

Basil Davidson

A memory

Michael Barratt Brown

Basil Davidson died in July 2010. Michael Barratt Brown, his lifelong friend, spoke at his funeral. We follow Michael's words with a small sample of Basil's own work; his review of a book about the Second World War. We hope this might, in some small way, introduce new readers to Basil Davidson's outstanding work over a long and eventful life.

It would be impossible for me ever to forget the impression that Basil made on me on one of the first occasions that I met him some 60 years ago. He had just come out of Yugoslavia where he had been parachuted into largely enemy held territory as a British liaison officer with Partisan forces in the Vojvodina. It was in a villa just outside Bari, where I was leading a small advance unit of a Yugoslav mission of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) stationed there, preparing to enter Yugoslavia as the German armies withdrew under intense Partisan pressure. I had asked Basil to come to speak to us about what we might expect when we met up with the civil authorities which the Partisans were establishing in territory which they had liberated. He was a toweringly impressive, rather austere, figure, very tall and slim, clothed in a rather splendid battle dress made of some green waterproof material, with a rather fetching cravat at the top and enormous boots at the bottom.

But what he had to tell us was riveting. Some of us from Britain had already met some of Tito's Partisans in refugee camps in Egypt where we had been working, and had got some understanding of the extraordinary capacity for democratic organisation that they were capable of. Our attitude was in strong contrast to that of other Brits who had an army background and had imbibed strong colonial attitudes. Others still coming straight from the United States were deeply suspicious of anything smelling of Communism. Basil won us all over, not by any romantic picture of guerrilla armies and heroic deeds against

fearful odds, though we could imagine these. What he gave us was a very simple down to earth description of peasant families organising themselves quietly and efficiently to defend themselves and their villages from a brutal occupation, involving the collaboration of many of their own people. Basil explained to us something of the structure of local and district and county committees held together by a multi-ethnic Assembly and government, which had already been meeting in liberated territory. Basil described something of this experience in his book *Special Operations Europe*, published by Gollancz in 1980, which I most strongly recommend as a complement to his African studies.

Some of this Partisan experience of Basil's we in UNRRA already knew from the reports which we had received from the British Military Mission of which Basil was a member. But what Basil added to the story, as a trained journalist as well as a seasoned soldier, was the simple humanity of the men and women involved, drawn as they were from several ethnic groups, which the Germans were anxious to divide in order to conquer, but which Tito's Partisans were seeking in every way to unite against a common enemy. When I got into Yugoslavia and drove inland over the mountains to reach Sarajevo, just a few days after the Germans had left, I found that what Basil had told us was true. I had to talk to local committees about getting food supplies in from outside. I found that these committees always included representatives from each of the local ethnic groups, all determined to work together to rebuild their country after the terrible destruction that the occupiers had wrought.

I still believe in the capacity of the Yugoslav peoples to work together – and have written about this – in spite of the civil wars of the 1990s, which once again, as so often before in Yugoslav history, were incited and inflamed by outside forces with their own several ambitions – Turks, Austrians, Hungarians, Italians, Germans, and now Americans. What Basil learnt from those brave Partisans gave him the courage and the understanding for his subsequent defence of the liberation struggles of the African peoples and his continuing faith that, one day, they will win. What I could hardly have guessed from those early meetings 60 years ago was that they would lead to a lifetime's close personal friendship with Basil and Marion.

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What really happened?

In 1996, at Ken Coates' suggestion, Basil Davidson wrote this review of a substantial new history of the Second World War. It was originally published in European Labour Forum journal (no.17).*

What the Second World War meant to all of us in Europe is a vast and painful subject which eventually, maybe in 50 years of so, will be summarised in a balanced and 'definitive' judgment. Meanwhile, as the old millennium draws to its close, there is now a good place for summaries which tell us, in a reasonably comprehensive and reliable way, what actually happened after Hitler's armies marched into Poland in September 1939 and the killing and burning seriously began. How was the war fought through those terrible years? Who did the bulk of the fighting, and with what overall objectives in view? Weinberg is an American historian who attempts some answers which will hold good for the present and immediate future. In a huge book scaled to the massive size of his undertaking, he gives us what appears to me – a serving soldier through that war but by no means a military historian – a remarkably successful response to such questions. Free in his judgements of the main *dramatis personae*, he is bound to run into serious dissent here and there, notably in relation to some aspects of the archival sources – but generally he encourages a sense of confidence in what he has to tell and in his manner of telling it.

His book moves with impressive ease and competence from the initial nazi aggressions of 1939 and early 1940 to the enormous campaigns of killing and destruction in which Hitler developed his aims of world-wide conquest. Here Weinberg remains true to his initial organising principle: as in his earlier books on the background to the war, to his well-nourished conviction that 'the course of German foreign policy provides the obvious organising principle for any account of the origins of World War Two'. In short, the aims and objectives and methods of the Nazi Party, and centrally of Hitler himself, were and remained at least until 1943, by which time the tide had begun to turn, the central dynamic of all this horrific warfare and destruction. With a powerful command of his military material, Weinberg has composed a genuine *tour de force*.

How did Hitler's plans unfold after his destruction of the French army in 1940 and his somewhat later invasion of the Soviet Union? While the Western Allies, essentially Britain alone until late in 1941, strove to meet their expulsion from the European mainland by the then called *Festung Europa*, what happened on the vast 'Eastern Front'? Weinberg usefully expounds the course of all that in a lucid account of the *Wehrmacht's* engulfment of the Low Countries and the Scandinavian states while its legions pressed home their assault as far as the very crests of the Caucasus, the approaches to the Nile Valley, and on all the lands between. Weinberg does all this with skill, and everything that critically mattered seems to be somewhere here: the titanic struggle across the oceans, the unbending and

always malicious violence of Hitler's planning and commitment, whether on the war fronts or in the civilian rear, the endless massacres wherever the *Wehrmacht* could reach, and the various and bestial designs and 'measures' by which Hitler's Europe was to be rendered worthy of the Aryan master race. Weinberg goes on to recount the war in Asia, and again does so in a way that usefully shows how Japanese imperialism, in its turn, was duly overcome and humbled in the dust.

There are, of course, some oddities of Weinbergian judgement; and no doubt on this wide canvas it could scarcely have been otherwise. Weinberg's view of the famous confrontation between Hitler and Chamberlain, at Munich in 1938, is that the 'Munich Agreement' was a stiff defeat for Hitler and his plans. European judgement, then and since, has been exactly the reverse. By delivering the Czechoslovak Republic and its powerful army into Nazi hands, Chamberlain's 'peace in our time' (as Chamberlain claimed) ensured the subjection of the Poles and laid open the way to the defeat of France and invasion of the USSR. Weinberg quotes his previous books in support of what can only seem a perverse judgement on the realities that followed 'Munich', but these I have not read.

Some other aspects will give the admiring reader pause, a very insufficient handling of the campaign in Italy being one of them. But generally Weinberg's method suffers most, even if understandably for a writer clearly given to a complete self-confidence, from a wish to suggest omniscience. He has read widely in the available archives, yet he has not always read enough. On minor points he is thus rather easily led astray. In the matter of the British decision to shift military support from the monarchist 'chetniks' in Serbia to the Communist-led partisans he is content to recite some very foolish gossip by monarchist writers in the USA, although the hard-and-fast reasons for that well-known 'switch' of British military effort are perfectly clear in the archives and their official commentaries. His severe criticisms of some of the British deception ploys in the lead-up to the Normandy landings of 1944 are sharply at odds, again, with British official histories based on archives still not completely available to the public. On all major issues, however, he is surely well based. Which is why his work will be welcomed as a useful reminder of what the military history of World War Two was really about.

**A World at Arms: A Global History of World War Two*, Gerhard L. Weinberg, Cambridge University Press, 1178pp.