

Williams, Susan: *Who Killed Hammarskjöld? The UN, the Cold War, and White Supremacy in Africa*. London: Hurst & Co. 2012. ISBN: 978-1-84904-158-4; 306 S.

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Judging from the title of the book, you might as well think that this is just another conspiracy theory about the mysterious death of Dag Hammarskjöld, the then Secretary-General of the United Nations, in the dark nights of 17 and 18 September 1961 in the Cold War trouble spot, the Congo. The circumstances of his death – officially declared as pilot error – are still a matter of speculations. Typically Western and settler-colonial interests, in alliance with big mining companies operating in the region, a CIA, MI6 and South African intelligence operation are at the forefront of suspicion.¹ But this book is written by Susan Williams, currently a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies at the University of London, and known for her expertise in the history of decolonization and not conspiracy theories.

To start with the end, Susan Williams does not answer the so sensational question in the title: 'Who killed Dag Hammarskjöld?', but she concludes that „it is most unlikely that the Albertina crashed as a result of pilot error, as claimed by the Rhodesian public inquiry of 1961-62 and by a private inquiry for the Swedish government in 1993“ (p. 232), demanding for a „further, transparent, public inquiry into the death of Dag Hammarskjöld“ (p. 236).²

Hammarskjöld's plane, on the way to peace talks with the leader Moïse Tshombe of the secessionist region of Katanga in Ndola, never reached its destination, but crashed only 8 miles from the airport.

In contrast to his predecessor Trygve Lie, Hammarskjöld was known for his support of the small and mainly newly independent nations in world affairs. During his term the UN changed greatly in number and composition of its member states. Until 1960 the number of member states almost doubled, particularly new states from Asia and Africa joined the organization and changed the major-

ity in the General Assembly. Thereby, challenging the old patterns of power constellations. Furthermore, the Congo initiative constituted a turning point in the history of the UN by actively engaging the organization in the process of decolonization with a military intervention. (p. 35)

After Congo's independence in June 1960 from the Belgian empire, only a month later the region of Katanga broke away and functioned as nearly independent state until reintegration in January 1963. Not only was the Katanga secession the central issue in the Congo crisis, but it was at the same time controlled and patronized with political support, arms and money by Belgian industrialists. The Belgian Congo with the rich reserves of copper, diamond, gold, uranium and cobalt was one of the most valuable colonies in Africa.³

One of the strengths of this book is that Susan Williams does not place the whole story in a common Cold War, U.S.- Soviet rivalry framework, but in an intense competition of most notably economic interests and ideological objectives, mainly the preservation of white supremacy in Southern Africa.

The first third of the book is dedicated to developments in the Congo (chap. 2) and the United Nations Organization mission in the Congo (ONUC) arriving and operating in the Congo (chap. 3-4), leading to the proposition of peace talks. The next four chapters deal with the events at the airport in the night of the plane crash (chap. 5-6) and the subsequent inquiries of the Rhodesian government (chap. 7) and the UN (chap. 8). The second half of the book is mainly a collection of actors who were or seemed to be involved in the Congo business, some of the accounts more or less speculative, for instance the involvement of the

¹ Henning Melber, Dag Hammarskjöld, the United States and Africa, in: *Review of African Political Economy*, 39 (2012) 131, p. 151-159, here p. 157.

² In fact a new international commission of inquiry into Hammarskjöld's death was set up in July 2012. New inquiry set up into death of UN secretary general Dag Hammarskjöld, *The Guardian* (London), 18 July 2012 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jul/18/inquiry-death-un-dag-hammarskjold-2>

³ David N. Gibbs, Dag Hammarskjöld, the United Nations, and the Congo Crisis of 1960-1: a Reinterpretation, in: *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 31(1993) 1, p. 163-174, here p. 165.

South African Institute of Maritime Research (SAIMR), CIA, MI5 and MI6.

Throughout the book Susan Williams bases the story on oral testimony, personal recollections of eyewitnesses and an extensive archival research, some of them opened for the first time. But, nonetheless, given the nature of such a topic, the line between assumptions and facts is rather thin and Susan Williams not always succeeds in this challenging tightrope walk between a 'historical detective' story (p.xi) and mere speculation.

Likewise, the subtitle – the UN, the Cold War and White Supremacy – is rather misleading, as they constitute only implicit issues in the whole story. Instead she concentrates very much on the events surrounding the tragic accident, pointing to contradictions in the inquiries and findings which challenge the hitherto existing narrative. The great numbers of actors - if involved or only presumably involved - and anecdotes makes the whole story at some points too imprecise and misses the embedding in wider historical events.

For sure one can criticize Susan Williams for concentrating on this single event; this is mainly her personal interest. But it becomes evident that there are still many stories untold in the history of decolonization, e.g. the role of multinational companies and their attempt to secure their economic interests and preeminence in the decolonization process, the role of transnational mercenary networks fighting to maintain white supremacy, the role of the UN in the process of decolonization. And with more and more archives being opened to the public, hopefully, some of these stories will be told in the near future. Despite the aforementioned shortcomings, Susanne Williams wrote an exciting historical detective story about one of the mysteries in twentieth century history; suitable not only for historians but everyone interested in decolonization and African affairs.

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