

## Review – Cold Case Hammarskjöld

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, FEB 5 2025

### Cold Case Hammarskjöld

Directed by Mads Brügger, 2019; Re-released BBC Storyville, 2024.

In international relations we are inured to the world of conspiracy theory, while in digital filmography the expression “the camera never lies” is equally mistrusted. Here is a project which requires both our theoretical and cinematographic scepticism. In April 2024 BBC’s Storyville Series broadcast the 2019 Danish investigative film, Cold Case Hammarskjöld by Danish film maker Mads Brügger. With this film like all retrospective history-gazing, we are inevitably confronted with the ugliness of the present. At the front and centre is not just UNSG Dag Hammarskjöld’s loss, the UN’s standing or AIDS conspiracy theories – but the fact that global society remains as divided as it was back in 1961 when Hammarskjöld died.

Cold Case Hammarskjöld is a documentary examining the 1961 plane crash that killed Hammarskjöld and suggesting the involvement of rightist militia acting for mining corporations targeting Hammarskjöld. It examines how vested corporate interests were alarmed by the UN leader’s overt anti-colonialism. It also includes a provocative claim that the same white supremacist groups who were involved in military weaponizing – also welcomed AIDS (and conceivably exploited) bogus clinics in South Africa to help spread it. The film plot is difficult to follow for those unfamiliar with the idiosyncrasies of the period, so is summarised here.

The film investigates the possibility that Hammarskjöld’s plane, which crashed in Northern Rhodesia, was shot down by Belgian-British mercenary pilot Jan van Risseghem, hired by shady corporate interests. After unsuccessful attempts to conclusively prove that theory, it focuses suspicion on the South African Institute for Maritime Research (SAIMR), with two fresh witnesses. Cinemographically, sections of the movie are meta-cinematic, depicting docudrama plot sequences depicting two African secretaries reflecting on the motivations of the filmmaker. There is useful contemporaneous news footage of the era, and its interweaving with these narratives is compelling.

In regard to new physical evidence about the plane crash the trail runs cold. Mads Brügger partners with Swedish journalist Göran Björkdahl, who believed he possessed a part from the Albertina, Hammarskjöld’s Douglas DC-6B aircraft. They investigate the theory that a Fouga CM.170 Magister downed the Albertina near Ndola, after a bomb-plant failed in Lubumbashi. This is not authenticated. Near Ndola Airport, Brügger and Björkdahl (probably) locate the buried wreckage of the Albertina, but are eventually prohibited by state officials from excavation.

The film moves to South Africa, where in 1998 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission revealed a document about the assassination of Hammarskjöld. Brügger and Björkdahl trace SAIMR, through its deceased leader, Keith Maxwell. Brügger and Björkdahl recover the second part of the autobiography of Maxwell, which alleges the involvement of SAIMR in the Hammarskjöld assassination. The final part of the film brings forward two new witnesses as former SAIMR members. They allege that SAIMR was a major clandestine mercenary organization.

The first witness claims the playing card depicted in one of the photos of Hammarskjöld’s corpse is a covert signal of CIA involvement. It is plausible that TRC references to Hammarskjöld have not been adequately analyzed. These papers, regraded as credible by the TRC, certainly suggest that a white militia, operating with the support of the C.I.A. and British intelligence, orchestrated the 1961 plane tragedy.

## Review – Cold Case Hammarskjöld

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The film, which won awards at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival, not only raises the issue of international collusion in the alleged downing of Hammarskjöld's plane, but equally sinister suggestions about AIDS. In the film a former militia member (and SAIMR affiliate) claims that his organization used bogus vaccinations in the early 1990s to spread H.I.V. The suggestion was that this was a vast White supremacist black operation. "We were at war," said the former militia member, Alexander Jones. "Black people in South Africa were the enemy." These claims were vigorously disputed by the medical and scientific community.

Indeed, after the film's release, AIDS experts said the film's claim — which arose in interviews with the former militia member, were no more than conspiracy theory. "One dangerous consequence of these allegations is that they have the potential to sow mistrust and suspicion of doctors and the medical establishment, and that they may confuse people about how H.I.V. is transmitted," said Rebecca Hodes, the director of the AIDS and Society Research Unit at the University of Cape Town.

There is no medical consensus why H.I.V. struck sub-Saharan Africa so hard. That disagreement, and disproportionately high infection rates among blacks, gave rise to conspiracy theories, including that the disease had been perversely created during the faltering years of white supremacist rule. Jones claimed that extremists deployed science "to eradicate black people." While the filmmakers present Mr. Jones as a whistle-blower, there are inconsistencies in the evidence he presents during the film. The medical science about "rightist misuse of medicine" also appears spurious.

It is noteworthy that when the filmmakers shared their data and sought joint-authorship with The New York Times, the latter declined. There is (however) a caveat made by Danish producer Peter Engel that: "Journalists...should take care to contextualize the allegations," and to consider that modern medical clinics...are regulated in ways which did not exist in the 1980s at the end of the apartheid era." What is refreshing about the work of these two journalists is that far from behaving as cranks, they have undertaken exhaustive old-fashioned reportage, interviewing eye-witnesses to the crash, and seeking out people who knew about these mysterious AIDS clinics.

A UN panel concluded that there was "persuasive evidence that the aircraft was subjected to some form of attack or threat." No action was ever taken in response to these critical conclusions. We are also reminded that rightist militias were accused of gross abuse of power, including murdering their former researcher, Dagmar Feil in 1990. The right-wing extremist Keith Maxwell, remains a mysterious figure. The Hammarskjöld documents which surfaced in the late 1990s, may well implicate Maxwell in the potential downing of the UN plane, but they remain unverified.

SAIMAR recruited ex-military operatives for foreign operations. Maxwell, who reportedly died in 2006, certainly organized medical clinics in South Africa while being quoted as "hoping AIDS might decimate the black population". This hyperbole is a long step from a germ warfare campaign, but it raises suspicion. Adrian Hadland, of the University of Stirling interviewed Maxwell and cautions against his claims. This writer would suggest that a "wildcard" like Maxwell might have motivation, but this film has failed to deliver the hard evidence.

The film is directed by Mads Brügger, a Danish journalist who previously starred as a European adventurer in Central Africa in the 2012 documentary, "The Ambassador." As result of that film on "passports for sale", Liberia took legal steps to prosecute Brügger, although Denmark was not asked for Brügger's extradition. It must be stressed however that Brügger has a reputation for diligent research.

If one was to describe international reception on the authenticity of the Cold Case Hammarskjöld story-line, this would be "highly sceptical." As to the credibility of the film's apparent key findings (a) that Hammarskjöld's plane was likely downed in a hit organized by mining interests, and that (b) the same outfit were also engaged in black operations such as spreading AIDS, the summarization would have to be the same.

However, where this film has a definite point is the reluctance to properly investigate two such significant allegations. On this matter the film has a strong argument. What the film-makers attempt to do in an amateurish way e.g. excavate the site, and to scope SAIMAR, are both tasks that should have been conducted professionally at the time. No party has yet expressed interest in full-scale forensic-investigation. Modern investigative techniques are highly

## **Review – Cold Case Hammarskjöld**

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likely to add to our factual knowledge on matters which almost certainly pertain to serious wrongdoings.

Conspiracy theories proliferate where proper inquiry is not conducted, so this film adds to our evidence-base. We should now verify the plane site and the status of Maxwell's Clinics. The inferences about Hammarskjöld's plane and AIDS vaccination seem outlandish without independent investigation, and this film suggests merit in such work. In July 2019, Cold Case Hammarskjöld was nominated for a European Parliament Lux Prize. It has now won numerous international awards. One suggests this certainly supports more investigative reporting.

From an IR perspective the most salient point is that we possess a filmographic "smoking gun". The plane crash and any involvement of rightist groups in public health merit thorough examination by trusted authorities. The alternative is idle speculation or still worse, a belief that the international community prefers to be ignorant of the truth. When Sergio de Mello was killed to the UN's gross embarrassment in Baghdad in August 2003, it seemed the file could not be closed fast enough. For those who remembered 1961, it must have seemed like history repeating itself.

The producers of Cold Case Hammarskjöld have assembled new witnesses and previously unheard expert opinion (such as former US defence officer Charles Southall), and their film shows that key questions deserve to be answered. What these journalists show is probably something no less important than what they have proven – namely that the international community and the UN itself- should encourage transparency about the critical events of the past.

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### **About the author:**

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.