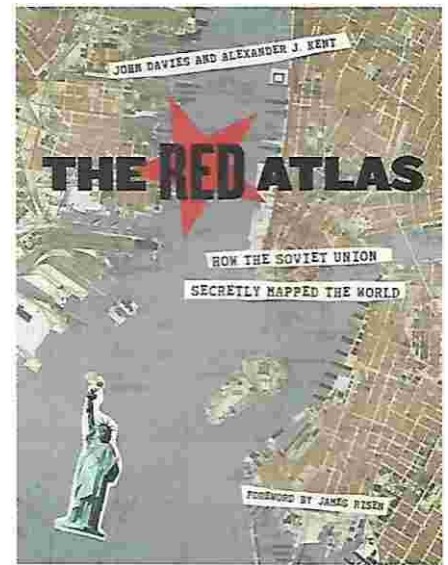


Book review

Moscow's Maps



The Red Atlas

John Davies & Alexander J Kent

University of Chicago Press; \$35 / £26.50;

230 pp; 237 illustrations

In the *Newsletter's* Spring 2017 issue we reviewed the British Library's exhibition on 20th Century cartography, noting the incredibly detailed Soviet military mapping of the UK as late as 1990. *Red Atlas* is the big book of Soviet Union mapping – a real eye-opener as well as a superbly illustrated feast for the eyes. It majors on charts of the UK and the US, but is based squarely on the comprehensive global mapping enterprise commissioned initially by Stalin, which in turn had origins in a very impressive Russian state cartographic capability dating much further back. But this is no mere coffee table book: there is history aplenty and no shortage of explanation and analysis.

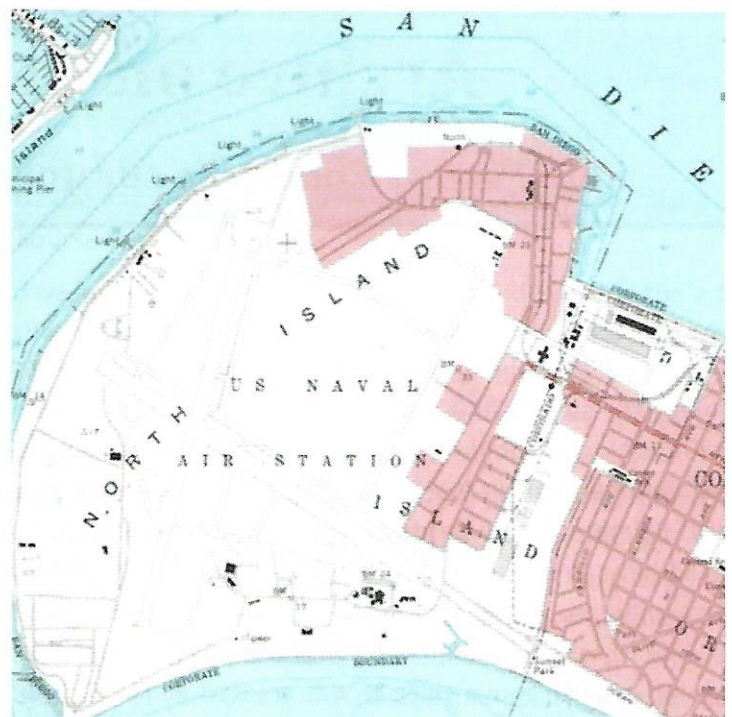
It reveals a truly superior cartographic tradition, by which (not to mince words) I mean: *better than ours*. How much detail about a railway station, for example, is offered by the 1:50,000 OS map? Essentially, none. Its Russian equivalent has symbols differentiating five types of layout for a basic station. A confusing extra level of detail? Not at all: the symbols are neat and heuristically schematical, hence easy to interpret and learn – so there's absolutely no reason not to employ them. The same impressive level of detail is found in their painstaking and ultra-informative treatment of roadways, bridges, inland waterways, factories, ports and harbours ... (though, curiously, not airfields).

Russia being Russia, every map printed is an accountable document, to be signed out and back again. (Contrast this with the service experience I am sure many of us have had, when one ordered up maps that were delivered by the pallet-load and considered fit for little more than mopping up rainwater after a single outing in the field.) The story of how the *Atlas* came to be compiled is the tale of how a large collection of Russian military maps – still secret in their country of origin to this day – fell into the hands of the authors via 'dealers' active in Estonia and Latvia around the time of the fall of the Soviet Union. They are now used in many places around the world – because of that inherent superiority! – but not in the UK; because the Ordnance Survey, ever watchful for its copyright, declares that their own maps were extensively plagiarized by the Russians and they think they can prove it.

Well – used as a baseline, maybe: in one case it is clear they started from an 1852 OS map of Bradford! But it is easy to see that the Russians added vast amounts of extra detail of their own – not least, filling in all those tantalizing details of British naval dockyards (illustrated by maps of Pembroke and Chatham dockyards) and military airfields etc over which the OS and its US equivalent cast protective veils. The book provides several side-by-side examples of facilities in the UK and US as mapped locally, and by the Russians (see illustration opposite). Some of the additional detail in the latter must have come from satellite imagery, for sure – but other elements can only have come from espionage and/or deployment of the Mark One Eyeball propelled by boots on the ground.

Accordingly, some of the maps caused palpitations when first revealed. For example, the Swedes were appalled to learn that their complex and "highly secret" system of coastal defences, minefields and "hidden" naval bases was known and mapped to a high degree of detail. Incidentally (and unsurprisingly, perhaps) the Russians are probably still at it: the authors have seen a 1997 military map of Falmouth naval base, and a 2003 plan of Vancouver.

Overall, then, the verdict on these Russian maps is "ultra-accurate". But not infallible: they seem, for example, to have missed the UK Regional Seats of Government (RSGs) which, frankly, have been known about for quite a while by the outside world (see, for example, Peter Laurie's *Beneath The City Streets*, 1970).

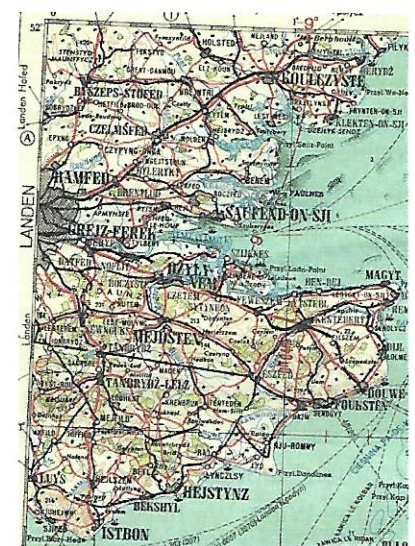


Superior detail ... San Diego naval facilities, Russian and US versions

Understandably, the book is preoccupied with detail. But it does offer one intriguing hint as to why the Soviets excelled over the West in this sphere post-war. Russia, essentially a land power, has long been very understandably fixated by mapping the ground – its own vast spaces, and then by extension everyone else's. Their battles would always be primarily on land; so details of terrain matter greatly. But the West expected to operate an air-based war and was content to work with less informative maps, filling in the gaps where necessary with air recce. Perhaps modern digital methods make these distinctions a thing of the past? Still - check out all that extraordinary detail ...

Being in possession of reams of material, the authors have been working up this volume patiently over many years with several expert collaborators. They would have done well to recruit an IA to their group, which would have saved them from elementary errors such as asserting that vertical imagery cannot be used to gauge the height of an object.

But in sum, they have done a fine job. For anyone interested in geospatial intelligence, poring over this book gives the same kind of pleasure as roaming around Google Maps. The hundreds of illustrations (predominantly extracts from maps) are superbly reproduced. The authors fairly describe the Russian cartographic achievement as an “unsurpassed” pre-digital database of “geographical knowledge and geopolitical potential”. This book does it justice.



**Welcome to Saufend -
Transliteration from
Cockney for Polish users**

‘Lynceus’

SPRING EVENT

DATE: TBD – APRIL 2019

VISIT TO THE NATIONAL COLLECTION OF AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHY (NCAP), EDINBURGH

NCAP is moving location to bigger premises in Edinburgh. Next spring we will see them in their new home and watch as they demonstrate their processes using Medmenham Collection imagery.