The Albertina enigma
A mystery examined

Who killed Hammarskjöld?

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Who killed Hammarskjöld? The UK, the Cold War, and White Supremacy in Africa
By Susan Williams

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Hammarkskjöld, 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 Peace in Peace (co-written with Nader MousaviTehrani), we learn that Hammarskjöld institutionalised a practice called ‘peacekeeping’ a form of preventative diplomacy’. Plus ça change, today the UN peacekeeping force is the Congo is the largest in the world.

The crash theories
Hammarkskjöld was flying by night in a DC6 of the Transair company, named the Albertina, from Elizabethville in the east to Ndola. As the plane was flying at low altitude, he was hit 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 the crash theories… a form of ‘preventative diplomacy’. Plus ça change, today, the UN peacekeeping force is the Congo is the largest in the world.

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’s Charter’s objectives.

For Hammarkskjöld, the UN’s primary responsibility was to do everything within its means to prevent successive generations from the ravages of war. Quoted in Who killed Hammarskjöld was loved by the vast majority of Africans, who recognised his heroic commitment to their liberty and self-determination.

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 years 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 African 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 by that name, was established by the CIA to blow up Hammarkskjöld’s plane. The CIA and Retain’s MI6 also knew about it.

This amazing story is just one facet of an extraordinary narrative that Williams pieces together. She shows how when she uncovers points to the Hammarkskjöld plane crash Southall recalls his 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.”

Stephen Williams