

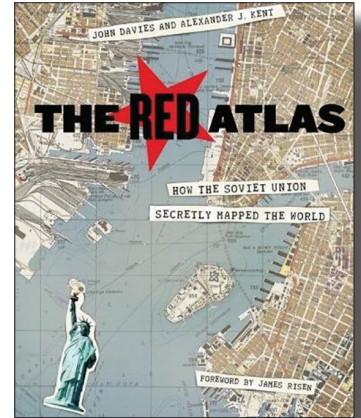
The Red Atlas

John Davies and Alexander J Kent

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Greg Miller's now-classic article in *Wired* magazine from July 2015⁸ introduced the world to a group of loosely affiliated map collectors, enthusiasts, and academics who slowly uncovered one of the most intricate and ambitious cartographic projects of the twentieth century: the large-scale topographic mapping



of the world by the Soviet Union. There was something almost old-fashioned about the tales of intrepid researchers like the amateur map historian John Davies going through back channels and even using some clandestine means to accrue a staggering wealth of Soviet maps. A bit of Cold War intrigue hung over the proceedings. In fact, as Miller reports, when Davies and his collaborator Alexander J. Kent (who has an important body of scholarly work on maps) presented findings from their years of careful work at a Moscow conference in 2011, they hoped to make contacts with Russian cartographers interested in the maps and their history. Miller writes, "They thought maybe someone might come up after their talk or approach them at happy hour. No one did. 'The silence was disconcerting,' Kent says. 'This was a subject you just don't talk about.'"

The silence is finally fully broken. The *Red Atlas* is the impressive fruit of years of Davies' and Kent's labours, leaving us with a subject that must be talked about. Davies and Kent should celebrate at the next happy hour: University of Chicago Press has worked with them to produce a beautiful and lovingly-curated volume that is as aesthetically pleasing as it is politically and historically important. With over 350 samples from the maps, produced in colour and brilliantly annotated (the composite four sheets from 1982 of London's city plan is a particular stunner), no expense has been spared here in production. Some reviews of my own book, *Mapping the Cold War*, rightfully challenged the lack of a Soviet point of view on the era's maps, and we finally have the book that can offer that perspective. Not only does *The Red Atlas* expand our specific knowledge of Soviet mapping practices, it itself is, more broadly, a profound reflection on the nature of seeing

and documenting the world in a tumultuous half-century.

With a foreword from journalist James Risen (he opens grandly with “Nearly three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Cold War secrets are still tumbling out. Some of them are beautiful.”), the book is then divided into four chapters: the first half contains a kind of pre-history of Russian/Soviet mapping, followed by a chapter that defines the maps’ specifications and orients the reader on how to work with the texts. A third chapter explores just how the maps were made through particular Soviet interpretations and mis-interpretations of the global landscape, which also contains some discussions on where the Soviets may have gotten their information for the maps. A terrific vignette, for example, on p. 127–128 shows how the Soviets made frequent trips to British ports like Southampton to survey the areas without telling UK authorities exactly what they were doing. And finally, the authors give the reader a tour through the “afterlife” and legacy of these remarkable pieces. A series of appendices then further explores examples from the maps and provides information on sources and symbology to assist readers in their interpretations.

As Davies and Kent know, the Soviet maps were often impressively accurate beyond all expectations, and because they were a secret project, they were free of the usual deliberate distortions and obfuscations that public maps from the Cold War era in the Soviet Union traded in. However, the authors’ expansive knowledge of the maps and their meticulous readings reveal plenty of eye-opening errors and discrepancies that speak to the limitations of cartographic knowledge. Often such mistakes understandably came from cultural misunderstandings: a small village structure in the Huddersfield, UK, map is listed in the index as “Institute of Technology,” a term suspiciously sounding like something out of a Soviet city. A local would know, however, that this building was the Mechanics’ Institute, as Davies and Kent write “one of many educational establishments found in the mid-nineteenth century for the betterment of the working man – to provide libraries and enlightenment for workers and to give them an alternative to spending evenings in the local pub” (p. 85–87). Examples like this are plentiful in the middle chapters, where the authors do an impressive job of delving deeply. At the same time, Davies and Kent are able to link the Soviet mapping project with the larger ideologies of other global mapping initiatives. For example, *The Red Atlas* is also a timely reminder of tensions between realism and idealism in the period: the ideal scientific cooperation of a project like the International Map of the World (IMW) failed, yet many of its very same specifications were adopted by the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact nations to wage and maintain cold war.

One of the most intriguing parts of the Atlas comes toward the final chapter when Davies and Kent trace

some of the circulation of these maps throughout the Cold War and beyond. The story of how the Soviet maps were appropriated, exchanged, and fought over truly enrich the deep readings of the map themselves, and anchor them importantly in the changing contextual conditions of cartographic technology. Cartographers (from the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency) for the US invasion of Afghanistan drew upon the extensive and brilliant mapping of the area by these seemingly secret Soviet maps. From Armenia to Israel and Lebanon and to Finland, the Baltic States, and a reunifying Germany, there are fascinating examples provided as to how the Soviet maps lived on. Even with all the growth in satellite mapping and flexible cartographic software, it is remarkable how the Soviet maps still provide useful information that other platforms cannot provide. The chapter also indicates, importantly, that this kind of cartographic knowledge is still dangerous, as Colonel Vladimir Lazar received a twelve-year prison sentence in 2012 for passing thousands of scanned images of maps to an American intelligence operative.

Of course, because of the aforementioned “disconcerting silence”, *The Red Atlas* has to stop short of offering a full history of the Soviet mapping project. Without a lot of access to the Soviet side of the story, Davies and Kent are left with the maps themselves for the most part, and have to leave the reader to fill in the blanks about Soviet motives and the contextual conditions that produced the maps. There is handy information on how the maps would have been compiled and produced, but less about the origins and mission of the mapping program as a whole. The authors acknowledge that this kind of history will have to come with more investigation of Soviet sources, and perhaps interviews of key players in the program. This criticism is small, though. Arguably, it is those ghostly gaps that make the atlas that much more exciting, and builds a sense of mystery around the whole project. For example, the immensity of the detail of the Soviet mapping program leaves to the imagination just how many Soviet agents on the ground were contributing to the fine print – it wasn’t just satellites doing the job, and those kinds of Soviet “eyes” add an eerie spectre of state surveillance that remains relevant today in a world of Google Earth and other technologies.

In the end, *The Red Atlas* is not just for map enthusiasts and academics; it’s a volume that should sit on the shelf of those who want to understand anything about the global space of the twentieth century and beyond and who still understand the Cold War as an enduring framework for understanding our world today.

Tim Barney

* <https://www.wired.com/2015/07/secret-cold-war-maps/>