

Book Review

A. Susan Williams.

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

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Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Sometimes there are just too many conspiracies. When that happens, the forces of evil in the world get together and work out the details of a sinister plan. They prepare to use all means at their disposal, including lethal force when necessary, to cover their tracks. Usually it is sufficient to use their pawns in the corporate media to persuade a nervous public that the *real* problem lies with conspiracy theorists and not the conspirators. These conspiracy theorists are presented as paranoids, who are just a degree or two of delusion away from UFO abductees and Loch Loman monster sighters, not to mention people who swear they've seen Elvis in the sportswear department of their local Wal-Mart. Which local Wal-Mart? Why the one in Edmonton, Alberta or East Sandusky, Ohio. It doesn't matter. They're all the same.

I should know. I am a firm believer in the idea that, from time to time, governmental agencies, criminal organizations and small groups of extremists (separately or in concert) decide to assassinate certain people and successfully carry out their plans. I first became committed to this view on 22 November 1963. Although unaware of their identity, I instinctively knew that "they" had executed John F. Kennedy. Today, I still have no idea which particular villains killed him. The list of suspects is impossibly long. It includes business executives—largely, though not exclusively, Texan oil millionaires—who were disturbed by Kennedy's modest attempts to control prices in major US industries, rogue CIA agents in company with Cuban exiles who had not forgiven him for failing to provide air strikes in support of the absurd adventure in the Bay of Pigs, Southern racists angry at his belated backing of local civil rights leaders and ubiquitous "outside agitators," FBI agents carrying out the orders or the intimations of Kennedy-hater and Bureau Director J. Edgar Hoover, gangsters upset with JFK's choice of mistresses (they don't like to share), or military officials who had concluded that he was having unwarranted second thoughts about US intervention in Vietnam. Some people (I'm not one of them) even put future presidents Johnson, Nixon and the elder Bush on the list. My conviction that Lee Harvey Oswald was a "patsy" was confirmed, by the way, in 1965, when I met his mother. I looked her squarely in the face and asked her calmly but firmly whether her son had assassinated the president. She looked me squarely in the face and calmly but firmly replied: "No, Lee didn't do it." Why should she lie?

Less than five years later, I was working late in my office in the Department of Political Science at the University of Hawai'i, when a friend who was a CIA operative (honest!) showed up at my door. He was carrying a bottle of Canadian whisky. Instinctively I reached into my cupboard for two glasses and only when he started to pour did I notice that tears were streaming down his cheeks. His visit was not a friendly gesture toward an amiable foreign visitor. He had come to lament the execution of Robert F. Kennedy earlier that evening. In time, I concluded that the shooter in this case was indeed a young man named Sirhan Sirhan. I remain unconvinced that he acted alone.

The slaying of Dr. Martin Luther King also disturbs me. Most people, when reflecting on such killings think that it would be difficult to organize a group of people, direct them toward a murderous end and successfully cover it up. I, in the alternative, think that the idea that a lone gunman would embark on such a venture without symbolic and material assistance is even more unlikely.

I find it odd that people are willing to believe almost anything conspiratorial in spy novels, films or television dramas, but they won't risk believing that such things happen in "real life." It doesn't have to be the homicide of a celebrity; people also don't really want to know much about price-fixing, interest rate manipulation or the intricacies of toxic waste management either. It's fine to complain in general terms about the fact that all gas stations raise their prices at precisely the same time by precisely the same amount, but to think seriously about how that happens and how to change it is a conversation ender. We'd rather shrug and murmur words of resignation, for to do more can make our brains hurt.

Which brings me to Dag Hammarskjöld. I remember precisely where I was on May 2, 1960, when the convicted rapist Caryl Chessman was executed in the gas chamber at San Quentin Prison in California. For no obvious reason, his death started me on a life-long campaign against capital punishment. I also recall where I was when I heard the news about JFK and, for that matter, the explosion of the Challenger on January 28, 1986. I don't recall hearing about Hammarskjöld's death, though I know it was on my sixteenth birthday. To tell the truth, I didn't know very much about events in the Congo other than that I felt myself to be vaguely sympathetic to Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, and disturbed when he was viciously murdered by nefarious forces with at least the tacit agreement of several foreign governments. Eventually, I would learn more.

The fact is, however, that I didn't really pay much attention to Dag Hammarskjöld's death until about three years later, and even then it wasn't politics that led me to him. Instead, I read his extraordinary book, *Markings*, which was more of a religious confession than a diary or book of memoirs of the sort written by politicians, career civil servants and diplomats—usually for the self-serving purpose of justifying morally ambiguous careers.

I was at that time of life when reading the personal revelations of exceptional people was a sort of self-education in the nature of life and what it requires of us. I had unintentionally, and only as a by-product of many re-readings, committed large parts of Camus' *Notebooks* to memory. There were other inspiring and sometimes tragic figures, and I was drawn to Hammarskjöld in the same way and for the same reason. His book, however, was not easily understood or assimilated, so I came to no conclusions about him and, in fact, maintain a studied uncertainty about him to this day. Perhaps he was a little too much of a mystic for me to internalize properly. Hammarskjöld's sense of divine destiny, his anticipation of martyrdom and his constant and monumental efforts to suppress his ego in order to become an instrument of God struck me as odd. For W. H. Auden, who wrote the "Foreword" to my personal copy of *Markings*, Hammarskjöld displayed "a kind of megalomania ... because humility and demonic pride speak the same language."

It was, therefore, only much later, when a growing interest in neocolonialism in Africa led me to inquire into the circumstances of Dag Hammarskjöld's death, that the larger political picture began to replace my somewhat desultory interest in the internal workings of the man. Incidentally, for anyone unaware of the reasons why a successful Swedish bureaucrat who had reached the apex of his career as the second Secretary-General of the United Nations should perish in the very "darkest" part of Africa, a quick sketch and time-line should offer sufficient information for my purposes here.

- June 23, 1960: Patrice Lumumba is elected Prime Minister of the first Congolese government;
- June 24: Joseph Kasavubu is elected President and Head of State;
- June 30: the colony formerly known as the Belgian Congo declares its independence;
- July 9: Belgium begins military intervention on the pretext of protecting Belgian citizens and property;
- July 11: the resource-rich Katanga province, supported by Western European governments and private mining interests secedes from the newly independent country.

When Belgian forces reentered the Congo, the UN was asked to intervene. When aid was not forthcoming in a timely manner, Prime Minister Lumumba requested assistance from the United States, but was turned down flatly in the last year of the Eisenhower-Nixon administration. He then approached the USSR which happily agreed to help. This led to the Cold War narrative fully subsuming an instance of local neocolonialism.

- August 16, 1960: Lumumba calls for withdrawal of all White troops;
- August 31: Belgium withdraws its forces;
- September 5: Lumumba and Kasavubu split, and Kasavubu replaces Lumumba with Joseph Ileo;
- September 19: Attempts at a reconciliation between Lumumba and Kasavubu fail;
- October 10: Lumumba is put under "house arrest" in Leopoldville by the Congolese Army, but is afforded UN protection;
- November 27: Lumumba flees and tries to return to his supporters in Stanleyville;
- December 1: Lumumba is "arrested" by the Army and tortured;
- January 17, 1961: Lumumba and two supporters are killed with the implicit approval of the USA, Belgium and other European states; it is three days before John F. Kennedy's first official day in office.

In August, 1961, UN troops were finally dispatched to put an end to Katanga's secession and, in September, Hammarskjöld attempted to meet with Moïse Tshombe, the leader of the breakaway state, in order to negotiate a ceasefire. Dag Hammarskjöld died in a plane wreck before his mission had properly begun. The event was reported as a tragic misadventure at the time, and it seemed to outsiders to be nothing more. Two separate formal inquiries by the white racist Government of Northern Rhodesia (later Zambia) where the crash occurred came to the same conclusion: the misfortune was the result of pilot error. A later investigation commissioned by Sweden in 1993 confirmed the pilot error theory. Only a 1962 UN study raised any suspicion whatever, but it also reckoned that pilot error was most likely to blame, though it took care not to rule out other causes.

Now, forty years later, Susan Williams has revisited the incident. A Senior Research Fellow at the University of London's Institute of Commonwealth Studies, she has reexamined the evidence as it was available at the time, and brought to bear research techniques that were unavailable to the initial investigators—even if they had been in a mood to consider them. Her reexamination of the documentary and physical evidence—both previously produced and previously concealed—have led her to a new conclusion. Although it cannot be said exactly how the crash came about, it is all but certain that Dag Hammarskjöld was assassinated.

Williams was particularly interested in the papers of Sir Roy Welensky. He was the colonial prime minister of the federation of Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland from 1957 to 1963. He was an active supporter of Katanga independence and maintained a close, if informal, relationship with Katanga's president, Moise Tshombe. He had facilitated further external support from apartheid South Africa and the dictatorship of António de Oliveira Salazar of Portugal, which had a complementary interest in the area with its own colonies of Angola and Mozambique.

The Welensky papers convinced Williams that a tremendous amount of evidence had been concealed, censored and suppressed covered up, and much of the rest had been falsified. Also coming to light was the fact that, while the other passengers and crew of the airplane were incinerated, Hammarskjöld's body was whole and intact except for a round hole in his forehead that had been airbrushed out before official photos were released. A host of other "anomalies" are reported including the dismissal of the words of the only crash survivor (a Hammarskjöld bodyguard who died a few days after the "accident" and reported events wholly inconsistent with the official reports). Particularly strange is the fact, although that the plane went down as it was about to land at Ndola airport and was found just eight miles away on its scheduled flight path, the airport was almost immediately closed, no search was begun for four hours and the wreckage was not discovered for fifteen hours, despite the fact that eye-witnesses report seeing paramilitary units at the crash site shortly after the plane went down.

If, as seems clear, the UN Secretary-General was murdered, the relevant questions are the same as those lingering around the killing of John Kennedy just two years later: why, and by whom?

The list of suspects with plausible motives and means for sabotaging Hammarskjöld's mission is certainly as long as that for murdering John Kennedy. It includes the Government of the Congo, any number of foreign governments, various intelligence organizations, assorted mining companies, internal enemies of Lumumba and partisans of Moise Tshombe, and the ever-available "rogue" members of the CIA. That they feared that Hammarskjöld might bring matters to a head, expose the true story of Patrice Lumumba's fate at the hands of Western-backed Army operatives, and do effectively what the larger United Nations had failed to do, namely bring an end to the carnage and help restore a free and independent Congo are certainly plausible conjectures. Hammarskjöld was a partisan, not of Lumumba and certainly not of the Soviet Union, but of national self-determination rather than brutal neocolonialism and residual European imperialism. Whatever he planned to do and whatever he might have accomplished would not be good news for anyone wishing to halt the trend toward African independence.

Events in the Congo came at an especially important time in African history. In 1957, the former Gold Coast became the independent African country of Ghana under the exhilarating leadership of Kwame Nkrumah. It was followed by the formal liberation of many former colonies, especially those of Britain and France. More than a nominally independent Africa raised the prospect of immense material losses for foreign investors and local white elites. As well, hysterical concerns about Soviet world domination excused almost any act of desperation to salvage the African situation and stem the communist tide. It should go without saying, then, that the deft assassination of an eccentric Swedish diplomat be a small price to pay if it would facilitate neocolonial control of one of Africa's most important prizes.

A final question remains. Why bring any of this up now? The pertinent personalities are long since dead. The Congo, Belgium and other parties to the disputes have long since moved on. Although Russia continues to be worrisome to many Western leaders, the "Soviet menace" is no longer apt to frighten children in their beds. So, what purpose can possibly be served, even if some distinguished panel of experts or an international judicial inquiry were able to exhume the truth?

One answer is that the truth is worth pursuing regardless of the topic. It shall, as someone once said with confidence, "set you free." Another is that the same sorts of events have occurred many times since and targeted assassinations of foreign nationals are everyday current events. (Iranian scientists seem to be the *cible de jour*.) By opening up the past and drawing parallels to the present, we may be able to contextualize contemporary debates about formal "kill-lists" generated by well-respected governments, rogue states and terrorist groups alike. There may be a risk insofar as illuminating past bad behaviour may encourage a blasé acceptance of continued bad acts, but I would like to believe that we have not become so intimidated by the national security state or made so hard-hearted by compounded atrocities that we can look with indifference upon such fundamental violations of human ethics. And, not to make light of it, we may regain an interest in some of the more heinous political murders of our era, even if it shows that the conspiracy theorists were right all along.

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