

BOOK REVIEW

Henning Melber. *Dag Hammarskjöld, The United Nations and the Decolonisation of Africa*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. xii + 180 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$39.95. Cloth. ISBN: 9780190087562.

Dag Hammarskjöld's career as the secretary general of the United Nations (1952–1961) coincided with the onset of African decolonization. Henning Melber's book *Dag Hammarskjöld, The United Nations and the Decolonisation of Africa* attempts to probe Hammarskjöld's personal views regarding both the United Nations and decolonization. Melber challenges simplistic assessments of the power of the secretary general while also considering whether or not Hammarskjöld unduly colluded with Western governments. Developed from lectures on the Swedish secretary general's career, this study broadly considers Hammarskjöld's ideas regarding the United Nations, great power politics, and the independence of African countries. It should not, however, be considered to be a thorough review of United Nations policies toward African states under Hammarskjöld's leadership.

Melber is at his best when analyzing the intellectual orientation of the secretary general and the historiographic debates about Hammarskjöld's effectiveness. The reader certainly gains a convincing grasp of how Hammarskjöld's internationalism and his sympathy for decolonization molded his policies as secretary general. Melber argues convincingly that Hammarskjöld distanced himself from Western governments and sought to maintain his office as an impartial actor in the Cold War. At the same time, the manifold limitations of the United Nations—particularly in trying to curb the excesses of powerful states—constrained Hammarskjöld's ideals. Instead of castigating the UN for not doing enough to promote the end of colonial rule in the 1950s, the book contends the UN's promotion of vaguely defined individual rights and internationalist cooperation proved to be useful tools for newly independent countries.

There are some striking omissions. The decolonization of Africa does indeed rank behind Hammarskjöld and the United Nations here, just as the book's title might indicate. Melber doesn't spend much time on African actors, blaming in part "a lack of African voices and perspectives on record" in the relevant literature, thus rendering decolonization "a predominantly

Western affair” (4). Given how much decolonization has become a central theme of so much historical research for over two decades, one can hardly argue there just isn’t enough evidence to discuss how African stakeholders engaged with the UN. Melber only uses a paucity of case studies on the role of the UN in African decolonization beyond the Congo. Cameroon—a UN trust territory from 1946 until independence in 1960—somehow only receives one reference, despite the guerilla war of the Union du Peuple Camerounais against French rule. Beyond the French bombing of the Tunisian port of Bizerte in 1961, the Algerian war for independence also never comes into view. How individual cases of decolonization might have influenced Hammarskjöld’s decision-making later on is entirely unclear. These lacunae leave the reader little by which to judge major claims regarding the UN’s role made by the author. For example, Melber assures readers that Hammarskjöld took a deep interest in having the United Nations furnish technical and development aid to newly independent countries (60). Since he did not reference any precise cases to back this statement up, however, one can only guess at how accurate this statement actually might be.

One might expect a book on Hammarskjöld’s policies toward African decolonization to make extensive use of records from UN archives in New York and Geneva. One would be wrong. Melber is hardly the only culprit; John Kent wrote an entire monograph on the relationship between the UN and the U.S. government in Congo that also neglected this rather obvious set of sources. These materials are difficult to access, mainly due to the glacial pace of the UN’s archival declassification process. However, Melber’s general approach to decolonization would have been more convincing had it been anchored to detailed records beyond public sources and Hammarskjöld’s own correspondence. The author rightly recognizes the limitations of the secretary general’s influence. However, a more thorough review of relevant archives would better indicate how others in the UN could also have shaped or even challenged Hammarskjöld’s policies. While this book effectively outlines Hammarskjöld’s thoughts on decolonization in a general sense, its Olympian view of decolonization leaves a great deal obscure.

For readers seeking a better understanding of Hammarskjöld’s intellectual trajectory and the obstacles to his moderate anti-colonial positions, this book is a valuable reconsideration of the scholarly literature. However, this study will be somewhat disappointing for anyone seeking to grasp the complex relationships between the UN and rival African, European, and southern African white supremacist governments in the 1950s and early 1960s.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Hjalmarsson, Clarissa Charlotte. 2020. "Healthcare of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front and Its Politicization, 1970–1991: Treating the Body Politic." *African Studies Review* 63 (1): 146–69. doi:[10.1017/asr.2019.6](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.6).
- Laudati, Ann, and Charlotte Mertens. 2019. "Resources and Rape: Congo's (Toxic) Discursive Complex." *African Studies Review* 62 (4): 57–82. doi:[10.1017/asr.2018.126](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.126).
- Skinner, Kate. N.d. "West Africa's First Coup: Neo-Colonial and Pan-African Projects in Togo's 'Shadow Archives.'" *African Studies Review*, 1–24. doi:[10.1017/asr.2019.39](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.39).