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Davies, John and Kent, Alexander J. *The Red Atlas: How the Soviet Union Secretly Mapped the World*. First edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. 234 p. \$35.00. LC: 2017007292. ISBN: 978-0-226-38957-8.

This work is quite an undertaking for a relatively short book: evaluating the scope of the largest mapping endeavor in the history of the world, that of the Red Army, while focusing on its mapping of the West. It goes into some of their techniques and touches on their possible mission. As a coffee table book, it will fascinate Western readers by its evidence of Soviet “boots on the ground” surveillance of their hometowns. It will especially appeal to map enthusiasts and be of greatest interest to specialists in cartography and the geospatial sciences. Historians, especially of the Cold War, will eat up every detail (and probably learn something new).

The main body of this work comprises 143 pages, 108 of which contain maps, illustrations and tables. The book consists of 4 chapters: War and Peace; Capturing the World – on Paper; Plots and Plans; and Resurrection. Appendix 1, Map Extracts, is 58 pages of color maps. Appendices 2-6 comprise 21 pages (References and Resources; Translations of Typical City Plans “Spravka” [Information], Symbols and Annotation; Print Codes; Secrecy and Control) and there is a place-names index and a general index (4 pages each).

This book is not a reference atlas, but a comparative one, showing the differences and similarities between Soviet maps of the US and the UK and those produced by



the West. The maps in it (mostly enlarged cutouts) also give insight into the methods and perhaps the motives of the Soviet military cartographic program.

Although there are various related journal articles on the subject, this is apparently the first ever book on the history of Soviet mapping of the world that focuses on a comparative analysis of those maps against their western counterparts. For this fact alone, the authors are to be lauded. They painstakingly compare and contrast the Soviet maps with American and British maps of similar scales. The overwhelming takeaway is that the Soviets included much more detail on their maps of US and the UK than the national maps produced in those countries reveal. They point out how the Soviet maps included things such as road widths, bridge heights and direction of river flow. They focus a great deal on the city plans (typically 1:10,000 and 1:25,000). It is important to point out (and they did not) that it is not fair to do a direct comparison of city plans with national series maps, even at the same or similar scales. The reason for this is the focus of such mapping programs. A city plan is by its nature more detailed than a “quad map,” (the nickname for maps from the 1:24,000 scale US Geological Survey series of topographic maps). City plans detail important cities; regular topographic maps, on the other hand, typically depict the terrain and other important features of the entire territory of a country. And one must bear in mind the scope of each mapping program (for example, there are more than 60,000 1:24,000 scale maps of the United States). So it is unsurprising that a Soviet city plan at the 1:25,000 scale would be more detailed. That said, the regular Soviet military mapping is in fact more detailed, scale-for-scale, than western military mapping (produced by the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency and its predecessors, often jointly with American allies, e.g., 1:50,000, 1:100,000, 1:500,000).

Many of the map graphics are yellow due to the age of the paper originals, which is pointed out at the beginning of the book (“we ask the reader’s understanding”); but with modern graphics programs available to the publisher, it is very surprising that this imperfection was not resolved.

A number of errors would be distracting to readers who are intimately familiar with the maps (but would not be noticed by the casual reader). In referring to the soil maps depicted on the verso of many of the 1:200,000 scale topographic maps, the authors incorrectly described them as “geological sketch maps” (they’re basic soil maps, a type of map distinct from geological and topographic maps). This and other small inaccuracies could have been avoided if enough reviews by subject matter experts had been carried out. On the other hand, the detailed descriptions of



projection, coordinate system, grids and numbering schemes reveal a labor of love by devoted researchers and cartophiles. There are also detailed comparisons of multiple source maps that were used by the Soviet cartographers. In several of the cases, the evidence that these British and American maps were used as sources or base maps by the Soviets was found by the authors through sheer sleuth work, as there was no citation of any sort on Russian maps.

The authors made some glaring translation and transliteration errors, e.g., the name “Oleinikova N.A.” was incorrectly rendered “Olienikova H.A.” on page 49. This is of course minor; but it is especially ironic since the authors pointed out such errors in the Soviet maps of Britain. The authors also criticize the Russians’ “phonetic” renderings of English place names in Cyrillic. Numerous examples are given. But in many cases, they are simply the official Russian names of these cities. The Russians aren’t wrong for their renderings any more than we are wrong for saying “Moscow” when the Russian name is “Moskva”.

The overwhelming accomplishment of the authors is bringing to light, beyond academic circles, the contribution of Soviet mapmakers to the global body of cartographic work; and the fact that they mapped many countries at better scales than those countries did themselves.

This work would be a valuable reference for any research on Soviet mapping in general, and of the West in particular. It would be a good addition to any earth sciences collection or map library. Libraries specializing in Russia and the Soviet Union or in military science and intelligence would also benefit from it.

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