Dag Hammarskjöld became Secretary-General of the United Nations on 31 March 1953 following the resignation of Trygve Lie. He was ultimately elected as a compromise candidate about whom little was known.\(^1\) An economist, he had been Swedish Under-Secretary for Finance (1935-1947), before moving to the Foreign Affairs Ministry. His nominators felt he would prove a restrained and sound administrator, preferable to an outspoken political leader.\(^2\) The Americans, who bluntly asked “Who is this guy?”,\(^3\) set out to gather a dossier of information on him. It revealed “… a Swedish civil service aristocrat, gifted administratively, unobtrusive rather than flamboyant, a brilliant technician, an executant rather than political leader, and, some feared, a compromiser rather than fighter”.\(^4\) Carl Schürman, the Netherlands representative at the UN, mentioned that it was

... the wish of the Big Powers to see – after Trygve Lie who had taken a strong position on several questions – at the head of the Secretariat someone who would concentrate mainly on the administrative problems and who would abstain from public statements on the political conduct of the Organization. Such a careful and colourless official they thought to have found in Dag Hammarskjöld.\(^5\)

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\(^1\) Lester Pearson (Canada), nominated by France and Great Britain, had gained the most votes, but was vetoed by the Soviet Union because of his stance on the Korean War. Stanislaw Skreszewski (Poland), supported by the Soviet Union, and the General Romulo (Philippines), nominated by the US, did not enjoy wide support. France and Great Britain then proposed that Hammarskjöld be considered. See Brian Urquhart, \textit{Hammarskjöld} (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1972), at p. 11.


\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) Ibid.

\(^5\) Urquhart, \textit{supra} note 1, at p. 15.
Within the Swedish government Hammarskjöld was regarded as an economic expert and technician rather than a politician. It was concluded that “Hammarskjöld was elected because he was assumed to be without ambition or assertiveness. It was believed that he was adept at not giving offence”.

Hammarskjöld was an attractive choice to the Western powers. He had written openly against Marxism as an economic and political ideology, and the Soviets had heated exchanges with him when he served as Swedish Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. Both the UK and the US had regarded him as having very pro-Western views. It thus came as a surprise to some that he was elected Secretary-General with the support of the Soviet Union. The presumed reason for this Soviet acquiescence was the internal turmoil created by the death of Joseph Stalin on 5 March 1953. Stalin had eliminated or marginalized any clear successor and, in the power struggle that followed, it was difficult for Soviet Representative Andrei Vishinsky to get any clear instructions. Hammarskjöld’s name was proposed immediately following Vishinsky’s return from Moscow with directions to push for a new “peace offensive” and his “happiness” with the nomination was promptly declared.

The Great Powers were only partially right in their estimates of Hammarskjöld. He would prove himself more than willing to immerse himself in political affairs, using the office of Secretary-General on many high-level diplomatic initiatives aimed at mediation and conflict resolution. However, he would also use his administrative skills to reorganize the UN Secretariat, cutting back in a number of areas. Secretariat support for the UN human rights programme was affected more than any other sector. This article examines Hammarskjöld’s attitude towards human rights in the broader context of his other activities as Secretary-General. It concludes that his policies of de-emphasizing the UN human rights programme were not justified by the reasons generally attributed to him.

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8 Zacher, *supra* note 6, at p. 10: “Dag Hammarskjöld was culturally and politically a Westerner and a European. His own adherence to the values of the West had a deep foundation in his Christian religion and his study of Western history and philosophy.”
10 See Zacher, *supra* note 6, at pp. 18-19 for a brief treatment of his rejection of Marxism, and Lash, *supra* note 2, at p. 9 for a discussion of the incident involving the exchange of curt correspondence regarding two Swedish planes being shot down over the Baltic by Soviet forces.
12 Urquhart, *supra* note 1, at p. 12.