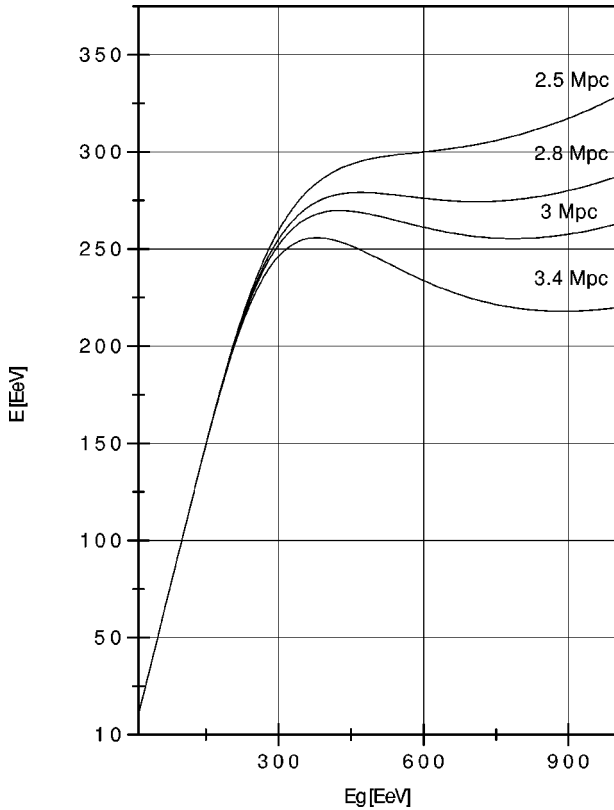


FIG. 2. Relation between the injection and arrival energies for possible propagation distances from NGC 253 according to current data.

tion through the giant dipole resonance, the value of the modification factor is always less than 1.

Contrariwise, if the injection energy has an upper cutoff at $E \geq 560$ EeV (this can be achieved, for instance, with a higher value of τ), the function which relates the injection and arrival energies becomes multivalued, yielding a bump-like feature in the modification factor. To understand this behavior, recall that nuclei suffer a violent disintegration at these energies (see Fig. 1), in such a way that, for a Lorentz factor $\Gamma \approx 8 \times 10^9$, the composition of the arrival nuclei drops to $A \approx 33$. So particles injected with different energies might arrive with the same energy, piling up around 250 EeV, just before the expected cutoff. The whole effect can be clearly appreciated in Fig. 3, where we have plotted the modification factor for two different cutoffs in the injection spectrum.

For longer propagation distances, the pileup shifts to lower energies (e.g., to ≈ 200 EeV for 3.4 Mpc), broadening its profile. On the other hand, for shorter distances to the nuclei-emitting source there is no spectral bump; i.e., the spectrum is monotonic. Thus, the probability of detecting events diminishes with increasing Lorentz factor.

We remark that the change of the spectral index does not significantly affect the shape of the modification factor. The height of the pileup diminishes with the steepening of the injected spectrum, but this effect is accompanied by a simultaneous drop in the CR flux of the preceding bin of energy, resulting in the same overall shape for η , although downshifted (see Figs. 4 and 5 of Ref. [8]).

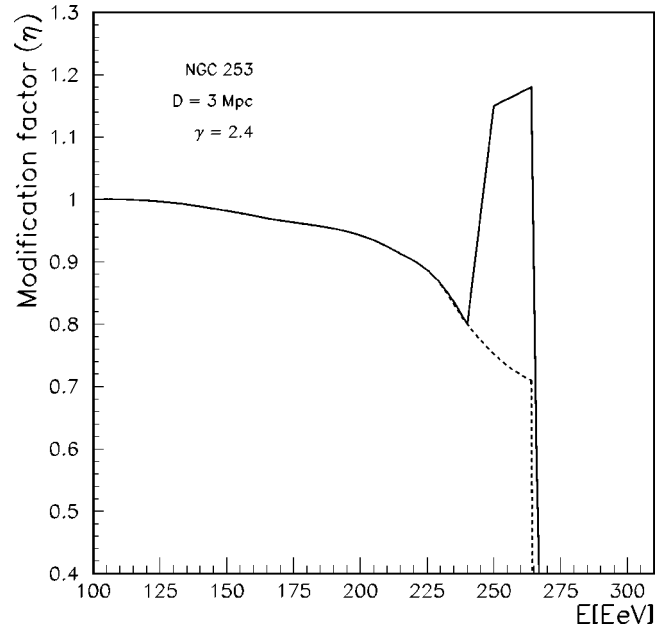


FIG. 3. Modification factor for initial iron nuclei from NGC 253, assuming a differential power law injection spectrum with spectral index $\gamma = 2.4$. The solid (dotted) line stands for the case with an upper cutoff at the injection energy of 560 EeV (340 EeV).

Events from the pileup are about 50% more probable to be detected than those at energies immediately lower. The reason is that nuclei with energies ≥ 560 EeV would be almost completely photodisintegrated during their journey to Earth, in such a way that the surviving fragments end at energies of the pileup, changing the relative detection probabilities. Thus, we have the interesting result that the existence of a sufficiently high cutoff (at Lorentz factors, say, $\Gamma \geq 8 \times 10^9$) in the source acceleration mechanism favors the detection of events around 250 EeV from the starburst galaxy NGC 253.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Might heavy nuclei be primaries at the end of the cosmic-ray spectrum? If the spectrum extends over the up-to-now observed energies, the answer will be certainly “no.” Heavy nuclei with energies above 200 EeV could not propagate for more than 10 Mpc. Besides, Lorentz factors above 2×10^{10} require large astrophysical regions for acceleration where the relic photon density would be sufficient to provide a significant loss mechanism for the nuclei (see Fig. 1).

However, if the highest cosmic-ray energy is of the order of 300 EeV, heavy nuclei accelerated in the nearby starburst galaxies (NGC 253 and M82) can be present at the end of the spectrum. We have shown that these nuclei, originating from the central regions of the galaxies, can be accelerated without suffering catastrophic interactions in a two-step process that involves supernova remnant shock waves and the large-scale terminal shock produced by the superwind that flows from the starbursts.

Anchordoqui *et al.* [8] have suggested that the lack of data at energies immediately lower than the two “super GZK

events'' recorded to date could be the result of a different primary composition of disintegrated iron nuclei at the end of the spectrum. This speculation might find some support from our calculations since they suggest that the production of the energetic nuclei in next-door galaxies (NGC 253 and M82) is at least feasible. In any case, we have made some concrete predictions that could be tested with the forthcoming facilities of the Southern Auger Observatory [41] and the satellite experiment called OWL [42].

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Several fruitful discussions on photonuclear interactions with M.T. Dova, L.N. Epele, and E. Roulet are gratefully acknowledged. Special thanks go to D.F. Torres for a critical reading of the manuscript. This work has been supported by the FOMEC Program (L.A.A.), CONICET (through research grant PIP 0430/98), and Antorchas Foundation (through funds granted to G.E.R.).

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