

The *Albertina* enigma

A mystery examined

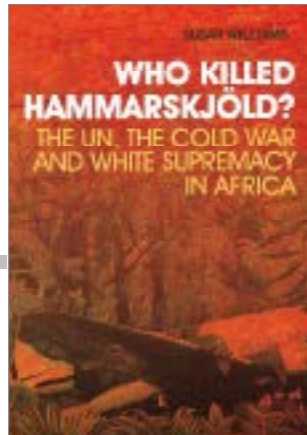
Who killed Hammarskjöld?

The UN, the Cold War, and White Supremacy in Africa

By Susan Williams

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Who killed Hammarskjöld? was published all of 18 months ago, so reviewing it is something of a departure for *African Business*. This magazine generally only deals with recently released books, but this title is so important, and so relevant to the current situation in DR Congo, that it deserves to be covered.

To put this book's narrative into context, it deals with the death of Dag Hammarskjöld, the UN Secretary-General, ostensibly in a plane crash near Ndola, Zambia, in September 1961. He was a well-regarded Swedish diplomat who had risen to the top at the UN.

He saw his mandate as being to lend support to newly independent countries in their struggle to break free from neo-colonial interference and economic exploitation.

The DR Congo had won independence from the Belgian colonial administration on 30th June 1960. But in the early 1960s, the Cold War was at its frostiest and Africa and her enormous resource wealth was key to the proxy-war playground conflict between the East and the West.

DR Congo is particularly blessed (or perhaps cursed) by possessing enormous reserves of strategic minerals, such as the uranium that fuelled the atomic bombs that the US dropped on Japan at the end of World War II.

In a sense, the struggle in the early 1960s for control of DR Congo's resources is very similar to the situation today – and towards the end of this book we read an argument that makes clear just why this look at an incident that took place more than 50 years ago is so crucial.

Professor Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, a leading scholar of African politics in general, and Congolese history in particular, makes that argument. He is quoted by the author, Dr Susan Williams, as stating “[there is a] clear and powerful need of the people of Central and Southern Africa for more information about the 1960s. Only in this way would they be able to understand better the period

of decolonisation and the roles of the UK and other European powers”. He adds that while the Congolese people are concerned to concentrate on what lies ahead, “they need to understand the past to plan for the future”.

One particular handicap for the country that Nzongola-Ntalaja draws to the author's attention is that “much of [the Congo's] history has been determined by external powers”.

And so it is today, many would argue. The focus might have shifted northwards, from Katanga to the Kivus, and the alleged involvement (according to a UN report published late last year) of both the Ugandans and Rwandese – with such rebel groups as M23 seeking to secure the mineral wealth of the region – has also changed. A half a century ago, the issue was the breakaway Katanga province, the mighty Union Minière mining company, and the external interference of both neighbouring Rhodesia Federation and DR Congo's former colonial power, Belgium.

And, again, it was the involvement of the UN that was key to the issue all those years ago – especially their support for the independent Congolese government and the UN's Secretary-General Hammarskjöld's efforts to halt the secession of Katanga, under Moïse Tshombe.

Katanga was the province where many of the country's mines were located – which,

it is suggested by this book – held the motive that led to a conspiracy to assassinate the Secretary-General. Tucked away in the footnotes are the numbers that indicate just how powerful was the Belgian influence that remained in Katanga post-independence.

Williams quotes an article first published in 2005 in *African Economic History* by Olivier Boehme, ‘The Involvement of the Belgian Central Bank in the Katanga Secession, 1960–63’, that states: “At the end of 1960 there were in Katanga: 1,133 Belgian civil technicians (while only 609 remained in the capital Leopoldville, now Kinshasa); 114 Belgian officers, 117 non-commissioned officers and soldiers that served the Katangan gendarmerie; and 38 Belgian public servants or police officers who worked for the Katanga government”.

Hammarskjöld was a controversial figure, both loved and loathed in equal measure. Loved by the vast majority of Africans, who recognised his heroic commitment to their liberty and self-determination, and loathed by the white supremacists and a substantial element of the European colonial governments, including many of the Belgians that stayed in the country after independence, who feared an end to their substantial economic interests in Africa.

But Hammarskjöld, posthumous winner of the 1961 Nobel Peace Prize,



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advocated a community-based vision of the UN in maintaining international peace and security. Central to his conception of the institution's effectiveness was his fundamental belief that states should respect the UN's neutrality, and so enable it to become an instrument and expression of the international community in pursuit of the UN Charter's objectives.

For Hammarskjöld, the UN's primary responsibility was to do everything within its means to protect successive generations from the ravages of war. Quoted in *Who killed*

Dashing, daring, and determined: Hammarskjöld death had a profound effect on the Congo's geopolitical and economic interests.

Hammarskjöld?, Kofi Annan, (arguably the only other UN Secretary-General to have even come close to Hammarskjöld in terms of personal charisma) says that he was guided by the example of Hammarskjöld when he headed the UN between 1997 and 2006. “There could have been no better rule of thumb,” says Annan, “than asking ‘How would Hammarskjöld have handled this?’”

In fact, if you turn to Annan's latest book *Interventions: A Life in War in Peace* (co-written with Nader Mousavizadeh), we learn that Hammarskjöld institutionalised a practice called ‘peacekeeping’ ... a form of ‘preventative diplomacy’. *Plus ça change*: today, the UN peacekeeping force in the Congo is the largest in the world.

The crash theories

Hammarskjöld was flying by night in a DC6 of the Transair company, named the *Albertina*, from Elizabethville (today Lubumbashi) to Ndola in Northern Rhodesia (today Zambia), when his plane crashed. He had agreed to meet with Moïse Tshombe, the leader of the Katanga secessionists, in Ndola in a bid to avert further conflict and reach a political settlement.

So why did the plane crash? The official enquiry carried out by the Rhodesian authorities put it down to pilot error – but then, as Williams points out, there were a number of shortcomings to the enquiry, not least that it virtually ignored all the eyewitness reports made by Africans that stated that shortly before the crash there was another plane

(or planes) in close proximity, and fire in the night sky. Adding to the many conspiracy theories are the reports that the Ndola authorities closed the airport when Hammarskjöld's plane was late in arriving, and delayed searching for the crash site when it was apparent the plane had come down.

Among the theories were the possibility that a bomb had been placed on board; that the plane had been hijacked; that it had been shot down by a Katagan Fouga air force jet fighter; or even attacked by a non-military plane that dropped an improvised grenade bomb. There is also speculation that Hammarskjöld actually survived the crash (as did one other passenger found barely alive) but had been executed, shot in the head at the crash site. This theory is built upon the suspicion that some of the photographs of Hammarskjöld's corpse had been airbrushed to conceal the evidence.

Relentless research

The author's scrupulous research shines through this book's carefully argued narrative. There are also two events that add to the book's compelling argument. The first is Williams' sleuthing tracked down a certain Charles Southall who, in September 1961, was serving with the US's National Security Agency and stationed in Cyprus where there was an important ‘listening post’ for US intelligence.

Called into the office one night, Southall recalls he was one of four or five officers clustered around a loudspeaker listening to a “cockpit narrative”. That narrative, he told Williams, was of a pilot saying: “I see a transport plane coming low. All lights are on. I'm going down to make a run on it. Yes! It's the Transair DC6. It's the plane ... I've hit it. It's going down. It's crashing.”

In Southall's opinion, the communication must have been transmitted to, or intercepted by, a CIA field command post on Very High Frequency and then retransmitted on to Cyprus for relay to Washington.

Who was the pilot talking to? Southall believes it was to the CIA or with some other Katangan, Rhodesian or British base cooperating with the CIA. He adds: “If the CIA didn't order Hammarskjöld's death, at least they paid for the bullet.”

And given the CIA's known involvement in the death of the Congo's first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, nine months earlier, this theory cannot be dismissed as fanciful.

The other event was the chance discovery of a dozen papers in a collection of documents concerning the death of Chris Hani, given to the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission by the country's National Intelligence Agency. The papers apparently originated from a mysterious organisation calling itself the South African Institute for Maritime Research. Some of the papers made reference to a certain *Operation Celeste* that, while it did not go exactly to plan, outlined a plot to blow up Hammarskjöld's plane. The CIA and Britain's MI5 were also implicated.

This amazing story is just one facet of an extraordinary narrative that Williams pieces together. All the evidence she uncovers points to the Hammarskjöld plane crash being the culmination of an assassination plot – and put into the current context, with Congo peace talks breaking down at the AU in Addis Ababa in February; and, in South Africa, police countering a coup attempt against the Kinshasa government being plotted in that country, it is a story that continues to unfold. ■

Stephen Williams