

# The Price of Uranium: the Congo and Hammarskjöld

By Paul Kelly

Review of *Who Killed Hammarskjöld? The UN, The Cold War and White Supremacy in Africa*, by Susan Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012)

September 19, 1961, newspapers around the world ran with headline news of the untimely death of Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary-General of the United Nations, in an airplane crash at Ndola, in what was then Northern Rhodesia (now the Republic of Zambia). Dr. Susan Williams, a senior research fellow at the University of London's Institute of Commonwealth Studies, who has written widely on Africa, turns her attention to the circumstances surrounding the crash and the political environment in central Africa at that time.

The assassination of President Lumumba, in January 1961, had increased the prospect of civil war in the newly independent Congo. In response the Security Council passed resolution 161 (1961), calling for the withdrawal of all foreign military personnel from the Congo. Belgium, the former colonial power in the Congo, complied with the resolution; however, secessionist Katanga province was able to replace the Belgian "advisors" with mercenaries from Rhodesia, South Africa, Britain, and France. The Katanga secession was financed by the mining company Union Minière which held the leases on the very profitable copper, uranium, cobalt, and diamond mines in the province. The company gave Katanga an advance of approximately \$25 million, and immediately began paying taxes due to the central government to Katanga, to the tune of \$42 million annually or about 70 percent of the budget.

Williams shows that it was not just control of the fabulous wealth of Katanga that was at stake; there was also vehement opposition to majority rule in the Central African Federation (comprised of Southern Rhodesia, Nyasaland, and Northern Rhodesia, which borders Katanga). Sir Roy Welensky, Prime Minister of the Federation, had hoped to integrate a minority-ruled Katanga into the Federation. When it became obvious that would not happen, he sought, along with the mining interests in the province, to have a nominally independent puppet-state of Katanga act as a buffer between majority-ruled Africa and his own, minority-ruled Federation.

In the midst of all this, Hammarskjöld hoped to be able to convince Tshombe to establish a stable ceasefire, to expel all of the mercenaries in his employ, and to enter negotiations with a view to reuniting the Congo, as per resolution 161. To this end, on September 17 Hammarskjöld and his entourage left Léopoldville (now Kinshasa) for Ndola to meet with Moïse Tshombe, the self-declared President of Katanga.

The Secretary-General was flown to Ndola by a very experienced crew who took the precautions of flying a circuitous route and maintaining radio silence so as not to invite attack by Katanga's fighter jet. It was a clear and calm moonlight night in Ndola. At ten minutes passed the plane radioed that it was "overhead Ndola." Approximately five minutes later it crashed some eight miles from the airport and was still burning when it was eventually located at three in the afternoon.

Williams details the egregious shortcomings of the Rhodesian authorities, including their failure to begin a search at first light and shortcomings of the subsequent investigation into the cause of the crash. The Rhodesian Department of Civil Aviation dismissed testimony that would have indicated foul play and found instead that the crash was due to "pilot error." A later UN inquiry, which interviewed more witnesses, returned an "open verdict," meaning that foul play could not be ruled out.

Although unable to give a definitive answer to the question posed in the book's title, Williams does explicate the relationship between foreign powers, mining companies, and the region. The United States wanted to ensure continued access to the Katanga uranium being mined by Union Minière and also to deny this uranium to the Soviet Union. In Britain a group of Tory Members of Parliament who had a financial interest in the region through links to Union Minière, were opposed to Prime Minister Macmillan's decolonization policy. South Africa was desperate to halt decolonization north of its borders and was linked to the

region through the diamond trade. Members of the extreme right French Organisation de l'armée secrète (O.A.S.) were mercenaries in Katanga and had a pathological hatred of the UN and decolonization. Finally, Belgium, the former colonial power, had both a political and economic stake in the region.

All of these powers had economic and political reasons to oppose the establishment of a truly independent Congo, which was Hammarskjöld's goal—a Congo whose resources would be exploited for the benefit of the Congolese themselves. The secession of the province of Katanga ensured the continued exploitation of mineral wealth for the benefit of Western countries and companies. The province was reunited with the rest of the Congo in 1962, and the CIA-sponsored coup led by Mobutu in 1965 ensured that the West maintained its control of Katanga's natural resources.

There is a common theme in Congolese history: the same exploitative impulse which defined King Léopold's Congo, carried on in spite of independence, and has continued unbroken to this day. The biggest losers throughout have been the Congolese people; the biggest winners, the multinational mining companies.

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