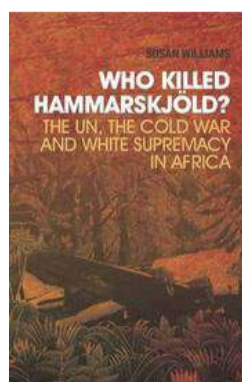


The work of historians has sometimes been likened to that of detectives, and this book certainly fits into that category. Published to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the death of the second Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) in a plane crash in what is now northern Zambia on the night of 17-18 September 1961, *Who Killed Hammarskjöld* is an exhaustive – and sometimes exhausting for the reader – enquiry into the crash, its context, the subsequent enquires into it, and the evidence that has come to light concerning it. Susan Williams has uncovered new documentation (including the medical reports on the crash victims, which she found in the Welensky Papers in Oxford, and newly discovered papers in Scandinavia). She has interviewed people who could throw light on the crash who had not been interviewed before. She is also the first to have conducted a detailed investigation of the documents uncovered by South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission relating to an alleged plot (Operation Celeste) to kill Hammarskjöld.

For anyone interested in why the crash occurred, this will prove an invaluable book. But its title repeats the

view often expressed that someone set out to kill Dag Hammarskjöld and accomplished that goal. Though the author follows every lead to try to establish who that might be, in the end she finds no smoking gun. There are numerous strange aspects relating to the crash of the plane, even if the claims that it and its passengers were riddled with bullets, or that it was forced down, or attacked by another plane, are discounted. By drawing careful attention to these strange aspects, Williams has almost certainly ensured that hers will not be the last word on informed speculation



## In Search of the Smoking Gun

Chris Saunders

### Who Killed Hammarskjöld?

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

by Susan Williams

Hurst and Company, 2011. 306 p., ISBN: 978-1-84904-158-4

as to what led to the crash and who was responsible. She concludes that Hammarskjöld's death 'was almost certainly the result of a sinister intervention' and that it is 'most unlikely' that the plane crashed as a result of pilot error, which was the finding of two of the enquiries into the crash (p. 232). But she is unable to say who carried out the 'intervention', or on whose orders they acted.

The title of the book is, then, somewhat sensational, suggesting agency where none can be proved. The subtitle, too, may mislead, in that

only those aspects of the role of the UN, the Cold War and white supremacy that relate to the crash are explored, not, say, the wider role of the UN in Central Africa from 1960 to the end of the Cold War. Williams' book, narrowly focused as it is on the crash itself and the evidence relating to it, does not draw upon the wider literature now available on what happened in the Congo (as it was then known) in the early 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Nor does it explore in any detail, for instance, Hammarskjöld's role in relation to apartheid South Africa (mainly discussed on page 197). At the beginning of the year in which he died, Hammarskjöld visited South Africa and engaged with Prime Minister H.F. Verwoerd. Though Hammarskjöld made clear his criticisms of apartheid, he achieved nothing through that engagement.<sup>2</sup>

Many at the UN, including Kofi Annan, one of Hammarskjöld's successors, have hailed Hammarskjöld as the greatest man to hold the office of UN Secretary-General, as well as being the creator of, and driving force behind, the UN mission in the Congo (known by its French initials as ONUC) and, therefore, the person who more than any other helped hold the Congo together when it might otherwise have

broken up. But the successes of the UN in the Congo in the early 1960s were limited. The UN did not prevent Patrice Lumumba from being killed in January 1961. Fifty years later, another UN mission (called MONUSCO), as large as the first, is still engaged in trying to stabilise the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Why pay so much attention to one man's death, and the possible reasons why someone may have killed him and then engaged in an elaborate cover-up, which included doctoring the photographs taken at the crash scene? Williams's enquiry allows her to write about the possible motives of a range of characters in a highly complex Cold War and decolonisation environment. Western, and especially Belgian, complicity in the killing of Lumumba is now proven. Likewise, Western multinationals certainly can be shown to have had interests in supporting Katangan secession, while the white

rulers of what was then the Central African Federation and of South Africa had reasons to want to get rid of Hammarskjöld, for his aim was essentially to ensure that the decolonisation of the Congo succeeded, and any such success posed a potential threat to white supremacist regimes in southern Africa. But there is no proof that those regimes acted to kill Hammarskjöld. That Cecil Margo, a key figure in the first enquiry into the crash, went on to engage in a number of cover-ups of plane crashes in South Africa, including that which killed Samora Machel of Mozambique (as mentioned on page 197), does not necessarily prove a cover-up in this case.

While recent research has shown that the so-called Communist threat in the Congo was virtually non-existent, and that such a threat was often invoked in Western capitalist interests,<sup>3</sup> that does not provide any firm evidence of a plot

to get rid of Hammarskjöld. Williams ends her book by calling for 'a further, transparent, public inquiry into the death of Dag Hammarskjöld...conducted possibly by the United Nations' (p. 236). In her final sentence, she links Hammarskjöld and Lumumba, and maintains that they were both 'killed because they sought to protect the integrity of the Congo and the self-determination of its people – free from the greed and interference of foreign

powers' (p. 237). Despite her labours, following clues in the most careful fashion and described here in almost two hundred and fifty pages of text, that assertion remains a speculation. Further evidence may well be uncovered in future, but it remains to be seen whether it will ever substantiate her conclusion. Readers of this book may well find its detail fascinating, but they should retain a critical sense and not confuse speculation and fact.

#### Notes

1. Especially John Kent, 2010, *America, the UN and Decolonisation. Cold War Conflict in the Congo*, London: Routledge, which is based on new research in the official archives of the United States and Britain.
2. See especially Chris Saunders, 2011, 'Dag Hammarskjöld and Apartheid South Africa', *Development Dialogue* 57, Uppsala.
3. This is the conclusion of Kent, *op.cit*

