

Who Killed Dag Hammarskjöld?

by Michael Curtis



Don't count stars or you might stumble. Someone drops an allegation and down you'll tumble.

Amid the turbid ebb and flow of history are inexplicable mysterious deaths, some of them unresolved. Some of the more intriguing of these deaths, occurring in a variety of countries and historical periods are well known, and become the subject of phantasmagorical speculation and fiction. Jimmy Hoffa, head of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters disappeared on July 30, 1975 without a trace, except in the Martin Scorsese movie *The Irishman*. The British princes, 9 and 12 years old, heirs to the throne were sent to and presumably murdered by Richard III in the Tower of London in 1483. The Swedish Prince Minister Olaf Palme was assassinated in a main

street in Stockholm in February 1986. The Hollywood actress Natalie Wood was murdered or possibly accidentally drowned in November 1981. In the Soviet Union, Sergei Kirov, the head of the Leningrad Communist Party, rival of Stalin, was murdered on December 1, 1934 in the Smolny Institute in St. Petersburg, probably on instructions from Stalin. Probably the most publicized undetected serial killer of all time is Jack the Ripper, active in East London in the 1880s, and still a living legend.

Responsibility for some deaths appears certain, but may be still disputed: the assassination of JFK on November 22, 1963 in Dallas; the murder of the wife of O. J. Simpson; the end on December 5, 1791 of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart by disease or poisoning; the kidnapping and murder of the son of Charles Lindbergh on May 12, 1932, an event which became the theme of Agatha Christie's play *Murder on the Orient Express*. Malcolm X, African-American nationalist, was presumably killed by rival Black Muslims in New York on February 21, 1965. Six year old Jon Benet Ramsay was found murdered in her home on December 1, 1996.

Prominent figures are among those whose death remains a mystery. By curious coincidence, they include two brave internationally famous Swedish diplomats whose end still remains unresolved many years after their deaths.

Raoul Wallenberg is an honored figure, a "Righteous" individual, who was the special Swedish envoy to Budapest between July and December 1944. During that time his efforts saved at least 15,000-200,000 Jews in Hungary from being deported and massacred in Nazi extermination camps. On January 17, 1945, Wallenberg was detained by SMERSH, Soviet counter-intelligence, on charges of espionage and disappeared since then. Officially, he was reported to have died in July 1947 while in the Lubyanka prison of the KGB in Moscow. However, some reports were of people who claimed to have seen him at a later date, others that he was liquidated in prison. Soviet

leader Nikita Khrushchev was sufficiently puzzled to have a senior KGB official Ivan Serov investigate the issue and find out who ordered Wallenberg's death. The event, complicated with unsubstantiated allegations both of Wallenberg's contacts with British intelligence, and his use of the OSS to help Jews and others escape the Nazis, remains unresolved.

It is obvious that no matter how Wallenberg died or who killed him, leaders or agents of the Soviet Union were involved. More uncertain, however, is whether the Soviet Union or Stalin himself was responsible for the death of Dag Hammarskjold, then 56. At the age of 47 Hammarskjold was elected as Secretary-General of the United Nations by 57-1 on April 7, 1953, the second Secretary-General, and was re-elected unanimously in 1957. President J.F. Kennedy called him "the greatest statesman of our century." He was awarded posthumously the Nobel Peace Prize in 1961, one of only four people to be honored posthumously by Nobel.

Hammarskjold was killed with 15 others in a DC-6 plane crash on September 18, 1961 as it was approaching Ndola, Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia during the Congo crisis. One of the passengers, an American Harold Julien, said before dying that there had been an explosion in the plane before it went down. However, the cause of death remains disputed.

For some time, Hammarskjold at the UN was concerned with conflict and threats of conflict in the Middle East, particularly between Israel and the Arab states. He had joined Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson in a resolution of the Suez Canal crisis in 1956 by organizing the UN Emergency Force to resolve the crisis. He also played a role in the 1958 crisis in Lebanon and Jordan. He was responsible in September 1961 for a peace mission to Moise Tshombe, president of Katanga, who had declared himself independent.

The context of the predicament for Hammarskjold was the activity of foreign mining companies who opposed the full

independence of the Congo from Belgian rule. Belgian officers commanded Congolese troops following official independence on 1960. These troops mutinied but the UN refused to assist Patrice Lumumba, Congo's first prime minister. He appealed to the Soviet Union, and Soviet troops helped Katanga province, where most of the mines were located, to secede. The UN Security Council by Resolution 43 ordered Belgian troops to withdraw and installed UN peacekeepers in Katanga to prevent civil war.

The CIA then assassinated Lumumba and installed in his place Mobutu Sese Seko, who ruled Congo/Zaire 1965-1997.

The UN Security Council in Resolution 161 called for withdrawal of all foreign advisers, and authorized the UN to take all necessary measures to prevent civil war, including supplying armed troops to protect the Congolese government. It was however evident that the UN troops were inadequate to control the situation. Therefore, Hammarskjold set out for Northern Rhodesia to try to get a cease fire with acting president Moise Tshombe.

So who killed Hammarskjold and why? Many alternatives have been offered, and the setting is one of fake news and misinformation. In 1962 a Rhodesian commission of inquiry concluded that pilot error was responsible, a mistake in judging the height of the forest tree line. A subsequent UN inquiry was inconclusive, about whether Hammarskjold died as a result of an accident or foul play. Others held that the plane was shot down by a CIA contractor, or by U.S. troops, or by foreign agents, or by mining interests that supported Katangas's secession, or by a South African mercenary named Swanepoel. A documentary of 2019 alleges that Hammarskjold was killed by a Belgian pilot.

On December 27, 2019 the UN General Assembly approved a resolution for further investigation of the death of Hammarskjold. A Tanzanian judge, Mohammed Othman, was

appointed by the UN in 2017 and reported, without reaching any definite conclusion, that it appeared plausible that an external attack or threat may have been a cause of the plane crash, whether by direct attack, or by momentary distraction of the pilots. He accused South Africa, the U.S. and the UK of withholding important undisclosed information of his death. He urged those states to release them. Judge Othman has been reappointed, and a large number of states want to continue the investigation.

One hopes Othman will find whether President Harry Truman was correct when on September 19, 1961 he said, "Hammarskjold was at the point of getting something done when they killed him. Notice that I said, "when they killed him." Whatever Othman's report, Hammarskjold was a martyr for peace.