



*Changing Character of War Centre  
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**Red Atlas. How the Soviet Union Secretly Mapped the World** by John Davies and Alexander J. Kent. London: University of Chicago Press, 2017. HB. 234pp. Maps, Photos, Index. ISBN-13: 978-0-226-38957-8

This fine book examines the significant effort that the Soviet Union invested in mapping the USSR, its Soviet allies and world. This was the world's 'largest mapping endeavour', conducted by thousands of cartographers who produced perhaps more than a million different types of maps of different parts of the planet, to an 'extraordinarily high quality of craftsmanship', to present an alternative view of the globe. Indeed, the maps often appear as works of art (pp. x-xi).

The authors, John Davies, the editor of *Sheetlines*, a journal dedicated to the study of Ordnance Survey maps, and Alexander Kent, until recently President of the British Cartographic Society and currently an academic specialising in cartography and geographic information science, have gathered their collection over many years. Their book is an accessible, concise volume consisting of four substantive chapters and eight appendices which serve to supplement the numerous maps that feature throughout the text to illustrate the different styles of maps and the evolution of their specifications, as well as the resources to help interpret the maps. Importantly, one of the appendices additionally provides a guide to further reading, including seminal texts on Russian military mapping.

Chapter 1 offers a brief history of Soviet mapping, exploring the origins of imperial Russian cartographic expertise. The scale of continental Russia and the harsh nature of both climate and terrain led, the authors suggest, to the emergence of 'arguably the most talented pool of geodesists topographers, surveyors and cartographers the world has seen' (p. 4). But it was Lenin who put all mapping activities and their relevant control functions under the state's supervision, and it was in 1921 that standard specification for military topographic maps was introduced. The chapter then traces the various legislative revisions and technical developments through the Second World War and into the 1970s, including the introduction of satellite imagery. The authors note that if Penck's International Map of the World (IMW), begun in 1913, ultimately failed with fewer than half of the planned 2,500 sheets produced, the Soviet military mapping programme is 'likely to run into millions of sheets'. The enormous task of completing the 13,133 sheets to cover only the USSR at a scale of 1: 100,000 (ten times that of the IMW sheets) – was achieved by 1954 (p. 8).

Together, chapters 2 and 3 reflect on Soviet military mapping during the Cold War era. Chapter 2 looks at the maps as artefacts, tracing the substantial evolution of Soviet symbology and specifications from the 1940s to the 1990s in the effort to create a single all-embracing system that would be applicable worldwide and acceptable for all scale and series of maps. It also discusses the establishment of the Glavnoe Upravleniye Geodezii i Kartografii [GUGK, the Main Directorate for Geodesy and Cartography], and the Voenno-Topograficheskoe Upravlenie [VTU, the Military-Topographical Directorate of the General Staff]. The latter conducted a major secret mapping programme at a high level of detail and coverage for almost the whole globe, indeed, it was 'the most comprehensive global topographic mapping project ever undertaken' (p. 11).

Chapter 3 examines the range of sources for the maps, from state maps to aerial imagery, personal reports tourist guidebooks, port visits, train timetables and road atlases, even maps captured from other states, and some of the unit commanders who can be seen to be responsible for mapping over several years. Important

points emerge. It was a ‘natural assumption’, for instance, in Soviet culture that if a map was in the public domain then it has necessarily been falsified (p. 47). Though they were used as sources, therefore, foreign maps were treated with caution. Moreover, evidence could become ‘lost in translation’, as cartographers were producing maps of countries of which they had no experience and with no insight into cultural norms, leading to confusion and misinterpretation of imagery and detail (p. 83). The authors also recount some illuminating confusions between the Soviets and others, for instance during the frequent Soviet visits to British territorial waters and ports. Often lacking interpretation, the UK authorities were often unable to discover the purpose of Soviet ships. On one occasion, the Soviet Naval Attaché was unable to identify naval ribbons worn by Soviet sailors and ‘by way of explanation let it drop that this was his first job in the navy’. (p. 127).

Chapter 4 looks at the post-Soviet era, the ‘afterlife’ of the maps, how these previously secret maps became available to a wider international audience, and their various legacies, sometimes as the most reliable maps of parts of the world. Their ongoing utility was reflected by their use by NATO during operations in Afghanistan in the early 2000s, and by those working in Israel and Lebanon who found that soviet maps were ‘significantly better in the representation of topography’. Being military in purpose, one user noted, they were more interested in ‘the going’ – road, rail and air networks, than the more social features (p. 136). Equally, the authors indicate that large scale global mapping continued after the breakup of the USSR, noting the mapping of Falmouth and Vancouver.

At first glance, the book might appear to be enjoyable trivia: desirable reading, perhaps. In fact, it is essential reading for those who wish to understand how Moscow sees the world and Russian global activity today. What stands out throughout the book is the very scale of the effort: the time, effort and resources invested by Moscow into mapping the world. It has created an ‘unparalleled legacy of geographical knowledge and geopolitical potential’ (p. 143).

Not only is it an important reminder of a specifically Russian view of the world – yet another example of different conclusions being drawn from what might be considered to be the same evidence: Soviet cartographic and hydrographic information did not correspond with that of the UK or US. Indeed, the authors note that ‘in many cases’, information is ‘at variance with that shown on’ UK and US charts (p. 120).

But Russian cartography is also something that is absent from the Euro-Atlantic discussion of Russia, despite all the talk of Russia as a “global competitor”, information warfare, and evidence of Russian mapping and cartographic activity. The authors note the ‘extent to which the West seriously underestimated the global scope and scale of Soviet mapping, even as late as 1992 (p. 141). This is very much the case today – as Putin noted when addressing the Defence Ministry leadership in early May 2019, it is a matter of course that they should have access to the most up-to-date and reliable information on aerospace, meteorological and cartographic situation. This book is a fascinating foundation guide to what that means.

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