The Visions of "Soviet Military Power"

The artwork in those famous Pentagon booklets provided an offbeat view of Soviet forces.

This painting of a remarkably crowded battlespace—DOD's conception of a Soviet combined arms army on the march—appeared in the first Soviet Military Power booklet (inset), which was released in September 1981.
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Pentagon booklets provided an
On Sept. 29, 1981, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger unveiled a 99-page booklet titled Soviet Military Power. The Washington Post noted it “paints an awesome portrait of the USSR as a military machine.” The Post was not just figuratively but also literally correct: SMP boasted actual paintings depicting Soviet weapons and forces. Many readers puzzled over these images; it was said that, to shield sensitive sources, DOD had doctored some of them. Whatever the truth, the colors, composition, and perspective did often impart an unusual feel to the paintings. We hereby offer a look at some of the images from the earliest years.

Submarine-launched SS-N-21 nuclear cruise missile over what appears to be a city. MiG-29 Fulcrum fighter (airborne) above Su-27 Flanker fighters on an austere Soviet base. Orbital anti-satellite weapon attacking a space-based target with “a multipellet blast.” MAZ-537 heavy equipment transporters hauling main battle tanks to the front.

The distinctive paintings found in Soviet Military Power were produced by Defense Intelligence Agency artists using classified images, including satellite images, along with other data. DIA used the artwork for classified reports and official briefings. The artists produced about 150 paintings expressly for Soviet Military Power.
In the 1980s, DIA employed as many as five artists. They worked at DIA’s Illustrations Department, located at Arlington Hall Station in Arlington, Va., a 10-minute drive from the Pentagon. In 1984, they moved to the Defense Intelligence Analysis Center at Bolling AFB, D.C.


DIA has said that its artists and analysts would cooperate closely to produce a rendering of a particular weapon system. The paintings often reproduced a classified photograph that, because of security restrictions, could never be put in the public domain in its original form. Still, many of the paintings themselves were stamped “secret” and have only recently been declassified.
Tu-22M Backfire theater bomber, a swing-wing, turbofan powered aircraft capable of conventional or nuclear attacks. The Soviet Army’s experimental T-80, said to be the third of a new class of tanks with “markedly improved firepower, armor, and mobility.” Two models of the Mi-28 Havoc, the USSR's newest attack helicopter. Two An-124 Condor heavy-lift transport aircraft, largest airlifter in the world, operating from what appears to be a remote airfield.

The Pentagon each year printed about 200,000 copies of Soviet Military Power, providing a key outlet for DIA artists. By the 1990s, old-fashioned paintings had given way to computer-generated graphics.

All of the more than 1,000 DIA paintings have been stored. They are now treated as historical artifacts and are maintained in the DIA’s Military Art Collection.