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“The Red Atlas [book review]”

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The Charles Close Society was founded in 1980 to bring together all those with an interest in the maps and history of the Ordnance Survey of Great Britain and its counterparts in the island of Ireland. The Society takes its name from Colonel Sir Charles Arden-Close, OS Director General from 1911 to 1922, and initiator of many of the maps now sought after by collectors.

The Society publishes a wide range of books and booklets on historic OS map series and its journal, *Sheetlines*, is recognised internationally for its specialist articles on Ordnance Survey-related topics.

John Davies and Alexander J Kent, *The Red Atlas: how the Soviet Union secretly mapped the world*, University of Chicago Press, 2017, ISBN 978-0-226-38957-8; 234 + xiv pages, £26.50.¹

*I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.*² So said Churchill. Soviet mapping is nothing if not enigmatic. It makes the familiar seem exotic. Seeing a map of the countryside around XAPJIOY we start to imagine Cossack cavalry and soldiers with snow on their boots – only to realise that we are looking at Harlow. But equally, the maps make the exotic familiar. The Soviet Union imposed consistent standards throughout the world, so on facing pages in *The Red Atlas* we may contrast the straight lines of New York and the seemingly random curves of Newcastle upon Tyne without being distracted by differences between US and British cartographic style.

All was mysterious until the fall of the Soviet Union. A lot is still unknown but this book provides a much-needed resource by drawing together into a single volume everything that has now been discovered about the world-wide Soviet maps produced during the Cold War period, estimated to be in excess of one million separate sheets. The main text starts with a brief history of Russian cartography before detailing the various series, scales and specifications of twentieth century Soviet mapping. The authors then consider how the raw data was collected, particularly in Britain and the United States. Topographic maps could rely largely on published information, but the ‘city plans’ of places as small as Gainsborough would have needed ‘boots on the ground’.

Secrecy was everything, the few maps of Soviet home territory permitted for civilian administrative use or tourism were generalised or deliberately falsified. But complete secrecy throughout the vast Soviet empire was problematic. The authors quote a former Red Army officer that even maps damaged on exercise had to be signed back in after use, and yet some fragments apparently filtered out from a training area after having been used as toilet paper.³ Nonetheless, very little was known about Soviet maps until they began to reach the West after the collapse of the USSR. In the final chapter of *The Red Atlas* this story reads like a thriller, with descriptions of \$250,000 in cash being handed over at a helipad in Estonia and tons of secret maps in Latvia being sold as scrap paper instead of being destroyed.

The meticulous academic detail included in the earlier part of the book may of necessity not sit entirely comfortably with this closing chapter but, together with the copious map extracts, each makes a vital contribution to this important new work.

Davies and Kent have been well served by their publishers: the main body of the text is plentifully illustrated and it is followed by a fascinating 58-page ‘appendix’ of mainly full-page extracts of Soviet mapping. Despite use of colour throughout, the cover price is very reasonable for a specialist work. The illustrations set a new standard of sharpness and clarity; all the detail is clearly visible – even the semi-matt paper has obviously been carefully chosen. Soviet mapping is utilitarian rather than glossy.

Map addicts are used to Christmas presents with titles like *Old and Decorative Maps* and to the disappointment of opening them to find page after page of fuzzy reproductions with poor colour registration. This year let it be known amongst your nearest and dearest that a copy of *The Red Atlas* would be far more welcome.

Chris Higley

¹ See <https://redatlasbook.com/> for details of a discounted price.

² Winston Churchill, broadcast talk, 1 October 1939.

³ Ian Mumford, *Sheetlines* 71, 65.