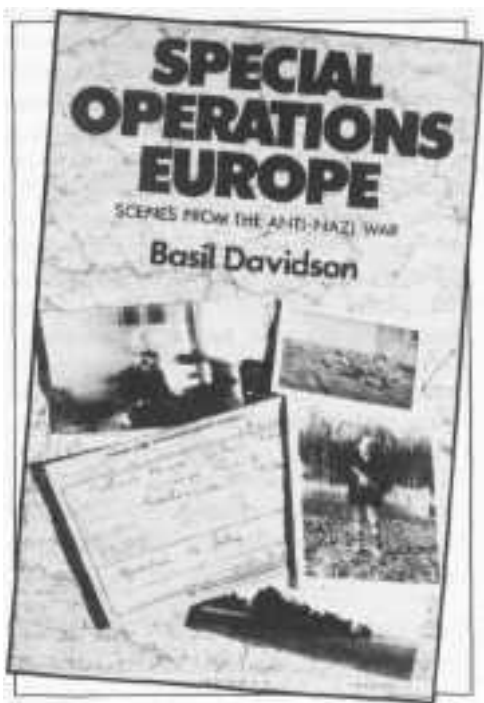


**SPECIAL OPERATIONS EXECUTIVE:  
SCENES FROM THE ANTI-NAZI WAR**  
**Basil Davidson**

Victor Gollancz 1980 288 pp £8.50.

History is both 'past politics' and very much current politics, too, in this autobiography of a World War II British agent, which will be as evocative for the old as it is educational for young readers.

The author was an officer in the Special Operations Executive set up to promote resistance 'in countries overrun or overawed by the Nazis'. He operated throughout the war — in Hungary, at the SOE base in Cairo, in Yugoslavia and in Italy. His story is highly personalised, cinematic in its to-ing and fro-ing over the years, but firmly held together by the themes it develops. It gives a deeply moving account of the genesis of people's armed resistance under Communist leadership. One puts the book down with two main impressions. The first is how much of what we had all learned by 1945 has been



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distorted, or simply buried, by the long cold war years. The second is that while thousands of more specialised studies since have so often used the trees to conceal the wood, here the whole dark forest stands illuminated.

The first concealment has been the hope of 1945. By that blood-soaked year, the genie was getting out of the bottle all over Europe: popular governments stemming from the resistance experience, the outlawing of fascism and the resumption of progress, with no more war to come, were all widely assumed to be the shape of the future.

The politics of armed resistance, as Davidson shows, everywhere grew into the politics of radical democracy. Into this picture he also fits a brilliant cameo of one of the more extraordinary 'scenes' of the war, one that was offside from the fighting resistance movements but politically entirely kin to them.

This was the Cairo Forces Parliament, the meteoric outbreak of democracy and people's politics in the British forces in the Middle East (with a similar event in India) which startled the brasshats out of their wits and presaged the electoral overthrow of Toryism after the war, despite Churchill and what he had seemed to stand for.

One could argue that Davidson's view of the Communist successes in leading partisan

struggles as a kind of first rejection of Stalinist bureaucratic/dictatorial conceptions, and the root of today's 'Eurocommunist' trends, is simplistic in its presentation.

But certainly changes in this direction were under way before the Western-launched cold war in 1946 and the responding Cominform break with Tito in 1948 slammed them into reverse and strangled the changes almost at birth.

One' of the great merits of the book is its demonstration that this alteration was seeded continuously during the war itself. Davidson zeroes in close on the Cairo-based reactionary intrigues that secured — up to and beyond the last defensible moment — that British aid went exclusively to the royal Yugoslav government representative in Yugoslavia Draza Mihajlovic, whose chetniks refused to fight the nazis, would fight only the Communist-led partisans, and above all aimed at emerging intact after the war to retain control for the socially conservative forces.

A note from SOE Balkan chief Lord Glenconner for July 1942, quoted by Davidson, said: 'As we know, any activities in Yugoslavia should really be attributed to the partisans. But for public consumption we can see no harm in a certain amount of this going to the credit of Mihajlovic'.

When Davidson was appointed G2 of the operational section for Yugoslavia, he recalls, 'I was given not one word of advice or information about the partisans. So far as we were concerned, they were supposed not to exist'.

His story of how the Italian partisans saved Genoa from Nazi scorched-earth plans, despite British and American top-level efforts to pretend that they, too, scarcely existed, and to ensure that they disappeared as rapidly as possible, shows the same policy at work. It failed in Yugoslavia but succeeded in Italy, choking a budding new Italian *risorgimento* and laying the basis for three decades of unbroken Christian Democrat one-party rule in the interests of big capital.

Almost a 'scene' to himself in this richly thoughtful memoir is occupied by the figure of the late James Klugmann, this journal's former editor for many years, and the subject of fascinating pages of tribute to his role and his comments on all the Cairo intrigues and their long-term implications.

'James', as he appears already then to have been generally known, gets a wonderfully life-like pen portrait. He emerges constantly as lecturer, counsellor, friend and general guru of the forces of light amid the Cairo murk of those days.

**Stanley Harrison**