

# An overview of the Soviet mapping of South Africa

Martin Davis <sup>a,\*</sup>, Alexander J. Kent <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Oxford, United Kingdom – [martin.davis@bodleian.ox.ac.uk](mailto:martin.davis@bodleian.ox.ac.uk)

<sup>b</sup> Canterbury Christ Church University, United Kingdom – [alexander.kent@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:alexander.kent@canterbury.ac.uk)

\* Corresponding author

**Keywords:** Soviet Union, South Africa, topographic mapping, military mapping

## Abstract:

The vast cartographic output of the Soviet Union during the Cold War represents the largest cartographic project of the twentieth century. Varying greatly in scope, the maps produced cover the globe at multiple scales from 1:1,000,000 to 1:10,000, including both thematic maps for public use and detailed military topographic mapping produced by the General Staff in secrecy. The coverage of these maps in relation to particular countries and territories has been the focus of a growing body of research in recent years, including Poland (Kent *et al.*, 2019), Malta (Kent and Davies, 2020), Denmark (Svenningsen and Perner, 2020), China (Aylmer, 2021) and Laos (Whyte, 2022). Such work provides valuable insight into the scope, coverage and content of Soviet mapping in different parts of the world. However, the extent of the project's coverage means that Soviet maps of many parts of the world remain relatively unstudied.

This paper gives an overview of the Soviet mapping of South Africa, ranging from a civilian reference map of the country (printed in 1969) to highly detailed military city plans of Cape Town (printed in 1973; figure 1) and Durban (printed in 1979). By illustrating the nature of the maps' content and symbolisation at various scales, it indicates how they offer a rich resource for regional studies and how their cartographic approach can provide some solutions for addressing contemporary challenges of global mapping initiatives, with which they share some similarities. The paper also illustrates how the comprehensive Soviet symbology was applied to the South African landscape, and how various aspects of the maps' content may provide clues regarding their source materials.



Figure 1. Signal Hill, as shown on the 1:25,000 Soviet military plan of Cape Town (1973) (Source: IGC Catalunya)

## References

- Aylmer, C., 2022. Soviet Military Maps of China, *The Cartographic Journal*, DOI: 10.1080/00087041.2021.1997412.
- Kent, A.J. and Davies, J., 2020. The secret Soviet military mapping of Malta, *Proceedings of Imago Melitae*, 23rd November 2019. pp. 23-30.
- Kent, A. J., Davis, M. and Davies, J., 2019. The Soviet mapping of Poland – a brief overview, *Miscellanea Geographica*. 23 (1), pp. 5-15, DOI: 10.2478/mgrsd-2018-0034
- Svenningsen, S.R. and Perner, M.L., 2020. Soviet Cold War Maps: Examining the Organization and Practices of Production Through the Case of Denmark, *The Cartographic Journal*, DOI: 10.1080/00087041.2019.1660518.
- Whyte, B., 2022. The 1979 Soviet military city plan of Vientiane, Laos: A translation and analysis, *The Globe* (91), pp. 28–42.