

World News > Basil Davidson, path-breaking historian of Africa, dies at 95

Basil Davidson, path-breaking historian of Africa, dies at 95

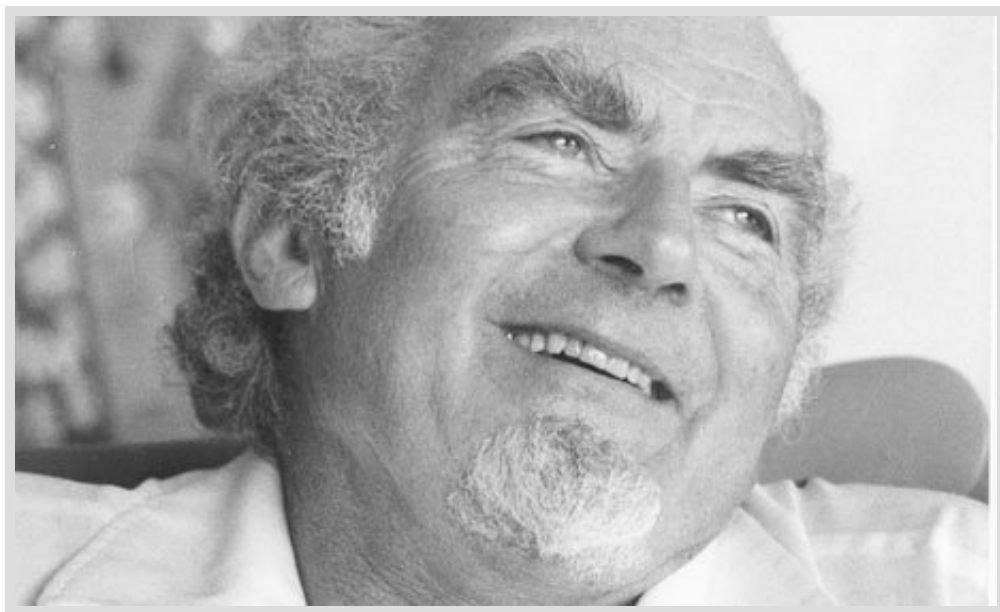


by: **DENNIS LAUMANN**

july 16 2010

tags: **Africa, history, imperialism**

[Print](#) | [Email to a Friend](#)



Basil Davidson, the radical journalist whose books introduced a mass audience to Africa's history, died on July 9 at the age of 95.

Davidson was a participant in, witness to, and chronicler of people's struggles against imperialism, fascism, and racism. He battled alongside partisans in Europe during World War II, traveled with guerrillas fighting for independence in Portuguese colonies, and campaigned against apartheid in South Africa.

Davidson was a true scholar-activist who was as determined in the combat zone as he was behind a desk.

Born in Bristol, England, Davidson left school at 16 to pursue a career in journalism. He worked as a foreign correspondent for notable London publications such as the Economist, before joining Britain's anti-Nazi Special Operations Executive in the late 1930s. Multilingual, imposing, and daring, Davidson coordinated resistance activities in several countries. He parachuted into Yugoslavia, where he joined Tito's Communists in 1943-44, then led a band of partisans who liberated Genoa in neighboring Italy.

After the war, he returned to reporting, based in Paris and writing for leading British newspapers, and he was active in labor causes. In the 1950s he traveled to Africa, the continent to which he devoted his research skills, literary talents, and political militancy for the remainder of his life.

Inspired by the anti-colonial movement sweeping Africa and committed to the Pan-Africanist program of Africa's new leaders, Davidson immersed himself in writing about Africa's present and past. His early, now classic, studies of Africa were published at a time when much of the continent was under colonial occupation, Jim Crow racism prevailed in the American South, and most Western intellectuals dismissed African history as nonexistent.

Davidson highlighted the magnificence of Africa's distant past, from the ancient city of Meroe to the powerful empire of Mali, in award-winning books such as *Lost Cities of Africa* (1959). In his effort to counter Western ignorance and stereotypes about Africa, Davidson emphasized its role in world history, educating readers about the invention of iron-working in sub-Saharan Africa, for example. An Afrocentrist, he rejected colonialist scholarship which separated ancient Egypt from the rest of the continent, showing that Egypt was an African civilization. His books also explored the negative consequences of Africa's more recent engagement with Europe, most notably in *The African Slave Trade* (1961), one of the first comprehensive studies of the subject.

Davidson covered current events in Africa, too, especially the fight for self-determination. His articles and books written on the front lines of the anti-colonial struggle in Africa helped raise awareness around the world. He shaped British public opinion in favor of decolonization and his publications were devoured by civil rights activists and proponents of ethnic studies in the U.S.

His first African monograph, *A Report on Southern Africa* (1952), was an eyewitness account of the implementation of the newly enacted policies of racial segregation known as apartheid. His 1951 trip was arranged by the Garment Workers' Union of South Africa and during his visit he met with Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, and other leaders of the African National Congress. Later he was deemed a "prohibited immigrant" by the apartheid government and denied entry to South Africa and other white-ruled colonies. Unbowed, he continued to speak out about the crimes of apartheid and he served as vice-president of the Anti-Apartheid Movement in Britain from 1969 to 1984.

Davidson celebrated the independence of Ghana in 1957 and the policies of its president, Kwame Nkrumah, who welcomed liberation fighters from throughout Africa to study and train in his country. In 1964, Davidson taught at the University of Ghana and later he published a biography of the Ghanaian leader entitled *Black Star: A View of the Life and Times of Kwame Nkrumah* (1973).

Davidson was the first Western journalist to travel to the liberated zones of the Portuguese colonies of Guinea-Bissau and Angola. Amilcar Cabral, the leader of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde who in 1967 invited him to the freed areas of Guinea-Bissau, wrote that Davidson "accepted every risk and fatigue that could bring him into personal touch with the way our people live now." Davidson later recounted his trip in the book *No Fist is Big Enough to Hide the Sky* (1981).

At the height of the armed struggle, Davidson walked 300 miles on foot to eastern Angola to visit the zone liberated by the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola. His account of this epic journey, called *In the Eye of the Storm: Angola's People*, was published in 1972.

In more recent years, Davidson explored the problems of postcolonial Africa which he principally attributed to the imposition of Western institutions such as multiparty liberal democracy. His most important work on this topic was titled *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (1993), in which he argued the solutions to Africa's troubles must come from Africans themselves rooted in a keen sense of their own history and cultures.

Although Davidson was never a member of any communist party, he often was labeled a "communist" and at times he was blacklisted like many leftists during the Cold War era. A decorated military veteran, his own country nevertheless vetoed his appointment as an editor at UNESCO, as punishment for his radical politics.

But, Davidson remained true to his principles. He once described his work as "obviously anti-imperialist." He championed Marxist organizations and leaders - including Nkrumah and Cabral - who fought against colonialism and apartheid. And he condemned the hypocrisy of Western liberals who turned a blind eye to the crimes of imperialism.

Davidson is remembered for the sacrifices he made and the role he played in liberating Africa. The MPLA, which now governs an independent Angola, issued a statement this week mourning his death. "At this moment of grief and sorrow," it reads, "the Politburo, on behalf of all party members, bends before the memory of so eminent personality and forwards to the bereaved family and the Mozambique-Angola Committee, of which he was a member, the deepest condolences."

At the presentation of an honorary degree from the University of Bristol in 1999, Davidson was recognized as "one of the great radical figures of the 20th century." The presentation continued, "He has pursued, throughout his life, a just cause, without fear for his own personal safety. He has provided an inspiration for millions, through his books and television work, and by his academic writings gave us African history, when many denied there could be any African history."

Davidson's impact is evident in the high school and university classrooms across Africa and beyond where his textbooks, such as *West Africa before the Colonial Era: A History to 1850* (1998), as well as his acclaimed eight-part documentary series, *Africa: A Voyage of Discovery* (1984), are required learning materials.

Enter any bookstore or library with a section devoted to Africa, and you certainly will find several of Davidson's works on display. Pay homage to this great scholar-activist by reading one of those books, and follow his example by committing yourself to the struggle against imperialism in its many forms today.

Photo: <http://africasacountry.com/2010/07/14/basil-davidson-r-i-p/>



Except where otherwise noted, content on www.peoplesworld.org is licensed under a **Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License**

Legal