

Chauncy D. Harris, 1914–2003

If any person could rightly be said to be the “dean” of geographic studies of the Soviet Union in the United States, that person would be Chauncy Dennison Harris. Retired as the Samuel N. Harper Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago, Chauncy died on 26 December 2003 at his home in the Hyde Park neighborhood of that city. He is survived by his wife of many years, Edith, a daughter, Margaret, and many other relatives. His contributions to Russian and Soviet studies and to the discipline of geography were both wide and deep, and he was a great friend and a mentor to many.

Chauncy Harris was born in Logan, Utah, and spent his youth in that state, the son of a distinguished professor of agronomy at the institution that became Utah State University who was later president of Brigham Young University. After graduation from BYU (as valedictorian) in 1933 and a brief stay at the University of Chicago, the young Harris went to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar for a second BA and then on to the London School of Economics for an MA. Returning to Chicago to pursue the PhD, Chauncy took up the study of urban geography, that branch of the discipline in which he would make his mark. His huge contributions to that field have been eloquently described elsewhere as including not only his extensive research record but also his sponsorship of younger scholars, both having been defining aspects of his career (Brian J. L. Berry, “Obituary, Chauncy D. Harris, 1914–2003,” *Urban Geography* 25, no. 1 [2004]: 1–13). Suffice it to say here that Chauncy Harris was first and foremost a professional geographer who had great respect for the core methodologies of the discipline. He was recognized accordingly by his election as President of the Association of American Geographers and by the award of numerous honors, including the Cullum Medal of the American Geographical Society and the Royal Geographical Society’s Victoria Medal.

But it was during a stint with the Office of the Geographer at the Department of State and then Army service with the Office of Strategic Services in World War II that Chauncy first delved deeply into the study of the Soviet Union. As difficult as it might be to imagine today, the USSR in the late 1940s and into the 1950s was almost literally *terra incognita*, and it is to his everlasting credit that Chauncy Harris, almost by himself, began the long and difficult process of rendering this vast land more visible and understandable. This he did by personal example, mastering the Russian language and traveling to the Soviet Union to meet colleagues and open academic exchanges. Both because of his personable style, totally without pretension or hidden agendas, and his obvious knowledge of the USSR, he was liked, trusted, and well respected by Soviet counterparts at a time when such contacts were rare. His own work on the USSR, from his first publication on the subject in 1945 (“The Cities of the Soviet Union,” *Geographical Review* 35, no. 1 [1945]: 107–121) and in particular his massive study *Cities of the Soviet Union: Studies in Their Function, Size, Density, and Growth* (Washington, 1970), were landmarks in the field both because they illuminated the subject and brought much-needed detail to a wider audience and also because Harris applied concepts of urban geography writ large to provide a systematic understanding of the Soviet case.

Beyond his own scholarly work, Chauncy undertook to develop the geographic study of the USSR in the United States by playing a key role in founding the journal *Soviet Geography: Review and Translation* with the late Theodore Shabad and Victor Winston. The journal’s main purpose, as its name suggests, was to bring work from leading geographers in the USSR to a western audience generally unfamiliar with the Soviet Union and unable to read Russian. After the untimely death of Ted Shabad, Chauncy guided the journal through major editorial changes until now, as *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, it publishes original research in English by all authors on a much larger area (see Andrew R. Bond, “Chauncy D. Harris, 1914–2003: An Appreciation,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 45, no. 2 [2004]: 83–89). Likewise, Harris’s incredible command of things bibliographic, both on the Soviet Union or on geography in general, organized meticulously and published for the benefit of all, proved extremely valuable to scholars everywhere.

Slavic Review 64, no. 1 (Spring 2005)

In recognition of his many contributions to the field of Russian and Soviet studies, Chauncy Harris was elected President of the AAASS and was the recipient of the Distinguished Contributions to Slavic Studies Award.

Throughout his extraordinary life, Chauncy Harris exemplified the scholar as both a learned person and a gentleman, unfailingly polite and of great good humor, respectful to all regardless of seniority, and willing to share his time and expertise with the many of us junior to him. From the days of his youth, bicycling and backpacking through the Europe of the 1930s, to the very last moments of his life, he possessed a desire to know things about places, to make sense of those things, to communicate his thoughts on the subject to others, and to engage in a reasoned discourse about them. A life well and productively lived.

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August 2004