



THE RED ATLAS: HOW THE SOVIET UNION SECRETLY MAPPED THE WORLD

By John Davies and Alexander J. Kent

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Review by: Allan Mustard

IN THE 1980S, when I was a first-tour diplomat newly assigned to the US Embassy in Moscow, among the items issued to me upon arrival was a street atlas of Moscow prepared by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). It was highly detailed, and included all the streets and many of the public buildings in the city, unlike Soviet maps available in bookstores and newspaper kiosks, which were sparser and also harbored distortions and deliberate errors—errors included by the Soviets to deceive and confuse foreigners. We did not know, at the time, that maps of a quality similar to, and even better than, our CIA products existed in the USSR. They were, however, classified “secret,” and we had no access to them. These were the now-famous products of Josif Stalin’s ambitious project to map the entire world.

The Red Atlas: How the Soviet Union Secretly Mapped the World begins by recounting how some of these maps, to this day still classified in Russia, were discovered in the Baltic states after independence and sold to Western collectors (including to me; I have a complete set of 1:500,000 maps of Turkmenistan). The narrative then shifts to detective work: how did the cartographers collect the detailed information included on the maps? Data on the USSR itself was largely derived from Soviet aerial photography, coupled with on-the-ground data collection, but where did they learn so much about other lands—many of them openly unfriendly? The *Red Atlas* authors conclude that much of the information was clearly derived from maps published in the targeted countries—in particular United

States Geological Survey maps of the United States and Ordnance Survey maps of the United Kingdom. In fact, because the provenance of the cartographic data was so obvious, soon after the maps came to light, Her Majesty’s government threatened anyone using the Soviet military maps with lawsuits for copyright infringement. Not all of the maps mined for information came from the target countries’ own mapping agencies, however. Davies and Kent, authors of the *Red Atlas*, point out that several cartographic errors appearing on maps prepared by the German military for their intended invasion of the British Isles are reproduced in the Soviet maps, a happenstance that leads them to conclude that there was a clear inheritance. Similarly, not all information on foreign countries came from maps—some came from ground truth: Soviet diplomats, military attachés, and spies, with eyeballs and camera lenses on site. Information on the number of lanes in a roadway, or the load-bearing capacity of a bridge, for example, or the products manufactured by a factory, could only be collected by someone on the ground—sometimes by simply chatting with local residents (as occurred in at least one documented case). Today, of course, some of this data collection is much easier; for much of the world, one needs only to visit the Mapillary (mapillary.com) or Google Streetview (google.com/streetview) websites to count a road’s lanes or read the sign on a factory.

If nothing else, the authors’ study of the maps demonstrates the importance of ground truth and local knowledge. An entire chapter is devoted to cartographic errors,



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many of which betray misunderstandings about the territory being mapped (including the misidentification of streams and creeks as roads, or inclusion of others that simply didn't actually exist), or in some cases, the local culture (for instance, misidentification of a "Mechanics Institute"—essentially a social institution for the acculturation of working-class Britons—as an institution of higher education). In some cases, streets bear the wrong names and buildings torn down decades earlier persist on paper. Davies and Kent estimate that the total number of maps generated by the Soviet mapping program exceeded one million, although the vast bulk of them remain under lock and key in Russian military installations and copies of only a fraction of this number have come to light in the West. Thus, considering both the geographic scope of the project and the challenge of cribbing information from maps annotated in scores of languages, it is understandable that some errors should have crept in, and one can forgive the Soviet cartographers their occasional mistake.

Not surprisingly for a book about maps, about half its space is taken up with map reproductions, including several side-by-side detail comparisons of Soviet and the Western maps from which the cartographers seem to have purloined information. The *Red Atlas* authors express their apologies for the uneven quality of images—limited, as they are, by the quality of the original maps

themselves—but I found them generally quite legible, thanks in part to the high quality of the paper and obvious care taken in reproduction. Given the emphasis on graphic information in this volume, I advise buyers to select the hardbound volume over the e-book.

The book includes a selection of the symbols used on Soviet maps with explanations of their meaning. It is probably too much to ask that the entirety of the "symbology" be presented, but it would have been nice, since I possess a substantial collection of the maps, and the meaning of some symbols is less than obvious.

The Red Atlas: How the Soviet Union Secretly Mapped the World does not shy from the most obvious question: *why?* Why did Stalin think the Soviet Union needed maps of the entire world? Did he plan to invade each and every country, one by one? The authors speculate that a more likely intention for these maps was to facilitate civil administration after the proletariat overthrew the then-existing regimes and came, one by one, voluntarily, into the Soviet fold. On the other hand, the authors might have inadvertently supplied a different answer to that question with the opening line of Chapter Two: "Maps are instruments of power . . ." Perhaps Stalin's reasoning was as simple as that.

