



Book Review

Susan Williams

Who Killed Hammarskjöld? The UN, the Cold War and White Supremacy in Africa

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Reviewed by: Mark Stevenson Curry, De La Salle University, Philippines

At the end of Susan Williams' investigative historical account, *Who Killed Hammarskjöld?*, a fellow researcher explains that his own publication on the death of Patrice Lumumba was an effort to verify findings, draw disparate pieces of information into perspective and thus provide a new and more complete representation of what was well known about the event. The same can be said of Williams' new work. Though she does not provide a smoking gun to clearly answer the question of her book's title, she deftly gathers officially ignored or discredited accounts from multiple sources and locations, stretched across the span of the past 50 years, and assesses them thoroughly, at first hand as well as through processes of elimination and cross referencing. The result is a well-paced and lucid examination of one of the 20th century's enduring mysteries, and of a particular decade notorious for prominent assassinations. This book marks the 50th anniversary of Hammarskjöld's death and is a timely assessment of the available data.

The investigation begins with a glowing account of Hammarskjöld's life and work before settling down to a crisp, tight background of the Congolese tragedy amid the sweeping wind of decolonization, Belgian intransigence, and the determination of British colonial administrators and white settlers in southern Africa to maintain a buffer for their own protection and access to resources. This brings Moïse Tsimbe's hopes of secession for Katanga province from the newly independent Congo into perspective, along with the roles of mercenary soldiers, and the mining industry. Thus the intervention of the UN is precipitated with Secretary General Hammarskjöld's direct act of peacemaking by flying to central Africa. We are in more turbid waters in the immediate week preceding the crash of Hammarskjöld's airplane. Here Operation Morthor initiated by Conor Cruise O'Brien and UN soldiers on the ground in the Congo amid the turmoil of communiqués from and across the Western world and southern Africa is not an easy introduction to new readers of Africa's colonial experience. However, the narrative clears in the crash aftermath and the following chapters provide an intriguing and often moving account of the relevant events and factors.

Williams' investigative work and evidence of her scholarly acumen gather pace with more of her first person present tense narrative style. She reviews the evidence of the crash site and witness testimonies, meets living witnesses like Chibesa Kankasa in Zambia, and sifts through archives from the UN to those of colonial overlords like Roy Welensky and Lord Alport. She engages with a US listening post officer of the NSA who was in Cyprus at the time of the crash, Charles Southall, and proceeds to deliver a sharp précis of the French mercenaries in the Congo and the aerial tactics used in the Katanga conflict, all of which have some conjectural bearing on the fate of the UN flight. More recent analysis includes the possible role of a shadowy South African-UK intelligence and operations organization.

What comes across most poignantly, and which could have been more elaborated, is the witness testimonies of ordinary Zambians who claimed to have heard more than one aircraft above Ndola in the night of 17-18 September, 1961. Their reports to authorities were ignored and the crash site was only officially discovered 15 hours later. The high regard of Zambians for Hammarskjöld is a detail of great pleasure to the reader given the struggle of Africans in general to overcome intense racial prejudice and inequality. Equally importantly, the work of other scholars like Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja who seek to create a future for Africa and Africans out of knowing and owning the truth about the past is neatly underscored. The result is a master class in how to write marketable narrative history as well as a key to how scholarship in the era of peak neoliberalism can connect with the ideals and the sense of service to human dignity and emancipation that Hammarskjöld embodied.

Nevertheless, occasional issues deserve to have been given more attention or balance. For example, Williams recounts the hyperbole verging on hysteria of Welensky, the Rhodesian Federation's prime minister, but does not indicate whether his references to atrocities by UN soldiers in Katanga were justified. Likewise, the relations and communications between O'Brien and Hammarskjöld in the week before the crash could have been unfolded in more detail. Elsewhere, the text mentions the existence of photographs and other evidence that might have been more compelling than less relevant shots such as of Southall meeting King Hassan. And somewhat curiously, Williams ends the *Cha Cha Cha* chapter pondering whether the wreckage of Hammarskjöld's plane exists and might yet be examined, a question that we never return to. While she has a keen eye for disinformation in the interests of equanimity before the facts, it is clear by her use of first names – Dag for Hammarskjöld, Charles for Southall – where her sympathies and confidences lie, and this can detract from an otherwise admirable approach. A reader's quibble is the editorial oversight of 'attitude' for 'altitude' on page 177.

The problem and the engine for Williams' inquiry is that Hammarskjöld was an intensely divisive figure for a variety of interests deeply committed to keeping white, Western control of central Africa and its resources. While Williams is convinced that Hammarskjöld's DC-6 airplane was attacked above Ndola in Zambia on 17-18 September, 1961, any independent enemy or combination of the interests in mining, mercenary war and secession in the Congo, and racial or geopolitical ideology could have had the capacity and determination in central Africa to eliminate Hammarskjöld's influence. Nevertheless, what Williams makes clear is the gravity of

the loss of a man who was not only critically valuable to the complex time in which he worked, but also in commitment to ideals, principles and vision for the international community, extraordinarily ahead of it.