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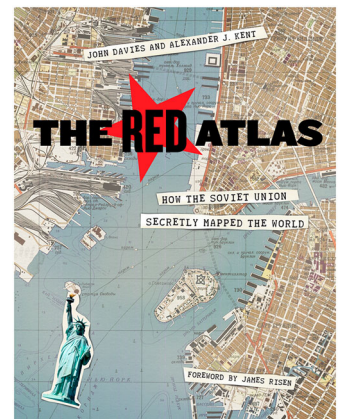
The Red Atlas

by John Davies and Alexander J. Kent

University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2017, 272 pp., \$35.00 (approximately £25.00) (hbk), ISBN 9780226389578

Publication of this long-awaited book is very welcome. The authors have, of course, previously published and presented parts of their work on the Soviet world mapping programme, but this is the first presentation of their work as a whole. And an impressive whole it is too.

During the Cold War, the military geodesists, topographers and cartographers of the Soviet Union progressively developed an ambitious project to map the world at topographic and larger scales. Until the break-up of the Soviet Union, this vast project remained highly secret and essentially unknown to individuals and security agencies in the West. This secrecy broke down in the 1990s as stocks of Soviet maps in some of the successor states to the USSR were released, by both formal and informal means, to a wider public. Davies and Kent have spent many years collecting and studying these maps, particularly the large-scale plans of cities around the world, and this book is the outcome.



There are four chapters, plus eight appendices and two indexes. The opening chapter gives a necessarily brief overview of the history of Soviet military cartography as it applied to the world mapping project. The brevity is necessary because substantial books have been written (in Russian) on various aspects of this history; a full treatment would have overwhelmed the subject matter of the book.

Chapter 2 provides an extended description of the different types and scales of maps produced by the Soviet Army and the geodetic and reference framework within which they were constructed. In addition, it also includes short descriptions of the secret map series produced for civil–official use within the USSR following the Cuban Missile Crisis, and likewise the derived aeronavigation map series. The complex, and very detailed, symbol sets for all these series are discussed, without attempting to be comprehensive. The full definitions of the symbol sets in Russian fill a series of substantial books, each of which went through multiple editions. Here the authors rightly concentrate on features that differ significantly from those of familiar American, British and Western European maps. The chapter is profusely illustrated with large and small map extracts illustrating the points being made. Almost all of these appear on the same page as the relevant text, a considerable achievement by the publishers. The quality of the reproduction and printing of the illustrations is also exceptional, which in turn allows one to appreciate the high print quality of the Soviet originals.

Chapter 3, the largest in the book, discusses the sources used to compile the large-scale town plans. There are over 120 illustrations to this chapter alone. The discussion is largely focussed on the maps of the USA, Britain and Western Europe, reflecting the target market for this book; however, some examples from elsewhere in the world are given. Nevertheless it would have been interesting to know more about the source materials used for the sprawling conurbations of South America, Africa and South-east Asia. Using a detailed analysis of many different sheets of different dates, the authors convincingly show that they were compiled from a huge range of different materials. Not only were locally produced maps of many different dates and publishers used, but also German wartime maps of Britain and many documentary sources. For example, while few Western maps identify the precise nature of individual factories or the names of their operating companies, this information was sourced by the Soviets from trade directories and other documents and then accurately presented on their maps. Furthermore, by analysing the few errors in the maps, and also the representations of sites blanked out from local maps for security reasons and of new road and housing developments not yet mapped locally, they are able to identify an increasing use of aerial (satellite) images from the 1960s onwards. Finally, certain information presented on the maps, such as bridge heights and some hydrographic data, could only have been the outcome of on-the-ground reconnaissance. There is a fascinating discussion of how (and where) this was achieved; such reconnaissance seems to have been more easily achieved in the USA than in Britain! Compiling all this information into a map was a complex process that sometimes revealed unexpectedly different cultural assumptions: in northern England, a nineteenth-century rural Mechanics Institute was presented as an Institute of Technology. The compilers were often unwilling to accept that disused railways could disappear from the landscape, that ferries would cease to exist when superseded by bridges and that industrial sites could be allowed to pass out of use or into different uses. The data they presented is generally highly accurate, if sometimes outdated. Nevertheless I feel great sympathy for the draughtsman who muddled up the road numbers and junction numbers on the motorways of Birmingham, England!

The short concluding chapter discusses the complex routes by which these maps escaped from military control to become available in what is still called the West. It reads like a thriller, so I will avoid any plot-spoilers here! The appendices and indexes fill just over a third of the book. Appendix 1 in particular presents 58 full-page map extracts further illustrating the range of maps produced and points raised in the text. A list of documentary sources forms Appendix 2, while six further appendices present additional supporting material. There is an index of geographical names as well as a general index.

While a single volume cannot hope to include everything that there is to know about Soviet military map-making, this book provides an accessible introduction for the Anglophone non-specialist. Yet, despite its size, the USSR showed an impressive ability to achieve substantial change and development in its cartography throughout the period between the end of the Second World War and the break-up of the Soviet Union. If I have a criticism of this book it is that, while it recognizes that these maps changed with time, it underemphasizes the continuous nature of that evolution. In Britain, there used to be a programme of cyclical revision of the Ordnance Survey large-scale plans. In the USSR, there was a programme of cyclical revision of the drawing specifications of topographic maps. Revised editions of the specifications for each scale would appear every 5 or 6 years, iteratively improving the legibility of the maps and the specificity of the information presented. Accordingly, the maps produced during the final years of the USSR were astonishingly high-quality artefacts, both objectively and artistically. Such high cartographic standards have seldom been achieved anywhere. That the Soviets achieved them in a world-wide programme incorporating remote sensing data is truly impressive.

All present-day cartographers working at computer screens to produce multilayered digital images should study the maps in this book to appreciate what could be achieved on paper with carefully thought-out design, detailed compilation, meticulous craft techniques and large-format offset-litho printing in 12 colours. Modern technology has its advantages,

but the Soviet maps of our cities are a very hard act to follow. The maps presented in this book should focus the aspirations of every contemporary cartographer.

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