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'The Golden Thread' Review: Who Killed Dag Hammarskjöld?

After his plane crashed, conflicting clues and witnesses emerged and records went missing. It's one of the unsolved mysteries of our times.



Dag Hammarskjöld, secretary-general of the United Nations, in the newly independent Congo in September 1961. PHOTO: AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

By Edward Kosner Dec. 21, 2020 6:24 pm ET

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As the story has been told and retold, the man "was lying slightly away from the carnage. Though he was clearly dead, he looked untouched save for specks of blood on his face. His blue eyes, now lifeless, were still open. He was surrounded by playing cards. One of them, the ace of spades, was on his body."

The man was Dag Hammarskjöld, 56, the Swedish diplomat and second secretary-general of the United Nations. The destruction was the wreckage of his DC-6 jetliner in the tropical forest outside the airport in Ndola, in what is now Zambia. On Sept. 18, 1961, the plane taking him to a rendezvous with Moïse Tshombe, the leader of the mineral-rich breakaway Congo province of Katanga, inexplicably crashed, killing all but one on board. Nearly six decades later, Hammarskjöld's death is one of the great unsolved mysteries of our times. Was it simply a plane accident, or was it a botched effort to kidnap the U.N. leader—or to assassinate him?

Over the years, there have been several supposedly in-depth investigations of the episode —by British colonial authorities, the U.N. and others, and probes by obsessed civilians and intrepid journalists. The latest is "The Golden Thread," the work of Ravi Somaiya, a former correspondent for the New York Times, and it's an adroitly written, compelling book. If Mr. Somaiya doesn't deliver a final solution to the mystery—who could?—he leads the reader through the tangled brush to the most likely explanation.

And he does it in an efficient 260 pages. True-crime, political biographies and other nonfiction staples have grown bloated in recent years. For Mr. Somaiya, thankfully, less is more. He deftly sets scenes (like the description of Hammarskjöld's body above), sketches his long cast of characters and tells his intricate story with verve and economy.

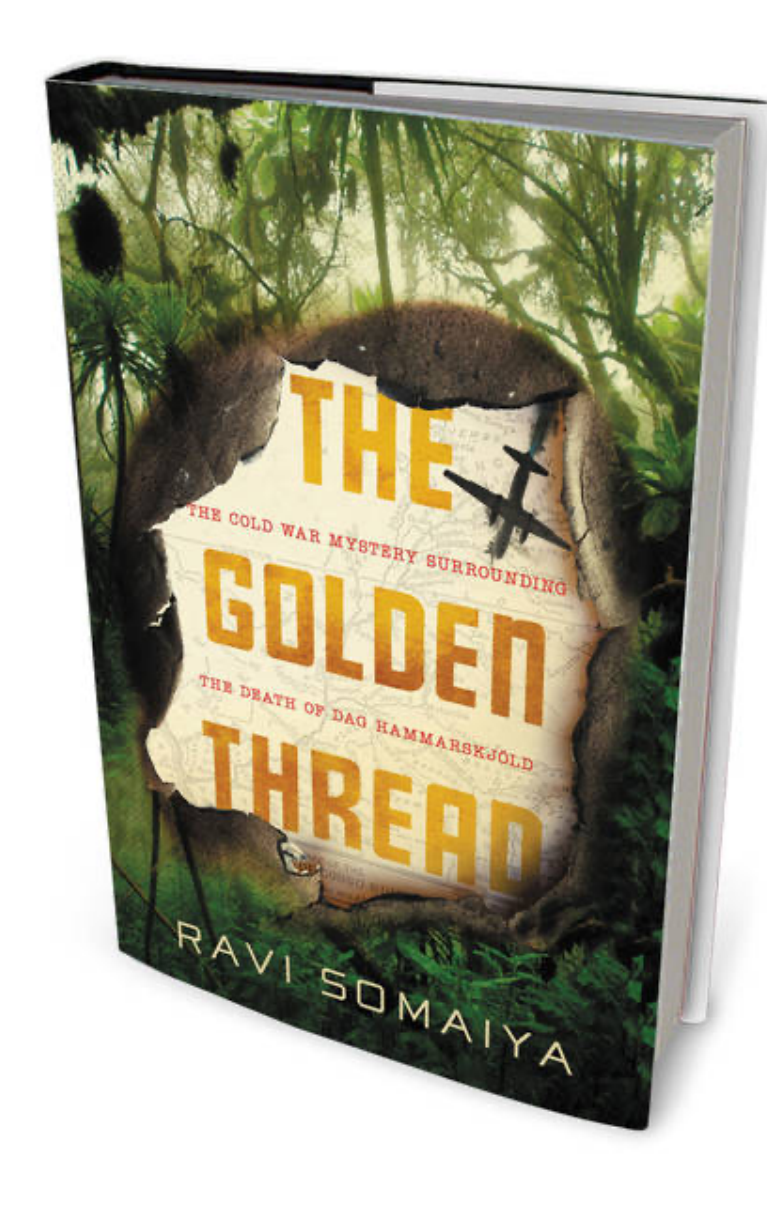


PHOTO: WSJ

THE GOLDEN THREAD

By Ravi Somaiya Twelve, 289 pages, \$28

Readers of later-stage John le Carré, when he shifted his gaze to the Third World and the machinations of greedy corporations and such, will recognize the Congo at the dawn of the 1960s. After almost a century of harvesting the colony's bounty of uranium, cadmium and other strategic metals and working many of its people to death, the Belgians turned the country over to the Congolese and the firebrand Patrice Lumumba, who was cozy with the Soviets. Most of the country's mineral riches were in the southeastern province of Katanga, bounded by the British colonies of the Rhodesian Federation (now Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi).

Backed by Belgium's mining giant Union Minière and related British interests, Katanga seceded. French and other mercenaries supported Tshombe, who had a small air force, including several jet fighters. The KGB, CIA, MI6, German agents and others conspired with the two sides—and with and against each other. Hammarskjöld championed Lumumba, before Lumumba was murdered with the support of, among others, U.S. officials. A U.N. force launched offensives against Katanga, and the U.N. chief headed to the Congo to try to resolve

the conflict. For his trouble, Hammarskjöld won the hatred of the Belgians, British colonial officials, the mercenaries and others, who were convinced that he would be helping to turn the country over to Soviet domination, ending their profits.

Hammarskjöld's plane, with 16 aboard, including an experienced crew, flew from the Congolese capital of Léopoldville across the country to Ndola, then in northern Rhodesia. The plane contacted the Ndola tower, flew over the lighted airstrip, circled to land—and crashed into the trees 9 miles from the airport. A fireball leapt into the air, but an official search didn't begin for hours. Hammarskjöld's body was found propped against a termite mound. All aboard were dead except one member of the U.N. staff, who died a few days later.

Mr. Somaiya skillfully identifies all the conflicting clues about the crash and the equally intriguing missing records and contradictory witnesses. A group of charcoal burners said they saw flashes—one described a "fire arrow" and a small jet tailing the DC-6 before the crash. All the tower logs from the time of the crash disappeared. Each of the formal investigations had provocative gaps and ended inconclusively. Over time, ever more leads or blind alleys turned up. And what about that ace of spades found on the U.N. chief's body—a signal, an omen or just an incongruity?

Eventually, Mr. Somaiya lists five possible explanations for the crash: pilot error on the landing; explosives placed aboard the DC-6 while it was unattended before departure; a stowaway skyjacking gone wrong; an attack, either from the air or the ground; or the unintended consequence of an effort by jet fighters to divert Hammarskjöld's plane to a different airport, where he could be held hostage or killed. There's evidence—or, at least, inference—for each of these outcomes in the record.

Readers who want to learn Mr. Somaiya's verdict from his book should stop reading this review here.

For the rest, his analysis is intricate and persuasive: Two fighter jets flown by mercenaries known to be operating in the skies over Ndola caused the crash. The plan was to intercept the airliner, give orders to its pilot and escort the plane to an airport controlled by Katangan forces, where Hammarskjöld would be held. Trying to evade the jets, the pilot simply lost control. In a more elaborate variant: When the DC-6 pilot ignored the radioed orders, one of the jets fired what was intended to be a warning fusillade. One of the shots severed a cable connected to the tail assembly, causing Hammarskjöld's pilot to lose control, and the plane crashed into the forest.

It's unlikely that a definitive answer to the mystery will ever materialize. Mr. Somaiya's fascinating book is the best proxy we can expect.

Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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