

Lazlo Passemiers

Post-Doctoral Fellow,
International Studies Group,
University of Free State.
Email: Lazlo.Passemiers@
gmail.com

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BOOK REVIEW

Dag Hammarskjöld, the United Nations and the decolonisation of Africa, Henning Melber, London, Hurst & Company, 2019. 190 pp, ISBN: 9781787380042.

Henning Melber's *Dag Hammarskjöld, the United Nations and the decolonisation of Africa* is a welcome addition to the ever-growing literature on the United Nations (UN) and Africa.¹ Melber's new book critically examines Dag Hammarskjöld's role as UN Secretary General (1953-1961) in relation to Africa's decolonisation. It thus combines two subjects that Melber has extensive knowledge of; namely the decolonisation of Africa and Dag Hammarskjöld.² Hammarskjöld's time in office as the

- 1 See, for instance: R Thakur, *United Nations peacekeeping operations: ad hoc missions, permanent engagement* (New York: United Nations University, 2001); J Boulden, *Dealing with conflict in Africa: the United Nations and regional organisations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); N Macqueen, *United Nations peacekeeping in Africa since 1960* (New York: Routledge, 2016); E Keller and R Hill (eds.), *Trustee for the human community: J Ralph Bunche, the United Nations, and the decolonisation of Africa* (Athens: Ohio university press, 2010); A O'Malley, *The Diplomacy of Decolonisation. America, Britain and the United Nations during the Congo Crisis 1960-1964* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).
- 2 Melber acted as the director of the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation and served as a member of the UN committee that was tasked with reinvestigating the death of the former Secretary General. He has also published extensively on Dag Hammarskjöld, the UN, and the decolonisation of Africa. See, for instance; H Melber and C Saunders, "Conflict Mediation in Decolonisation: Namibia's Transition to Independence", *Africa Spectrum* 42 (1) 2007, pp. 73-94; H Melber, "In the footsteps of Hammarskjöld : the United Nations and interventions for security and development", *Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 34 (1), 2012; H Melber, *Understanding Namibia: the trials of independence* (London: Hurst & Company, 2014); H Melber, "Mission Impossible: Hammarskjöld and the UN Mandate for the Congo (1960-1961)", *African Security* 10

second UN Secretary General coincided with a growing demand to end colonial and white minority rule in Africa. The UN played a noteworthy part in shaping this turn in Africa's history. In the existing literature, Hammarskjöld's contribution in this regard has typically been discussed in the context of the so-called Congo Crisis (1960–1961).³ While the UN's intervention in Congo was certainly one of the most defining moments in Hammarskjöld's career as Secretary General and was an episode upon which much of his legacy has been judged, it should not be assessed in isolation. With his new book, Melber tries to break this trend. Through closely examining Hammarskjöld's values and his actions as UN Secretary General, Melber provides an insightful perspective of his role during Africa's decolonisation process.

Melber sets out his appraisal of Hammarskjöld in eight thematically structured chapters. Chapter One introduces the themes of the book and critically engages with the historiography on Hammarskjöld's life and career. Melber, who is not afraid of being introspective about his own past work on Hammarskjöld, reflects on how the Secretary General has commonly been portrayed in the literature as either a hero or a villain. Aware of this dichotomous framing, Melber aims to position his account in-between that of the "fan club" and the critics of Hammarskjöld. Chapter Two provides an overview of Hammarskjöld's formative years that shaped and defined many of his principles. Melber identifies two key influences and discusses them at some length. First, Hammarskjöld's spirituality, which consisted of a mix between mysticism and Protestantism that cultivated the ethic of service to humanity. Secondly, his induction into the Swedish civil service, which was typified by the ethos of serving "the community of citizens" rather than "the state as detached from the people" (p. 12). While noting the importance of Hammarskjöld's early socialisation, Melber reminds the reader that individual choices can still shape decisions. In Chapter Three, Melber focusses on the formation of the UN and discusses the organisation's normative framework in the context of the decolonisation of Africa. Despite the UN Charter's initial ambiguity towards decolonisation and the organisation's limited mandate to "interfere with existing colonies", the UN's adoption of the notion of human rights as well as the steady incorporation of African and Asian members to the general assembly significantly contributed to achieving African independence (p. 19). During Hammarskjöld's term of office, 25 African countries joined the UN. The book's first three chapters thus serve as a background to assess Hammarskjöld's role as Secretary General.

(3–4), 2017, pp. 254–271; H Melber, "Populism in Southern Africa under liberation movements as governments", *Review of African Political Economy* 45 (158), 2018, pp. 678–686.

3 In this case, the "Congo Crisis" refers to the first turbulent years that followed the Democratic Republic of the Congo's independence on 30 June 1960, which included a UN intervention that lasted from 1960–1964.

In Chapter Four, Melber discusses Hammarskjöld's understanding of the UN's role and purpose in the world. He notes that Hammarskjöld was the preferred candidate for the job of UN Secretary General, as "he was widely considered to be an apolitical bureaucrat" (p. 40). Melber explains how Hammarskjöld's spirituality and his values on solidarity and "universal humanity" influenced his interpretation of the UN's mandate, particularly towards the world's oppressed peoples (p. 33). While the Secretary General was aware of his positionality, he was committed to the notion of neutrality in his job, an idea that, under the right conditions, he believed was attainable. According to Hammarskjöld, the UN needed to be free from the influence of "individual governments and states" and guided by a "binding legal international framework" (p. 40). However, the UN's role as an organisation of international civil service increasingly collided with the interests of global powers. This clash is discussed in detail in Chapter Five. Cold War politics were highly influential during Hammarskjöld's time as Secretary General, particularly in the context of the so-called Third World. Melber illustrates how Hammarskjöld was a proponent of UN driven technical assistance programmes for new African nations. According to Hammarskjöld, such developmental aid could result in true independence; consisting of economic, political, and ideological freedom. Nevertheless, Hammarskjöld was confronted with the limitations of the organisation's mandate, which in the end resulted in a minimal amount of assistance provided by the UN. Such multilateral aid by the international organisation also stood in stark contrast to the Cold War's system of bilateral aid, which was growing increasingly competitive. Melber further critiques the widespread idea that the UN under Hammarskjöld was used to co-opt newly independent states into the capitalist world and argues that, in principle, Hammarskjöld remained neutral.

Chapter Six discusses the extent and limits of Hammarskjöld's diplomacy by focusing on several African challenges that he was faced with during his time in office. While it is unfortunate that Melber did not expand the section on apartheid South Africa and Tunisia, or include other examples of Hammarskjöld's African policy, the two main case studies of the Suez Crisis (1965) and the Congo Crisis (1960-1961) nonetheless support his argument well. Both incidents resulted in direct UN intervention and allowed Hammarskjöld to test the limits of his mandate in a tense Cold War climate during which the UN security council and general assembly became the site of a power struggle between the opposing sides. While in the case of the Suez Crisis, Hammarskjöld's diplomacy was successful in mediating the situation, the UN intervention in Congo proved much more challenging. Melber reveals that Hammarskjöld increasingly "resorted to and relied upon" the support of the Afro-Asian bloc in the UN general assembly to protect the UN from giving in to the demands of the United States or the Soviet Union (p.99). However, confronted by different interpretations of the

UN mandate, as well as the constant opposing demands from stakeholders inside Congo, across the continent, and throughout the world, Hammarskjöld was forced to compromise on his own principles as well as those set out in the UN's mandate in Congo. The dismissal, detention, arrest, and eventual murder of Patrice Lumumba was particularly decisive in bringing about this change in policy. While Melber acknowledges that the UN's intervention in Congo resulted in severe errors in handling the complicated situation, not least the murder of Lumumba, he disagrees that Hammarskjöld was personally responsible for the organisation's shortcomings and failures in mediating the situation.

The final two chapters wrap up the book. Chapter 7 provides a brief overview of Hammarskjöld's mysterious aeroplane crash in Ndola on the night of 17-18 September 1961 and details the different investigations that have been commissioned over the years. Noteworthy is the continuous unwillingness of the United States and United Kingdom governments to fully cooperate with any subsequent investigation by withholding classified information that could hold important clues and provide clarity about what happened. Despite ongoing efforts by the UN, it remains to be seen if truth of that fateful incident will ever be revealed. Chapter 8 is the concluding chapter and offers a final appraisal of Hammarskjöld's role as Secretary General in the decolonisation of Africa. While Hammarskjöld was an individual with strong ethical foundations, Melber argues that personal ethics have limitations to "steering and navigating an institution of global governance", especially when factoring in the limitations of Hammarskjöld's office and the constant pressure of external powers (p. 128). Melber's compelling account thus illustrates the complexity of how individual values interact with the principles and structures of an intricate organisation and play out against broader political forces.

Melber has produced an eloquently written and well-argued book that provides a nuanced but critical explanation of Hammarskjöld's role as UN Secretary General. To construct his arguments, Melber makes extensive use of Hammarskjöld's writings as well as the reflections and observations of various individuals who were in close contact with him. This is the book's greatest strength. His careful reading of these sources allows Melber to rebut various claims made about Hammarskjöld that are based upon selective statements made by the Secretary General. In so doing, he presents a holistic understanding of Hammarskjöld in his capacity as the head of UN and successfully illustrates the extent and limitations of personal influence on positions of leadership. There is no doubt that *Dag Hammarskjöld, the United Nations and the decolonisation of Africa* furnishes a revealing perspective on Hammarskjöld's character, and greatly contributes to a better understanding of the complicated role that the UN has played in Africa.