

Dag Hammarskjöld's place in history

By John Bechtel
Freelance Writer

Peder Mikaelsson was knighted in 1610 for providing five fully-armed men to fight for King Sigismund III Vasa, who was also the King of Poland at the same time. To be more precise, not one to take chances on outcomes, Peder fought on both sides of the conflict later called the War Against Sigismund (a war to remove a king from office).

[Readers may recognize the Sigismund name from an SP feature article in the Fall of 2018 entitled "THE DELUGE" (1655-1660)—When Sweden overwhelmed Poland." You can read that article here: <https://tinyurl.com/y7aljdyk>.]

Peder Mikaelsson was granted a couple manors and given the name of Hammarskiöld (with several variations in spelling since then). You might think of this in a modern context as being gifted with some substantial acreage and two small rural villages as well as the legal right to the occupants' labor. It was a start. There were always more wars to expand one's real estate.

As in most parts of Europe, nobles initially were ordinary soldiers who were skilled enough, or lucky enough, to return alive from combat in service to a chieftain. There were no standing armies, and the kings rarely had cash with which to pay their soldiers.

Compensation for service was land or treasure seized from others, the losers in the skirmishes or wars. During the medieval era, soldiers quickly realized that an estate was more valuable if it came with laborers, those who would perform the manual labor on the farms.

Farm laborers worked outside under the hot sun and became deeply tanned. In the agricultural American South, for instance, such lower-caste workers were pejoratively referred to as "red necks."

In Old Europe as well as the developing Americas, to distinguish themselves from such commoners, members of the nobility and their families took great pains to shield themselves from the sun, their pale complexions and dark veins marking them as "blue bloods" or aristocrats. Nobles were not to perform manual labor. That is what serfs (or servants) were for.

Wikipedia lists 45 noteworthy members of the Hammarskjöld noble family since then, and no less than twelve of them were soldiers or officers, and eleven more have been involved in Swedish government, including one Prime Minister. Other occupations were judge, architect, lawyer, physician, banker, and engineer. In the modern industrial age, members of the nobility are frequently found among the diplomatic services, graduates of the best schools, and distinguished by their refined manners and impeccable social skills. They are generally expected to seek high office or prominent positions where their family connections will prove most useful. In some cases, restrictions are placed on whom they are permitted to marry, at the very least, someone from a comparable level of society.

Hjalmar Hammarskjöld

Hjalmar Hammarskjöld, Dag's father, was born in 1862, became a serious student and scholar, and, by 1891, was a professor at Uppsala University, the oldest and most prestigious in Sweden. He acquired a reputation as an expert in international law, and by 1904, became a member of the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague. The next year, in 1905, Norway achieved its independence from Sweden, and his son Dag was born.



PHOTO: COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG

Hjalmar Hammarskjöld, Sweden's Prime Minister from 1914-1917.

Dag considered Uppsala Castle his childhood home while his father was Governor of Uppsala County. Hjalmar was appointed ambassador to Copenhagen. From 1914 to 1917, at the peak of WWI, he served as Prime Minister of Sweden. The following year, 1918, he was selected to be a lifetime member of the prestigious Swedish Academy (more about that below). He was the Chairman of the Nobel Foundation from 1929 to 1947.

The Hammarskjölds and the Nobel Foundation

Alfred Nobel was born in 1833, and became a chemist and inventor and armaments manufacturer, eventually holding 355 patents, including the most valuable, for dynamite. In 1896, he died of a stroke, but in his last will he made provision for 94% of all of his assets to be used to award five prizes each year in the fields of chemistry, physics, literature, medicine/physiology, and peace. A sixth one was added later, for economics. Four different organizations would nominate laureates; three Swedish organizations and one Norwegian, as follows:

- *Nobel Assembly at the Karolinska Institute (Swedish): Physiology or Medicine*
- *Swedish Academy: Literature*
- *Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences: Chemistry, Physics*
- *Norwegian Nobel Committee: Peace*



PHOTO: RICARDO FEINSTEIN

Uppsala Castle, Dag's childhood home during the time his father Hjalmar was Governor of Uppsala County.

If it seems odd that one of the nominating committees was Norwegian, for a mainly Swedish organization, bear in mind that it took almost five years for the Nobel Foundation, the investment and administrative arm of the Nobel legacy, to be established on June 29, 1900. At that time, Norway was still a part of Sweden. Five years later, in 1905, the union of Norway and Sweden was dissolved, and the awarding of the Nobel prizes was split between the two countries, with Norway responsible for the Nobel Peace Prize, and Swedish organizations responsible for all the others.

The Nobel Foundation does not participate in any way with the selection of the laureates, but it handles almost everything else. It has a Board of Directors of five persons. One of those five serves as Chairman of the Board, appointed by the King in Council (the King's cabinet). The other four board members are chosen by the trustees of the awarding organizations listed above. The board's first duty is to select an Executive Director from among themselves.

There have been thirteen Chairmen of the Nobel Foundation's board since its inception in 1900. The fourth was Hjalmar Hammarskjöld, Prime Minister of Sweden from 1914-1917, and Dag's father. The following year, 1918, Hjalmar was elected to the Swedish Academy, one of only 18 people selected for life at this post, with the responsibility of choosing laureates for the Nobel Prize in Literature. The Hammarskjöld family functioned at the highest levels of Swedish society.

There have been eight Executive Directors of the Nobel Foundation since its inception. Each of these was chosen by the board members at the time, from among themselves. One member was Chairman of the board, and another was Executive Director. As with the post of Chairman, the Executive Directors were drawn from among aristo polloi of Swedish society. From 1946-1948, Sven Hammarskiöld served as Executive Director at the same time that Hjalmar Hammarskjöld was Chairman of the Board.

Even though special legal rights
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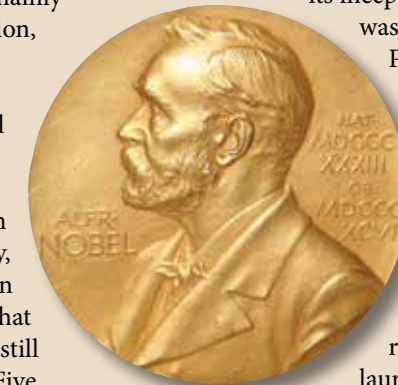


PHOTO: COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG

Dag Hammarskjöld in front of the United Nations building in NYC, 1953.

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for the nobility ended in 2003, there endured a social nobility by birth to affluent families and the advantages that such wealth makes possible, such as attending the best schools both at home and abroad, and the network of future contacts while there that often opened exceptional doors of career opportunity and prospective honors. The Hammarskjölds were a family blessed with such good fortune. Hjalmar's son Dag was his youngest of four children. Educated at Uppsala University, Dag worked at a variety of government posts, until, in 1951, he led the Swedish delegation to the U.N. General Assembly, and the following year became the chair of that delegation.

Six years after Hjalmar Hammarskjöld retired as Chairman of the Nobel Foundation, his son Dag, at 47 years of age, was appointed as the second Secretary-General of the United Nations, in the spring of 1953. He was the youngest in that position in the history of the United Nations, before or since. Six months later, on October 12, 1953, Hjalmar died, and the next year Dag was elected to replace his father as chair of the prestigious Swedish Academy. Young, bright, already on an accelerated career track, and full of enthusiasm to make the world a better place, life must have seemed near perfect for Hammarskjöld.

Eight years later, Dag himself was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Unfortunately, he wasn't alive to accept it.

April Fools' Day 1953

The United Nations was founded in 1945, at the end of World War II, by 51 countries ostensibly committed to promoting peaceful relationships between nations. In 74 years of existence, it has had only eight Secretaries-General, each of whom was the face of the organization to the world community.

The U.N.'s first session was convened in San Francisco, not New York City, in 1945, with Alger Hiss as the Acting (temporary) Secretary-General.

The first elected Secretary-General was Trygve Lie from Norway. The Nazis



PHOTO: EN.WIKIPEDIA.ORG

Overlooking the East River, the United Nations building dominates New York City's skyline. It has served as the official headquarters of the United Nations since its completion in 1952.



PHOTO: RIN.RU

On February 1, 1945, Norway's Trygve Lie was the first elected Secretary-General of the U.N. He resigned in 1952.

occupied Norway during World War II, and Trygve Lie had served as Foreign Minister for the Norwegian government in exile in London. An early avowed socialist, Lie's political career began when Lenin, whom he met on a visit to Moscow, was the uncontested leader of the Bolshevik movement.

When Lenin died in 1924, the internal Soviet power struggle between Joseph Stalin (politician) and Leon Trotsky (commander of the Red Army and the Cheka, the first Soviet secret police organization) heated up. Stalin won that struggle, and by 1929, Trotsky was expelled from the Soviet Union

and found refuge, first in France, and then in Norway on Lie's invitation in 1935. Under political pressure from the Soviet Union, Trotsky was expelled from Norway the next year, and he found his last refuge in Mexico, where he was murdered by a Soviet agent in 1940.

In 1950, Lie was voted into a second term at the U.N. by a vote of 46-5, over the strenuous objections of Joseph Stalin. About that time also, in the U.S., Alger Hiss was being tried as a spy for the Soviet Union during the years when the U.N. was being established. Hiss went to Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary.

When it became known that Abraham Feller, who had been General Counsel to the Legal Department of the Secretariat in 1945, was a close friend of Alger Hiss, Feller jumped to his death from a window of his New York City apartment in November 1952.

Trygve Lie resigned from his post as Secretary-General that same month.

When Lie resigned in November 1952, the superpowers wanted a neutral Secretary-General. Joseph Stalin died on March 5, 1953, and the next month the U.N. settled on non-controversial Dag Hammarskjöld, who biographer Emery Kelèn described as "a brilliant economist, an unobtrusive technician, and an aristo-bureaucrat." The Soviet representative called him "harmless"

and the U.S. State Department concluded that Dag Hammarskjöld "may be as good as we can get."

When Dag got the first phone call informing him of his selection on April 1, 1953, he thought it was an April Fools' Day prank. He set about organizing his staff of 4,000, and emphasizing his "common touch" by eliminating his private elevator, shaking hands with everyone, and eating in the cafeteria. Five years later he began a second term, having been unanimously reelected.

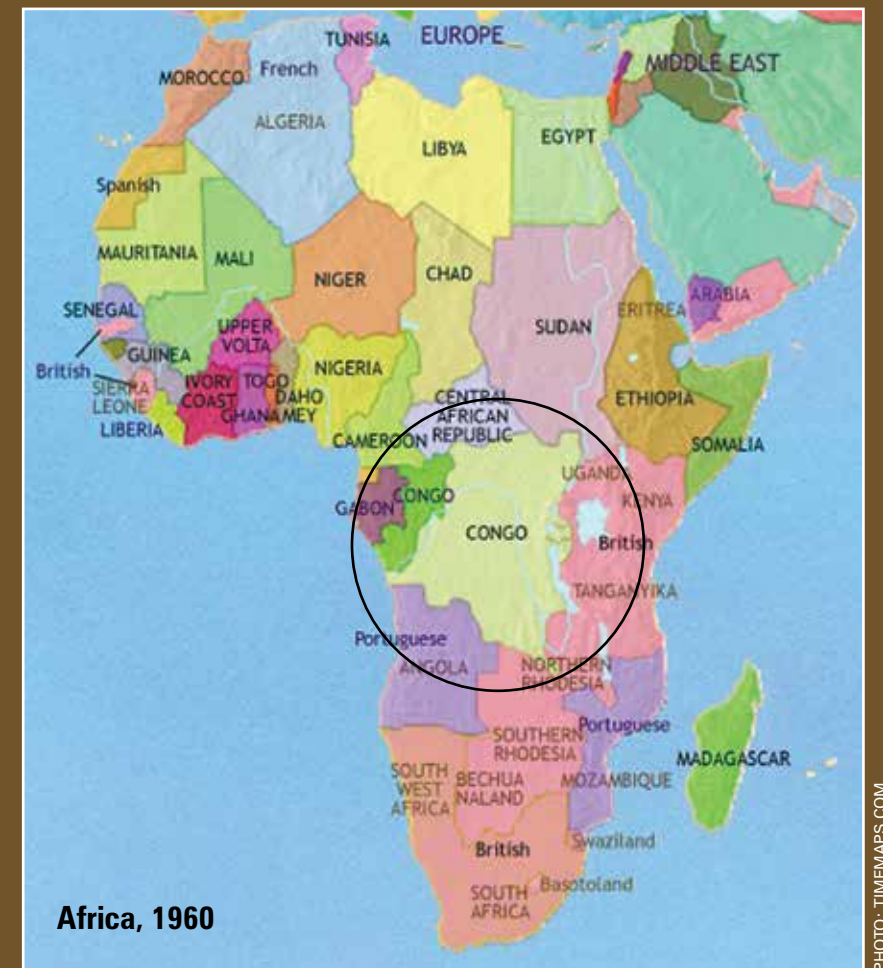
Like Trygve Lie, Dag Hammarskjöld was not destined to complete his second term. Two years into it, he was thrust into the Belgian Congo crisis, the front lines of what we might now call the decolonization of Africa. Dag had already flown into the Congo four times in attempts to defuse the crisis, and the Soviet Union had denounced his decision to send a U.N. peacekeeping force there, demanding Dag's resignation. The world was locked in a battle of two superpowers, who fought their battles by proxy, often in remote places, usually where vital resources were at stake. Like the Congo, for example.

Under the Ndola Slave Tree

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is the second-largest country in Africa (after Algeria), and it is the 11th largest in the world, and with almost 80 million people, it has more French-speaking people than France. Over the years, this country has had many names, including Zaire. In most cases we will refer to it as simply Congo. One-third of the country lies north of the equator and two thirds south of it. Its central basin is huge, hot, and tropically humid.

As you can see from the maps, D.R. Congo has changed size and shapes over the years, but it has always geographically dominated central Africa. In the center of its border with Zambia you will find the town of Ndola, founded in 1904, with the opening of a copper mine nearby. Standing near the center of this town

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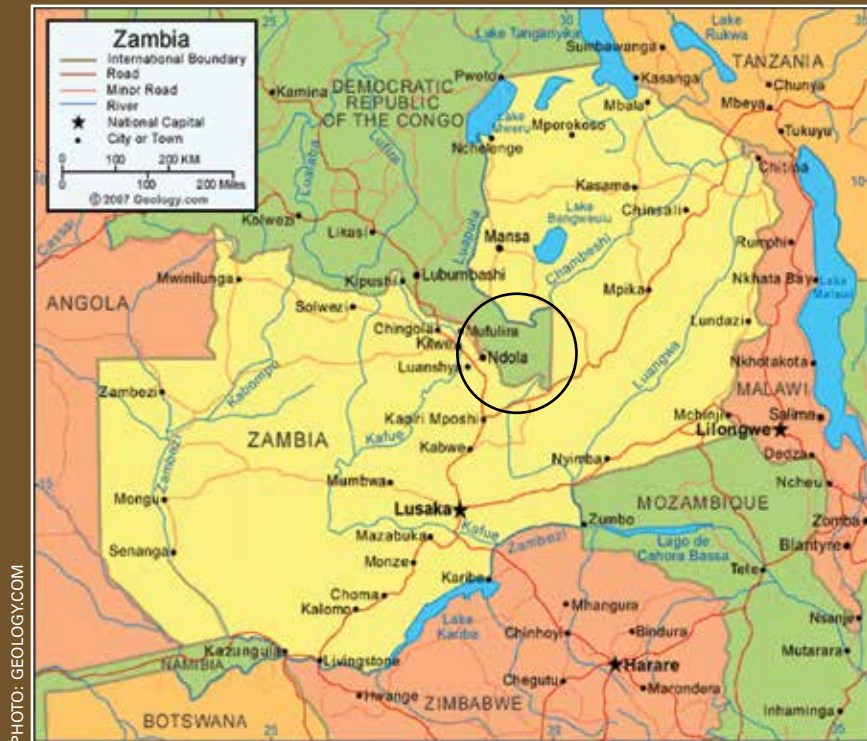


Africa, 1960

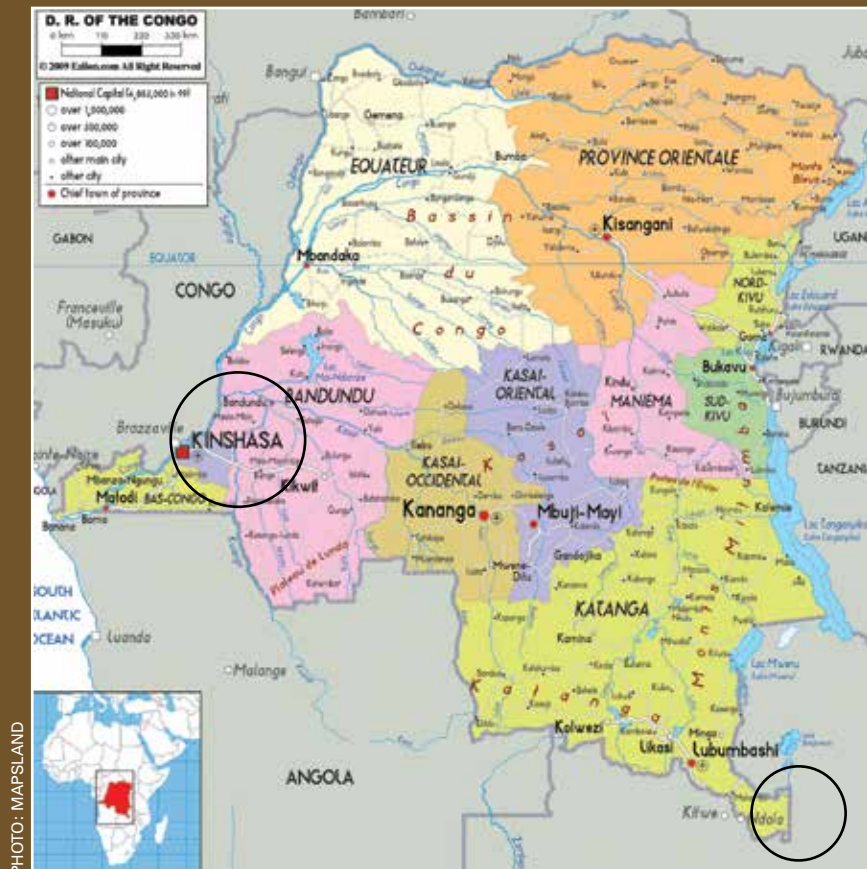
PHOTO: TIME.MAPS.COM



PHOTO: GIZMODO.COM



Zambia map highlighting the city of Ndola, on the border with the Congo, home of the now-fallen Slave Tree, where slave traders sold slaves to the Mambundu from Angola.



The Democratic Republic of the Congo map shows the provinces. Today there are twenty-five provinces, including Kinshasa, the capital city of the country.

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Ndola Slave Tree

is the Ndola Slave Tree, for it was under the shade of this tree that tribal slave traders such as the Chipembere, Mwalabu, and Chiwala sold slaves to the Mambundu from Angola. These traders crisscrossed central and southern Africa, transporting their slaves to the “Swahili coast” consisting of the littoral regions of what is today Kenya, Tanzania, and northern Mozambique on the east coast of Africa.



Tippu Tip, Swahili-Zanzibari slave trader, who led many trading expeditions into Central Africa by constructing profitable trading posts that reached deep into the region. By 1895, he had acquired seven ‘shambas’ [plantations] and 10,000 slaves. He met and helped several famous western explorers of the African continent, including David Livingstone and Henry Morton Stanley. He claimed the Eastern Congo for himself and for the Sultan of Zanzibar; and was later made governor of the Stanley Falls District in the Congo Free State.



Sketch of the memorable meeting in 1871, between Henry Morton Stanley and Dr. David Livingstone in a remote village in what is now Tanzania.

Elika M’bokolo, wrote in *Le Monde diplomatique* in 1998: “**The African continent was bled of its human resources via all possible routes. Across the Sahara, through the Red Sea, from the Indian Ocean ports and across the Atlantic. At least ten centuries of slavery for the benefit of the Muslim countries (from the ninth to the nineteenth).**” He continues: “**Four million slaves exported via the Red Sea, another four million through the Swahili ports of the Indian Ocean, perhaps as many as nine million along the trans-Saharan caravan route, and eleven to twenty million (depending on the author) across the Atlantic Ocean.**”

Slavery was a very old story in the Congo Basin. But some of the worst happened just before it all ended.

The legacy of Leopold II

European exploration of the Congo was first carried out by American Henry Morton Stanley, sponsored by King Leopold II of Belgium. This Stanley was an adventurer and soldier, probably the only man ever to serve in the Confederate army, the Union army, and the Union navy. Later, as a journalist, he was financed by the *New York Herald* newspaper to map the Congo Basin. He also searched for David Livingstone, a physician and Congregationalist missionary, who had



King Leopold II of Belgium made a personal fortune as sovereign of a million square miles of the Congo.

disappeared in the region years before. Their famous meet-up gave rise to the expression “*Dr. Livingstone, I presume?*”

Leopold II sought out Stanley and hired him to claim as much of central Africa as possible for Leopold in a secret agreement.

Leopold II’s claim to the vast Congo region was approved by his peers at the Berlin Conference in 1885,



1872, Stanley and Kalulu, a young African slave given to him in Tanzania. Kalulu was freed and became Stanley’s adopted child. In his short life, Kalulu visited Europe and America. Sadly, he drowned at age 12.

and he named his new country the Congo Free State. Approval of the Congo as his private property with his private army, was based on nothing more than his firm declaration that his “charitable” Congo Free State was committed to improving the lives of the native inhabitants. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Fourteen European countries and the U.S. signed off on Leopold II as personal sovereign of a million square miles of the Congo.

King Leopold II made a fortune, first from ivory and rubber, which he harvested by reducing the locals to slaves.

Between 1885 and 1908, millions of the locals died from disease and exploitation, marked by murder, torture, and atrocities like amputating the hands of men, women, and children who failed to meet their production quotas.

Partly inspired by *Heart of Darkness*, the book authored by Joseph Conrad, a former steamboat captain on the Congo, an international scandal erupted, and in

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1908, the government took over the administration of the Congo and renamed it Belgian Congo. It remained a Belgian colony until 1960.

Leopold II died the year after Belgium took over his private African country in 1908, but during his 44-year reign he built many public works and gardens for Belgium, and he acquired five chateaux for himself, 17,000 acres of forest, as well as country estates on the French Riviera. In addition to keeping his fortune, the government paid 42.5 million francs of the outstanding debt on his building projects at home in Belgium, as well as another 50 million to him.

The records were burned, and the Royal Museum for Central Africa that opened just outside of Brussels in the 1990s, makes no mention of the atrocities committed in the Congo. Not a single apology was ever offered, and Leopold II has gone down in history as the great Belgian “Builder King.” He plundered the Congo without ever setting foot there.

Fifty years later destiny awaited Dag Hammarskjöld in the Congo.

The Congo of Dag Hammarskjöld

Dag Hammarskjöld turned out to be something of a surprise. Far from being a milquetoast bureaucrat, he had become a flaming idealist. He attempted to help black Africans reclaim their countries from their foreign masters. And if in the process of accomplishing this, blacks killed their fellow blacks, it was a lesser evil than blacks being manipulated or enslaved by white foreign powers.

In the heat of the Cold War, African nations were nothing more than proxy battlegrounds for the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Hammarskjöld wanted to quickly root out the last vestiges of colonialism, leaving black Africans to define their future, hoping for the best. Most slavery had ended in the early 20th century, and even the Arabic slave trade to the Middle East was ending as late as the 1960s. But would the new,



PHOTO: UN

Dag Hammarskjöld, left, was the guest of honor at an official reception in Leopoldville (now Kinshasa), Congo, on September 13, 1961, with Cyrille Adoula, the head of the country, right, and his deputy, Antoine Gizenga (with glasses). Five days later, the secretary-general, and others were dead in a mysterious plane crash in the region.

independent nation-states be able to win the confidence of their people and build a stable, viable society with trusted institutions?

The Belgian Congo obtained its independence in 1960, and it became known as the Republic of Congo-Leopoldville (named after guess who?) until 1966, to distinguish it from its smaller neighbor Republic of Congo-Brazzaville (named after French explorer de Brazza). By the 1960s, copper was king, and the Katanga elites wanted to secede from Congo and keep control of the mineral wealth to themselves.

The new government of the Congo had a mutiny in its army, Katanga was seceding, Belgian troops were on the ground to protect the Belgian mining companies, and Patrice Lumumba, the first elected prime minister of the new Congo, ran to the U.N. for help. The U.N. sent a noncombatant peacekeeping force with Hammarskjöld personally in charge of operations to support the central government against the mostly mercenary separatist forces, and violence quickly erupted between the U.N. forces and the separatists. The U.S. and Britain were



PHOTO: AFRIPPOST

The wreckage of Hammarskjöld's plane near Ndola, Zambia. Eyewitnesses claim they saw a second plane fire at the U.N. chief's plane (theguardian.com).

both upset because they were not consulted beforehand. Lumumba was assassinated. Suddenly Hammarskjöld and the Congo found themselves embroiled in a quagmire involving the interests of Belgium, France, South Africa, the Soviet Union, Britain, the U.S., and their intelligence services.

On December 17, 1961, Dag Hammarskjöld chartered a DC-6 named the Albertina for a secret meeting in Ndola to negotiate a cease-fire privately with Moïse Tshombe, the leader of the separatists in Katanga. The plane crashed in a forest near Ndola, killing Dag and 14 others, including U.N. staffers and all the crew. A fireball was reported in Ndola, but rescue personnel, for some reason, took all night to get to the crash site.

Denouement

Rumors of foul play surfaced immediately.

Since that night, just before Christmas, 1961, there have been 60 years of inquiries and investigations. One of the first, by an early U.N. panel, stated there was “persuasive evidence that the aircraft was subjected to some form of attack or threat.” In 2011, Dr. Susan Williams, a historian and senior research fellow at London University, published the book *Who Killed Dag Hammarskjöld?*, that released new information and raised more questions. Her book eventually led to the most recent investigation due to end this year, perhaps finally closing the book on how Dag Hammarskjöld died.

Former Secretary-General Ban-ki Moon pushed to reopen the case, and the U.N. appointed a Tanzanian judge, Mohamed Chande Othman, to review the crash in 2017. The current Secretary-General of the U.N., António Guterres extended Judge Othman's engagement for another 15 months, at Sweden's insistence, but it is only the judge and an assistant, both working part-time in multiple countries, and a third of the project's budget goes to translating his reports to the U.N.'s official languages. The U.N. and most of the affected countries have all been slow or reluctant to declassify relevant documents.

In January of this year, a new documentary entitled *Cold Case Hammarskjöld* was released at the Sundance Film Festival by Danish journalist Mads Brügger. That notwithstanding, at the moment, it appears the 60 years of piecemeal and haphazard investigation of Dag Hammarskjöld's death, the biggest mystery in U.N. history, was designed to give the appearance of rigorous intent, but subsequently treated as more of a bureaucratic housekeeping matter.

Two monuments

There is a significant monument to Dag Hammarskjöld at the crash site and a small museum. There is a caretaker and an entrance fee. Every year, on the anniversary of the crash, the president of Zambia and all the members of the U.N. mission in Zambia attend a memorial service.

Not far from there, a large pod mahogany or mupapa tree stood. It was called The Slave Tree. The tree fell over in 2007, probably due to termites and a strangler fig that kills its host. Inside a small fence, there is still a plaque that reads: “This plate has been placed on this mupapa tree to commemorate the passing of the days when, under its shade, the last of the Swahili traders, who warred upon and enslaved the people of the surrounding country, used to celebrate their victories and share out their spoils.”

Someone lost the gate key, and it's hard to read the plaque from outside the enclosure.

D.R. Congo today

Sixty years after his death, the following is the 2019 British travel advisory for anyone thinking about traveling to this country, rich in all kinds of mineral resources and now, even oil:

“The security situation in eastern D.R.C. remains unstable. The continued presence of armed groups, military operations against them, intercommunal violence and an influx of refugees from neighboring countries all contribute to a deterioration in the political, security and humanitarian situation. There are continued reports

of attacks and kidnappings, including against staff from NGOs. There have been a number of reported attacks on Ebola responders working in affected areas.” The rest of the article discourages all but the most necessary travel to this country.

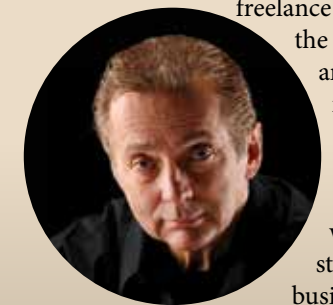
When Dag Hammarskjöld traveled, he carried the oath of his office with him. It was in one of his books at the Ndola crash site. He was a dedicated statesman. We have to wonder, how would Dag Hammarskjöld feel surveying this part of the world now? From over a thousand years of slave traders to today's unstable and dangerous D.R. Congo, are we closer or farther than ever from his dream?



PHOTO: TRIPADVISOR.COM

Memorial to Dag Hammarskjöld near Ndola, Zambia, Africa.

John Bechtel is a professional freelance writer for the food, wine, and tourism industries; ghostwriting non-fiction books; and web content strategist for businesses.



Follow him on his website:
www.johnbechtelwriter.com