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POSTCOLONIAL CONFLICT AND THE QUESTION OF GENOCIDE

THE NIGERIA-BIAFRA WAR, 1967-1970



EDITED BY
A. DIRK MOSES AND LASSE HEERTEN

Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide

This volume is the first comprehensive and balanced historical account of the momentous Nigeria-Biafra war. It offers a multi-perspectival treatment of the conflict that explores issues such as local experiences of victims, the massive relief campaigns by humanitarian NGOs and international organizations like the Red Cross, the actions of foreign powers with interests in the conflict and the significance of the international public sphere, in which the propaganda and public relations war about the question of genocide was waged.

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The Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967–1970

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The Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967–1970

**Edited by A. Dirk Moses
and Lasse Heerten**

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Introduction



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1 The Nigeria-Biafra War

Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide

Lasse Heerten and A. Dirk Moses

Introduction

The Nigeria-Biafra war that raged between 1967 and 1970 made headlines around the world, above all for the major famine caused by the Nigerian state's (Federal Military Government, FMG) blockade of the self-proclaimed separatist region of Biafra in the country's east. The crisis drove prominent academics, activists and journalists to mobilize public opinion, prompted a major international relief operation to bring supplies to starving civilians and exercised the minds of statesmen and -women from the great powers to the United Nations (UN).¹ It was a genuinely global event. Whether in its estimated one to three million deaths, its implications for secessionist movements and political stability in Africa, its role as a crucible of contemporary humanitarianism or as subject matter for famous African novelists, the war was widely regarded as a watershed in the postcolonial global order.² Throughout the 1970s, scholars published energetically on the multifarious issues raised by the conflict, often comparing it with the bloody but successful secession of East Pakistan (Bangladesh) from Pakistan in 1971.³ And yet, at least internationally, it was largely forgotten by the end of the decade, overtaken by the grotesque events in Cambodia and elsewhere.⁴

The war is relevant for genocide studies in four ways. In the first place, famine was intrinsic to the war's operational unfolding, and accusations of genocide-by-famine were elemental to the Biafran propaganda campaign, prompting an international debate about the application of the term. Second, two of the field's prominent figures—Leo Kuper and Robert Melson—observed the war as scholars of Africa and drew formative conclusions about the nature of genocide that effectively excluded the conflict from the canon of twentieth-century genocides. Third, just as many defeated Igbo claimed that their genocidal experiences were denied during the war, so they have campaigned since then for its recognition and inclusion in the genocide studies field and in popular consciousness.⁵ Finally,

genocide studies have recently taken colonial and international ‘turns’ that draw attention to the (post)colonial, imperial and global contexts in which genocidal violence is embedded.⁶

In historiography more broadly, scholars working on postwar humanitarianism have rediscovered the Nigeria-Biafra war, using western-based archives of civil society organizations, states, the UN and International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva (ICRC).⁷ Many are now focusing on the 1970s as the ‘breakthrough’ decade for human rights and humanitarianism, and the global concern about the war features as part of this research agenda.⁸ The visual component of the global moment called ‘Biafra’ is also an important object of inquiry.⁹ Still others are interested in the norms that guide the foreign policies of states in debates about humanitarian intervention in which Biafra figures as a divisive case study.¹⁰ Recently, the Nigeria-Biafra war is beginning to rate a mention in surveys of postcolonial Africa.¹¹

That the subject of Biafra and genocide is in the air is also indicated by the publication of Chinua Achebe’s blend of memoir and history, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*, a few months before he died in March 2013, two years after the death of the wartime Biafran leader, Chukwemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu. The famous novelist had worked for the Biafran cause during the war, and the genocide issue appears throughout the book. Commenting on Achebe’s views, another famous Nigerian author, Wole Soyinka, whose imprisonment during the war by the FMG is recorded in *The Man Died* (1971), concurred that Biafrans had indeed been victims of genocide even though he did not support Biafran secession.¹² Literary signs of a renewed interest in the conflict were also discernible before the publication of the late Achebe’s last book. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, a novel about the travails of a Biafran family during the war, won a major literary prize in 2007 and was the subject of a British-Nigerian co-produced motion picture.¹³ The recent excision of the southern Sudan from the Republic Sudan also reawakened interest in the Nigeria-Biafra war by drawing attention to the stability of postcolonial Africa’s borders and the possibility of secession.¹⁴ These discussions tied in with a longer debate about postcolonial self-determination, in which the Eritrean national movement, leading to the state’s independence from the Ethiopian federation in 1991, also featured prominently.¹⁵ The rise of the northern Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram also raised questions about Nigerian federalism and the legacy of the Nigeria-Biafra war.¹⁶

This resurgence of memorizations of the conflict in the literary and cultural sphere dovetails with the currently growing interest in issues of trauma and memory raised by the conflict. Nigerian scholars in particular have started working on its multiple legacies, many of whom are

personally affected by the conflict's consequences. If anything, memories of the war have recently gained in relevance in Nigerian politics, as underlined by the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), a Southeastern Nigerian secessionist movement founded in 1999.¹⁷ Despite the growth of public and scholarly interest, however, sound and comprehensive primary source-based accounts of the history of the civil war are still lacking.¹⁸

For these reasons, and in view of the war's fiftieth anniversary in 2017, we decided it was timely to gather scholars working in these domains to contribute to this book. We present 19 chapters that we hope will stimulate the scholarly discussion about the war and genocide question, while maintaining sufficient distance from the hornets' nest of sensitivities that the war continues to generate. As already noted, the genocide claim remains as salient today as it was in the later 1960s.¹⁹ All too often, the temptation to restage the war's propaganda campaigns—and express the accompanying emotion of outrage—seems difficult to resist, whether by Nigerians for or against Biafra, or by westerners sympathetic to one side or the other, leading to partisan advocacy rather than balanced analyses.²⁰ To that end, proving whether genocide took place is not the purpose of our undertaking, although we suggest alternative ways to conceptualize the issue. Our aim, to adapt the expression coined by the Australian historian Raymond Evans, is to write a book, not to catch a crook: we wish to historicize the discourse about genocide and Biafra.²¹ Specifically, we are interested in mapping how contemporaries understood the humanitarian and criminal dimensions of the war, and how and why victims were constructed as objects of identification and empathy in relation to the emerging international archive of human catastrophe like the Holocaust. Moreover, in this chapter, we highlight the relevance of the Nigeria-Biafra war for genocide studies, and suggest how the assumptions dominating the field could be re-conceptualized in view of the issues raised by the conflict.

Intrinsic to the conflicting perceptions of the war was the 'politics of naming'.²² There is a considerable semantic and political difference between labelling the conflict as an insurgency, as the FMG initially did, as a civil war or as genocide.²³ An understanding of the conflict as genocidal was principally promoted by the Biafrans and their supporters, and these claims have become elemental to Biafran constructions of national identity. Had the secessionists achieved their revolutionary project of national self-determination, we would probably call the conflict the Biafran war of liberation.²⁴ However, since Nigeria was, and remained, the recognized political entity within which the war was fought, the designation as 'Nigerian Civil War' gained the most currency, at least in the Anglophone world.²⁵ Here, we primarily use the term 'Nigeria-Biafra war' to reflect

that these were the two warring parties. Even if Biafra never became a recognized state in international law and politics, the internationalization of the conflict turned it into a recognized term for contemporaries around the globe. Moreover, for many living in the secessionist state, ‘Biafra’ began to signify the political entity within which they lived—and with which many identified—and still do.²⁶

This book is an augmentation of a special issue of the *Journal of Genocide Research* published in 2014.²⁷ We solicited new chapters on the experience of Biafran women and girls in the war, on its traumatic impact, on the roles of Russia and France, and the reaction of West Germans and African-Americans. Even then, the book does not purport to offer comprehensive coverage of the war. With more time and space, we would have included contributions dealing in more detail with the war’s prelude and the 1966 massacres against Igbos in northern Nigeria, on its military and social dimensions and further case studies on the role and impact of international actors. As it stands, this collection represents current historiography’s focus on the conflict’s international history and legacy.²⁸

The Nigeria-Biafra War: Evolution and Course of Events

As a unified territory, Nigeria had been created in 1914 through the amalgamation of Britain’s west African colonial possessions. After independence in 1960, Nigeria had widely been considered one of sub-Saharan Africa’s most promising postcolonial states. The potential for development seemed boundless in the democracy of roughly 45 million people, where large amounts of high quality oil reserves had been discovered shortly before the end of colonial rule.²⁹ Two British legacies combined to impair the evolution of a stable political system and social relations, however; colonial rule divided the population along ethnic lines but incorporated the defined groups in a centrally governed federal state.³⁰ The territorial and ethnic borders that marked Nigerian colonial society were still in place when the country achieved independence. Established as a federation, postcolonial Nigeria was split up into three main regions, each dominated by one or two ethnic groups: Hausa-Fulani in the North, Yoruba in the West, and Igbos in the East; hundreds of other ethnic minorities of different size comprised the rest of the population. In 1963, the federation was separated into four states when the multiethnic Midwestern Region was carved out of parts of the Western State. Partly parallel with these political borders, what many perceived as a religious divide cut through the territory: the south was predominantly Christian, whereas the north was widely Islamic-dominated.³¹

The optimism of decolonization begun to crumble by the mid-1960s. Paradoxically, the growing participatory options for the population

weakened the postcolonial democracy. At the regional level, a system of patronage was created along ethnic lines. At the national level, the three ‘mega-tribes’ competed for state resources that had become increasingly lucrative, thanks to the revenues from oil and other commodities.³² A deepening rift severed the north and the southern regions. The Eastern Region, geographically in the country’s southeast, was increasingly isolated in particular. Federal and national elections developed into fiercely fought battles for power, and ballot rigging and other forms of manipulation were omnipresent.³³

In January 1966, an Igbo-dominated putsch by a group of army officers initiated a series of coups and countercoups that led to the installation of military rule.³⁴ The first coup was forestalled after the rebellious officers killed a number of high-ranking officials, among them Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto, one of the principle figures in the northern leadership. The remaining rump cabinet transferred state power to the highest-ranking officer, Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, General Commanding Officer of the Nigerian Army. The new head of state and most of his advisors were Igbo. Many in the north considered Ironsi’s government as a continuation of the southern-instigated coup and, in the last days of July 1966, a group of northern officers and soldiers killed him in a countercoup. The remaining officers selected Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon as the new head of state. The coup d’état was a success—except in the Igbo-dominated Eastern Region, where military Governor General Ojukwu remained in power.³⁵

Repeated outbursts of violence between June and October 1966 peaked in massacres against Igbos living in the *Sabon Gari*, the ‘foreigners quarters’ of northern Nigerian towns. These riots claimed the lives of tens of thousands according to estimates. Whether representatives of the Nigerian state systematically organized the killings remains disputed, the Nigerian government failed to halt the riots at the very least.³⁶ This violence drove a stream of more than one million refugees to the Eastern Region, the ‘homeland’ of the Igbos’ diasporic community. The massacres were one of the key events in the unfolding of the civil war. Amidst rampant fears among the Igbos in particular, the Eastern Region began to call for more autonomy.³⁷ Ever since the end of colonialism had become imaginable, the leaderships of all regions had at times pondered secession.³⁸ Now, after failed negotiations, this dramatic step was finally taken. On 30 May 1967, the east’s political leadership around Ojukwu declared its independence as the Republic of Biafra, named after the Bight of Biafra, a bay on the country’s Atlantic coast. Hostilities erupted a few weeks later. On 6 July, the Nigeria-Biafra war began with the advance of federal troops into secessionist territory.³⁹

The military power of both sides was limited because of lacking funds, personnel, discipline and education. The federal army was still better equipped even though the secessionist forces comprised a large part of the former Nigerian officer corps, which had been dominated by Igbo.⁴⁰ Despite spectacular offensives from both sides, the military situation was a stalemate for the most part.⁴¹ The FMG's major strategic advantage was not its military force but its diplomatic status: internationally recognized statehood. That the FMG could argue that it was a sovereign government facing an 'insurgency' was decisive: foreign governments, in particular most of those organized in the Organization of African Unity (OAU), considered the conflict an internal matter. The regional organization principally responsible for mediation thus ensured that no step was taken that might be interpreted as recognizing the Biafran government. The latter, in turn, soon rejected any OAU intervention.⁴²

Nigeria's secured diplomatic status was also crucial for the most significant development in the war's early stages: the FMG's decision to blockade the secessionist state. To cut off Biafra's lines of communication with the outside world, air- and seaports were blockaded, foreign currency transactions banned, incoming mail and telecommunication blocked and international business obstructed. Even with its limited resources, Nigeria was able to organize a successful blockade without gaping holes or long interruptions, mostly because other governments or companies were ready to acquiesce to Lagos handling the matter.⁴³ Moreover, as a recognized government, the Gowon regime also did not meet any substantial difficulties in obtaining weapons on international markets. Due to their 'rebel' status, by contrast, the Biafrans were forced to use black-market channels to buy arms. The secessionists' efforts were also hampered by Nigeria's overnight change of currency in early 1968, which rendered worthless millions of Nigerian pound notes in the Biafran treasury.⁴⁴

The most important third party to the conflict was the United Kingdom (UK). As the former colonial power, Whitehall had usually supplied the federal army with weaponry. Even so, Her Majesty's Government (HMG) initially wavered in its decision about which side to support, leading the FMG to turn to the Soviet Union. Moscow, hoping to gain a foothold in a major west African state, began to supply the federal side with arms.⁴⁵ Now afraid of losing its influence, London began to dispatch arms deliveries.⁴⁶ Nigeria's oil—most of which lay within Biafran territory—played a significant role in the evolution of Whitehall's policy line. When war broke out in Nigeria, London was concerned about its oil supply because Arab states limited their oil shipments to states supporting Israel after the Six-Day War between Israel and Arab countries in 1967. Despite initial leanings towards Biafra, most oil companies preferred to continue dealing

with the federal government—and the HMG soon followed suit, firmly opting for a federal solution, not least because it expected that this would keep the oil flowing out of Nigeria.⁴⁷ The British position also effectively determined the policy of the Cold War superpower across the Atlantic. To secure their transatlantic ‘special relationship’, the US government, in particular the State Department, followed the British line, although not supplying arms to the FMG.⁴⁸

Realizing their slim chances on the battlefield, the Biafran leadership moved the conflict into the propaganda domain.⁴⁹ However, the situation looked no more promising for Biafra’s propagandists in the international sphere. Governments of the Global South were particularly hesitant: as many of them faced separatist movements at home, they were adamantly opposed to what they understood as illegitimate secession rather than as the legitimate exercise of the Biafrans’ right to self-determination. As Brad Simpson argues in this volume, the Biafran campaign showcased the ambivalence about how the postcolonial international system dealt with self-determination projects, and left an equally ambivalent legacy. Since its inception in 1963 in the wake of the Congo crisis and the attempted secession of Katanga, the OAU’s guiding principle was the rejection of separatism. With the defence of postcolonial sovereignty deeply ingrained into its fabric, the Biafran campaign fell on deaf ears in African inter-governmental circles with only a few exceptions.⁵⁰

Accordingly, despite the secessionists’ intensive efforts, the conflict did not engender much international interest during the first year of fighting even though casualties were substantial from the outset. Throughout the hostilities, federal aircraft shelled towns and other targets on Biafran territory, frequently inflicting numerous civilian casualties. The population in the war zone was particularly threatened in moments of instability produced by military advances and setbacks. In August 1967, Biafran forces launched a major offensive, crossed the Niger and marched through the Midwestern State towards Lagos. But, failing to capitalize on the momentum, the Biafrans came to a halt 100 km east of the capital and then withdrew after federal forces retaliated. Violence against civilians broke out in border towns that experienced double occupation. Ethnic minorities in Asaba, for example, considered themselves relatives of the Igbos and were treated as sympathizers of the ‘rebels’; they became victims of massacres and rape by federal soldiers. As S. Elizabeth Bird and Fraser Ottanelli show in this volume, the memory of the Asaba massacres is still alive although the Nigerian state has repressed publication of the terrible events and its commemoration; for many in Asaba, the memory of the massacre remains painful and stands in the way of inter-ethnic reconciliation.⁵¹

Despite Nigeria's efforts to suppress reports about such events, the deepening humanitarian crisis of the Biafran population thrust the conflict into international spotlight. Already by the end of the year, the first signs were discernible that Biafra would be threatened by serious food shortage; the Biafran population was heading for a famine that could cost hundreds of thousands of human lives. Then, in early May 1968, Biafra's principal port town and remaining access to the sea, Port Harcourt, fell to federal forces. The secessionist state was turned into a landlocked enclave. With federal forces tightening the noose around the secessionist territory, the shrinking Biafran enclave soon encompassed only the heart of Igboland. At the same time, this territory had to absorb increasing numbers of people fleeing federal offensives. After a year of fighting, the rump state was overpopulated, its people impoverished, lacking supplies, food and medicine.⁵² As Gloria Chuku shows in her chapter in this volume, Igbo women and girls were at the forefront of the struggle, which transformed gender relations in that society.⁵³

By then, ever-more religious groups and humanitarian organizations were alerted to the conflict, due in large measure to the presence of western missionaries. These religious ties were conduits for the transnational networks through which the conflict would be turned into an object of international humanitarian concern. For many Christian clerics and lay-people, the war seemed to be a cosmic drama fought between a vulnerable Christian Biafra and a northern Muslim-dominated federal Nigeria. Their shared Christian religion was one of the main channels to empathize with the African 'Other' in the secessionist enclave.⁵⁴

The growing international interest in the conflict generated by the humanitarian crisis became a major factor of change in political and military terms, seemingly representing a political gain for Biafra. In April 1968, Julius Nyerere's Tanzania recognized the secessionist state, citing humanitarian concerns as the ground for this decision. Gabon, Ivory Coast and Zambia followed in the ensuing months, a year later 'Papa Doc' Chevalier's Haiti. On morally ambiguous grounds, the *Estado Novo* dictatorship in Portugal and the South African and Rhodesian apartheid regimes clandestinely supported the Biafran secessionists as well, ostensibly to weaken one of sub-Saharan Africa's biggest states.⁵⁵ The De Gaulle government also backed Biafra. In Paris, postcolonial power politics conjoined with efforts to ride on the wave of domestic humanitarian concern. France delivered arms to Biafra, mostly channelled through Houphouët-Boigny's Ivory Coast. Projecting its postcolonial power through the ties of *Françafrique*, Paris aimed to weaken Nigeria, not only for its close British ties, but also because it was the largest and potentially most powerful state in France's principal sphere of influence in west Africa.⁵⁶ To a lesser degree,

Peking, a few years into the Sino-Soviet split, also supported Biafra, partly to oppose Russia.⁵⁷ The airlifts of aid to Biafra, partly used for humanitarian, partly for military purposes, prevented Biafra's fall for months.⁵⁸

These various sources were also insufficient to tip the scale in favour of the secessionists. The military standoff remained for another one-and-a-half years after the increase of international interest in mid-1968. Breakthrough attempts were orchestrated by both sides. They invariably failed, at least until late 1969. By then, Nigerian strategic adjustments and changes in the military leadership ensured a successful final onslaught on the Biafran enclave.⁵⁹ In early 1970, Ojukwu and some of his followers fled to the Ivory Coast. After two and a half years of fighting, the remaining secessionist regime surrendered on 15 January 1970.⁶⁰

The Relief Operation, Representations of Humanitarian Crisis and Third-World Suffering

In the summer of 1968, contemporaries around the globe witnessed the emergence of a new third world icon: the 'Biafran babies'. Readers and audiences in the West in particular were confronted with photographs of starving children in the secessionist Republic of Biafra, which made headlines for months.⁶¹ For various commentators, the Biafran crisis marks the onset of a new age of humanitarian catastrophe broadcast by modern media: the 'age of televised disaster' began with the Biafran War.⁶² As the 'first major disaster that was brought into the living rooms of the world by television . . . [it] challenged indifference to faraway suffering', explained Aengus Finucane, a founder of the Irish NGO Africa Concern.⁶³ The war was the first postcolonial conflict to engender a transnational wave of humanitarian concern. The ICRC, national Red Cross bodies and a number of religious organizations organized airlifts to bring relief supplies into Biafra.⁶⁴ 'Biafra committees' were founded across the West, raised funds for the humanitarian operation and lobbied governments and international organizations to intensify their relief efforts.⁶⁵

Some of these committees evolved into NGOs that now feature in the prominent non-governmental sector of human rights politics. The most well-known example is the French *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF). The NGO developed from the *Comité de Lutte contre le Génocide au Biafra*, formed by a group of young French Red Cross volunteers during the conflict, which, in 1971, joined forces with the medical journal *Tonus* to send doctors to famine- and civil war-ridden East Pakistan—a re-run of Biafra, as many back then thought.⁶⁶ Making use of the channels of the mass media age, this new breed of activists believed in what became known as *témoignage*, the outspoken public disclosure of what humanitarians and

journalists had witnessed in the field. Accordingly, these ardent believers in the humanitarian cause had to break ranks with the organization that stood for humanitarian idealism since its inception a century before: the ICRC. With Biafra, a new era, the age of *sans-frontiérisme* had begun.⁶⁷

The alleged rift between outspoken French doctors and an overly cautious ICRC has turned into a myth of origins of this new movement.⁶⁸ As Marie-Luce Desgrandchamps deftly shows in her contribution to this volume, these conflicts were based not only on diverging principals, but also different realms of experience: it was an entirely different matter whether these events were analyzed from a Genevan office or witnessed in a Biafran hospital. The humanitarian workers in the field directly experienced the situation, but lacked the general picture of international policy experts. However, contrary to what MSF mythology would have us believe, ICRC headquarters were not entirely reluctant to speak out against atrocities reported by their staff. But due to policy considerations and, in some instances, simply communications mismanagement, the organization's public statements about such instances were more cautious than those of more overtly partisan pro-Biafran organizations not bound to the ICRC's principles of neutrality. Yet, still, ICRC structures allowed for some leeway. The organization was not as clearly bound to the principal of nation-state sovereignty as the UN, for instance. In UN bodies, federal Nigerian sovereignty was not up for a discussion.⁶⁹

The Biafran crisis was also connected to wider changes in the relief sector. In particular, it resulted in a massive spending increase through state funds and public donations, leading to the growth and proliferation of NGOs. As argued by Kevin O'Sullivan in his chapter here, the conflict accordingly needs to be situated within complex sets of historical change *and* continuity.⁷⁰ O'Sullivan's contribution also helps to inscribe the visual landscape of the Biafran crisis into longer strands of images of and paternalistic relationships with the third world—and their connection with transformations in humanitarian politics. As he argues, in the aid operation for Biafra, 'imperial responsibilities and care for far-off communities' were re-packaged for a postcolonial era: 'The vision of an inclusive "common humanity" the NGOs espoused was in practice rooted in a very Western understanding of humanitarian responsibilities and a very Western image of the third world'.⁷¹

As O'Sullivan also shows, humanitarian representations of the conflict led to a 'flattening out the complexity of Biafran and Nigerian society in favour of the moral imperative of humanitarian aid'.⁷² Nonetheless, despite the dominant tendency to de-politicize understandings of the conflict, some of Biafra's international supporters formulated their activism along overtly political lines. Brian McNeil's chapter demonstrates that members of one

of the biggest ad hoc organizations that came to life during the Biafran crisis, the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, spoke out not only against genocide but also for Biafran self-determination. His close reading of the sources shows how intimately intertwined the notions of genocide and self-determination became in the committee's perception of the crisis. For them, any negation of a Biafran state amounted to genocide.⁷³ By contrast, according to James Farquharson's account in this volume, African-American leaders and commentators split on the issue, though most supported a united Nigeria while deploring intra-African violence.⁷⁴

The spheres of a self-proclaimed apolitical moral concern and politics were much more blurred than many advocates of humanitarian intervention at the time would have admitted. Accordingly, Biafra needs to be situated within the complex histories of humanitarianism, ideas about sovereignty, genocide, human rights and the right to self-determination, as well as the rise of NGOs in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Biafra, Holocaust Analogies and the History of Genocide

After the 1966 massacres, allegations of genocide against federal Nigeria—in particular, casting Muslims as 'savages'—became the core of secessionist propaganda. Biafra's campaign aimed at its own population and at possible allies abroad. The Biafran leadership was confronted with the task of uniting the heterogeneous peoples of the secessionist state: the nation of 'Biafra' still had to be turned into an imaginable community.⁷⁵ Only roughly half of the 14 million inhabitants were Igbo, the rest belonging to different ethnic minorities. Roy Doron's detailed study of Biafran propaganda reconstructs how this message was formulated and tightly controlled by strict guidelines. In particular, political cartoons—reproduced here—played a crucial role in disseminating this message to a largely illiterate population.⁷⁶ Some foreign commentators observed that this fear of genocide to be authentically experienced, as Joseph C. McKenna wrote in *Foreign Affairs* in 1969:

Unable now to feel secure away from their native soil, the Ibos saw themselves as the target of genocide. The trauma induced by the September [1966] riots, coming on the heels of the violence in May and July, cannot be overestimated. Secession had become almost inevitable.⁷⁷

Further elevating the genocide reproaches, the Eastern, later the Biafran, leadership frequently made comparisons to the Holocaust to draw attention to their cause.⁷⁸ This analogy originated in ethnological genealogies that cast the Igbos as the 'Jews of Africa', even as one of Israel's

'lost tribes'. The Biafran leadership drew on this representation that many Eastern Nigerians had adopted as their self-perception. Combined with the genocide charge, the analogy was used by the leadership to secure the support of the population, and to build loyalty to Biafra by emphasizing the threat by a common enemy. The 'Jews of Africa' envisioned their state like an 'African Israel', a new nation born of genocidal violence.⁷⁹

Soon, the growing cast of Biafra's supporters around the globe adopted this rhetoric, further elaborating it in the process. After the publication of images of starving Biafran children in the Western media, analogies and comparisons with the Holocaust abounded. Biafran refugee camps were described as 'the camp of Belsen at its liberation', 'Mauthausens of famine' or as a 'Buchenwald for children'.⁸⁰ Auschwitz, the most well-known site of mass annihilation, was repeatedly referenced, although the camps that had been liberated by Western allied troops were most frequently invoked. Photos of them had circulated in Western media since 1945. The connections between Biafra and the Holocaust were also a product of representation strategies. Biafran propagandists and many of the secessionists' sympathizers around the globe tried hard to secure what they deemed the 'right' interpretation of the 'facts'.⁸¹ To a large degree, the connection between the humanitarian crises Biafra and the Holocaust was made on a visual level, at least in the eye of Western observers: contemporaries were reminded of the photos of the liberation of the camps, which they increasingly understood as denoting genocide, by the images of emaciated civil war victims.⁸²

A symbiotic relationship of identification developed with Jewish activists and organizations, as it did for Bernard Kouchner, the figurehead of *sans-frontiérisme* whose grandfather was killed in Auschwitz.⁸³ These networks were vital for the establishment and coordination of transnational Biafra protest. Biafran linkages to Jews during the Holocaust were extended to contemporary Israelis. As Zach Levey demonstrates here, Biafrans identified closely with Israel as a similarly beleaguered modernizing nation surrounded by backward, Muslim neighbours. Inspiringly, it had won a stunning victory against them in the Six Days War in 1967. Biafran leader Ojukwu announced that 'Like the Jews . . . we saw in the birth of our young Republic the gateway to freedom and survival'. Many Israelis reciprocated, viewing the Biafrans in similar terms and pressuring their government to aid the secessionist struggle in various ways. They thought genocide was taking place.⁸⁴

For many in West Germany, the genocidal past was an obligation to act in the present.⁸⁵ Günter Grass felt it was a particular responsibility of his fellow countrymen to react:

As Germans, we should know what we say when we use the word 'genocide'. This biggest of all crimes weighs heavily on the past of

our people. Not moralizing condescension, but the knowledge of Auschwitz, Treblinka and Belsen obligates us to speak out publicly against the culprits and accessories of the genocide in Biafra. . . . [S]ilence—we had to learn that as well—turns into complicity.⁸⁶

Many West German commentators agreed that ‘after Auschwitz, to which Biafra had been rightfully likened’, the Federal Republic of Germany bore ‘a special responsibility’.⁸⁷

Many felt that this responsibility was not West Germany’s alone. Bishop Heinrich Tenhumberg, head of the Roman Catholic Church’s liaison office with the Bonn government, explained that the ‘principle of non-intervention is outdated in our time when the protection of fundamental human rights is at stake’. ‘Civilized states’ cannot remain passive in a world after Auschwitz, given that modern communication technology automatically transformed internal conflicts into international crises.⁸⁸ The international community of states would need to react, the weekly magazine *Der Spiegel* argued as well. The UN has ‘defined what is happening in Biafra as criminally liable. The Nazi genocide of the Jews prompted the world organisation in 1946 [sic] to declare genocide an international crime’. Yet the organization lacked the instruments to enforce this norm in practice. Without an international court, ‘the genocide allegations against Nigeria would have to be judged by a Nigerian court’, commentators pointed out. The UN Convention on the Punishment and Prevention of Genocide (UNCG) remained toothless.⁸⁹ In view of Biafra, the lesson to be drawn from the Holocaust was to create international norms to prevent similar crimes in the present and the future.

The associations with the Holocaust became especially virulent in the United Kingdom. As Karen Smith notes in her chapter, because of the entanglements with the former British colony, discussions about the Nigeria-Biafra war were particularly intensive in Britain. By summer 1968, Harold Wilson’s Labour government had come under heavy rhetorical fire.⁹⁰ Wilson’s critics in the Biafra lobby, in the press and in the two Houses of Parliament, accused Whitehall of complicity in genocide. In *Biafra Story* (1969), which sold out in weeks, the staunchly pro-Biafran journalist and later author of bestselling crime novels Frederick Forsyth explained that Britain was culpable for supporting Nigeria’s genocidal persecution of the Biafrans that resembled the treatment of the Jews in World War II.⁹¹ Auberon Waugh argued that the ‘mass starvation to death of innocent civilians’ was ‘the most hideous crime against humanity in which England has ever been involved’.⁹² Wilson was taken aback by the criticism, and in his memoirs expressed grudging admiration for the Biafran propaganda, writing that it ‘secured a degree of moral control over Western broadcasting systems, with a success unparalleled in the history of communications in modern democratic societies’.⁹³

So far, genocide studies scholars have not delved very deeply into the significance of the ideas of genocide and the Holocaust for the perception of other conflicts.⁹⁴ Scholars in the field have devoted more energy to identifying genocides in the past than in analyzing what historical effects the idea of genocide has had in the decades since its inception.⁹⁵ The Biafran case, which, according to a relatively widespread consensus, did not constitute genocide, hardly features in this scholarship, as we detail below. The conflict is also seldom commented upon in the vast historiography on the cultural memory of the Holocaust and its legacies.⁹⁶ Genocide allegations during the Nigeria-Biafra war—if mentioned at all—tend to be disregarded as irrelevant by arguing that they merely underline the weakness of genocide as a political and legal idea.⁹⁷ The salience of the cultural memory of the Holocaust in the internationalization of the humanitarian crisis in Biafra underlines that genocide studies should develop new methods to incorporate a diverse set of conflicts, even those that many nowadays would not understand to have constituted genocide, if only because many contemporaries thought they did.

Biafra and the Founding Assumptions of Genocide Studies

The field of genocide studies did not exist during the Nigeria-Biafra war. It started to crystallize only in the early 1980s and consolidated and developed in the 2000s, spurred by the wars of Yugoslav secession and the Rwandan genocide in 1994. The relevance of the war is that the field's founders were academics and graduate students at the time of its waging, and reflected on it in the later 1970s and 1980s as they debated definitions of genocide for social scientific research. In many ways, they were rowing against the tide, as these were also the decades when the Holocaust came into public and academic prominence as a supposedly singular or unique event. Engaging in comparative genocide studies, as the emerging field called itself, could be seen as heretical. Helen Fein recalls that her presentation about different national responses to Jewish persecution during the Holocaust, which included a comparison with the Armenian genocide, at the First International Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust in 1975, was regarded as 'radical' because 'the dominant position was that the Holocaust was unique, noncomparable and to some, non-explicable as a historical event—viewed as a mystifying or transcendent event'. This was a position that the sober sociologist Fein could not share, despite her personal commitment to Holocaust research.⁹⁸ As late as 1992, Robert Melson felt compelled to preface his *Revolution and Genocide* with the statement that the book's pairing of the Holocaust and Armenian genocide 'does not spring from a desire to trivialize the Holocaust by

spuriously universalizing human suffering and denying its unique and perhaps unfathomable characteristics'.⁹⁹ How genocide would be defined in relation to the Biafran case had profound implications for the field and study of postcolonial genocides generally. As we will see, the Holocaust-as-prototype-of-genocide came to shape these scholars' moral and political imaginations.

Melson's reasoning is particularly revealing because he was a *bona fide* Nigeria expert, having spent 1964 and 1965 in the country for his doctoral research on its labour movement. News of a Biafran friend's murder brought back traumatic memories of the Holocaust, which he had barely survived as a child in Poland. 'I could not help but make the connection between their experience and my own'. Biafrans were being killed purely for their identity: it was 'as if the twenty-some years after the Second World War had been compressed into a few minutes. The Holocaust monster was on the prowl again, and it was no use trying to escape its implications in Africa or elsewhere'.¹⁰⁰ He consequently supported their secessionist campaign. This initial moment of empathetic recognition soon passed, though, when he saw that the FMG did not intend to exterminate all Biafrans after its victory in 1970, and indeed apparently sought to integrate them into the state. 'The Nigerians were not Nazis, and the Ibos were not Jews'.¹⁰¹ This conflict could not be genocide because its messy script did not resemble the tidy dramaturgy of the Holocaust of utterly innocent victims and monstrous perpetrators bent on their total extermination.

Genocide, Melson intuited, needed to entail the attempt to destroy a group in its entirety. Accordingly, he criticized the UN genocide definition's criminalization of group destruction 'in whole or in part' for conflating what he called 'total' and 'partial genocides' (or 'genocides in part'). Unlike the Holocaust, Armenian and Cambodian genocides, which were cases of attempted total destruction by revolutionary regimes driven by redemptive ideologies, the Biafran and other cases were partial, meaning the aim was to 'coerce and alter' a group's identity and social status rather than to eliminate it, even though it exceeded massacres in scale and effect.¹⁰² Thus although he acknowledged that 'over a million Biafrans starved to death as a result of the deliberate Nigerian policy of blockade and disruption of agricultural life', the policy could not be called genocidal because the FMG policies 'did not include extermination of the Ibos'.¹⁰³ Melson also implied another feature intrinsic to genocide. Igbos were not being killed for ideological reasons or purely for their identity but because they were a party to a secessionist civil war. Not the product of a global ideology of racism, the Nigerian violence was rather a territorially contained conflict of self-determination resulting from the tensions of postcolonial state-building and modern nationalist ideology.

As an expert on African politics and later genocide, Melson would have been aware of Leo Kuper, an older scholar who also moved from African studies to genocide studies. He came to stand for the thesis that postcolonial political instability was caused by these states' internal ethnic pluralism, one close to Melson's own approach to ethnic communalism, which he thought was intensified by modernization processes.¹⁰⁴ Kuper distinguished, on the one hand, between genocides caused by ideological fanaticism in which victims were largely passive objects of phobic hatreds, destroyed for who they were, like the Holocaust (non-political genocide) and, on the other hand, conflicts that erupted from the quotidian power struggles within shaky polities in which people were destroyed for what they did (political genocide).¹⁰⁵ In his influential *Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century* (1981), Kuper briefly mentioned the Biafran conflict, particularly the 1966 massacres in the north before the civil war and famine, as a case of 'genocidal massacre', a new concept he introduced to the field; it performed the same qualifying function as Melson's distinction between total and partial genocide. He thought Biafran propaganda about genocide to be excessive and also noted that no attempt was made to exterminate the Igbo after their military defeat.¹⁰⁶

This style of reasoning was hegemonic within the founder generation of genocide studies in the 1980s and 1990s. In an early genocide anthology, Alan Berger summed up the consensus in his chapter entitled 'The Holocaust: The Ultimate and Archetypal Genocide', which observed that the Holocaust had 'come to be viewed as the paradigm of genocide'. The question of agency was central, echoing Kuper's distinction between political and non-political genocides: 'it was not *what* Jews did but rather *that* they were Jews which constituted their "crime"'.¹⁰⁷ The notion of political passivity was built into Irving Louis Horowitz's influential definition of genocide in his *Genocide, State Power and Mass Murder* (1976), one of the field's founding texts: 'Genocide is herein defined as a *structural and systematic destruction of innocent people by a state bureaucratic apparatus*'.¹⁰⁸ On this logic, the palpable political agency of Biafrans rendered dubious their claims to genocidal victimhood: they could not be innocent. What is more, the centrality of the state for genocide's perpetration also made it difficult to class as genocide the 1966 massacre of Igbo in northern Nigeria. Although many genocide scholars eschewed his arguments about the Holocaust's 'phenomenological uniqueness', Steven T. Katz's contention that 'the concept of genocide applies *only* where there is an actualized intention, however successfully carried out, to physically destroy an *entire* group' accurately reflected the field's assumptions.¹⁰⁹

This argument persists to the present day. Writing in an anthology on the Nigeria-Biafra war in 2013, Paul Bartrop, acting as gatekeeper to the

house of genocide studies, insisted that ‘until it can be demonstrated that their [the FMG] goal was the *total destruction* of the Igbo as a people, and not forcing the surrender of Biafra and its reincorporation into the Nigerian Federal Republic, caution must be exercised in concluding the genocide occurred’.¹¹⁰ In fact, neither for Raphael Lemkin, who coined the genocide concept, nor in international law is it necessary to show intended total destruction to demonstrate genocide. As Melson lamented, the UNCG speaks of the intention to destroy ‘in whole or in part’.¹¹¹ Not for nothing did Samantha Power observe that

the link between Hitler’s Final Solution and Lemkin’s hybrid term would cause endless confusion for policymakers and ordinary people who assumed that genocide occurred only where the perpetrator of atrocity could be shown, like Hitler, to possess an intent to exterminate every last member of an ethnic, national, or religious group.¹¹²

This paradigm ensured the exclusion of the Nigeria-Biafra war from genocide studies. Thus the first anthology on genocide, published by Jack N. Porter in 1982, contained a section on the Hutu-Tutsi in Burundi, the Ache of Paraguay, the Buddhists of Tibet, East Timor, Cambodia and East Pakistan, but not the Igbos of Nigeria.¹¹³ In a much-cited article in 1988, Ted Gurr and Barbara Harff did not count the 1966 massacre of Igbos in the north because ‘there was no deliberate, sustained policy of extermination dictated and organized by ruling groups’, and also excluded the subsequent state-induced famine.¹¹⁴ Helen Fein was prepared to refer very briefly to the ‘Ibos in Nigeria (preceding the Biafran secession in 1966)’ in her well-known analysis, *Genocide: A Sociological Perspective* (1990), although she too omitted the deliberate famine.¹¹⁵ The Biafran case was not covered in Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn’s widely read anthology, *The History and Sociology of Genocide* (1990), but included a bibliographical reference despite their stated misgivings.¹¹⁶ Neither did Jonassohn’s survey of ‘man-made famines’ mention the million or more Biafran victims.¹¹⁷ The paucity of research was evident when Israel W. Charny’s pioneering *Encyclopedia of Genocide* (1999) contained a perfunctory paragraph-long entry on the Igbos based wholly on Kuper’s own brief summary.¹¹⁸

The situation had not changed appreciably in the 2000s. Harff again excluded the 1966 massacres from her survey of genocide and political mass murder since 1955 because ‘the government was not complicit in killings carried out by private groups’, and again she omitted the subsequent war and the famine.¹¹⁹ No mention was made of the Nigeria-Biafra war in the canonical *Century of Genocide* anthology in 2004, nor in the fourth edition of 2013, although the third edition (2009) contained a chapter with

few paragraphs on the war in relation to undefeated perpetrator regimes.¹²⁰ Ben Kiernan's mammoth, prize-winning world history of genocide makes no mention of Biafra despite purporting to cover 'genocide and extermination from Sparta to Darfur'. Nor does it appear in new books on 'forgotten' and 'hidden' genocides.¹²¹ If at all, it is briefly mentioned in passing, as in Benjamin Valentino's monograph on mass killing and genocide in the twentieth century and Philip Spencer's *Genocide Since 1945*.¹²² Usually genocide scholars do not even list Biafra among the cases excluded from their definition of genocide. The exclusion of the Biafran case from genocide studies has been virtually as complete as it has been unnoticed.¹²³

Until the Bosnian and Rwandan cases of 1994, the canonical genocides were the Holocaust and Armenian genocide. The first comparative genocide studies conference, held in Israel in 1982, was limited to these cases. This selection perhaps can be explained by the biographies of the founding generation of genocide scholars, who were Armenians and Israelis and either Holocaust survivors or their children. Yet, as Melson's journey indicates, the Holocaust was not the initial focus. It was too traumatic to write about the Holocaust early in his life, he wrote later. The interest in postcolonial Africa functioned as a displacement. 'As did so many of my generation growing up in the late 1950s and 1960s, I had hoped that Africa, the Third World, would avoid the recent horrors of Europe'. The Biafran case spurred him less to explore contemporary Africa and similar contemporary cases, however, than to go back in time: 'I knew I had to return to the Holocaust to try to make sense of it both at the level of personal emotion and in some broader comparative intellectual perspective'.¹²⁴ Europe's traumatic past, then, led to a commitment to postcolonial reconstruction, and then back to the Holocaust when these hopes for the new postcolonial nation-states were dashed.¹²⁵ After spending 1977 in Jerusalem, overlooking the occupied Judean desert and Dead Sea from the Hebrew University's elevated campus, he decided to work on the Holocaust and became a charter member of the Jewish studies programme at his home institution, Purdue University in Indiana, USA. Seeking a case to compare to the Holocaust, Melson settled on Armenia rather than Biafra or Cambodia because it 'most resembled [the Holocaust]'.¹²⁶ Fein, too, had initially written about colonial violence after a period of anti-Vietnam war activism before rediscovering her Jewish identity while living in India in the early 1970s and resolving to work on the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, genocide and refugees.¹²⁷

In a very concrete sense, the canonization of the Holocaust and Armenian genocide came at the conceptual expense of Biafra and other so-called partial colonial and postcolonial genocides. Rather than incorporating the colonial and postcolonial into genocide studies, the Holocaust focus superseded them so that only conflagrations that somehow resembled this

‘maximal standard’ (Martin Shaw) could be imaginable as genocide, that is, as the terrible outcome of redemptive ideologies whose victims were passive objects of revolutionary state violence.¹²⁸ If this exclusion was the result of unreflective models of genocide, however, so were the Biafran claims to genocide during and since the civil war.

Biafran Claims of Genocide

Proponents of the Biafran cause made out a case for genocide from the beginning of violence in 1966. As noted above, in doing so, they also bought into the Holocaust prototype by casting themselves as African Jews in the developing dramaturgy of genocide. Their case consisted of several elements: positing the Nigerian construction of an enduring ‘Igbo problem’, ontologizing collectives (the Igbo, the Hausa and so on), highlighting fierce northern Nigerian (read: Hausa) ethnic resentment at Igbo talent and social success, stressing that the Igbo were innocent victims of premeditated and highly organized exterminatory violence and narrating the war/genocide as the culmination of fifty years of ‘Igbophobia’. In these accounts, the genocide had two phases: the 1966 killings followed by the war—famine and bombing of civilian targets like schools and markets, though some scholars traced a line of violence to earlier massacres.¹²⁹ Lastly, the British are held virtually co-responsible. Douglas Anthony’s chapter in this volume shows that Biafran elites also termed the 1966 massacres ‘pogroms’ and explicitly invoked Jewish and Armenian precedents, linking them to longstanding ethnic antipathies against Igbos living in northern Nigeria in particular, while they also stress that Biafrans included other groups living in Eastern Nigeria. An example of this tendency was a Biafran pamphlet that argued diplomacy had failed because ‘the final solution of the “Biafran problem” involved genocide’.¹³⁰

This genocide claim provoked an international debate about the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Nigeria. It also placed immense pressure on the British government, whose support for the FMG attracted accusations of neocolonialism by Biafran proponents.¹³¹ Public opinion there was firmly on the Biafran side; government rhetoric about Nigerian unity and its longstanding military relationship were no match for images of starving babies, the widespread circulation of which was part of the Biafran public relations campaign. Senegal and Tanzania also referred to Biafran genocide. The British ultimately won the propaganda war, however, by sponsoring an international observer team to visit Nigeria and report on the genocide issue. The FMG played along, although it forbade the team entry to Biafran territory where the famine and aerial bombing of Eastern Nigerians were actually occurring. The team determined that genocide was not taking

place, and international public opinion largely concurred. Like Melson, the latter concluded that the Nigerians were not Nazis and the Igbos not Jews.¹³² It was deemed a civil war rather than a genocide.

Academic proponents of the Biafran cause today advance arguments strikingly similar to the Biafran propaganda campaign of the late 1960s. Biographical trajectories account in part for this continuity: these scholars were either participants in the conflict or are children of participants, often working in universities abroad. G.N. Uzoigwe, for instance, author of the ‘Reflections on the Biafran revolution’ from 1969—a passionate yet poised and beautifully rendered plea for the Biafran cause—has since also penned many books on the subject, as well, most recently, a conference paper entitled, ‘The Igbo Genocide, 1966: Where Is the Outrage?’, which seeks to raise the profile of the Biafran case by making less poised comparisons:

It dwarfed the Congolese killings of the early 1960s, the Tutsi genocide, and the Darfur genocide, in its hatred, planning, intensity, ferocity, barbarity, and the number of people killed or affected. And yet genocide scholars have totally ignored it despite the impressive documentation of what happened.¹³³

These are not claims likely to advance his cause. Who can say with certainty whether the Rwandan genocide was less intense, ferocious or barbaric? Unfortunately, this academic advocacy is characterized by such rhetorical excess, argument by assertion and recurrence to the same, thin layer of evidence for FMG genocidal intention.¹³⁴ For example, Chima Korieh, a prolific writer on the subject, recently edited two anthologies on the Nigeria-Biafra war, one dedicated to his Biafran parents and daughter, ‘haunted by the images of the starving children in Biafra’, which were based on a conference co-funded by an Igbo organization. He proclaims ‘the capacity of an oppressed people to resist an attempted genocide’.¹³⁵ Little has been written about the conflict’s ‘genocidal character from the Biafran perspective’, he continued, which has been mischaracterized as a war: it was thus an ‘invisible genocide’. He pointed to evidence for ‘the meticulously planned and implemented political project of exterminating the Igbo ethnic group in northern Nigeria before the conflict in other parts of Nigeria and during it’, although adducing none beyond the conclusions of an International Committee on the Investigation of Crimes of Genocide in 1969 (an ad hoc group originating in Paris ‘under official Jewish and Christian auspices’ and comprising jurists from various countries¹³⁶) and the experiences of Biafran refugees. The same misplaced certainty and argument by assertion is on display again when he writes, regarding the famine, that the ‘Conditions in Biafra during the war leave *no doubt* that there was

a well-organized and systematic attempt to starve the Igbo population to extinction'. As usual, there is also the invocation of the Nazi analogy: 'The war was indeed a Nigerian variant of what the Nazis called the final solution to the Jewish problem'.¹³⁷ To maintain consistency with the Holocaust dramaturgy as a non-political genocide, Korieh and others emphasize Igbo innocence and lack of agency. They thus play down Igbo officers' participation in the fateful military coup of 1966, and do not mention the Biafran rejection of a supply corridor (for fear that the FMG would poison food) in 1968 and 1969, still less recall the obdurate continuation of the war against all odds despite the catastrophic famine.¹³⁸

Responses to the international observer team are also weak. Korieh writes defensively, 'Perhaps that intent [to commit genocide] was not officially proclaimed. But the state had many willing executioners with clear intent on exterminating the Igbo. The state did not do much to stop it nor prosecute those who did the job'.¹³⁹ The Biafran case tends to resort to quoting contemporaries, whether other Biafrans or sympathetic Westerners, who asserted that genocide was taking place, without independently assessing the evidence. Where incriminating quotations of Nigerian officials can be adduced, they are conscripted into an argument about 'unparalleled hatred' against the Igbo and Nigerians' long-term genocidal intentionalism with Goldhagenesque overtones.¹⁴⁰

The prolific independent scholar Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe is perhaps the most outspoken articulator of this paradigm, which also depicts the Nigerian state as a prison house of nations, especially for the Igbo. Like Uzoigwe in his 1969 article, and many of the project's supporters at the time, Ekwe-Ekwe believes that the Biafran ideal represented authentic self-determination because it challenged the borders and artificial states imposed on Africans by European colonial rulers.¹⁴¹ These notions are worthy of serious discussion, but come with considerable partisan baggage. Thus he claims Biafra as 'Africa's most devastating genocide of the 20th century' while 'Most of Africa and the world stood by and watched'. His indignation continues:

The records of those who carried out the Igbo genocide make no pretences, offer no excuses, whatsoever, about the goal of their dreadful mission—such was the maniacal insouciance and rabid Igbophobia that propelled the project. The principal language used in the prosecution of the genocide was Hausa. The words of the ghoulissh anthem of the genocide.¹⁴²

Ekwe-Ekwe, Uzoigwe, Korieh and others are well aware that other Nigerians accuse the Igbo of being a 'bumptious' and ethnocentric people

who seek to dominate the country. What non-Igbo Nigerians deplore as overweening ambition, Ekwe-Ekwe understands as talent, enterprise and leadership:

The Igbo were one of the very few constituent nations in what was Nigeria, again prior to 29 May 1966, who understood, fully, the immense liberatory possibilities . . . and the interlocking challenges of the vast reconstructionary work required for state and societal transformation in the aftermath of foreign occupation. The Igbo had the most robust economy in the country in their east regional homeland. Not only did they supply the country with its leading writers, artists and scholars, they also supplied the country's top universities with vice-chancellors and leading professors and scientists. They supplied the country with its first indigenous university (the prestigious university at Nsukka), with its leading and most spirited pan-Africanists and its top diplomats. They supplied the country's leading high schools with head teachers and administrators, supplied the country with its top bureaucrats, supplied the country with its leading businesspeople and supplied the country with an educated, top-rated professional officers-corps for its military and police forces. In addition they supplied the country with its leading sportspersons, essentially and effectively worked the country's rail, postal, telegraphic, power, shipping and aviation services to quality standards not seen since in Nigeria. . . . And they were surely aware of the vicissitudes engendered by this historic age, precisely because the Igbo nation played the vanguard role in the freeing of Nigeria from Britain, beginning from the mid-1930s.¹⁴³

In his contribution to one of Korieh's anthologies, Uzoigwe complained that Ekwe-Ekwe has been ignored. Given the tone of his writings, that would not be surprising, but in fact his online contributions have attracted attention.¹⁴⁴ A Canadian academic, Gerry Caplan, disputed Ekwe-Ekwe's casualty figures, pointed out that 'Ojukwu was hardly the knight in shining armor portrayed by Ekwe in his various writings', that Biafra contained its own minorities that were less than enthusiastic about the independence cause and, most importantly, that it was not a non-political genocide: 'the responsibility for it was hardly as one-sided as he [Ekwe-Ekwe] claims'.¹⁴⁵ Oxford don Gavin Williams objected to the 'blanket condemnations of the "Hausa-Fulani"', and Ian Smillie, founder of the Canadian NGO Inter Pares and noted writer on humanitarianism, argued that the conflict was a war rather than a genocide.¹⁴⁶

These arguments are equally unsatisfactory. Ekwe-Ekwe's critics admit that the perpetrators of the 1966 massacres were never brought to justice,

and that ‘The federal forces did indeed try to starve the Igbos into submission, a cruel weapon’ (Caplan), yet they do not draw any consequences from these facts. Igbo scholars’ frustration with the failure of genocide studies to join the dots and think seriously about the million deaths in relation to their models of genocide is understandable. The almost-cavalier dismissal of this violence was echoed in the British prime minister’s recounting of the 1966 massacres: ‘The Ibos who had seized power [in the 1966 coup] were themselves dispossessed by another military coup, and had retired to Iboland to brood’.¹⁴⁷ By contrast, this is how Charles Keil, an American ethnomusicologist who witnessed the 1966 massacres and then led the chapter of the Committee to Keep Biafra Alive at the State University of New York at Buffalo, described the events to which Wilson referred:

The pogroms I witnessed in Makurdi, Nigeria (late Sept. 1966) were foreshadowed by months of intensive anti-Ibo and anti-Eastern conversations among Tiv, Idoma, Hausa and other Northerners resident in Makurdi, and, fitting a pattern replicated in city after city, the massacres were led by the Nigerian army. Before, during and after the slaughter, Col. Gowan could be heard over the radio issuing ‘guarantees of safety’ to all Easterners, all citizens of Nigeria, but the, intent of the soldiers, the only power that counts in Nigeria now or then, was painfully clear. After counting the disembowelled bodies along the Makurdi road I was escorted back to the city by soldiers who apologized for the stench and explained politely that they were doing me and the world a great favor by eliminating Ibos. ‘They eat dogs. They must die like dogs’. ‘We find ’em, we kill ’em, and they do us the same, na be so?’. ‘They are born with greed in their hearts’. ‘They are the only people spoiling Nigeria ever since—One Nigeria without Ibo!’. ‘We make sure they will never worry us again’. I am paraphrasing the kernels of conversations with dozens of soldiers conducted at nightclubs, roadblocks and in their barracks during the ten months between the pogroms and July, 1967, when I left Nigeria. I met a few soldiers, mostly officers, who were not convinced that the Ibos were innately evil, expendable, exterminatable, but they were exceptions.¹⁴⁸

Despite their differing assessments of the conflict as a genocide *or* a civil war, all parties have been transfixed by the Holocaust dramaturgy, thereby missing the point that war and genocide are not utterly distinct categories, indeed that genocides usually take place during military conflict: war can be waged in a genocidal manner. To require the ‘innocence’ or agentlessness of the victim party ontologizes the victim collective, conflates

combatants with civilians and thereby imports a genocidal logic into academic analysis. Just because the Nigerians may not have been Nazis, and Igbo not African Jews, does not mean they cannot still be victims of genocide. We elaborate on this proposition briefly in the next section.

Genocide, Famine and Warfare

Just as the Holocaust dramaturgy has framed genocide studies, so has the distinction between war and genocide. They can be distinguished in various ways: for example, belligerents can surrender in the former but not the latter, because it is essentially a campaign to exterminate rather than to dominate groups.¹⁴⁹ While seemingly clarifying, there are grounds for regarding these options as too stark for some factual circumstances. How much sense does it make to categorize the eventually predictable starvation of over half a million people, like in Biafra, as merely as a campaign to dominate and then govern a fractious people, the military violence performing ‘a communicative function with a clear deterrent dimension’?¹⁵⁰

On the face of it, intending to destroy part of a group—or cripple it, as Lemkin sometimes put it—would satisfy the requirements of genocide. For all that, the literature focuses exclusively on the casualties, forgetting that the purpose of the genocide concept is to protect people’s ‘groupness’: the FMG campaign was not just attacking individuals but the notion of ‘Biafra’. Finally, consistent with the Holocaust dramaturgy, it presumes that genocide must entail the complete extermination of the enemy; that is why surviving a surrender, as occurred in Nigeria in 1970, cannot be imagined as genocide. Observing, as many do, that Eastern Nigerians were not exterminated upon losing the war misses the point that doing so would have delegitimized the FMG and its patrons, and was functionally unnecessary: committing genocide during the war could be sufficient to exert control of the contested territory.¹⁵¹ For ‘integrating’ Eastern Nigerians into the state with the policy of ‘no victor, no vanquished’ meant smashing Biafra through ‘lawfare’, that is, legal measures that achieve the same end as military operations: in this case, dismembering the Eastern Region with the new federal state borders instituted in 1967.¹⁵²

Ultimately, the slippage between Igbo and Biafra categories explains the fraught nature of the genocide concept in this case. The former have not been destroyed, nor can it have been the FMG intention to destroy such a large group. However, without doubt, Igbo have been subordinated in Nigeria since 1970 by removing their regional governance of the oil-producing areas, subjecting them to punitive abandoned property and post-war currency conversion regimes, and hindering economic development of their states by policies of studied neglect.¹⁵³ When MASSOB and other

Igbo leaders talk of the continuing 'war' on the Igbo, this is what they mean.¹⁵⁴ But is this genocide? By contrast, 'Biafra' as an Igbo project of collective assertion and liberation was destroyed in 1970 and has been a taboo subject ever since, at least until MASSOB placed it back on the agenda. For its members and other Igbo, the destruction of this agency and dashing of collective hopes for freedom can be experienced as genocidal loss of group self.¹⁵⁵ A critical discussion of these propositions is overdue even if it has no bearing on the legal meaning of genocide.

One dimension of this discussion is revisiting the war-genocide relationship. Martin Shaw has posited a distinction between what he calls degenerate warfare and genocide; both target civilians but in different ways. The former attacks the enemy's civilian population as part of a broader military campaign, as in aerial bombing of cities, but destroying it is not the ultimate goal: the belligerent is the enemy's state, not its population. In genocide, a group as a whole is the enemy and its power and members are targeted for destruction.¹⁵⁶ In practice, genocides usually occur during military conflict, so it is appropriate to think of them as 'a component of such conflicts' and or as interwoven in a single campaign.¹⁵⁷ Indeed, Shaw concludes that 'hybrid forms of war *and* genocide are the general rule'.¹⁵⁸

Arguing along similar lines, Mark Levene reminds us that Lemkin conceptualized genocide as warfare against civilian groups rather than states, a notion captured by Lucy Dawidowicz's book, *The War Against the Jews, 1933–1945*.¹⁵⁹ He posits three types of warfare—between states, by a state against one deemed illegitimate and warfare within states; each can evince genocidal features in certain circumstances, especially where partisan resistance breaks out. In reality, genocide emanates 'in many cases of these very same "total war" scenarios'.¹⁶⁰ Unlike Shaw, however, he follows the conventional distinction between war and genocide, and thus classes Biafra in the former category because the Eastern Nigerians were not exterminated upon surrender.¹⁶¹ Yet on his own definition of genocide, which highlights a regime's attempt to destroy a group 'if not in totality, then in such numbers—at least as perceived by the regime—that it no longer represents a threat', the Biafran case could be made to fit; after all, Eastern Nigerians were attacked as a whole until they were no longer threatening.¹⁶² Each case will need to be examined for dimensions of overlap or confluence that may be difficult to disentangle. On these terms, the Biafra case, with the blockade representing an attack on the entire population seems to occupy a grey zone between degenerate warfare and genocide.

So much for social science, what about law? Induced famine can be classified as an *actus reus* of the article II(c) of the UNGC: 'Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part'.¹⁶³ Proving the necessary 'intent

to destroy in whole or part' is less straightforward. The jurisprudence of the international criminal tribunals has insisted on 'special intent' (*dolus specialis*), meaning that foreseen outcomes of a policy (*dolus eventualis*) do not count as genocidal. 'Even if a government knows that its policies will create famine among Tigrayans, for example, unless it specifically intends to exterminate the Tigrayans in whole or in part, its actions will not meet the standard for genocide'.¹⁶⁴ At the same time, the tribunals have acknowledged that perpetrators can possess various intentions (sometimes called motives) that do not vitiate a genocidal one.¹⁶⁵ In other words, the intention to defeat a state militarily can coexist with an intention to destroy a group's social power and ability to resist, indeed destroy it as a group—consistent with Shaw's point about the hybridity of war and genocide.

Whether these considerations bear on the Biafran case remains to be determined empirically and conceptually. The various dimensions of the military campaign need to be reconstructed, and the organizers and perpetrators of the 1966 violence identified. What is more, careful consideration should be given to contextualizing the Biafra case in the history of civilian victims of blockades, sanctions regimes and sieges—and especially consequent famines—which are far more common features of warfare (both civil, interstate and *de facto*) than supposed, ranging from the Napoleonic wars, the American civil war, the First World War, the Ukrainian hunger-famine for 1932–33, and the German siege of Stalingrad. Serious questions confront the case for genocide.

- Can a genocide accusation be sustained on behalf of such an immediately invented group like Biafra, one that purported to transcend the Igbo to encompass smaller groups in Eastern Nigeria that chafed under Igbo domination?
- If the genocide was aimed at the Igbo as such, how does one account for the fate of Igbo people who safely resided outside Biafra—in FMG-controlled territory—during the civil war and re-migrated there after it was over? This is a case in which the killing was ended by the aggressor, not by a third party.
- Can one identify a FMG intention to destroy Biafra or Igbo people by starvation through its blockade when the Biafran authorities rejected offers to enable the delivery of supplies because it did not suit their military objectives?
- What about the claim by Ogoni writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa that his people suffered genocidal violence at the hands of Igbo soldiers during the war for allegedly supporting the FMG?¹⁶⁶
- What of the possible, bitter irony that the prolongation of the war due to Western support of Biafran resistance, which was elicited by

the fear that genocide was taking place or would occur if Biafra lost, dramatically increased the Biafran civilian losses that the secession and western aid was designed to prevent? For this reason, Ian Smillie called the relief effort ‘an act of unfortunate and profound folly’, also noting that the hard currency that humanitarian organizations brought to Biafra were spent on weapons, just as weapons were smuggled with humanitarian aid, as suspected by the FMG.¹⁶⁷

- Igbo scholars are wont to quote some incriminating statements by northern generals but were they implementing government policy? Did Gowon make such statements in public or private?
- Finally, most genocides are expulsions of one kind or another; in this case, the aim was to preserve a federation by including the Igbo against their will. How does this fact cohere with a genocidal intention?

More thinking remains to be done to relate genocide and the FMG campaign.

Conclusion: Memory and Aftermath of the Conflict

When Saro-Wiwa wrote his book, *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy*, its main point was not to accuse the Igbo-Biafrans of dominating and killing the river peoples of the Niger Delta during the war.¹⁶⁸ His target was the Nigerian state and foreign oil companies, especially Shell British Petroleum, for plundering the delta peoples’ resources, despoiling their environment and attacking them when they protested. Saro-Wiwa himself and others were executed by the state on trumped-up murder charges in 1995. Despite government oppression, various delta protest and liberation movements continue to resist this form of internal colonialism, and now make common cause with their erstwhile enemy, the Biafrans, in the form of MASSOB.¹⁶⁹ Both use the genocide rhetoric.

Ever after Biafra’s fall in early 1970, the memory of the war remained wrenching in Nigeria and Nigerian diaspora circles. The question whether genocide was committed constitutes a recurrent bone of contention within Nigerian society, going back, as we have seen, to the widespread genocide allegations and invocations of Holocaust memory during the conflict. As Mpalive-Hangson Msiska argues in this volume, Achebe’s *There Was a Country* does not exemplify the ethnic chauvinism for which some commentators reproached it, but rather an attempt to reach closure through a confrontation with the past. ‘[H]ankering for a home’, as Msiska argues, Achebe aimed to ‘work through’ the conflict as his personal and postcolonial Nigerian society’s traumatic experience.¹⁷⁰

A similar plea for a confrontation with a troubling past can be identified in the contribution by Bird and Ottanelli. The memory of the Asaba

massacres haunts the town community up to this day: this spectre can only be relegated to the past, it seems, once a national process of national reconciliation through commemoration has been initiated.¹⁷¹ MASSOB broke the taboo to refer to Biafra in Nigerian political discourse and, as one might expect, the centrifugal forces of the Nigerian federal state have countered this resurgence. In recent years, the movement for a new Biafra collaborated with other quests for ethnic self-determination while allowing the grievances to be increasingly termed as ‘Igbo’ concerns, rather than ‘Biafran’.¹⁷²

Whether the massacres, bombings and famine are named as genocide or not, dealing with the history of the war is important to understand the fabric of postcolonial Nigeria and the international order in which the conflict emerged and unfolded. The Nigeria-Biafra war poses intricate challenges for genocide-studies scholars. Two related issues in particular are worth pondering further. First, the Nigeria-Biafra war underlines the importance of the conceptual history of genocide and of what Michael Rothberg has dubbed ‘multidirectional memories’ for the study of genocides.¹⁷³ More thinking needs to be devoted to how genocide as a concept—crucially often directly tied to dominant understandings of the Holocaust as a state-sponsored, ideology-driven racial hate crime—influences the perceptions, and thus, in effect, the politics of other conflicts. Second, but connected with this point, scholars of genocide studies need to reflect on the impact of this understanding of the Holocaust on their discipline and how this model determines their (mis-)apprehension of other cases they discuss or—exactly because of this model—fail to discuss.

This chapter was written as Western publics were again stirred by a humanitarian crisis in Nigeria, this time by the kidnapping of some 276 female students from a secondary school dormitory in the town of Chibok in Northeastern Nigeria in mid-April 2014. Although the culprits, an Islamist militia known as Boko Haram, have been registered by Western security agencies and international observers like the International Crisis Group (ICG) since 2011, their brazen act now invoked what Didier Fassin calls ‘humanitarian reason’: the expression of moral sentiments to motivate humanitarian action for far-off victims that conceals its redemptive emotional investment and the asymmetrical power relations between the West and the Global South.¹⁷⁴ For Nigeria, the recent rise of Islamic terrorism is part of a longer history of political crisis in its postcolonial kleptocracy, a political system unable to offer basic services, still less provide hope for its citizens. Widespread corruption, mounting economic inequality and social marginalization are the breeding ground of unrest and violent conflict.¹⁷⁵ The country’s complex and multiple insurgencies, which have predominated in the non-Muslim southern oil region, are now perceived

internationally through the depoliticizing prisms of 'Islamic terror' and 'humanitarianism'. In many ways, the Nigeria-Biafra remains a crucial episode to make sense of these current events.

Notes

1. Auberon Waugh and Susan Cronje, *Biafra: Britain's Shame* (London: Joseph, 1969); Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'A condemned people', *New York Review of Books*, 21 December 1967, pp. 14–20; O'Brien, 'Biafra revisited', *New York Review of Books*, 22 May 1969, pp. 15–27; Frederick Forsyth, *The Biafra story* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969); Stanley Diamond, 'Who killed Biafra?', *New York Review of Books*, 26 February 1970, pp. 17–27.
2. The figure is taken from Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton, *A history of Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 158.
3. On secession: David A. Ijalaye, 'Was "Biafra" at any time a state in international law?', *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 65, No. 3, 1971, pp. 551–559; Charles R. Nixon, 'Self-determination: The Nigeria/Biafra case', *World Politics*, Vol. 24, No. 4, 1972, pp. 473–497; M. G. Kaladharan Nayar, 'Self-determination beyond the colonial context: Biafra in retrospect', *Texas International Law Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 1975, pp. 321–345; E. Wayne Nafziger and William L. Richter, 'Biafra and Bangladesh: The political economy of secessionist conflict', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1976, pp. 91–109; Lee C. Buchheit, *Secession: The legitimacy of self-determination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978). On humanitarian intervention: roundtable with five academics convened by Senator Edward M. Kennedy on 27 April 1972 on 'Biafra, Bengal and beyond: International responsibility and genocidal conflict', *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 66, No. 4, 1972, pp. 89–108; Richard B. Lillich (ed.), *Humanitarian intervention and the United Nations* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1973); here especially, Michael Reisman and Myres S. McDougal, 'Humanitarian intervention to protect the Ibos', pp. 167–195; Laurie W. Wiseberg, 'Humanitarian intervention: Lessons from the Nigerian civil war', *Human Rights Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1974, pp. 61–98. On ethnic conflict: Crawford Young, *The politics of cultural pluralism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976); Dan Jacobs, *The brutality of nations* (New York: Knopf, 1978).
4. The Nigeria-Biafra war has long ranked among Africa's forgotten wars. See Rolf Hofmeier and Volker Matthies (eds.), *Vergessene Kriege in Afrika* (Göttingen: Lamuv, 1992). In Nigeria, the civil war had remained a topic of scholarly and public debate throughout. See for instance Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, *The Biafra war: Nigeria and the aftermath* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990); Ekwe-Ekwe, *Biafra revisited* (Dakar and Reading: African Renaissance, 2007); Chima J. Korieh (ed.), *The Nigeria-Biafra war: Genocide and the politics of memory* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2012).
5. We use the spelling 'Igbo', now widely common in English. However, the usage is not consistent throughout the theme issue's contributions; in particular if the spelling 'Ibo' is used in original sources, this will be left unaltered.
6. Mark Levene, *Genocide in the age of the nation-state*, 4 vols. (London: I. B. Tauris and Oxford University Press, 2005–2013); A. Dirk Moses (ed.), *Empire, colony, genocide: Conquest, occupation and subaltern resistance in world history* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008). Vol. 13, No. 4, 2011 of the *Journal of Genocide Research* is a special issue devoted to the East Pakistan secession of 1971. Martin Shaw, *Genocide and international relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Adrian Gallagher, *Genocide and its threat to contemporary international order* (Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

7. Michael Barnett, *Empire of humanity: A history of humanitarianism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011), pp. 133–147; Eleanor Davey, *Idealism beyond borders: The French revolutionary left and the intellectual origins of humanitarianism, 1954–1988* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Marie-Luce Desgrandchamps, ‘Entre coopération et concurrence: CICR, Unicef et organisations religieuses au Biafra’, *Relations Internationales*, Vol. 152, No. 4, 2012, pp. 51–62; Desgrandchamps, ‘Revenir sur le mythe fondateur de Médecins Sans Frontières: les relations entre les médecins français et le CICR pendant la guerre du Biafra (1967–1970)’, *Relations internationales*, Vol. 146, No. 2, 2011, pp. 95–108; Forian Hannig, ‘“Eins, zwei, drei Biafra”: Internationale humanitäre Hilfe in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren’ (PhD project, University of Halle-Wittenberg); Lasse Heerten, *The Biafran war and postcolonial humanitarianism: Spectacles of suffering* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, ‘Humanitarian aid and the Biafran war: Lessons not learned’, *Africa Development*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 2009, pp. 69–82; Tehila Sasson, ‘From empire to humanity: Technologies of famine relief in an era of decolonization’ (PhD thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2015); Mie Vestergaard, ‘Representing “humanitarian victims”: The case of Biafra’ (PhD project, Roskilde Universitet, 2015).
8. Lasse Heerten, ‘The dystopia of postcolonial catastrophe: Self-determination, the Biafran war of secession, and the 1970s human rights moment’, in Jan Eckel and Sam Moyn (eds.), *The breakthrough: Human rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), pp. 15–32; Daniel J. Sargent, *A superpower transformed: The remaking of American foreign relations in the 1970s* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), ch. 3.
9. Lasse Heerten, ‘“A” as in Auschwitz, “B” as in Biafra: The Nigerian civil war, visual narratives of genocide, and the fragmented universalization of the Holocaust’, in Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno (eds.), *Humanitarian photography: A history* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 249–274; Claude Cookman, ‘Gilles Caron’s coverage of the crisis in Biafra’, *Visual Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No. 4, 2008, pp. 226–242.
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90. Young, *Labour governments*, 2: ch. 8.
91. Frederick Forsyth, *The making of an African legend: The Biafra story* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977 [1969]), pp. 267–278.
92. Auberon Waugh, *Britain and Biafra: The case for genocide* (London: Britain-Biafra Association, 1969), pp. 5, 7.
93. Harold Wilson, *The Labour government, 1964–1970: A personal record* (London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson and Michael Joseph Ltd., 1971), p. 557.
94. Michael Rothberg’s work has offered stimulating insights how this shortcoming can be overcome. See especially his *Multidirectional memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the age of decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).
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96. The most notable exception is Peter Novick's seminal study *The Holocaust in American life* (Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 1999), pp. 247–248. See also William F. S. Miles, 'Third world views of the Holocaust', *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2004, pp. 371–393, which unfortunately contains some misjudgements about the Biafran case.
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Section I

Genocide and the Biafran Bid for Self-Determination



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2 Irreconcilable Narratives

Biafra, Nigeria and Arguments About Genocide, 1966–1970

Douglas Anthony

Introduction: Nigeria and Biafra

Arguments about genocide helped frame both inter-communal violence that wracked Nigeria in 1966 and the war that followed. Much has been written about the political backdrop to the coup that toppled Nigeria's young, troubled democracy on 15 January 1966.¹ While the violence of 1966 has deep historical roots, the January coup was a proximate cause. Central to most analyses of the coup are the facts that it was organized and directed by a small group of junior southern Nigerian officers, most members of the Igbo ethnic group, and that it led to the deaths of several key political figures, among them the premier of the Northern Region and the country's prime minister, also a northerner. Nigeria's president had been abroad and survived; that both he and the senior military officer who emerged as Nigeria's new head of state were Igbos led many Nigerians to ascribe ethnic motivations to the coup. In the months that followed, Nigeria experienced both a retaliatory countercoup and violence targeting Igbo civilians; war followed in mid-1967.

This chapter treats the events of 1966 and the war as part of a single historical stream. The violence of 1966 unfolded in three waves, concentrated in the Northern Region. Each of those outbreaks targeted Igbos, though others from the country's Eastern Region were also affected. The first and third waves began in May and September, and mainly affected Igbo civilians living outside of the east. Between those waves came the countercoup, during which officers and enlisted men, most of them Igbo, were slain by fellow soldiers. These three episodes of violence led to a months-long political standoff after which the Eastern Region declared itself the independent Republic of Biafra in May 1967. Several weeks later, the Nigeria-Biafra war (Nigerian civil war) began. It lasted for 30 months, from July 1967 until January 1970. After early Biafran successes, the war became one of attrition, characterized by massive civilian deaths on the Biafran side, some from direct military action but most from starvation and disease.

Contemporary claims that Nigeria was engaged in genocide appeared in publications, speeches and other statements by the governments of the Eastern Region and then Biafra and their supporters. As those arguments evolved, they helped shape how Biafrans, Nigerians and the world understood the conflict. After Biafra's surrender it was reabsorbed into Nigeria, but arguments about genocide remained unresolved.

Shaping Irreconcilable Narratives

The 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (hereafter 'the convention') frames discussions of genocide. Like other African colonies, Nigeria did not have standing to sign the convention before it came into force in 1951. In fact, Nigeria acceded to the convention only in 2009, two generations after the war. Despite Nigeria's failure to recognize it, a great deal of Biafran and pro-Biafran rhetoric leveraged the convention's authority by citing the text or referencing it indirectly. In other cases, Biafran rhetoric invoked genocide more loosely, without referencing the convention. In either case, identifying genocide remains distressingly subjective and, many would argue, inconsistent. John Roth argues there is a need for

definitions that are not, on the one hand, so broad as to trivialize genocide and to render uses of the term frivolous or, on the other hand, so narrow that cases of mass death are unreasonably excluded from the category of genocide.²

Events in Nigeria from 1966 and the war years highlight these and other difficulties in applying the label of genocide. Some scholars, most recently G. N. Uzoigwe, have argued that the violence of 1966 satisfies convention criteria.³ Others have been more equivocal, including Leo Kuper, whose milestone 1981 study grappled with Nigeria's 1966 violence by introducing a new classification, the 'genocidal massacre', characterized by 'the annihilation of a section of a group—men, women, and children, as for example in the wiping out of whole villages'.⁴ Kuper did not explain why he chose to place 'genocidal massacres' outside the reach of the convention.

Likewise, arguments persist about whether genocide occurred during the war. Robert Melson maintained that

the mass destruction of Ibos during the Biafran war as 'a genocide-in-part' rather than a 'genocide-in-whole'. Ibos were massacred and driven out of the Northern Region and thousands perished during the war itself, but the intent of the northern elites and later of the Federal Military Government was not the extermination of the Ibos as such.⁵

More recently Emmanuel Okocha argued that Nigerian forces committed genocide during the 1967 massacre of unarmed civilians at Asaba⁶ and Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe maintained that Nigeria's use of starvation as a weapon of war constituted genocide.⁷

Charges of genocide played a key role in Biafran propaganda. In his 1972 book *The Brothers' War*, journalist and former British diplomat John de St. Jorre explained the place of those claims.

The beauty of the genocide concept for the propagandist was that it left no loophole. It ensured that the masses, which firmly believed it, would support the leadership's decision to fight to on to the very last—even beyond the point where all reasonable hope of victory had faded—because they were convinced that there was no alternative. The genocide theme was, therefore, ubiquitous in Biafran propaganda.⁸

Accepting de St. Jorre's point does not preclude taking allegations of genocide seriously. In the early 1990s, I interviewed dozens of Igbos, nearly all former Biafrans, on their experiences after the war.⁹ I rarely asked about the conflict itself, but during those interviews a majority volunteered that they believed genocide had occurred or been attempted during the crisis years.

The conviction that they have been affected by genocide continues to colour the outlook of many Igbos. Nonetheless, the standard international tool for weighing charges of genocide, the UN convention, is not a lay instrument to be read through the lens of anecdote. Rather it is international law subject to technical and politicized interpretation. In *What Is Genocide?*, Martin Shaw captures the difficulties of using the convention as our primary tool for historical analysis.

The legal concern with *individual* responsibility of perpetrators meant that legal means were an indirect way of getting at the more fundamental issues involved. The constraints of legal standards of proof meant that law was hardly the most satisfactory discipline in which to come to balanced judgments about historical episodes, let alone creative theoretical interpretations.¹⁰

Legal constraints are not the only challenge to reaching a 'balanced judgment' on such a weighty question. Allegations of genocide present a heavy burden for those who identify (or are identified by others) with the accused—in this case the Nigerian state, its leadership or, in some cases, the people of the former Northern Region. While any analogy between mid-twentieth-century Nigeria and early-century Turkey is limited, Taner Akçam's ideas about Turkish refusals to acknowledge the 1915 Armenian

genocide are useful in framing the Nigerian state's resistance to genocide allegations.

Perhaps the government fears that if Turkey were to acknowledge the genocide and its responsibility there would be serious repercussions in terms of compensation for territory and property. Setting aside the issue of territorial claims, which have no validity in international law, the issue of financial compensation is real.¹¹

Moreover, Akçam argues, acknowledging genocide could 'call into question the state's very identity'.¹² Akachi Odoemene has argued that 'the [Nigerian] government and its supporters want this war to be remembered in a particular way—that is forgotten'.¹³ Implicating Nigeria in genocide would make it virtually impossible to erase from national memory either the bloodshed of 1966 or the war.

So allegations of genocide remain politicized and unresolved. Despite an expanding body of scholarship, prospects for settling the question of whether the violence directed at Igbos in Nigeria before the war constituted genocide are dim. Living memory, survivor testimony and contemporary media accounts clarify the nature and magnitude of what victims experienced, but proving how that violence was organized presents enormous challenges. Evidence suggesting genocidal intent is at best incomplete and circumstantial. In part this is because Nigeria's state was polarized and fragmented in 1966, with official functions disrupted by two changes of government and multiple civil disturbances, and many remaining records are tainted by partisan bias. The shift from regional to state governments in 1967 complicated matters. While there is evidence that much of the anti-Igbo violence was both premeditated and coordinated, definitive proof remains elusive.¹⁴ For example, although much of the propaganda that helped catalyze violence in northern Nigeria in 1966 was produced with state resources, there are no verifiable authors of a Nigerian policy of extermination.

Many who see genocidal motives at work in 1966 argue the same intent was present during the war, but sorting out those allegations presents similar difficulties. Others, such as Melson, who argued that the war represented 'a genocide-in-part', separate the *effects* of Nigeria's wartime actions from the *motives* behind them. '[D]espite their original intentions, which were not to exterminate a people in the manner of the Nazis, the policies of the Nigerian military had led to a mass death'.¹⁵ While most of Nigeria's Igbos survived the war, the challenge of evaluating allegations of genocide in a context of 'total war' persists, particularly disentangling violence aimed against combatants from that directed against non-combatants.¹⁶ Shaw draws a basic distinction between war ('a social

practice that has possessed a high legitimacy historically’) and genocide (which is, ‘by definition, illegitimate’).¹⁷ In accounting for its illegitimacy, he wrote that ‘Genocide is war against civilian groups. Hard power is used to destroy soft power’.¹⁸ ‘It is the fact that the perpetrators of genocide are generally armed and militarily organized, while victims are generally unarmed and militarily unorganized, that marks off this form of political violence from others’.¹⁹

United States Senator Charles Goodell led a brief ‘study tour’ of Biafra in early 1969 that documented Nigerian strikes against civilian targets the previous year, including nine air attacks on hospitals.

All the establishments are not within a township or near a military object. They are standing isolated. The first three were/are clearly marked with the Red Cross.

Raids generally consist of bombs/rockets/machine gunning, usually one of the three categories.

The report explained why only three of the hospitals were marked.

Schools and hospitals have been particular targets and so significant is this fear that hospitals have covered up their red crosses which have served to identify, but not protect them.

Another set of soft targets, markets, operated at night to avoid attacks, and relief centres also took precautions.

Even the hundreds of feeding centers where 200 to 8,000 women and children gather to receive relief food are now operated daily before sunrise, so as to finish early and avoid being defenseless against air attacks.²⁰

Biafra’s Ministry of Information seized on ground attacks against civilians to press its case that genocide was occurring.

There [is] no civilian population ever left once the Nigerian troops have been there. People run and those who cannot run are slaughtered. It is only in a war of GENOCIDE that there can be no civilians.²¹

As Shaw has argued, within wartime settings where ‘states or political movements begin to organize the conditions for widespread violence . . . any hostility against enemy groups may threaten genocide’.²² Perhaps most pressing in the Biafran case was Nigeria’s stated policy of using

starvation as a weapon. International jurisprudence has found that dietary and medical deprivation or deliberate denial of adequate accommodation can fit under sections of the convention addressing the physical destruction of the targeted group.²³ Whether doing so in the Nigeria/Biafra context constituted a genocidal act remains disputed.

Irreconcilable narratives ossified as early as 1966. The Northern Region presented a spectre of 'Ibo domination' that threatened Nigerian unity.²⁴ In contrast, the Eastern Region argued that its citizens were targets of northern violence. By the time Biafra declared independence, each side had positioned the other as aggressor and cast its own actions as defensive: Nigeria claimed it was defending the integrity of the republic (to 'keep Nigeria one') and safeguarding citizens trapped behind 'rebel' lines; meanwhile Biafra argued independence was a necessary response to an existential threat.

Emergence of the Extermination Narrative: *Nigerian Pogrom*

Our concern here is not with detailing the events of 1966, but rather mapping how the idea of genocide helped shape contemporary and future understandings of that violence. As Nigeria's political crisis deepened in late 1966, the government of the Eastern Region began publication of the *Crisis Series*, seven illustrated pamphlets that presented its position on the year's events for domestic and international audiences. The most dramatic volume was the third, *Nigerian Pogrom: The Organized Massacre of Eastern Nigerians*. Like other pamphlets in the series, *Nigerian Pogrom* included a thumbnail history of Igbo migration throughout Nigeria and a synopsis of recent political events. At its core were graphic descriptions of northern violence, including nine first-person accounts offered to an Enugu panel remembered as the 'atrocities tribunal'.²⁵ Accompanying the narratives were unsparing black and white photographs of men, women and children bearing ghastly evidence of attacks by civilians and soldiers.

Around this material, *Nigerian Pogrom* presented an early version of the genocide argument that would come to fruition after secession. Its title conjured anti-Jewish violence in Europe, an association the authors built on by arguing that the Nigerian attacks belonged in a context relatively familiar to an international audience. 'As these pages will show, it is an episode that rivals in its inhumanity the fate of the Armenian Christians in the Ottoman Empire or the Jews in Nazi Germany'. The authors accused northern Nigerians of an 'attempt to exterminate Easterners in the North

and other parts of Nigeria'. They argued that after a military decree eliminated Nigeria's four administrative regions in favour of a unitary state on 24 May, 'The so-called Muslim elite of the North immediately conspired with their feudal rulers and, aided by the former Northern politicians and administrators, a plan was hatched to massacre all the Easterners in their midst'.²⁶

Although the word 'genocide' appears only once in *Nigerian Pogrom*, the theme of extermination runs throughout. The document argues that disturbances in the northern cities of Jos (1945) and Kano (1953) demonstrated a pattern of northern 'hatred and hostility' toward 'Eastern "foreigners" in their towns'. Under the heading 'The May-June massacres', the authors argued that the 1966 violence replicated that pattern.

The genocide of Easterners by the combined action of Northern soldiers, Local Government Police and civilians which has been going on for the last four months in the North and other parts of the country is the latest and most savage attack yet unleashed.

The violence, they wrote, was a coordinated response.

On the morning of Sunday, 29th May, the Northerners pounced on Eastern Nigerians praying in churches or relaxing in the privacy of their homes. That the slaughter which followed took place simultaneously in several Northern towns testifies to the careful planning and deep involvement of Northern leaders.²⁷

Demonstrating that this violence was organized and premeditated would become an important part of the emerging genocide argument.

Nigeria's second military coup began on 29 July 1966. More than 200 officers and enlisted personnel, the majority Igbos, were systematically killed by their comrades, mostly in military barracks outside the Eastern Region.²⁸ Among the dead was first military head of state, General J. T. U. Aguiyi-Ironsi. Two months later, a second, bloodier round of attacks on civilians began. Those September and October events were still fresh when *Nigerian Pogrom* appeared, and its treatment of them was less well developed than that of the May/June violence. The authors relied mostly on witness and press accounts from *Time*, the *Observer* (London), the *Daily Express* (London) and even the Kaduna-based *New Nigerian*. While *Nigerian Pogrom* was first and foremost propaganda calibrated to shock readers, its descriptions accurately reflected the extent of the violence. Later documents would more deliberately characterize that violence as genocidal.

‘Ours is a War of Survival’: Genocide and Biafran Independence

Nigeria’s political crisis deepened during early 1967 despite attempts to reconcile the Eastern Region and the Lagos-based Federal Military Government. In May, Nigerian head of state Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon announced the end of Nigeria’s regional structure in favour of 12 states. Doing so broke up the Eastern Region and administratively severed the Igbo heartland (the new East Central State) from two less populous coastal states with non-Igbo majorities. Three days later, on 30 May, Biafra declared its independence, claiming the entire Eastern Region; federal troops invaded 6 July.

There is little question that the violence of 1966 loomed large in the minds of ordinary Biafrans and framed their understanding of the war. When the New York-based American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive sent three US-based academics to Biafra in 1967, their joint statement declared

It is not surprising that the people of the former Eastern Region—primarily the Ibos, but people of other groups as well—fear that conquest by Federal troops—that is, in practice, Northern groups—is likely to mean not just conquest, but actual genocide.

They concluded that ‘This is felt to be a struggle not just for political survival, but for biological survival’.²⁹

Biafra inherited the Eastern Region’s public information apparatus. Early publications from its Ministry of Information developed the idea that the violence of 1966 was a template for the war. When *The Case for Biafra* appeared in 1967, it reprised the linkage of 1966 to earlier rioting in Jos and Kano. Its authors wrote that ‘On three previous occasions—1945, 1953 and May 1966—the killings did not go far enough’ in addressing longstanding resentments between northerners and the easterners living alongside them. The overthrow of the Ironsi government, they explained, presented an opportunity to escalate inter-communal violence. ‘Little did anyone know that the aim of Northern Nigerians was the extermination of Eastern Nigerians. This [extermination] began in July, 1966’. According to the authors, that beginning—the coup—was followed by the mass slaughter of September/October, a ‘pogrom’ that was ‘the culminating point of the pent-up hate and frustration which the Northerners had felt against Eastern Nigerians over a long period’.³⁰

The Case for Biafra combined a treatment of the 1966 violence with a critique of the war, first by assigning northern leaders collective

responsibility for the slaughter of 1966.³¹ In contrast, blame for wartime atrocities fell squarely on Gowon.

Instructions were given his soldiers to kill every male child of seven years and over. This was done everywhere Nigerian soldiers went. Girls were carted off from Biafran homes to Lagos and Northern Nigeria.

Gowon is fighting a war of conquest, nothing more. The aim is genocide.³²

The army had issued Nigerian soldiers a code of conduct that, among other things, specifically forbid attacks on children and assaults on women.³³ Nonetheless, the claim that Gowon's forces pursued a policy of genocide would remain a staple of Biafran rhetoric.

One place where assertions of genocide regularly appeared was the official propaganda instrument *Biafra Newsletter*, which circulated mainly inside Biafra but also abroad. Its folio line declared 'Ours is a war of survival' and on at least one occasion the *Newsletter* reproduced the UN convention outright.³⁴ In its third issue, Biafran writer Arthur Nwankwo offered a truncated definition of genocide.

Genocide is the systematic and calculated extermination of a race or a nation. Between May and October, 1966, 30,000 Biafrans were tracked down and massacred cold bloodedly in several planned outbursts of Northern savagery.³⁵

The selective targeting of victims was a frequent theme in the *Biafra Newsletter* and other official and unofficial publications.

The *Newsletter of the Biafra Association in the Americas* connected Biafra and supporters abroad, and often reproduced statements by prominent Biafrans. Nigerian president Nnamdi Azikiwe had been in the Caribbean during the first coup and later spent much of the war representing Biafra abroad. In 1968, the newsletter published a speech he gave to a British audience in which he argued that in 1966 'Our kith and kin were slaughtered like cattle in an abattoir, for no just cause other than that they were Biafrans'.³⁶ In fact, by any contemporary measure they had not been Biafrans in 1966, but rather, depending on one's frame of reference, Igbos, Eastern Nigerians, or in most cases both. But by projecting Biafran identity backward through time, Azikiwe reshaped it to meet to the demands of the moment.

In the speech, Azikiwe argued that 'our very existence is threatened', and that in the absence of self-defense 'we shall be exterminated'.³⁷ He also addressed other concerns from the convention, which outlawed conspiracy and incitement to commit genocide.³⁸ Azikiwe cited as evidence

of organization and planning the dates of and intervals between the May rioting, the July coup and the September attacks. ‘It will be seen that these three pogroms were deliberate and calculated. Their periodicity is clear. They occurred every 29th and at intervals of two months. Not only that, they were perpetrated against a particular sector of Nigeria, namely Biafra’.³⁹ But defining the boundaries of the Biafran community Azikiwe and other Biafran thinkers envisioned proved an ongoing challenge.

Genocide, Ethnicity and Nationality

The language used to describe those marked for violence was a moving target, one closely tied to the formidable task of first imagining and then formulating ‘Biafran’ nationality. Rhetoric from the Eastern Region referenced ‘easterners’ who shared common geographical and cultural roots. That regional focus countered 1966 tracts from northern Nigeria that incited violence against Igbos in ethnically specific language.⁴⁰ Regional claims also emphasized a rhetorical and moral umbrella of eastern identity that included the region’s non-Igbo minorities.⁴¹ In contrast, many outside accounts of the 1966 violence had used ‘easterner’ and ‘Ibo’ interchangeably, and later many would conflate ‘Biafran’ and ‘Ibo’. Potentially lost in the rhetorical shuffle were non-Igbo minorities.

Official Biafran statements were designed to keep that from happening. They repeatedly emphasized that Biafran nationality transcended ethnicity, even as Biafra’s non-Igbo population shrank. Though federal forces had captured most non-Igbo-speaking areas in the war’s early months, some non-Igbos remained inside of Biafra. Most visible among them was vice president Philip Effiong, an Ibibio who offered Biafra’s surrender after Chukwuemeka Ojukwu fled to exile in January 1970. Another prominent Ibibio was the chief secretary to the Biafran government, Ntiyong U. Akpan.

According to a 1968 edition of the Biafran military newsletter *The Leopard*, Azikiwe made Biafra’s ethnic diversity his main point in a speech to soldiers. Recent experiences, he said, had deepened the ties between Biafra’s ethnic groups. ‘They lived in [the] North, some lived in the West, but when these massacres came, no discrimination was shown’. He continued, ‘All were slain. So this became clear, crystal clear, that we were marked for extinction’.⁴²

Another example of this emphasis followed the Nigerian occupation of the southeastern port city of Calabar, whose population included many Efik and Ibibio people. According to *The Case for Biafra*, as residents returned after fighting ended ‘over 2,000 pure Efiks were slaughtered’.⁴³ That invasion had been part of a broader operation directed at areas with non-Igbo majorities.

It must be clearly noted that Calabar is not Ibo. Bonny is not Ibo. Ogoja is not Ibo. Most Ogoja people who are still alive took refuge in

Ibo towns, where they were received and treated with brotherly affection. Most of the displaced Biafrans now taking refuge in the Biafran hinterland come from these non-Ibo speaking areas. All this goes to show that THE WAR IS NOT AGAINST IBOS but AGAINST ALL BIAFRANS.⁴⁴

While *The Case for Biafra* both downplayed ethnic divisions in Biafra and emphasized Gowon's personal responsibility for genocide, another government publication shifted its allegations to Nigeria's largest ethnic group. Under the headline 'Hausa Army: Genocide Is Their Aim', the *Biafra Newsletter* identified the army as 'Hausa' rather than 'Nigerian'.⁴⁵ Doing so deployed a shorthand that readers could read through different lenses. While the ethnic boundaries of Hausa society have historically been porous, a narrow application of the label signified a transnational ethno-linguistic group, rooted in northern Nigeria and predominantly Muslim, whose members constituted the region's largest ethnic group. A narrow reading of the *Newsletter* text, therefore, could suggest that the Nigerian soldiers involved in the operation were ethnically homogenous and motivated by ethnic solidarity. But a less restrictive reading of 'Hausa' allowed the term to stand in for either northern Nigerians or Nigerian Muslims. By substituting 'Hausa army' for 'Nigerian army', the *Newsletter* article sidestepped the language of political strife between rival states; instead it made a visceral appeal to ethnicity that amplified religious overtones.

In fact, while Hausa-speakers were indeed part of the Nigerian army, its soldiers came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, the Calabar operation had been commanded by a Yoruba, Benjamin Adekunle, often remembered for a remark he made the next year that many read as endorsing genocide.⁴⁶ But Biafran political calculus downplayed Nigeria's diversity and often substituted 'Hausa' for 'Nigerian'. In the words of the *Biafra Newsletter* article,

one of the big points at issue in this war is not merely the alleged fear of genocide, but the *knowledge*, gained from experience before and during the war, that the ethnic and racial extermination of Biafrans is what the soldiers of the Hausa Fulani Emirs have been commanded to carry out.⁴⁷

By shifting terms, the article minimized political complexity and implied that wartime genocide was an extension of a longstanding anti-Igbo agenda among northern elites.⁴⁸

Questions of ethnicity in Nigeria and Biafra also surfaced in the pro-Biafran booklet *Biafra: A Challenge to the Conscience of Britain*. The

author, Oxford professor H. G. Hanbury, had served two years as dean of the law faculty at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, near Enugu. After returning to Britain in 1966 Hanbury lobbied his government. In pleading Biafra's case the booklet's presentation of Nigeria's ethnic equation was less crude than what appeared in the *Newsletter*, but no less inflammatory. 'Hausas . . . had apparently been determined to fight to the last Mid-Westerner and Westerner, reserving themselves for the final massacre, which would exterminate the Ibos for ever [*sic.*]'⁴⁹ Hanbury rejected Nigerian claims that Biafra had violated the rights of non-Igbos, saying that 'they have remained enthusiastically loyal to Ojukwu'. He argued that the loyalty of non-Igbo Biafrans was 'hardly surprising in that the Northerners were by no means selective in their lust for slaughter' in 1966.⁵⁰

Another stream of Biafran thought cast blame for genocide far more broadly, and in the process diminished Nigeria's moral and political stature by asserting the country lacked political independence. A poem in the *Biafra Newsletter* was one of many texts tying foreign assistance to genocide. Lines from its second stanza read

They wish us dead
 Top hat Whitehall, Turbanned Lagos
 So no one ever learns
 The true Biafran tale
 Of genocide
 Hatched by our erstwhile countrymen
 Backed by Foreign guns and planes.⁵¹

Britain had been Nigeria's primary arms supplier before the war, and by 1968, with the British public divided on the subject of support for Nigeria, the government 'found itself in the awkward position of continually playing down the amount of weaponry it was supplying in order to mollify its critics at home, while simultaneously stressing their quantity and value in Nigeria, to please the Nigerians'.⁵²

Unable to acquire heavy weapons from Britain, Nigeria had negotiated shipments of aircraft from the Soviet Union shortly after the war began.⁵³ Biafran propagandists were quick to exploit the arrangement, as in a 1968 editorial cartoon from *The Leopard* depicting a wrestling bout where Ojukwu stood confidently above a dazed Gowon. Ojukwu, however, was restrained on one side by British Prime Minister Harold Wilson and on the other by uniformed Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. In the caption below Wilson called to Gowon, 'Up boy! We're here to assist you'.⁵⁴

Unlike the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom was deeply enmeshed in Nigeria's history and politics. British expatriates opposed to the unification

of the civil service had been represented as instigators of anti-Igbo violence as early as the *Crisis series*.⁵⁵ In 1968, Azikiwe said publically of the first attacks on civilians that ‘These atrocious murders were said to have been planned within the confines of Ahmadu Bello University and the names of certain indigenous and expatriate members of the academic and administrative staff were mentioned as instigators of this foul massacre’.⁵⁶ Wartime allegations against the British government were even more forceful. According to a *Biafra Newsletter* article, in addition to ‘engaging in a war of genocide against Biafrans’, Nigeria’s leadership was guilty of ‘conspiring with Britain to exterminate Biafrans’. The article asserted northern Nigerian leaders intended to ‘undo the independence struggle which Biafrans successfully fought against British Colonialism’. It claimed that ‘Today, Nigeria’s slavery to Britain is worse than before Independence’.⁵⁷ Similar sentiments surfaced in Tanzania, one of four African countries to recognize Biafra. According to the official *Nationalist* newspaper, ‘Those who want continued bloodshed are the Nigerians and the British. The former because they are hankering for the annihilation of the Biafran people and the latter because they will do anything to fight for neo-colonial stakes in Africa’.⁵⁸

Cooperation between Lagos and London allowed Biafra to denounce Nigeria for political impotence, as when Ojukwu accused Wilson of complicity in genocide. ‘No, I accuse Harold Wilson of being a direct accomplice in the crime of Genocide. Nigerians could never have done 1/100th of what they are doing today but for Harold Wilson’.⁵⁹ And the same theme ran through a 1969 *Newsletter* piece that described the ‘crime of genocide against the peoples of the former Eastern Nigeria committed by Harold Wilson and Yakubu Gowon’. ‘Genocide is a crime that can only be committed by the state. Genocide even requires more than all the resources of any one state to execute. For Genocide also needs the tacit or express support of collaborating states in the international community’.⁶⁰ While arms shipments to Nigeria helped shape wartime discourse, for most observers abroad questions of genocide would centre less on foreign weapons than on policies that dramatically limited Biafran’s access to food.

Mass Starvation: ‘A Legitimate Aspect of War’

We will probably never know how many Eastern Nigerians died in the 1966 attacks. Estimates of civilian deaths rose steadily during the crisis years. *Nigerian Pogrom* was quickly assembled and drew on hastily gathered estimates; it reported 7,000 deaths from the combined attacks. In the months to come, the regional government increased the total to 30,000, a figure that circulated widely, making it into the 1967 US *Congressional Record*.⁶¹ By mid-1968, Ojukwu stated that 80,000 had been killed.⁶² There was no

definitive estimate of the number of easterners displaced and dispossessed that year, but a Biafran ambassador floated the figure two million.⁶³

Wartime casualties soon eclipsed those from 1966. In one case, Biafra argued ‘there are 100 civilian casualties to every military one’.⁶⁴ Biafra and its allies called particular attention to victims of Nigeria’s land blockade and the starvation that resulted. Even before the war, the Eastern Region had been a net importer of food, particularly protein sources. Biafra quickly lost its access to the sea, and by August 1968 two-thirds of its former territory was behind Nigerian lines. This forced perhaps eight million people into roughly 9,000 square miles.⁶⁵ Fertilizer and fuel were scarce inside that territory. With agriculture and food distribution disrupted, Biafra’s situation was desperate. Against that backdrop, Nigeria restricted food shipments, ostensibly to prevent arms from reaching Biafra.⁶⁶ The situation was compounded by Biafra’s refusal to allow daytime relief flights for fear of revealing the locations of its limited infrastructure. Moreover, ‘Biafrans . . . rejected aid by way of Nigeria, partly of a fear that the food would be poisoned, partly to avoid any act that would show a dependence on the Nigerian government’.⁶⁷ During 1969, the Red Cross (ICRC) suspended flights after Nigeria downed an ICRC plane over Biafra. Other relief agencies that continued flights estimated hunger deaths at more than 1,000 per day—a figure both shocking and significantly lower than earlier ICRC estimates.⁶⁸ Estimates of a million starvation deaths circulated, as in the Goodell report. ‘There are those who assert that only a few thousand Biafrans died of starvation in the past six months. We now know that an absolute minimum of 1 million Biafrans died during that period’.⁶⁹

While many Biafrans starved, their leaders harnessed hunger as a political weapon. The Ojukwu government refused to compromise on relief shipments, citing tactical concerns about establishing a land corridor for shipments from Nigeria or allowing daytime flights. Scrutiny over Biafran restrictions on aid were such that, as Lasse Heerten noted, in mid-1968 ‘the secessionist leadership felt impelled to issue a statement that it was not their intention’ to leverage mass suffering for political gain.⁷⁰ John de St. Jorre wrote that ‘Ojukwu chose the short-term benefits, even though it meant a heavy cost in Biafran lives’.⁷¹ Still, by late 1968 the ‘starvation story’ had become a cornerstone of Biafra’s international appeal, appearing in government statements and those by the Swiss firm Markpress News Feature Service, which operated the Biafran Overseas Press Service. According to de St. Jorre, by focusing on hunger, Biafra ‘succeeded where all their other tactics . . . had failed’.

It had become apparent to them during the mass starvation of the preceding months that a hunger-wracked skeleton of a child was more

effective in internationalizing Biafra's cause than any other single combination of factors.⁷²

One example of this success was a 1968 statement by a group of Biafran supporters including anthropologists G. I. Jones and Margaret M. Green. On the consequences of Nigeria's blockade, they wrote

Whether or not these deaths constitute 'genocide' may be argued at length but with little profit. The real issue now, as far as the Biafrans are concerned, is the terrible choice between continuation of the high death-rate of malnutrition on the one hand, and the possibly worse consequences, on the other hand, of allowing Biafran-held territory to be overrun by Federal troops.⁷³

Some comments by Nigerian officials reinforced Biafra's efforts to cast the blockade as genocidal. Federal Commissioner of Information Anthony Enahoro was quoted as saying 'There are various ways of fighting a war. You might starve your enemy into submission, or you might kill him on the battlefield'.⁷⁴ And federal minister Obafemi Awolowo was quoted as saying 'All is fair in war, and starvation is one of the weapons of war. I don't see why I should feed my enemies fat only to fight us harder', a sentiment echoed by army chief of staff Hassan Usman Katsina.⁷⁵ Time and again Biafran rhetoric referenced such statements to demonstrate that Nigeria intended not to defeat a military foe but rather to exterminate a people. For example, the *Biafra Newsletter* quoted another statement by Enahoro, this one to press members at the UN, whom he reportedly told 'Mass starvation is one of the unfortunate aspects of war and some may even say it is a legitimate aspect of war'.⁷⁶

Again, the burden of proving that Nigeria's actions constituted genocide fell to Biafra, and despite dramatic coverage of the famine, Biafra's charges did not lead to the military support or widespread diplomatic recognition Biafran leaders sought. Nigeria countered that starvation was a byproduct of legitimate military action and of Biafran restrictions on relief. Regardless of political positions, still photographs and moving images depicting starving Biafrans, many victims of kwashiorkor or marasmus, were striking to African and non-African eyes alike.

Creating Context: Comparisons with the Holocaust

Media coverage of the conflict in North America was often sympathetic to the plight of Biafrans, while coverage in the United Kingdom was more divided. But regardless of editorial slant, much of the reporting on the

conflict reflected foreign journalists' limited understanding of Nigerian history and politics. As Heerten reminds us, '“the Holocaust” had not yet emerged as the symbolic core of a memory culture focused on genocidal suppression and violence'.⁷⁷ Nonetheless, Biafra leveraged the comparatively familiarity of the Nazi genocide to an international audience by comparing Nigeria to Nazi Germany, and Biafrans (or Igbos) to Jews. One example was a Biafran pamphlet that appropriated anti-Semitic tropes to argue that attempts at diplomacy had failed because for Nigeria 'the final solution of the “Biafran problem” involved genocide'.⁷⁸

Then, in the aftermath of remarks by Enahoro at the United Nations, Biafran leader Ojukwu bundled the 1966 killings, wartime attacks on civilians and Biafra's famine in language that begged comparisons with the Nazi genocide. He reminded the first group of journalists to officially visit Biafra that in 1945 world leaders had 'sat together and solemnly bound themselves to intervene and stop acts of genocide wherever they might occur in the world'. With that frame in place and the 1967 Six-Day War fresh in many minds, Ojukwu used a series of rhetorical questions to advance his claim of genocide, asking the assembled journalists

what must be reached in the systematic massacre of a people before it can be adjudged as amounting to genocide?

Has the massacre of 30,000 Biafran men, women and children in May, 1966, satisfied the criteria? Could the slaughter of 50,000 Biafrans in September-October 1966 and the flight of 2 million maimed and destitute others be accepted as the necessary criteria? What about the fate of 100,000 Biafran civilians who have lost their lives through aerial bombing, strafing and shelling? And the 4.5 million refugees who are fast starving to death?

His language was calibrated to resonate with discourse on the Nazi genocide.

In short, when will the world statesmen awaken to the fact that the Biafran race is being systematically wiped out? Can they, being responsible and honourable men, sit back and wait till genocide is completed before they realise that it is actually being committed with impunity?⁷⁹

A few months later, a Biafran press statement used the Nazi genocide to downplay Nigerian claims that there were Igbos living peacefully in Nigeria, and to press assertions of Nigeria's genocidal intentions.

[I]t is not necessary for all Biafrans to be killed before a case of genocide is substantiated. Nazi Germany did not succeed in killing all Jews

and yet genocide was the charge against German leaders at the Nuremberg trials. In the case of Biafra, there have been acts of genocide over a period of years establishing a pattern from which the intention of genocide can be inferred.⁸⁰

Some of Biafra's allies also analogized Biafrans and Jews. In a statement extending diplomatic recognition, the Tanzanian foreign minister wrote that 'Biafrans have now suffered the same kind of rejection within their state that the Jews of Germany experienced'.⁸¹ And Richard West of the *Sunday Times* wrote that 'Ibophobia, which is widespread too in Western Nigeria is comparable to the Nazi hatred of Jews'.⁸² West's article referenced a speculative colonial era discourse that used supposedly inherent 'racial' traits to position Igbos as 'the Jews of Africa'.⁸³

Reversing the Genocide Narrative: The International Observer Team

Public discourse about whether genocide was occurring responded in critical ways to the visit of an international observer team to Nigeria between September and November 1968. As detailed in Karen E. Smith's excellent contribution to this volume, Nigeria's invitation to the team was in large measure a response to British pressure. The team's report stated that 'the invitation was issued because of allegations that the Government was conducting a planned programme of systematic and wanton destruction of Ibo people and their property'.⁸⁴ The team included military officers from Canada, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Representing the Organization of African Unity, but not formally contributing to the team's report, were officers from Algeria and Ethiopia; there was also a representative of the United Nations secretariat. British Foreign and Commonwealth Office documents argue that the team's presence 'provides ample evidence of F.M.G.'s sincerity in saying that they have no intention of exterminating the Ibos'.⁸⁵

Biafra responded to the report by commissioning its own observer team. The International Committee on the Investigation of Crimes of Genocide, led by a Ghanaian listed only as 'Dr. Mensah', lacked the stature and visibility of the first team. Mensah's report drew heavily on the findings of the 1966 'atrocities tribunal', concluding 'that previous and present actions of northerners against the Igbo clearly constituted both "intent to destroy" and "deliberate destruction" of the Igbo'.⁸⁶ The report also asserted that Nigerian authorities 'admitted that there is genocide going on in Biafra' but failed to accept responsibility.⁸⁷ Mensah's report, however, received very little attention outside of Biafra.

The observer team operated solely in territory controlled by Nigeria, meaning the only easterners to whom it had access were outside Biafra.

Among those living in the war-affected areas the team reported widespread fear.

Discussions with village leaders and other displaced persons emphasise that while all the people were frightened by the fighting, the Ibos in particular were also frightened by the secessionist claims that if they fell into the hands of the Federal troops they would be killed. This fear of being killed by the Federal troops is real and as a result the Ibos in the bush in Federal occupied areas are very slow to come out of hiding.⁸⁸

The Nigerian military code of conduct emphasized, in de St. Jorre's words, 'that the Ibo people as a whole were not their enemies, especially civilians'.⁸⁹ According to de St. Jorre, Nigerian soldiers, while guilty of 'many excesses' and 'several well-documented atrocities', were also well served by the code. In his analysis, the code served as an effective check on brutality by providing both moral guidance for Nigerian officers and a framework for the political education of ordinary soldiers. He also argued that the code provided 'a useful yardstick' for the observers, who reported that the troops were aware of the code and were abiding by its strictures.⁹⁰ The observers also reported they 'neither saw nor heard evidence that the Federal Forces were committing acts with intent to destroy the Ibo people'. Instead they described 'considerable evidence that the troops were assisting the civilian population', though they also noted 'complaints of abuse at the hands of soldiers'.⁹¹

There is at least one reason to believe that the team's observations did not capture the full reality of conditions on the ground. The team met with the head of the Nigerian Air Force who showed them the Air Force Code of Operations. That code, dated 14 January 1968, specified that non-military targets and civilian gatherings were to be avoided. Most (and possibly all) of the nine attacks on hospitals the Goodell study tour detailed 12 months later happened after the code went into effect.

Still, the observers' conclusions were unequivocal.

The Observers neither saw nor heard any evidence that the Federal Army is following such a policy towards the Ibo people. . . . Based on what the Observers saw and heard they are of the opinion that the use of term "genocide" is unwarranted'.⁹²

That conclusion received broad media coverage. In a letter to the *Times*, Brigadier Bernard Fergusson, a team member, declared 'an emphatic Not Guilty'.⁹³ The observer team's finding that no genocide had occurred

reassured the Wilson administration. Minister of State Lord Shepherd drew copiously on the report in responding to critics of British support for Nigeria.⁹⁴ Yet, in internal FCO communications Shepherd was equivocal. He dismissed Brigadier Fergusson's published 'not guilty' declaration because, he argued, the presence of the observers may have helped to create the conditions the report detailed. In an internal memorandum, Shepherd wrote 'there was no massacre of Ibos while the team was present if only because the team served to deter excesses. The main issue remains on the table as before unaffected by the operations of the Commission'. Another problem Shepherd found with the team's conclusions stemmed from the difficulties inherent in the UN convention definition of genocide that had guided its inquiry. 'The Report although short is of poor quality and unsatisfactory on the aspects which I find disturbing. The verdict of "not guilty" is not very valuable in the light of the unrealistic definition of genocide'.⁹⁵ One of the most persistent internal critics of British policy, Lord Lytton, was also suspicious of the report. Lytton argued that Fergusson's evidence was biased toward a negative finding of genocide, arguing that the latter 'regards bombing hospitals as second effects of assaulting military positions whereas the patients almost certainly call it genocide'.⁹⁶

The observer team's conclusions did little to reassure Biafrans. A four-page Biafran statement rejected the report's findings and critiqued its methods.

The team did not get anywhere near the war fronts nor did they come into Biafra. They were taken on a conducted tour. They ignored well authenticated reports made by neutrals about the massacre of Biafran civilians near the war fronts.⁹⁷

Other Biafran publications packaged the team's report as evidence of an international conspiracy against Biafra, and *Newsweek* reported that Biafrans remained unconvinced by the conclusion that there was no genocide. 'Such statements . . . bring jeers from the Ibos, who remain utterly convinced that they face extinction. And that conviction, of course, has stiffened their resolve'.⁹⁸

Biafran scepticism notwithstanding, the observers' report marked a turning point in how the outside world handled allegations of genocide. While those claims remained a cornerstone of pro-Biafran arguments, they lost much of the traction they had held before the report. For example, *Newsweek*, while still critical of Nigerian airstrikes against civilians, in 1969 voiced suspicion of genocide claims. Ojukwu, *Newsweek* wrote,

possesses a considerable talent for propaganda, and he has skillfully used that talent to promote abroad the notion that Nigeria is waging a

genocidal war against the Ibos. In this effort, he has received considerable assistance from the Nigerians themselves.⁹⁹

The question of genocide figured less prominently in reports by later incarnations of the team. As Biafra continued to lose both territory and population to federal advances, the team directed its attention to the conditions of Igbos living in federally held territory. The final paragraph of a mid-1969 observer team report connected the two threads. ‘The Administration at Enugu is an Ibo Administration and is actively engaged in rehabilitation of the thousands of Ibos now in federal-held areas. The existence of this administration belies charges of genocide’.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion: ‘Loyal’ Igbos, Former Biafrans and the End of the War

Throughout the war, Nigeria’s government rebutted genocide charges by pointing to Igbos who lived in Lagos or returned to the north. The government-owned *Morning Post* wrote that ‘it would be foolish to think that every Ibo man living on Nigerian territory not held by Ojukwu is a loyalist, yet it is easy enough to observe that there are indeed firmly loyal Ibos’.¹⁰¹ Still, some Igbos in Nigeria chose to disguise or downplay their ethnic affiliation.¹⁰² But others, probably a large majority, openly presented themselves as Nigerian Igbos. The most visible example—and one of the federal side’s most useful weapons in confronting allegations of genocide—was the civilian administrator of the East Central State. Dr. Ukpabi Asika was from a prominent Onitsha family. An academic, he remained in Ibadan during 1966.¹⁰³ Asika was a frequent target in Biafran rhetoric, which lambasted him as a puppet or traitor. Other prominent Biafrans also bolstered Nigerian denials of genocide by switching sides. In early 1968, diplomat Raphael Uwechue crossed over, and Azikiwe followed late the following year. As British diplomats noted in 1969, ‘Dr. Azikiwe, in his statement of 28 August, described the accusation of genocide as “palpably false”’.¹⁰⁴

As the war neared its end, persistent shortages and collapsed infrastructure meant conditions remained difficult both inside what remained of Biafra and in former Biafran territory behind federal lines. Moreover, contemporaneous accounts describe depredations by Nigerian and in some cases Biafran soldiers. Biafra surrendered 12 January 1970; at the end of that month, US diplomats reported that fears of genocide had dissipated as the conduct of Nigerian soldiers improved.

The Ibo population does not fear extermination, and all the Ibos interviewed along the way stated that almost everyone has come out of the

“bush”. The troops of the 1st Division were observed sharing their rations with the people in their area and they were well disciplined.¹⁰⁵

But even as the immediate threat of genocide faded, the trauma of 1966 and the war years did not. As early as 1968, a British supporter of Biafra argued to her government the war’s hidden effects might take years to surface. ‘Ibo children were beginning to think of themselves as Nigerians, now they are Biafrans, and it will be a long, long time before the psychological shock of feeling they are the victims of genocide can be cured’.¹⁰⁶

Whether those children were the targets of genocidal intent remains for some an open historical question; for others, it has long been settled fact. Beyond dispute is that many of them were among those targeted for ruthless violence in 1966 because of their actual or perceived membership in a particular ethnic group. Many were for 30 months subjected to repeated attacks, often in violation of rules ostensibly governing the Nigerian military, and most had been starved. Demands that such experiences be weighed against an international standard of genocide are not surprising, particularly given the limited reach of the international observers charged with investigating allegations of genocide. And beyond the question of how we label such violence, Akçam, historian of the Armenian genocide, argues for the intrinsic value of confronting and acknowledging uncomfortable historical chapters.

The important thing . . . is not the term, but rather the moral position that recognizes the crime and condemns it. However we define it, whatever word we use, we must acknowledge that this history involved the deliberate destruction of people.¹⁰⁷

In the case of Nigeria, this work remains, in the words of the Federal Military Government’s wartime motto, ‘a task that must be done’.

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Notes

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5. Robert Melson, 'My journey in the study of genocide', in Samuel Totten and Steven L. Jacobs (eds.), *Pioneers of genocide studies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002), p. 150fn.
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9. Douglas Anthony, *Poison and medicine: Ethnicity, power and violence in a Nigerian city* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002).
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11. Taner Akçam, *A shameful act: The Armenian genocide and the question of Turkish responsibility* (New York: Holt, 2007), p. 10.
12. Akçam, *A shameful act*, p. 11.
13. Akachi Odoemene, 'Remember to forget: The Nigeria-Biafra war, history, and the politics of memory', in Chima J. Korieh (ed.), *The Nigeria-Biafra war: Genocide and the politics of memory* (Amherst: Cambria, 2012), p. 167.
14. Ekwe-Ekwe discusses the alleged role of northern Nigerian elites in the violence of 1966. See *Biafra revisited*, p. 76. See also Anthony, *Poison and medicine*, p. 89.
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17. Shaw, *War and genocide*, p. 4.
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26. Eastern Nigeria, *Nigerian pogrom: The organized massacre of Eastern Nigerians* (Enugu: Ministry of Information, Publicity Division, 1966), p. 4.
27. Eastern Nigeria, *Nigerian pogrom*, p. 6.
28. See Anthony, *Poison and medicine*, pp. 78–79.
29. Undated statement 'Committee members recently returned from Eastern Nigeria' (Audrey Chapman, Stanley Diamond, Conor Cruise O'Brien), papers of the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, Northwestern University Library.
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31. The final volume of the *Nigerian crisis* series accused, by name, six prominent northerners of leading 'the initial panning of the broad outlines' of the May/June violence and the July coup. It identified them as 'discredited Northern ex-politicians' and 'Northern civil servants'. All were associated with the defunct Northern Peoples Congress political party. Eastern Nigeria, *January 15 before and after* (Enugu: Ministry of Information, 1967), p. 42.

32. Republic of Biafra, *The case for Biafra*, p. 5.
33. Major General Yakubu Gowon, 'Operational code of conduct for the Nigerian Army, July 1967', undated (circulated July 1967) in Anthony Hamilton Millard Kirk-Greene (ed.), *Crisis and conflict in Nigeria*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1, pp. 455–457.
34. *Biafra Newsletter*, Vol. 2, No. 6, 17 January 1969, p. 6. The *Newsletter* was published by the External Publicity Committee of the Commission for Information in Enugu.
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36. Nnamdi Azikiwe, 25 February 1968 speech reproduced in *Newsletter of the Biafra Association in the Americas*, 31 August 1969.
37. Azikiwe, *Newsletter of the Biafra Association in the Americas*, 31 August 1969.
38. CPPCG defines as punishable the commission of genocide, conspiracy to commit genocide, 'direct and public incitement to commit genocide', the attempt to commit genocide and 'complicity in genocide'.
39. Azikiwe, *Newsletter of the Biafra Association in the Americas*, 31 August 1969.
40. See Anthony, *Poison and medicine*, pp. 121–129.
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42. 'We are not trees', says Nnamdi Azikiwe, *The Leopard: Bulletin of the Biafra Armed Forces*, Vol. 1, No. 5, 5 March 1968, p. 1.
43. Republic of Biafra, *The case for Biafra*, p. 27.
44. Republic of Biafra, *The case for Biafra*, p. 28. Emphasis in original.
45. 'Hausa army: Genocide is their aim', *Biafra Newsletter*, 29 December 1967, p. 3.
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47. 'Hausa army: Genocide is their aim'. Original emphasis.
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49. Harold Greville Hanbury, *Biafra: A challenge to the conscience of Britain* (London: Britain-Biafra Association, 1968), p. 16.
50. Hanbury, *Biafra*, p. 18.
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52. St. Jorre, *Brothers' war*, p. 297.
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66. See Michael Gould, *The Biafran war: The struggle for modern Nigeria* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2011), pp. 134–135.
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72. St. Jorre, *Brothers' war*, p. 241.
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75. Press statement to London *Daily Telegraph*, 27 June 1969, cited in Inyang, 'A task that must be done', p. 6. Katsina was quoted as saying, 'Personally I would not feed somebody I am fighting', *Times*, 28 June 1969, cited in 'Nigeria: Did the federal government of Nigeria engage in Igbo genocide?', *Pambazuka*, 9 May 2013.
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3 Marketing Genocide

Biafran Propaganda Strategies During the Nigerian Civil War, 1967–1970

Roy Doron

Introduction

The debate over genocide in the Nigerian civil war has its origins in the political turmoil that began with the massacres after the coup and countercoup in 1966 culminating in the starvation and siege warfare perpetrated against Biafra during the war itself. Most estimates place the number of Igbo casualties in the range of one to two million, mostly civilians.¹ Throughout the war and in its aftermath, the debate over its genocidal nature became a serious matter of contention in state-society relations in Nigeria, especially regarding the increasingly politicized and intense debate regarding the Igbo's place in Nigeria today.² Biafran propaganda claimed that their war was strictly for survival and that the Nigerian Federal Military Government (FMG) was bent on the total annihilation of Biafra. Portraying the Nigerian assault on Biafra as a genocidal campaign, the secessionists masterfully constructed their message to appeal to a wide audience, both in Biafra and abroad.

There is comparatively little dispute that the Biafran experience was an unmitigated humanitarian catastrophe. The main issues of contention centre on the number of casualties and the role of the Nigerian military in maximizing civilian suffering. The second issue is of utmost importance, because the central question, both during and after the war, was whether the Nigerian establishment intended to commit genocide or whether the mass starvation was simply a tactic to beat the Biafrans into submission. The debate over genocide is not merely an academic one; its very construction raises important questions on the issue of conflict and identity in Nigeria and has helped to redefine the relationship between the state and the varied groups that make up this multiethnic country.

While many scholars, activists and politicians have focused on the message of Biafra's propaganda, this chapter specifically discusses how the Biafrans crafted their message during the war.³ I examine how the propaganda directorate ensured that their propaganda was effective, and

was able to adapt to the changing environment in the besieged country despite considerable logistical difficulties. For the Biafrans, it was important to convey a cogent message regarding genocide that resonated both in Biafra and around the world. However, due to wartime privations, it became difficult to produce mass amounts of material catering to different audiences. With only one clandestine operational radio tower, the Biafrans had to make efficient use of their airtime, and with limited ability to manufacture and distribute printed matter, they had to rely on unconventional means to disseminate their message beyond their apparent limited reach. The Biafrans' effectiveness in formulating and constantly retooling the message, coupled with the ability to disseminate it under extraordinary circumstances, helped the Biafran narrative maintain its staying power for most of the war.

The extensive coverage of the humanitarian crisis led to intense debates about the issue. The Biafrans went to great lengths to portray the war as genocidal, utilizing journalists and photographers whose work helped prove their case in global public opinion. Several authors have focused on how Biafran propaganda depicted the republic, and how its portrayal transformed into a narrative of genocide that shaped the war's prosecution. In one of the first major works on the war, journalist John de St. Jorre recalled a conversation with a Biafran official who stated that the fear of annihilation was so strong that 'if you gave us the choice of 1,000 rifles or milk for 50,000 starving children, we'd take the guns'.⁴ The propaganda was so effective that people of all professions and educational backgrounds saw the war as a fight for survival.

Most secondary works deal with the humanitarian catastrophe in some form. Notable in early analysts, John Stremmler posited the crisis to frame a large portion of his work on the war's worldwide impact.⁵ More recently, Michael Gould used the war's imagery as a backdrop to his study of its international implications.⁶ Biafra's message of genocide has become especially important more recently for scholars like Douglas Anthony, Nicholas Ibeawuchi Omenka and Françoise Ugochukwu. Though they focus on very different aspects of the media's role in the war, each examines how the Biafrans were able to convey their plight to the world in 1968, one of the most eventful years of the twentieth century. Anthony's discussion centres on the Biafrans' portrayal of themselves as a bastion of modernity in the heart of Africa besieged by atavistic forces from the Muslim north, and how this elicited the sympathy of the Western world. When that sympathy did not materialize in concrete benefits, the Biafrans transformed their propaganda into a narrative of racial bias that depicted a modern and independent Biafra as a threat to the neocolonial order.⁷ Omenka argues that the religious aspects of Biafran propaganda were effective in mobilizing

the Biafran population and, if belatedly, garnering support from Christian groups abroad.⁸ Ugochukwu's study shows that Biafran propaganda proved a hindrance to effective reporting because many of its false claims perplexed global media outlets. An earlier discussion of this issue can be found in Morris Davis's work, which focuses on Nigerian and Biafran attempts to navigate the media world, detailing how they courted various public relations entities and how these organizations, governmental and private, responded by helping both sides wage the global propaganda war.⁹

Much of the current literature highlights the propaganda message rather than the relationship between that message and its means of dissemination. Examining how the Biafrans ensured their propaganda remained consistent yet flexible during capricious wartime circumstances, and how the Biafrans spread and maintained their narrative, is central to understanding how Biafra's propaganda shaped the war effort at home and abroad.

Constructing the Genocide Argument

The debate over genocide in Nigeria falls squarely into the framework of debating genocidal conflicts. The Biafrans centred their media offensive both at home and abroad on the assertion that the Nigerian 'vandals' were waging a genocidal campaign against the Biafran people. The enormity of Igbo suffering during the war is widely acknowledged, but the main challenges to those claiming genocide comes from the assertion of the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (UNCG) that the perpetrators of genocide must have a provable intent. Throughout the war, various Biafran publications published versions of the UNCG annotated with Nigerian atrocities against the Biafrans to prove their case in the court of world public opinion. The Nigerian government invited a team of international observers, led by representatives from the British government, to evaluate the genocide claims. Governments and humanitarian organizations widely acknowledged that the war was taking an unimaginable toll on the civilian population trapped in the Biafran enclave. However, the question of genocide rested on the legal definition of genocide enshrined in the 1948 convention, which gave genocide a very limited, if also very vague, definition.¹⁰

So strong was the fear of genocide that much of the postwar literature focuses on the global reaction to the humanitarian crisis and Biafra's ability to project their plight around the world. According to Stremlau, the humanitarian catastrophe galvanized global public opinion that genocide was taking place in Biafra. That public pressure led to two failed attempts to negotiate a ceasefire in 1968. The first at Kampala, which Stremlau dubbed a confrontation rather than a conference, ended with the Biafrans walking out of the talks.¹¹ The second, in Addis Ababa, hosted by the

Organization of African Unity (OAU), also ended without an agreement, despite some preconference manoeuvring to avoid a repeat of Kampala. Moreover, Western governments came under intense internal pressure to aid Biafra's suffering. In one instance, George Christian, Lyndon Johnson's press secretary, stated that it was insufficient for the US government just to assist, and asked 'are we getting across what we're doing to help?', suggesting that publicizing the American humanitarian response was equally important for US domestic reasons.¹²

Biafra's message resonated inside the Igbo heartland. Within the break-away state, the goal of the secessionists' propaganda effort was to ensure that the civilian population believed that the war was genocidal, especially among the Igbo, who, by mid-1968, comprised the bulk of the population still under Biafran rule. This narrative was also instrumental in creating the argument for genocide around the world. However, the Biafrans had to contend with unique challenges in disseminating their message. Biafra's ability to constantly evaluate, critique and reformulate their propaganda for audiences at home and abroad testifies to the resilience of the Biafran propaganda engine.

Biafran Propaganda During the War

The Biafran propaganda apparatus had two closely related objectives, outlined in several key documents. As Anthony states, Biafran propaganda abroad endeavoured to show Biafrans not as a struggling orphan state in need of Western paternalistic assistance, but a modern nation in the making. The elites, who spoke perfect English, appeared in the foreign press.¹³ However, as he acknowledges, Biafra's general population was much different from the face that the secessionists' propaganda wished the world to see. Internally, the propaganda directorate had to deal with a much different set of challenges than the formidable ones facing them abroad. Despite the image they projected to foreigners, in reality most of Biafrans were illiterate. According to one Biafran document, the propaganda directorate estimated five percent of the population to be the elites and a further twenty-five percent was classified as the 'literate and illiterate middle class'.¹⁴ This fact posed significant challenges, as written publications meant little to a population that could not read.

The directorate created several innovative ways to reach this internal target audience. In order to organize a coherent policy, and to create a strategy to circumvent the obstacles of creating effective propaganda during wartime, the Biafrans created a series of plans, of which only one, 'Guide lines [sic] for effective propaganda', also called Plan #4, remains. The plan's first part details the general purpose, aims, techniques and strategies of the campaign. The second part explains how the Biafran 'propaganda

man' was to deal with the unique challenges of operating in a war so close to home and a home front that was increasingly under siege, blockaded and teeming with refugees.

The authors of the guidelines studied propaganda techniques very carefully, and incorporated the lessons of Allied and Axis propaganda during World War II with strategies used in the advertising world. Thus, when the Biafrans discussed hate appeals as an effective propaganda tactic, they invoked Josef Goebbels's words 'we are enemies of the Jews, because we are fighting for the freedom of the German' alongside catchy advertising slogans such as 'Fresh up with Seven-Up!'¹⁵ Like any marketing campaign, no matter the message, 'the presentation of propaganda materials around whatever phenomena should be so striking as to be memorable'.¹⁶

The second part of the publication deals with the challenges of creating effective propaganda in Biafra under wartime circumstances. Some of the solutions were quite mundane: 'propaganda men' were urged to bring batteries to the local markets and set local radios to Radio Biafra; actors and playwrights were deployed to produce plays in the rural areas, where access to radio and television was further limited and the high illiteracy rate minimized the efficacy of printed propaganda. However, the directorate could not directly solve the main problem of dissemination, given the war situation and the lack of transportation and materials to propagate the message. In fact, the directorate addressed the issue by stating that 'the problems of blockade and transport cannot be solved by the propaganda machinery. The primary concern of the directorate is with the mental attitude of the people'.¹⁷

Despite these difficulties, the authors of the guidelines went to great lengths to ensure that the 'propaganda man' was equipped to circumvent the limitations and effectively distribute the Biafran message. The propaganda directorate carefully managed what information was to be distributed. Thus, it acted as the central coordinating unit for all propaganda, internal and international. The appraisals committee was created to evaluate every piece of propaganda before distribution, and 'Each propaganda item should be placed with the Director or preferably with the Appraisals committee. This practice may be different and rigorous but it is the only way to sharpen the tip point of the propaganda arrow'.¹⁸

The directorate went to great lengths to ensure that Biafran propaganda maintained credibility throughout the war. Therefore, it issued special guidelines regarding the use of falsehoods in propaganda. The goal was not to be wholly factually accurate, but to maintain credibility with respect to the general situation in the country. The guidelines state:

Arising from the proximity of the war fronts to the home audience, propaganda of falsehood cannot be effective because the true facts

soon reach the audience through eyewitnesses who travel from the war zones back to the centre of population. Propaganda of falsehood thrives only where the verification of the facts cannot be verified. This may in fact explain Nigeria's lying propaganda. Our propaganda should thus be very cautious about faked stories which are false though aimed at achieving desirable psychological results.¹⁹

Cartoons played an important role in the propaganda machine. They were usually instantly relatable to the illiterate, who needed little explanation to understand them. The tone of the cartoons became more morbid as the situation in Biafra became direr. One of the most successful ways they transmitted the severity of their situation was by using the cartoons in the military newsletter *The Leopard*.

These cartoons are important, not only because of how they depict the war, but also because of their tone during the early days of the war compared with the near-apocalyptic images that appeared as the war dragged on. The Biafrans portrayed themselves early on with an aura of invincibility, which lasted largely until mid-1968, when the war sharply turned against Biafra.²⁰ These early cartoons echo the sentiments that the Biafrans were a strong, independent nation, viable in its own right, which would not bow to the Nigerians or their neocolonial masters (portrayed in the cartoons by the Soviets and British), Nigeria's main arms suppliers and air force pilots. The themes of a global conspiracy against Biafra's self-determination are already apparent in these early cartoons—Nigeria could only hope to defeat Biafra with assistance from Britain and the USSR. This line of propaganda would repeat itself as the tide of the war turned increasingly against Biafra.

As the situation in Biafra worsened, the cartoons became increasingly morbid. The November issue featured an image, shown in Figure 3.3, of a group of obviously white men, sitting in a boardroom labelled 'International observers HQ, Lagos'. One of the men, looking through binoculars into the distance, states 'no blood mist!'. The other man replies 'then there's no genocide!'. Another caricature in that issue, shown in Figure 3.4, is even more gruesome, showing a sign that reads 'Doddan Barrack's Farm, Lagos' and an emaciated soldier with a basket full of skeletons on his head walking through a field of corpses. The caption under the image reads 'Gowon's harvest'.²¹

These examples, less than a year after the first images, show the transformation of the mood in Biafra. The war had taken a disastrous turn in favour of the Nigerians, and the tone of Biafran propaganda shifted in the direction of genocide. Figure 3.1 criticized the observer team that was stationed in Lagos as collaborating with the FMG. Ifegwu Eke, Biafra's

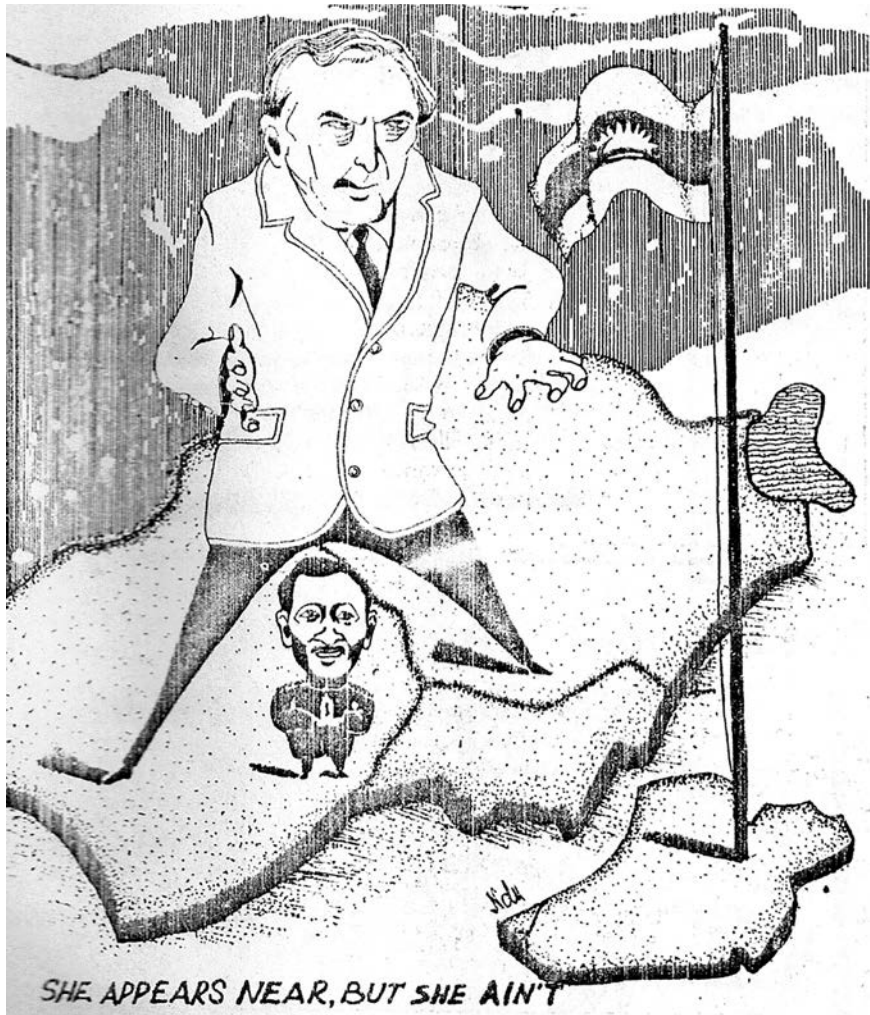


Figure 3.1 'She Appears Near, but She Ain't'.²²

information commissioner, who was in charge of much of the propaganda, called the observer team 'a bunch of crooks'.²³

These images are not unique in their evolving depictions of the plight of the Biafrans. Indeed, the last extant issue of *The Leopard* came to press in November 1968, and was the same issue that contained the two morbid cartoons mentioned above. The issue came about after a six month hiatus imposed by the military situation following the fall of Port Harcourt, and during a major assault from the south; one that saw the cities of Aba

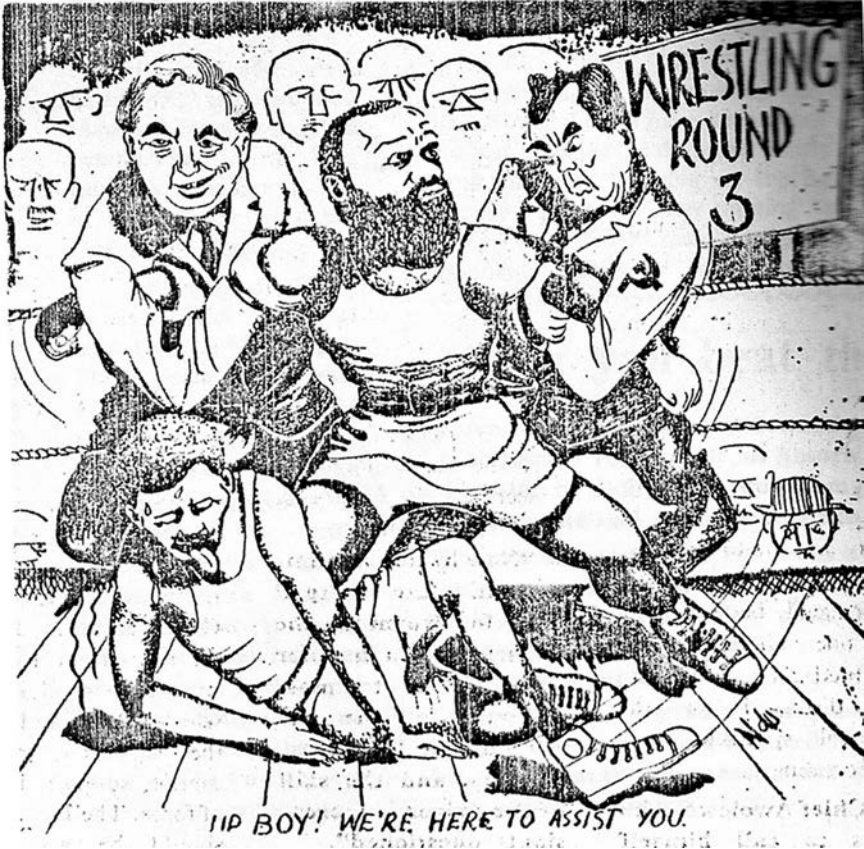


Figure 3.2 'Wrestling Cartoon'. A broad and fit representation of Ojukwu is being held by the British and Russian leaders, who urge an exhausted Gowon to continue the fight.²⁴

and Owerri fall to the Nigerian third marine commando division, led by Colonel Benjamin Adekunle (aka the Black Scorpion). The appearance of this issue must have been a salve on the battered troops who by November 1968 were only beginning to reverse the collapse that began in May. Further, most of the Biafran soldiers were no doubt conscious of the lack of supplies and ammunition that sorely hampered their war effort. The cover article in the November issue explained in very simple terms why the Nigerians were suddenly able to establish themselves in the Igbo heartland: 'the answer is British and American treachery!'.²⁵

This claim merits special attention because it serves as an excellent case study in how Biafran propaganda was formulated, edited and packaged for

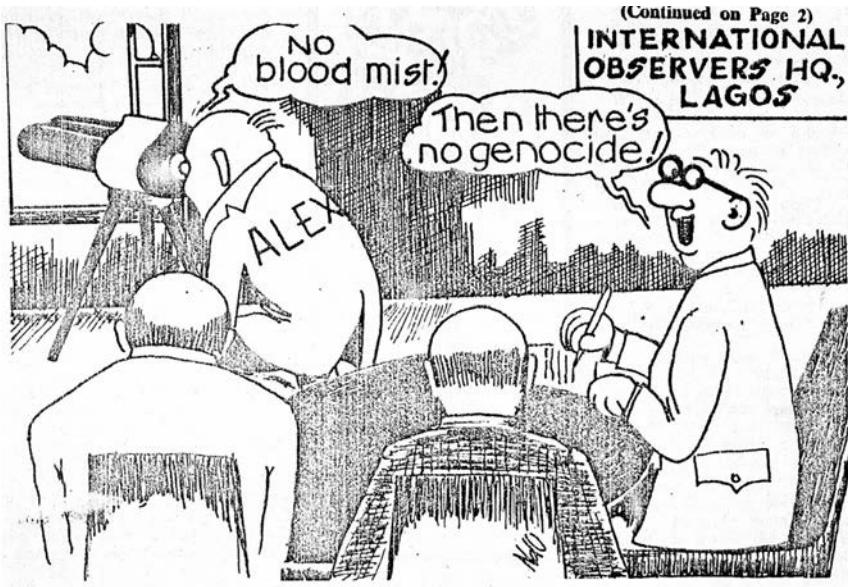


Figure 3.3 'International Observers HQ, Lagos'.²⁶

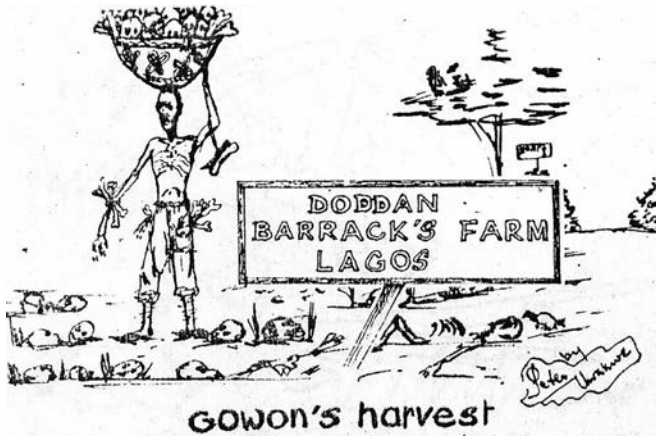


Figure 3.4 'Gowon's Harvest'.²⁷

consumption. The narrative is well constructed and is built around two highly publicized incidents about which most soldiers in Biafra would have been aware. First, cut off from supplies by land and sea, the Biafran military suffered acute shortages, leaving the defenders of many Biafran cities with minimal ammunition. The defenders at Aba and Owerri were reportedly

only issued five bullets each to stave off the Nigerian assault on the towns. Second, the arms shipments into Biafra organized by American gunrunner Hank Wharton suddenly ceased due to an engine failure that forced Wharton's crew to jettison eleven tons of arms and ammunition.²⁸

The Biafrans created a fanciful story of how British intelligence unsuccessfully attempted to bribe Wharton for months to stop sending aid to Biafra 'until August 1968 when they finally succeeded in persuading Wharton to change his allegiances to their side'.²⁹ In fact, the American gunrunner continued to fly into Biafra, contracting with aid organizations, and shipping humanitarian supplies instead of arms. For *The Leopard*, using Wharton as a scapegoat provided a clear and simple explanation as to why arms and ammunition suddenly disappeared from the battlefield. The propaganda directorate thus supplied the military with a somewhat credible story that placed the blame for Biafra's collapse squarely on the rest of the world. By concocting a story that the soldiers in the field had no way to verify, and manipulating the reports of lack of ammunition that every Biafran soldier must have experienced, the article exhibits how the propaganda directorate helped stop the panic and reinforce the troops' will to fight.

As evidenced in this story, Biafra's guidelines for propaganda set out a rigid and effective structure for the creation and dissemination of propaganda throughout the war: commencing with a story of significant impact on the target audience that audience can easily verify, they then offered credible-sounding but unverifiable explanations engineered for that specific audience. This method was sufficient to maintain a coherent message throughout the war but sufficiently also malleable to be redeployed multiple times. By establishing a system whereby the message remained centralized and by allocating resources effectively, the Biafrans created a propaganda machine that was effective in mobilizing the local population to accept the privations of war and that felt it was suffering a genocide. The Biafrans kept their propaganda apparatus so tightly maintained that, even at the end of the war, Radio Biafra still sustained an effective voice, both in Biafra and outside the country. The next section discusses the control system that the Biafrans put in place to ensure that their propaganda was properly evaluated and adjusted.

Evaluating the Propaganda

The Biafrans could not create propaganda in a rapidly shifting political and military environment without being in tune with the fluid situation in the country. They created two major methods of evaluating the effectiveness of their propaganda: surveys to ascertain the success in reaching their

targeted audiences, and evaluations and reports to ensure that the writers maintained quality standards and remained unified in their message.

The directorate commissioned surveys to ascertain how propaganda was received within Biafra. Like most Biafran documents, most of the research reports are unavailable, but the few that exist give us a glimpse into the importance that the Biafrans placed on propaganda, and the methods they employed implementing it. The report 'What Biafrans Know About the Nigeria/Biafra War' though undated, was most likely written in early 1969.³⁰ The report analyzes a survey about various perceptions of the war and segments these perceptions by age groups, sex, education levels and ethnicity. The stated goal of the report was to 'help in some small way to make our national propaganda campaigns more effective and more successful. This alone can *JUSTIFY* the amount of labour that goes into the production of a report of this nature'.³¹ More importantly, the survey was designed to ascertain the Biafran people's morale and the effectiveness of the propaganda directorate in reaching the various demographics in the country. Not only was the education level of primary concern, but the sex and the 'war weariness' of respondents merited special consideration. The report voiced a general concern of the effectiveness of the propaganda. While 50.9 percent of the respondents agreed that 'Biafra is continuing to fight because we want to prevent Nigeria from killing us off', the report stated that number was extremely low 'since genocide has been Biafra's propaganda trump card, and indeed the single greatest factor that makes Biafrans to persist in the fight against all odds'.³²

The report also sought to give 'some insight as to the people's attitude on the basic issues . . . to shift around our points of emphasis to meet the challenges of our national propaganda campaigns'.³³ Results were segmented by location, sex, educational status and age groups, with several sections overlapping. For example, the report found that 'female youths, as a group, appear least committed to the struggle. . . . This attitude appears quite dangerous at a time when the females, especially the female youths, are being called upon to take over the running of this nation so that the males can move to the war fronts'.³⁴

One section of the report deals extensively with the land army scheme. The latter was a programme designed to alleviate starvation in Biafra whereby communities would grow food, part of which would be distributed among the community and another part would be handed over to the government for redistribution. The scheme was very important to the propagandists, because 'a clear knowledge about the pattern of the distribution of the rewards of any project of the society influences their degree of participation and enthusiasm in it and therefore the success of the project'.³⁵ It was thus imperative that the Biafran government know the extent

of the penetration of their messages. The land army scheme survey provides us with a concise example of how the appraisals committee collected and analyzed data and how they arrived at their recommendations.

Segmenting the population served an important purpose, as different groups required different strategies to be effective. In the case of the Land Army Scheme, the committee asked one question:

How Will the Proceeds of the Land Army Scheme Organized in Your Town or Village Be Used?

- a) Will be taken by the Government
- b) Will be shared between the Government and people
- c) Will be handed over to the Army
- d) Will be shared among the people
- e) I don't know³⁶

Though the survey methodology is unclear, and the perils of conducting such surveys under siege and without adequate mobility were laid out in the guidelines, it is remarkable that the appraisals committee was able to conduct surveys at all. Though the surveys were very small in scale, with 902 respondents, the appraisals committee used these responses to make recommendations about how to approach propaganda. In the case of the land army scheme, the answer for which the survey was searching was that the proceeds would be shared between the government and the people. That answer garnered 57.9 percent, which, according to the survey authors, 'is too small a number to know this. The people were therefore poorly informed on the exact nature of their reward as motivation device for the success of the project'.³⁷ The land army scheme was also important for propaganda abroad. The Biafran plight elicited much sympathy, as the war dragged on without resolution or an agreement over a land corridor for aid. By early 1969, a consensus developed that the only way to end the humanitarian crisis was to end the war. The land army scheme sought to show the world that, even under the grimmest circumstances, Biafrans were a resourceful people and could withstand their enemies with the same ingenuity that allowed them to continue to fight the increasingly desperate war.

It was not only in the land army scheme that the appraisals committee sought to give the other offices of the directorate a snapshot of the state of the propaganda efforts. In another question section, entitled 'Settlement of the war', the appraisals committee queried the public on their perceptions on the resolution of the war. Though the questions asked how Biafrans thought both Nigeria and Biafra desired to end the war, the real motive behind the questions was to gauge how the respondents saw Nigeria as

a militaristic power that was bent on either a military defeat of Biafra or on killing every Biafran, which polled 65.9 percent and 24.2 percent, respectively.³⁸

The authors sorted the results according to age, sex and education. In all the responses, young women were the least likely to reply with the desired response. This pattern troubled the authors who equated the lack of knowledge about the situation with lack of commitment to the Biafran cause. They proposed ways to rectify the situation. Specifically, they saw a marked difference between the literate and the illiterate in terms of how each group understood the political dynamics of the war. Further, the directorate singled out women, especially younger ones, as the most important demographic to convert to the side of the war. Women carried much of the burden on the home front and their support was necessary to ensure the rest of the population would support wartime's mounting hardships.

In addition to surveys, the evaluation committee regulated Radio Biafra, which had a series of scripted programmes that conformed to the propaganda objectives the committee articulated on a weekly basis. In addition to these programmes, the station broadcast most of Ojukwu's speeches, which were transcribed by media outlets such as the BBC, and also reported news from the war and erroneous reports to confuse and demoralize the enemy. The limited capacity of a single camouflaged station broadcasting both to Biafra and abroad required tight quality controls on the scripted content to verify that the limited capacity was utilized to its fullest extent. Therefore, the evaluation committee established a stringent process for verifying that these programmes were effective pieces of propaganda and in compliance with the weekly directives. The appraisals committee authored a series of reports critiquing 'the propaganda effectiveness of the scripts' methods of persuasion', evaluating the appropriateness of the message and the ways it reached, or failed to reach, its audience.³⁹ Though only one of these critiques has survived to be catalogued in the Nigerian archives, and was, by the committee's own admission, 'by far less comprehensive and less ambitious' than the other reports in the series, it nonetheless illuminates how the propaganda directorate made genocide the major focus of Biafran propaganda.

The most important aim of the Biafran message was to remind the people that 'Nigeria is bent on a military solution unlike Biafra which stands for a peaceful settlement of the crisis'.⁴⁰ Not only was this claim continually addressed, but the global dimensions of Biafra's plight, standing alone while Nigeria conspired with Britain and the Soviet Union, was also repeatedly mentioned. As the military situation became increasingly hopeless, the Biafran government hoped to leverage this conspiracy claim to convince the FMG to return to the negotiating table and conclude a treaty that would, if not save Biafra's independence, at least mitigate the effect of Gowon's new federal configuration of Nigeria. The Igbo perceived this

new structure as an imminent threat, for it sought to balkanize the Eastern Region and create a new arrangement that would minimize the Eastern Region's influence.

The extent of the appraisals committee's control over propaganda was evident in a series of weekly guidelines, now lost, but repeatedly mentioned in the critique. These guidelines demonstrate the level of quality control the Biafran propaganda machine exerted on every piece they released. Two radio programmes, discussed below, 'Nigeria, No Closer to Unity' in the *Outlook* programme and 'We Suffer Because We Are Black', in the programme *Calling Biafrans Behind Enemy Lines* proved to be especially problematic.⁴¹

Because of the limitations in effectively spreading propaganda, the appraisals committee sought to broaden the appeal and comprehensibility of all propaganda broadcasts. By simplifying the message, they hoped the radio broadcasts would be accessible to the uneducated people in the villages and to the global audience, while maintain credibility with the educated. However, this balancing act was not easy to follow. One script analyzed was 'Nigeria, no closer to unity' in the *Outlook* programme.⁴² This segment portrayed the Yoruba, who were fighting on the federal side, as suffering disproportionately while their leadership was 'treacherous and selfish and signed away the legacies of Oduduwa land for mere office promotions and shining medals'.⁴³ Biafran propaganda was also reacting to the Agbekoya Parapo tax revolt that had gripped the Western Region beginning in 1968, and crescendoed in September 1969.⁴⁴ The appraisals committee lauded this script for effective technique, especially its manipulation of ignorance. For example, "at the bloody battles at Uzuakoli and at Owerri, Yoruba troops featured prominently as captured documents indicated". This may well be true but if it is not true, the Yorubas cannot find out; it is an effective propaganda technique'.⁴⁵ However,

the script is a complete departure from the week's propaganda guidelines. We cannot excuse this departure. We recognize that the disturbances in the west at the time were attractive materials to Committees; but discipline and orderly campaign require that the national guidelines be followed strictly.⁴⁶

Though the details of the weekly guidelines are never stated in the critique, their mention provides proof that there was a set of rules designed to create and maintain a coherent strategy, both for internal and global propaganda.

The extant critique only contains one programme for foreign consumption, titled 'We Suffer Because We Are Black', in the program *Calling Biafrans Behind Enemy Lines*, and even that one is aimed at Igbo who lived in former Biafran areas controlled by the Nigerian federal forces.

This document is one of the strongest scripts analyzed, despite the many flaws the directorate identified, mainly regarding its comprehensibility for the targeted audience. This script illuminated many of the arguments framing the Biafran side from a pan-Africanist perspective. Voiced most prominently in Ojukwu's Ahiara Declaration, the Biafran government sought to garner public support for their secession by claiming that their self-determination was part and parcel with the broad pan-Africanist movement. By comparing Biafran secession to the various Balkan revolutions against the Ottoman Empire, the programme argued that racism informed the Western world's support for Greek, Yugoslavian and Romanian secession from the Ottomans, while at the same time opposing Biafra's separation from Nigeria. Similarly, the failure to reach an agreement on the humanitarian corridors to deliver aid to the besieged Igbo population was also sketched in racial terms. The committee determined that 'the script paints a sufficiently ugly picture of the white world in his attitude to the black world', a point echoed in Anthony's analysis.⁴⁷ This echoes the change in Biafra's propaganda line in 1969, which focused on European and American racism against Africans in general as the main reason for the lack of international support for Biafran secession.

The appraisers determined that 'this message of racism is fairly well developed' and went on to praise the authors in showing how Nigeria was little more than a 'blackman's black leg' in the cogs of the great powers (namely Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union).⁴⁸ Thus, the script painted a picture of Biafran self-determination and the continued resistance to reunification with the 'corrupt, oppressive, decadent and irreformable Nigerian Federation' as a type of black empowerment fighting the white man's double standard.⁴⁹

Despite the script's propaganda strengths, the committee did not find it a proper work of propaganda for the targeted audience. The target audience of this programme, as stated in its title, was those Biafrans living under Nigerian control. First and foremost, as with the script on the Yorubas, it did not conform to the weekly guidelines. Second, the appraisals committee determined that the language was 'very academic and high flown' on several levels.⁵⁰ The authors of the programme presumed the audience was familiar with world history, Pan-Africanism and global politics. The appraisers scolded the scriptwriters, saying

[R]emembering that those behind enemy lines are probably mostly villagers, and therefore least educated, the script writer should have made simplicity his watchword. . . . In fact, we feel so disappointed by the language of the script that we are almost tempted to suggest that this programme should be written in indigenous languages.⁵¹

Most importantly, the appraisers addressed the issue of falsehoods in the programme. Though the deprivations in Biafra were central to the accusations of genocide as a global cause célèbre, many of the Igbo living in Nigerian-held territories were not suffering to the extent that those in Biafran territory were. By projecting Biafra's suffering onto that population, this piece was deemed catastrophic from a propagandist standpoint as it could be perceived as an easily confirmable falsehood. The appraisers warned the writers against falling into the trap of disseminating verifiable lies to a population that was in a much better position to determine the accuracy of their claims than the writers were.

Radio Biafra also served as the only broadcast avenue to the rest of the world. It was severely limited because Radio Biafra was responsible for both internal and international broadcasting and had only one central transmitter. As a result, it only provided English-language programming for a short time each day. Each issue of the *Biafra newsletter*, a weekly newsletter printed in London, contained a detailed programme guide. Splitting its time between English, French and Spanish from 6.00 A.M. until 11.00 A.M. GMT, Radio Biafra then switched to Nigerian languages, broadcasting in Hausa, Yoruba, Tiv, Igala and Idoma with a midday news break in English before returning to French, Spanish and English in the evening.⁵²

Another major challenge was the ability to effectively disseminate information through the fog of war. Many of the problems for global media in obtaining accurate information were due to the lack of understanding of a distant African tragedy. Thus, for the Biafran message to be effective, the Biafrans had to turn a regional conflict in a remote (for Europeans and Americans) part of Africa into a global cause and to translate that awareness into concrete political and strategic gains.⁵³ Moreover, foreign agencies were reluctant to use Biafran sources as an authoritative voice. Several times, Biafran outlets quoted military successes where none occurred, such as in February 1968, when they proclaimed the recapture of Nsukka.⁵⁴

Radio Biafra had to broadcast in several languages while maintaining the impression of only one voice. Furthermore, that voice was muted by the layers of gatekeepers preventing it from receiving a wider audience around the world. The Biafrans were thus faced with real obstacles to penetrating the world media system in a meaningful and effective way. To address these obstacles, they chose to utilize a Swiss public relations firm called Markpress.

Markpress and the World

Markpress served as Biafra's public diplomacy arm for the duration of the war. The Geneva-based PR agency accepted the Biafran account in

late 1967 and immediately had a profound effect on the conduct of the war. Though none of the material that Markpress released was of its own making, the firm made extensive use of its knowledge of the international media system and thus gave Biafra an effective avenue into global media. *Time* acknowledged Markpress's success, saying

Since January [of 1968], Mark-press has literally waged Biafra's war in press releases—more than 250 of them. They are crammed with news of impending arms deliveries that is designed to embarrass European governments and with stark warnings about starvation. The firm has arranged air passage into Biafra for more than 70 newsmen from every West European nation and transmitted eyewitness reports to their publications.⁵⁵

Though Markpress published thousands of press releases, its owner, American H. William Bernhardt, made relatively few remarks regarding his rationale for accepting the role as Biafra's international press department. In one letter addressed to the editors receiving Markpress releases, Bernhardt stated that his company had only accepted the Biafran account after an investigation concluded that

Our company felt that it had no alternative but to put its communications network at Biafra's disposal, thus the Biafran people and their government, which is supported by a consultative assembly, representing all ethnic groups within Biafra, could be heard and defend themselves from false information flowing from Lagos.

People all over the world are presently sending money to purchase food and medical supplies for the Biafrans. Our company is extending its services below costs as its contribution to this very worthy cause.⁵⁶

Markpress contributed to the war effort by funding journalists' travels to Biafra and acting as a hub to release their stories, images and films. The company was so effective in its efforts that it was alternately praised and maligned using much the same language. *Time* reported that 'the [Nigerian] Federal Government admits that it has come out second best in the war of words'.⁵⁷ In response to Markpress's work, the Nigerian government hired the British advertising firm Galizine, Grant & Russell. Its director David Russell said 'I think one reason we were taken on was because the Biafran account was dealt with so brilliantly'.⁵⁸

By the end of the war, however, Markpress's handling of the account began to lose its lustre. Criticism of Markpress's effectiveness reached the British House of Commons, where conservative MP John Cordle stated

that 'sincere people in this country believe the propaganda and muck which Markpress has put out about Nigeria. My heart boils when I compare this propaganda with what the Nigerians say for themselves'.⁵⁹ In the only other open letter regarding Markpress's involvement with Biafra, Bernhardt wrote 'the photographs which have appeared in the Press are all taken by completely independent Press photographers, not by Markpress or the Biafran Government'. Bernhardt accused Cordle of hypocrisy, stating that Markpress was doing the same work that the Nigerians had contracted other public relations companies to do, and that the Nigerians had the added benefit of their own official government and the British Commonwealth assisting their public diplomacy efforts.⁶⁰

Much of Biafra's propaganda campaign began to wither in the latter half of 1969, owing to the Nigerian military's push that would end the war in January 1970. In October 1969, the British government released a booklet called *Conflict in Nigeria: The British View*, and widely circulated it to its representations around Europe.⁶¹ In anticipation of its release, the foreign office sent a letter to its embassies in Europe.⁶² However, interest in the conflict had waned in many European capitals, even those considered to be pro-Biafran. John Wilson of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office stated that

The need for [special envoys sent to European meetings regarding Biafra] may be somewhat less. The Biafrans are now perhaps somewhat on the defensive even in Scandinavia. . . . Apart from this, pro-Biafran campaigns are no longer unchallenged and it seems to us that the peak of the criticism of our policies in Germany and Switzerland may have passed and that Markpress is now less widely accepted as an authoritative source.⁶³

The exact impact that Markpress had on the conflict was not tied to its role as a mouthpiece for the Biafran government. The firm's efforts helped secure widespread international support by financing journalists and photographers to report from within the secessionist enclave. By mid-1968, the global narrative of the war became one of a genocidal conflict, thanks in no small part to Markpress's efforts. The image of genocide turned out to be a problematic one, however. Though the international outcry grew fervent, the image of Biafra shifted. Many commentators saw that the only way to end Biafra's suffering was to end the war. In fact, even one of the stalwart Biafran leaders, Nnamdi Azikiwe, abandoned Biafra stating

Knowing that the accusation of genocide is palpably false, but bearing in mind the widespread killing of 1966, which must always haunt

our memories, why should some people continue to fool our people to believe that they are slated for slaughter, when we know that they suffer mental anguish and physical agony as a result of their being homeless and their places of abode having been desolated by war and their lives rendered helpless?⁶⁴

Azikiwe's rejection signalled the unravelling of the secessionist propaganda narrative. As the Ministry of Information was well aware, Igbo outside of Biafra's control were not in as dire a situation as those in the enclave. In fact, as mentioned above, the appraisals committee needed to remind the propagandists writing scripts for Radio Biafra of that very fact.

Conclusion

Azikiwe's renunciation of support was one of the final deathblows that preceded the end of Biafra. In fact, the months between Biafra's second independence day and the end of the war in January 1970 were punctuated by a series of military setbacks and political blunders. The fall of Umuahia in April 1969 signalled the onset of military collapse for the Biafrans, which was echoed by the beginnings of the end of Biafra's credibility in the eyes of the world and the struggles to keep their message on target at home. Most damaging abroad was the kidnapping and subsequent ransoming of eighteen oil workers, which undermined Biafra's credibility and challenged the narrative of a modern and progressive nation in the heart of Africa.⁶⁵

Biafra's ability to shape and evolve its message helped ensure that the claims of genocide remained a central aspect of the conflict. In spite of this, towards the end of the war, several events combined to help undermine the Biafran narrative. Azikiwe's defection to Nigeria in August 1969 signalled a symbolic beginning of the end of the Biafran state. His desertion was preceded by the Nigerian capture of the last major Biafran urban centres, Umuahia and Owerri. When Umuahia fell on 22 April 1969, Major M. J. Vatsa recalled that the few Biafrans left behind were expecting to be killed because 'the rebel propaganda machinery had pumped ideas of "pogrom" and "genocide" into them. But in accordance with our "code of conduct", we received them back into the Nigerian fold, clothed and fed them'.⁶⁶ When events like this became widely verified enough to undermine the genocide narrative, it became increasingly difficult to maintain credibility for a population eager to end the war. Nevertheless, Biafra's ability to create a robust system that focused on accusing Nigeria of genocide and to constantly adapt the charge over the course of the war is key to understanding how the message maintained its efficacy throughout the war and laid the foundations of the discussion of genocide in the postwar years.

Notes

1. Estimates vary from half a million to three million dead, with most of casualties on the Biafran side being civilians. General H. B. Momoh, in H. B. Momoh, *The Nigerian civil war 1967–1970: History and reminisces* (Ibadan: Sam Bookman Publishers, 2000), pp. 191–192 states that ‘over 1 million people, military and civilian, lost their lives in the war’. This number is the most commonly cited figure for the number of deaths in the war. However, some dissent exists. Chinua Achebe, *There was a country: A personal history of Biafra* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), pp. 228–232, records a number of three million, though his sources for such a number come from quotations taken during the conflict when the fog of war was an important factor in obscuring the numbers. Bethany Lacina and Nils Petter Gleditsch, ‘Monitoring trends in global combat: A new dataset of battle deaths’, *European Journal of Population*, Vol. 21, Nos. 2–3, June 2005, pp. 145–166, created a statistical model for combat deaths in several conflicts in Africa, including the Nigerian civil war. By their estimate, the number of combat deaths was roughly seventy-five thousand. Even at an estimate of half a million total deaths, combat fatalities in Biafra amounted to only 15 percent of the total number of fatalities during the war. If we assume the most cited figure of one million deaths, that ratio falls to 7.6 percent.
2. For a definitive work on Igbo state-society relations, including an extensive section on the role of the war in shaping the relations, see Axel Harnett-Sievers, *Constructions of belonging: Igbo communities and the Nigerian state in the twentieth century* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2006).
3. The idea of the Biafran war as a genocidal conflict was established from the very onset of the crisis in 1966. However, when the scope of the humanitarian disaster became apparent, the Biafrans received the help of several public relations firms around the world. The idea was supported by groups and individuals from around the world. Biafran boxer Dick Tiger publicly supported the cause and donated his entire fortune to the war effort. Similarly, British journalist (later novelist) Frederick Forsyth penned *The Biafra story: The making of an African legend* (London: Leo Cooper, 2001). In recent years, Biafran activists, such as the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), have evoked the spectre of genocide in their attempts to revive the Biafran cause.
4. John de St. Jorre, *The Brothers’ war: Biafra and Nigeria* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), p. 220.
5. John Stremmlau, *The international politics of the Nigerian civil war, 1967–1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).
6. Michael Gould, *The struggle for modern Nigeria: The Biafran war 1967–1970* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2012).
7. This idea was articulated in Ojukwu’s Ahiara declaration in which he outlined his vision for a post-independence Biafra, stating that ‘We are the latest victims of a wicked collusion between the three traditional scourges of the black man—racism, Arab-Muslim expansionism and white economic imperialism’. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, *Ahiara declaration: The principles of Biafran revolution* (Enugu: Biafra Information Service Corporation, 1969).
8. Nicholas Ibeawuchi Omenka, ‘Blaming the gods: Christian religious propaganda in the Nigeria-Biafra war’, *Journal of African History*, Vol. 51, No. 3, 2010, pp. 367–389. He neglects to account for the changing nature of Biafra’s propaganda over the course of the war by maintaining a static analysis of the role of religion, both in the propaganda message and the response to it.
9. Morris Davis, *Interpreters for Nigeria: The third world and international public relations* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977).
10. The literature of genocide in international law is extensive and cannot be adequately listed here. A great starting point is William Schabas, *Genocide in international law: The crimes of crimes*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). For

works that deal with genocide in international law, both as a concept and in case studies, see for instance John Hagan and Wenona Rymond-Richmond, *Darfur and the crime of genocide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Several recent volumes deal with the historical problems of genocide; in particular, Dan Stone (ed.), *The historiography of genocide* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2008); A. Dirk Moses (ed.), *Empire, colony, genocide: Conquest, occupation, and subaltern resistance in world history* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008). Many recent works discuss genocide in the context of the Nigerian civil war, such as Chima Korieh (ed.), *The Nigeria-Biafra war: Genocide and the politics of memory* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2012); Daniel Rothbart and Karina V. Korostelina, *Why they die: Civilian devastation in violent conflict* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011) provide an alternate view on the nature of modern warfare and the reasoning behind the disproportionate number of civilian casualties in modern conflicts.

11. Stremlau, The international politics of the Nigerian civil war, p. 166.
12. Memo from Lou Schwartz, 14 August 1968, The Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library [hereafter LBJ], Country File [hereafter CO], 206–1.
13. Douglas Anthony, ‘“Resourceful and progressive blackmen”’: Modernity and race in Biafra, 1967–70’, *Journal of African History*, Vol. 51, No. 1, 2010, p. 45.
14. Research Bureau Appraisal Committee (ed.), *Guide lines for effective propaganda* (Aba: Directorate for Propaganda, 1968).
15. Research Bureau Appraisal Committee, *Guide lines for effective propaganda*.
16. Research Bureau Appraisal Committee, *Guide lines for effective propaganda*.
17. Research Bureau Appraisal Committee, *Guide lines for effective propaganda*, p. 35.
18. Research Bureau Appraisal Committee, *Guide lines for effective propaganda*, p. 39.
19. Research Bureau Appraisal Committee, *Guide lines for effective propaganda*, p. 34.
20. One of the key events came on 19 May 1968 when federal troops captured Port Harcourt. With the fall of the city, Biafra became an almost entirely Igbo enclave surrounded on all sides by the Nigerian military.
21. ‘Editorial cartoons’, *The Leopard*, 22 November 1968.
22. ‘She appears close, but she ain’t’, *The Leopard*, 26 January 1968.
23. ‘Observer team called “crooks”’, *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 12 November 1968.
24. ‘Wrestling cartoon’, *The Leopard*, 16 February 1968.
25. ‘Don’t let the vandals go!’, *The Leopard*, 22 November 1968.
26. ‘International observers HQ, Lagos’, *The Leopard*, 22 November 1968.
27. ‘Gowon’s harvest’, *The Leopard*, 22 November 1968.
28. For a detailed biography of Henry ‘Hank’ Wharton, see Peter Marson, ‘Prop personality: Hank Wharton’, *Propliner Aviation Magazine*, December 1981.
29. ‘Don’t let the vandals go!’.
30. Research Bureau Appraisal Committee (ed.), *What Biafrans know about the Nigeria-Biafra war* (Enugu: Appraisals Committee, Directorate for Propaganda, no date); though there is no date assigned to the document, it was most likely written in March of 1969. The Biafran government continued to place all their documents at Enugu, though the city was one of the first taken by Nigerian troops, in October 1967, shortly after the collapse of the Midwest Offensive. However, this document states the situation on the ground that corresponds with early 1969. Further, the Land Army scheme was introduced in early 1969, as a way to both relieve pressure on the population’s dwindling food supply and to address the international pressure that was increasingly sceptical of Biafra’s viability as a state.
31. Research Bureau Appraisal Committee, *What Biafrans know*, p. 35. Emphasis in original.
32. Research Bureau Appraisal Committee, *What Biafrans know*, p. 15.
33. Research Bureau Appraisal Committee, *What Biafrans know*, p. 2.
34. Research Bureau Appraisal Committee, *What Biafrans know*, p. 35.
35. Research Bureau Appraisal Committee, *What Biafrans know*, p. 32.

36. Research Bureau Appraisal Committee, *What Biafrans know*.
37. Research Bureau Appraisal Committee, *What Biafrans know*, p. 33.
38. Research Bureau Appraisal Committee, *What Biafrans know*, p. 27.
39. Research & Publications Divisions Appraisal Committee (ed.), *A critique of propaganda radio programmes* (Enugu: Ministry of Information, 1969), p. 2.
40. Research & Publications Divisions Appraisal Committee, *A critique of propaganda radio programmes*, p. 4.
41. Research & Publications Divisions Appraisal Committee, *A critique of propaganda radio programmes*, p. 4.
42. Research & Publications Divisions Appraisal Committee, *A critique of propaganda radio programmes*.
43. Research & Publications Divisions Appraisal Committee, *A critique of propaganda radio programmes*. Oduduwa, or Odùduwà, is widely regarded in Yoruba oral tradition as the semi-mythological ancestor of all Yoruba kings.
44. In 1968, a peasant organization in the Yoruba parts of Western Nigerian began to petition the government for tax reforms. By 1969, this revolt became widespread as peasants and middle class Yoruba united in their demands for lowering taxes, changing the tax collection system and improving infrastructure. By mid-1969, the protests turned violent and became known as the Agbekoya Parapo Revolt. Though not directly related to the Civil War, the Agbekoya Parapo Revolt forced the Nigerian Government to divert troops from the front to confront the protesters. For a fuller account of the uprising, see Tunde Adeniran, 'The dynamics of peasant revolt: A conceptual analysis of the Agbekoya Parapo uprising in the Western State of Nigeria', *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 1974, pp. 363–375; R. T. Akinyele, 'Ethnic militancy and national stability in Nigeria: A case study of the Oodua People's Congress', *African Affairs*, Vol. 100, No. 401, 2001, pp. 623–640; For an analysis of the economic aspects of the war, including taxation policies, see Festus O. Egwaikhide and Oyeranti O. Alabi, 'Economics of the Nigerian civil war: A historical analysis', in Eghosa E. Osaghae, Ebere Onwudiwe and Rotimi T. Suberu (eds.), *The Nigerian civil war and its aftermath* (Ibadan: John Archers Publishers for Programme on Ethnic and Federal Studies, 2002).
45. Research & Publications Divisions Appraisal Committee, *A critique of propaganda radio programmes*, p. 18.
46. Research & Publications Divisions Appraisal Committee, *A critique of propaganda radio programmes*, p. 19.
47. Research & Publications Divisions Appraisal Committee, *A critique of propaganda radio programmes*, p. 24.
48. Research & Publications Divisions Appraisal Committee, *A critique of propaganda radio programmes*, p. 25.
49. Research & Publications Divisions Appraisal Committee, *A critique of propaganda radio programmes*, pp. 24–25.
50. Research & Publications Divisions Appraisal Committee, *A critique of propaganda radio programmes*, p. 27.
51. Research & Publications Divisions Appraisal Committee, *A critique of propaganda radio programmes*.
52. The radio schedule appeared in nearly every issue of the *Biafra newsletter*. For examples, see Biafra newsletter 28 June 1968, and Biafra newsletter 17 January 1969.
53. Françoise Ugochukwu, 'The Nigerian civil war and its media', *Media, War & Conflict*, Vol. 3 No. 2, 2010.
54. 'University town on Nsukka recaptured', *Biafra Newsletter*, 16 February 1968.
55. 'Nigeria's civil war: Hate, hunger and the will to survive', *Time*, 23 August 1968.
56. Letter from H. William Bernhardt to editors receiving Markpress releases, 25 June 1968.
57. 'Nigeria's civil war: Hate, hunger and the will to survive'.

58. 'Signing off', Markpress Press Release, January 1970.
59. House of Commons, 9 December 1969. Cited in HC Deb, 09 December 1969, vol. 793, p. 328.
60. Open letter from H. William Bernhardt to John Cordle, 24 December 1969.
61. Central Office of Information (ed.), *Conflict in Nigeria: The British view* (British Government, 1969).
62. B. R. Curson, P.Q. by Frank Allaun on 13 October: Booklet on Nigerian civil war (London: Information Policy Department, 1969).
63. John Wilson, Head of West Africa Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, untitled confidential memo, 7 October 1969: The National Archives of the United Kingdom [hereafter PRO], Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 26/302.
64. Anthony Hamilton Millard Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and conflict in Nigeria: A documentary sourcebook*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 2: p. 415.
65. Stremlau, The international politics of the Nigerian civil war, pp. 229–231.
66. Momoh, The Nigerian civil war 1967–1970, p. 905.

4 The Case Against Victor Banjo

Legal Process and the Governance of Biafra

Samuel Fury Childs Daly

Introduction

In June of 1968, Chief Justice of the Biafran Court of Appeal Sir Louis Mbanefo confidently assured a British diplomat that ‘all Biafra not in enemy hands was committed without distinction to independence’.¹ In fact, the Biafran government feared that the situation in the new country was divided from within; there were many within Biafra who did not see themselves as ‘Biafrans’. In the opening months of the war, Biafra’s leadership became increasingly paranoid about threats of subversion and espionage; Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu found internal enemies everywhere he looked, and no one was above suspicion. It was true that many Biafrans had reservations about the war, even though few were actually engaged in the kind of cloak-and-dagger espionage that Ojukwu feared went on behind every closed door. This fear shaped Biafra’s internal administration in important ways. Law occupied an important place in Biafra’s administration and its national imaginary, and the fact that the legal system continued to operate throughout the war suggests that the Biafran government was animated by the law to a greater extent than historians have appreciated, or at least that the secessionist government saw value in the performance of legal processes. The present chapter looks inward on Biafra through the lens of its legal system, which reveals dimensions of Biafra’s internal life not captured in its propaganda and other sources.² Using a treason trial from early in the war it investigates how Biafra’s political culture came to be characterized by paranoia, and how the application of military justice shaped questions about the ethnic identity, political ideology and administration of the new state.

The Biafran treason case *The State v. Victor Banjo and three others* provides a view of Biafra’s politics from within, and gives a sense of how paranoia became engrained in Biafra’s political culture in the first months of the war. This important trial had many dimensions; it was not only

about an isolated act of treason, but a referendum on the content of Biafran nationality, the ethnic composition of the new country and the relationship between the war and the larger task of crafting a Biafran state. The case played a role in redrawing the lines of Biafra's national identity to exclude non-easterners, pushed Biafra's internal political culture towards suspicion and paranoia and provided an alibi for greater absolutism in everyday administration. Orderliness and equability were central in Biafra's sense of itself as a nation, but the emergency measures that Biafra implemented early in the war were used not only to maintain 'order' in a general sense, but to blunt political dissent and to root out saboteurs both real and imagined.³ This history unfolded largely beyond the view of the foreign press and other outside observers, but events within Biafra critically shaped the progress of the war.

As the political and humanitarian situation deteriorated over the course of the war, the Biafran state turned its dwindling powers of coercion to the elimination of spies, saboteurs, and traitors to the Biafran cause. How suspicion reached such a pitch in Biafra is an important question for the history of the war, and part of the answer can be found within Biafra's piecemeal legal record.⁴ Subversion and treason were closely tied to violence and everyday crime in the public imagination, all of which were facets of a 'lawlessness' that judges feared was overwhelming Biafra's political culture. The rhetoric of law and order was ubiquitous in Biafra, and law was at the centre of both the political identity of the state and its techniques of governance. Biafra claimed to be the true inheritor of the British common law tradition and the rule of law, in contrast to Nigeria's deviation from those traditions. Biafra's secession was predicated on the claim that Nigeria had become lawless—the inability of the Nigerian government to stop the killings of Igbos in the north in 1966 was the clearest proof of that claim, and the Biafran leadership made the case for secession as a restoration of law and order. Chief Justice Louis Mbanefo constantly stressed to the outside world that 'the Biafran authorities were not irresponsible rebels who had seized power for the sake of power: on the contrary they had maintained law and order and the courts system inherited from the Federation'.⁵ The performance of law and order was a central component of Biafra's legitimacy as a sovereign state, which helps to explain why the courts remained functional even when other essential public services like schools and markets were suspended due to the war.⁶

The State v. Victor Banjo and Three Others

The growing paranoia within the Biafran government, the humiliation of retreat, and the pressure that the war placed upon Biafra's legal system

came to a head in September 1967, when Major General Victor Banjo of the Biafran Army was tried and executed for subversion. Banjo was a Yoruba military officer from southwestern Nigeria who had been imprisoned in January 1966 for his role in the abortive coup that toppled Nigeria's First Republic. He was serving his sentence in the Eastern Region when Biafra seceded, and Ojukwu, seeing Banjo as a figure who might be useful in making the case for Biafra's independence to Yorubas in Federal Nigeria, offered him the opportunity to leave prison and become an officer in the Biafran Army, where he would lead a 'liberation army' to occupy the Midwest and then march on to capture Lagos. As a British intelligence source noted, 'Banjo's line will touch sympathetic chords in many Yoruba circles in Western Region which is likely to create further strains in the West with the help of people like Wole Soyinka (who has been campaigning for a negotiated peace)'.⁷ What Banjo hoped to achieve by accepting this offer is a topic of sharp contention in the historiography of the war, and he himself was cryptic in his intentions. He wrote to his wife shortly after Biafra's secession that

I never approved of the idea of my friend here [Ojukwu] declaring a separate state, but one cannot always control the behaviour of one's friends. Everyone is entitled to his own opinion on any issue and in political as well as military situations the final test of sagacity is in eventual success or failure.⁸

Banjo's release and commission into the Biafran Army caused some disension within the leadership there, and when suspicion later turned against Banjo, he would find few supporters among his Biafran fellow officers.⁹ In his orders to Banjo, Ojukwu promised that the Biafran troops under his command would remain in the southwest 'only for as long as we in Biafra consider it necessary for the Yorubas to consolidate their position and sovereignty against any external threat'.¹⁰

Banjo accepted the offer, and was put in charge of Biafra's first and only major offensive operation, to capture the Midwest State. Banjo's mission in July 1967 was initially a success, with seven thousand Biafran troops taking its capital city of Benin in only a few days, sending the military governor of the Midwest State fleeing the advancing Biafran troops on the back of a bicycle. Despite this success, many within the Biafran government began to question Banjo's loyalty at this point; Chinua Achebe recalled later that his speech announcing the occupation 'sounded to me far more like a lament of the breakup of Nigeria than a speech coming from "a Biafran military leader" or an explanation for the invasion of Nigerian territory or Biafran secession'.¹¹

Biafra's brief occupation of the Midwest State, which in September 1967 was declared the 'Republic of Benin' in an attempt to appeal to the local people, was divided and tenuous. Although Biafran troops enjoyed support from some Igbo-speaking midwesterners, much of the population remained loyal to the federal side and some engaged in subterfuge against the occupying Biafran forces. As one Nigerian administrator recalled, Biafra ruled the occupied territory harshly; 'there were fears of abduction, torture, detention and even murder of opponents. Anxiety had gripped the people of the Midwest—as you could not tell who was an agent for the secessionist authority'.¹² Banjo had orders to continue marching onwards to Lagos, but the Biafran troops encountered resistance at Ore and retreated, losing control of the Midwest as they did so. Biafra's ignoble retreat was a source of embarrassment to Ojukwu, a major blow to Biafran morale, and to many observers the first step towards Biafra's eventual military defeat.

Upon their return to Enugu, Colonel Victor Banjo and Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna, a Nigerian turned Biafran officer who had participated in the coup that overthrew the First Republic, and their subordinates Major Philip Alale and Samuel Agbam, were arrested and tried before the Special Tribunal of Biafra for two counts against the Law and Order (Maintenance) Decree of 1967.¹³ The first was that the officers 'without lawful authority made preparation of carrying out an armed disturbance against the Military Governor and some officers of the Republic of Biafra', in effect a charge of insubordination for having turned back at Ore and failing to capture Lagos following their occupation of the Midwest. The second charge, framed as 'subversion', was that they,

with intent to cause breach of public order, agreed to procure the downfall of the Government of the said Republic by violent and unlawful seizure of the Military Governor and Head of State of the Republic of aforesaid, and Commander-in-Chief of its Armed Forces and other military officers.

The state prosecutor claimed that the officers had hatched 'plot'—vague and inconsistently described—against Ojukwu that would culminate in their seizing power in either Biafra, Nigeria or both, which in most versions of the story would be followed by handing over power to Obafemi Awolowo.¹⁴ Although the existence of a plot is supported by various sources, the details of the charges against Banjo and the others appear to have been fabricated.¹⁵ In addition to subversion, the charges included stockpiling foreign currency, conspiring with foreign agents and other lesser offences. Philip Alale was charged with a third crime, 'intent to cause a breach of public order', for having liaised with trade unionists.¹⁶

Why Banjo stopped at Ore and did not continue on to capture Lagos (which would likely have been an exceedingly difficult order to carry out, despite Ojukwu's confident claims to the contrary) was a subject of intense dispute. The trial did little to settle the matter. One interpretation, supported by Banjo's sister, is that Banjo had a change of allegiance while the fight was still underway, deciding that he did not want to see Ojukwu in charge of all of southern Nigeria. In this interpretation, Banjo

saved [the southwest] from domination and occupation knowing fully well that he was putting his own life in jeopardy. . . . The Western Region was saved from a second occupation by Ibo soldiers, after the spell with Hausa soldiers.¹⁷

Other interpretations posit that Banjo's intentions had been treasonous from the beginning, and that his plan was always to hand over power in the Midwest to Awolowo. Bernard Odogwu, Biafra's Director of Military Intelligence, claimed that

for Banjo, his life ambition was power and the rulership of Nigeria. . . . After all, it was only a mere accident of fate that he found himself around in Biafra; Banjo had been detained in Eastern Nigeria after the January coup by the Ironsi regime, which fact alone was insufficient to change a Yoruba like Banjo overnight into a Biafran.¹⁸

British and American intelligence reports suggest that there was credence to the idea that Banjo had political ambitions; at a meeting with the British Deputy Commissioner in Benin on 9 August 1967, Banjo is reported to have said that 'he does not (repeat not) agree with Ojukwu on the separate existence of Biafra. He is convinced that a united Nigeria is essential',¹⁹ and Banjo approached British and American operatives about whether he could count on their support if he defected to the Nigerian side. Ifeajuna's reasons for becoming involved in the plot are equally contested. A close friend of Ifeajuna speculated that he joined Banjo in the plot because he feared that Igbo civilians would be massacred *en masse* if Biafra continued its fight for independence, while other interpretations point to personal grievances with Ojukwu.²⁰

The trial was a confused and hurried affair. Banjo's hearing took place—over a single day—on 20 September 1967, with Justice George Nkemena presiding, accompanied by a military officer and a civilian administrator. Evidence for the prosecution was presented by the heads of Biafra's army and Directorate of Intelligence, along with various witnesses whom the conspirators had allegedly tried to recruit to their plot, or had witnessed

the discussions taking place. Exhausted and poorly fed, Banjo and Ifeajuna cross-examined the witnesses for the prosecution cursorily and ineffectively. Banjo, speaking on behalf of all four men and without legal representation, mounted only a brief defence of their actions, perhaps realizing that the decision had already been made:

the statement of accused 1 [Banjo] merely consisted of the activities of the accused persons in assisting the Governor in one way or the other to prosecute the war successfully. He admitted that there was a group of young men who met occasionally to air their views on the current affairs of the state and the war. This group, he said never plotted to subvert the Government. He said that accused persons could not have been parties to such a plot in view of their past performances and the high esteem in which they held the Governor.²¹

This appeal to Ojukwu's favour failed, but because the tribunal had been stacked against the defendants there was likely no defence that might have succeeded. A civilian lawyer initially placed on the tribunal later claimed that he had been ordered to convict the four men regardless of whatever defence they presented, or how weak the case was against them. When the lawyer refused to do so he was detained, and spent the remainder of the war in prison.²² Justice Nkemena, otherwise known as a defender of judicial independence, agreed to chair the tribunal.

Nelson Ottah recalled that the trial was 'a solemn and scrupulous affair',

despite the hysteria and white-hot hate that were riding the wind. . . . Outside the heavily guarded courtroom were thousands of men and women who, however mistaken they were in this, strongly believed that the four men on trial had sold them and Biafra down the river and therefore deserved nothing but death. 'Have them all shot!' was the popular cry of these thousands of men and women wherever they gathered to exchange views and gossips about how the secret trial was going.

Nkemena conducted the proceedings as if they were impartial, even though in Ottah's view it was, 'a trial that, in normal circumstance, he would have thrown out of hand'.²³ Banjo, Ifeajuna and their subordinates were sentenced to death by firing squad. They were executed four days later in a yard near Biafran Army Headquarters, the government fearing that Enugu could be overrun by Nigerian troops at any moment. Ottah recalled that

their execution by a firing squad was conducted under the perfect glare of massive publicity. Everybody who could stand the sight

was permitted to go along and witness how ‘Biafra deals with saboteurs’. . . . The crowd of people on the way to this twentieth-century Calvary was so massive that thousands failed to get within eyeshot of the execution platform.²⁴

For many Biafrans, Banjo’s execution proved to be one of their most lasting memories of the war’s early months.

The proceedings had been officially held in secret but attracted large crowds outside the school building where the Special Tribunal sat. They were staged to reinforce the Biafran government’s authority in the context of rapid deterioration. The Biafran leadership feared that if the proceedings were held in public people might sympathize with the plotters, which Ojukwu wanted to avoid as much as possible.²⁵ A ‘secret’ trial allowed the Biafran government to maintain the appearance of judicialism, which a summary execution would have precluded. The private nature of the trial also enabled the Biafran government to shape the narrative of the events. That they faced likely exaggerated charges was widely known in the Biafran intelligentsia, and Ottah and other observers recalled that although the trial was generally held in a manner outwardly consistent with legal principles, it would be naïve to think that they could have received anything like a fair trial in the context of the war.²⁶

The State v. Victor Banjo and three others was a choreographed political performance, meant to show the Biafran public that everyone was being carefully watched. While this kind of surveillance was not unthinkable in this early stage of the war, when the Biafran state apparatus was relatively intact, in the later periods of the fighting it would become clear that the Biafran state had no capacity to actually keep tabs on its citizens. An ex-Biafran lawyer also recalls that the case was a ‘message to the judiciary and to government employees in general that you were not allowed to go against Ojukwu’s wishes in any way’.²⁷ As in most wartime tribunals the decision was exemplary, and was meant to show soldiers the consequences of disloyalty. The public dimension of the trial suggests that this application of military justice was also a warning to the general civilian public. There were, in the eyes of one Biafran propagandist, three types of saboteurs in Biafra—hired agents of Nigeria, expatriates whose sympathies lay with Nigeria, and finally,

the last brand of saboteurs, whose activities though detrimental are usually unintentional and sometimes unconscious, are indigenes who [sic] indiscreet actions such as loose talks, spread of demoralising rumours for prestige reasons or hoarding of food items are creating artificial difficulties to the society.²⁸

Banjo and Ifeajuna fit none of these categories perfectly, but their execution was intended as a message to all of them. ‘Saboteurs, think again’, the propagandist warned. ‘Your ancestors tilled Biafran soil, why help the Northern vandals to kill your countrymen?’²⁹ In the state press, Biafrans were actively encouraged to mistrust their neighbours, to inform on one another, and to bring the presence of strangers to the attention of the police or army. In this political and social climate, it became increasingly common for Biafrans to turn the state’s suspicions against their rivals.³⁰

The Consequences of the Trial

Within the Biafran legal system, the power of tribunals rapidly increased following Banjo’s execution. The Special Tribunal was a new and unfamiliar type of legal forum at the beginning of the war, and the Banjo case was the first significant test of its powers. The Banjo decision opened the floodgates for an expansion of wartime emergency measures into all aspects of Biafran life, ushering in a politics of emergency that would long outlast the fighting itself. The tribunal was established under Biafra’s emergency measures, also known as the Law and Order (Maintenance) Edict of 1967. This was the sixth edict that Ojukwu issued as head of state, following the declaration of Biafra’s independence and a series of edicts about the armed forces, the courts and the legal profession.³¹ Edict No. 6 gave Ojukwu wide authority to pursue internal enemies, and created a bifurcation in the legal system between the common law courts and the military tribunals. In the absence of a constitution, these emergency measures became the guiding document of Biafra’s administration.³² The Special Tribunal constituted an area of legal exception that coexisted alongside the normal workings of the civil and common laws. The tribunal was not bound by the rule of *habeas corpus*, could strip defendants of their right to legal counsel, and had restrictive rules of evidence which were stacked against defendants. Many of the crimes within its jurisdiction were actions that were legal in peacetime, including loose talk, commercial activities marked as war profiteering and public assembly.³³ ‘Subversion’ was a particularly capacious category of misconduct, and it accounts for the majority of the cases heard before the Special Tribunal.

The Biafran legal system remained operative until the very end of the war, but the emergency measures precluded it from being the model of common law equitability that Biafra’s lawyers had hoped it would be. Many of Biafra’s lawyers rightly feared that this turn to martial law would compromise the new country’s commitment to legalism. Over the course of the war the Special Tribunal’s jurisdiction crept into a growing number of other areas of law. It heard cases of misconduct by soldiers, acts of sabotage

and possession of arms or acts of public disturbance by civilians.³⁴ It also had jurisdiction over acts of fraud, profiteering and embezzlement, all glossed as ‘subversion’. In effect, the state prosecutor could bring anything related to the conduct of the war, or involving soldiers, before a tribunal instead of a civilian court. Ojukwu also reserved for himself the ability to detain anyone ‘at the governor’s will’, which unlike court sentences could not be appealed.³⁵ He exercised this prerogative frequently. The tribunal consisted of two civilian judges and a military officer, and sat in various parts of the country—like most wartime courts in Biafra, it moved with the front and as a result its proceedings were often conducted irregularly.

With martial law only a few months old, all parties involved in the Banjo trial found themselves on unfamiliar ground. This new and untested legal order entrapped some people, proved advantageous to others and gave the Biafran government an expansive ability to punish individuals. There were frequent debates in the tribunal over what kinds of crimes could be considered ‘subversion’, as in a case over the theft of gasoline intended for a civilian hospital. In a decision reflecting the priorities of a society at war, the tribunal ruled that the theft fell under that category;

without the electric plant the welfare of the inhabitants would be adversely affected. The surgeons will not see to operate nor can various apparatuses which are electrically operated be of any use. Any theft, therefore, of the gas oil used in generating the plant is a crime against the inhabitants of the Republic. It is an offence of subversion within the context of present emergency.³⁶

As the war continued, ‘subversion’ grew to encompass anything that a judge or officer said it was. Civilians adapted to this changing climate as best they could; ambiguities about who was most responsible for preserving order in Biafra—the military or the police, the tribunal or the court—created blindspots in the legal system that Biafrans could turn to their advantage. Civilians often went to the military to settle their disputes, even when the matters at hand were of a civilian nature. The Biafran Army sometimes became involved in these disputes, especially when soldiers stood to gain something from them. When a man went to an army camp at Umuoji to report that he had been beaten up by a woman who accused him of theft, he was laughed at and told that ‘the matter is a civil case’.³⁷ When, a few months later, a different man came to the same camp to enlist the soldiers’ help in laying claim to some building materials, they readily offered their services, ostensibly because there was money at stake.

Victor Banjo’s execution was disturbing to some Biafrans, and was taken as a sign of repressive and unsavoury measures to come. Many observers

were angry with Banjo and Ifeajuna for their betrayal, but were also disturbed by their executions and for the note of paranoia that it brought into Biafra's political life. The military administrator of Aba Province recalled that 'personally, I was not surprised that the whole expedition had eventually ended in fiasco. Nor did my heart bleed at all when the whole sordid plot to subvert Biafra finally blew up in Banjo's face'.³⁸ Banjo and Ifeajuna were complicated figures whose ideas about what path was best for Nigeria changed in response to the rapidly changing conditions of the war. To see them as either traitors or as tragic heroes, as many accounts of the war do, occludes much about the wider circumstances in which they found themselves. Their guilt or innocence cannot be easily discerned from Biafra's partial historical record, but the consequences of their executions are clear. As a Biafran officer later recalled, the executions 'set the pattern for the way Biafra was to react in times of difficulty, to look for a scapegoat after every defeat, a sacrificial lamb to explain every set-back'.³⁹

In the wake of the Banjo trial, a wave of suspicion washed over Biafra, which was felt even in places remote from the capital. One lawyer remembers that even in villages, 'it was wartime, so you could not say what you thought openly'. In the aftermath of the Banjo trial, 'even suggesting that they should make peace with Nigeria could be considered sabotage'.⁴⁰ Biafrans with ties to Onitsha, where Ifeajuna had hailed from, suffered the greatest recriminations in the aftermath of the executions. A non-Igbo officer who managed to shield himself from the intrigue recalled that

every known friend of Ifeajuna (male or female) was hunted, his relations had to denounce him and dissociate themselves from the crime he was alleged to have committed. The family house and any other house that had anything to do with Ifeajuna were destroyed. The toughs were at work, it was mob rule nearing anarchy.⁴¹

Any Biafran officer who had served in the Nigerian Army, a category that encompassed all but the most junior Biafran officers, was also subjected to intense scrutiny.

Suspicious ran especially high amongst the small group of advisors surrounding Ojukwu. These people, most from Ojukwu's home town of Nnewi and many of whom had known him since childhood, used their influence with Ojukwu to punish political rivals, and occasionally used their access to him to pursue personal vendettas. The circle of people whom Ojukwu trusted became smaller, and in the months after the Banjo trial, organizations in Onitsha and elsewhere were subjected to investigations that uncovered mysterious, likely fictive conspiracies by students, lawyers and trade unionists.⁴² Numerous purges were made of government

agencies suspected of being ‘infested’ with spies, and the state began to consume itself from within. Public officials could be accused of treason on the slightest of pretexts; one government circular established that ‘instances of abrupt excuses for casual leave or sick leave without genuine medical certificate should be regarded as reasonable indication or evidence in concluding that the staff/employees who absent themselves from duty have deserted to the enemy’.⁴³ People at the very top of the Biafran government were not above suspicion and were dismissed or imprisoned on the basis of rumours.⁴⁴ Although Biafra relied heavily on military and humanitarian assistance from the outside world, any contact with individuals outside of the enclave was treated with great suspicion. An internal circular warned government employees from communicating with foreigners attached to humanitarian projects, and admonished that ‘people leaving Biafra on Government duties should be advised of the risk they run by accepting mail the contents of which they will not accept responsibility for when accosted’.⁴⁵

Banjo’s execution especially alarmed Biafran legal practitioners, though few of them dared to express their concerns publicly. Judges and lawyers who had been trained in the common law tradition were aware of the dangers inherent in this kind of ‘rough’ justice.⁴⁶ Many legal practitioners privately worried that the expanding remit of martial law threatened to hollow out Biafra’s legal culture, and they did everything they could to avoid having to appear before it. One prominent Biafran lawyer wanted nothing to do with that part of the legal system. His avoidance of the Special Tribunal was a statement of principle: ‘If I did not believe in you I would not go to the court for you, and if I did not believe in the court I would not go to the court’, he recalled. Like many Biafrans he did his best to keep to himself throughout the war, and declined to take on clients whose cases would require him to go before a tribunal.⁴⁷ Legal practitioners and most judges hoped that these tribunals were temporary, and that their effects on the integrity of the legal system could be contained, but it was plain to most of those involved that the demands of the war compromised many of the ideals in the name of which Biafra had been founded. Even in ostensibly civil cases, the military often had a role in the proceedings. In the absence of state prosecutors (due to death, conscription or inability to travel to court—all common occurrences in Biafra), military officers sometimes took on the role of the prosecutor in civilian courts. Given their lack of legal training, they were not particularly astute prosecutors, and their ability to secure convictions perhaps owed more to their intimidating presence in the courtroom than to their legal acumen.⁴⁸

Biafra’s legal system became increasingly politicized in the aftermath of the Banjo trial. Even as the common law courts remained operative, the

expanding authority of the military and the withering of all other parts of the Biafran state made the courts a site of sharp dispute over the country's political future. In one 1969 case, two men stood accused of subverting Biafra's economy for purchasing a bag of black-market salt for more than the government control price, on the grounds that they were driving inflation. The tribunal acquitted the defendants on a technicality—it could not be confirmed that the bag reading 'British Salt—40 lbs' indeed contained salt because the police had not taken a sample of its contents. The acquittal infuriated the Attorney-General, who intervened in the case and succeeded in convincing them to stage a retrial. He threatened,

One recalls the ageless principle of interpretation established in *Heyden's Case* centuries ago, which is that a law must be interpreted so as to suppress the evil and advance the remedy. The evil here is in the inflation of prices against the welfare of the people of Biafra. The remedy is to stamp it out by means of sanctions provided by law. To avoid those sanctions by means of technicalities is to advance the evil, and this is a thought I do not find refreshing.⁴⁹

In the eyes of this Biafran administrator and many others, a particular application of the law was crucial to preserving order. In his mind a preoccupation with the rules of evidence or process could not be allowed to stand in the way of the war effort, and as a result of this pressure, the rules and protections embedded within the legal system eroded as the war went on.

Many lawyers who practised in Biafra recalled that the tone of the proceedings in a military tribunal was combative, treacherous and unfamiliar to all parties involved. The tribunal invariably included at least one military officer with no legal training; sometimes he respected the due process of law and sometimes he did not, and some had contempt for civilian lawyers while others were willing to respect the conventions of court. There was always at least one legally trained judge among the panel of three that made up the tribunal, but the real power seemed to lay with the officer. That said, many lawyers recalled that a defendant appearing before a military tribunal could usually receive a fair hearing; the soldiers delivered conscientious and moderate judgements, even if their rhetoric in the courtroom tended to be fiery. An examination of these cases reveals that even for capital offences the Special Tribunal usually imposed fairly modest sentences rarely exceeding twenty years imprisonment—no more than the common law courts. But in spite of their relative restraint the tribunal was a suspension of the normal working of the law, and the presence of a military officer on the bench alongside the civilian judges was a radical departure from the normal order of things. 'It was the same people practicing the

law in Biafra as had practiced in Nigeria', one lawyer recalled, 'but now they were more afraid of the government than they had been in Nigeria'.⁵⁰

Martial law was in force on both sides throughout the war, and the emergency measures would prove to be one of the war's most important legacies.⁵¹ Like Biafra, Nigeria had declared a state of emergency in June 1967, which entailed the mobilization of the federal army and the assumption of broad powers to detain people and investigate anyone thought to have sympathies with the rebel regime.⁵² As in Biafra, the war had deleterious effects on the openness and equability of Nigeria's legal system and political culture. But unsurprisingly, the war's effects on law and administration were most visible in the theatre of war itself, which is to say in Biafra. The Biafran Special Tribunal could hear any cases touching on military activities in even very tenuous ways, including those between civilians, creating a precedent that would long outlast the war. Towards the end of the war, even the robbery of a civilian by a gang of other civilians could come under the jurisdiction of the Special Tribunal on the grounds that it was a disruption of Biafra's economy.⁵³ The war and its prerogatives blurred some distinctions in Biafra and sharpened others. This dynamic is visible in many Biafran court cases, including *The State v. Victor Banjo and three others*.

The trial was also important for what it revealed about the fault lines within Biafra and the new country's national identity. A secondary consequence of the trial was to tighten the definition of who could be considered a Biafran to exclude Yorubas like Banjo, bringing to a close the rhetorical notion that the boundaries of Biafran national identity were drawn in a way that could include Yorubas and other southern Nigerians. The inclusion in the army of Banjo, who was neither Igbo nor a member of one of the eastern minorities, but Yoruba, reflected a strain of thinking about Biafran nationality that was not rooted in ethnicity, but in regionalism and a politics of opposition to the north. In the wake of the Banjo trial, the popular and official conception of who could be considered a Biafran shrank from this expansive notion to one more narrowly associated with being Igbo, or at the very least 'eastern'. By the end of the war, when most of Biafra's minority regions had come under Nigerian control, courts frequently articulated Biafran nationality as being a fundamentally Igbo form of political belonging, and made rulings which supported that claim (though often obliquely or indirectly). In one illustrative case from 1968, a magistrate ruled that an unidentified body was that of a Biafran soldier entitled to a state funeral because the man appeared to be Igbo from his build and facial features.⁵⁴ Such an assumption would not have been made in the earlier period of the war, when officials went to great lengths to show that any southern Nigerian could be a Biafran.

The question of whether Biafran nationality was connected to a particular ethnicity or ethnicities was an intractable and controversial one. Biafra's secession had largely been a response to pogroms against Igbo Nigerians resident in the north, its head of state was Igbo, and the centre of Biafra's government was within the Igbo heartland. But scattered within that region and surrounding it were communities of people who did not identify as Igbo, and Biafra's coastal regions in particular did not have Igbo majorities. The place of minorities in Biafra—including Ibibio, Efik, Ijaw and others—was ambiguous, and the Banjo trial did little to assuage fears that non-Igbos would be marginalized in the new Biafra. Largely in order to counter Nigerian claims that Biafra's five million members of non-Igbo ethnic groups were being 'held hostage',⁵⁵ Biafran propaganda claimed that they had equal membership in Biafra to Igbos, and frequently made reference to the small number of ethnic minorities who had positions within the Biafran government. The true position of minorities was probably somewhere between these two extremes,⁵⁶ but the effect of the Banjo trial was to call into question the allegiances of anyone outside of Ojukwu's immediate circle, and to do so in a way that seemed to many Biafrans (especially non-Igbos) to be underpinned by ethnic considerations.

The stakes of this case and others like it were extremely high in the context of the war. The Special Tribunal of Biafra was not merely a site for the adjudication of criminal matters, political or otherwise. Many Biafran legal practitioners felt that, more than any other part of the Biafran state, the Special Tribunal could reflect the interests and character of the new state. Because it was not tied to the body of jurisprudence that Biafra shared with Nigeria and the rest of the common law world, some felt that the Special Tribunal was the place where Biafra could best fashion its distinct identity.⁵⁷ The cases that appeared before it were not only enactments of 'justice', but statements of Biafra's independent legal and political identity. Over the course of the war, the legal system, and especially the Special Tribunal of Biafra, would become an important site for the arbitration of who could be considered part of Biafra, and what Biafran nationality fundamentally meant.

Conclusion

Three days after Banjo's execution, Biafra's capital of Enugu was overrun by Nigerian troops. The Biafran government fled, along with most of the city's residents, to the market town of Umuahia, leaving Banjo's body still tied to a post as a public reminder that Biafra would not tolerate indiscipline. From this point on, the Biafran state became increasingly diffuse as the war chipped away at it, operating out of army camps and makeshift

quarters rather than government buildings, and expending greater energy on combating starvation than on engaging Nigerian troops. The emergency measures that both sides implemented during the war proved to be one of its most lasting and most pernicious influences. Martial law, with its draconian conception of what constitutes guilt and innocence, bled into other areas of the legal system and became a permanent feature of Nigerian legal and public life after the war. Former Western Region governor David Jemibewon described the logic of martial law in Nigeria after the war in the following terms:

the doctrine that it is better that ninety-nine guilty men go free than one innocent be convicted is not easily squared with the need to maintain efficiency, obedience and order in any army, which is an aggregation of men (mostly in the most criminally disposed age brackets) who had strong appetites, strong passions and ready access to deadly weapons.⁵⁸

When this logic was applied widely, as it first was during the war, the result was a massive curtailment of civil liberties. Wartime measures implemented in Nigeria and Biafra made juridical norms like these seem tolerable and even normal, and the Biafran crisis broadly gave the Nigerian government an alibi for the implementation of emergency measures that would last for the next thirty years.

Notes

1. Summary of meeting between Lord Shepherd and Sir Louis Mbanefo, 11 June 1968: National Archives of the United Kingdom [hereafter: NAUK] FCO 38/216.
2. The voluminous literature on the war has most commonly taken the form of memoirs, military histories and fiction. Exemplars of these various approaches include Godwin A. Onyegbula, *The memoirs of the Nigerian-Biafran bureaucrat: An account of life in Biafra and within Nigeria* (Ibadan: Spectrum, 2005); Ralph Uwechue, *Reflections on the Nigerian civil war: Facing the future* (Victoria: Trafford, 2004); Ntiyong U. Akpan, *The struggle for secession, 1966–1970: A personal account of the Nigerian civil war* (London: Frank Cass, 1971); Alexander A. Madiabo, *The Nigerian revolution and the Biafran war* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1980); Hilary M. Njoku, *A tragedy without heroes: The Nigeria-Biafra war* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1987); Olusegun Obasanjo, *My command: An account of the Nigerian civil war, 1967–1970* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1980); Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a yellow sun* (New York: Anchor, 2006); Chinua Achebe, *Girls at war* (New York: Anchor, 1991). The few works that address the legal dimensions of the war include Tekena Tamuno (ed.), *Nigeria since independence*, Vol. VI: *The civil war years* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1989); Ekong Sampson, *Evergreen memories of Sir Louis Mbanefo* (Lagos: Lomanc Press, 2002). Recent studies of the war have given greater attention to its international dimensions, including its relationship to changes in humanitarian practice, human rights, the question of genocide and the Cold War. See for example Daniel Sargent, *A superpower transformed: The remaking of American foreign relations in the 1970s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Lasse Heerten, ‘The dystopia of postcolonial

- catastrophe: Self-determination, the Biafran war of secession, and the 1970s human rights moment', in Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (eds.), *The breakthrough: Human rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), pp. 15–32, and the present volume.
3. The Biafra War was not the first time that emergency measures had been implemented in Nigeria. Emergency-type suspensions of the normal legal order were imposed at many points during the colonial period, most famously in Eastern Nigeria during the anticolonial rebellion led by women known as the *Ogu Umunwaanyi* of 1929. There is no comparison made to these colonial suspensions of law in the proceedings or correspondence related to the Biafran Special Tribunal, but they are an important part of the context for the implementation of emergency measures in the post-independence period.
 4. The fragmentary nature of these records makes it difficult to identify general trends in jurisprudence, or to confidently make statements about the Biafran 'rule of law' as such. The present work approaches cases individually and qualitatively, drawing out their political content while remaining aware that they are highly subjective, and emerge from a contested legal and political environment.
 5. Summary of meeting between Lord Shepherd and Sir Louis Mbanefo, 11 June 1968: NAUK FCO 38/216.
 6. The rhetoric of law and order was not unique to Biafra; Nigeria too invoked an imminent anarchy to justify its military intervention against the secessionist region. These duelling accusations of lawlessness show that politics on both sides of the conflict drew upon a generalized idea of legality in their rhetoric. They also betray an anxiety about the common law's capacity to foster a cohesive society, which both sides acted upon by implementing martial law in their respective domains. The fact that Nigeria's first reaction to Biafra's secession was to stage a 'police action' to end the crisis also suggests that the political struggle of the war took place partially within the space of the legal and criminal justice system. These and other factors suggest that the language of law was the war's discursive terrain—in the same way that the former Eastern Region was its physical terrain.
 7. 'Changes brought about in Nigerian situation by recent changes in Mid-West', [August 1967]: NAUK FCO 38/284.
 8. Victor Banjo and Olayinka Omigbodun, *A gift of sequins: Letters to my wife* (Ibadan: Mosuro Publishers, 2008), p. 230.
 9. Alexander A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian revolution and the Biafran war* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1980), p. 145.
 10. Njoku, *A tragedy without heroes*, p. 224.
 11. Chinua Achebe, *There was a country: A memoir* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 130.
 12. Samuel Osaigbovo Ogbemudia, *Years of challenge* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1991), p. 98.
 13. The records of the trial have not survived in archival form, but transcripts and summaries of it have been included in a number of postwar memoirs by people who were present. These second-hand accounts provide an incomplete picture of these events, but the way they describe the scene is broadly consistent with other treason trials that were preserved, for example In the Special Tribunal of the Republic of Biafra, No. ST/15c/69, *The State v. Joseph Nwabueze*, 10 March 1969: Nigerian National Archives, Enugu [hereafter: NNAE] MINJUST 117/1/7. Observers present at the trial included Nelson Ottah, former editor of *Drum* magazine's Nigeria edition and an important propagandist in Biafra who later defected to the Nigerian side, and the Biafran Director of Military Intelligence Bernard Odogwu, who was a key witness for the prosecution. These incomplete recollections, together with oral reminiscences of the trial and the records of ancillary cases, form the source material for this account of the trial.
 14. Obasanjo, *My command*, p. 31.
 15. Sir David Hunt to Commonwealth Office, 9 August 1967: NAUK FCO 38/284.

16. Ekong Sampson, *Law and statesmanship: The legacy of Sir Udo Udoma* (Lagos: Patrioni Books, 1997), p. 79.
17. Felicia Adetowun Ogunsheye, *A break in the silence: A historical note on Lt. Colonel Victor Adebukunola Banjo* (Ibadan: Spectrum, 2001), p. 79.
18. Bernard Odogwu, *No place to hide (crises and conflicts inside Biafra)* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1985), p. 22.
19. Sir David Hunt to Commonwealth Office, 9 August 1967: NAUK FCO 38/284.
20. Interview with anonymous informant, Enugu, March 2015.
21. Quoted in Nelson Ottah, *Rebels against rebels* (Lagos: Manson and Company, 1981), p. 120.
22. Adewale Ademoyega, *Why we struck: The story of the first Nigerian coup* (Ibadan: Evans Brothers, 2012), p. 242.
23. Ottah, *Rebels*, p. 65.
24. Quoted in Ottah, *Rebels*, p. 124.
25. Interview with anonymous informant, Enugu, September 2014.
26. Ottah, *Rebels*, p. 115.
27. Interview with Dr. Jacob Ibik, SAN, in his chambers on Owerri Road, Enugu, 26 September 2014.
28. Unnamed editorialist, *The Biafra Sun*, 5 August 1967, p. 3.
29. Unnamed editorialist, *The Biafra Sun*, 24 January 1968, p. 3.
30. Many examples of this can be found in the records of local militias and civil defence organizations. See Umuobom Civil Defence Committee Minute Book, 1968–1969: National War Museum, Umuahia, uncatalogued collection.
31. Unnamed editorialist, *The Biafra Sun*, 5 June 1967, p. 1.
32. This does not include the Ahiara Declaration, which was declared in the final months of the war and was only ever implemented partially and inconsistently. Cynical observers at the time saw the declaration as a last-ditch ploy to gain the support of the USSR.
33. David M. Jemibewon, *An introduction to the theory and practice of military law in Nigeria* (Lagos: Friends Foundation Publishers, 1989), p. 16.
34. Ojukwu's paranoia did not apply solely to Biafran subjects. Biafra occasionally detained foreigners, as when a British businessman was accused of being a spy on the grounds that his company had a radio transmitter which, in theory, could be used to communicate with Nigeria. This case and others like it, including the widely reported detention of a group of Italian oil workers, were staged to demonstrate that Biafra would not tolerate suspicious behaviour, and secondarily to force foreign governments to intervene on behalf of their nationals with the Biafran state, which Ojukwu hoped would imply a tacit kind of recognition of Biafra's independence. 'British Manager Held by Biafrans', 31 August 1967: NAUK FCO 47/176.
35. M.O.I. Idigo to Chwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, 2 July 1968: NNAE MINJUST 90/1/31.
36. In the Special Tribunal of the Republic of Biafra, No. ST//11c/69, *The State v. Gilbert Obazi Ihejiobi*, 11 May 1969: NNAE MINJUST 117/1/4.
37. In the Magistrate's Court of the Republic of Biafra, Holden at Nnewi, No. MO/715c/68, *Inspector-General of Police v. Joshua Okezie*, 19 July 1968: NNAE MINJUST 127/1/74.
38. Ben Gbulie, *The fall of Biafra* (Enugu: Benlie Publishers, 1989), p. 72.
39. Fola Oyewole, *Reluctant rebel* (Akure: Olaiya Fagbamigbe, 1977), p. 76.
40. Interview with anonymous informant, Enugu, September 2014.
41. Oyewole, *Reluctant*, p. 73.
42. See for example 'Treasonable Felony, Contrary of Section 41CC', November–December 1967: NNAE MINJUST 9/1/1.
43. 'Absentee Local Government Staff/Employees', 18 April 1968: NNAE MINJUST 23/1/24.
44. Odogwu, *No place to hide*, p. 94.

45. 'Conveyance of letters, parcels, etc. to persons outside Biafra by Relief Organisations', 23 December 1968: NNAE MNJUST 25/1/3.
46. Interview with Jerome H.C. Okolo, SAN, in his chambers on Zik Avenue, Enugu, 17 September 2014.
47. Interview with Anthony Mogboh, SAN, in his chambers in City Layout, New Haven, Enugu, 2 October 2014.
48. Interview with Jerome H.C. Okolo, SAN, in his chambers on Zik Avenue, Enugu, 17 September 2014.
49. Attorney-General/Commissioner for Justice to the Chairman, Special Tribunal, Nbwasi, 10 November 1969: NNAE MINJUST 115/1/1.
50. Interview with anonymous informant, Enugu, September 2014.
51. The simultaneous coexistence of law and law's suspension is a feature of many military regimes, including wartime Nigeria as well as Biafra. In Nigeria, the Suppression of Disorder Decree of 1966 had a similar function to the Law and Order (Maintenance) Edict of 1967 in Biafra, and these parallel sets of emergency measures set a precedent for the practice of martial law that would last with only brief interruptions until the civilian handover in 1999. The Nigerian tribunals were largely concerned with cases of military insubordination, and the suppression of dissent and the maintenance of public order was for the most part left to the common law system.
52. In practice the federal government had had these powers before Biafra's secession, but the war gave the Nigerian government a reason to expand them and keep them in place. The most famous person to be held under this pretext was Wole Soyinka. 'Note: Nigeria, Sécession de la province orientale', 1 June 1967: Centre des Archives diplomatiques, Nantes (CADN) 332PO/1 Box 4.
53. In the Special Tribunal of Biafra, *The State v. Peter Atulobi and two others*, 21 October 1969: NNAE MINJUST 116/1/4.
54. 'Repatriation of war dead', [1968]: NNAE MINJUST MISC.
55. 'To keep Nigeria one is a thing that must be done!' [c. 1968]: Nigerian National Archives, Ibadan (NNAI) CWC.
56. D. F. Hawley, 'Eastern nationalism', 15 April 1967: NAUK DO 186/1.
57. Attorney-General/Commissioner for Justice to the Chairman, Special Tribunal, Nbwasi, 10 November 1969: NNAE MINJUST 115/1/1.
58. Jemibewon, *An introduction*, p. 16.

5 The Biafran Secession and the Limits of Self-Determination

Brad Simpson

Introduction

In January 1970, as Biafra was collapsing and the Nigerian civil war was drawing to a close, Biafran students in the United States meditated on the ‘philosophy of the Biafran revolution’:

The Biafran revolution has raised a fundamental issue in the entire politics of unity in Africa. The question is this: Can Africa be better unified on the basis of the colonial boundaries or could a lasting unity be achieved on the basis of self-determination for the various African peoples.¹

Biafrans had posed this question on 26 May 1967, when the Eastern Region of Nigeria voted to secede, followed shortly after by Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu’s announcement of the independence of the Republic of Biafra. For the next two and a half years Nigeria’s Federal Military Government (FMG), backed by both the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union, waged a fierce war on the breakaway republic, including a devastating blockade of the landlocked territory, resulting in the deaths from fighting and starvation of an estimated one million civilians. By the time the republic finally surrendered on 12 January 1970, Biafra had become for many a symbol: of the exhaustion of postcolonial optimism, of the horrors of civil wars, of the starving African child and of the emergence of a new sensibility that in the 1970s would help to produce both an explosion of human rights activism and new forms of ‘humanitarian intervention’ exemplified by such groups as *Médecins Sans Frontières*.²

The Nigerian civil war also provoked a wide-ranging discussion in international forums, among Western governments and among social scientists and political activists over the meaning of genocide, the legitimacy of secession, the definition of state viability and the limits of self-determination. For Biafra’s supporters, the carving of a new state out of the remnants of

Nigeria offered an opportunity to challenge the dominant conception of self-determination as nothing more than an act of decolonization. To backers of Nigeria, Biafra was an omen of things to come if more expansive definitions of self-determination gained traction in international law and state practice, threatening state fragmentation and the balkanization of the African continent. Underlying the debate over the Biafran secession were many of the questions that scholars and diplomats had long asked of self-determination elsewhere: Who or what is a people (and were the ‘Biafrans’ a people)? Who, if anyone, has the right to self-determination, and does this right extend to minority groups within established states (and did the minority Igbo community have this right)? How does the international community decide or define whether a territory is viable enough to merit self-determination (and did Biafra meet this threshold of state viability)?

The Nigerian civil war raised but could not answer these fundamental questions about the nature and direction of decolonization, and their possible application to the southeastern region of the country. Instead, it could only highlight the ambiguity and contested nature of sovereignty and self-determination, and the ability of groups such as the Igbos to exploit their indeterminacy in an effort to achieve their aims. This chapter will highlight these ambiguities by examining the nature of the Biafran claim to self-determination and the critique of its opponents, as well as the ways in which these claims and counter-claims evolved over the course of the civil war, especially in response to charges of genocide made by Biafran supporters. Finally, it will explore the lessons that supporters and opponents of Biafra drew from its collapse regarding the nature and limits of self-determination.

The Biafran Claim for Self-Determination and Its Critics

Upon achieving independence in 1960, Nigeria became Africa’s largest, most populous and wealthiest country. Like many of its neighbours, however, Nigeria was also a heterogeneous state—in which political and social conflict often bore both cultural and regional characteristics—with ethnic Igbos, Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani dominating the eastern, western and northern parts of the country, respectively. These local and ethnic loyalties had long hampered the emergence of a strong national identity, producing frequent threats of regional secession and, in 1963 the reorganization of the Nigerian state along federal lines.³ The 1966 coups and subsequent massacres of ethnic Igbos suggested to some that this structure precluded effective political representation for minority communities. It was thus no surprise that, in May 1967, when Nigeria’s Eastern Region declared its independence as the Republic of Biafra, Biafran leaders framed their

claims in terms of self-determination. In doing so, however, they revealed the principle to be a deeply contested terrain, the meaning of which few could agree upon.⁴

Although Biafra's self-styled leaders spoke of self-determination, much of the world heard secession. While the United States and its European allies, China, the Soviet bloc and the nations of the postcolonial world often violently disagreed on the nature and scope of self-determination since 1945, there was something approaching genuine international consensus on the danger of secession. Much of the burgeoning social science literature on self-determination in the 1960s and 1970s focused on this question, which lay at the heart of the postcolonial settlements and the emergence of independent states from the remnants of former colonial territories. Although the United Nations (UN) charter only mentioned self-determination in passing and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights excluded it from consideration entirely, many anticolonial and nonwestern leaders sought to enshrine self-determination as a legal right in the human rights covenants and myriad General Assembly resolutions.⁵ Before 1945, scholars such as Alfred Cobban evinced a cautious optimism about the prospects for self-determination as a principle that might ease the path from colonialism to self-government, though many Western observers framed their understanding of self-determination in liberal, individual terms as little more than representative self-government. Even the worrying signs of early partition crises in Palestine and India did not significantly dampen such enthusiasm.⁶ As UN member states moved to condemn colonialism and enshrine self-determination as a human right in the early 1960s, however, and as decolonization accelerated in earnest, so too did worries that cascading self-determination claims within anticolonial movements might lead to increased pressure for secession.⁷ The UN, with African members in the lead, repeatedly condemned attempts by secessionist movements to redraw the borders of often fragile multiethnic states, and explicitly or tacitly authorized the Congo, Nigeria and other countries threatened by such movements to take whatever actions necessary to preserve their territorial integrity.⁸

The rapid decolonization of much of Africa in the early 1960s forced many of the most pressing questions concerning the nature and limits of self-determination to the surface. At the founding conference of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963, anticolonial leaders heatedly debated whether the Pan-African ideals of unity, anticolonialism and self-determination required the maintenance of colonial borders or their dissolution in favour of a Pan-African federation or some other formation. The OAU eventually took a strong and unequivocal stance in favour of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states and the preservation of

existing borders, partly out of fear of state fragmentation, and partly at the insistence of smaller states fearful of border disputes with and territorial claims by their larger neighbours. While insisting on the 'inalienable right of all people to control their own destiny', the charter placed respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity among its founding principles.⁹ This was a reasonable stance given the ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity of many postcolonial states and the often arbitrary definition of colonial borders, both of which raised the spectre that acknowledging a right of secession might lead to the unravelling of the postcolonial African system. One Kenyan official told an OAU summit conference in 1963 that 'the principle of self-determination has relevance where foreign domination is the issue. It has no relevance where the issue is territorial disintegration by dissident citizens'.¹⁰

The OAU's stance reflected the deep unease spawned by the Congolese civil war (1961–1963) and the attempted secession of Katanga province, justified by Moïse Tshombe 'on the basis of the universally recognized right to self-determination'.¹¹ The secessionist state of Katanga, indirectly backed by numerous western governments and mining firms, was defeated in January 1963, just a few months before the OAU's formation. Many African leaders saw the Katanga secession as an attempt by former colonial powers to foster the emergence of weak postcolonial states, and postcolonial self-determination (at least as described by them) as a mask for the promotion of imperial and commercial interests.¹² Katanga served as a powerful, if sometimes contradictory, precedent for Biafran leaders and their supporters, who pointed to its experience both as a justification for their own attempt at secession and as a counterpoint to what they argued were the more legitimate circumstances animating their claims. The Congo crisis also underlined the political economy of self-determination claims and the ways that these often served as a shorthand for conflicts over the control of vital natural resources such as oil and other extractive commodities.¹³

The Nigerian civil war erupted less than a year after the UN General Assembly adopted the covenants on civil and political rights and economic, social and cultural rights, capping fifteen years of often bitter negotiations in the Human Rights Committee. Article I of each covenant famously declared that 'All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development'. The covenants enshrined self-determination as the 'first right' from which all others derived, though its substantive meaning remained unclear and open to fierce contestation.¹⁴

From the start, many Biafran leaders framed their claims to legitimacy in these terms. Ojukwu's 'Proclamation of Biafra', issued alongside the territory's declaration of independence on 30 May 1967, argued that the 'desire

on the part of the minority groups for self-determination is the active force behind the demand for the creation of more states'. Biafran officials made a four-fold argument defending their right to self-determination. First, they cast their efforts as the latest chapter in the history of African decolonization, and as part of 'the heroic struggles of all peoples all over the world for their national freedom', all of which 'have been motivated under identical impulses of self-determination'.¹⁵ Perhaps more importantly, they suggested that self-defined linguistic and 'tribal' groups, rather than colonial borders, were the logical unit of organization and governance in Africa. In short, Biafran officials rejected the imperial premises of decolonization and argued that 'progressive' African leaders should be willing to consider solutions which accorded to African, rather than metropolitan realities.¹⁶ As such, they argued, the

best hope for a satisfactory solution to the problems of Nigeria lies in the recognition and preservation of the separate identity of the various tribal or linguistic groupings and their right to develop each along its own line and at its own pace.¹⁷

The emphasis on minority rights hearkened back to the post-World War I period, when the European powers employed similar logic to justify the creation of ethnically or linguistically homogenous states out of the remnants of the Hapsburg and Ottoman empires.¹⁸ It also reflected the often regional and ethnic character of the Nigerian decolonization process. As Bonny Ibhawoh has observed, the Freedom Charter drawn up in 1943 by the National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroons (and based on the 1941 Atlantic Charter) 'particularly stressed the right to self-determination'. Biafran leaders emphasized this long history of regionalism, noting that in negotiations over a new constitution following the 1966 military coup, representatives of the North, West and Eastern states had insisted, as the North's proposal put it, that the 'right of self-determination of all people in the country must be accepted', and that 'these rights include the right of any State within the country to secede'.¹⁹

At the same time, Biafran leaders insisted—dubiously—that recognition of Biafra's sovereignty was 'in keeping with the best practice of the concept of territorial integrity for all nations', the actual intent of which was to 'neutralize the ambitions of those states which adhere to it with regards to the territories of one another'—in other words, to prevent strong states from absorbing their smaller, weaker neighbours. Even the OAU Charter, they insisted, recognized 'the right of a new state to emerge from a state through the process of self-determination' and did not explicitly rule out secession in all instances. In any case, the history of British-sponsored

federations (the West Indies, Malaysia, Central African Republic, etc.), suggested both that colonially sponsored federations were doomed to fail and that their dissolution could be accomplished without bloodshed.²⁰

Finally, Biafran officials suggested that the Nigerian state, which had proved unable and unwilling to protect residents of Eastern Nigeria and afford them full democratic rights, had forfeited their loyalty. ‘When the Nigerians violated our basic human rights and liberties’, argued journalist Simon Anekwe, ‘we decided reluctantly but bravely to found our own state, to exercise our inalienable right to self-determination as our only remaining hope for survival as a people’.²¹ Here Biafran secessionists made a novel case that the violation of their right to liberal, individual self-determination by the Nigerian state compelled them to exercise their right to collective self-determination.²² Such an argument flies in the face of the claims by human rights scholars that by the 1960s anticolonial leaders had abandoned individual or liberal understandings of self-determination in favour of collective ones.²³ Throughout the civil war, self-identified Biafrans continued to insist on both the right to liberal, individual self-determination within Nigeria, through the exercise of local self-rule, and their right to exit it through an act of collective self-determination.²⁴

The lukewarm international reaction to Biafra’s declaration of independence suggested that most members of the international community rejected both the premise and the substance of its claims. To be sure, Biafra was not without its supporters in the West. On 30 July 1968, France announced its support for Biafran independence (though it did not officially recognize Biafra), and Paris quickly emerged as the largest supplier of food and weapons. Through its loud and public support, as Lasse Heerten has argued, French officials ‘re-narrated’ the story of French imperialism ‘as one of the benevolent guidance of colonial “nations” towards self-determination’. France has ‘always defended the people’s right to self-determination’, claimed former French diplomat and Parliament member Raymond Offroy in the Bulletin of the *Comité d’Action pour le Biafra*, effacing the bloody memory of Algeria’s war for independence and the tortured questions regarding French national identity and the meaning of self-determination which that conflict raised.²⁵ Perhaps more important, the French Foreign Ministry believed that Britain had ‘made a mistake in giving the territories around Lagos their independence as a federation’—a seemingly peculiar British preference—rather than as independent states.²⁶ As the civil war dragged on and the Sino-Soviet split widened, China also joined the fray, denouncing ‘imperialist’ and ‘revisionist’ (i.e. Soviet-allied) powers for supporting Nigeria while giving ineffectual lip-service to Biafran self-determination. Portugal allowed relief organizations seeking to aid Biafra to use the Island of São Tomé as a transshipment point,

much to the dismay of the United States and Britain, but offered only lukewarm statements concerning recognition.²⁷ Though they never recognized the territory, South African officials also occasionally spoke in favour of self-determination for Biafra, mostly to make the case for Apartheid and the creation of the Bantustans, arguing that ‘enforced integration of people of different tribal backgrounds inevitably leads to friction and bloodshed, with Nigeria providing only the most recent example’.²⁸

Only a handful of nations formally recognized Biafra—Haiti, Tanzania, Ivory Coast, Gabon and Zambia—and they did so for a wide range of reasons.²⁹ Julius Nyerere’s Tanzania offered the most significant support, extending official recognition to the Republic Biafra in April, 1968 and framing his decision in terms of support for self-determination.³⁰ Tanzanian officials were careful to reiterate their support for Nigeria’s sovereignty and territorial integrity as well, observing that in service of these principles ‘Africa has watched the massacre of tens of thousands of people, has watched the employment of mercenaries by both sides in the current civil war, and has accepted repeated rebuffs of its offers to help by mediation or conciliation’. The fundamental question raised by the Nigerian civil war, as it would be raised by the East Pakistan crisis a few years later, was whether there existed a threshold of state repression beyond which a people ‘have the right to create another instrument for their protection—in other words, to create another state’. In this case, Nyerere suggested, the answer was yes, though he stated both publicly and privately that recognition was intended as a spur to negotiations, not a solution to the conflict. He argued that the denial of individual self-determination to Igbos by the Nigerian government legitimized an act of collective self-determination, though not necessarily liberal democracy.³¹ Like many of his postcolonial peers, Nyerere had established one-party rule in Tanzania and suppressed or banned ethnic and regional loyalties in favour of a state-imposed national identity, and viewed the spread of the type of ethno-nationalism represented by Biafra with dismay.³²

Humanitarian Reaction and Self-Determination

The Nigerian government’s successful implementation of its blockade against Biafra in spring 1968 and reports of mass starvation and massacre in June sparked a wide-ranging effort by both Western governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and Joint Church Aid to deliver food, medicine and other relief supplies to the beleaguered territory. Historians have treated this eruption of activism, accompanied by widespread media coverage and grassroots mobilization in many countries, as a moment when the politics

of humanitarianism and human rights began to blur, helping to pave the way both for the explosion of activism in the 1970s and for the humanitarian interventions of later years.

The two major organizations involved in Biafra—the ICRC and JCA—publicly framed their involvement in these terms, focusing on the relief of the suffering of Biafrans affected by the civil war. They, along with the majority of North American aid organizations involved in Biafra relief, took no public stance on the human rights implications of the FMG’s military strategy or on the merits of Biafra’s self-determination claims, though they sometimes fiercely debated the wisdom of recognition in private.³³ One important exception was the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, which squarely confronted the legitimacy of secession and the meaning of self-determination. In early 1969 the Committee organized a postcard and letter campaign calling on US President Richard Nixon to recognize Biafra and ‘not bully [them] into giving up “their God-given right to life and the right to self-determination”’.³⁴ Likewise, the American Committee to Save Biafra suggested that Nigeria’s territorial integrity should not be inviolate in the face of an alleged genocide and that violence on a sufficiently large scale might justify secession.³⁵

As Lasse Heerten notes, many French and German organizations working on Biafra expressed support for Biafran self-determination as a response to allegations of genocide against the Igbo.³⁶ Biafran exiles living in Canada and other Western countries adopted a similar stance.³⁷ The divergent responses to the humanitarian and political crisis sparked by the Nigerian civil war highlighted the conflicts between humanitarian and solidarity activists, the latter of whom were much more willing to take an explicitly political stance on the core question of self-determination for Biafra. These groups linked human rights abuses committed by the Nigerian government and the humanitarian catastrophe in Biafra to the denial of self-determination and urged their governments to do so as well, exposing a gulf between differing visions of NGO human rights politics that historians have thus far accorded little consideration.

Nigerian leaders were well aware of the moral power of Biafra’s self-determination claims, and engaged in wide-ranging efforts to counter the international diplomacy of the self-styled Biafran Foreign Minister Pius Okigbo, as well as the Swiss public relations agency Markpress hired to represent Biafra to the global media.³⁸ In countering them, the Gowon government exploited the still-contested status of self-determination in international law, as well as the fears that the Biafran secession raised among governments of other fragile, multiethnic states. First, they argued, Nigeria had already gone far to meet Igbo concerns about political representation, or internal self-determination. At the ad hoc constitutional conference of

12 September 1966, the FMG had proposed a more decentralized federal structure involving the creation of twelve states, rather than six, in theory reducing the likelihood of political domination by the north and its Hausa-Fulani majority.³⁹ Moreover, Nigerian officials argued that the creation of Biafra would simply replicate Eastern Nigeria's 'minority problem' in a new guise, leading to an Igbo-dominated state in which the rights of five million Efiks, Ibibios, Ekois and Ijaws would be denied. 'If the union of Nigeria is dissolved', a government broadside declared, 'ethnic groups in Biafra have just as much right to self-determination as Ibos'.⁴⁰ A number of Nigerians and their supporters also viewed calls for self-determination for Biafra as a neocolonial plot, waged 'by international politico-economic interests and haters of the black people, to destroy us and our potentially wealthy nation, and to create in its place a weak, puppet mini-Euro-African "state", through the reactionary concept of "Biafra"'. These views were shared by otherwise radical African leaders such as Algerian President Houari Boumedienne, who, at the OAU summit in Algiers in September 1968, fiercely denounced 'plots from all sides directed against Nigeria, aiming to disintegrate and shake to its foundations this great African state'.⁴¹

The moral legitimacy of Biafran demands for self-determination derived in no small measure from the charge that the FMG was committing genocide against Igbo civilians through massacre and enforced starvation. Much of the scholarly literature concerning the civil war has in fact centred on this question, and both Biafran supporters and propagandists and the FMG invested considerable resources in shaping global perceptions of the accuracy of the genocide charge.⁴² The unequivocal humanitarian disaster produced by the FMG military blockade of Eastern Nigeria led some who opposed secession to wonder if 'subduing Biafra is far too great a price to pay just to allay the fears of Balkanization'.⁴³ The FMG, of course, hotly contested the charge of genocide, pointing to the lack of repression faced by Igbos living in other parts of Nigeria and under FMG control, and alleging atrocities committed by Ojukwu's forces, a charge partially confirmed by an international observer team invited into the territory by the Nigerian government. As the civil war ground on, journalists and diplomats began to criticize the provisional Biafran government for its absolutist negotiating stance and suggested that it was manipulating global concern over civilian suffering to advance its political aims.⁴⁴ The increasingly critical coverage of Ojukwu and his associates, Lasse Heerten concludes, made it 'hard to disentangle the Biafran cause of self-determination from the associations flowing from the secessionist's regime's characterization as mendacious artists of propaganda'.⁴⁵

Support for Biafran self-determination, however, was always a minority proposition, and most Western governments, even those that provided

relief to the beleaguered territory, backed the FMG throughout the civil war. Ireland, to cite just one example, provided relief assistance to Biafra but maintained an official policy 'firmly rooted in the primacy of a united Nigeria'.⁴⁶ No European government officially recognized Biafra, and surveys of public opinion and media coverage by US embassy officials revealed that most Europeans, though sympathetic to Biafra's suffering, were ill-informed on the basic facts of the civil war and in any case inclined to support Nigeria's territorial integrity. The same was true across much of Africa, where access to accurate information concerning the situation inside the territory was scarce and polemical pronouncements from state-controlled newspapers ruled the day. The OAU, in its attempts to mediate between the FMG and the Biafran leadership, repeatedly stressed, as the first OAU mission to Lagos in November 1967 did, that 'any solution to the Nigerian crisis must be in the context of preserving the territorial integrity of Nigeria'.⁴⁷

The United Kingdom remained the staunchest backer of the Nigerian government throughout the civil war, offering weapons, economic assistance and diplomatic support for its former colony. While British officials were keen to avoid setting a secessionist precedent for other multiethnic former colonies, they also feared that 'the whole of our investments in Nigeria will be at risk if we change our policy of support for the Federal Government. The French would be glad to pick up our oil concessions'. Whitehall's position, however, proved unpopular. Biafra solidarity groups in Britain raised money for relief, organized meetings and mass marches, published ads decrying government policy in major newspapers, and lobbied Parliament. Among labour Party MPs there was 'considerable back-bench support for Biafran relief and even self-determination' and consistent criticism of Whitehall's determined support for Lagos.⁴⁸

In the United States, the Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon administrations never wavered in their support for Nigeria's territorial integrity, even as they supported an arms embargo against Lagos, professed public neutrality in the civil war, and provided more than half of the relief assistance entering Biafra.⁴⁹ Most US officials, though sympathetic to Biafra's humanitarian plight (and in some cases, to its aspirations), feared that recognition of its secession would set a dangerous precedent across the continent. Meeting with French officials in 1969, Secretary of State William Rogers suggested the United States in principle supported self-determination for Biafra, but that 'the concept . . . takes many forms. If we were to speak of it as meaning that any group in a sovereign state can secede, then it takes on an entirely different meaning', one with potentially catastrophic implications for other multiethnic states.⁵⁰ US opposition to Biafran secession was hardly a reflection of iron-clad principles; Washington

proved more than willing to support separatist movements (with Katanga and the PRRI rebellion in Indonesia the two most notable examples) when they served broader geopolitical or commercial interests.⁵¹ But the United States largely deferred to British interests on Nigeria, especially after the Biafran government demanded that Shell-BP Oil pay royalties directly to it rather than to the Nigerian government. As in Britain, however, a sizeable minority in Congress opposed US policy as the civil war dragged on, and began expressing support for self-determination as part of a diplomatic solution aimed at ending what seemed like an intractable military conflict and intolerable human suffering.⁵²

Self-Determination and the Dilemmas of the Postcolonial State

The Nigerian civil war finally ended in January 1970, when FMG troops overcame a crumbling Biafran resistance and conquered the last remaining pockets of rebel-held territory. Biafran officials surrendered on 15 January, bringing the war to a rapid close.⁵³ The collapse of one of the boldest movements for postcolonial self-determination provoked a steady stream of commentary and reflection on the lessons Biafra might offer for other secessionist movements, for governments facing them and for social scientists and international legal experts seeking to describe, and prescribe, the acceptable boundaries of sovereignty and statehood in the international system. Supporters of Biafra tried to find consolation in the postwar concessions that the Nigerian Federal Government made to reincorporate Eastern Nigeria into the body politic, and to the predicted genocide against Igbos which never transpired. Opponents breathed a sigh of relief, arguing that the collapse of the Biafran experiment hinted at the ominous implications of self-determination too broadly construed, demonstrated the limits of state viability and, hopefully, would serve as a salutary lesson for other movements considering similar demands.

In 1967, Biafra had a population of approximately 13.5 million inhabitants, making it (had it survived) one of Africa's largest countries. The territory contained a wealth of minerals and natural resources, and sat on the bulk of Nigeria's massive oil wealth. Yet opponents of Biafran independence argued that the collapse of the breakaway state demonstrated (ex post facto) that it lacked political and economic viability which was the precondition for a legitimate claim to self-determination. Echoing Nigerian officials, they suggested that 'Biafra' could not lay claim to a coherent, rooted sense of linguistic, cultural or national identity; in short, it was a place, a region, perhaps, but not a nation. The territory's non-Igbo population, moreover, had not experienced the same trauma at the hands of FMG

forces and lacked the sense of existential threat that bound most Igbos to the cause of self-determination.⁵⁴

Furthermore, some opponents of Biafra argued the territory was simply too small to be economically or politically viable. Biafran leaders thus confronted not only deep international scepticism regarding the existence of an authentic national identity, but an ever-shifting geopolitical and social scientific sensibility regarding the thresholds for state viability. During the long period of postwar decolonization many anticolonial leaders and their former colonial masters internalized what one commentator called the 'bigness bias', believing that small countries were 'militarily vulnerable, politically weak, [and] economically unviable'. This fear helps to explain the support for schemes of federation which proliferated among small decolonizing states, as well as among great powers such as the United States and Great Britain, which viewed small states as sources of instability and potential geopolitical conflict. They were joined, though for different reasons, by anticolonial leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, who 'condemned any expression of the right to self-determination which was on a small scale, and blamed it on neo-colonial influences'.⁵⁵ Academic economists and political scientists, moreover, were 'obsessed with the need for large internal markets to promote economic development in the third world', and believed that small states, especially those dependent upon resource exports, could never create balanced, independent economies.⁵⁶ A decade later, explosive economic growth among tiny East Asian states such as Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan put some of these concerns to rest, but too late to help Biafra's cause.

The stiffest challenge that Biafra faced grew out of the simple unwillingness of the vast majority of states to accept secessionist self-determination as legitimate. This opposition was closely linked to the pervasive fear that granting self-determination to aggrieved minorities in multiethnic settings would result in the balkanization of Africa, state fragmentation and perhaps a gradual unravelling of the interstate system. Many postcolonial states, especially in Africa, had arbitrary boundaries bearing little resemblance to the actual dispersal of ethnic, linguistic or cultural groups. Forging and maintaining a national identity across diverse ethnic and linguistic lines was therefore a priority for many postcolonial regimes, which viewed strong, single party states as a means to this end. Unsurprisingly, in this light, the Congolese government emerged as perhaps the staunchest defender of Nigeria's territorial integrity. 'To have supported secession', one Congolese minister told the British Prime Minister, 'would have been to commit a crime against Africa'.⁵⁷

Countless observers in Nigeria and its neighbours in Britain and in the United States made this case, insisting that 'self-determination thoroughly

carried out in Africa would end in each household or clan having its own separate flag'.⁵⁸ Political scientist Rupert Emerson, arguably the leading scholar of self-determination, suggested that 'at some point even the most ardent enthusiast for a permanent and continuing right of self-determination must call a halt to the process of fragmentation' symbolized by Biafra. Other scholars, while lamenting the death and suffering caused by the civil war, grimly hoped that Biafra would serve as a warning for other disaffected minority groups or secessionist movements. *New York Times* correspondent C. L. Sulzberger wrote that the war's destruction was 'gruesome, brutal and crippled development of the continent's most promising black state. It was also inevitable', even necessary. 'Had Katanga or Biafra succeeded in breaking loose', Sulzberger warned, 'the disruptive power of tribalism would have been vastly enhanced everywhere. If the continent allows the emotional pull of clan to run wild, it stands no chance of independent survival'.⁵⁹

Scholars, journalists and diplomats drew a variety of lessons from Biafra's tragic experience. Given the Hobbesian choice between state disintegration on the one hand and territorial integrity at the cost of hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths on the other, the collapse of Biafra suggested that the international community would not-so-reluctantly chose the latter.⁶⁰ In this way, Biafra hinted at the extraordinary degree of violence the international community was willing to tolerate in the name of the territorial integrity of states. The President of Chad, François Tombalbaye, for example, a consistent supporter of Nigeria during the civil war, 'undoubtedly had in mind the ongoing insurgency in his territory' as well as his country's dependence on Nigeria for access to the sea.⁶¹ Other states facing restive internal minorities harboured similar fears.

Biafra's supporters assailed the reductionist and faulty logic of those who argued that its struggle pointed toward a grim future of balkanization and fragmentation, asking 'must Africa replicate centuries of bloody European wars in order to rationalize arbitrary colonial borders?'.⁶² Biafra's opponents, they suggested, ignored the vast range of ways in which states and the international system could address self-determination claims, including federalism, autonomy and other solutions falling well short of secession (which Biafran leaders claim they only turned to after other options failed). In fact, though self-determination claims would continue to proliferate in the coming decades and especially after the end of the Cold War, the vast majority would be resolved through methods falling short of secession, and without violence on anything approaching the scale of the Nigerian civil war.

After the collapse of the Biafran struggle, Nigerian leaders faced the challenge of reintegrating Eastern Nigeria into the body politic and to some

degree accommodating Igbos and others who feared retribution. Nigerian remained a military dictatorship, but the FMG proved surprisingly pragmatic given the ferocity of the civil war that had recently convulsed the territory. In at least parts of the country, argued Sam Ikoku, commissioner for economic development and reconstruction in East Central State, Nigeria's military rulers 'had to concede the principle of ethnic self-determination to the smaller ethnic groups in the country'. Though Biafra itself fell, he concluded, 'the forces of federalism with the base of ethnic self-determination won the civil war'.⁶³ Igbos and other secessionists did face myriad hardships in the aftermath of the civil war, including job discrimination, the confiscation of abandoned homes and property and issuance by the FMG of a new currency that rendered much of Biafra's prewar monetary supply worthless. Fears of a postwar genocide, however, proved unfounded, though the ethnic and resource-based grievances that animated the conflict would continue for decades after.

Conclusion

If Biafra was supposed to serve as a parable for others on the limits of international tolerance for secession from postcolonial states, it appears that few were listening. The two closest regional analogues to Biafra, the Eritrean movement for secession from Ethiopia and the Southern Sudan movement for secession from Sudan, predated the Nigerian civil war and continued long after it. Like Biafra, Eritrea had few international supporters, especially among the great powers, who viewed its claims as no more legitimate than those of Biafra's and as ominous in their implication. 'It is especially necessary', R. A. Ulyanovsky of the CPSU Central Committee told an East German counterpart in 1978, to convince the Eritrean Liberation Movement 'that self-determination for the Eritrean people will be achieved within the framework of an Ethiopian state'.⁶⁴ Eritrea's leaders, however, viewed Biafra not as a warning but as an analogue and inspiration. Like Biafra, Eritrea had been 'forced into a 'federal' shackle with Ethiopia against their expressed wishes', compelled in 1961 to take up arms after more peaceful ways of achieving self-determination had failed.⁶⁵ In a different vein, leaders of the South Sudan Liberation Movement (SSLM) and the Anyanya separatist army, which led a rebellion for self-determination in the Southern Sudan from 1969 until 1972 (intensifying a civil war begun in 1955) framed the lessons of Biafra in negative terms. The struggle in Southern Sudan, SSLM propaganda insisted, was 'not a Biafra-like fight tearing apart an African country' but 'a fundamental struggle pitting an indigenous African culture against alien invading forces—Arabisation and imperialism. The Anyanya is the vanguard of Africa's struggle against this

new colonialism'. Foreign intervention in the conflict (especially on the part of Egypt and Israel), Sudanese politician and Communist Party member Joseph Garang insisted, was designed 'to create another Biafra in the Sudan and, if possible, to transform the Southern question into an Afro-Arab conflict on a continental scale'.⁶⁶

Biafra, as Srinath Raghavan argues, also 'proved to be a curtain raiser for Bangladesh'. Bangladesh, however, would prove to be an exception, the sole Cold War example of a successful secessionist movement leading to a new, independent country.⁶⁷ There are many reasons why Bangladesh's situation was comparatively unique: its geographic isolation, majority status within Pakistan, the democratic mandate of the Awami league, and the decisive military intervention of India, with the support of the Soviet Union.⁶⁸ Only the Soviet Union and its allies backed India in UN resolutions that called for a ceasefire in Bangladesh and a withdrawal to international borders, 'though such an outcome would leave Pakistan in control of East Pakistan as before'.⁶⁹ Most Western officials took a position on East Pakistan similar to that which they took on Biafra—secessionist self-determination was illegitimate, and Pakistan had the right to use virtually any means at its disposal to preserve its territorial integrity, even at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives and millions of refugees. But some US officials, such as Idaho Senator Frank Church, argued that in the wake of Biafra 'our government has an opportunity now to uphold the right of self-determination', and that such movements and claims needed to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis.⁷⁰

The Biafran secession crisis raised a host of uncomfortable questions about the sanctity of international borders, the legitimacy of postcolonial settlements, and the meaning of self-determination. The Nigerian government's crushing of the Biafran rebellion provided few answers to these questions except for the obvious ones—that successful movements for self-determination generate their own *ex post facto* legitimacy, while unsuccessful ones do not. As one contemporary observer noted, 'While genocide is illegal, civil war is not. That, we must recognize, is at the heart of the problem. Civil war is not illegal under international law, neither is the suppression of secession'.⁷¹ While scholars, diplomats and contemporary observers now take for granted that the Katanga and Biafran secession attempts were threatening and illegitimate (though for different reasons), far fewer would say the same about Bangladesh, Eritrea or South Sudan—contemporaries of Biafra and now independent states. If the Nigerian civil war and its aftermath offered any lessons, one scholar averred, it is that 'international law is neutral on the issue of post-independence self-determination', and that 'whether any group of human beings constitutes a people seems more often than not to depend on the fortunes of war and

the strategic demands of the great powers' than on the intrinsic legitimacy of their claims'.⁷² These lessons, as the resolution of recent secessionist self-determination crises demonstrates, still hold today.⁷³ But bloody crises such as Biafra did leave an important legacy. In the 1960s, secession or its violent repression were widely framed as the only alternatives in answer to postcolonial claims for self-determination. Since then, the negative example of the Nigerian civil war has stimulated a slowly expanding body of international legal principles to adjudicate self-determination disputes beyond the potentially violent zero-sum logic of secession.⁷⁴

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6. Vernon Van Dyke, 'Self-determination and minority rights', *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1969, pp. 223–253; Rupert Emerson, 'Self-determination', *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 65, No. 3, 1971, pp. 459–475; Samuel Keith Painter-Brick, 'The right to self-determination: Its application to Nigeria', *International Affairs*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 1968, pp. 254–266; Ved Nanda, 'Self-determination in international law: The tragic tale of two cities-Islamabad (West Pakistan) and Dacca (East Pakistan)', *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 66, No. 2, 1972, pp. 321–336; Lee Buchheit, *Secession: The legitimacy of self-determination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978); Azadon Tiewul, 'Relations between the United Nations organization and the Organization of African Unity in the settlement of secessionist conflicts', *Harvard International Law Journal*, Vol. 16, 1975, p. 259.
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Section II

A Global Event



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6 The UK and ‘Genocide’ in Biafra

Karen E. Smith

The UK and ‘Genocide’ in Biafra

In late August 1968, just after it launched a ‘final offensive’ to defeat the ‘Biafra’ rebels, the Federal Military Government of Nigeria (FMG) announced it would allow an international observer team into the country to show that it was not pursuing a campaign of genocide against Igbos in Biafra.¹ It did so under some pressure to take such a course of action: the British government had signalled strongly that its continued support for the FMG, including arms supplies, would depend on the FMG’s acceptance of observers. From September 1968 until the end of the war in January 1970, a small team of observers from the United Kingdom (UK), Canada, Poland, Sweden, the Organisation for African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations (UN) operated in FMG-controlled territory and repeatedly reported that no genocide was taking place in the country. The British government used those findings to justify its policy of support for the FMG.

The observer team hardly features in recent discussions of the Nigeria-Biafra war, or even in some older pieces.² Only Suzanne Cronje discussed it at much length, in *The World and Nigeria*.³ Yet it is curious that the observer team was sent at all, as it is an indication of how much pressure the UK itself was under as a result of the claims that a genocide was being perpetrated against Biafrans.

This article explains why the UK pressed for the FMG to invite observers into Nigeria, highlighting the need for the British government to rebut accusations that it was abetting genocide in Nigeria, especially by continuing to supply arms to the FMG. These accusations generated concern within the government despite the fact that the UK had not yet acceded to the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Their concern stemmed not from questions about the UK’s conformity to the legal norm against genocide, but instead from doubts about its conformity with the social norm against genocide.

This article first sets out the argument that there are two norms against genocide, a legal one (embodied in the 1948 Genocide Convention) and a social one. The main part of the article then reveals the decision-making and diplomacy regarding the creation of the observer team as disclosed in the relevant papers in the UK national archives. The social norm created pressures on the government to take action that it viewed as inimical to its interests (such as imposing an arms embargo on the FMG), and thus it needed specifically to rebut the claims of genocide to relieve the pressure. The section also shows how the observer team's conclusions were used by the UK government to justify its policy (and to resist any changes to it), while activists and observers argued the observer team was biased. This case illustrates how and why it is difficult to use observer teams to ensure an 'objective' determination of whether genocide is taking place or not.

The Social and Legal Norms Against Genocide

This article uses the concept of 'norms' when assessing the impact that the claims about genocide in Nigeria had on British foreign policy. Norms are 'collective expectations about proper behaviour for a given identity'.⁴ Norms can have different impacts on states: they can require action (to comply with the norm), constrain action (again, to comply with the norm) and enable action (which could be justified as in compliance with the norm).⁵ However, norms may also have little or no impact on states: in other words, states' behaviour may not conform with the norm at all, and they may resist pressure or incentives to take action in accordance with the norm. This may be because the costs of so doing are perceived to be greater than the costs of not conforming to the norm. There are also different types of norms—legal, social, professional, cultural and so on—and they may have different influences on states.⁶

As I have argued elsewhere, there are two norms against genocide, a legal one and a social one.⁷ The legal norm is set out in the genocide convention, which provides a definition of genocide and a set of rules by which states are to punish and prevent genocide. The definition of genocide in the convention is widely considered to be constricting, with its demanding requirement to prove 'intent to destroy'. Furthermore, the convention does not mandate any *particular* action with respect to 'prevention', instead setting out certain requirements regarding the punishment of individuals for carrying out acts of genocide.

The UK's attitude towards the genocide convention was lukewarm in 1948, and for twenty years afterwards. It abstained in the UN sixth committee vote on the convention, and then very nearly abstained from voting on it in the General Assembly, because of concerns that acceptance of the convention into British law would require changes to the laws on

granting asylum and the cabinet had not agreed to this. Though the UK did in the end vote for the convention, the British delegate told the UN General Assembly that the UK's vote was without prejudice to the right to grant asylum.⁸ The UK did not sign the convention,⁹ and only moved to accede to it after Harold Wilson became prime minister in 1964. Until then, a bureaucratic standoff between the foreign office (in favour of accession due to the reputational costs of remaining aloof) and the home office (adamant that there was no support for changing the UK's law on asylum) had prevented accession. Wilson, however, supported accession and after he assumed office, his government put the convention forward for approval by Parliament, though not until 1968.¹⁰ The main debate on the convention in the House of Commons took place in February 1969; the UK formally acceded to it on 30 January 1970.

There is little evidence of British government concern about any legal requirements that the UK might have vis-à-vis Nigeria as a result of accession to the genocide convention. Indeed, the foreign office was confident that accession would not lead to claims that the UK was violating the convention by supporting the FMG, because the observer team had proven that FMG was not committing genocide.¹¹ Had the observer team not been dispatched to Nigeria and found no evidence of genocide, then it is possible that when the UK acceded to the convention, it could have been accused by Biafra's supporters of contravening its legal obligations.¹² But there is no evidence in the files in the UK national archives or parliamentary debates to suggest that the question of accession to the convention was linked to decisions about the observer team.

What this indicates is that the legal norm played little to no role in the British government's considerations of either its vulnerability to criticism over its policy regarding Nigeria, or its defence of its policy. Nor did the legal norm figure highly in public contestation of the policy. Instead, the case of the UK and genocide in Biafra illustrates the impact that social norms can have on foreign policy-making.

The social norm against genocide entails a wider definition of genocide: in public parlance, genocide usually just means large-scale killing (as happened in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge regime, for example). The social norm also requires a response going beyond the legal norm: genocide is seen as raising 'a legal, political and moral obligation, an irrevocable imperative that cannot be pushed aside but must be acted on'.¹³ In the last two decades, this has entailed an expectation that states will take measures to *stop* genocide, measures which ultimately should include the use of coercive military force if that is what it takes to stop the killing. But before the end of the Cold War—when 'humanitarian intervention' was beyond the limits of acceptable action in international affairs¹⁴—the social norm against genocide meant that governments should take action short of

intervention, such as imposing arms embargoes or criticizing countries in international fora. Indicators of the social norm in discourse include the use of the term genocide to describe killings without reference to the genocide convention definition, and use of the related argument that a government's policy has to change to try to stop the killings. Whether and how the government does so indicates the norm's impact: did the norm enable, require or constrain action? To investigate the way the social norm impacted British policy vis-à-vis Nigeria, I have analyzed the public discourse (declarations by the government, debates within Parliament, newspaper editorials), reviewed the relevant official documents in the UK national archives and read the memoirs of the key British actors involved in the discussions.

The UK and the Nigeria-Biafra War

On 30 May 1967, the military ruler of the Eastern Regions of Nigeria ('Biafra'), Odumegwu Ojukwu, announced the secession of Biafra from the Nigerian federation, and its independence as a sovereign state. He did so following the massacre of perhaps 30,000 Igbos in the north of the country in September 1966,¹⁵ and his declaration of independence told the people of Eastern Nigeria that '[you are] aware that you can no longer be protected in your lives and in your property by any government based outside Eastern Nigeria'.¹⁶ In response, the federal government (also military-ruled) imposed a blockade on Biafra and attempted to regain control of the region by military means. It did not do so until January 1970.

Initially, after Ojukwu had declared Biafran independence, the Wilson government adopted a 'neutral' position, though it continued to fill the Nigerian government's orders for supplies of arms.¹⁷ But British support for the FMG soon became clear, reflecting an understanding of its national interests.

Those interests were economic in the first place: 'secession would threaten the security of the 3,500 subjects in the Eastern region and put investments at risk, especially in the oil industry'.¹⁸ Shell-British Petroleum was a major investor in Nigeria, and over a tenth of British oil imports came from Nigeria.¹⁹ When the Six-Day War broke out in the Middle East in June 1967, the importance of securing oil imports from Nigeria was reinforced. Second, the British feared the implications of the breakup of states in Africa: 'if the principle of secession on a tribal basis were once accepted there would be chaos on the [African] continent'.²⁰ Third, there were 'geopolitical concerns'. Nigeria was potentially a major power in Africa; a breakup of the federation would reduce such power—and allow France and its francophone allies in the region to exercise more influence. The UK also needed to balance Soviet support for the FMG (the Soviets were also selling arms to it).²¹

Arms sales were justified by the government because it

was undoubtedly right to help an ex-colony and fellow Commonwealth country when it faced secession . . . to change our policy now when both sides have reached virtually irreconcilable positions, would have a catastrophic effect on our relations with the Federal Government and would put our interests in Nigeria in jeopardy.²²

In August 1968, in Parliament, the secretary of state for commonwealth affairs, George Thomson, publicly defended arms sales in this way:

Our supplies have amounted to about 15 percent by value of Nigeria's total arms purchases. . . . [I]f we were to cut off our supply of defence equipment unilaterally . . . we would, I believe, lose our capacity to influence the Federal Government.²³

The 15 percent figure was inaccurate: the UK had supplied most Nigerian arms imports in 1963, less than 40 percent in 1964–66, but almost half in 1967.²⁴ (It was revealed after the war that British arms imports amounted to considerably more than that during the war itself: British supplies made up 79.19 percent of Nigerian imports in 1968 and an astonishing 97.36 percent in 1969.²⁵) It would have damaged the FMG's war effort had the UK cut off arms supplies, and almost certainly led the FMG to acquire supplies from the USSR: this made the issue of a British arms embargo on Nigeria such a potent one. In comparison, at the start of the conflict, the US had refused to supply arms to either side (arguably an easier decision than that facing the UK, given that the US had not been a major arms supplier to Nigeria),²⁶ in June 1968 France and the Netherlands announced an arms embargo on Nigeria (though within two months the French government was supplying arms to Biafra) and a month later Belgium did so.²⁷

As discussed further below, the Wilson government came under considerable pressure to halt arms sales to the FMG, and was facing accusations that by not halting arms sales, it was aiding a government that was engaging in genocide. The rest of this article explores why and how the Wilson government tried to 'square the circle' by combating the accusations of genocide and continuing its support for the FMG.

Accusations of Genocide in Nigeria and Opposition to UK Arms Sales

Ojukwu referred to the massacres of Igbos in 1966 as a 'genocide' and the core reason why the Igbos needed their own homeland. In an address to

the Organisation of African Unity on 5 August 1968, he accused the FMG of waging a 'genocidal war' against Biafra, and argued that it was 'appalling' that 'this palpable genocide is being openly financed and directed by major NON-AFRICAN powers whose interest in the event is the economic and political advantage of their own countries'.²⁸ (Although not directly named, the UK was seen as the principal supporter of the FMG, and therefore of its 'genocidal war'.) The accusations of genocide were repeated by what some regarded as a very well-oiled Biafran propaganda machine, and, for John Stremlau, served the primary purpose of magnifying the external threat so as to promote internal unity.²⁹ Nonetheless, the accusations were repeated elsewhere. The Senegalese and Tanzanian presidents (Leopold Senghor and Julius Nyerere) also labelled the Nigerian policy as 'genocide', though it should be noted that most African governments opposed the Biafran move to secede.³⁰

Above all, though, the genocide claims were heard in Europe. The capture of Port Harcourt, Biafra's only link to the outside world, by Nigerian forces in May 1968, combined with a blockade of Biafra that seemed to be the cause of malnutrition and starvation of increasing numbers of victims, gave the accusations of genocide enough force to generate widespread public concern in Europe. For example, in the wake of the fall of Port Harcourt, several British newspapers used Holocaust imagery: 'worse than Belsen'; 'fate could be as dreadful as that of the victims of the Nazi concentration camps'.³¹ It was widely believed (in Biafra and outside it) that the Igbos would be at risk if they were defeated by the FMG. Such fears were easily fuelled by the words of Nigeria's top military commander, Colonel Benjamin Adekunle, who declared in August 1968, 'I want to prevent even one Ibo having even one piece to eat before their capitulation. We shoot at everything that moves'.³² As *The Guardian* noted, the Nigerian government may not have had any intention of committing genocide, but it was less certain this applied also on the battlefield.³³

For almost a year, from November 1967 to August 1968, the UK considered participating in a commonwealth peacekeeping or observer force as a solution to the war: it could help persuade the Biafrans to surrender because their safety would be guaranteed by the external force.³⁴ The idea was pushed principally by the commonwealth secretary-general, Arnold Smith, who was attempting to arrange a ceasefire and negotiations between the two sides. The UK was in principle willing to contribute, but only if certain conditions were met first, including that Canada would help pay for the force, and India and Ghana would contribute to it.³⁵ In the end, however, the idea did not gather enough support—in Nigeria or the rest of the commonwealth. Instead, during the course of the summer 1968, the proposal was transformed into the idea of sending observers from the

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) or other governments who would monitor the FMG's conduct of the war.³⁶

Throughout the first half of 1968, opposition to British policy increased—as concern grew also about the accusations of genocide in Nigeria. In particular, the government's defence of arms sales was criticized intensely inside and outside Parliament. The Archbishops of Westminster and Canterbury called for a ban on arms supplies to Nigeria.³⁷ In May 1968, the Church of Scotland assembly unanimously called for the ends of arms sales to the FMG, and one speaker claimed the arms supplies would 'link Britain's name in history with premeditated massacre'.³⁸ Leading newspapers such as *The Times* echoed the call.³⁹ *The Guardian* argued in July 1968 that 'stopping the arms is therefore the best way to save Biafrans from both slaughter and starvation'.⁴⁰

Although 'genocide' was not a term that was used very often in parliamentary debates (except, somewhat paradoxically, by those MPs and ministers arguing that no genocide was taking place), several MPs used very similar terms. On 11 June 1968, in the House of Commons, one MP asked the foreign secretary whether he was 'aware of the depth of feeling in the country that arms supplied to the Nigerian Government should be cut off so that we should not be a party to the slaughter?'. Another asked him to 'reconsider policy on this point [supply of arms], particularly now when the dangers of massive slaughter appear to be brooding over the scene'. A day later, an MP argued that it has 'now become a war leading possibly to the extermination of a race'. Another said that 'so long as we are sending arms we are partly responsible for the bloodshed'.⁴¹

However, it should also be noted that the number of public protesters was never particularly high: about 700 people attended a march in early June 1968; a 1968 petition calling for a ban on arms sales was signed by 2,000 people.⁴² Although the Labour Party conference passed resolutions calling for an end to arms sales in 1968 and 1969,⁴³ the then foreign secretary, Michael Stewart, noted later in his memoirs that 'the great majority of Labour and Conservative MPs supported the Government . . . so we always had a decisive majority'.⁴⁴ Thus while the Nigeria-Biafra war was 'the most consistently significant foreign policy issue' in 1968–1970,⁴⁵ the government was not in serious danger of falling over it. Instead, it appears that the moral arguments used by protesters—including the claims that arms sales were aiding a government engaging in genocide—had a particular force that put the British government in a bind and led it to make adjustments to its policy. Wilson wrote later that Nigeria 'took up far more of my time, and that of ministerial colleagues, and far more moral wear and tear than any other issue. Commentators . . . rarely recognise the impact of these moral pressures, internal as well as external'.⁴⁶

Evidence of the impact of the moral pressure can be seen in the government's response to it. In the course of the 12 June House of Commons debate, the foreign secretary, Michael Stewart, made the following declaration:

If we make the supposition that it were the intention of the Federal Government not merely to preserve the unity of Nigeria but to proceed without mercy either with the slaughter or the starvation of the Ibo people, or if we were to make the supposition that it were the intention of the Federal Government to take advantage of a military situation in order to throw aside with contempt any terms of reasonable settlement, then the arguments which justified the policy we have so far pursued would fall, and we would have to reconsider, and more than reconsider, the action we have so far taken.⁴⁷

The British government needed not only to defend arms sales to the FMG, but also to indicate that it would stop supplying arms if the FMG appeared to be slaughtering Igbos. Arguably, this shows the impact of the social norm: if slaughter—or genocide as some supporters of Biafra termed it—is happening, then government policy must change.

The same message about the conditions for continued British support was given directly by Wilson to the federal Nigerian commissioner for information and labour, Chief Anthony Enahoro, in a meeting following the 12 June debate. At the same time, Wilson also asked what the FMG's views were on the possible stationing of a commonwealth observer force before a ceasefire were in place, and was told only that the FMG would consider it.⁴⁸

After the FMG publicly announced that it was launching the 'final push' to defeat the Biafrans on 26 August, there was an uproar in the House of Commons, and a noisy demonstration outside it. The House of Commons has been recalled to discuss the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia, but the government had been successfully pressed into adding a day during which there could be a debate on Nigeria. That debate occurred on 27 August. It was particularly uncomfortable for the government.

Numerous fears were expressed that the 'final push' would lead to genocide/mass slaughter of the Igbos. One Conservative MP said, 'If this invasion takes place and if resistance continues, there is the gravest possible danger of genocide'. Another said that the UK government's policy 'is not defensible if it leads in Nigeria itself to indifference to civilian suffering and eventually to the destruction of a whole people'. Once again, it was the British government's policy on arms supplies that attracted the most criticism. A Labour MP accused the government 'of helping the war

and worsening the terrible situation'.⁴⁹ A motion calling on the government to halt arms sales had been tabled by fifty MPs, and they tried to force a vote on it, to no avail—amid much 'turmoil' and 'near chaos' in the chamber, as both MPs and spectators in the gallery protested angrily.⁵⁰ A large demonstration in Trafalgar Square marched to 10 Downing Street and 'nearly succeeded in battering their way through the front door'.⁵¹

That very evening, Chief Enahoro was called in to meet the commonwealth secretary, George Thomson, and informed that if there had been a vote, the government would have been defeated (a view which contradicts Stewart's optimism, reported above, but seems to reflect both a real fear of the strength of opposition, and a bargaining chip vis-à-vis the FMG). Thomson told Enahoro that if the British government was to continue its present policy in the midst of a final offensive by the FMG, then there needed to be 'an invitation to outside observers to accompany the troops and to testify that there were no massacres'. If the FMG did not do so, then the British government would not continue supporting the FMG. Enahoro was then given a paper drawn up by the commonwealth office on the proposal for observers.⁵² The paper suggested that the federal government might find it

helpful to have a small number of outside observers attached to their own forces at this stage in the campaign. . . . The main purpose of such observers would be to demonstrate that the Federal authorities were not seeking to conceal the truth and to provide a degree of objective and authoritative checking on future propaganda stories about misconduct by Federal troops, so that world opinion could be quickly reassured about the true facts in a supposed incident.⁵³

The ICRC would be the most suitable organization to arrange for such observers.

Two days later, the Nigerian high commissioner told Thomson that they were to make an announcement about international observers that very day.⁵⁴ Thus, although various UK ministers and diplomats portrayed the observer team as having been proposed by the FMG—not only did the British push for the Nigerians to take such a move, but they made it clear the kind of team desired. However, Stremlau suggests that the Nigerian head of state, Yakubu Gowon, agreed to invite in observers 'to show his good faith'—given that British arms exporters had already committed themselves to delivering arms months in advance, he was not under serious pressure to comply with the British demands, plus he could also purchase equipment from Russia.⁵⁵

Of more relevance to this article is that the Wilson government needed the FMG to agree to observers to reduce the pressure it was under at home

and abroad, as one official indicated in an internal request for funding a third observer:

The Biafrans have gained a great deal of international sympathy by claiming that the Federal Government are bent on a policy of genocide. This sympathy throughout Europe and North America has led to widespread and most embarrassing criticisms of H.M.G.'s [Her Majesty's Government] own policy. . . . The Federal Government's decision to establish a team of international observers is a valuable step in the direction of countering Biafran allegations of genocide, and it is very much in our own interests that the observer team should succeed.⁵⁶

The creation of the observer team indicates that the social norm against genocide had an impact, though not exactly the one hoped for by the British government's critics: the government needed to prove that genocide was not being perpetrated in Nigeria. This would enable it to continue to support the FMG, including by selling arms to it. The social norm had enough of an impact to prompt a response to the concerns about genocide, but not enough to prompt a change in policy (suspension of arms supplies).

The Observer Team

The formal invitation from the Nigerian ministry of external affairs was directed to Canada, Poland, Sweden, the UK, the OAU and the UN secretary-general.⁵⁷ It stated that the

Federal Government's reason for establishing this Observer Team is in pursuance of its desire to satisfy the world opinion, contrary to the malicious propaganda of the rebels, that there is no intentional or planned systematic and wanton destruction of civilian lives or their property in the war zone.

It invited one observer from each country or organization, who would 'visit all war-affected areas and newly liberated areas, on the Federal-controlled side, to witness the conduct of Federal troops—*re charges of genocide, etc*'.⁵⁸ The FMG would provide transport, and board and accommodation, for the observers. The team was to serve for two months.

The FMG allowed each observer to have an assistant, but did not bow to pressure from the British government to permit the further expansion of the observer team. The FMG eventually agreed to allow the team to remain in Nigeria 'until such time as may be determined by the Federal Military Government unilaterally or by mutual consultation with the respective

governments or organisations'⁵⁹—though only after prodding by the British government, which reminded Nigeria of the usefulness of the observers in 'taking the sting out of Biafran claims of genocide'.⁶⁰ The Nigerian government would not agree, however, to allow the observer team to operate in Biafra (assuming the Biafrans would allow them to do so), even though many MPs and some officials in the foreign and commonwealth office tried to push for this.⁶¹ Allowing the observers to operate in Biafra would confer status on the rebels.⁶²

Between September 1968 and January 1970, the observers periodically issued reports on their activities, which included visits to displaced persons camps, prisoner of war camps and villages that had been retaken by Nigerian federal forces. Their reports invariably found no evidence of genocide. The first report, of 2 October 1968, concluded that 'There is no evidence of any intent by the Federal troops to destroy the Ibo people or their property, and the use of the term genocide is in no way justified'.⁶³ Every subsequent report repeated that message.⁶⁴

Using the Observer Team's Findings to Justify Policy

The British government considered that the observer team had performed the important task of proving there was no genocide, thus enabling it to reassure public and parliamentary opinion and reduce the pressure to suspend arms supplies to the FMG. In October 1968, Wilson told the Commons that

the best guarantee against what the whole House seeks to avoid, namely, genocide or a massacre as a result of the last stages of the fighting, is our success in securing the agreement of the Federal Government to the appointment of international observers, including a very distinguished military officer from this country. The reports which we are getting are more reassuring than some of us might have expected two or three months ago.⁶⁵

Foreign secretary Michael Stewart told the Commons in November 1968 that 'the story about genocide has been proved beyond doubt to be completely false'.⁶⁶ The following month, Wilson directly linked the observer team to domestic concerns about genocide: 'Because of the concern of this House and all of us to prevent genocide, massacres and undisciplined action, we have a military observer at the battlefield, reporting all the time, together with other observers, on what is happening'.⁶⁷

A confidential diplomatic report written by the British high commissioner in Nigeria (Sir Leslie Glass) in March 1970 (shortly after the end

of the war) argued that the ‘value of the [Observer] Team’s work cannot be over-estimated’. The observer teams’ reports refuting the accusation of genocide ‘played a large part—perhaps a key part—in enabling Her Majesty’s Government to resist demands that we should change our policy of support for the FMG’.⁶⁸

Sir David Hunt, the British high commissioner in Nigeria for much of the war, later wrote of the observer team:

The genocide story was killed stone dead by the most sensible action on the propaganda side that the Federal Government ever took [inviting in the observer team]. It is startling evidence of the credulity of the world that it was thought necessary to go to such lengths, especially as Nigerians, very reasonably, resent foreign interference.⁶⁹

In his memoirs, Michael Stewart justified the continued arms sales to Nigeria principally because Britain could not side with secessionists and would respect existing state boundaries. It would have been different if Gowon had been brutal, but his ‘conduct of the war can only be described as chivalrous, old-fashioned though that word is. He agreed that his troops should be accompanied by UN observers, whose verdict on their conduct was favourable’.⁷⁰ But as seen below, there were still doubts about the observer team’s objectivity and the extent to which its conclusions were credible.

Criticisms of the Observer Team

Despite the British government’s faith in the observer team’s findings, the team was criticized in Biafra and by its supporters in the UK and elsewhere. The Biafran government claimed it was ‘nothing but a shameless conspiracy’, aimed at preventing the UN and OAU ‘from taking a positive stand or positive action against the genocide being practiced’.⁷¹ Ojukwu claimed that the observer exercise would ‘hardly achieve anything that can be presented to the world as original, accurate and impartial’ so long as there are so few of them and their movements are restricted on the federal side.⁷²

In the UK, *The Guardian* expressed scepticism: ‘There is alarming evidence that the assurances given by General Alexander [the British observer] and the other observers—that Biafran fears of “genocide” are groundless—are not the whole truth’. The newspaper cited as evidence the televised picture of a Biafran being shot dead by an FMG officer, the shooting of four Red Cross workers, air raids on crowded Biafran markets and the reports of a group of Canadian MPs that there was an element of

genocide in the war. It urged the UK to put pressure on the FMG to reach a compromise, a confederal solution.⁷³ A piece in *The Times* noted that the conclusions of the observer team may have helped 'dispel in the public mind some of the horror raised by the sight' of that televised execution, but then the news that millions of people could die of starvation disturbed them again.⁷⁴

The impartiality of the British members of the observer team was questionable. There was evidence that they gathered intelligence for the British government, commented on the military performance of the FMG, considered what the FMG could do better and assessed FMG military needs.⁷⁵ Two somewhat bizarre episodes at the end of the war illustrate this. In 1970, the *Sunday Telegraph* published the Scott report, written by a defence advisor to the British high commission in Lagos, which not only criticized the FMG's conduct of the war but also indicated the extent to which the UK supported the FMG. Scott passed the report to Colonel Douglas Cairns, a British member of the observer team at the time, who then showed it to General Alexander, a former member of the observer team. Alexander then passed a copy to the journalist Jonathan Aitken, who published it without permission. Cairns, Aitken and the editor of the *Sunday Telegraph* were charged with violating the Official Secrets Act (they were all acquitted).⁷⁶ The key point here is not about the case, but the fact that there was communication about the FMG's war efforts between the British high commission and the British members of the observer team—thus feeding doubts about the impartiality of the observer team itself. In the second case, a British member of the observer team, Ian Walsworth-Bell, was withdrawn from Nigeria by the foreign office because he had been in too much contact with FMG army officers; Walsworth-Bell later claimed he had been wrongfully dismissed, as he had been instructed to obtain details of Russian arms supplies to the FMG, to make reports for the Nigerian army and to tell the Nigerians to destroy a Biafran airstrip. The social security tribunal rejected his claim for compensation, but indicated that the evidence provided about his work could have been truthful.⁷⁷ These cases raise obvious questions about the extent to which the observer team was acting in British interests rather than objectively investigating the accusations of genocide.

Cronje argues that the observer team was not neutral; it was not instructed on what genocide is nor how to identify it; it was dependent on the FMG for transport and accommodation; it never investigated the 1966 massacres of Igbos.⁷⁸ Indeed, at no point did the British government ever provide its observers with a definition of genocide, nor did it provide guidance on how one might determine whether or not a genocide was taking place or had taken place.⁷⁹

The observer team did refer to the genocide convention definition in one of its reports⁸⁰ but, as Cronje notes, all of its members except for the UN representative were military men (often retired):

they had no means of judging in legal terms what constituted genocide, and it was within their terms of reference to pronounce on this issue. At the very least the team should have included international jurists and professionals experienced in the investigation of crime and the recording of evidence, not to speak of social workers, medical men and people capable of telling an Ibo from a non-Ibo.⁸¹

Nonetheless, the observer team—and the related pressure on the FMG by the UK government to moderate the level of violence—may have had some impact on the ground. Wilson later wrote that the observers' 'presence was designed to be a guarantee against "genocide"'.⁸² This is not how it was presented initially, but the extent to which the UK's expressions of concern and its insistence on the observer team may have helped to prevent violence against civilians merits further research.

The story of the observer team shows that the social norm against genocide had an impact on the British government: to continue with its policy of support for the FMG, including by supplying arms, it had to assuage public concerns about genocide. However, the story also illustrates the difficulty of providing 'objective' evidence regarding a purported ongoing genocide. The suspicion is that any observer team is simply there to confirm the views of the sending state/organization.

Conclusion

This chapter has not taken a position on whether genocide was or was not perpetrated in Nigeria in the late 1960s; that is a matter for debate among historians and experts on the region. Instead, it has sought to show the power of language, and particularly, of one word. 'Genocide' is indeed so powerful that its usage is linked to the imperative to act to stop it. As Alain Destexhe has argued, genocide 'is the first and greatest of the crimes against humanity both because of its scale and the intent behind it: the destruction of a group. It is, therefore, a crime that obliges the international community to respond'.⁸³ Although there has long been controversy over what that response should entail (more recently, for example, the debate centres on military action with or without UN security council authorization), there has also long been an understanding that there should be an appropriate response. Wilson's government clearly felt and understood this pressure.

This, however, means that those governments, such as Wilson's, who are being pressed to 'take action' will try to avoid using the word—because if a situation is not genocide, then there is less pressure to do something. As we have seen in the case of the observer team to Nigeria, a decision to send an observer team to investigate whether genocide is ongoing or not, can be linked to protecting the interests of outside states *not* to intervene or change policy, which thus leads commentators and others to cast doubt on their objectivity.

This leads to a conundrum: if genocide is never acknowledged while it is possibly ongoing (so as to avoid having to respond to it), it will only ever be 'discovered' after the fact. One way out of this conundrum is for governments, international organizations and civil society to pay more attention to the task of preventing genocide (and other mass atrocities), entailing a shift in emphasis from short-term crisis response to long-term prevention. Numerous commentators have urged such a shift and there are indications of government response, as with the 2005 UN agreement on 'responsibility to protect', which includes the imperative to prevent mass atrocities, and the creation of the US Atrocities Prevention Board in 2011.⁸⁴ Prevention may thus become a higher priority for governments and international organizations.

Notes

1. The Igbos are an ethnic group originating in Southeastern Nigeria. In the past they were often (incorrectly) referred to as 'Ibos', as the sources cited in this chapter demonstrate.
2. It is not mentioned in Chinua Achebe, *There was a country: A personal history of Biafra* (London: Allen Lane, 2012); Chima J. Korieh (ed.), *The Nigeria-Biafra war: Genocide and the politics of memory* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2012); Frederick Forsyth, *The Biafra story: The making of an African legend* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2001 [1969]). John Stremlau discusses it briefly in *The international politics of the Nigerian civil war, 1967–1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 265–268. Of course, the fact that the observer team operated only on the Nigerian side of the front line meant that those inside Biafra would not have encountered it.
3. Suzanne Cronje, *The world and Nigeria: The diplomatic history of the Biafran war, 1967–1970* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1972).
4. Ronald L. Jepperson, Alexander Wendt and Peter J. Katzenstein, 'Norms, identity, and culture in national security', in Peter J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The culture of national security: Norms and identity in world politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 54.
5. See Nicholas Wheeler's work on how norms constrain and enable actors. Nicholas Wheeler, *Saving strangers: Humanitarian intervention in international society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
6. Martha Finnemore, 'Are legal norms distinctive?', *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 2000, pp. 699–705.
7. Karen E. Smith, *Genocide and the Europeans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 6–7.

8. A. W. Brian Simpson, 'Britain and the genocide convention', *British Yearbook of International Law*, Vol. 73, 2003, pp. 14–35. The concern about the asylum law is that the Convention states that genocide cannot be considered a political crime, and thus laws that protect individuals fleeing political persecution cannot extend to those accused of genocide.
9. The Convention was opened for signature until 31 December 1949; 41 states signed the Convention and could then 'ratify' it. After 1 January 1950, any state which had not signed it could 'accede' to it.
10. Smith, *Genocide and the Europeans*, pp. 48–51.
11. Note from A. J. Collins (3 February 1969), on Genocide and Nigeria, in UK National Archives file FCO 61/520.
12. Auberon Waugh—a journalist and trenchant critic of the UK's support for the FMG—suggested in December 1968 that British ministers could be answerable in the courts to charges of genocide in Nigeria after the UK acceded to the Convention. Auberon Waugh, 'Within the meaning of the act', *The Spectator*, 6 December 1968, pp. 791–792.
13. Lene Hansen, *Security as practice: Discourse analysis and the Bosnian war* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 140.
14. While some interventions during the Cold War might be classified as 'humanitarian' (Vietnam's overthrow of the Khmer Rouge, for example), these were not justified principally in those terms. See Wheeler, *Saving strangers*.
15. The number of dead was initially given as 30,000 by the Eastern Region after the names of dead and missing were listed. In 1969, the British government stated that 7,000 had died; in later stages of the war, the Biafran government claimed that 50,000 had been killed. Cronje, *The world and Nigeria*, p. 18.
16. Cited in Strelau, *The international politics*, p. 60. It should be noted that there were other, complex reasons for the declaration of secession. See, for example, Chibuike Uche, 'Oil, British interests, and the Nigerian civil war', *Journal of African History*, Vol. 49, No. 1, 2008, pp. 114–121; or Laurie Wiseberg's review of several early histories of the war, 'An emerging literature: Studies of the Nigerian civil war', *African Studies Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 1975, pp. 117–126; or the works cited in endnotes 2 and 3.
17. John W. Young, *The Labour governments 1964–70*, Vol. 2: *International policy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 200; Strelau, *The international politics*, p. 65.
18. Young, *The Labour governments*, p. 198; Strelau, *The international politics*, p. 76.
19. Young, *The Labour governments*, p. 201.
20. 'Confidential (not for public use), Nigeria: A Background Note on British interests and the Government's approach to the civil war' (no date, but in file from Nov 1968 to March 1969), in UKNA file FCO 65/179. Such reasons were actually frequently cited by the government, as in debates in the Houses of Parliament.
21. Young, *The Labour governments*, p. 199.
22. Young, *The Labour governments*, p. 199.
23. House of Commons, *Sitting of 27 August 1968*, Hansard, volume 769, col. 1447.
24. Young, *The Labour governments*, p. 203; Cronje, *The world and Nigeria*, pp. 38–65.
25. Cronje, *The world and Nigeria*, pp. 38–65.
26. 'Information Memorandum from the Western Africa Country Director, Bureau of African Affairs (Melbourne) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Affairs (Palmer)', 18 April 1968, Department of State, Central Files, POL 1 NIGERIA-US, in *Foreign relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, Vol. 24, document 396.
27. See Young, *The Labour governments 1964–70*, p. 204; Strelau, *The international politics*, pp. 228, 297.
28. Republic of Biafra, 'Address by Ojukwu to the OAU in Addis Ababa, 5 August 1968', in file MS321463, Vol. 65, of the Nigerian Civil War Collection archives (donated by Suzanne Cronje), School of Oriental and African Studies. Emphasis in original.

29. Stremlau, *The international politics*, p. 113.
30. 'Pressure on Lagos to accept cease-fire', *The Times*, 10 April 1968, p. 7. In 1968, the 'International Committee for the Study of the Crimes of Genocide', a Paris-based unofficial organization of lawyers from several countries, determined that genocide was occurring in Nigeria. Cronje, *The world and Nigeria*, pp. 277–278.
31. Cronje, *The world and Nigeria*, p. 75.
32. As reported in 'Let's finish it off', *The Economist*, 24 August 1968, p. 21.
33. 'Too partisan to mediate', *The Guardian*, 28 August 1968, p. 6.
34. Note to Mr. Williams from E. G. Norris, 24 November 1967, in UKNA file FCO 38/293.
35. Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, Peacekeeping Force for Nigeria, Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, 18 March 1968, in UKNA file FCO 38/293; Briefing note on Nigeria by the West and General Africa Department, Commonwealth Office, 29 May 1968, in UKNA file FCO 38/294.
36. Record of Meeting between the Commonwealth Secretary and Chief Enahoro on Monday, 26 August 1968, in UKNA file FCO 25/243.
37. Dennis Barker, 'Save Biafra movement gets a fillip', *The Guardian*, 4 June 1968, p. 5; 'Archbishop urges arms ban', *The Guardian*, 16 July 1968, p. 2.
38. Robert Brown, 'Government blamed for allowing export of arms to Nigeria', *The Guardian*, 24 May 1968, p. 4.
39. 'Stop the arms', *The Times*, 28 May 1968, p. 11.
40. 'A final solution for Biafra?', *The Guardian*, 15 July 1968, p. 6.
41. Quotes in order: David Winnick MP (Commons sitting of 11 June 1968, Hansard, vol. 766, col. 35); Reginald Maudling MP (Commons sitting of 11 June 1968, Hansard, vol. 766, col. 36); Sir John Eden MP (Commons sitting of 12 June 1968, Hansard, vol. 766, col. 247); and Frank Allaun MP (Commons sitting of 12 June 1968, Hansard, vol. 766, col. 263). Winnick and Allaun were Labour MPs, Maudling and Eden Conservative MPs.
42. Barker, 'Save Biafra movement gets a fillip'.
43. 'Demand for peace and equality', *The Guardian*, 1 October 1969, p. 7.
44. Michael Stewart, *Life and Labour: An autobiography* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1980), p. 241.
45. Young, *The Labour governments*, p. 193.
46. Harold Wilson, *The Labour government 1964–1970: A personal record* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson and Michael Joseph Ltd., 1971), pp. 558–589.
47. Commons sitting of 12 June 1968, Hansard, vol. 766, col. 293.
48. Record of a meeting between the Prime Minister and the Federal Nigerian Commissioner for Information and Labour, in the Prime Minister's Room at the House of Commons on Wednesday June 12 at 7 p.m.; in UKNA file FCO 25/242.
49. First quotation: Hugh Fraser, House of Commons, Sitting of 27 August 1968, Hansard, volume 769, col 1456; 2nd quotation: Bernard Braine, col. 1513; 3rd quotation: Frank Allaun, col. 1469.
50. Hugh Noyes, 'Protests by MPS over arms for Nigeria', *The Times*, 28 August 1968, p. 6.
51. Stremlau, *The international politics*, p. 265.
52. Record of Meeting between the Commonwealth Secretary and Chief Enahoro at 8 p.m. on Tuesday, 27 August, 1968, in UKNA file FCO 25/243.
53. 'Observers', in UKNA file FCO 38/225.
54. Letter from George Thomson to the Prime Minister, 29 August 1968, in UKNA FCO 25/254.
55. Stremlau, *The international politics*, pp. 266–267.
56. Letter from J Wilson, West and General Africa Department, to the Head of Conference Section, Protocol and Conference Department, 11 October 1968, in UKNA file FCO 38/226.
57. The choice of countries/organizations involved was down to the FMG. Canada had been involved in discussions on the Commonwealth force; Sweden was considered

- a sympathetic country; Poland was—like the rest of the Soviet bloc—virulently anti-secessionist; the OAU was supportive of the FMG.
58. Letter from A. A. Baba-Gana, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs, Federal Military Government of Nigeria, to Sir David Hunt, British High Commissioner, Lagos, 6 September 1968, in UKNA file FCO 38/225. Emphasis added.
 59. Telegram from British High Commission in Lagos to the FCO, 9 December 1968, in UKNA file FCO 65/168.
 60. Confidential minute dated 18 November 1968 on ‘Observers’, in UKNA file FCO 65/167.
 61. Poland did not favour such a move and Wilson was unenthusiastic—as the safety of the observers could not be guaranteed. Brief by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on Observers, for the Prime Minister’s Visit to Nigeria, March–April 1969, PMN (69) B.3, 20 March 1969, in UKNA file FCO 65/172.
 62. Telegram 556 from UK High Commission in Lagos to FCO, 12 March 1969, on the question of observers visiting rebel-held areas, reporting a meeting with Gowon and Arikpo (Minister for External Affairs) in UKNA file FCO 65/171.
 63. Report dated 2 October 1968 on International Observer Team’s visit to 1st Nigerian Division (UKNA file FCO 65/178).
 64. All of the reports are in the UK National Archives. See Smith, *Genocide and the Europeans*, p. 77–78.
 65. Commons sitting of Thursday, 24 October 1968, Hansard, vol. 770, col. 1587.
 66. Commons sitting of Monday, 18 November 1968, Hansard, vol. 773, col. 884.
 67. Commons sitting of Thursday, 3 December 1968, Hansard, vol. 774, col. 1241.
 68. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Diplomatic Report no. 211/70, ‘Nigeria: International Team of Observers’, The British High Commission in Nigeria to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, 11 March 1970, in UKNA file FCO 65/782.
 69. David Hunt, *On the spot: An ambassador remembers* (London: Peter Davies, 1975), p. 188.
 70. Curiously this is the only time he refers to observers—and does not note that the observer team included observers from the UK and other countries. Stewart, *Life and Labour*, p. 240.
 71. Markpress News Feature Service, “‘Observers’ in Nigeria would be absurd, says Biafra”, in UKNA file FCO 38/225.
 72. In a radio broadcast on 4 October 1968; referred to in minute of 28 February 1969 by A. N. R. Millington, in UKNA file FCO 65/171.
 73. ‘If not “genocide”, still bloody’, *The Guardian*, 11 October 1968, p. 12.
 74. ‘Genoslaughter?’, *The Times*, 31 December 1968, p. I.
 75. Uche, ‘Oil, British interests, and the Nigerian civil war’, p. 130; Cronje, *The world and Nigeria*, p. 93.
 76. John Ezard, ‘Colonel gave press briefings from confidential report’, *The Guardian*, 14 January 1971, p. 5; ‘General says journalist a trusted friend’, *The Times*, 15 January 1971, p. 4.
 77. ‘Britain withdrawn from post in Lagos’, *The Times* 25 September 1969, p. 6; ‘Major says, “I was asked for Nigeria plans”’, *The Guardian*, 2 May 1970, p. 1; ‘Major’s “dole” case fails’, *The Times*, 30 May 1970, p. 4.
 78. Cronje, *The world and Nigeria*, pp. 83–92.
 79. For example, the ‘Directive for Major-General Alexander’ (the first British observer) repeats the terms of reference set out by the FMG, but offers no advice on what he should look for to prove there was no ‘intentional or planned systematic and wanton destruction of civilian life or civilian property in the war zone’. UKNA file FCO 38/225.
 80. Report on activities during the period 24 Sep–23 Nov 1968, in UKNA file FCO 65/168.
 81. Cronje, *The world and Nigeria*, p. 84.

82. Wilson, The Labour government, p. 749.
83. Alain Destexhe, 'The third genocide', *Foreign Policy*, No. 97, Winter 1994–1995, p. 4.
84. See, for example: Genocide Prevention Task Force, *Preventing genocide: A blueprint for U.S. policymakers* (Washington, DC: US Holocaust Memorial Museum, American Academy of Diplomacy, US Institute for Peace, 2008); Gareth Evans, *The responsibility to protect: Ending mass atrocity crimes once and for all* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 2008); David A. Hamburg, *Preventing genocide: Practical steps toward early detection and effective action* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2010); I. William Zartman, *Preventing identity conflicts leading to genocide and mass killings* (New York: International Peace Institute, November 2010); Task Force on the EU Prevention of Mass Atrocities, *The EU and the prevention of mass atrocities: An assessment of strengths and weaknesses* (Budapest: Budapest Centre for the International Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities, 2013).

7 France and the Nigerian Civil War, 1967–1970

Christopher Griffin

Introduction

The French government officially declared its support for the separatist province of Biafra on 31 July 1968, fourteen months after the outset of the Nigerian Civil War. A Foreign Ministry communiqué stated that ‘the current conflict must be resolved on the basis of the right of self-determination’.¹ In a speech to the National Assembly on 2 October 1968, French Foreign Minister Michel Debré stated that the war in Biafra was a ‘kind of genocide’, with ‘thousands of children being evacuated in physical conditions that makes one think of the worst horrors of the last world war’.² France, however, categorically refused to officially recognize Biafra, a possibility President Charles de Gaulle ruled out as early as 14 December 1967.³ At the same time it was well known that France was supporting Biafran leader General Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu with covert military aid throughout the war, including mercenaries and weapons.⁴ Ojukwu, in a speech on 28 January 1968, stated that, ‘there are French nationals who have [worked for Biafra]’.⁵ The question remains, however: how did France try to help Biafra achieve victory without according it official recognition?

Due to the general lack of available French sources before the second half of the 1990s, there has been comparatively little recent academic research on the question of French military support for Biafra.⁶ General studies of the war from the 1970s analyzed the French involvement extensively,⁷ but the authors did not have the benefit of the memoirs and journals of French participants that appeared in the 1990s and 2000s. Recent sources provide a more detailed picture of de Gaulle’s decision to allocate limited French military and diplomatic support to Ojukwu. Jacques Foccart’s journals in particular have not been used extensively in studies of French policy in Biafra and provide a valuable day-to-day account of the decision-making process in the Elysée Palace. I have also made use of archival documents from the French Foreign Ministry, the Foreign Relations of the United States series, British Cabinet documents and declassified CIA bulletins.

As this chapter relies extensively on Foccart's journals, it is necessary to highlight the controversy surrounding Foccart in French historiography. Foccart is often, and probably correctly, seen as the instigator of many plots and coups in Africa, carried out by his local 'networks' in place. Foccart, as de Gaulle's primary African advisor, was closely engaged with and informed about events across the continent, even though his methods, as well as those of French intelligence officers, were often questionable. De Gaulle also categorically refused to put down anything in writing regarding French support for Biafra, and thus, Foccart's journals, which chronicle his daily meetings with the General and his weekly meetings with Pompidou, are an essential source.

This chapter will analyze the decision of France to intervene in the Nigerian Civil War as well as the structure and evolution of the intervention in the context of France's strategy in sub-Saharan Africa. De Gaulle wanted to use military intervention to limit Nigeria's power in the region for the benefit of France and its partners. Support for Biafra, however, was never a vital strategic interest for France, which led it to limit its intervention in the civil war.

France and Katanga: A Rehearsal for Biafra?

The Katanga secession (1960–1963) was in many ways a precursor to the Nigerian Civil War for France. French mercenaries went to Katanga to support the Belgian intervention. The Belgians were helping separatist leader Moïse Tshombé fight Congolese forces loyal to Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, who was supported by the Soviet Union. The Belgians and the French mercenaries created the Katangan gendarmerie, which was eventually defeated after offensive UN operations and the UN capture of Jadotville in January 1963.⁸ According to the head of the African wing of the French *Service de Documentation Extérieure et de Contre-Espionnage* (SDECE),⁹ Colonel Maurice Robert, France supported the breakup of the Congo to stop the Marxist influence from spreading and to undermine American and Soviet activities in Africa.¹⁰

The Katangan secession was ultimately unsuccessful, and thus it is a surprise that de Gaulle's government would support another secession attempt in Biafra four years later. A number of other countries also drew a link between the two conflicts, and Ojukwu released a statement on 11 January 1969 called 'Biafra: the antithesis of Katanga', to reassure foreign powers.¹¹ Ojukwu argued that Biafra was different, and that it was not about 'foreign business', and 'tribal hatred', but about escaping from massacre and genocide.¹²

Despite Ojukwu's protestations to the contrary, many of the same dynamics persisted in both conflicts, including the fact that French help for

Tshombé was at least in part solicited by the President of the Ivory Coast, Félix Houphouët-Boigny.¹³ France also began collaborating with the South Africans, which would extend to the later stages of the Nigerian Civil War.¹⁴ The coordinator of French forces in Katanga, and the liaison to South Africa was a former French Resistance commando, Jean Mauricheau-Beaupré. Mauricheau-Beaupré was an advisor to Michel Debré (who was both Foreign Minister and Defence Minister during the period of the Nigerian Civil War) during the 1950s, and in 1959, he became an advisor to Foccart. As well as coordinating the Katanga effort, Mauricheau-Beaupré was France's closest advisor to Houphouët-Boigny after 1963.¹⁵

While France was partially involved in Katanga via mercenaries, military intervention by French regular forces was reserved only for its former colonies, and even then was limited in both scope and frequency. De Gaulle was generally inclined to let African states resolve their own political problems whenever possible, and did not intend for French forces to stop every coup attempt in every one of its former colonies. Foccart was far more interventionist than de Gaulle, but was often stymied by the General's refusals to send French military support to help friendly leaders.¹⁶

De Gaulle's conception of French strategic interests in Africa had three tiers. The first tier of interests was in the most important former colonies: Senegal, the Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Gabon and Chad. The defence treaties signed with the former colonies, however, did not call for automatic intervention, except in cases of external attack.¹⁷ The second tier was the rest of the former colonies, including Congo-Brazzaville, Dahomey, Togo, Mali, Guinea, the Central African Republic (CAR), Madagascar and Niger. The third tier was the former colonies of other European countries, of which the Francophone states were the most important.

Togo, Dahomey, the CAR and Congo-Brazzaville all experienced coups in the 1960s. De Gaulle refused to intervene in every case. Foccart was not in favour of a rescue of Sylvanus Olympio in Togo in January 1963, but he was very upset when de Gaulle refused to intervene to save Fulbert Youlou in Congo-Brazzaville in August 1963.¹⁸ Robert explained that the commander of French troops in Brazzaville, General Louis Kergaravat, reported that saving Youlou would be impossible 'without carnage', and de Gaulle agreed.¹⁹ France did not get involved in coups in the CAR or in Dahomey in 1965, and stood aside during the military coup in Congo-Brazzaville in August 1968.²⁰

By contrast, France intervened in Gabon during the night of 19 February 1964 to rescue President Léon M'Ba. French military units flew to Gabon and quickly defeated the coup leaders and liberated M'Ba.²¹ While a description of the operation itself is beyond the scope of this study, it had at least one important effect on the war in Nigeria. In a conversation

between Roger P. Morris, on the American National Security Council (NSC), and the Nigerian Minister of External Affairs, Okoi Arikpo, on 12 October 1969, Arikpo said ‘that Nigeria would have our “pound of flesh” from the French sooner or later. But they were frankly concerned that a move now might invite some kind of French intervention’.²² The Nigerians were plainly afraid of the French Army and the seeming unpredictability of French intervention. After the civil war, the Nigerian government moved quickly to mend fences with France, as, according to a report of the CIA African Division on 31 July 1970, ‘Nigeria was impressed by the ability of the French to make problems for them and they decided not to cross the French in the future’.²³

The Decision to Support Biafra in 1967: De Gaulle, Foccart and the SDECE

French African policy generally did not cover the former colonies of other European countries, with the notable exception of the Katangan mercenary intervention. Nigeria, however, was very important for France due to its size as well as the oil in the Niger River Delta. France had no diplomatic relations with Nigeria after 1960, as Nigeria expelled the French ambassador, Raymond Offroy, following the third French nuclear test in Algeria on 27 December. The severing of diplomatic relations did not halt commercial relations between the two countries, and in 1964, the French national oil company, SAFRAP, was given the rights to search for oil in parts of Eastern Nigeria that would later declare independence under the name of Biafra.²⁴ The French ambassador to the Ivory Coast presented de Gaulle with an official letter from Nigerian Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa on 20 September 1965, and de Gaulle began working with Houphouët-Boigny to re-establish relations between France and Nigeria.²⁵ The rapprochement was halted with the assassination of Balewa in January 1966.²⁶

At the same time, the SDECE was closely watching Nigeria. Under Robert, the SDECE’s African Service set up a network of listening posts in African capitals during the 1960s, called *Postes de Liaison et de Renseignement* [Liaison and Intelligence Posts] (PLRs).²⁷ The PLRs were run from Dakar and intended to guarantee the ‘stability of the regimes in place’.²⁸ In 1963, Lieutenant-Colonel Raymond Bichelot was sent to the PLR in Abidjan with the specific mission of watching events in Nigeria.²⁹ The SDECE was informed about the massacres of Igbos in Northern Nigeria in 1966, and had advance warning of the Biafran secession.³⁰ De Gaulle and Foccart were also well informed of events in Nigeria, and when Foccart asked the General about what to do following the massacres of Igbos

in Kano in October 1966, de Gaulle replied: ‘But what can we do? Nothing for the moment. What needs to be done is to carefully watch the borders of friendly African countries’.³¹

Biafra declared itself independent from Nigeria on 30 May 1967. Federal Nigerian forces mobilized quickly under Nigeria’s military leader, General Yakubu Gowon, to crush the rebellion.³² Foccart’s journals first refer to Biafra on 19–20 June 1967, when de Gaulle set out his initial strategy:

We must not intervene or give the impression of choosing a side, but . . . it is preferable to have a Nigeria that is broken up into small parts than a unified Nigeria. . . . [I]f Biafra succeeds, it will not be such a bad thing for us.³³

Foccart also stated in interviews in the 1990s that the main French concern in the early months of the war was the security of the Francophone states around Nigeria. Hamani Diori, president of Niger, was particularly afraid of Nigerian military reprisals if his country supported Biafra.³⁴

Foccart says de Gaulle’s decision to send military assistance to Biafra was made on 27 September 1967, when the General met personally with Houphouët-Boigny, who was Biafra’s most important African ally throughout the war.³⁵ On 26 September, the Biafran capital, Enugu, was shelled for the first time by Federal Nigerian forces.³⁶ The problem with this date is that it appears that France had already supplied Biafra with two B-26 aircraft, Alouette helicopters and pilots in summer 1967.³⁷ In 1971, however, Ralph Uwechue, Biafra’s envoy to France, wrote that the helicopters had been purchases made by the Eastern Nigerian Regional Government from France for civilian purposes well before the war.³⁸

Ojukwu understood early on that France would be a close ally, and moved quickly to court French officials and the French people. He made a speech on 10 August 1967 where he indicated that the Biafrans needed to focus on Francophone Africa. Ojukwu wanted the Biafrans to all learn French, saying:

This will further enable Biafrans to benefit from the rich culture of the French-speaking world which otherwise would be lost to them. Consequently, it will be our policy to make the study of French compulsory in our secondary, technical, and teacher-training institutions, and actively encourage those who have the aptitude to pursue the study at university level.³⁹

The speech was clearly an appeal for French aid. Uwechue stated in his reflections after the war that a large part of Biafran propaganda was aimed at the French government and public.⁴⁰

De Gaulle appears to have been motivated primarily by geopolitical concerns in Biafra. De Gaulle told Foccart on 23 August 1967 that: 'I am for Biafra. We need to destroy these enormous machines created by the English, such as Nigeria, which cannot support themselves'.⁴¹ Chinua Achebe, the celebrated author and cultural envoy for Biafra, agreed, writing in 2012 that de Gaulle fundamentally wanted to get back at the British,

for what he [de Gaulle] saw as their unhelpful role in the French resistance during World War II. . . . Some Africanists believe that the Gaullist objective seemed to be to neutralize Ghana and diminish Nigeria as a regional power and thereby contract Great Britain's sphere of influence in West Africa.⁴²

De Gaulle's animosity towards the UK did not extend to severing diplomatic relations, however, which may have been the case had France intervened directly or recognized Biafra.⁴³

A French precedent also existed for dismantling large federal states at decolonization. In a French Foreign Ministry document regarding a meeting between Michel Debré and Okoi Arikpo on 2 May 1969, there is a reference to the brief attempt to unify Senegal and Mali in the Mali Federation. The document states that 'in 1960, the Sudan [Western Sudan, Mali] and Senegal wanted to join together, [but] France made sure that the experience would not last long'.⁴⁴ The French government was fundamentally opposed to large federations in Africa, preferring instead smaller, centralized states. Even the US Government was sceptical as to the viability of a large Nigerian state, and in October 1966 a telegram from Secretary of State Dean Rusk said that they would regret a breakup of Nigeria, but that 'it is not for us to go around telling people how they should solve such problems'.⁴⁵

Henry Kissinger's view of de Gaulle's motives for intervening in Biafra are worth citing, as it shows how the American government viewed the French president's approach to security in Africa. Kissinger stated that 'they think the Feds [the Nigerian Federal Government] will break up first and they'll have a dynamic new client amid the wreckage of an Anglo-American dream in Africa'.⁴⁶ This confirms the idea that de Gaulle wanted to retaliate against the British, but also that American influence in Anglo-phone Africa was at least a partial target. Kissinger went on to write that 'it's a cheap investment—justified so far by events and, one suspects, de Gaulle's romantic taste for underdogs'.⁴⁷ It is not entirely clear as to which 'underdogs' Kissinger is referring to here.

On the other hand, it appears that at least part of de Gaulle's strategy was consistent with larger American attempts to contain the Soviet Union. In interviews in 2004, Robert stated that the SDECE's network in Africa was primarily aimed at halting Soviet expansion on the continent and

fighting Soviet 'attempts at subversion'.⁴⁸ When Guinea refused to enter the French Community in 1958, Sekou Touré's regime turned toward the Soviet Union for assistance. The SDECE responded by introducing fake currency into Guinea in an attempt to topple its financial system.⁴⁹ The US State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research argued in 1969 that French assistance to Biafra was having the desired effect of limiting Soviet influence in Federal Nigeria. A research memorandum stated:

if Moscow were to escalate the level of military aid with the aim of producing a quick and decisive Federal victory, it could run the risk of aggravating France, Biafra's chief supporter and possibly of provoking an increase in French aid. This in turn could result in continued military stalemate and thus confront Moscow with the same questions all over again. French support for Biafra is thus a partial deterrent to an increased level of Soviet military assistance to Federal Nigeria.⁵⁰

France's limited aid and unpredictability in Biafra served the purpose of both intimidating the Nigerians and deterring greater Soviet commitment.

At the end of the war, the CIA reported that the French support for Biafra had a great deal to do with oil concessions. A 14 January 1970 telegram from the CIA to the White House stated that 'the [French] support was actually given to a handful of Biafran bourgeoisie in return for the oil'.⁵¹ There is a debate over the extent to which the French company SAFRAP was promised oil concessions by Biafra in the Port Harcourt area in summer 1967. Future Nigerian President General Olusegan Obasanjo wrote that this sale indeed did take place.⁵² Secondary sources from the 1970s were more sceptical about the agreement, saying that the purported Rothschild deal was probably based on a false document.⁵³ In a recently declassified State Department document, however, the US Ambassador to Nigeria said he was shown the original, genuine Rothschild's document by General Gowon in August 1967.⁵⁴

Whether or not the oil concessions provided a sufficient reason for French intervention in the conflict, oil money was part of the discussion between de Gaulle and Houphouët-Boigny on assistance for Biafra on 27 September 1967. Houphouët-Boigny explained that Elf-Aquitaine owed 800 million francs (1967 values) to the Eastern Nigerian Regional Government, which had become Biafra, and the General asked Foccart to instruct the head of the company to pay out that sum so that Ojukwu could use the money to buy weapons in Portugal.⁵⁵ De Gaulle was quite upset when he found out that a large amount had already been paid to Federal Nigeria, but, according to Foccart, the rest of the money did eventually reach Ojukwu.⁵⁶

The Organization of French Military Support for Biafra

After the 'official' decision for limited French support for Biafra on 27 September 1967, French intervention took two forms. First, the mercenary networks that had fought in Katanga were reactivated. Foccart refused to discuss the mercenary operations in his journals and interviews, and said only that the mercenaries were handled by Mauricheau-Beaupré and the French ambassador to Gabon, Maurice Delaunay.⁵⁷ It appears that the SDECE took responsibility for French mercenary recruitment for Biafra and was at least partially behind the abortive operation to retake Calabar on the Cross River in December 1967. The French mercenary experience in Biafra was no more successful than in Katanga, and Raymond Offroy, following an official visit to Ojukwu in February 1969, stated: 'It was thus possible for us to say that the mercenary aid played no role at all in the resistance of Ojukwu's army'.⁵⁸

The most important dimension of French military assistance was the shipment of weapons to Biafra, which had severe shortages of not only heavy weapons, but also small arms and ammunition.⁵⁹ Portugal also provided weapons to Biafra, as did Czechoslovakia, until the Soviet invasion of the latter in 1968.⁶⁰ The Biafrans set up an office in Paris called the 'Biafran Historical Research Centre', which allowed Ojukwu to purchase arms directly from European arms dealers.⁶¹

The Biafran Historical Research Centre presented its compliments and thanks to the French Foreign Ministry for its welcome on 12 March 1969, and provided a list of the members of its delegation, which was led by Kenneth Dike.⁶² The Quai d'Orsay cited two precedents for its decision to let the Biafran delegation operate in France: the relationship between North Vietnam and France since 1954, which included some diplomatic recognition for both countries' delegations in Hanoi and in Paris; and the granting of a diplomatic passport to the head of Quebec's separatist delegation in Paris.⁶³

De Gaulle made the decision to begin regular French arms shipments to Biafra on 17 or 18 October 1967. De Gaulle was very reluctant to send weapons from French stocks, and only agreed when Foccart suggested sending captured German and Italian weapons from World War II with the serial numbers scratched off. The weapons would not be sent directly to Ojukwu, but would go via Houphouët-Boigny, so that it looked like France was replenishing the Ivory Coast's stocks as stipulated in the normal bilateral military assistance agreements.⁶⁴ The first French weapons arrived in Libreville on 8 November 1967 for transshipment to Biafra. The French arms sent to Ojukwu were always in limited amounts.⁶⁵

Mauricheau-Beaupré coordinated the operation from Abidjan, and in Libreville, French ambassador Maurice Delaunay convinced Gabonese

President Albert-Bernard (Omar) Bongo to cooperate with the operation. Bongo was reticent, likely due to the fear of Nigerian retaliation, but the memory of the 1964 French intervention as well as the understanding that his position in power was due to French support led him to acquiesce.⁶⁶ In Libreville, operations were coordinated by Delaunay and, after September 1968, a close collaborator of Mauricheau-Beaupré, Philippe Létteron. Létteron set up a front company, called SOGEXI, for arms and medical shipments to Biafra.⁶⁷

Dissension in the French Government

French ministers were well aware of the arms shipments to Biafra, and not all were in favour. The most powerful opposition came from Prime Minister Maurice Couve de Murville, the foreign ministry and the defence ministry. The foreign ministry refused the entry of Biafran officials into France on 14 December 1967, and de Gaulle acknowledged that the Quai d'Orsay was generally in favour of Nigeria, which had to change. De Gaulle told Foccart: 'One day Nigeria will fall apart, and we must take a side without delay'.⁶⁸

Foccart's disputes with the foreign ministry and the Prime Minister over Biafra were clearly important for the evolution of French policy, even if Foccart tried to argue that de Gaulle ultimately made the important decisions. In interviews in the 1990s, Foccart stated that the Quai d'Orsay provided de Gaulle and the rest of the government with 'erroneous information' that was 'favorable to the Federals'.⁶⁹ A major source of problems was the issue of the diplomatic recognition of Biafra, and Foccart's efforts in that direction seem to have been largely blocked by the Quai.⁷⁰

Couve de Murville also opposed the weapons shipments to Biafra, and de Gaulle sent him a note in response on 14 December 1967, which stated: 'Without our having to recognize Biafra at the current time or provide it with direct assistance, we need to control the future of the situation, especially since nothing indicates that Lagos will be able to defeat Biafra'.⁷¹ Couve de Murville nevertheless attempted to block military shipments completely on 24 August 1968, when he instructed Messmer 'not to act and to wait for his return from vacation'. De Gaulle was irritated at what he saw as Couve de Murville's interference and forced him to change his position.⁷²

As for Defence Minister Messmer, in charge of coordinating the weapons shipments to Biafra, his position changed over the course of the war. In 1998, he wrote in his memoirs that he initially supported the secession attempt of Biafra because it 'would weaken Nigeria, whose African imperialism irritated him'.⁷³ Messmer's optimism regarding a potential Biafran

success quickly died, however, and by 1968, he was convinced that they would be defeated. In 1969, he made his opinions about ending French support known to de Gaulle, whose response was to instruct Messmer to inform the public that France was not directly involved in the war.⁷⁴ As with Couve de Murville, Messmer in his turn attempted to stop arms shipments on 5 March 1969, but in April, Houphouët-Boigny successfully negotiated with de Gaulle to restart the shipments.⁷⁵

The indications of a sustained dispute between the foreign ministry, the defence ministry, the Prime Minister and the Elysée calls into question the popular perception of an all-powerful Foccart in African policy. While he had considerable influence over de Gaulle, the General ultimately made his own decisions, and Foccart was never able to win the battle over the recognition of Biafra. This lack of power in the issue area clearly irritated Foccart, and that was further indicated in his frustration with de Gaulle's order that there be no direct contact between the French Government and the Biafran officials in Paris.⁷⁶

France and Biafra in 1968: Weapons, Genocide and Human Rights

French military aid to Biafra was very limited in the first half of 1968, and the available sources do not cover this period well. De Gaulle refused to see a delegation of Biafran officials in early April 1968, as he believed that it would implicate France too closely in the conflict.⁷⁷ At the beginning of May 1968, however, the Ivory Coast and Gabon recognized Biafra, which pleased de Gaulle a great deal.⁷⁸

It was in early May 1968 that de Gaulle began to take an interest in the humanitarian aspects of the Biafran question. The General asked Foccart after a meeting with Houphouët-Boigny on 3 May 1968 to find a way to increase the commitment of the French Red Cross to Biafra. De Gaulle seemed especially concerned about reports of indiscriminate bombings of civilians by the Federal Nigerian forces.⁷⁹ The Quai d'Orsay was instructed to release two million francs to buy medicines and fund their delivery to Biafra, and de Gaulle added 30,000 francs from his own personal fund on 8 May 1968.⁸⁰ The only condition was that the medical aid had to go by way of the French Red Cross, and not the International Red Cross, which de Gaulle said was incompetent.⁸¹

De Gaulle's new interest in the humanitarian situation in Biafra in spring 1968 was likely in part due to increasingly dire media reports, but was perhaps also influenced by an SDECE media campaign led by Robert. Robert, in a surprising admission, stated that it was the SDECE that instructed the media to use the term 'genocide' in 1968. He says that the SDECE gave

the French press precise information about Biafran casualties and civilian losses, and that *Le Monde* was the first to pick up the story.⁸² Rony Brauman wrote in 2006 that the SDECE paid the Biafran press service Markpress, located in Geneva, to introduce the theme of genocide to the general public.⁸³ The logic of this plan, according to Robert, was that the French Government needed something to 'shock' the public and to bring them over to the Elysée's way of thinking about the conflict.⁸⁴ The attempts to influence press thinking in favour of government policy was of course nothing new, but it is a relatively unusual tactic for governments in contemporary France. As Barbara Jung has pointed out, however, it was really the first time (in July 1968) that 'viewers saw images of famine appear on their television screens', which became in her words, 'weapons of war' for the Biafran leaders.⁸⁵ The lack of government control over the press, however, became evident with the surprising publication of an article in *Le Monde* in October 1968 that reported that four international observers questioned the existence of genocide in Biafra.⁸⁶

In May and early June 1968, protests and general strikes in France prevented de Gaulle, Foccart or any other French official from following the situation in Biafra. On 12 June, after the riots had subsided, a French ministerial council decided to impose an official arms embargo on both Nigeria and Biafra, and to start providing direct humanitarian aid to Ojukwu. Robert explains that the humanitarian aid provided a very effective cover for the secret French arms shipments, which began to increase.⁸⁷ De Gaulle, however, said little to Foccart prior to the official 31 July 1968 statement, saying only on 30 July that 'the identity of the Biafran people needed to be recognized', and it was perhaps time to begin considering a 'confederal solution'.⁸⁸

The 31 July 1968 statement in favour of Biafra was preceded by a concerted campaign in the French press during the month of July to inform the French public about events in Nigeria. Prior to this period, French newspaper and television coverage had largely focused on the political aspects of the war.⁸⁹ The first reference to genocide was by reporter Jacques Madaule in *Le Monde*, where he wrote that 'we have used and abused the term genocide a great deal, but I am afraid that it can be applied quite precisely to what is happening in the country of the Ibos'.⁹⁰ Other *Le Monde* articles described terrible conditions in Biafra throughout July 1968, with reports of more victims than in Vietnam, and of starving people fighting over rats and lizards to eat.⁹¹ *Le Figaro*, traditionally more favourable to the Gaullist party, went even further in its condemnation of the atrocities in Biafra, including photos of starving children in the paper on 30 July 1968 and on the cover (with starving Biafran soldiers) of the 31 July 1968 edition. *Le Figaro* had already stated on 18 July that the federal offensive, backed up

by the British and Soviets, was genocide, and said there was a universal 'duty to assist people in danger', which applied to Biafra.⁹² The implication of the British and Soviets in what the French called genocide was an extremely serious accusation, but the effects of this press campaign on diplomatic relations remain unknown.

The French government's next step after the 31 July statement was to launch a major campaign to gain public funding for humanitarian operations in Biafra. The campaign was coordinated at the highest levels of government, and French Foreign Ministry files make it clear that the French television service and the French Red Cross were required to get government approval to ask for funds.⁹³ The French public eventually contributed 12,600,000 francs.⁹⁴ The French press continued a concerted campaign throughout August 1968 to alert the public to the humanitarian situation.

While both *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* were clearly in favour of Biafra, their articles were somewhat different. *Le Monde* focused considerably more on the international relations of the war and on the right to self-determination. An article in *Le Monde* from 2 August 1968 is particularly representative, in that it explained that the French government was forced to choose between two conflicting principles in Biafra: non-intervention in civil wars and the right of peoples to self-determination.⁹⁵ In September 1968, another *Le Monde* article gave the position of 'Paris', which was that the Biafrans, along with the South Sudanese, were the only ones courageous enough to fight for a new country, and it was that resistance that validated their claims to self-determination.⁹⁶ Journalist Philippe Decraene wrote in *Le Monde* on 1 November 1968 that Biafran self-determination was a 'right won on the battlefield and acquired in the wake of the massacres endured by the Ibos'.⁹⁷ *Le Figaro* celebrated the Biafrans' heroism on 13 August 1968, saying that they were holding out with 'no external assistance'. There were, however, some racist comments in the same article, which stated that 'they [the Biafrans] demonstrated that a black population was also capable of suffering and dying for their homeland'.⁹⁸ Certain colonial reflexes had not completely disappeared in the French press.

Most of the articles in *Le Figaro*, on the other hand, concentrated more on the humanitarian aspects of the conflict. In a series of articles by reporter Jean-François Chauvel in July and August 1968, *Le Figaro's* readers were exposed to extensive descriptions of the horrors of the Biafran famine. Chauvel even compared the conditions in Biafran camps to those of Buchenwald.⁹⁹ According to Rony Brauman, the French media drew an explicit link between the Jews in the Second World War and the Ibos, and compared Biafra to the Warsaw Ghetto.¹⁰⁰ French Jewish organizations put out requests for aid for the Biafrans via the press in summer 1968.¹⁰¹ *Le Figaro* also supported the activities of the France-Biafra Association, and

published the calls for aid in its columns.¹⁰² The newspaper criticized the lack of useful action by the International Red Cross and praised the French Red Cross instead, which was consistent with de Gaulle's thinking about the organization.¹⁰³

French military assistance was substantially increased following the 31 July statement of support for Biafra, and would remain at a high level until March 1969. The US NSC believed that French aid in summer 1968 saved Biafra from destruction in the federal offensives, but the NSC stated 'We simply do not know how far the French are prepared to go in support of Biafran independence'.¹⁰⁴ Foccart also seemed to never be sure of how far de Gaulle was willing to go in his assistance to Ojukwu. As of August 1968, there had been two major shipments of arms to Houphouët-Boigny, and the Ivorian President was asking for more, which de Gaulle approved on 24 August.¹⁰⁵ On 5 September, however, Bongo and Houphouët-Boigny asked for more aid for Biafra and to send a French technical consultant. De Gaulle's response was: 'Oh no! That's not possible'.¹⁰⁶ De Gaulle's reticence to provide greater levels of aid to Biafra would continue until he left power in April 1969.

France's ability to help Biafra was hampered by other strategic priorities in late 1968. In August, François (Ngarta) Tombalbaye's regime in Chad began to crumble due to an internal revolt. Tombalbaye asked for a French military intervention, and de Gaulle responded favourably. Even so, de Gaulle asked his military advisors to limit the size of the Chad intervention in 1968, meaning there were likely limited French forces available.¹⁰⁷ The Chad intervention would be intensified in 1969 by President Georges Pompidou, and would not end until early 1972.

By October 1968, de Gaulle was becoming increasingly reluctant to send more war matériel to Ojukwu, and less responsive to the entreaties of Houphouët-Boigny and Bongo. On 16 October, the General told Foccart, 'Listen, that's enough for the moment. We have made an effort, but we are not seeing the circumstances in which the weapons are being used. We need more information'.¹⁰⁸ De Gaulle wanted to continue assisting Ojukwu, but in a limited fashion, and on 4 November, he stated to Foccart, 'I do not want to recognize Biafra, there are some limits that should not be passed'.¹⁰⁹

At the end of November 1968, France experienced a monetary crisis. De Gaulle had to decide whether or not to devalue the franc, and he eventually made the controversial decision not to devalue, which pushed the problem into 1969.¹¹⁰ De Gaulle told Foccart that the orders for weapons for Biafra were 'costing too much and we will be obliged to reduce all of that', and that Foccart should understand that 'there are other things to take care of'.¹¹¹ Biafra was clearly a secondary priority for de Gaulle, as both Chad

and the monetary crisis were considered as threats to vital French strategic interests.

De Gaulle could afford to make Biafra less of a priority, as the French public's interest in the Biafran situation declined in the fall of 1968. By the end of November 1968, the Quai d'Orsay was concerned about the lack of funds for humanitarian operations past mid-January 1969.¹¹² The waning in public interest occurred despite the efforts of Doctors Bernard Kouchner and Max Recamier to break with the traditional neutrality of the International Red Cross and denounce Federal Nigeria openly in the press.¹¹³ The French public never fully embraced the cause of Biafran independence or self-determination, and humanitarian contributions were limited outside of the campaigns of August 1968 and March 1969.¹¹⁴

Despite de Gaulle's reluctance to make a Biafra a foreign policy priority, after the worst of the monetary crisis had passed, he moved to fulfil the orders of Houphouët-Boigny and Bongo after Foccart showed him a map on 26 November that indicated that the military situation had improved in Biafra.¹¹⁵ The delivery appears to be the last major shipment of 1968.

France and Biafra: January 1969–January 1970

By late 1968 and early 1969, the US, the UK and Nigeria were all concerned about the French assistance to Biafra, despite its limited nature. A British Cabinet report from 12 November 1968 demonstrates considerable concern that the French aid was prolonging the war and inhibiting the possibilities for a negotiated settlement.¹¹⁶ The American government was convinced that de Gaulle was counting on a Biafran victory to 'have a dynamic new client amid the wreckage of an Anglo-American dream in Africa'.¹¹⁷ The Nigerians, as mentioned above, were largely intimidated by the French strategy.

The French government made another concerted effort to raise public awareness and funds for humanitarian efforts in March 1969, with a 'Biafra Week', from 11–17 March 1969.¹¹⁸ The humanitarian focus in the press had shifted from coverage of the famine to concern about the increasing casualties of federal bombing attacks against civilians.¹¹⁹ 'Biafra Week' was primarily a game in which people could buy raffle cards for two francs each (with the money going to the French Red Cross), and at the end of the week, a winner was announced who won 500,000 francs.¹²⁰ In a meeting at the Mutualité in Paris on 13 March, where Biafran supporters and opponents nearly came to blows, French humanitarians, including Abbé Pierre, denounced the game show atmosphere of the campaign.¹²¹ There was a further attempt during Biafra Week by French Member of Parliament Raymond Offroy to again, as we saw above, compare the war to the Holocaust,

writing in *Le Figaro* that Biafra was ‘a Buchenwald for children’.¹²² Much of the French public had lost interest by early 1969, however, as an IFOP poll on 14 March found that only 34 percent of the population thought the French government needed to do more to help Biafra.¹²³

On 26 March 1969, French military advisors reported on the catastrophic military situation in Biafra, which had little ammunition and no heavy weapons.¹²⁴ General Obasanjo said, however, that French military assistance allowed the Biafrans to surround and defeat sixteen Federal brigades at Owerri, despite the temporary halt in shipments in March 1969 by Messmer as mentioned above.¹²⁵ De Gaulle did not have time to make any real modifications to his Biafran policy, due to the defeat of his constitutional referendum and subsequent resignation on 27 April 1969.

After de Gaulle’s resignation, the interim president, Alain Poher, fired Foccart due to fear of his power in the Elysée, as well as to create a clean break with de Gaulle’s presidency.¹²⁶ Georges Pompidou, one of de Gaulle’s closest political allies, defeated Poher in the presidential elections on 15 June 1969, and quickly reinstated Foccart in his old position. Pompidou told Foccart on 1 July that he was not well informed about the situation in Biafra.¹²⁷ Houphouët-Boigny met with Pompidou on 16 July, and in light of the military problems of the Biafran Army, asked Pompidou to force Ojukwu to negotiate with Gowon.¹²⁸ Henry Kissinger noticed that the French were beginning to exert more pressure on Ojukwu to negotiate in August 1969, while still keeping the arms shipments at the same level. At the same time, France was reluctant to negotiate directly with the other powers involved, because with the US, the USSR and the UK, France would be outnumbered three to one.¹²⁹

The change in the French presidency was significant, as Pompidou did not have the same view of the situation as his predecessor. First, Pompidou, as Foccart admitted much later on, did not have the same antipathy toward the British as did de Gaulle, and thus saw it as less important to break up Nigeria.¹³⁰ Second, Pompidou was receptive to the idea of a negotiated settlement to the conflict, which means that by 1969, he was much less confident of a military resolution to the war than was de Gaulle in 1967 and 1968.¹³¹ At the same time, Pompidou was reluctant to cut off support entirely for France’s Biafran allies. The reasons for this continuation of the active policy of arms shipments to Biafra under Pompidou may have been at least in part due to pressure from an unexpected source. President Nixon told Kissinger in a telephone conversation on 18 July 1967 that ‘Pompidou should step up support for Biafra’.¹³²

On 23 September 1969, Foccart’s journals make reference to a new phase of French involvement in the conflict: cooperation with the South African secret services. Mauriceau-Beaupré organized Franco-South

African flight teams to fly weapons into Biafra, but it was very secret, due to South Africa's pariah status.¹³³ Not only France, but the Ivory Coast and Gabon ran significant diplomatic risks in working with the South Africans. In a much less controversial fashion, France also supported Swedish Count von Rosen's aerial assault on the Nigerian Air Force and armed his planes with rockets.¹³⁴

The joint missions with South Africa were suspended on 6 January 1970, but when Biafra fell, France took a very active role in the aftermath.¹³⁵ Mauriceau-Beaupré and Bichelot moved quickly to rescue Ojukwu and brought him to safety in Abidjan.¹³⁶ The CIA reported that Foccart headed directly from Cameroon for Libreville. Mauriceau-Beaupré then met with Debré, who had become Defence Minister under Pompidou, and they agreed to retrieve the remaining French arms and send them to Douala and Abidjan. The CIA stated that in total: 'France had sent \$30,000,000 in material to Biafra, lent Ivory Coast President Houphouët-Boigny \$8,000,000 for Biafran operations, and faces a debt of circa \$400,000 for [blacked out in the text] operations'.¹³⁷

A refugee base was set up in Libreville, and Foccart flew back to Paris on 19 January 1970 to brief Pompidou on the fall of Biafra. Foccart told Pompidou that the defeat

was caused by famine, because the people were exhausted . . . the actions of the British, and even more, the actions of the Russians, was also decisive. Finally, the [Biafran] leaders, who were inept at command, also without a doubt made errors.¹³⁸

Pompidou said that the next step was to force Gowon to give provisions to the starving Igbo population, which was done.¹³⁹

Conclusion

On 17 November 1969, as it became increasingly evident that Biafra would not survive the war, Pompidou allowed Nigeria to send a new ambassador to Paris. This step was clearly aimed at setting out a new framework for relations between Paris and Lagos. By 1972, Nigeria was the largest client for French goods in Africa, meaning both sides were able to put the events of the Biafran War behind them.¹⁴⁰

While in retrospect the French commitment to Biafra may have seemed extensive, it was in fact very limited. Other than SDECE advisors and mercenaries, France never put troops on the ground in Nigeria. In this way, France was never directly involved in the war, and most importantly, did not jeopardize its relations with the UK. The arms shipments

and mercenaries, while expensive, were nowhere near as costly in lives or credits as direct military intervention. Had Biafra won, France would have Ojukwu's greatest friend and ally, but when Biafra lost, France had very little to lose, and was able to extract itself relatively easily from the situation and restore relations with Nigeria. France did make one final gesture toward Biafra, however, which was to help protect Ojukwu from Nigerian efforts to extradite him during his prolonged exile after the war.¹⁴¹

Acknowledgement

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Notes

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13. Jean-Pierre Bat, *Le Syndrôme Foccart: la politique française en Afrique, de 1959 à nos jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), pp. 275–277.
14. Bat, *Le Syndrôme Foccart*, p. 280.
15. Bat, *Le Syndrôme Foccart*, pp. 270–273, 281.
16. Foccart, *Tous les soirs*, p. 132.
17. Jacques Foccart, *Foccart parle—II—entretiens avec Philippe Gaillard* (Paris: Fayard/Jeune Afrique, 1995), p. 497.

18. Jacques Foccart, *Foccart parle—I—entretiens avec Philippe Gaillard* (Paris: Fayard/Jeune Afrique, 1997), pp. 268–269, 274–279.
19. Robert, ‘Ministre de l’Afrique’, p. 147.
20. Foccart, *Tous les soirs*, pp. 289, 313–315; Robert, ‘Ministre de l’Afrique’, p. 153.
21. Robert, ‘Ministre de l’Afrique’, pp. 194–209.
22. ‘Memorandum of conversation between Nigerian Minister of External Affairs Okoi Arikpo, Nigerian Ambassador to the US Joe Iyalla, Permanent Secretary Baba Gana, and Roger P. Morris, NSC Staff’, Washington, 12 October 1969, in *Foreign relations of the United States* (hereafter FRUS), *Documents on sub-Saharan Africa (1969–1972)*, Vol. E-5, 2005. (128).
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25. Foccart, *Tous les soirs*, pp. 218, 237.
26. Foccart, *Tous les soirs*, p. 337.
27. Bat, *Le Syndrome Foccart*, pp. 160, 181–182.
28. Robert, ‘Ministre de l’Afrique’, p. 118.
29. Guisnel, ‘Derrière la guerre du Biafra’, p. 149.
30. Robert, ‘Ministre de l’Afrique’, p. 187. Following the countercoup by General Gowon on 28 July 1967, there were large-scale massacres of Igbos in Northern Nigeria, leading to a migration of the Igbo residents to Eastern Nigeria, where Ojukwu was governor. The exact numbers killed in the massacres (estimated by Ojukwu as high as 30,000 dead) have never been determined with any certainty. See Michael Gould, *The struggle for modern Nigeria: The Biafran war, 1967–1970* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), pp. 32–34.
31. Foccart, *Tous les soirs*, p. 489.
32. Gould, *The struggle for modern Nigeria*, p. 39; General Obasanjo admitted later that Federal troops shot first on 6 June 1967, General Olusegan Obasanjo, *My command: An account of the Nigerian civil war, 1967–1970* (London: Heinemann, 1980), p. 13.
33. Foccart, *Tous les soirs*, p. 664.
34. Foccart, *Foccart parle—I*, pp. 340–341.
35. Foccart, *Foccart parle—I*, p. 343.
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8 Israel, Nigeria and the Biafra Civil War, 1967–1970

Zach Levey

Introduction

This chapter analyzes Israeli policy toward the Nigerian civil war, exploring Israel's relations with both the Federal Military Government of Nigeria (FMG) and separatist Biafra. Israel encountered obstacles in Nigeria that turned that country into one of the most difficult tests of its African statecraft. The most severe challenge Israel faced in Nigeria was the 1967 Biafran secession, the product of Nigeria's acute political and ethnic conflicts. By that time, Israel had begun to sell Nigeria military equipment on a modest scale and hoped to heighten security ties in order to further consolidate relations with that government. The civil war forced Israel to choose between the expansion of ties with Nigeria, an exigency of *realpolitik*, and the moral imperative of aiding a people whose plight was, for many Israelis, a disturbing reminder of recent Jewish experience. While the literature on the Nigerian civil war affords some insight into Israel's policy toward that conflict, files made available by the Israel state archives (restrictions notwithstanding) comprise the material most salient to this study. That documentary record reveals that Israel transferred arms to Nigeria while at the same time secretly providing assistance to the Biafrans.

This study is divided into four sections, covering both Israel's relationship with Nigeria from the time of that country's independence in 1960 to its severing of ties in October 1973. A first section explains the circumstances in which Israel entered Nigeria, Muslim resistance to that presence and Israeli efforts to create a defence connection with Lagos. The second and third sections constitute the principal part of this work, accounting for how Israel dealt with the Biafran secession and the exigency of maintaining relations with the FMG. Those sections examine the Israeli view of the plight of the Igbos, efforts to provide relief, the Igbo perception of Israel and the diplomatic circumstances that determined the scope of Israeli assistance to Biafra. A fourth section analyzes briefly Israel's position in Lagos following the civil war, concluding with the break in relations that Nigeria in October 1973 effected.

Entry to Nigeria and the Defence Connection with Lagos: 1957–66

Israel was certain that Nigeria, the most populous country on the continent (fifty-five million in 1960) and rich in oil, would have a great influence on African politics. The Israeli foreign ministry was determined to establish full diplomatic relations upon that colony's receipt of independence (1 October 1960). Ehud Avriel, ambassador to Ghana and a close confidant of both Prime Minister David Ben Gurion and Foreign Minister Golda Meir, cautioned that were Israel to fail to establish ties with Nigeria, 'all of our work in West Africa will have come to naught'.¹

Chief C. D. Akran, minister of development for Nigeria's Western Region, visited Israel in October 1957 and agreed to increased trade and technical assistance.² Four months later, Meir included Nigeria in the itinerary of her trip to Africa. The Nigerians received her warmly, and Meir returned to Tel Aviv with a 'full head of steam about West Africa'.³ Later that year, Chief Akin Deko, minister of agriculture for Western Nigeria, led a delegation to Israel. But Britain rejected the Israeli application to open a consular office in Lagos, the Foreign Office claiming that it would result in an Egyptian demand for similar status, to which it was averse. As British diplomats noted, the Egyptian government used Islam to exert political influence on the predominantly Muslim Northern Region.⁴ The legislature formed after Nigeria's 1959 elections obtained Westminster's consent to the country's independence,⁵ and in late March 1960 Britain finally allowed Israel to open a legation in Lagos. Israeli specialists were already aiding Nigeria; a joint enterprise for rural water prospecting operated in the Eastern Region, and Nigersol, the Israeli-Nigerian construction company, had been established.⁶ In July 1960, Levi Eshkol, Israel's minister of finance, toured west Africa and announced a \$10 million loan to the FMG.⁷

An Arab reaction followed quickly. Egypt's envoy met with Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto and premier of the Northern Region, and the two men delivered speeches on Muslim unity.⁸ This rhetoric altered not at all the fact that the Israelis were 'in at ground level' by the time of Nigeria's independence. Israel had established good relations with the leading political figures of both the country's Eastern and Western Regions. Chief Obafemi Awolowo, who headed the Action Group in the predominantly Yoruba Western Region, was friendly to Israel.⁹ As Parfitt writes, the Igbo of the Eastern Region had since the early nineteenth century been imbued with the idea that their origins were traceable to the Lost Tribes of Israel, their language heavily influenced by Hebrew.¹⁰ Edith Bruder examines the lore of the Igbos' Eri, Nri and Ozubulu clans, which claim descent from the Israelite tribes Gad, Zevulun and Menashe. She notes that the Igbo compare their traditional customs, including circumcision on the eighth

day and 'exclusiveness', with those of the ancient Israelites.¹¹ Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe ('Zik'), leader of the (largely Igbo-based) National Congress of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), admired Israel and had warmly supported its bid for diplomatic representation in Nigeria.¹² Daniel Lis adds that the establishment of Israel had a profound effect on the Igbo and Azikiwe personally. Azikiwe gave expression to this deep affinity in a meeting in late 1960 with Hanan Yavor, Israel's first ambassador in Lagos. Yavor presented 'Zik' a silver goblet inlaid with stones from Eilat, moving the Igbo leader to speak, as the ambassador reported, 'excitedly and knowledgeably' about King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.¹³

This was, for the Israelis, an auspicious beginning. Nevertheless, the conservative Muslim leaders of the Northern region viewed askance relations with the Jewish state.¹⁴ The Sardauna forbade the entry of any Israeli to the cities of Maiduguri and Sokoto, sites the Nigerians considered holy to Islam.¹⁵ Not all of the Northern Region's politicians were so ill disposed. Aminu Kano, the Muslim reformer and northern politician, had met Meir at Ghana's independence celebration in 1957. Aminu openly criticized the Sardauna's attitude and eventually visited Israel.¹⁶ But such exceptions notwithstanding, the stubborn opposition of the northern 'traditionalists' to normal ties was an abiding encumbrance upon Israel's undertakings in Nigeria.

The Israeli ministry of defence expended considerable effort in establishing security ties with Nigeria, because the country's size and economic potential made it a highly attractive market to purveyors of arms and military training. By early 1961, both the Israeli ministry of defence and prime minister's office began to press for entry to the Nigerian arms market. The federal government intended to abrogate the Anglo-Nigerian defence pact, and in September 1961 Azikiwe apprised Yavor of Nigeria's determination to 'conduct our military planning with no dependence upon Britain'.¹⁷ 'Zik' noted that the Lagos government would turn to the United Arab Republic (UAR), India or even Israel, resistance of the Northern Region to the last of these alternatives notwithstanding.¹⁸

During the next three years, the Israeli defence ministry worked to cultivate an arms relationship with Nigeria, but elicited little response. In April 1964, the defence ministry noted a few 'encouraging signs'. In October 1963, Israel delivered to Nigeria several mortars from Soltam Ltd., an Israeli company that manufactured both civilian goods and military hardware. The Nigerian army had requested these mortars, and the defence ministry hoped that Nigeria would buy ammunition and additional items from Israel.¹⁹ The Nigerians turned instead to Finland.²⁰ The Soltam Company urged the embassy in Lagos to convince the Nigerians to end their 'quiet boycott' of Israel's defence industries.²¹

In 1964, *Mashav* (the foreign ministry's division for international cooperation) received seventy-one Nigerians for study in Israel, bringing to eighty the number of trainees from that country. But in other areas Israeli ties with Nigeria languished, and Israel made little progress in defence affairs. That year the Israel defence forces (IDF) hosted fourteen Nigeria Airways trainees in a course for mechanics,²² but the defence ministry succeeded in selling the Nigerians almost no military equipment, failing to interest them even in the *Gadna* and *Nahal* paramilitary frameworks that other African countries had found attractive.²³ Only in 1966, following the January coup in which the Sardauna was assassinated, was Israel able to break into the Nigerian arms market. By that time, Nigeria was spending \$22 million annually on arms. In black Africa, only Ghana (\$29.6 million) and Congo (Kinshasa, \$22.5 million) spent more than Nigeria on military hardware.²⁴

The January 1966 coup in Nigeria brought to power General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo from the Eastern Region. Ironsi's ascent to power came two weeks after the 1 January coup in the Central African Republic, in which Jean Bédél-Bokassa deposed David Dacko. Israel had had close relations with Dacko, and his overthrow heightened the foreign ministry's concern regarding the pitfalls of what some officials termed 'personal defense contracts with tottering African leaders', identification with whom Israel remained saddled after they fell. In the aftermath of the coup in Lagos, Israeli diplomats questioned the wisdom of a defence connection with Nigeria.²⁵

Nevertheless, as Israel's ambassador wrote, 'the rise to power of the Igbos under Ironsi has created a political climate conducive to Israeli activity'.²⁶ Israeli archival sources demonstrate the Defence Ministry's determination, despite the foreign ministry's misgivings, to cultivate the security connection with Nigeria. Ram Nirgad, who became Israel's ambassador at Lagos in mid-January 1966, met with Ironsi shortly after the general's ascent to the presidency and told him of the Congolese soldiers that Israel had trained as paratroopers. Two months later, Nirgad met with Babafemi Ogundipe, the army chief-of-staff, who asked Nirgad to inquire 'discreetly' about Israeli pilot and parachute training for the Nigerian army. Nirgad's report of his exchange with Ogundipe makes clear that this brigadier, who also served as de facto vice president, was highly eager to promote military ties with Israel.²⁷

In mid-April 1966, an Israeli ship unloaded thirty tons of 81mm and 82mm mortar rounds that the Nigerian government had ordered from Soltam Ltd., thus lending impetus to an incipient arms connection.²⁸ That sale notwithstanding, Nirgad counselled circumspection regarding defence ties with Nigeria. Nirgad insisted that military aid was only one component

of the bilateral relationship, whose purpose was to cultivate ties with the military and civilian elites of all of the country's regions.²⁹ Yet, the onset of civil war in Nigeria forced Israel to view the sale of arms to Lagos in the context of its dilemma regarding that conflict.

Israel and Biafra's Road to War: 1966–68

On 29 July 1966, officers of the Northern Region launched a countercoup that placed in power in Lagos General Yakubu Gowon, a Christian of the Northern Region. Gowon convened a constitutional conference in September, seeking the regions' agreement on a viable political arrangement for the country. Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, military governor of the Eastern Region, accepted only economic cooperation with Lagos, moving the east toward independence in both military and foreign affairs. Between May and September 1966, northerners murdered between 80,000 and 100,000 Igbos and other easterners resident in the Northern Region. The violence reached a climax with the massacres of 29 September 1966 ('Black Thursday').³⁰ Those atrocities forced Ojukwu to deal with an influx to the east of between 700,000 and 2,000,000 refugees. He responded by expelling thousands of non-easterners from the Eastern Region.³¹

By September 1966, an open arms race had developed between the East and the federal government.³² In mid-August, Ojukwu sent two representatives from the Eastern Region on a clandestine visit to Israel in a bid to purchase military hardware.³³ Biafran attention to Israel was a highly astute move, primarily because the secessionists knew well what associations the massacres evoked for the Israelis. The Igbos frequently referred to what they viewed as their great similarity to the Jews. Biafran propaganda included the bearded figure of a 'military Moses' and termed anti-Igbo riots anti-Semitic Cossack 'pogroms'.³⁴ As Harnischfeger writes, Igbo nationalists related closely to the Jewish experience and especially that of the Holocaust, viewing themselves, too, as a people who would recover and build their own state.³⁵ In an essay titled 'Harvest of Arms', Ojukwu proclaimed that 'Like the Jews . . . we saw in the birth of our young Republic the gateway to freedom and survival'.³⁶

Israeli foreign ministry officials knew that Ojukwu's emissaries would leave Israel without arms but did not want them to go in anger. Moshe Bitan, deputy director-general of that office, noted that these representatives were likely to be leaders of 'whatever [future] Eastern Nigerian regime'. For that reason, he wrote to Nirgad,

it's clear they'll depart empty-handed, but we want them to feel our friendship toward them and believe that if there really does arise an

independent Eastern state, Israel is bound in the future, repeat future, to be of some support.³⁷

At the same time, the presence in Israel of these Biafrans placed the Israeli government in an uncomfortable position. Bitan instructed Nirgad to dispel persistent rumours that Israel was supplying arms to the Eastern Region, assured the Nigerian government that Israel would extend no military aid to any faction and avoided confirmation that Ojukwu had already made such an approach. Bitan sought to protect the visitors, signalling that the Nigerian government's strong suspicions placed them in danger.³⁸ On one hand, the foreign ministry wanted to give these guests no grounds for believing they had drawn Israel into 'collusion' and insisted it would not sell them weapons. On the other hand, the Biafrans' trip to Israel was not a futile effort; their hosts offered to introduce them to reliable arms merchants abroad.³⁹ Stremlau cites a US diplomat who believed that the greatest service Israel performed for Biafra was to put Ojukwu's arms purchasers in touch with European dealers who unloaded ageing Soviet equipment that Israel had captured during the June 1967 war.⁴⁰ We will note that Israel did more than that for Biafra.

Nirgad reported on the atrocities that marked the Nigerian violence, in October 1966 writing, 'I would like to find a way to express to the East that we share their sorrow. They expect that we, more than others, understand the plight of a persecuted people'. On one hand, he cautioned against misunderstanding with the government in Lagos, which would interpret even a shipment of blankets and medical supplies to the East as succour for the rebels. On the other hand, he counselled dispatching a separate representative to the Eastern Region, since Nigeria's political future would surely be either confederation or (so he assumed) complete independence for its regions. The ambassador then entreated Moshe Leshem, director of the foreign ministry's Africa division, 'please think how it may be possible to do something [for the Biafrans]'. Nirgad admitted to the dissonant elements of his own missive, writing 'I feel that I have contradicted myself several times in this letter. It expresses precisely our uncertainty and is but the commencement of the dialogue that we will have to conduct'.⁴¹

In November 1966, the Mossad (Israel's foreign intelligence agency) tried unsuccessfully to recruit a weapons dealer in western Europe willing to fly arms to Nigeria's Eastern Region. The Eastern Region's purchasing agents had transacted several times with unscrupulous dealers who cheated them, raising for Ojukwu's government the imperative of finding a stable source of military equipment.⁴² Gowon and Ojukwu met on 4–5 January 1967 at Aburi, Ghana, but failed to reach a settlement. Ojukwu then promised his people that the East was 'militarily ready' to resist any threat.⁴³

Biafran representatives in Washington approached the Israeli embassy there, demanding military assistance that they claimed Israel was in a position to provide. The embassy responded by pointing out that 'Israel does not deal in arms', cited again the difficulties involved in finding honest arms brokers, and reminded the Biafrans of their own experience at the hands of scoundrels. The foreign ministry sought to deflect Biafran pressure to provide military equipment. That office agreed that Israel extend civilian aid, acceding to the East's urgent request for experts in economics, intelligence and refugee resettlement. Disappointed that Israeli assistance would include no military component, the Biafrans angrily rejected Israel's offer to send these personnel, making clear that they expected nothing less than the direct sale of arms.⁴⁴ The foreign ministry viewed askance sustained Biafran pressure and remained highly ambivalent with regard to the prospect of Israeli military support of the secessionists.

Ojukwu's announcement from Enugu on 30 May 1967 of the independent Republic of Biafra placed the Eastern Region on a military collision course with the FMG, and on 6 July war broke out between Nigeria and secessionist Biafra.⁴⁵ The Biafrans drew great inspiration from Israel's victory of several weeks earlier in the June 1967 Six-Day War, viewing it as a harbinger of their own salvation.⁴⁶ Three observations are in order here. First, the Igbos' perception of the justness of the Israeli position, especially in the aftermath of the 1967 Middle East war, was at variance with the manner in which the African states perceived Israel's policies and its conquests in that armed clash. Second, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was not partner to Biafra's self-image, which was that of a republic beleaguered, like Israel valiantly defending its national existence. Third, Biafra claimed that Israel had granted it diplomatic recognition. In fact, the Israeli government never accorded Biafra such status. In spring 1968, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Tanzania and Zambia recognized Biafra's independence.⁴⁷ These four states were the only members of the OAU to do so, the organization itself upholding the territorial status quo on the continent even as 'one of the costliest wars in African history was raging out of control'.⁴⁸ Israel withheld recognition of Biafra not out of deference to OAU policy, but because pragmatism dictated that it adopt the 'wait and see' approach to which Bitan had referred in August 1966.

The 1967 war induced only Guinea among the black African states to cut ties with Israel, but it brought those countries to view Israeli occupation of the Sinai peninsula as an encroachment upon African territory. Ghana, Guinea and Mali had in 1961 signed a declaration at Casablanca condemning Israel as 'the pillar of imperialism in Africa'.⁴⁹ The fourth conference of the Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO) in 1965 adopted a resolution calling Israel 'the aggressive base of old and

neocolonialism which menaces the progress, security and peace of the Middle East region as well as world peace'.⁵⁰ In December 1965, all of the African states except Madagascar and Sierra Leone voted in favour of UN General Assembly Resolution 2052, which reiterated the call for 'repatriation or compensation of the [Palestinian] refugees'.⁵¹ One week after the Six-Day War, the heads of state and government of the OAU, meeting in Rabat, passed a resolution urging 'all member states . . . to take all initiatives for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Israel from the Arab territories and the condemnation of Israel's attitude'.⁵²

By early 1968, the war between Nigeria and secessionist Biafra had given rise to a sharp divergence in Israeli perceptions of the conflict and pursuit of a contradictory policy. Nirgad complained that some officials in the foreign ministry had already 'written off' Israel's relations with Nigeria. He criticized Israelis who considered the Biafran war reason to regard as morally impossible any further dialogue with the Nigerian Government, writing

as for those whose approach is driven by emotion, I say that my heart, too, is not with the Federal Government in its barbaric war. As a Jew who lived under Nazi rule, I feel keenly for the bitter fate of the secessionists. [Yet] as a state we are bound by the political calculus and hypocrisy upon which modern statecraft is built. We are too vulnerable . . . to permit ourselves a policy based on sentiment . . . and the chances of an independent Biafra are exceedingly slim . . . while it is clear that Nigeria will continue to exist. We must not assist our enemies in bringing about a break in relations with Nigeria, and it is clear that any act of disloyalty toward the Federal Government jeopardises our position there and in other [African] countries.⁵³

Israel's dilemma grew more acute when the federal government turned to Israel for arms in April 1968. Aminu Kano, serving as minister of communications and chair of the FMG's arms-procurement committee, asked that Israel provide 'large quantities' of 7.62 calibre ammunition, 81mm mortars and ordnance, 75mm rockets and 250 pound bombs. He urged that the items be transferred by air, with payment to be made in any form that Israel demanded.⁵⁴ Nirgad pressed the foreign ministry to accede to the request, noting that Israel would thus earn the appreciation of a Nigerian government under pressure.⁵⁵ Hanan Bar-On (from 1968 to 1969 head of the Africa Division) concurred and recommended to Bitan immediate coordination with the Ministry of Defence.⁵⁶ Thus, by mid-1968 Israel was selling ordnance to Nigeria. According to US sources, Israeli military sales to the Lagos government during the civil war reached \$500,000.⁵⁷

At the same time, Biafra's representatives pleaded with Israel for more help. They expressed disappointment at the scope of the support that Israel had hitherto extended and wanted military rather than civilian aid. Students from the Eastern Region created the Biafra Union of Israel, with headquarters at the Technion (Israel's Institute of Technology) in Haifa, both protesting and distributing literature, in that manner playing their part in recruiting Israeli public opinion to identify with the secessionists' plight. In December 1967 the US embassy in Tel Aviv sent the embassy in Lagos a copy of a twenty-two-page essay distributed in Israel titled 'Biafra: Struggle for National Survival', noting that both 'sincere empathy' with the victims and concern over a 'Muslim-Hausa dominated' Nigeria shaped the Israeli view of the conflict.⁵⁸ As Idith Zertal writes, even in the aftermath of the Six-Day War, Israelis clung to 'the notion of recent, impending doom', their victory having averted a catastrophe of proportions similar to the Holocaust.⁵⁹ Michal Givoni points out that after June 1967, Israelis viewed the Biafrans as a people threatened in a manner similar to Israel during the crisis period that preceded the war.⁶⁰ She also notes that Israel's daily newspapers reported frequently and prominently on what they termed the 'genocide' taking place in Nigeria. The general public in Israel, in the wake of that intense press coverage, expressed revulsion at the world's feckless response and the helplessness of the Biafran victims, which, for Israelis, recalled their own catastrophe. This was, writes Givoni, 'a singular challenge for a collective that perceived itself at once, and paradoxically, as the embodiment of the permanent victim . . . that had become a sovereign actor'.⁶¹

On 17 and 22 July 1968, the Knesset conducted lengthy debates on both the government's diplomatic stance and moral responsibility regarding the 'prevention of genocide'.⁶² Those deliberations reflected both Israelis' sustained concern over Biafran suffering and heightened world attention to the humanitarian catastrophe in the breakaway republic, which, as Heerten notes, in mid-1968 became 'an international media event'.⁶³ The party affiliations of the fifteen parliamentarians who contributed to the discussions represented a cross section of the Knesset's factions, all of those participating expressing shock at the horrors of the war. Some of their remarks bear recounting. Shlomo Lorenz, of the ultra-Orthodox *Agudat Israel*, declared that 'we, more than any other nation, must not cease to cry out until the mass murder of an entire tribe in Africa ceases'. Gideon Hausner of the centrist Independent Liberals, who had in 1960 headed the prosecution team in the case of Adolf Eichmann, noted that it was 'the duty of this victim of genocide [Israel] to rouse the entire world; to alert, expose, and denounce; for a people shall not be exterminated in broad daylight'. Shulamit Aloni of the Labour Party warned that were Israel to remain silent,

it would bear the mark of Cain. Emma Talmi of left-wing *Mapam* called upon the Israeli public to assist in rescuing the children of Biafra from the 'killing pits'. Uri Avneri of *HaOlam HaZeh—Koach Hadash* ('This World—New Force'; a far left-wing faction) called for the establishment of diplomatic relations with Biafra, while Aryeh Ben-Eliezer, of the right-wing Herut party, lambasted Egyptian and Soviet support of Nigeria.⁶⁴ The Israeli press praised the Knesset's attention to Biafra, pointing out that Israel's parliament was the first in the world both to devote a session to the issue and declare its intention to help the victims.⁶⁵

Abba Eban (since 1966 foreign minister in the Labour-led coalition), promised that the government would accelerate humanitarian aid, but avoided the question of diplomatic ties with Biafra, stating emphatically that Israel would not (as Herut's Shmuel Tamir demanded) sever relations with Lagos. On 18 July, the independent daily *Haaretz* attacked Eban for his careful phrasing, noting the foreign minister's emphasis on Israel's ties with Nigeria and commitment to refrain from interference in the country's domestic affairs. Three days later, an indignant Eban responded vigorously, telling the left-wing newspaper *Lamerhav* that he had been misquoted. Eban pointed out that he had said 'the intensity of the suffering . . . has removed the problem from the internal African sphere . . . [turning it into] an onus upon the conscience of all civilisation'.⁶⁶

'Balancing Act': 1968–70

Two weeks after the second Knesset session on Biafra, public pressure in Israel led to a government decision to send, openly, an Israeli Air Force plane to a pickup point 'near' Biafra. That plane carried twelve tons of foodstuffs that the IDF had captured during the Six-Day War. Bitan warned Eban that any attempt to send the plane directly to Biafra would entail a violation of airspace over which Nigeria claimed sovereignty. In any case, wrote a pessimistic Bitan, 'our maneuvering room is narrow, and it is doubtful whether [with this move] we will be able to avoid diplomatic damage'. The deputy director-general was concerned that Lagos would respond to Israeli support of Biafra by terminating relations between Nigeria and Israel.⁶⁷

At the same time, Biafra maintained pressure on Israel to raise the level of its assistance and add a military component. Thus, at the end of July 1968, Dr. Sebastian Okechukwo Mezu, a Biafran representative, approached the Israeli embassy in Abidjan with an urgent petition for greater diplomatic support, money, food, medicine and arms, citing the 'obligation' of the Jewish state to aid Biafra's cause. The last item, noted the Biafran, was the most pressing, telling the Israelis that 'even five thousand rifles could alter

the [military] situation'.⁶⁸ In truth, Israel had already assisted Biafra in several areas, including financial support and medical relief. The Mossad in 1968 twice transferred to Biafra, through Zurich, the sum of \$100,000.⁶⁹ An Israeli medical team worked in Biafra from September to December 1968, performing over 1,400 medical operations at a mortality rate of only 4 percent.⁷⁰ In early summer 1968, Israel attempted, unsuccessfully, to carry out a secret arms transfer to Biafra. At that time, Tanzania refused Israel access to its airspace.⁷¹ Okechukwo Mezu's approach brought an exasperated Bar-On to complain that no African country had done as much for Biafra as had Israel. He urged Yitzhak Minerbi, Israel's ambassador to the Ivory Coast, to explain to the Biafrans that 'Israel is not a great power'.⁷² The foreign ministry instructed its envoys to refrain from an 'apologetic tone' when dealing with the Biafrans.⁷³

Israel's relationship with the Ivory Coast became a principal factor in Israeli policy regarding military assistance to Biafra. That country's president, Felix Houphouët-Boigny, with whom Israel was keen to maintain close ties, was one of Biafra's closest supporters in Africa. Houphouët-Boigny placed considerable pressure on Israel to help the Biafrans, telling Minerbi in late July 1968 that in his view humanitarian aid was insufficient. A planeload of arms departed Abidjan nightly, and this, said the president, now provided Israel with a new opportunity to dispatch military hardware to Biafra.⁷⁴ Bar-On acknowledged that interest in maintaining close relations with Abidjan was the reason Israel was willing again to attempt to dispatch to Biafra the military hardware it had earlier tried to deliver, and cabled that Eban would fly to the Ivory Coast to discuss with Houphouët-Boigny the logistics of that supply.⁷⁵

Israeli military assistance to Biafra was the principal item on the agenda of Eban's mid-August meeting with the Ivoirian leader in Abidjan. Houphouët-Boigny withdrew his demand that Israel airlift arms directly to Biafra but not from that of supplying them. Eban wrote the foreign ministry that the good will Israel sought in that African country dictated meeting Houphouët-Boigny's request. The Biafran list of demands was extensive, including 100 machine guns, 11.5 million rounds of ammunition for various types of arms, 45,000 rounds for mortars of four different diametres and several thousand rounds for anti-tank guns. Eban asked the foreign ministry to clarify which items the defence ministry could make available immediately for pickup in Israel, adding that on none of the arms and ordnance should Israeli markings appear. The Israelis also realized that the Ivory Coast president intended that Israel underwrite the cost of transporting much of this materiel to Abidjan, obligating Eban to obtain cabinet approval.⁷⁶ On 26 August, the Israeli foreign ministry reached agreement with the Abidjan government; Israel would supply arms to Biafra at no

charge, with the Ivory Coast providing transport planes. Houphouët-Boigny expressed his satisfaction at this development, telling Eban, 'Israel surely understands Biafra' and urging him to deliver the arms quickly, 'lest the patient die before the doctor arrives'.⁷⁷ Israel was careful to cloak this arrangement in the greatest secrecy.⁷⁸

Documents of the Israeli foreign ministry make evident that by late 1968, that office urged a diminished involvement in Nigerian affairs. Bitan wrote to Eban that Israel's position in all of black Africa made exigent 'sitting on the fence' with regard to the Nigerian civil war. Israel, urged Bitan, must take no position on the conflict, lest the African states accuse it of war mongering for the sake of its own parochial objectives. Of course, Israel had not remained aloof of the conflict, for it had already rendered assistance to Biafra and sold military equipment to Nigeria. Bitan's counsel was, therefore, an urgent call that Israeli aid to Biafra be limited to that already in progress.⁷⁹ Later that year, Bar-On instructed that no more direct contact with Biafran representatives be conducted, a step he deemed necessary to remove that source of pressure on Israel. That restriction notwithstanding, Bar-On pointed out that this meant neither a complete refusal to aid the secessionists nor open support of the Nigerian government. He noted Israel's willingness even to continue clandestine arms sales to Biafra. But the head of the Africa division made clear that the Biafrans would have to initiate such transactions through friendly governments and pay Israel in cash.⁸⁰

The foreign ministry also wanted to minimize the Israeli defence connection with Nigeria while at the same time avoiding a diplomatic rupture with that government. Thus, Israel's principal concerns remained the fate of the Biafrans but at the same time correct relations with Nigeria, a break with which could affect Israel's standing in other African capitals. These elements, taken together, distinguished its involvement from that of governments such as Britain and the Soviet Union, which sided with Nigeria, and France, which from 1968 backed the secessionists. The United States adopted a policy of neutrality, imposed an arms embargo on the parties to conflict, although supporting Britain's view that there must remain 'One Nigeria'.⁸¹ At the same time, the US share of international relief to Biafra reached \$112 million; 44.6 percent of the total of \$251 million. US public resources provided \$57.6 million; that was 34 percent of international humanitarian assistance during that war, most of the American aid provided beginning in late 1968.⁸² The most vocal proponent in the United States of the secessionist republic, notes Heerten, was the Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, which urged members of Congress to view Biafra as 'a test case for humanity'.⁸³

From 1967 to 1970, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Poland sold Nigeria twelve L-29 Delfin training aircraft, forty-seven MiG-15 and

MiG-17 fighter jets, and five Ilyushin-28 bombers, two of which Egypt transferred to Lagos.⁸⁴ This constituted a virtual about-face in Soviet policy, because, until the secession, Moscow had evinced both admiration of the Igbos and sympathy for their plight. The Soviet Union chose pragmatism, in the form of alignment with federal Nigeria, over the ideological (if not idealist) alternative of support for Biafra. The Kremlin made that position manifest in October 1967, when Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin stated that ‘the Soviet people fully understand the desire . . . to preserve [Nigerian] . . . unity and territorial integrity . . . and to prevent the country from being dismembered’.⁸⁵ It was a turnabout that baffled Biafrans, who ‘probably viewed the whole matter as some sort of misunderstanding, and . . . still hoped for a change of heart in Moscow’.⁸⁶ Moreover, the Soviets had absolved themselves of the moral dilemma that Israel experienced. As Matusевич writes, Soviet policy was ‘dictated by the crude pragmatism of *realpolitik*. . . . Biafran hopes of obtaining Soviet sympathy on humanitarian grounds . . . spectacularly dashed’.⁸⁷ It bears noting that so extensive was support of Nigeria from the Eastern Bloc, a force hostile to Israel, that some foreign ministry officials considered pointless the investment of any further Israeli effort in that country.⁸⁸

Britain’s principal interest was to preserve both its commerce and political influence in the country, at first vacillating but then backing Nigeria when the federal army regained control of the oil-producing regions in the Midwest and Rivers States.⁸⁹ Despite denials that it issued during the war, Britain transferred two naval vessels and at least sixty armoured vehicles to Nigeria.⁹⁰ Harold Wilson, prime minister during the Nigerian civil war, explained in 1971 that had Britain not been Nigeria’s ‘traditional’ arms supplier, ‘we could have taken a more detached line . . . but that would still have meant support for the Federal cause’.⁹¹ According to Ogunbadejo, British military hardware to Nigeria implied moral backing for the Lagos government despite London’s denials of such transfers.⁹² Yet Britain created its own paradox, supplying those arms even as British humanitarian agencies provided food and medical supplies ‘dangerously flown in’ to aid civilians in besieged Biafra.⁹³

France supported Biafra principally because it was ‘jealous of British sponsorship of the African giant which towered above the dwarf-like states’ that the French had left behind in west Africa.⁹⁴ France, too, pursued contradictory policies, selling Nigeria Panhard light armoured cars⁹⁵ and halting all arms transfers to Lagos only later that year, by which time it was supplying the Biafrans via the Ivory Coast and Gabon.⁹⁶ Clapham notes that France’s military aid to Biafra prolonged the war for about eighteen months.⁹⁷

Nigeria’s perception of Israeli aid to Biafra badly strained bilateral ties, and in August 1968 Bitan flew to Lagos to meet with Gowon and Okoi

Arikpo, his foreign minister. Gowon told Bitan that he believed in ‘real friendship’ with Israel, even if ‘certain indications give rise to suspicion regarding its probity’.⁹⁸ The foreign ministry sought to maintain ‘correct’ relations with the FMG but rejected a defence ministry proposal to improve ties by expanding the transfer of military hardware to Nigeria, and agreed only to the sale of spare parts. That was the level of defence ties that the foreign ministry considered the minimum necessary to maintain Israel’s position in Lagos.⁹⁹

Israel’s relations with Nigeria took a turn for the worse when, in July 1969, Abba Eban expressed concern in the Knesset for the victims on both sides of the conflict. Lagos newspapers sharply criticized Israel for (ostensibly) aligning with Biafra.¹⁰⁰ The Israeli foreign minister’s speech also upset the FMG, which resented Eban’s expressions of sympathy for Biafra.¹⁰¹ Yissakhar Ben-Yaacov, who became Israel’s ambassador to Nigeria in October, told Gowon that his country supported the federal cause. The envoy’s assurance succeeded not at all in dispelling the view in Lagos that Israel was, clandestinely at least, fully behind Biafra. Gowon told Ben-Yaacov that he hoped Israel would yet provide an ‘accurate interpretation’ of its position on the civil war.¹⁰²

Israel and Nigeria After the War

The foreign ministry viewed the end of Nigeria’s civil war as an opportunity to improve Israel’s ties with the FMG. Bitan briefed Eban with regard to the Knesset session of 14 January 1970, which, two days following the secessionists’ surrender, would be devoted to ‘Biafran affairs’. The director-general told the foreign minister,

we must make certain that you do not say things that would be to our detriment in Lagos. There is no doubt [the Nigerians] will request the full text [of the speech]. . . . Were we free of constraints, we would give vent to our emotions, but that would be damaging to Israel’s national interest. . . . With the end of the Biafran war, we must attempt to repair relations with Lagos.¹⁰³

Disregarding Bitan’s advice, Eban’s response in the Knesset served to heighten tension between Israel and Nigeria. First, Eban gave account of Israel’s humanitarian aid to Biafra, citing the work of Israel’s medical team there and that of Israelis at the Bouaké refugee camp in the Ivory Coast. Second, Eban spoke of the siege that the Nigerian government had imposed on the secessionist region, describing graphically the pictures of starvation that had shocked the Israeli public. Third, he declared that a

moral as well as a political significance attended the war's conclusion, terming it a 'Holocaust'. Thus, Eban insisted that 'nothing could persuade Israel, the Jewish state, to ignore the peril looming over millions of people. [Our] historical memory does not allow it'.¹⁰⁴ Israeli archival material provides no indication that that country's officials, including the foreign minister, took into account the report of the international observer team to Nigeria (OTN) dispatched in September 1968, at Lagos's invitation, to examine allegations of genocide and war crimes in the Nigerian civil war. That team concluded that 'unprovoked and inexcusable killings' had taken place, but found 'no evidence that the Nigerian forces had been or were engaged in genocide'.¹⁰⁵

Eban reinforced the belief in Lagos that Israel had, in fact, been a major contributor to the Biafran war effort, and his speech had a predictably deleterious effect upon relations with Nigeria.¹⁰⁶ The Nigerian *Daily Times* wrote of 'the open confession by the Israeli Government that they supported the rebellion to the hilt'.¹⁰⁷ Several days before publication of Eban's speech, the ambassador at Lagos had urged 'preventive diplomacy', suggesting that Israel's president dispatch a letter of congratulations (upon the occasion of the end of the war) directly to Gowon. The foreign ministry rejected the idea, explaining that Eban had had no choice but to present the government's position in a manner that reflected both public opinion in Israel and democracy itself. Were Israel's president to write such a letter to Gowon, noted that office, it would have to mirror those sentiments and include elements that would anger Nigeria's leader.¹⁰⁸ Bitan instructed the ambassador instead to present to the federal government his own government's offer of humanitarian aid to be extended to Nigeria.¹⁰⁹

Eban did not divulge the precise details of Israeli aid to Biafra. Foreign ministry records reveal that from July 1968 to January 1970 Israel provided aid in various forms worth \$73,750,¹¹⁰ in addition to two transfers of \$100,000, to which Bar-On had made separate reference.¹¹¹ In that respect, Stremiau is right to remark that 'if Israel did help Biafra, her actions were heavily camouflaged'. It is not necessarily the case, however, as Stremiau also says, that Israel 'did relatively little to support Biafra'.¹¹² Israel's assistance to Biafra in 2013 terms reached \$1.83 million, a considerable sum for the Israeli government in 1968. The Nigerian government suspected that Israel had supplied arms but did not know the extent of Israeli support of Biafra. Perhaps the most incriminating words in Nigerian eyes were those Eban chose in order to fend off criticism in the Knesset of the government's performance, declaring that 'Israel has done all it could to aid Biafra'.¹¹³ Four days after delivering his speech, he revealed to a journalist that Houphouët-Boigny had told him, 'with tears in his eyes', that the Biafran tragedy would not have taken place 'were twelve states

in Africa to have done what Israel did'.¹¹⁴ Ben-Yaacov reported Aminu Kano's 'shock that such words had come out of Eban's mouth'.¹¹⁵ Yet for the Israeli foreign minister, insistence that his country had stood by a people facing a disaster that evoked the Holocaust was vindication of Israel's conduct during the civil war.

The Africa division of the foreign ministry instructed Ben-Yaacov to work to 'turn over a new leaf' in ties with Nigeria.¹¹⁶ As the ambassador wrote, the Nigerian foreign ministry had put its relationship with Israel into a 'deep freeze'.¹¹⁷ In June 1972, he added ruefully, 'we have been eating bitter herbs in Nigeria since the establishment of ties'.¹¹⁸ Nigeria was one of the countries which that month forced a unanimous anti-Israel resolution at the June 1972 OAU summit in Rabat.¹¹⁹ Moreover, at the end of 1972, Israel remained the only state represented in Lagos to which Nigeria had sent no envoy.¹²⁰ In Israel's view, its principal achievement in Nigeria after the Biafran 'episode' was its success in maintaining diplomatic relations with Lagos until October 1973. Moreover, there is no evidence that Israel's role in Nigeria's civil war played a part in Lagos's decision to sever those ties during the Yom Kippur war in October 1973.

Conclusion

The Nigerian civil war created a conundrum for Israel that juxtaposed *realpolitik* with the moral responsibility that Israelis felt toward Biafra. The Israeli government would have preferred, as Bitan wrote in late 1968, to 'sit on the fence' with regard to that war. The Israeli archives record the acuity of the dilemma that Israel faced. Ram Nirgad, ambassador at Lagos and himself a Holocaust survivor, in late 1966 reported that the Igbo compared their circumstances with the genocide perpetrated against the Jews.¹²¹ Israeli public opinion, in large measure shaped by a press that accorded the civil war sustained coverage, led to close parliamentary attention to Biafra and extension of support to the secessionists. Heerten refers to a 'shared visual and semantic space of associations' in which photographs of Biafra were understood as images of a new 'Auschwitz'.¹²² Givoni writes, too, of Israeli society's identification with the Igbos on two planes, both of which were based on the recognition of a common fate. Thus, Biafra was 'the Israel of Africa', while its people were the 'Jews of Africa'.¹²³

At a certain point in that war, Israel transferred military equipment to both sides. There is, on one hand, no evidence that the Israeli government pursued such a policy in order to exacerbate the conflict. On the other hand, Israeli documents provide no indication that that country's officials reflected upon the contradiction thus created. Israel's African statecraft

dictated ensuring the continued conduct of correct relations with the FMG. Put simply, Israel could not afford to risk a crisis in relations with the largest of the black African states. A diplomatic break with Nigeria would have placed in jeopardy Israel's ties with other black African governments that, the Israelis feared, would take an example from Lagos. At the same time, Israel regarded Biafra, too, as a diplomatic objective. In early 1968, the Israeli foreign ministry, still convinced that the secessionist republic would 'in some form survive', noted the utility to be derived from maintaining relations with the new entity.¹²⁴ Thus, the question of assistance to the secessionists included a political as well as a humanitarian component.

Israel was clearly reluctant to extend military assistance to Biafra, loath to incur both the opprobrium that black African states might assign Israel for (ostensibly) exploiting the situation to its own ends and the wrath of the FMG. The records also reveal the great importance that Israel attached to its relations with the Ivory Coast, one of Biafra's principal supporters, and how that country's president, Felix Houphouët-Boigny, prevailed upon the Israelis to provide arms to the republic the independence of which only the Ivory Coast and three other African governments recognized. That was a diplomatic step that, as noted, Israel declined to take. The Biafrans made clear their displeasure at that refusal, but nevertheless preferred any form of concrete aid to the mere declaratory benefit of diplomatic recognition. Yet, the Igbos, who identified so closely with the Jews, expected more of the Israelis than they did of the African states.

Israel's foreign minister, Abba Eban, spoke in the Knesset on the occasion of the end of the Nigerian civil war. Moshe Bitan, the senior foreign ministry official who dealt extensively with the issue of Biafra, advised Eban to choose his words carefully. Bitan urged his superior to hold forth in measured terms, avoiding historical comparisons that would ire the Lagos government. In his 14 January 1970 address, the foreign minister spoke about Israel on the eve of the war that broke out on 5 June 1967, noting that Biafra had one week earlier declared its independence. Israel, he said, had broken through the stranglehold, while carnage raged through Biafra. Bitan's advice notwithstanding, Eban in his speech evoked the terms 'Holocaust' and 'genocide', thus giving expression, once more, to the context in which Israelis viewed the horrors of the Nigerian civil war.¹²⁵

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9 Strange Bedfellows

An Unlikely Alliance Between the Soviet Union and Nigeria During the Biafran War

Maxim Matusevich

Introduction

One of the bloodiest African wars of the twentieth century ended in mid-January 1970. Within days following the cessation of hostilities in Biafra, the victorious Nigerian federalists began to lavish praise on a country that, according to the Nigerian ambassador in Moscow, George T. Kurubo, contributed more than any other international actor to Nigeria's triumph over the secessionists in the East. In his laudatory remarks, the ambassador insisted that the victory over Biafra was the result ('more than any other single thing, more than all other things together') of the assistance by the Soviet Union.¹ The Soviets responded in kind, hailing Nigeria's triumph as 'the victory of progressive forces of the whole African continent over imperialism', laying the blame for the conflict at the feet of the 'unbidden imperialist "guardians" of Nigeria'.² This exchange of pleasantries bookended one of the strangest alliances in the history of the Cold War, an alliance that seemingly defied the conventions of the ideological age and revealed the gap between Soviet theories of third world development and the pragmatic needs of Soviet foreign policy. Adapting Marxist-Leninist ideology to the demands of the moment was not entirely new; after all, the Soviets had performed a far more radical foreign policy reversal in 1939 when they entered an alliance with their Nazi adversaries. However, the significance of Moscow's entrance into the Biafran War lies in the fact that it took place within an entirely different historical context—at the height of the Cold War and in the aftermath of the wave of Third World decolonization. While the Soviet-Nazi pact could be interpreted as a cynical but defensive measure in the face of Western hostility and encirclement, it is less clear what exactly was at stake for the Soviets in late-1960s west Africa. This chapter argues that to better understand the odd partnership between the Nigerian federalists and the Soviet Union, one has to consider Moscow's broader goals in the Third World, where the Soviets sought to burnish their image as the reliable allies of nationalist regimes

facing the rise of ethnic particularisms. One should also connect the Biafran conflict to other foreign policy concerns preoccupying Moscow at the time: namely, the conflict in the Middle East and the challenges to Soviet supremacy within the socialist camp, particularly in Czechoslovakia. Most importantly, the history of Soviet involvement in the Biafran War reminds us of the elasticity of the Kremlin's ideological commitments in the Third World and thus of the limited utility of ideology as an interpretive lens to analyze some of the more momentous Cold War developments.

The Soviet Union's involvement in the Nigerian Civil War baffled contemporary observers, including Moscow's cold war rivals. As noted by a number of scholars of Soviet foreign policy in Africa, the first post-independence decade (1957–67) had provided no indication of the coming alliance. In fact, in Nigeria of all places, early Soviet advances had been met with a distinctively cold-shouldered response. During the period of the First Republic (1960–66), the administration of Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa kept the Soviets at bay, forging close ties with Nigeria's 'traditional' partners in the West, particularly their former British colonial masters.³ From Moscow's point of view, when it came to Soviet relations with independent Africa, the 1960s was a period of high but eventually dashed hopes. Under Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviets exerted considerable efforts courting the newly independent African states. Whereas Stalin and his ideologues had harboured deep suspicion of African nationalists like Kwame Nkrumah or Jomo Kenyatta, Khrushchev was confident of Africa's eventual 'progressive' choice, pushing robustly for the expansion of diplomatic ties on the continent. In 1960–61, the Soviet Union founded two important institutions whose very creation reflected Khrushchev's growing optimism: Moscow's Africa Institute and the Friendship University, named after the martyred Congolese nationalist Patrice Lumumba. Africa Institute would eventually emerge as a flagship institution formulating and overseeing Soviet policy in Africa, while Lumumba University drew thousands of third world students (including many thousands Africans) to study in the USSR.⁴

The high expectations for Africa's eventual 'socialist orientation' barely survived Khrushchev's tenure as the Soviet leader. Within a couple of years following his own 1964 ouster, three of the Soviet Union's closest African allies (and Lenin Prize recipients) lost power: in a series of military coups, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Modibo Keita of Mali and Ahmed Ben Bella of Algeria were overthrown by their far less Soviet-friendly rivals. The relationship with another tentative west African ally, Guinea under Sekou Touré, had suffered a major setback as early as 1961, just a few months after the overthrow of Patrice Lumumba effectively checked any possible Soviet advance into central Africa.⁵ On the eve of the Biafran war, the

Soviet Union faced few palatable options in Africa, least of all in Nigeria, whose post-independence leaders had inherited their colonial master's distaste for all things communist. In a poll conducted in 1963–64, over forty percent of Nigerian parliamentarians opted for closer ties with the United States and Britain, while less than two percent of the polled expressed any interest in expanding contacts with the Soviet Union.⁶

As observed at the time by Robert Legvold and much more recently by Sergey Mazov, these strings of failures combined with Khrushchev's departure from the scene to push the Soviets towards a more balanced and less emotional conduct of foreign affairs, at least when it came to Moscow's dealings with third-world actors. In Africa, Moscow's general disillusionment with the continent's potential for a speedy socialist transformation translated into a sober-minded 'new realism', a recognition of a simple if disagreeable fact that the Soviet Union would have to contract with African nations regardless of their leaders' ideological preferences.⁷ This newly acquired realism undoubtedly accounted for a surprising flexibility that the Soviets would exhibit during the civil war in Nigeria. The wartime alliance between the Sandhurst and Oxford-trained Nigerian elite and Moscow's communist apparatchiks appears less surprising when viewed through the prism of the earlier Soviet disillusionments in Africa.

From Balewa to Gowon: In Search of Compatibility

Considering the generally icy relationship between the Tafawa Balewa administration and the Soviet Union, Moscow's initial response to the January 1966 military coup that removed Balewa from power was predictably favourable, even enthusiastic. Soviet commentary on the event focused unsparingly on the many failures of the First Republic, including its reliance on 'Western monopolies' and lack of social and economic reforms. 'The success of the coup has demonstrated the precariousness and unpopularity of the former regime which had been pictured by Western propaganda as a "model democracy" and "governmental wisdom" for the rest of Africa', asserted a *Pravda* article. 'The shop window of the West has been shattered', announced Radio Moscow.⁸ The Soviets expected the new head of state, General Ironsi, to modify or even reverse his murdered predecessor's 'reactionary' approach to the conduct of Nigeria's foreign affairs, a change that, in their view, entailed laying 'a foundation for further ways of creating and strengthening an independent Nigeria'.⁹

Alas, the Ironsi regime failed to live up to these expectations and before long the Soviet official commentary returned to its earlier pessimistic assessments of Nigeria. In the aftermath of the January coup General Ironsi banned all political parties, including the Socialist Workers and Farmers

Party (SWAFP), which Moscow viewed as progressive. Furthermore, the new regime sought to isolate (and even imprison) the younger, more radical officers involved in the original coup, while upholding its traditional ties with the West and confirming its business commitments to foreign concerns. The new government also emphasized its principled opposition to nationalization—a source of particular irritation for the Soviets who had hoped for a clean break with the past. Soon enough Moscow began to voice its growing concern about Nigeria's 'progressive choice':

Very little has changed in the country in recent months. The state machinery, though slightly reduced, is still in the hands of those who served the old regime and the foreign monopolies. What is more, the government has made it clear that it will encourage foreign capital in Nigeria. . . . And the people are hardly to be satisfied with half measures. They just insist on rejecting the past in all forms and manifestations.¹⁰

This disillusionment likely accounted for the Soviets' ready acquiescence to the second coup, in July 1966, even though it was executed by a group of Northern officers who represented the interests of the 'feudal North', in the past routinely decried by the Soviet propaganda. Moscow was clearly looking for any signs of another reversal and apparently found such ray of hope when the new rulers released from prison a prominent Yoruba politician, Obafemi Awolowo, who (prior to being jailed for seven years by the Balewa administration) had gained some standing with the Soviet Union during the First Republic.¹¹ Subsequently, the Soviet commentary warmed up considerably to the new Nigerian leader, the 32-year-old Yakubu Gowon, who was now being complimented on his alleged sensitivity to the problems of ethnicity and a sensible approach to the increasingly combustible situation in the north of the country. Soviet observers of the Nigerian scene were clearly channelling the official line when they argued for the preservation of the federation and suggested that it could serve as a basis for progressive socio-economic reforms. The Soviets did reflect on the terrifying plight of the Ibos in the North, but seemed to believe (or at least intimated so in their official pronouncements) that their safety could be guaranteed under the unitary arrangement. And as usual, the ultimate rationalization came from the standard appeals to (imagined) class solidarity:

Nigeria is one country and the successful solution to the problem lies not in a greater or lesser autonomy for her regions but in the uniting of all progressive forces on a basis of wholly national interests in the

struggle for a better life for the working masses in all regions and all nationalities in the country.¹²

As the likelihood of Eastern secession grew through late 1966 and the early part of 1967, the Gowon administration took note of Moscow's friendly neutrality. His primary focus still remained on the traditional Western partners whom he approached on numerous occasions pushing for commitments of military assistance in case of the war erupting in the East. Both the British and the Americans expressed their support for the unity of Nigeria but, to Gowon's great frustration, treaded carefully and unequivocally rebuffed his repeated requests for troops, tactical aircraft and a naval presence.¹³ Frustrated with the West's intransigence and clearly aiming to play on the usual cold war apprehensions, Gowon hinted at the possibility of going to 'other sources'—a threat that neither Americans nor the British apparently took too seriously, at least not seriously enough to modify their non-committal stances vis-à-vis the Biafran secession, which did materialize on 30 May 1967.

The Surprising Arms Deal

The weeks following the announcement of Biafran independence by Colonel Ojukwu were filled with feverish attempts by the Federal Military Government of Nigeria (FMG) to procure arms. On July 2, 1967, Gowon sent identical cables to President Lyndon Johnson and Prime Minister Harold Wilson, pleading for immediate sale to the FMG of twelve fighter-bombers, six PT-boats, and twenty-four anti-aircraft guns. He wanted deliveries to begin within forty-eight hours and added that if the US and UK were unable to supply these weapons, he 'would be forced to get them from any source which would make them available'—a not-so-subtle allusion to the Soviet bloc. The Americans remained unimpressed, however, observing that Nigeria's political milieu made any significant Communist infiltration highly unlikely. The possibility of 'Communist arms sales' to Nigerian federalists did not sufficiently alarm Washington, at least not enough to force it to 'forsake our even-handed stance'.¹⁴

But the Gowon government was facing the secession in the East and had little patience for impartiality. In late June 1967, a four-man Nigerian mission headed to Moscow, prompting immediate rumours that the visit was in fact an arms-procurement expedition.¹⁵ Both Moscow and Lagos issued terse denials but less than a month later another Nigerian delegation went to the Soviet Union. The delegation included Chief Anthony Enahoro, the Commissioner for the Ministries of Information and Labour in the FMG and, significantly, a close political ally of the Soviet-friendly

Obafemi Awolowo. On 2 August 1967, Enahoro met in the Kremlin with a Soviet deputy prime minister, ostensibly to sign a cultural agreement, which seemed like a frivolity for a country confronting an existential crisis.¹⁶ Despite the mounting evidence to the contrary, both sides continued to insist that arts and sports, and not the aircraft and the bazookas, constituted the subject of the talks. On 3 August, Radio Moscow quoted a statement by the Nigerian embassy, which dismissed the rumours of an arms deal as 'Western propaganda'.¹⁷

The denials lasted for a few more days until in a meeting with the US ambassador in Lagos on 8 August, Gowon admitted to signing a deal for the procurement of an unspecified number of Czech aircraft but also stressed the strictly commercial nature of the transaction. The federalist leader lamented the lack of support by the British and the Americans and alluded to a 'spate of anti-Americanism' sweeping across Nigeria.¹⁸ It appears that Gowon had understated the scope of the agreement. In the days following the meeting between Gowon and Ambassador Matthews, Nigerian and foreign press began to report the arrival in the country of crated Soviet and Czech aircraft (reportedly, ten to twenty MiG-15 and MiG-17 fighter trainers and up to six Delphin L-29 jet fighters) accompanied by up to 200 Soviet technicians.¹⁹ Quite contrary to the 'spate of anti-Americanism', the Soviet Union enjoyed an immediate surge of popularity in Nigeria. The rapprochement between the FMG and Moscow did not go unnoticed by Nigerian Marxists (many of them self-proclaimed and lacking formal party affiliations) and in some cases resulted in a quick reversal of their previous pacifist stances. For example, the SWAFP founder Tunji Otegbeye, one of Nigeria's very few bone fide Marxist-Leninists, shifted his earlier anti-war position to a far more bellicose one. 'Total war! Total destruction must be the vow of the Nigerian army . . . Crush the vandal Ojukwu', fulminated his party newspaper *Advance* in late August.²⁰ And the Soviet Union was now gaining in stature not only among the radicals. Western observers noted the unmistakable signs of a new climate of 'mild pro-Sovietism' emerging within the Nigerian political establishment. In the months following the signing of the 'Czech' arms deal, Soviet-friendly groups began to proliferate in Nigeria. Such front organizations as the Nigerian-Soviet Friendship Society, the Committee of Solidarity with Asia and Africa, and the Nigerian Trade Union Council popularized Soviet achievements and way of life through their publications, numerous meetings, symposia and film screenings. In the fall of 1967, the Soviets opened a new US\$15,000 cultural centre in the district of Surulere in Lagos, and four Moskvich car dealerships opened doors around the country.²¹

Having learned from their recent debacles in Guinea, Ghana and Mali, the Soviets now moved with caution and, at least on the surface of it,

steered clear of ideology. Soviet support for the FMG provided breathing political space to such Nigerian progressives as Otegbeye, who could now claim with some credibility close links with one of the chief guarantors of Nigerian unity. But Moscow apparently understood that the newly found friendship with Lagos had its obvious limitations; their support for the federalist cause notwithstanding, the Soviets could not be perceived as subversive. While humouring their leftist Nigerian supporters, they never failed to stress the affinity of views between the FMG and the country's progressives who may have differed when it came to Marxism and most certainly followed the common cause when it came to the preservation of Nigeria's unity. In fact, the fight against Biafran secessionists, broadly supported by Nigerian progressives, allowed the Soviets to play up the left's legitimacy within Nigeria's political scene (historically inhospitable to the likes of Tunji Otegbeye). Moscow's commentary on the alleged alliance between the Gowon administration and the leftists probably reflected a hope for a postwar expansion of Nigerian political landscape to include the previously ostracized pro-Soviet radicals: 'The support for Gowon's government given by the progressive forces of the country—the trade unions, farmers' organizations, youth and student groups—had a great effect on the struggle for unity in Nigeria'.²² However, such expectations were conspicuously free of Khrushchevian euphoria and ideological day-dreaming. Throughout the war, both sides perceived their unusual alliance first and foremost in practical terms. The Soviets had taken advantage of the sponsorship vacuum during the early days and weeks of the war and were not prepared to jeopardize their newly gained popularity with Nigerian elites for the sake of promoting the occasional Marxist-Leninist loyalist. When, in November 1967, Tunji Otegbeye and S. O. Martins (of the Nigerian-Soviet Friendship Society) were arrested by Nigerian authorities upon their return from the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the Great October Socialist Revolution in Moscow, the Soviets exhibited remarkable restraint.²³ In 1969, upon their return from another Soviet junket, Otegbeye and an associate were placed into a preventive detention. Instead of issuing the standard vitriolic denunciations reserved for exactly such situations, Moscow presented the whole affair as an unfortunate misunderstanding. A *Pravda* commentary emphasized the arrested radicals' stated commitment to the upholding of Nigeria's unity and even their alleged loyalty to the federalist regime:

The arrest of Dr. T. Otegbeye and S. Martins evoked deep perplexity among progressive Nigerian society. Their political views and convictions were never a secret from anyone. At the same time it was well known that their political and social activity, based on their convictions,

was never directed against the interests of the Nigerian government. On the contrary, Dr. T. Otegbeye and S. Martins won broad acceptance inside the country and beyond its borders as honest, consistent patriots, fighters for the true independence, unity, revitalization and prosperity of Nigeria.²⁴

Such incidents revealed the extent of Soviet pragmatism and opportunism, a significant departure from the earlier, ideology-driven approach to the conduct of Moscow's African diplomacy.

Nigeria's New Communist Ally and the Triumph of Pragmatism

By mid-autumn 1967, the alliance between the Kremlin and the Federal Military Government had been acknowledged by both sides. While presenting his credentials in Moscow, the new Nigerian ambassador in the Soviet Union, George T. Kurubo, spoke warmly of Soviet assistance and thanked the USSR for the 'practical support for the government of Nigeria in its efforts for the maintenance and consolidation of Nigeria'.²⁵ Almost simultaneously with Kurubo's arrival in Moscow, the Soviets finally conceded their backing of the FMG. On 17 October, Lagos made public a letter to Gowon dispatched a few days earlier by the Soviet premier Alexei Kosygin. The letter left little doubt that the Soviets had chosen sides in the conflict and it articulated Soviet support for the FMG in no uncertain terms. 'The Soviet people', explained Kosygin, 'fully understand the desire of the Nigerian government to preserve the unity and territorial integrity of the Nigerian state and to prevent the country from being dismembered'.²⁶ Once made public, Kosygin's letter presented a framework for the expansion of Nigerian-Soviet ties—the Soviet Union, it suggested, was uniquely positioned to help safeguard Nigeria's territorial integrity because of its own experience of forging a multiethnic nation. This latter point clearly carried some weight with the Nigerian side. In reference to the Nigerian government's decision to allow for the circulation of Soviet print matter in the country, the vice chancellor of the University of Lagos and respected historian, Professor Saburi Biobaku, expressed hope that these materials would help Nigerians better understand the Soviet people and their history of building a united country in a context of great ethnic diversity.²⁷

Over the next two years the contacts between Moscow and Lagos proliferated—a source of some concern for Nigeria's customary friends in the West and their African allies. The Soviets inaugurated their new embassy compound in Lagos—a massive, forbidding-looking, fortress-like structure of glass and concrete; they expanded their diplomatic staff

from nine to fourteen, which now included a military attaché—one Colonel Medvedev, whom the notoriously flamboyant Nigerian press pronounced to be ‘an armored warfare expert, late of Kiev, Peking, Cairo, and Khartoum’.²⁸ Having opened its doors on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the Russian revolution, the new embassy sponsored a series of commemorative events in Lagos, including an exhibit of Soviet scientific achievements and a film festival. Soviet ambassador Alexander Romanov, who in his gregariousness cut an unusual diplomat figure for a Soviet, became the toast of Lagos high society—playing tennis at the prestigious Ikoyi Club and navigating Lagos traffic in his large-sized Mercedes-Benz.²⁹ By some contemporary accounts, the Soviet ambassador was a ubiquitous sight at numerous diplomatic functions, scoring appearances on national television and generally sporting one of the busiest social schedules in town. His willingness to speak publicly about the Soviet Union’s interest in expanding its ties with Nigeria encouraged at least some Nigerian politicians to expect more aid, especially at the time when Nigeria’s Western partners (primarily Great Britain and the US) preferred to proceed with caution. At a press conference with Romanov, in November 1967, Nigeria’s commissioner of works and housing, Femi Okunnu, appealed to the ambassador to ‘use his good offices to secure Russian aid for the reconstruction of war-damaged bridges and roads’.³⁰ In December, while opening yet another Soviet book exhibit in Lagos, the commissioner of Education, Wenike Briggs, openly marvelled at the Soviet people’s ‘present interest in Nigeria’, which, he remarked, ‘placed them further ahead than any other country in the world’.³¹

The ostensible growing closeness between the two governments sounded alarm bells within Western intelligence and foreign policy community. In early 1968, the US National Intelligence Estimate assessed Soviet position in Nigeria as ‘improved’ and registered a ‘loss of influence’ on the part of the United States. The Estimate anticipated this trend to continue and envisioned a postwar Nigeria that would likely pursue a ‘more nonaligned and less pro-Western’ foreign policy.³² The fact that the Gowon administration abstained from any direct criticism of the 1968 Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia seemed to bear out this assessment. Nigeria’s acquiescence to the Soviet aggression in Europe was at least partly a response to the earlier decision by Czech reformers (sympathetic to the Biafran cause) to suspend arms deliveries to Nigeria. As Czechoslovakia was drifting out of the Soviet orbit during the spring and summer months of 1968, the reformist government of Alexander Dubcek and the increasingly independent and unrestricted radio and press began to voice open support for the separatists and express sympathy for the Biafra’s plight. Not surprisingly, some of the reformers seeking greater independence from Moscow recognized a

telling similarity between their own political aspirations and the Biafran struggles. It is equally unsurprising that under these circumstances the federalist Nigerians would find little sympathy for the Czechoslovak freedom movement crushed by the Soviets in August 1968. 'Czechoslovakia got what it deserved', quipped one Nigerian official having learned of Soviet tanks entering Prague.³³

In mid-1968, the goodwill mission to the USSR (and Poland) by Nigeria's Commissioner for External Affairs Okoi Arikpo became the highlight of Nigerian-Soviet relations during the war. The Soviets clearly assigned much significance to this visit, which attracted daily coverage in the Soviet press. The final communiqué contained an emphatic statement of the alleged congruence of Nigerian and Soviet views on a number of issues of regional and international concern. The visit also appears to have cleared way for a major economic accord signed a few months later and featuring a \$140-million package of long-term credits and a clause providing for the construction of Nigeria's first iron-and-steel complex (in Ajaokuta).³⁴ The continued deliveries of arms were not trumpeted at the Kremlin reception but in fact proceeded apace, likely remaining the single most important contributing factor behind the FMG's steadily improving martial fortunes in the East.³⁵

The Soviet Union's growing visibility in Nigeria manifested itself in a steady stream of visiting delegations but also in the appearance on the Nigerian roads of 'very sturdy but not exactly streamlined' Soviet-made cars and trucks. The Soviet auto-exporting firm Avtoexport had begun delivering cars to Nigeria in 1966–67 through a Nigerian company WAATECO (West African Automobile and Technical Company), which quickly developed a sales and service network throughout the country. By 1968, it was in a position to import up to 600 vehicles annually—not a spectacular number but a dramatic increase nevertheless when compared with the prewar period. By the end of the decade Moskvich cars would become a familiar sight on the streets of Nigerian cities. A Nigerian journalist noted at the time that the federal troops were now using 'almost as many left-hand drive Russian trucks as British field cars'.³⁶

The last year of the war saw a flurry of activities underscoring and showcasing the expanding bilateral ties—ministerial exchanges, the inauguration of a weekly Aeroflot route between Moscow and Lagos, an opening of a Nigerian-Soviet Chamber of Commerce, visits by trade unionists, geologists, technical experts, circus performers and even Orthodox and Muslim clergymen. In early March 1969, British and American diplomats were unnerved to witness Soviet warships docking in Lagos Harbour during the first official visit to Nigeria by the Soviet navy.³⁷ On the surface it seemed that the future of Nigerian-Soviet relations was bright and their

continuous growth assured. But some contemporary observers (not all of them disinterested) began to notice the signs of possible discontent. Declarations of friendship and solidarity with Moscow notwithstanding and despite the West's refusal to provide meaningful military aid to the FMG in its hour of need, Gowon had never disowned Nigeria's Western allies. As early as April 1969, a US intelligence memorandum argued that Nigerians had never overcome their deep-seated mistrust of Soviet motives and were careful to limit the scope of Soviet ideological activities in the country. The MiGs and 122-mm guns were welcome but the Marxist-Leninist ideology apparently not so much. Western diplomats looked on warily as the Nigerian-Soviet lovefest continued seemingly unabated, but the old colonial hands remained sceptical about the potential of this love affair turning into a long-term relationship. US and British officials, in particular, preferred to view the Nigerian-Soviet rapprochement as a fluke, a temporary development occasioned by a fleeting wartime alliance. Mindful of recent Soviet failures in such places as Guinea, Ghana and Mali they cautioned their home offices not to panic. As one British diplomat put it at the time, 'The Russians have yet to plumb the depths of Nigerian ingratitude'.³⁸

Biafra and the Soviet Union

Political scientist Robert Legvold, writing during the Nigerian Civil War, noted the irony of the Soviet Union allying itself with the very forces that it had previously decried as reactionary and against the people 'whom Soviet commentators had always considered the most progressive and sympathetic'.³⁹ Prior to the Biafran secession, the Eastern Region of Nigeria advocated for closer ties with the USSR and even entered into agreements with Moscow independently of the federal centre in Lagos. On the eve of the war an Ibo served as Nigeria's ambassador in Moscow (who reportedly threw a party to celebrate the Biafran secession) and the Easterners were overrepresented among Nigerian students studying at Soviet institutions of higher learning. In the aftermath of the outbreak of the war and the conclusion of the Nigerian-Soviet arms deal, the Ibo students picketed the Nigerian embassy in Moscow and fought pitched battles with their pro-federalist peers in the dorm of the Lumumba Friendship University in Moscow.⁴⁰ A prominent Soviet foreign correspondent (Yevgenii Korshunov) visited the Eastern Region in early 1967 and wrote warmly about meeting his old Ibo friends, many of them enthusiastic Russophiles and advocates of the Nigerian-Soviet friendship. Among those who first informed Korshunov about the horrors experienced by the Ibos fleeing the North were the editor of the

West African, Pilot Herbert Unegbu, and a renowned Biafran Marxist and one-time president of the Nigerian-Soviet friendship Society, Paul Nwokedi. Ojukwu himself received a sympathetic treatment in Korshunov's reporting: Ojukwu, Korshunov claimed, saw socialism as a preferred path of development for independent Africa.⁴¹

Since up to the very day of the secession the Soviets had shown no sign of hostility towards Biafra and its leadership, their decision to aid Lagos came as a dramatic shock to the Biafrans, who initially tended to view the shift as something of a misunderstanding. As late as July 1967 Ojukwu was still appealing to Moscow for support and stressing the alleged incompatibility between the FMG and the Soviet Union. The apparent Soviet drift towards the federalists was presented as profoundly antithetical to Soviet principles, a regrettable product of Nigerian machinations and Soviet gullibility:

Gowon wants to tarnish the image of the Soviet Union in Africa by dragging it into a foreign war. . . . There is no basis for meaningful association between the progressive socialist government of the Soviet Union and the reactionary clique of renegades in power in Lagos. Gowon only wants to make a mockery of the progressive foreign policy of Moscow by dragging to Soviet government into a scandalous marriage of convenience with Nigeria. . . .⁴²

Throughout the early months of the war, the Biafran propaganda made repeated appeals to Soviet leadership to reconsider their emerging alliance with Lagos. Notably, the Biafrans stressed the affinity between Moscow's progressive values and their own (alleged) leftist credentials. While the Gowon regime represented 'one of the last bastions of feudalism in the modern world' Biafra, they insisted, was much closer to Soviet ideals, a 'natural ally' of the Soviet Union. By instigating the 'feudal pogroms of 30,000 Ibos' Biafra's federalist opponents had more in common with the 'dead Czar of Russia than with the modern leaders of the modern [sic] Soviet Union'.⁴³

Following the revelations of Soviet arms deliveries starting in mid-August 1967 and especially in the aftermath of the publication of Kosygin's letter a couple of months later, the Biafrans abandoned restraint, and their anti-Soviet rhetoric began to gain in intensity. Even the Biafra-Soviet Friendship Society demonstratively severed all connections to Moscow and appealed to its members to denounce these latest imperialist newcomers. Enugu became the sight of vociferous anti-Soviet demonstrations, while Ibo students were reported to have rioted in Moscow.⁴⁴ As the war progressed, Biafran propaganda grew noticeably 'cold warish', playing on known Western fears of Communist infiltration. The scale of Soviet

ascendancy in Nigeria was grotesquely exaggerated; Moscow's ultimate goals claimed to be nothing short of total domination:

Already, only Russian cars are available in Nigeria. . . . Everyday there are Russian-inspired political demonstrations in Nigeria against Britain and the United States. . . . Russia has achieved an eternal stranglehold on Nigeria. . . . The wide ramifications of Soviet Communism [are] now beginning to spread through Nigeria and into adjoining lands. . . . For London and Washington to continue to court Lagos, which is already in Moscow's palm, and to alienate Biafra, where Communism hardly exists [sic] is not the way to retain Western influence in Africa.⁴⁵

Once the Nigerian-Soviet alliance had been disclosed, the inexorable logic of the Cold War pushed the Biafrans, initially congenial to the Soviet Union, to embrace the panoply of anti-Soviet causes. Where the official Lagos displayed little sympathy for the 'Prague Spring' of 1968, the Biafrans were emphatically supportive, seeing in the Soviet invasion of the independent nation yet another example of Moscow's neocolonial agenda (Biafran officials were fond of accusing the Soviets of 'pseudo-anticolonialism'). The link between the Nigerian Civil War and the 'Prague Spring' is an interesting one. Political scientist Stanley Orobator has noted the intensity with which the champions of 'democratic socialism' in Czechoslovakia debated the conflict throughout the heady months of their doomed reform movement in 1968. Support for Biafra, in fact, emerged as a major rallying cause enabling the reformists in Prague to distance themselves from the Soviet big brother; it represented an attempt to fashion an independent foreign policy agenda and clearly served as a serious irritant in the relationship between the two nations on the eve of the Warsaw Pact invasion.⁴⁶

In the course of the war, Biafra courted the Soviet Union's traditional adversaries. As self-styled 'Jews of Africa', Biafrans found it easy to establish a close relationship with Israel, where the cause of Biafran independence became particularly popular. Israel's recent triumph in the Six-Day War (1967) against the Soviet-equipped and trained Arab armies provided particular inspiration. The symbolism of Biafran civilians bombed and strafed by Egyptian pilots flying Soviet MiGs was not lost on the Israeli public. The Israelis also tended to see certain parallels between the plight of the Ibos and their own existential dilemmas of survival and the preservation of national independence.⁴⁷ As observed at the time by Stanley Diamond, the Israelis interpreted the Soviets' support for Nigerian federalists (many of them Northern Muslims) as an attempt to refurbish their credentials in the Muslim world after the fiasco of the Six-Day War, which left many Arab states resentful of the Soviet Union. In this, the struggle for

Biafra assumed an exceptional relevance and poignancy for the Israelis.⁴⁸ As a result of massive public pressure, the Israeli government provided clandestine military and a more visible humanitarian assistance to the Biafrans.⁴⁹ Having failed to secure substantial Western backing, the Biafrans sought to exploit to their advantage another cold war opportunity—the Sino-Soviet rift. Even before the outbreak of the war, the Biafran leadership had been exploring the possibility of obtaining aid and recognition from the People's Republic of China. A specially commissioned position paper concluded that 'China is perhaps the only communist country that can intervene effectively on our side'. It then went on to recommend that Beijing 'should be approached for aid as soon as possible'. Another confidential blueprint, tellingly titled 'Diplomatic Activities with the Socialist Zones', urged the government to seek closer contacts with the Chinese via Beijing-friendly Tanzania.⁵⁰ The courtship of communist China yielded results when in the summer of 1968 Beijing finally threw its weight behind Biafra and issued a strong-worded declaration of support denouncing the 'alliance between Anglo-American imperialism and Soviet revisionism' and condemning the 'massacre of the Ibo people'. At least in word, Beijing seemed to have openly sided with Biafra:

Ganging up with the U.S. and British imperialists, the Soviet revisionist clique supports the Nigerian federal military government in its large-scale slaughter of the Biafran people who have announced their secession from the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Since the outbreak of the war in August 1967, Soviet revisionism, openly supplying the federal military government with large numbers of military aircraft, warships, bombs, rockets and other military equipment and dispatching large numbers of military personnel, has helped it massacre the Biafran people.⁵¹

Ojukwu immediately reciprocated by dispatching an appreciative letter to Chairman Mao and 'our dear comrades in China'. Well schooled in cold war sensibilities, Ojukwu called on Mao to consider Biafra's struggle akin to China's own epic path towards independence and its valiant stand against American and Soviet hegemony.⁵² But unfortunately for Biafra, Chinese declarations of sympathy did not translate into arms deliveries or serious international lobbying on the secessionists' behalf. Just like their fellow Marxists-turned-foes in Moscow, the Chinese were now practicing the art of the possible, whereby Beijing's condemnations of the alleged genocide in Biafra did not interfere with the growing Nigerian-Chinese trade, which more than doubled in the course of the war. Nigerians, on the other hand, did not seem to mind what they likely assumed to be a side-show necessitated by the exigencies of the Sino-Soviet conflict. In fact,

Lagos continued to support China's bid for the UN membership and cast ballot in favour of it during the General Assembly vote in 1970.⁵³

Having failed to procure military assistance from Mao's China and generally running out of options, the Biafrans mounted one last bid to weaken the Soviet-Nigerian alliance. Rumours of pro-Biafran sentiments among certain members of Soviet intelligentsia and even government elites must have encouraged Biafran leadership to reach out to the Kremlin.⁵⁴ Throughout 1968 international media outlets were vigorously reporting on the mounting evidence of genocide being committed against the Biafrans. Images of malnourished Biafran children became the staple of evening news programmes across the Western world and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) launched a massive humanitarian effort, its largest, in fact, since the end of World War II.⁵⁵ In a hope to capitalize on the growing international awareness of the Biafran tragedy, Biafra, in October–November 1968, submitted a memorandum to the Soviet Union, detailing charges of genocide allegedly committed by the federal troops. Interestingly, the Soviets did not reject the report out of hand and even tasked their representative at the Paris-based International Committee for the Study of Genocide to review its findings.⁵⁶ The Biafrans, encouraged by the Soviets' willingness to listen, dispatched Paul Nwokedi to Moscow to try and elicit some understanding from his old friends. But the mission failed, its secrecy compromised by an inauspicious report by a British correspondent. The delegation was immediately asked to leave the Soviet Union and its alleged presence in Moscow denied by the Soviets as a 'vicious falsehood'.⁵⁷ The Biafrans would never get another chance to make their case to the superpower, on which they had pinned such high hopes and who ended up contributing mightily to their defeat.

Conclusion

The Soviet decision to support the federalist side in the Nigerian Civil War (1967–70) marked a decisive departure from Moscow's previous ideology-driven commitments in the Third World and particularly in Africa. Burned by a string of fiascos in West and North Africa (Guinea, Ghana, Mali and Algeria) the Soviets came to reassess the utility of ideology in their African engagements. By throwing their weight behind a side whose leadership had exactly zero interest in 'socialist orientation', the Soviets effectively accepted the primacy of pragmatic geopolitics over ideology. The Biafran War was indeed a Cold War conflict but of a very peculiar kind, with alliances forged and maintained across the usual ideological divides: surprisingly, Moscow, London and Washington found themselves supporting (although with widely different degrees of enthusiasm) the same faction

in the war, betting, as it were, on the federalists' superior numbers and resources. From the Soviet point of view, this was a winning bet. Even though the wartime Western fears (stoked by Biafran propaganda) of the Soviet Union's ascendancy in west Africa would prove to be largely unfounded, the Soviets did increase their visibility and influence in a region formerly closed to them. Curiously, almost half a century later the Russian foreign policy establishment still views their Soviet predecessors' involvement in the Biafran war as a major foreign policy accomplishment. For example, a recent article in a glossy Russian journal of geopolitics, published under the auspices of Russia's Foreign Ministry and clearly reflecting Moscow's 'official line', referred to the conflict as 'provoked by the separatists of the self-proclaimed "republic of Biafra"' and praised the USSR for providing the timely military and political assistance to the federalists.⁵⁸ It is telling that at the time of Russia's controversial resurgence as a global power the new adherents of *realpolitik* in the Kremlin have found inspiration in an all but forgotten African conflict that served as a testing ground for Moscow's foreign policy of pragmatism. Indeed, just days after the Nigerian troops had stormed the Uli airstrip and thus ended Biafra's drive for independence, a well-informed contemporary observer of the conflict noted caustically that Soviet support for Nigeria cost the Russians next to nothing financially. Moral costs could have been high had morality entered the equation. After all, he quipped, the decision to support Nigeria was as tactically brilliant as it was ideologically bankrupt.⁵⁹

Notes

1. Jim Hoagland, 'Nigerians hail Russia's help, criticize U.S.', *Washington Post*, 29 January 1970, p. A22.
2. See respective *Pravda* and *Izvestia* articles quoted in 'Moscow radio hails victory of Nigerians', *New York Times*, 13 January 1970, p. 14; Bernard Gwertzman, 'Nigeria says Russian help was vital to war victory', *Washington Post*, 21 January 1970, pp. 1 and 3.
3. See Maxim Matusevich, *No easy row for a Russian hoe: Ideology and pragmatism in Nigerian-Soviet relations, 1960–1991* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003), p. 302.
4. Sergey V. Mazov, 'Afrikanskije studenty v Moskve v god Afriki [African students in Moscow in the year of Africa]', *Vostok*, No. 3, May–June 1999, pp. 91–93; Mazov, 'Sozdanie Instituta Afriki [The creation of Africa institute]', *Vostok*, No. 1, 1998, pp. 80–88.
5. Sergey V. Mazov, *A distant front in the cold war: The USSR in West Africa and the Congo, 1956–1964* (Washington, DC and Stanford: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 334.
6. Lloyd Free, *The attitudes, hopes and fears of Nigerians* (Princeton, NJ: Institute for International Social Research, 1964).
7. See, Robert Legvold, *Soviet policy in West Africa* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970); Mazov, *A distant front in the cold war*.
8. Radio Moscow (in English for Africa), 19:30 GMT (18 January 1966), quoted in *Africa Research Bulletin (ARB)*, Vol. 2, 1966, p. 447; V. Korovikov, 'Polozhenie v Nigeri [The situation in Nigeria]', *Pravda*, 22 January 1966.
9. Radio Moscow (11 February 1966), quoted in 'Nigeria', *Mizan*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 1966, p. 130.

10. Radio Moscow (in English for Africa), 21:00 GMT, 13 May 1966.
11. For a highly complimentary portrayal of Obafemi Awolowo by a Soviet foreign policy establishment insider, see V. Solodovnikov, *Politicheskie partii Afriki* [Africa's political parties] (Moscow: Nauka, 1970), p. 328.
12. Yevgenii Korshunov, 'Reportazh iz Nigerii [Reports from Nigeria]', *Za Rubezhom* (Moscow), No. 24, 9–15 June 1967.
13. 'Memorandum from Edward Hamilton of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Special Assistant (Rostow)', *Foreign relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, Vol. 24, Africa, Document 387 (Washington, 31 May 1967, 7 pm), available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/d387> (accessed on 11 March 2016).
14. 'Memorandum from Edward Hamilton of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Special Assistant (Rostow)', *Foreign relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, Vol. 24, Africa, Document 390 (Washington, 3 July 1967), available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/d390> (accessed on 11 March 2016).
15. Anthony Astrachan, 'Nigerian mission is accused of seeking Russian arms to fight Biafra', *Washington Post*, 23 June 1967, p. A19.
16. The meeting was reported in 'Beseda v Kreml'e [Meeting in the Kremlin]', *Pravda*, 3 August 1967.
17. Radio Moscow (in English for Africa), 20:30 GMT, 3 August 1967.
18. 'Telegram from the Embassy in Nigeria to the Department of State', *Foreign relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, Vol. 24, Africa, Document 392 (Lagos, 8 August 1967, 1700Z), available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/d392> (accessed on 12 March 2016).
19. See, *Daily Times* (Lagos) (11 August 1967); Radio Cotonou (Domestic Service in French), 06:15 GMT (18 August 1967); Radio Biafra (Domestic Service in English), 15:00 GMT (20 August 1967); Benjamin Welles, 'U.S. Scores Soviet on Arming Nigeria', 22 August 1967.
20. Editorial, 'On with total war', *Advance*, 20–26 August 1967.
21. See Stanley E. Orobator, *Diplomacy and conflict resolution in international relations: The Soviet Union and the Nigerian crisis* (Ibadan: Uniben Press, 1997), pp. 104–105; Anthony Astrachan, 'Soviets gaining prestige in Nigeria, as U.S. is accused of helping Biafra', *Washington Post*, 9 December 1967, p. A19.
22. K. Karpovich, 'Za kulisami voyny v Nigerii [Behind the scenes of the war in Nigeria]', *Azia i Afrika Segondya*, No. 3, 1969, p. 28.
23. See, Tunji Otegbeye, *The turbulent decade* (Lagos: VisionLink Nigeria, 1999), p. 187.
24. *Pravda*, 31 July 1969.
25. *Pravda*, 20 October 1967; *Izvestia*, 21 October 1967.
26. See *Africa Diary*, 26 November–2 December 1967, p. 3681; also *Daily Times* [Lagos], 17 October 1967.
27. Radio Lagos (in English to Europe), 16:00 GMT (28 October 1967).
28. See Alfred Friendly, 'Nigeria cements close Soviet tie', *New York Times*, 22 November 1968, pp. 1 and 13; *Listener* [Lagos] (30 January 1969); for a contemporary U.S. intelligence assessment of the growing Soviet influence in Nigeria, see 'Research memorandum from the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hughes) to Secretary of State Rogers', *Foreign relations of the United States, 1969–1972*, Vol. E-5, Documents on Africa, 1969–1972, Document 53 (Washington, 2 April 1969), <http://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/nixon/e5/54853.htm> (accessed on 12 March 2016); 'Memorandum from the president's assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to the under secretary of state (Richardson), Washington, April 15, 1969', National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 741, Document 56, Country Files, Africa, Nigeria, Vol. 1 (1969–1972).
29. 'Nigeria cements close Soviet tie'; also see John Stremlau, *The international politics of the Nigerian civil war, 1967–1970* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 80.

30. Federal Ministry of Information [Lagos], Press Release no. F2480 (2 November 1967).
31. Federal Ministry of Information [Lagos], Press Release no. F2826 (16 December 1967).
32. 'National Intelligence Estimate: Consequences of Civil Strife in Nigeria', *Foreign relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, Vol. 24, Africa, Document 397 (Washington, 2 May 1968), available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/d397> (accessed on 13 March 2016).
33. Friendly, 'Nigeria cement close Soviet tie'; for an in-depth treatment of the connection between the Nigerian Civil War and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, see Stanley E. Orobator, 'The Nigerian civil war and the invasion of Czechoslovakia', *African Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 327, 1983, pp. 201–214. More recently, the symbolic significance of the Biafran War in the 1968 Czechoslovak challenge to Soviet supremacy was examined in Philip Muehlenbeck, *Czechoslovakia in Africa, 1945–1968* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
34. See reports in *Pravda*, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, and 22 July 1968, and *Izvestia*, 19, 20, and 23 July 1968; for the text of the agreement, see *Nigeria's Treaties in Force*, Vol. 1 (Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information, 1971), pp. 144–148.
35. See *Financial Times*, 21 November 1968.
36. See ECOTASS (19 February 1968), quoted in *Nigerian Review*, May/June 1968, p. 11; *Listener*, 30 January 1969.
37. See *Izvestia*, 25 January 1969; *ARB*, Vol. 2, 1971, p. 21128; R. W. Apple, Jr., 'Soviet improving ties with Nigeria', *New York Times*, 9 March 1969, p. 5. The naval visit, it turns out, was clouded by a scandal that revealed the fragility of the Nigerian-Soviet partnership. A Soviet seaman jumped the ship in Lagos and Ambassador Romanov apparently overstepped the boundaries laid out by the diplomatic protocol by presenting demands to the Nigerian police to apprehend and return the defector. Romanov also had a run in with the Nigerian navy commander Admiral Joseph Wey, whom he reportedly suspected of interfering with the schedule of the naval visit: 'Research memorandum from the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hughes) to Secretary of State Rogers', *Foreign relations of the United States, 1969–1972*, Vol. E-5, Documents on Africa, 1969–1972, Document 53 (Washington, 2 April 1969).
38. Friendly, 'Nigeria cement close Soviet tie'; also see 'Research memorandum from the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hughes) to Secretary of State Rogers', *Foreign relations of the United States, 1969–1972*, Vol. E-5, Part 1, Documents on Sub-Africa, 1969–1972, Document 53 (Washington, 2 April 1969), available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve05p1/d53> (accessed on 30 March 2017).
39. Legvold, Soviet policy in West Africa, p. 325.
40. Stremlau, *The international politics of the Nigerian civil war*, p. 80 (footnotes); 'Nigerian foes fight in Moscow', *New York Times*, 2 April 1968, p. A21; for succinct analysis of the Soviet shift from ideology to pragmatism and the subsequent abandonment of Biafra, see Angela Stent, 'The Soviet Union and the Nigerian war: A triumph of realism', *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1973, pp. 43–48.
41. See Yevgenii Korshunov, 'Reportazh iz Nigerii [Reports from Nigeria]', *Za Rubezhom* [Moscow], No. 24, 9–15 June 1967.
42. Radio Biafra, quoted in Arthur J. Kinghoffer, 'The USSR and Nigeria: Why the Soviets chose sides', *Africa Report*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1968, p. 48.
43. Radio Biafra in Kinghoffer; Radio Biafra (Domestic Service in English), 18:00 GMT (5 August 1967).
44. 'Biafran students in Soviet demonstrate at Embassy', *New York Times*, 11 September 1967, p. 8; Radio Biafra (Domestic Service in English), 22:00 GMT, 22 August 1967; 12:00 GMT, 23 August 1967; 15:00 GMT, 9 September 1967.
45. 'Britain commits economic suicide in Nigeria', *Markpress: Biafran overseas press division*, GEN-433, 5 December 1968; 'The West fails to recognize Russian grip on Nigeria', *Markpress: Press Comments on Biafra*, GEN-611, 27 May 1969.

46. See Orobator, 'The Nigerian civil war and the invasion of Czechoslovakia'.
47. 'Israelis see a parallel in the plight of Biafra', *New York Times*, 13 January 1970, p. 15.
48. For this argument, see Stanley Diamond, 'Who killed Biafra?', *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol. 31, 2007, pp. 339–362. Reprint of the original article: *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 14, 26 February 1970.
49. For more on Israel's involvement in the Nigerian Civil War, see Zach Levey, 'Israel, Nigeria and the Biafra civil war, 1967–70', in this volume.
50. Republic of Biafra, Research Bureau of the Propaganda Directorate, 'Biafra's quest for survival and recognition: The alternative of seeking Chinese aid', submitted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (8 April 1967); Stremlau, *The international politics of the Nigerian civil war*, p. 237.
51. *Peking Review*, July 1969, quoted in Diamond, 'Who killed Biafra?', p. 357.
52. 'Biafran chief asks Red China for help', *New York Times*, 30 September 1968, p. 13.
53. For a comprehensive analysis of China's African (and Nigerian) strategy during this time period, see Alaba Ogunsanwo, *China's policy in Africa, 1958–1971* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).
54. On the Biafra debate among Soviet dissidents, see Matusevich, *No easy row for a Russian hoe*, pp. 126–127.
55. Marie-Luce Desgrandchamps, 'Dealing with "genocide": The ICRC and the UN during the Nigeria-Biafra war, 1967–70', in this volume; also Marie-Luce Desgrandchamps, '“Organizing the unpredictable”: The Nigeria-Biafra war and its impact on the ICRC', *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 94, No. 888, 2012, pp. 1409–1432.
56. See Matusevich, *No easy row for a Russian hoe*, pp. 127–128.
57. See report 'Russian pledge to Nigeria', *Sunday Telegraph*, 10 August 1969, p. 26; see Soviet denial in *Izvestia*, 9 July 1969; also see the incident related in Bruce D. Porter, *The USSR in third world conflicts: Soviet arms and diplomacy in local wars, 1945–1980* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 102.
58. 'Nigeria: The first in Africa', *Russian View*, No. 1, 2016, available at: www.russianview.com/dossier?id=16&lang=en. (accessed on 25 March 2016).
59. Diamond, 'Who killed Biafra?', p. 358.

10 West German Sympathy for Biafra, 1967–1970

Actors, Perceptions and Motives

Florian Hannig

Introduction

After surviving a severe heart attack in September 1968, 74-year-old Sister Anna, from the small West German town of Beckum, donated one thousand Deutschmarks for Biafra. To her—a nurse receiving only a small pension—it was an enormous amount, but she wanted her donation to express her overwhelming gratitude to God.¹ Sister Anna's action raises the questions of how and why, in the late 1960s in the Federal Republic of Germany, the idea of doing a good deed became synonymous with charity for Biafra.

West Germany was not alone in this—many other Western countries were similarly affected, and the Nigeria-Biafra war (1967–1970) attracted more public attention and empathy than any previous African conflict. This outpouring of Western charity has yet to be thoroughly analyzed, but the response has been variously attributed to: (1) the lobbying of Catholic missionaries from the Order of the Holy Ghost² (2) PR companies hired by the warring parties³ (3) the efforts of Western solidarity committees, which were created during the war in several countries⁴ and (4) the flood of magazine covers and TV reports featuring photographs of starving Biafran children, which began appearing in summer 1968.⁵ These might be relevant factors in explaining the concern for Biafra in Western Europe and North America. They cannot, however, be the starting point of an in-depth historical analysis, as these factors need to be historicized, assessed in their importance, and integrated into a larger argument. It is important to ask who initially raised awareness of the war and with what motivation as well as how the general public perceived the conflict. What factors, furthermore, drove people to donate money and why did they side so strongly with Biafra. And finally, why did governments become so deeply involved in humanitarian aid for the victims of the conflict. Situating the above-mentioned factors within a larger historical context makes it possible to more accurately assess their relevance. Using West Germany (which was

surpassed only by the United States in terms of donations for Biafra)⁶ as an example, this chapter examines the conflation of historical events and social factors which resulted in this unprecedented level of interest and involvement in an African conflict.

This contribution will provide the first analysis of West Germany's response to the Nigerian civil war. It analyzes the main actors popularizing the conflict in West Germany as well as the reactions of civil society and the government. To cover media representations of the Nigeria-Biafra war across the political spectrum from the beginning to its end, magazines published for different target audiences will be analyzed. These magazines include the New Left monthly and later, bi-monthly *konkret*,⁷ the major liberal German weeklies, *Der Spiegel* and *Die Zeit*, and the conservative, church-associated *Rheinischer Merkur*. In considering the role of the humanitarian aid community, the largest German aid agencies, which include the German Caritas, German Red Cross, and the work of the social service organization of the Evangelical Church, *Diakonisches Werk* will be examined. Furthermore, the Biafran diaspora in Germany and the solidarity group *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* are investigated as German mouthpieces for Biafra. Finally, the voices of German citizens, which are represented by letters written to the German government, along with the government's responses will be taken into account. The primary argument is that, from the very beginning of the conflict, the German churches and Biafrans built up a lobby infrastructure for Biafra. The success of the pro-Biafra campaign was made possible by a conflation of the media's bias in favour of the secessionist republic and Germans' projections of their personal stories onto the unfolding events. In line with the evolving nature of the Nigeria-Biafra war and its representation, this chapter is divided into three historical phases, which explore the development of awareness in West Germany.

First Phase (May–December 1967): Developing an Infrastructure and Forming a Bias

In the first phase of the conflict's representation, German media shaped public understanding of the conflict and its causes. Additionally, Biafra's few supporters developed an infrastructure in West Germany to raise awareness for the Nigeria-Biafra war. At this stage neither war party was heavily invested in influencing the representation of the conflict in other countries. The Nigerian Federal Military government's eagerness to keep the war against secession an internal matter meant that international public relations were neglected. Internationally isolated Biafra had much greater cause to look abroad, but its strategy focused on gaining recognition from political decision makers and obtaining military equipment, rather than

on swaying public opinion abroad. Its propaganda was primarily directed towards domestic audiences and it avoided the divisive issue of ethnic diversity, choosing instead to champion the idea of an invincible Biafran nation built on the unity of its people.⁸

Initially, German media showed only sporadic interest in the conflict. It focused on the war's outbreak and its causes, reducing the complexity of the civil war by portraying it as a tribal conflict between Igbos and Hausas.⁹ *Der Spiegel* summarized the causes of the conflict as, 'the Muslim Hausas—conservative and distrustful of progress and modern technology—env[ying] the hegemony of the more intelligent and adaptable Ibos in the economy, administration, and military'. The descriptions of the 'tribes' and the conflict as a tribal one were similar in *Die Zeit* and *Rheinischer Merkur*.¹⁰ Even the New Left *konkret*—typically eager to dissent from mainstream media's interpretations—described the Igbos as 'survivors of a tribal and religious war'.¹¹ Although these generalizations served Biafra's interests, they were not in fact the product of Biafran propaganda, which downplayed ethnicity, emphasizing instead the strengths of an all-inclusive nation. Rather, the roots of these widely reported stereotypes reached back to Nigeria's colonial times, and were the result of an interplay between outsider views and Igbo self-definitions.¹²

The magazines further engendered a sympathetic view of Biafra by focusing on its war victims and framing the war effort as a fight for survival. In turn, Nigeria's attempt to hold the federation together was represented as violence in the service of a lost cause.¹³ So, from the beginning, German media across the political spectrum presented the conflict in a way that invited readers to sympathize with the Igbos and Biafra.

Besides the media, some of the first actors popularizing the conflict in the Federal Republic were people with roots in the war-torn region. Foremost affected were the approximately one to two thousand Nigerian students in West Germany who identified as Igbos.¹⁴ Similar to the Biafran leadership, they first addressed their concern not to the public, but to actors whom they saw as able to influence the outcome of the conflict. On 22 September 1967 a group of seventy Igbos demonstrated in front of the US Embassy in Bonn to thank the US government for its neutrality and to protest against British and Soviet military support for Nigeria.¹⁵ Soon after, the Igbos organized themselves into groups including the Biafra Student Association in Germany (*Biafra Studentenvereinigung in Deutschland*), with the aim of making Germans aware of the situation in Biafra. They sought close partnership with both the Evangelical and Catholic churches in Germany.¹⁶

And indeed, the churches also felt particularly affected by the war. In October 1967 the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany released

material addressing the worldwide ‘persecution and physical extermination of Christians’. It drew particular attention to the situation in Nigeria ‘where in a few months tens of thousands of Christians from the Ibo-tribe were murdered without the effective interference of the world public’.¹⁷ This publication, in turn, activated the political lobby organization of the Catholic Church in Germany—the Catholic Office in Bonn.

In a meeting on 2 November 1967, the Catholic Office discussed how the West German public sphere could be better made aware of the ‘religious conflicts’ in Sudan and Biafra. Its members concluded ‘that [their] protest would be almost useless outside of the Church community if the impression was maintained that they cared only for [their] own people’. Also, they indicated that ‘Christian protest would be more effective in solidarity with all groups of the public sphere’.¹⁸ Consequently, the Catholic church fell back on the language of human rights to give an impression of impartiality. In November 1967, a human rights working group (‘Arbeitskreis für Menschenrechte’) was established within the Catholic Office. Politicians, civil servants and journalists who had previously been engaged in protests against the persecution of Christians were invited to be members of the group.¹⁹

This human rights working group evolved into one of the most important mouthpieces for Biafra in West Germany. In particular, it provided fertile ground for the Biafra campaign of the Holy Ghost Fathers. One of them, the bishop of Benin Patrick Joseph Kelly, visited several Western countries as ‘friend of the Ibos’. In December he travelled around Germany and met with Catholic leaders.²⁰ The Holy Ghost Fathers did not initiate support for Biafra in Germany. Rather, they built upon the pro-Biafra infrastructure that had been established by student groups and churches, whose identification with the Igbos was based on real or imagined ethnic and religious ties.

At this stage, the support for Biafra was mostly restricted to a small group of people who felt particularly invested in the cause. This can be seen in letters the German government received regarding Biafra. They came from people with a deep political and geographic understanding, like the Cologne association, *Gesellschaft für Afrika-Fragen e.V.*²¹ The association’s members consisted largely of Catholic laymen, who combined their interest in Africa with religious topics, particularly the persecution of Christians.²²

The West German government, however, was not much interested in the Nigerian civil war. It did not respond to a letter Ojukwu had written in March 1967.²³ And unlike the US, British and French governments, and against the recommendation of the Foreign Office, the head of the government, Kurt Georg Kiesinger, did not reply personally to a letter Gowon had

sent to declare the secession an internal Nigerian matter. Instead, only the German ambassador in Nigeria acknowledged Gowon's position.²⁴ This reaction reflected the uncertainty of the German government. Regarding German economic interests in Nigeria, the Foreign Office strongly recommended non-interference and successfully lobbied for an export licence to send ammunition to the Nigerian government in November 1967.²⁵ This decision was in line with a German-Nigerian military cooperation, which had begun in 1963.²⁶ The Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, however, showed signs of concern regarding the 'extermination of the capable and development-ready Ibos'—a characterization based on the letter from the *Gesellschaft für Afrika-Fragen e.V.* Yet these doubts were not made public.²⁷

In summary, during the first phase of the conflict, Biafra was presented in a sympathetic light by German media and gained a small but influential group of key supporters in West Germany, who established an infrastructure that would play an important role in future campaigns.

Second Phase (January–June 1968): 'A Vietnam for Christians'

In the second phase the media increased their coverage and began to report from within Biafra, showing its civilian victims in graphic detail and criticizing the lack of outrage in response to the conflict. The number of Biafra's supporters in the Federal Republic consequently multiplied and there was a notable shift in their perception of the crisis. These developments were closely connected to the progression on the battlefield. After some early military success, Biafra lost significant ground in the latter half of 1967, prompting an intensification of its propaganda campaign. It hired the American Robert S. Goldstein Enterprises and the Geneva-based Markpress to handle its public relations (PR). These PR-consultants convinced the leadership to open Biafra to outside observers and helped foreign journalists to enter the secessionist enclave. Markpress began distributing newsletters to editors and politicians in Western countries. The Biafran propaganda offensive also included sending prominent Biafrans like Akanu Ibiam, one of the six presidents of the World Council of Churches, to Western Europe to promote the Biafran cause.²⁸

The content of the propaganda changed, too. Now, the accusation that the Federal Military Government was planning a genocide against Biafra moved to the centre of the campaign. This was an attempt to nullify Nigerian claims that the conflict was an internal matter. The Biafran leadership hoped that the protest against Nigeria's 'crimes against humanity' would delegitimize Gowon's military campaign and help Biafra rally supporters.²⁹

Furthermore, Biafran propaganda stressed the religious dimension of the conflict even though many members of the Nigerian army and government, including the head of state, were Christians. To this end, the civil war was presented as a 'Muslim jihad directed toward the annihilation of Biafrans, and the Islamization of Biafra'.³⁰

Biafra's strategic changes immediately affected German journalists, who reacted to the new propaganda content and were able to report from within Biafra. The journalists mostly adopted the term 'genocide'. The *Rheinische Merkur*, for instance, began using the term as a result of Akanu Ibiam's visit to Germany at the beginning of 1968. The weekly not only covered his visit extensively but also accepted his representation of the conflict as a genocidal war initiated by Nigeria to exterminate Christians in Biafra.³¹ The other weeklies were more cautious with the term using it only when describing the Igbos' fear of extermination. They also showed more reluctance towards a religious interpretation of the conflict. *Die Zeit*, for instance declared: 'Talking about a religious war between the Mohammedan Hausa and the Christian Ibo is not the truth. The bloody conflict is no religious war; persecution of Christians does not take place'.³² *Der Spiegel*, however, which had previously made no mention of the Igbos' religious affiliations, now began to describe them as Christian with greater frequency.³³

Because journalists reported from within Biafra, the descriptions of suffering focused most strongly on civilian victims on the Biafran side. Whereas the human cost of the conflict had previously been given in plain numbers, the weeklies began presenting eyewitness reports from bombed markets and hospitals.³⁴ The on-site reports, which were usually written by correspondents with regional experience, gave voice to journalists with a deeper understanding of the conflict, but who also sometimes had a clear bias.

In this regard, the role of journalist Ruth Bower offers an illustrative example. She was one of the first German journalists writing from within Biafra. In April 1968, Bower was outraged by the Federal Military Government's bombing of civilian facilities and was impressed by Biafra's war effort and Ojukwu's charisma. A former refugee herself, Bower was among the first reporters to describe in detail the hardships of the approximately two million people who had fled to Biafra after the massacres in 1966.³⁵ Bower was hardly a neutral bystander; she had been an activist for Biafra since summer 1967, was a member of the human rights working group of the Catholic Church, and later headed a Biafra committee near West Germany's capital, Bonn.³⁶ Despite this bias, the *Rheinische Merkur* repeatedly used her as a correspondent from Biafra. In total, Bower wrote twelve articles about Biafra for the conservative weekly.³⁷ Bower was not exceptional in blurring the lines between journalism and activism for

Biafra. Others speaking out for Biafra included *Stern's* Randolph Braumann and Dieter Brauer from *Deutsche Welle*.³⁸ It seems like the on-site experience generally caused journalists to become emotionally invested in Biafra's cause or at least in the civilian suffering they witnessed. The more the media covered the conflict, the more they criticized West Germany's lack of awareness. Comparing it to the war in Vietnam, the weeklies proclaimed that there was a comparable level of suffering with far less resultant outrage. Drawing a contrast to the Vietnam war, *Der Spiegel* pointedly observed that 'no students marched on the streets and sang Ibo songs'.³⁹ This criticism was mostly directed against the apparent anti-Americanism of the New Left. Indeed, as the conflict did not lend itself to furthering a left-wing cause, it did not hold *konkret's* interest. The next Biafra-related article the magazine would publish appeared only after the end of the war. Nevertheless, among the mainstream media reports about the African conflict became an established media topic in the first half of 1968, and it became more and more intertwined with West German domestic issues.

It is also worth noting that although Markpress helped in opening Biafra to foreign journalists, previous research has frequently overestimated the significance of its role and especially the impact of its newsletters. Markpress's involvement continues to be seen from a 1960s vantage point when a certain fear of the gullibility of the masses was widespread. This perspective is evident in articles from *Der Spiegel* and *Rheinischer Merkur* about public relations companies from July and September 1968. Both reports stoked fears of extensive and secret manipulation by invisible PR companies. They claimed that only after Markpress's involvement in early 1968 did German media side with Biafra, even though—as previously shown—both magazines clearly sided with the Igbos from the onset of the war.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, Igbos in West Germany continued to stress the religious dimension of the war and presented themselves as part of the Western bloc in order to invite German identification with Biafra. For example, the Biafra Union of Germany wrote in a leaflet, 'The Muslim and Eastern-Bloc states tried every means to achieve the total extermination of the new AFRICAN CHRISTIAN NATION OF BIAFRA'.⁴¹ Akanu Ibiam approached Germans with similar messages. In January and February, Ibiam stayed for ten days in West Germany speaking to the human rights working group and to the Evangelical Church, which also organized a press conference for him in Frankfurt. There, Ibiam told his German audience that the Nigerian army was committing genocide and framed the conflict as a religious persecution: 'The predominantly-Christian majority in eastern Nigeria seceded from the central government in Lagos [. . .] so that they would not fall under the rule of a Muslim regime which wants to cruelly suppress the population of Biafra'.⁴²

Ibiam's visit was followed by extensive church action for Biafra. It strengthened the collaboration between the Evangelical and Catholic churches. Together they established methods of delivering aid to Biafra. Furthermore, important members of the Evangelical Church joined the human rights working group, whose view of the war's origins changed in this phase.

The human rights working group did not adopt Ibiam's interpretation of a religious conflict, because it believed that 'sixty per cent of the Nigerian army members are Christians'. Instead, the working group perceived the war as a 'tribal conflict' identifying the Igbos as 'seemingly the most able tribe in all of Africa' and as the 'Jews of Africa in the best sense of the word'.⁴³ Although it abandoned the notion of a religious persecution, the human rights working group was still motivated by the human suffering of the Igbos, and continued and even intensified its campaign for Biafra. In addition, it saw Biafra as an opportunity to apply moral parameters to discussions of foreign policy and international law. The group's members were delighted to establish a strong voice for a moral theological argument that resonated with West German society. It condemned the 'out-dated principle of non-intervention in current international law' and spoke of valuing the 'defence of an ethnic and religious minority's culture and lives' above the 'preservation of a state's unity'.⁴⁴ With this new perspective the protest expanded to include a challenge to the German government's inaction when confronted by the apparent extermination of a people.

Because some of its members, including Herbert Czaja, were MPs and members of the Parliamentary Subcommittee on Humanitarian Aid, the working group brought its cause to the German parliament. These MPs actively pushed the topic of the conflict in the *Bundestag*, for instance in the first parliamentary debate about the Nigeria-Biafra war in March 1968. A church report which followed a few months later in November stated contentedly: 'It is no coincidence that the most informed, critical questions were raised by MPs who are also members of the human rights working group, or who are close to the Commissariat of the German Bishops, and who are regularly informed by us. In part we had agreed in advance on key aspects of the debates'.⁴⁵ The report's satisfaction derived not only from establishing Biafra as a public issue but also from being able to set the political agenda. Although marginalized in many public debates on domestic issues in the 1960s, the Catholic Church and the human rights working group managed to mobilize parts of West German society.⁴⁶ In a letter to Bishop Tenhumberg, one commentator even likened the mobilization for Biafra to 'Vietnam for Christians', and asked: 'Should we Christians be surpassed by the Vietnam protesters? Let's look at how these mostly political extremists engaged and what they have accomplished! It would be a shame if we Christians could not show that we are also willing to fight for

an ideal world'.⁴⁷ So, it can be seen that the human rights working group in particular, and both churches, also saw their activism for Biafra as an opportunity to regain social ground in West Germany.

The German Government maintained a hesitant position regarding the Nigeria-Biafra war. Its policy was still dominated by economic interests and therefore it more or less sided with the Federal Military Government. It continued its development aid in zones not affected by the war and supported German business relations with Nigeria. Despite the war, German companies, particularly in the truck manufacturing and pharmaceutical industries, were able to increase their volume of sales in Nigeria. And the *Fritz Werner Industrie Ausrüstung GmbH* even kept six German engineers in an ammunition factory the company had built in Nigeria in 1966.⁴⁸ The economic interests, however, could not provide a shared perspective on the outcome of the war. Whereas the German embassy in Nigeria ruled out the chance of a Biafran victory, the Office of the Chancellery considered a Biafran surrender unlikely. Still, the work of Biafra's supporters in West Germany put the government in a comfortable position. There was no pressure to translate the government's uncertainty into policy. While Gowon welcomed the official neutrality and the continuation of business relations, Ojukwu was pleased with the support from the churches.⁴⁹ Domestically, however, the German government felt increasingly pressured by 'church-influenced propaganda for "Biafra"'. The Foreign Office received 'growing numbers of petitions' supporting the secessionists.⁵⁰ With a further escalation of the conflict, this domestic pressure would become the force to change the government's policy.

The letters from the public to the German government regarding Biafra reflected the arguments and language of the Church campaigns. Outraged by the discrepancy between what seemed moral and the realities of international law, Bernard H. protested 'vigorously against seeing people cruelly forced into states whose governments threaten them with enslavement and extermination, and standing back without saying a word'.⁵¹ Notably, Bernhard H. articulated his indignation by clearly emphasizing that indifference was not an option. Therefore, his letter also seems to be a reaction to complaints about the lack of outrage in West Germany regarding Biafran suffering. In criticizing inactivity and lack of outrage, the media and the churches presented speaking out against the conflict's suffering as an end itself. This form of protest offered moral purity without requiring a clear understanding of the conflict or an allegiance to one war party. It resonated with a society still struggling with its own history of genocide. Increasingly, speaking out against the current 'bestial murder of tens of thousands of Ibos in Nigeria' was presented as an appropriate way to come to terms with its Nazi past.⁵²

In the second phase, media representations of the war became more detailed—though not more substantial. It still focused on victims on the Biafran side, excluding the suffering and losses of the Nigerian army. Furthermore, it held to a simplistic explanation of the conflict rooted in tribal envy and criticized the lack of outrage regarding the Nigeria-Biafra war. The number of Biafra supporters increased, and through the human rights working group they entrenched their voice in the media and parliament. They turned their criticism to the—in their opinion—unjust and immoral international system which allowed a genocide to take place. Therefore, the media as well as the campaigns of the Biafra supporters increasingly highlighted the responsibility of the German government and society for the continued suffering in the Nigeria-Biafra war.

Third Phase (July 1968 Until the War's End): Reaching Beyond the Immediately Concerned

When Port Harcourt fell at the end of May 1968, Biafra was completely cut off from the outside world, with the exception of a makeshift airstrip. Consequently, severe difficulties of supply emerged. Famine spread within Biafra, impacting children most severely. Despite the fact that aid organizations reported the famine in May, it did not become headline news until July, when photographs of starving children began to circulate, and the suffering of 'innocent civilians' took centre stage.⁵³ Journalist presented shocking death numbers and pictures of starving and dead children.⁵⁴ Symptoms of the protein-energy malnutrition diseases, kwashiorkor and marasmus, were described in gruesome detail and pictures sometimes replaced commentaries entirely.⁵⁵ The 'pictures of skeleton-children with bloated stomachs, red hair and inanimate eyes' sealed Biafra's status as the victim in the conflict. While Nigerian casualties were absent from the media coverage, Biafrans were depicted as passive people 'who got shot or starved to death'.⁵⁶ Ruth Bowert, still impressed in April by the determination of the Biafran soldiers, in August saw Biafra turn into 'one big hospital', in which 6,000 children died daily. She then appealed: 'Don't abandon the people here, think about the years between 1944 and 1948 in your country, in Germany, [. . .] ask yourself whether the right to live is not the right of all people: Protest! Don't say again we didn't know'.⁵⁷ Bowert appealed to her readers to stop the starvation in Biafra by drawing parallels between them and the bystanders and victims of the Second World War and its aftermath. This was unusual at the time, because most journalists did not directly implicate the audience even though they compared the famine in Biafra to the Nazi genocide. The weeklies lost their caution when using the term 'genocide', describing the events in Biafra as such without clarifying what they meant.⁵⁸

Instead, the weeklies increasingly presented the famine without its military context and it sometimes even appeared to be a natural disaster. *Der Spiegel*, for example, commented that ‘famine spread in Biafra like the plague in the Middle Ages’.⁵⁹ The pictures mostly omitted any military context and the fact that the children were victims of a war was, for the most part, not visible. The description and visualization of the famine reduced the apparent complexity of the civil war to a point where regional and background information seemed unnecessary to comprehend what was happening. This abstraction invited readers to interpret the human suffering through their own experiences and political convictions. In summary, the media initially offered an orientation for who to side with in the conflict, but over time the coverage presented it as a more general story of human suffering.

The pictures of the ‘Biafra children’ are often seen as the driving force behind the media attention, which in turn mobilized a broader segment of the German population for Biafra. In evaluating the effect of the pictures, previous research often makes the morally charged assumption that it took sensationalized images of starving children to shock an indifferent public into action. This moral argument neglects the fact that before the summer of 1968, the Nigeria-Biafra war received more than average attention considering it was a conflict in the Global South without the direct involvement of any Cold War power. It also fails to recognize that its assessment of the photos as emotionally manipulative is descended from a similar view held by many in the 1960s. The pictures of starving children broke a taboo in the late 1960s at a time when German society was actively negotiating the limits of what was acceptable to depict with regard to sex and violence.⁶⁰ Both the media and groups appealing for donations used the images but at the same time denounced them as being cruel and dreadful. For example, the anchorman of the German TV programme *ZDF-Magazin*, Gerhard Löwenthal, warned his audience in 1969 of the ‘horrific images’ of Biafra that they were about to see, and *Rheinische Merkur* described the photographs of starving Biafran children as ‘dreadful’.⁶¹ This ambivalence towards the pictures also featured in calls for donations. The German Caritas used a picture of a child visibly suffering from kwashiorkor and explained: ‘This picture is cruel but it is even more cruel letting millions of children die’.⁶² And even though the analyzed weeklies reported about the pictures from the beginning of July 1968, it took them almost a month before they printed them, as if they feared that the inclusion of the pictures would compromise the quality of the magazines.⁶³ Meanwhile, in the most widely read German tabloid, *Bild*, the photos of starving children moved from the last page at the beginning of July to the front page by the end of the month.⁶⁴

Despite the disturbed response to their emergence, the photos of Biafra children were very effective in increasing fundraising for Biafra. The coverage of the famine set in motion a competition for donations. Immediately after the fall of Port Harcourt, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) asked its national societies to appeal for donations. In turn, the German Red Cross reached out to the West German government on 24 May 1968.⁶⁵ In response to mounting public pressure, the Foreign Office donated 100,000 Deutschmarks without waiting for the reactions of other governments. It was the first government to react to the ICRC appeal.⁶⁶ This hasty response was the first sign that the German government had begun to compromise its foreign policy interests by providing humanitarian aid for Biafra. The giving of aid threatened not only the economic interests of the German government but also increased the likelihood of a rapprochement of the Nigerian Federal Military Government and the German Democratic Republic.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, officials felt that ‘pressure from the public sphere’ left the German government with little room to manoeuvre. This ‘awareness of the public sphere’, which manifested itself through letters to the Foreign Office from individuals and organizations, became the main justification among government officials for providing aid to Biafra.⁶⁸ In the 1960s, the ‘public sphere’ had become a focal point of intellectual and political debate. A younger generation of opinion leaders recast the hitherto-pejorative term in a positive light, as a force for democracy and anti-totalitarianism.⁶⁹ Supported by Willy Brandt, the Social Democratic Foreign Minister, this favourable attitude towards the public sphere entered the Foreign Office in 1966, which then adopted a more democratic and transparent image.⁷⁰

The churches immediately followed the ICRC’s example, starting with a call for donations from the Evangelical Church on 28 May.⁷¹ The same day, Bishop Tenhumberg complained that the Catholic Church had not started a donation even though ‘the German public was almost exclusively made aware of the emergency situation in Biafra by Catholic circles’.⁷² In agreement with Caritas Internationalis and in cooperation with the aid organization of the Evangelical Church, Diakonisches Werk, the German Caritas delivered an appeal to the German public on 4 June. Caritas Internationalis and the World Council of Churches—of which Diakonisches Werk was a member—explicitly discouraged the German organizations from using the term ‘Biafra’ to avoid the impression of partisanship and out of consideration for its African partner churches. The appeal was nevertheless named ‘Biafra-Aid’.⁷³ For the Catholic Church, the aid campaign became a counterpart to its protest activity. It constituted an ‘effective foundation for the moral credibility’ of its political work and therefore it seemed only logical to act in the name of Biafra.⁷⁴

The donations fell short of the campaign's expectations, only collecting one hundred thousand Deutschmarks by the end of June. The pro-Biafra rhetoric discouraged not only international partners but also the German government. The German embassy in Nigeria recommended only using the German Red Cross because the Nigerian government saw church aid as pro-Biafran.⁷⁵ The churches started a massive and effective campaign to receive a share of the German government's donations. The Human Rights Working Group and the Evangelical Church lobbied the Federal Budget Committee, the Federal Development Committee and the Committee on Foreign Relations.⁷⁶ Their main advantage was that the ICRC, working with the consent of the Nigerian government, was forced to interrupt its airlift to Biafra several times to adjust to government regulations. In contrast, the churches, in keeping with their critique of current international law, refrained from consultations with the Nigerians and therefore operated a more effective airlift to the African enclave. This effectiveness, which was emphasized by the media, eventually altered government policy.

In July 1968, the German government donated one million Deutschmarks, which were originally designated for German Red Cross relief operations, to the agencies of the churches.⁷⁷ At the end of the month, both church agencies received two-and-a-half million Deutschmarks from the government for the relief operation in Nigeria, while the German Red Cross received only one-and-a-half million.⁷⁸ Afraid that the reputation of the ICRC might stain their image in West Germany, the German Red Cross sent unrequested German personnel to Nigeria, and urged the ICRC to deliver more goods to Biafra.⁷⁹ Still, these actions did little to improve the image of the Red Cross in Germany.

Meanwhile, the famine in Biafra made headlines and the churches were receiving more and more money from the public. The donation to the German Caritas alone increased within a month from one hundred thousand to 2.5 million Deutschmarks by the end of July.⁸⁰ By August 1969 the German Caritas received a total of over 36 million Deutschmarks, including 14 million from the German government.⁸¹ Increased media attention and new Biafra supporters also contributed to the rising aid budget. The intensity of the media representation and the decontextualized interpretation of the Biafra conflict as abstract human suffering served to engage people beyond the already-involved circles. The Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development reported receiving letters regarding Biafra 'not only from clerics or church influenced circles [. . .] but from seemingly all segments of the society'.⁸² Everywhere in West Germany people formed Biafra committees.

Aktion Biafra-Hilfe from Hamburg became the most important of the over ninety committees. Founded by Tilman Zülch and Klaus Guercke on

June 15, 1968, it initially only reached out to students at Hamburg University. However, by July and August, by organizing protest marches with over one thousand participants and hosting prominent speakers, including Günter Grass, it soon became the coordinating agency for all Biafra committees in the Federal Republic.⁸³

The fluctuations in the group's membership reflected the varying intensity of West Germany's outrage concerning Biafra. In June 1968, the group consisted of five members. By August, this number had increased to seventy. At the end of 1968, as the news coverage on Biafra waned, so too did the number of committee members. In January 1969, there were only six members left. However, after the end of the war when the Nigerian government forced Western aid agencies to leave, attention returned to Biafra and the group again grew to twenty members.⁸⁴

Providing information about the conflict and collecting money for Biafra were the two primary aims of the Biafra committees. The Hamburg committee printed and distributed around 55,000 posters and 1.7 million leaflets.⁸⁵ Zülch and Guercke translated and edited documents on Biafra, which were published in two editions as a book.⁸⁶ The donations the unit collected were mostly given to the churches. While criticizing the Red Cross for working only with the approval of the Nigerian government, the *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* maintained close contact with the Evangelical and Catholic Churches. This link resulted in *Diakonische Werk* inviting Zülch to Biafra in the beginning of 1969. He published reports of his trip in several newspapers including *Tagesspiegel* and *Publik*.

Furthermore, *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* arranged for a delegation of students from Biafra to visit Germany. The delegation spent three-and-a-half months in Germany and toured fifty, mostly university, cities. Zülch and his group attached great importance to the composition of the delegation. Due to the Federal Nigerian Government's claim that the Igbo repressed other minorities in Biafra, it seemed necessary to present the voices of non-Igbo delegates.⁸⁷

One of the delegates, Elizabeth Etuk, identified as Ibibio. Etuk presented her cause in a long article for the liberal German weekly, *Die Zeit*. She described her and Biafra's struggle as the result of a disappointed Nigerian nationalism. Having grown up in the south, she moved as a believer of a democratic Nigeria to the north to fight for women's political rights. After experiencing discrimination and death threats, Etuk fled back to the south where secession seemed the only possible self-defence—not just for the Igbo, but for all Nigerians interested in progress and democracy.⁸⁸ The delegation's visit made a strong impact on the German public. Delegates talked to several mayors, members of parliament, bishops and the president of Germany. Newspapers published between 150 and 200 articles about

them and they gave eleven radio and TV interviews.⁸⁹ *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe*, along with the other Biafra committees in West Germany, strengthened its position within an established infrastructure and a media field highly sympathetic to its cause. *Die Zeit* journalist Marion Dönhoff was especially receptive to the group and its concern. In August 1968 she, along with the writers Günter Grass and Max Frisch, appealed in *Die Zeit* to governments worldwide to end the 'genocide' in Biafra.⁹⁰

Even though the group's founder, Tilman Zülch, had a left-wing background, he successfully gained support for Biafra from people across the political spectrum.⁹¹ In the first demonstrations in the summer of 1968, he brought together the Social Democratic Students' Union, the Liberal Students of Germany and the Committee of Christian Democratic Students among others.⁹² Also in its rhetoric, *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* crossed political lines. Similar to the left-wing Vietnam protesters, it compared the atrocities of Nigeria to crimes of the Nazis by using slogans like 'A for Auschwitz, B for Biafra'.⁹³ However, with the slogan, 'One DRESDEN—one AUSCHWITZ—one HAMBURG is enough!', *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* equated Nazi crimes to the allied bombings of Germany—a comparison which would have been repellent to members of the New Left.⁹⁴ As a result of his involvement with the Biafra activity, Zülch became increasingly estranged from the New Left.⁹⁵

The New Left lacked a position from which to use the Biafra crisis to its advantage.⁹⁶ In contrast to the Vietnam War, the Nigerian civil war offered no opportunity for the New Left to condemn Western capitalism. While both the Western bloc and the Soviet Union supported a united Nigeria, the Biafrans presented themselves as being in line with the Western bloc, and emphasized democracy, anticommunism and Christianity.

Members of the New Left regarded the conflict to be a result of colonialism. In their view, a powerful Nigerian bourgeoisie could never emerge and revolt against the feudal conditions because all accumulated capital was transferred outside and not invested within Nigeria. They believed that a small elite acted in the interest of the British, who created ethnic tensions among the Nigerians to prevent a revolt against the colonial power. In this interpretation, the tensions between the elite and the masses following independence became strong enough that it turned into a 'revolutionary situation' that could have overthrown the unjust system. However, the already-divided ruling class, in alliance with interested outside powers, manipulated the masses and channelled the class contradictions into ethnic tensions. As a result, the New Left commentators viewed the Biafra campaigns in Germany as disguising the class conflict, which it perceived as the root of the civil war.⁹⁷ Biafra supporters across the political spectrum claimed that the death toll in Biafra had surpassed that of Vietnam and they

accused the New Left of passivity.⁹⁸ This charge further alienated the New Left from the Biafra supporters because it interpreted this accusation as an attempt to discredit its protest of the Vietnam War.⁹⁹

The absence of the New Left as well as the political ambiguity of the Biafra supporters helped to form alliances across the political spectrum. The decontextualized interpretation of the conflict as abstract human suffering provided little fodder for political controversies. Similarly uncontroversial was the most common response to the famine—donations of money. This explains the broad support for humanitarian aid to Biafra from such politically diverse people as conservative politician Franz-Josef Strauß, social democratic leader Willy Brandt, left-wing novelist Günter Grass and conservative commentator Golo Mann.¹⁰⁰

The abstract media representation turned the Biafra conflict into a screen onto which Germans projected their own stories, religious perspectives and political convictions. The Biafra conflict confronted Johann Ludwig von E. from Heidelberg, for example, with a memory of his enthusiasm for Hitler in his youth, and led him to express the conviction that the ‘Nigerian government’s war of extermination’ had to be stopped.¹⁰¹ In contrast, the Bavarian section of the Federation of Expellees, drew parallels between the plight of the Biafrans and the expulsion of the Germans after World War II.¹⁰² As a result, these projections offered personal ways to empathize with people in Biafra, as well as strong motivations to act on their behalf.

Several of Biafra’s most important supporters in West Germany seem to have been motivated by their experiences during the expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War. Tilman Zülch later connected his activity for Biafra to his experiences as a German expellee. He was one of the about twelve million Germans who were forced to flee their homes, so, being a refugee himself, he felt he could relate to some of the hardships the Biafrans experienced.¹⁰³ In addition to Zülch, other *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* members, including Elfriede Reinke and P.F. Ponath, had been victims of the expulsion of Germans at the end of the Second World War. Other important Biafra supporters were expellees as well. For example, the human rights working group member and Biafra correspondent for the *Rheinische Merkur*, Ruth Bowert.¹⁰⁴ Herbert Czaja, one of the most vocal parliamentarians for the Biafran cause, as well as a member of the human rights working group, became president of the Federation of Expellees in 1970. So, although references to crimes committed by Germans during the ‘Third Reich’ were much more vocally and frequently expressed than references to the German expulsion in campaigns for Biafra, both comparisons caused Germans to reflect on their roles as perpetrators, bystanders and victims in the Second World War.

Conclusion

Why did West Germans care so much about the Nigeria-Biafra war? Why did the largest aid agencies and the government of the Federal Republic of Germany become so deeply involved in a humanitarian relief operation in west Africa? Previous research has focused on the Biafra awareness only at the height of its intensity in the summer of 1968, interpreting the emotional and financial outpouring as a matter of course in response to lobbying Catholic missionaries, activities of PR companies and solidarity committees as well as graphic media coverage of human suffering.

This contribution aims to broaden the scope of research on this topic, and analyzes the perception of the conflict from its beginnings. It shows that West German awareness of Biafra was the product of an evolving confluence of actions and a variety of motives and interests. It is only within this larger context that the complex human engineering underpinning the ostensibly spontaneous response can be revealed.

The involvement of important actors, who later initiated the massive humanitarian aid campaign for Biafra can be traced back to the second half of 1967. From the beginning of the conflict, a small number of people in Germany identified with Biafra based on real or imagined ethnic and religious ties. These people formed groups which aimed to raise German awareness of the Nigerian civil war and created an efficient infrastructure with which to organize support. So, fertile ground for his pro-Biafra campaign was already provided when a Catholic missionary travelled to Germany in December 1967. Meanwhile, media reports on the conflict drew heavily on pre-existing ethnic stereotypes, which cast Biafrans in a favourable light.

At the end of 1967, in response to multiple military defeats, Biafra looked outward and embarked on an international propaganda campaign. The hired PR companies were not capable of influencing the media representation of the conflict directly, but persuaded Biafran leaders to open the borders to foreign journalists, whose on-location reports reinforced the media's positive portrayal of the secessionists. The 1968 propaganda offensive in Germany was heavily dependent on the previously established pro-Biafran infrastructure, which provided public forums for travelling Biafran representatives like Akanu Ibiam. In this phase, the media and Biafra supporters developed a rhetoric for protest and proposed humanitarian aid as solution to the diverse moral problems posed by the conflict. This enabled the future translation of Biafra awareness into active civic engagement.

After a further escalation of the conflict in late spring 1968, there was widespread starvation in Biafra. In response, the first solidarity committees

were formed. These groups supported the aid organizations by increasing the pressure on the German government and by providing funding to deliver aid to Biafra. The German government reacted to this mounting domestic pressure with its first donation for an international relief operation. With this precedent set, the government changed its general policy despite resulting damage to its ties with Nigeria. At the same time, German media intensified their Biafra-biased reporting and began including disturbing and graphic images of starving children. The focus on the famine in the media and in pro-Biafran campaigns decontextualized the conflict and invited people to project their personal stories onto the suffering they saw. Only then did the idea of doing a good deed become synonymous with charity for Biafra. And even people like Sister Anna from the small town of Beckum, who were so seemingly far-removed from the African conflict, contributed their share to alleviate the suffering in Biafra. The varied voices of Biafra's supporters had resonated to become a thundering chorus that the German government could not ignore, leading it to provide massive donations of humanitarian aid and to compromise its economic interests.

Notes

1. See letter from Sister Anna to German Caritas, 6 December 1968: Archiv des Deutschen Caritasverbands [hereafter: ADCV], 187–1–6 b1af 3.
2. See Ken Waters, 'Influencing the message: The role of Catholic missionaries in media coverage of the Nigerian civil war', *Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 90, No. 4, 2004, pp. 697–718; Joseph E. Thompson, *American policy and African famine: The Nigeria-Biafra war, 1966–1970* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), p. 42; John J. Stremlau, *The international politics of the Nigerian civil war, 1967–1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 118–123.
3. See Morris Davis, *Interpreters for Nigeria: The third world and international public relations* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977); Stremlau, *The international politics of the Nigerian civil war*, pp. 115–117; John de St. Jorre, *The Nigerian civil war* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1972), pp. 305–307.
4. See Lasse Heerten, 'The dystopia of postcolonial catastrophe: Self-determination, the Biafran war of secession and the 1970s human rights moment', in Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (eds.), *The breakthrough: Human rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), pp. 15–32; Lasse Heerten, "'A" as in Auschwitz, "B" as in Biafra: The Nigerian civil war, visual narratives of genocide, and the fragmented universalization of the Holocaust', in Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno (eds.), *Humanitarian photography: A history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 249–274; Thompson, *American policy and African famine*, pp. 75–77; Jürgen Wüst, *Menschenrechtsarbeit im Zwielicht: Zwischen Staatsicherheit und Antifaschismus* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1999), pp. 244–252; St. Jorre, *The Nigerian civil war*, pp. 357–361; Brian McNeil's contribution in this book.
5. See Michael Gould, *The struggle for modern Nigeria* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012); Heerten, "'A" as in Auschwitz, "B" as in Biafra'.
6. See Thompson, *American policy and African famine*, p. 167.

7. Until 1968 *konkret* was published on a monthly basis, from 1969 onwards two magazines per month were published.
8. See Stremlau, The international politics of the Nigerian civil war, pp. 3–108; St. Jorre, The Nigerian civil war, pp. 27–176; Suzanne Cronje, The world and Nigeria: The diplomatic history of the Biafran war 1967–1970 (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1972), pp. 1–23.
9. I use the modern spelling ‘Igbo’ and ‘Hausa’ while in the 1960s in Germany most people spelled it ‘Ibo’ and ‘Hausa’. Therefore, in quotations you will find the older spelling.
10. See *Der Spiegel*, 5 June 1967; *Die Zeit*, 14 July 1967; *Rheinischer Merkur*, 11 August 1967.
11. See *konkret*, October 1967.
12. See Douglas Anthony, ‘Resourceful and progressive Blackmen: Modernity and race in Biafra, 1967–1970’, *Journal of African History*, Vol. 51, No. 1, 2010, pp. 41–61.
13. See *Der Spiegel*, 5 June 1967; *Die Zeit*, 13 October 1967; *Rheinischer Merkur*, 11 August 1967 and 22 September 1967.
14. Estimate according to the German Foreign Office, see notes of Posadowsky-Wehner, 14 May 1968: Bundesarchiv in Koblenz (hereafter BArch), B136, 6272.
15. See note from McGhee (AM Embassy Bonn), Biafran Student Demonstration in Bonn, 25 September 1967: National Archives and Records Administration, RG 59 Central Files, 1967–69, POL Biafra, Box 1871; *konkret*, October 1967.
16. See note from Hans-Otto Hahn, 6 November 1967: Archiv des Diakonischen Werks (hereafter ADW), HGSt/PB, 906.
17. See Evangelischer Pressedienst (epd) Nr. 237, 14 October 1967.
18. See note Hannes Kramer, 6 November 1967: ADCV, 187–1–6 biaf 12.
19. See Report of the Catholic Office, Nationale und internationale politische Bedeutung der Biafra-Frage für die Kirche, 5 November 1968: ADCV Nachlass Stehlin 1968.
20. See note from Posadowsky-Wehner: Der Bürgerkrieg in Nigeria, 21 December 1967: BArch, B136, 6272.
21. See letter from Christoph H. from Cologne, 23 October 1967: BArch, B213, 03971.
22. See for example the book of the founding members Elimar von Fürstenberg and Helmut Ruppert, *Der Südsudan in Sklavenketten* (Regensburg: Habel, 1969).
23. See letter from Arnold to Boss, 24 April 1967: BArch, B136, 6272.
24. See notes from Posadowsky-Wehner: Beantwortung der Botschaft des nigerianischen Staatschefs. 3 October 1967: BArch, B136, 6272; notes from Boss: Schreiben des nigerianischen Staatschefs Gowon an den Herrn Bundeskanzler vom 29. Juli 1967, 10 October 1967: BArch, B136, 6272.
25. See Note from Günther Harkort, 29 November 1967, Document 408, *Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1967*, ed. Hans Peter Schwarz (Munich: Oldenburg Verlag, 1998).
26. See Adeolu Durotoye, Nigerian-German relations: The role of political culture (Münster: LIT, 2001), p. 136.
27. See Note from Posadowsky-Wehner, 21 December 1967, Der Bürgerkrieg in Nigeria: BArch, B136, 6272; Note from Theierl, 22 December 1967: BArch, B213, 03971.
28. See Stremlau, The international politics of the Nigerian civil war, pp. 23–25; St. Jorre, The Nigerian civil war, p. 179; Davis, Interpreters for Nigeria, pp. 60–106.
29. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, ‘Genocide’ (Address to joint meeting of the consultative assembly and the council of chiefs and elders, January 27, 1968), in *Biafra selected speeches and random thoughts of C. Odumegwu Ojukwu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 231.
30. Ojukwu, ‘Genocide’, p. 233.
31. See *Rheinischer Merkur*, 2 February 1968.
32. See *Die Zeit*, 8 March 1968.
33. See *Der Spiegel*, 8 April and 27 May 1968.

34. See, for example, *Rheinischer Merkur*, 26 April 1968.
35. See *Rheinischer Merkur*, 26 April 1968.
36. See *Der Spiegel*, 16 June 1969; Protokoll über die Sitzung des Menschenrechtsarbeitskreises, 19 June 1968: ADCV, 187.1/6 biaf-12.
37. See *Rheinischer Merkur*, 26 April, 21 June, 9 August, 16 August, 30 August, 13 September, 20 September 18 October, 25 October, 1 November, 6 December 1968; and 28 March 1969.
38. See Randolph Braumann, 'Selbstbestimmung für Biafra'. Opening speech for the exhibition of art and craft from Biafra in Cologne, 30 May 1969: Archiv der Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker (herafter AGfbV); Dieter Brauer's letter to Tilman Zülch, 10 September 1968: AGfbV, Biafra Korrespondenz 1972–1982.
39. See *Der Spiegel*, 27 May 1968; a similar criticism can be found in *Die Zeit*, 8 March 1968; *Rheinische Merkur* 2 February 1968.
40. See Werbung in Watte, *Der Spiegel*, 8 July 1968; Die Hand des Kenners. Die Meinungsmacher, *Rheinischer Merkur*, 20 September 1968.
41. See Biafra Union of Germany, Newsletter 'Humanitäre Hilfe für Biafra-Flüchtlinge' (no date): ADW, HGSt/PB 906.
42. See Evangelischer Pressedienst (epd) No. 23, 27 January 1968.
43. See appendix 1 of the human rights working group's newsletter, 22 May 1968: ADCV 187–1–6 biaf 12 Handakte Kramer.
44. See Report of the Catholic Office, Nationale und internationale politische Bedeutung der Biafra-Frage für die Kirche, 5 November 1968: ADCV Nachlass Stehlin 1968; human rights working group's newsletter, 22 May 1968: ADCV 187–1–6 biaf 12 Handakte Kramer.
45. See Report of the Catholic Office, Nationale und internationale politische Bedeutung der Biafra-Frage für die Kirche, 5 November 1968: ADCV Nachlass Stehlin 1968.
46. For the marginalization of the churches see Thomas Großbölting, *Der verlorene Himmel: Glaube in Deutschland seit 1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), pp. 96–180.
47. See letter from Erik Z. to Heinrich Tenhumberg, 30 June 1968: BArch B136/6271.
48. See letter from Boss to Kiesinger, 17 April 1968; note from Posadowsky-Wehner, 14 May 1968: BArch, B136, 6272; note from Gnodtke, 14 February 1968, letter from Meyer (Fritz Werner Industrie Ausrüstung GmbH), 17 June 1968: BArch, B213, 03971.
49. See note from Gnodtke, 1 April 1968; letter from Boss to Kiesinger, 17 April 1968; note from Posadowsky-Wehner, 14 May 1968: BArch, B136, 6272.
50. See note from Posadowsky-Wehner, 14 May 1968: BArch, B136, 6272.
51. See letter from Bernard H. from Kleinwallstadt, 22 May 1968: BArch B 213, 3971.
52. See Sozialdemokratischer Hochschulbund an der pädagogischen Hochschule Rheinland Abteilung Köln: Resolution des Sozialdemokratischen Hochschulbundes an der Pädagogischen Hochschule Köln gegen den Völkermord an den Ibos in Nigeria, 23 January 1968: BArch, B213, 3971.
53. See Paul Harrison and Robin Palmer, *News out of Africa: Biafra to Band Aid* (London: Hilary Shipman, 1986).
54. See *Der Spiegel*, 22 July 1968.
55. See *Rheinischer Merkur*, 2 August 1968.
56. See *Der Spiegel*, 19 August 1968; Heerten, "'A" as in Auschwitz, "B" as in Biafra'.
57. See *Rheinischer Merkur*, 9 August 1968.
58. See *Die Zeit*, 12 July 1968; *Der Spiegel*, 19 August 1968; *Rheinischer Merkur*, 9 August 1968.
59. See *Der Spiegel*, 19 August 1968.
60. See Habbo Knoch, 'Bewegende Momente. Dokumentar fotografie und die Politisierung der westdeutschen Öffentlichkeit vor 1968', in Bernd Weisbrod (ed.), *Die Politik der Öffentlichkeit—Die Öffentlichkeit der Politik. Politische Medialisierung in der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003), pp. 97–122; Quinn

- Slobodian, *Foreign front: Third world politics in sixties West Germany* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).
61. See ZDF-Magazin, 26 November 1969; *Rheinischer Merkur*, 12 July 1968.
 62. See German Caritas call for donations 1968: ADCV.
 63. The pictures of children were mentioned in *Die Zeit*, 12 July 1968; *Rheinischer Merkur*, 12 July 1968, but only printed in *Die Zeit*, 20 September 1968; *Rheinischer Merkur*, 2 August 1968; *Der Spiegel* was an exception, printing one picture already on 1 July 1968.
 64. On July 5, 25, 27 *Bild* featured Biafra on the last page. On 31 July, August 1, 2, 3, the conflict was on *Bild's* front page.
 65. See telegram from the German Red Cross, 24 May 1968: Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (hereafter PA/AA) B 30 624.
 66. See note for the undersecretary, 10 July 1968: PA/AA B 34 741.
 67. See note from Boss, 18 November 1968: BArch, B136, 6271.
 68. See note from Posadowsky-Wehner, 14 May 1968: BArch B 136, 6272; Note from Posadowsky-Wehner, 27 May 1968; Letter from Per Fischer to Posadowsky-Wehner, 29 August 1968: PA/AA, B 30, 634; Letter from Willy Brandt to Karl Carstens, 10 September 1968: BArch B 136, 6271.
 69. See Christina von Hodenberg, *Konsens und Krise: Eine Geschichte der westdeutschen Medienöffentlichkeit, 1945–1973* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006), pp. 31–86.
 70. See Andrea Wiegeshoff, *Wir müssen alle etwas umlernen. Zur Internationalisierung des Auswärtigen Dienstes der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (1945/51–1969)* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2013), pp. 136–137, 336–355; Peter Hoeres, *Außenpolitik und Öffentlichkeit. Massenmedien, Meinungsforschung und Arkanpolitik in den deutsch-amerikanischen Beziehungen von Erhard bis Brandt* (Munich: Oldenburg, 2013).
 71. See *Das Diakonische Werk: Hilfe für Nigeria—Biafra* (6), 28 May 1968: ADW, HGSt/PB, 906.
 72. See Konrad Pözl's note, 28 May 1968: ADCV 084 N26 Nachlass Stehlin.
 73. See report of Scheuner of World Council of Churches meeting (no date): ADW, HGSt/PB, 906.
 74. See Report of the Catholic Office, *Nationale und internationale politische Bedeutung der Biafra-Frage für die Kirche*, 5 November 1968: ADCV Nachlass Stehlin 1968.
 75. See Ruyter's telegram to the Foreign Office, 19 July 1968: BArch, B213, 03971; Note from Féau de la Croix, 25 July 1968: BArch, B 126, 2965.
 76. See note from Tenhumberg to the chairman and the members of the federal budget committee, 20 June 1968: BArch, B 126, 31457; Note from Geißel, 1 August 1968: ADW, HGSt/PB, 906; Letter from Boss to Kiesinger, 26 July 1968: BArch, B136, 6272.
 77. See Theierl's note, 17 July 1968: BArch B213, 03971.
 78. See protocol: *Humanitäre Hilfe für Nigeria (Biafra)*, 30 July 1968: BArch, B 126, 31457.
 79. See letter from Paul to Tenambergen, 9 August 1968: Archiv des Deutschen Roten Kreuzes (hereafter ADRK), DRK 11 Hilfsmaßnahmen für Biafra, Präsident Bargatzky—Prinz Wittgenstein, 1968–70; letter from Bargatzky to Gonard, 8 August 1968: ADRK, DRK 11 Hilfsmaßnahmen für Biafra, Präsident Bargatzky—Prinz Wittgenstein, 1968–70.
 80. See Hannes Kramer, *Humanitäre Hilfe für Ostnigeria (Biafra): Zwischenbericht des DCV*, 17 July 1968: ADCV, Nachlass Stehlin 1968.
 81. See Specht, Georg: *Die Hilfe des Deutschen Caritasverbandes für die Notleidenden in Biafra, Caritas '69. Jahrbuch des Deutschen Caritasverbandes*, p. 129.
 82. See note from Theierl, 1 July 1968: BArch, B213, 03971.
 83. See press release of the Nigerian ambassador in Germany, Adedokun A. Haastrup, 'Aufruf zu Gewissenhaftigkeit und Gerechtigkeit bei der Beurteilung der nigerianischen Krise' von seiner Exzellenz, 28 June 1968: BArch B136, 6272; Tilman

- Zülch, 'Wir wollen keine ideologischen Scheuklappen', *Pogrom*, Vol. 251, 2008, pp. 8–12, *Die Zeit*, 12 July 1968.
84. See Statement from Tilman Zülch to Obi Ifeobu's letter, no date: AGfbV, Biafra.
 85. See Eckard Beckmann, 'Die Arbeit der Biafrakomitees', in Tilman Zülch and Klaus Guercke (eds.), *Soll Biafra überleben?* (Berlin: Lettner Verlag, 1969), pp. 191–192.
 86. Tilman Zülch and Klaus Guercke (eds.), *Biafra: Todesurteil für ein Volk?* (Berlin: Lettner Verlag, 1968); Tilman Zülch and Klaus Guercke (eds.), *Soll Biafra überleben?* (Berlin: Lettner Verlag, 1969).
 87. See Note on delegation, no date: AGfbV, Biafra.
 88. See Elisabeth Etuk, 'Warum ich für Biafra kämpfe', *Die Zeit*, 30 May 1969.
 89. See Letter from Wilfried P. Vollmerhaus to Gesellschaft für Leben und Zukunft bedrohter Völker, e.V., 11 June 1970: AGfbV, Biafra.
For the meeting with the President of Germany see note from Zimmermann, 4 August 1969: BArch, B122, 11625.
 90. See *Die Zeit*, 23 August 1968. For Dönhoff's sympathies with *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe*, see *Die Zeit*, 12 July 1968.
 91. Founder Tilman Zülch for example had been a member of the Social Democratic Students' Union, see Zülch, 'Wir wollen keine ideologischen Scheuklappen', pp. 8–12.
 92. See digitized Biafra material: AGfbV.
 93. See Heerten, "'A" as in Auschwitz, "B" as in Biafra'.
 94. See Flyer of Aktion Biafra-Hilfe, September 1968: AGfbV, reproduced flyers.
 95. See Tilman Zülch, 'Plädoyer für die Republik Biafra', in Tilman Zülch and Klaus Guercke (eds.), *Biafra: Todesurteil für ein Volk?* (Berlin: Lettner Verlag, 1968), pp. 9–16.
 96. See Konrad Kuhn, *Entwicklungspolitische Solidarität: Die Dritte-Welt-Bewegung in der Schweiz zwischen Kritik und Politik (1975–1992)* (Zürich: Chronos, 2011), p. 207.
 97. See Paola Antonello, Bettina Decke, Franz J. T. Lee, Herbert Schmel, Alex Chima and Obi B. Egbuna, *Nigeria gegen Biafra? Falsche Alternativen oder über die Verschärfung der Widersprüche im Neokolonialismus* (Frankfurt: Wagenbach, 1969); konkret, January 1970.
 98. The New Left was criticized by, for instance, Günter Grass in 'Letter to the Katholisches Büro', 24 July 1968: BArch, B 136, 6271; *Der Spiegel*, 27 May 1968; Golo Mann, 'Geleitwort', in Tilman Zülch and Klaus Guercke (eds.), *Biafra: Todesurteil für ein Volk?* (Berlin: Lettner Verlag, 1968), pp. 9–10; Tilman Zülch, 'Plädoyer für die Republik Biafra', in Tilman Zülch and Klaus Guercke (eds.), *Biafra: Todesurteil für ein Volk?* (Berlin: Lettner Verlag, 1968), pp. 9–16.
 99. See Antonello, *Nigeria gegen Biafra?*
 100. See Biafra appeal from Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, Max Frisch and Günther Grass, *Die Zeit*, 22 August 1968; flyer Hilfsaktion Biafra: BArch, B213, 3971; Golo Mann, 'Geleitwort', in Tilman Zülch and Klaus Guercke, *Biafra: Todesurteil für ein Volk?* (Berlin: Lettner Verlag, 1968), pp. 9–10.
 101. See letter from Johann Ludwig von E. from Heidelberg, 22 July 1969: BArch B122/11624.
 102. Letter from Bund der Vertriebenen—Landesverband Bayern e.V., 23 January 1970: BArch B122/11623.
 103. See Zülch, 'Wir wollen keine ideologischen Scheuklappen', pp. 8–12; Lora Wildenthal, *The language of human rights in West Germany* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), pp. 129–130.
 104. See Bowert's biography Ruth Bowert, 'Die Prosa Karl Wolfskehls: Grundzüge seines Denkens und seiner Ausdrucksformen' (unpublished PhD thesis, Hamburg University, 1964), p. 299.

11 Dealing With ‘Genocide’

The ICRC and the UN During the Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967–1970

Marie-Luce Desgrandchamps

Introduction

The Nigeria-Biafra war is an excellent example of the diversity of responses by human rights and humanitarian organizations confronted with reports of genocide. In the summer of 1967, following the secession by the East Region of Nigeria, which declared its independence as the Republic of Biafra, the Nigerian Federal Military Government (FMG) set out to reconquer the territory through the use of arms, as well as by setting up a blockade around the area to weaken the separatist regime. The conflict lasted until January 1970, and was accompanied by a famine, images of which moved contemporaries around the globe in the summer of 1968 and triggered the pro-active involvement of various relief organizations, such as churches’ aid agencies and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). These organizations tried with more or less success to bring relief supplies to the starving population.¹ However, humanitarian aid was strongly linked with questions of military and political strategy for each belligerent party and the governments supporting them, which complicated the task of the relief organizations. Moreover, the Biafran authorities accused the Nigerian government of genocide, an accusation that made the situation even more complex. It was vehemently confirmed by some humanitarian organizations or workers in the field and just as passionately negated by others.

In the decades that followed World War Two, the existence of diverging attitudes toward the term ‘genocide’ was not something specific to Biafra. In 1948, genocide became a crime under international law with the adoption of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Even though the Convention remained difficult to enforce,² describing a situation as genocide engendered legal and above all moral obligations for the international community. Thus, even in cases of mass violence, states, and by extension the UN, were for the most part reluctant to employ the term to avoid the legal and the implicit moral obligation to intervene.³ In contrast, the term was used frequently by various civil

society groups' or organizations' to draw attention to a variety of causes.⁴ During the Nigeria-Biafra war, the attitude of international organizations and NGOs on this issue not only reveals their policy in cases of massive violations of human rights of humanitarian principles, but also helps to explain why Biafra is considered an important moment in the history of humanitarianism. In some writings, Biafra constituted a turning point due to the future founders of *Médecins sans frontières* (MSF, Doctors without borders, created in 1971) break with the ICRC.⁵ According to some French doctors working for the ICRC at the time, most prominently Bernard Kouchner they chose to testify to and denounce the alleged genocide of the Biafrans.⁶ Part of this motivation was, they explained, to avoid the repetition of ICRC's mistakes during World War Two.⁷ At the same time, critical reflection on the impact of relief operations also gained some ground. On the basis of questions raised during the conflict, many studies have underlined that, by participating in the dissemination of the Biafran point of view and bringing relief to the secessionist region, humanitarian organizations actually contributed to strengthening the separatist regime and thus helped prolong the conflict.⁸ In this regard, the role played by the churches and especially the European missionaries in spreading the idea of genocide has been emphasized in particular.⁹ However, the attitude of other organizations remains less well known.

The chapter examines how two very different organizations which shared international responsibilities regarding the enforcement of human rights and humanitarian law—namely, the UN and the ICRC—reacted to reports evoking a possible genocide of the Biafran people.¹⁰ To understand their different attitudes, the chapter studies the knowledge these organizations generated about the conflict, which type of information reached them, and what they used it for. Which mechanisms influenced the ICRC and the UN to position themselves in view of the genocide allegations and, more generally, the violation of humanitarian law and principles during the conflict? The situation of these organizations in the field, their permeability to dominant discourses or simple pragmatism are key factors which were perhaps more important than established principles or procedures. Accordingly, they should not be underestimated. Finally, in examining how these different international actors apprehended the issue of genocide, this chapter sheds light on the history of violence that took place during the conflict, a history that remains controversial.

During the first half of the conflict, Biafran propaganda regularly accused the FMG of genocide against the civilian population. The first part reconstructs how the ICRC reacted to this discourse. Why did the ICRC initially not exclude the possibility of genocide, and which measures did it take in this regard? Focusing on the UN, the second part analyzes how

the organization participated in the production of a counter-discourse that stated that there was no genocide. Although this counter-discourse became dominant during the second half of the war, studying its limits reveals why the preoccupations of humanitarian aid workers in the field did not completely disappear. This was particularly the case for some of the future founders of MSF, who decided to denounce genocide by their own means. By placing their stances in a broader context, the third part of the chapter places the story of their rupture with the ICRC into perspective.

From the Field to the Headquarters: The ICRC and the Biafran Genocide Allegations (1967–1968)

During the summer of 1967, very soon after the start of the Nigeria-Biafra war, the ICRC, which had proposed its services to the belligerents a few weeks before, received the first reports of delegates who had managed to gain access to Biafra.¹¹ Their writings provided insights into the violence potentially aimed at civilians, and thus aroused the concern of the ICRC. The delegates reported the fears of the population and, from an early stage, did not hesitate to use the term 'genocide'. For example, Paul Reynard, on secondment to Biafra for a few weeks in September 1967, spoke of a meeting with the Anglican bishop of the province, reporting that: 'if the Federals win, genocide awaits'.¹² According to Reynard, this was a fear shared by the population. He warned that the ICRC headquarters in Geneva should prepare for such an outcome:

People here everywhere are extremely certain that falling into the hands of the Federals will be tantamount to a death sentence. It won't even be an issue of prisoners of war. We are of the impression that there will be no capture, just extermination. We thus understand that this hateful war does not only oppose armies, but races where civilian populations flee from the enemy. [. . .] In the event that Biafra is invaded, at the very minimum, we will have to provide for a minimum of protection for the Ibos who will be particularly targeted by the genocide.¹³

In November 1967, Reynard was replaced by Karl Heinrich Jaggi in his functions as head of the ICRC delegation to Biafra. Jaggi expressed the same concerns as his predecessor. In January 1968, he wrote to the ICRC headquarters that the most serious aspect of this war was the threat of genocide. Drawing a comparison with the Second World War, he stated that he was happy that the Igbo—the main population group inside Biafra—had fled, for otherwise the region would have been 'like Europe thirty years ago'. Jaggi considered it crucial to inform his superiors of this situation,

which he described as serious and critical.¹⁴ Other sources, like missionaries and foreign doctors, also confirm the Biafran population's fears and took the genocide allegation very seriously.

Such an outcome seemed plausible for several reasons in the eyes of the westerners *in situ* during the conflict's early stages. The first reason for these perceptions resides in the skilfulness of Biafran propaganda. John Stremlau has shown how, by means of booklets and especially via Radio Biafra, the authorities undertook to convince their own population of the danger hanging over their heads. In a second step, the latter would convince the international community.¹⁵ To this end, Biafran propaganda notably placed emphasis on the massacres committed against the Igbo that had led to the deaths of several thousand victims in 1966. As underlined by John O. Ahazuem, after an enquiry carried out amongst the population of former Biafra, the massacres left a severe trauma on the easterners and convinced them that they could no longer live safely in Nigeria. This belief was accentuated by the influential Biafran propaganda.¹⁶ With the outbreak of fighting in July 1967, the massacres of 1966 became the key reference of the secessionist authorities, who turned them into the cornerstone of the genocide allegations. Unhesitatingly exaggerating the number of victims, the figures provided by secessionist publications grew from 10,000 at the beginning of 1967 to 50,000 by 1969. During the war, the massacres were invoked to show that the Igbo were not the victims of the conflict's collateral damage but of a policy of extermination orchestrated by the FMG that had begun even before the conflict.

Second, Biafran authorities presented the war as a means to continue that policy. This affected the behaviour of civilians who, upon the arrival of federal troops, frequently fled even deeper into Biafra or into the bush for fear of coming into contact with enemy forces. It is difficult to assess the extent to which Biafrans' panic at the sight of federal troops was created only by the propaganda or whether it was also the result of the violence suffered at the hands of the Nigerian army. That this theory spread so easily makes it reasonable to suppose that these fears were at least partly based on experience. In this regard, following the Biafran offensive towards Lagos during the summer of 1967, the tone in the Nigerian press became particularly violent, depicting the Igbo as ambitious creatures whose sole purpose was to assert their dominance over all Nigeria.¹⁷ After that episode, federal military operation was turned from a police operation, as which it was initially presented, into a full-on war waged mercilessly, at least for a time.¹⁸ Nsukka, Benin, Asaba, Calabar and Ikot Ekpene were theatres of war in which numerous civilians were massacred.¹⁹ When Port Harcourt was taken in May 1968, the massacre of several hundreds of wounded patients in a hospital was also reported by ICRC delegates.²⁰

These abuses were probably not the result of a systematic extermination policy by the FMG.²¹ Nonetheless, as noted by General Momoh, the FMG had poor control over the troops both in terms of the military strategy to be followed and the behaviour of troops in their treatment of prisoners of war, the wounded and civilians.²²

Third, the indiscriminate bombings of civilian populations in Biafra also contributed to the theory of genocide. Reports by ICRC delegate Jaggi repeatedly highlighted the way in which the bombings reinforced the fear of the local population, further convincing the people that they were the victims of a genocidal war.

Air raids of the kind carried out during the last two weeks make absolutely no sense whatsoever, they have definitely either [sic] any 'value' except for demoralising the people. On the contrary it keeps reminding the people that the aggressor is engaged in a war of genocide. I think it our duty to keep on intervening and if necessary to apply any means possible to have such a kind of warfare stopped.²³

Whether justified or not, this statement was nevertheless based on concrete facts, and the fear of the population was something that was particularly felt by humanitarian aid workers in the field. Convinced by what they saw and the impressions gained during the first year of the war, the ICRC delegates asked their headquarters to take measures to put an end to this excessive violence. Headquarters in Geneva also received information of a potential genocide and mass violence from the Swiss government and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), which were looking to cross-reference their information with that of the ICRC.²⁴ The ICRC was considered the best informed organization and thus as most capable of issuing an opinion and taking action in face of this problem. In most cases, no direct reference was made to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

The arrival of this information in Geneva raises questions about ICRC headquarters' reaction toward the data gathered in the field by the humanitarian workers. It also raises the issue of principles, but above all, the inconsistency of ICRC practices in terms of denouncing violence reported by its delegates.²⁵ Paradoxically, at the end of the 1960s, its policy on public protests seemed relatively well established. This was notably expressed by the former president of the ICRC and Committee member, Leopold Boissier, in an article published in the *International Review of the Red Cross* and also in the *Journal de Genève* of January 1968.²⁶ The argument was as follows: the ICRC favoured discretion to loud denunciations and justified its position by explaining that the interest of the victims was better

protected by silence and an active presence in the field than by public protests that would result in its expulsion from the field. Within the ICRC, this position was defended by Boissier in particular. However, there were also voices of dissent. For example, in October 1967, intense discussions took place between Committee members about how much of their knowledge about the situation of political prisoners in Greece where the Colonels had seized power should be publicly divulged. Some wanted to spread the information on ‘what our delegates have seen and done as far as possible’.²⁷ A few days later, a similar discussion took place in relation to the Nigeria-Biafra situation. A delegate had reported a prisoner massacre. The issue was whether to protest to the FMG and whether to make it public. To convince the more reluctant members of the Committee, it was noted that to protest was no different to the approach used by the ICRC in the conflicts in Yemen and Vietnam. In addition, the Presidential Council decided to speak out publicly against the massacres by arguing that ‘publicity is the only thing that people are truly afraid of’.²⁸ A few days later, a press release was published which stated that:

Seriously alarmed by the summary execution of three prisoners, as reported by its delegation in Nigeria, as well as by news of massacres of the civilian population, the International Committee of the Red Cross has made a strong call to the belligerents, asking them to strictly comply with the provisions of humanitarian law and notably Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions.²⁹

The resort to public appeal was not something new for the ICRC, which previously used it during the First World War and the conflict in Yemen for example.³⁰ However, public appeals sometimes implied a certain degree of public denunciation, which was much more difficult to handle. Accordingly, it did not become a systematic policy. Moreover, if it were to be made public, a delegate must have directly witnessed the violation. During the first year of the conflict this was not always possible as the ICRC had very few staff in Biafra. Indeed, if a violation was reported, the ICRC relayed it to the Nigerian government. In an internal memo covering the period from September 1967 to the beginning of May 1968, a delegate drew up a summary list of actions by the ICRC following alleged or observed breaches of the Geneva Conventions and bombings of civilian populations. The list comprises about ten protests sent either by the headquarters in Geneva or the delegation in Lagos.³¹ These were not always witnessed first-hand by ICRC delegates, which raises questions as to the actual knowledge of the situation by the organization. Some of the reports were reported in the press, but they were generally not made public.³²

In parallel, the ICRC also sought other ways to protect the civilian population, notably by sharing the information it possessed with other international bodies. For example, already prior to the conflict, in February 1967, the person in charge of Nigerian affairs shared the ICRC concerns about the possibility of a war and civilian massacres with the UN secretary-general.³³ In the autumn of 1967, on the basis of information from various sources about the danger of genocide, more subsequent action was envisaged by the ICRC's delegate general for Africa, who wanted to contact the UN and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to propose mediation.³⁴ The members of the Committee considered such an initiative as interference in the political resolution of the conflict, and thus refused it on grounds of the principle of neutrality. However, this did not prevent some people working for the ICRC from continuing to disseminate information about the conflict. For example, the person in charge of Nigerian affairs invited UNICEF to disseminate the information that the organization possessed 'so as to create a wave of public opinion that could have an influence on the behaviour of the Federal forces'.³⁵ In May 1968, the ICRC publicly called upon the belligerents to lift the blockade and to spare the civilians, referring implicitly to the violence of the federal army, in order to secure public support on these issues.³⁶

Delegates in the field also insisted that organizations with mandates 'to protect mankind' be alerted. In March 1968, it was decided that the Committee enter into 'contact with the competent international body, for example the UN Commission on Human Rights, in order to draw attention to the dramatic circumstances of the civilian population, resulting from the unacceptable way in which this war was being waged'.³⁷ In June 1968, the ICRC reiterated its decision to inform the UN secretary-general about the situation, as well as to 'share with the international labour conference being held at that time in Geneva, strong concerns as to the situation in that part of Africa'.³⁸ The aim was most probably to make this matter known to a greater audience of international representatives. This decision was not only explained by the fears of genocide, but more generally by what was becoming a major humanitarian problem that had already led the ICRC to make other public appeals, i.e., the deterioration of the food supply and health conditions within the separatist province.³⁹ Thus, in the summer of 1968, the priority of the ICRC became, above all, to reach starving people with relief supplies. However, within the organization, striving for a more humane conduct of hostilities and stopping the massacres was still seen as a major challenge. As stated during a directorate meeting at the end of August 1968 in the middle of a crisis opposing the ICRC and the FMG about the way to bring relief supplies into Biafra, 'the problem of the behaviour of the Nigerian troops that are exterminating the Ibos should

not be forgotten'.⁴⁰ In that context, appealing to international organizations was a means for the ICRC to attempt 'an emergency humanization of the conflict in order to get the massacres to stop', as 'if Biafra fell, a genocide was to be feared'.⁴¹ These shy approaches seem to have fallen on deaf ears within the UN, whose stance during the war rather contributed to spreading the opposite point of view.

The UN and the Observers: The Production of a Counter-Discourse (1968–1970)

In the summer of 1968, the pictures that appeared in the Western press of Biafran children dying from hunger stirred emotions and drew the attention of the international community to the conflict. Initially, this contributed to spreading the idea of genocide. Biafra's supporters presented the famine as an additional policy implemented by the FMG to exterminate the Biafrans through hunger. Languages and pictures drawing parallels between the Nazi genocide of the Jews and the fate of the Biafrans flourished.⁴² Ironically, during a second phase, the upsurge of famine on the international scene and its management actually cast doubt on the credibility of the accusations of genocide, for several reasons. First, Biafra became a crisis requiring relief through the provision of large quantities of food and medicine. The urgency of the situation thus pushed the issue of military violence—on which the secessionists' genocide claims were initially based—into the background. Second, the appearance of photos of malnourished children and the emotions it provoked throughout the world made it necessary for the FMG and its British ally to improve Nigeria's image. They thus emphasized that the Nigerian government was not solely responsible for the famine and argued that no genocide was being committed. In the case of the famine, negotiations to send relief to Biafra increasingly shed light on the fact that the Biafran authorities were also responsible for the difficulties encountered by relief organizations trying to dispatch food to the region. As for the genocide issue, the Nigerian government invited a team of international observers to attest to the fact that the troops in the field were not perpetrating genocide.⁴³ To a certain extent, the UN participated in the production of this counter-discourse. While the ICRC had considered the UN secretariat as a potential interlocutor when it was trying to alert the international community to the situation in Biafra, paradoxically the UN became involved in legitimizing the Nigerian government's claim that no genocide was happening. In spite of the establishment of an international human rights regime after World War Two in the framework of the UN, the absence of reactions to accusations of genocide was characteristic for the organization during this period.⁴⁴

More interesting is its implication in demonstrating that no genocide was happening. It raises questions about how much leeway the international organization had to act in a humanitarian crisis that occurred during a civil war and whether this type of involvement can have a positive impact for the civilian population in the field.

Subject to strong domestic criticism during the summer of 1968 for its support of Nigeria, the British government suggested that the FMG invite international observers to prove that no genocide was happening. The foreign office thought that the ICRC could take charge of the mission. In the eyes of London, the ICRC was a guarantor of the Geneva Conventions and seemed best suited to providing the experts capable of assessing and legitimizing the process.⁴⁵ However, given the tensions between the federal government and the ICRC, this option was quickly set aside.⁴⁶ In the view of the FMG, the ICRC was too attentive to the Biafran authorities and their propaganda.⁴⁷ Lagos thus preferred to invite observers from four countries regarded to be either more neutral or sympathetic to its cause. Canada, Poland, Sweden and the UK responded positively and sent representatives who formed an observer team. The OAU, which had tried to settle the disputes in favour of Nigeria since 1967,⁴⁸ was also involved. The FMG likewise invited UN representatives to participate in the observations to give them an international status.

Despite being asked, the UN secretariat had not said much about the situation in Nigeria as most of its member states considered this conflict to be of an internal nature. UN secretary-general U Thant did not seek to mediate.⁴⁹ During the summer of 1968, the throes of emotion caused by the famine as well as the concerns voiced by UNICEF, led the UN to slightly reconsider its position by publically calling upon the belligerents to cooperate in letting relief through to the victims. In the framework of this objective, in July 1968, U Thant decided to send Nils-Göran Gussing to Lagos as his representative to Nigeria on humanitarian activities.⁵⁰ Gussing was supposed to facilitate the negotiations between humanitarian agencies and the FMG on the conditions under which relief could be brought to Biafra, but his role was very limited. Thus, when U Thant decided to respond positively to the Nigerian government's proposal to send a UN observer, he chose Gussing who was already familiar with the situation. As the observer team was clearly invited by the FMG to improve its image on the international scene, U Thant set a few conditions for the participation of a UN observer.⁵¹ The aim was to ensure that the mission would be carried out as objectively and independently as possible under these circumstances. By choosing Gussing, U Thant decided that the assignment would be entrusted to a civilian and not a military officer as had been initially requested by the Nigerian government. He felt that a civilian would be more capable of

producing an objective report on the treatment of civilian population by the Nigerian military. The secretary-general also asked that the UN observer would not be a member of the national observers' team and compile his own reports in order to guarantee the independence of his observations.

However, once in the field, the conditions under which the mission was carried out inevitably placed limits on the UN observer's objectivity. Based in Lagos, the Nigerian federal capital located several hundred kilometres from the front line, the observers made relatively short trips to the conflict areas. During the first four months of observation, from 15 September 1968 to 17 January 1969, they spent no more than twenty days in Eastern Nigeria, but used this as a basis to declare that no genocide was taking place.⁵² Moreover, once on site, their travel was organized by the FMG and its military authorities. They only had access to the war-stricken areas once the situation had been stabilized, which made it difficult to see how the troops had behaved toward the civilian population. If on the whole the observers considered the accessibility of the zones recovered by the federal army to be correct, they were also limited in their movements by some commanders who did not want to be embarrassed by the observers' presence. Thus, certain areas remained inaccessible to the observers as well as to humanitarian aid for a very long time. Furthermore, the observers almost always travelled as a group accompanied by several journalists, which made the local populations reluctant to trust them. As noted by the UN observer:

The accuracy and value of the observations however is qualified by the unwieldy size of the group when travelling as a whole together with members of the press, and the mode of operation which necessitates military escorts and involves the presence of high-ranking officers. During short visits in these circumstances, ordinary people might be reluctant to reveal matters of significance which they are afraid may tell against their own interest.⁵³

Finally, the observers remained dependent on the FMG and the army for their transportation as well as their contact with the civilians. Even if the observers generally seemed to be able to speak to the people without the presence of soldiers, communication with the people, many of whom did not speak English, required the presence of a soldier for translation. These limits gave rise to several criticisms as to the reliability of the observations. For example, the US government wondered whether it might be possible to send other civilian observers (apart from the UN observer, the rest were military) and have them based closer to the front line in order to have a better relationship with the local population.⁵⁴

Despite criticisms of the reliability of the observations, there were also positive outcomes from these field missions. The fact that there were

foreign observers assessing how the army conducted its hostilities probably led some of its troops to hold back in relation to the civilian population and gave the federal authorities further control over the behaviour of its soldiers in the field. Furthermore, the observers used their position to put forward very concrete recommendations for the areas that had been taken back by the federal army. As commented by the ICRC delegate:

Even though less systematic and not as in-depth as those by the ICRC, visits by the observers nevertheless made a significant contribution to improving conditions such as the methods of detention for prisoners of war. [. . .] Even though observer investigations sometimes seem superficial and some of their conclusions hasty, it must be recognized that their intervention in the present conflict has had a positive influence on the behaviour of the military authorities. The Nigerian government has taken their recommendations into consideration and has already followed-up on these in a number of cases. For example, some Nigerian officers, whose behaviour had been officially criticized by the observers, had been replaced. Furthermore, periodic inspections in sectors close to the front, had certainly contributed to limiting the number and gravity of abuses committed by the armed forces.⁵⁵

While the observer missions may have contributed to some extent to improving the relationship between the Nigerian army and the civil population, the main result was the improved image of the Nigerian government in the international arena, the main intention behind the endeavour at the outset. The conclusions made by the observers were a blow to the Biafran accusations of genocide and to a large extent dispelled the doubts about the intentions of the FMG. Nonetheless, reservations about the reliability of the observers and the existence of contradictory reports partly explain why accusations of genocide did not disappear altogether.⁵⁶ Moreover, these observations were only based on territories reconquered by the federals and did not include those under Biafran control, to which the observers had no access. There, many air raids by the federals on civilian or neutral targets such as hospitals were reported by westerners. These attacks tarnished the positive picture painted by the observers and were a particular source of preoccupation for humanitarian workers in the field.

Denouncing Violence: Principles and Practices of the French Doctors and the ICRC (1968–1970)

Within the ICRC, the difficulty to bring relief supplies to the population as well as the reports from the observers attesting to the good intentions of the FMG turned the possible genocide into an issue of secondary concern.

However, the violence of the federal army remained a pressing problem. This time, it was not only the Igbo people who were concerned but also Western humanitarian workers, since the famine and the development of relief operations during the summer of 1968 had increased the number of volunteers working in the field. Whereas the ICRC only had one or two delegates and an intermittent medical team present in Biafra during the first year of the conflict, by October 1968 it had around 140 European and American people working there. This influx of staff, which accompanied the growth in activities, caused the ICRC headquarters once again to question its policy on the denunciation of federal army violence, which, by then, directly hit its operations and workers. In August 1968, the neutral landing strip provided by the Biafrans to the ICRC was bombed by the Nigerian Air Force.⁵⁷ In October, four Yugoslavian, Swedish and British volunteers working for the humanitarian operations of the ICRC and the churches were murdered by federal soldiers at a hospital. At the same time, several hospitals marked by the Red Cross emblem and designated as neutral were attacked by the federal air force. These events, confirmed by the delegates, created tensions within the ICRC, notably between the headquarters and the teams in the field. The latter felt that ICRC protests, even if they became the subject of press releases, lacked power and publicity. Many of them did not hesitate to state their frustrations in the press. In doing so, they disregarded the ICRC's rule of not speaking publicly of what they had seen and done during their mission.⁵⁸ The discontent was worsened by the failure of the ICRC to effectively manage its public communication, also sometimes because of other circumstances. For example, on 19 October 1968, the commissioner general for action in Nigeria-Biafra, August Lindt reported that the Aboh hospital, where an ICRC team was working, had been bombed by the federal air force in full view of a delegate. He asked for a public declaration of protest to be made as soon as possible. However, as important negotiations were taking place at the same time relative to the ICRC's airlift, a few days later Lindt asked that this action be postponed. The protest was made to the FMG, but the public declaration was finally abandoned as too much time had passed since the event.⁵⁹ This infelicitous management was not specific to public appeals but was apparent in the ICRC's overall communication policy, which generally did not receive the attention it deserved.⁶⁰

The well-known rupture between the future founders of MSF and the ICRC took place in this context. On September 1968, the French Red Cross, encouraged by the French presidency that supported the secession,⁶¹ started its own relief operation. At first, it consisted of a relief airlift from Gabon's capital, Libreville, to Biafra and French medical teams assigned to assist ICRC operations in the secessionist region. Several later founders of MSF were part of the teams. According to some of them, the French

doctors broke the commitment to discretion they had signed with the ICRC and started a public campaign to mediatize the conflict and denounce genocide. If Biafra was a turning point for the founders of MSF, placing their stance in a broader context provides a more nuanced story. Regarding the media coverage, although the French doctors participated in it, they were not the initiators of the process. When they arrived in the field, the first peak of international media coverage had already taken place in July and August 1968. Furthermore, their decision to speak publicly did not signify a rupture with the ICRC, which actually considered some of the French doctors' publications as good publicity. In November 1968, the ICRC Directorate advised members of the Committee that the later MSF co-founders Max Recamier and Bernard Kouchner had published an excellent article in the French newspaper *Le Monde*.⁶² This article, usually presented as the manifestation of the rupture between the French doctors and the ICRC,⁶³ was also reproduced in the *International Review of the Red Cross*.⁶⁴ Its content, which consisted of a description of the doctors' work on the ground, as well as its moderate and neutral tone, probably explain the ICRC's reaction.

While some French doctors maintained this line, some of them also wanted to publicly condemn the violence they were witnessing or fearing in the field. As shown previously, this preoccupation was shared among the delegates. However, these fears were exacerbated by the fact that some French doctors were its direct object. In December 1968, the Awo-Omamma hospital, where a French medical team was stationed, was bombed several times and the ICRC's lack of reaction exasperated its delegates. Therefore the humanitarian workers chose other ways to inform the world public about the attacks. Following the bombing on 9 December 1968, a French doctor asked the pro-Biafran French embassy in Libreville to spread the news.⁶⁵ The information was reported in the media even before the ICRC protested, since, on 11 December, an article in the *Journal de Genève* indicated that Genevan humanitarian circles were aware that a Red Cross hospital had been attacked by the federal army.⁶⁶ The following day, the ICRC issued a press release denouncing the bombings.⁶⁷ In consequence to this attack, the organization decided upon a more systematic policy regarding FMG bombings in Biafra. For each ICRC objective attacked, the headquarters should send a protest to the Nigerian minister of external affairs, which could potentially be publicized.⁶⁸ However, the recurrence of the attacks on hospitals and the meagre results of ICRC protestations led some French doctors 'to wonder if they should not stop working for the Red Cross, whose neutrality did not protect them but prevented them from expressing their sympathy for Biafra'.⁶⁹ The French Red Cross vice president also notified the

ICRC that it was becoming increasingly difficult to recruit French staff for ICRC missions, given the insecure conditions in which they had to work.⁷⁰ The anger of the delegates was aggravated by yet another attack on the same hospital in January 1969.⁷¹ The ICRC denounced the bombings in a press release issued on 7 January 1969.⁷²

For some French doctors, the ICRC policy line on Biafra was too inconsistent, and they decided to publicly denounce the genocide by publishing letters and articles and by creating, in December 1968, *Le Comité international de lutte contre le génocide au Biafra*.⁷³ Nonetheless, they did not completely break ties with the ICRC. The organization did not issue statements reacting to the French doctors' activities and publications for different reasons. First, during the conflict, the ICRC encountered difficulties in recruiting competent medical staff to send to Biafra. Keeping its volunteers was probably its priority, even if they were too vocal. Second, as shown above, the ICRC, interested in improving its image on the international scene, considered some of the doctors' publications as good publicity. Third, the ICRC was facing other more important problems. It was occupied by serious financial and diplomatic difficulties regarding its relief airlift to Biafra.⁷⁴ More generally, the declarations of its delegates regarding the violence in Biafra did not become a central concern for the ICRC until some of the Red Crescent societies accused it of publishing reports about violations committed by Nigeria while remaining silent on the violations committed by Israel in the Middle East.⁷⁵ They reproached the organization for conveniently adjusting its policy depending on the states involved. Criticism formulated by Red Crescent societies led the ICRC to examine and restate its doctrine on public denunciations.⁷⁶ It called upon its legal experts to examine the situation, who confirmed that only those protests were published that had been directly noted by a delegate.⁷⁷ The headquarters strongly reminded its delegates that they had committed themselves not to denounce Nigerian violations directly to the press.⁷⁸

Even in this case, the headquarters did not especially aim at the French doctors, but at its delegates in general and more particularly at Swiss workers identified as having spoken to the media.⁷⁹ The ICRC perhaps regarded the latter's deviations from its rule as more damaging than the deviations by the French doctors, who were sent by the French Red Cross, which was known for being pro-Biafra.⁸⁰ In addition, the impact of their stance remained relatively low. Even in France, where the French doctors were active and the intelligence service tried to promote the term,⁸¹ some media remained cautious about the accusations of genocide.⁸² At the end of the conflict, the French volunteers were even divided on the issue.⁸³ Moreover, those who used the term employed it less to denounce a policy of extermination carried out by the FMG than to sound the alarm about a serious

situation that was claiming the lives of numerous civilians. In an article published in 1969, Max Récamier wrote:

It is mostly when speaking about the victims of this war that we speak about genocide. Genocide? No, if it is used in the same sense of the cold-blooded extermination executed like the Nazis. Yes, if we look at the sequence of events, the particular circumstances of the blockade and perhaps the difficulties experienced through a lack of control of the troops or over-zealous leaders or mercenaries.⁸⁴

In the 1960s onwards, using the word 'genocide' in a wide sense to draw attention to a situation was not entirely uncommon for politicians or civil society groups.⁸⁵ In this case, the fact that the authors were humanitarian workers gave a certain weight to their declarations since they were considered experts of the situation.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, at the time, their impact remained relatively marginal, and the Nigerian government was already making successful efforts to counter the accusations of genocide. As noted by Peter Redfield, 'MSF's core myth of outspokenness derived less from the specific facts of its inception than from its subsequent evolution'.⁸⁷

Conclusion

The Nigeria-Biafra war raised questions about the reactions of organizations with perceived responsibilities to protect human rights and humanitarian principles in cases of allegations of genocide. Their responses show how their policy lines and public positions were the product of different elements. Their stances were less the result of an impartial analysis of the situation than a response to certain imperatives and specific circumstances. Going back to the construction of their reactions is thus a way to highlight the complexities involved in apprehending the words of the humanitarian and international organizations.

As for the ICRC, pressures from its field staff, the latter's safety, the urgency of a situation and the need to make its actions known to the greater public were all factors that would drive it to speak out publicly on a situation. Contrary to what has often been said, the ICRC was not always reluctant to appeal to public opinion. However, concomitant negotiations, political considerations or possibly just the bad management of its information and communication were factors that pushed it to keep quiet. The importance of these restricting factors grew after the summer of 1968, when the ICRC became more deeply involved in the very complicated relief operations, through which the responsibilities of the two belligerents regarding the situation in the secessionist province appeared more clearly.

To a certain extent, more than a specific rupture with ICRC's principles—which were actually not very well established—the stance of the French doctors was a response to the specific situation in the field. They witnessed violence by the federal government every day and, not having the larger picture in mind, could not tolerate ICRC hesitations and inconstancy regarding this issue. They were not the only ones who were unhappy about the way the ICRC dealt with the matter. Their stance primarily illustrated the tensions between the headquarters and the field workers rather than a strong opposition on principles.

Although a very different actor than the ICRC or the French doctors, the UN's attitude towards the issue of genocide during the conflict was also the result of a specific involvement and not of objective observations. Despite calls by different organizations, their priority remained to respect the FMG's sovereignty. The secretary-general did not take any real initiatives to implicate the organization in the war's settlement and his only way of playing a part was to respond to FMG's requests. As illustrated by the UN, not all organizations concerned with humanitarianism and human rights backed the Biafran point of view. To the contrary, the organization contributed to legitimizing Nigerian statements that there was no genocide by participating in the observers' missions. Despite limits in terms of the reliability of the observations, it seems that their presence did positively affect the federal army's behaviour in the field. Accordingly, denunciation was not the only way to improve the condition of the population in the field and a certain complementarity existed between the organizations. Beyond shedding light on the leeway of the UN to act during a civil war and on the attitude of the ICRC towards denunciation, analyzing how the discourse around genocide was built is also a way of grasping the history of violence during the Nigeria-Biafra war—a history that was more complex and nuanced than it is often presented.

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12 Humanitarian Encounters

Biafra, NGOs and Imaginings of the Third World in Britain and Ireland, 1967–1970

Kevin O'Sullivan

Introduction

The Biafran humanitarian crisis holds a critical place in the history of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It prompted the creation of new agencies, like Africa Concern, and thrust existing ones, like Oxfam, into a spotlight they have left only rarely since. As part of a wider 'NGO moment', it focussed public and official attention on the role of non-state actors and accelerated the emergence of an internationalized, professionalized aid industry that took centre stage in the mid-1980s. The relief operation also remains critical to understanding the mechanics of non-governmental aid. Biafra was both 'totem and taboo' for NGOs: it not only drew attention to their actions, but also exposed their inexperience, bordering at times on naivety, in dealing with the politics of intervention and the use of hunger as a weapon of war.¹

If we turn the lens inwards, as this essay does, the story of NGO involvement in the Nigerian civil war also sheds considerable light on European attitudes to the Third World in the postcolonial era. From the late 1960s NGOs emerged as 'symbols of societal responsibility and global morality' and important filters in the West's relationship with the global south.² The kind of 'people-to-people' action they espoused adapted traditional notions of charity and philanthropy for a global era. Biafra played a critical role in that process. Not only did it transform the reputation of non-state actors, it also generated a particular understanding of the postcolonial world and with it a particular role for humanitarian aid. The result owed less to the inclusive, global humanitarianism suggested by NGO rhetoric and more to Western internationalism and a very Western imagining of the Third World.

To articulate that argument, this essay draws on case studies from Britain (Christian Aid, Oxfam and the Save the Children Fund) and Ireland (Africa Concern, Gorta and Christian missionary societies), along with wider lessons from the Western humanitarian sector. Both countries

featured prominently in the Biafran relief effort and shaped their approach to humanitarianism within a strongly Anglophone tradition, but their attitudes were marked by contrasting approaches to empire and its legacies. They had different vested interests in Nigeria: for Britain postcolonial responsibilities were paramount, for Ireland the needs of the 'spiritual empire' dominated.³ Biafra also played a contrasting role in shaping national identities in the postcolonial era: expressed in the shift from the 'civilizing' goal of imperialism to the 'saving' aims of humanitarianism in Britain, and in the rhetoric of common experience (of famine, anticolonialism and Catholicism) in Ireland.⁴ Yet the significance of these case studies lies not in their contrasting backgrounds. Rather it is to be found in the striking similarities that emerged in British and Irish popular reactions to Biafra: in the values they imbued in NGOs, and in the image of the Third World they created.

This essay describes that response in terms of four themes. It looks first at Biafra's impact in bringing NGOs to centre stage as mediators between Britain, Ireland and the Third World. That newfound standing gave those organizations considerable influence. But it also led to questions, not least the one posed by the second section of this essay: to what extent were NGOs products of their circumstances—namely, a decolonized world? That leads us to our third theme: paternalism, and the extent to which traditional attitudes to Africa were reinforced in renewed emphases on donation, dependency and Western concepts of 'need' and 'development'. It also says much about the concluding theme of this essay: the ideal of a 'common humanity' that was a constant reference point in NGO rhetoric. The response to Biafra unfolded in a Europe embroiled in the social, political, cultural and emotional transition from imperial to postcolonial worlds. It created a humanitarianism that was complex and at times paradoxical. And in its emphasis on disaster, famine and the importance of the expatriate volunteer, it cemented a vision of the Third World that decades of development education programmes have found difficult to resolve.

Biafra, the 'NGO Moment' and the Birth of the Modern Humanitarian Industry

'Something has been happening to "charities" in the last few years', Christian Aid Director Alan Booth told his organization's supporters in autumn 1970, 'and it is nearly all good'.⁵ To the traditional model of giving—'to encourage the maximum generosity to dependents'—was added a greater emphasis on development, justice and the potential for far-reaching economic reform.⁶ But the change that Booth described was not driven solely by some belated 'discovery' of development by NGOs. The sector's

massive expansion in the late 1960s and early 1970s owed much to its growing visibility and its standing as the primary mediator between the West and the Third World.

Biafra played a key role in that process. The logistics of the relief operation placed NGOs to the forefront of aid giving. Their involvement grew slowly. The first International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) supplies arrived in Biafra in November 1967, and five months later that organization became the key coordinator of the relief effort in federal-held territories. By then cases of kwashiorkor and marasmus—debilitating conditions caused by serious protein deficiency—had become increasingly prevalent, particularly among Biafran children. NGOs began to sit up and take notice. In Britain, Christian Aid contributed to the World Council of Churches (WCC) relief effort, Oxfam and War on Want expanded their funding to the region and the Save the Children Fund (SCF) sent emergency resources to one of its local administrators, John Birch, who had just undertaken a tour of the former rebel-controlled areas in the east. Birch's description was typical of the stories beginning to filter out from Nigeria: 'As I passed through one village the mothers cried for help for their emaciated children, but I had to drive on, unable to offer relief because I had not enough manpower or supplies'.⁷

While the conflict settled into a slow war of attrition, the escalating humanitarian crisis took centre stage. For the federal government and the Biafran authorities, hunger became a tool of propaganda and an important weapon of war—exemplified by their lengthy (and ultimately fruitless) wrangling over the possibility of a land corridor for relief. Frustrated by their inability to access Biafra on the ground, the ICRC took to the air. NGOs soon followed. Joint Church Aid (JCA)—a cooperative effort of the Protestant and Catholic churches—organized night-time airlifts into Biafra from the Portuguese island of São Tomé in an effort to avoid the attentions of the Nigerian Air Force. Huge volumes of medicines, food and other goods arrived at Uli airstrip, from where they were distributed through an already-existing and complex web of feeding stations and medical centres run by Christian missionaries. With increased media attention came a greater role for NGOs and with it greater volumes of relief. By December 1969, with the eyes of the world firmly on west Africa, 250 metric tons of supplies were landed at Uli every night.⁸

It took time, however, for popular attention to focus on the crisis. In Britain that occurred only after 12 June 1968, when a film broadcast on ITV and a press campaign led by the *Sun* newspaper sparked the humanitarian response into life. By the end of the following month, SCF and Oxfam relief teams had transferred to Nigeria to work under the aegis of the ICRC, and were joined by consignments of food, money and medicines

delivered to west Africa. Their work testified to the expanded operational capacities of British NGOs (not least Oxfam, whose relief team was the first such group to be sent overseas by the organization). The depth of Biafra's impact over the following eighteen months is best appreciated however by examining a subject close to the sector's heart: money. At its most basic level, the public response to the crisis resulted in a massive increase in income across the NGO community.⁹ In late 1968, for example, the Nigerian War Victims Appeal, run by the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC; a campaign coordinating group consisting of the British Red Cross, Christian Aid, Oxfam, SCF and War on Want), raised more than GB£100,000 in less than four weeks.¹⁰ DEC's five member organizations had already jointly subscribed GB£725,000 to the ICRC's relief efforts, and would continue their high levels of spending (with some help from the British government) until the end of the war.¹¹

In Ireland, the response followed a similar trajectory: from a slow beginning, the increased media attention that began in early summer 1968 led to an explosion of NGO activity thereafter. The difference lay in the almost total absence of an Irish NGO sector prior to that period. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization's Freedom from Hunger Campaign spawned Gorta (formed in 1965), yet that organization's emphasis on long-term agricultural development had limited purchase on the popular mind-set. What Biafra's potent mix of strong missionary connections and the impact of television and print media created, therefore, was something entirely new in an Irish context. In March 1968 a meeting in Dublin of missionaries, volunteers and other interested individuals led to the foundation of Africa Concern, the country's first indigenous humanitarian NGO.¹² It was not until three months later however, when images from Biafra began to filter through to the Irish media, that the crisis grabbed the attention of the wider public. The Joint Biafra Famine Appeal (JBFA; co-organized by Africa Concern), launched in Dublin on 28 June 1968, capitalized on the large numbers of Irish priests, nuns and brothers involved in the distribution of relief to generate a massive public response. Within two months the appeal had collected IR£148,819, and in the course of the war Africa Concern alone raised more than IR£1 million.¹³ In effect, the crisis reshaped Ireland's relationship with the Third World. Where once it had been defined through school-, church- and hospital-building campaigns run by missionaries, the rise of Africa Concern placed NGOs to the forefront.

What were the consequences of this rapid expansion of humanitarian action? It is an often-repeated trope that the crisis was 'the first humanitarian disaster to be seen by millions of people'.¹⁴ But that should not distract from the depth of its impact. For many it represented a first real engagement with the postcolonial world and the realities of humanitarian crisis on

a massive scale. Where the public's gaze turned, opportunities proliferated for NGOs. Led by the ICRC and the JCA umbrella, new organizations emerged and others flourished with the attention and—most importantly—the funding afforded to them through massively increased public donations. They ranged from missionary societies and those directly linked to the institutional churches (Christian Aid), to religious-inspired, yet ostensibly secular organizations (Africa Concern). They included agencies formed within, and that remained closely influenced by, the imperial context (SCF), those that were part of a new generation of 'secularizing' and 'professionalizing' NGOs (Oxfam and Africa Concern) and those created as a result of international, UN-led initiatives (Gorta). They were operational and non-operational: SCF, the missionary societies and, to a lesser extent, Oxfam and Concern, all sent volunteers into the field; Christian Aid worked through local Church groups. Those organizations were also rivals—in Britain more so than in Ireland, where Africa Concern's only real competitor was the local Red Cross Society—fighting over a limited pool of funding and public support. What united them, however, was the commitment to 'saving' and their success in persuading the people of Britain and Ireland that they were the ones to do it.

By 1970 names such as Christian Aid, Oxfam, Save the Children, War on Want (Britain), Africa Concern, Gorta (Ireland), Nordchurchaid (Scandinavia), Mensen in Nood (Netherlands), Misereor, Brot für die Welt (West Germany) and Caritas Internationalis (the official relief agency of the Catholic Church) were familiar in public discourse in a way that NGOs had rarely been before. Biafra gave them the opportunity to take centre stage. In the years that followed that role was consolidated. In 1971 the European non-governmental sector took a further turn when frustration at the perceived shortcomings of the ICRC operations in Biafra and East Pakistan prompted a group of French doctors to form a new organization and a new way of approaching non-governmental aid: Médecins sans Frontières.¹⁵ Those two crises, and later NGO campaigns in Africa, Asia and Latin America, created the momentum, the opportunities and the conditions for the continued expansion of the humanitarian sector. Within that context, a simple but powerful equation emerged: for many in the watching public, the image that those interventions projected—of crisis, followed by NGO response—became the norm.

Decolonization and NGO Attitudes to Biafra

The significance of that shift should not be underestimated. As NGOs moved to centre stage in translating humanitarian concern into humanitarian action, they took on an equally important role in mediating between the

lives of donors and life 'on the ground' in the Third World. Their advertisements, images and stories dominated the public narrative. In some cases, they did so in quite a direct fashion—Africa Concern, for example, established its own telex service to send up-to-date reports to the major Irish media outlets straight from west Africa, and in so doing had a considerable influence on the news agenda. Their impact was anything but benign. Rather, the understanding that 'representations do not simply re-present facts but also constitute them' behoves us to look more deeply at the manner in which NGOs presented Biafra to the watching public, the context in which those images were constituted, and what kind of reading of the Third World resulted.¹⁶

The dominant paradigm within which the response to Biafra was generated and articulated was that of empire—or, to be more specific, the process of adjusting European identities to fit a decolonized world. In Britain, humanitarianism became a vessel through which society could construct a new sense of national purpose; it amounted, in essence, to a benign reimagining of imperial compassion for a postcolonial world.¹⁷ When the Biafran crisis erupted, it offered an opportunity to renew this emphasis on the country's responsibilities: 'The British, with their long contacts and many nationals in Nigeria, are best able to offer this help'.¹⁸ And it underlined the state's 'obligation to try to alleviate the situation'.¹⁹ There were also direct continuities from the imperial to NGO worlds. Far from abandoned, the colonial service impulse was often simply repackaged to suit a shifting political context. Among the SCF team members with colonial experience, for example, was A. R. Y. Irvine Neave, the organization's crisis-time administrator at Ilesha, a former Lieutenant Commander in the Nigerian Navy and a strong believer that 'superstition and ignorance' hindered SCF's efforts to aid local communities.²⁰ That spirit of service was not limited to SCF alone. When the organization appealed in June 1968 for doctors and nurses for its medical teams who were 'interested in doing a humanitarian service of the highest order and who are prepared to rough it in a hot tropical climate for a period of four to six months', it tapped into a growing international volunteer movement exemplified by Voluntary Service Overseas—an agency founded ten years earlier by Alec Dickson, a former colonial official in Nigeria, who sought out a new role for young British men and women at the end of empire.²¹

On the surface, the Irish response to Biafra was built on something very different to the British: a shared religion (Catholicism), a common colonial experience and a narrative of humanitarian disaster. At the launch of the JBFA in June 1968, one speaker reminded the assembled that Ireland and Nigeria were united in their knowledge of 'the horror of famine and civil war'.²² The strength of the missionary connection—at the outset of

the crisis there were 1,449 Irish Catholic missionaries in Nigeria, almost half of them in Biafra, and several more from the Protestant faiths—served to further underline the links between the two peoples.²³ The Igbo were described as ‘very industrious people’ who ‘learned the value of education early on’—as the Irish had done in the nineteenth century.²⁴ Their fortunes were held to bring out a natural empathy in the Irish ‘towards Africa or towards people who were oppressed’.²⁵ When allied to what one government official politely termed the missionaries’ ‘non-neutral activities’, the basic politics of the conflict—small nation oppressed by its larger neighbour—also drew considerable Irish sympathy.²⁶ Accusations of gun-running and stories of heroism among priests, brothers and nuns in the face of hunger and adversity reinforced a simple but powerful equation: the Irish had a

personalised and humanised interest . . . they wished to give to Biafra relief materials which their own compatriots would distribute and which they had chosen; they wished to see these materials delivered by Irish efforts and received as Irish gifts.²⁷

Yet the dominance of the decolonization paradigm suggests that the experiences of British and Irish NGOs were much closer than they might at first appear. From different starting points, and with differing goals, NGOs in both states assumed the mantle of organized reactions and reimaginings of their countries’ roles for the postcolonial era. Where the British public used humanitarianism to negotiate the shift from formal empire to responsible power, the changing role of Irish Catholic missionaries reflected the need to rearticulate the Irish ‘spiritual empire’ for this new world. From the late 1950s onwards, recognition of the need to adapt to African independence led the institutional churches to reposition themselves and to emphasize what one expatriate Catholic bishop termed ‘stability, cooperation and progress’.²⁸ The deliberate talking up of church involvement in the mechanics of state building—in education and health provision in particular, but also in any activities that could be described under the broader umbrella of ‘aid’—was an important part of that process. By the time Pope Paul VI published *Populorum Progressio*, his 1967 encyclical on ‘human progress’, individuals like Aengus Finucane (Holy Ghost missionary and later CEO of Concern) and Tony Byrne (also a member of the Holy Ghost Order and later head of the Caritas Internationalis airlift from São Tomé) were undertaking university courses in development studies and moving ever more strongly into the practical world of humanitarian assistance.

Africa Concern’s emergence did even more to bring together the worlds of NGO humanitarianism and the missionary tradition: in practical terms,

through the strong formative influence of *Viatres Christi* (a lay Catholic volunteer organization) and the Holy Ghost Order on its activities, but also in the tactics that it used. The organization's advertisements, carrying images of marasmus- and kwashiorkor-afflicted children and slogans like 'Is one meal a day too much to ask?', were instantly recognizable to generations of Irish people brought up on 'penny for a black baby' fundraising campaigns in their churches, schools and local communities. And, almost eight years after Nigerian independence had prompted an outpouring of interest in the west African state, they renewed a debate that was as hierarchical as anything established by British NGOs. In 1960 the Society of African Missions (an Irish Catholic order based mainly in the Northern Region of Nigeria) had proclaimed that '[n]o country in the world owes so much to Ireland alone'.²⁹ By June 1968 that belief had been translated into a determination to 'save Ireland's spiritual children from extermination'.³⁰

Neo-Humanitarianism and the Paternalism of Aid

Decolonization, therefore, imposed its own logic on the NGO sectors in Britain and Ireland. The inherently reactionary nature of that process meant that the language and practice of humanitarianism was less removed from the imperial world than its rhetoric of 'common humanity' suggested. It fitted easily into a trend that was visible across the Western NGO sector. Biafra came at the height of what Michael Barnett termed the era of neo-humanitarianism, the period between the end of the Second World War and the end of the Cold War, during which new forms of global governance replaced the 'civilizing' narrative of imperial humanitarianism. British and Irish NGOs were far from immune to its central premise: much less than a fundamental shift in attitudes, neo-humanitarianism 'altered the tone more than the workings of paternalism'.³¹

What did this mean in practice? Like imperialism, this neo-humanitarianism tended to reduce the complexity of crisis to simple, easily consumable messages. 'Saving men' replaced 'civilizing' or 'saving souls' in what one commentator, reflecting on Africa Concern's activities (and with no apparent irony), termed the NGO's 'crusade'.³² That sense of continuity was visible in the images of Biafra employed by NGOs in both states. In Britain, Christian Aid was more than aware that '[p]eople are most likely to be moved by human faces, or human figures in dejected attitudes. Women and/or children have most appeal'.³³ In Ireland the pervasive media image was of the Biafran child with 'limp body and tired eyes . . . [that] . . . reflect the anguish of a people'.³⁴ A July 1968 article in the Dublin-based *Evening Herald* newspaper was not untypical in the vivid picture it drew of rural Biafra: children 'eating everything—rats, mice, lizards, frogs,

grasshoppers, but the town children are not able to eat them, and this is often the difference between life and death, because these vermin do give some protein'.³⁵

The reduction of the crisis to such basic imagery generated an equally simplistic response. In Ireland stories of missionary relief work (including accusations of political bias and gunrunning) played an important role in generating excitement and energy around Africa Concern. So too did the campaign that launched the JBFA in June 1968—to 'Send One Ship' (S.O.S.) of relief supplies to Nigeria.³⁶ The humanitarian imperative flattened out the complexity of the political crisis and replaced it with adventure and a belief that 'some really desperate action is needed, completely regardless of politics and danger'.³⁷ In July 1968, for example, six lorry drivers volunteered for a three-month stint with SCF 'after seeing the distressing photographs and films of starving children'.³⁸ The relief airlift that generated such publicity and popular support was the perfect example of this reflexive urge to help in action. What better image of NGO virtuosity than that of an 'expensive and hazardous' undertaking that would continue 'no matter what it costs in effort, money or even the safety of our workers'?³⁹

Alongside that reductive tendency, the neo-humanitarians also inherited the late colonial desire to modernize and reform. Control was an important element of this response. Descriptions of children employed in NGO campaigning—as variously 'innocent', 'emaciated' and 'pathetic mites'—reinforced paternal relationships of a humanitarian father and a powerless recipient.⁴⁰ So too did the idea of flying groups of Biafran babies to the West for treatment—criticized by some (Christian Aid) but embraced by others (Africa Concern) as part of the relief effort. The very process of administering relief further reinforced the primacy of NGOs. SCF aid workers described queues of people, their foreheads marked red to designate their need for immediate attention, 'clutching their tiny bowls and pointing to their stomachs and then to their mouths, crying, "Master, food"'.⁴¹ The power they wielded to relieve starvation was 'startling, and extremely satisfying . . . two feedings of protein food were sufficient to abolish the swelling of the legs and to reduce the swollen abdomens'.⁴²

In each of these scenes it was the neo-humanitarians—NGOs and missionaries—that held the keys to 'progress' and 'native' development. Not only was humanitarianism, like colonialism, something done unto others, it also carried another familiar sub-text: that Western relief agencies were bringers of all that was 'modern' and 'advanced', and could—and should—transform Biafra in their own image. 'Experts' recruited in the West administered medical and other assistance to local populations, and in Western terms. Early in the crisis one SCF official warned that he

could 'not foresee any efficient service of relief [in Nigeria] until we get good expatriates that we can control'.⁴³ His colleagues at the organization's 'Mothercraft Centre', a haven for families at Ilesha in southwestern Nigeria, later spoke of their attempts to 'educate' local women on how to feed their children, maximize nutritional intake, and substitute 'primitive and harmful customs' with 'health hygiene at home, insistence on preventive immunization wherever practicable, and instilling an appreciation and understanding of the needs of the infant'.⁴⁴ Reports from Oxfam's relief efforts were equally filled with 'corridors for getting in large-scale supplies of carbohydrates' and the need to 'keep the protein flowing'.⁴⁵ That insistence on the power of science and of trained intervention was echoed in the rearticulation of the Irish missionaries' role. The tasks of relief and welfare provision were designated to the missionaries who had trained as development workers, while others like the Medical Missionaries of Mary—a Catholic order with a specifically humanitarian remit that was prominent in the relief operations in Biafra—were given an equally important role.

That process reinforced a further inheritance of neo-humanitarianism: the desire to organize the Third World and to render its 'otherness' as something that could be understood and 'known'. Following in the tradition of Africanism (Orientalism's close cousin), NGOs in Biafra replicated the dichotomies of the 'developed' and 'under-developed' worlds: traditional *versus* modern; subsistent *versus* productive; agrarian *versus* urban.⁴⁶ That contrast was acutely visible in the descriptions of Irish missionaries who worked at feeding and medical centres deep in 'the bush'. It was present in the near-mythical status the Irish media accorded to Uli airstrip, the stretch of road turned night-time landing spot from where the JCA supplies were distributed by missionaries to locations across Biafra. British NGOs tended to much the same response. In September 1969, for example, SCF reported from Ilesha that

[m]ost of the mothers who are admitted to the Centre with their children are illiterates, and it takes quite some time before they could understand the simple rules of hygiene. One cannot blame them because many of them come from the remote villages where people still live in a primitive way.⁴⁷

But the desire to rebuild Biafra and Nigeria in the West's image did not end with the rebels' collapse. As early as April 1969, one SCF official argued that 'it will not be sufficient to restore conditions in Eastern Nigeria to the prewar level, the limelight of Western interested nations will demand a higher standard than the people have known in the past'.⁴⁸ What began

as a response to disaster translated itself into a longer-term commitment to humanitarian reform. Three months after the war ended in January 1970, Oxfam reminded its supporters of the difficulties associated with rapid social and economic change in a context like that unfolding in Nigeria: ‘The very world itself confounds them as they are sucked by the slipstream of modern technology from their ancient ways. They need both steadying influence and a helpful bridge to cross this chasm successfully’.⁴⁹ This was not simply a story of rebuilding, therefore—it was also about the inability of NGOs to let go. Africa Concern’s covert activities in the former Biafran territory, for example, continued long after the organization’s expulsion in the aftermath of the war, driven by an inherent belief in the superiority of outside action and a concurrent belief that the locals charged with action (in this case the Nigerian National Committee for Rehabilitation and the Nigerian Red Cross) could not, or would not, deal properly with the residual crisis.

Biafra, NGOs and Western Internationalism

The evidence presented here—of the power of decolonization in shaping the attitudes and activities of humanitarian NGOs—reveals strong parallels between the British and Irish experience of the Biafran crisis. But how do we unpack that ‘different-but-similar’ narrative to describe the emergent model of NGO humanitarianism and what it meant for Western conceptions of the Third World? Why, for example, did pride in Ireland’s anticolonial past and the constant references to a shared experience of famine produce a humanitarian response that looked remarkably similar to a British society still coming to terms with the legacy of direct imperial control? It is plainly reductivist to see NGOs simply as continuations, as Manji and O’Coill put it, of ‘the work of their precursors, the missionaries and voluntary organizations that cooperated in Europe’s colonization and control of Africa’.⁵⁰ Their role—both in Africa and in Britain and Ireland—was much more complex than that formulation allows. Yet the extent to which NGOs in both countries fell easily into the neo-humanitarian narrative does point to a model of humanitarianism rooted in a set of shared social and ideological norms.

One way of understanding this convergence is to think of it in terms of the dual logic of ‘difference’ and ‘oneness’ that dominates the imagery utilized by Western NGOs.⁵¹ In that reading, the humanity that drives compassion is counterbalanced by a clear hierarchy of difference and distance between North and South. In Biafra the concept of a shared ‘humanity’ was prominent in British and Irish calls to humanitarian action. Oxfam’s spring 1969 statement on the crisis warned that ‘apart from the historical

associations, humanity demands that Britain faces this awful dilemma'.⁵² Influenced by its roots in the lay Catholic volunteering agency *Viatore Christi* and its links to the Holy Ghost Fathers, Africa Concern viewed its role in similar terms to religious organizations like Christian Aid (the official aid agency of the Protestant British Council of Churches) and the Catholic missionary organizations that were so prominent in the distribution of relief: 'part of a world-wide movement of the Spirit which has united men of goodwill of every denomination as never before in efforts to lessen human misery'.⁵³ The NGO-sustained description of Biafra tended to something different, however—an image of 'helplessness' and the 'desperate' plight of the Igbo people that reinforced hierarchies of humanity and emphasized the distance between the two worlds. Biafra's role as the first televised famine was marked by an over-exposure to images of crisis that frequently tended to numb rather than inspire the public. The 'long distance viewer', as one *Guardian* journalist termed them, 'switched off because they'd seen it before and it hurt them'.⁵⁴ That admission was important: while the crisis brought suffering into Western living rooms and loosened humanitarian compassion, it remained something 'out there', something that could be turned down or off, and something that remained largely extraneous to everyday existence.

Reading the donor-NGO-recipient chain in terms of this 'radically unequal order that is the mark of the humanitarian relationship' suggests that we need to think about the organized response to Biafra not just in terms of empire and the order imposed by decolonization, but also as part of a model of liberal governance and the spread of Western values through the medium of the NGO.⁵⁵ The depoliticization of relief was an important first step in that process. From the beginning of the Biafran crisis, British and Irish NGOs attempted to elevate their actions above and outside of the politics of the conflict. Christian Aid stated its desire to be 'impartial in regard to the military and political issues of the war—and [to] try to relieve suffering on both sides, as equally as possible'.⁵⁶ It was not alone. Oxfam told readers of its newsletter in December 1968 that it was 'in no way concerned with the politics of the situation. . . . In pleading for a cease-fire our only concern is for humanity'.⁵⁷

Even in Ireland, where the crisis was experienced in a broadly pro-Biafran context—to the extent that Africa Concern and the Holy Ghost Fathers were among the first organizations to be expelled from Nigeria after Biafra's collapse—this depoliticization of the narrative was openly evident. In popular discourse, humanitarianism was designated to the realm of Christian humanity and viewed as something quite apart from the exigencies of civil war, including any references to genocide made by the rebels' supporters. The analogy of industrial action employed by

journalist Raymond Smith to justify Catholic involvement in the relief effort was typical:

if a strike brings men out on the street and if that strike is prolonged with the result that their families are faced with hunger, the relief agencies do not stop to consider whether the strike is justified or not. They see defenceless women and children suffering—and come to their immediate help. It should be left to others to debate the issues in the strike.⁵⁸

Solidarity in this case stood above politics and instead brought a broadly shared pride in the role played by the Irish missionary community—and, by extension, Africa Concern—that did little to interrogate the nuances of Christian humanitarian action.

Depoliticization of the relief effort had the same result as the imagery employed by the NGOs, flattening out the complexity of Biafran and Nigerian society in favour of the moral imperative of humanitarian aid. While SCF, Christian Aid, Oxfam and War on Want remained closely conversant with British officials, operated under the ICRC umbrella and were frequently at the mercy of changing federal and Biafran priorities—where and when they could send food, how it was distributed, how many expatriate personnel could be employed and in what locations—these developments were little discussed in public. Rather they remained buried beneath the primacy of impartiality and the immediate response to hunger: ‘the most heartbreaking consequence of this war’.⁵⁹ Equally absent was any sustained public critique of imperial and missionary continuities as the building blocks of humanitarian action. In their place came NGOs—the embodiment for many of the inherent ‘good’ that was ‘people-to-people’ action.

Taking that analysis a step further, the role of British and Irish NGOs in Biafra was also crucial in the acceleration of what Mark Duffield termed ‘permanent emergency’: the reproduction of the humanitarian movement through consistent crisis, by simultaneously emphasizing NGO neutrality and stripping away any complexity from the recipients of disaster relief.⁶⁰ The primacy of ‘emergency’ and ‘relief’ in west Africa reinforced the image of NGOs as above politics, while further negating the agency of those to be ‘saved’. The complete eclipse of Gorta’s model of long-term development in Ireland by the immediacy of Africa Concern’s activities provided a good example of this hierarchy in practice. In 1969 Gorta formed a ‘Nigeria/Biafra advisory group’, made up of representatives of missionary organizations, its own council members and government officials, yet dismissed the package of projects it put forward as ‘not a very

dramatic one'.⁶¹ They had reason to be concerned. By July of that year, the organization's regional officers reported 'a great deal of surprise and dismay among the public that Gorta should be concerning itself with long-term objectives while people were actually dying of starvation'.⁶²

Therein lay Biafra's most telling contribution to the popular understanding of the Third World: the primacy of emergency and the immediate NGO response. What Gorta experienced in west Africa was merely underlined in a succession of crises that followed. The flight of refugees from civil war in East Pakistan in 1971 inspired not an interrogation of its causes but a Concern-run 'Pakistan Famine Appeal'. In Cambodia eight years later NGOs focussed attention away from the politics of Vietnamese intervention and the residual influence of the Khmer Rouge regime towards a situation that Oxfam technical officer Jim Howard described as 'worse than Biafra. But you can't make comparisons like that when there are so many people dying of starvation'.⁶³ In Ethiopia (1984–85) the situation was much the same. British and Irish NGOs preferred to emphasize the distribution of aid than to publicly criticize the policies of displacement and resettlement followed by the Derg regime. The lesson was simple: the importance of the decolonization paradigm was reduced, but the power of neo-humanitarianism and Western liberal governance remained.

Conclusion

This essay has traced the evolution of the Biafran 'humanitarian encounter' in terms of new beginnings (for the NGO sector), of the decolonization paradigm (the rise of neo-humanitarianism), of paternalism (aid as something done unto others) and of Western internationalism and the rise of the liberal humanitarian regime. In Biafra, or at least in the NGO *response* to Biafra, those elements collided so that the 'NGO moment' helped to crystallize a particular humanitarian vision of, and relationship with, the Third World that did little to challenge, and much to reinforce, that cultivated in the colonial era.

In constructing the 'imaginative geographies' of British and Irish attitudes to the Third World—the 'practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is "ours" and an unfamiliar space beyond "ours" which is "theirs"'—the NGO response to Biafra largely stripped away the complexity and agency of the very society that it purported to help.⁶⁴ Decolonization and the shift to neo-humanitarianism were central to that narrative. In Britain, the relief effort amounted to a repackaging of imperial responsibilities and care for far-off communities for a postcolonial era. In Ireland the response—whether articulated through Africa Concern or the missionary relief effort—was closely associated with the country's

'religious empire'. In both states popular representations of the crisis reinforced a tendency to view the peoples of the Third World as inferior or, at the very least, as near-perpetual victims. The inherent paternalism and power imbalances that the NGO 'crusade' made integral to public discourse further emphasized this popular imagining of the Third World. Biafra became a place to be 'saved' by 'experts' and by the superiority of scientific knowledge: of nutrition, technology and medicine.

To argue that this was the case is not to impose some kind of neat divide between 'good' and 'bad' humanitarianism or between 'the West' and 'the rest'. We should not be too quick to dismiss the positive virtues embodied by NGOs, missionaries and volunteers, for example. Nor were NGOs universally comfortable with a Biafra-inspired model of the developing world. In May 1969 Christian Aid Director Alan Brash wrote to the organization's public relations officer to describe his frustration at the image of Africa generated by the ongoing crisis. His comments said much about the dominant public vision of the Third World:

We do not want any more films which result simply in provoking a relief programme. A film including some of the war damage but leading on to an interpretation of the rehabilitation situation, not only the need but also the potential, would be meaningful.⁶⁵

The Biafra-inspired 'imaginative geography' of the Third World should instead lead us to realize that humanitarianism could be simultaneously (and paradoxically) outwardly all encompassing in its ideals yet rooted in Western social and ideological norms, and to appreciate the important role that NGOs played in making it so. In their broadest sense, NGOs have been feted as central building blocks in an increasingly interdependent post-1945 world.⁶⁶ They created new frames of reference for Western publics in terms of regional, transnational and global foci rather than simply local or national ones. And for their supporters, they became interlocutors between worlds. In translating and transmitting Biafra's plight, NGOs like Oxfam and Africa Concern articulated what Didier Fassin described as the core of humanitarian reason: 'the response made by our societies to what is intolerable about the state of the contemporary world'.⁶⁷ It was a keenly felt set of values.

Yet the NGO experience of Biafra warns us that we should not naively assume that this 'people-to-people' action implied the existence of a utopian 'common humanity' based on justice, equality and some commonly held notion of human rights. Alan Brash's misgivings about the use of disaster imagery did not result in its abandonment by the sector. Steeped in imperial and missionary continuities, and often paternalistic in language

and practice, NGOs tended to reinforce and rearticulate rather than challenge existing stereotypes of the Third World. The belief in humanitarianism as an inherent 'good' and an attempt to tackle the problems of the Third World merely draws attention to the unconscious, but no less potent, inequalities inherent in the aid-giving process. This was, after all, largely a Western projection *on to* the Third World. And the fact that NGOs were highly successful while pursuing it testifies to its purchase among the watching Western public. It also leads us to one final lesson that British and Irish organizations shared with the anti-apartheid movement, another prominent contemporary international humanitarian campaign. The watching public needed translators like NGOs to make sense of the outside world. Or, as Håkan Thörn rather bluntly put it, 'common humanity' was more appealing in the West when it was expressed with a local accent and 'a white face'.⁶⁸

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13 ‘And Starvation Is the Grim Reaper’

The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive and the Genocide Question During the Nigerian Civil War, 1968–1970

Brian McNeil

Introduction

The mood matched the weather that cold December morning when a funeral procession marched down the streets of New York City. The departed, born in 1948, came to life following the Second World War and embodied the hopes of a generation that sought to atone for and avoid the sins of the past. But a near quarter-century of neglect had led to the death that the congregation was now mourning. As the cavalcade arrived at the burying ground, thirty people held a wake where each participant read a short message from a small piece of paper in remembrance of the deceased and then placed their note inside a black coffin. The words ‘Biafra: two million dead’, were emblazoned with white markings on the side—cutting through the darkness and bringing clarity to the tenebrous casket. Yet the body count from the secessionist state of Biafra was not the demise that the bereaved onlookers were lamenting. It was a sorrowful day, for on 10 December 1969, on its twenty-first birthday, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was pronounced dead by the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive.

Outside of the United Nations building, Paul Connett, president of the committee, decried the world organization. ‘That the U.N. has not acted diminishes it, diminishes all people, and diminishes the meaning of the Declaration’, he said to the crowd.¹ The United Nations had an obligation to act in the Nigerian Civil War because of the genocide being committed by the Federal Military Government of Nigeria against the Igbo living in the secessionist state of Biafra, the American Committee claimed.² Since the summer of 1968, grotesque images of starving Biafran women and children with swollen stomachs, hollowed eyes, and matchstick legs had elucidated the travesty for the American public in ways that words never could. Indeed, *Time* magazine noted that these images appealed to the ‘conscience of the world’, and as one American citizen remarked in

a letter to President Lyndon Baines Johnson, in plain sight, 'for the first time, the world is confronted with an all too obvious case of actual mass genocide perpetuated by the Nigerian Federal Government against the Ibo people'.³ While not all of the more than two hundred ad hoc humanitarian organizations in the United States that emerged in response to the famine invoked genocide, many elicited genocide in order to bolster their efforts of pressuring the United States government into supporting humanitarian intervention in Biafra. As a result of this grassroots activism in the United States, the potential of genocide in Eastern Nigeria caught the attention of many high profile American leaders. Both presidential candidates included the Nigerian Civil War in the 1968 campaign. Democratic candidate Eugene McCarthy called for a ceasefire in the war, an arms embargo and a massive relief effort where aid would be sent directly into the Biafran enclave.⁴ Richard M. Nixon, the Republican nominee, agreed. He argued that the United States government had a moral obligation to take action against the man-made famine in Eastern Nigeria. 'Genocide is what is taking place right now', he said, 'and starvation is the grim reaper'.⁵

No organization in the United States made the genocide claim as boldly or as pronounced as the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive. With its advanced advertising campaign, political connections in Washington, DC, and fundraising ability, the committee played a crucial role in informing the American public about the Nigerian Civil War and framing the debate over genocide in the United States.⁶ The American Committee stated purpose was 'to save the people of Biafra from the threat of genocide' by promoting and conducting 'a general campaign of advertising in all legal and acceptable media'.⁷ The committee's activism helped to galvanize public support in the United States behind humanitarian intervention in Biafra, which facilitated a fundamental shift in American foreign policy for increased humanitarian aid during the Nigerian Civil War.

Despite the importance of the ad hoc organization to the development of American policy toward the Biafra war, scholars have yet to analyze the committee's evolving views on genocide, self-determination and the creation of a separate Biafran state.⁸ As it became clear to committee members that the United States government was not going to violate Nigerian sovereignty in the name of humanitarian relief, the committee changed tactics from lobbying for ostensible apolitical humanitarianism to calling for the political recognition of Biafra. Along with this shift within the organization, I argue, was a redefinition of genocide by committee members from the eradication of a group of people to the destruction of a nation-state. By wedding the Biafran people to the concept of a nation, activists within the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive claimed that the prosecution of the war itself by the Nigerian government was a genocide,

making the actual eradication of Biafrans an important but not necessarily contingent aspect to the definition of genocide.

In many ways, the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive's political transformation represented a last-ditch effort to save lives in the distant hinterland of Eastern Nigeria. However, I argue that the change was bolstered by many different undercurrents of international politics operating at the same time in the late 1960s, sometimes reinforcing and at other times competing with each other, that were fundamentally related to the genocide question during the Nigerian Civil War. The first was the ambiguous and expanding definition of genocide during the 1960s. As scholars of genocide have clearly noted, there is no consensus on the meaning of the word.⁹ In 1967, for example, French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre reintroduced 'cultural genocide', a contested vision of genocide that had been part of Raphael Lemkin's original formulation, to the list of acts that constituted genocide in response to France's war in Algeria and, more to the point, the American war in Vietnam.¹⁰ During the Nigerian Civil War, when there were competing claims over whether the Nigerian government was committing genocide in Biafra, the lack of consensus on genocide offered a space for the American Committee to put forward a new conception of what constituted genocide that was based on the eradication of nationhood.¹¹ The Biafran episode, then, provides the historical origins of the link between self-determination and genocide, two terms that are often brought together during independence struggles for sometimes desultory results.¹²

Both Biafrans and American activists made genocide claims during a moment in African decolonization when many were questioning the legitimacy of inherited colonial borders, whether through federation or through armed struggle.¹³ Despite this questioning of sovereignty, international recognition of a nation-state with inviolable borders remained the standard for peoples in the developing world, and committee members connected their new definition of genocide to decolonization and an older liberal tradition of revolutionary rights tied to citizenship within a state to bolster the claim for a separate Biafran nation.¹⁴ Historians have demonstrated that in 1948 the Genocide Convention and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights were created by different people for different purposes, but some scholars have argued that the struggle to prevent genocide and feed Biafrans during the Nigerian Civil War—specifically the willingness of Western activists to disregard Nigeria's claims to sovereignty—was a significant moment in human rights history.¹⁵ It is certainly the case that the erosion of sovereignty was an important component for many humanitarian activists during the conflict; however, the political shift of the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive toward the political recognition of

Biafra as a sovereign state demonstrates the limits of this argument. The American Committee did indeed appeal for the violation of Nigerian sovereignty for humanitarian relief, but they concomitantly called for the creation of a new Biafran sovereign state. More sovereignty, not less, was the committee's solution for ending genocide in Biafra. To be sure, this call for Biafran sovereignty grew out of frustration with international organizations that refused to intervene and protect Biafrans from the Federal Military Government of Nigeria. Still, it is nevertheless significant that they appealed to older traditions of sovereignty and citizenship as the solution. 'We will campaign for the birth of a nation as the only way to avoid the death of a people', committee members said in 1969.¹⁶ With the violation of sovereignty tied to the creation of a new sovereign state, I contend that the committee's work demonstrated the ambiguity and, indeed, remoteness of human rights in international politics during the 1960s.

Finally, this essay argues that the genocide question in Biafra was an important early barometer in measuring what would become the limits of American foreign policy in the post-Vietnam era. Above all, the committee wanted to save the lives of those affected by 'the genocide now being perpetrated on the Ibo people and other tribesmen in Biafra', by working through the United States government to 'move in the direction of a U.S. sponsored humanitarian intervention' in Biafra.¹⁷ The committee defined humanitarian intervention as sending humanitarian relief into Biafra with or without the consent of the Nigerian Federal Military Government. In lieu of direct humanitarian intervention by the United States, the committee hoped that its activism would pressure the American government to call for an extraordinary session of the United Nations General Assembly where the Nigerian Civil War would be open for international debate. This never happened, and the United States, along with nearly every country in the world, refused to broach the subject in the UN.¹⁸ While the committee argued that American noninvolvement in the Nigerian Civil War demonstrated the moral bankruptcy of US foreign policy, it also illustrated the widening gulf between what the United States government was willing and not willing to do in a political conflict in the Global South—a gap that raised new questions on America's role in an increasingly interconnected and heterogeneous world.

Genocide and Nigeria

The genocide claim during the Nigerian Civil War was tied to the complex political past of the Igbo, the predominant ethnic group of the Eastern Region of Nigeria, and the struggle for Nigerian unity following the end of the British Empire in Africa.¹⁹ At independence on 1 October 1960,

Nigeria was a federation comprised of three unequally sized regions: north, south and east. Owing to the fact that these three regions were religiously, culturally and linguistically different from one another, British officials and Nigerian political leaders believed that federalism was the only model of political association that could best protect and promote Nigerian unity after independence.²⁰ But the inequality of the regions—the north was geographically the largest region and had a population roughly equivalent to the Eastern and Western Regions combined—led to fears of ethnic domination by all of the groups in Nigeria, which, in turn, led to further political instability. The volatile situation in Nigeria turned violent in January 1966 when a group of military officers attempted a coup against the Nigerian government. Unsuccessful in radically transforming the Nigerian state, these ‘Young Turks’, as Nigerian President Nnamdi Azikiwe described the mutineers, did manage to kill Abubakar Balewa, the first prime minister of Nigeria, and end Nigeria’s First Republic.²¹ A military government came to power following the first coup, and Nigerians initially welcomed its arrival. Despite high expectations, the seemingly irrepressible fear of ethnic domination in Nigerian politics again reared its ugly head. Major General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, leader of the new Nigerian military government, was convinced that federalism was the problem, and on 24 May 1966 he issued Decree no. 34, which transformed Nigeria into a unitary state. In a radio broadcast announcing the decree, Ironsi said his plan was ‘intended to remove the last vestiges of the intense regionalism of the recent past, and to produce the cohesion in the governmental structure which is so necessary in achieving . . . national unity’.²²

In the north, the unitary decree was met with derision as it threatened to overthrow the entire northern way of life. Usman Nagogo, the emir of Katsina, explained to Birney A. Stokes, American consul at Kaduna, that a change to a unitary state would mean that the North would no longer be able ‘to maintain a separate and different way of life’ from the South.²³ The change in Nigerian political association served as a backdrop for northern agitation against Ironsi, and the Hausa cry of *a raba*—let us secede—could be heard throughout the Northern Region following the promulgation of Ironsi’s decree. The situation became violent when northerners turned their anger toward the Igbo living in the *sabon gari*, or stranger’s quarter, of northern cities.²⁴ Northerners killed hundreds of Igbo in a massacre that was met with indifference from local authorities and led to an exodus of approximately 100,000 Igbo from the north to the east.²⁵ Chukwue-meka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the military governor of the Eastern Region, described the killings as a ‘pogrom’ in which northerners attempted to ‘apply the final solution’ to Igbo living in northern Nigeria.²⁶

A second military coup in July 1966 brought Yakubu Gowon, a Christian from the Middle Belt area of northern Nigeria, to power but did little to stem the violence in the country. Very few observers had high hopes that Gowon could instil confidence in Nigerians and put an end to Nigerian political instability. His tenure in office was barely two months old when, at the end of September 1966, northerners again attacked easterners living in the North, killing at least 7,000 Igbo in a brutal fashion. Witnesses to the massacres recalled their stories to American officials that travelled across northern Nigeria following the slaughter. One onlooker in Kano, a British expatriate who had also witnessed the violence that accompanied Indian partition in 1947, said the mob action in northern Nigeria was worse than anything he had ever seen.²⁷ 'The terrible aspect of what happened in Kano was the savagery that accompanied the killing', he remembered. In Maiduguri, a city in the extreme northeast of Nigeria, northerners massacred at least five hundred Igbo, and the police, because of a fear of reprisals, complicity in the attack, or pure apathy, turned a blind eye to the massacre. An American living in the North recalled that 'the Northerners in Maiduguri were jubilant for several days following the violence, extremely pleased with themselves for having gotten rid of the Ibos'.²⁸ The killing stopped sometime in mid-October, but the Igbo exodus continued well into December 1966. The few Igbo that remained in the North, the American consul at Kaduna reported, faced a northern police force 'engaged in a sustained effort to gather and repatriate all remaining Ibos, whether or not the easterners wish to remain in the North'. The consul concluded 'that, in fact, it seems to have become de facto illegal for Ibos, at least, to dwell in the Northern Region'.²⁹

Toward Humanitarian Intervention

The September massacres and subsequent Igbo withdrawal from Northern Nigeria was the basis for the initial human rights petition to the United Nations to end genocide and provided an historical link to Biafran claims of genocide during the Nigerian Civil War.³⁰ Numerous attempts at political negotiation between eastern leader Ojukwu and Nigerian Supreme Commander Gowon failed, and on 30 May 1967, Ojukwu announced the creation of the Republic of Biafra. While some influential figures like anthropologist Stanley Diamond and Irish scholar-activist Conor Cruise O'Brien protested to American officials in 1967 that Biafrans had the right to self-determination and deserved 'protective political sovereignty' because of the massacres, the far majority of Americans could not be bothered with the conflict in Nigeria.³¹ Indeed, African-American journalist

Charles S. Sanders wrote in July 1967 that in the United States the Nigerian Civil War was ‘the war between blacks nobody cares about’.³²

In the early summer of 1968, reports of famine and pictures of starving women and children brought the Nigerian Civil War to the living rooms of American homes. The famine was the result of a blockade that the Nigerian government had imposed on the Eastern Region in the feverish months leading up to Biafran secession. The food situation was already difficult before the institution of the blockade, and the influx of upwards of one million refugees into Eastern Nigeria following the September Massacres exacerbated the problem by ensuring that an adequate amount of protein would not reach the mouths of the starving people. According to Nigerian officials, the blockade was the legal right of a sovereign state seeking to put down an internal rebellion. Outside of Nigeria, the Federal Military Government’s refusal to allow relief directly into Biafra was proof that Nigeria intended to starve the Biafrans into extinction.

In response to claims of genocide and images of mass famine, ad hoc organizations sprung to life across the Europe and North America.³³ In the United States, these groups ranged from a few high school students locally raising funds in the name of humanitarian relief to broader political organizations that supported the creation of a separate Biafran state.³⁴ These groups tended to have little coordination with each other, and in most cases it is unclear who founded the groups, how long they lasted, or what sort of influence they had in their communities. And like many ad hoc organizations that emerged in response to a crisis, these groups were long on grievances but short on adequate suggestions for how to fix the problem at hand.

The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive stood apart from these other organizations by very quickly creating a broad strategy for pressuring the American government into taking a more active role in facilitating relief. Former Peace Corps volunteers who had recently returned from Nigeria and college students founded the American Committee in July 1968.³⁵ For Susan Durr, one of the original members of the committee, the Peace Corps experience was instrumental in her development as an activist during the Nigerian Civil War. In retrospect, Durr told me that she was part of ‘a generation of social workers’ that was inspired by President John F. Kennedy’s vision for the international programme. ‘The idealism of the Peace Corps was contagious’, she said. Durr had been stationed at Okija, a tiny village just south of Onitsha. When I asked her why she helped to create the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, she responded that the answer was simple: Peace Corps volunteers stationed in the Eastern Region ‘developed strong friendships and identified as Igbo. So why did we help? Because we saw ourselves as Igbo’.³⁶ Peace Corps ideals infused the American Committee’s mission. The committee, its leaders explained,

was 'committed to the third goal of the Peace Corps which is to bring back to the American people insights into our international obligations and to educate citizens to undertake purposeful action'.³⁷ For many within the organization, the Peace Corps played an integral part in instilling a desire to save those suffering from what they interpreted to be genocide in Eastern Nigeria.

For Paul Connett, an Englishman studying chemistry at Cornell University, it was the Vietnam War that ignited his political activism, and he became involved in American politics as a student volunteer for Eugene McCarthy's 1968 presidential campaign. It was through Connett's work on the McCarthy bid for the presidency that he met Allard Lowenstein, a one-term Congressman for New York's Fifth District. Like so many Americans during the summer of 1968, Lowenstein had seen the horrific images of starving Biafrans on the news and wondered what could be done to relieve the suffering in the Biafran enclave. In the back of a limousine that was carrying both Connett and Lowenstein to a political planning session for McCarthy, the Congressman broached the subject of Biafran starvation. Lowenstein was concerned that the starvation issue would not make it past one week in the American news cycle, and he wanted Connett to go out and raise money for the relief agencies struggling to get food into Biafra. 'With your English accent', Lowenstein told Connett, 'you can do something really important'.³⁸

Connett and his colleagues sought to do just that. The committee initiated public protests, took out advertisements in major American newspapers like the *New York Times*, lobbied Senators and Congressmen directly, and encouraged Americans to write letters to their representatives to support American-led humanitarian action in Biafra. They even worked closely with public relations firms like Young & Rubicam to get out the message, using the resources of the Madison Avenue firm to fundraise and coordinate activities across the country.³⁹ The committee especially favoured petitions, and one appeal was addressed 'To all Adults' and signed exclusively by children. 'We don't want children like us to die of starvation wherever they are', the petition read.⁴⁰

The American Committee adopted the language of other activist groups during the 1960s of participatory democracy and argued that starvation in Biafra was a test case of the values of governments and international organizations. Earlier in the decade the Students for a Democratic Society had made it clear that the institutions of governance must be transformed to better reflect the needs of mankind and human dignity.⁴¹ The American Committee argued that American policy toward humanitarianism was a betrayal of the wellbeing of man. As a result, the committee said, 'we the children of our institutions put our institutions on trial. If they purport

to carry out our intentions, they must not mistake what our intentions are'.⁴² The intention was to get the United States moving toward relief and 'establishing a formal channel of humanitarian aid which would act independent of political, social, or economic considerations to insure personal and group security'.⁴³ Stopping genocide and saving Biafran lives was the American Committee's most important task. 'We believe if we fail the whole world will share the guilt', the committee declared. Governments must act, they said. 'Our intention is not to tell them how this should be done but to make it overwhelmingly clear that this is what they must do'.⁴⁴

Committee members were following Lowenstein's charge to do something important on Biafra, though they faced many obstacles—the biggest hurdle being financial. The committee was run out of a seedy storefront at Hotel Hadson on Broadway in Midtown where the rent was the property's only saving grace. 'It was really cheap', Ellen Langley, the group's secretary, recalled, 'and there was a reason for that'.⁴⁵ If the committee kept official membership records, then the exact numbers have been lost. In truth, the committee was probably never fully aware of the exact number of volunteers because the American Committee was not so much a club you joined as it was a movement that you worked for. The committee depended on donations for funding, whether from money collected during demonstrations, direct donations from volunteers, or from the numerous satellite committees located across the country. There are no precise numbers on the group's budget, although at one point in 1969 Paul Connett claimed that the committee was spending between \$1,000 and \$2,000 a week. It is almost certainly the case that the committee's resources fluctuated greatly, and the group often benefited from large donations from wealthy donors such as Harvard Professor Martin Peretz.⁴⁶ Sizable contributions from affluent supporters, however, were few and far between, and the committee, like so many other ad hoc organizations during the sixties, scraped by to make ends meet.

Founded as a non-political humanitarian organization that focused solely on raising public awareness of the Biafran situation—Langley said their job was to make 'noise'—the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive did not initially seek the creation of a separate Biafran state.⁴⁷ In its premier charter, the committee explained

we are political only in the sense that we aim our efforts at both governments and at international organizations calling for them to rise above the diplomatic problems and reach out and stop this crime against humanity and save the starving victims of this tragedy—NOW.⁴⁸

At a protest outside the United Nations building on 13 August 1968, committee member Philip Nix said the committee was 'disgusted with the use

of the word "politics" in connection with this famine. . . . We aren't taking sides politically'.⁴⁹ In order to stop the suffering in Biafra, the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive called for the United States government to bring the Biafran situation in front of the United Nations General Assembly and, if necessary, take unilateral action for humanitarian assistance.⁵⁰ Raising humanitarian awareness was the focus of a major three-day charity event called Lifeline that began on 25 October 1968. Lifeline was meant 'to show that people throughout the U.S. (and elsewhere) are deeply concerned about the inhuman treatment of the people of Biafra'.⁵¹ At events across the country, local organizers held their own Lifeline events that raised money for Biafran relief by aiming at the conscience of American citizens. The committee instructed local groups to place a large image of a small, starving child in the centre as a focal point.⁵² In addition, activists created written messages and marched in around in circles. 'Love thy Neighbor Aid Biafra', read one placard. 'Your Silence Encourages GENOCIDE in Biafra', read another.⁵³

Genocide and genocide prevention were key components of the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive's insistence on humanitarian intervention. Despite disagreements within the group over methods, committee members agreed that the Nigerian government was committing genocide against the Biafrans.⁵⁴ By labelling the Nigerian Civil War as genocide, the American Committee joined a chorus of ad hoc organizations across the nation and world that accused the Nigerian government of attempting to exterminate the Igbo. Student Mobilization for Biafra, an organization founded by New York City's high school students, argued in a broadside that by the end of 1970 'we will have been witness to one of the greatest crimes ever committed: the genocidal murder of millions of innocent people'.⁵⁵ The Committee of Returned Volunteers, an American organization established by former members of governmental and non-governmental organizations, said that 'genocide' was the key factor separating the Nigerian Civil War from other conflicts taking place in the 1960s.⁵⁶ The Britain-Biafra Association, one of the three major groups operating in Britain, published pamphlets explaining that the reports from 'unbiased observers' made it 'frighteningly clear that Nigerian policy toward Biafra is nothing short of genocide'.⁵⁷ And in France, the *Comité International de Lutte contre le Génocide au Biafra*, whose name alone explicitly stated that the organization was fighting against genocide in Biafra, passed out a cartoon flyer comparing Biafran starvation to the Holocaust.⁵⁸ The French group, founded by Bernard Kouchner, said that the twentieth-century alphabet must be updated to recognize the fact that A now stands for Auschwitz and B should represent Biafra.⁵⁹

It was one thing to claim genocide in Biafra, but how did the American Committee actually know that the Nigerian Federal Military Government

was committing genocide in Biafra? After all, genocide is difficult to determine in an international propaganda war where both sides employed public relations firms that provided one-sided and slanted reports of events in Biafra.⁶⁰ Committee members leaned on statements made by Nigerian military leaders to bolster their claim that the Nigerian government was pursuing a policy of genocide in the war. In the organization's official newsletter *Biafran Lifeline*, the committee quoted Nigerian Colonel Benjamin Adekunle who said that he wanted 'to see no Red Cross, no Caritas, no World Council of Churches, no Pope, no missionary and no UN delegation. I want to prevent even one Ibo from having even one piece to eat before their capitulation'. More important than these statements, the images of starving children made the case for genocide for committee members. They argued that any further discussion on whether or not Nigeria was committing genocide was simply academic and got in the way of action that could allay the suffering in Biafra. With these forces working together, the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive declared that everyone should 'Protest Genocide' in Biafra. As if to quell any further discussion on the merits of their genocidal assertion, the Committee asked, 'If this is not genocide, what is?'.⁶¹

Until this point, the United States government had been able to stay noninvolved in the Nigerian Civil War. Humanitarian pressure made that position difficult. The American Committee followed a dual approach of national and international activism that lobbied American policymakers to take action at the United Nations. As Paul Connett explained in a letter to Stephen Frankfurt, president of the advertising agency Young & Rubicam, 'Our goals are supra-national'.⁶² On 25 September 1968, committee members Susan Durr and Robert D. Jackson travelled to Washington to discuss with American officials what the United States could do in Biafra in light of the 'fact of genocide'. Making it clear that they were 'opposed to secession', Durr and Jackson demanded that the United States bring the Biafran situation to the United Nations General Assembly and push 'for a "humanitarian intervention" of some sort in Biafra in order to save countless lives'.⁶³ To augment their call for humanitarian intervention, the committee members provided a legal brief created by professors at the Yale Law School. Claiming that the Biafran 'circumstances clearly call for employment of the exceptional legal institution of humanitarian intervention', Michael Reisman and Myres S. McDougal's lengthy brief argued that violating sovereignty for humanitarian relief had a long history and a well-established legal tradition that could be invoked in the case of the Igbo in Biafra. In summation, the counsellors offered not a legal justification for humanitarian intervention but a moral one: 'If we cannot perfect, as a minimum, a system of humanitarian intervention, we have lost our

humanity. If we sit passively by while the Ibos suffer genocide, we have forfeited our right to regain it'.⁶⁴

Within the American bureaucracy, Reisman and McDougal's memorandum was largely met with indifference, but it did begin a conversation about the legality of humanitarian intervention in Eastern Nigeria. Lawrence Hargrove, a legal advisor to the United States Mission in New York, examined the document and determined that the UN could, in theory, act in the name of humanitarian intervention 'consistently with its Charter and its practice under the Charter'. Promoting such an act was inadvisable, Hargrove concluded, because

to invoke a supposed right of "humanitarian intervention" as described . . . would be wrong on the law as it exists, harmful to the future integrity of the Charter, and politically unhelpful to the cause of getting quick and effective action to relieve the Ibos.

In particular, Hargrove stated that the brief provided by the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive violated Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter, which stated that all members of the UN must abstain from the threat or use of force against the sovereignty or independence of any state. There were two practical reasons for judging Article 2(4) in this way, he wrote. First, the majority of states in the UN agreed with this position. Second, it would set a precedent for any state to legally intervene in another state's affairs in the name of 'humanitarian intervention'—a vague phrase that could be interpreted in many ways. After all, Hargrove noted, in 1968 had not the Soviet Union argued for intervention in Czechoslovakia in the name of maintaining international peace and humanitarianism? 'One requires no Calvinist predilections to see that governments are not essentially good enough to be trusted with a rule which allows them to exercise force against another country when they believe it would serve the ends of human rights to do so', Hargrove wrote, 'or would otherwise be consistent with one of the vaguely formulate purposes stated in Article 1 of the Charter', which was to maintain international peace and security.⁶⁵ The United States, in other words, was not going to push for humanitarian intervention in the UN and was certainly not going to take the lead in unilaterally violating Nigeria's sovereignty.

Toward Political Intervention

Committee members went to Washington in the fall of 1968 with high hopes for a change in American foreign policy toward the Nigerian Civil War, and in some ways their activism was successful. Susan Durr,

for example, struck a friendship with Roger Morris, a National Security Council staff member, and they shared information about the Biafran situation over the phone on a weekly basis for the duration of the war. Morris embraced many of the positions advocated by the American Committee and pressed Nixon to adopt a more active response to the conflict.⁶⁶ Durr told me that the conversations with a high-ranking official in the White House like Morris ‘made us feel relevant’.⁶⁷ Despite minor successes, the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive found itself at a crossroads in early November 1968. While Secretary of State Dean Rusk privately admitted that the ‘humanitarian pressure’ over Biafra was so great that the United States might ‘be forced to reappraise the policies we have been following’, the Johnson administration did not seem to be coming any closer to taking a lead on humanitarian relief.⁶⁸ And the United Nations, the august world organization that to committee members was the logical place to voice concerns about suffering in Biafra, was even more reluctant to bring up the Nigerian Civil War. After picketing at the UN, Durr told me, she ‘learned that the UN is about nations. It’s not about splinter groups within nations. It’s not about solving internal affairs. It’s about zero interest in anything about Biafra’.⁶⁹

The frustrating experience in Washington and New York led the committee to demand a more radical solution to genocide in Biafra. The politics of Biafran self-determination was tied to the humanitarian question of relief, and the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive decided that humanitarian intervention in Biafra would not take place until governments treated humanitarian relief as a political problem. If the United States and United Nations refused to take the lead in relief out of a reluctance to violate Nigerian sovereignty, then the answer was for the committee to openly advocate for Biafran self-determination and the Biafran right, in the face of genocide, to an independent and inviolable nation-state. Providing Biafra with a path to sovereignty and citizenship within a separate nation-state, they said, was the only practical solution for ending the genocide against the Biafrans.

The committee’s linking of politics and humanitarianism was a direct challenge to US foreign policy goals toward the Nigerian Civil War. Since the beginning of the conflict, the Johnson administration had consistently declared that it only recognized the Nigerian government and wanted Nigeria to remain as one political unit. As Joseph Palmer, assistant secretary of state of African affairs and former ambassador to Nigeria, explained, the United States government drew ‘a distinction—to the extent that one is possible—between the political and humanitarian aspects of the war’.⁷⁰ American officials realized, however, that the separating of the two was

a Herculean task. 'So long as the fighting goes on', Under Secretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach wrote to Rusk, 'the relief effort is going to be fatally hamstrung by the politics of the civil war'.⁷¹ While the United States would try and draw a distinction between humanitarianism and politics in Biafra, the reality for the American government was that they were, in fact, intertwined. Indeed, Katzenbach concluded that those advocating for the United States to intervene in the name of relief wished for the Johnson administration to 'slice through the Gordian knot which twists together a thousand political and humanitarian strands in an attempt to separate them'.⁷² Rather than cut the hitch and send aid without Nigeria's approval, it became official American policy to try and untie the Gordian knot of relief and only push for humanitarianism in Biafra on terms palatable to the Nigerian government.

For the American Committee, such a policy was foolhardy and immoral. With no humanitarian arrangements forthcoming, the committee declared that 'in Biafra's case, humanitarian and political goals are inseparable', and the group resolved that the only way to end genocide in Eastern Nigeria was for Biafrans to protect themselves by being in control of their own sovereign state.⁷³ After the Lifeline protests that took place across the United States in late October 1968, the American Committee officially changed its strategy toward genocide in Biafra. In a pamphlet on the relief problem, committee member Miriam M. Reik said the group had 'been naïve in our purely humanitarian approach and our hoping for a solution in a relief operation'. If governments would not intervene and violate Nigerian sovereignty to stop genocide, then the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive determined 'that there is no viable solution short of the establishment of a sovereign political entity, a Biafra which can safeguard its own national interests without foreign intervention and protect its own people from the hostility of neighboring populations'.⁷⁴ The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive now advocated for the Biafran right to protective political sovereignty and for the recognition of Biafra as an independent state to end the genocide against the Igbo.

Becoming outwardly political and supporting Biafran self-determination cost the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive support, both internally and externally. By pushing for a Biafran state, 'you will help prolong the war, increase the number of war casualties, and abet the starvation among the children', one member wrote to Paul Connett when disassociating himself from the organization.⁷⁵ Those that turned away from the committee believed that the group's initial humanitarian goals were pure and would be contaminated by taking a political stand for Biafra. When justifying to one supporter the committee's decision to

change its position on the political recognition of Biafra, Connett argued that the reality of genocide made it imperative that the American Committee adjust its course.

If we, as individuals, continue to feed Biafrans yet fail to speak out against the continuing slaughter, then we are acting out a humanitarian ritual for our own sakes, not for theirs. If relief cannot go hand in hand with vocal demands for a political solution, then we negate our own efforts. For relief is only a short-run holding action. If relief continues, increases, indeed inundates the country with protein and carbohydrates, yet the bombing and shooting continue, then we prolong the war with our studied silence, while we mitigate the suffering only slightly with our money.⁷⁶

Connett was making the broader point that relief might allay the suffering but it would not actually fix the genocide facing the Igbo in Nigeria. Those that only supported humanitarian action refused ‘to distinguish between cause and effect’, he said. ‘It’s almost as if having become aware of Hitler’s attempt with the gas chambers, we had decided to send the Jews gas masks. There comes a point when to ignore the cause is to become accomplices to the crime’.⁷⁷ The cause, as Connett diagnosed it, was not a lack of food but a political problem in which the Igbo would be perpetually denied fundamental human rights within a united Nigeria. ‘Who are we to feed these people and serenely ignore the resolute vision of sovereignty for which they starve?’, Connett asked.⁷⁸ Connett wanted Americans to ‘stop saying “These people should be fed” and have the courage to say “These people do not deserve to die!” This is the point where sympathy changes to empathy, and charity to justice’.⁷⁹

The success of American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive’s shift on political recognition hinged on persuading the United States government that Nigeria was, in fact, carrying out genocide against Biafra. Yet the competing claims of genocide during the Nigerian Civil War made this job incredibly difficult.⁸⁰ For Connett, there was no debate over genocide, and he charged that those claiming that there was none were more interested in ‘the semantics of the word genocide than in the gruesome reality’ of Biafra. In order to ‘circumvent the semantics’, the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive argued that genocide must account for the fact that people in this postcolonial world were irrevocably connected to nations. In the case of Biafra, Connett argued that it was impossible to ‘separate the lives of the Biafran people from the concept of Biafra’. In prosecuting the war, the Nigerian government was not just depriving food from a group of people but starving out an idea of a nation-state that was completely

entwined to a consciousness of the Biafran people. Though 'the historical reality is that Biafra is indestructible', Connett said, 'the human reality is that the Biafrans are not'. The Nigerian government was at war with the concept of Biafra, but to destroy that idea, the Nigerian government had to kill the people of Biafra. For the American Committee, then, the fundamental denial of a group of people to create the nation that embodied its consciousness was a form of genocide. 'When a mental concept is so wedded to the consciousness of a people that the only way that concept can be removed is by killing the people, then to do so is genocide', Connett said.⁸¹ The American Committee, in effect, defined genocide as not only the killing of a group but as the destruction of a conception of nationhood. This was a postcolonial definition of genocide, one tied more to the rights of man than human rights, and in this new definition of genocide, maintaining a united Nigeria was morally and practically equivalent to exterminating Biafrans.

The American Committee's change in focus toward self-determination and genocide also led to a change in its propaganda and lobbying, which was noticed in Foggy Bottom. Secretary Rusk said the switch from humanitarianism to political action represented a 'certain taking off of the gloves'.⁸² In the *New York Times*, for example, the committee now asked Nixon if Nigerian unity was worth 'the Bodies of 10 Million People?'⁸³ They inquired in pamphlets, 'What's wrong with self-determination?'⁸⁴ And the call to 'Recognize Biafra' became a staple of the official committee newsletters. The committee even tried to stop using images of starving children in their advertisements by featuring pictures of adults to make the case for Biafran self-determination. The focus on the parents was a major difference between other humanitarian groups and the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive. As Paul Connett explained to me, where other organizations said 'feed the kids but screw the parents. . . . We wanted to save their parents'.⁸⁵

Committee members believed that Richard Nixon wanted to save the parents, too, and his victory in 1968 brought hope to the committee that the United States might move toward the political recognition of Biafra. One of Nixon's first acts was the appointment of a special coordinator for relief, Clarence Ferguson, to negotiate for new humanitarian aid routes.⁸⁶ In this endeavour, Ferguson continuously found his efforts stifled. Even still, there were rumours that Nixon planned to recognize Biafra as late as May 1969, though Roger Morris believed that Nixon's decision would have been motivated as a way 'to teach the State Department a lesson in authority'.⁸⁷ The president did not, however, make any further overtures toward recognizing Biafra. He kept Ferguson on a tight leash, telling the relief coordinator that the United States was only concerned with humanitarian

relief and not the politics of Nigerian Civil War. Recognizing Biafra in the name of humanitarian intervention and genocide prevention was not on the table. The committee's hope in Nixon faded as they continued to argue that the Nigerian government was committing genocide against Biafra and that the only solution to the problem was the creation of a separate Biafran state. When the war finally ended on 15 January 1970, the American Committee's plan to get the United States to recognize Biafra in the name of ending genocide failed.

Conclusion

Looking back, the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive's expectation of an American-led humanitarian intervention and political recognition of Biafra was, on the whole, unrealistic since championing Biafran secession would have been a dramatic rupture in American foreign policy. Further, America's most important cold war ally, Great Britain, steadfastly supported Nigerian unity and, perhaps more important, the far majority of African nations supported the Federal Military Government in its war of preserving Nigerian unity. Within the State Department especially, the United States saw few reasons to go out on a limb and against the current of international politics by supporting a secessionist movement in Africa.⁸⁸

There were other reasons for American policy toward the humanitarian crisis in Biafra. In response to domestic upheaval during the late 1960s, Western governments were shying away from foreign intervention in order to shore up power and legitimacy at home.⁸⁹ At the exact same time that other activists were calling for the United States to disengage from foreign intervention, the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive was asking Richard Nixon to intervene directly in a political imbroglio in the developing world. The late 1960s was a renegotiation of America's international role, and the Biafran crisis represented a critical moment when American leaders began to challenge and change their position toward intervention. 'While America is not the world's policeman', Nixon said when discussing genocide in Biafra, 'let us at least act as the world's conscience in this matter of life and death for millions'.⁹⁰ Foreign intervention, especially the recognition of a breakaway state, was an unlikely proposition given the climate of the 1960s. While Nixon was willing to help with relief, he was not going to upset the delicate balance and stability that arose in response to social unrest during the period.

To be sure, the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive was not asking for the American government to be the world's policeman. What they were seeking, however, was a radical transformation of American foreign policy priorities. Unlike other periods in American history when the

concept of intervention itself was in question, the debate now was over the limits of American intervention.⁹¹ Activists during the Nigerian Civil War envisioned a world in which the United States used its preponderance of power to intervene in the service of morality and justice, not great power politics and the waging of the Cold War. While the committee disagreed that successful Biafran secession would lead to the balkanization of the rest of the African continent, it was still unclear to them why that should be a concern in the face of genocide.⁹² They claimed that the borders of Africa were artificial and that the balkanization of Africa was a logical rejection of what the Western world wanted Africa to be. Biafra, the committee concluded, was 'where black pride and black power converge'. Far from breaking Africa apart, Connett said that 'Biafra is a new phase in this struggle towards African unity'.⁹³ What was clear to the committee was that enough food was not getting into Biafra. Pressuring the United States to support Biafran political sovereignty, an unrealistic goal for sure, was deemed better than what seemed to be the alternative: slow, creeping death from starvation and extermination of the Igbo inside of a united Nigeria.

For Paul Connett, Biafra marked the beginning of his political activism. After Biafra's collapse, Connett and representatives from other groups in North America and Western Europe formed the International Conscience in Action, an organization that they claimed would act as a 'watch-dog' on Nigerian affairs and 'develop programs and strategies for concerted international action on human rights'. As Connett disclosed in his justification for such a group, he had learned 'how little relevance basic human rights has' to governments.⁹⁴ International Conscience in Action ran out of funds within a few months, but Connett, using contacts he made through the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, founded Operation Omega, an organization dedicated to raising awareness of the atrocities committed during the 1971 East Pakistan War.⁹⁵ Unlike before, this group pushed for the political recognition of Bangladesh from the beginning. It is difficult to measure Omega's influence, but Connett believed that his organization's activism on behalf of Bangladesh put the news of the conflict's atrocities in front of an international audience in a way that had a large impact. If the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive lost its overall objective of Biafran independence during the Nigerian Civil War, Connett told me, then 'the victory came later with Bangladesh'.⁹⁶

The victory, of course, was the creation of a sovereign Bangladesh in the face of a genocide, and much like the crisis in Nigeria, Connett argued that more sovereignty and national citizenship offered the best solution for ending genocide in the developing world. In both cases, Connett and other activists appealed to human rights, but they did so as one of many different ideological traditions, the most important being the liberal tradition of

citizenship through a nation-state. What this speaks to is the fact that there were many currents operating in the postwar world and that human rights, even in the late 1960s, was not a universal language that could galvanize the world to the threat of mass murder. It was not until the late 1970s that that breakthrough happened. There is, then, a great irony of the funeral held outside of the United Nations building on 10 December 1969. While committee members met to symbolically bury the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the truth was perhaps even more interesting: human rights had yet to even be born.

Notes

1. 'The "de-celebration" of human rights day', *About Biafra*, 17 December 1969, The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Folder 3, Box 10, Clearinghouse for Nigeria/Biafra Information Records, 1968–1970 (hereafter CHNB), Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore, PA (hereafter SCPC).
2. Igbo is the more modern spelling, but before the 1970s it was typically spelled Ibo. I have chosen to use the more modern spelling here, though I left the text as Ibo when used by contemporary actors.
3. 'Nigeria's civil war: Hate, hunger, and the will to survive', *Time*, 23 August 1968, pp. 20–26; F. Taylor Ostrander to Lyndon Baines Johnson, 8 August 1968, CO 206 Biafra, Box 11, Confidential File, Papers of Lyndon Baines Johnson President, 1963–1969, The Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, TX (hereafter LBJL).
4. Dean Rusk to Lagos, 3 August 1968, POL 27–9 Biafra-Nigeria 7/16/68, Box 1881, Record Group 59, General Records of the State Department (hereafter RG 59), Central Foreign Policy Files, (hereafter CFPPF), 1967–1969, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, USA (hereafter NARA).
5. *Biafra Lifeline*, 9 October 1968, Vol. 1, No. 1, in The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Folder 1, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.
6. On framing international events, see especially Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond borders: Advocacy networks in international politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).
7. Certificate of American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, no date, The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Folder 2, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.
8. The best works that analyze the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive are Joseph E. Thompson, *American policy and African famine: The Nigeria-Biafra war, 1966–1970* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990); and Daniel J. Sargent, *A superpower transformed: The remaking of American foreign relations in the 1970s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); for review of the historiography of the Nigerian Civil War, see Brian McNeil, 'The Nigerian civil war in history and historiography, 1967–1970', in Toyin Falola and Emily Brownell (eds.), *Africa, empire, and globalization: Essays in honor of A. G. Hopkins* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2010), pp. 541–554.
9. See, for example, Ann Curthoys and John Docker, 'Defining genocide', in Dan Stone (ed.), *The historiography of genocide* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 9–41.
10. Jean-Paul Sartre, *On genocide, and a summary of the evidence and the judgments of the international war crimes tribunal*, ed. A. El Kaïm Sartre (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968); on Lemkin, see A. Dirk Moses, 'Raphael Lemkin, culture, and the concept of genocide', in Donald Bloxham and A. Dirk Moses (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of genocide studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 19–41.
11. On the lack of consensus, and especially how governments in Europe shied away from using the specific word genocide, see, Karen Smith, *Genocide and the Europeans* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 66–81.

12. Brian Grodsky, 'When two ambiguities collide: The use of genocide in self-determination drives', *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2012, pp. 1–27.
13. I am borrowing from John Darwin's definition of decolonization that looks beyond independence to understand the long-lasting effects and struggle with decolonization. John Darwin, *Britain and decolonization: The retreat from empire in the post-war world* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988); On federation, see Michael Collins, 'Decolonisation and the "federal moment"', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2013, pp. 21–40.
14. On human rights and genocide in the 1940s, see Mark Mazower, *No enchanted palace: The end of empire and ideological origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 121–133; On decolonization and human rights, see Jan Eckel, 'Human rights and decolonization: New perspectives and open questions', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2010, pp. 111–135. For the relationship between citizenship and the rights of man, see Samuel Moyn, *The last utopia: Human rights in history* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 11–43.
15. This argument is made most forcefully by Sargent, *A superpower transformed*, pp. 68–99; and Lasse Heerten, 'The dystopia of postcolonial catastrophe: Self-determination, the Biafran war of secession, and the 1970s human rights moment', in Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (eds.), *The breakthrough: Human rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), pp. 15–32.
16. Statement by Paul Connett, president of the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, 25 July 1969, The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Folder 1, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.
17. Paul Connett to UN Ambassadors, no date, The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Folder 2, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.
18. Paul Connett to George Ball, 9 September 1968, Soc-US Nigeria 1968, Box 3, RG 59, Bureau of African Affairs, Office of West African Affairs, Records Relating to Nigeria, 1967–1975 (hereafter BAA, OWAA, RRN, 1967–1975), NARA.
19. James S. Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to nationalism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1958).
20. Kalu Ezera, *Constitutional developments in Nigeria: An analytical study of Nigeria's constitution-making developments and the historical and political factors that affected constitutional change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964).
21. 'Statement made by Dr. Azikiwe to the press in England, 16 January 1966', in Anthony Hamilton Millard Kirk-Greene (ed.), *Crisis and conflict in Nigeria*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 1, p. 127.
22. 'Broadcast to the nation by his Excellency Major General J. T. U. Aguiyi-Ironsi, head of the national military government and supreme commander of the armed forces', 24 May 1966, (Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information, 1966), located at the British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, England; an edited version can be found in "'The regions are abolished": Ironsi's broadcast to the nation banning political parties and introducing decree No. 34, 24 May 1966', in Anthony Hamilton Millard Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and conflict in Nigeria* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 1: pp. 174–177.
23. Kaduna to State, 17 June 1966, POL 18 Nigeria 6/8/66, Box 2626, RG 59, CFPF, 1964–1966, NARA.
24. Lagos to State, 9 July 1966, POL 18 Nigeria 6/8/66, Box 2526, RG 59, CFPF, 1964–1966, NARA.
25. Lagos to State, 9 July 1966, POL 18 6/8/66, Box 2526, RG 59, CFPF, 1964–1966, NARA.
26. Lagos to State, 8 August 1966, POL 18 Nigeria 8/4/66, Box 2526, RG 59, CFPF, 1964–1966, NARA.
27. On accusations of genocide and Indian partition, see Ian Talbot, 'The 1947 partition in India', in Dan Stone (ed.), *The historiography of genocide* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 420–437.

28. Lagos to State, 8 December 1966, POL 18 Nigeria 12/1/66, Box 2527, RG 59, CFPF, 1964–1966, NARA.
29. Kaduna to State, 13 January 1967, POL 18, Biafra-Nigeria, 1/1/67, Box 2374, RG 59, CFPF, 1967–1969, NARA.
30. St. Jorre, *The Brothers' war*, p. 130; for the petition see, 'Memorandum on the deliberate and continuous contraventions of the United Nations Charter Provisions on human rights by Nigeria and her practice of genocide', in MCF CPN 7, Box 90, Papers of the Movement for Colonial Freedom, Archives and Special Collections, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, England.
31. Memorandum of Conversation, Joseph Palmer, Stanley Diamond, Conor Cruise O'Brien, inter alia, 1 December 1967, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, 12/67, Box 1875, RG 59, CFPF, 1967–1969, NARA.
32. Charles L. Sanders, 'The war between blacks nobody cares about', *Jet Magazine*, 27 July 1967, p. 14.
33. For many, *Life* magazine introduced the Nigerian Civil War with its 12 July 1968 cover story. See, *Life*, 'Starving children of Biafra war', 12 July 1968.
34. For a state-by-state breakdown of the American organizations, see Boxes 11 & 12, CHNB, SCPC.
35. For the origins of the group's name, see, Roy Melbourne to Joseph Palmer, 25 September 1968, Soc-US Nigeria 1968, Box 3, RG 59, BAA, OWAA, RRN, 1967–1975, NARA.
36. After the Nigerian Civil War, Susan Durr married Philip Nix. In the text I refer to her as Susan Durr to avoid confusion. Interview with Susan Nix, 12 March 2012.
37. Paul Connett to Stephen G. Frankfurt, 13 September 1968, The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Folder 1, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.
38. Interview with Paul Connett, 9 March 2011.
39. Thompson, *American policy and African famine*, p. 75; Interview with Ellen Connett, 24 February 2011. After the Nigerian Civil War, Ellen Langley married Paul Connett. In the text I refer to her as Ellen Langley to avoid confusion.
40. Children's petition sponsored by the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, 28 August 1968, CO 206–1 Biafra, Republic of 8/11/68–8/31/68, Box 58, Papers of Lyndon Baines Johnson President, 1963–1969, LBJL.
41. Tom Hayden, *The Port Huron statement: The visionary call of the 1960s revolution* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005).
42. Charter of the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Folder 1, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.
43. Paul Connett to Stephen G. Frankfurt, 13 September 1968, The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Folder 1, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.
44. Charter of the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Folder 1, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.
45. Interview with Ellen Connett, 14 February 2011.
46. William Chapman, "'Biafra's lobby' melds left and right', *Washington Post*, 19 January 1969, p. 1.
47. Interview with Ellen Connett, 14 February 2011; Paul Connett to Stephen G. Frankfurt, 13 September 1968, The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Folder 1, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.
48. Charter of the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Folder 1, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.
49. Quote in, no author given, 'Demonstration', *The New Yorker*, 17 August 1968, p. 23.
50. Letter from Paul Connett, no date, The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Folder 2, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.
51. Organization of Lifeline, no date, The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Folder 1, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.
52. Organization of Lifeline, no date, The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Folder 1, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.

53. *Biafra Lifeline*, 5 November 1968, Vol. 3, in The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Folder 1, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.
54. Interview with Ellen Connett, 14 February 2011.
55. 'Save starving Biafra', no date, New York City, Box 9, CHNB, SCPC.
56. 'An independent radical perspective on Nigeria/Biafra', no date, Committee of Returned Volunteers, Box 9, CHNB, SCPC.
57. 'Biafra: Britain in the dock', no date, Britain-Biafra Association, Box 13, CHNB, SCPC; the other two organizations were the Save Biafra Campaign and the Committee for Peace in Nigeria; see, too, Lasse Heerten, 'The Biafran war in Britain: An odd alliance of late 1960s humanitarian activists', *Journal of the Oxford University History Society*, No. 7, 2009, pp. 1–19; and Gary Blank, 'Britain, Biafra, and the balance of payments: The formation of London's "one Nigeria" policy', *Revue française de civilisation britannique*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2013, pp. 65–86.
58. On Biafra and the historical memory of the Holocaust, see Lasse Heerten, "'A" as in Auschwitz, "B" as in Biafra: The Nigerian civil war, visual narratives of genocide, and the fragmented universalization of the Holocaust', in Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno (eds.), *Humanitarian photography: A history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 249–274.
59. 'l'alphabet (à suivre) de l'horreur', no date, Europe, Box 12, CHNB, SCPC.
60. Morris Davis, *Interpreters for Nigeria: The third world and international public relations* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1977).
61. *Biafra Lifeline*, 9 October 1968, Vol. 1, No. 1, The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Folder 1, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.
62. Paul Connett to Stephen G. Frankfurt, 13 September 1968, The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Folder 1, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.
63. Roy Melbourne to Joseph Palmer, 25 September 1968, Soc-US Nigeria 1968, Box 3, RG 59, BAA, OWAA, RRN, 1967–1975, 1967–1975, NARA.
64. Michael Reisman and Myres S. McDougal, 'Memorandum upon humanitarian intervention to protect the Ibos', 4 September 1968, Soc-US Nigeria 1968, Box 3, RG 59, BAA, OWAA, RRN, 1967–1975, 1967–1975, NARA.
65. Lawrence Hargrove to George Ball, 11 September 1968, Soc-US Nigeria 1968, Box 3, RG 59, BAA, OWAA, RRN, 1967–1975, 1967–1975, NARA.
66. See Roger Morris, *Uncertain greatness: Henry Kissinger and American foreign policy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).
67. Interview with Susan Nix, 14 May 2013.
68. Rusk to Lagos, 15 August 1968, POL 27–9 Biafra-Nigeria 7/16/68, Box 1881, RG 59, CFPPF, 1967–1969, NARA.
69. Interview with Susan Nix, 14 May 2013.
70. Thompson, *American policy and African famine*, pp. 74–75.
71. Nicholas Katzenbach to Dean Rusk, 3 December 1968, POL 27–9 Biafra-Nigeria 12/1/68, Box 1883, RG 59, CFPPF, 1967–1969, NARA.
72. Address by the honourable Nicholas Katzenbach under secretary of state at Brown University, 3 December 1968, White House and State Department Statements, Box 5, CHNB, SCPC.
73. *Biafra Lifeline*, no date, Vol. 1, No. 8, in The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Folder 3, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.
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93. Statement by Paul Connett, president of the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, 25 July 1969, The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive Folder 1, Box 10, CHNB, SCPC.
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14 ‘Black America Cares’

The Response of African-Americans to Civil War and ‘Genocide’ in Nigeria, 1967–1970

James Farquharson

Introduction

On a balmy evening on 10 August 1968, ‘thousands of persons’, according to the *New York Amsterdam News*, marched towards the United Nations Plaza in New York. The crowd—which included African-American and Puerto Rican children from East Harlem—radiated melancholy as it sang dirges and held flickering candles aloft. The marchers had come to the United Nations to vent their frustration at the lack of international action to address the ongoing civil war in Nigeria, where thousands of people, a large number of them children, were starving to death. The war between the Nigerian government and the secessionist movement in the Eastern Region of Nigeria, the so-called Republic of Biafra, was 1-year-old at this point, and had resulted in an estimated 50,000 deaths on both sides and forced millions to flee their homes.¹ At the Ralph Bunche Park directly across from the United Nations Plaza, the march—organized by the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive—was addressed by the black American civil rights leader James Farmer, co-founder of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).² Farmer was not the only civil rights activist to speak with urgency about the situation in Nigeria. At the corner of First Avenue and East 42nd Street another James addressed a counter demonstration of mainly Nigerian students sympathetic to the Nigerian government.³ This was James Meredith, who had heroically desegregated the University of Mississippi in 1962. Although Farmer and Meredith had been integral to the struggle to end segregation in the American South, when it came to the Nigerian Civil War, they were literally on opposite sides of the street.

According to *The New York Times*, Farmer called for an ‘immediate ceasefire’ between the warring parties and a large-scale airlift of food by the international community into Biafran territory, which had been blockaded by the Nigerian military. Meredith countered and accused the Biafran leadership and its supporters of using ‘the people they have starved as propaganda tools’, and praised the efforts of the Nigerian government in

providing food relief routes into Biafra (that the Biafran leadership had rejected).⁴ Africa had figured prominently in the careers and intellectual development of both men as they verbally clashed in the august shadow of the UN headquarters. In 1964, the Nigerian government had invited Meredith to study political science at the University of Ibadan. In Nigeria and during his peripatetic travels throughout west Africa, Meredith was able to reconnect with his families roots and described the experience as the moment he ‘became a child of Africa’.⁵ As the national director of CORE, Farmer had travelled to Africa in 1965 to build stronger relations between African-Americans and Africans. The trip, which included a visit to Nigeria and meetings with Nigerian political leaders and officials, solidified in Farmer’s mind the deep interconnection between the civil rights revolution in the United States and the struggle of national liberation and nation-building in Africa.⁶ A month prior to the rally outside the UN, Farmer had launched his campaign as a Republican-liberal candidate for the predominantly African-American 12th district in the US House of Representatives with the political backing of Governor Nelson Rockefeller.⁷ Facing an uphill battle against Democrat Shirley Chrisolm, the rally offered Farmer not only a platform to make himself known to the voters of the 12th district, but also an issue that he cared about deeply and knew had political traction in the African-American community.⁸

The vignette of Farmer and Meredith, and their conflicting views, is evocative of how African-Americans responded to the civil war in Nigeria and reports of genocide being committed against the Igbo tribal group.⁹ Scholars who have viewed the war through a transnational lens have focused on the war in terms of the rise of humanitarianism as a key aspect of globalization, the evolution of the concept of self-determination, and the role of non-governmental organizations in the United States and Western Europe in shaping public perceptions of the conflict.¹⁰ However, the response of African-Americans to this devastating conflict and humanitarian catastrophe in Nigeria has been neglected by historians. This oversight is surprising considering the growth in scholarship focused on the role of African-Americans in international affairs and in US foreign policy over the past two decades.¹¹

According to historian Brenda Plummer, the response of the black diaspora in the United States was ‘subdued’, compared to previous African-American support for national liberation struggles in Africa in the late 1950s and 1960s, because it ‘introduced indistinctness into the truths that freedom movements, both foreign and domestic, had laid down’.¹² While Plummer noted, to a limited extent, the diverse level of African-American engagement with the Nigerian Civil War, this work will build on her foundations and show that the war unleashed widespread discussions and

debates in black America. This chapter will argue that rather than a 'subdued' response, African-Americans were politically, socially and intellectually active in addressing the war in Nigeria. From the beginning of the conflict, civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and A. Phillip Randolph worked to bring the Nigerian government and the Biafran leadership together to avoid bloodshed. Groups such as the Joint Afro Committee on Biafra used rallies, conferences and press coverage to advocate for an independent Biafra as a source of renewed 'black power' on the continent. In the pages of the major black newspapers such as the *Baltimore Afro-American*, *The New York Amsterdam News* and *The Chicago Daily Defender*, black foreign correspondents provided in-depth commentary on the war and editorial pages overflowed with debates concerning the future of Nigeria as a nation-state and the humanitarian consequences of the conflict. At a time when African-Americans were still engaged in the struggle against racial discrimination and economic injustice at home, blacks from all walks of life were willing to engage in debates about the war, raise money, form ad hoc groups, lobby politicians and even give up their lives in a struggle occurring thousands of miles away.

The war occurred at a time of intellectual ferment within the African-American community and this was reflected in how individuals and groups approached the crisis. In the late 1960s terms such as 'Black Power', 'Black Internationalism' and 'Pan-Africanism' had fluid political definitions. Black supporters of humanitarian assistance, a diplomatic settlement, Biafran self-determination and Nigerian unity used these terms to define their position on the war and to gain greater legitimacy within the African-American community. The activism of the African-American community towards the crisis in Nigeria was part of the *longue duree* of black American engagement with the African continent stretching from the early nineteenth century, to the aid to Ethiopia campaign in the mid-1930s and the anticolonial activism of the 1950s and 1960s.¹³ However, the advent of globalized humanitarianism and human rights in the late 1960s added a new layer to how African-Americans responded.¹⁴ The debates within the black community over Nigerian sovereignty, the provisioning of humanitarian aid, the intervention of other powers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Nigeria on humanitarian grounds and the protection of individuals from the excesses of sovereign power mirrored the intense debates occurring throughout the world as the war raged.

Using a variety of untapped primary sources such as digital copies of the major black newspapers, the papers of the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa, and the papers of the Joint Afro Committee on Biafra, this chapter will posit that the war in Nigeria forced African-Americans to think deeply about questions of self-determination, the viability of

Pan-Africanism, sovereignty and the protection of human rights, and the impact of neocolonialism. Rather than the relatively straightforward narratives of national liberation from European powers and the struggle against white supremacy in Africa, which had been the defining narratives of the 1950s and 1960s, African-Americans were for the first time confronted with the complexity of postcolonial Africa. Historian James Meriwether has noted that ‘African-Americans tended to focus on the travails of liberation struggles as opposed to the trials of newly independent Africa’.¹⁵ However, mass starvation, total war and claims of genocide in Nigeria—one of the largest and most important states in Africa—forced African-Americans, from politicians and civil rights leaders to regular citizens, to reappraise their understanding of political developments on the continent.

African-Americans and Nigeria, 1960–1967

From the time Nigeria gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1960, African-American leaders and the black press had lauded this African state as a model for the rest of the continent. Although rejecting the radical Pan-Africanism of Kwame Nkrumah’s Ghana, Nigeria, with its huge population, economic resources and commitment to parliamentary democracy, was a source of inspiration across the Atlantic. Indeed, as Meriwether has argued, ‘[B]eyond inspiring black Americans to continue the struggle, the sweep of African independence boosted the pride and confidence that African-Americans felt in their heritage and themselves’.¹⁶ African-American novelist James Baldwin noted that:

[T]he American Negro can no longer, nor will he ever again, be controlled by white America’s image of him. This fact has everything to do with the rise of Africa in world affairs. At the time that I was growing up, Negroes in this country were taught to be ashamed of Africa. They were taught . . . that Africa had never contributed ‘anything’ to civilization [sic].¹⁷

During the first half of the 1960s, Nigeria was lauded in the African-American press, one of the most important institutions in the black American community, as a model of self-determination and progress.¹⁸ Given its economic potential (including the discovery of oil on the eve of independence), the fact that it had the largest population in Africa and its stable political institutions, ‘Nigeria’, according to journalist Wilbur Landrey of the *Atlanta Daily World*, was the ‘key to what happens in Africa . . . it is a key country on the continent, its fate is important in world terms’.¹⁹ A *Chicago Daily Defender* article noted that ‘Nigeria, whose [sic] slave coast gave the U.S. its Negroes, has become the key to black Africa. If

democracy and moderation survive here, they have a chance elsewhere as well'.²⁰ In an interview in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nigeria's first president, described his country as exceptional in the Third World due to its 'ideals of parliamentary democracy and the respect for individual freedom under the law . . . distinguishes us from other emergent countries in the world'.²¹

While undoubtedly a nation-state of huge potential, Nigeria, like many of its neighbours, was also a heterogeneous state with a patchwork of cultural, ethnic and religious communities. The nation-state was superimposed on tribal groups then dominated the post-independence polity: Hausa and Fulani tribal groups lived mainly in the North, a Yoruba population in the southwest, and Igbo in the southeast, an area known as the Eastern Region.²² 1966 was the *annus horribilis* for Nigeria, as two military coups within six months fractured the federation. Politically motivated assassinations and jockeying for power within the upper echelons of the armed forces were at the heart of a wave of inter-ethnic violence. In the Northern Region, ethnic Igbo migrants were shot or hacked to death in their thousands by mobs, which saw them as complicit in the political instability. The killings caused widespread internal displacement as Igbo fled back to the east and northerners headed in the opposite direction.²³ In a letter to Martin Luther King Jr., Sam Aluko, who had met King at the World Council of Churches meeting in Geneva in July and was based at the University of Ife in Western Nigeria, described the violence:

The revolt did not end within the army but developed to some sort of unfortunate communal strife which led to several civilians being killed and many others being injured or maimed. As a result of all these, more than one million Nigerians have fled from their normal places of work back to their places of birth or were asked to leave the regions of their employment to return to their regions of birth.²⁴

It was in this bleak context that African-Americans viewed the potential disintegrating of one of Africa's most promising states. An article in the *Chicago Defender* described Nigeria as having 'plunged into a nightmare of sectional rivalries capped by kidnappings'.²⁵ Another report stated that the first military coup in January had 'shattered the legend that this [Nigeria] was Africa's most stable state'.²⁶

The American Negro Leader Conference on Africa Peace Mission, 1967–1968

The first significant effort by African-Americans related to the crisis in Nigeria was the involvement of the American Negro Leadership Conference

on Africa (ANLCA) in seeking a negotiated settlement to the conflict. Between March 1967 and April 1968, the four co-chairmen of the ANLCA—Martin Luther King Jr. from the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), Roy Wilkins of the National Associate for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Whitney Young of the Urban League—worked with Nigerian and Biafran officials to develop a diplomatic solution to the fighting.

Founded in 1962, the ANLCA reflected the ebullience of the times both in the United States and Africa. Across the states of the old Confederacy, civil rights organizations and activists were challenging the racial inequality of Jim Crow through non-violent sit-ins, Freedom Rides and other forms of mass protest. At the same time, across the Atlantic, beginning with Ghana in 1957, newly independent African states were emerging from European colonial rule to assert themselves on the world stage. The ANCLA sought to direct this political energy to ‘raise interest in America and the situation in Africa, to educate people about Africa, and to influence U.S. policy towards the continent’.²⁷ In addition to developing a greater understanding of Africa amongst African-Americans and in the broader American society, the Conference aimed to influence the direction of US foreign policy towards the continent by arguing that the United States should throw its full weight behind decolonization, both for reasons of morality and justice but also to counter the appeal of the Communist bloc in the Third World. Brenda Plummer has noted that the ANLCA was not endorsing ‘separatism’ along Garveyist lines; rather, the Conference hoped ‘to make relations with African states a central feature of black American protest by harnessing minority voting potential to a revised set of policies [towards Africa]’.²⁸

The harrowing violence and massacres in Nigeria in 1966, particularly of Igbo living in the North, promoted the Governor of the Eastern Region, Lieutenant-Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, based in the city of Enugu, to consider secession as a way to protect Igbo—and their heartland in the east—from further violence.²⁹ The failure to bring the parties together through the mediation of the Ghana’s head of state, Lieutenant-General Ankrah, at Aburi in January 1967, caused deep concern not only in Nigeria, but across the Atlantic. This perilous situation brought about a direct intervention by the ANLCA. In a memorandum to King, Randolph, Wilkins, Young and Dorothy Height of the National Council of Negro Women, Theodore Brown, the Executive Director of the ANLCA, noted that following the failure of diplomacy at Aburi ‘unless some new element, or elements, are introduced, this African state will experience, and the world will observe, a horrible civil war’.³⁰ The turmoil in Nigeria offered

'a unique but extremely vital opportunity for Negro American leaders' to assert themselves in contemporary African affairs and diplomacy.³¹ The *New York Amsterdam News* described the offer of help mediating the crisis as a 'historically unprecedented opportunity to do what governments and statesmen have been unable to do'.³² While provoked by the fear that the disintegration of Nigeria would lead to untold human misery and a backward step for postcolonial Africa, the mission also reflected the domestic context of the battle for black liberation in the United States, particularly the growing influence of the Black Power movement and the appeal of radical Third World regimes and revolutionary national liberation movements in the African-American community.³³

Throughout the period of ANLCA mediation, from the initial appeal to all sides in the conflict in March 1967 to the decision of the four co-chairmen to travel to Nigeria to help broker a settlement to hostilities in February 1968, the goals of the peace mission reflected the Conference's understanding of black internationalism and Pan-Africanism. While committed to Nigerian sovereignty and 'preventing the destruction of this very promising African nation', the ANLCA was cognizant of the need to help provide a settlement that dealt with the underlying issues of justice and security for all tribal groups, particularly minorities such as the Igbo. In actively stepping into the realm of international diplomacy to prevent the needless slaughter of their ethnic kin, the ANLCA were not only showing their commitment to Pan-Africanism, but the potential power of moderation, diplomacy and compromise in achieving justice. Simon Anekwe, writing in the *New York Amsterdam News* as preparations were underway for the departure of the peace mission, stated that 'the mission [of the four co-chairmen] would represent the finest expression of Black Power'. Martin Luther King Jr. even proposed postponing 'his Poor Peoples March on Washington to an 22 April starting date, partly to enable him to make the April 15 trip (to Nigeria and Biafra)'.³⁴ The fact that King was willing to postpone one of his most significant domestic initiatives in order to act alongside his fellow civil rights leaders as international peacemakers, was indicative of the significance of the growing crisis in Nigeria in black America.

By April 1968, the efforts of the ANLCA to assist in negotiating a settlement in Nigeria had failed. The assassination of Martin Luther King on 4 April, the overwhelming domestic concerns of the moderate civil rights leaders and the hostility of both sides in the civil war took away the momentum for a peaceful settlement. Although the mission failed to adjudicate a negotiated diplomatic settlement, it did establish a strong precedent for how African-Americans should view the war. First, the deep historical relationship between African-Americans and Nigerians or, as

stated by Theodore Brown, ‘the ethnic relationship that exists between 56 million Nigerians and 22 million Afro-Americans’; second, to encourage an honourable diplomatic solution that would respect all sides in the conflict including the Igbo; finally, that a united Nigeria still offered the best platform for ensuring justice and security for all Nigerians.³⁵ These fundamentals would be tested by the escalating fighting and reports that starvation was being used as a weapon against the Biafrans by federal government forces, with the intention of committing genocide.

Black America and ‘Biafra Babies’

By the summer of 1968, the war between federal and Biafran forces had reached a stalemate. Following initial Biafran military successes in late 1967, including the rebel offensive across the Niger River and the capture of Benin City, the Nigerian army gradually gained the upper hand with arms supplies and logistical support from the United Kingdom and Soviet Union. In May, the *New York Times* reported that Port Harcourt, Biafra’s main deep seaport had been captured by Nigerian forces. The article noted that the capture of Port Harcourt ‘all but completes a circle around the area where some eight million Ibos live’.³⁶ As Nigerian forces severed Biafra’s contact with the outside world and seized over two-thirds of its territory by August, starvation emerged as the dominate issue in the war. Before the war, the Eastern Region had been a net importer of food, particularly protein. A report by the *International Review of the Red Cross* in August noted that ‘the most alarming situation is to be found inside the enclave remaining in the hands of Biafran forces’. As the fighting dragged on, Red Cross officials feared ‘serious undernourishment’ among the population in Biafra and the almost 4.5 million civilians forced to flee the advancing federal forces.³⁷ As food supplies were restricted, kwashiorkor, a protein deficiency disease common to west Africa, emerged as an epidemic, particularly among children, the most vulnerable to its deadly effects.³⁸

The siege of Biafra by mid-1968 had emerged as a major international media event due to extensive television and print media coverage in North America and Western Europe. According to Africanist Dame Margery Perham, ‘through the medium of television for the first time the suffering of a besieged people have been carried into the homes of the great majority of our population’.³⁹ The images of emaciated children with swollen bellies, stick-like limbs and thinning hair struck at the conscience of viewers and readers across America. The images on television and stories in the black press provoked concern and even outrage among African-Americans. From California to Virginia, black newspapers gave expression to the sentiments of their readers in response to the developments in Nigeria. Booker

Griffin, in an editorial in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, noted that '[G]enocide is certainly what is happening today as over a million Ibos are dying a month. Men, women and children dying like beasts in an era of supposed international justice'.⁴⁰ The *Call and Post* in Ohio called on its readers to contribute financially to the ad hoc Biafran-American Relief Committee on behalf of the 'starving refugees of Biafra'.⁴¹ Peter Lynch, writing in the pages of the *Chicago Daily Defender*, described the war in Nigeria as the 'deadliest conflict in modern African history'.⁴² In an interview with Betty Washington, the Associate Editor at the *Chicago Daily Defender*, Jim Bo Achebe a Biafran student studying at Illinois Institute of Technology, described the situation in Biafra as 'a war of genocide mounted by Nigeria (against secessionist Biafrans) in collaboration with Britain, the Soviet Union and the United Arab Republic'.⁴³ The *New Journal and Guide*, a regional weekly from Norfolk, Virginia, described a press conference with Father Anthony Byrne, the director of emergency airlifts under the auspice of the Catholic relief organization, Caritas. Byrnes, who had been in Biafra the week prior to the press conference, stated that, 'children [in Biafra] get only one good meal every three weeks. . . . They eat flies and scrape the ground for worms in hope of finding something to eat'.⁴⁴

The food crisis and claims of genocide in Nigeria that Lasse Heerten described as 'a dystopian vision of postcolonial catastrophe' provoked individuals and groups—both ad hoc and established—in the black community into action.⁴⁵ The widespread reporting, both in the mainstream and black press, of mass civilian deaths as a result of starvation in one of Africa's most significant states, gave rise to a sentiment that blacks in America had a unique role in alleviating the suffering in Nigeria. This unique role was a product of the fluid political dynamics within the African-American community in the late 1960s. 'Black Power', a term first articulated by civil rights activist Stokeley Carmichael, became a rallying cry for African-Americans concerned with the situation in Nigeria.⁴⁶ However, the term was used less in the context of armed self-defence (as espoused by groups such as the Black Panther Party) or radical critiques of American society, and more as a form of community activism and political empowerment. 'Black power' was linked to programmes such as the Panthers' 'Free Breakfast for Children Program' that started in Oakland and expanded across the country, rather than being associated with violence or alliances with radical Third World regimes and liberation groups.⁴⁷ For example, Robert T. Bowen, the Black Nationalist and founder of the Institute for Black Studies in Los Angeles, lambasted his fellow blacks for being 'tone deaf' on Biafra. The crisis in Nigeria, according to Bowen, presented African-Americans with the question of 'whether or not home-grown black power leaps the ocean and—like the modern airline—spans

the Atlantic river'. 'Biafra' was a 'test [of] our proclaimed love, nation-spanning brotherhood, and inner strength and beauty'.⁴⁸

Maxwell Cohen, a lawyer and member of the international law committee of the American Bar Association, as well as a friend of the late Professor Raphael Lemkin, who was the architect of the UN Genocide Convention, called on African-Americans to show more interest in, and concern about, the situation in Nigeria and claims of genocide. Cohen, who had recently visited Biafra and seen first-hand the bloodshed—including indiscriminate Nigerian government airstrikes that had resulted in the deaths of many children—noted that, '[U]nless he [African-Americans] identifies with Biafra, all that African clothing and hairdo will amount to nothing but shallow mannerisms'.⁴⁹ Charles Kindle, the African Affairs chairman of the Pittsburgh chapter of the NAACP, wrote in the *New Pittsburgh Courier* that, '[M]any black Americans are rightfully claiming their African heritage but wearing robes and beads and long hair does not make one identified with Africa. One must think and feel black'. Kindle saw the lobbying role of American Jews during the Six-Day War as a model black Americans should emulate. They needed to press the US government to provide food aid for Biafra and persuade the Nigerian Federal Government to allow it through their frontlines. According to Kindle, African-Americans needed to use their political clout to stop 'black men . . . killing black men for the white man's interests' both in terms of Nigeria, but also in relation to Southern Africa, since the only parties to benefit from a fragmented Nigeria would be Apartheid South Africa, Rhodesia and the Portuguese empire.⁵⁰

Shirley Washington, an African-American activist who was Secretary of the anti-poverty organization, Daughters of African Descent (DAD), wrote a heartfelt appeal for African-American engagement with the war:

We must show, as black people,[sic] that we care about our fellow black men's plight no matter where they are or what the political implications may be. . . . One has only to look at those pitiful news photos of emaciated dying children to think of Auschwitz. I can't believe the black community would join the general indifference that has been prevalent since the inception of this conflict.⁵¹

Washington went on to invoke the deaths of August Martin and his wife Gladys in a plane crash in Biafra. Martin, the first African-American commercial pilot in the United States, was killed trying to land a plane loaded with emergency-relief supplies for the Red Cross at an improvised airstrip.⁵² Washington noted that:

One need not get as involved as the Afro-American couple Mr. and Mrs. Martin, who lost their lives in an air crash carrying food, in order

to give concrete help. . . . All that is asked is your help in alerting our Government to our fervent desire to save our starving African brethren.⁵³

Whitney Young Jr., Executive Director of the National Urban League, and one of the American Negro Leadership Conference peace envoys to Nigeria, echoed Washington's concerns in the *New York Amsterdam News*. Young stated that:

Black Americans especially, have a responsibility to urge such actions on our government [in regard to the famine in Biafra]. And they ought to question some of the black nationalists who are so openly pro-Arab about the Egyptian role in this slaughter of black people.⁵⁴

The coverage of the war and famine in the black press and the impassioned commentary from African-Americans ranging from civil rights leaders to local activists for the community to do something in relation to Biafra, provoked a wide variety of activities in response. Across the country from New York to Wichita, Kansas, African-Americans organized protests, raised money, lobbied politicians, formed ad hoc organizations and even travelled to the war zone in order to raise awareness of the situation in Nigeria.

Simon Anekwe reported on the first stirring of action by the black community in Brooklyn. He noted that 'Miss Mary Harden led a demonstration at the U.N.' with leaflets distributed during the march calling for 'an immediate ceasefire, massive relief airlift, [and] peaceful negotiations'. The leaflet also noted that 'Black America Cares'.⁵⁵ Further demonstrations followed. On Sunday September 8, a rally organized by the newly-formed Black Ad Hoc Committee for Biafra/Nigeria Relief and co-chaired by Shirley Washington, marched from Lower Manhattan to Brooklyn to dramatize the concerns of the African-American community. The article that covered the rally also reported on the sending of a telegram to President Lyndon Johnson, UN Secretary U Thant and the Red Cross from a prominent group of black Americans led by former US Ambassador to Ghana, Franklin Williams. The telegram stated that '[A]s black Americans living in New York City with differing political philosophies we share a common concern over the tragic condition in which millions of black children presently find themselves [in Nigeria-Biafra]'. The telegram was co-signed by the psychologist Dr. Kenneth Clark, the judge and Harlem civic leader Livingstone Wingate, the former head of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) Floyd McKissick, the surgeon and civil rights leader Dr. Arthur C. Logan, the baseball legend Jackie Robinson and Whitney Young.⁵⁶ The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, one of the

oldest black denominations in the United States, called upon its 850,000 members to raise money to help the suffering ‘babies, children, women and aged people of Biafra who are caught in the civil war in Nigeria’. The Board of Bishops of the denomination made an initial contribution of \$1,500 to start the fundraising.⁵⁷

In Wichita, Kansas, in late August 1968, the African-American editor of the *Wichita News Hawk*, Leonard Garrett, started a nationwide campaign to assist in alleviating starvation in Nigeria-Biafra. From August, the *News Hawk* covered ‘the starving Biafrans’ plight as its most important story. With the backing of the Democratic governor of Kansas, Robert Docking, as well as support from the World Council of Churches and ‘every black church in Kansas’, Garrett was able to form the Black American Aid To African Starvation (BAATAS) organization. The organization, whose high profile supporters included Governor Docking as well as Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts and the first popularly elected African-American Senator, Edward Brooke, a moderate Republican, sought to mobilize church groups, fraternities, sororities and YMCA branches in African-American communities in order to ‘arouse the solid voice of Black people in the U.S. to show their concern about the starving Black children in Africa’.⁵⁸ With the motto ‘Let the Black Man Help the Black Man’, BAATAS raised over \$25,000 to ‘cover the cost of inland shipment of high protein foods destined for the ravaged African land’.⁵⁹ One of Garrett’s most successful initiatives was the ‘Month of Hope for Children of Nigeria-Biafra’ to raise awareness about starvation in Biafra. With support from Governor Docking, the festive season was dedicated to drawing the attention ‘of the people of the world to the plight of the nations of Biafra and Nigeria’.⁶⁰

While most African-Americans concerned with the crisis in Nigeria focused their efforts on fundraising and lobbying, some individuals followed in the footsteps of the Martins and travelled to the war zone either to provide relief or to understand the situation in greater detail. One of the most prominent figures (or rather infamous) was Charles ‘37X’ Kenyetta, the leader of the Harlem Mau Mau society, and one-time bodyguard for the black nationalist leader Malcolm X. Kenyetta, a media-savvy convicted criminal, who led a small group of machete-wielding militants in protests against the war in Vietnam and in ‘defence’ of the black community in Harlem, travelled to Biafra in November 1968. According to the *New York Amsterdam News*, Kenyetta was the first black man from the United States to visit Biafra. Over four days, he met with Biafrans from all walks of life, including with head of state Colonel Ojukwu. For Kenyetta, the trip had two aims: to highlight the issue of starvation in Biafra (he claimed to have eaten only one full meal during his stay and the rest of the time

eaten bananas), and to highlight the situation for black Americans at home who 'do not understand what is really going on'. He went on to note that 'the black world of America must be concerned and I shall tell it from the mountain top. What I saw cannot be described in one story'.⁶¹

The Question of Biafran Self-Determination in the African-American Community

The war in Nigeria proved to be a tremendous shock for African-Americans. The fighting brought instability and chaos to one of Africa's most promising states and created an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe. The secession of Biafra from the Nigerian Federation also challenged African-American understandings of postcolonial Africa and the question of self-determination. While black Americans ranging from Senators to civil rights leaders to average citizens expressed deep concern over the images of starving children, the question of Biafran self-determination and its impact on Africa caused serious debate and differences. As Bradley Simpson noted,

[T]he Nigerian civil war . . . provoked a wide-ranging discussion in international forums, among western [sic] governments and among social scientists and political activists over . . . the legitimacy of secession, the definition of state viability and the limits of self-determination.⁶²

African-Americans were not immune to these discussions. For a small number of black activists in the Joint Afro Committee on Biafra (JACB) and their supporters in the wider community and black press, the genocidal activities of the Nigerian state justified support for Biafra. An independent Biafra according to the JACB represented a new vision of African self-determination and a symbol of black empowerment. For the majority of African-Americans, while deeply concerned about the suffering of their fellow Africans due to war and starvation, they remained wary of the Biafran experiment. This wariness was the product of several factors, including growing awareness of the exaggerated claims of genocide, loyalty to Nigeria as a model of African development, fears of Biafra being used as a tool of neocolonialism and distrust of the motives of the Biafran leadership.

The first mention of the Joint Afro Committee on Biafra (JACB) appeared on February 1, 1969 as a one page advertisement in the pages of the *New York Amsterdam News*. Under the slogan 'Do Our Brothers and Sisters Care?' a picture depicted a group of emaciated children, and below the picture, a cartoon showed the Nigerian leader, Lieutenant General Gowon accepting caches of weapons from the Soviet Union and United Kingdom

while the UN and OAU turn a blind eye, even as these weapons were used to destroy hospitals, schools and villages in Biafra. At the bottom of the advertisement, a tear away section gave readers the opportunity to send a pre-written message to an African-American member of Congress. The message simply stated: 'I urge you to use the power of your office to stop the massive slaughter of our Biafran brothers'.⁶³

The organization was led and organized by four diverse individuals with a national executive committee with members from New York to California and South Carolina. The honorary co-chairmen were Charles Kenyetta and Floyd McKissick, the former CORE leader, who had emerged as a supporter of Biafran self-determination through a series of columns in the *Amsterdam News* that first appeared in August 1968.⁶⁴ The organization was coordinated by Mary Harden Umolu, a black educator and speech pathologist from Brooklyn who had worked for the East Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation in the 1950s and 1960s and had married a Nigerian, while Shirley Washington from the Daughters of African Descent acted as secretary.⁶⁵ According to its official position paper, the JACB aimed to raise awareness about the suffering of the victims of the civil war but also to promote Biafra as

worth our support for what they are. . . . They can use their brain power, muscle and soul power for survival and advancement. . . . In fact, they are the kind of people who offer great hope to Africa and black people everywhere.⁶⁶

In an editorial written by Umolu and Washington in the *Amsterdam News*, the two activists called on their fellow 'black nationalists' to show 'that our chief concern is about black people everywhere in the world. The last thing a true black nationalist wants is the destruction of a group of black people for any reason'. The failure of the OAU and other African states to impose a ceasefire or craft a settlement, according to the JACB, meant that '[w]hat the Afro-American thinks and does in this crisis is extremely important. In fact, the helplessness of Africans [sic], shows that it will be the Afro-American response to this crisis that will be critical'.⁶⁷

The JACB through its media engagement, fundraising, conferences and lobbying sought to shape African-American attitudes to the war. Through these various strategies, the JACB crafted a narrative of Biafran self-determination as a humanitarian response to the mass killing and starvation of Igbo, and a progressive development in terms of black self-government in Sub-Saharan Africa. Nigerian unity, a concept many African-Americans viewed as sacrosanct, was pernicious when justified to destroy the nationhood of a people whom the JACB believed were a positive force for African

development. In an editorial, Umolu and Washington condemned the alleged destruction of facilities—including books and university equipment—at the University of Nsukka in Enugu state by federal forces as an example of Nigeria's reactionary nature. The article stated that

a black university where young black minds were being trained in the ways of running a modern progressive black state . . . was wilfully destroyed by the reactionary forces that run the supposed potentially great Nigeria. . . . [This] destruction merely confirms the kind of nation Nigeria is now and will be in the future—a backward place intent on the repression of Ibo [sic].⁶⁸

Paul Connett, the British-born president of the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive (ACKBA), 'the largest and most influential organisation in the United States that formed in response to the Nigerian Civil War' according to Brian McNeil, wrote an editorial in the *Amsterdam News* extolling Biafra's 'struggle for freedom'.⁶⁹ During his recent visit to Biafra, Connett saw 'a black African dream come true'. Rather than death and destruction, Connett vividly described a nascent state 'in the vanguard of the African revolution. It has a face-to-face confrontation with the forces of neo-colonialism and imperialism'.⁷⁰

Throughout August 1969, the JACB released a series of articles coinciding with their first conference on the theme of 'Biafra's right to survival and self-determination' in New York.⁷¹ In a series of long and emotive articles, the Committee called on fellow African-Americans to throw their support behind the Republic of Biafra. Invoking the legacy of African-American support for liberation struggles against European colonial powers in the 1950s and 1960s, the article stated that:

What started out as a reaction of an aggrieved and shaken people has turned into a full-fledged genuine revolution for change against the reactionary forces of Nigeria. . . . This has brought about a new breed of black men who for the first time realize [sic] that they can think for themselves and can rely on themselves because they must.⁷²

The authors also linked the struggle of Biafra to the Black Power movement in the United States.

For more than two years the Biafrans have given real meaning to Black Power by their ability to maintain order despite the bombings and disruption of war. . . . The lack of panic and the calm dignity in the face of death on the part of the Biafrans should fill any black man with pride.

Nigeria was an ‘Uncle Tom partner’ of Great Britain, the Soviet Union and ‘the rich oil men of the world’. In resisting them, Biafra was ‘a threat to the International white power structure and they have shown through their courage and blood in the past two years that they are capable of withstanding all . . . the white world can throw at them’.⁷³

Black America and the Concept of ‘One Nigeria’, 1969–1970

While the Joint Afro Committee on Biafra was vocal in its advocacy for Biafran self-determination, it remained a distinctly minority viewpoint in the broader African-American community. An undated document from the ACKBA papers at the Hoover Institution noted that the JACB ‘had little if any impact on the Black community. PanAfricanism [sic] was far more enticing’.⁷⁴ Why was this so? As stated above, since 1960 Nigeria (even with glaring political, ethnic and social faults) had been a model of African development for African-Americans. Pan-Africanism, as expressed in support for the unity of the Nigerian state was deeply connected to the strength of postcolonial Africa, an inspiration and example for the black diaspora. While African-Americans had been united in their condemnation and horror at reports of starvation and claims of ‘genocide’ in Biafra, developments on the ground in Nigeria shifted debates from what black America could do to help those in need, to whether Biafra was a viable political experiment.

By the start of 1969, the evolving military and humanitarian situation reshaped the optics of the war. On the battlefield, the war, although stalemated, favoured the federal government with its greater international backing and resources. Michael Gould wrote that ‘the balance of support from the international community increasingly favoured the Federal authorities, and this determined that Biafra’s objective would be denied’.⁷⁵ By late 1968, international observers at the behest of the British government had been allowed into the war zone. The observation team, made up of military officers from Canada, Poland, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the OAU reported, according to the *New York Times*, that ‘there was no evidence supporting the allegations of genocide in the region of eastern Nigeria’.⁷⁶ Both Karen Smith and Lasse Heerten viewed the reports of the observer teams as critical at muting much of the international outrage at the situation in Biafra.⁷⁷ ‘The moral legitimacy of Biafran demands for self-determination’, wrote Bradley Simpson, ‘derived in no small measure from the charge that the FMG (Federal Military Government of Nigeria) was committing genocide against Igbo civilians through massacre and enforced starvation’.⁷⁸ As the issues of mass starvation and ‘genocide’

receded, African-Americans were forced to confront the political realities of Biafran secession. Detached from the humanitarian issue of starvation, the African-American community was extremely wary of Biafra's bid for self-determination. This wariness was shaped by strong Pan-African sentiments throughout the community.

These sentiments were not only expressed in terms of helping victims of starvation but paradoxically in preserving a strong united Nigeria. Of the major black politicians and civil rights leaders, none (besides the former CORE leader Floyd McKissick) endorsed the idea of Biafran independence.⁷⁹ Congressman Charles Diggs, the first African-American to be elected to the House of Representatives from Michigan (Democrat), became one of the key proponents of the 'one Nigerian [sic] concept best serves Africa'.⁸⁰ As the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, Diggs led a 'fact finding' mission to Nigeria and Biafra in February 1969. The *Afro-American* reported that Diggs 'conceded that things are bad there [in Biafra] with the war going on but said he discovered it was 'nothing compared to the kind of impression that has been generated in this country'. Diggs, while deeply concerned about the deprivations of the war, expressed his concern about the role of some humanitarian groups 'who have other motivations'.⁸¹ In May, Diggs condemned his fellow Democrat and former presidential candidate, Eugene McCarthy, for calling for US diplomatic recognition of Biafra. Diggs blasted the senator's comments as lending 'false encouragement to a dying cause'. In particular, Diggs pointed out that 'only 4 of 41 independent African nations have recognised the Biafran rebels, two of them heavily dependent of France, which has supported the cessionists [sic]'.⁸²

In an interview with Moses J. Newson of the *Afro-American*, Senator Edward Brooke, one of the high profile supporters of Leonard Garrett's BAATAS campaign firmly stated that 'he was of the opinion the best interests of Africa would be served if the civil war is concluded in a manner that leaves Nigeria a united country'.⁸³ Brooke regularly sparred with his fellow colleague from Massachusetts and supporter of BAATAS, Edward Kennedy, over aid to Biafra. In February 1969, Brooke declared that Kennedy's proposal that 'the US should provide direct non-military assistance to the starving population [of Biafra]' was a recipe for 'a Vietnam-type of situation' that would 'interfere in the problems of a sovereign country, Nigeria'.⁸⁴ In an interview in 2006, Brooke ruminated on his clashes with Kennedy:

Teddy, of course, was tied in with the Biafrans and all the rest of it, and they wanted us to give immediate relief to the Biafrans. They used women and children as the argument, but that would have been seen

as really supporting the Biafrans. . . . What I definitely feared was this would have its rippling effect through the whole continent of Africa. So I just didn't want that to happen, and I really—I didn't get down on my knees with Nixon, but I said, 'This is something I feel very passionate about. I'm sure it's right'.⁸⁵

Simon Anekwe, in a scathing column in the *Amsterdam News*, condemned *The Crisis*, official organ of the NAACP, for an editorial supporting a unified Nigeria. The editorial praised the Biafran who 'fought with desperate heroism, but, seemingly, in a lost cause, the success of which could prove fatal to the world's largest and potentially most powerful black nation'.⁸⁶ Anekwe bitterly stated that '[E]vidently *The Crisis* wants Biafra to be annihilated so the prospects of the powerful black nation can be realized'.⁸⁷

The significant support for a united Nigeria within the African-American community must be placed within the context of broader developments in Africa through the 1960s. The 'Year of Africa' in 1960, according to James Meriwether, inspired

black Americans to continue the struggle [for racial equality at home], the sweep of African independence boosted the pride and confidence that African-Americans felt in their heritage. . . . Successful liberation . . . [offered] examples of black men and women running their own countries.⁸⁸

However, by the mid-1960s, this sense of optimism had dissipated. The Congo crisis and the secession of Katanga province (backed by Belgium troops and European mercenaries), the wave of military coups throughout the continent in 1966 and the stalling of the decolonization process in Southern Africa all contributed to a growing sense that African national liberation was still tenuous.⁸⁹ The disintegration of Nigeria in 1967 was another blow to the optimistic view of postcolonial Africa, and one that had potentially far-reaching consequences considering Nigeria's potential as a leading state in Black Africa. An editorial in *The Crisis* neatly captured this sentiment in the black community:

[A] victory of the Federal forces . . . is of significance not only to Nigeria but also to all of black Africa What is sorely needed in Africa today is not fragmentation of existing nations, but rather, consolidation of smaller countries into strong federations with the potential to play an important role in world history. . . . Even though appalled by the misery endured by the progressive Ibo [sic] . . . , most black Americans supported the Federal government because we fervently want a strong

African state and a united Nigeria affords the best opportunity for realization of that dream.⁹⁰

This sentiment became increasingly apparent, particularly in the black press, as the humanitarian crisis ceased to be the overriding issue in the conflict and as black correspondents started filing reports from on the ground. The *Afro-American* newspaper, described by Meriwether as 'perhaps the most militant of the mainstream black press at the time [1960s]', became a firm advocate for Nigerian unity.⁹¹ In its coverage of the fighting in Nigeria-Biafra, particularly during 1969–70, the *Afro-American* was unashamedly hostile to what it viewed as Biafra's futile resistance, and its perceived collaboration with outside powers. Lillian Wiggins, the *Afro* correspondent in Lagos, described the sale of eight Globemaster transport planes to the International Red Cross and American volunteer agencies as providing 'encouragement for the rebel regime to prolong the war'.⁹² An *Afro* article in March 1969 bluntly stated that 'the best thing Biafra's supporters can do for the people in rebel area, and for Nigerians as a whole, is to encourage an end to the civil war and a united nation'.⁹³ In a provocative headline titled '[T]ime to Crush Biafra', the author wrote that '[O]utside interests who want to split up Nigeria to control it economically and politically are behind the war it is these same people who encourage Col. O. Ojukwu to betray his own people'.⁹⁴

The *Chicago Daily Defender* also voiced its opposition to Biafra's seemingly futile struggle. Ethel Payne, the 'First Lady of the Black Press', reported from Lagos on the flow of French arms and ammunition to the Biafran rebels. She stated that 'sources in Lagos believe that not only does France wish to weaken the potential strength of a United Nigeria but that it is [President] De Gaulle's intention to stamp out British influence in West Africa'.⁹⁵ In an interview with an Ukpabi Asika, an American-educated Igbo official working for the federal government, Payne reported that

the majority of Ibos [sic] have never been loyal to Ojukwu as an individual, but that they were drawn back to their traditional heartland after the military coup by powerful and emotional appeals from kinsmen who were being pressured by Ojukwu and his forces.⁹⁶

The *Defender* was also quick to report the decision of former President of Nigeria, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, widely regarded as the father of Nigerian nationalism, to move his support from Biafra back to the Federal government. Azikiwe, an Igbo, who had been educated in the United States, had originally sided with the secessionists. However, as the tide of war flowed towards the federal side, the former President stated that '[All Nigerians

should] urge their leaders to go to the conference table and negotiate for a just and honourable peace, which shall give them a respectable place in Nigeria as worthy citizens of one united country'.⁹⁷

Conclusion

The surrender of the Republic of Biafra on January 15, 1970 ended a trauma that had engulfed Africa and the African-American community in the United States. An editorial in the *Chicago Daily Defender* neatly encapsulated the dilemma of Black Americans, lamenting that '[Y]es, there was sympathy for the starving Biafran children, but no sympathy for Biafra's aspirations towards nationhood'.⁹⁸ Charles Kenyetta—recovering from bullet wounds sustained during a shoot-out in Harlem he claimed was related to his vocal support for Biafra—wrote in the *Amsterdam News* that, '[T]hese American Black organisation and so-called Black leaders did not identify with the Biafran cause'.⁹⁹ His fellow members of the Joint Afro Committee on Biafra, Mary Umolu and Shirley Washington, in a eulogy for the now extinct nation declared that

[W]e are at least on record as having been representative of some black American concern about the worth of every black human being who breathes. . . . We black Americans could have saved those people and we will never be allowed to forget it.¹⁰⁰

The tone of the *Chicago Daily Defender* was starkly different in describing the ramifications of Biafra's surrender. A united Nigeria was described as '[leading] the parade of African states in the march to free the white world of its narrow concept of race and social values'.¹⁰¹ Audrey Weaver, a veteran of the *Defender* editorial team, spoke for many black Americans when she declared that. '[N]o matter who is right or wrong in this tragic conflict, I deplore the killing of blacks by blacks'.¹⁰²

The Nigerian Civil War, rather than a 'subdued' event in the African-American diaspora, was a period of deep engagement and debate. The figures of James Farmer and James Meredith personified how black America cared about the struggle in Nigeria. Although cast as polar opposite figures in the introduction, Farmer and Meredith embodied the competing narratives within the body of the African-American community. Throughout the 1960s, Nigeria was a model of the future of African self-government at a time when African-Americans were engaged in their own struggle to gain political equality and economic justice at home. The descent of the Nigerian political experiment into civil war in July 1967 shocked many blacks from all walks of life. As the spectre of genocide emerged from the

war zone in mid-1968, with images of starving children that resembled the Holocaust, African-Americans mobilized to help. Even in the midst of the civil rights struggle and the ongoing battle for racial equality at home, African-Americans—whether civil rights leaders, black politicians or average citizens—remained committed to helping those suffering in the black diaspora and the principles of black internationalism. While committed to humanitarian aid and moral solidarity, the political aspect of the civil war—the secession of the Republic of Biafra—caused African-Americans to be more circumspect.

Nigeria, although a deeply flawed political experiment, represented to many black Americans—from civil rights leaders to black nationalists—a symbol of the potential of the African continent liberated from colonial rule. Although Africa had faced civil wars prior to 1967—Sudan had been engulfed in civil war since 1955—the political and economic potential of the Nigerian nation-state was tremendous. In its appeal to act as a neutral peacemaker in the crisis, the ANLCA stated that

[W]e [the four co-chairmen of the ANLCA] offer our services in such an enterprise in the hope that this largest, richest, and in many respects most promising nation in Black Africa may fulfil the destiny it so richly deserves, to the benefit of Africa, the world, and ourselves.¹⁰³

Self-determination for Biafra, particularly once a clearer picture emerged of the humanitarian situation in the war zone, was viewed as a liability by the majority of African-Americans engaged with the conflict. As the African continent grappled with the legacy of colonialism, white supremacist regimes in Rhodesia and South Africa and interventions by former colonial powers and the superpowers, a strong Nigeria was seen as critical. A strong and united Nigeria was not only a potent symbol of postcolonial African development, but also a symbol of black pride across the Atlantic. Black America did indeed care.

Notes

1. In its 12 July edition, the front cover of *Life* magazine carried graphic images of two emaciated Nigerian children, 'collateral damage' in the war between the two sides. The figure of 50,000 comes from the article from the 12 July edition; see 'Biafra: A war of starvation and extinction', *Life*, 12 July 1968, pp. 20–21.
2. 'Biafra drawing attention', *New York Amsterdam News*, 17 August 1968, p. 24.
3. Two months after speaking outside the United Nations, Meredith left on a two-week fact finding mission to Nigeria to observe the conflict and speak to Federal government officials. In an interview with the *New York Amsterdam News*, he stated that the Nigerian government was not 'guilty of waging genocide against the Ibos', that the leader of the Republic of Biafra Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu was 'a

- racist' and that the Biafran war effort was supported by '[W]hite racists from South Africa and Portugal and the pseudo liberals from America'. He is also noted as saying he did not visit the main war zone in Biafra. 'Nigeria's war: Meredith on Nigeria', *New York Amsterdam News*, 26 October 1968, p. 1.
4. 'Rival demonstrations on Nigeria held near U.N.: Farmer and Meredith', *New York Times*, 11 August 1968, p. 2.
 5. James Meredith, *A mission from God: A memoir and challenge for America* (New York: Atria Books, 2012), pp. 226–227.
 6. 'Farmer seeks US change in Africa', *New York Amsterdam News*, 13 February 1965, p. 1.
 7. 'Governor endorses James Farmer race', *New York Times*, 7 October 1968, p. 40.
 8. 'Campaign opened by James Farmer', *New York Times*, 26 July 1968, p. 36.
 9. The Igbo people, in the past incorrectly referred to as 'Ibo' are an ethnic and cultural group that reside predominantly in Southeastern Nigeria.
 10. See Daniel J. Sargent, *A superpower transformed: The remaking of American foreign relations in the 1970s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 68–80. See Also Lasse Heerten, 'The dystopia of postcolonial catastrophe: Self determination, the Biafran war of secession, and the 1970s human rights movement', in Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (eds.), *The breakthrough: Human rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), pp. 15–32. See Also Brad Simpson, 'The Biafran secession and the limits of self-determination', Brian McNeil, 'And starvation is the grim reaper: The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive and the genocide question during the Nigerian civil war, 1968–1970'; and Kevin O'Sullivan, 'Humanitarian encounters: Biafra, NGOs and imaginings of the Third World in Britain and Ireland, 1967–1970', in this volume.
 11. The past two decades has seen this field grow exponentially; for selected works see: James H. Meriwether, *Proudly we can be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935–1961* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Brenda Gayle Plummer (ed.), *Window on freedom race, civil rights, and foreign affairs, 1945–1988* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Michael Krenn, *The color of empire: Race and American foreign relations* (Dulles: Potomac Books, 2006); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising wind: Black Americans and U.S. foreign affairs, 1935–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race against empire: Black Americans and anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the prize: The United Nations and the African American struggle for human rights, 1944–1955* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Carol Anderson, *Bourgeois radicals: The NAACP and the struggle for colonial liberation, 1941–1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Leonardo Campus, 'Missiles have no colour: African Americans' reactions to the Cuban missile crisis', *Cold War History*, Vol. 15, 2015, pp. 49–72; Gerald Horne, *Black revolutionary: William Patterson & the globalization of the African American freedom struggle* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013).
 12. Brenda Gayle Plummer, *In search of power: African Americans in the era of decolonization, 1956–1974* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 194–195.
 13. James H. Meriwether, *Proudly we can be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935–1961* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), pp. 11–56.
 14. Heerten, 'The dystopia of postcolonial catastrophe', pp. 15–17.
 15. Meriwether, *Proudly we can be Africans*, p. 240.
 16. Meriwether, *Proudly we can be Africans*, p. 201.
 17. James Baldwin, 'A Negro assays the negro mood', *New York Times*, 12 March 1961, p. SM25.
 18. Gunnar Myrdal wrote that '[t]he importance of the Negro press for the formation of Negro opinion, for the function of all Negro institutions, for Negro leadership and concerted action generally, is enormous'. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American*

- dilemma: *Volume two the negro social structures*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), pp. 908–924.
19. Wilbur G. Landrey, 'Democracy in Nigeria important for world', *Atlanta Daily World*, 10 January 1963, p. 1.
 20. William G. Landrey, 'Nigerian looms as key nation of black Africa's bid for democracy', *Chicago Daily Defender* (Daily Edition), 21 November 1961, p. 19.
 21. James V. Clinton, 'President Azikiwe calls Nigeria's independence "destiny rendezvous"', *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 24 October 1963, p. B3.
 22. Simpson, 'The Biafran secession and the limits of self-determination'.
 23. Sargent, A superpower transformed, pp. 70–71.
 24. Letter from Sam Aluko to Martin Luther King, Jr., 16 November 1966, The King Center Digital Archive, available at: www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/letter-sam-aluko-mlk. Retrieved on 14 May 2016.
 25. 'Africa in transition', *Chicago Defender* (National Edition), 29 January 1966, p. 10.
 26. 'Nigeria on right road', *Chicago Defender* (National Edition), 26 February 1966, p. 10.
 27. Meriwether, Proudly we can be Africans, p. 206.
 28. Plummer, *In search of power*, p. 123.
 29. Simpson, 'The Biafran secession'.
 30. Memorandum From Theodore E. Brown to Dorothy Height, Martin Luther King, A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, 21 March 1967, Box A42, File 'NAACP Administration 1966– General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966–69', The Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
 31. Memorandum from Theodore E. Brown.
 32. 'Americans offer mediation of Nigeria division crisis', *New York Amsterdam News*, 20 May 1967, p. 34.
 33. For a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between the ANLCA mission and the domestic context of the advent of Black Power see James Farquharson, 'American Negro Leader Conference on Africa and the Nigerian civil war 1967–68'. Paper presented at the ANZASA Postgraduate and Early Career Scholar Conference, Sydney, Australia, 6–8 July 2016.
 34. '4 to try for peace in Nigeria', *New York Amsterdam News*, 23 March 1968, p. 2.
 35. Memorandum from T. E. Brown to R. Wilkins, A. P. Randolph, W. Young, M. L. King, R. E. Nigeria, 14 June 1967, Box A42, File 'NAACP Administration 1966–General Office File American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa 1966–69'. The Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
 36. Alfred Friendly Jr., 'Vital Biafra port claimed by Lagos: Secessionists again call for cease-fire agreement at peace talks this week vital Biafra port claimed by Lagos', *New York Times*, 20 May 1968, p. 1.
 37. International review of the Red Cross, August 1968, Library of Congress, available at: www.loc.gov/tr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/RC_Aug-1968.pdf. Retrieved 29 July 2016.
 38. Sargent, A superpower transformed, p. 71.
 39. Margery Perham, 'Reflections on the Nigerian civil war', *International Affairs*, Vol. 46, 1970, pp. 231–232.
 40. Booker Griffin, 'World condones genocide in Biafra', *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 25 July 1968, p. D1.
 41. 'Committee seeks aid for Biafra', *Call and Post*, 21 September 1968, p. 7A.
 42. Peter Lynch, 'People dying like flies in steamy Biafra', *Chicago Daily Defender* (Daily Edition), 15 July 1968, p. 5.
 43. Betty Washington, 'Effort made here on behalf of starving blacks in Biafra', *Chicago Daily Defender* (Daily Edition), 23 July 1968, p. 3.
 44. 'The starving children of Biafra', *New Journal and Guide*, 17 August 1968, p. BB.

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Section III

Trauma and Memory



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15 Women and the Nigeria-Biafra War

Gloria Chuku

Introduction

In fictional and nonfictional accounts of war, especially those written by men, women are often peripheralized or stereotypically represented as passive spectators and victims of armed conflicts.¹ Such works tend to ‘promote a form of heroism’ drawn directly from the involvement of men² just as they highlight and exaggerate women’s moral laxity and sensationalize their marital infidelities.³ They often blame women and girls for being sexually exploited and abused, a tendency which obscures the fact that the female gender disproportionately experiences sexual violence in times of war as demonstrated by studies on civil wars in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and elsewhere.⁴ In this chapter, a clear distinction is drawn between sexual predation against women and girls by men, especially those in the military, and women’s strategic deployment of their sexuality in order to survive and advance Biafra’s causes.

A related problem with certain war narratives is the tendency to minimize or even obscure the valiant and gallant ways women carried out old and new responsibilities occasioned by wars. In the case of the Nigeria-Biafra war, Flora Nwapa’s positive representation of women in her war novels has been criticized as ‘feminist propagandizing’.⁵ Minimal attention has been paid to the role of women in the conflict and how the war affected them. Apart from a couple of fictional representations of women during the conflict,⁶ only a few studies have presented historical accounts of women’s experiences in wartime and postwar reconstruction period.⁷ Though a welcome development, these studies are insufficient to break the silences that have surrounded the Nigeria-Biafra war in general—official attempts to ensure the perpetuation of the silence, no national conversation on the war, lack of any truth and reconciliation efforts, non-inclusion in the country’s school curriculum, scanty academic accounts and a deafening silence of women from the Nigerian side—and Biafran women’s experiences in

particular.⁸ Equally lacking are primary source-based analytical accounts of the war. More sustained studies on the war, especially life stories and accounts of ordinary survivors and the impact of the hostilities on their children, are required to break the silences surrounding the conflict.

This essay is therefore an attempt to bring out of the archive of silence the experiences of ordinary Biafran women in wartime and immediate postwar period. It covers the experiences of Igbo women and those from other ethnicities in southeastern Nigeria, such as the Andoni, the Efik, the Ekoi, the Ibibio, the Izon (Ijo), the Ikwerre, the Ogoja and the Okrika. It reveals how economic and political expediencies drove some Igbo and non-Igbo groups into playing ethnic cards during and after the war. For instance, there were some people who initially regarded themselves as Biafrans and downplayed their ethnic identities until the fortunes of the war turned against Biafra. But most Igbo, for a number of reasons discussed here, identified with Biafra throughout the conflict and even after. The overwhelming Igbo commitment to the Biafra cause and the fact that the Igbo homeland was the last theatre of the hostilities explain why the word 'Biafran' is often synonymous with the Igbo. Analyzing how these ethnic-diverse Biafran women related to one another and to their counterparts from other parts of Nigeria in prewar, war and postwar Nigeria is crucial to understanding the war and present-day Nigeria.⁹

Biafran women are presented in this study as active participants and survivors who demonstrated remarkable resilience, perseverance and initiative in the face of precarious war conditions. They embodied vulnerabilities and agency in the face of daunting challenges as well as opportunities occasioned by the hostilities. The argument here is that despite the inhospitable environment of scarcities and insecurities brought about by the war, women in Biafra persevered and waged war on all fronts as both the battle-front and home front became violent terrains in order to ensure the survival of their families, communities and Biafra, which eventually collapsed in January 1970 after thirty months of hostilities. The war engendered the transformation and redefinition of gender roles and identities as women assumed increased responsibilities in their families, communities and Biafra. Relying on interviews that I conducted in southeastern Nigeria over a span of two decades (1991–2012), official reports and gazettes, private papers and memoirs, newspaper articles and different genres of secondary sources, the chapter examines wartime roles of Biafran women with a focus on their economic and social activities, involvement in military operations, and their expanded public engagements. Women's survival strategies and coping mechanisms to complex emergencies in war-torn Biafra; how the war impacted them, their families, culture and communities; as well as the challenges of postwar transition are also analyzed.

The Nigeria-Biafra War

The 1966 mass killings of thousands of Easterners resident in northern Nigeria forced the survivors to flee to their homeland in the Eastern Region. The escalation of tensions resulted in mass exodus of Easterners, especially the Igbo, from Lagos, the Northern, Western and Midwestern Regions. While over 30,000 of them were reported murdered in the northern part of the country, more than two million returned to Biafra.¹⁰ Eastern Region was a densely populated territory and the return of Easterners to their homeland compounded the problem of space and resources. It was estimated that the region that became Biafra had a population of 14 million with the Igbo constituting nine million.¹¹ The arrival of survivors and bodies of the dead and wounded engendered an air filled with anger, frustration, sorrow and the demand for secession. Many of the returnee women had lost their husbands and breadwinners in the pogrom making survival much difficult for them and their children. It was in this state of hopelessness that Eastern Nigerian women carried out protest demonstrations against the killings of over 30,000 of their people in the North and the uncertainty faced by their fellow returnee women and their children; and also urged for secession. Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, the governor of the Eastern Region, was given the mandate to declare the independence of Eastern Nigeria as the Republic of Biafra 'at an early practical date'.¹² The Federal Military Government (FMG) under Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon responded by declaring a state of emergency throughout the country, announcing the creation of 12 states in place of the existing four regions and reimposing a blockade on the East.¹³ On 30 May 1967, the Eastern Region seceded when Ojukwu declared the Republic of Biafra. These successive events and unsuccessful peace attempts led to the outbreak of hostilities between Nigeria and the seceded Biafra Republic.

The Nigeria-Biafra war, which has been described as 'a crucible of contemporary humanitarianism [and] a watershed in the postcolonial global order', began on 6 July 1967 when the federal troops fired their shots at Gakem in the Ogoja Province.¹⁴ Five days after the war started, Ogoja, an ethnic minority town on the northeastern part of Biafra and a meat-producing area on the Cameroon border, was captured by the federal troops. The town experienced widespread looting by the FMG forces, a pattern that was repeated in many other areas of Biafra.¹⁵ By 10 July, Ibagwa in the north was captured. At Nsukka, the university town and part of Igbo heartland, Biafrans mounted stiff resistance with Major Nzeogwu, Christopher Okigbo (who was killed in the battle) and others leading the defence. Bonny on the coast of Biafra, the first sea-borne battle, fell to the federal forces under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin Adekunle on

25 July 1967. The loss was a blow to Biafra for it not only brought the Nigerian forces 35 miles closer to Port Harcourt, Biafra's major port and most important commercial city, but also ensured the FMG's effective enforcement of the blockade and Biafra's loss of three million barrels of crude oil in the tanks.¹⁶

In August 1967, the Biafran forces launched offensive attacks toward Lagos, crossing Benin city in the Midwest State but were halted at Ore in the Western state. The Biafran assault led to a full-on war waged mercilessly by the FMG. Eastern Nigerian towns of Asaba, Calabar and Ikot Ekpene as well as Benin became theatres of war with numerous civilian casualties. The federal offensive and Biafran retreat resulted in the double occupation of border towns such as Asaba with dire consequences. Asaba town and wider Anioma area under the then Midwest state became a site of bitter battles and the notorious Asaba massacre as the federal troops pushed the Biafran forces back across the Niger River. It was reported that on 7 October 1967, between 800 and 1,000 Asaba men and boys were massacred by the federal forces.¹⁷ Some women lost their lives, including Mgboshie Okoli, the Omu of Asaba (the head of Asaba women), who was beaten to death and subsequently mutilated by Nigerian soldiers as a result of her spiritual powers and leadership in her community.¹⁸ Others were wounded, raped and harassed. Many of them fled their homes and lived in bushes and forests for weeks and months. These acts of human destruction had profound consequences on Asaba women and their families.

Federal offensives resulted in the capture and occupation of major cities and towns in Biafra. One of such cities was Port Harcourt, which fell on 19 May 1968. The capture of the principal Biafran port and its only sea access turned Biafra into a landlocked enclave and made its blockade total, with food scarcity degenerating into a human catastrophe. By the middle of 1968, Biafra had lost almost the entire territory inhabited by non-Igbo ethnicities, many of whom supported the federal government mainly due to their fear of Igbo domination and exploitation. Further loss of territories reduced Biafra from 29,484 to 3,600 square miles of Igbo heartland, with unimaginable consequences on the civilian population.¹⁹ By this time, the food-producing areas of Biafra—Abakaliki, Anam, Bende, Cross River valley, Ikwerre and Ogoja—had been lost. Life in Biafra became precarious with overpopulation, impoverishment, shortages and scarcities of food, medicines and other supplies, which were compounded by considerable logistic difficulties. As John de St. Jorre noted in early 1968 as he was departing Biafra: 'Virtually everything [in Biafra was] in short supply, everything except human energy, ingenuity and an extraordinary collective and relentless will to struggle on'.²⁰

Starvation and Indiscriminate Bombings of Civilians: Legitimate Military Tactics or Acts of Genocide?

The FMG blockade of Biafra by air and sea cut off Biafra's lines of communication with the outside world, with no foreign currency transactions and international business, and also blocked incoming mails and telecommunication. It caused famine and starvation. Continued blockade of Biafra amidst famine and starvation prompted the Biafran authorities' accusations of genocide and propaganda campaign that led to the international debate on the application of the term 'genocide'. While the FMG and some sections of the international community, including experts on genocide studies, denied the occurrence of any acts of genocide during the war, Biafrans, especially the Igbo, believed that they experienced genocide in the hands of the FMG. To Biafrans, it was a war of survival.

But for the Nigerian officials, the goal was to starve Biafrans into submission. They saw the blockade as the legal right of a sovereign state seeking to suppress an internal rebellion. As a result, Nigerian ministers and military officers openly acknowledged the tactic of cutting off food supplies to the civilian population of Biafra. Hassan Usman Katsina, the Nigerian army chief of staff, Obafemi Awolowo, the commissioner of finance, and Anthony Enahoro, the Nigerian information minister, verbalized the FMG policy on starvation as a weapon of war against Biafra. For instance, while Awolowo stated on 26 June 1969, 'All is fair in war, and starvation is one of the weapons of war. I don't see why we should feed our enemies fat in order for them to fight us harder', Katsina declared, 'Personally, I would not feed somebody I am fighting'. At a press conference at the United Nations, New York, on 8 July 1968, Enahoro acknowledged that mass starvation was 'a legitimate weapon of war'.²¹ Two weeks later, the head of the Nigerian delegation at a peace conference in Niamey, Niger, refused to consider feasibility criteria for a food corridor to Biafra by declaring: 'Starvation is a legitimate weapon of war, and we have every intension of using it against the rebels'.²²

Many Biafrans, especially the Igbo, were displaced. They had to adjust to the realities of the war, which included scarcities of food and medical services, transportation facilities and other necessities of life. The influx of two to three-and-half million returnees, the shrinking size of Biafra and loss of food-producing areas created a horrendous refugee problem with a huge stress on limited resources and also compounded the problems of scarcities and starvation in the enclave.²³ Many civilians suffered from malnutrition, starvation and their attendant diseases, particularly kwashi-orkor, a protein-deficiency disease. There were massive civilian deaths resulting from malnutrition and starvation. These were mostly children, pregnant women, nursing mothers and the elderly.

Photographic images of emaciated starving Biafran children, women and the elderly with matchstick legs, swollen stomachs, hollowed eyes and large heads in Western media in early summer of 1968 touched the conscience of Americans and Westerners, and galvanized public opinions in favour of humanitarian support for Biafra. Thus, the conflict became the first postcolonial war to unleash a wave of humanitarian operations by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), African Concern and various religious groups, which organized airlift of relief supplies into Biafra. Frederick Forsyth, a BBC correspondent in Biafra who was dismissed in August 1967 but remained in Biafra as a freelance reporter, helped to expose the crisis in Biafra and draw international attention. The ICRC delegate in Nigeria reported that by the summer of 1968, an estimated 3,000 famine deaths occurred daily in Biafra and recommended airlift of relief as the only option to avert massive starvation there.²⁴ The pioneer efforts of Irish missionaries in Biafra resulted in the humanitarian activities organized by Christian churches starting from October 1968 and led to the establishment of the Joint Church Aid, a consortium of over 33 charities that took the largest airlift to Biafra.²⁵ Both the Swedish serving as medical chief of the Red Cross in Biafra and the UNICEF Dutch nutritionist, who oversaw 65 refugee camps, alerted their agencies of the alarming increase of kwashiorkor among Biafran children who were likely to be starved to death in thousands if there were no immediate food and relief supplies.²⁶ Dr. Edwin Spirgi of the ICRC reported that over 300,000 children were suffering from the disease by summer of 1968. Another report indicated that 10,000 Biafrans were dying daily as a result of starvation and air raids in 1968.²⁷ By the end of 1968, the ICRC and World Council of Churches recorded 700 refugee camps with 700,000 inmates and between 8,000 and 12,000 starving Biafrans dying daily.²⁸ Some mothers had to make the painful decision of giving up their sick children who were evacuated to Gabon, Sao Tome and Ivory Coast between late 1968 and early 1969. For some of those women, such painful separations were final as they never reunited with their children.²⁹

Biafrans were also faced with insecurities caused by constant air raids, heavy artillery, shelling and the menace of the soldiers. Many Biafrans became casualties of indiscriminate bombings by the federal forces of civilian populations and soft targets like markets, schools used as refugee camps, church buildings, hospitals, homes, farmlands and playgrounds. The federal aircraft bombing of villages, towns and other targets with numerous civilian casualties was attested by several eyewitness accounts (both Biafrans and foreigners) and reinforced the Biafrans' fear of genocide.³⁰ As John Horgan noted, 'Every major town in Biafra has been subjected to

day-light bombing raids by Russian and Czech-built fighter-bombers'.³¹ William Norris, who visited Biafra in April 1968, wrote:

I have seen things in Biafra this week which no man should have to see. Sights to scorch the mind and sicken the conscience. I have seen children roasted alive, young girls torn to two by shrapnel, pregnant women eviscerated, and old men blown to fragments [caused by] high-flying Russian Ilyushin jets operated by Federal Nigeria, dropping their bombs on civilian centres throughout Biafra.³²

Similarly, Alan Grossman, a *Time* magazine correspondent, reported on 10 May 1968 of air raids against Biafran civilians that 'intensified to two-a-day strikes on all Biafran towns'. Within the six days he spent in Biafra, civilian bombing took 300 lives. He witnessed the bombing by Nigerian jets and Nigeria's Egyptian pilots of Biafran civilian crowds 'at railway crossings, in villages, marketplaces and in churchyards after morning services [and] hospitals whose roofs [were] clearly marked with large red crosses'.³³ In a feeding centre at Owerinta, a MiG dropped a bomb on 8,000 people, killing 22 and wounding several; at Ihiala hospital with 258 patients, bomb reduced the number to eight; and in Okigwe, 100 Biafrans were killed along with four Red Cross workers.³⁴

Winston Churchill III, grandson of the former British prime minister, who came to Nigeria for the London *Times*, observed that it was clear that the Egyptian pilots hired by Nigeria regarded Biafra as a free bomb zone, for none of the places bombed had military targets anywhere near. He noted that on 25 February 1968 the Nigerian Air Force carried out five bombing raids on Umuahia, which were at a Red Cross headquarters, a hospital, a marketplace, a clinic for convalescents and a Red Cross vehicle, concluding that 'such consistent attacks on hospitals and civilian population can in no way be attributed to misidentification of targets or to inaccurate bombing'.³⁵ During his tour of Biafra in early 1969, United States Senator Charles Goodell reported air raids of markets, relief centres and nine hospitals, including those with Red Cross signs.³⁶ Stephen Lewis, who witnessed some of the air raids and killing of Biafra civilians lamented:

these village market-places [and hospitals cannot] be construed as military targets. They are chosen with great care as civilian centers only. . . . Surely the systematic murder of women and children amounts to the kind of satanic ritual which genocide connotes.³⁷

For precautionary measures, markets, which shifted to the bush, operated at night and hundreds of feeding centres, where thousands of women and

children gathered to receive relief supplies, operated daily before sunrise. Buildings were also camouflaged against air raids.

Attacks on civilian population and the magnitude of the humanitarian disaster reinforced the Biafran claim of genocide against its citizens. For instance, Biafra's Ministry of Information noted that 'no civilian population [was] ever left once the Nigerian troops [had] been here. People [ran] and those who [could not] run [were] slaughtered'; arguing that it was 'only in a war of GENOCIDE that there can be no civilians'.³⁸ This claim about acts of genocide was supported by reports at the early stages of the conflict of excessive and indiscriminate use of force on the part of the FMG that fed Biafrans' genuine fear of extinction. For instance, in September 1967, few months after the war started, the ICRC received reports of Biafrans' fear of genocide from delegates who visited Biafra. Paul Reynard, head of the ICRC delegation who spent weeks in Biafra, reported an interview he had with an Anglican bishop in Biafra who noted in a frightened tone that 'if the Federals win, genocide awaits'; Reynard observed that many Biafrans expressed this fear.³⁹ Karl Heinrich Jaggi, who succeeded Reynard, reported to the ICRC in January 1968 that the greatest problem in Biafra 'was the threat of genocide'.⁴⁰ In frustration, Cardinal Francis Arinze queried: 'Granted that the war is not religious, does it then follow that the Biafrans should be massacred? Have they none at all of the fundamental human rights?'⁴¹ The ICRC headquarters in Geneva was also informed by the Swiss government and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) of the danger of mass violence and a potential genocide in Biafra.⁴²

The debate whether it was the FMG intension to commit genocide, as upheld by Biafrans, or to use bombing and mass starvation as legitimate war tactics to force Biafran submission, as claimed by the Nigerian authorities, does not obscure the fact that Biafrans were seized by fear of annihilation. As a Biafran official stated, 'if you gave us the choice of 1,000 rifles or milk for 50,000 starving children, we'd take the guns', because it was a war of survival against extinction for Biafrans.⁴³ Within humanitarian circles, the FMG's refusal of any direct relief to Biafra was seen as evidence of its intension to exterminate Biafrans by starvation. But it is important to note that while the FMG and its representatives indeed employed excessive violence and starvation during the war, the Biafran propaganda that painted a dire picture of extinction and spread rumours that Nigerian authorities were using poison to complete their genocide against the Igbo and other Biafrans was a double-edged sword.⁴⁴ On the one hand, the propaganda increased the determination of Biafrans to fight for their survival. On the other hand, it prolonged the war and resulted in more deaths and hardships.

It was estimated that the deliberate policy of enforced famine and starvation resulted in over one million civilian deaths and more than 100,000

military deaths.⁴⁵ The catastrophic condition in Biafra could have been graver but for the activities of humanitarian relief organizations and the resilience of Biafrans.⁴⁶ For example, Cardinal Francis Arinze noted: 'Caritas planes flew into Biafra every night from 1968 till 1970. In some of the best nights, 40 flights were recorded'.⁴⁷ Humanitarian aid workers in the field supported Biafran position due to excessive violence from Nigerian troops and were therefore strongly accused of prolonging the war.⁴⁸ Some have suggested that humanitarian aid workers played a major role in publicizing the Biafran cause by spreading information of the 'alleged' genocide in Biafra.⁴⁹

Biafrans' determination to survive also contributed in prolonging the conflict. Within the FMG circle, it was believed that the 'police' action against Biafrans would take only a few weeks to bring them back to Nigeria. But the war lasted for thirty months. Biafrans gallantly defended their sovereignty. Moreover, despite hardships and scarcities, the Ojukwu-led government enjoyed significant popular support. The trail of tears, mounting death tolls, the wounded and loss of property occasioned by the conflicts and the idea that safety was only guaranteed in the Igbo heartland became the forceful glue that united the people in support of their government. While many young men and women volunteered, others were conscripted to serve in military and paramilitary units.⁵⁰ Biafrans demonstrated their resilience and ingenuity through many technological innovations and inventions, particularly those carried out in their Research and Production Directorate (popularly known as RAP). Under RAP, Biafran scientists, engineers and technicians were able to produce different kinds of weapons, equipment, tools and machines that helped to sustain the war for almost three years and that placed Biafra on the path of technological development. There were other directorates, including Directorate of Food, Directorate of Information, and Directorate of Transport and Fuel.⁵¹ Some young Biafran men and women were involved in overseas missions, educating their audience about the Biafran cause, and soliciting and mobilizing for aid. The remaining section of the chapter focuses on women's roles and contributions during the war and how the conflict impacted them and their families.

Biafran Women, Livelihood and Survival Strategies

The shifting fortunes of the conflict helped in determining how Biafran women coped with the exigencies of war. Biafran women who were displaced and camped in refugee centres, or those who lived in bushes and farms or rotated between the camps and bushes, and those who remained in their communities, as well as women from non-Igbo ethnic groups adopted similar

and different strategies to protect themselves and their relatives. All of them exhibited sheer resilience and determination to survive where improvisation became the order of the day in Biafra. As military enlistment or hiding from conscription, as well as other public responsibilities took many men away from their homes, most Biafran households experienced a role reversal when women became breadwinners or heads of household and did everything within their capability to ensure the survival of their families. Some female adolescents became breadwinners too, taking care of themselves, their aged parents and younger siblings. Women and adolescent girls struggled against starvation, epidemics and insecurities associated with the war. As a coping mechanism, some married women entered into new relationships with Biafran men. Other Biafran women of different ethnicities established various kinds of relationships with both federal and Biafran soldiers. While some of them married federal soldiers, others dated the officers. Survival was the primary reason why these women (both married and unmarried) resorted to such liaisons with federal troops. They were guaranteed food, free movement and access to essential and scarce items. A number of Biafran men, particularly those of Igbo descent, accused their women who were in such relationships with non-Igbo federal soldiers of licentiousness and greed.

There were, however, young girls who were abducted by the soldiers and forced into unwanted relationships. For this reason, mothers of adolescent girls were faced with the difficult choice of hiding and protecting their daughters from predatory soldiers or succumbing to the enticing benefits that came with their daughters being in relationships with the soldiers. Dympna Ugwu-Oju from Nsukka area noted how her mother was torn by the difficult choice of perpetually hiding her daughters or marrying them away at young ages. She stated:

Mama decided then and there that she had to save my sisters, before the unthinkable had happened. Her first step was to keep them permanently hidden in the bushes; they could no longer come 'home'. . . . Mama worked furiously, passing messages to relatives and friends throughout the region, letting it be known that her daughters were on the market for husbands. The urgency in her tone signalled that she was willing to settle for lesser suitors for my sisters; there was no time to be selective.⁵²

For protective purposes, young women and adolescent girls often disguised themselves as old women or individuals with physical disabilities to make themselves unattractive to soldiers and militia men.

The fluidity and malleability of ethnic and national identities became a survival strategy for many Biafrans especially among ethnic minority

groups. As the fortunes of the war shifted against Biafra and as federal soldiers occupied more Biafran communities, the people denied their allegiance to Biafra and identified with their respective ethnicities and Nigeria. Biafrans from Igbo and non-Igbo ethnic groups manipulated their ethnic origins and identities as a survival strategy. Those who could speak fluently any of the major Nigerian languages—Hausa, Yoruba, Fulfulde, Idoma, Kanuri, Nupe and others—stood to benefit as they could serve as interpreters and informants, and manipulate their ethnic origins. As one Ibibio respondent, who was a young boy when the war broke out, remembered:

We ran away from both Biafran and Nigerian soldiers. The Biafran troops came first and we identified as Biafrans, and later, when the Nigerians came, we became Nigerians and Ibibios. . . . If we knew what we know now, we would have accepted secession. People did not see what Ojukwu saw 40 years ago.⁵³

Yet another Ibibio respondent noted that his village supported Biafra initially out of fear but switched to Nigeria when the federal troops arrived. He stated: ‘Under Biafra, we were all Biafrans. But when the federal army arrived, we made it clear that we were Ibibios and not Igbo . . . because of Igbo domination, my village did not support Biafra’. He suggested that the animosities between the Igbo and the Ibibio contributed to the collapse of Biafra, noting that ‘the Ibibio showed Nigerian soldiers the ways and creeks to get Biafran soldiers. Our women cooked food for Nigerian soldiers and offered vital information’.⁵⁴ A respondent from Ikwerre in Rivers State informed me that Ikwerre people regarded themselves as part of the larger Igbo family prior to the outbreak of the war but the war changed everything, including ‘our names and the names of our towns and villages. Now, we are Ikwerre. We are not Igbo’.⁵⁵ This sentiment of being Ikwerre, an autonomous ethnic group, was expressed by other Ikwerre respondents.⁵⁶

Girls and young Biafran women of different ethnicities engaged in various economic activities that helped to sustain themselves, their families and even the soldiers throughout the war. While some engaged in different agricultural activities—farming, palm oil processing, food production and processing, preparation of local gin, poultry and livestock keeping—others produced salt, pottery products, mats, local cloth, soap and pomade. They traded in all sorts of goods. There were those who sold prepared food, others established minirestaurants and drinking houses, and a few privileged ones became food contractors, supplying foodstuff to either Biafran or Nigerian military units.⁵⁷ Although the hostilities and insecurity with

constant displacement and relocation made farming irregular, strenuous and hazardous and also resulted in a general decline in agricultural activities, women and girls did their best to produce food for their families and for sale. Farmers preferred fast-yielding crops, with cassava, beans and vegetables being the most widely cultivated. For example, women popularized the eating of a species of cassava called *Panya* (*aburu asuo* in Igbo), which was eaten like yam or sweet potatoes with vegetables and palm oil, or boiled and pounded like yam. *Panya* could be harvested in less than nine months but decayed easily if in the soil for over a year compared to other species that could remain unharvested for up to three years without decaying. Cassava tuber peelings, which were fed to domestic animals prior to the war, were processed into tapioca and flour for human consumption during this period. Yams, the Igbo chief crop, were cultivated by elderly men and a few women whose husbands were away or dead. Bush rovers, including soldiers, did not help those who farmed.

Biafrans resorted to the use of certain leaves that were not eaten in prewar period. These were leaves of cocoyam, paw-paw, cassava, hibiscus plant, wild *Amarantus* and wild bitter leaf. Bush combing for wild vegetables, spices, mushrooms, fruits, nuts, snails, insects—grasshoppers, crickets, termites—and small animals such as squirrels, rats and rabbits was common. These insects and rodents became vital sources of the much-needed protein in Biafra. Scouring the bushes for wild and edible items had its hazards, including attacks by dangerous wild animals and poisonous reptiles. Women who were involved in fishing sought after fish, crawfish, crabs, frogs, periwinkles and other sea-snails, which supplemented vegetable and animal sources of protein in Biafra. Nursing and medical personnel launched a series of educational campaigns on sources of protein and vitamins in local foods and condiments.⁵⁸

To avert hunger and starvation, soldiers from both sides looted village farms, often when crops were not fully mature. As a coping mechanism, women and other village farmers learned to harvest their crops and vegetables prematurely, and then preserved them. Foodstuffs such as banana, plantain, cocoyam, maize, vegetables and breadfruits were cut into small pieces or processed, dried and stored. Women devised new mechanisms for food preservation and storage, including a variety of prepared food that lasted up to ten to twelve days. Many of these food items were sun-dried or smoked by women. Breadfruit prepared with calcium and wrapped well with banana leaves could be preserved for a week or more. The intensification of food preservation practices by Biafran women led to the development of dry packing where processed or prepared food was sealed in cellophane bags in ration sizes. For instance, the Division of Women's Council of Social Services at Nnewi produced 34,718 packs of dry-packed

food, made out of local corn flour, yam, fish and chicken ingredients that were distributed to the soldiers in their trenches at Onitsha. The Calabar and Arochukwu branches of the Women Voluntary Service Organization established a packed-food centre at Arochukwu. The practice of packed-food continued after the war and included such food packs as chop-one chop-two, plantain and banana chips, popped or roasted corn, different variety of biscuits and cakes, roasted beef, chicken and snails.⁵⁹

Local manufacturing industries received a mixed report during the war. While some of them—pottery and weaving—that were associated with women declined, others thrived. Distilling of local gin, a prewar preserve of men, was taken up by women. These women distillers relied on male tappers for palm and raffia wine used for liquor distillation. Local liquors were bottled and also packaged in plastic sachets for sale. Emu women of Ukwuani were famous distillers. Acute shortage of table salt was one of the greatest food problems that faced Biafrans. Consequently, local salt production received a boost, particularly at Ohaozara and Abakaliki where salt brines were abundant. As in the prewar years, local salt production remained the preserve of women during the war.⁶⁰ In addition to locally produced salt, Biafrans used imported salt from relief organizations and smuggle trade across Nigeria. They also resorted to the use of salt-fish obtained from relief agencies, as well as ashes from palm fronds and leaves. Seawater was also used as salt substitute by those who lived near such bodies of water.

Local and long-distance trades among ethnic groups within Biafra continued throughout the war in spite of the insecurity and distress caused by unpredictable air raids and menace of soldiers. Transborder trade between Biafra and Nigeria developed. Women dominated all the trades. However, certain changes were made and innovations introduced in their trading organizations and modes of operation to contain war exigencies. For instance, house-to-house trade and bush trade became the norm. There was constant shifting of markets from village to village. Market sites were moved from towns and exposed areas susceptible to air raids to hidden sites. Markets such as Ekeoha Aba moved to Eke Akpara in Ngwa, Obollo Afor market to Afor Ovoko, Eke Ndizuogu to Ogbo Rubber (rubber plantation market), Eke Imoha of Abakaliki and Onitsha Main Market were deserted and traders moved to bush markets. The Boji-boji market in Agbor (in the Mid-west state), which replaced Onitsha in Biafra, became the major trading centre for western Igbo people. Border markets such as Umuoba market in Enugu-Ezike—the main market between Nsukka Igbo and the Idoma-speaking people of Benue-Plateau state—and Oye Obiete market—for Nsukka and Akpanya people in Benue-Plateau state—developed. Ikpe Ikrouguru market in Ibibioland served as the most famous market for the

Aro of southern Igbo and the Ibibio. When the Nigerian soldiers occupied Cross River territory, the market became an important transborder centre. Ngwa women went to Afor Okom market of the Ibibio for fish and crayfish. Omuma market in Rivers state, later lost to the Nigerian troops, was rich in banana, plantain, vegetables and palm oil. Those who lived in the riverine communities like the Ukwuani and Utagba-ogbe people moved their markets inland away from the riverbanks.

The exigencies of war also resulted in changes to the sessions of existing markets: most of them operated very early in the morning and late in the evening. Often, commercial transactions in these markets lasted for few hours and sometimes as brief as an hour. Traders were constantly in fear and panic, and dispersed at the sound of unfamiliar noise, air raids and appearance of soldiers, especially federal troops in occupied or liberated areas. Old routes were often abandoned and new ones created to escape military surveillance and detection. For instance, Nsukwa-Abala-Oko-Ogbele-Atani and Okpanam-Anwai-Eke-mkpu-Anam routes developed as a major source of foodstuffs into Biafra from the Midwest state. There were also Abakaliki-Enugu-Nsukka-Oturkpo (in Benue-Plateau); Otuocha-Asaba-Ugwashi-Ukwu; Atani-Ossomari-Oguta-Ohaji-Egbema-Owerri; Otuocha-Nando-Ogidi-Obosi-Oba-Nnewi; Otuocha-Nkwele-Idemili-Nnewi-Ihiala-Owerri; Arochukwu-Itu-Uyo; Ogoja-Abakaliki-Enigma-Uburu-Afikpo-Ohafia-Arochukwu; Umuoba-Ovoko-Umualor-Ugwuogo-Nike routes among others.⁶¹

Articles of trade included foodstuffs, personal belongings—apparels, jewellery and household goods—salt, milk, meat, chicken, palm oil, medicaments, cosmetics, soap, tobacco, cigarettes, medicines, batteries and tobacco. Prices of these goods rose astronomically from their prewar rates. For instance, beef, which was rarely obtained, rose from 3s to 6s a pound (shillings), eggs from 4s to 8s a dozen, a chicken from 15s to £5 initially and £15 by 1968 and £30 just before the end of the war; dried fish rose from 5s a pound to 60s; salt from one penny (1d) a cup to 20s.⁶² At the end of 1968, a chicken cost £B5 and a young goat £B25; a cup of *gari* £B1. For a population desperate for protein, snails, rats and mice fetched good amounts of money too.

Transborder trade or smuggle trade (popularly called *Ahia* or *Afia* attack in Igbo) was a long-distance trade between Biafra and Nigeria. The traders were mostly Biafran women who smuggled essential commodities into Biafra. The trade helped Biafrans and Nigerians in federally liberated areas to acquire much-needed foodstuffs and essential items and medicines by crossing enemy lines into Nigeria and occupied territories of Biafra. It was called *Ahia* attack because the trade was illegal as both Biafran and Nigerian authorities discouraged the smuggling of foodstuffs and goods into Biafra. The smuggle trade undermined the FMG's blockade of Biafra

and was a concern to Biafran authorities due to fear of food poisoning. The trade was also dangerous and risky. It was a life-or-death trade but a child of necessity. Women who engaged in this trade were those who had the capital and the gut to shoulder the risks involved. Although the banning of movement of goods and foodstuffs into Biafra was enforced—lorries loaded with foodstuffs heading to Biafra towns seized, curfews imposed, federal troops ordered to shoot on sight anyone found in the Niger and Niger Delta creeks after dusk and women thoroughly searched at checkpoints for contraband goods with some arrested, punished, wounded, raped or killed—Biafran women managed to cross military barriers and checkpoints to trade in liberated areas and Nigerian territories.

Biafran transborder traders took several precautionary measures because of the risky nature of the trade. They travelled in groups, at night and secretly. Many of them befriended Biafran and Nigerian soldiers for security and free passage. Some of them unofficially acted as spies, providing vital information to both Biafran and federal troops. To avoid constant harassments and assaults by soldiers, the traders adopted various forms of disguise: some wore expensive clothes and jewellery to be mistaken as army officers' wives; others darkened their skins and wore ragged wrappers and dresses, stooped or limped to look old and unattractive. While some tied wads of cloth on their stomach faking pregnancy, others carried infants and toddlers to disguise as nursing mothers. Yet a number of the traders disguised in Idoma, Edo and Yoruba wrappers and attires were able to travel into enemy villages and towns without detection. Fluency in Hausa, Edo, Idoma, Nupe, Yoruba and other Nigerian languages meant added advantage for communication, understanding and trust. The trade enhanced the economic power of women who engaged in it. This group of traders was among the most prosperous in Biafra. Examples were Mrs. Jeo Olumba of Orlu, Mrs. Margaret Nwogu of Umuna and Mrs. Ijeoma Okoli of Ihiala, who also supplied bulked food and provisions to the Biafra military.⁶³ There were also Biafra women in federal occupied towns who served as food contractors for the federal military. They included Gladys Obi of Asaba and Agnes Odagwe of Utagba-ogbe, who dealt in bulk purchases of foodstuffs that they supplied to military barracks in their towns. It is reported that Gladys Obi was a madame who connected Asaba girls with federal soldiers, and with her knowledge of midwifery, she assisted women in the barracks to deliver their babies. She lived in the barracks and her different roles there earned her the title of *magajiya* (mother of the barracks).⁶⁴

The Nigerian pound note, which was par with the British pound, was the currency in use until January 1, 1968 when the Federal Military Government changed the currency note as a war strategy to nullify Biafra's

foreign exchange.⁶⁵ Nigerians in border towns and liberated areas suffered hardships as a result of the discontinuation of the old Nigerian notes and closure of most banks there. For example, the West Niger Igbo had to travel to Agbor where only one bank was operational in order to change their old Nigerian currency. The currency change was a major blow to Biafra as millions of Nigerian pound notes in the Biafran treasury were rendered worthless. It was the same for substantial sums of old Nigerian currency in the possession of Biafran civilians and many Nigerians in liberated or occupied areas. Consequently, in March of the same year, the Central Bank of Biafra began printing new currency notes in 5 shillings, 10 shillings, 1- and 5-pound denominations, which were illegal in Nigeria. However, Nigerian coins were not changed and they remained a legal tender and the most sought-after currency in Biafra. In spite of being cumbersome, coins became the commonly used currency in commercial transactions between Biafrans and Nigerians, and thus, accumulated higher value than the Biafran notes. Some people, mostly elderly men, who stored coins in calabashes in prewar years, went into money exchange business. A thousand Biafran pounds was the equivalent of twenty Nigerian pounds in 1968. At the peak of the dry-up of Nigerian coins in Biafra, especially in 1969, £B1 was exchanged for five-shilling coins. In some places, one-shilling coins fetched as much as £B2.⁶⁶ The scarcity of Nigerian currency (both notes and coins) profoundly affected commercial transactions in Biafra as many banks were closed both in the new country and neighbouring Nigerian territories, such as those in the Midwest and Benue-Plateau states. Women traders, particularly the attack traders, were often exploited by racketeers from both federal and Biafran sides. For these reasons, barter trade remained popular throughout the war.

Lack of transport facilities was a major problem in Biafra. Most of the traders walked long distances with their goods on their heads. Trekking and head portage became the most convenient means of transportation in remote and bush markets. As the war advanced, Biafran soldiers commandeered private vehicles and confiscated bicycles belonging to civilians, an action which undermined the activities of women traders. Canoes and boats were used by those who lived around navigable bodies of water such as across the Niger, Ulashi, Imo, Anambra and Cross Rivers and their creeks. Women traders relied on professional fishermen to convey their goods from one trading centre to another. Sailing was usually done at night due to curfew and as a security measure. At times, coffins were used to conceal trade goods. Well-connected traders, such as female contractors who supplied food, provisions, medical and clothing materials, toiletries and alcoholic drinks to military barracks and bases, depended on military vehicles. The women were also issued with military passes for free mobility.

Some Biafran women established and managed minirestaurants and drinking houses in towns with large concentrations of soldiers. This group of women included Madam B. Oti of Ihiala, Mrs. Ngozi Nnabuife of Nnewi, and Regina Ijeh of Akwukwu-Igbo, who had lived in the North but forced to return home during the 1966 pogrom.⁶⁷ Often, soldiers from both sides ate or drank on credit and never paid. Other Biafran women survived as a result of their spiritual power and knowledge of indigenous medicines. Such women were highly sought-after and respected as many Biafrans relied on indigenous professional midwives and on indigenous medical practices, herbs, leaves, roots and other local remedies.

Service and Activism

Biafran women's activism embodied their contributions to the efficient management of the Biafra Red Cross and a number of civil defence forces and organizations, including Women's Voluntary Service (WVS), which served both civilian and military populations. Women who served in the Biafra Red Cross helped in the distribution of medical and food supplies provided by the International Committee of the Red Cross and other relief organizations to soldiers and civilians. The Biafran Red Cross managed most of the hospitals and relief bunkers, which served as places of refuge until the Nigerian forces began bombing them. Some of the Biafran Red Cross women, particularly those recruited into the Armed Forces Nursing Corps (AFNC), worked at the war fronts, administering first aid to wounded soldiers and attending to others who needed medical attention.⁶⁸ Many members of the AFNC were trainee nurses recruited from the University of Biafra Teaching Hospital (UBTH), Enugu (former University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital). What was remarkable about these women is that they succeeded in saving many Biafran lives with limited resources and irregular supplies. According to one of the nurses, 'we did what the doctors ought to do . . . we had 500 patients with just two of us'.⁶⁹ Often, the women became victims of bomb air raids, bomb explosions, grenade or shell attacks, and shrapnel and gunshots. The WVS had various service groups performing different responsibilities for the military and civilians, including delivery of medications, food provision and clothing materials. One of such groups prepared meals for the soldiers and were fondly called the 'Kitchen Battalion'.⁷⁰ The women involved in preparing soldiers' meals used makeshift kitchens strategically located near the frontlines, a service which put them at great personal risk just as the soldiers they served. This group also serviced hospitals and refugee camps, feeding thousands of starving Biafrans and educating women on protein substitutes such as soya beans. The Kitchen Battalion women maintained small vegetable gardens and staple farms to augment their food supplies.⁷¹

Teenage girls and young female adults, especially undergraduates and technical school leavers, served in civil defence militia groups such as the Biafran Organization of Freedom Fighters (BOFF) and the Special Task Force (STF), whose main task was the maintenance of the internal security of Biafra. As the fortunes of the war turned against Biafra from 1968 and more men were drafted into combat, women began to play a dominant role in the civil defence and other paramilitary services. As noted by Alexander A. Madiebo, former commander of the Nigeria Army Artillery Regiment in prewar Nigeria and the commander of the Biafran Army, 'local leaders and ex-servicemen trained young men and women in the use of whatever weapons the individuals had . . . mainly imported and locally manufactured shotguns . . . dane-guns and locally-made mines and explosive devices'.⁷² The militia women in particular stepped up and administered their towns and villages in the absence of their men and sons. Women and girls who received training in self defence, practical drills for vigilance and alertness, life-saving devices during emergency situations and air raids, served as a buffer between the civilian populations and the soldiers; some of them, along with young boys, manned roadblocks. The militia women not only policed Biafran towns and villages, maintaining law and order, but they also monitored the movement of people within their communities and manned roadblocks within Biafra and at the borders against deserters and infiltrators or spies. They reported saboteurs and deserters to the authorities. Only very few received training in military procedures and operations. Some of them performed different administrative jobs as telephone operators and aids to quartermasters, distributing supplies to soldiers in military battalions and brigades. A few of them, such as Tina Okwuashi, Ndidi Okoli and the 'smart clean shaven young 2nd Lieutenant on parade', with men of the 57 Brigade that Colonel Jeo Achuzia described in his book, served as platoon commanders and were often allowed to carry firearms.⁷³ Some Biafran ex-soldiers noted that a few daring young women unofficially served as armed combatants.⁷⁴ Many of them such as Miss Ikorensia, who was a member of the Daughters of Biafra, died in battle.⁷⁵

Militia members were ranked in reverse order as recruits, cadets, corporals, sergeants, sergeant-majors and lieutenants. Even though female militias provided vital support and service functions to male soldiers, they were never placed on the Biafran payroll. Generally and officially, they were not allowed to carry arms and, if found, they were usually disarmed and sent back to their camps. There were a few female militia members who served as spies and volunteers by engaging in a more sophisticated covert operation called 'seek and report', or 'rece' by Biafran soldiers. While there were among this group those who used their youthfulness and sexuality to establish some trust with enemy soldiers, there were also

others who disguised themselves as elderly and deformed in order to elude being captured. These women enjoyed greater mobility than men. They were used by both federal troops and Biafran soldiers for high-risk intelligent work. While some of them, such as Tina Okwuashi, were arrested and imprisoned by the federal authorities, others lost their lives as they engaged in espionage. For example, one Faustina Oko was executed by the federal forces for allegedly spying for Biafra.⁷⁶ Other Biafran militia women served in refugee centres, hospitals and sickbays; attended to wounded soldiers and sick civilians; distributed relief materials to refugees and taught them life-saving skills. An ambulance unit at Nkume, Orlu Division, noted that one of its objectives was 'to train and send young men and girls to work in hospitals, to help wounded soldiers and, in sick bay or milk centers, [and] to aid kwashiorkor victims'.⁷⁷ Some of these militia women were schoolgirls, who in addition to the above responsibilities, knitted, sewed and cooked 'for the "boys at the front", many of whom were their former classmates'.⁷⁸

Even though Jeo Achuzia, one of Biafra's tough military commanders ordered the dismissal of a female platoon commander simply because she was a woman, he did admire her gallantry which he noted 'represented the inflexible and determined attitude of Biafran guts' which he recognized throughout the war.⁷⁹ There were other militia women who worked in the propaganda unit, helping to keep the morale of Biafrans up, educating and mobilizing them for the Biafra cause. They encouraged the Biafran civilians to contribute to the Civil Defence Fund and elicited international sympathy and support for the new republic. Through child-oriented advertisement, these women educated mothers and their offspring how to tag Biafran children for easy identification in case of displacement. Mary G. C. Oraeki (nee Ezeani), who was an undergraduate of Graphic Design and Fine Arts at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, when the 1966 pogrom began, was one of such women. She worked in the Graphic Design unit of the Propaganda Directorate.⁸⁰ Unquestionably, these militia women were highly respected and admired. Many Biafrans believed that they were incorruptible and formidable, and were therefore fondly referred as the 'Biafran amazons'.⁸¹

Consequences

General Philip Efiang, Biafra Chief of Army Staff, announced the Biafra surrender on 12 January 1970, but it took Gowon up to 15 January to ask the federal troops to end the hostilities. When the war ended, there was general unwillingness of the displaced, especially those hiding in bushes and farms to go back to their homes due to fear. Despite instructions from

the federal government to maintain discipline, some Nigerian soldiers set village houses in Biafra on fire, looted properties and continued to harass, intimidate and molest former Biafrans. While some were beaten, others lost their lives, atrocities that continued several weeks after the cessation of hostilities had been announced. The death toll among the Igbo and other Biafrans rose to millions, and many of the civilian casualties died of malnutrition and starvation. Some young women and girls were abducted and forced into relationships with Nigerian soldiers during this period. Most of the social norms and cultural traditions were abandoned, such as the dead buried without the elaborate rituals associated with rites of passage. However, many families accorded their dead ones proper burial ceremonies after the war.

As actors and victims, the war affected women, young girls and boys individually and collectively and in their positions as members of the military, paramilitary and displaced and dispersed populations. So many lost their lives and others were permanently disabled. The survivors have constantly struggled with the horrors and scars of the war and many have passed on. Eastern Nigeria, especially Igbo homeland, suffered from enormous devastation and destruction. Its economy was in ruins. Individually and collectively, the Igbo and other ethnicities in former Biafra did everything within their power to rehabilitate themselves and reconstruct their homelands. Many self-help organizations and community development associations sprang up for these purposes and were successful. Women were at the centre of these reconstruction efforts. The federal government, for its part, launched a programme of reintegration and rehabilitation centred on 'Three Rs': reconstruction, rehabilitation and reconciliation. As early as March 1968, it established the National Rehabilitation Commission to oversee the implementation of the programme.⁸² Many former Biafran personnel were reabsorbed into the civil service and the military. Efforts were made to rebuild destroyed infrastructure, including public utilities and social services, but not to the prewar levels.

Some of the Biafran young women and girls who were abducted by the soldiers as well as those who, as an economic survival mechanism, engaged in war 'marriages' through patterns of relationship with Nigerian soldiers of different ethnicities had lasting experiences. A few of them were happily married after the war when their soldier partners performed the customary marriage rituals to legitimize their relationships. One of such women, Maryam Babangida (née Okogwu), became Nigeria's First Lady when her husband, General Ibrahim Babangida, ruled the country as the military head of state (1985–1993). These were the few lucky ones. For many wartime female partners of non-Igbo Nigerian soldiers, the relationships ended inauspiciously after the war with residual outcomes that

included embarrassment, destitution, broken hearts, stigmatization and rejection from their Igbo relatives and communities. The experience was traumatic and they had to live with the humiliation and social stigma associated with that type of life. As one Igbo woman, who was 12 years during the war puts it:

the fate that awaited the women survivors was worse than anything the soldiers could have done to them. The married ones could not return to their husbands; they had defiled the soil by their 'infidelities'. . . . 'They have violated the laws of the land'. These doomed women were paraded through the community, accused of infidelity, the worst of crimes. They went through a cleansing ritual, entailing sacrificing chickens and goats to appease the gods, to seek forgiveness and reacceptance into the community.⁸³

Often, some of the women who either were abducted or chose to leave with Northern soldiers preferred to die rather than be taken by the soldiers or return to their families. Some of them who braved returning were often 'treated like someone with leprosy'.⁸⁴ They were socially stigmatized as wayward women with illegitimate children. Sample quotations from some of the female survivors of the war whom I interviewed between 1991 and 2012 illustrate their state of despair decades after the war had ended: 'Look at me! Is this a life worth living?'. 'Please, do not ask me about that war. I do not want to talk about it. . . . War is bad and should be prevented at all cost'. 'While we all went to hell during that war, only few of us came back alive . . . we cannot be the same again'. 'I am like a living corpse, rejected by my Hausa husband and Igbo relatives'.⁸⁵ There were also increased numbers of Eastern young women who moved to northern cities of Kano, Kaduna and others entering the sex trade as never before and through that way raised their start-up capital for private enterprise.

Having realized the destructive nature of ethnic conflicts, the federal government pursued policies that promoted national unity and security. Emphases were placed on programmes that would increase the interaction, tolerance and understanding among Nigerians of different ethnicities. One of such programmes was the National Youth Service Corp (NYSC), established in 1973. The NYSC program requires graduates of tertiary institutions to engage in a one-year compulsory national service in a state other than their state of origin. The goal is to promote national unity and integration through greater inter-ethnic interaction and understanding among Nigerian youth. It is hoped that the programme would help to raise a new group of highly disciplined and 'detrribalized' young Nigerian men and women, the future leaders of the country.⁸⁶

Many have commended Gowon's 'no victor, no vanquished' policy for helping to ensure the integration of the Igbo back into the Nigerian society without government retribution, Igbo reentry into the military and the civil service, as well as access to university education. Inasmuch as the above observation might be true, it is also important to note that it was the same government that pursued a banking policy immediately after the war that denied the Igbo access to their prewar bank accounts in Nigeria, and offered those who deposited Biafran money in banks only 20 pounds, regardless of the amount involved. This policy was followed soon after with the Nigerian Enterprises Promotion Decree (Indigenization Decree) of 1972 that naturalized foreign enterprises and assets in Nigeria.⁸⁷ Only Nigerians with enough capital were able to buy up shares of the naturalized foreign firms. Financially, Igbo men and women were not in a position to bid for the auctioned enterprises. Thus, the cumulative outcome of the federal postwar fiscal and economic policies on the Igbo was that they were pushed down from their prewar commanding economic apex. They had to start from scratch to rebuild their lives, economy and homeland.

The Igbo also suffered from the 'abandoned property' problem, which was worse in Port Harcourt (the city they literally built).⁸⁸ When the Igbo fled Port Harcourt as a result of the war, their houses and other landed properties were either occupied or claimed by non-Igbo ethnicities of Rivers state. At the end of the war, when they returned to reclaim their properties, they were informed that a body, Abandoned Property Authority (APA), created by the Rivers state government in August 1969, was 'vested with powers for the custody, control and management of every abandoned property within the [state]'.⁸⁹ The Rivers state government gave persons claiming their properties 60 days to register with authentic documents of ownership. There was no measure taken to ensure that those who lost their property documents in the course of the war recovered their property. Having taken off during the war, the Rivers state government was faced with scarcity of office buildings and other structures and Igbo properties came in handy. Such properties were permanently taken by the state. Many Igbo property owners in the state were frustrated and heartbroken by this policy; a good number of them never recovered their properties. One of them, Madam Mary Nzimiro, whose husband, Richard Nzimiro, was the first indigenous mayor of Port Harcourt Municipality, and who owned seven houses in the city, was frustrated out of it by the 'abandoned property' policy. She never resided in Port Harcourt again, a city she and her husband had contributed greatly to build.⁹⁰ The East Central state government (the only Igbo state created in 1967) was critical of the Rivers state policy on Igbo property and claimed that the people lost 5,600 buildings, undeveloped land, machinery and petrol stations in Port Harcourt and the surrounding areas. Ironically,

the Rivers state government failed to disclose the list of Igbo property in the state.⁹¹ In a number of northern cities, like Kano, Kaduna and Jos, many Igbo recovered their property and renegotiated their position in the new political and economic environment of postwar northern Nigeria.⁹²

One of the postwar nation-building policies of the federal government was the Principle of Federal Character and Quota System. It was ostensibly aimed at 'ethnic balancing' in federal appointments, university admissions and employments. Instead of targeting war survivors, especially those who were displaced, the programme favoured northerners for being educationally disadvantaged. There is no doubt that the war led to widespread popular resentment toward the Igbo as many Nigerians blamed them for the war and its devastating impact. As a result, the Igbo have often felt a sense of alienation from the country and distrust of other ethnic groups. Thus the war has strengthened ethnic ties and led to the proliferation of ethnic associations. As Nigerian economic and political conditions continued to worsen, many Nigerians have experienced continuous alienation from the state and accusations of ethnic marginalization have increased. It is not surprising that there has been a resurgence of ethno-nationalist sentiments and separatist movements in the country.⁹³

Conclusion

The Nigeria-Biafra war has left an indelible mark in the hearts of the survivors, especially Biafran women. Many of them still remember the physical and psychological agony inflicted on them and their relatives by the hostilities. Many still live with the physical and emotional scars of the war as orphans, widows, parents without children, socially stigmatized and depressed survivors. The war also led to the transformation and redefinition of gender roles and identities as Biafran women assumed increased responsibilities in their respective families and communities and in Biafra. In spite of inhospitable environment of scarcities and insecurities occasioned by the hostilities, and driven by survival instinct, Biafran women became a formidable force and waged war on all fronts as both the battlefield and home front became violent terrains. Even when they were harassed, raped, kidnapped and abused, wounded, starved and killed, Biafran women and girls as survivors withstood the storm through hard work, resilience and the sheer determination to live and tell their story of what they regarded as a war of extinction. In the absence of men and as the burden of food production fell on them, Biafran women fed Biafrans and sustained the economy of Biafra through their economic activities. They farmed, produced, processed, prepared and preserved food for both civilian and military populations. They expanded the local food choices

and dietary system of their people through innovations they introduced and popularized during the war. Their activities in local industrial production—salt, local gin, cloth, mats, pottery products, soap and pomade—proved valuable as Biafra was blockaded and reduced to a small enclave. Biafran women ensured that local and long-distance commercial exchanges continued in their communities throughout the war.

Demonstrating their entrepreneurial ingenuity and acumen, women became innovative and dynamic in their trading organizations. While some market-places were deserted, new ones were opened in hidden places, including new trade routes. House-to-house trade and bush markets thrived. Transborder trade between Biafra and Nigeria developed and became one of the enclave's most important sources of imported goods and essential items. The trade was dangerous and risky but a child of necessity. As risk-takers, Biafran women and adolescent girls successfully engaged in local and long-distance trade, particularly in the attack trade, navigating military checkpoints, enemy lines, dangerous terrains under the vagaries of weather to bring the much-needed food and other essential materials into Biafra, an experience that marked the beginning of highly successful careers in trade and entrepreneurship for some of them.

Women's organizations and market network maintained a distributive system for food, essential commodities and services, and also provided channels for the passage of vital information to their communities and the military. Biafran women demonstrated innovative and imaginative abilities in both home and war fronts. They exhibited enviable leadership roles in their families and villages as heads of household, breadwinners, community organizers and leaders. Militia and other women leaders administered and policed towns and villages and maintained law and order. They staffed roadblocks against deserters, infiltrators and spies. Some of them served as platoon commanders and engaged in high-risk intelligence work such as espionage. Others performed different kinds of administrative responsibilities in military battalions and camps, propaganda units and other directorates. Some were medical corps, serving in hospitals, health centres, military barracks and war fronts. There were those who worked with different relief organizations, distributing foodstuffs and medications to both civilian and military populations. Yet a few were sent on overseas missions to mobilize support and resources for Biafra. At home, women mobilized Biafrans for resources and all public occasions. They were indeed a cohesive force that bound Biafrans together for the 30 months that the war lasted. Women demonstrated resilience in tackling unique challenges of living in postwar Nigerian society. They were at the forefront of the postwar reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts, mobilizing self-help and community associations for the purpose.

The Nigeria-Biafra war ended over four decades ago. Yet there are lingering questions. Was it correct to prioritize state sovereignty over emergency-relief operations when thousands of civilians were starving to death? Did humanitarian relief operations in Biafra prolong the war? Should Biafra have surrendered before January 1970? At what point was it necessary to surrender? Did the Nigerian FMG intend to destroy the Igbo as an identifiable group? What about the Nigerian behaviour during the most devastating phase of the war? What happens when the head of government was weak and could not control the army or the air force? In such a situation, how do we account for the atrocities committed by members of the armed forces? Who bears the responsibility? Should the United Nations, the United States and other countries have intervened soon enough to save Biafran children and women? How do we address the silence over human rights violations during the war, especially those against children and women?

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73. Jeo O. G. Achuzia, *Requiem Biafra* (Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1986), p. 178.
74. Azubuieke Iloje, Obinofia, Ezeagu, 20 June 2012; Peter C. Onwudinjo, Ihiala, 21 June 2012; Retired Major Cletus Anyanwu, Nsukka, 21 June 1993.
75. Anon, 'Daughters of Biafra', *The Biafra Sun*, 9 August 1967, p. 12.
76. Uchendu, *Women and conflict*, pp. 119, 125.
77. NNAE, MSP/X11, Nkume Ambulance Unit.
78. St. Jorre, *The Brothers' war*, p. 224.
79. Achuzia, *Requiem Biafra*, p. 179.
80. Mary Getrude C. Oraeki (nee Ezeani), Agukwu, Nri, Anambra state, 25 July 2012. See also Kate Nkwo, 'Women and the challenge', *The Biafra Sun*, 27 August 1967, p. 3.
81. Mary Getrude C. Oraeki (nee Ezeani), Agukwu, Nri, Anambra state, 25 July 2012; Peter C. Onwudinjo, Ihiala, 21 June 2012; Felicia Choi Emordi, Onitsha, 24 June 1993; Mary Enigwe, Amike, Abakaliki, 16–17 June 1993. See also Editorial, 'Biafran amazons on the war path', *The Biafra Sun*, 12 July 1967, p. 1b.
82. See Olukunle Ojeleye, *The politics of post-war demobilisation and reintegration in Nigeria* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2010).
83. Ugwu-Oju, *What will my mother say*, pp. 193–194.
84. Ugwu-Oju, *What will my mother say*, p. 195.
85. Oral data collected by the author between 1991 and 1994 and in 2003, 2005, 2007 and 2012. (Names of the interviewees and respondents are withheld because they prefer anonymity). An in-depth analysis of these testimonies and many others within the socio-cultural, economic and political contexts of Nigeria and the ethnicities in former Biafra is done in my forthcoming book, *Confronting the silences*.
86. See Otwin Marenin, 'National service and national consciousness in Nigeria', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 1979, pp. 629–654.
87. See Thomas Biersteker (ed.), *Multinationals, the state, and control of the Nigerian economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).
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16 ‘Biafra of the Mind’

MASSOB and the Mobilization of History

Ike Okonta

Introduction

On 1 November 1999, five months after Nigeria returned to civilian rule, a young lawyer in Lagos dispatched a document to the United Nations office in New York. Ralph Uwazurike, 39 at the time, titled the document ‘Biafra Bill of Rights’. It stated:

We, the people of Biafra, namely: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa and Delta States numbering about 40 million and being one of the major tribes in Nigeria and two of the geopolitical zones within the Federal Republic of Nigeria, hereby seek the actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra on the following grounds:

1. That Biafra (Igbo) before the advent of British colonialism was a distinct race east of the Niger.
2. That it was for the administrative convenience of the British colonial masters that Biafra (South-East and South-South) were merged with other provinces to give rise to the Federation of Nigeria, on January 1st 1914.
3. That the hostility of Nigeria towards Biafra brought about the civil war of 1967–1970, in which about 2,000,000 lives were lost.
4. That the death of Biafra (Igbo) in the said war brought the Igbo back to Nigeria against their will.
5. That consequent upon their defeat in the said war, the Igbo are regarded as enemies and treated as slaves among other nationalities in Nigeria.¹

The document went on to cite instances of Nigerian citizens of Igbo extraction being killed, injured or generally maltreated by Hausa-Fulani Muslims, the dominant ethnic group in the northern part of the country, where Igbo merchants live in large numbers. The Biafra Bill of Rights also stated

that Igbo university graduates were being discriminated against by the federal government in employment and that as a consequence 'Nigeria' was not conducive to the achievement by 'Biafrans' of their ideals and aspirations. The bill went on to make a six-point demand on the 'government and people of Nigeria':

1. That instruments be put in motion for the self-determination of Biafra (Igbo), without violence.
2. That further lifting of oil be stopped in the Biafra areas of South East and South-South states.
3. That all the monies belonging to Biafrans (Igbos) in the banks immediately after the civil war be paid without any further delay.
4. That all the abandoned properties belonging to Biafrans (Igbos) before the war be released.
5. That the life and properties of Biafrans (Igbos) be protected during and after the period of their self-determination.
6. That all toll gates mounted on all erosion-devastated roads across Biafra (Igbo) land be dismantled without further delay.

The Biafra Bill of Rights, drafted by Uwazurike, was the culmination of several meetings of Igbo young men, drawn largely from the Lagos commercial class, he had convened in his Lagos home shortly after Olusegun Obasanjo took office as president in May 1999 on the platform of the People's Democratic Party (PDP). In September of that year, these meetings gave birth to the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra of Sovereignty (MASSOB), an ethnic militia advocating secession, with Uwazurike as its 'leader'.²

The Igbo, globally known for their entrepreneurial skills and trading networks, were dispersed all over the country and beyond. A middle class-dominated civic public, fragile but nevertheless active, had developed in the region since the civil war. A new generation of politicians, aligned with a powerful and unaccountable central government, was firmly in power in the Igbo states. This Igbo elite, represented in numbers in Ohaneze Ndigbo (ON), a socio-cultural organization established on the eve of the military's initial disengagement from government in the late 1970s, and also the governors of the five Igbo states and their coterie, were openly hostile to MASSOB's project despite their ambiguous noises about a reascent 'Ndigbo' as a perfunctory nod to the large swathe of poor urban youth they knew were sympathetic to the militia's separatist message. Some of this elite had played a role in the behind-the-scenes manoeuvring that saw the armed forces hand over power to their preferred successors in 1999 in the federal centre and the states. Forty years after the end of the civil war they still looked to the federal capital for protection and career advancement.³

The Igbo elite were not MASSOB's only opponent. Impatient and impoverished members opposed to the militia's non-violent stance had broken off and established new organizations. Youth leaders in the ethnic minority areas of the defunct Biafra, fearful of Igbo 'hegemony', also kept their distance. MASSOB had to negotiate these barriers. The process has not been without considerable violence. The bulk of this violence has been generated by the state in its attempt to put down what it describes as 'resurgent secession', thus bringing into question the legitimacy of the democratic transition and Nigeria's continued existence as a multiethnic state.

This study examines the circumstances of MASSOB's emergence in a period of political liberalization and considerable uncertainty as the armed forces began to prepare to relinquish their grip on power, and the specific ways the actions of the promoters of this ethnic militia have shaped Nigeria's still unfolding democratization process since 1999. It tracks MASSOB from its inception in 1999, shortly after a civilian government took office following controversial elections, through the imprisonment of its founding leader Ralph Uwazurike in 2005, precisely when the government, under pressure, convened a national conference to address the grievances of the various ethnic groups, to the present, even as members reassess their strategies in the face of the apparent reluctance of a significant section of the Igbo political elite to buy into a new secession project.

Primary data for the study were collected in field research from July–November 2010. MASSOB leaders and ordinary members in 10 Igbo, as well as Igbo politicians and sundry elites, Igbo civic actors and other citizens resident in the Igbo part of the country were interviewed. The militia's own reports and video recordings, and first-hand observation of MASSOB rallies, marches and burial and wedding ceremonies of members provided additional context. These data were supplemented with secondary material on the militia and the democratization process collated from the print media. In the next section, I briefly reconstruct the political context of MASSOB's emergence militia and the ways in which history and elite calculations shaped the process. In the subsequent section, I explore the historical background of the militia and its inner workings and organization. The final section discusses the institutional factors in the Igbo and Nigeria-wide political arena that wittingly or unwittingly serve as a countervailing agent to MASSOB's project, the strategies MASSOB deploys to negotiate these obstacles and the extent to which they have succeeded.

Political Contexts

In colonial times, the state was the chief repository of power and economic opportunities and was also an active participant in economic and political life. People on the make tapped its coercive institutions to make their

fortunes. A powerful authoritarian state emerged after the civil war in 1970 that centralized administration and Nigeria's considerable oil revenues—triggered by the Middle East conflict of 1973—estimated at \$50 billion per annum on sales of two million barrels of oil daily. The bulk of this revenue was distributed to the central government and the 36 states through a complex formula that emphasized population size, 'need' and 'even development', thereby transferring the lion's share to the centre and the northern states to the disadvantage of the ethnic minority groups in the Niger Delta where the oil was extracted. By the time popular protests had forced the generals to relinquish power after a quarter of a century, the economy had collapsed, millions were without work and the social fabric had fragmented into several ethnic and religious laagers, all of them competing with the central state for citizens' allegiance.

A key consequence of the economic slump, military dictatorship and Ibrahim Babangida's polarizing policies in the 1980s and early 1990s was the retreat of Nigerians into ethnic, religious and other associations of primary identity. Lagos in particular witnessed feverish pentecostal revivalism and the re-emergence of ethnic associations and sundry kinship-based self-help groups during this period. Uwazurike himself was chair of the Lagos branch of the Igbo council of chiefs, a countrywide network of diaspora Igbo merchants that emerged in the twilight of military rule and which sought to preserve 'traditional' culture in their new abodes.⁴ This organization was apolitical, and mainly concerned itself with matters like the welfare of ethnic Igbo in large cities and towns outside their homeland, marriage and burial ceremonies of their members, and 'proper' observation of such landmark events in the Igbo cultural calendar as the new yam festival. The imminent end of military rule caused some of these ethnic associations, including the Igbo Council of Chiefs, to begin to take an interest in politics, for long considered the exclusive preserve of the armed forces.

As might be expected, the departing army officers were anxious to retain this arrangement, even as they also looked for a replacement who would not ask searching questions about an estimated \$600 billion that had been embezzled by successive governments since the end of the war.⁵ Western governments that had considerable investments in Nigeria's oil industry, with the United States and the European Union in the lead, also worried that the political transition could result in anarchy and threaten their oil supplies. The other concern was the loud calls for 'self-determination' and 'true federalism' in the south, particularly in the Yoruba area and the oil-bearing Niger Delta region where Ken Saro-Wiwa, a writer and minority rights activist, had led a powerful civic movement to confront the central government and the oil companies before he was hanged by Abacha in 1995.⁶

What emerged in 1999 was an elite pact following closed-door negotiations between the generals and the conservative segment of Nigeria's

political elite. The pact between the junta and its would-be successors was brokered by two retired generals: Yakubu Danjuma, former army chief staff and Ibrahim Babangida, a former military head of state. Working through influential retired northern senior civil servants, Danjuma had northern leaders to agree that power would be ceded to the south, since the north had supplied the bulk of the country's military leaders following the end of the First Republic in 1966.⁷ The grid of unaccountable power, embodied in state institutions, was not dismantled, even as elections were held in the early months of 1999. Again, as in colonial times, the state rewarded favoured ethnic groups with power and access to the oil rent and excluded the rest.

It was into this twilight world of widespread poverty, powerlessness and a peculiar brand of modernity that had meshed with power since colonial times to speak the divisive language of 'tribe' that the men of MASSOB, claiming that the new political settlement did not address Igbo postwar grievances, emerged. Their fathers had confronted this grid three decades earlier, with bloody consequences. Their children were willing to confront the state again, but this time using the new weapons that openings during democratic transitions, no matter how fragile, usually afford. In the process, they began to redefine what it meant to be 'Biafran', as there was no ready-made Biafran 'nation' almost 30 years after the war's end immediately available to be politically mobilized to back the secessionist project.

On 29 May 1999, Olusegun Obasanjo was sworn in as president. Unlike other ethnic self-determination organizations such as the Yoruba Oodua People's Congress (OPC) and the Niger Delta-based Ijaw Youth Council, which emerged in the mid-1990s as a reaction to unaccountable military rule and its use by northern generals to secure sectional interests, MASSOB was the direct child of the elite pact that characterized Nigeria's founding elections in 1999 after a long period of military rule. As noted above, this pact sought to maintain the prevailing political and social order in a period of turbulence by disenfranchising the majority of voting citizens through the process of ballot-stuffing, putting a retired general in power to preside over a powerful and centralized oil rentier state, and stabilizing the political order by incorporating into this powerful centre trusted elements from an aggrieved section of the country perceived to be a potentially destabilizing factor. This exclusionary power politics necessarily created losers and winners, insiders and outsiders. The Yoruba, whose interest Obasanjo was now said to be representing in the new civilian regime, was the new winner-insider. Ralph Uwazurike backed fellow Igbo Dr. Ekwueme and lost, but quickly defined this loss in ethnic rather than personal or civic terms. The Igbo, in his new scheme, were the loser-outsiders. Even so, the process of elaborating the personal and political into what would quickly become a

powerful ethnic narrative, was fundamentally civic in character. Losing out in this bruising winner-takes-all game refereed by partial authoritarians who blatantly incentivized ethno-regional calculations, Uwazurike responded by creating an Igbo equivalent of the Yoruba 'grievance' on which Obasanjo had successfully ridden to power. The roots of the MASSOB leader's grievance were civic and political, while his response, shaped by the political terrain in which he operated, was ethnic.

When MASSOB emerged shortly after the controversial election, it heightened political tensions in the country by appealing to fellow Igbo to turn their backs on this 'fake democracy' that denied them their fair share of the national cake. But rather than mobilization rapidly progressing to the predicted ethnic violence, the leaders were sucked into a furious debate with entrepreneurs from the other ethnic minority groups that constituted part of 'old' Biafra in 1967, on one side, and fellow young Igbo on the other over what 'Biafra' really meant. Influential elderly Igbo, chastened by still-fresh memories of that bloody conflict and knowing, like Vice President Abubakar, that the central state, rid of the democratization pretence, was still all-powerful and unrestrained, preached caution and indeed sought to redefine what it means to be 'Igbo' to accord with the still dangerous times.

Reimagining Biafra, Remobilizing for Secession

The Igbo, one of the country's three largest ethnic groups, could serve as a ready-made platform if Uwazurike could mobilize them to embrace his new political project. Although dispersed throughout the country, they still constitute the overwhelming majority in five states in their ancestral homeland east of the Niger River. There were also sizeable Igbo-speaking 'minorities' in the neighbouring Delta and Rivers States. Unlike ethnic self-determination groups in the 1980s and 1990s, these young Igbo chose an already-existing name for their new organization. The identification with the name 'Biafra' was designed to achieve three main objectives: drive home the point that Igbo grievances have a deep history whose apogee was the concatenation of events that exploded in secession and civil war in July 1967; broaden the platform by drawing in the ethnic minority groups that had been part of the Eastern Region after independence in 1960 and who constituted part of the Republic of Biafra along with the Igbo when Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, military governor of the region, announced the new state in 1967; and signal to the Nigerian authorities that they were in earnest when they broke the unofficial ban on the use of the word 'Biafra' in political discourse after the secessionist attempt was smashed in 1970. Significantly, neither Uwazurike nor any of his peers involved in the creation of MASSOB were old enough to have fought in

the war when it broke out in 1967. They proudly described themselves as a new generation of Igbo unburdened by the scar of defeat.

It is unclear how deep their grasp of Nigerian history was and whether they intuited, rightly as it later turned out, that the social forces that shaped the bloody emergence of Biafra 32 years previously were at work in the country again. Uwazurike and the other men of MASSOB did not immediately realize it, but they had tapped a deep vein of discontent, just as the young intellectuals and political entrepreneurs around the 34-year-old Colonel Ojukwu had when, with the latter as their spokesperson, they solemnly announced to the world one early morning in May 1967 that they had had enough of Nigeria.

The lethal mix of mass poverty, powerlessness and self-serving central power that had given birth to Biafra was again on the ascendant when Uwazurike formally announced the establishment of MASSOB to the press at his Lagos residence on 13 September 1999. From this point to the dispatching of the Biafra Bill of Rights to UN headquarters in November of the same year, MASSOB underwent a drastic makeover. A good number of Uwazurike's colleagues who initially backed the new Biafra project had done so in the belief that MASSOB would serve only as a pressure group to forcefully articulate Igbo grievances in the nascent civilian dispensation, as their Yoruba counterparts had done in the wake of the annulment of the 1993 elections. On their reading, the Yoruba had only threatened secession, a project they had promptly abandoned once some of their leaders had been placated with political office and economic opportunities. They too would borrow from this book.

Uwazurike thought differently. Explained Uchenna Madu, MASSOB'S director of information:

Let me give you the details. Uwazurike was the founder, the initiator of MASSOB.

When he initiated the idea, he started selling it to some friends, to people of like mind, telling them this is what I'd like to do to mobilize the Igbo and other easterners. Those that were interested began to come to his house in Lagos for regular meetings, saying, let's try this to see if it can work. But the majority of them came thinking not what Uwazurike had in mind. Uwazurike had in mind that he must actualize Biafra but others saw the new organization as some kind of

new political pressure group that they can use to get one or two economic benefits from the Federal Government. But Uwazurike disagreed with them. At the end of the day, on the day MASSOB was officially inaugurated, about 68 new members were there. This was how MASSOB started. Uwazurike was the founder.⁸

Uwazurike drew on the example of Ken Saro-Wiwa, the writer and minority rights activist, who, on establishing an organization in 1990 to press the Ogoni case for self-determination, named it Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP). The name MASSOB was influenced by the MOSOP example. So too was the decision to draw up a Biafra Bill of Rights and dispatch it to New York in November 1999, two months after MASSOB was established—much as Saro-Wiwa had done in the early 1990s.

Unlike MOSOP, which began life with a collegial leadership, MASSOB was from its inception firmly under Uwazurike's sole control. A formal organizational structure, mobilization method and the rhetorical tools to undergird the latter slowly coalesced in the following three years through a method best described as 'trial and error'. MASSOB espoused two main principles from the outset: non-violence and 'non-exodus'. Biafra's secession attempt in the late 1960s, having been brutally crushed by the federal government, pointed to the need for new methods.⁹

Drawing on the rich tradition of non-violent subaltern resistance in the twentieth century, Uwazurike aligned himself with the writings of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, and stressed that his choice of India for his law degree in the early 1990s was informed by his admiration for the Mahatma whose mobilization strategies he wanted to study and apply:

Revolution doesn't necessarily mean the use of guns. The independence of India came through revolution, a process of change. Gandhi did not use guns. The word 'revolution' is all-inclusive. You have peaceful and violent revolutions, and I am proceeding with a peaceful revolution. . . . So if I am non-violent, which is recognized all over the world as the most civilized way of protesting, and a military junta or an ex-head of state brings a gun or artillery to bomb me, he is primitive. He is showing his primitiveness to the whole world.¹⁰

Recognizing that the Igbo had, following the end of the civil war, resettled in other parts of the country, including Lagos in large numbers, and that a call on them to return to their ancestral homeland would likely go unheeded, at least in the immediate term, Uwazurike also stressed that

secession did not necessarily require fellow Igbo to relocate. With the establishment of a sovereign Biafran state, MASSOB would initiate discussions with the government of Nigeria and other countries where Igbo reside in sizeable numbers and ensure that the latter's residence rights were formalized in cases where they preferred to remain where they were.¹¹ The Igbo, Uwazurike also pointed out, were outstanding merchants, business entrepreneurs and intellectuals, and their presence in Nigeria and other countries should not be viewed as a stigma. Even so, they were required as 'true Biafrans' to propagate the creed of Igbo self-determination wherever they might choose to live in the world.

Uche Madu, MASSOB's director of information, stated that it took three years of internal debate and repeated 'field tests' to build up the group's organizational structure.

We developed a structure that will help the leadership to maintain effective control of MASSOB and also for the members to interact freely among themselves and send feedback whenever the need arises. Also, if you look carefully, our administrative structure reflects that of the Nigerian government because MASSOB sees itself as a shadow government in the eastern part of the country, waiting to take over when the Nigerians leave.¹²

At the apex of this structure is Ralph Uwazurike, whose official title is 'The Leader'. Uwazurike's Nigerian counterpart is the president. Directly under the leader are the national directors, supervising such key departments (in Nigeria, ministries) as health, education, information, finance, women and youth, public works, foreign affairs, etc. Regional administrators are the equivalent of Nigerian state governors, while area administrators are chairpersons of local government councils. Chief provincial administrators are district heads. Provincial administrators are ward chairmen and work with the district officers to mobilize grassroots members for protest marches, community projects and other activities specified by the top leadership. Membership is organized from the ward level upward.

In August 2010, the leadership estimated its membership to be 'in the region of 7 to 8 million in Igbo land, the Niger Delta, and all over the country'.¹³ While these figures are obviously exaggerated, the militia's true membership is difficult to verify because there is no central membership roll. That the organization has a large membership is, however, beyond doubt. MASSOB is primarily financed through monthly dues voluntarily contributed by members.¹⁴ As the organization began to gain in popularity and public acceptance from 2004 onward, wealthy Igbo also began to make contributions in cash and kind. Reports in the newspapers of politicians

seeking to use the organization's region-wide network to further their political ambitions have been vigorously denied by the leadership.¹⁵

Apart from the leader and a few other ranking officials, who are in their 50s, the bulk of the members are young men whose median educational qualification is the high school certificate. There are very few college graduates. Women are represented in the top administrative posts, particularly in the regional and area administrator categories, but their numbers sharply decrease at the base. The majority of MASSOB members are unemployed or only part-employed, and subsist below the UN poverty line as occasional artisans, seasonal subsistence farmers, motorcycle taxi operators (Okada) and casual labourers. Lagos, where the organization began life, has several chapters, whose members meet regularly. There are also chapters in such large northern cities as Kaduna, Jos and Kano. It is, however, in Igbo cities and towns that MASSOB's presence is most strongly felt.

At its inception, MASSOB adopted as its official symbol the Biafran flag of green, red and black vertical stripes with half a yellow sun superimposed on the red middle, a flag first unfurled when Ojukwu addressed the international press in Enugu in May 1967 announcing the new state.¹⁶ In Igbo cities such as Aba, Onitsha, Nnewi, Umuahia, Enugu, Asaba, Nsukka, Umuahia, Abakiliki, Owerri and Awka this flag flutters from utility poles, high rise buildings and the front of commercial buses.¹⁷ Police contingents regularly raid these buildings to remove what they describe in their official logs as 'secessionist flags', but these are replaced as soon as they depart. 'Freedom House', MASSOB's international headquarters, is an imposing edifice in Ralph Uwazurike's home town Okwe, a village near Okigwe. He maintains another home in Lagos, where his wife and some of his children still live.

'Go Down, Moses'

The lyrics of the African-American spiritual, 'Go Down, Moses', adapted to speak trenchantly to the Igbo social condition in the first years of the new millennium, has served as the background refrain to MASSOB's mobilization strategy since inception:

When Israel was in Egypt's land
Let my people go
Oppressed so hard they could not stand
Let my people go¹⁸

Ralph Uwazurike's message to diverse Igbo audiences was that the Igbo were the new Israelites in Nigeria, here taken to mean Egypt. Theirs was

a story of trials, tribulation and persecution at the hands of the Nigerian Pharaoh, a tale whose bloody dénouement was the anti-Igbo pogroms in the north in 1966 and the civil war shortly after, in which an estimated two million people, the bulk of them Igbo, lost their lives.¹⁹ MASSOB leaders regularly recounted the gory events of this turbulent period to potential members, stressing that whatever personal social and economic hardships these individuals were experiencing ‘in a cruel and uncaring Nigeria today’ were merely a continuation of the policy of war and persecution of Ndigbo by the Nigerian government since 1966. In the words of MASSOB’s deputy leader in this early period:

The events of the war are still fresh in our minds, like when you see the Kwashiokor pictures. You hear stories of people who were driven out of their homes, as refugees. And then you hear stories of mass graves and bombs dropped at market places and church buildings. And you also remember that people like Chief Awolowo, one of the Nigerian leaders, publicly stated that starvation is a legitimate weapon of war. They starved about a million Biafran children to death, and this figure . . . does not even include the dead soldiers and slaughtered civilians. Some of us believe that the war is the second largest holocaust in human history, coming behind that of the Jewish nation.²⁰

Whereas such prominent Igbo organizations as Ohaneze Ndigbo were complaining that the Igbo had been marginalized in Nigeria and that the way to address Igbo grievances was for the new civilian government to appoint leading Igbo to strategic government offices, site industries and other social projects in the region, Uwazurike insisted that nothing short of peaceful separation would do. He had three specific complaints against Obasanjo and his government. First, although he and other Igbo had campaigned and voted massively for him during the presidential election, he refused to appoint an Igbo to the National Security Council, one of the strategic arms of the state. Second, Obasanjo’s Yoruba kin had spurned him during the election, but Obasanjo was now openly courting them while ignoring the Igbo. Third, Obasanjo was the Nigerian commander who received the instrument of surrender from the Biafran army leader and from then on, including the mid-1970s when he was military head of state, he had been one of the masterminds of the plot to keep the Igbo in perpetual bondage. This he himself had openly acknowledged in a statement credited to him that because the Igbo had lost the civil war, ‘they are supposed to stay for about 200 years before ever talking again in Nigeria’.²¹ These, according to Uwazurike, were clear signals that the Igbo were unwanted in Nigeria.

His choice of the phrase 'non-exodus', with its biblical allusion to a pivotal moment in Jewish history, was not only designed to calm diaspora Igbo unwilling to face the chaos of relocation but also to link his project to a 'time out of mind' when the Igbo were masters of their own destiny and nation. He called on MASSOB members and other Igbo to turn their backs on Nigeria, refrain from participating in elections and consorting with Igbo politicians in the ruling PDP, and to resort to peaceful resistance when called upon to participate in census counts and court appearances:

Administration after administration, my people were humiliated, were excluded; my people were not accommodated in the scheme of things in Nigeria. Even if there was no marginalization, inasmuch as they have done things that affected my people, I would have resurrected Biafra because I believe in Nigeria the people were not consulted; there was no consensus as to the formation of Nigeria. So Nigeria is a deceit . . . a price which the British government used to compensate the north.²²

On 22 May 2000, eight days short of the thirty-third anniversary of Ojukwu's speech announcing the birth of Biafra, Uwazurike presided over a 'flag-hoisting' ceremony in Aba, a sprawling city and the commercial heart of the Igbo region. This event, according to Prince Orjiako, MASSOB's regional head of mobilization at the time, 'was the first formal public declaration of our intention to be independent from Nigeria, and we considered it important that this be done on Igbo soil, in Igboland's leading city'.²³ The 'flag-hoisting' also served as the commencement of the 25 stages that would culminate in the 'actualization of the sovereign state of Biafra'. The early stages of this project, Uwazurike later explained, would involve mass mobilization, establishment of the primary structures of a sovereign state and the calling of a referendum supervised by the UN in the eastern part of Nigeria to determine whether the people preferred to remain in Nigeria or desired to join him in resurrecting Biafra.²⁴ On 29 September 2001 MASSOB, working with the Biafra Foundation, a coalition of Igbos resident in the US, performed the dedication of a building in Washington, DC they named 'Biafra House'. Biafra Radio, a shortwave broadcasting station modelled on civil war Radio Biafra was also announced. By pure chance, Ojukwu was in the US capital at the time receiving medical treatment. When MASSOB and the Biafra Foundation members learned of this, they immediately sent a delegation to Ojukwu. The former Biafran leader was initially reluctant to lend his name to the house dedication. Ojukwu's relationship with Nigeria since 1982, when he returned to the

country after 12 years in exile in Abidjan, has been complex. While consistently maintaining that he has no apology to make for leading the secession bid in 1967, he has nevertheless stated that Biafra as a political reality was now in the past and that what had taken its place was ‘a Biafra of the mind’, adhering faithfully to the tenets of justice, civil liberty and unbending opposition to genocide that had led him to declare an independent state for the Igbo and the other peoples of the then Eastern Region.²⁵ Though participating in Nigeria-wide politics, he has repeatedly threatened to lead a second secession if Nigeria’s leaders persisted in treating the Igbo with contempt.²⁶ Ojukwu, who in old age still enjoyed near-mythical adulation among Igbo worldwide, was persuaded to attend the ceremony, and indeed held the tape for Uwazurike to cut, formally declaring Biafra House open that afternoon.

This event, more than any other in MASSOB’s 12-year history, boosted the militia’s public image, galvanized Igbo youth to join in droves and confirmed Uwazurike in their eyes as Ojukwu’s ‘heir apparent’. A Lagos-based weekly reported Uwazurike’s metamorphosis thus:

The event marked a watershed and did magic for Uwazurike’s reputation. Igbo youths who saw pictures of Ojukwu, the venerable Ikemba Nnewi, holding a tape for the MASSOB leader to cut immediately understood that an anointing ceremony had taken place. Uwazurike was now the new dike (hero) of Ndigbo. They would mass behind him and raise new songs of resistance. Behold, another Moses had . . . emerged to confront the Pharaohs of Nigeria.²⁷

MASSOB’s message that Nigeria was a failed project and that ‘all true Igbo’ should rally behind the new Biafran flag struck a chord with the swelling tribe of unemployed urban youth in Igbo cities, MASSOB leaders’ prime target at this time. By September 2003, the militia, despite a continuing brutal security crackdown and the killing of many of its members by anti-riot police and soldiers, was sufficiently strong to convene an ‘international conference on Biafra’ in Maryland, and threatened in the conference communiqué ‘to explore the possibilities of forming a government in exile, in six months, if the federal government fails to organize a conference of ethnic nationalities to decide how they want to associate with each other’.²⁸ MASSOB did not follow up on the threat. Nor did Uwazurike permit the ‘young Turks’ in the militia to retaliate in the face of mounting casualties from police bullets.

One explanation for why Biafra lost the civil war, still popular among ordinary Igbo when MASSOB emerged 40 years later, was that the war effort had been sabotaged by ‘enemies within’. ‘Sabo’, a shorthand for

'saboteur', was the deadliest insult one could hurl at another during the war, and invariably resulted in the accused being carried off to be executed by army high command, which grew more paranoid as its fortunes declined on the war front after early 1969. Uwazurike felt that engaging the Nigerian security forces in a shooting war would open up his ranks to infiltration and sabotage, besmirch his non-violent credentials and abort the secession project.

We agreed that we have to fight this issue once again on a different setting with non-violence. . . . In non-violence you don't have saboteurs. In the old Biafra you had saboteurs arising from greed and money and all that. Today nobody is fighting the Nigerians, so there is no need for sabotage.²⁹

Unlike OPC, which announced its emergence shortly after the annulment of the 1993 presidential election by attacking northerners in Lagos, MASSOB scrupulously refrained from molesting northerners in Igbo cities, where sizeable numbers of them live and dominate the meat-processing trade. The militia's leader has also been particularly effective in avoiding clashes between his members and OPC and ordinary Yoruba in Lagos, even when Igbo merchants in the city began to complain, following the re-election of the Yoruba governor of Lagos state in 2003, that his incessant demands that they relocate their market stalls were discriminatory and reflected 'a hidden ethnic agenda'.³⁰ The first direct criticism Uwazurike received when he publicized the Biafra Bill of Rights of November 1999 was his repeated mention of the term 'Igbo-Biafra' in the bill. According to his critics, this was a clear indication that the ethnic minority groups of the Niger Delta who had been part of old Biafra in 1967 were no longer part of his new republic. Yet others said he had a 'schizophrenic' attitude towards the eastern minorities. Partly wanting them to belong, he also insisted that the Igbo 'abandoned property' in Port Harcourt and other cities in the non-Igbo part of the east be revisited. The federal government had shortly after the war decreed that all Igbo-owned property in the newly created Rivers and South Eastern states be forfeited to the Ijaw and other ethnic minority groups who now controlled them. Igbo leaders still view this policy as a great injustice and argue that it is one of the key 'war wounds' that the Nigerian government must heal if the Igbo are to put the civil war fully behind them.³¹ Ijaw and other Niger Delta ethnic leaders, for their part, see the 'abandoned property' as compensation for the discrimination in jobs and other social amenities they claim they suffered when the Igbo controlled the government of the Eastern Region before the January 1966 coup.³²

Re-Narrating the Nation

‘Master narratives’, Ashutosh Varshney reminds us, ‘tell stories that make the critical issues in politics intelligible to the masses. They are ways of putting together popular social coalitions so that politics can be altered and political power won’.³³ There are two dominant narratives of the Biafra war regarding the role of the eastern ethnic minorities. One, promoted by the federal government and the intellectuals from the Niger Delta like Ken Saro-Wiwa who aligned with it during the war, is that of domination—the more populous Igbo, deploying the tyranny of the majority, compelled the smaller ethnic groups in the Eastern Region to back its secession project, even though their political interest would be better served in a united Nigeria where they would be one of several freely competing ethnic groups.³⁴ The other, argued by Igbo commentators, is the politics of consensus—that it was not coincidental that the Igbo and eastern minorities shared a common region at the dawn of colonial rule, that there were deep cultural and economic bonds between both groups going back to precolonial times, and that the Biafran nation was merely a modern manifestation of this fact.³⁵ As calls for a national conference to re-examine the fit between the Nigerian state and its various ethnic ‘nations’ resurged following the blatant rigging of the 2003 general elections by the ruling PDP, enabling Obasanjo to return to power, Uwazurike and MASSOB embraced the second master narrative and began to send deputations to communal, civic and youth leaders in the Niger Delta. MASSOB’s message, in summary, was that they were all trapped in the belly of the Nigerian whale; that the post-civil war narrative that their people and the Igbo were mortal enemies was the classic divide-and-conquer tactic of the oppressor, and that their common salvation lay in resurrecting Biafra.³⁶

After earning an average of \$50 billion in oil rents annually since 1999, the Obasanjo government was still unable to diversify the economy away from near total oil dependence, generate paying jobs, invest in badly needed infrastructure or curb widespread corruption. Peter Lewis’s vivid description of an early 1990s Nigerian political economy embodying ‘the characteristics of such autocratic regimes as Mobutu Sese Seko’s Zaire, Haiti under Jean-Claude Duvalier, or the Somoza dynasty’s Nicaragua’ was even truer of the Obasanjo presidency, where ‘personalistic’ and predatory control of the state was also rapidly being replicated in the PDP-controlled states and local government councils.³⁷ This framework of decentralized despotism, fragile and fractious, was propped up by a Leviathan that did not hesitate to deploy violence against challenges to its hegemony, particularly from the increasingly restive Niger Delta. Obasanjo had adopted a ruthless policy towards the Delta peoples, in several instances ordering

troops to level entire villages and murder their inhabitants.³⁸ Unable to replace their election-rigging local representatives and chafing at state-induced violence and deepening poverty, self-determination and civic groups began to proliferate in the region. Drawing on a complex mix of civic and primordial resources to mount a counter-politics of resistance, these groups demanded that the federal content of the 1999 constitution be given practical expression in a new revenue allocation formula favouring the derivation principle.³⁹ The more confrontational among them, like the Asari Dokubo-led Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF), began to openly challenge the federal government's monopoly of the use of violence by arming its members and urging them to attack troops deployed to their area to suppress legitimate dissent.

In May 2004, MASSOB signed a seven-point memorandum of understanding with 'the Great Commonwealth of Niger Delta' (GCND), a coalition of youth-led civic and ethnic organizations drawn from the various states comprising the region: 'Having come to terms with glaring realities of unmitigated internal colonization in the present-day Nigeria, we have decided to look the bull in the eye and take our destiny firmly in our hands'. 'Therefore', the preamble continues, GCND and MASSOB 'entered into an ALLIANCE in pursuit of the non-violent actualization of the Sovereign States of United Biafra (the New Biafra). . .'.⁴⁰ The immediate outcome of this pact was that MASSOB changed the name of its future state from 'Republic of Biafra' to the 'United States of Biafra', a federating umbrella capacious enough to accommodate the Igbo and their deltaic neighbours.

Political developments in the wider Nigerian arena in this period also swelled MASSOB's ranks in the Igbo heartland and reinforced Uwazurike's credentials as a political leader of 'uncommon vision'.⁴¹ Article 3 of the PDP's constitution stipulates that key political offices would be periodically rotated between the various geo-ethnic sections of the country 'in the spirit of true federalism to ensure a fair and equitable distribution of power and resources'.⁴² Igbo leaders, shortly after Obasanjo was returned for a second and final term in 2003, were convinced this meant it was their turn to present a presidential candidate after Obasanjo quit in 2007. Their northern counterparts thought differently. In their view, Obasanjo had run as the South's candidate in 1999.

Asked to clarify the party's official position on the matter, Obasanjo affirmed that 'power shift and power rotation must be maintained', but failed to specify to which part of the country it would be rotated when his term ended.⁴³ Igbo youth read Obasanjo's ambiguous statement as confirmation of a plot to 'cede' the office to the north and raised a cry of protest. Uwazurike waded into the controversy and declared to journalists that 'no Igbo man will be the president of Nigeria till thy kingdom come', alluding

to a secret meeting shortly after the end of the civil war in 1970 in which, Uwazurike alleged Nigerian leaders agreed that no Igbo man would be allowed to 'occupy any sensitive post in the country'.⁴⁴ The result of this war of words, reported a magazine during that period, 'has been a massive increase in the number of people identifying with MASSOB'.⁴⁵

Riding on its new popularity, MASSOB sent out a notice asking all Igbo wherever they lived in the country to observe 26 August 2004 as 'Biafra Day'. Business owners, artisans and petty traders were to stay at home that day. Public servants should observe a quiet moment in their offices in memory of the Biafran dead during the war. Despite massive government propaganda to ignore the MASSOB order, 'Biafra Day' was an outstanding success. MASSOB also began to organize monthly 'sanitation' exercises in major cities and towns, pointing out that the central government had failed even in the elementary duty of keeping Igboland clean. The latter move won over the previously sceptical and they began to participate in these events, openly identifying with MASSOB. The 2003 general elections had yet again been widely rigged by the PDP.⁴⁶ The economy was still in the doldrums and many youth were desperately casting about for an alternative to what they began to openly describe as a 'failed Nigeria'. This sentiment was forcefully articulated by the Pro-National Conference Organisation (PRONACO), a coalition of largely southern based ethnic self-determination groups led by Anthony Enahoro, a veteran politician whose project was a loose Nigerian federation.⁴⁷

PRONACO was the third 'beneficiary' of the rigged polls. PRONACO is an outgrowth of the Movement for National Renewal (MNR) that Enahoro, the federal military government's chief propagandist during the war, had floated in 1992 to collate views in the south on ways and means of restructuring the country to ensure what he termed 'true power sharing' and an enduring federal republic. MNR's views and recommendations on a new constitution had been ignored as the generals and their political allies stitched together the 1999 pact. The impunity with which that election was rigged, and the growing perception that Obasanjo was just 'another stooge of the northern generals' led to the rechristening of MNR as PRONACO, bringing aboard other self-determination groups who felt left out by the new civilian regime. By early 2005, there were sufficient otherwise 'pan-Nigerian' politicians who felt sidelined by the PDP 'anti-politics machine' (James Ferguson) to back PRONACO's call for a Sovereign National Conference. Separatist organizations like MASSOB also jumped aboard.

Explaining that the call for the immediate convening of a 'national conference' was now too loud to ignore, Obasanjo scheduled the National Political Reform Conference (NPRC) for February 2005 in Abuja, the capital since 1991. All thirty-six governors, grouped into the six geopolitical

zones corresponding to the broad ethnic divisions of the country, were to send delegates drawn from the various senatorial districts of their states. The conference would not enjoy sovereign powers, however. Since the majority of the states were controlled by PDP governors, who in turn were controlled by Obasanjo and his inner circle, Igbo delegates were carefully vetted to ensure that none of them harboured pro-MASSOB and secessionist sympathies. Midway through the conference, it became obvious that Obasanjo had a different motive. The gathering was intended to rubber stamp his bid for tenure elongation.⁴⁸ Obasanjo's bid to rewrite the constitution and remain in office for a third term crashed already in May 2005, the conference still in session. In spite of substantial financial inducements to delegates and members of the National Assembly, the president was unable to secure the majority votes required to make his 'third term' bid a success. Four weeks later, the conference adjourned indefinitely when Niger Delta delegates staged a walkout following their northern counterparts' refusal to back their demand that the 13 percent derivation allocated to them from oil rents be doubled to 25.⁴⁹

In the wake of the Abuja fiasco, PRONACO revved up its campaign for an alternative conference of the country's 'ethnic nationalities' with full sovereign powers. The central government responded with brutal repression. Members of the ethnic militias, particularly MASSOB and Asari Dokubo's NDPVF, were attacked and killed by special security personnel. In mid-October 2005, a number of OPC leaders were arrested and taken into detention. On 25 October a team of federal police in disguise stormed Uwazurike's Okwe home and took him to Abuja, where he was charged with treason a few weeks later. He was to spend the next two years in various prisons and detention centres. The long absence of their leader, who had developed an authoritarian leadership style, was a severe resilience test for MASSOB. But the rump of the echelon quickly rallied, established a collegial governance structure and successfully converted their leader's trial into a fresh mobilization issue. Many Igbo in the east and other parts of the country partook in shows of solidarity with Uwazurike, now styled 'the spirit of Biafra' in Nigeria's gulag.⁵⁰ A new 'Voice of Biafra International' radio station was launched in Washington, DC by the Biafra Foundation, which also led an initiative to establish a 'Biafran government in exile' to operate from the United States, and a 'shadow government' in Nigeria that MASSOB leaders themselves would superintend. The plan failed to get off the ground, however.

In May 2006, MASSOB leaders' attempts to mobilize market women and men in Onitsha to resist punitive taxes imposed on them by the Anambra state government triggered a bloody reprisal. The federal government, at the governor's request, dispatched soldiers to the city and they proceeded

to murder several MASSOB members. An attempt led by Nnamdi Ohiagu, a member of the collegial leadership, to replace as ‘acting leader’ in February 2007 was crushed.⁵¹ The leadership began to style the organization as the MASSOB/Biafra Liberation Front from this period, in an attempt to bring splinter groups under a common umbrella. It also announced that the eastern part of the country, including the Igbo heartland and the Niger Delta area, had been divided into thirty administrative regions.

A federal high court, clearly working on the government’s instruction, released Uwazurike in October 2007, five months after Umaru Yar’Adua, Obasanjo’s successor, took office. The judge was careful to describe the move as a ‘temporary bail’, to enable Uwazurike to perform the burial rites for his mother who had died six months previously.⁵² The colourful burial ceremony of Monica Uwazurike in Okwe in January 2008 confirmed Uwazurike in the eyes of separatist and self-determination leaders from other parts of the country who attended as the *de facto* leader of the ‘new Biafra’. ‘Mama Biafra’, as the late Mrs. Uwazurike was referred to in MASSOB leaflets, was transformed into the living embodiment of ‘a suffering’ and ‘comatose’ Biafra that her only son was now battling to revive.⁵³ In his eulogy presented by Ojukwu, Ojukwu declared: ‘Uwazurike is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased’. Turning to the MASSOB leader he said, ‘Don’t be afraid to champion the cause that you believe in because fear itself does not entertain fear’.⁵⁴ Rumours that an announcement declaring the secession of the ‘new Biafra’ would be made shortly after the interment of ‘Mama Biafra’ that afternoon proved groundless—to the disappointment of the thousands of unemployed youths who had converged on Okwe from all parts of the region for the ‘great declaration’. The previous April, the PDP had rigged the general elections yet again, and the widespread perception was that the country had returned to the dark days of dictatorship.⁵⁵ However, since his release from detention, Uwazurike had been careful to remind the impatient among his followers regularly of the ‘several stages’ through which the mobilization of the ‘Biafran masses’ would pass before secession took place. His primary focus thus lay on the transformation of MASSOB into a respectable ‘peoples movement’ looking out for the vulnerable in ‘Biafra’.

While Uwazurike and MASSOB continue to enjoy considerable support and goodwill in the Igbo heartland, retelling the Biafra story to include a Niger Delta whose youth had in January 2006 taken to the swamps in armed rebellion against the Nigerian state, they have not been able to take the crucial last step and bring their dream nation-state into being. Marooned in an in-between world where they are neither fully part of Nigeria nor citizens of their dream state, MASSOB and ‘Massobians’, as the members call themselves, remain, like ‘New Biafra’ itself, a narrative in progress.

'True Igbo'

In the long years of military rule, during which the allocation of the oil rent was centralized, authoritarianism was elaborated and entrenched. Uwarurike and MASSOB had to contend with this behemoth, whose politics was hostile to opposition and amenable to the deployment of incumbent violence to suppress legitimate dissent. The post-military Nigerian state did not rely only on crude force, however. The 'federal character' principle, originally conceived by the authors of the 1979 constitution as a power and resource-sharing mechanism to include the various ethnic groups in a common national project had, from the NPN-led Second Republic on, been turned into an elaborate patronage network. The PDP inherited this network in 1999 and proceeded to transform it into decentralized ethnic hegemonic machines in the various states on which it relied every election cycle to muscle its way back to power. This was the first formidable obstacle MASSOB had to contend with.

These debates have been particularly fierce in the Igbo east following the founding of MASSOB in 1999. PDP politicians counter MASSOB leaders' accusation that they are saboteurs of the 'cause' by asserting that all 'true' Igbo are now 'one hundred percent' Nigerians who want to join hands with members of other ethnic groups to build a country where all will thrive and prosper. The Bakassi Boys, a youth-led vigilante organization that emerged in Aba in 1998 to fight crime in the city, was also openly hostile to MASSOB's nationalist project and was apolitical until it was pressed into service a few years later by vote-rigging PDP politicians in the region.⁵⁶

Leaders of Ohaneze, the pan-Igbo cultural organization, also espouse pro-Nigeria sentiments, even as they insist that the ethnic group has been 'marginalized' by successive postwar governments. Raph Uwechue, current president-general of Ohaneze, articulated the group's position thus:

The young men of MASSOB must have their say, but we their elders in Ohaneze speak the mind of Ndigbo when we say that Biafra is a thing of the past and all we want now is for Nigeria to work for the benefit of all.⁵⁷

Ohaneze has demonstrated considerable political skill in cutting the ground from under MASSOB leaders even as it publicly praises them for their concern for Igbo welfare. Shortly after the unexpected success of the July 2004 'Biafra Day', Ohaneze leaders announced a less-divisive 'Igbo National Day' to be marked annually in a chosen Igbo city. Igbo National Day has since 'absorbed' MASSOB's event.

Even Uwazurike's repeated insistence that secession would not require Igbo residents in other parts of the country to return to a 'new Biafra' has not impressed the latter. Ndigbo Lagos, an association of leading Igbo businessmen and professionals in that city, dismissed MASSOB's December 2003 threat to establish a 'government in exile' as quixotic and urged the militia's leaders to 'focus on impacting on the people the real independence,' which, according to them, was freedom from want, ignorance and disease.⁵⁸ Igbo have returned to cities and towns in the northern and western parts of the country in large numbers. The powerful centralizing logic of the postwar rentier state also meant that ambitious Igbo who wanted to make their financial or political fortunes had to relocate to Lagos, and then, since 1991, Abuja.

In recent years, a reinvigorated civic platform in the region, comprised of human rights, pro-democracy and faith-based organizations has offered an increasingly credible alternative to MASSOB's nationalist project. Olisa Agbakoba, a prominent lawyer and founder of the Lagos-based Civil Liberties Organisation, the country's premier rights NGO, convened a summit of these groups in Enugu in July 2010 and released a communiqué upbraiding Igbo politicians, who routinely rigged elections in the region and converted public funds to personal use. The summit also called for an end to the harassment of Uwazurike and other MASSOB members by the central government, and 'immediate initiation of the process to return Nigeria to a federal structure upon which it was founded, including immediate restructuring of the Nigerian federation'.⁵⁹ The Agbakoba-led initiative is firmly opposed to secession, even as it seeks remedies within a Nigerian framework for the grievances articulated by MASSOB and sundry separatist groups. Ojukwu's decision to participate in the 2003 general election as the presidential candidate of the newly registered All Progressive Peoples Party (APGA), also presented MASSOB leaders, who regarded the former Biafran war leader as the 'life president of the new Biafra' with a dilemma. If they mobilized support for Ojukwu and APGA, they would be indicating they still believed in a Nigeria of which the Igbo were an integral part. On the other hand, if they refused to back Ojukwu, this would open MASSOB to the charge that it showed insufficient reverence for the man whose name was synonymous with the Igbo quest for self-determination. Uwazurike's decision in 2003 to support Ojukwu's presidential campaign led to a split in the organization. Prince Orjiako, his deputy, broke away and established the Eastern Peoples' Congress (EPC), based in Aba. EPC and other Igbo self-determination groups, some of whose leaders were previously members of MASSOB, have since banded together to establish the umbrella Biafra Liberation Council.

While these organizations ostensibly espouse a common project, they differ in their analysis of the Igbo predicament and the strategies to adopt

as remedies. When Ojukwu, shortly after running for president again in the 2007 elections that were marred by widespread fraud, stated in a BBC interview that the Igbo had been denied the right to vote and that the alternative to continued electoral fraud was 'a separate existence' for the region, the member groups of the BLC could not agree on a practical course of action to follow to exploit the situation.⁶⁰ Uwazurike and the MASSOB leadership have adopted three main strategies in response to these rancorous debates over what precisely 'Biafra' is and the appropriate course of political and civic action to be adopted by the people. They have sought to delegitimize the breakaway factions by labelling them 'agents of the Nigerian government'. In an attempt to browbeat prominent Igbo politicians and community leaders refusing to support the militia, MASSOB has revived the term 'saboteur' in a double move to get the former to embrace the 'proper Igbo spirit' and also explain away the fact that the Igbo have yet to band together under the MASSOB flag and 'actualize' the Biafra nation.⁶¹

Uwazurike has also publicly identified with the cause of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), an armed organization pressing for a greater share of the oil rent for the oil-producing communities of the region. MEND first emerged in 2006, while he was still in detention. The movement's audacious kidnapping of oil workers and targeted bombing of oil facilities has increasingly caught the attention of the international press and the Nigerian government, leading the region's unemployed youth, some of them previous MASSOB supporters, to rally to the former's fiery rhetoric. While MASSOB has not yet ditched its non-violent stance, Uwazurike regularly threatens to join forces with MEND because, in his own words, 'the only language the Nigerian government understands is the use of force, just like the tactics of MEND in the Niger Delta'.⁶²

Conclusion

As the foregoing demonstrates, political institutions, in this case the authoritarian version of electoral politics deployed by the PDP in Nigeria since 1999, not only shape the actions of political actors but also the social terrain on which the game of politics is played. The elite pact and the ethnic calculations that shaped the outcome of the 1999 general elections may have provided the 'vent' for Ralph Uwazurike to establish MASSOB as an excluded ethnic group's counter-strategy. However, the reach of a powerful and still authoritarian state with awesome powers of patronage has made it difficult for the ethnic militia to proceed from apparently successful ethnic mobilization to the critical next stages of violent disruption of the democratization process and outright secession.

In Nigeria's authoritarian winner-takes-all political system, the richest pickings are reserved for those able to stitch together a coalition of ethnic hegemony and deploy this to seize power in the centre. Ethnic politics is tolerated, even cynically incentivized, but only to the extent it is a subordinate and pliant extension of the Behemoth. The leaders of Ohaneze knew only too well as they quickly moved from 2005 on to substitute a tepid and less threatening 'Igbo Day' narrative for MASSOB's emotive 'Biafra Day' celebrations, that the authoritarian state's control of the legitimate means of violence was still very secure, even as its key actors began to go through the motions of 'democratizing' governance from 1999 onwards.

Uwazurike and MASSOB too remain firmly in the behemoth's shadow. Their two political narratives of choice—'non-exodus' and non-violence—are the ultimate in pragmatism. The putative citizens of their dream nation-state, even as they regularly ventilate legitimate grievances, are still firmly embedded in the interlocking webs of a Nigerian state that has repeatedly demonstrated that it will brook no challenge to the 'corporate existence of Nigeria' from any of its ethnic constituents. Authoritarian political institutions, even as they are apparently being dismantled in a period of democratization, continue to shape and constrain the choices and strategies of political actors in multiethnic societies like Nigeria.

Confronted with the task of discharging the burden of civil war memory, the young men of MASSOB sought to mobilize history, ethnicity and a parlous economic present to press their claims on an electoral authoritarian regime founded on an ethnic logic. In so doing, they threatened to derail Nigeria's democratization process. Countervailing forces, including civic actors in the Igbo heartland itself, intervened, powerfully illustrating the case that democratization is indeed a long-drawn out and open-ended process. Properly nurtured, it could progress to the crucial consolidation stage in multiethnic states. Even so, the fact that MASSOB's project is presently struggling does not in any way detract from the validity of the grievances that gave birth to the ethnic militia in the first place. As social scientists, we are challenged to come up with a normative political ordering in which victims of ethnic injustice can demand and obtain redress while standing on a civic and inclusive platform.

Acknowledgements

This is an abridgement and adaptation of Ike Okonta, *Biafra ghosts: the MASSOB ethnic militia and Nigeria's democratisation process*, Discussion Paper 73 (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet 2012).

Notes

1. For details of the bill, see 'Biafra bill of rights', originally published in *Biafra News*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1999.
2. Interview with Chris Mocha, MASSOB deputy director of information, Onitsha, 2 August 2010.
3. General Ishaya Bamaïyi, a former chief of army staff during the regime of the late General Sani Abacha, played a role in the political transition following his principal's death in 1998. He gave an insight into these closed-door negotiations in a speech to a theological college in central Nigeria in September 2010, *The Punch*, 21 September 2010, p. 9.
4. Interview with Uche Madu, MASSOB director of information, Onitsha, 2 August 2010.
5. Nuhu Ribadu, founding executive chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), stated in numerous public forums in Nigeria and abroad that the bulk of the 'missing billions' was the handiwork of military governments in the country. Nuhu Ribadu, 'Addressing corruption in Africa' (Lecture, Howard University, Washington, D.C., 3 March 2010).
6. For details of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), see Ike Okonta, *When citizens revolt: Nigerian elites, big oil and the Ogoni struggle for self-determination* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2008).
7. Sam Isaiah-Nda, a leading northern journalist, was privy to the backroom dealings that led northern politicians to agree to take a backseat during the 1999 presidential election. Isaiah-Nda chronicled this event thus in his popular newspaper column: 'Within a few days, General Danjuma placed a call to his friend, Ahmed Joda, a retired federal permanent secretary and broached the idea of the need to repackage Obasanjo for the presidency of the nation especially as talks of power shift to the south had filled the air'. See Sam Isaiah-Nda, 'Danjuma's Mea Culpa', available at: Gamji.com. Retrieved 2 February 2011.
8. Interview with Uchenna Madu, MASSOB director of information, Onitsha, 2 August 2010.
9. For details of the chain of events that culminated in Biafra and the civil war, see Gavin Williams, *The origins of the Nigerian civil war* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1983); Kenneth Post and Michael Vickers, *Structure and conflict in Nigeria* (London: Heinemann, 1973), and Okwudiba Nnoli, *Ethnic politics in Nigeria* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1980).
10. Ralph Uwazurike, interview, *The Week*, 24 May 2004.
11. Interview with Nnamdi Agomo, MASSOB area administrator, Owerri, 20 July 2010.
12. Interview with Uchenna Madu, MASSOB director of information, Onitsha, 2 August 2010.
13. Interview with Chris Mocha, MASSOB deputy director of information, Onitsha, 2 August 2010.
14. Interview with Chris Mocha, MASSOB deputy director of information, Onitsha, 2 August 2010.
15. Interestingly, the leadership's assertion that membership dues are the chief source of MASSOB's funding is a relatively new development. When questioned by a journalist on this issue in May 2004, Ralph Uwazurike had this to say: 'God raises money to run it [MASSOB] always. Whenever I need money, God gives me as much as I need': *The Week*, 24 May 2004. Regarding obtaining funds from politicians, this has been a source of persistent speculation in Nigerian newspapers since 2000, but tangible proof has not been forthcoming. In June 2010, it was also reported in several dailies that some MASSOB members had raised questions about the source of the money Ralph Uwazurike used to build a one-storey building for his personal use in Owerri, the Imo State capital. Nnamdi Agomo, Owerri area administrator, told the writer during a

- conversation in the city in August 2010 that Uwazurike was a ‘successful lawyer long before he founded MASSOB’, and that therefore he could easily afford to fund the construction of a new house from his own private resources.
16. The novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, an Igbo, gave her civil war novel the title *Half of a yellow sun* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), an allusion to the symbol of the rising sun on the Biafran flag.
 17. This writer visited these towns and cities from July through November 2010 and was struck by the ubiquity of these flags in public places and the confidence with which MASSOB officials and members went about their activities, even in the face of repeated police intimidation and brutality.
 18. For details of the lyrics of this spiritual, go to [www. music-lyrics-gospel.com](http://www.music-lyrics-gospel.com). In Owerri, the Imo State capital and a MASSOB stronghold, one of the militia leaders who invited me to his apartment for drinks in August 2010 played Louis Armstrong’s version of ‘Go down, Moses’ while he kept beat with a paper weight he’d improvised as a gong. When the song ended, he said to me, ‘I have not been to America like you, but this music is Biafran music’.
 19. The exact number of Biafran dead is still fiercely contested in Nigerian academic and journalistic circles, but there is a broad consensus that it is ‘above one million’. The Igbo usually refer to their ethnic group and its members as ‘Ndigbo’, meaning ‘the Igbo people’.
 20. Interview with Prince Orjiako, former deputy leader of MASSOB, Aba, 13 July 2010.
 21. *Insider Weekly*, 31 December 2001.
 22. *Insider Weekly*, 31 December 2001.
 23. Interview with Prince Orjiako, MASSOB’s former deputy leader and head of mobilization in the Igbo heartland (1999–2002), Aba, 13 July 2010.
 24. *The Source*, 15 December 2003.
 25. A Lagos-based journalist alluded to Ojukwu’s ‘Biafra of the mind’ thesis when he was interviewing Ralph Uwazurike two months after the Washington, DC event: *Insider Weekly*, 31 December 2001.
 26. At a conference in Enugu in December 2001, Ojukwu told reporters: ‘I have no fear that if what Nigeria comes out with from the National Conference is not exactly what we Ndigbo want we may talk about secession. We do not want to break up Nigeria but if you treat us like a goat, we will behave like a goat; even like a he-goat’. *Insider Weekly*, 31 December 2001. General Ojukwu died in November 2011 and was given a state funeral by the president and people of Nigeria.
 27. *The Source*, 5 September 2005.
 28. *Insider Weekly*, 13 December 2001.
 29. *Insider Weekly*, 13 December 2001.
 30. Bola Tinubu was first elected governor of Lagos State on the platform of the Alliance for Democracy, a Yoruba-dominated party, in May 1999. He was re-elected in 2003. One of the governor’s advertised policies was to clean up the city, which he complained had been neglected by past military governments. Tinubu established an environmental sanitation agency that subsequently ordered traders in areas of the city where the Igbo were dominant to relocate to another part of the city because they were obstructing the smooth flow of traffic and ‘polluting the environment’. This order generated considerable tension between Igbo and Yoruba residents until a joint panel of Yoruba and Igbo leaders intervened and amicably resolved the matter.
 31. Two other major grievances of the Igbo are the postwar state creation exercise and nationalization of foreign-owned enterprises embarked on by successive military governments. The Igbo still consider Port Harcourt part of their ethnic homeland and argue that it should not be the capital of Rivers State, controlled by the Ijaw. They also say that the number of states in Igboland is smaller than the ones controlled by the Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba, the two other large ethnic groups in the country they consider as rivals. Igbo business leaders also complain that the policy of indigenizing foreign enterprises by the federal government between 1972 and 1977 was designed

- to displace their people from the commanding heights of the economy, because the government realized that Igbo entrepreneurs had been reduced to pauperdom during the war and so were in no position to bid for any of the auctioned firms. For details of Igbo postwar grievances, see Okwudia Nnoli, *Ethnicity and development in Nigeria* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1995). See in particular chapter five, 'Ethnicity, development and the civil war, 1967–1978'.
32. The late Ken Saro-Wiwa, leader of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), forcefully made this point in books and newspaper articles throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. See Ken Saro-Wiwa, *On a darkling plain: An account of the Nigerian civil war* (Port Harcourt: Saros International, 1989).
 33. Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic conflict and civic life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 55.
 34. Ken Saro-Wiwa elaborated this position in *On A Darkling Plain*.
 35. Throughout the 30-month long civil war, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu was careful to articulate a 'Biafran', as opposed to an Igbo political project in all his speeches and writings. The classic text of this national reimagining is C. Odumegwu Ojukwu, *Biafra: Selected speeches and random thoughts* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).
 36. Several respected observer teams monitoring the election reported they had been marred by violence and sundry irregularities designed to return the PDP to power. For an example of these reports, see Human Rights Watch, *Nigeria's 2003 elections: The unacknowledged violence* (New York: Human Rights Watch, June 2004). Lieutenant Colonel Abubakar Umah, a retired army officer and noted democracy activist, also spoke out after the election results came in, accusing President Obasanjo and other PDP officials of colluding with election officials and security personnel to stuff ballot boxes on their party's behalf. *Insider Weekly*, 2 February 2004.
 37. Peter Lewis, 'From prebendalism to predation: The political economy of decline in Nigeria', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 1996, pp. 79–103.
 38. In December 1998, President Obasanjo ordered Nigerian troops to storm the village of Odi in central Delta. All the houses in the village were burned. Only a handful of villagers escaped this genocidal attack. For details of the Odi massacre, see Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth, Nigeria, *Odi: Blanket of silence* (Benin City, 2000).
 39. I examine the politics of the demands of the Delta ethnic groups in Ike Okonta, *When citizens Revolt: Nigerian elites, big oil and the Ogoni struggle for self-determination* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2008).
 40. Great Commonwealth of the Niger Delta, Memorandum of Understanding, 8 May 2004, Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Some of these Delta groups are Niger Delta Independence Seekers, Ijaw Liberation Council and Niger Delta Youth Council. Several prominent Niger Delta youth leaders also signed the document in their personal capacity.
 41. This phrase was used by Uchenna Madu, MASSOB director of Information, in the course of our interview in Onitsha, 2 August 2010.
 42. Constitution of the People's Democratic Party, Abuja, Nigeria, June 1998.
 43. *The Week*, 24 May 2004.
 44. *The Week*, 24 May 2004.
 45. *The Week*, 24 May 2004.
 46. The International Crisis Group (ICG) has tracked elections and broad political and economic developments in Nigeria and other countries. In a major report published in 2006 on Nigeria's transition from military rule since 1999, ICG quotes one of the monitors of the 2003 presidential polls thus: 'The problems were so numerous and the gap in credibility so vast that the victors writ large can hardly claim to hold the legitimate mandate of the Nigerian people'. See International Crisis Group, *Nigeria: Want in the Midst of Plenty* (Africa Report No. 113, 19 July 2006), p. 15. In the same report, the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute and the European Union also described the elections as 'deeply flawed'.

47. Pro-National Conference Organisation, Draft Constitution for the Federal Republic of Nigeria Proposed by Peoples' National Conference, August 2006, Lagos: Movement for New Nigeria, August 2006.
48. *Thisday*, 17 April 2005.
49. *Thisday*, 17 April 2005.
50. Ken Saro-Wiwa was also given the name 'Spirit of Ogoni' shortly after he emerged from a short spell of detention in 1993, following a central government crackdown on MOSOP.
51. *The Guardian*, 9 February 2007.
52. *Saturday Champion*, 26 October 2007.
53. *Daily Sun*, 25 January 2008.
54. *Daily Sun*, 25 January 2008.
55. Local and foreign groups monitoring Nigeria's 2007 elections agreed that it was one of the worst in terms of egregious abuse of basic electoral rules since the country gained independence in 1960. Jean Herskovits, a longstanding student of Nigerian politics, reported thus of this controversial election, the first since Nigeria's independence in which a civilian leader would hand over power to another civilian: 'The elections themselves were disastrous, with even more rigging and violence than during the previous presidential election, in 2003, when stolen ballot boxes and bogus vote counts marred the polling'. See Jean Herskovits, 'Nigeria's Rigged democracy', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 4, July–August 2007.
56. For details of the Bakassi Boys, see Human Rights Watch, *Nigeria: The Bakassi Boys: The legitimization of murder and terror* (Human Rights Watch Report, Vol. 14, No. 5, May 2002).
57. Interview with Raph Uwechue, president-general of Ohaneze Ndigbo, Ogwashi-Ukwu, 1 September 2010.
58. *The Source*, 15 December 2003. For details of the return of Igbo businessmen to the northern city of Kano after the civil war, see Douglas A. Anthony, *Poison and medicine: Ethnicity, power and violence in a Nigerian city, 1966 to 1986* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002).
59. Communiqué of the First Summit of the Eastern Human Rights and Pro-democracy Activists, Enugu, 10 July 2010.
60. *BBC News*, 7 June 2007.
61. See for instance *Daily Sun*, 16 October 2008.
62. *Daily Sun*, 23 January 2009.

17 Memory as Social Burden

Collective Remembrance of the Biafran War and Imaginations of Socio-Political Marginalization in Contemporary Nigeria

Edlyne Anugwom

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the 1967–1970 Nigeria-Biafra war from the perspective of collective memory, interrogating how the remembrance of the war fosters specific imaginations of the actions of the Nigerian state by people of the former Biafran enclave of Southeastern Nigeria.¹ Extant literature on collective memory demonstrates the value of narratives of the past not only in providing understanding of the present but, more critically, in directing group actions in the present. Such actions may contribute to social conflict or even more positively in the memorialization of significant events of the past by a given group. The past reflects and transmits a strong sense of socio-political identity and power as well as a sense of place and time that creates difference and uniqueness among nations. Because of this temporal potency, the past represents a source of power that can be appropriated in the present as a mechanism to legitimize or delegitimize both violent and non-violent political actions.² The calling into the present of past events becomes a determinant of current and future actions by groups.³ Collective memory becomes especially crucial in societies like Nigeria with a deep-seated history of inter-group conflict.

In Nigeria, the narratives of the thirty-month tragic war are carefully excised from formal discourse in a state-promoted forgetfulness.⁴ However, even though the Igbo-dominated Biafran enclave or mainly the former Eastern Region of Nigeria (which included other ethnic groups, like the Ijaw, Efik, Ibibio, Ogoni, Ikwerre and Annang), was defeated, the war experience continues to shape Igbo ethnic identity and politics today.⁵ Hence, I subscribe to the sentiments that the recollection of Biafra is somehow bound up with contemporary power relations and political arrangements in Nigeria. Though Biafra is past, it is a past that never passes away and is recounted by a collective that considers it pregnant with respect to its present life.⁶

Indeed, the war has become established in dominant socio-political narratives in the southeast as the explanation of the perceived marginalization of the area.⁷ This same discourse has also been recently appropriated by the ethnic minorities in the Niger Delta of Nigeria, who have seen the alienation of the region from the oil in its environment as equally reflective of the Nigerian state's intent to marginalize groups in the former Biafra enclave.

The potency of the 'un-remembered' past to trouble the present is captured in the concept of periphery and centre, as postulated by Yuri Lotman,⁸ which argues that groups that do not control power occupy the periphery and are often compelled by socio-economic challenges to produce memories and narratives that challenge idealized state memories. Ultimately, such sub-state narratives seek to project the periphery to the centre or replace the cultural narratives at the centre with those of the periphery. Hence, there is always an alternative memory (or what has been called counter-memory) at the periphery. The memory process at the periphery is frequently subversive.

While memory is the linchpin of my argument here, it is important to note that Biafra as an expression of aspiration towards liberation and equity in Nigeria predates the civil war. Therefore the comparison between the civil war and the Niger Delta conflict should be seen as embodied in memories of the state in Nigeria as biased mediator and even a source of socio-political marginalization especially for social groups in the erstwhile Biafra territory. It is also important to state at this point that my conception of Biafra is not as an Igbo affair as one would often glimpse from recent writings on the subject⁹ but rather as a bid by the peoples of the Southeastern Region even though the Igbo was the majority group and the attempted secession was led until towards the very end by an Igbo. So Biafra was neither an Igbo adventure nor a war between the Hausa Fulani of the North and the Igbo of the South East of Nigeria. Most other socio-ethnic groups in Nigeria were involved in the war either on one side or the other. For instance, the Yoruba were as much involved in the war as were the Hausa Fulani on the federal or Nigerian side; in the same way, most of the ethnic minorities of the Southeastern Region (Efik, Ibibio, Annang, Ogoni, Ekoi, Ikwerre, even Ijaw) were almost as involved on the Biafra side as the Igbo.¹⁰

This chapter utilizes information derived from social surveys and documentary evidence to examine the role of collective remembrance among people of the former Biafran enclave in the perception of the Nigerian state and its actions as well as the consequences of such collective remembrance for the state-building project in Nigeria. It makes use of unstructured in-depth interviews in which respondents were selected through purposive

sampling and snowball techniques. The sample was made to reflect both gender equity and demographic differences in the population of study (the age range of those interviewed was 24 to 72 years). A total of 98 respondents were interviewed for the study, including 86 respondents from Enugu state which is the main study focus (made up of 26 women and 52 men, i.e., 78 respondents from the general population and 8 respondents from the Hausa-Fulani community in the state) and 12 respondents (9 men and 3 women) from Bayelsa state. A sample of 78 respondents from the general population was interviewed in three Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Enugu State. These three LGAs (Nsukka, Udenu and Igbo-Eze North), were chosen from the 17 LGAs in the state, based on my familiarity with the area and the fact that the present Enugu North senatorial zone in which these three LGAs are located was the most intense theatre of the war. Therefore, 26 respondents from each of the LGAs were interviewed. I also interviewed 8 prominent members or gatekeepers (political and religious) leaders of the Hausa-Fulani community in Enugu state who were selected through purposive sampling. The idea was to ascertain how they perceive the conflict and its aftermaths, especially as settlers from the group that is often seen as the main adversary of the Igbo during the war and who have resided among the Igbo for decades since the end of the war.

In order to provide a basis for comparison, I also conducted key person interviews (KPIs) with community leaders and youth militants in the Niger Delta state of Bayelsa. For this article, I interviewed a total of 12 respondents from three communities: Imigiri (Ogbia LGA), Kaiama and Odi (Kolokuma/Opokuma LGA). As in Enugu state, I chose respondents through opportunity sampling, using the criteria of availability, willingness to be interviewed and self-admitted knowledge of past and contemporary events. The interviews covered such issues as socio-political roots of marginalization, ethnicity and governance, aftermath of the war, the role of the Nigerian state in mediating inter-ethnic conflict, politics of resource distribution since independence, nature and causes of the civil war, effects of the war on the Igbo, relationship between Biafra and the agitation of the Niger Delta indigenes, the role of MASSOB, influence of the war on postwar inter-group relations in Nigeria, etc.

Collective Remembrance of the War and Imagination of Socio-Political Marginalization

The war lives on intensely in the memory of the people of the old Eastern Region. As evident from the opinions of the respondents, the war is perceived as influencing both the action of the Nigerian state and the situation of the area even decades after its end. For the sake of clarity and

brevity, the discussion of these perceptions and role of memory are loosely organized under the following themes: memory and ethnic undertones of the civil war; the Igbo as the new minority group; and similar patterns of remembrance of the war by both the people of the Southeast east zone and the oil-producing minorities of the South-south of Nigeria.

Memory and Ethnic Undertones of the Civil War

The role of memory in both the war and in the nascent imaginations of Biafra cannot be overstressed. The war itself was anchored and sustained by memories of ethnic violence and perceived state-sanctioned marginalization against people of the Southeastern Region especially the Igbo shortly before the war. The appeal of the war and its intensity were greatly aided by the manipulation of these fresh memories of violence by the Biafran leadership. Be that as it may, the Nigerian state, by replicating its nature of the 1960s as ethnicized, institutionally weak and prone to manipulation by ethnic jingoists and opportunistic political elites, creates room for the re-emergence and sustenance of the memories of the war and the interpretation of its actions along such lines of imagination.¹¹

The war can be largely explained, in spite of the sentiments of some of the respondents, not only in terms of individual errors and omissions but in the structural angst or anger in the Nigerian federation.¹² As has been observed, the response to angst can be in two forms: flight or fight. In terms of national politics, this means essentially secession or civil war.¹³ War seemed inevitable given that pre-independence animosities between different ethnic groups were not addressed by the political system; indeed, they were rather heightened by it. Moreover, the process of legitimacy, as expressed in such exercises as census, elections and the framework guiding national wealth distribution, seemed perpetually in the firm grips of centrifugal forces. These factors together created a bleak future scenario. This angst was not limited to the southeast but was prevalent among all the groups in prewar Nigeria; hence, the stories about the threat of secession by both the North and the West prior to the war were not mere fables.¹⁴

Again, the memory of gross violence and killings exhibited in the 1966 pogroms in the North is reignited in response to killings associated with religious conflicts targeting non-Muslims and predominantly people from the Southeast Region now and then in the North of the country. These violent religious-cum-ethnic episodes are recurrent features of northern Nigerian towns,¹⁵ ranging from the popular Maitatsine uprisings in the 1980s and 1990s, the Sharia riots of 2000¹⁶ to a lesser extent current Boko Haram activities.

In spite of the claims in some quarters that the people of the Southeastern Region were well reintegrated into Nigeria at the end of the civil war in

1970,¹⁷ the issue of reintegration still remains a sore point. More than half of the respondents with whom I spoke were of the view that reintegration was not fully successful. According to one interviewee:

Gowon¹⁸ at the end of the war in 1970 talked about 3Rs, there is a fourth one and that is re-integration. There are four Rs and the real one is the re-integration which has not been done. And that is the job that is left undone and on our conscience and their own and until it is done; one cannot genuinely talk about one Nigeria. The non-inclusion of re-integration was done on purpose, he (Gowon) would not say he did not know what he was doing.¹⁹

Perhaps, the events that led to the war, especially the attitude of the leaders and military brass to the deepening cleavage between the south and north showed glimpses of the pervasive feeling of fear and distrust that characterized relations between the different ethnic groups in the country at independence. The case of the Igbo or southeasterners became pronounced because of what then was turning into a contest for power between military elites from the east and those from the north. This contest is often understood as the outcome of the so-called Igbophobia, seen as prevalent in the Nigerian federation shortly before the war.²⁰ The respondents illustrated this fact by pointing to the actions of the then Nigerian head of state, Yakubu Gowon in two critical instances. First was the state creation in May 1967 that, from the view of the majority of the respondents, aimed to fragment the ethnic groups in the Eastern Region. This was in spite of the fact that the action affected the whole of Nigeria since he split the existing four regions in Nigeria into twelve states. Second was the declaration of economic (food) blockade against the Eastern Region in October 1966, months before the first bullets were fired. These actions were seen by some people in Biafra as motivated by intolerance pre-dating even the most remote cause of the war.²¹ This intolerance, often expressed better as Igbophobia, provides insight into the massive human carnage of the war and why it would appear that the Nigerian state was neither moved nor affected by the massive toll of the war on women, children and non-combatants in the Biafran enclave.²² Overriding this phobia or what may be called a psychological feeling of dissatisfaction is the history of ethnic schism rife in Nigeria's political and social life even before the war.²³

In 1996, the wartime Nigerian leader Yakubu Gowon admitted the error of the civil war and the unnecessary carnage caused by it, especially in the southeast. He advocated for days of national prayers as a way of building the unity and peace that have eluded Nigeria. The call of the 'born again' Gowon for several days of national prayer in 1996 at the height of General

Sani Abacha's dictatorship and reign of terror attracted searing but very incisive commentary from Dele Sobowale, a Yoruba. In this popular and widely circulated essay, Sobowale criticized Gowon for his hypocrisy and despicable role during the Biafran war. He argued that Gowon's slow reaction to the pogrom that led to:

The death of 300,000²⁴ Igbo men, women and children must weigh heavily on his conscience. The civil war that followed was just another instance of might crushing right. The Igbos were the aggrieved party. So in leading the prayer, General Gowon should start with a long prayer for the forgiveness of his own sins, which are grievous.²⁵

However, it would be excessive to blame Gowon or even the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group for the war, since the events that led to the war had antecedents in the fractious nature of the then-new Nigerian nation. The unstable foundation of the Nigerian nation was well known by the early nationalists, who at times had clear contempt for the idea of a united Nigeria. Thus, the Sarduna of Sokoto, Sir Ahmadu Bello, in the heady days of the mid-1960s condemned the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914 by Lord Lugard as a huge mistake.²⁶ Moreover, leadership incapacity on both sides of the war divide was equally a factor. One of the respondents avers:

Even though I am Igbo and also agree that the Igbo were butchered in the North before the war, I think the Igbo leaders were too-ambitious in declaring Biafra. Perhaps more results and better solution would have come out if they had been patient. Yes, Aburi²⁷ did not work and Gowon was not to be trusted but dialogue has worked in similar situations elsewhere in the world.²⁸

The above sentiments were shared by another respondent, a Hausa trader in the southeast. In his words:

I think it was Ojukwu and his bad advisers that caused the war. Nigeria entered problem because the white men did not do their work well in organizing the different people in Nigeria into one country but the problem with the war is because everybody in the army wanted to rule. Ojukwu wanted to rule, Gowon wanted to rule and none agreed that the other should rule, so there was the war.²⁹

The war memories still exert considerable influence on how the respondents conceive relations between different groups in Nigeria now. Moreover, the recollections of the war by the people do not just create melancholy

but also a desire not to experience the event again. In the views of one of the respondents,

War is bad. I had the misfortune of losing a child to kwashiorkor and the hunger in the land was very widespread, people ate green leaves and immature root crops and lived like rabbits in holes. We made efforts to hide in bunkers each time there was the roar of air planes in the sky and became adept in covering every space with green leaves, thereby blocking out both the sun and light. It was terrible, one should not wish for it again. No matter what happens, half peace is better than war.³⁰

Another respondent captured it in another perspective:

Now you go to the villages and see people. You see happy and normal-looking children playing now. During the war, all the children were sick-looking often with distended stomachs. It was a miracle living from day to day because you have to contend with both hunger and the always imminent danger of air raids. These days, each time I hear the noise of a plane close-by I still feel the urge to take cover or run towards a bunker. The war was living in fear, a fear of inescapable death.³¹

Despite the hatred, suspicion and distrust that characterized and still characterize the relations between different socio-ethnic groups in Nigeria, the nature of the Nigerian state at independence in 1960 and the role of the political elites were core determinants of the war. Hence, the lumping together of diverse and socio-historically diverse groups into one nation and the overt ethnic leanings of the political elites which reinforced centrifugal forces rather than build national solidarity may be the main causes of the war.

The Igbo as the New Minority Group

Another way in which the respondents perceive the marginalization of the Igbo as a direct outcome of the war is what they saw as the systematic bid by the federal government to make the Igbo a new minority in Nigeria. Unlike many of Nigeria's ethnic groups, the Igbo are part of the conventional big three groups in the country. However, ethnicity and its constructs are highly dynamic and shift over time, so that the notion of minority in contemporary political discourse does not just refer to numbers, but more critically to socio-political and economic influence and power in a plural society. It is in this sense that the Igbo of today's Nigeria have become increasingly 'minoritized' since the end of the war.

While the stakes and benefits of the demographic and political minorities in the Niger Delta have been on the increase, the political influence of the southeast has been waning, largely because the region is the only one with five states, compared to the seven and six states apiece of the other geopolitical zones. As a respondent argued, ‘the creation of states and local governments are tools for ensuring that the Igbo people continue to remain in the minority especially since the local government is used in revenue allocation. So we end up being cheated always’.³² However, the perception of marginalization has become rife among different groups in Nigeria in recent times. Such feelings even amongst members of the ethnic group that has had more control of the central leadership, such as the Hausa-Fulani, are arguably a reflection of the failure of the state to impact positively on the lives of the people.³³

Be that as it may, the efforts to minoritize the southeast are seen mainly in terms of the socio-political marginalization³⁴ of the zone in Nigeria. Thus, one of my respondents avers that the marginalization of the southeast zone,

Should be appreciated against the context of ethnic struggle and resource distribution; the regions in the 1960s were more or less equal but in the Southeast we fared well initially in terms of resources. But in terms of disadvantages the Southeast fared well unlike the West under the AG³⁵ as part and parcel of the national government with Azikiwe as Governor General and later President. So by then we were not as marginalized as we are now since after the war.³⁶

For another respondent, the marginalization of the Igbo is an automatic outcome of having lost the war. Thus,

I know that the Igbos are discriminated against but what do you expect? If you have the courage to go to war and then lose the war, then you should have the patience to bear the suffering and discrimination. You do not expect that you will be treated as a king when you lost a war. It would have been better if the Igbo did not fight the war.³⁷

The state creation exercise in 1967, which carved up the old Eastern Region into three states, was not just calculated to undermine the minority support for Biafra in the face of a looming war but may also be seen as the first formal attempt by the Nigerian state to minoritize the Igbo and deal with the threat of their resurgent nationalism. The decree also shrank Northern power and gave visibility to the Southern minorities. However, it gave two states to the minorities in the region and left only one state to the

more populous Igbo. This turned the Igbo, in spite of their demographical and economic prominence in the region, into a minority from the perspective of administration and resource allocation. The spirit of the 1967 policy has continued in various ways to influence the fate of the Igbo in the national political scheme. One of my interviewees contended, 'the imbalance in creation of state in all the zones in Nigeria is to be considered as the worst thing that has happened to the Southeast since the end of the war'.³⁸

As a result, the area is the one with a continuously shrinking share of top level bureaucratic appointments and membership of the various federal cabinets since the 1980s. A look at the membership of the various ethnic groups in the federal cabinet between 1983 and 2004 would buttress this fact (see table on next page).

The above figures of the southeast cabinet membership through two decades compares badly with the fact that, as Osemwota has shown, the Southeast Region had the highest number of high level manpower (architects, doctors, chemists, scientists, pharmacists, geologists, accountants, surveyors, etc.) in the 1960s compared with the other regions.³⁹ The current situation of the Igbo is perceived by many people in the area as the outcome of a manipulated structural arrangement by the Nigerian federation since the end of the war in 1970. This perception has been the source of great emotional discomfort for a good number of people from the Southeast who perceive discrimination against the Igbo in the public sphere in Nigeria. Thus, one respondent explained:

I know the discriminations. You go to the Police, unless you are from the North, some of the juicy positions don't get to you and they have a better way of jumping the queue than you so even at the end of the war, the Igbos have become like slaves, we don't have any voice. We have become the new minority whether we like it or not. We cannot run away from that fact.⁴⁰

In spite of the points above, it is only logical to explain that the information in the table may not be tenable in the present-day Nigeria. Equally important is to point out that despite the significance given to ethnic origin in the table, often the determining factors in allocation of positions are interest group and political allegiance. Therefore, what seems an ethnically determined outcome may in reality be a case of the conflation between interest or political allegiance and ethnic membership. However, the prominence of the ethnic factor in the table above may have to do with the issue of quota system that is a cherished component of the Nigerian constitution in which appointments into key public positions are expected to achieve socio-ethnic equity or balance.

Table 17.1 Geopolitical Zonal Composition of Various Cabinets in Nigeria (1983–2004)⁴¹

<i>Geopolitical Zone</i>	<i>1983–85 (M. Buhari)</i>	<i>1985 (I. Babangida)</i>	<i>1986 (I. Babangida)</i>	<i>1990 (I. Babangida)</i>	<i>1993 (S. Abacha)</i>	<i>2004 (O. Obasanjo)</i>	<i>Total</i>
Northwest	6 (30%)	6 (27.3%)	5 (22.7%)	6 (33.3%)	5 (22.7%)	7 (21.2%)	35 (25.5%)
Northeast	2 (10%)	2 (9.1%)	2 (9.1%)	3 (16.7%)	3 (13.6%)	5 (15.1%)	17 (12.4%)
Northcentral	4 (20%)	4 (18.2%)	5 (22.7%)	2 (11.1%)	4 (18.2%)	6 (18.2%)	25 (18.3%)
Southwest	4 (20%)	5 (22.7%)	5 (22.7%)	3 (16.7%)	4 (18.2%)	5 (15.1%)	26 (18.9%)
Southeast	2 (10%)	2 (9.1%)	2 (9.1%)	3 (16.7%)	2 (9.1%)	4 (12.1%)	15 (11%)
South-south	2 (10%)	3 (13.6%)	3 (13.6%)	1 (5.5%)	4 (18.2%)	6 (18.2%)	19 (13.9%)
Total	20	22	22	18	22	33	137 (100%)

The scrutiny of state actions by the constituent parts of the federation was seen as not only an aftermath of the war and its perception but equally as a product of the mutual distrust over the fair distribution of resources which predated the war. This tendency has generated a situation where projects or programmes are critically evaluated on the basis of regional gains rather than the more positive assessment of their contribution to overall national development and integration.

Contemporary Igbo memory, which embodies a growing perception of marginalization and injustice since the end of the civil war, gives insights into why a group that once stood stoutly behind Nigeria's federalism is now the one with the greatest percentage of people who prefer their ethnic to their national identity.⁴² As the AFROBAROMETER surveys conducted in 2007 show, the Igbo with 53 percent of respondents in favour of ethnic against national identity were first, followed by the Ijaw with 45 percent.⁴³ It comes as no surprise, then, that both groups are in the same geographical region where dissension and social conflict generated by perception of marginalization and injustice has been highest in modern Nigeria.⁴⁴ The perception of marginalization and social injustice from the Nigerian government are often cited by people from the area as forces underlying the civil war. According to one of them,

since 1960, people of the Southeast Region or Biafra are greatly marginalized. This marginalization as well as religious and ethnic discrimination is what led to the civil war. The most annoying is that they (Northerners) have monopolized the seat of the President.⁴⁵

In spite of the above views, members of other ethnic groups especially in the North have a different opinion on the cause of the war. In this case, it is averred, 'true, true the war killed plenty Igbo people but it was Ojukwu who did not want to listen to other people in the army that caused it. He believed that he knew all because he spoke fine grammar'.⁴⁶ In a somewhat related tone, another respondent averred,

Honestly I do not support this Biafra thing, the Igbos are their own worst enemies. Even if they are allowed to form a Biafra nation, the only thing that would change is those who they would say now oppress them would be their own brothers. Can't you see them all over the place enjoying even with those we are told are enemies of the Igbo people. I am confused, my brother.⁴⁷

Also emerging from the interviews is a whole set of narratives of Igbo superiority or sophistication which many of those interviewed ascribed

to the relative superior education of the Igbo and their business acumen. For them, the war was not really generated by this superiority but was reinforced by it. In other words, the war was not all about keeping the unity of Nigeria but was also about keeping the Igbo in their proper place in the comity of ethnic nations that make up Nigeria. The alleged superiority of the Igbo was embodied largely in the persona of the rebel leader Odimegwu Ojukwu during the war. He was cast in the opinions of many respondents as embodying the superior intellect and cunning of the Igbo; this enabled him to outwit the Nigerian side in the failed peace talks in Aburi, Ghana before the war. In the views of one of these respondents,

The story is a story of Ojukwu and Gowon on their peace talk mission at Aburi, Ghana. In the conference, they agreed that Nigeria should form a confederation that is where Ojukwu ‘quoted’ *instead of coming together and die, we slightly draw apart and live in peace*. When they returned from Ghana, Gowon tried to deny the decision of the conference but Ojukwu used number one sense on him but unknown to him Ojukwu taped everything and that tape was being sold in the markets. Based on that denial Ojukwu said that *On Aburi We Stand* but Gowon refused and declared war.⁴⁸

This perceived superiority or cleverness of Ojukwu was often captured in motivational songs during the war. In one of these songs rendered by another respondent, the lyrics cast Ojukwu as ‘a king of the jungle that cannot be lifted up by mere mortals but who defeats the Nigerians whether they come by land or sea’.⁴⁹ Perhaps, the above imaginations of superiority and invincibility made it possible for the Biafrans to believe that they would overcome the Nigerians in spite of a small demographic size and dearth of weapons of war. In some cases, this belief acquired spiritual connotations. Thus, ‘the northerners kill most of our people because they are struggling for freedom or independence of Biafra forgetting that actualization of Biafra is something the Almighty God has already sanctioned, nobody can prevent it’.⁵⁰

While the minoritization of the Igbo may serve the overall purpose of keeping in check the emergence of the group as a serious force in the national political scene, it has generated a growing perception among the people of the area that they are increasingly relegated to the margins in Nigerian politics and society. There abound in the area popular narratives and discourses of marginalization within the Nigerian federation on which nascent Biafra resurgent militant groups like the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) feed. But more interesting is the contention that,

‘the prevalence of “minority narratives” among the Igbo, who rail against their “minority” status within the Wazobia⁵¹ triad has also created space, at least conceptually, for the “coming together” of Igbo and minority causes’.⁵² It is on this basis that I now examine how the respondents perceive a nexus between the war and contemporary oil conflict in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

***Similar Patterns of Remembrance: A Nexus
Between Two Conflicts***

The respondents have identified a linkage between what they see as the unfinished business of Biafra and the present Niger Delta conflict, both within the old geographical area of Biafra. Therefore, the remote cause of the Niger Delta conflict as well as the nascent efforts at the rebirth of Biafra lie squarely in the utilization of collective memory as a political idiom, especially by groups who perceive themselves as excluded or as bearers of social injustice from significant others. In the case of Nigeria, the narratives of the past (embodied largely in the civil war experience) have given rise to a new Ijaw and Niger Delta minorities’ interpretation of the role of the Nigerian state. While such narratives may appeal to the population at large, they are probably more beneficial to ethnic entrepreneurs and warlords in the Niger Delta who see opportunities in the fomenting of general disillusion with the Nigerian state.

The nexus between Biafra and the Niger Delta conflict is given more substance by the fact that even the youth militants fighting in the Niger Delta have seen their actions as consistent with both the spirit of Biafra (emancipation) and the nascent efforts towards realizing Biafra. In this regard, the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF) of Asari Dokubo struck an alliance with the MASSOB in its heydays in the 2000s. An alliance built on the imagination of similar aspirations for the entire old Eastern Region of Nigeria. Perhaps, Dokubo borrowed a leaf from the late Ogoni activist Saro-Wiwa who reportedly in a fit of repentance in 1993 had extended a hand of friendship to the Ohaneze⁵³ and sought its support for his own struggle.⁵⁴ Further evidence of this alliance can be inferred from the tendency of both groups to use similar expressions as marginalization, social injustice, political oppression, internal colonization and even slavery in capturing the situation of their groups in present Nigeria.⁵⁵

The emerging appropriation of Biafra by Niger Delta militants has not just privileged the resurgence of the memory of the social injustice upon which the war was fought but equally the reinterpretation of the significant events of the past to suit the demands of the day. Therefore, one of my

respondents from the Niger Delta avers with reference to the narratives of the marginalization of the region,

I know what is going on in my area having read about them, seen them, experienced them so it is no longer just mere stories told by others because I am old enough and we were physically involved in some of these acts.⁵⁶

Against this backdrop, a triad of major factors, in addition to the entrenched memories of the violence against the Southeasterners before the 1967 secession helped in the recreation of the longing for Biafra and the recent imaginations of Biafra as epitomizing the real freedom of the Southeasterners in contemporary Nigeria. These events include the unceremonious removal of Ebitu Ukiwo⁵⁷ as second-in-command to Babangida⁵⁸ over his opposition to Nigeria's highly secretive membership of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), the incessant ethno-religious violence on the Igbo and other Southeasterners in the North of Nigeria under the guise of religion⁵⁹ and the increasing minoritization of the Igbo as evinced by the lack of appointment into lucrative positions in the government and federal bureaucracy. These factors have been reinforced by other developments, especially the general spectre of deteriorating physical infrastructure and declining federal presence in the form of dilapidated roads, lack of state-owned or -sponsored industries and development projects. The same spectre of infrastructural neglect affects almost all geographical areas in Nigeria. However, the respondents see the situation in the East as most severe and unjustifiable. In the opinion of one of them:

Both the Biafra war and the Niger Delta conflict are the same due to the fact that the federal government over the years has continued to explore and exploit the two areas yet it has failed not only in addressing environmental problems but also poverty and hunger in these places. The legitimate demand by the regions' groups which has international recognition and sympathy was and is still being ignored instead of being addressed by government. One therefore begins to wonder whether these regions are not part of Nigeria again.⁶⁰

The failure of the Nigerian state to foster enduring unity and harmony as evidenced by frequent ethno-religious conflicts and the rise of ethnic militants groups championing the marginalization struggle of different groups in Nigeria contradicts the optimism of Yakubu Gowon in 1970 that the sun of Biafra is set forever and Nigeria has an opportunity to build a new nation.⁶¹ His statement equally amounted to a clear proscription of

the name Biafra and its discourse. However, as Amadiume has argued, this proscription interfered with the healing process of the people of the Biafran region and robbed the nation of the opportunity of constructively dealing with the tragic event.⁶²

While the official silence remains, the telling and retelling of the Biafra episode continues on varying levels (at the level of the family; informal settings outside the family and in the good number of informal magazines and newspapers popular in markets in the Southeast zone) and engenders an inter-generational sharing of perceived social injustice and perhaps the motive to take action to redress such injustice. In the most primary level of memory dissemination, those who still feel strongly aggrieved by the events of the war and the aftermath continue to tell their stories and encourage others to keep the narrative going.

Conflation, Difference and the Oil Narrative

There is no doubt that the findings from the interviews privilege a narrative of conflation between the Biafra war and the Niger Delta conflict. In other words, the respondents see quite glaring similarities between the two historical events in Nigeria. In the first case, the Biafran war is seen by a good number of the respondents as driven by the same socio-political marginalization and lack of access to political power that also generated the Niger Delta conflict. Therefore, what is at stake between the two incidents that occurred within the same contiguous geographical area is the issue of resource control (tremendous oil wealth in the Niger Delta including the Southeast zone) and access to political power in the centre. Incidentally, these two goals are conterminous. Expressing some of the above deductions are the opinions of the respondents. For instance, 'yes because the militants are defending the oil area so that the government in power cannot deprive them their right while the MASSOB is equally fighting for the independence of Biafra and both are from the southeast region'.⁶³

As revealing as the above seems, it would be in order to examine the difference between the two phenomenal conflicts in Nigeria's postcolonial history. In the first instance, Biafra right from the onset was framed largely as a secession bid, i.e., the resolve of the people of the then Eastern Region of Nigeria (including the now Niger Delta with the exception of Ondo and Edo states) to carve out an independent nation from Nigeria. On the other hand, the Niger Delta agitations started from the desire and struggle of the oil-producing areas of Nigeria to get the lion's share or appropriate share of the resource or revenue allocation in Nigeria, given the fact that over 80 percent of the revenue came from that region. Indeed, the Niger Delta struggle was initially anchored on the dissatisfaction of the region with the

decline of the derivation principle in revenue allocation in Nigeria at the same time that oil was emerging as the sole source of Nigeria's foreign earnings. Milford Okilo, the first governor of Rivers state and one of the pioneering elites of the Niger Delta struggle, saw the decline in derivation as a consequence of the manipulative tendencies of the ethnic majority groups in control of political power at the centre in Nigeria.⁶⁴

The pioneering thought of Okilo was subsequently elaborated and reinforced with the narrative of environmental devastation of the region as a result of oil exploitation by Ken Saro-Wiwa, another leading light of the struggle.⁶⁵ In fact, it was Saro-Wiwa who took the struggle beyond media rhetoric and energized critical civil society response to the issue within the region. This civil society push for a better deal for the oil-producing region within Nigeria's federal state is often captured in the argument for resource control, that is, the access and control of the oil resources in the region by the people themselves. Second, the nature and trajectories of the Niger Delta conflict have differed from the Biafra episode. Generally, the Niger Delta struggle has been framed as the handiwork of a few militant youth in the region who are against the Trans-National Oil Companies (TNOCs) operating in the region.

While the government is implicated because it is the regulatory authority over oil exploitation and the main beneficiary of the oil wealth, the militants have been largely satisfied with targeting oil installations and workers of the TNOCs perhaps as proxy targets to the government. Third, and perhaps more definitive, is the fact that, unlike the Biafra case, the Niger Delta struggle has been seen mainly by the government as a civil revolt. Hence, there was not a full-fledged military action or war since the militants have not really laid claims to any territory. Also, the recent emergence of an Ijaw from the Niger Delta region, Goodluck Jonathan, as President of Nigeria (2010–2015) has to some extent assuaged the feeling of political marginalization by the majority of the people of the region.

There is reason to believe that the Biafra conflict, much like the Niger Delta conflict, has some connection with the control of the oil wealth in Nigeria in the views of those interviewed. Therefore, one of the respondents argued, 'what is happening nowadays is like Biafra in so many ways but the main thing is oil. Those people in charge of power in Abuja now like their brothers in 1967 desperately want our oil'.⁶⁶ Supporting the above opinion, another interviewee opined,

Yes I see a connection between the war and the Niger Delta youth conflict because the southeast is always marginalized in state creation and local government creation. In the Northern parts of this country, a village will be created as local government and they receive federal

allocation like others. This is in spite of the known fact that the wealth being distributed comes from the Southeast. Even though they now call most of the Niger Delta the South-south, it is a political label we are all part of the old Biafra. Why do you think Goodluck had his most support in the elections in the Igbo states, it is because he is one of our own. All the politics is about oil and the dollars from it simple.⁶⁷

Another respondent averred, ‘the whole conflict in the Niger Delta is about who will take possession of their God-given oil, just like the civil war, it is about resources. And once you say resources in Nigeria, you are automatically talking about oil’.⁶⁸ The above opinions actually reverberate with the position of the pioneer youth militant in the Niger Delta, Isaac Adaka-Boro. Adaka-Boro had argued shortly before the civil war in Nigeria while proclaiming a Republic of the Niger Delta in 1966 that one of the driving forces behind the move was to ensure that Nigerians from other ethnic groups, especially the Igbo, did not deprive the people of the region of their God-given oil. Perhaps, the main difference between the position of Adaka-Boro and the later-day militants is that he saw the Igbo as the main threat to the oil wealth of the Niger Delta (as at this time the discovered and profitable oil deposits were in the core of the Niger Delta—today’s Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta states). It was this reasoning that made it possible for Adaka-Boro to accept presidential pardon from treason conviction and fight on the side of the federal side during the war.

It is important in the above context to understand that in spite of the other factors adduced for the war, oil (the control of oil resources), then emerging as a significant foreign exchange earner, foreshadowed the conflict. Perhaps, the intention of the federal state in both creating new states out of the Southeast Region before the war and the promulgation of the 1969 Petroleum decree were borne out of the desire to ensure its total control of the oil resources abundant in the Niger Delta which was then part of the breakaway Biafra. Therefore, while the creation of more states in Nigeria aimed not only to change the administrative structure of Nigeria but to also balkanise Biafra or weaken the support of the ethnic minorities in the Biafra enclave for the secession, it was equally driven by the goal to ensure that the oil resources do not end up in the hands of the Igbo seen as the main architects of the secession bid. In other words, the strategy of the Nigerian leaders was to frame the war as a purely Igbo affair and in the process diminish the support base of Biafra (among the minorities) and ensure that the abundant oil resources in the ethnic minority enclaves did not go to the nascent Biafra. The war was incidentally not only a war to keep Nigeria together but also it was a struggle for great economic resources (oil). The unhidden British support for the federal side in the war was not only driven

by the need to protect the territorial integrity of its former colony but also to protect its oil interests.

Memory and the Nigerian Civil War: Lessons in State Building

While the idea of Biafra entailed secession in the Nigeria civil war (1967–1970), there is little doubt that it embodies the aspirations of the people of the Southeastern Region for a more inclusive and equitable nation-state, which arguably precedes both the official declaration of Biafra and subsequent civil war. Probably, the reference to the ‘Biafra of the mind’ which one hears about now and then conveys the impression of a longing for freedom that predates the civil war and that is still rife, especially among youth elements in present Southeastern zone of Nigeria. In fact, one respondent captured this imagery thus,

the difference between then and now is that there was an open war conflict but now the war is now cold war between the southerners and northerners. It is deep in our hearts that Biafra can be achieved somehow one day.⁶⁹

Therefore, the memory bandwagon which generated the war (captured in narratives of socio-economic and political marginalization) has been further reinforced by the lack of healing of the memories of the war itself. The fact that large number of young people can still march violently in the name of Biafra bringing business and commerce to a standstill in such major towns as Port Harcourt, Enugu and Onitsha in late 2015 and even 2016 says a lot about the spirit of Biafra. This so-called spirit of Biafra or Biafra of the heart is common fare of the memory repertoire of the people of the Southeastern Region. Moreover, the coincidence between the movement of power at the centre to the North (in the person of Muhammadu Buhari, current President of Nigeria) and the strong re-emergence of a popular demand for Biafra makes one perceive not only a political angle but equally a discontentment with the fact that the oil wealth would once again as in the heydays of the war and the Niger Delta conflict lie in the hands of a government controlled by the North.

However, despite what can be considered the strong pull of centrifugal forces is the wish of some Nigerians to build a united virile nation, the war notwithstanding. Thus, a respondent opined,

My son, all I can say is that Igbo has been good to me. I have two wives from this Nsukka and we are now building a big mosque in the

campus. I believe that both the Igbo and Hausa have overcome the war. It was a period of madness and our leaders manipulated and deceived us. I have lived here since 1980 and I have good Igbo friends and neighbours and customers. Ba wahala (no problem), so make you tell our leaders not to deceive us again. Nigeria is one.⁷⁰

Be that as it may, our understanding of the influence of memory in the case of Nigeria should take cognizance of the fact that social memory does not only reflect the past but equally serves to orient or predispose people towards a given situation or course of action in the present. Memory does not just capture what the society was or is but is imbued with imaginations of what society should be. Social memory serves the purpose of embodying narratives which engage the drive to settle a score or improve situations and creates notions of what the desired state could look like. Nationalistic memory, especially in the context of a lost political aspiration as embodied in this case in the quest for the separate state of Biafra conjures up the feeling that a given social group is short-changed in the existing status quo. This memory equally captures imaginations of the needed changes and what the final situation should be. Such process of modelling a desired state is very dynamic and thus affected by ongoing dynamics of group existence and change in the larger society or world.⁷¹

For the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria, cross-generational narratives posit the war as largely responsible for the perceived marginalization of the group in the socio-political entity called Nigeria. The role of the Nigerian state is largely perceived and evaluated on the basis of collective remembrances of the war. Such collective remembrances of the war persist in spite of the desire of the Nigerian state to systematically confine it. The inability of the Nigerian federal state to learn from the recurrent divisive forces in the Nigerian social environment, heal the wounds of socio-economic marginalization and positively engage in addressing the past through positive disclosure continually present challenges to its nationhood. Also, such a failing may impede national development and engender the continuous waste of diverse resources on the management of frequent ethno-sectional conflicts.

It is instructive in this regard to note that five decades after the end of the war, a Nigerian can still contend that,

Nigeria is at best three countries in one. We should allow Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba form their own countries. We are always shouting one Nigeria but we are all suffering in that one Nigeria. I don't know about the Yoruba people but a lot of Igbo people like me are not enjoying this country. Since the Igbo lost the war, they have been second class citizens in Nigeria. Something needs to be done. I fear for my children.⁷²

Anthony Kirk-Greene makes a strong case that fear can be seen as one of the most potent causes of conflict in the history of modern Nigeria.⁷³ Fear has been generated, sustained and reinforced by other centrifugal forces (ethnicity, regional politics, weak federation, etc.) in the country. As I argue, it is still very much alive in memories of the war.⁷⁴

As many respondents posited, the state in Nigeria has worked towards a denial of the memories of the war. Official records either avoid the episode or give it a little footnote as a distraction in Nigeria's journey to nationhood. Emblematic of this tendency is the worrisome non-remembrance of the episode in national life, the glaring omission of the episode in official history and especially history taught in schools in Nigeria,⁷⁵ the tendency of the Nigerian political and military elites to capture the war as a product of a group of overzealous and adventurous Igbo men or as the outcome of the sole ambition of Chukwue-meka Odimegwu Ojukwu. This tendency was copiously displayed by Olusegun Obasanjo in his book, *My Command*, which chronicles his own accounts of the war. Therefore, taking a cue from the Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka, the downplaying of Biafra's relevance is reflective of uncritical assessment of the contemporary Nigerian state and its relationship to the ethnic nations in it.⁷⁶ This is especially the case since the issues that generated Biafra are neither ephemeral nor inconsequential to Nigeria's statehood even now.

Conclusion

The sentiments of the respondents need to be seen against the background of the mutual fear and distrust that have characterized relations among different groups in Nigeria, alongside the non-performance of government at various levels. This gives rise to imaginings of reasons for official under-performance including recourse to primordial explanations; an ethno-regional politics which is still largely alive in Nigeria; a winner-takes-all politics that impinges on the ability of the government to respond to development needs. This type of politicking breeds the tendency of the political elites to manipulate ethnic and regional differences and promote them as planks for comparison of performance and legitimacy. The state and its agencies play a critical role in what is remembered and what is forgotten. The way such narratives are presented influence the processes of remembering and forgetting, especially when such narratives are socially privileged or emanate directly from the formal organs of a social group.

However, one problem here is that such acts suffer from the illusion of conceiving the state as a unitary whole. Another problem is that this perspective assumes that the interest of the state overrides the forces of difference in it. But, as Foucault points out, there is always the danger of counter-memory, which underlines the fact that the memory privileged by the state may in actual sense

be the past that is consistent with maintaining the status quo and its brand of elites.⁷⁷ However, just as Foucault explained, there is no way of building reliable counter-memory or discourse outside power, thus such groups as MAS-SOB and local political elites who push the Biafran discourse are also in the vanguard of the quest for power. For these groups, the final settlement of the Biafra episode lies in the creation of a Biafran state carved out of Nigeria and in which they are the privileged power holders and power brokers.

Memory is essentially a two-way street. This is no less the case in Nigeria. While marginalized and oppressed groups may subscribe to a social memory peculiar to their groups, the oppressors may also invoke nationalist memories and foundations to legitimize their grip on power. For instance, during the thirty-month civil war in Nigeria, the refrain 'One Nigeria' was promoted as a battle cry by the federal side. 'One Nigeria', encapsulated a national unity that was considered superior to remembrances of the past by any individual group.

Accordingly, while social memory can serve the interests of the group that feels marginalized, it can equally be exploited by statist ideologies and employed to build notions and rhetoric of homogeneity considered necessary to the maintenance of the status quo. Nation-states are not inured to the manipulation and exploitation of history. Often, the principle of the necessity of keeping the state together is seen as providing a justification for such manoeuvres. The systematic forgetfulness or collective amnesia of the state in Nigeria to the Biafra episode is a classic example of this tendency. However, this orientation has only a short-term utility since it is bound to back-fire and impedes the development of a genuine national identity. It would appear that the reasonable option is for a constructive and systematic engagement of the Nigerian state with this past represented by the civil war.

Beyond the political and social tensions which Biafra had generated and still generates is the unavoidable conclusion that Biafra has become a symbol of socio-political and economic marginalization or exclusion in modern Nigeria. Therefore, it is an ideal that may be imitated and ramified by any social group in the country. In other words, while the need to tackle the memory of the war especially in terms of bringing closure to the event by the state in Nigeria cannot be over-stated, there is equally the need for a more equitable realignment of Nigeria's federal structure to respond to the main issues that generated the war.

Notes

1. It may be necessary to state that my aim in this article is neither prognostic nor the pursuit of indictment but rather an examination of the effects of that sad episode in Nigeria's history on memory and the imaginings of the role of the state in contemporary Nigeria.

2. Pamela Machakanja, 'Politics of memory: Collective remembering and manipulation of the past in Zimbabwe', *Africa Peace and Conflict Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2008, p. 45.
3. See Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad (eds.), *Memory in a global age: Discourses, practices and trajectories* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time maps: Collective memory and the social maps of the past* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
4. Emmanuel C. Ejiogu, 'On Biafra: Subverting imposed code of silence', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 6, 2013, pp. 741–751; Chima Korieh, 'Introduction: History and the politics of memory', in Chima Korieh (ed.), *The Nigeria-Biafra war: Genocide and the politics of memory* (New York: Cambria Press, 2012), pp. 1–39.
5. Axel Harneit-Sievers, *Constructions of belonging: Igbo communities and the Nigerian state in the twentieth century* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006).
6. Olajide Oloyede, 'Biafra in the present: Trauma of a loss', *African Sociological Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2009, pp. 2–24.
7. Perhaps, the influence of the war on the Igbo in the post-civil war Nigeria is captured in the contention that, 'for Igbos, memories of Biafra can be poignant and powerful. Igbos commonly explain their perceived marginalization in contemporary Nigeria as a legacy of Biafra', Daniel Smith, 'Legacies of Biafra: Marriage, home people and reproduction among the Igbo of Nigeria', *Africa*, Vol. 75, No. 1, 2005, p. 30.
8. Yuri Lotman, *Universe of the mind: A semiotic theory of culture*, trans. Ann Shukman (London and New York: I. B. Taurus, 1990).
9. See Oloyede, 'Biafra in the present', pp. 2–24.
10. Some of the most dreaded commanding officers of the Nigerian Army during the war including Olusegun Obasanjo and Benjamin Adekunle (Scorpion) were Yoruba; in the same vein, Ojukwu's deputy during the war, Phillip Effiong, who announced the surrender of Biafra by 4:40 P.M. on Monday 12 January 1970 was from Ibiono Ibom, a minority group in the Southeast Region then and in today's Akwa Ibom state.
11. See Korieh, 'Introduction', pp. 1–39; Ejiogu, 'On Biafra', pp. 741–751; Okwudiba Nnoli, *Ethnic politics in Nigeria* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1978); Dauda Abubakar, 'The rise and fall of the first and second republics of Nigeria', in Fidelis Okafor (ed.), *New strategies for curbing ethnic and religious conflicts in Nigeria* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1997), pp. 69–97; Richard Joseph, 'Class, state and prebendal politics in Nigeria', *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 3, 1983, pp. 21–28.
12. Angst which typifies anxiety and fundamental worry over the survival of the region in Nigeria of the 1960s and of the future given the role of such social factors as ethnicity, regionalism, weak federalism and recurrent ethnic and social conflicts.
13. Anthony Hamilton Milliard Kirk-Greene, *The genesis of the Nigerian civil war and the theory of fear* (Uppsala: The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1975).
14. Martin Lynn, 'We cannot let the North down: British policy and Nigeria in the 1950s', in Martin Lynn (ed.), *The British empire in the 1950s: Retreat or revival?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 144–163. For the general context, see also Toyin Falola and Mathew Heaton, *A history of Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), chs. 6 and 7.
15. Actually a very thorough-going historical analysis has shown that these conflicts have occurred in such Northern towns as Kano, Kaduna, Jos, Maiduguri, Jimeta, Gombe, Bauchi, Katsina among others, Slyvanus Udoidem, 'Religion in the political life of Nigeria: A survey of religious related crises since independence', in Fidelis Okafor, *New strategies for curbing ethnic and religious conflicts in Nigeria* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1997), pp. 152–183.
16. According to one estimate, 'these riots took the lives of over 5,000 Igbo residents in a number of Northern Nigerian cities': Osita Agbu, *Ethnic militias and the threat to democracy in post-transition Nigeria* (Uppsala, Sweden: Nordic Africa Institute, 2004), p. 27.

17. Alex Gboyega, 'Nigeria: Conflict unresolved', in William Zartman (ed.), *Governance as conflict management: Politics and violence in West Africa* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1997), pp. 149–196; John Streamlau, *The international politics of the Nigerian civil war, 1967–1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).
18. Yakubu Gowon was the military ruler of Nigeria during the war and some years immediately after the war (1967–1976).
19. Interview by the author with university don Jones Ahazuem, Nsukka, 7 September 2011.
20. Of course other groups in the country can equally contend that the Igbo opted for secession out of phobia of the North or other groups.
21. The emergence of inter-group conflict in Nigeria can be traced back to the pre-independence era especially in the nascent urban towns in the North where the colonial system of residential segregation between the indigenes and stranger-elements helped in fostering a us-versus-them mentality. Also the early history of political activism in Nigeria shows the tendency of the political elites to manipulate ethnic linkages in the quest for power. Both of these factors generated inter-group distrust among the different ethno-social groups in Nigeria. Also Chinua Achebe and Chima Korieh have in more recent works argued that the Igbo were resented by other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria; Chinua Achebe, *There was a country: A personal history of Biafra* (New York: Penguin); Korieh, 'Introduction', pp. 1–39.
22. One of those interviewed, Jones Ahazuem saw this as part of the grand plan to overwhelm Biafra and void its ability to fight or resist the Nigerian state.
23. For good understanding of the colonial basis of ethnicity in Nigeria, see Okwudiba Nnoli, Ethnic politics, and Onigu Otite, *Ethnic pluralism and Ethnicity in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Shaneson, 1990).
24. Estimate by Sobowale; the real figure may be lower or even slightly higher than this. The author was not able to get a verified statistic on this.
25. Dele Sobowale, 'Gowon's call for prayers', *Sunday Vanguard*, 20 October 1996, p. 7.
26. Ahmadu Bello, *My life* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 133.
27. Aburi Ghana was the venue where the warring factions in the Nigerian federation has a peace talk and some form of agreement which was later reneged on by the federal side. In Biafra during the run-up to the war, people would always chant 'on Aburi we stand'. The centrepiece of the Aburi accord was the formation of a loose federation that would have given more autonomy to the regions.
28. Author's interview with Sam Ekenwa, medical doctor and ex-Biafran army captain, Nsukka Town, 7 September 2011.
29. Author's interview with Alhaji Sani Mohammed, trader, Nsukka, 20 May 2013.
30. Author's interview with anonymous 67-year-old man, Obollo Afor, 3 September 2011.
31. Author's interview with 64-year-old retired headmaster, Nsukka, 6 September 2011.
32. Author's interview with Geoffrey Obiekwe, 62-year-old MASSOB sympathizer and lawyer, Nsukka, 19 August 2011.
33. The Hausa-Fulani is used here as is the practice in popular discourse to refer to the Northern part of the country. Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, the North has produced eight heads of state compared to the South's five (including the second coming of Obasanjo and current Jonathan Goodluck. Moreover, Jonathan is Ijaw and only two Igbo have assumed the position ever.
34. In spite of the sentiments of the respondents, the notion of marginalization is one that has become overstretched in contemporary Nigeria and has been invoked by people from the different socio-geographical zones of the country.
35. AG refers to the Action Group, a first republic political party founded by Obafemi Awolowo.
36. Author's interview with Jones Ahazuem, University Don in his sixties, Nsukka, 7 September 2011.
37. Author's interview with 70-year-old retired court clerk, Enugu-Ezike, 4 September 2011.

38. Author's interview with an anonymous 53-year-old businesswoman, Enugu-Ezike, Igbo-Eze North LGA, 3 September 2011.
39. Osa Osemwota, *Regional economic disparity and conflict in Nigeria* (Benin City: Omega Publisher, 1994).
40. Author's interview with Jones Ahazuem, University Don in his sixties, Nsukka, 7 September 2011.
41. Adapted from Raufu Mustapha, *Ethnic structure, inequality and governance of the public sector in Nigeria* (Geneva: UNRISD, 2004).
42. Thus, 'in the run-up to the war, the Igbo and their leaders were initially advocates of federalism, supporting the existing Nigerian system of strong regions and a weak centre. The Hausa-Fulani-dominated Northern Region, however, which controlled a majority of seats within a central parliament had growing reasons to favour a stronger centre, particularly after the discovery of oil in the East coast the regional system of resource control in a new light', Catherine Nwajiaku-Dahou, 'Heroes and villains: Ijaw-nationalist narratives of the Nigerian civil war', *Africa Development*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 2009, p. 55.
43. Peter Lewis, *Identity, institutions and democracy in Nigeria* (Cape Town, Legon-Accra, Lansing: AFROBAROMETER), Working Paper, No. 68, 2007).
44. Even though there has not been a more recent survey especially since an Ijaw person, Jonathan Goodluck became Nigeria's president, it is possible that the percentage of Ijaw who prefer ethnic identity over national identity may have declined significantly.
45. Author's interview with Samuel Ogbonna, 54-year-old community leader, 2 September 2011, Obollo Afor, Udenu LGA.
46. Author's interview with Seriki Abdullahi, Nsukka, 18 May 2013.
47. Author's interview with Musa Aminu, a tailor in his late fifties, Nsukka, 3 September 2011.
48. Author's interview with anonymous youth leader, Ihe, Nsukka, 19 September 2011.
49. Author's interview with Mabel Ugwu, 44-year-old woman leader, Opi, Nsukka, 1 September 2011.
50. Author's interview with anonymous 62-year-old palm wine tapper, Enugu-Ezike, Igbo-Eze North, 3 October 2011.
51. An amalgam of the word 'come' in the three major languages in Nigeria—Yoruba (wa); Hausa (zo); Igbo (bia). The term is commonly invoked as an idiom of unity among the diverse ethno-linguistic groups in the country.
52. Nwajiaku-Dahou, 'Heroes and villains', p. 66.
53. A Pan-Igbo socio-political organization; perhaps well known for presenting one of the most articulate discourses of the marginalization of the Igbo group as a consequence of losing the civil war to the Human Rights Violation Investigation Commission in 1999.
54. See Nwajiaku-Dahou, 'Heroes and villains', pp. 47–67.
55. See Edlyne Anugwom, 'Oil minorities and the politics of resources control in Nigeria', *Africa Development*, Vol. 30, No. 4, 2005, pp. 87–120.
56. Chief Sample Sunday, Community leader and Public Relations Officer of the Chief in Council of Imiringi Community, Emeyal Clan Ogbia, 42 years (8 October 2011).
57. Ebitu Ukiwe was Nigeria's Chief of General Staff, a de facto vice president under Ibrahim Babangida from 1985 until 1987 when he was booted out by Babangida. Although Babangida's regime was military, Ukiwe's importance derived from the fact that he was the first Igbo person to ascend to the office of the second-in-command in Nigeria since the end of the war in 1970. Though Alex Ekwueme, another Igbo, was Vice President under the short-lived civilian administration of Shehu Shagari (1979–1983), Ukiwe was seen as a symbol of the absorption of the Igbo and other Southerners fully into Nigeria's military to which most of them re-entered at the end of the war at lower ranks than they had before the war. In fact, a lot of the officer corps of the Nigerian military from the Southeast were compulsorily retired at the end of the war. Even efforts to address the injustice by converting the retirements into

- benefits accruable exits begun by the democratic regime of Obasanjo (1999–2007) remain largely uncompleted.
58. Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida aka IBB was Nigeria's 8th head of State. He took over power in August 27 1985 after spearheading a coup against the then General Buhari's government. He left unceremoniously on August 27 1993 after annulling the June 12 1993 election often seen as the most fair and free election in Nigeria.
 59. See Edlyne Anugwom and Paulinus Oji, 'Ethnic and religious crisis in Nigeria: A review of past and present dimensions', in Malachy Okwueze (ed.), *Religion and societal development* (Lagos: Merit International Publishers, 2004), pp. 136–161; Isiah Elaigwu, *The shadow of religion on Nigerian federalism: 1960–1993* (Abuja: NCIR, 1993); and Osita Agbu, *Ethnic militias and the threat to democracy in post-transition Nigeria* (Uppsala: Nordic African Institute, 2004) for copious instances of religious violence in the North against stranger-elements, especially those from the South of the country.
 60. Author's interview with a 33-year-old youth leader and businessman, Nsukka, 28 September 2011.
 61. Yakubu Gowon, Important records on Nigerian civil war: The Nigeria war diary, 1966–1970, dates of events in Nigeria (Onitsha: J. C. Brothers Bookshop, 1970).
 62. Ifi Amadiume, 'The politics of memory: Biafra and intellectual responsibility', in Ifi Amadiume and An-Naim Abdullahi (eds.), *The politics of memory: Truth, healing and social justice* (New York: Zed Books, 2000), pp. 38–55.
 63. Author's interview with 48-year-old businessman, Nguru, Nsukka, 25 September 2011.
 64. Melford Okilo, 'The derivation principle and national unity', *Daily Times*, 19 July 1980, p. 5.
 65. Edlyne Anugwom, 'Beyond oil: Environmental rights, travel, local knowledge and youth conflict in the oil-rich Niger Delta of Nigeria', *Africa Today*, Vol. 61, No. 2, 2014, pp. 21–40.
 66. Author's interview with 66-year-old traditional title holder and opinion leader, Odi, 12 October 2011.
 67. Author's interview with 59-year-old woman leader, Ibeku-Opi, Nsukka, 26 September 2011.
 68. Author's interview with 63-year-old native bone setter, Ogurute, Enugu-Ezike, 28 September 2011.
 69. Author's interview with 61-year-old Uzo Emenike, business tycoon and active MASSOB supporter, Nsukka, 24 September 2011.
 70. Author's interview with Shehu Danlami, 68-year-old yam merchant, Nsukka, 3 September 2011.
 71. Anugwom, 'Oil minorities and the politics of resources control in Nigeria', p. 116.
 72. Author's interview with middle aged mother of four, Nsukka 7 September 2011.
 73. Kirk-Greene, The genesis of the Nigerian civil war and the theory of fear.
 74. Interestingly the memories of the war especially the atrocities, human carnage and hunger associated with it have even functioned as antidote to new conflicts. Thus, quite a good number of the respondents while readily asserting that the war has led to the unfair treatment of the Southeast in Nigeria, equally state that they do not wish to see the events of the war again in the country. Thus, the memories of the war do not necessarily fan the embers of discord or whet the appetite for conflict in contemporary Nigeria.
 75. See also Raisa Simola, 'Time and identity: The legacy of Biafra to the Igbo in diaspora', *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2000, pp. 98–117.
 76. Soyinka, The open sore.
 77. Michel Foucault, *Language, counter-memory and practice: Selected essays and interviews*, trans. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).

18 The Asaba Massacre and the Nigerian Civil War

Reclaiming Hidden History

S. Elizabeth Bird and Fraser Ottanelli

Introduction: The October Massacres

In October, 1967, a few months into the Nigerian civil war, federal troops entered Asaba, a small town on the west bank of the River Niger, in pursuit of the retreating Biafran army. Over the next few days, at least a thousand civilians were killed, and the town lay in ruins. News of the atrocities was suppressed by the federal government and, consequently, subsequent histories of the war barely mention the massacre.¹

In an earlier article, drawing on three years of interviews with survivors and witnesses of the killings, pillaging and rapes, we reconstructed the history of the Asaba massacre, using their accounts and available archival sources.² In so doing, we aimed to describe the details of the events that unfolded over a few weeks, while suggesting longer-term consequences. In this chapter, drawing on additional interviews and sources, we focus more centrally on the short and long-term impact of the Asaba killings, providing new insight into the nature of the war and as well as into the legacy of ethnic suspicion that continues to reverberate in Nigeria today.

The civil war had broken out in July 1967, when Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Ojukwu, governor of the predominantly Igbo Eastern Region, declared its independence as the sovereign state of Biafra. Ojukwu argued that Igbos were not safe within Nigeria, responding to massacres of Igbo people in the north and west, following the coup and countercoup of 1966. These ‘pogroms’, as the Igbo called them, had prompted thousands to return to their ancestral homes in the East or Midwestern Regions.³ After the conflict had simmered for a few weeks, Ojukwu made a decision that was to prove momentous—to send Biafran troops across the Niger to invade the midwest. This was the most multiethnic of the four Nigerian regions, and was outside Biafra, which lay east of the Niger. On 9 August, Biafran troops crossed into Asaba, using the new bridge that had been constructed in 1966.

The apparent purpose of the invasion was to draw advancing federal troops away from Biafra’s capital, Enugu, and perhaps even to capture Lagos. The

Biafrans spread west, overrunning Benin City and advancing as far west as Ore, barely one hundred miles from Lagos, where they were halted after key bridges were blown up. However, by late September, the hastily-organized federal Second Infantry Division, under Colonel Murtala Muhammed, had pushed back and retaken Benin City. By 4 October, they had forced the Biafrans back to Asaba, where they retreated across the Niger, blowing up two spans of the bridge, and leaving the federal troops angry and frustrated at their inability to pursue their enemy.⁴ The people of Asaba became the victims of the troops' anger, with hundreds dying at their hands in the next few days.

Before the war, Asaba was a quiet town known mostly for high levels of education; estimates of its population in 1967 vary from 5,000 to 30,000.⁵ Although linguistically Igbo, Asabans consider themselves distinct from their cousins in the east, often claiming the identity 'Anioma',⁶ and their region officially favoured the government's ideal of 'One Nigeria'. The Biafran troops had passed through Asaba without incident; however, as federal troops advanced, reports were reaching the townspeople of killings of Igbo by other ethnic groups in the midwest, and people were anxious. Many in Asaba undoubtedly held sympathy for Biafra and distrusted the government, justifiably believing it had condoned previous atrocities against the Igbo; some, including the Asagba (traditional leader), fled to the east or elsewhere.⁷ Nevertheless, Asaba's population also included many current and retired high-ranking civil servants, who had a strong allegiance to a unified Nigeria. They believed in the professionalism of the country's armed forces and some were no doubt aware of General Gowon's 'operational code of conduct' which was supposed to guide the proper treatment by the military of civilians. Some of those civil servants had fled back to Asaba when non-Igbo civilians took the opportunity to slaughter many Igbos in midwest cities like Benin and Sapele after these cities were retaken by federal troops. In spite of witnessing that horror, many still believed government troops would not attack civilians. As interviewee Gertrude Ogunkeye notes:

The Sunday before the horrible events of October, at mass the Reverend Father had said people were to stay calm and remain in their houses and just stock food and water because if there's going to be a war, it might take a while for things to calm down . . . wait for the war to pass through Asaba and then your life can continue as normal.⁸

Troops entered Asaba on 5 October; citizens were shocked when soldiers began going from house to house looting, demanding money and rounding up boys and men accused of being Biafran sympathizers,⁹ then shooting them on the spot or taking them in groups to execute elsewhere. In some cases, soldiers were seeking specific individuals, who were executed,¹⁰ while others report indiscriminate group killings,¹¹ and a horrific episode when youths

were lined up, and ordered to dig a grave, stand in it, and be shot.¹² Several hundred people seem to have died in small groups all over town. On 6 October, in an attempt to end the violence, senior leaders met to plan a show of support for the Government, in which money and gifts would be presented to the commander.¹³ This strategy had been used in other midwest towns;¹⁴ the next morning, hundreds (by some witness estimates, thousands) of men, women, and children assembled, with elders in front. Singing, dancing, and chanting 'One Nigeria', they moved up the main street, picking up many more on the way. As the crowd reached a major junction, troops removed women and small children, and began channelling men and boys of around twelve and upwards on to the square at Ogbe-Osowa, a village in one of Asaba's quarters. Machine guns were revealed and shooting began. Witnesses report panic as the assembled hundreds were mowed down, starting with elders at the front. Some managed to break loose and run into the bush, while others were shielded by the bodies of the dead and survived.¹⁵

Exactly how many died in this incident is unclear; between 500 and 800 seems likely.¹⁶ Sporadic shooting continued for hours, until darkness caused the soldiers to disperse. Some families were able to retrieve bodies for traditional burial in their compounds,¹⁷ but with surviving townspeople fleeing, many more went unclaimed and were later buried in mass graves or thrown into the Niger. Witnesses report seeing heaps of bodies in the street before it was considered safe to begin burial.¹⁸

After the Massacres

After 7 October, the worst killing stopped, although federal soldiers remained barracked in Asaba for many months, and acts of violence continued. By the second week of October many civilians had found refuge in nearby bush or small towns in the area; others with family elsewhere had fled to Lagos or crossed the Niger into Biafra, not to return until the war's end in 1970. The once thriving town was largely deserted, with most houses burned and everything of value stolen. The records of relief organizations, several of which came into the area in the months following and at the war's end, indicated the exceptional and long-lasting nature of Asaba's suffering, one noting in 1969, 'UNICEF reports the Midwestern region normalized, except for Asaba'.¹⁹ Another reported in August 1968:

During the fighting around Asaba, 60% of the homes were leveled and destroyed. . . . People are actually living in what were former latrines which have been merely covered over with a layer of dirt.²⁰

The extent of the destruction is indicated by Asaba's removal in 1969 from the government's official list of Nigerian towns.²¹

In the immediate aftermath, those who had remained in Asaba, or who trickled back as things settled down, were focused primarily on survival. Many returned to what was left of their houses, gradually making them habitable,²² while others subsisted in refugee camps established in local schools,²³ joining other displaced refugees from surrounding areas. In a report to the American Friends Service Committee in August 1968, visiting relief workers David Scanlon and Christian Hansen described conditions in the largest camp, at St. Patrick's College, where they witnessed 'extreme malnutrition' and a complete lack of medical care (see Figure 18.1). Scanlon notes that six or seven refugee teachers were trying to offer classes:

There are probably about 400 children in the camp/school. They have no books, paper, pencils; the teachers are trying to recall the subject matter that they would be covering in an ordinary class. . . . I have never seen teachers trying to teach without any materials/supplies. . . . I have nothing but admiration for these teachers. . . .²⁴

Conditions remained dire in Asaba for the rest of the war. Throughout 1968, repeated incursions of small groups of Biafran soldiers led to skirmishes around the town, followed by reprisals from federal troops. In April



Figure 18.1 Refugee Camp at St. Patrick's College, Asaba, 1968. Photo courtesy of American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, USA.

1968, federal troops forcibly evacuated many still living in the town for several weeks, further swelling the numbers on the refugee camps, and resulting in another significant wave of killings of men and boys accused of Biafran sympathies.²⁵ This is known in Asaba as the 'second operation'. During this time, Asabans were caught in an impossible situation, struggling to survive while under occupation from soldiers who distrusted their every move. Scanlon and Hansen noted:

People are confined in the town by the military government as it is feared they might . . . give help to the Biafrans. . . . Medical supplies are simply not there. Theoretically people could go to the doctors attached to the military but after the . . . killings that have taken place in the town the people are petrified and are afraid to go near the army at all. And they would have to go through army lines to get to the military doctor.²⁶

They observed that people still in the town were required to get permits from the military to move about, and that farming and commerce had come to a halt, further exacerbating the food shortages (see Figure 18.2).



Figure 18.2 Refugees Assemble for Distribution of Rice, Beans and Yams; Catholic Mission, Asaba, 1968. Photo courtesy of American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, USA.

Resilience and Recovery

With the loss of so many men, a huge burden fell on women, as they faced the task of rebuilding their families' lives alone. Felicia Nwandu describes her return to Asaba after a few weeks in the bush:

We have no home to enter. Our house was burnt down. Everything. In fact, you know, the bags they put rice and beans, that is what we tied, because there was no clothes, there was nothing for us to hide our nakedness.²⁷

The family lived as refugees in their own community:

We suffered . . . later we saw some Christian organizations, they give us salt . . . you just put your finger in the salt like this (*swirls finger*) and then put it in your soup so you can get that taste. A lot of children *kwashi-orkor*, people were dying just like that. We ate rat, lizard, all these things.

At times, religious groups stepped in. Emma Okocha, for example, described how after the death of his father, his mother felt unable to care for him, as the youngest of several surviving brothers. She handed him over to a Catholic nun, who then raised him.²⁸ Aged 14 in 1967, Martina Osaji lost her father and up to forty other male relatives. Her mother was a refugee in Biafra, so Martina was taken in by a Catholic priest who had studied under her father, until her sister finished secondary school and could take care of her.

However, in families that rebounded, women were the key. With the breakdown of traditional patterns of responsibility, some women took on roles that would have been unthinkable before, as in the Uraih family. Before the war, Asaba indigene Robert Uraih was a successful tailoring contractor in Kano, northern Nigeria, where the family lived in the *Sabon Gari*, the 'strangers' quarters' assigned to non-indigenes. Several of Robert's ten children were born in Kano, and visited Asaba only during the summer holidays, spending time with grandparents in the family home. Ify Uraih describes their life in Kano: 'my father was quite well-to-do. We were comfortable. We had stewards; we had a driver who was taking us to school'.²⁹ When the 1966 pogrom began, the family fled to Asaba; the oldest son was in university in Britain. Robert and two of his sons, Paul and Emma, were killed on 7 October, and another son, Medua, was gravely wounded. Robert's other son Ify also survived, crawling out from among the bodies of the dead. Later, Robert's wife, Veronica, then 49 years old, found the bodies of Robert and Emma, and dragged them in a wheelbarrow back to the family house for burial. Paul was never found.

Mrs. Uraih, who had lost nine members of her own natal family, took on the role of family leader. Robert had been the patriarch, with many extended family members beholden to him, and with his death, the surviving children described how those family members turned their backs on her and her children, refusing to help:

I think it was not out of wickedness and such. . . . It was because there was no money. They didn't even have money to train their own children. It was my father helping them. So, when it happened, they couldn't get their share.³⁰

Life had been turned upside down:

If you look at it, for a woman who was not a working mother because she was being provided for, all of a sudden turned to be a trader, a working woman, to fend for her children—not only one but about six. Life has to change greatly.³¹

Although she had lost almost everything, the family home remained standing, if damaged, and Mrs. Uraih was determined to ensure her children succeeded. She became a trader, and her children also hawked goods when they could. While tradition had dictated dependence on the extended family, the Uraih's formed their own tight-knit unit: 'It taught me a lesson—mind your business. . . . Because you don't know who is your friend, who is not. . . . So we had our own relationship amongst ourselves'.³² All the Uraih children went on to higher education, including the girls:

Her eyes were red, she would say this smoke that is making me cry now will never touch my daughters. . . . They must go to school . . . as long as I'm alive none of my daughters will suffer. So that had been her determination.³³

In Asaba, as in Igbo society generally, when a woman dies she is returned for burial to her natal family. When Mrs. Uraih died in her nineties, her children insisted she be buried in the Uraih family house, recognizing her central role in their survival and success. We heard other stories like hers; the resilience of such women was striking. Again, relief workers reports point to the way the people of Asaba, especially women, worked hard to rebuild their shattered homes and lives:

While we were in the area we saw some of the most imaginative examples of self-help projects and cooperatives of any of our trips. These

included rabbit raising, piggeries, poultry farms and fisheries. . . . We were impressed with their foresight and initiative as they prepared for a return to normal life even while the military situation could not permit mobility and continuity.³⁴

And, as E. Uchendu notes, their new independence began to undermine traditional male dominance in a way that resonates today.³⁵

While many other communities throughout Nigeria and secessionist Biafra suffered great loss of life in the war, few lost so many key people in such a targeted way. On entering Asaba, the rampaging troops had singled out influential men by name,³⁶ and many more elders and titled men were in the forefront of the Ogbe-Osowa massacre. Some families lost up to forty men and boys; witness Charles Ugboko noted, ‘some women went crazy, they just couldn’t bear it. . . . Some lost all their sons, plus husband’.³⁷ These losses had a profound impact on the political structure and traditional family support system. For instance, Assumpta Mordi’s uncle, Daniel Mordi, was the recognized family head. A prominent figure, he ran a successful stenography school; his impressive home and its telephone (the first in Asaba) stood as symbols of his influence. Like many Asaba leaders, he was a strong proponent of western education, and family members turned to him for guidance and to settle differences. Assumpta, a small child in 1967, was living temporarily away from Asaba with her immediate family, but described how usually cousins from the same extended family of polygamous marriages lived together ‘like brothers and sisters. All the children ate according to age grades, and the wives took turns to cook’.³⁸ Daniel Mordi died at Ogbe-Osawa, along with his brothers Gabriel and Benedict and at least one cousin; after that, ‘everything fell apart’. Daniel’s wives struggled to keep the children in school, as they had lost not only him but also his brothers who would normally step in to help. The two surviving junior brothers, including Assumpta’s father, were overwhelmed and could not take care of them all. The family never returned to its former prominence: ‘my family with that glory and all that is all gone. . . . We never really recovered’.

Many other families were equally devastated. Emmanuel Chukwara lost four brothers, Eddie, Christian, Dennis, and Samson, as well as his mother, Mgbeke, and father, David. He survived because he had taken his wife and children to safety as the troops arrived:

There is no house . . . that did not suffer the killing. There are places you have three doctors, all killed. Father, mother, everybody. In my mother’s case, the senior brother was killed, the next sister was killed, the junior ones, about five of them. . . . I was the only man in the house

where you have more than thirty people. . . . I was responsible for my children, for the children of my relations, too.³⁹

Emmanuel described how heavy this burden became for him, as a man who would never normally have this level of authority, and how many family members, himself included, were never able to receive the education that once would have been expected.

As noted by anthropologist Victor Uchendu, the extended family, often including the descendants (through the male line) of one great-grandfather, was (and still is) the building block of Igbo society.⁴⁰ Senior males are the linchpins, but all males are highly valued: 'Following from mutual dependence, is the value placed on the importance of man. Man is valued above all things in Igbo society. The society demanded, and still demands, a large family, a demand that makes polygyny a desirable goal and the position of ancestors a dignified one'.⁴¹ Influential men would likely have two or more wives and many children; in addition to having responsibility for them, they were also expected to provide leadership to their full and half-brothers and their families, and to assist with education and other needs. Such men would also be expected to provide for the widows and children of men who died. This hierarchical kinship structure is an essential foundation for local community cohesion; as Elizabeth Isichei points out, it incorporated:

the authority of the family head, Diokpa . . . over the extended family, the authority of the governing age-group, Oturaza, over the whole town, and the limited and specific duties and the personal prestige of individuals holding particular titles. The Diokpa was the oldest man of the oldest surviving generation in a family. Each quarter, as well as each component family, acknowledged a Diokpa's authority. He was regarded with reverence, for he embodied the authority of the ancestors.⁴²

The disruption of traditional support mechanisms within families led to spirals of decline that affected generations. Emeka Okelum Okonta, not born until after the war, offered a vivid picture of the long-term impacts on his family.⁴³ His grandfather (his father's father) was killed, along with two sons; Emeka's father and one brother survived. A wealthier uncle had taken care of this branch of the family, but worn down by the deaths of many family members and the destruction of their homes, he died 'of heartache' in 1969, leaving no clear family leader. Emeka's father fled to Biafra and joined the army, as did other young men who found themselves alone. Returning from the war, he began to rebuild his life without support, his hope of education dashed by the uncle's death. He married, and

obligations to take care of his family and his wife's surviving relatives forced him to take any available occupation. He found work as a driver for the federal ministry of agriculture, but lack of skills and education made him vulnerable to economic downturns and he lost his position to budget cuts in the 1980s. He briefly worked as a taxi driver, but eventually lost the car and became a motorcycle (*okada*) taxi driver, never finding stable employment again. Born in 1973, Emeka was a gifted student who found his prospects for higher education closed. He remembers that, to his dying day, his father repeated how 'his life would have been different' but for the war. Emeka believes that his fall 'from grace to grass', tore his family apart and eventually led to his father's death. He speaks for a generation that sees the disaster resonating today:

I will never be a happy man knowing that this war, this massacre . . . brought penury to me . . . for instance, when I was in the Federal College of Education. . . . A lecturer asked me to buy his handout. . . . Do you know how much his handout was? Forty naira [about twenty-five cents in today's U.S. currency]. . . . I couldn't afford it.

The lecturer berated him, saying he had repeatedly failed to buy the handouts: 'I just can't forget that statement. It lives with me and it will die with me . . . and that contributed to leaving school without the certificate . . . mine is a typical example'.

Along with the civilian killings and the pillage of the town, federal troops targeted many women in Asaba, and rape was widespread. As Tuba Inal notes, 'throughout history, it is almost impossible to find a war where rape did not happen',⁴⁴ yet it was only in the late twentieth century that rape began to be recognized as one of the most devastating crimes of war.⁴⁵ Our male informants typically referred to rape not as a violation of women, but as a challenge to men's rights over 'their' women, for the shame it brought on husbands whose wives or daughters were raped in front of them or abducted by soldiers.⁴⁶ In our interviews, both male and female interviewees described the widespread rape and forcible 'marriages' to soldiers, while also vividly showing how shameful and difficult it was to acknowledge this at the time:

Oh, yeah, there were rapes. I came by enough girls that were forcibly married by soldiers. I have an auntie who was forcibly married by a soldier. After, he left the woman with the children. . . . Children were raped, even old women were raped. . . . They treated us like animals.⁴⁷

The family we stayed with, their daughter was abducted by soldiers . . . taken from Asaba . . . and brought back to her father after a week. When she came back, she was a different girl . . . she wouldn't

talk to anybody, she was very weepy. . . . We got to hear later that the child was taken by one of the officers and used for a week. . . . But, you see, we come from a culture where talk like rape is taboo—a girl says she's been raped, getting married is like an impossibility. So lots of girls had been raped and not said anything.⁴⁸

In these accounts there was no doubt as to who bore the physical and emotional scars of the experience: 'One of our sisters, one of the army officers took her away and dumped her. . . . At that time he has impregnated her and then he moved away'.⁴⁹ Emeka Okonkwo, a boy of six in 1967, observed something he did not understand at the time:

I can remember my mom and one other lady, a soldier man was pointing at them. . . . And my mum and her was kneeling down, begging. After some time my dad took us to the sitting room. And later my mom came and joined us again . . . when I told my mom what I witnessed, she was shocked that I could remember such.⁵⁰

Another male interviewee spoke of the longstanding trauma experienced by a female relative:

After the killing of people in Asaba. . . . They started raping the women. They come to the house. They say they heard gunshots around, that the women are hiding the soldiers. They take them away, then they bring them back later. These girls come back, they cannot talk. . . . One of my relatives, when she sees me, she says, 'Fabian, do you remember what happened when they came to take us away?'. She told me, 'I have not discussed this. I have never mentioned it to my husband'. She is feeling bad that she wants to tell him. I said, 'Listen, it's your deal. If you want to tell him, tell him'. She says, 'I want you to tell him'. So, we went out . . . he said he'd never heard, and when he got home, they cried. Anyway, at the end, that was a way for her to forget, because she's been carrying it in her mind all along.⁵¹

We heard no first-person accounts of rape, but we cannot rule out the phenomenon Thomson describes from her interviews with genocide survivors in Rwanda: 'it was common to learn early in our relationship that the sister or neighbor had been raped. . . . Sometimes, later on, the individual would report that in fact she was the person'.⁵² Clearly fear of rape was pervasive. Several women described how as young girls, they were disguised as older women or given babies to carry, in an attempt to ward off would-be rapists. In addition, their stories pointed to the fact that, contrary to many survivors' reports that only males died, many

women were killed in the massacres and occupation, often after resisting the soldiers' advances.

In the last few years, many studies have appeared of the traumatic effect of wartime rape.⁵³ For women, the experience of rape must somehow be incorporated in their daily lives as they continue to function as mothers and providers, often in silence.⁵⁴ So many years later, it is probably impossible to capture the suffering of women in Asaba, yet the literature from more recent events can act as surrogate. As Inal writes, 'For centuries . . . the physical pain of women has been translated into a social pain through the meanings attached to rape'.⁵⁵ In Asaba, the mass rapes have indeed left a palpable legacy in the community at large. Chiseche Salome Mibenge writes of the concerns with male honour that traditionally colour attitudes to rape, and that are 'rooted in such patriarchal considerations as fear of miscegenation . . . the idea that women raped by the enemy army/nation/race will bear children that will be alienated from the targeted group'.⁵⁶

Although some survivors told us that the children of raped women were not stigmatized, they were clearly not easily incorporated into the strongly patrilineal social structure. A child without a recognized father has no place in the extended family, and thus in the village and the quarter. Tradition had ways to absorb the children of unmarried mothers, such as adoption by the women's father. No doubt some children of rape experienced this, but because of the large numbers and the decimation of the male population, this option was often closed. The unassimilated children of rape were known to all, since they carried their mothers' names and had no inheritance rights.

The combined legacy of massive loss of life and widespread rape continues to cast a long shadow on contemporary Asaba. Today, the city faces many of the same problems as other Nigerian communities, such as high unemployment, crime and disaffected youth. However, a common and distinctive narrative in Asaba is that these problems can be attributed to the war; younger generations are described as disrespectful and violent, with no appreciation for tradition, as a direct result of both the physical destruction and the disruption of traditional authority. A specific thread in this narrative, shared by many Asabans, blames the generation of children of rape for many of these problems; we often heard versions of this. A local history, written by a well-known town leader, captures this in describing the 'decline in education' in Asaba, noting that the war 'saw many Asaba families shattered', and pointing to the rise in single mothers of children fathered by soldiers: 'In the end, a good number ended up being school dropouts. Thus, they simply attained growth without development. Today, such children have matured to adults without any visible, sustainable means of livelihood'.⁵⁷ The author argues that these young men then fall into lives of crime, especially blaming them for the pervasive and fraudulent selling off of communal land that has plagued Asaba recently.

While the disaffection of these youth is commonly attributed to the social breakdown caused by the war, some blame the town's problems on a kind of physical 'pollution' of Asaba. This narrative is encapsulated by Emeka Okonta:

We are highly educated people, we are highly intelligent people. We don't steal. . . . After the war you now see children, you now begin to see them steal, to see things that our forefathers never do. You now see youth come out unintelligent. . . . Who when they go to school, fail. This is not a trait of our people. . . . Our people are a race who are advanced. . . . How come we have children who can't express themselves and who resort to vices and crime? Some of these [were] children of those who the federal troops either raped, or those of our women who they enticed to have sex with, they now imported blood—traits—that are foreign. Most of the boys who are creating havoc in town today if you check their birth—they are those born in 1968 to '70. . . . Because those are the people who have this bad blood. They are not the original stock. . . . That is why our people will say *ahaba amago umu wa*—that means this town knows her children . . . anywhere you see a child or a man who is becoming unruly, you will know that these are product of those, we call them *gwodogwo* soldiers.

Egodi Uchendu notes that Asaba historically had a strong disdain for soldiers, dating back for decades before the war. The word 'soldier' could be flung as an insult to women—'an indictment that would automatically label her as defiled and in need of ritual purification'.⁵⁸ Some of the troops who occupied Asaba were from the north and drawn from Hausa-speaking populations; witnesses described them as very tall, very dark, often bearing tribal scars, and very brutal, encapsulated in the derogatory term *gwodogwo*. The difference between Hausa and Igbo (especially Asaba) is seen by some as biological, so pollution by a soldier of this origin is especially shaming.⁵⁹ This sense of 'bloodline' derives from the core notion of the 'indigene'. To be an Asaba indigene, one must be able to trace descent through the male line of one of the five quarters, all of which descend from Nnebisi, the founder of Asaba. Accordingly, the children of rape cannot be true indigenes. The impact of this can still be heard in conversation, or in the discussion on Asaba online forums. For instance, in discussing the impact of a flood in Asaba in October 2012, a contributor on such a forum wrote:

Illegitimate half Sons and daughters gotten from Loose Asaba Women and Rape Victims in the Asaba Genocide have turned Scavengers,

selling Asaba Land indiscriminately to any criminal who can give them money for illicit and worthless life style of women, drugs and alcohol.

Later that year, during a discussion about the prevalence of kidnapping, another contributor commented: ‘those killed or captured should undergo DNA testing to ascertain if they are real Asaba indigenes!!’⁶⁰ Such comments point to the current symbolic meaning of the massacres, a point to which we return below.

Silence and Suppression

Thus, more than four decades since the events of 1967–68, the trauma is still felt, leaving a pervasive sense of unresolved grievance. At one level this is personal—surviving individuals still mourn the loss of so many loved ones. At another level, there is anger that this trauma has gone so long unrecognized. Many interviewees told us they rarely spoke of the massacres outside their families, because they would not be believed:

I kept it all buried in my heart. When I went to school in Lagos and the war had ended . . . I was talking about the Civil War with a group of Yoruba classmates, and I told the story. One of them, whose father was a magistrate, looked me in the eyes and said I was a liar, that it could never have happened. I took a knife, and I almost killed him. I was going to be expelled from my school because his mother . . . thought the principal brought in some ex-Biafran soldiers to kill their children. . . . Fortunately for me, the principal was a Catholic reverend father, and he happened to have known a little bit about what happened. So, he managed to solve the problem.⁶¹

This lack of knowledge outside Asaba is not surprising. In Nigeria in 1967, the government kept tight control of the media, with newspapers taking a firmly pro-government line and the midwest action, including the arrival of federal troops in Asaba, was described as a ‘liberation’.⁶² Accounts of federal soldiers slaughtering hundreds of fellow-Nigerians would have seriously undercut claims that the war was aimed only to keep Nigeria united and the massacres went unreported. London *Times* correspondent Bill Norris passed through Asaba in mid-October, sending back photos of the damage and noting that the town appeared to be largely abandoned.⁶³ When interviewed in 2012, he noted that while the damage in the largely deserted town was extensive, he had no idea that a systematic massacre had occurred.⁶⁴

The international media mostly relied on official Nigerian sources and hearsay accounts.⁶⁵ The British press, especially influential in Nigeria, was

largely silent about the war in 1967. According to Norris, most other reporters ‘stayed in Lagos and took briefings from the British Consulate [who] lied through their teeth throughout’.⁶⁶ The only mention of mass killing in Asaba appeared in the London *Observer*, almost four months later, when Africa correspondent Colin Legum confirmed that federal troops took part in the killing. However his (second-hand) account claimed that a group of ‘implacably hostile’ Igbo attacked troops by surprise as they watched the welcome dance, leading to retaliation.⁶⁷ Book-length accounts of the war written close to the time, whether pro-federal or pro-Biafran, typically made no reference to the Asaba massacre (or any other large-scale civilian deaths).⁶⁸ The occasional mention, such as by John de St. Jorre, echoes the explanation given by Legum, as do some later histories.⁶⁹

It is unclear how much the federal government in Lagos knew about what was happening in the midwest; it is well known that Colonel Muhammed functioned much like an independent warlord.⁷⁰ There is evidence that attempts to inform people outside Asaba of the massacres were systematically suppressed. Our interviewee Sylvester Okocha, an Asaba indigene and then senior civil servant in Benin, wrote to the International Committee of the Red Cross describing what had just happened. After his letter was intercepted by the military, he was arrested, tortured and incarcerated in Lagos.⁷¹ Indeed, the Nigerian government kept tight control of all information from the war zone, making it illegal for anyone, including international news sources, to divulge information deemed detrimental to federal authorities.⁷²

Some attempts were made to get news to Britain, resulting in a series of exchanges in the letters pages of the *Times* in late 1967, in which reports of a massacre in Asaba were condemned as ‘wild rumours’ by the High Commissioner of Nigeria, B. O. Ogundipe,⁷³ and also dismissed by Bryan Sharwood Smith, former governor of northern Nigeria.⁷⁴ The British government was firmly on the federal side,⁷⁵ and the official position denied all atrocities. The *Times* of London reported in 1968 that Biafran propaganda had instilled fear of federal soldiers in Igbo people, but these fears were unfounded.⁷⁶ A year later, the *Times* reported that an international observer team had ‘been unable to find one single trace of mass killings of Ibos’.⁷⁷

The silence only lifted in 1994 when Emma Okocha (who lost his father at Asaba) published the first sustained account of the massacres. It made a considerable impact in Asaba and among the Nigerian diaspora and was crucial in spurring recent attempts to reclaim the history.⁷⁸ Okocha brought the Asaba events to the attention of the Nigerian Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission (HRVIC, or Oputa Panel), established in 2001 by President Olusegun Obasanjo. The panel considered human rights

abuses from 1966 to May 1999, and included 1969 depositions made by Asaba survivors and testimony from witnesses. The Oputa panel dissolved in ethnic wrangling,⁷⁹ and its report was never officially released, although it is now available on the internet. However, it brought visibility to Civil War (and other) atrocities, and set the stage for more survivors to write and speak publically.⁸⁰ Especially valuable was the work of Egodi Uchendu, whose interviews with women in 2000–2001 shed light not only on the Asaba massacres, but on the neglected experience of women in the entire Anioma region.⁸¹

The Distinctive Suffering of Asaba

Clearly, the Asaba experience is only one among many stories of suffering left by the civil war. However, it presents singular characteristics which had a major and unique impact not only on the progression of the war, but also on the deeply entrenched ethnic hostility that continues to linger today. Asaba, while suffering one of the worst systematic killings of civilians by federal troops, was in the Midwest Region, which had not joined secessionist Biafra. Indeed, all those who died in the massacre of October 7 were killed while pledging support for ‘One Nigeria’ and condemning secession. As noted above, Asaba’s tradition of civil service had contributed to a sense of allegiance to a united Nigeria, along with trust that federal troops would behave appropriately. It is striking that one of those who decided to await the arrival of federal troops, presumably sharing this sense of trust, was Sidney Asiodu. A younger brother of Philip Asiodu, an Asaba indigene who was a federal permanent secretary and a prominent member of General Gowon’s war cabinet, he was residing in Asaba and was killed in the early days of the occupation.

The Asaba massacres are distinctive in other significant ways. First, we argue that the slaughter of civilians outside of the secessionist Biafra had a major impact on the progression of the war. While the federal government worked hard to prevent news reaching the outside world, people fleeing Asaba brought news of the massacres to Biafra, and this killing of large numbers of people of Igbo ethnicity appeared to confirm long-standing Biafran claims that the war was one of genocide. A few months later, the Joint Consultative Assembly of Biafra sent a document to the UN Committee on Human Rights, listing multiple atrocities, starting with the 1966 pogroms and continuing through the midwest invasion. In requesting that the war be ruled genocide, it noted: ‘Asaba was one of the centers of mass killings of the natives’, and gave detailed accounts of murder and rape, with one witness estimating 2,000 killed.⁸² Essentially, the Biafrans were arguing that if federal troops would massacre so many of those who

remained loyal to Nigeria, simply because of their ethnicity, they would do far worse to Igbos who had defied the government and seceded.

Therefore, while Asaba was not the only site of civilian killings in the midwest,⁸³ the combination of the numbers killed, along with the other atrocities committed in the town, sent an especially chilling message that served to steel Biafran fear and resolve. Meanwhile, although it might be speculative to suggest that the success of the Nigerian government in suppressing this news might have muted international opposition to the war, it seems safe to assume that the consequences of the massacres almost certainly helped prolong the war.

Furthermore, the suffering inflicted by federal troops on a community that was part of the midwest and therefore lay outside Biafra has left an especially bitter sense of grievance, which has had long-lasting effects. As Wole Soyinka wrote in 1972, the midwestern Igbo, caught between their desire to remain part of the federation and their identity with eastern cousins, became ‘the most vulnerable Nigerians’.⁸⁴ In fact, to this day, Asabans (and some other neighbouring midwesterners), still feel caught in the middle. The legacy of the federal soldiers’ actions makes identification with a truly united Nigeria problematic. Yet at the same time, they also resist attempts to be pulled into Biafran resurgence movements or initiatives to group them with ‘Biafran war dead’ for memorial purposes, since many blame Biafra for having initiated the war in the first place.

Conclusion: The Significance of Memory

In objective terms, it is impossible to prove, as some claim, a direct link between the wartime massacres and many of the problems that currently afflict Asaba. The physical destruction of the town is undisputed, and in the absence of significant government help, the people depended on the ability of the extended family to start again. Bullet holes still scar many buildings, and survivors pointed out homes that had never been repaired; the main boys’ secondary school, St. Patrick’s College, was only restored in 2012. More complex is the broader perception of social decline, which speaks to the symbolic meaning of the massacres today. Still, in the community’s collective memory there is a strong connection between the events of October 1967 and the problems of the present. With a paucity of full documentary sources, our knowledge of the October events derives largely from oral accounts. Alessandro Portelli, in an early and influential defence of oral history, noted that the richness of the method does produce valid accounts of past events, especially when these have been silenced in traditional histories.⁸⁵ At the same time, he cautioned that ‘memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings’,⁸⁶

a point that has been taken up by the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of ‘memory studies’ in recent years.⁸⁷ Our many interviews showed that over four decades, the people of Asaba have constructed potent memories about the massacres and their contemporary salience. This construction starts with the community memory of the Ogbé-Osowa parade itself, which is now often framed as a horrendous betrayal that was completely unexpected, given the goodwill gesture of the people—joyful marchers were mowed down without warning, in a grotesque dance of death. This core narrative is regularly heard from people who were not physically present. Yet eyewitnesses report that the killings started days earlier, as soon as the troops arrived, and that the parade was not a joyful welcome, but a last-ditch attempt to stop the killing. Several days of chaotic killing are distilled into one highly dramatic (if undoubtedly real) event that has become the centrepiece of a narrative that also offers a horrific and one-dimensional depiction of the evil northern perpetrators.

This collective memory does important symbolic work. It marks out Asaba as being especially badly hit, and supports the notion of exceptionalism that characterizes many Asaba people’s senses of identity. A common expression in Asaba is ‘*aya buta kpum*’—‘the war brought my grief’—showing the sense among many that everything bad, unjust or wrong in the community is the result of the massacre and its aftermath. Asaba people generally believe that resentment of its tradition of education and professional success was one reason the town was targeted. The war destroyed that elite status, which in the view of our informants ‘set us back decades’. Interviewees repeatedly told us of the important people who died—the doctors, lawyers, civil servants and chiefs, with less emphasis given to the many ‘ordinary’ people also killed. One man noted: ‘The long-term effect is that we lost our rightful position in the scheme of things. In Nigeria, generally’.⁸⁸ This sense of exceptionalism is further bolstered by the additional threads that speak to the purity of Asaba indigeneity, as well as by the failure of postwar Nigeria to acknowledge the atrocity. For the people of Asaba, the combination of official concealment as well as the local selective narrative of the event as an act of ‘genocide’ have combined to keep ethnic tensions alive and stood in the way of meaningful reconciliation.

Named the Delta State capital in 1991, Asaba has experienced great growth in the last two decades, with a new airport, quality hotels, restoration of some schools, and an explosion of home and local government building. Nevertheless, the legacy of the massacres and destruction is still potent, exacerbated by the long history of silence. In 2002, after the Oputa panel, former President General Gowon (while stating that he had no knowledge at the time) offered a personal apology to Asaba, which

was a deeply symbolic moment that emboldened more people to speak out. Survivors and community leaders are now working to create a public memorialization, efforts in which we are active participants,⁸⁹ while others propose pursuing more legal remedies based on a desired formal government admission of guilt.⁹⁰ Whatever their differences, the common goal is to make the story of the Asaba massacres part of the ‘officially sanctioned heritage’ of Nigeria.⁹¹ Many now also speak of the role that the story of what happened in Asaba could have in opening dialogue and inviting reconciliation. For instance, during our research, stories (sometimes reluctantly) emerged that complicated the common narrative of pure evil. Several survivors recalled instances in which, amid the brutality, individual federal officers and soldiers stepped in to prevent violence and to save and protect civilians. Some of them came from the same ethnic groups whose ‘impure blood’ was seen as ‘polluting’ Asaba, yet they displayed the upstanding behaviour that prevented even further bloodshed. Some people in Asaba recognize that these stories are an important part of the history, and may help point the way to reconciliation rather than revenge.

In Nigeria, the process of memorialization as a form of transitional justice is complex and fraught with potential dangers. As Chinua Achebe noted in the memoir published just before his death,⁹² there has been a deep-seated reluctance to discuss the war and its consequences; standard Nigerian history curricula largely ignore it.⁹³ Some commentators argue that violence and ethnic hatred in contemporary Nigeria are partly attributable to the legacy of the war;⁹⁴ our research suggests that the unresolved burden of memory has indeed become a potent symbol of festering injustice. However, our hope, shared with many in Asaba, is that an understanding of the community’s complex history, and its acknowledgement in the nation’s sanctioned memory will not only enrich the record of the Nigerian civil war, but may also help address this lingering legacy and ultimately contribute to meaningful reconciliation.

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special issue and two anonymous reviewers for the helpful comments that have strengthened this paper. Finally, we thank the many people of Asaba who agreed to tell their often painful stories. More information on the ongoing research may be viewed at www.asabamemorial.org

Notes

1. We explore the history, legacy, and significance of the massacres in much greater detail in our book: S. Elizabeth Bird and Fraser Ottanelli, *The Asaba massacre: Trauma, memory and the Nigerian civil war* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, in press).
2. See S. Elizabeth Bird and Fraser Ottanelli, 'The history and legacy of the Asaba, Nigeria, massacres', *African Studies Review*, Vol. 54, No. 3, 2011, pp. 1–25. When citing interviews, we indicate the name of the interviewee in an endnote, along with the interview date. Unless stated otherwise, interviews took place in Asaba.
3. Immediately before the war, Nigeria was divided into four regions: the Yoruba-dominated western, Igbo-dominated eastern, Hausa-Fulani dominated northern, and the multiethnic Midwestern Region.
4. Stanley E. Orobator, 'The Biafran crisis and the midwest', *African Affairs*, Vol. 86, 1987, pp. 367–383.
5. Egodi Uchendu, 'The growth of Anioma cities', in Toyin Falola and Steven J. Salm (eds.), *Nigerian cities* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004), pp. 153–182, puts the figure at 30,000. However, relief workers' reports from 1968 mention 6,000 or 12,000 (e.g., David Scanlon, Report to American Friends Service Committee, Philadelphia, 3 October 1968, Archives of American Friends Service Committee). A 1970 assessment of damage at the war's end noted that before the war there were '1,186 recorded houses', which would suggest that 30,000 is an over-estimation (Quaker Service—Nigeria, Refugees Relief and Rehabilitation Report #14 June 1970, p. 2, Archives of American Friends Service Committee, Philadelphia). Differences may reflect a distinction between the town proper and the Asaba administrative district.
6. Don C. Ohadike, *Anioma: A social history of the western Igbo people* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994).
7. See Egodi Uchendu, *Women and conflict in the Nigerian civil war* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007) for a discussion of Anioma sympathy for Biafra.
8. Gertrude Ogunkeye interview, 11 December, 2009, Lagos.
9. Testimony of Francis Dike Okwudiafor, made 20 January 1969; included in *The violations of human and civil rights of Ndi Igbo in the federation of Nigeria (1966–1999)*, October 1999, p. 78, available at: www.asabamemorial.org/data/ohanaeze-petition.pdf. Retrieved 2 May 2014. Ohanaeze Ndigbo, a pan-Igbo rights group, presented this 'Ohaneze petition' to the Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission (known as the Oputa Panel). In subsequent endnotes, 'Testimony' refers to 1969 depositions included in this document.
10. Stanley Okafor, 12 October 2011 (Ibadan); Medua Uraih, 13 December 2010.
11. Patience Chukura, 10 December 2010 (Lagos).
12. Nicholas Azeh, 5 October 2011.
13. Testimony of John Kanayo Hudson Oddittah, p. 90.
14. E. Uchendu, *Women and conflict*, p. 76, notes that several midwest communities had staged formal shows of support for 'One Nigeria', hoping to avoid reprisals.
15. Interviewees present at the parade offered consistent accounts; for details of the event as it unfolded based on their testimony, see Bird and Ottanelli, 'The history and legacy'. Another eyewitness account is provided in Celestina Isichei-Isamah's self-published book, *They died in vain* (Seattle: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011).

16. No precise casualty count has been established. In 1981, the Asaba Development Council compiled a list of 373 dead, acknowledging many more not included. Eyewitness estimates range from 500 to over 1,000. In 1968, Legum noted 700 dead (see note 58). In October 1968, David Scanlon of Quaker Relief Services reported that 759 men and boys had been massacred in Asaba after 'the recapture of the city' the previous year. (Report to American Friends Service Committee, Philadelphia, 3 October 1968, consulted in AFSC Archives). Both these reports rely on second-hand accounts.
17. Testimony of Francis Dike Okwudiafor, 78.
18. Frank Ijeh, 13 December 2009; Patrick Obelue, 12 December 2009; Emeka Okonkwo, 28 June 2010, and others.
19. International Red Cross Committee, 'Food and relief situation', 24 April 1969, p. 22, Archives of AFSC, Philadelphia.
20. American Friends Service Committee, 'Nigeria/Biafra relief', 10 October 1968, Archives of AFSC, Philadelphia.
21. E. Uchendu, 'The growth of Anioma cities'.
22. Igwemma Osakwe, 12 December 2009 (Asaba).
23. E. Uchendu, *Women and conflict*.
24. Transcript of tape recorded by David Scanlon and Christian Hansen, 15 August, 1968; summary of recommendations to American Friends Service Committee, no page numbers, Archives of AFSC.
25. Many interviewees mentioned relatives killed or displaced in April 1968. Felix Onochie (interviewed June 28, 2010), for example, described how the troops stormed into the family house, and fired into the ceiling, killing his brother Emanuel, who was hiding there.
26. Scanlon and Hansen, 15 August 1968.
27. Felicia Nwandu, 28 June 2010.
28. Emma Okocha, 13 October 2009 (Tampa).
29. Ify Uraih, 9 October 2009 (Tampa).
30. Victoria Nwanze (nee Uraih), 3 May 2012.
31. Medua Uraih, 3 May 2012.
32. Chineze Uraih, 3 May 2012.
33. Victoria Nwanze, 3 May 2012.
34. Report of Bradford and Jean Abernethy: 'AFSC relief efforts for war sufferers in the federally reoccupied areas of Nigeria, September–December. 1968', Archives of American Friends Service Committee, Philadelphia, US, pp. 3–4.
35. E. Uchendu, *Women and conflict*.
36. Joseph Nwajei, 10 October 2009 (Tampa) described how his uncle George, a prominent civil servant, was executed in the family home.
37. Charles Ogboko, 12 December 2009.
38. Assumpta Mordi, 7 October 2011.
39. Emmanuel Chukwara, 15 December 2009.
40. Victor Chikezie Uchendu, 'Ezi na ulo: The extended family in Igbo civilization', *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol. 31, Nos. 1–3, 2007, pp. 167–219.
41. V. Uchendu, 'Ezi na ulo', p. 216.
42. Elizabeth Isichei, 'Historical change in an Ibo polity: Asaba to 1885', *Journal of African History*, Vol. 10, 1969, pp. 421–438.
43. Emeka Okonta Okelum, 24 June 2010.
44. Tuba Inal, *Looting and rape in wartime: Law and change in international relations* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 4.
45. The 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions offered the first legal protection against rape in wartime, and in 1998, the Rome Statute defined rape explicitly as a war crime. 1993 efforts to document 40,000 cases in Bosnia-Herzegovina represented the first systematic recording of rape 'as a weapon of war'. Michelle Hynes

- and Barbara Lopes-Cardozo, 'Observations from the CDC: Sexual violence against refugee women', *Journal of Women's Health and Gender-Based Medicine*, Vol. 9, No. 8, 2000, pp. 819–823.
46. See also Jyotsna Mishra, *Women and human rights* (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2000) for a discussion of rape as humiliation of the male enemy.
 47. Nkemdelim Maduemezia, 23 June 2010.
 48. Gertrude Ogunkeye, 11 December 2009, (Lagos).
 49. Ken Eneamokwu, 28 June 2010.
 50. Interview Emeka Okonkwo, 28 June 2010.
 51. Interview Fabian Oweazim, 10 October 2009 (Tampa).
 52. Susan Thomson, 'Getting close to Rwandans since the genocide: Studying everyday life in highly politicized research settings', *African Studies Review*, Vol. 53, No. 3, 2010, pp. 19–34.
 53. For example, Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman (eds.), *Sites of violence: Gender and conflict zones* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
 54. Veena Das, *Life and words: Violence and the descent into the ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
 55. T. Inal, *Looting and rape in wartime*, p. 60.
 56. Chiseche Salome Mibenge, *Sex and international tribunals: The erasure of gender from the war narrative* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), pp. 41–42.
 57. Augustine N. Ndili, *Guide to customs, traditions and beliefs of Asaba people* (Asaba: His Bride Ventures, 2010), p. 16.
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 59. The troops of the Federal Second Division were drawn from many parts of Nigeria, including the West and Midwest, as we note in Bird and Ottanelli, *The Asaba massacre*.
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 62. For text of the code, see Anthony Hamilton Millard Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and conflict in Nigeria: A documentary sourcebook 1966–1969*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 1: pp. 455–457.
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19 Imagined Nations and Imaginary Nigeria

Chinua Achebe's Quest for a Country

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Introduction

The distinguished African writer Chinua Achebe passed away on 21 March 2013. He will be remembered for his strongly held view that writers should be committed to cultural and socio-political causes, which he himself exemplified. This stance is evident in his last book, *There Was a Country* (2012), a memoir that, according to Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, 'retraces the responsibility of Achebe's faith vis-à-vis a historical challenge . . . [and offers] the definition of the *écrivain engagé*'.¹ Achebe began shouldering the 'historical challenge' with the publication of his seminal and widely-acclaimed novel, *Things Fall Apart* in 1958. As Simon Gikandi observes:

[f]or many students and scholars of African literature, the inaugural moment of modern African literature was the publication of Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart* . . .; since then the Nigerian novelist's reputation has never been hard to sustain.²

For M. Keith Booker, it is 'the African novel that is most often read by Westerners and taught in British and American classrooms [in] courses in world literature'.³ It is also on most school and university syllabi in Africa.⁴ Additionally, it has been translated into at least fifty-three languages.⁵ Undoubtedly, the novel is now part of the international English literary canon. Achebe's success was also instrumental in the emergence of the first generation of African writers, especially in his role as the founding editor of the influential Heinemann African Writers Series from 1962 to 1972.

What is more, Achebe's writing has also contributed to the formation of the critical practice on African literature. Indeed, *Things Fall Apart* was one of the key texts in response to which the professional study of African literature emerged.⁶ Moreover, the novel was central to the formation of postcolonial theory, especially for the notion that postcolonial texts 'write

back' to the metropolitan centre.⁷ It has also featured in key debates in critical theory, for instance in Stephen Knapp's *Literary Interest* as an example of texts that resist what he regards as the tendency of critical theory to reduce canonical texts to political statements rather than attending to their open-ended form.⁸ The inclusion of the novel in an important debate on the state of theory underlines Achebe's significance as a reference point in contemporary cultural theory and practice.

Achebe's fame rests not only on his first novel, but also on his subsequent work, primarily his four novels: *No Longer at ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), *A Man of the People* (1966) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), which consolidated his position as the leading African novelist. All his fictional work seeks to explore the history and formation of contemporary Nigeria. For the Nigerian critic Abiola Irele, Achebe's role in African letters 'has consisted in bringing fully to our consciousness the processes and forces that have determined our peculiar experience in the modern age. No one was better placed therefore to understand and to point out the directive purpose of literature in the crisis of consciousness that has attended our experience of colonialism and its agonizing aftermath'.⁹

This chapter argues that in *There Was a Country*, Achebe extends the probing of the historical and postcolonial 'crisis of consciousness' in his creative writing to the domain of the memoir, this time, situating it as a narrative of lived experience rather than of the literary imagination. Irele has noted that Achebe's creative writing is 'a function of the comprehensive testimony it offers of the turns and patterns of an unfolding drama of existence in which [Nigerians] have been and continue to be involved'.¹⁰ The chapter proposes that, in the memoir, Achebe extends that literary testimonial function to autobiographical testimony, using his life as a site for exploring national history. Nevertheless, in the shift from literature to autobiography, Achebe does not repress his literary craftsmanship. Thus, the memoir is a hybrid text that testifies to history, but with the obvious writer's freedom to experiment with form. In this regard, it echoes Paul de Man's view that autobiographies are forms of masking and fictionalizing the self.¹¹ Yet, the autobiographical subject that emerges cannot be easily reduced to the fictional status of novelistic characters, especially because the memoir also presents itself as a well-researched historical account, with footnotes and all. It is the tension between the memoir's aspiration to historical authenticity and its literary form that is one of the most intriguing aspects about *There Was a Country*. Most critics have neglected this innovative aspect of the book. We will explore it further in the chapter.

It is noteworthy that Achebe locates the 'crisis of consciousness' in both the process of the historical formation of Nigeria and in the absence of post-colonial forms of agency required to probe adequately what was lost and

how it might be retrieved. Thus, whilst he accepts the principle of historical determination in the formation of postcolonial Nigeria, he also insists on the need for an active exercise of restorative agency. In my view, *There Was a Country*, in its deep reflection on the history of Nigeria, its crises and its contemporary formation, is an attempt at such a restoration. It is that project that defines the autobiographical self that emerges from the memoir. In this respect, this chapter disagrees with the negative reception of the memoir. In this chapter, the memoir is regarded as an innovative narrative that combines literary and other forms to plot the nation's progress and that of the autobiographical self. It contributes to our understanding of contemporary Nigeria as well as to the development of the memoir as a genre.

There Was a Country has been criticized for its 'ethnic chauvinism' by, among others, Femi Fani-Kayode.¹² For Biodun Jeyifo, the memoir reveals Achebe as an ethnic ideologue for the fact that he assumes uncritically the notion of Igbo intellectual and professional dominance and disregards the class dimension of postcolonial Nigeria.¹³ These are important criticisms that echo some of the key debates on the relationship between class, ethnicity and state formation in Nigeria. However, they cannot be fully addressed on this occasion without digressing from the main concerns of the chapter.¹⁴ We will return to them briefly towards the end of the chapter. For the time being, suffice to say that Achebe does not offer a classic class reading of Nigeria in *There Was a Country* precisely because, from his personal experience, as elaborated in the memoir, it was his ethnicity rather than his class that defined his primary relationship to the Nigerian national formation, particularly just prior to, during and after the civil war. Nevertheless, whilst the memoir is a loyalist's account of the Biafran cause, a careful reading suggests that Achebe's commitment to the idea of Biafra transcends ethnic identity. It is about the notion that Biafra constituted a liberation of what Jeyifo has, in a different context, described as 'arrested decolonization'.¹⁵ To use Alain Badiou's phrase, the memoir is the work of a 'faithful subject' loyal to the truth of the nationalist revolution.¹⁶

There Was a Country is concerned with much more than the fate of the Igbo people of Nigeria. It is engaged in the production of a viable imagined community in Nigeria.¹⁷ That labour of transformation, Achebe seems to suggest, entails the proper and uninhibited mourning of what has been lost. It is a lament for the loss of, not just a single country, but of several, as it seeks to grasp the essential character of what was lost. It is interspersed with moments of utopic possibility, even as it fundamentally dwells on the idea of postcolonial Nigeria as a dystopia. In summary, it operates with a 'utopia-dystopia dialectic' as its main rhetorical principle of narrative organization and representation of history. At the same time, it firmly sets its sights on achieving a postcolonial utopia.

The memoir locates Nigeria's problems in the colonially derived contradictions embedded in the institutional formation of the country, and in the failure of the postcolonial leadership to resolve the founding intrinsic contradictions as well as in the legacy of ethnicity. It also dramatizes the tension between, on the one hand, the idea of the nation as an 'imagined community', and, on the other, as an 'imaginary' construct, in Jacques Lacan's sense, as merely an illusory promise of such a community.¹⁸ However, the memoir demonstrates the subject's desire to stop this process of serial repetition of hope and its erasure. The search is for an effective and affective as well as a rationally ordered national formation, a country he could call 'home'. The dialectic between the nation as imagined and as imaginary is never completely resolved, but there are moments of utopic possibility such as Achebe's colonial childhood, the independence of Nigeria and the founding of the Republic of Biafra. Thus, the memoir is an articulation of nostalgia for past glimpses of plenitude as well as a veritable manifestation of trauma, the deep wound left on Achebe's nationalist mind by the disappointing trajectory of postcolonial Nigeria.

Theorizing Trauma

The subject's alienation from the state and the nation in Achebe's work can usefully be conceptualized through trauma theory. Ato Quayson offers a helpful observation, that

the African postcolony is a place of violence and death such that to attempt to transcend this space of death requires a careful understanding of the trauma that . . . produced the nation in the first place and that . . . is still persistent to its understanding across the continent'.¹⁹

It is indeed such a retracing of the origins of the trauma of postcolonial identity that Achebe undertakes in *There Was a Country*, bemoaning the loss of countries, homes—places of dwelling.

Following the typology proposed by Dominick LaCapra, the representation of trauma in the memoir serves as Achebe's way of both 'acting out' and 'working through' trauma.²⁰ For LaCapra, traumas can also be differentiated in terms of 'historical' and 'foundational' ones.²¹ In Achebe's case, I would suggest that we are dealing with a clear sense of an engagement with a historical trauma whose origins and trajectory his work has sought to unravel. That cannot only be detected in *There Was a Country*, but also in his creative work. He describes *Things Fall Apart* as 'an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son'.²² There is here a recognition that, whatever the writer is suffering from, it

has a specific moment of origin in recoverable history and the process of reclaiming that history is itself therapeutic. That original moment was the advent of colonialism and the consequent loss of a particular social structure and its ethical orientation. Nevertheless, the use of biblical language in Achebe's statement suggests that it would be simplistic to adhere strictly to the distinction between historical and foundational traumas when looking at his work. It can be argued that, for Achebe, the form of alienation that colonialism produces in the colonized functions both as historical and foundational.

For Achebe, the lost metaphysical space of traditional Africa can be recovered, perhaps, not as a utopia, but as a reachable horizon that can constitute a founding postcolonial knowledge that effects a radical break with the constraints and contradictions of the colonial legacy. The religious rhetoric in his statement needs to be understood as a simile that endows postcolonial cultural nationalism with the solemnity of a religious transformation. It also conveys the depth of loss and its impact on the subject—one that is presented as having the affective proportions of religious belief. In this context, Achebe's work as a whole can be read as a series of interventions to 'work through' the traumatic stresses of the founding moments of postcolonial society. This process will entail the 'acting out' of and bearing witness to a historical trauma in *There Was a Country*, not only as history, but as part of the determining contemporary present.

The Loss of Nigeria

The immediate objective of *There Was a Country* is to mourn the loss of the Republic of Biafra, as a viable home and national space, for the Igbo and other ethnic groups in Eastern Nigeria. It also serves as a site for grieving over the demise of a Nigeria that had been promised by the nationalist movement. Beyond that, it revisits the ground covered by his creative work, such as *Things Fall Apart*, by tracing where things began to go wrong, bemoaning the loss of a traditional African social and political order in the encounter with colonial modernity. Indeed, Achebe directly refers to the notion of trauma in relation to the author's violent loss of Nigeria as a home and marker of national identity:

The problems of the Nigerian Federation were well-known, but I somehow had felt that perhaps this was part of a nation's maturation, and that given time we would solve our problems. Then suddenly this incredible, horrific experience happened—not just to a few people but to millions, together. *I could not escape from the impact of this trauma happening to millions at the same time.*²³

It is significant that in, this instance, the traumatic events are presented as symptomatic of the flawed structure of the national formation and its history rather than as inherent in the ethnicity of a particular group. As Achebe further explains:

It was not human nature, a case of somebody hating his neighbour and chopping off his head. It was something more devastating, because it was a premeditated plan that involved careful coordination, awaiting only the right spark.²⁴

In light of the allegations of ethnic chauvinism against Achebe, it is important to highlight the fact that the memoir in fact historicizes—rather than essentializes—the violence as well as the emergence of ethnic rivalry.²⁵ That traces the traumatic events beyond the particularity of occurrence to their historical origins, thereby explaining the fracture of the national formation not simply in terms of the negative affect of ethnocentric hatred directed towards the Igbo, but equally as a dissemination and reproduction of a problem of national formation.

The historical sections of the memoir recount how Nigeria was put together in 1914 by Lord Lugard out of three distinct and autonomous British areas of influence in west Africa. As Adiele Afigbo argues:

The origins of Nigeria's federalism lie not in the pluralities of economic and geographic regions or of ethnic nationalities, but in the plurality of colonial administrative traditions imposed by the British. These traditions produced regional rivalry and conflict that were entrenched in the Nigerian polity by the processes of consolidation and nation-building. After independence, this regional rivalry became the basis for triggering the conflicts between economic and ethnic areas.²⁶

It is such structural stresses that Achebe sees as accounting for the tensions that eventually led to the secession of Biafra. The memoir's historicization of the development of ethnic consciousness among all the groups in Nigeria prior to independence demonstrates a commitment to unravelling both the colonial roots of the problems besetting Nigeria in its early years of independence, and also those evident within the nationalist movements and ideologies of the 1940s and 1950s.

Nationalism, which had offered a certain utopian future, seemed to contain the seeds of the destruction of that promise as well, as the leadership preached unity whilst simultaneously fashioning strong countervailing ethno-nationalist bases. The magnitude of betrayal is rhetorically intensified by Achebe's description of nationalism's initial liberatory promise.

For the youthful Achebe, the nationalist leadership and its ideology held such a mesmerizing aura that made him believe an independent Nigeria would most likely be successful. He records the intensity of expectation as follows:

The general feeling in the air as independence approached was extraordinary, like the building of anticipation of the relief of torrential rains after a season of scorching hot Harmattan winds and bush fires. . . . We had no doubt where we were going. We were going to inherit freedom—that was what mattered. . . . Nigeria was enveloped by a certain assurance of an unbridled destiny.²⁷

The memoir depicts how that enthusiasm for the postcolonial project was displaced into self-aggrandizement and power games by the various sections of the leadership, turning the country into an intolerable place. In this context, the intervention of what was seemingly a modernizing military elite, perhaps, modelling itself on others, for example, Gamal Abdel Nasser and his 1952 anti-royalist coup in Egypt, was not totally unexpected. It was populist, as implied by Nzeogwu's address to the nation:

My dear countrymen, no citizen should have anything to fear. . . . Our enemies are the political profiteers, the swindlers, the men in high and low places that seek bribes and demand 10 percent; those that seek to keep the country divided permanently so that they can remain in office as ministers. . . . We promise that you will no more be ashamed to say that you are a Nigerian.²⁸

Clearly, they saw themselves as defending the nationalist ideals that had been betrayed by the ruling elite; and there is some evidence that they had a national outlook. Although predominantly Igbo, the group included Major Adewale Ademoyega, a Yoruba from the Western Region, whose memoir *Why We Struck* explains the nationalist and populist intentions of the coup.²⁹

Achebe foregrounds the cross-ethnic character of the coup leaders, pointing out, for instance, that, though of Igbo extraction, Nzeogwu was born and bred in the north and was not known in the east prior to the coup. It can be surmised that Nzeogwu, like many other Nigerians, had laboured under the illusion of being a subject of the national rather than his patrimonial ethnic formation when in fact the situation was more complicated. The imagined national identity was indeed imaginary as the response to the coup would take on a particularly ethnic character. It is the disappearance of nationalist ideals professed during decolonization as well as that of the

possibility of building a genuinely cosmopolitan and liveable country that Achebe mourns and bears witness to in his memoir.³⁰ In the end, the ‘interpellative’ labour of the colonial regime as well as that of the postcolonial leadership towards producing subjects who identified with the national formation, had been overwhelmed by the countervailing forces working against the idea of a unified national formation.³¹

Biafra as a Haven for the Dispossessed

The memoir argues that the founding of the Republic of Biafra on 30 May 1967 formally acknowledged what had been de facto since the counter-coup, that, for the Igbo and other easterners, Nigeria was no longer their country. They were part of a new imagined community. The new national formation was constructed out of a sense of collective persecution, the experience of the pogroms—that had by then claimed at least 30,000 lives—and by the easterner’s conviction that their suffering had been perpetrated with the full knowledge and, in some cases, participation of the federal government. As he observes:

Looking back the naively idealistic coup of January 15, 1966 proved a terrible disaster. It was interpreted with plausibility as a plot by the ambitious Igbo of the East to take control of Nigeria from the Hausa/Fulani North. . . . What terrified me about the massacres in Nigeria was this: if it was only a question of rioting in the streets, . . . that could be explained. . . . But in this particular case a detailed plan for mass killing was implemented by the government—the army, the police—the very people who were there to protect life and property. Not a single person has been punished for these crimes.³²

Thus *There Was a Country* is a narrative about not only the traumatic demise of one country and the rise of another, but also about the need for justice and public accountability for the events surrounding the war. It is dedicated to the memory of Biafra. Opposing the federal government’s view that Biafra was simply the invention of its leader General Chukwue-meka Ojukwu, the memoir argues that the country was founded on the need for survival by a people who had been let down by their government.

There Was a Country bears witness to the suffering of those who were not able to tell their story: it is about the death of well over two million people who lost their lives during the war on the Biafran side and it seeks justice for the one million or so who died of starvation as a consequence of the food blockade implemented by the federal government.³³ In order to convey to the reader why Biafra was ethically a necessary invention,

Achebe describes vividly the suffering he and others went through. In this respect, the memoirist acts out the historical trauma.³⁴ He conveys his deep sense of shock and disbelief at the dissolution of his national identity in the face of ethnic violence:

I found it difficult to come to terms with the fact that Nigeria was disintegrating, that I had to leave my house, leave Lagos, leave my job. . . . People were disappearing right and left. . . . There was a media report of someone from the senior service whose body was found the night before. At this point the killings had reached the peak figure of hundreds a week. . . . I was one of the last to flee Lagos. I simply could not bring myself to believe that I could no longer live in my nation's capital, although the facts clearly said so.³⁵

Achebe, the Nigerian nationalist who was in effect, as director of the external service of the Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation, part of the national elite, found it difficult to accept that his privileged location in the postcolonial national formation was neither a guarantee nor sufficient evidence of his Nigerianness. In other words, he was being interpellated, not in terms of his class position, but rather of his ethnicity. That might account for the absence of a class perspective in the memoir that Jeyifo mentions.³⁶

That traumatic separation from the motherland, as it were, invites a psychoanalytic reading, as evidently, it restages what Freud describes as the primal fear of the loss of the mother.³⁷ The depth of loss is most intensely dramatic in the context of the affective and cognitive investment the author and all Nigerians had put into the idea of an independent country. It is here that rhetorically Achebe deploys the sharp contrast between what was promised and what was achieved in order to make the reader empathize with the intensity of his sense of loss, disappointment and anger at what had happened to him, fellow-Easterners and Nigeria as a whole. In this way, the narrative is the testimony of a betrayed Nigerian nationalist, but one who presents that betrayal as the ethical legitimization of the founding of a new national formation—Biafra.

It is also noticeable that Achebe is quite circumspect about disclosing information on some occasions in the memoir. With regard to the excerpt above, Achebe later discovered that his would-be travelling companion, with whom he had lost touch, had not, in fact, reached his destination. The incident is told without any emotion and with a verbal terseness that confirms Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's observation that Achebe leaves a lot unarticulated in the memoir. She observes that 'the reader is left with a nagging dissatisfaction, as though things are being left unsaid'.³⁸ For Giorgio Agamben, the problem of inarticulacy has to do with the tension

between ‘knowing’ and ‘saying’, since, ‘[f]or the one who knows, it is felt as an impossibility of speaking; for the one who speaks it is experienced as an equally bitter impossibility to know’.³⁹ It is a problem of how much of what one knows about a harrowing experience can be told or should be fully disclosed, on the one hand, and, on the other, it is about the acknowledgement of the limits of one’s knowledge of the traumatizing event.

What Achebe shows is that what may be recounted is always a part of a larger story and so he leaves a space within his own account for different narratives from the absent others—the silent or silenced that cannot bear witness to their own experiences. As he puts it, in relation to his-would-be travelling companion: ‘[u]nfortunately, [he] is no longer alive. If he were, it would have been interesting to know what happened’.⁴⁰ Achebe is thus foregrounding the ‘lacuna’ that according to Agamben is at the heart of every testimony.⁴¹ Agamben borrows the concept from Primo Levi’s testimony about his experience and survival in Auschwitz. Levi notes: ‘Witnesses are by definition survivors and so all, to some degree, enjoyed a privilege. . . . We who were favoured by fate tried, with more or less wisdom, to recount not only our fate but also that of others, indeed, the drowned’.⁴²

Similarly, the absent narratives of the others compel Achebe to circumscribe his own as a personal history, but that does not limit its authority, as it still bears witness to the untold stories and the ‘unrepresentable’.⁴³ For Achebe, and indeed Agamben, this kind of verbal limitation does not suggest, as in the poststructuralist readings of trauma such as Cathy Caruth’s and Shoshana Felman’s, that language is inherently inadequate to represent the real, but rather that in the practice of testimony, language offers the survivor the human possibility of articulating the particular experience of the real.⁴⁴ The particularity that is conveyed is selective, but it can still deliver an essential aspect of the general character of an event and in that way bear witness to the experience of an individual as well as of others caught up in the same tragic event. As such, a personal trauma testimony is intrinsically and invariably the story of a community.

The ‘unrepresented’ or ‘unrepresentable’ can also be a product of the narrator’s agency, of ideological preference rather than an immanent aspect of testimony. That seems true of Achebe’s memoir, especially on occasions when he is writing about his role as an official of the Biafran regime. He mentions being an emissary to Léopold Sédar Senghor, the then president of Senegal, but says very little about the main topic of their discussion. Furthermore, Achebe is openly cryptic about a fellow Biafran diplomat, describing him as having “‘vanished” at some point during our travel’.⁴⁵ We learn later that the man had been executed by the Biafrans allegedly for spying. Whilst euphemism signals that the narrator’s knowledge is limited

by his location in relation to some events he is recounting, it also indicates that he is, in this instance, donning his diplomatic mask.⁴⁶ Thus, memoirs do not bare all, so to speak, as certain truths cannot be told either because their narrative time has not yet arrived or because of ethical considerations or those of narrative representation.

What is interesting is that Achebe does not conceal the fact that he is hiding something from the reader and, through euphemism, he allows the reader to fill in the gaps. In a sense, memoirs cannot tell us the whole truth, but they can achieve authenticity by laying bare the gaps and by empathetically drawing in the reader's interpretive agency. In this regard, memoirs entail an active 'interpretive collaboration' between the memoirist and the reader.⁴⁷

Biafra as Achebe's Lost Country

That reticence also surrounds the very production of the memoir. It is noticeable that it took Achebe forty-two years or so after the end of the war to write something substantial about his experiences in Biafra. We may never fully know the reasons for the belatedness of the memoir, but what is clear is that he was not the only one who remained silent about the war. There has in fact been what, for Achebe, amounts to an official repression of the memory of the war. It is that silence that prompted him to write the memoir and publically address some of the outstanding issues:

Almost thirty years before Rwanda, before Darfur, over two million people—mothers, children, babies, civilians—lost their lives as a result of the blatantly callous and unnecessary policies enacted by the leaders of the federal government of Nigeria. . . . As a writer I believe that it is fundamentally important, indeed, essential to our humanity, to ask the hard questions, in order to better understand ourselves and our neighbours. Where there is justification for further investigation, then I believe justice should be served.⁴⁸

The belatedness of the memoir may also be attributable to the desire not to undermine the post-civil war resettlement, making the repression of the memory of the trauma a function of the need to subordinate remembering to the reality principle of making postwar Nigeria habitable and palatable. That view is supported by Achebe's attempts to foster cross-ethnic political alliances during his brief period in national party politics in the early 1980s. It may well be that the memoir is itself a product of the failure of postwar integration. That is discernible from the way it links that failure to the pogroms, the civil war and what had gone on before.

Nevertheless, it is important to underline the fact that Achebe tells the story of Biafra not only as a site of trauma, but also as a space of an unfulfilled utopic possibility. The formation of the new country was a utopian moment for Achebe, as it gave him not only a sense of belonging, but also an opportunity and a responsibility to contribute towards the creation of the kind of country he and his generation had hoped Nigeria would become after independence, but had not:

For most of us within Biafra our new nation was a dream that had become reality—a republic, in the strict definition of the word. . . . We could forge a new nation that respected the freedoms that all of mankind cherished and were willing to fight hard to hold on to. Within Biafra the Biafran people would be free of persecution of all kinds.⁴⁹

In a sense, Biafra resurrected the process of decolonization that had been derailed by a corrupt and ‘unnationalistic’ leadership. He reports that some of his Biafran compatriots saw Nigeria as a neocolonial state, especially in its reliance on Britain for military support during the war.⁵⁰

He believes that Biafra exemplified a number of positive values lacking in federal Nigeria. In Biafra, he witnessed the spirit of selflessness and self-reliance in greater abundance, suggesting the emergence of a new national formation and subjectivity. He recalls one particular incident when young people, without waiting for instructions, directed traffic on congested roads and concludes: ‘[t]hat this kind of spirit existed made us feel tremendously hopeful. Clearly, something had happened to the psyche of an entire people to bring this about’.⁵¹ In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe uses a colonial administrator to tell the protagonist bluntly that: ‘[t]here is no single Nigerian who is prepared to forgo a little privilege in the interest of the country’.⁵² It was also the people’s resilience amidst untold suffering that exhibited an admirable sense of responsibility and stoicism for Achebe. In addition to those who died defending their new country, a huge number of civilians perished from indiscriminate strafing by the Nigerian Air Force. Achebe’s home and publishing house too were bombed.⁵³ It is that quality that, for him, made Biafra more of a community than Nigeria.

It was most supremely embodied by his best friend and fellow-writer Christopher Okigbo who died at the war front. For Achebe, he demonstrated exceptional commitment to the cause by paying the ultimate price for his beliefs. He recalls the process of Okigbo’s transformation from a Nigerian poet to a Biafran combatant as follows:

The experience of the Igbo community from the pogroms onward had different effects on different people. . . . He had no doubt at all in his

mind about Biafra and the need for the country to be a free and separate nation. That strong stance was something new in Okigbo.⁵⁴

Okigbo's commitment was exceptional, but not new—it was a re-enactment of the idealism of decolonization that had led to Nigeria's independence. Moreover, his act demonstrates the subordination of artistic subjectivity to the defence of a political truth. With Badiou, we could say, Okigbo's body bore the truth of Biafra's separation from the Nigerian body politic.⁵⁵

This strong sense of patriotism was also exemplified by the citizens' willingness to engage in scientific and technological innovation in order to defend the country and make it habitable, which led to the invention of weapons and refining of crude oil with homemade equipment, among others. That is much cherished by the writer as a mark of a society in which citizens are actively involved in the production of a liveable present and hopeful future. However, it was also linked to a clearly articulated national ideology grounded in the ideas of self-affirmation. That is evident in Ojukwu's involvement of intellectuals in decision-making processes. For instance, Achebe and other writers became roving ambassadors for Biafra. Even more significant was the leadership's attempt to define a political philosophy of the new country, a task that Ojukwu entrusted to Achebe and his group, the national guidance committee.

Comprising a cross section of the intellectual elite and others, the committee was mandated with the formulation of the intellectual basis of Biafra, culminating in the manifesto known as the *Ahiara Declaration* (1969). The document reflected a number of influences: Igbo philosophy, Julius Nyerere's *Arusha Declaration* (1967), Pan-Africanism as well as Maoism.⁵⁶ Achebe saw his role as fulfilling the traditional Igbo definition of artistic responsibility in moments of crisis, that is, to be 'a warrior for peace, with a proclivity for action'.⁵⁷ For Mudimbe, 'Achebe's moral normativity is exemplary [and] reflects our times and accords itself to the ethics of responsibility . . . and principles of human rights'.⁵⁸ It is also based on discourses of political commitment of the 1940s and '50s espoused by, among others, Jean-Paul Sartre and Senghor, confirming Biafra's ideological link to the pre-independence nationalist and internationalist anticolonial struggles.⁵⁹ Thus, Biafra was not only a hospitable country that offered security for the displaced Achebe, but it also renewed the intellectual's role in society. Achebe suggests that postcolonial Nigeria had sidelined the intellectual, thereby impoverishing its ruling ideology.

Biafra also offered an opportunity for developing a postcolonial political philosophy that drew on African traditions. Achebe says, when considering membership of the committee, he sought 'people who embodied a wholesome African wisdom—African common sense . . .

who were . . . within the group that would be called “the uneducated”’. He saw them as ‘arbiters of the traditional values that had sustained our societies from the beginning of time’.⁶⁰ The blending of tradition and modernity echoes the aesthetic hybridity of his fiction. He demonstrates that African literature can be a paradigm for radical forms of political knowledge, questioning the conventional relationship between history and literature in a manner reminiscent of constructivist historians.⁶¹ According to Achebe, it is such epistemic forms that can replace the superficial modernity of postcolonial Nigeria with the original nationalist idealism, transforming the country into a viable modern national formation in which, unlike the one described in *No Longer at Ease*, the citizen can truly feel at ease.

In light of this, one of the countries Achebe reminds his readers about is that which his protagonist in *Things Fall Apart* lost. It is appealed to, not as a place for nostalgic projection, but as a recoverable community of values that can enrich the impoverished postcolonial ideologies that had led to the civil war. On this occasion, he identifies with the *Négritude* project of cultural reclamation.⁶² So, with the defeat of Biafra, the memoirist had lost not just a physical country, but also all the other cultural spaces and forms of agency that had made it a habitable home. It is the loss of Biafra as the embodiment of the values of an ideal imagined postcolonial community that accentuates the trauma of its loss for Achebe.

The kind of epistemological and ideological hybridity attributed to Biafra is also evident in the mixing of genres in the memoir. It exemplifies the search for a representational form that might adequately capture or accommodate the nuances and complexities of what the writer and his fellow Biafrans went through and what they lost with Biafra. It is as if its truth cannot be accommodated within the boundaries of a particular genre. As he declares, ‘I have made a conscious choice to juxtapose poetry and prose . . . to tell complimentary stories, in two art forms’.⁶³ In fact, there are other narrative genres in the text: history, personal memoir and anthropology, among others, which together offer the author’s multiple, but overlapping perspectives on the historical events depicted. Principally, the narrative breaches the distinction between fiction and history, echoing what Linda Hutcheon has described as ‘historiographic metafiction’, a postmodernist fiction that appropriates and interrogates the relationship between fiction and history.⁶⁴ Although, *There Was a Country* does not take liberties with the notion of historical truth to the same extent as ‘historiographic metafiction’, its style allows the writer a similar degree of transgression to enable multiple representations of a given event.

The style redefines the nature of the historical event, since an event occupies two or more discursive or disciplinary spaces. Whilst the historical

realist frame draws out the factual contours of an event and its cognitive import, the poetic one conveys its affective dimension. That is illustrated in the juxtaposition of the account of Okigbo's death and the poem, 'Mango Seedling'. The lines: 'Today I see it still— / Dry, wire-thin in sun and dust of the dry months— / Headstone on tiny debris of passionate courage' offer a wide range of feelings towards the agency of 'passionate courage', which portrays the memoirist's ambivalence towards Okigbo's death.⁶⁵ As a Biafran patriot, Achebe admires his sacrifice, but, as a personal friend, he is uncertain that it was a prudent undertaking. Achebe seems to be suggesting that given the complexity of historical trauma, no genre is singularly equipped to represent it. Evidently the memoir gains from the inclusion of poetry, as it explores the affective dimensions of the real more powerfully than the historical realist narrative.

The use of strategies of fiction is additionally evident in the adoption of the *Künstlerroman* genre, that is, a story of an artist's development. Achebe thus provides an account of the cultivation of his subjectivity as an artist. He locates his interest in literature in the traditional lore of his people and in the Westernized upbringing in his family, at school and university. The development of artistic consciousness is also shown to be linked to his acquisition of political knowledge. The family home is not only the source of a creative personality, but also of a transformative agency, as shown by his mother's deliberate violation of the practice of forbidding women from plucking kola nuts. She serves as a model for the writer's later counter-hegemonic agency. That is another quality that Achebe wishes were distributed more widely in contemporary Nigeria, as it would make the country more habitable, more of a home.

There is also an emphasis on the general development of Achebe as a man, in which respect, the memoir is quintessentially a *Bildungsroman*, a novel of development, as we are given an overview of his life from childhood to adulthood. However, unlike a traditional *Bildungsroman*, here there is no final plenitudinous stage of development for the autobiographical self, though there are in the intervening periods, moments of utopic fulfilment. The development into adulthood involves the recognition of the writer's transformation into a political subject, which, through nationalism, is experienced as utopic, but the promise of an independent and progressive Nigeria is shattered by a lack of an ethic of national community. Thus, moments of utopic achievement or promise are often undermined by negative events in the narrative, including seriously diastopic ones, such as the 1966 pogroms and the subsequent civil war.

Significantly, the *Bildungsroman* format facilitates the articulation of the unsayable, as a way of 'working through' a historical trauma, which results in the rehabilitation of aspects of life under colonialism. From

the perspective of the postcolonial moment, Achebe views the colonial national formation as a more efficient and ordered society. He says,

[h]ere is a piece of heresy: The British governed their colony of Nigeria with considerable care. There was a very highly competent cadre of government officials imbued with a high level of knowledge of how to run a country. . . . There was a distinct order during this time.⁶⁶

This revalorization of the colonial period by an ardent nationalist may seem a contradiction in terms. However, it may be understood as a rhetorical device for highlighting the extent to which postcolonial Nigeria has fallen below the expectations of decolonization. So his quest for a return to the colonial moment is not to colonial rule as such, but to the forms of governmentality that ensured a measure of an ordered community. It is the colonial national formation as a habitable community that is one of the countries the memoir seeks to recover. In articulating this ‘heresy’, Achebe counter-identifies with the dominant nationalist critique of colonialism, indicating that, like the typical *Bildungsroman* hero, his development has led to a particular understanding of life whose validity is predicated on his progressive learning from experience. Thus, in this context, the memoir abides with the traditional linear structure of the genre, though in its overall deferment of plenitude, it departs from it.

Postwar Nigeria as Unhomely

The memoir also presents the Biafrans re-joining Nigeria as returning to another country, not the Nigeria that was before the war. The war had reconstituted the national space and redefined their relationship to Nigeria:

My generation had great expectations for our young nation. After the war everything we had known before about Nigeria, all the optimism, had to be rethought. The worst had happened, and we were now forced into reorganising our thinking, expectations, and hopes.⁶⁷

The new Nigeria was ‘unhomely’, to borrow Homi Bhabha’s term.⁶⁸ The ‘unhomely’ refers to the subject’s state of being ‘unaccommodated’ in a place. That sense of unbelonging is clear from Achebe’s observations:

We . . . had to carry on in spite of the great disaster that was the military defeat and learn very quickly to live with such loss. We would have to adjust to the realities and consequences of a Nigeria that did not appeal

to us any longer. Nigeria had not succeeded in crushing the spirit of the Igbo people, but it had left us indigent, stripped bare, and stranded in the wilderness.⁶⁹

There is here a repetition of the state of being ‘no longer at ease’ of Achebe’s 1960s novel.⁷⁰ As in the case of the novel’s protagonist, the name ‘Nigeria’ has lost its meaning for the former Biafrans. It is no longer the promise of a nationalist fulfilment. The returnees come to realize that Nigeria is not an imagined community, but an imaginary one.

For Achebe, postwar Nigeria is ‘unhomely’ primarily because of the failure to integrate the returnees effectively. He attributes this to a general national incompetence, as well as the resurgence of ethnic competitiveness over the resources of the nation. He argues that the postwar resettlement policies clearly diminished the political and economic influence of the Biafrans. It would be such policies that would confirm the sense of unmitigated alienation for the Biafrans:

The federal government’s actions soon after the war could not be seen as conciliatory but as outright hostile. After the conflict ended, ‘the same hardliners . . . got the regime to adopt a banking policy which nullified any bank account which had been operated during the war by the Biafrans. A flat sum of twenty pounds was approved for each Igbo depositor of the Nigerian currency’. If there was ever a measure put in place to stunt, or even obliterate the economy of a people, this was it.⁷¹

Moreover, he sees the attempt to diminish the influence of his group in Nigeria as having underwritten the genocide of two million people or so in Biafra, largely through starvation. Achebe quotes Awolowo’s statement made during the war that: ‘all is fair in war, and starvation is one of the weapons of war. I don’t see why we should feed our enemies fat in order for them to fight us harder’.⁷² He concludes that:

Chief Obafemi Awolowo was driven by an overriding ambition for power, for himself in particular and for the advancement of his Yoruba people in general. . . . However, Awolowo saw the dominant Igbos at the time as the obstacles to that goal and when the opportunity arose . . . his ambition [made him hatch up] a diabolical policy to reduce the numbers of his enemies significantly through starvation—eliminating over two million people, mainly of the future generations.⁷³

This passage has riled a number of Nigerians. Fani-Kayode has attacked the memoir, saying:

[t]he worst thing that anyone can do is . . . to indulge in historical revisionism. . . . Sadly it is in [that] light . . . that I view Professor Chinua Achebe's assertion . . . that Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the late and much loved Leader of the Yoruba, was responsible for the genocide that the Igbos suffered during the civil war. This claim is not only false but it is also, frankly speaking, utterly absurd.⁷⁴

It is noteworthy that he does not deny that Awolowo made the statement, but decries Achebe's ascription of his motive to ethnicity. He accuses Achebe of being partisan by not blaming Ojukwu for refusing the federal government's offer to open up a land corridor through which food supplies could be delivered.

Unlike Fani-Kayode's sweeping condemnation of the book, Jeyifo sees vices as well as virtues in the memoir, arguing that it reveals two personas of the writer: '[o]n the one hand, there is the superb realist writer and progressive intellectual; on the other hand there is the war-time propaganda and media warrior and ethno-national ideological zealot'.⁷⁵ He sees the ethnic ideologue in Achebe as not questioning the myth of Igbo dominance which had been constructed by conservative forces to ethnicize postcolonial politics in Nigeria. Jeyifo may well be right, and if he is, then, it proves the overall point Achebe is making, that Nigerians have historically been interpellated doubly—as subjects of the national formation, on the one hand, and of the ethno-nation, on the other. His alleged blindness to the fact that he is speaking from an ethno-national subject-position proves the success of the interpellative work of the ethno-centred national ideological apparatus. In this regard, the civil war must have enhanced the sense of ethnicity among the easterners. Furthermore, the perceived iniquity of the postwar resettlement arrangements must have done little to counter that feeling. Indeed, Adichie has noted how responses to Achebe's memoir among Nigerians have taken on an ethno-national tinge.⁷⁶

Adichie does not agree with Achebe's characterization of Awolowo's motives, but adds that: 'The blockade was, in my opinion, inhumane and immoral'.⁷⁷ Besides, she highlights what underpins the divergent responses to Achebe's memoir—the problem of differential memory. She remarks: '[f]or some non-Igbo, confronting facts of the war is uncomfortable, even inconvenient. But we must hear one another's stories. It is even more imperative for a subject like Biafra which, because of our *different experiences, we remember differently*'.⁷⁸ What is indeed at stake in the responses to the memoir is the question of a differential national memory.

Is it possible for Nigeria to have a shared memory of the civil war or the overall history of its formation?

Conclusion

The fact that the responses to the book among Nigerians have largely run along ethnic lines would suggest that it is impossible to achieve a national consensus on some of the key events in the country's recent history. However, the memoir itself may show a possible way towards these aims. It can be argued that in *There Was a Country* Achebe has initiated the work of producing a shared, if heterogeneous, collective memory as a prerequisite for making Nigeria a home for all its inhabitants. He calls for a process of 'working through' the traumas of the past through a candid, but empathetic understanding of how the national malformation has damaged its subjects and the national space. The differential memory of the war is, just as the war itself was, a symptom of the founding flaws in the structure of the country, in which the national-state formation has always existed in tension with the tendency towards regional and ethnic autonomy. Achebe's intention in the book is to offer a communal national story, as he says, 'Nigeria's story, Biafra's story, our story, my story'.⁷⁹ It is an attempt to clear a space for a serious debate about how to make Nigeria an inclusive and habitable country. Thus, *There Was a Country* is a nationalist text *par excellence* whose 'aim is not to provide answers but raise a few questions, and perhaps cause a few headaches in the process' as a part of national healing.⁸⁰

Notes

1. Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, 'Reading There was a country: A personal history of Biafra', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 6, 2013, p. 671.
2. Simon Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe* (London: James Currey, 1991), p. 1.
3. M. Keith Booker, *The African novel in English* (London: Heinemann, 1998).
4. See David Whittaker and Mpalive Msiska, *Chinua Achebe's Things fall apart* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 37.
5. See Emmanuel Akyeampong and Henry Louis Gates (eds.), *Dictionary of African biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
6. Gerald Moore, *Seven African writers* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1962).
7. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The empire writes back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989). See also Mpalive-Hangson Msiska, 'Things fall apart: A resource for cultural theory', *Interventions*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2009, pp. 171–179.
8. Stephen Knapp, *Literary interest: The limits of anti-formalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 100.
9. Abiola Irele, *The African experience in literature and ideology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 1.
10. Irele, *African*, p. 1.

11. Paul de Man, in his essay, 'Biography as de-facement', *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 94, 1979, pp. 919–930, argues that the author and the autobiographical self are not always one and the same person, as autobiography uses the techniques of fiction in order to narrate and represent a certain image of the self.
12. Femi Fani-Kayode, 'Obafemi Awolowo and Chinua Achebe's tale of fantasy', available at: <http://thenet.ng/2012/10/opinion-obafemi-awolowo-and-chinua-achebes-tale-of-fantasy>. Retrieved 17 February 2014.
13. Biodun Jeyifo, 'First, there was a country; then there wasn't: Reflections on Achebe's new book', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 6, 2013, p. 3.
14. There is a good summary of such debates in Larry Diamond, 'Class, ethnicity, and the democratic state: Nigeria, 1950–1966', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 1983, pp. 457–489.
15. Biodun Jeyifo, 'The nature of things: Arrested decolonization and critical theory', *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 1990, pp. 33–48.
16. Alain Badiou, *The logics of worlds: Being and event II*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 50–54. Badiou argues that by rebelling against the tyranny of slavery, Spartacus, the Roman gladiator, elaborates the category of the faithful subject, one who transforms existing relations of power.
17. All references to the term 'imagined community' are to Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities* (London: Verso, 1983).
18. Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1989).
19. Ato Quayson, *Calibrations: Reading for the social* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 77.
20. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing history, writing trauma* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 53–60.
21. LaCapra, *Writing history*, pp. 53–60.
22. Chinua Achebe, *Morning yet on creation day* (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 70.
23. Chinua Achebe, *There was a country: A personal history of Biafra* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), p. 71. Emphasis added.
24. Achebe, *Country*, p. 82.
25. Fani-Kayode, 'Obafemi Awolowo and Chinua Achebe'.
26. Adiele E. Afigbo, 'Background to Nigerian federalism: Federal features in the colonial state', *Publius*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 1991, p. 13.
27. Achebe, *Country*, p. 40.
28. Major Patrick Chukwuma Nzeogwu, 'Declaration of martial law', 15 January 1966, available at: www.dawodu.com/nzeogwu2.htm. Retrieved 3 September 2013.
29. Adewale Ademoyega, *Why we struck: The story of the first Nigerian coup* (Ibadan: Evans Brothers, 1981).
30. The term nationalist is used here to refer to the ideas of the nationalist movements of the 1940s and 1950s which sought self-determination within a unified Nigeria.
31. Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and ideological state apparatuses', in Louis Althusser (ed.), *Lenin, philosophy and other essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 85–126.
32. Achebe, *Country*, p. 82.
33. Achebe, *Country*, p. 228.
34. LaCapra, *Writing history*, pp. 53–60.
35. Achebe, *Country*, pp. 70–71.
36. Jeyifo, 'Reflections', p. 3.
37. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed experience* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 14–17.
38. Chimamanda Adichie, 'Things left unsaid: There was a country: A personal history of Biafra', available at: www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n19/chimamanda-adichie/things-left-unsaid. Retrieved 24 February 2014.
39. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The witness and the archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), p. 123.

40. Achebe, *Country*, p. 70.
41. Agamben, *Remnants*, p. 161.
42. Agamben, *Remnants*, p. 33.
43. We might also read the excerpt, following Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed*, p. 68, as involving the subject's experience of the traumatizing events as unpredictable, unregistered and not capable of being framed within the parameters of existing knowledge. However, her concept of traumatic excess has been criticized by LaCapra in *Writing*, and Roger Luckhurst, *The trauma question* (London: Routledge, 2008, for its failure to provide for closure to trauma).
44. For an example of the poststructuralist reading of trauma, see Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (eds.), *Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history* (London: Routledge, 1992); Caruth's *Unclaimed*. For the term 'real', see Lacan's *Ecrits*.
45. Achebe, *Country*, p. 171.
46. Man, 'Biography', pp. 919–930.
47. For the notion that textual gaps are immanent in texts and allow greater interpretive participation by the reader, see Roman Ingarden, *The literary work of art*, trans. George Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1973), pp. 29–33.
48. Achebe, *Country*, p. 228.
49. Achebe, *Country*, p. 143.
50. Achebe, *Country*, p. 124.
51. Achebe, *Country*, p. 171.
52. Chinua Achebe, *No longer at ease* (London: Heinemann, 1960), p. 139.
53. Achebe, *Country*, pp. 182–183.
54. Achebe, *Country*, p. 116.
55. Badiou, *The logics of worlds*, pp. 50–54.
56. Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, *Ahiara declaration: The principles of the Biafran revolution* (Enugu: Biafra Information Service Corporation, 1969).
57. Achebe, *Country*, p. 109.
58. Mudimbe, 'Reading', p. 671.
59. The idea that writers should be committed in both their writing and their lives was first espoused by Jean-Paul Sartre in the introduction to the 1945 issue of *Les temps modernes* and was extremely influential in discussions of African literature in the 1950s and 1960s.
60. Achebe, *Country*, p. 147.
61. See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).
62. The *Négritude* movement was started in France by students from French colonies, such as Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor. It sought to contest the negative colonial representation of Black culture by asserting its positive values. See Abiola Irele, *The Négritude moment: Explorations in Francophone African and Caribbean literature and thought* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011).
63. Achebe, *Country*, p. 3.
64. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of postmodernism: History, theory, fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 122–123.
65. Achebe, *Country*, p. 186.
66. Achebe, *Country*, p. 43.
67. Achebe, *Country*, p. 227.
68. This term 'unhomely' was first used by Sigmund Freud's his 1917 essay, 'The uncanny'. See *The uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003). It has been popularized in postcolonial theory by Homi Bhabha's essay, 'Home and the world', *Social Text*, Vol. 10, No. 31–32, 1992, pp. 141–153.
69. Achebe, *Country*, pp. 227–228.
70. Achebe, *Ease*, p. 11.
71. Achebe, *Country*, p. 234. He quotes from his essay, *The trouble with Nigeria* (London: Heinemann, 1984), pp. 45–46.

72. Awolowo's statement as quoted in Achebe, *Country*, p. 233.
73. Achebe, *Country*, p. 233.
74. Fani-Kayode, 'Obafemi Awolowo and Chinua Achebe'.
75. Jeyifo, 'Reflections', p. 3.
76. Chimamanda Adichie, 'Chimamanda Adichie pays tribute to Chinua Achebe at 82', available at: <http://thenet.ng/2012/11/chimamanda-adichie-pays-tribute-to-chinua-achebe-at-82/>. Retrieved 17 October 2013.
77. Adichie, 'Tribute'.
78. Adichie, 'Tribute'. Emphasis added.
79. Achebe, *Country*, p. 3.
80. Achebe, *Country*, p. 228.

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