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Cartography

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The title of this handsome, quirky, and illuminating volume about the post-war Soviet Union's gargantuan military mapping project is both evocative and misleading. What the map historians John Davies and Alexander J. Kent have to chew over are the maps themselves, as the history of their production and usage is still classified. Moreover, though the authors conclude that the USSR mapped nearly the entire surface of the globe at scales ranging from 1:1,000,000 to 1:10,000, the "world" shown here is overwhelmingly British and American.

But the 300-plus maps Davies and Kent do reproduce are fascinating in their scrupulous, even compulsive attention to detail. High- and low-rise buildings are differentiated by colour; delicate crosses on a green background indicate a grassy lawn, while dots depict open spaces with trees; symbols denote the building materials of highways and bridges, the heights of tunnels, the depths of rivers. Davies and Kent deduce

compellingly that much of this data could only have been captured by “boots on the ground” – on-site information gathering. The secrecy of the project was such that even military personnel had restricted access to the foreign maps, while maps of Soviet cities and towns remained unknown to ordinary citizens. It was only the chaos of communism’s collapse that lifted the veil, as hard-up military personnel and other agents sold off thousands of the maps to Western dealers.

The Soviet Union’s Cold War competitors also mapped widely, but not to the same extent, not in such detail and not with the same aesthetic verve. Many of the maps in *The Red Atlas* play beautifully with colour and contrast, while a page-sized reproduction of a list of important sites indulges a foreign reader’s pleasure in the visual exoticism of the Cyrillic alphabet. The frisson of seeing familiar places (London, New York, Cambridge, Paris) marked up with *с* and *с* – particularly in the context of the Cold War – is a given here.

As far as we know, the Soviet military mapping project was the largest in history, and it clearly involved the labour of thousands over decades. What was it all for? John Davies and Alexander J. Kent promote the intriguing hypothesis that the maps were not plans for invasion, but rather a cartographic compendium of information about the world (why else note the location of a shoe factory, a car park, coniferous trees?). *The Red Atlas* shows the Soviets playing a long game, mapping in order to make the most of the world when the world was finally won for communism.