

## **Dag Hammarskjöld and the Congo crisis, 1960-61**

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Through the analysis of primary (American, European and UN archives) and secondary sources, the paper aims at enlightening the role played by the Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld during the first Congo crisis, 1960-61, its significance for the organisation and the member States in terms of reliability and efficacy in the short and long run, as well as its impact on the overall decolonization process.

Erupting immediately after the proclamation of independence, the crisis involved many of the challenges facing the international system at that time: the issue of state and nation-building after an ill-prepared process of power-transfer; potential cold-war competition between great powers looking for proxies in post-colonial Africa; an occasion to “new” African actors to engage an international stage; and the secession of a rich region, Katanga, without which the viability of the newly independent country could be severely questioned. These and other reasons urged the Secretary-General to engage in the Congo – from an institutional viewpoint but arguably on personal terms as well.

The paper will try to address the roots of Hammarskjöld’s entanglement in the Congo, its evolution and results. Did he have a personal agenda? If this is the case, how did he manage it in front of multiple pressures? Can the extreme price he paid in the Congo be seen as a metaphor of the impossibility to find viable and long-lasting solutions to a set of issues confronting the country, many of which are still waiting to be solved? In other words, can the first Congo crisis be perceived, as it seems Hammarskjöld did, as a crucial test for the future of a fundamental African State as well as for the organisation of the UN itself? Did this perception alter the outcome of events?

Fifty years afterwards, a reappraisal of the short- and long-term effects of the involvement of the UN Secretary-General in the first Congo crisis can help to widen the debate over the role played by the organisation in the decolonisation process. Direct results are under scrutiny, of course, as well as the willingness and the ability of the Secretary-General to transform the UN from being the mere outcome of the Yalta system to become a true universal organisation giving voice to issues and agendas not necessarily linked to great powers’ interests.