Chauncy D. Harris, 1914–2003: An Appreciation

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On December 26, 2003, Chauncy Harris—a giant figure in the development of urban geography and Western geographic studies of the former USSR and Russia, and one of the two Founding Editors of this journal—succumbed to pancreatic cancer at the age of 89.²

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²Obituaries published prior to the press date for this paper include Rotzoll (2004), Saxon (2004), and AAG (2004).
Although one is tempted to be inclusive, the scope of this essay is much more limited than a complete exposition of Chauncy’s scholarly accomplishments in geography and contributions to the discipline from the 1940s through the end of the 20th century. The temptation is curbed for two basic reasons.

First, Chauncy’s achievements in urban geography (sometimes in collaboration with his colleague Edward Ullman) are sufficiently well known, so that most geographers will be familiar with many of them. Perusal of an introductory urban geography textbook (Hartshorn, 1980) popular when I was a graduate student revealed an impressive listing, including: a threefold classification explaining the locational patterns of cities in terms of size and spacing (Harris and Ullman, 1945); the best-known functional classification of cities according to economic activity categories (Harris, 1943); elaboration of the tributary area/urban field concept in a classic case study of Salt Lake City (Harris, 1940); pioneering studies of the relationship between economic activity, population, and distance (the so-called “market potential,” e.g., Harris, 1954); and the well-known multiple-nuclei model of urban structure (Harris and Ullman, 1945).

A second reason is that in the field focused on the geography of the USSR an appraisal of the early contributions of Chauncy Harris already exists (Rodgers, 1984), as part of a collection of essays published in commemoration of his retirement as the Samuel N. Harper Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago (Demko and Fuchs, 1984). So one ought to do no more than briefly note some of the major accomplishments documented in that paper. Rodgers neatly demonstrates how much of Chauncy’s research on USSR/Russia was a natural outgrowth of his urban geographic research, beginning with 1945 articles in the Geographical Review on Soviet cities and the ethnic groups living there (Harris, 1945a, 1945b), followed by many more. In many respects, a culmination of Harris’s early work on the USSR was the 1970 monograph entitled Cities of the Soviet Union: Studies in Their Functions, Size, Density, and Growth (Harris, 1970a); the monograph revisited many aspects of his previous work on the functional classification, spacing, market/population potential, and rank-size distributions of U.S. cities, although this time they were applied masterfully and comprehensively to the urban system of the USSR.

Thus, I will trace here Chauncy’s role in the growth and evolution of this journal through its founding as Soviet Geography: Review and Translation and several subsequent transformations prompted by an increasing emphasis on original submissions at the expense of translations from the Russian in 1984 (Soviet Geography), the collapse of the USSR at the end of 1991 (Post-Soviet Geography), the expansion to related disciplines (Post-Soviet Geography and Economics) in 1996, and extension of areal coverage to other transition

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3Readers interested in background and explication of the impacts of these developments are best served by consulting the obituary in Urban Geography prepared by Brian J. L. Berry (2004), the comprehensive biographical essay of Mikesell (2004), as well as the literature on the history of urban geography, and specifically the 50th-year commemoration of Harris and Ullman’s “The Nature of Cities” (Lake, 1997) and Chauncy’s own reminiscences and assessments (Harris, 1997, 1998a).

4Included among them was a special issue of Soviet Geography (a predecessor of Eurasian Geography and Economics) devoted to an analysis of changes in the population and other characteristics of Soviet cities derived from the censuses of 1897, 1926, 1939, and 1959, updated to 1967 (Harris, 1970b).

5For a more complete appreciation of Chauncy’s publications, his role in promoting scholarly exchanges among U.S. and Soviet geographers, editorship of English translations of translated volumes representing critically important resources in teaching and research on the USSR (e.g., Balzak et al., 1949; Soviet, 1962), and compilation of lists of serial geographic publications serving as valuable reference materials for geography as a whole (Harris, 1980, 1985) and for Russia/USSR (Harris, 1975), see Rodgers (1984).
countries in Europe and Asia (Eurasian Geography and Economics) in 2002. Again, it is fortuitous that Chauncy left us some of his own observations about these changes, in a 1998 article chronicling the first 40 years of the journal’s history (Harris, 1998b).

To say that Chauncy played a role in the journal from its very inception is a gross understatement. Soviet Geography: Review and Translation’s founding conference was convened in his office at the University of Chicago in February 1959 (Harris, 1998b, p. 557), where Theodore Shabad was selected as the journal’s first editor. Harris subsequently chaired the journal’s Advisory Committee, which eventually evolved into its Editorial Board, from March 1961 until Ted Shabad’s untimely death in May 1987. At that time Chauncy assumed an even more visible post, serving as Acting Editor through 1988 and providing much-needed support and credibility during a period of great uncertainty for the journal. He later described the fears and apprehensions of many of us involved with the journal during this period:

Shabad’s unexpected death struck us with an intense feeling of loss. Gone was the acknowledged maestro of our professional craft and our ability to partake of his remarkable knowledge. Soviet Geography . . . instantly lost its dedicated producer and driving force, ushering in a new crisis that many thought to be terminal (Harris, 1998b, p. 562).

That the journal did survive this initial shock is a tribute to all those in the discipline who rallied in support by submitting and soliciting papers, assisting with evaluations, and otherwise contributing their time to help in numerous other ways. But much of the credit is due to Chauncy, exhibiting a “steady-as-you-go” demeanor at the helm, providing sage advice on procedural matters, contacting potential authors about paper submissions and ideas for special issues, and contributing papers, book reviews, translations, and other materials at times when they were most sorely needed. His first such contribution was the “Directory of Soviet Geographers 1946–1987” in the February and March 1988 issues of Soviet Geography (Shabad, 1988a, 1988b). Chauncy was determined that a third edition of Ted Shabad’s decadal listing of geographers of the USSR, their institutional affiliations, and research specializations—a massive project that appeared to be due for completion sometime in 1987 or 1988—would appear in print in the journal. Consequently, he singlehandedly assumed responsibility for completing the task, updating, supplementing, and editing Shabad’s card file of Soviet geographers; this major undertaking required that he set aside practically all other commitments. In Chauncy’s unpretentious prose in the Editor’s Introduction to the first issue of the directory, he gives us a hint of the nature of the task, noting that “Ted’s legible handwriting has been my constant companion for the last six months” (see Shabad, 1988a, p. 95).

Soon after this, Chauncy took the lead in editing a special issue of the journal featuring papers from the Ninth Congress of the Geographical Society of the USSR in 1990 (Soviet Geography, October 1991). Again, I choose to think of this as a commitment on Chauncy’s part to maintain continuity with a practice already well established in the journal. In his

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6After this, and until 1993 when he became the journal’s Editor-in-Chief, Harris served as one of the journal’s four Co-Editors.
7Of papers by Francophone specialists on the USSR.
8Two previous directories, compiled by Shabad, appeared in the September 1967 and September 1977 issues of Soviet Geography.
memorial to Shabad published in the June 1987 issue of *Soviet Geography* (Harris, 1987, p. 380), he noted:

Of particular importance was his [Shabad’s] attendance at several of the quinquennial congresses of the Geographical Society of the USSR and his subsequent publication in *Soviet Geography* of translations of key papers summarizing trends in the development and evolution of the major fields of geography in the Soviet Union over five-year periods.

Harris also was an important contributor to the *Soviet Geography/Post-Soviet Geography* roundtables. Early in 1987, Ted Shabad and Victor Winston, *Soviet Geography*’s publisher, determined that given the winds of change in the USSR following Mikhail Gorbachev’s accession to CPSU leadership, it would be useful for the journal to address major issues and problems confronting the Soviet Union by utilizing a new “roundtable” format, facilitating direct and immediate communication. The first such panel was organized by Shabad in 1987 (Panel, 1987) and after a brief interruption in the wake of his death, resumed in 1989 as an annual forum through 1995; the panels tackled such thorny issues as the nexus between nationalism and territory, the state of the Soviet environment, the wisdom (or lack of same) of Siberian development policy, patterns of the USSR’s political and economic disintegration, the quality and state of the USSR’s human capital, and problems of transition in the Russian North. Harris participated in nearly all of these roundtables as a presenter and active discussant.

Arguably his most important contributions to the journal during the 1990s were two groundbreaking papers on the effects and implications of the USSR’s disintegration for members of major nationality groups. Many individuals belonging to the titular nationalities of union republics but residing outside their “home” republics, for example, were suddenly displaced when the once relatively insignificant internal borders became international boundaries. In the opening sentence of the first of the two papers, “The New Russian Minorities: A Statistical Overview” (Harris, 1993a, p. 1), Harris provided a dramatic backdrop for the analysis that followed: “On January 1, 1992, more than 25 million Russians, without moving an inch or leaving their homes, suddenly found themselves abroad in 14 different non-Russian republics.” That masterful and widely cited paper, drawing upon census data and the author’s original computations, examined the location, concentration, occupational structure, and language affinities of the Russian population of the Near Abroad, providing valuable background and contextual information and highlighting differences in the situation confronting Russian minorities in different non-Russian republics of the former Soviet Union (FSU).9

A second paper, “A Geographic Analysis of Non-Russian Minorities in Russia and Its Ethnic Homelands” (Harris, 1993b) provided factual material for many researchers investigating the potential for newly independent Russia’s fractionation along ethnic lines. It analyzed the characteristics of 27 million non-Russians within the Russian Federation constituting 18 percent of the population: long-term trends in population change, rural-urban differences, family size, migration patterns, factors influencing language shift to Russian,

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9A follow-up to this first paper was “Ethnic Tensions in the Successor Republics in 1993 and Early 1994” (Harris, 1994), in which Harris sought more specifically to illustrate how the status of Russian minorities in the non-Russian successor states (together with political instability in those states and Russian military, economic, and political pressure) were part of a process whereby Moscow sought to reassert its influence in many of those states.
effect of location inside or outside of homeland, and other factors. The two 1993 papers boosted the journal’s visibility and attracted interest from scholars in related disciplines.

It is easy to forget, at least for this author, that Chauncy’s contributions to the journal after Shabad’s death were made during a time in his life when he might have enjoyed immersing himself in non-geographic pursuits postponed during earlier years of intense activity, or simply “taking it easy.” Not Chauncy. In fact, from time to time I puzzled over Chauncy’s “retirement,” because in the vast majority of cases I reached him by phone at his office at the university. He clearly loved his work, and Soviet Geography and its renamed successors were the fortuitous beneficiaries of his energies. However, by the late 1990s, thanks to the efforts of the editorial board and others too numerous to mention, it had become apparent to him that a flow of quality manuscript submissions had been generated that would be sufficient to sustain the journal (Harris, 1998b, p. 564). At roughly that same time, Chauncy began to hint to us that he would be comfortable with stepping back and letting others carry on the work of charting a new course for the journal in the 21st century, and beginning with the 2000 volume that wish was officially recognized in Chauncy’s appointment as Editor-Emeritus. Later, in 2003, he joined Ted Shabad as one the Founding and Honorary Editors of Eurasian Geography and Economics.

Despite his achievements, I will always remember Chauncy first for who he was, and second for what he accomplished. A giant in professional stature, Chauncy the person was a modest, unpretentious man with a quick wit and a great sense of humor. I suspect many readers who have known Chauncy longer (and better) than I will have many personal recollections. My list is shorter, but I think nonetheless illustrative. Chauncy was a pleasure to work with, because by virtue of his long experience in editing, he was familiar with the business of publishing and was sympathetic to the editor’s plight. More than once while discussing the contents of an issue in press and looking at papers “upstream” in the production chain, he would jokingly say something like: “It’s the darnedest thing. Once you get one issue out the door, another one is staring you in the face!” His brisk walk and cheerful laugh, on the way to a paper session or evening dinner, will be among the fondest memories of this author and many of his contemporaries at the AAG Annual Meetings. Here was a founding father of two of our discipline’s subfields who with undisguised pleasure looked forward to sharing his time and experience with those he genuinely cherished as colleagues, who now mourn his passing and miss his energy and friendly encouragement and support.

REFERENCES


10On several occasions, Chauncy reminded me that “some stress is a good thing; but too much is bad.” I have no doubt that this was an axiom he followed in his own life, believing that self-induced pressure to work productively, when applied in moderation, contributed to a long, healthy life.

Harris, Chauncy D., Salt Lake City: A Regional Capital. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Geography, University of Chicago, 1940.


