

Robert A. Hill and Edmond J. Keller (eds.) (2010), *Trustee for the Human Community: Ralph J. Bunche, the United Nations, and the Decolonization of Africa*, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, ISBN 978-0-8214-1909-0 (Hardcover) / 978-0-8214-1910-6 (Paperback), 205 pp.

Ralph Bunche (1904–1971) was a scholar of African Studies and the first Afro-American to receive a doctorate in political science (1934). During his field research in parts of Eastern, Central and Southern Africa in 1937/38, he explored African responses to European colonialism. After his return, as a two-year interlude, he collaborated with Gunnar Myrdal in the research project on the plight of the African-Americans by conducting fieldwork in the southeastern US. While World War II was raging in the 1940s, he joined the US Foreign Office to assess the need for a government policy toward the European colonies in Africa. As a key diplomat in the US Foreign Service, he was involved in the establishment of the United Nations in 1945, where he had a major responsibility in drafting Chapters XI, XII and XIII of the Charter, dealing with trusteeship and non-self-governing territories. In 1947 he joined the UN Secretariat as director of the trusteeship department. He served as chief aid to the UN-appointed Swedish mediator Count Folke Bernadotte in the efforts to establish a peaceful solution to the conflict over Palestine. After Bernadotte's assassination by Jewish militants on 17 September 1948, Bunche was in charge of the continued negotiations and ultimately achieved an armistice between Israel and the Arab states, for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950. A few years later, he worked very closely with the second Secretary-General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld, and played a major role in establishing the UN peacekeeping mission during the Suez crisis. Bunche executed major responsibilities with regard to African decolonization processes during the late 1950s, culminating in his (contested and controversial) mission to the Congo, beginning in 1960. It seems almost a tragic repetition of history that Hammarskjöld died in a plane crash near Ndola (in then Northern Rhodesia, modern-day Zambia) on the night of 17–18 September 1961, almost to the hour 13 years after Count Bernadotte's assassination.

Bunche's pioneering role both as a scholar in African Studies as well as an international civil servant contributing to the UN's role in the decolonization processes on the African continent created a legacy, one which is also reflected in the existence of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies at The City University of New York. Bunche was honoured on the occasion of what would have been his hundredth birthday by a series of activities in 2003 and 2004, including a commemorative conference held at the University of California at Los Angeles, where Bunche was an under-

graduate in the 1920s. This volume publishes some of the (at times slightly updated) papers then presented, in order “to situate Bunche within African-American intellectual history and within the focused world of the UN’s critical role in the end of European empires in sub-Saharan Africa”, as the editors state in their introduction (x). The decision to ignore Bunche’s role in the Middle East and the Suez crisis seems a bit obscure, since these were other major reference points in his long career and service. Why it took six years to publish without the editors even making the minimum changes required during such a delay (at least one of the authors has since passed away without any acknowledgement in the volume) is also questionable. Why the Ralph Bunche Institute seems to have not been involved in this project and remains completely invisible also provokes some curiosity.

All these critical observations aside, the contributions to this volume paint a colourful picture of a man and his time and the environment in which he operated and which his activities impacted. The cover photo, showing Bunche in conversation with Kwame Nkrumah during Nkrumah’s visit as prime minister of Ghana to New York in 1958, as well as the inside photo of Bunche at a press conference in the company of the Congolese Premier Patrice Lumumba at the latter’s residence in July 1960, testify to the prominent exposure Bunche had. The ten chapters in this book – including ones by authors who had had the opportunity to interact with Bunche personally, or at least were in other ways closely related to and inspired by Bunche’s life – often provide insights beyond the person into the wider socio-political contexts in which he operated. The volume, therefore, is more than a personal homage. It ventures into fascinating facets of contemporary history with regard to the state of the art of African Studies in the US in the 1930s and 1940s and the emergence of the UN system and its role in Africa during parts of the mid-1940s to the early 1960s.

As a student exposed to the works of Melville J. Herskovits, Bronislaw Malinowski and Isaac Shapera, among others, Ralph Bunche displayed the ambiguities of a radically minded Afro-American inspired by anti-imperialists who at the same time tended towards pragmatism. This obvious tension, if not discrepancy, is sensitively observed and elaborated on in some of the five chapters in the first part, “Bunche the Africanist Intellectual”. The four chapters in the second part, “Bunche the Statesman for Africa”, are just as enlightening and thoughtful. Aside from an overview on his role in establishing the UN trusteeship, the section concentrates exclusively on Bunche’s role in the Congo, including the view of a colleague in charge of the local UN logistics at that time. It is a tragic story of failure.

Bunche’s interaction with Lumumba highlights a mismatch due mainly to clashes in the personal chemistry, suspicion on both sides and miscom-

munication. This escalated into a toxic personal relationship characterized by animosity and mutual contempt. The unfortunate role played by the Swedish commander of the UN military operations, who was never able to relate to the African realities on the ground, added to this recipe for disaster. The resulting constellation ended in deadly consequences for Lumumba and one of the biggest mission failures in the history of the United Nations. The subtitle of Crawford Young's illuminating chapter "Ralph Bunche and Patrice Lumumba" reads "The Fatal Encounter", and Young goes on to opine that "the flow of information that shaped their understandings was so completely at odds that one might imagine that they were engaged in wholly separate settings" (129).

This is a collection of easily readable essays, often based more on personal reflections by scholars involved in related areas than on rigorous academic analysis. The volume focuses on only some aspects of Bunche's scholarly and diplomatic careers as an Africanist during the 1930s and 1940s and his involvement as a UN diplomat in the decolonization processes of the African continent during the 1950s and early 1960s. It is not flawless and at times the details border on sloppy – for example, through the absence of a proper biographical summary of Bunche to the extent that curious readers are not even able to learn details about his date of birth. This is nonetheless a timely and noteworthy tribute in recognition of an outstanding Afro-American with an exceptional career, who notably contributed as much to the state of the art of African Studies in the US as he did to the transition to independence on the African continent, even though at times without a very positive outcome, as the sad story of the Congo illustrates.

- Henning Melber