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**Forging a Nation while losing a Country: Igbo Nationalism, Ethnicity  
and Propaganda in the Nigerian Civil War 1968-1970**

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**Forging a Nation while losing a Country: Igbo Nationalism, Ethnicity  
and Propaganda in the Nigerian Civil War 1968-1970**

**by**

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# **Forging a Nation while losing a Country: Igbo Nationalism, Ethnicity and Propaganda in the Nigerian Civil War 1968-1970**

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This project looks at the ways the Biafran Government maintained their war machine in spite of the hopeless situation that emerged in the summer of 1968. Ojukwu's government looked certain to topple at the beginning of the summer of 1968, yet Biafra held on and did not capitulate until nearly two years later, on 15 January 1970. The Ojukwu regime found itself in a serious predicament; how to maintain support for a war that was increasingly costly to the Igbo people, both in military terms and in the menacing face of the starvation of the civilian population. Further, the Biafran government had to not only mobilize a global public opinion campaign against the "genocidal" campaign waged against them, but also convince the world that the only option for Igbo survival was an independent Biafra. Thus it is not enough to look at the international aspects of the war, or to consider the war on a strictly domestic level. By looking at both the internal and external factors that shaped the Biafran propaganda machine and the Biafran war effort and how these efforts influenced international support and galvanized internal resolve to continue fighting, we can see how the Biafran war effort was able to last for twenty months after the fall of Port Harcourt. Recent scholarly

and political work, uncovered documents, and the new plethora of memoirs on the Civil War provide us with a veritable treasure trove of data and analysis with which to study the issue of Igbo nationalism and a unique opportunity to create a new vision of secessionist conflict in Africa. This work will thus provide a step in moving away from the long accepted “Tribalism” paradigm that has so long pervaded not only the study of post-colonial Civil Wars in Africa, but more importantly, the discourse in looking at ethnicity, violence and national identity across the continent. Further, by analyzing the ways that the Biafran propaganda machine operated on a nationalist level, we can see the effects of Biafran secession on the broader Igbo national consciousness and the Igbo national movement, as well as on subsequent political movements in Nigeria.

## Table of Contents

List of Figures .....	viii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter Outline .....	27
Chapter I: The Origins of the Nigerian Civil War .....	32
Chapter II: From the Beginnings of the War to the Capture of Port Harcourt .....	53
Chapter III: Internal Propaganda and the Prosecution of the War .....	73
The Fall of Port Harcourt and the transformation of Biafran Propaganda ...	73
Biafra – From Multiethnic Project to the Igbo Alone.....	75
Propaganda – Ministry of Information v. Directorate of Propaganda .....	80
Focus of project.....	82
In the Face of Genocide: Internal and External Propaganda .....	84
Marketing Strategies in War .....	87
Plans.....	88
The Leopard .....	94
Surveys.....	106
Directives and analysis .....	110
Chapter IV: Heroes Fought like Biafrans – External Propaganda and the World System.....	121
Public Diplomacy.....	123
Biafra Newsletter .....	127
Use of language.....	134
Radio Biafra.....	138
Markpress.....	142
Unofficial channels .....	147
Universities .....	149
First International Conference on Biafra .....	150

Global opinion .....	152
Protests and Letters .....	152
Practical effects .....	160
Pressure to intervene .....	161
Chapter V: Analysis of Biafran Propaganda.....	163
Introduction.....	163
Propaganda and Peace Talk Diplomacy .....	167
Biafra’s First Collapse: May – November 1968 .....	196
Continuation of Propaganda .....	201
Land Army.....	202
Obasanjo and the end of the war .....	206
Bibliography .....	225
Interviews.....	225
Archival Sources .....	225
Periodicals.....	225
Nigerian.....	225
Foreign .....	226
Published sources.....	226

## List of Figures

Figure 1:	Nigeria at Independence, 1960 .....	36
Figure 2:	1963 Map of Nigerian Regions.....	41
Figure 3:	1967 Map of Nigerian States .....	47
Figure 4:	The Biafran Midwest Offensive and subsequent Nigerian advance .	57
Figure 5:	She Appears Near, but She Ain't .....	96
Figure 6:	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. ....	97
Figure 8:	Gowon's Harvest .....	99
Figure 9:	In this image, the Nigerian soldier appears to shoot innocent civilians while the international observer team observes silently...	132
Figure 10:	In this cartoon, Gowon urges the international observer team to sign his report stating that there is no genocide rather than risk their lives to see for themselves. The observer team appears to acquiesce.....	133
Figure 11:	U.S. State Department Map depicting Biafran Airfields and proposed relief corridor.....	186
Figure 12:	Map showing Federal advances on Biafra until the capture of Umuahia in April 1969 .....	200
Figure 13:	Final Nigerian Offensive on Biafra. Arrow numbers denote brigade number designations. ....	217



## Introduction

On 30 May 1967, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu declared the Eastern Region of Nigeria the independent Republic of Biafra. The culmination of the Nigerian political crisis that began on 15 January 1966, Biafran secession ushered in a war that lasted 30 months and cost the lives of millions, due mainly to starvation.<sup>1</sup> The plight of the starving millions in Biafra rivaled some of other major events of the late 60s, such as the Vietnam War, the Arab-Israeli Six Day War and the Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia. Yet the study of the Biafran War has largely been relegated to obscurity outside Nigeria. Perhaps it is because the war did not change the African political landscape or create long lasting shockwaves that it has been largely forgotten. However, the war is important because, and not in spite of, these aspects. Why did a war that caused such great controversy, both in Nigeria and around the world fade from the collective memory around the world, and be relegated to a taboo subject at home? The fact that

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<sup>1</sup> Though the numbers have been disputed and have varied from less than half a million to as high as five million, the accepted figure has recently been that about one million died as a result of the war and ensuing starvation. However, because of the nature of Nigeria's political conflicts in the early years after independence, a clear census was never established and the real casualty figure will probably never be known. During the war, the Red Cross estimated that anywhere between 2,000 – 10,000 people were dying every day from starvation in Biafra. Karen Ekpenyong of the Inventory of Conflict & Environment (ICE) at the American University estimates that 2,000,000 civilians died in Biafra due to starvation. Karen Ekpenyong, "The Biafran War," *ICE Case Studies* (1997), <http://www1.american.edu/ted/ice/biafra.htm>.

many books were published around the world in the immediate postwar years and quickly faded into oblivion until very recently is very telling.

Biafra's plight became a cause célèbre due in major part to the successful penetration of Biafran propaganda into the world consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Biafran propaganda, both at home and abroad, proved extremely effective in creating a groundswell of support for the secessionist enclave. All over the world, people protested the war, Nigeria's perceived genocide against the Igbo and British support of the Lagos government.<sup>3</sup> Despite widespread public support of the starving masses in Biafra, the war continued for approximately thirty months and cost at least one million lives.

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<sup>2</sup> When referring to propaganda, I use the term to mean the public dissemination of information from a government source aimed at influencing behavior. During World War II, the German government ran an effective propaganda campaign against the Jews and other peoples. The Nazi campaign as orchestrated by Josef Goebbels and the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda gave the word a negative and sinister connotation. However, my use of the term is not to imply any association with the Nazi regime, and the only connection I make in this work between the Biafran propaganda and Nazi propaganda is the fact that the Biafrans attempted to make an overt connection between the Nigerian campaign against them and the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews.

<sup>3</sup> Today the spelling of Igbo is more popular and it is the spelling I choose to use. However, when quoting source material I remain faithful to the source spelling and use the previous spelling of Ibo where it is used. Both spellings refer to the Igbo ethnic group that seceded from the Federal Republic to create the short lived Republic of Biafra.

This dissertation looks at this most polarizing issue of the war: that of Biafran propaganda and the accusation of genocide against the Biafran people. Even before the war began, the Igbo suffered a series of massacres, largely at the hands of Northerners who saw the series of coups as an ethnic power struggle between the north and south of the country. These massacres galvanized the Igbo into a siege mentality and spurred Ojukwu into reacting to the crisis that ended on 27 May 1967 with the declaration of the Eastern Region of Nigeria as the Republic of Biafra. However, the Biafrans framed the conflict not as an ethnic struggle, but as a religious one. Though the Muslim northerners massacred the Igbo, they only did so because the Igbo were the only major Christian group living in the North. The Igbo attempted to convince the Ijaw, Ibibio and other southern ethnic groups that the massacres in the North were not aimed at the Igbo, but that the massacres were only the beginning of a campaign of religious extermination against all the Christians of Southern Nigeria.

Biafran propaganda took a decisive shift in the spring of 1968 after the city of Port Harcourt was captured by Nigerian troops. Port Harcourt was the last major entrepôt for Biafra and the last major city outside of the Igbo heartland to fall to the Nigerian Army.<sup>4</sup> When the Biafrans lost the city, their propaganda effectively shift from one that focused on national, multiethnic unity to a narrative whereby Biafran was Igbo and Igbo was Biafran.

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<sup>4</sup> Port Harcourt was a predominantly Igbo city but its location in the heart of Ijaw territory gave the Biafrans control over a significant non Igbo population.

The archival work for the Nigerian Civil War presents unique challenges due to the problems of Biafra's military defeats. The political issues surrounding the immediate aftermath of the war in Nigeria further compounded these problems due in no small part to Nigeria's "no victor, no vanquished" policy. When Biafra surrendered in January 1970, Ojukwu had already fled, taking with him an untold number of documents with him, presumably Biafran government documents.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Biafra had been under siege for nearly three years for nearly three years before its capitulation and the capital was forced to relocate three times during the war.<sup>6</sup> These forced relocations no doubt contributed to the loss of Biafran documents. The simple lack of paper in Biafra during the war also contributed to the paucity of Biafran documents in the archives. In many instances, government documents were recycled and the reverse was used to print new documents, rendering the old ones useless as order was rarely kept. Also, toward the end of the war, documents were printed on school notebook paper when no other paper was available. No doubt, many documents must have been lost due to shortage of other types of paper for other uses.

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Col. Benjamin Okafor, who claims to have been the pilot that flew Ojukwu out of Biafra in January 1970. Draper states that the pilot who commanded the plane Ojukwu left on was an American named Hank Coates. Draper states there was a Biafran copilot, who he names simply as Osakwe; however Draper often minimized the role of Biafrans in the air campaigns, focusing instead on foreign pilots.

<sup>6</sup> Most Biafran documents continued to identify as published in Enugu, though Enugu fell to the Nigerian military very early during the war and was never recaptured, even temporarily, by the Biafrans.

Both Biafran and Nigerian government documents are conspicuous in their absence from the Nigerian archives. The lack of meticulous record keeping proves difficult for the historian, as foreign archives become even more instrumental in understanding the war, in an even more fundamental way than just ascertaining the attitudes of foreign governments. The Israeli National Archives in Jerusalem proved especially useful in understanding the war from the summer of 1968.<sup>7</sup> The Israeli embassy in Lagos proved especially diligent in following the war and sent almost daily dispatches to Israel documenting the progress of the war with minimal commentary and analysis. The Lyndon Johnson Archives in Austin contain extensive correspondence between administration officials regarding the war and provide a great deal of insight into the international policies, not only of the Johnson administration, but of the various international actors like the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and various church organizations and individuals, with special

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<sup>7</sup> The Israeli files from January 1967 – July 1968 are still classified, despite several attempts to gain access to them. My first attempt was in the summer of 2004, when I was told that the files were still not released due to the fact that the archives did not have enough declassifiers on staff and thus could not submit my request for declassification. By the time I left Israel at the end of the summer, I could still not access the files. I made a second attempt in 2007, but the archives were under renovation and the Nigeria files were in storage at a remote location and would be unavailable for 18 months. I tried again in 2009 to see the files, sending my brother. He was told that the files were still classified and could not pursue the matter further.

emphasis on Count Carl Gustav Von Rosen, the Swedish pilot who almost singlehandedly resurrected the Biafran Air Force in 1969.

Though the use of foreign archival sources to shed light on the internal workings of any African country, and especially in Nigeria during the Civil War proves problematic, but the lack of available Nigerian and Biafran primary sources makes the reliance on foreign sources unavoidable, if regrettable.

Secondary sources suffer from a similar problem as primary sources. Though the Civil War was a defining moment in Nigeria's political formation, the military regime suppressed meaningful research on the war as part of Gowon's "no victors, no vanquished" policy. The engagement with the issues of the civil war thus focused on three levels. First, most Nigerian scholars were unanimous in their condemnation of the First Nigerian Republic that collapsed with the first coup on 15 January 1966. Though it remains difficult to concisely organize the origins of the civil war, three major themes that emerge on why the civil war broke out. First is the economic determinist argument. Oil was discovered in Nigeria in 1956. According to some scholars, Biafran secession came out of a desire to control the oil fields in the Niger Delta, rather than from the crisis of the Nigerian state and the crisis of 1966, which included the massacre of the Igbo in the North. By reducing the war to a conflict over resources, the magnitude of the crisis is easily overlooked and the Biafran crisis is reduced to a similar prism as Katanga.

However, the Civil War was a traumatic experience, and the way forward was not at all clear. Early works emerged, especially from the Igbo side. One of the first accounts of the war and its political repercussions for the future was Raph Uwechuwe, *Reflections*

*on the Nigerian Civil War: Facing the Future*.<sup>8</sup> In his account, Uwechuwe does not divulge much into the machinations of the war, for these were not important to him. Originally written in 1969 and subtitled *A Call for Realism*, Uwechuwe's account is about the genesis of failure of the Nigerian state. For Uwechuwe, the cause of the war led on both the corruption of the Nigerian state and the colonial basis on which it was founded.

This failure of the Nigerian state, especially the first Republic would become the center point of the early criticism into the causes of the war. Ben Gbulie, one of the (in)famous five (Igbo) majors of the first Nigerian coup, wrote his account of events in 1981. For Gbulie, there were two reasons to undertake this coup. First and foremost was the corruption inherent in the Nigerian government. He says, "The politicians and public officers had indeed let the nation down [...] many a public servant had fraudulently enriched himself with the 10% takings in kickbacks from contractors. Embezzlement, too, was on the increase."<sup>9</sup> However, for Gbulie, the number one cause of political instability in Nigeria was the ever present specter of tribalism. It was the colonial legacy of a multiethnic Nigeria, combined with the inherent and rampant corruption in the political system that made action unavoidable, necessary and in the best interests of Nigeria.

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<sup>8</sup> Raph Uwechuwe, *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War: Facing the Future* (Paris: Jeune Afrique, 1971).

<sup>9</sup> Ben Gbulie, *Nigeria's Five Majors: Coup D'etat of 15th January 1966, First inside Account* (Onitsha: Africana Educational Publishers, 1981).

Another of the five majors, Adewale Ademoyega, wrote his account in the same year as Gbulie. Similarly, he states that

People have been disillusioned and disaffected with the Balewa government and the rulership of the clique of the NNA. Corruption was rife and nepotism was the order of the day. The safety belts of the nation were reposed in such institutions as the courts the Census commission and the electoral commission, the police and finally the Armed Forces. But the sanctity of those institutions as being politically assailed assaulted in direct in the mud so that they were fast losing their credibility.<sup>10</sup>

For Ademoyega as well, something had to be done in order to save the country from the ruin that corruption, tribalism and the legacy of colonial rule sought to impose. In his book, Ademoyega places his actions within the context of the political turmoil in Nigeria since independence. For Ademoyega, the coup was not an attempt to split the country asunder, but rather an attempt by radical officers in the Nigerian army to save Nigeria from the chaos of the corrupt and decadent civilian leadership. Though all the officers involved in the first coup were Igbo, they were also well trained at Sandhurst military Academy in Britain, and were also all radical Marxists.

Ademoyega places the failure of his January coup at the center of the unraveling of the first Republic. The events that caused Ironsi to come to power, the subsequent counter coup and the horrors that led to Ojukwu's secession in May 1967 came not as a

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<sup>10</sup> Adewale Ademoyega, *Why We Struck: The Story of the First Nigerian Coup* (Lagos: Evans Brothers, 1981).



result of Ademoyedga's coup in January 1966, but rather as a result of the failure of his attempt to seize power. While Ademoyega does not feel any ill feelings toward the demise of the First Republic; in his view, the events that followed would have been avoided had his coup not failed and ushered in an ethnic power vacuum that was to prove so bloody.

The amount of ink spilled over the problems of the first republic is almost without end. Obasanjo, Alexander Madiebo and most every other author that wrote any words about the causes of the Civil War in some way chastised the first Republic's corruption, tribalism and infighting as a destabilizing element that made some kind of military intervention, if not unavoidable, then at least precariously looming.<sup>11</sup> One dissenting voice in the almost universal condemnation of the First Republic came from A. M. Mainasara, a Northern Historian from Kano. Mainasara acknowledged the problems of corruption inherent in the First Republic, put points to spirit of compromise that the regional leaders attempted to forge in creating a united country. With all the problems of the government, it was still the legitimate government, and in general run by men with good intentions, and as such was preferable to any military junta.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Alexander A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing, 2000); Olusegun Obasanjo, *My Command: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (London: Heinemann, 1981).

<sup>12</sup> A. M. Mainasara, *The Five Majors: Why They Struck* (Zaria: Hudahuda Publishing Company, 1982).

Wole Soyinka, one of the great dissidents in Nigeria spent most of the war in prison. In 1972, he published his prison diaries where his disdain for Nigeria as a political entity becomes apparent. For Soyinka it is not this government or that government that caused Nigeria's problems, but the fact that Nigeria exists as an independent nation state when it was created solely as a colonial entity. Nigeria was formed by British decree in 1914 in order to minimize the cost of administering West Africa. For Soyinka, then, the problem lay in the colonization of the mind of the post-independence Nigerians who stuck to the colonial state. Thus Soyinka replies to the federal wartime slogan "to keep Nigeria One is a Task that must be done" by simply asking "why?"<sup>13</sup>

Thus, much of the scholarship focused on the Civil War as an instrument of Nigeria's unity and the reincorporation of the Igbo into Nigerian society. For example, in *The Economics of the Nigerian Civil War and Its Prospects for National Development*, Rueben Ogbudinkpa charts a very safe path of the economics of the Civil War, without really touching any contentious issue relating to the economics of the war. Absent in this work is any discussion regarding oil, the politics of economic siege that caused untold deaths in Biafra. Instead, Ogbudinkpa discusses the innovation of Biafran rocket makers and chemical engineers. Though he does talk about the centers for nutrition science that evolved during the conflict as a response to the severe shortage in food, this work shows a timid literature that cannot engage the real questions and create a meaningful dialog,

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<sup>13</sup> Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

because the fear of opening the dialog outweighed the potential benefits of allowing for a clear and open discussion.<sup>14</sup>

Third, the foundational literature on the war was never written. Despite several memoirs, such as Obasanjo, Madiebo and Adedimoyega, who wrote firsthand accounts, the scholars who wrote on the war, refrained from engaging the war in a meaningful way.

The First Republic does not find many friends among those who witnessed its collapse. Indeed, many writers viewed the regional system of the early independence as untenable. Chief among those writers was Olusegun Obasanjo. Obasanjo's seminal memoir, *My Command*,<sup>15</sup> an account of his time in command of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Commando division that is credited with winning the war for the Federal Government, contains a scathing condemnation of the First Republic, which he saw as corrupt, inept and prone to regionalism. Though he never condoned any action to overthrow it, he did realize that, if nothing else, the republic needed a major reworking.

Obasanjo's memoirs are in the minority of the literature on the war, as by far, the vast majority of memoirs, especially in recent years have been written by those who fought on, or lived in the Biafran side of the conflict. This is hardly surprising considering the plight of the Igbo people was a major cause célèbre during the war. Moreover, most of the war was fought; with the exception of what Philip Efiang called

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<sup>14</sup> Reuben N. Ogbudinkpa, *The Economics of the Nigerian Civil War and Its Prospects for National Development* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1985).

<sup>15</sup> Obasanjo, *My Command*.

the “flash in the pan”<sup>16</sup> that was the Biafran Midwest offensive, squarely in Biafra with its civilian population.

One of the most prolific authors in Nigeria, Ken Saro-Wiwa, wrote a venomously scathing memoir called *On a Darkling Plain: Account of the Nigerian Civil War* in which he attacks the Biafran project as an Igbo land grab to control the resources of the “minority peoples” in the Delta. In Saro-Wiwa’s view it was better to support a united Nigeria and the internal conflicts of a multi ethnic nation state than allow the Biafran regime to succeed and create a state with one major ethnic group that could potentially impose its will on the minority peoples.<sup>17</sup>

Others who supported Nigeria during the war fell afoul of the Biafran experiment, especially during the ill-fated Midwest offensive and the short lived Republic of Benin.<sup>18</sup> Samuel Umweni was the head engineer in charge of the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation’s office in Benin City. During the Midwest offensive, when Colonel Victor Banjo declared the Midwest region the independent Republic of Benin, he remained loyal to the Federal Government and was thus imprisoned in Biafra where he was held until the

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<sup>16</sup> Philip Efiog, *Nigeria and Biafra: My Story* (Princeton, Abuja, Owerri, Loeji: Sunghai Books, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Ken Saro-Wiwa, *On a Darkling Plain: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War* (Epsom: Saros, 1989).

<sup>18</sup> Not to be confused with modern day Benin that was then called Dahomey.

end of the war. His memoir, *888 Days in Biafra*<sup>19</sup>, is one of the only accounts of the personal experiences of a man who suffered from the oppressed becoming the oppressor.

Victor Banjo did not write any memoirs, because, like millions of others, he did not survive the war. Banjo was executed for allegedly plotting to overthrow Ojukwu in September 1967, shortly after his ill-fated expedition to the Midwest and Lagos that was stopped at Ore. Banjo was the highest ranking Yoruba that fought on the Biafran side and largely due to his sudden fall from grace and demise became a very controversial figure, both during the war and after it. Using his papers, official Biafran documents (that are not in the public domain) and her own personal connection with Banjo, F. Adetowun Ogunshye, Banjo's sister, wrote *A Break in the Silence*<sup>20</sup> in 2001 to help clear her brother's name and redeem his reputation. One of the major points of contention in Banjo's legacy during the Midwest offensive was the question as to whose idea it was to attempt an advance to Lagos. Ojukwu and official Biafran sources called Banjo a rogue that attempted to subvert the Biafran experiment into a personal crusade to "liberate" the Yoruba. However, Ogunshye contends that everything that Banjo attempted with regard to the Midwest offensive was done with the support and under the direction of Ojukwu. Though Ogunshye's chapter on Biafra is titled "the Biafran Debacle", like her brother,

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<sup>19</sup> Samuel E. Umwani, *888 Days in Biafra* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse Inc., 2007).

<sup>20</sup> F. Adetowun Ogunshye, *A Break in the Silence: Lt. Col. Adebukunola Banjo* (Ibadan: Spectrum, 2001).

she has always been a firm supporter of a re-imagining of Nigeria and moving away from the “imposed Lugard negotiated federation”<sup>21</sup>

As the dead cannot speak, the living make them heard. This cannot be truer than the account of one of the most colorful military men in Nigeria’s early history, Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu. Two very different storied of his life were penned by his brother and his friend Obasanjo. Nzeogwu was one of the leaders of the January coup and performed his duties as the coup’s mouthpiece and subsequently joined Ojukwu in Biafra where he was killed at Obolo Offor near Nsukka in the early days of the war.

Peter Nzeogwu, the Major’s younger brother, wrote his memoirs of his elder brother in what proves to be one of the more heartfelt of memoirs on the war.<sup>22</sup> Charting the life of his elder brother, Nzeogwu both looks at the Major’s life, political evolution and at himself and his own adoration of a brother who was a hero, not just to him as an elder, but also to many who saw in the Major a path of action that reflected heir own hopes for Nigeria and the quick disillusionment with the corrupt regional political situation that emerged so soon after independence.

In another story, simply titled *Nzeogwu*,<sup>23</sup> Obasanjo attempts a work that showcases both the intimate friendship between the two men and the puzzlement that

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 105

<sup>22</sup> Okeleke Peter Nzeogwu, *Major C.K. Nzeogwu: Fighting the Elusive Nigerian Enemy from Childhood to Death* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd. , 2003).

<sup>23</sup> Olusegun Obasanjo, *Nzeogwu: An Intimate Portrait of Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu* (Ibadan: Spectrum, 2004).

Obasanjo felt after learning that his good friend was one of the masterminds of the January coup. In his work, Obasanjo attempts to illustrate the friendship between the men with their mutual appointments in England, Congo and even back to Kaduna. For Obasanjo lasted even through Nzeogwu's incarceration and subsequent defection to Biafra. Indeed, Obasanjo was one of the few people to attend Nzeogwu's funeral in Kaduna. Both authors paint a picture of a soldier who did his best to uphold his conscience in a time of upheaval and to try to be the best soldier and man that he could be in such uncertain times. No doubt, if the war had ended differently, Nzeogwu most likely would be remembered another way.

Since the Civil War was indeed a war, a large proportion of memoirs have been written by military men. Both high ranking officers in the military, almost exclusively on the Biafran side, with the notable exception of Obasanjo, wrote about their experiences and how they affected the war, for good or ill. Philip Efiog was second in command of the fledgling Biafran nation and took over as president after Ojukwu fled to Abidjan. In his memoirs<sup>24</sup>, Efiog charts out his path from secession to capitulation in an understated tone. Here was not a man who went to secession and war with enthusiasm, but a sober man who saw the tide turning against his people and did what he thought best. He states at the beginning of his book that "I have no regrets whatsoever of my involvement in Biafra or the role I played. The war deprived me of my property, dignity, my name. Yet, I saved so many souls on both sides and by this, I mean Biafra and Nigeria" and was

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<sup>24</sup> Efiog, *Nigeria and Biafra: My Story*.

indeed credited, along with Obasanjo, with ensuring that Biafran surrender did not turn into a bloodbath.

For stories of bloodbaths, one needs not look further than Joe “Hannibal” Achuzia’s book *Requiem Biafra*.<sup>25</sup> Achuzia claimed to have graduated from Sandhurst and then joined the Biafran army after secession. However, no record exists of him ever attending the prestigious military academy. What is well documented, however, is the fact that Achuzia was given command of some of the civilian militia groups and was sent to defend Onitsha and then Port Harcourt. Achuzia’s work is peppered with self-aggrandizement and he even gloats about an episode where shot a Biafran soldier in cold blood in order to preserve his reputation and maintain discipline during the defense of Port Harcourt. Achuzia’s book places him at the center of all aspects of Biafran military and is more a testament to the man’s ego than to his military prowess. The most important aspect of his book is the testimony it serves to the disorganized nature of much of the military structure in Biafra that such a monster could not only be a part of it, but that such a beast could take arbitrary control over entire regiments that should not have been under his disposal.

As mentioned above, one of the more publicized aspects of the war was Biafran science. Colonel E. O. Aghanya served in the Biafran army as the head of Research and Production (RAP) and towards the end of the war as one of the main leaders of the

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<sup>25</sup> Joe O. G. Achuzia, *Requiem Biafra: The True Story of Nigeria's Civil War* (Asaba: Steel Equip Nigeria Ltd., 1993).



Biafran Organization of Freedom fighters (BOFF). In his book, *Behind the Screen*<sup>26</sup>, Aghanya reveals the structure of the Biafran development program and how different weapons were developed, tested and constructed in very dire conditions and with very limited resources. It was this scrounging methodology that left Aghanya well placed to lead BOFF, the irregular resistance to the Federal forces that was created toward the very end of the war. By supplying the civilian population with food, as well as sabotaging the Nigerian supply lines, BOFF hoped to continue the war indefinitely while enjoying support from the locals who would remain loyal to Biafra even after the end. However, when Ojukwu left for the Ivory Coast Biafra, ceased to exist in less than a week and BOFF was no longer needed.

Others served Biafra in capacities other than military, but had just as much and sometimes more, effect on the imagining of the breakaway region. I. Dike Ogu was one of the scriptwriters for the Propaganda Directorate and wrote the radio broadcasts and press releases that would haunt the Nigerian government and help turn world opinion squarely in Biafra's favor. In his memoir, titled *The Long Shadows of Biafra*<sup>27</sup> Dike recollects his time and activities as well as a terror of being a civilian in the war. Dike continues long after the war and tells his story of the successive military regimes, the terror of the Abacha years and his views on the condition of the African continent and what he calls "the triumph of Imperialist diplomacy".

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<sup>26</sup> E. O. Aghanya, *Behind the Screen* (Owerri: Springfield Publishers Ltd., 2004).

<sup>27</sup> I. Dike Ogu, *The Long Shadows of Biafra* (Nsukka: AP Express Publishers, 2001).

In 1985, the Federal Government opened a museum commemorating the Nigerian Civil War in Umuahia. To commemorate the occasion, the National War Museum held a conference titled “Nigerian Warfare through the Ages”. Though the seminar encompassed warfare in Nigeria from pre-colonial and colonial times, there were three essays on the Nigerian Civil War.

The opening of the War Museum in Umuahia is important for several reasons. First and foremost it was the first attempt by the Nigerian Government to engage the events of Biafran secession and begin a national dialog. However, the constraints that were placed on this dialog served only to water down the debate and focus on peripheral issues. Looking at this seminar is of utmost importance because it was the first academic conference that incorporated the Civil War and enjoyed official sanction by the Federal Government.

The essays on the Nigerian Civil War presented in the conference show the official stance on the war. The official stance can be summed up on several levels. First, there was to be no engagement in the controversial issues of the war, or even in the war itself. The war was to be swept under the carpet. In fact, the chronology of the war presented in this conference in an essay entitled “The Nigerian Civil War – Causes and Courses” by Major General Ibrahim Haruna, is a black hole. It reads as follows

Mar 1967 ... Eastern Region’s consultative  
Assembly voted to secede from Nigeria

May 27th 1967 ... Gowon proclaimed State of Emergency, unveiled plan for creation of twelve state federation to become effective April 1st 1968.

May 29th 1967 ... Lieutenant-Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, Military Governor of Eastern Region, proclaimed establishment of independent state of Biafra.

July 1967 ... Civil War in Nigeria, Biafra resistance collapsed following capture of Owerri by federal [sic]

Jan. 1970 ... Troops Jan 6th, unconditional cease-fire called by Biafran Government on Jan 12th. <sup>28</sup>

In short, though the Nigerian Civil War lasted for 30 months and cost untold loss of life, those 30 months are practically nonexistent in the official history.

Another troubling aspect of the way the war was portrayed at this conference is how the myth of a war between brothers was perpetuated. The underlying theme of the treatment of the Civil War in this conference was to discuss it only inasmuch as it pertained to the unity of Nigeria. By not engaging the problematic aspects of the war, including its causes, and the suffering of the Igbo, it was hoped that sleeping dogs would continue to lie.

In the rest of the world, scholars made attempts to come to grips with the war in Nigeria, but these attempts centered on both situating the war in the global cold war alignments and in the framework of postcolonial studies. Both of these attempts

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<sup>28</sup> Ibrahim Haruna, "The Nigerian Civil War – Causes and Courses" (paper presented at the Nigerian Warfare through the Ages Conference, Umuahia, Nigeria, 1985), 162-63.

ultimately proved problematic, because the war in Biafra could not easily confine itself to a cold war analysis or to the issues of post-colonial nationalist reconstruction. This war could not be seen as another case of cold war/post-colonial resource conflict. To pigeonhole Biafran secession in such an oversimplified way was to negate the political processes that led to the coup, countercoup and massacres on 1966, as well as thirty bloody months of civil war.

As mentioned above, one of the most difficult aspects of studying the Nigerian Civil War, and of studying post-colonial Africa in general is the state of the archives. One of the first objectives of historians in Africa has been to preserve the archival material. H.M. Kirk Greene was instrumental in preserving many of the primary documents from the civil war, many of which would have been lost without his contribution. His two volumes of *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria* remain one of the most important repositories for primary documents about the war.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, his essay in *African Affairs*<sup>30</sup> with C.C. Wrigley begins to make sense of the reasons behind the explosion of news coverage about Nigeria during the war. Indeed, the Biafran side of the war employed MarkPress, a Swiss public relations firm, which handled almost their entire publicity and news campaigns abroad with stunning success. Zdenek Cervenka similarly approaches this cataloging of news stories in his work, *The Nigerian War, 1967-1970: History of the*

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<sup>29</sup> A. H. M. Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: A Documentary Sourcebook*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

<sup>30</sup> A. H. M. Kirk-Greene and C.C. Wrigley, "Biafra in Print," *African Affairs* 69, no. 275 (1970).

*War; Selected Bibliography and Documents*. Cervenka's work is discussed more in-depth in a later section.<sup>31</sup>

Media outlets, diplomats, celebrity and academia helped to galvanize public opinion and create a huge public interest in the war, especially the humanitarian crisis. Many works came out of the media itself, including several of the earliest journalistic accounts of the war. Most important among these are two works, one written during the war and the other right after Biafra's surrender. Frederick Forsyth wrote his book *The Biafra Story* with one stated purpose: to galvanize support in Britain and around the world for the Biafran people.<sup>32</sup> His work was a call to arms for the world to wake up and see the genocidal war that destroying the Igbo people. A close friend of Ojukwu's Forsyth also penned a biography of the Biafran leader called *Emeka*.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps the most read book about the Nigerian Civil War remains John de St. Jorre's *The Brothers' War*.<sup>34</sup> De St Jorre was a correspondent for the Observer covering the war and made several journeys to Biafra. A combination of first hand reportage, historical background and political commentary, de St. Jorre's writing and his

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<sup>31</sup> Zdenek Cervenka, *The Nigerian War, 1967-1970. History of the War; Selected Bibliography and Documents* (Frankfurt: Bernard & Graefe, 1971).

<sup>32</sup> Frederick Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend* (London: Pen and Sword, 1968).

<sup>33</sup> Frederick Forsyth, *Emeka* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1982).

<sup>34</sup> John De St. Jorre, *The Brothers' War: Biafra and Nigeria* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972). Note: This book was also published in the UK under the title *The Nigerian Civil War* but they are the same book.

knowledge, journalistic sense and political acumen (honed for several years in the British Foreign Service) make this book one of the most essential books for any scholar or layman wishing for an introduction to the study of the war.

The 1960s were a very interesting time all around the world, and some scholars have attempted to place the war within the context of the times, with varying degrees of success. This was not another Katanga with a strong post-colonial influence, nor could it be classified as a cold war conflict since the Americans were largely absent, and the Russians and British both supported the Federal side with the French supporting the Biafrans, along with the Portuguese, South Africans and Ian Smith's Rhodesia. Nonetheless, several scholars place the war within the global system, and several interesting comparative works emerged.

Two of the more interesting works deal with placing the war within the global awareness. One departure from the established historiography of the war as humanitarian crisis deals with the Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. S. E. Orobator's essay *The Nigerian Civil War and the Invasion of Czechoslovakia*<sup>35</sup> contends that the Soviet invasion was in part prompted by Alexander Dubček's anti soviet stances including publicly supporting Biafra in defiance of the USSR's support for the Federal Government. Indeed, the Czechoslovak government stopped delivering arms to Lagos in April of 1968, despite the fact that the Czechoslovakia was one of the major arms manufacturers of the Warsaw Pact. Dubček's courage in defying his Soviet masters was

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<sup>35</sup> S. E. Orobator, "The Nigerian Civil War and the Invasion of Czechoslovakia," *African Affairs* 82, no. 327 (1983).

not limited to the Biafran cause and Biafra was not the sole reason that the Soviet bloc invaded Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1968. Biafra was, however, a very public, global defiance to the official line that Moscow sought to tow and caused much embarrassment to the Russian propaganda machine in the rest of the Soviet satellite states.

A second work, by Wayne Nafzinger and William Richter, compares the war in Biafra to the war in East Pakistan, which would successfully secede and become Bangladesh.<sup>36</sup> By looking at the long term legacies of colonialism, nationalism, religion, and the economy, Nafzinger and Richter seek to determine why Bangladesh was able to secede and Biafra failed so spectacularly. Through analyzing mainly the economic development of both Nigeria and Pakistan, the authors conclude that Biafra was too integral a part of Nigeria, especially for future economic development to allow for secession, while in Pakistan, the development of the east would have depleted the Karachi government and its business allies from enough resources that letting go of the territory was not as painful for future prospects than the Nigerians' potential loss of the entire eastern region. The deciding factor, for Nafzinger and Richter was that the potential oil revenue was too much of a central aspect of any economic planning in Nigeria to allow for any compromise in the integrity of the nation.

The military history of the war has been one of the most neglected aspects of the conflict until recently. With the exception of the plethora of recent memoirs on the

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<sup>36</sup> E. Wayne Nafzinger and William L. Richter, "Biafra and Bangladesh: The Political Economy of Secessionist Conflict," *Journal of Peace Studies* 13, no. 2 (1976).

subject, written mainly by the chief actors in government and the high echelons of military command only two works stand out as focusing on the military conduct of the war, with very inconsistent results. First, Zdenek Cervenka's account of the war<sup>37</sup>, released very shortly after the end of the war, remains until today the most comprehensive account of the chronology of the conflict and the best bibliography of primary source documents from around the world during the war.

More recently, a book commissioned by the Nigerian Military and written by H.B. Momoh was published in 2000 with a view at creating a true military history of the war. By looking at the impressive 800 page tome, it would appear that Momoh succeeded. However, opening the book shows that a mere paltry 200 pages is devoted to the war, and much of that is a recap of the events leading to the war. The remaining 600 pages are devoted to interviews with almost every officer of rank that served during the war and most of the top ranking members of the political elite that were not also members of the military.<sup>38</sup>

The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War is not only the title of one the most influential works on the Civil War, but also one of the most studied aspects of the war. The civil war proves itself time and again an interesting subject of study for several reasons. First and foremost, the war occupied the world's attention, especially after the

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<sup>37</sup> Cervenka, *The Nigerian War, 1967-1970. History of the War; Selected Bibliography and Documents.*

<sup>38</sup> H.B. Momoh, *The Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970: History and Reminiscences* (Ibadan: Sam Bookman Publishers, 2000).



collapse of the Biafran Midwest offensive and Ojukwu's introduction of a massive propaganda scheme. This propaganda offensive blasted images of the war and, more poignantly, of the humanitarian crisis into homes all over the world. The images of starving Biafran babies mobilized the world to action.<sup>39</sup> Scholarly interest also peaked during the war and in the immediate postwar years many scholars published works during the war and in the immediate postwar years.

The politics of the civil war also prove to be a challenge to scholars of the war. The configuration of the power alignment challenges conventional wisdom of cold war and regional politics. The British found themselves on the same side as the Soviet Union, with both supporting the Federal side, the former despite the intense public pressure against supporting the perceived genocidal regime in Lagos. The French supported the Biafran side, though De Gaulle initially refused to get involved. After Pompidou gained the French Presidency in 1969, he provided more active support to Ojukwu, placing him on the same side of a rather motley crew which included Ian Smith and Julius Nyerere.

The best work on the political aspect of the war remains John Stremlau's excellent book, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*,<sup>40</sup> published in 1977. Stremlau's book is an excellent work of diplomatic and political history, and succeeds in

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<sup>39</sup> During my first year review at the University, when I mentioned that I was to write on Biafra, one of the committee members replied with "I remember Biafra. I donated money to someone."

<sup>40</sup> John Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

analyzing the political machinations and international intrigue surrounding the war. Stremmlau's work dissects the complex alliances both within Africa and around the world. Stremmlau analyses how the different countries, sectors, and international organizations maneuvered in the war.

Though the Organization for African Unity was determined to maintain the colonial boundaries, primarily to avoid endless civil wars, this was the first time they had been put to the test, and the strain highlighted the tensions between nationhood and the Pan-africanist ideal.<sup>41</sup> The Nigerian Civil War was the first internal secessionist conflict since the creation of the organization, and the war dominated the organization's agenda, with many attempts to bring draft a strong resolution and two failed peace conferences in Addis Ababa and Kampala. Yet several of the leading members in the OAU broke rank and openly supported Ojukwu's separatist republic, with Nyerere joined by Kenneth Kaunda (Zambia), Félix Houphouët-Boigny (Ivory Coast) and Omar Bongo (Gabon) all recognizing Biafra and establishing diplomatic relations with the nascent republic.

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<sup>41</sup> Several works cite the tension between the end of colonialism and the tensions in independent Africa. Most especially P. Olaniran Esedebe, *Pan-Africanism: The Idea and Movement, 1776-1991* (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1994). The end of colonialism challenged the ideals of Pan Africanism when the nation state and the new political realities emerged that challenged the notion of blackness as a way of confirming identity.

The OAU itself published a volume commemorating its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>42</sup> It devoted a chapter to the organization's involvement in civil conflicts. The Nigerian Civil war serves as the benchmark for it was the first civil secessionist conflict in Africa after the OAU was created, and it nearly tore the organization apart when several of the major leaders of African Unity, such as Nyerere, Kaunda and Houphouët-Boigny broke ranks with the organization's one Nigeria policy and recognized Biafra.

#### **CHAPTER OUTLINE**

The first chapter of this work looks at the causes of the Nigerian Civil War. The British Colonial government under Lord Lugard created Nigeria in 1914 with the amalgamation of the mainly Muslim Northern and predominantly Christian Southern Nigeria into one administrative unit. By utilizing the British model of maximum rule at minimum cost, Lugard created a governmental system that carried over into Independence whereby regional, ethnic and religious tensions became paramount in establishing leadership and governance in the country. When Nigeria gained its independence on 1 October 1960, many of the instabilities that colonial rule mitigated came to the forefront. Among the tensions, control of the military and the civil service became one of the major battlegrounds between Northern and southern Nigeria.

Southern Nigeria, especially the East, had a long relationship with Europeans, even before the imposition of colonial rule. The Igbo especially embraced many aspects of European culture, including Roman Catholicism, and the missionary education that

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<sup>42</sup> R. A. Akindele, ed. *The Organization of African Unity: A Role Analysis and Performance Review* (Lagos: Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, 1988).

came with it. As a result, when the British imposed colonial rule on Nigeria in the late 19th century, the Igbo were best equipped to act as collaborators and fill key administrative positions, a trend that continued through to independence. When Nigeria became independent in 1960, many in the North feared that the Southerners in general and the Igbo specifically would come to dominate all political, economic and social life in the new Republic. Northerners agitated for a quota system whereby civil service appointments and military commissions would be allocated to each ethnic group to preserve a regional balance of power in the country. Southerners feared that by basing civil service and military appointments on quotas rather than merit, the integrity of the state would be compromised. These tensions eventually erupted in a series of crises and culminated on 15 January 1966, when a group of predominantly Igbo colonels overthrew the Nigerian republic. Though their rebellion failed, the military Chief of Staff, Major General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, himself an Igbo, took command of the government, only to be overthrown in a bloody coup on 29 July of the same year by a group of Northern Officers lead by Colonel Murtala Mohammed.

In the wake of the second coup, major massacres occurred against the Igbo in most parts of the country. Ojukwu, who Ironsi appointed as the governor of the Eastern Region issued a call for the Igbo and all other easterners to flee their homes and return to the relative safety of the Eastern Region. The new Federal Government, led by a Northern Christian, Yakubu “Jack” Gowon, attempted to mitigate the regional conflicts that were so endemic to the Nigerian State by instituting a Federal structure of twelve states based largely on ethnic boundaries. However, Ojukwu rejected this solution and,

after several attempts to reach a compromise failed, declared the Eastern Region the independent Republic of Biafra, causing the Nigerian Civil War.

The second chapter looks at the first year of the Civil War, from the outbreak of hostilities to the capture of Port Harcourt by the Nigerian Military. Two major events have been called the turning points in the war. First, the Biafran Midwest Offensive, led by Colonel Victor Banjo, was a Biafran attempt to widen the war by striking at the Nigerian capital, Lagos; and by attempting to lure the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria to join the conflict, and to create a North-South divide in the country. Despite its initial success, the Midwest Offensive stalled and was eventually repulsed at the Battle of Ore, only 200km from Lagos. During the offensive, Banjo declared the Midwest Region the Republic of Benin, but the ill-fated Republic lasted only a few months and did not survive the Nigerian counter offensive that drove Banjo back across the Niger.

The Midwest offensive changed the attitude of both Nigerians and Biafrans. For the Biafrans, the rapid success of the offensive created an aura of invincibility around Ojukwu and the sudden collapse of the offensive quickly shattered that myth and created a siege mentality. For Nigeria, the offensive signaled an end to limited engagement in the conflict, and spurred Gowon to declare the war an all-out war, and not a “police action” as he initially framed it. Through a series of offensives, the Nigerians regained control of most of the country apart from the Igbo heartland, which remained under Biafran control. The chapter concludes with the capture of Port Harcourt by Nigerian Forces under the command of Benjamin Adekunle. The capture of Port Harcourt symbolized the end of the viability of the Biafran state and many expected the war to end in the ensuing peace talks

in Kampala. However, the Biafrans refused to surrender and the war continued for another twenty months before Biafra finally capitulated.

Chapter three discusses the various methods that the Biafran Directorate of Propaganda used to maintain the war effort and the support of the civilian population during the war. Looking at the few extant documents, as well as publications such as *The Leopard*, the Biafran Armed Forces bulletin, this chapter shows the adaptability of Biafran propaganda to changing conditions that hampered the dissemination of propaganda. Further, the chapter illustrates how the Biafrans employed effective strategies borrowed from the corporate marketing world implemented those strategies to maintain both military morale and the support of the civilian population.

Similarly, the fourth chapter looks at how Biafrans disseminated their message abroad. By employing both direct appeals to the Western world and using modern marketing tactics, most notable the use of Swiss public relations firm Markpress, the Biafrans successfully garnered public support that led to an intense public pressure campaign against the British Government to stop supporting Nigeria. Though the public pressure did not end British support for Nigeria, it was effective in that the British took special notice of the protests all around Europe and North America and formulated a strategy that attempted not only to bring about an end to the war, but also to overtly paint the efforts as in the best interests of both Nigerians and the Igbo in Biafra.

Chapters Three and Four make the case that despite Biafra's foundation as a multi ethnic expression of disgust with the corruption and brutality of the Nigerian government no longer willing or able to protect its citizens, the fact that by May 1968, Biafra was

almost exclusively an Igbo enclave surrounded by Nigerian Federal forces. The fact that for the last twenty months of the war very few Biafrans were not Igbo, the propaganda switched from one that emphasized national unity in Biafra to one that focused on Biafran survival in the face of genocide.

Chapter Five places Biafran propaganda at the center of the political and military situation in Biafra and examines the political effect of the propaganda campaign, both at home and abroad. More specifically, the chapter looks at various aspects of the political and military situation and how the response to the propaganda campaign effected changes in the way various actors (governments, NGOs, and empowered individuals) responded to the changes.

These responses affected the outcome of events, such as the peace conferences in Kampala and Addis Ababa, which in turn created a new situation that Biafran propaganda responded to; creating new opportunities to either prolong or end the war. Biafran propaganda thus acted as an integral and important supporting element of the Biafran war effort and played an important part both strategically and tactically in the outcome of the Nigerian Civil War.

## Chapter I

### The Origins of the Nigerian Civil War

On 1 January 1808, British legislation came into effect abolishing the Transatlantic Slave trade. The abolition of the transatlantic slave trade was brought about by a coalition of antislavery activists, church officials and trading interests. Thus began a coalition between Christian moral activism and economic interests that would eventually lead to the colonization of most of Africa. Initially, explorers such as Mungo Park and Stanley and Livingstone went into the African interior to pave the way for the three Cs: Commerce, Christianity and the Crown. For them, capitalism and trade was an essential part of spreading the Christian faith and the “civilizing mission” could only be done when these areas were under the control of the crown.

The coastal region of Nigeria, especially the Bights of Benin and Biafra were traditional centers for the transatlantic slave trade. The British government encouraged trade in a legitimate commodity, palm oil, in effort to help end of the trade in human chattel. Palm oil was essential for Britain during the industrial revolution for two reasons. First, it was one of the key ingredients in the manufacture of soap.<sup>1</sup> Second, palm oil (along with peanut oil) was one of the chief lubricants for industrial machinery.

Onwuka Dike, in *Trade and Politics on the Niger Delta*, illustrates the difficult situation with which the British traders had to contend. The early history of the oil trade in the Niger Delta, called the Oil rivers, was that of English trade with coastal middlemen

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<sup>1</sup> It was essential for creating a good lather



who owned large trading “families” along the coast and who had exclusive access to the interior palm producing regions. The largest of these families were at Bonny and Brass. At first, the trade patterns followed those of the slave trade, except now the Europeans were trading in oil and other products, and not in people. The same middlemen in Bonny and Brass now traded with the British Merchants, only rather than slaves, these middlemen now traded in palm oil. In 1806, palm oil exports from the Niger Delta region amounted to 150 tons. By 1839, exports stood at 13,000 tons.<sup>2</sup>

British policy was to maintain an informal presence where they could, and formally occupied a territory only when they had no alternative. To this effect, they turned to a man named George Taubman Goldie. Goldie was actively seeking a charter company to control the territory around the Niger River, for according to Dike, the only way to control the trade on the Niger was through political control of the Niger<sup>3</sup>. Pressures from France and Germany forced Britain to consolidate their situation in the Niger.<sup>4</sup> Goldie was the natural choice, because he had already begun to consolidate the

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta; an Interoduction to the Economic and Poltical History of Nigeria* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956).and John Flint, *Sir George Goldie and the Making of Nigeria* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 11. The Niger Delta region was called the Oil Rivers because the course of the Niger river had not been charted yet and the Europeans did not know that the Oil rivers were the tributaries of the Niger.

<sup>3</sup> Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta*, 75.

<sup>4</sup> Most troublesome for the British was Bismarck’s insistence on “effective occupation” where a European power could only lay claim to a territory be effectively occupying it.

four trading firms under his own, and together they amalgamated into the United Africa Company, or UAC, in 1882.

British administration in Nigeria would follow the same path as in other parts of the empire. Indirect rule and a divide and conquer strategy superimposed on a British judicial and legislative system that would guarantee British trade interests were put in place. Initially the territory was split into two administrative units. The predominantly Muslim territories of the Hausa states and Borno–Kanem were amalgamated to create Northern Nigeria. The very heterogeneous territories in the south were united to form Southern Nigeria. The creation of the Nigerian administration cannot be understated here, because as we will see after independence, the administrative units would remain largely intact and much of the instability of the newly formed Federal Republic of Nigeria can be traced directly to this colonial legacy.

Perhaps the most significant development of the colonial administration came in 1914, when the erstwhile governor, Lord Lugard, united the two halves of Nigeria and set the capital at Lagos. As Major Abubakar A. Atofarati stated, “This, in effect, produced two Nigerias [within one political entity], each with different social, political, economic and cultural backgrounds and developments.”<sup>5</sup> During World War II, Nigeria was divided into the regions that would last until independence.

The colonial period also marked the culmination of the doctrine of legitimate trade and as a direct result, the extraction economy. The economic structure that took

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<sup>5</sup> Abubakar A. Atofarati, "The Nigerian Civil War: Causes, Strategies, and Lessons Learnt," (Quantico: US Marine Command and Staff College, 1992).

hold in Nigeria has been well studied by many scholars, such as A.G. Hopkins, Dike, and Flint.<sup>6</sup> It was this economic structure, which was based on the extraction of wealth without concern for the consequences on the broader population that would lead to the perception of corruption, incompetence and disregard that the political elites were seen to indulge during the First Republic. Indeed, Olusegun Obasanjo, in his memoir, *My Command*, states that corruption and excess, such as the importation of expensive scotch whiskey for top officers was one of the main financial problems in the early years of the war.<sup>7</sup>

The British Imperial project served not only to transform the political and economic landscape of Nigeria, but also changed the ways in which the different ethnic groups viewed themselves and interacted with each other. Indeed, until the coming of European colonialism, the Igbo lacked a distinct sense of political and social identity. While the Hausa and the Yoruba had strong political entities, the Igbo were touted as a prime example of an acephalous society.

After the Second World War, the British government made a decided effort to divest itself from its colonial empire. Ghana became the first African colony to attain independence, under Kwame Nkrumah, in 1957. 1960 became known as the year of

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<sup>6</sup> Antony G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973); Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta*; Flint, *Sir George Goldie and the Making of Nigeria*.

<sup>7</sup> Olusegun Obasanjo, *My Command: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War* (Oxford, Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1980).

African Independence, when almost all the British colonies and most of the French possessions achieved independence. On October 1<sup>st</sup> 1960, the Union Jack was lowered for the last time, and the Green White Green of Nigeria was unfurled for the first time.

Sentimentalism aside, Nigeria was full of structural flaws that would allow the deterioration of governmental control and eventually lead to violence, secession and civil war. Both the institutions that the British left and those they created would serve to create an unstable state, and one that would eventually come to the brink of falling apart.

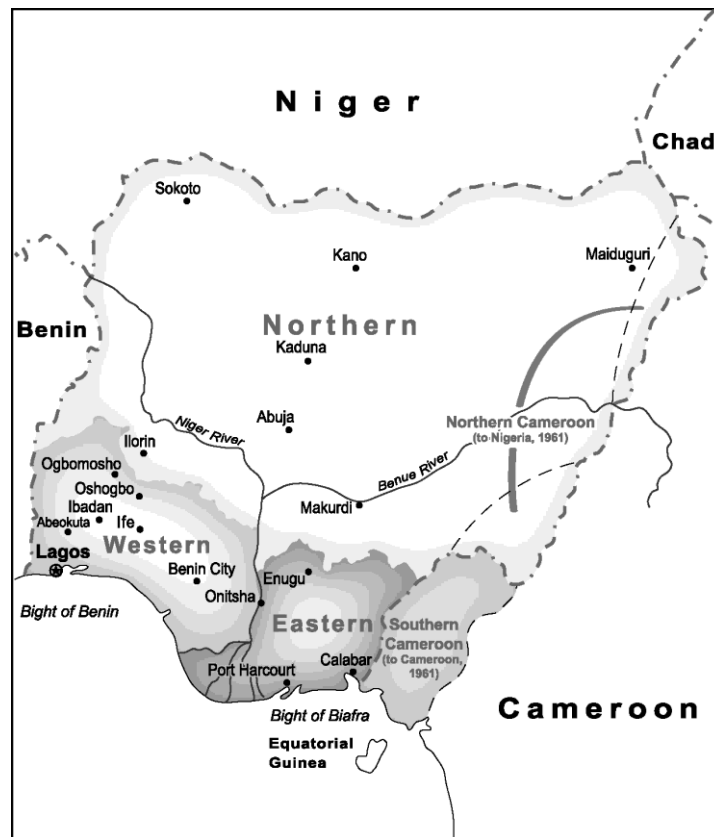


Figure 1: Nigeria at Independence, 1960 <sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Toyin Falola; unpublished map collection

First and foremost, the colonial administrative system remained largely intact, and the four region system that the British authorities had put in place remained, with some minor changes. The Lagos colony was absorbed into Western Nigeria, and in 1963, the Midwest region was created. Thus, in 1963, the map of Nigeria was split up into four large regions. These regions were, for the most part, homogeneous. Though there were large minorities in all of them, the North was dominated by the Hausa, the West by the Yoruba and the East by the Igbo. The Midwest was the most heterogeneous area and was a mix of Igbo, Yoruba, and Ijaw.<sup>9</sup>

The makeup of the country lent itself to the development of regionalism, and indeed, by 1965, the army was thoroughly segregated along ethnic lines. This would prove disastrous after the first coup d'état in January 1966. The early structure of the Nigerian state has been cited by many scholars as a determining institutional factor in creating the chaos that would lead to Eastern secession.<sup>10</sup> Though most scholars and firsthand accounts cite the structure of the country as a leading determinant in the civil war, and the regional structure was the locus of the power struggle within Nigeria that galvanized the many other factors that contributed to the deterioration of Nigeria and Biafran secession.

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<sup>9</sup> It is impossible in a paper of this scale to give more than a brief overview of the ethnic composition of Nigeria.

<sup>10</sup> These scholars include, but are not limited to, John De St Jorre, John Oyimbo, Zdenek Cervenka and others cited throughout this work.

Second, the British created a system of government that mirrored their own in place of the colonial administration. This parliamentary democracy would prove sorely inadequate to maintaining order and control within the country. Obasanjo cites the many riots, fixed elections, and institutional violence as endemic of the first six years of independence. Though he blames much of the violence on “rogues and miscreants”<sup>11</sup> and mentions the help that Northerners afforded to fleeing Igbos in the wake of the July coup, such large scale fraud, graft and violence cannot be summed up as nothing but the work of rogues and miscreants, but rather of a system that allowed such a culture of thievery and recklessness to thrive.

Nigerian foreign policy was known throughout the world to be balanced, pragmatic and, above all, professional. Nigeria initiated and hosted a Commonwealth summit on Ian Smith’s illegal declaration of the independence of Rhodesia, held in Lagos in mid-January of 1966, only days before the first coup struck. The domestic situation in the country deteriorated quickly after independence with internal divisions and ethnic suspicions regularly boiling over. Indeed, it was this outward appearance of “business as usual”, even up to, literally, the day before the first coup that served to lull many, both in Nigerian and abroad, into a false sense of complacency regarding the deep troubles that Nigeria was facing.

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<sup>11</sup> Obasanjo, *My Command: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War*, 5-9.

Both Obasanjo and Philip Efiog<sup>12</sup> along with many journalists like John de St. Jorre<sup>13</sup> have offered riveting and differing accounts of the events that led up to the civil war, especially of the violent period of the January 1966 coup and July countercoup. However, the violence inherent in the Nigerian political system did not begin in 1966. Rather, it was born with the country in 1960.

Violence in Nigeria went part and parcel with independence. John Oyimbo, in his book on the war, called the first period of democracy the “Conspiracy of Optimism”.<sup>14</sup> For Oyimbo, the initial optimism of independence created a sort of conspiracy where the flaws of the system of government were not acknowledged, and often ignored. According to Oyimbo “Neither the British nor the Nigerians fully realized how vital the British presence was to the operation of a system which contained gross imbalances, was rooted in an alien culture and the product of another nation’s history.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Philip Efiog, *Nigeria and Biafra: My Story* (Princeton, Abuja, Owerri, Lorji: Sungai Books, 2003). Gen. Efiog was second in command of the Biafran army during the Civil War and after Col. Ojukwu fled in January 1970, he became President of Biafra and signed the surrender papers.

<sup>13</sup> John de St. Jorre, *The Brothers' War: Biafra and Nigeria* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972).

<sup>14</sup> John Oyimbo, . London, Charles Knight and Co. Ltd. 1971 *Nigeria: Crisis and Beyond* (London: Charles Knight and Co. Ltd., 1971), 1-36. (this is the title of his chapter)

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

Throughout the 1960s, elections in Nigeria were rife with regionalism, violence, intimidation and fraud. Since the system of representation in the federal government was based on the different regions, even the census became a political issue. Thus, for example, in the 1962 census, the Northern region's population of 22.5 million people was certified as 31 million.<sup>16</sup> In short, Oyimbo saw the entire project of British democracy transplanted to Nigeria as artificial, and would not be able to hold in a country where regionalism, pomp and importance went hand in hand. Much like Obasanjo's criticism of the military, Oyimbo's critique of the Westminster system in Nigeria was that there was no precedent in Nigeria for a government where the pomp of government were to lie in with the president while real power would lie with the Prime Minister. "If one had a Rolls Royce, so must the other"<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Obasanjo, *My Command: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War*, 10; Oyimbo, *Nigeria: Crisis and Beyond*, 23.

<sup>17</sup> Oyimbo, *Nigeria: Crisis and Beyond*, 28.



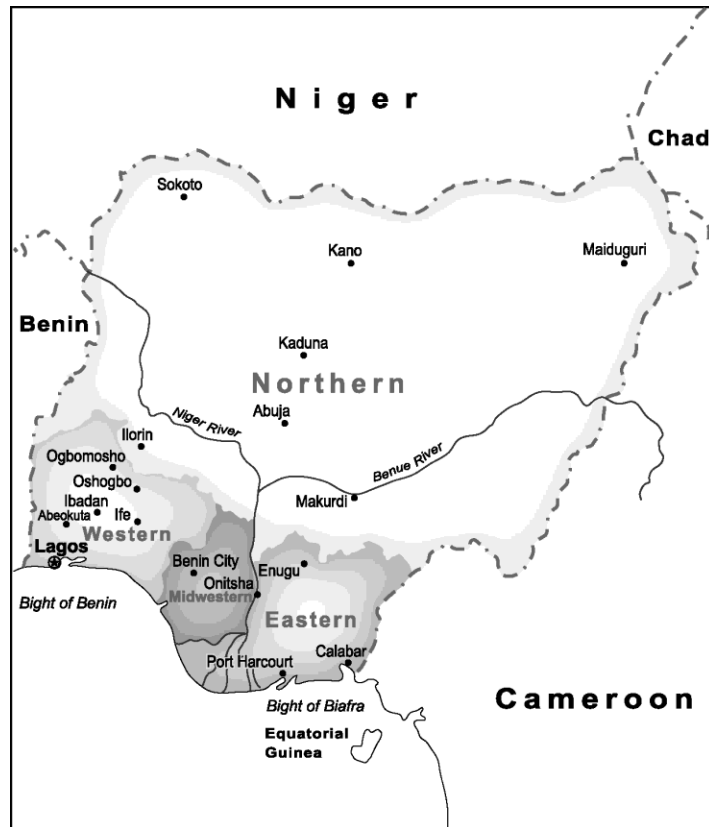


Figure 2: 1963 Map of Nigerian Regions.<sup>18</sup>

On 15 January 1966, a group of majors, mainly Igbos from the east rose up and attempted to take over the federal government of Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. Though they succeeded in killing Balewa and many other heads of the Nigerian Government, including Sir Ahmadu Bello, the powerful premier of the north and, in a dramatic gunfight, Samuel Abiola, the Premier of the Western Region, within less than 2 hours Major General Ironsi began to organize a resistance to the coup.

Many events of that night are still shrouded in mystery and innuendo, but by the next morning, the prime minister of the federal republic, along with the chiefs of the

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<sup>18</sup> Toyin Falola; unpublished private map collection.

eastern and northern regions were dead. The Chief of Staff of the Army, General Ironsi, himself an Igbo, was able to muster troops still loyal to the government and to end the coup and kill or capture the ringleaders. He then appointed himself provisional head of government and tried to regain order and stability. Two other important actors emerged during this coup. First, the head of communications under Ironsi was a man named Yakubu (Jack) Gowon, a northerner who was approached by the plotters and refused to join them and thus became a target himself. He escaped with the help of his Igbo girlfriend and came to Ironsi's aid. The second was a young captain in the northern city of Kanu named Odumegwu Ojukwu. When news of the coup broke, he sealed off the city and was thus able to save it from the plotters.

The January coup was a watershed event in the history of Nigeria. It was seen as an ethnic coup, led by the Igbo to gain control of the federal government. Though it was portrayed as such, the truth is more likely that the plotters, all officers who were educated in England, most of them classmates at Sandhurst (the English officer's training academy), were reacting to the chaos and instability inherent in the government. Though they ultimately failed in their attempts at taking over the government, they did take down the structures of power and replaced them with a military government. However, all the senior military and civilian officials that were killed were either Westerners or Northerners, thus increasing the regional strife.

Ironsi sought to solve the regional differences by creating a unified country and abolished the federal system, replacing it with a unitary government. This would prove to be his downfall, as this move was seen to strengthen the Eastern hold on power. Ironsi's

regime also had other weaknesses that served to increase the chaos and showcase his weakness. First and foremost, even though the coup leaders that survived the attempt were arrested, none of them were executed, an act that was unheard of for such a work of high treason. This act alone fueled the fire of regionalism. How could Ironsi, an Igbo, want to create a unitary state, abolish the regional system and say that he was working for all Nigerians when he would not punish the plotters who had massacred the Northern political elite with the only punishment that could be conceived for such a treasonous act? To many Northerners, it was obvious that Ironsi was part and parcel of the coup.

The end of civilian government became a talking point across Nigeria, with many supporting the new military government, as *The West African Pilot* would state in an editorial

The seed of tribalism watered in Nigeria in 1949 by Sir John Macpherson has grown to rend Nigeria into tribal entities. [...] Macpherson played up tribalism among the politicians and thus disarmed the nationalist camp. [...] The politicians of the first Republic preached Tribalism in order to preserve their influence. The new Regime is resolved to abolish, very ruthlessly if need be, the regionalism and unworkable constitution thrust upon us.<sup>19</sup>

By June, the Northern region was in chaos. After a month of rioting, on 29 July 1966, a counter coup was hatched, with the dual purpose of punishing the Igbo, and breaking up the federation. Indeed, according to Zdenek Cervenka, once the dust settled

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<sup>19</sup> *West African Pilot* 10 February 1966

and the coup failed (yet this coup also removed most of the Eastern leaders<sup>20</sup>) Gowon became Military Governor and in his speech to the nation affirmed that Nigeria would remain unified. However, Cervenka points out that Gowon's speech was so haphazardly put together that it seems that he was initially going to announce the secession of the north, but only at the last moment was counseled into changing his mind.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the coup plotters used the codename Araba, which is Hausa for secession to name their plot against Ironsi.

Soon after the July coup, Northerners began to take revenge on the Igbo. Igbo were slaughtered in the Northern provinces. According to most estimates, around 50,000 Igbo were killed in the months following the July coup and millions returned to their ancestral homes in the Eastern Province. Col. Ojukwu expelled most northerners from the East. In the West, many Yoruba were expressing fear and hatred of Federal soldiers from the North who were called "an occupation force".

Gowon quickly reinstated the regions and attempted to find a way to solve this constitutional crisis. However, buoyed by the July coup, many northerners began to exact revenge on the Igbos. In September and October, the Northern Government sat idly while soldiers, civilians and militia slaughtered the Igbo. One account of the killing is as follows:

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<sup>20</sup> Ironsi was declared missing, but he had been murdered. Official word of his death was kept secret until March of 1967.

<sup>21</sup> Zdenek Červenka, *The Nigerian War, 1967-1970. History of the War; Selected Bibliography and Documents*. (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard & Graefe, 1971), 33.

A sergeant ordered that all Easterners should raise up their hands... The Sergeant asked us whether we could remember what happened on January 15<sup>th</sup> when the prime minister and the Premier of the North lost their lives and the Ibos were all very happy. We said “No, Sergeant”. Paying no heed to that he asked us to give our names and addresses and send any messages we have for our people because we were going to die... They drove us 5 miles away to the Katsina road, brought us down and started shooting us. I felt my leg shattered and I fell down... I managed to crawl into the bush.<sup>22</sup>

It was clear that a crisis was reaching critical mass. By March 1967, one and a half million Igbo had left their homes all across Nigeria and returned to the east. Any military personnel who were not from the East were expelled from Eastern Nigeria. Colonel Ojukwu became governor of the East and began with preparations for secession.

There would be a last ditch effort at maintaining unity. A meeting was held under the invitation of Kwame Nkrumah in the town of Aburi in Ghana on 5 January 1967. At the meeting, Gowon and Ojukwu expressed their resentment for each other and the two were not to meet again until 1983. At Aburi, the leaders of Nigeria issued a communiqué, restructuring the military and renouncing the use of force in solving the crisis. The Aburi accords would never be implemented, and a very different solution would end up manifesting itself.

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<sup>22</sup> de St. Jorre, *The Brothers' War*, 85.

The minutes of the Aburi meeting was made public immediately and provides insight as to the mood, the policies and foreshadows the events that led ultimately to Biafran secession.

Gowon had plans to solve the crisis by dividing Nigeria into twelve states. The geography of these states would leave only the Igbo heartland under direct Igbo control. The oil rich Niger Delta would be stripped from the East, and more importantly, the food producing regions would no longer be under direct Igbo supervision. After the atrocities of 1966, the Igbo people, especially Ojukwu expressed their fears that the Federal Government under Gowon was attempting to starve the Igbo, both physically and economically. Ojukwu declared that if the twelve state plan would go into effect, he would have no choice but to secede from the Nigerian federation.

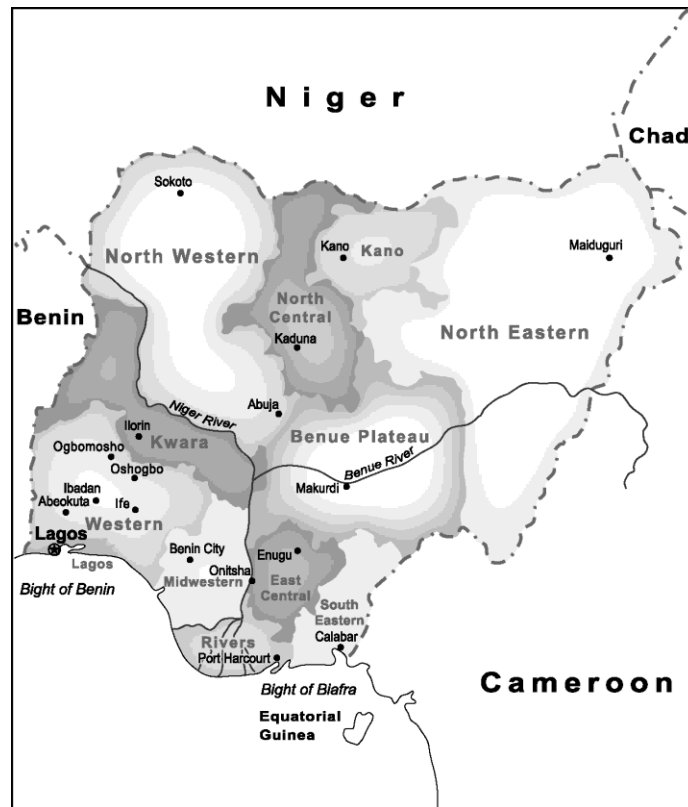


Figure 3: 1967 Map of Nigerian States<sup>23</sup>

On 27 May 1967, Gowon created 12 states out of the existing four regions. On 30 May, Governor Ojukwu declared the Eastern Region of Nigeria to be the Independent “Republic of Biafra”. After Ojukwu’s declaration of independence at the end of May, nothing happened. This period can best be characterized as the “Phony War”.<sup>24</sup> There are

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<sup>23</sup> Toyin Falola, unpublished private collection

<sup>24</sup> I borrow the term “phony war” from the Second World War. The Phony War refers to the period between Hitler’s invasion of Poland in Sept. 1939 and the battle of France in June 1940. This period is called the phony war because though war was formally

several reasons why it took two months from Biafra's declaration of independence until Gowon's "police action" that signaled the beginning of the Civil War. First and foremost, the Nigerian military was in turmoil. After going through two major coups, massacres, and a severe "ethnicization", the Nigerian Army could only muster 7,000 troops. This number would rise to over 120,000 by the end of the war, but in mid-1967, The Federal Government was in little shape to fight a civil war. It was not even clear if this would be necessary.

As for the Biafran side, though Ojukwu began stockpiling weapons as early as November of 1966, the Biafran military was in even worse shape, if it could be called a military at all. Further, the Biafran side had no real incentive in opening the fighting. Because the Biafrans were fighting an essentially defensive war, there was no need for them to attack the Federal Government. If Gowon was reluctant to unify Nigeria by force, it was hoped that secession would end up a peaceful, if acrimonious affair.

Both coups had the added effect of decimating the commissioned ranks in the Nigerian Army. In fact, since independence, the Nigerian military was plagued by sectionalism, regionalism and incompetence that left the upper ranks either dead, in exile or otherwise ineffective.

Even before the coups of 1966, the Nigerian military was heading toward impotence and sectarian strife. With Nigerian independence in 1960 came a plan for the Nigerianization of the armed forces and the civil service. Though there was no doubt that

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declared, there was no fighting. In the Nigerian case, the term applies because although no hostilities had begun, all sides knew that it was only a matter of time.



the Nigerian Army should consist of no foreign officers, the system broke down into regional conflict from the very beginning. During the colonial period, the overwhelming number of Nigerians commissioned as officers were Igbo. This is not surprising because the British system was based on exams and was a western meritocracy. The Igbo were traditionally considered the most receptive to western influence and were thus best suited to pass exams. According to N.J. Miners, Igbo and Eastern officers in the Nigerian army reached 44% before regional quotas were introduced to reduce Igbo influence on the military and by proxy on the main executive tool of the Nigerian state.<sup>25</sup>

At independence, only 14% of Nigerian officers were from the North. This situation created a severe imbalance when the mass expulsions of non-easterners from their military posts in the east occurred. Since most of the seasoned officers were Easterners, and many fought in Burma and elsewhere in the Second World War, it was clear that the Biafran Army had an advantage in seasoned, battle hardened officers capable of creating a much better trained military.

However, at Independence only 22% of the officers in the Nigerian army were Nigerian.<sup>26</sup> The first defense minister, Muhammadu Ribadu embarked on a massive Nigerianization of the armed forces, but under a quite regional scheme, with a clear view at checking Eastern power in the army. Although the official policy was to Nigerianize the military as quickly as possible, the higher ranks were kept British, because the clear candidates to man them were Easterners. Most glaring, when the British head of the

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<sup>25</sup> Norman Miners, *The Nigerian Army, 1956-1966* (London: Methuen, 1971), 115.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

army, Major General Foster was due to leave his post in March 1962, he was replaced with Major General Welby-Everard and not with a Nigerian, and most assumed would be the case. The two top Nigerians in the Army were Lt. Cols. Ironsi and Ademulegun. This glaring omission sparked the *Nigerian Outlook* to the following editorial:

Are we to believe that if either Lt. Col. Ironsi or Lt. Col. Ademulegun was appointed to take over command of the Nigerian Forces that Northern Nigeria would one day be invaded by the South? Or could it be inferred that since one of the most important ministries – the Defense Ministry – is under the control of a Northerner and perhaps there is no Northerner yet qualified to command the Nigerian Forces, then the post of commander must continue to be occupied by expatriates?<sup>27</sup>

On the flipside, when Ironsi was eventually appointed as commander of the army in 1965, the *Nigerian Citizen*, a Northern paper based in Zaria, published the following:

Today I am weeping because the North has foregone all its advantages brought to it by its natural position – majority in population, expanse of land, and majority in parliament. The head of the police force goes to Eastern Nigeria, the Navy also goes East. Where is the Army now? Eastern Nigeria has captured it too.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Nigerian Outlook, Feb. 23 1962

<sup>28</sup> Nigerian Citizen, Mar. 3 1965

Eastern Nigeria's Governmental newspaper, the *Nigerian Outlook*, responded by saying "it is to be hoped that no-one gets the stupid idea that the Ibos are going to stay like a punching bag for any group of mischievous but cowardly clots."<sup>29</sup>

Tied closely to the turmoil at the high ranks in the Nigerian army was the chaos at the lower level of the ranks. At independence, only 22% of officers in Nigeria were Nigerian. The rest were British. When Ribadu decided on a swift Nigerianization of the military officers, he also stated that 50% of cadets must be from the North. In the British system, all cadets had to have passed some type of secondary schooling, and have been accredited with at least the British "O Level". Since Western education never penetrated the North in as significant a way as the South, the effect was to create a system where poorly educated, ill-suited cadets were guaranteed entry to the officer ranks.

The regional policy became a large issue in the elections of 1964, so much so that the United Progressive Grand Alliance issued the following policy statement "UPGA will accelerate the training of Nigerian officers in the Armed Forces [...] Recruitment and promotion of members of the Armed Services will be divorced from Tribalism and based strictly on merit and qualifications."<sup>30</sup> This was seen as an anti-northern statement, since the easiest way to measure "merit" was by academic and other certificates. Southerners possessed these credentials in far greater numbers than their northern counterparts.

Thus, the military was in such turmoil that in May of 1967, it was doubtful how it could function as a military force. Most of the battle hardened Eastern officers were now

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<sup>29</sup> *Nigerian Outlook*, Mar. 4, 1965

<sup>30</sup> Miners, *The Nigerian Army, 1956-1966*, 140.

either dead or in Biafra, and the new officer core was poorly equipped to handle a prolonged conflict. Gowon also believed that a prolonged conflict would not be necessary. When hostilities erupted, they were framed as a 48 hour “police action” to round up the criminals who perpetrated secession. This police action lasted 30 months and claimed nearly a million lives (according to some estimates).

## Chapter II

### From the Beginnings of the War to the Capture of Port Harcourt

Hostilities between the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the Biafran secessionists began on July 7<sup>th</sup>, nearly two months after Ojukwu's declaration of independence. Initially, Gowon did not see Biafran secession as a major military threat. The Nigerian government sent a small contingent of troops to the north to capture Enugu, apprehend the conspirators and restore order. On 7 July, the Nigerian government announced that "rebel forces" had opened fire on several outposts in Benue – Plateau state and destroyed several bridges along the border. The press release continued and stated that Ojukwu "boasted to the whole world that he will wage total war against the people of Nigeria" and "the commander in chief of the armed forces has since issued orders for the Nigerian Army to penetrate into the East-Central state and capture Ojukwu and his gang". The statement concluded with the phrase that would become one of the catchphrases of the war "To keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done."<sup>1</sup>

The Federal Government first framed the assault as a "Police Action". This was done for several reasons. First and foremost, Gowon was not willing to accept any compromises with these "rogues". The military would enter from the North, take Nsukka and Enugu, capture Ojukwu, Efiog and whoever supported them, reunite Nigeria and finish this episode. Second, by framing the conflict in any other way, it was assumed that Gowon at least begrudgingly accepted this move for secession and would fight to end it.

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<sup>1</sup> Daily Times, 7 July, 1967

Indeed, on 14 July, Gowon said in an interview “why should we sit with him [Ojukwu] and discuss as two separate countries?” Gowon would continue to say that before any talks could begin, Ojukwu would have to renounce secession, recognize Gowon’s central government and accept the 12 state solution.<sup>2</sup> Gowon would conclude the interview by stating unequivocally that this was “not a total war against the Eastern States, but against a rebellion.”<sup>3</sup>

At first, the Biafran forces put up little resistance, and most of it was in the form of obstruction. The Biafran military force was still in its infancy, and could do little more than tear up roadways, destroy bridges and harass the advancing Nigerian forces. Though initially, the Nigerians expected no resistance, even this harassment caused major delays in the Nigerian push toward Enugu. However, by July 12<sup>th</sup> Federal forces had captured the first major center, at Ogoja. Three days later, Nsukka fell. Clearly, this was not a 48 hour police action, but at the same time, little seemed to be able to stop the Federal advance.

Toward the end of July, Biafran forces were able to slow the Nigerian advance to Enugu enough to keep the Federal forces from taking any other significant towns. It seemed that a stalemate was fast approaching that would force both sides back to the negotiating table.

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<sup>2</sup> Recognizing Gowon’s government is not just a minor point. Since the coup failed especially in the east, Ojukwu refused to recognize Gowon as the head of state. Ojukwu would never accept Gowon’s rule and several times publicly stated his personal distaste for his rival.

<sup>3</sup> Daily Times, 14 July, 1967

However, on 9 August 1967, a Biafran force of 3,000 men, led by Col. Victor Banjo, a Yoruba officer who sided with Ojukwu, crossed the River Niger at Onitsha beginning what is commonly called the Midwest offensive. This move took everyone, including many in Biafra, totally by surprise. Largely unopposed, the Biafran “liberation army” entered Benin City, established a new provincial government, defense force and police. Soon thereafter the Governor of the Midwest province declared the “Independent Republic of Benin”.

After capturing Benin, Banjo’s invasion force split up with most of the force headed toward Lagos and Ibadan. A smaller force went north to cut off the supply lines to the Federal forces at Nsukka. However, after waiting three days, the element of surprise was lost. The Federal Government created a new military formation, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, and placed it under the command of Col. Murtala Muhammad. Muhammad’s force set out to engage the Biafran force and met Banjo’s forces in what was the first real battle of the Civil War at Ore. The Biafran offensive soon collapsed. Thus, the Midwest offensive turned into a quick “flash in the pan”, as Col. Efiang called it. The Republic of Benin was very short-lived and soon returned to full federal control. However, the offensive was a complex political and military maneuver designed to bring about a change in the dynamics of the war.

The battle of Ore, like most battles of the Civil War, remains shrouded in mystery. What is known is that Banjo’s forces crossed into the Western Region and arrived at Ore; after Banjo telephoned the governor of the Western Region, Governor

Adebayo, to notify him of his impending liberation<sup>4</sup>. Ore was a strategic location, as it connected the main road to Lagos with the road that headed north to Ibadan. In anticipation of Banjo's arrival, the Federal forces destroyed the major bridges on the roads heading north to Ibadan and the road west to Lagos. The picture then becomes very unclear. Though there was a skirmish along the road to Lagos, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division called up every available man to defend the road to Lagos, whether there was a decisive battle at Ore or whether Banjo, realizing that he could advance no further and concerned about a Nigerian outflanking maneuver along the minor roads to the north, decided to withdraw from the arena. Regardless of what actually happened at Ore, it was the furthest the Biafrans would advance. Soon after, they were being chased back across the Niger and were themselves forced to destroy bridges to cover their retreat. De St Jorre states that the battle of Ore was the Nigerian version of Gettysburg in that it completely turned the tide of the war. One major difference is that Gettysburg happened after two years of war, and Ore was fought after less than two months.

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<sup>4</sup> John De St. Jorre, *The Brothers' War: Biafra and Nigeria* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 160.



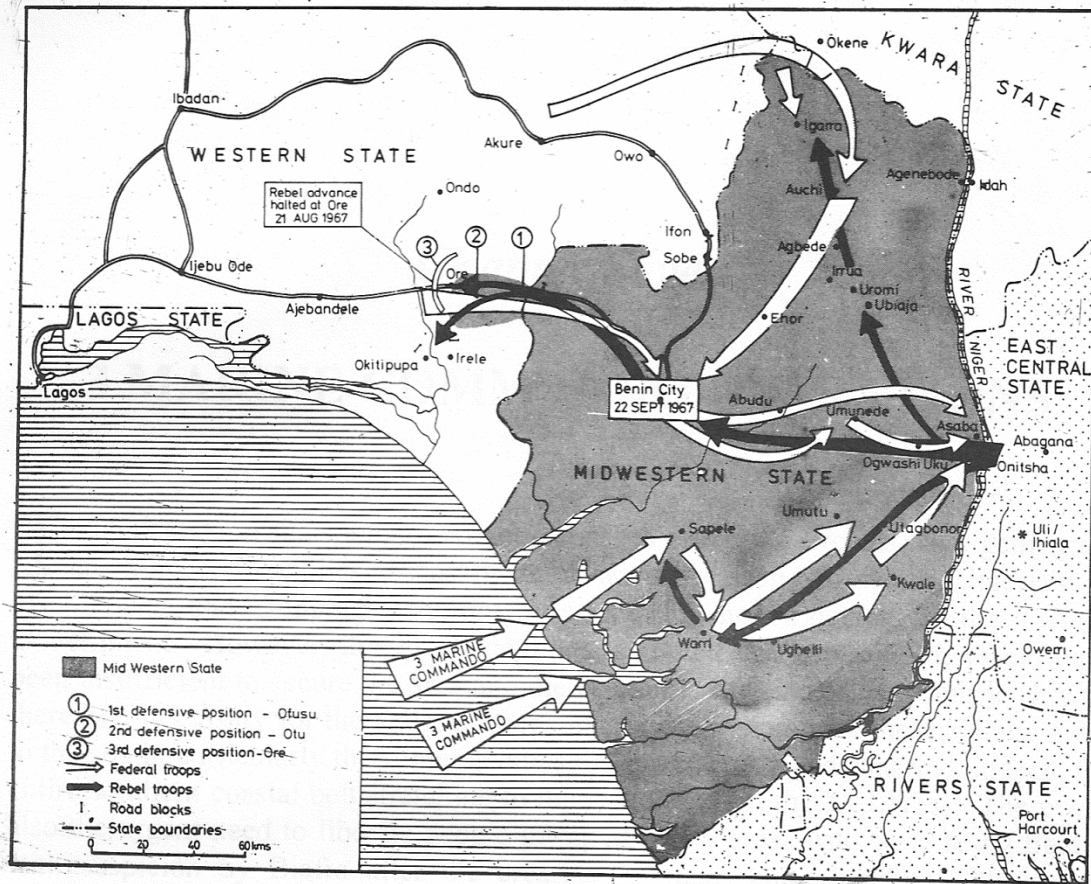


Figure 4: The Biafran Midwest Offensive and subsequent Nigerian advance<sup>5</sup>

The first major effect of the Midwestern offensive was to end the “limited engagement” of the Federal government. After the incursion to the Midwest, the government in Lagos no longer saw the conflict as a “police action”, but rather now “total war” would be waged against the secessionists.

The head of the Federal Military Government and Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces has issued instructions to the Nigerian Army, Air Force and Navy to

<sup>5</sup> H.B. Momoh, *The Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970: History and Reminiscences* (Ibadan: Sam Bookman Publishers, 2000), 95.

carry out full scale military operations against the rebel forces wherever they may be. The Federal Military Government will reply with heavier blows for every act committed by the rebels and will pursue them in an all-out drive until the rebellion is completely stamped out.<sup>6</sup>

If the incursion to the Midwest was an attempt to tell the Federal Government that Biafra would not be cowed to submission, it was successful. If it was an attempt to bring the Federal side back to the negotiating table, it failed miserably. Now the Biafran forces would have to deal with a more determined foe, and one that was potentially better supplied and definitely more determined to quash the rebellion.

Politically, the “Midwestern misadventure”<sup>7</sup> is one of the most interesting developments of the war, even though militarily it was a total disaster. It led to the abandonment of Lagos’ limited engagement, opened the way for civil war and a long thirty months of conflict.

Upon capturing Benin, Banjo gave the following address on Benin radio:

Some of you might have woken up to the sound of minor firing in the Capital city of Benin as well as in some other areas of Mid-Western Nigeria and thought it was in the process of being invaded by Northern troops. I am happy to reassure you that you have not been invaded by hostile troops. As some of you may have found out within the last 48 hours, the soldiers amongst you are disciplined troops of the Liberation Army from Biafra which I command. [...] This action is consistent with the desired intention of Biafra to assist in the liberation of the people of Nigeria from domination by the Fulani – Hausa feudal clique.

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Efiog, *Nigeria and Biafra: My Story* (Princeton, Abuja, Owerri, Loeji: Sunghai Books, 2003), 202.

<sup>7</sup> Another term of Philip Efiog. It is the title of his chapter on the Midwest offensive.

It is my hope that by our presence, the people of the Midwest will, in complete freedom from any restraint either direct or implied, be able to seek their rejection of the fiction that peace in Nigeria is only possible under the conditions that the entire people of Nigeria should be dominated by the Fulani – Hausa feudal clique.<sup>8</sup>

Banjo's address brought the major gamble of the Midwest Offensive to the forefront. Banjo was by no means the top officer in the Biafran ranks, Ojukwu, Efiong, Achizue and many others were much more capable officers, and were put in charge of training, equipping and organizing the fledgling Biafran military. Banjo was the choice for the Midwest offensive largely because of his ethnicity. He was a Yoruba man. Though this aspect has been denied by many actors in subsequent years, probably the major gamble of the Midwest was to reach the Yoruba in the west and have them join secession. The survival of the Biafran state was thus hinged on tearing apart the colonial structure that Lord Lugard put in place in 1914. Thus Banjo's focus on the tyranny of the Hausa-Fulani was to appeal to the Yoruba, who were also part and parcel of the ethnic power struggle that plagued Nigeria since independence.

However, two events transpired that would ultimately doom this plan. First, the offensive was blocked by the newly created 2<sup>nd</sup> Division at Ore. Second, the Yoruba leadership affirmed its loyalty to the Lagos Government. On August 2<sup>nd</sup>, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, who at the time served as Vice Chairman of the Federal Executive Council and was known as one of the elder statesmen of the Yoruba went on Lagos Radio to

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<sup>8</sup> Banjo's address on Benin radio. Cited in Efiong, *Nigeria and Biafra: My Story*, 201-02.

“counter the massive propaganda offensives from Enugu.”<sup>9</sup> Awolowo stated that from Nigeria’s independence the Yoruba have stood for the unity of Nigeria and the complete self-determination of all Nigerians within the framework of Nigeria.

The gamble of widening the war was a costly one indeed and had several problems. First and foremost, ever since the July 1966 coup, the Igbo had been planning for the crisis that ultimately led to Biafran secession. There had been problems in the West as well, especially with the Western Region election of 1965, and some reports out of Nigeria as late as December 1966 stated that Yorubaland was chaotic to the point of anarchy and generally ungovernable.

Other indications suggested that the Yoruba would join the Igbo in a war against the North, or at least not interfere if war erupted.<sup>10</sup> Ojukwu’s gamble assumed that the Yoruba shared the corporal fear that the July coup and subsequent massacres instilled on the Igbo and led to the vast exodus back to the East. Though indeed there were power struggles within Nigeria, there was no strong movement for a secessionist movement.

Efiong, in his memoirs, minimizes the political aspect of the Midwest offensive as a way to draw the Yoruba into secession, attributing this entirely as a rogue act by Col. Banjo.<sup>11</sup> However, radio broadcasts and newspapers from Enugu and Benin after Biafran occupation suggest that Ojukwu’s government was not only cognizant of Banjo’s plan, but that it was not Banjo’s idea to create a Republic of Benin, or to attempt to reach Ibadan in order to sever the entire south of Nigeria from the North.

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<sup>9</sup> Lagos Radio, cited from *Africa Research Bulletin*, 1967, 641

<sup>10</sup> De St. Jorre, *The Brothers' War*.

<sup>11</sup> Efiong, *Nigeria and Biafra: My Story*, 201-03.

Efiong instead places the emphasis on the planning and execution of the Midwest offensive, stating that it was nothing more than a “flash in the pan” and that it had no prayer to succeed from the beginning. First and foremost, as an operative plan, the Midwest adventure had no clear objectives. Karl Von Clausewitz, in his seminal work on the subject of war *Vom Kriege*,<sup>12</sup> wrote about the preparation and execution of war, not only from a military standpoint, but also from a political one. His central point, that “war is the continuation of politics with the addition of other means”<sup>13</sup> does not divorce politics from the act of war. Clausewitz’s work led many scholars on the subject of war, such as Michael Walzer<sup>14</sup> among others to develop the theory of connecting the political ends and military means of war. Was the Midwest offensive an attempt to relieve the pressure and cut the supply lines to the Federal forces that were besieging Enugu? Was this an offensive that was designed to bring the Federal side back to the negotiating table? Was this an attempt to widen the conflict?

He also maligns the decision making process that would be endemic on the Biafran side throughout the war. Efiong states that he was the head of all military forces in the Onitsha sector, as well as logistics officer and commander of the Militia at the beginning of the war. Yet, he claims to have first heard of the Midwest offensive on August 8<sup>th</sup>, when some officers who were to take part in the offensive came to him with a

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<sup>12</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. J.J. Graham (Ware: Wordsworth, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> The popular phrasing of this quote “War is the continuation of politics by other means” is a mistranslation from the original German.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

request to requisition 10 jeeps for the offensive. He would call Governor Ojukwu and ask him “May I know why I was not informed about the operation, particularly because of the logistical requirements of such an operation”?<sup>15</sup> Once he was briefed on the operation, he immediately saw that it was doomed to failure. The supply lines would be untenably long for such a small force advancing towards Lagos. However, Banjo told him that the Nigerians would be back at the negotiating table before any supply problems would arise and that the federals lacked the “stomach” to fight a war on multiple fronts. However, Efiang’s concerns turned out to be what turned the tide against the Biafran forces in the Midwest.

The classical interpretation of the Midwest offensive rests on the element of surprise. Essentially, most scholars agree that the offensive might have succeeded if Banjo had not stopped in Benin for three days and notified everyone, including the enemy, of his plans. De St Jorre, Cervenka and Adewale Ademoyega are in general agreement on this point. Ademoyega writes “Banjo returned to Benin, early on Saturday, 12 August 1967. By then, the momentum of the initial advance, which could have led to the capture of Ibadan, had been lost by seventy two hours”.<sup>16</sup> This delay allowed the Federal forces enough time to muster the defensive line at Ore. The delay at Benin caused the same problems that Efiang had foreseen but were dismissed by Banjo. Once the Nigerian forces were entrenched in Ore, Banjo had no way to dislodge the and immediately requested mortar and artillery support since the entire advancing force did

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<sup>15</sup> Efiang, *Nigeria and Biafra: My Story*, 200.

<sup>16</sup> Adewale Ademoyega, *Why We Struck: The Story of the First Nigerian Coup* (Lagos: Evans Brothers, 1981).

not have any type of artillery support, and lacked any defensive weapons except several heavy machine guns.

The failure of the Midwest offensive is the key question when analyzing the offensive from a military point of view. Several explanations have been brought forward. The major point of contention is whether it was an adventure that was doomed from the start, as Efiog states, or if the Biafran forces could have succeeded. Though much of the argument revolves around the receptibility of the Yoruba to join in the war against the North, many other factors are involved that would determine the outcome of the offensive. In the study of the military aspects of the offensive, many fissures appear in the Biafran military, these fissures would expand later in the war and bring the Biafran military to the brink of collapse many times, but most of them appear as early as August 1967. They include animosity between the commanders, an unclear chain of command, ill-supplied and ill trained troops as well as a lack of coordination in planning operations.

One of the most disastrous consequences of the Midwest offensive was the euphoria with which it was greeted in Eastern Nigeria. Here was a hastily assembled force of several thousand men, who with lightning speed were able to enter enemy territory, advance nearly unopposed, take an enemy city and install a new government. The speed of the assault and the panic it caused in Lagos created a sense of invincibility that the Enugu propaganda machine glorified. Though the short term effects were a large increase in men available for recruitment, it also produced a sense of arrogance. This arrogance would turn to desperation once the noose on Biafra began to tighten.

At the end of the Midwest Offensive, it became clear that there was no “police action” but a full-fledged Civil War. Once the offensive failed and the Republic of Benin

collapsed, Biafra stood at a crossroad. Should the country follow the secessionist path and continue to fight the Nigerian Army or should secession be renounced and some sort of deal be reached with the Federal Government and have the Eastern region return to Nigeria?

Patrick Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu (one of the five majors involved in the January 1966 coup) was one of the top leaders on the Biafran side. He was killed in the defense of Enugu in the early stages of the war, but his involvement showcases another voice within the Biafran leadership. He had originally requested a plan that would use the Biafran forces to advance north along the Niger to the Benue River. Here, the Biafran forces would have had a long, wide river that would have been easily defensible. However, Ojukwu would side with Banjo and support the invasion of the Midwest.

The saga of Victor Banjo encompasses the struggle between the secessionist and the conciliatory factions within the Biafran leadership. Banjo supported the Midwest gamble and was the leader best suited to widen the conflict and perhaps end it with a lightning strike. Once the offensive failed, where would the rebellion go? Many in the leadership, like Banjo, Col. Emmanuel Ifeajuna, and Major Philip Alale thought that the war was now effectively unwinnable. They were arrested for plotting to overthrow Ojukwu's government and, after a short trial on Sep. 29<sup>th</sup>, 1967, they were summarily executed. Whether or not they were involved in a plot to overthrow Ojukwu or whether they were scapegoats in Ojukwu's attempt to secure a united front in his struggle for independence.

The official line of Banjo's plot was that he had conspired with Gowon and Obafemi Awolowo to return to Biafra and usurp Ojukwu's control. Much of this



speculation had to do with Banjo's flamboyant personality and his arrogance when communicating his military actions to the enemy during the Midwest offensive.<sup>17</sup>

On the Federal side, the end of the Midwest adventure gave the Nigerians the time they needed to push towards total war. The Midwest offensive forced the Nigerian Military to create a new formation, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, and soon a third division, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Commando Division was also formed. These new divisions would help the Federal Government in its push to encircle and strangle the fledgling republic of Biafra.<sup>18</sup> The plan was simple. Eastern Nigeria was the most heterogeneous of all the regions. The first phase of the Federal invasion was to reduce Biafra to only the Igbo heartland. This move would cut off Biafra's access to the sea and the Cameroonian border, thus severely limiting the ability to import arms and cutting Biafra off from the precious oil reserves in the Niger Delta.

Though oil was an important strategic asset during the war and the possession of the oil fields and the refineries at Port Harcourt were vital for the economic survival of Biafra, it was not a deciding factor of the war. Oil was first discovered in the Niger Delta in 1956. By May of 1967 many companies and countries had made significant investments in oil exploration and production in the Niger Delta region. When the Eastern region seceded, it took with it most of the oil producing regions of the East, and

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<sup>17</sup> De St. Jorre, *The Brothers' War*.

<sup>18</sup> The Federal offensive against Biafra in 1967 -1968 was very similar to General Winfield Scott's Anaconda plan during the US Civil War. Scott's Anaconda plan was to blockade the South to prevent the export of cotton and other goods and the importation of arms to end the war with minimal fighting. The anaconda plan was never adopted by the Union, and Lincoln initially opted for a more direct invasion.

with the Midwest offensive threatened to divorce Nigeria of the promise of all its potential oil wealth.

Though the oil producing regions were in Eastern Nigeria, they were not in the Igbo areas. Further, and more importantly, the Igbo heartland was surrounded on all sides by these “minority people”, the Ijaw, Ibibo, Ogoni and many others. By reducing the Biafran state to the Igbo heartland, the Federal Government would ensure that Ojukwu’s breakaway republic would not be economically viable. Also, Ojukwu would not be able to import weapons on a large scale, a fact that would considerably impair his ability to wage war. However, this policy would have disastrous effect on the civilian population as well, since the Igbo heartland depended on the surrounding areas for most of its food.

Since the only combat ready division in the Nigerian Army was the First Division, and it was stationed to the north of the Eastern region, the first logical front was to be the capture of the Biafran capital Enugu. On October 4<sup>th</sup>, Enugu fell to federal forces. Enugu fell largely without a fight, since the Biafran leadership had fled the city long before along with most of the defenders and moved to Umuahia deep in the Igbo heartland. With the capture of Enugu, Gowon went on Radio Lagos and said that “with the capitulation of the city, the Ojukwu rebellion is virtually at an end.”<sup>19</sup> This would not be the last time Gowon would declare imminent victory over the rebellion. However, as with all his declarations, actual victory would prove much more elusive.

Two weeks after the capture of Enugu, on October 19<sup>th</sup>, Calabar fell to Nigerian forces. The capture of Calabar was one of the pivotal points of the war, since it was the

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<sup>19</sup> Radio Lagos, Oct. 4<sup>th</sup> 1967. Cited in *Africa Research Bulletin* 1967, 887.

first successful use of an amphibious assault in the war. In the early phases of the war, Gowon attempted to capture the island of Bonny in the Niger delta. However, the assault on Bonny failed largely because of the lack of a trained amphibious unit. Most of the soldiers who died in Bonny and in the unsuccessful assault on Onitsha (discussed shortly) fell because the Nigerian military did not see the importance of swimming for amphibious forces. It was only with the training of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine commando division<sup>20</sup> that an effective amphibious force was created and was able to attack Biafra from the south. The attack on Calabar also showcased the increasing efficiency in coordinating attacks between the different branches of the armed forces, as the attack was well planned and executed with a naval and aerial bombardment in support of the amphibious assault.

Calabar would prove an important prize for the Federal government, for soon after its capture a Dutch merchant vessel laden with arms was captured attempting to dock in the city.<sup>21</sup> Biafran forces attempted several times to recapture the city and nearly succeeded several times, but in the end, the Federal government was able to hold its position, and use the city as a base to cut off the entire eastern border and create the “South Eastern State”; one of the twelve states in Gowon’s plan from Aburi.

The military situation was very slow in advancing after the initial Federal successes and soon both sides were locked in a stalemate. Federal forces could not properly secure the border with Cameroon, and though they maintained control of Enugu,

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<sup>20</sup> The 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine commando division held most of its training at Tarkwa Bay near Lagos. Tarkwa Bay today is one of the most pristine beaches in West Africa and a favorite spot for people seeking to escape the hectic chaos of Lagos for a day.

<sup>21</sup> Radio Lagos, Oct. 25<sup>th</sup> 1967. Cited in *Africa Research Bulletin* 1967, 889.

Calabar and Nsukka, they could not advance on those sectors and several times were nearly felled by Biafran counter offensives.

1968 began on a pessimistic note for the Biafrans. By the end of 1967, in addition to the short lived Republic of Benin falling back to Federal hands, the Federal government had also captured Calabar in the far east of the country, thus capturing a major port. By the end of January 1968, Federal forces had secured the entire area east of the Cross River, effectively securing the border with Cameroon. Federal forces had also captured Nsukka, and the capital at Enugu and by mid-February, were laying siege to Awka. Indeed, the Federal side was so confident of victory, that Gowon, in an interview to the *Daily Times* said that by March 31<sup>st</sup>, the “backbone of Ojukwu’s rebellion”<sup>22</sup> would be broken. He also began to speak of the postwar period, focusing on the federal structure, reiterating his previous points. For the first time, Gowon began to list names of people he the Nigerian Government would agree to deal with during peace talks. Among those mentioned were Nnamdi Azikiwe and Kenneth Dike. When asked about Ojukwu, Gowon said “knowing him as I do, I don’t think I could I could trust him anymore. He is a very dishonest and ambitious man”.<sup>23</sup>

With the Federal Government so confident of its imminent victory, Ojukwu and the Biafran government followed two strategies. First, and foremost, the domestic strategy that continued since the collapse of the Midwest offensive in 1967. Ojukwu and the Biafran propaganda machine convinced the Igbo that this was a war of survival. The events preceding the war and the recent offensives against the Igbo made sure that the

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<sup>22</sup> *Daily Times*, Jan 6 1968

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*

government did not have to work had to convince the Igbo that the survival of Biafra meant the survival of the Igbo. Also, the end of Biafra meant the annihilation of the Igbo as a people. Dr. Azikiwe, in a speech to the Biafran 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion said the following:

We are citizens of a free country who are resolutely determined to survive the onslaught of an enemy so as to preserve for ourselves and our posterity the heritage of freedom. We are fighting because there is abundant evidence to convince us that our very existence is threatened. If we fail to defend ourselves, we shall be exterminated. Therefore, we fight to survive.<sup>24</sup>

In the west, across the River Niger, the 2<sup>nd</sup> division was preparing for an assault on Onitsha. The bridge over the river Niger, built only two years prior to the start of the war was destroyed by the Biafran forces retreating from the Midwest. The first assault on Onitsha, in late October 1967, was a disaster for the federal troops. Largely unopposed, Murtala Muhammad led his largely untrained 2<sup>nd</sup> Division across the River Niger into a largely deserted Onitsha. One officer who was there described the scene:

There wasn't much resistance and we thought, "Great, we've won." The men, mostly new recruits, were not disciplined and went wild, drinking and looting. In no time most of them were drunk. Then, suddenly, the Biafrans were on us. I tried to rally the men, but it was hopeless; everyone panicked and ran for the boats. There was no point in staying and getting killed for nothing so I found a boat and got back to Asaba safely. But hundreds didn't make it and were drowned or shot.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Address delivered on Feb. 26<sup>th</sup> on Radio Biafra. Cited in *Africa Research Bulletin* Mar. 15, 1968, 984C

<sup>25</sup> De St. Jorre, *The Brothers' War*, 186.

In late March 1968, the 2<sup>nd</sup> division finally captured Onitsha by crossing the Niger north of Asaba and advancing south to take the city. Once again, as with the battle at Ore and most battles of the war, the exact turn of events is not known. After the capture of Onitsha, federal soldiers once again went wild, massacring the few remaining people who were left in the city, most of them seeking refuge at Onitsha Cathedral.

The Nigerians, however, found themselves in a quagmire with Onitsha. The Federal forces had captured all of the largest cities in Biafra, with the notable exception of Port Harcourt, but now Onitsha was a liability that threatened Gowon's proud New Year's declaration that the rebellion would be broken by the end of March. Nigeria effectively controlled the north of Biafra and had an enclave in Onitsha. But how to supply the troops in the city? Biafran forces controlled the entire area surrounding the town and the Nigerian army lacked the resources to secure a route across the River Niger. Plus, the Biafran forces at Awka under the command of Col. Joe "Hannibal" Achuzia were thwarting any establishment of a secure supply line from Enugu to Onitsha and were plundering many of the convoys. In his memoirs, Achuzia would recall the Onitsha days thus, "whenever the stories of the Abagana, Onitsha and Nsukka campaigns are told, those men who took part in them will remember and sigh, borrowing a quotation from Churchill; 'Yes, that was our finest hour'."<sup>26</sup> However, the most important fight was to be in Port Harcourt.

If Ore was the Nigerian Gettysburg, Port Harcourt was its Vicksburg. After launching an offensive in the Niger Delta, Federal forces controlled several key towns

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<sup>26</sup>Joe O. G. Achuzia, *Requiem Biafra: The True Story of Nigeria's Civil War* (Asaba: Steel Equip Nigeria Ltd., 1993), 365.

around Port Harcourt, namely Orika, Obegu and Akweie. Realizing the importance of controlling its last major outlet to the sea, Ojukwu sent Achuzia to organize the defense of Port Harcourt. His account of the defense of the city reveals how Biafran morale had begun to sink and how military order began to fray at the seams.

Achuzia tells how he arrived at Port Harcourt and attempted to make order of the situation. His story tells of a military formation that was about to collapse. The men of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Brigade in charge of the defense of Port Harcourt had completely fallen into anarchy. When he ordered the brigade to follow him to the front, the man in charge flatly refused saying “we are tired”. He continues

Then I said “listen to me carefully and all of you. I am going forward to ascertain the enemy’s true position. [...] I want to see all of you ready, formed to move, and if you are not ready, you my friend who said you are in charge, I will shoot you down like a dog, and any other soldier that refuses to obey orders. [...] When I came back I met the troops in the same position I left them. They had made no attempt to get ready to move. [...] I walked up to the soldier. I asked him, “Why are you not ready?” He said “I told you we are no more fighting.” He was holding his gun in his hand. I told him to hand the gun over to me. He refused. I lifted my automatic rifle from my shoulder. I said “I warned you all before I left. Now I will carry out my threat and anyone still sitting down will be dealt with in the same way.” I lifted the gun and shot him where he stood, then I said “everybody get up.” They all jumped and I marched them forward.<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, this was not a force that was ready to defend one of the major cities from an imminent Federal invasion. Later, during the last days of the defense of the city, some

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 367-68.

of the troops under his command mutinied with their commander, Lt. Col. Okpara. However, Col. Okpara was not court-martialed for inciting his troops to mutiny, but rather he was transferred to the Awka sector. Later, in another attempt to restore order in his collapsing defense, he summarily executed five men in an attempt to find the ringleaders of the mutineers.

Port Harcourt fell largely without a fight. This fact is not surprising considering the chaos within the defending ranks. With the collapse of Port Harcourt, Biafra was effectively surrounded on all sides by federal forces. The only connection to the outside world was now through the air. The only airfield that was still in working condition in Biafra was nicknamed “Annabelle”, but was better known by its location at Uli. Clearly, the war would be over soon.



## Chapter III

### Internal Propaganda and the Prosecution of the War

#### THE FALL OF PORT HARCOURT AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF BIAFRAN PROPAGANDA

When Port Harcourt fell to the Federal Forces on May 17<sup>th</sup> 1968, the changes in the war since the failure of Midwest offensive became increasingly apparent. The euphoria of Biafran independence, already a year old, was a distant memory and the reality of fighting a war against a much larger, better equipped, and internationally recognized entity was becoming increasingly painful. Even though the shift in the war came almost immediately after the collapse of the Midwest offensive with the fall of Calabar, the eastern border with Cameroon and Bonny, the fall of Port Harcourt served as a potent symbol of the turning tide of the war for several reasons. First and foremost, if the Midwest offensive gave the Biafran army and people a sense of invincibility, the fall of the country's financial center and last functional entrepôt served to harden the sense of siege in the nascent nation, that was now reduced to a mono-ethnic enclave surrounded by a hostile force.

For many observers, both within Nigeria and abroad, the Federal conquest of the city appeared to be the last nail in the coffin of the fledgling nation. Now that Biafra was reduced to little more than the Igbo heartland with very little ability to supply its military and even feed its population, the Biafran leadership would have little choice but to sue for peace in the upcoming peace talks in Niamey. However, the peace talks in Niamey stalled and were succeeded by talks in Addis Ababa and Kampala; all of which failed to end the war and showed that the Biafran spirit was far from broken. Indeed, the peace talks gave

the Biafran delegation an international stage to push for an internationalization of the war on humanitarian grounds. By arguing that the Nigerian government was starving the Biafran people, by this point almost exclusively Igbo, Ojukwu and his government were able to garner widespread support from abroad, and by doing that, apply pressure on the governments that were supporting Nigeria militarily.

The Biafran Directorate of Propaganda had to respond to this change in the military situation in several ways. First and foremost, the internal propaganda was essentially “Igboized”, as the situation in Biafra became that of a small Igbo enclave surrounded by the Nigerian military. While the propaganda still referred to Biafrans, gone was the rhetoric espoused in *The Spectator* shortly after independence where “personal and sectional considerations must give way to a common front, in defence of right, of freedom and justice; in defence of Biafra”<sup>1</sup>, and now the rhetoric for internal Biafran consumption was that of the survival of the Igbo. Second and closely related, no longer did Biafra’s propaganda style exalt the virtues of a free and independent Biafra as a beacon of hope for all of Africa, most famously extolled by Ojukwu in his Ahiara declaration.<sup>2</sup> Now, the propaganda style shifted to that of survival in the face of

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<sup>1</sup> "Fight for Fatherland!," *Spectator*, August 1967, 2.

<sup>2</sup> In the Ahiara Declaration, given in May 1969 on Biafra’s second Independence Day, Ojukwu advocated Biafran independence as not only a nationalist project, but one of further African liberation from the yoke of colonialism. In the declaration, Ojukwu framed Biafra as a project that would finally liberate the black man from his colonial oppressors. In Ojukwu’s words “Our Revolution is a historic opportunity given to us to establish a just society; to revive the dignity of our people at home and the dignity of the Black-man in the world. We realise that in order to achieve those ends we must

extermination. No longer was the viability of an independent Biafra at stake; rather, the survival of the Igbo in the face of a genocidal enemy became paramount to the propaganda effort. Lastly, the question of how to efficiently deliver propaganda while under a relentless siege with limited resources and to a population that was largely uneducated and illiterate became of utmost importance. With limited access to television, radio and other media that require electricity to run, and a population that would largely be unable to utilize print media, the Biafran propaganda directorate came up with several ingenious solutions to the conundrum of how to practically deliver the message and keep both the civilian population and the military willing to fight, suffer and die.

Port Harcourt's fall to the Nigerian forces crystallized the change in the dynamic of the war. No longer was a proud Biafra with an almost mythical military able to nearly bring Nigeria to its knees; now the country was under siege, with most of its territory lost, and the remaining territory was surrounded and under siege. The loss of the city changed the war on both tactical and strategic levels, with the young breakaway republic no longer fighting for its viability as a nation, but for the survival of the Igbo, who feared that losing the war would mean extermination.

#### **BIAFRA – FROM MULTIETHNIC PROJECT TO THE IGBO ALONE**

The single most important change to the dynamic of the war was the shift from a Biafra that included Igbo, Ijaw, Ibibio, Efik and many other ethnic and linguistic groups, to an Igbo enclave, surrounded by hostile forces.

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remove those weaknesses in our institutions and organisations and those disabilities in foreign relations which have tended to degrade this dignity.”

Biafra began its life on May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1967 with the secession of the entire Eastern Region from Nigeria, forming the Republic of Biafra. The impetus for Biafran secession stemmed from the chaos of the 1966, and especially the riots in Northern Nigeria that killed according to most estimates anywhere from 30-50,000 people, almost exclusively Igbo. Biafra, however, did not begin solely as a project of Igbo secession. The Eastern Region's many leaders gathered at the Presidential Hotel in May of 1967 and furnished on May 27<sup>th</sup> unanimously granting Ojukwu the authority to use whatever means necessary to guarantee the Eastern Region's security, thereby authorizing secession.

When Ojukwu declared independence, he did so with the consent and recommendation of the chiefs and representatives of the Eastern Region who, gathered at the Presidential Hotel in Enugu on May 25<sup>th</sup> to discuss the Nigerian crisis. One of the delegates – Joe Achuzia, who would later be one of the more controversial of the Biafran military commanders – stated that the mood at the convention was such that “it left no more room for doubt that the regions as we knew them had come to the end of the road.”<sup>3</sup> After hearing Gowon's declaration creating the twelve states on the first day of the convention, the delegates voted unanimously to authorize Ojukwu to declare the Republic of Biafra; which he did two days later at the same hotel.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Biafra did not begin solely as Igbo secession from Nigeria, but was framed as a multi ethnic expression of no confidence in Nigeria on a systemic level. While the Igbo did not need to be reminded of the massacres in August and September on 1966, which saw, by most estimates, around

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<sup>3</sup> Joe O. G. Achuzia, *Requiem Biafra: The True Story of Nigeria's Civil War* (Asaba: Steel Equip Nigeria Ltd., 1993).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

50,000 killed and 2 million internally displaced people return to their ancestral homes in the East, the other ethnic groups in the Eastern Region did not suffer the same as the Igbo in Nigeria.<sup>5</sup> Thus, unlike the Igbo, the other ethnic groups in the East did not suffer the same violence that galvanized the Igbo. Thus, the Biafran propaganda had to implant the same kind of fear into the so called minority people in the east that the memories of the massacres of 1966 instilled on the Igbo.

However, while many of the non-Igbo leaders gathered in Enugu to grant legitimacy to Ojukwu's actions, not all in the East supported secession. One of the more vocal opponents of the Biafran project was Ogoni leader Ken Saro-Wiwa. In his memoir of the war, *On a Darkling Plain: an Account of the Nigerian Civil War*, Saro-Wiwa claimed that many of the leaders in the East were either coerced or bribed into supporting Biafran secession. Further, he clarified his position toward Biafra and its leader. Saro-Wiwa never supported the Biafran project, saying in his memoirs, "for me, biafra [sic] offered nothing new. It has no new ideology, no new inspiration. It was Nigeria in a different name." Saro-Wiwa was referring to Nigeria's regional structure, internal strife and political domination by the three major ethnic groups. This structure resulted in rioting across the country, two major coups, civil strife and violence that culminated in a brutal civil war. For Saro-Wiwa then, "the true interest of these lay in a more equitable country where all groups where all groups would be fairly treated, where all groups had

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 10

self-determination. Biafra was not that country [...] On the other hand, Nigeria of the twelve states offered a glimmer of hope and I clung to that hope.”<sup>6</sup>

Olusegun Obasanjo, in his memoir, *My Command*, conveyed his disappointment at the similar attitude that the minority peoples of the East exhibited toward the Nigerian side. In attempting to enlist Easterners to fight on the Federal side, he was dismayed that for the Ijaw, any will to fight for the Nigerian side ended with the establishment of their Southeast State. When Benjamin Adekunle captured the Niger Delta city of Bonny, he attempted to enlist the local population to augment his 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. While he did succeed in enlisting a battalion of one thousand, their lack of commitment, training and ill-discipline made them of little use except as a garrison left in Bonny.<sup>7</sup>

While it would be tempting to dismiss Biafra as an Igbo project, that analysis is incomplete, because Biafra included many non-Igbo in its inception. Though many shared Saro-Wiwa’s contempt of secession, a large number of non-Igbo also embraced the Biafran project. Ojukwu’s Vice President and the man who surrendered Biafra in 1970, Phillip Efiog (alternately spelled Effiong)<sup>8</sup> was himself a member of the Ibibio people of the Calabar region. In his memoirs *Nigeria and Biafra: My Story*, Efiog recalled that the euphoria of Biafran independence was shared by the people of the non-

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<sup>6</sup> Ken Sawo-Wiwa, *On a Darkling Plain: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War* (London. Lagos, Port Harcourt: Saros International Publishers, 1989), 88.

<sup>7</sup> Olusegun Obasanjo, *My Command: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War 1967-70* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1980), 45-47.

<sup>8</sup> Though both spellings of his surname name have been used interchangeably in print, Efiog himself used the single “f” spelling in his memoirs.

Igbo speaking areas, with large contingents arriving at Enugu to voice their support for the creation of Biafra.<sup>9</sup>

However, he did acknowledge that it was the creation of the Twelve States that eroded some support in the minority areas for Biafra. Further, Gowon's creation of the twelve States, in Efiang's estimation, was one of the deciding factors in pushing Ojukwu to declare independence. Unlike the federal structure of Gowon's new Nigeria, Ojukwu sought to shape Biafra into a provincial system. According to Efiang, Ojukwu thought that the provincial system "would eventually nullify the creation of the states." In effect, however, the creation of the States swayed many in the Niger Delta to support Nigeria and to side with the argument that Saro-Wiwa presented.<sup>10</sup>

At the outset of the war, Biafran propaganda sought to unify the country and rally the populace around the threat of extermination. To this end, the Ministry of Information, later replaced by the Directorate of Propaganda, used the Igbo massacres of 1966 to emphasize the argument that the Nigerians were waging a genocidal campaign. To most of the Igbo, still with the vivid memories of the 1966 massacres, accompanied by the horrors of millions of Igbo fleeing the violence to the relative safety of their ancestral homelands, no reminder was necessary.

However, Biafran propaganda was using what was essentially an Igbo tragedy to galvanize support across all the regions in Biafra. To this end, they added a vitriolic language, nicknaming the Nigerians "vandals" and, more importantly, a religious element

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<sup>9</sup> Philip Efiang, *Nigeria and Biafra: My Story* (Princeton, Abuja, Owerri, Loeji: Sunghai Books, 2003), 177.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

to the conflict. The Nigerians, led now by a Northern Muslim junta massacred the Igbo, not because they were Igbo; not in retaliation for the January coup, which many in the North viewed as an Igbo putsch; but because the Igbo were the only sizable Christian minority living in the North. According to John Stremlau in his work *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, Biafran propaganda played upon the perceived “Christian superiority, and described the Nigerian war effort as engineered by backward Northerners who were intent on imposing Islam on the East.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, the Biafran propaganda effort sought, during the first year of the war, to portray the war not as an ethnic struggle, but as a religious one.

#### **PROPAGANDA – MINISTRY OF INFORMATION V. DIRECTORATE OF PROPAGANDA**

Biafran propaganda underwent a major shift after Port Harcourt’s fall. While in the early stages of the war, Biafran propaganda focused on the viability of the new state and the reasons for rejecting Gowon and his 12 state solution, now the focus shift to that of a survival ethos; one that increasingly focused on the plight of the Biafran people, under siege, surrounded, and, by mid-1968, almost entirely Igbo.

Ojukwu’s inner circle anticipated the military crisis as early as October 1967 soon after the capture of Enugu to the federal forces. After relocating the capital to Umuahia, the Biafran government was restructured to give it the flexibility necessary to quickly adapt during war. To this end, several directorates were created to coordinate the war effort. These directorates answered only to Ojukwu and were kept apart from any

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<sup>11</sup> John Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 113-14.



hierarchical structure, either civilian or military and were thus almost completely autonomous units working independently of any civilian and military authority, save Ojukwu himself.

There is some confusion about Ojukwu's decision to create the various directives. According to Efiang, the directorates were created at the beginning of the war with the stated goal of streamlining decision making during the war. However, Stremlau's extensive interviews reveal that the directorates were not created until after the fall of Enugu in October, 1967. Stremlau claims that they were after the Biafran Government relocated from Enugu to Umuahia, and that "Ojukwu had not been satisfied with the ministry's work, which he considered inefficient, pedestrian and not sufficiently in tune with the hopes and fears of the Biafran people."<sup>12</sup>

Several directorates were created, including the Transport Directorate, Food Directorate, Fuel Directorate, Research and Production Directorate, and of course the Propaganda Directorate. These directorates, though designed to streamline wartime administration, suffered from inconsistent mandates. The Transport Directorate suffered from some of the worst corruption. Efiang stated that near the end of the war the lack of discipline and supply "created a near free-for-all situation in the acquisition of vehicles by the rank and file of the army."<sup>13</sup>

The Propaganda Directorate, however, had a very clear mandate, and the means and leadership to effectively enact that mandate. Though at first there was some confusion regarding the Ministry of Information's subordination to the Directorate, and

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.,111

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.,234

initially some resistance from senior officials in the ministry, very soon the Directorate assumed responsibility for formulating the propaganda, while the Ministry of Information would continue to be the official face of the Biafran nation.

#### **FOCUS OF PROJECT**

With the fall of Port Harcourt the dream of a viable, strong, multiethnic Biafra came to an abrupt end. With this change in the war's dynamic came a marked shift in the propaganda. The Directorate of Propaganda no longer had to justify the war to a populace that was only in part committed to it. Now, the Directorate of Propaganda essentially "Igboized" the Biafran project, equating Biafra with the Igbo in an overt way that it had previously tried to avoid.

In the early phases of the war, Biafran propaganda sought to unify the country's different ethnic groups into a nation that would resist the pending Nigerian invasion. However, Biafran propaganda used the massacres against the Igbo as the main thrust of its propaganda effort, a fact that did not resonate to the non Igbo population in Biafra. In an attempt to emphasize northern brutality and to avoid alienating the minority peoples in the east, Biafran propaganda portrayed the massacres as religious, rather than ethnic in nature. The main crux of the argument was that it was the Igbo that primarily suffered the brunt of the massacres in the north simply because they were the only major Christian minority in the north. Thus, only a secure Biafra could safeguard the rights of all the southern Christians, not just the Igbo.

From the outset of the war, Biafran propaganda policies sought to capitalize on the brutal nature of the massacres that followed in the wake of the July 1966 coup. The

problem was that the massacres were directed almost solely at the Igbo, while the entire Eastern Region that seceded was not exclusively Igbo. However, the situation changed in mid-1968, and the remaining territory was almost exclusively Igbo. Thus, the propaganda changed significantly. The Igbo needed no reminding of the massacres of 1966. The memory of the millions of refugees arriving in every town and city in the wake of the massacres was still a fresh one. Couple with the fact that virtually all the non-Igbo areas of Biafra were in the hands of the Nigerian Government, the propaganda directorate saw little need to maintain the same propaganda line that tried to maintain unity in a multi ethnic environment, and focus instead on one that would keep the Igbo fighting through a situation that was becoming increasingly hopeless.

Because the Biafran project shifted so quickly from the grandiose plans of May 1967 and the ideals of creating a multiethnic Biafra to that of ethnic survival for the Igbo, Ojukwu used a speech today known as the Ahiara Declaration to reiterate the philosophic undertones of Biafra. Biafra was, according to the declaration, to be a struggle for survival, but also a metaphoric struggle to uphold human values against a world that had turned its back on the suffering of the Biafran people. Though the Ahiara declaration came in 1969 and attempted to frame the Biafran independence project as a beacon for all Africans to shed their colonial shackles, Ojukwu's speech was a reiteration of much of the propaganda approach. Ojukwu's assertions of the world's racism toward the Biafrans were long a tenet of Biafran propaganda, and one of the main points that the internal memos sought to instill on the population.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ahiara Declaration, May 29, 1969

In fact, much of the Ahiara declaration was a focused repeat of the same ideas that the Biafran propaganda directorate sought to implant on the Igbo to keep them fighting. The portrayal of the Nigerians, not only as bloodthirsty, but as the lackeys of the western powers was well established in Biafran radio, in print and in the internal memoranda discussed in this chapter. Thus, much of the declaration can be seen as the culmination of much of the Biafran propaganda campaign, especially after the collapse of the Biafran military following the fall of Port Harcourt in 1968. The Biafran government sought to convince both their own people and the rest of the world that their fight was for their own survival and their struggle was that for the oppressed black man struggling against the institutionalized oppression of the world system. The Nigerians were thus only the lackeys of the British, the Russians, and all those that sought to maintain the inferiority of the black man.

#### **IN THE FACE OF GENOCIDE: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL PROPAGANDA**

While the message that the Biafran government sought to instill on its people was essentially the same message that they hoped the rest of the world would accept, the goals of each target audience was markedly different. Both at home and abroad, the Biafran propaganda was to convince the world that the Biafrans were fighting against a genocidal enemy that wanted only to kill every Biafran. The Biafrans had to convince the world, and themselves, that their only salvation lay in the establishment of an independent Biafra because Biafrans had no future in Nigeria.

Obviously, the reality of a people under siege was much different than the Europeans or Americans sitting in their homes watching the images from Biafra on their

televisions and reading about the war in the newspaper. Thus, the methods, means and messages were carefully crafted to suit the differing realities and were then more strenuously adapted to suit the needs of keeping the Igbo fighting and suffering in the name of their survival.

In his book *The Brothers' War*, John de St Jorre, a journalist with the London Observer, stated that though massacres did occur, they were perpetrated by both sides, and that the key element of a genocidal campaign, namely that it was a deliberate government policy did not exist in the Biafran case.<sup>15</sup> However, the power of the Biafran propaganda in perpetuating the myth remained strong and kept the population in the belief that the fight was no longer for independence, but for survival. De St. Jorre recalled one conversation with a Biafran official who told him “if you gave us the choice of 1,000 rifles or milk for 50,000 starving children, we’d take the guns.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, de St. Jorre stated that the propaganda was so well received that people of all professions and educational backgrounds saw the war as a fight for survival. He boiled down the typical Biafran response, “we have no alternative; if we surrender or are defeated, the Nigerians will wipe us out, so we might as well die fighting.”<sup>17</sup>

As if to lend credence to the Igbo fears of genocide, one of the Nigerian commanders, Benjamin Adekunle, nicknamed “The Black Scorpion” was quoted in the *New York Times* on Sept. 8, 1968 stating bluntly:

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<sup>15</sup> John de St. Jorre, *The Brothers' War: Biafra and Nigeria* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

I want 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. We shoot at everything that moves and when our troops march into the centre of Ibo territory, we shoot at everything even at things that don't move.<sup>18</sup>

This quote has been oft cited as evidence of Nigerian plans of genocide, but is more likely the psychosis of one man and his mania to win the war. Adekunle later gave an interview to *Stern Magazine*, where his personal venom against the Igbo was even more crystallized. In what seemed to be a surreal environment that included uniformed go-go dancers and a goat named Ojukwu, Adekunle invited Randolph Baumann to interview him. When asked whether he had any sympathy for the Igbo, Adekunle told the German reporter, "I have learned a word from the British, which is "sorry"! That's how I want to respond to your question. I did not want this war but I want to win this war. Therefore I have to kill the Ibos. Sorry!"<sup>19</sup>

It was not surprising therefore that Biafran propaganda shifted to that of Igbo survival in the face of genocide. The propaganda effort faced a formidable challenge: how to maintain the war effort when many observers, both in Biafra and abroad, figured that capitulation was merely a matter of time. The conundrum was not only a philosophical one, but also required practical, logistical solutions. Because the tide had

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<sup>18</sup> Lloyd Garrison, "The "Point of No Return" for the Biafrans," *New York Times*, 8 June 1968.

<sup>19</sup> Randolph Baumann, "I Have to Kill the Ibos - Sorry!," *Stern Magazin*, 18 August 1968.

turned in a seemingly irreversible way, communication and travel in Biafra was severely limited and required several drastic solutions.

### **MARKETING STRATEGIES IN WAR**

One of the most innovative aspects of Biafran propaganda was the use of modern marketing techniques to mine data and translate that data into recommendations for future broadcasts and initiatives. Though very few documents remain from the Directorate for Propaganda, Ministry of Information and the Political Enlightenment Committee, those that remain reveal that the various arms of Biafran public information were very adept at both getting their message out and adapting their message to suit the changing realities of war. That the Biafrans were able to create a system that had the look and feel of any well oiled public relations or advertising firm, despite the obvious challenges of operating in war and under siege warrants special attention in itself. The fact that they were able to create and maintain such an effective system under the circumstances remains remarkable.

The main difficulty in examining the content of Biafran propaganda, especially radio programs and non-print pieces, is the lack of data. Though some print propaganda remains, almost all the radio, television and non-print material is now lost. All of the scripts for the radio programs evaluated below are either lost or presumed lost. The only records of them ever existing are the critiques made by the Appraisals Committee of the Directorate for Propaganda. Even the remaining printed material reveals only a small portion of the voluminous propaganda made for internal consumption to keep Biafrans, especially the Igbo, determined to prosecute the war. On the other hand, much of the

information manufactured for global consumption remains; but this body of work can only provide us with the face that the Biafrans wished to show the rest of the world, which at times seems to contradict the scant evidence of what the Biafran Government wished to instill in the mind of its own people.

## **PLANS**

On June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1968, barely a month after Port Harcourt fell, the Appraisals Committee of the Directorate for Propaganda unveiled a plan titled “Guide Lines for Effective Propaganda” (henceforth Plan #4, the other plans are now lost).<sup>20</sup> This paper served as a guideline both in creating an overarching conceptualization of how Biafran propaganda should work and how to cope and circumvent certain problems that arose because the war was turning decisively against Biafra.

Plan #4 is comprised of two parts. The first part is a general overview of effective propaganda, and discusses the different aims, techniques and strategies of propaganda, especially in wartime. The main goal of this part of the report was to instill the basic principles of propaganda to those who might not be familiar with the different aspects of market segmentation, the connection between message and form and other aspects of modern marketing. The report begins with the different ways that the propagandist can appeal to the heart of their target, such as appeals to desire, fear, hatred, as well as human attributes such as tendencies toward conformity, repetition, and the esthetic value of propaganda.

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<sup>20</sup> "Guide Lines for Effective Propaganda," ed. Research Bureau Appraisal Committee (Aba: Directorate for Propaganda, 1968).



The authors of Plan #4 studied the art of propaganda very carefully, and meshed many of their guidelines by incorporating the lessons of Allied and Axis propaganda during World War II with lessons and tactics from the advertising world. Thus, when the Biafrans discuss hate appeals as an effective propaganda tactic, they invoke both Josef Goebbels' words "we are enemies of the Jews, because we are fighting for the freedom of the German. The Jew is the cause and the beneficiary of our misery..." with slogans such as "Fresh up with Seven Up!"<sup>21</sup> Like any advertising campaign, the goal was to instill a sense that no matter the message that the propagandist was trying to implant, "the presentation of propaganda materials around whatever phenomena should be so striking as to be memorable."<sup>22</sup>

However, Biafran propaganda was facing a far from ideal situation in which it was to work. The second part of Plan #4 explained how the Biafran "Propaganda Man" was to deal with the unique challenges of operating in a war that was so close to home and a home front that was increasingly under siege, blockaded and teeming with refugees. Further, Biafran propaganda was challenged by the lack of mobility within the country due in large part to the lack of fuel, and the general insecurity of traveling in a country under siege. It was not only the effects of the war that hampered Biafra's efforts to galvanize their populace, but also the diverse education level and access to technology of its people. With a population estimated to be 70% illiterate and rural (educational class 3), without access to radios and television, disseminating propaganda would prove a formidable challenge. Indeed, only 5% of the population was considered "the elite and

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

upper class” (educational status 1) and an additional 25% “the literate and illiterate middle class” (educational status 2).<sup>23</sup>

Plan #4 addressed circumventing the challenges both on a practical level and in keeping the county’s morale resolute on fighting despite the increasingly difficult situation. Indeed, Biafra’s situation, due to adverse effects of the war, the lack of infrastructure to disseminate ideas and propaganda made any effort at organized propaganda extremely difficult. Further, the large illiteracy among the population sorely limited the effectiveness of the printed word in bringing news and reports to the rural areas.

The authors of the propaganda directorate offered several remedies to the difficulties facing them. Some of the solutions were squarely practical, such as bringing batteries to the marketplaces so that radios could be set to Biafran radio and played. They also suggested the employment of actors and playwrights to produce plays that could be performed in the rural areas, where people lacked access to radio and television, and where the high percentage of illiteracy limited the impact of printed media. However, the realities of the war also elicited stern recommendations from the Directorate. As the report states:

One of the greatest problems which the Propaganda Directorate has to contend with is that of general immobility in the country. The immobility arose out of the shortage of vehicles and lately of petrol and diesel oil. [...] 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.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 35.

The dire situation demanded several responses and the Propaganda Directorate made several recommendations. First and foremost, the Directorate was to act as a coordinating unit for all propaganda. Not only was each department of the Directorate to adhere to the various guidelines when creating propaganda, especially regarding the aim and audience for each piece of propaganda it created, but statements regarding “Each [sic] 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.”<sup>25</sup>

Lastly, Plan #4 posited some interesting ways to bind the propaganda for internal consumption with that for the rest of the world. Considering that Biafra’s lack of infrastructure at the beginning of war came under increasing strain when most of the urban areas with their radio and television towers fell to the FMG by mid-1968, the Biafrans were left with relatively few ways to effectively reach their population and the outside world. The Directorate’s concern was how to minimize propaganda crossover. Though the Propaganda directorate had the masterful idea of effectively outsourcing most of the global propaganda to Swiss public relations firm Markpress (more on Markpress later in this chapter and the next one), Plan #4 also deals with the problems of having Biafrans receive propaganda that was meant for Nigerians and vice versa.

The Directorate also set certain red lines regarding the content of the Biafran information. Naturally, in time of war, the main problem in propaganda is divulging information that the enemy can use against you. However, divulging information can also

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 39.

have a negative effect on the enemy, such as the broadcast of a major victory against them. However, the Biafran propaganda man was warned to avoid publicizing falsehoods. This was not out of a moral need to be truthful, but rather from more practical considerations regarding the situation in Biafra.

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.<sup>26</sup>

Plan #4 thus provided many recommendations regarding the use of propaganda. The plan set forth ways not only to create propaganda, but to evaluate the effectiveness of the propaganda campaign, especially among the different educational groups that the materials targeted. Most important was to find ways to reach the uneducated and illiterate people living in the rural areas with little access to television and radio. To this end, the Propaganda Directorate sought to enlist the military in disseminating propaganda. This was important for several reasons. First, because of the nature of the war in Biafra, most of the military was in close proximity to the population it was defending. This proximity would allow for soldiers to help popularize much of the propaganda to those that could not read or write and had no access to radios. Second, the military “would benefit from the propaganda for the civilian population, but only as an argumentation of political

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 34.

indoctrination and the special morale services for the armed forces.”<sup>27</sup> Also, the military received top priority in the allocation of fuel and was thus a convenient means to circumvent the general immobility in the country.

The initial problem of conflating the Biafrans with the Igbo was rendered largely moot after the middle of 1968, when the FMG was able to capture and hold all the non-Igbo areas. Further, the crux of the genocidal argument was centered largely on the Igbo. The massacres of 1966 were directed against the Igbo. The mass exodus of people from all parts of Nigeria to the East was mainly Igbo. The memory of people arriving in Enugu, Umuahia, Aba and other Igbo cities with little more than the clothes they were wearing, having suffered the brutality of the pogroms did not resonate with the non-Igbo people in Calabar, Bonny and elsewhere. Thus the collective memory that the propaganda was evoking was that of the Igbo, not of Biafra as a whole.

Though the propaganda Directorate was mostly concerned with the civilian population, the military provided a unique challenge and opportunity for the Biafrans to propagate their messages. As the Biafrans were fighting a war on their home soil against an invading army, the military was never far from the civilian population, and in most cases the civilians were in intimate contact with the soldiers. Second, the military had the same educational background and literacy rates as the civilian population, so the same methods of delivery that applied to the civilians also applied to the military. Third, as stated earlier, the government felt that the same messages to the civilians would augment the political indoctrination that the soldiers themselves were receiving, and the soldiers

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 27.

themselves could serve as mouthpieces for the propaganda owing to their position of authority and perceived ability to better communicate across the country. Lastly, using the military supply lines to deliver propaganda materials solved an important logistical problem. By using the military to help spread the propaganda to the civilians, the government solved its most important logistical problem; that of limited means to deliver the message without interfering with the war effort.

### **THE LEOPARD**

One of the most important vehicles of propaganda dissemination was the official bulletin of the Biafran Armed Forces, *The Leopard*. The magazine began publication at the end of 1967, and was scheduled to be published twice a month. However, supply problems most likely hampered the magazine's publication; between December 1967 and the end of May 1968, eight issues were published, of which all but the first issue remain available. The ninth issue did not appear until the end of November 1968, and no other issues survive after the ninth. Like many newspapers in Biafra during the war, the paper shortage was apparent, as the last issue was printed on what obviously was school notebook paper, as evidenced by the lines running through the paper.

*The Leopard* provides us with a clear window into the shifting nature of Biafran propaganda for several reasons. First and foremost, the paper's language is simple, to the point and does not attempt to show any semblance of neutrality. Often times it addressed the soldiers directly, stating bluntly:

Nigeria's **BIG PLAN** aimed at you, the gallant, courageous Biafran soldier, and you, the mean, shameless agent of Gowon is *DEATH*.

Kill them *NOW* in their thousands at the battle fronts before they kill you in millions – in *cold blood!* <sup>28</sup> [Emphasis in original]

*The Leopard* was replete with such colorful language, and the text was often accompanied with graphic images of Nigerian atrocities such as one front page that had a photograph of a decapitated body. The article asked the reader whether he recognized the person in the photo before disclosing that the image is “the dismembered body of a Biafran (probably your own relation) and one of the 30,000 other Biafran victims murdered by Northern Nigerians barely two years ago.” The article then detailed how the massacres of 1966 were but a foreshadowing of Nigeria’s aims against the Biafrans and concluded by reminding the soldiers that “TO BE ALIVE WE MUST KILL EVERY NIGERIAN HORDE ON OUR SOIL.”<sup>29</sup>

*The Leopard* went through many content revisions in response to both the situation on the ground and as a response to military needs. In addition to the gruesome images, *The Leopard* had much in common with any military magazine, such as military related cartoons, crossword puzzles and brain teasers; as well as several recurring columns such as a humor section, and a section called Profile in Bravery, where historic acts of bravery, mainly during World War II, were recounted as an inspiration to the soldiers at the front. At first the cartoons seemed the fare of any magazine, with humorous scenes of a couple in the house, or a lovers’ quarrel gone awry. However, the cartoons shifted to that of a military and political nature by the third issue. Instead of a comic of a wife poisoning her husband and lying to the police saying she put too much

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<sup>28</sup> "Nigeria's 'Big Plan' Revealed," *The Leopard*, 16 February 1968.

<sup>29</sup> "Digging up the Past? Yes!," *The Leopard*, 31 May 1968.

pepper in the food, we are treated to a caricature of a diminutive Yakubu Gowon standing between the legs of a giant Harold Wilson on a map of Nigeria watching as a detached Biafra sails away into the ocean.

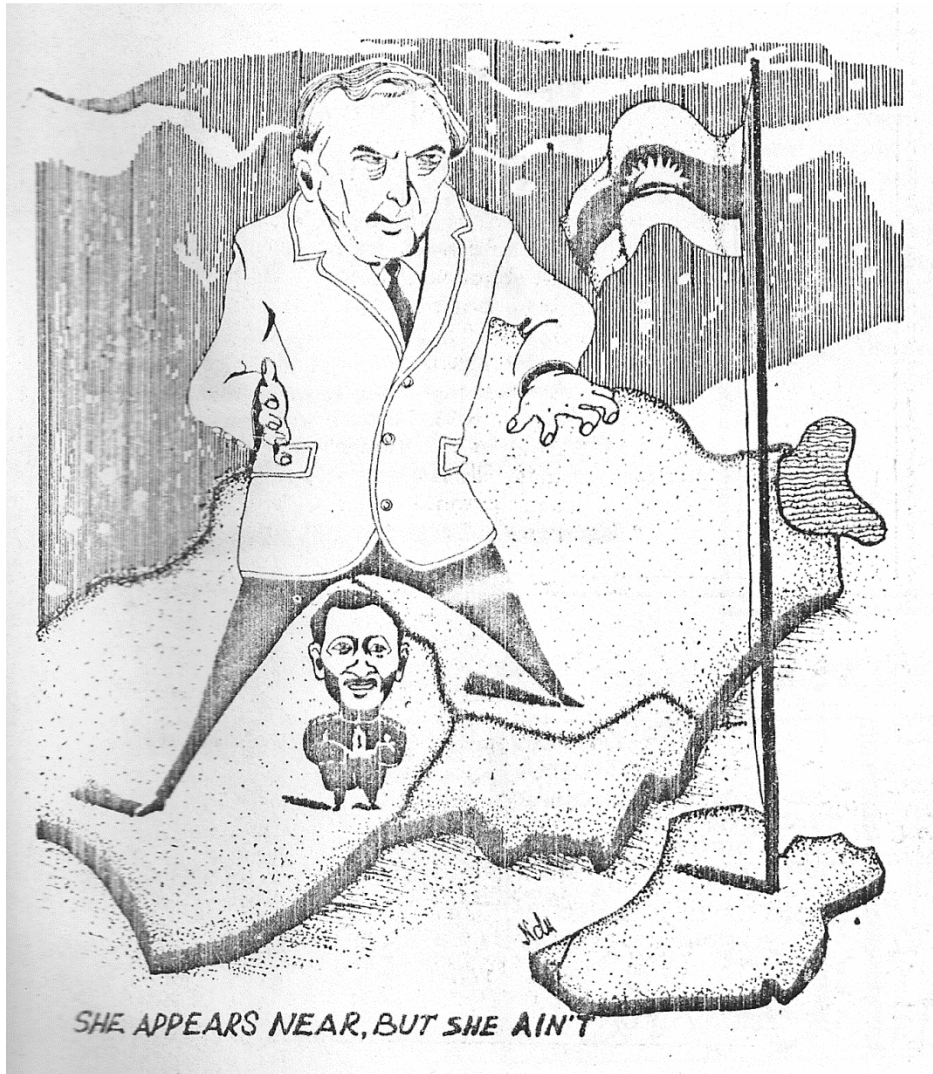


Figure 5: She Appears Near, but She Ain't<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> "She Appears Close, but She Ain't," *The Leopard*, 26 January 1968.





Figure 6: 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.<sup>31</sup>

As the situation in Biafra became more and more dire, the cartoons became more morbid. The November issue featured an image of a group of obviously white men, sitting in a boardroom labeled “International Observers HQ, Lagos”. One of the men, looking through binoculars into the distance, states “no blood mist!” Another man replies “then there’s no genocide!” Another caricature in that issue is even more gruesome, with a sign that reads “Doddan Barrack’s Farm, Lagos” and an emaciated soldier with a basket

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<sup>31</sup> "Wrestling Cartoon," *The Leopard*, 16 February 1968.

full of skeletons on his head walking through a field of corpses. The caption under the image reads "Gowon's Harvest".<sup>32</sup>

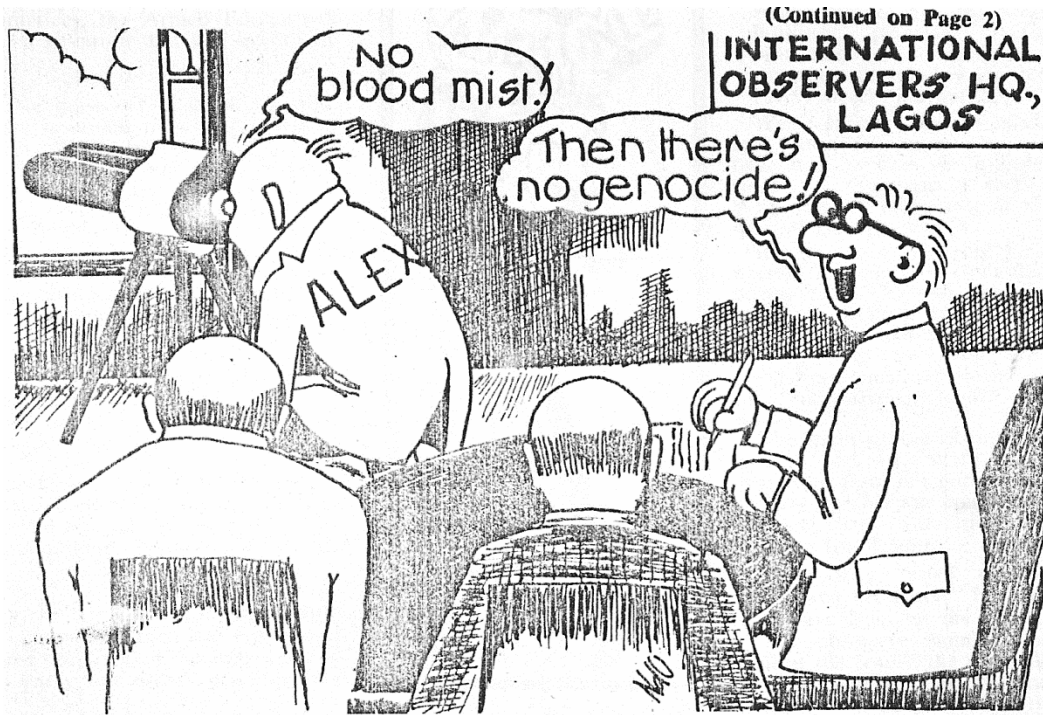


Figure 7: International Observers HQ, Lagos <sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> "Editorial Cartoons," *The Leopard*, 22 November 1968.

<sup>33</sup> "International Observers Hq, Lagos ", *The Leopard*, 22 November 1968.



Figure 8: Gowon's Harvest <sup>34</sup>

*The Leopard* did not only create an atmosphere of fear and loathing, it also instilled a sense of patriotism, loyalty and morality. Several columns in the magazine stressed how Biafran soldiers were to act; in the face of the enemy, with their comrades in arms and in interactions with the civilian population. This kind of indoctrination served to give the Biafran soldiers a sense of moral superiority in the face of a bloodthirsty enemy that wanted nothing more than the rapine rape and pillaging of their country. One such column was called What Would You Do? In this column, the magazine presented the soldiers with several moral conundrums and invited the soldiers to send in their responses to win prizes. The soldiers were asked, for example, what they would do if they

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<sup>34</sup> "Gowon's Harvest," *The Leopard*, 22 November 1968.

came face to face with a friend fighting on the Nigerian side, or what they would do if they met a girl while fighting away from home and “forgot” they were already married.<sup>35</sup> While the point was, no doubt, to ascertain the soldiers’ commitment to both the Biafran cause and to their own morality, the questions presented in this section probably made for some lively barracks conversations.

After the collapse of the Biafran lines in mid-1968, *the Leopard* disappeared for six months. When the last issue appeared, at the end of November 1968, the tone of the magazine had shifted dramatically. One recurring section, titled From Biafran Women and ostensibly written by one woman named Unamma who, in playful banter with the troops, made the soldiers aware of civilian life during the war. In one issue Unamma gave the troops insights on how to keep in touch with home; in another, she told the troops how the women of Biafra receive strength from the soldiers. However, in the November issue, Unamma’s tone shifts dramatically. Rather than tell the soldiers that they “are so serious minded as to melt a girl’s heart”, the November issue of *The Leopard* is much more stark in tone and bleak in message.<sup>36</sup> By November, the magnitude of the military and humanitarian catastrophe was all too apparent, and Unamma stated:

We fight for humanity. We fight for millions of refugees  
mortared out of their homes by Gowon’s soldiers.

We fight for men and women crippled and bed-ridden with  
old age who have been forced to abandon their haven.

We fight for young children who have lost their relations  
during their flight and are now children of charity.

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<sup>35</sup> "What Would You Do? ," *The Leopard*, 31 May 1968.

<sup>36</sup> Unamma, "Oh, So Chivalrous," *The Leopard*, 16 February 1968.

We fight for pregnant women and nursing mothers who lose their babies and often their own lives for lack of food and for excessive hardship.

And we fight for young men who flee their farms and hopelessly watch members of their family die off through hunger.

Above all we must fight to prevent Nigeria and Britain from adding to the number of these destitute persons.<sup>37</sup>

The November issue is important, not just because of the bleak tone in the face of the military meltdown that saw the Nigerian Army capture every major Igbo population center. While every soldier on the front most likely witnessed the collapse of the Biafran military firsthand, and suffered from the lack of food, supplies and ammunition, the appearance of a new issue of *The Leopard*, after a six month absence was likely a salve on the beleaguered soldiers' spirits, as it showed that the situation had stabilized enough to allow the magazine to return to publication. Moreover, the lead story in the 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!"<sup>38</sup>

The November issue of *The Leopard* went to great lengths to explain to the troops both that the military situation had stabilized and that the losses to the Nigerians had been temporary and reversible. The loss of Port Harcourt severely hampered the supply situation in Biafra, at least temporarily, and most soldiers were keenly aware of the shortages during Nigeria's push to end the war during the second half of 1968. By placing the blame on Britain and the United States, the Biafran propaganda writers were able to drive home two points. First, they painted Biafrans as standing up to neo-colonial

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<sup>37</sup> ———, "From Biafran Women," *The Leopard*, 22 November 1968.

<sup>38</sup> "Don't Let the Vandals Go!," *The Leopard*, 22 November 1968.

powers that were bent on helping Nigeria plunder the wealth of the Igbo, while turning a blind eye to Nigeria's genocide. Second, they were able to show that Nigeria's successes were not due to any weakness on Biafra's part, but rather due to foreign meddling that undermined Biafra's supply lines.

The claim put forward in the magazine merits special attention because it serves as an excellent case study in how Biafran propaganda was formulated, edited and packaged for consumption. The article is very well constructed, and is built around two highly publicized incidents that most soldiers in Biafra would have been aware of. 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. As the article states, the defenders at Aba and Owerri were reportedly only issued with five bullets to stave off the Nigerian assault on the towns.

The arms shipments into Biafra organized by Hank Wharton suddenly ceased. Wharton, a maverick gun runner, who had been delivering guns and ammunition to Eastern Nigeria as early as October 1966, had the only two airplanes that were flying into Biafra for most of the first half of the war. Wharton was contracted by the Biafran Government to ferry weapons, as well as most of the Church Aid organizations to fly in relief supplies for the civilian population. Because of the stress on the engines from flying supplies, Wharton's two Super Constellation aircraft developed engine trouble while flying from Sao Tome to the Biafran airstrip "Annabelle" at Uli. In one highly publicized incident, Wharton's crew had to jettison eleven tons of arms destined for Biafra after one of the engines on the plane cut out. Both of the planes eventually returned to Lisbon, where they never flew again. Wharton was able to secure other planes

to fly into Biafra with supplies from the various church organizations, but he was never contracted by Ojukwu again.<sup>39</sup>

While both of these incidents were very well publicized, the Propaganda Directorate took these stories and concocted a fanciful story of international intrigue and betrayal aimed at galvanizing the soldiers' perception that the Western Powers were conspiring to allow Nigeria to kill the Igbo and plunder the wealth of the land. Claiming to quote a British magazine called *Private Eye*, which *The Leopard* billed as "the authoritative British magazine that specializes in intelligence and espionage stories,"<sup>40</sup> *The Leopard* gave 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."<sup>41</sup> The British magazine quoted did exist (and continues to publish to this day), but it was not, as the Biafrans claimed, an intelligence and espionage magazine. It began publication in 1961 and continues to this day to be one of the largest circulating political satire magazines in the United Kingdom. Further, Wharton continued to fly into Biafra bringing much needed supplies, even after his reported betrayal. One incident in October 1968 saw

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<sup>39</sup> For a detailed biography of Henry "Hank" Wharton, see Peter Marson, "Prop Personality - Hank Wharton," *Propliner Aviation Magazine*, December 1981. An in depth discussion of the air war, including a detailed discussion of each plane, civilian and military, that took part on either side of the war was written by Michael Draper in Michael I. Draper, *Shadows: Airlift and Airwar in Biafra and Nigeria 1967-1970* (Aldershot: Hikoki Publications, 2000).

<sup>40</sup> "Don't Let the Vandals Go!."

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

one of Wharton's planes at the airstrip at Uli destroyed by another plane landing at the airstrip. Another incident, in December of the same year ended with one of the Super Constellations crashing on approach to Uli, killing all four crewmembers.<sup>42</sup>

In actuality, Wharton's arms shipments, though vital to Biafra, could never keep up with the Biafran demands for arms and ammunition. Eventually Ojukwu's government was able to secure other clandestine means of procurement, and contrary to the propaganda, between July and October 1968, Biafra's arms supply grew from ten to two hundred tons per week.<sup>43</sup> Wharton continued to fly into Biafra, contracting exclusively with the aid organizations to ship humanitarian supplies into the besieged Igbo enclave. However, using Wharton as a scapegoat for Biafran propaganda provided the soldiers with a simple, easy to grasp explanation as to why the Nigerians were able to capture almost the entire Igbo heartland before their advance was finally halted.

Further, adding the United States to the list of countries conspiring against Biafra made it appear that the entire world, East and West, was truly against Biafra. The Biafrans had tried many times to enlist American support to arrange a ceasefire or, failing that, to help arrange for a humanitarian relief corridor. Further, the Johnson

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<sup>42</sup> Marson, "Prop Personailty - Hank Wharton," 30. Annabelle was a makeshift airstrip and was used almost exclusively at night in blackout conditions for fear of Nigerian attacks on the airstrip. When a plane was on final approach, the land crew at the strip would flash the runway lights for no more than 5 seconds and the pilot would then have to make the rest of the approach in the dark. Incidents like Wharton's in October 1968 were not uncommon. Interview with Col. Benjamin Okafor, Chief of Biafran Air Force; July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>43</sup> Stremmlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 222.



Administration was heavily invested in mediating between the sides at the peace talks, especially in Kampala. Johnson himself was keen to stop the bloodshed and alleviate the suffering of the civilian population, going so far as to donate six Super Constellation aircraft to the relief efforts as one of the last acts of his presidency. However, the United States' reluctance to play a major role in the conflict led Johnson's National Security Advisor, Walt Rostow, to state in a memo "we are doing everything we can, which is very little."<sup>44</sup> Biafran disillusion with the Johnson administration was buoyed by the statement of then candidate Richard Nixon that "genocide is what is taking place right now – and starvation is the grim reaper [...] this is not the time to stand on ceremonies or to observe diplomatic niceties."<sup>45</sup>

The propaganda department supplied the military with a somewhat credible story to sell to their soldiers 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 rumors of lack of ammunition that every Biafran soldier must have experienced, the article did an excellent job of helping to stop the panic and reinforce the troops' will to fight.

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<sup>44</sup> Walt Rostow, August 14th, 1968.

<sup>45</sup> "Nixon's Call for American Action on Biafra," September 9, 1968, cited in Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 289. Also see George A. Obiozor, *The United States and the Nigerian Civil War: An American Dilemma in Africa 1966-1970* (Lagos: Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, 1993).

## SURVEYS

Like any modern advertising firm, the Biafran propaganda arm engaged in extensive market research to evaluate the effectiveness of its propaganda campaign. Like most Biafran documents, most of the research reports are unavailable, but the few that exist give us a glimpse into the methodology and importance that the Biafrans placed on the propaganda efforts, especially in regards to the local population. The report ““What Biafrans Know About the Nigeria/Biafra War”<sup>46</sup>, though undated, was most likely written in early 1969.<sup>47</sup>

The report deals with interpreting a survey about various perceptions of the war and segmenting 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. [Emphasis in original]”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> "What Biafrans Know About the Nigeria/Biafra War," ed. Research Bureau Appraisal Committee (Enugu (Aba): Appraisals Committee, Directorate for Propaganda, n.d (1969)).

<sup>47</sup> 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 skeptical of Biafra’s viability as a state.

<sup>48</sup>"What Biafrans Know," 35.

More importantly, the report asked questions designed, not only to ascertain the Biafran people's morale, but to ascertain 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 the respondents merited special consideration. The report voiced a general concern of the effectiveness of the propaganda. While 50.9% 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."<sup>49</sup>

The report's main goal was 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."<sup>50</sup> The report was split into several segments about the causes of the war, conduct of the war, outside involvement, settlement of the war and the Land Army scheme. Results were analyzed 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."<sup>51</sup>

One section of the report deals extensively with the Land Army Scheme. The Land Army Scheme was a program designed to alleviate the starvation in Biafra whereby

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.,35.

communities would grow food; part of which would be distributed both among the community and the other would be handed over to the government for redistribution. While a more in depth discussion of the Land Army Scheme will be detailed in the next chapter, 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.”<sup>52</sup> 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.

The Appraisals committee sought to ascertain how well propaganda was being received among different demographics, such as age groups, sex, education levels and income levels. 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 know<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 32.

Though the survey methodology is not clear, and the perils of conducting such surveys under siege and without were laid out in the guidelines, the fact that the Appraisals Committee was able to conduct surveys at all is remarkable. Though the surveys were very small in scale, with 902 respondents, the Appraisals Committee used these responses to give recommendations about how to approach propaganda. In the case of the Land Army Scheme, the answer the survey was looking for was that he proceeds would be shared between the government and the people. That answer garnered 57.9%, 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.”<sup>54</sup>

It was not only in the Land Army Scheme that the appraisals committee sought to give the other offices of the Propaganda 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 Biafran population saw Nigeria as a militaristic power that was bent on either a military defeat of Biafra or of killing every Biafran, which polled 65.9% and 24.2%, respectively.<sup>55</sup>

The authors of the report broke 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 troubled the authors of the report who equated the lack of knowledge about the

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 27.

situation with lack of commitment to the Biafran cause and then proposed ways to rectify the situation. Specifically, the authors of the report saw a marked difference between the literate and the illiterate in the ways each of the groups understood the political dynamics of the war.

#### **DIRECTIVES AND ANALYSIS**

Not only did the appraisals committee set guidelines for propaganda and compiled detailed surveys on the effect and penetration of the various propaganda messages; they also critiqued the various propaganda outlets. In a report titled *A Critique of Propaganda Radio Programmes*, published in October of 1969, the Appraisals Committee, which by now had been organized into different divisions, filed a detailed critique of four radio programs, Early Bird Show, Newstalk, Outlook and Calling Biafrans Behind Enemy Lines. The report evaluated “the propaganda effectiveness of the scripts’ methods of persuasion” of each show, according to its audience; the appropriateness of message and the ways it reached, or failed to reach, its audience.<sup>56</sup> Though this report is the only extant one and is numbered the 14<sup>th</sup> such critique, it is, by the committee’s own admission, “by far less comprehensive and less ambitious” than the other reports on the subject. However, it shows the underlying attitudes behind the methods that the Biafrans sought to disseminate their information.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> "A Critique of Propaganda Radio Programmes," ed. Research & Publications Divisions Appraisal Committee (Enugu (Aba): Ministry of Information, 1969), 2.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

Because the recordings of the broadcasts do not exist (it is unknown whether many of them were ever recorded) and most of their scripts are lost as well, the existing critique of radio programs not only provides us with insight regarding Biafra's propaganda quality assessment, but also serves as the only way to show what content was broadcast. The radio aspect of the Biafran propaganda is especially important for several reasons. First, the immediacy of radio allowed the Biafran propagandists a much quicker turnaround in reacting to events. When anti war riots broke out in the Yoruba Western Region, Radio Biafra was quick to produce a piece showcasing the casualties that the Yoruba were suffering in the east and to portray the Yoruba leadership as subservient to the Hausa. Radio was thus much quicker to disseminate information than the print sources could ever hope to be, especially in a war torn country with limited capacity to transport large quantities of newspaper across the countryside, where most of the Igbo lived.

Second, the majority of the population, especially the rural population, was illiterate. This fact, coupled with the limitations in producing and transporting printed matter, meant that the main method of reaching the local population was through radio broadcasts. Furthermore, the logistic restrictions of reaching the local population were compounded when trying to spread propaganda abroad, especially in Nigeria where possession of Biafran propaganda was a treasonous offence.<sup>58</sup>

However, radio itself presented a unique problem in that it required both transistor sets to operate and batteries or access to electricity to run. Both the radios themselves and

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<sup>58</sup> As was listening to Biafran radio.

the power sources to run them were in short supply. Though the Guide Lines report did specify that propaganda agents were to supply batteries for radios in marketplaces so that the radios remained tuned to Biafra Radio, the war was going increasingly badly for the Biafrans and even supplying batteries to the marketplaces became increasingly difficult.<sup>59</sup>

The two most important points of Biafran propaganda were that the Biafrans alone wanted peace and that the Nigerians, along with their international allies (namely Britain, the Soviet Union and, to a lesser extent, the United States) comprised a cabal bent on rejecting any negotiated solution, thus facilitating Nigeria's genocidal war against the Igbo. Each of the propaganda scripts are evaluated by their targets (i.e. what was the script attempting to engage), message, technique and style; then checked for their appropriateness to their intended audiences. Lastly, the propaganda pieces were evaluated as to how well they meshed with the broader propaganda effort as laid out by Propaganda Directorate.<sup>60</sup>

The most important aspect 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."<sup>61</sup> Not only was this aspect continually addressed, but the global dimensions of Biafra's plight, standing alone while Nigeria conspires with Britain and the Soviet Union, was also repeatedly mentioned. It was thus, when the military situation became increasingly hopeless that the Biafran Government hoped to hold out long enough to convince the FMG to return to the negotiating table and conclude a treaty that

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<sup>59</sup> "Guide Lines for Effective Propaganda," 35.

<sup>60</sup> "A Critique of Propaganda Radio Programmes," 19.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.



would, if not save Biafra's independence, at least mitigate the effect of Gowon's twelve state solution on the Igbo, who perceived a very real threat for the implementation of the new Federal structure. Unlike the euphoria of the summer of 1967, Biafra was now largely an Igbo enclave, surrounded by a much stronger and better supplied Federal government, with little hope of winning the war on the battlefield.

In all, the appraisals committee sought to keep Biafran propaganda clear, concise and, most importantly, concerted and on message both in the pieces for domestic consumption and for foreign ears. This was especially important because of the limited access the Biafrans had to the airwaves. It was thus important that there be no easily verifiable discrepancies between the domestic propaganda and the messages for the rest of the world, as such disconnects would undermine the overall credibility of Biafran propaganda.

Similarly, to make use of the limited resources, the Propaganda Directorate sought to use easily understandable language, which would be comprehensible to people of all education levels. Indeed, one of the criteria of an effective propaganda piece was for the writing style to be "clear, non-professional and straightforward,"<sup>62</sup> or "simple and non-professional and therefore easy for the audience to understand."<sup>63</sup>

In general, the pieces evaluated stick to the same theme and use much the same language to portray Biafra as the sole proponent of peace. Similarly, people like Anthony Enahoro and Nnamdi Azikiwe (Zik), suffer consistent ad hominem attacks throughout the

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 5.

programs. Enahoro comes under attack in a piece called No ‘Air-Armada’ for Biafra.<sup>64</sup> In this piece, Enahoro was called a jailbird, a reference to his arrest, extradition from the UK and imprisonment during the Awolowo treason trial.<sup>65</sup> Enahoro’s awkward usage of an “Air-Armada” begged the comparison to the Spanish Armada that sought to invade England in 1588. Thus Enahoro was compared to King Philip of Spain and painted the former as the “top vandal leader, foremost advocate of genocide by starvation,” and “bullying, threatening, insulting and blackmailing.”<sup>66</sup> However, the report criticized the use of the Spanish Armada, stating that the uneducated would need too much explaining of the historical context and the time could best be used differently.

Azikiwe is singled out as a traitor and turncoat. Zik, despite being the first president of Nigeria, was one of the early supporters of Biafran secession, and even went so far as to write the Biafran National Anthem. After his defection to the Nigerian side he became a traitor and was venomously pursued by the Biafran propaganda. In one section of the critique, called What the People Say, Azikiwe’s defection to the Nigerian side is treated as an act of gross treason. In fact, the script “consistently [depicts him] in unfavorable connotations as dishonest, morally bankrupt, a traitor to his own people and as one that lies against his nation with the express purpose of pleasing his Nigerian

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 6-7.. Enahoro was the leader of the faction of the Action Group that split with Awolowo, precipitating the Western Region crisis of 1962. He fled to Britain, but was extradited, was found guilty of treason, and imprisoned until his release by the military government in 1966.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 6.

masters.”<sup>67</sup> Azikiwe’s declaration that there was no genocide in Biafra had disastrous consequences on the psyche of the Biafran nation. It was therefore imperative that the Biafran propaganda machine do its utmost to discredit him, his motives and his actions.

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, the appraisals committee hoped the radio broadcasts would be accessible to the uneducated people in the villages and to the global audience. However, this balancing act was not an easy one to follow. One script analyzed was Nigeria, No Closer to Unity in the Outlook program.<sup>68</sup> This segment was directed at the Yoruba who were fighting on the Federal side and portrayed the Yoruba 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.”<sup>69</sup> The appraisals committee lauded this report for its techniques, such as the appeal to 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

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 27-28. Though Nnamdi Azikiwe was the first president of Nigeria, he was also one of the first to defect to the Biafran side and supported secession. He wrote the lyrics of the Biafran National Anthem, set to the music of the Finnish anthem, a country whose spirit and tenacity he admired. However, in August 1969, he changed his position and supported Gowon’s One Nigeria.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 17. Oduduwa, or Odùduwà is widely regarded in Yoruba oral tradition as the semi mythological ancestor of all the Yoruba kings.

true, the Yorubas cannot find out; it is an effective propaganda technique.<sup>70</sup>

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.<sup>71</sup>

Though the details of the guidelines are never stated in the critique and the weekly guidelines are now lost, there was a set of rules designed to create and maintain a coherent strategy, both in Biafra and for foreign consumption. The extant critique only contains one program for foreign consumption, and even that one is aimed at those Igbo that lived in areas of Biafra controlled by the Federal Forces. This one document is telling and one of the strongest scripts analyzed, though the directorate identified many flaws, mainly regarding the comprehensibility for the targeted audience.

The script, titled We Suffer Because We Are Black, in the program Calling Biafrans Behind Enemy Lines, though categorized as a very problematic piece of propaganda, nonetheless illuminated many of the arguments framing the Biafran side

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 19. 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 very 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 strained the Nigerian Government and forced them to divert troops from the front to confront the protesters.

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. Though this script was nominally aimed at the Biafrans behind enemy lines, the committee found the content too high browed for the average Biafran. By comparing Biafran secession to the various Balkan revolutions against the Ottoman Empire, the program argued that racism informed the Western world's support for Greek, Yugoslavian and Romanian secession from the Ottomans, while supporting the colonial structure of One Nigeria. Similarly, the failure to reach an agreement on the humanitarian corridors to deliver aid to the besieged Igbo population was also painted in racial terms. Thus, the committee determined that "the script paints a sufficiently ugly picture of the white world in his attitude to the black world."<sup>72</sup>

The appraisers determined that "this message of racism is fairly well developed" and went on to laud 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).<sup>73</sup> Thus, the script painted a picture of Biafran secession 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.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

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 program, as stated in its title, was those Biafrans under living under Nigerian control. First and foremost, as with the script on the Yorubas, this script did not conform to the weekly guidelines. Second, the Appraisals Committee determined that the script was "very academic and high flown" on several levels.<sup>75</sup> As the *Guide Lines for Effective Propaganda* stated, the majority of Biafrans were uneducated and mostly illiterate. Thus, this script, designed to showcase Biafra's struggle as one of black liberation, and portray Nigeria as a stooge of the white world, presumed the audience was familiar with world history, Pan-Africanism and global politics. The appraisers scolded the scriptwriters, saying

Remembering 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.<sup>76</sup>

Third, and equally as important, the appraisers addressed the issue of falsehoods in the program. Though the deprivations in Biafra, and subsequent accusations of genocide were a major part of the Biafran propaganda campaign and a global cause célèbre during the Civil War, 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 the population that was not necessarily suffering, this piece was deemed

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 27.

catastrophic from a propagandist standpoint as it could be perceived as an easily confirmable falsehood. Thus the Biafran propaganda writers themselves fell into the trap of disseminating easily verifiable lies, and projecting their own lack of evidence onto a population that was in a much better position to determine the accuracy of their claims than the propagandists.

Not only did the Biafran government have an extremely well organized and well developed propaganda arm, the extant documents show that they had an intricate system of checks and balances. Each part of the system was acutely aware of its role and the methods it had to properly prosecute a propaganda war. Radio programs played an especially pivotal role in the war, but only scant evidence of these programs remains. Almost none of the radio programs have been preserved, either on tape or in transcript form, and many of the content aggregators, such as the Africa Research Bulletin, largely ignored obvious propaganda messages in their reporting. By using the critique of the radio scripts, we can see not only how the programs were evaluated, but also glimpse their content. When studying Biafran propaganda for internal consumption, it is always important to remember that up to 70% of the Biafran population could not read, and were only marginally exposed to the printed propaganda. Though the majority of extant material forces us to give primacy to the printed word, even this small glimpse of the Biafran radio propaganda and, more importantly, the ways that the Biafran censors maintained quality control in their propaganda techniques gives us several insights into the mindset that the Biafran Government sought to instill on the largest swaths of the population.

The collapse of the Biafran Military that was so crystallized in the fall of Port Harcourt to the Federal Forces changed the dynamic of Biafran propaganda. Though the goal of the Biafran propaganda arm was still to galvanize the people to fight, there was no longer a need to cater to a multiethnic dimension within Biafran society, because that dimension no longer existed. The suffering of the Igbo became the suffering of Biafra in a way that no longer needed explaining on a religious level.

The propaganda thus reflected the state of affairs in Biafra; the country was largely reduced to a mono-ethnic enclave. The Igbo, who were the driving force behind Biafran secession were now the only people left in the nascent republic, and the need to keep the population fighting despite the continued setbacks is what drove the Directorate for Propaganda to focus their work only on maintaining the will of the Igbo to continue their resistance and despite the mounting suffering to the civilian population. For the Biafran propagandists the issue was to keep the population willing to suffer, and to convince them that the only other alternative was annihilation.



## Chapter IV

### Heroes Fought like Biafrans<sup>1</sup> – External Propaganda and the World System

The Biafrans faced a much different set of challenges abroad than they did at home. Internal propaganda focused on keeping the population willing to fight, suffer and die for the war effort, and the construction of the propaganda required a quickly changing message that could adapt to the situation in the country. In the rest of the world, where the day to day dealing of the war were distant and vague, Biafran propaganda had to deal with getting its voice to penetrate the international system. Though the Biafran message was very straightforward and sought to elicit sympathy and action that would translate to public pressure on world governments to agitate for Biafran sovereignty or, at the very least, a political solution that would be favorable to Biafran aspirations of self-determination.

When the Biafrans commenced their major propaganda blitz in 1968, they engaged the world during one of the most eventful years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The United States was embroiled in a war that took a turn for the worse in February 1968 with the Tet offensive, causing major unrest in the United States, most notably at Columbia University. Furthermore, two major assassinations, those of Martin Luther King Jr. and

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<sup>1</sup> In testament to the bravery of Biafran soldiers, French Deputy Foreign Minister, Raymond Offroy, said “Before I came to Biafra, I was told Biafrans fought like heroes. But now I know that heroes fought like Biafrans.” Cited in John de St. Jorre, *The Brothers' War: Biafra and Nigeria* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972).

Robert Kennedy shocked the country. In Europe, French protests erupted in May 1968, effectively shutting down the country and led to the demise of Charles De Gaulle. In Czechoslovakia, Alexander Dubcek's "Prague Spring" came to an abrupt end in August when Warsaw Pact Nations invaded the country and arrested him, which eventually led to his expulsion from the communist party. In the Middle East, following Israel's victory over Egypt, Jordan and Syria a long and drawn out war of attrition ensued across the Suez Canal, effectively shutting down the major waterway. The fact that Biafran propaganda machine, operating from a small besieged enclave succeeded in penetrating the international system in such an extensive way is in itself a testament to the ingenuity of the heads of the Biafran Propaganda Directorate.

The one consistent similarity between the propaganda initiatives at home and abroad was the genocidal aspect of the Nigerian siege on Biafra. Within Biafra, this thread aimed at galvanizing a people under blockade to fight to the bitter end. However, the aim of Biafran propaganda abroad was to internationalize the conflict and force the Gowon government to accept Biafran independence. To this end, the Biafran government mobilized global public opinion by propagating the notion that the Nigerians were waging a genocidal war against the Igbo. Much like the internal propaganda, the images from the 1966 Igbo massacres were used to great effect abroad. Further, the pictures of the Biafran children, with their bellies swollen from malnutrition gave the situation an immediacy that could not be ignored.

While the images delivered a sense of urgency, the Biafran propaganda machine had to deal with an emerging global media. Unlike at home, where television was

virtually inaccessible except to the very rich and radio was uncommon in the rural areas; in the West, television and radio were both commonplace.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to most Western countries, which had ready access to electronic and print media, the Biafran propaganda machine, operating from an ever shrinking and besieged country, needed to be extremely innovative in how they utilized their limited resources to gain maximum effect. Though internal propaganda had to be dynamic and constantly shift according to the ebb and flow of the war, the world outside Biafra was not as in tune with the daily goings on of the war. Thus the message did not need to oscillate and could remain focused on one key aspect; that of genocide.

#### **PUBLIC DIPLOMACY**

The Biafran message to the world was clear and concise. Disseminating the message required much of the ingenuity that the Biafrans were famous for. The Biafrans utilized several methods to utilize the minimal access they had to the outside world's media. The Biafrans had three major ways to disseminate their views: personal, printed

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<sup>2</sup> During the Vietnam War, in February 1968, the North Vietnamese launched what would be known as the Tet Offensive. Though militarily the offensive ended in disaster, nightly broadcasts of the events, including the fighting inside the U.S. Embassy compound in Saigon had a disastrous effect on American perceptions of the war. Some scholars, such as James Arnold and Don Oberdorfer, concluded that television coverage of the offensive was instrumental in American public opinion turning against the war. For in-depth discussions of the role of the media during the Vietnam War see Daniel Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Don Oberdorfer, *Tet!: The Turning Point in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

and transmitted. The personal method required direct contact between Biafran officials and the outside world in the form of interviews, press conferences and speeches. It was the most straightforward, but also the least effective for several reasons. First, transportation into and out of Biafra was dangerous, infrequent and costly.

Second, Biafra's diplomatic isolation as a secessionist state meant that Biafran officials were not afforded the same courtesy that their Nigerian counterparts enjoyed as a matter of protocol. This was not merely a matter of decorum in international relations. Biafran officials often had to travel clandestinely and were rarely afforded any recognition during diplomatic summit engagements. John Stremlau stressed throughout his work, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War* that one of the main objectives of the Biafran diplomatic corps was to alleviate the diplomatic isolation during the war.<sup>3</sup> These attempts led to several embarrassing moments during the series of peace talks in the summer of 1968 (discussed in detail in chapter 5). In one incident, Philip Efiang, Ojukwu's second in command, was en route to Addis Ababa to meet with Emperor Haile Selassie. During the circuitous route from Biafra to Addis Ababa, which included stops in Libreville, Khartoum and Athens, Efiang recalled that

Sudan, at the time, was said to be channeling a lot of military support to Nigeria and the thought of what could happen to me if the Sudanese authorities got wind of my

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<sup>3</sup> John Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

being there made me very uncomfortable while we waited in the transit lounge.<sup>4</sup>

The Biafrans attempted to make the most out of every opportunity in the public forum, often causing an extensive backlash against their efforts. In the first round of talks, sponsored by the British Commonwealth in Kampala, the Biafran delegation caused a media circus during their opening remarks, distributing graphic imagery of Biafran children in literature that equated the Igbo plight to that of the Jews in Europe during World War II. The talks in Kampala ended abruptly ten days later (discussed in detail in Chapter 5) and were followed by another set of talks in Niamey and Addis Ababa. These talks were sponsored by the OAU and the organization was desperate to avoid a fiasco like the one in Kampala. When Ojukwu was invited to Niamey to plead his case to the OAU leaders, he was escorted under guard from the airport and delivered directly to the Presidential Palace, and not allowed to hold any meetings other than with the OAU leadership.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these restrictions, Biafran diplomats were extremely effective at organizing press conferences and embarked on many missions of shuttle public diplomacy, especially after the peace talks. Louis Mbafero departed from Kampala for a series of talks in London where he blamed the Nigerian delegation for the collapse of the peace efforts. While in London, Mbafero met with Lord Shepherd from the

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Efiog, *Nigeria and Biafra: My Story* (Princeton, Abuja, Owerri, Lorji: Sungai Books, 2003), 241.

<sup>5</sup> Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970*.

Commonwealth office, much to the chagrin of the Nigerian government who saw this meeting a de facto recognition of Biafra as a legitimate political entity. In reality, the Harold Wilson government was attempting to deflect the growing groundswell of discontent regarding its commitment to supporting Nigeria militarily.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, after the Addis Ababa peace conference Nnamdi Azikiwe held press conferences in London talking both before and after parliamentary debates about Biafra on 28 August, 1968. These debates ended in adjournment without a vote with chaotic scenes in the House of Commons. The British *Daily Mail* reported on the disturbances saying that after the House refused to vote on ending military supply to Nigeria, the crowd erupted with shouts of "shame" and "murderer!"<sup>7</sup> Protesters subsequently marched on the Prime Minister's residence, breaking two windows with bricks.<sup>8</sup> This was not the first time that Biafran demonstrators had violently attacked British government buildings. On the same day, David Heaton of the Cabinet Office reported to the Commonwealth Office that

I think you should know that last Sunday, 25<sup>th</sup> August, at 10:40 p.m. a brick was thrown through the ground floor window of the cabinet Office (70 Whitehall), wrapped in a piece of paper on which was written the words "Stop Arms to Nigeria" were written.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Biafran organizations were putting increased pressure on governments, with protests outside British embassies, consulates and missions all over the world.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Young, "Murderer!," *Daily Mail*, 28 August 1968.

<sup>8</sup> Efiog, *Nigeria and Biafra*, 250.

<sup>9</sup> David Heaton, 28 August 1968.

Similarly, the Commonwealth Office reported disturbances at British Representations in Copenhagen, Bonn, Munich, Ottawa and Montreal; as well as protests in New York at the United Nations. Though direct engagement succeeded in many ways, and the Biafran efforts included several very high profile statesmen, such as Nnamdi Azikiwe until his renunciation of Biafra in August 1969, it was very limited in scope and required resources that the Biafran government could not afford.<sup>10</sup>

### **BIAFRA NEWSLETTER**

Despite its effectiveness, direct public engagement was only a small fraction of the Biafran push for international aid and support. Much of Biafra's propaganda effort stemmed from a very innovative and successful use of mass media, especially print, television and radio. The most widely disseminated print news organ that the Biafrans directly controlled was the *Biafra Newsletter*. Though it claimed to be published in Enugu, this is highly unlikely for several reasons. First and foremost, the Biafran government lost control of Enugu very early in the war and never regained control of the city. As mentioned in the previous chapter, most Biafran government documents placed themselves as printed in Enugu, despite the fact that doing so would place the publishers in mortal danger, with the most likely publication location for most documents being at the second capital in Umuahia until its fall in April 1969. Second, the periodical was so

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<sup>10</sup> Efiog's trip from Biafra to the peace conference in Addis Ababa is detailed in the next chapter. However, he stated in his memoirs that he would have been stranded with his entourage in Athens had Gabon's Omar Bongo (then Albert-Bernard Bongo) not provided him with money to complete the journey.

widely distributed outside of Biafra that publishing it within the country would have been very difficult, especially considering the paper shortages that forced Biafran documents to be published on school notebook paper, while the *Biafra Newsletter* continued publication unabated throughout the war.<sup>11</sup> Third, the newsletter's language was geared almost exclusively toward a foreign audience. Unlike other Biafran outlets that had to negotiate a balance in their programming that catered to Biafrans, Nigerians and those outside the conflict zone, the *Biafran Newsletter* was almost exclusively geared toward people outside of the warzone. Its emphasis on the genocidal aspect of the war was coupled with an accusatory tone toward foreign assistance to the Nigerians, especially from Britain, which appeared to be the main audience of the newsletter.

Regardless of its publication location, the *Biafra Newsletter* served as the prime outlet for the Biafran message. Printed very clearly for external consumption, the *Biafra Newsletter* had three clear objectives that ran through its entire publication. First and foremost, the weekly newsletter's main theme was the repetition of Biafra's main propaganda point: the Nigerians were waging a genocidal war against the Igbo. With articles such as If Londoners Knew! the Biafrans sought not only to accuse Nigeria of crimes against humanity, but also to implicate the Wilson government as actively complicit in Nigeria's genocide.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Douglas Anthony, "Resourceful and Progressive Blackmen: Modernity and Race in Biafra 1967-70," *The Journal of African History* 51, no. 1 (2010): 52.

<sup>12</sup> "If Londoners Knew!," *Biafra Newsletter*, 17 May 1968.



In another article, titled Why Britain has Become Nigeria's – Partner in Genocide, the newsletter argued that British economic interests were the single most important reason for British support of Nigeria.<sup>13</sup> Stating that “Britain wrongly believes that to preserve her economic interests in Nigeria and Biafra, she must crush Biafra by enthroning Northern Nigerian Feudalism [...] Yakubu Gowon is simply the Saraduna of Sokoto in military uniform”<sup>14</sup>, the article mentioned how the British government armed, trained and even fought for the Nigerians, listing the names of several British officers said to have died in the fighting.

In another article titled Support Biafra, the newsletter encouraged open and direct support by individuals and countries. Ifegwu Eke, the Commissioner for Information, implored open direct support of Biafra from countries and individuals, saying “we have got lots of support now from all over the world, but sympathy not expressed in concrete terms is not useful so long as Nigeria continues its war of genocide.”<sup>15</sup> The article enumerates the reasons why open support would strengthen Biafra and force a negotiated settlement. The article focuses on practical and moral issues pertaining to Biafran independence and urges the reader to support Biafra stating Nigeria's war as being “the gravest crime in international law, the most heinous crime against humanity – genocide”, and that by supporting Biafra, the reader “will salutarily indicate to Nigeria's

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<sup>13</sup> Several recent works have placed British oil interests as the prime motive of Britain's support of Nigeria during the Civil War.

<sup>14</sup> "Why Britain Has Become Nigeria's – Partner in Genocide," *Biafra Newsletter*, 17 May 1968.

<sup>15</sup> "Support Biafra," *Biafra Newsletter*, 29 March 1968.

collaborators that they are aiding and abetting a senseless war being waged in violation of the conscience of humanity.”<sup>16</sup>

Closely related, the newsletter accused the world of standing idle while the Nigerians waged a war of extermination against the Igbo. The failure to supply relief and aid to the starving masses, coupled with the large scale bombing campaign against what the Biafrans saw as civilian targets, the Biafrans accused all levels of British society of complacency and complicity in the genocide. In one article, the *Biafra Newsletter* accused the Church of England of abandoning its morality by not standing up to the British government’s assistance to Nigeria. Citing several British clergymen who witnessed the destruction of a hospital at Itu and “condemned the silence of the British press and Church”, the article praised Pope Paul VI who both personally implored Gowon to end the war at its very inception and sponsored several goodwill missions to Biafra and Nigeria. Thus, it was not just the British government that supported the Nigerian war of genocide, but all levels of British society proved to be complicit in Nigeria’s “war of genocide, [which] marks not only the culmination, but also the signal for a total extermination of all Biafrans.”<sup>17</sup>

Biafran independence was espoused as the only option for the Igbo to achieve security. The article Give us The Guns, in November 1968, portrayed a noticeably different tone in the language of propaganda.<sup>18</sup> The Biafrans here assert that they are

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> "The British Church and Biafra," *Biafra Newsletter*, 17 May 1968.

<sup>18</sup> "Give Us the Guns," *Biafra Newsletter*, 23 November 1968.

more than capable of fending off Nigerian aggression, but are unable to do so because of a lack of arms and ammunition. In an attempt to divert the issue from the hunger and suffering of the civilian population, the newsletter states simply that “the real cause of the suffering is the shooting WAR. As long as the shooting war continues, so long there will be homeless people and starving children.” The article continues to plead for a ceasefire, and states, “If there will not be a ceasefire, then – GIVE US THE GUNS. Biafrans are not a beggar nation, and despise the very idea of lining up for relief.”<sup>19</sup>

Accompanying the articles was a series of editorial caricatures called Biafratoons. These Biafratoons lampooned the Nigerian Government, portrayed the Nigerian soldiers as illiterate cowards, and exalted the Biafran military and leadership. Furthermore, these cartoons ridiculed the relationship between the British and the Soviets with Nigeria, at times portraying the Nigerians as lackeys of the European powers, other times showing the Europeans as complicit in the genocide. Much like in the articles, European motives, mostly relating to economic pressures featured prominently as the main impetus for British support of Nigeria. Many of these cartoons were designed more for shock value than amusement and depicted scenes like that of a Nigerian soldier standing over a pile of civilian bodies, shooting the baby on the back of one of the dead women, while a group of vultures watches from a tree labeled “THE SILENT OBSERVER TEAM”, a reference to the United Nations observer team sent to investigate accusations of genocide.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> "Biafratoon," *Biafra Newsletter*, 15 January 1969.

# BIAFRATOON



Figure 9: In this image, the Nigerian soldier appears to shoot innocent civilians while the international observer team observes silently.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

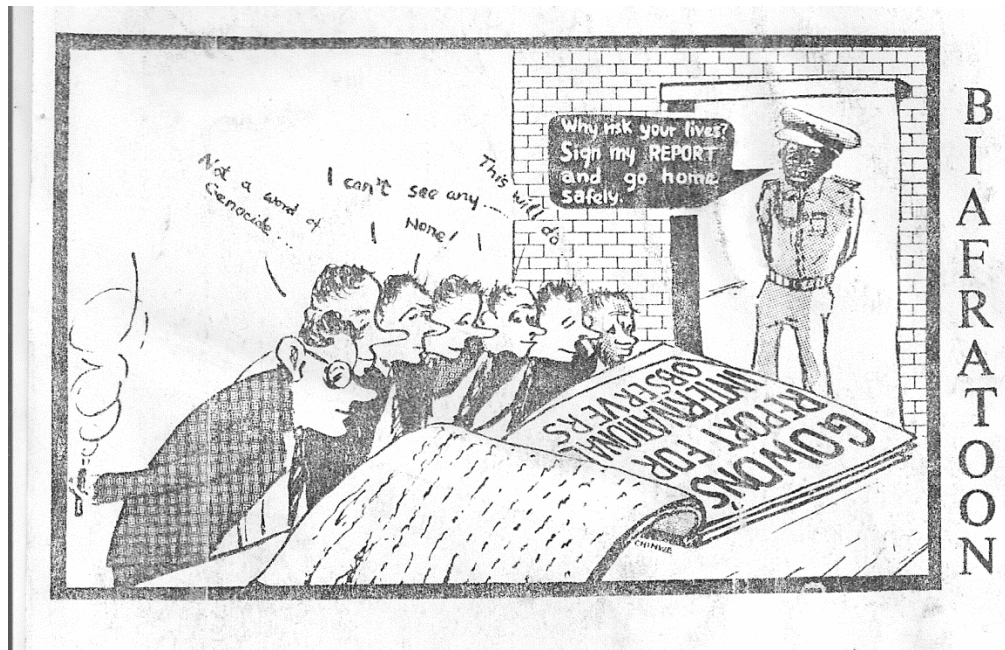


Figure 10: In this cartoon, Gowon urges the international observer team to sign his report stating that there is no genocide rather than risk their lives to see for themselves. The observer team appears to acquiesce.<sup>22</sup>

In another image, a man in traditional Hausa garb reminiscent of the Sarduna of Sokoto is standing on a stylized map of Nigeria, armed with a spear. He looks in fear as the part of country labeled Biafra drifts away. Spearing the breakaway Biafra, the obviously Northerner yells “KWOM BACK BIAPRA! [sic]”<sup>23</sup>

The *Biafra Newsletter* thus acted as a call to arms for the world to assist and put pressure on the world to intervene to halt the war. As such, with very few exceptions, the newsletter refrained from direct commentary on the war except to highlight Nigerian atrocities and to publicize Biafran successes. Reporting of the latter, however, was

<sup>22</sup> "Biafratoon," *Biafra Newsletter*, 23 March 1968.

<sup>23</sup> "Biafratoon," *Biafra Newsletter*, 1 March 1968.

largely abandoned when the successes that the Biafrans claimed could be verified rather quickly. In one instance, on 29 December 1967, the newsletter triumphantly reported that “the brigade commander in the Calabar region, Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin Adekunle, has been killed.”<sup>24</sup> The report listed several other fanciful successes in Enugu, but did report the failure of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division to capture Onitsha in November 1967. Similarly, on 16 February, 1968, the newsletter proclaimed that Biafran forces had recaptured the town of Nsukka, one of the cities to fall to the Nigerians in August 1967. Further, the paper reported Ifegwu Eke saying that Biafran troops had continued north and that the Nigerian military, led by white mercenaries had suffered what amounted to a total collapse. Eke described one story where a mercenary told his deserting soldiers “you idiots, go back and fight or I’ll carry out Gowon’s orders”, with the mercenary reportedly killed twenty five deserting soldiers.<sup>25</sup>

However, throughout the war, details of civilian casualties were consistently listed, with the 17 January 1969 issue devoting four pages chronicling Nigerian air and artillery raids on civilian targets.<sup>26</sup>

#### USE OF LANGUAGE

The main theme that permeated Biafran propaganda was that Nigeria was waging a genocidal war against the Igbo, Thus, the Igbo, the so called “Jews of Nigeria”, were

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<sup>24</sup> "Col. Adekunle and 300 Enemy Troops Killed," *Biafra Newsletter*, 29 December 1967.

<sup>25</sup> "University Town on Nsukka Recaptured," *Biafra Newsletter*, 16 February 1968.

<sup>26</sup> "Details of Raids on Biafra," *Biafra Newsletter*, 17 January 1969

suffering the same fate that their cousins, the Jews of Europe, suffered barely twenty years earlier at the hands of the Nazis. By focusing their efforts on this message they tapped in to the European collective memory of the Holocaust. The Directorate of Propaganda largely discouraged the use of European historical similes in propaganda destined for consumption in Biafra, claiming that the historical equivalents would be lost on people largely unfamiliar with European history. However, equating Biafran suffering to the Holocaust would immediately connect to the Second World War and the Jewish suffering where the memory of the atrocities that the Nazis committed was barely twenty years old.

*Biafra Newsletter* determined to equate the plight of the Jews to that of Biafra, not only on a metaphoric level, but portrayed Hitler as Gowon's ideological mentor. Calling Gowon a "pocket-size Hitler", the newsletter stated that only "stern, rapid and effective international action against the Gowon brand of Hitlerism" could stop "the big and empty bully."<sup>27</sup> Further, the descriptions of the ways the Nigerians supposedly executed the Biafrans were eerily reminiscent of the work of the German Einsatzgruppen on the Russian Front during World War II.<sup>28</sup> The Biafran account of the Nigerian massacres stated a pattern

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<sup>27</sup> "African Leaders and Biafra," *Biafra Newsletter*, 31 May 1968.

<sup>28</sup> The Einsatzgruppen were special SS death squads that followed the Wehrmacht on the Eastern front, entering villages, rounding up Jews and massacring them. The most notable Einsatzgruppen massacre was at Babi Yar on 29-30 September, 1941, where 33,771 Jews were shot and buried in a mass grave. For a detailed account of the

First, they line up all males above the age of eight and shoot them. Then the women and children are thoroughly whipped, with intermittent application of izal to the blisters made by the canes. The younger girls are carried to the North to become concubines to their 'religious' natural rulers. The women and children are carted off 'to refugee camps in Lagos, where they will be taken care of.'<sup>29</sup>

As in the Jewish Holocaust, the survivors of the initial massacres were allegedly taken to locations unknown where they were either forced into sexual slavery or disappeared completely. While the Newsletter did not specifically accuse the Nigerians of setting up death camps in Lagos, the implicit connection was that these camps were indeed "taking care of" the forced deportees. Further, Nigerians were accused of transporting Igbo girls to Northern Nigeria where they were forced into prostitution, similar to the Holocaust where Jewish girls were forced into Freudenabteilung, brothels called Joy Divisions, where they were sterilized and used as rewards for German soldiers and non-Jewish inmates of the concentration camps.<sup>30</sup>

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Einsatzgruppen, see Richard Rhodes, *Masters of Death: The Ss-Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

<sup>29</sup> "Barbarism Vs. Civilization," *Biafra Newsletter*, 31 May 1968. Izal is a type of medicated toilet paper that was notorious for being extremely painful to use after defecating.

<sup>30</sup> "New Exhibition Documents Forced Prostitution in Concentration Camps," *Spiegel Online International* (2007), <http://www.spiegel.de/international/0,1518,459704,00.html>.



The Biafrans did not only use the memory of the Holocaust to further their cause, but they used the language of persecution against the Jews in general as a crux to their writing in the *Biafra Newsletter*. The massacres of 1966 were not referred to as such, but rather as pogroms; a word used to describe the mass violence against Jews in Eastern and Central Europe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

By equating Biafra with the Jews of Europe during World War II, the Biafrans hoped to not only evoke the sympathies, guilt and anger of people in the West, but also to equate the establishment of the Jewish state to that of Biafra. Just as Israel was established in the aftermath of the Holocaust as a safeguard against future pogroms and genocide, only an independent Biafra could provide the necessary safeguards against future massacres from Northern Nigeria. Indeed, every issue of the *Biafra Newsletter* contained the phrase “ours is a fight for survival” as an immediate subhead to the title.

On 13 April, 1968, Julius Nyerere delivered a speech to mark Tanzania’s recognition of Biafra. In the speech, he directly equated Biafra’s need for an independent state with the founding of Israel only three years after the Holocaust. He said

Tanzania has recognized the State of Israel and will continue to do so because of its belief that every people must have some place in the world where they are not liable to be rejected by their fellow citizens. But the Biafrans have now suffered the same kind of rejection within their state that the Jews of Germany experienced. Fortunately they already had a homeland. They have retreated to it for their own protection, and for the same reason - after all other efforts had failed - they have declared it to be an independent state. [...] We therefore

recognize the State of Biafra as an independent sovereign entity, and as a member of the community of nations. Only by this act of recognition can we remain true to our conviction that the purpose of society, and of all political organization, is the service of Man.<sup>31</sup>

The propaganda line stated that Biafrans were waging a war to stave off the very fate that the Jews suffered during World War II. Whereas the Jews had no homeland to flee to, and thus were exterminated in Europe, the Igbo fled to Biafra, where they took up arms against their tormentors. Much like the popular perception whereby the Jews were “given” a country as a means to prevent another holocaust from ever occurring again, the Biafrans were fighting for their own “Zion”, a haven against continued aggression from the country they claimed to have not seceded from, but rather to have been pushed out of.

Thus, by using a language that instantly resonated with the British population, and urging the British population to counter their government’s complicit endorsement of genocide, the *Biafra Newsletter* urged people all over the world, but especially Britons to pressure their government to reject support of Nigeria and help to create the political and diplomatic space necessary to end the war with the only stated aim acceptable to Biafra: Independence.

#### **RADIO BIAFRA**

Despite the effectiveness of the *Biafra Newsletter*, the symbol of Biafra throughout the war was Radio Biafra. For most of the war, Radio Biafra broadcast from

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<sup>31</sup> Julius Nyerere speech. 13 April, 1968

Ojukwu's bunker in Umuahia until 15 April 1969, when the station was relocated due to the fall of the city to Federal troops, after which it moved quite often to avoid detection.<sup>32</sup>

The effectiveness of print propaganda, though undeniable, required an active readership and the creation of what Frank Biocca referred to as "the audience [having] active control over the structure of the information process and whether the individual is best described not as passive but as reactive to the structure and content of the media."<sup>33</sup> In other words, for print media to be effective, it required an active readership willing to seek out, read and process the information. Radio Biafra broadcasts required much of the same active response, as it was only broadcast on shortwave radio and therefore less accessible to most households.<sup>34</sup> Further, Radio Biafra had only one station transmitting, and only transmitted in English for a short time each day. Each issue of the *Biafra Newsletter* contained a detailed program guide for Radio Biafra. Splitting its time

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<sup>32</sup> The location is now the site of the Nigerian National War Museum. In his memoir, Obasanjo was impressed with the professional nature that the Biafrans employed concealment of Biafra's sole radio station. Olusegun Obasanjo, *My Command: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War 1967-70* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1980).

<sup>33</sup> Frank A. Biocca, "Opposing Conceptions of the Audience: The Active and Passive Hemispheres of Mass Communication Theory," in *Communication Yearbook 11*, ed. James A. Anderson (London: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>34</sup> Shortwave radio was prevalent in the 1960s mainly for propaganda purposes like the Voice of America and Radio Moscow, as well as stations like BBC World Service and educational stations such as French ORTF, which offered French Language classes over shortwave radio.

between English, French and Spanish from 6am until 11am, 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.<sup>35</sup>

Another major issue was the ability to effectively disseminate information through the fog of war. In "The Nigerian Civil War and Its Media: Groping for Clues", Françoise Ugochukwu argued that many of the problems for global media in obtaining accurate information were due to the lack of understanding of a distant African tragedy, and that for the Biafran message to be effective, the tragedy of "one death on your doorstep equals ten deaths in the neighbouring country and tens of thousands of deaths in Africa" had to be addressed.<sup>36</sup> Even more so, foreign agencies were reluctant to use Radio Biafra or any Biafran source as an authoritative voice. Several times, Biafran sources quoted military successes where none occurred, such as in February 1968, when they proclaimed the recapture of Nsukka by Biafran forces.<sup>37</sup>

One publication, *The Africa Research Bulletin*, a news aggregator, consistently reported Radio Biafra's reports of attacks against civilians as well as purported military successes such as the fictive recapture of Nsukka as well as many of the important

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<sup>35</sup> Biafra Newsletter June 28, 1968, Jan 17, 1969

<sup>36</sup> Françoise Ugochukwu, "The Nigerian Civil War and Its Media: Groping for Clues," *Media, War & Conflict* 3, no. 2 (2010).

<sup>37</sup> "University Town on Nsukka Recaptured."

speeches such as Nnamdi Azikiwe's speech to the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Biafran Army on 26 February, 1968, where he said

We are citizens of a free country who are resolutely determined to survive the onslaught of an enemy so as to preserve for ourselves and our posterity the heritage of freedom. We are fighting because there is abundant evidence to convince us that our very existence is threatened. If we fail to defend ourselves, we shall be exterminated. Therefore, we fight to survive.<sup>38</sup>

Because of the proximity of its publication to actual events, and the fact that the publication published most reportage regardless of source or veracity, the *Africa Research Bulletin* remains the most extensive source for Radio Biafra transcripts, if even in severely abbreviated form. Most media outlets, however, had reporters that authenticated their sources before publishing. Despite the fact that many news organizations, such as the BBC and Agence France-Presse had journalists in both Nigeria and Biafra, in many cases, even the simple facts of events were difficult to ascertain. In one instance, explored by Ugochukwu, a Swedish Red Cross plane was shot down by the Nigerian Air Force. Details of the incident and its political aftermath are discussed in depth in the next chapter, but Ugochukwu detailed the fact that it took over a week from when the incident occurred to ascertain the exact circumstances of the event. On the day of the incident, France-Inter, the news radio station of Radio France, reported that three planes were missing, while the BBC reported that the plane was brought down by anti aircraft fire and

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<sup>38</sup> Address delivered on 26 February, 1968 on Radio Biafra. Cited in *Africa Research Bulletin* 15 March, 1968 p. 984C

Radio Brussels reported that the pilots were captured near Calabar. In reality, the plane was shot down by a Nigerian MiG 17 flown by a South African pilot. Also, none on board the ICRC plane survived the crash.<sup>39</sup>

Radio Biafra, despite being the voice of Biafra was limited logistically, as it had to broadcast in several languages and consisted of only one voice. Furthermore, its voice was muted by the layers of gatekeepers preventing it from receiving a wider audience around the world. The Biafrans were thus faced with a real need to penetrate the world media system in a meaningful and effective way. To do so, they chose to utilize a Swiss public relations firm called Markpress.

#### **MARKPRESS**

Markpress served as Biafra's public diplomacy arm for the duration of the war. The public relations firm 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 make, the firm made extensive use of its knowledge of the international media system and thus gave Biafra an effective way of penetrating global media. *Time Magazine* acknowledged Markpress' 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

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<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of the media reportage of the incident see Ugochukwu, "The Nigerian Civil War and Its Media: Groping for Clues," 191. For details of the incident itself, see Michael I. Draper, *Shadows: Airlift and Airwar in Biafra and Nigeria 1967-1970* (Aldershot: Hikoki Publications, 2000), 177-78.

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.<sup>40</sup>

Though Markpress released thousands of press releases until Biafra's surrender in 1970, its owner, American H. Wm. Bernhardt, made relatively few remarks regarding his rationale for accepting the role as Biafra's press department. In one letter addressed to the editors receiving Markpress releases, Bernhardt stated that though his company had never accepted an account such as the Biafran one and only accepted Biafra's account after investigating the situation and concluding 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.<sup>41</sup>

Markpress contributed to the Biafran war effort, not by writing press releases, but by opening the country to reporters, funding their travels to Biafra and acting as a hub to

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<sup>40</sup> "Nigeria's Civil War: Hate, Hunger and the Will to Survive," *Time*, August 23 1968.

<sup>41</sup> Letter from H. Wm. Bernhardt to Editors receiving Markpress Releases. 25 June, 1968

release their stories, images and films. The company was so effective in their efforts that they were both praised and maligned using much the same language. *Time Magazine* reported in the same issue above that “the [Nigerian] Federal Government admits that it has come out second best in the war of words.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, in response to Markpress’ work with Biafra, the Nigerian Government hired the British advertising firm Galizine, Grant & Russell. Company director, David Russell said “I think one reason we were taken on was because the Biafran account was dealt with so brilliantly.”<sup>43</sup>

Criticism of Markpress’ effectiveness reached the British House of Commons, where conservative MP John Cordle told the House 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.”<sup>44</sup> In the only other open letter regarding Markpress’ 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.”<sup>45</sup> Bernhardt then 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 offices and the British Commonwealth offices assisting their public diplomacy efforts.

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<sup>42</sup> "Nigeria's Civil War: Hate, Hunger and the Will to Survive."

<sup>43</sup> Signing Off. Markpress. Jan 1970

<sup>44</sup> House of Commons, 20 December 1969

<sup>45</sup> Open letter from H. Wm. Bernhardt to John Cordle 24 Dec, 1969



Much of Biafra's propaganda campaign around the world 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.<sup>46</sup> In anticipation of its release, the Foreign Office sent a letter to many of its embassies abroad, with the British embassy in "Switzerland (important because of Markpress) would have liked something more detailed."<sup>47</sup> However, interest in the civil war had waned in many European capitals, even those considered to be very pro Biafra. 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.<sup>48</sup>

Interest in Biafra in general had waned across Europe by the latter half of 1969, and most British missions were in general agreement with the fact that Markpress was no

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<sup>46</sup> "Conflict in Nigeria: The British View," ed. Central Office of Information (British Government, 1969).

<sup>47</sup> B. R. Curson, "P.Q. By Frank Allaun on 13 October: Booklet on Nigerian Civil War," (London: Information Policy Department, 1969).

<sup>48</sup> John Wilson, 7 October 1969; FCO 26/302, National Archives, Kew

longer as effective as it had been in the earlier stages of the war. Further, the general consensus among British diplomatic staff was that the public opinion campaign for Biafra had waned enough that there was no need to stir up attention with either the booklet or and special envoys. The embassy in Rome stated simply that “in Italy, the Biafran propaganda campaign is now fairly muted and receives scant publicity [...] but if the situation deteriorates again, we shall probably want to take up your offer.”<sup>49</sup> Similarly, the embassy in Copenhagen reported that “Danish interest in Biafra is not at the moment acute”<sup>50</sup> and the embassy in Brussels concurred, saying “at present Biafran propaganda is neither very noticeable nor effective in Brussels” and that “we do not think [engaging the Belgian press] would be useful and it could even work against our purposes by drawing attention to a situation which does not at the moment get much attention from the local press.”<sup>51</sup> Just as the war was turning against the Biafrans, it appeared that Markpress’ reach as a media source lost much of its luster.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> British Embassy, Rome. 17 October 1969; FCO 26/302, National Archives, Kew

<sup>50</sup> British Embassy, Copenhagen. 23 October 1969; FCO 26/302, National Archives, Kew

<sup>51</sup> British Embassy, Brussels. 22 October 1969; FCO 26/302, National Archives, Kew

<sup>52</sup> After the Civil War, Markpress continued to take controversial accounts, such as the British Trawlers' Federation account during the Cod War with Iceland in 1972. One reporter claimed that “Markpress were trying to fight the ‘Cod War’ too much like the Biafran War” and were removed from the account after less than a year. Bruce Mitchell, "Politics, Fish, and International Resource Management: The British-Icelandic Cod War," *Geographical Review* 66, no. 2 (1976).

In January 1970, when Biafra finally surrendered, Markpress released a notice on the closure of the “Biafran Overseas Press Service”. Titled Signing Off, Markpress defended their support of Biafra by saying

We have been repeatedly asked since the surrender whether we thought we had done the right thing in accepting this account. We are even accused of having prolonged the war. To answer this, one has only to ask some simple questions, such as: “Does one believe in the freedom of the press?”, and: “Does one believe that everyone has a right to be heard?” Negative answers can only mean press censorship and, in effect, a rejection of basic human rights.

The Biafran people, no one can deny, fought bravely and from the highest motives. We are proud that we were afforded the opportunity of helping them.<sup>53</sup>

#### UNOFFICIAL CHANNELS

In addition to the official mediums that the Biafrans used to bring attention to the world, many unofficial channels also existed that comprised of students, activists, scholars, both Biafran and non Biafran. In one dramatic example, Eric Beth, an assistant professor at Buffalo State University purchased almost an entire page in the *New York Times* to publish “An Appeal to Uphold a Right to Survival”.<sup>54</sup> In his appeal, Beth made clear his agreement with the assertion that Biafran independence was the only way for the Igbos to obtain true security. Beth used the 1966 anti-Igbo massacres, stating that even Ironsi was powerless to protect the Igbo during the first massacres in May 1966. He

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<sup>53</sup> Signing Off

<sup>54</sup> Eric Beth, "An Appeal to Uphold a Right to Survival " *New York Times*, 2 September 1969.

continued, saying “if Easterners could not be saved when the government was headed by a person friendly to them, how can any present or future government of Nigeria be expected to be able to protect them, even if *willing?*”<sup>55</sup> Beth concluded by asking

Does mankind prefer to put its stamp of approval on forcing people into belonging to a country in which they will be in danger of extermination?

Whether the Biafrans succeed in defending their right (and the right of everyone) not to belong to a state in which they would be in danger of extermination by fellow citizens, and whether the Biafrans will survive, is likely to depend on the conscience of mankind.<sup>56</sup>

Biafrans abroad also flocked to support their fledgling nation. Perhaps the most prominent person to openly declare his support for Biafra was the boxer Dick Tiger. One of Nigeria’s most prominent fighters, Tiger declared his allegiance to Biafra very early in the war, and became a prominent spokesman for the country, donating his entire fortune to the Biafran war effort and receiving an honorary commission as a 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant in Biafra’s “Morale Corps”.<sup>57</sup> Tiger required that the Biafran national anthem be played at his fights, and in the prelude to his fight with Bob Foster (where he was knocked out for

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid. (emphasis in original)

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ojukwu was very keen on handing out medals and decorations to various people. Alexander Madiebo and Philip Efiog both criticized Ojukwu for placing such emphasis on pomp and circumstance when the country was under increasing siege.

the first and only time in his career and lost his world light heavyweight title) he told *Sports Illustrated*

Whatever happens, Biafra will never give up. This is a war of survival. If they left only one person, that person must fight until he dies. That is our country. They can't make me run away from my country. It's better that I die there than to carry my children and start running.<sup>58</sup>

In response to his allegiance to Biafra, Tiger was declared *persona non grata* in Nigeria and forbidden from ever returning to the country. This decree was finally lifted in late 1970, when a destitute Tiger, now working as a security guard in New York's Natural History Museum, was diagnosed with terminal cancer. He was immediately allowed to return to Nigeria, where he died in January 1971.

### **Universities**

U.S. student opposition to American involvement in the Vietnam War, especially by organizations like the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) led to the invention of teach-ins; large scale informal conferences designed both to educate attendees about the war and as an activist platform to agitate against it. The largest of these teach-ins took place at the University of California – Berkeley in 1965. The event drew up to 30,000

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<sup>58</sup> Robert Boyle, "Dick Tiger Fights Two Wars," *Sports Illustrated*, 20 May 1968. Tiger was 40 years old and near the end of his career, yet he was still able to regain his light heavyweight title in his next fight against Frankie DePaula, a fight that was named Ring Magazine's fight of the year for 1968.

people and included speakers such as Dr. Benjamin Spock, Norman Mailer and Mario Savio. These Teach-ins became a staple of resistance organizations.<sup>59</sup>

Many activist groups adopted the tactics of the SDS and other anti-Vietnam War activists. Biafrans and Biafran supporters formed campus organizations all over the world and conducted teach-ins, organized protests and staged several conventions, such as the Biafra Students Convention in New York on 24 November, 1967 and more importantly, the First International Conference on Biafra, held at Columbia University on 7-8 December, 1968.

#### **First International Conference on Biafra**

Perhaps the single most important event in the United States in support of Biafra came at Columbia University with the “First International Conference on Biafra” on 7-8 December, 1968. The conference attracted many scholars and activists, including Carl Gustav Von Rosen, who presented a speech about the military situation in Biafra, where he said about the Biafran soldier

He will always question authority; he will say, “I will follow the right man anywhere but if the man is not superior, then I will not follow him.” He wants to see an intelligent man on top. So they are not good soldiers in the conventional way. But, they are turning out slowly now to an excellent defense of their people because each Biafran is a little army in himself and he will be able to operate both

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<sup>59</sup> Harvey Pekar and Gary Dumm, *Students for a Democratic Society: A Graphic History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008).

at the front and far behind the Nigerian lines in a better way than any soldier I have met before.<sup>60</sup>

However, on the supply situation, Von Rosen said “as far as I can tell you on good days, they get 25 tons [of ammunition a day], and on not so good days, maybe 15.”<sup>61</sup> Interestingly, Von Rosen publicly spoke for the first time of an idea for air warfare that would become his famous Minicon squadron. In his speech about securing Biafra, he mentioned that a small force of sport planes could be raised for little cost and effectively “go in and smash those fighters and attack bombers on the ground which Nigeria has used to kill off the civilian population.”<sup>62</sup> Von Rosen’s efforts to open the air corridor to Biafra and the creation of the Minicon squadron are discussed in depth in chapter 5.

The conference included speeches by the Tanzanian ambassador to the United Nations, Akili Danieli, Nigerian experts Richard Sklar and Stanley Diamond a poetry reading by Ifeanyi Menkiti<sup>63</sup>. In his speech, Ambassador Danieli defended Tanzania’s decision to recognize Biafra saying that Biafra was a case where the government was longer viable as it had lost the loyalty of a significant portion of its citizenry. Rather than Biafra acting as a catalyst for other regions to secede, Danieli argued that it served as a

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<sup>60</sup> Carl Gustav Von Rosen, "The Military Situation - an Overview" (paper presented at the First International Conference on Biafra, Columbia University, 7 December 1968).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Spelled in the conference publication as Mankiti.

cautionary tale. In an argument similar to Thomas Paine's "Common Sense", Biafra was a case where the state failed its people, and thus was no longer considered legitimate.<sup>64</sup>

Though the conference masqueraded as an academic one, it was set up and organized by scholarly activists and included several workshops including one on genocide, which concluded with a letter that was sent to each African country's mission to the United Nations imploring them to "move the General Assembly of the United Nations to take appropriate steps to prevent or suppress the crime of Genocide in Biafra."<sup>65</sup> Other workshops included how to effectively raise funds for Biafra and how to engage the United States' foreign policy and effective dissemination of public information.

#### **GLOBAL OPINION**

Biafran propaganda had a very palpable effect on global opinion, spawning citizens, both of Biafran origin and others, to create organizations, garner donations and even risk their lives volunteering to assist Biafra.

#### **Protests and Letters**

Biafrans all over the world bombarded British embassies, consulate and other missions with letters that went along with several protests. The British High Commission

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<sup>64</sup> Akili Danieli, "Biafra's Independence - from an African Point of View" (paper presented at the First International Conference on Biafra, Columbia University, 7 December 1968).

<sup>65</sup> Report on Genocide Workshop at the First International Conference on Biafra, 8 December 1968.



in Ottawa reported a demonstration held on 19 July, 1968. Though radio and press announcements billed the protests as massive, according to the High Commission “only 20 turned up and only half of these were Africans, the others being Canadian sympathizers.”<sup>66</sup> Similarly, in New York, the NYPD warned the British Mission that a protest of up to 500 people would be staged on 2 August 1968. However, according to the communiqué “in the event they numbered about 35, mainly local Ibo students”, who tried to deliver a symbolic coffin to the mission, but the coffin was confiscated by NYPD and destroyed.<sup>67</sup>

The protesters handed W. N. Hugh Jones of the High Commission a letter, in which the British government was accused of being “ready to sacrifice 14 million African lives (in so far as they are not whites) if only to tap the oil wealth of Biafra.”<sup>68</sup> Hugh Jones stated that the protesters, armed with signs against Britain, Russia and Canada marched from the High Commission to the Soviet Embassy where they attempted to hand the Soviet Ambassador a similar letter. A member of the embassy scolded the protesters, telling them that their letter was insulting to his Government and refused to accept it.<sup>69</sup>

Similar protests took place in other European cities. In Copenhagen, the British Embassy reported on 8 July, 1968 that “the Biafran Students’ Union held a second

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<sup>66</sup> W.N. Hugh Jones, 26 July 1968; FCO 38/222 National Archives, Kew

<sup>67</sup> J.R. Owen, 6 August 1968; FCO 38/222 National Archives, Kew

<sup>68</sup> Letter from Biafra Union of Canada to the British High Commissioner, Ottawa. 18 July, 1968; FCO 38/222 National Archives, Kew

<sup>69</sup> W.N. Hugh Jones, 26 July 1968; FCO 38/222 National Archives, Kew

demonstration in Copenhagen on 6 July against British involvement in the Nigerian civil war [...] Afterwards the demonstrators visited both the Russian and British Embassies and left the enclosed letter with our Security Guard.”<sup>70</sup>

The letter accused Britain of hypocrisy, asking “if Britain supports genocide in Biafra, why not use force in Rhodesia to suppress their rebellion?”<sup>71</sup> Implicit in this question was the racist element that the Biafrans accused the British of. Many Biafrans accused Britain of a double standard by allowing the Nigerians to wage what they considered a war of extermination, while not intervening against Ian Smith’s rogue white supremacist regime in Rhodesia.

Several days after the protests in New York, the High Commission in Montreal reported a demonstration on 8 August, 1968. Similar protests were reported in Bonn and Munich by the British Embassy in Germany. The letter that the High Commission in Montreal received was similar in tone to the other letters, and added that

One cannot but conclude that your policy in the Nigeria/Biafra conflict verges very much on racial discrimination, seeing that your government has been most unwilling to use force to subdue your kith and kin in Rhodesia.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Letter from V.E. Beckett, 8 July, 1968, FCO 38/222; National Archives, Kew

<sup>71</sup> Letter from the Biafran Students Union, Copenhagen to the British Prime Minister. n.d.; FCO 38/222 National Archives, Kew

<sup>72</sup> Letter from Biafra Association of Canada to the Prime Minister of Great Britain. 8 August 1968; FCO 38/222 National Archives, Kew

Though all the protests were undoubtedly passionate, the British diplomatic staff stated that no major incidents occurred in any of the protests, and all the protesters “behaved in an orderly fashion.”<sup>73</sup>

In the United States as well, Biafran propaganda was having a profound effect. Images of starving Biafran children were on the news everywhere, and public pressure to help send relief flights to the affected area was mounting from all sides. One of the Johnson administration’s first actions with regards to the war was a presidential memo to General Gowon urging him to allow for the creation of a Red Cross airstrip at Uli.<sup>74</sup> Though this still did not represent a drastic departure from previous US policy, it would set the tone for events to come.

The administration was at first resistant to any direct involvement, despite much pressure from activist groups, concerned citizens, Congressmen and even the Mayor of Los Angeles. The Mayor of Los Angeles, Sam Yorty, urged the President to take responsibility and send a personalized team to assess the situation in Biafra. As a possible emissary, the mayor offered Senator Edward Brooke, Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and several others. Though the Administration only sent him a cursory reply, Walt Rostow, Johnson’s National Security Advisor, drafted a long letter explaining the US position on the Nigerian Civil War. In the unsent reply, Rostow stated

We hope that others may be in a better position to bring about a peaceful end to the Nigerian conflict. We have

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<sup>73</sup> J. D. Campbell, 27 May, 1968; FCO 38/222 National Archives, Kew

<sup>74</sup> Memo from Johnson to Gowon

quietly encouraged efforts of the Organization of African Unity and the British Commonwealth Secretariat to bring the sides together. And we welcome the individual efforts of men of good will. In the last analysis, only the Nigerians themselves can settle their dispute and resolve to live in peace with one another.<sup>75</sup>

The letter from Mayor Yorty was one of the first letters to arrive at the White House demanding action regarding Biafra. When the scale of the humanitarian disaster became apparent, the administration was flooded with letters from all over the United States. People of every walk of life signed countless petitions, sent letters, photographs, and offered to donate money to alleviating the famine in Biafra. The intensity of the letters showcased the intense public pressure on the Johnson administration to act in Biafra.

A letter from Robert Schulman, the head of the Department of Ambulatory Care at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Yeshiva College said

Why should these people die --just one-- because the rich nations stood idly by when they could have helped, it will be another black mark on the history of mankind ... and you, Mr. President, will be more to blame than anyone, because all you have to do is pick up a telephone to have the food sent. [...] Will your conscience permit you one moment of peace if you let millions starve? If so then God help you, for no one else can.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Proposed reply to Mayor Sam Yorty, March 28, 1968.

<sup>76</sup> Letter from Robert Schulman, 5/3/1968; B. 96 Biafra Letters folder, LBJ Archives.

While many of the letters to the President had such a strong emotional overtone, not all of them were as aloof and damning to a President who had little ability to act decisively to end the famine. Rev. Edward Riley, a catholic priest from New Orleans who was on his way to teach at a seminary in Ibadan, had a much more sober view of the situation, came to much the same conclusion of Schulman. In his letter, Riley stated that he understood the diplomatic difficulties in bringing food to Biafra, but the starving masses could not wait for a political solution. He ended by expressing sympathy for the decisions Johnson must make, not only regarding Biafra, but also on Vietnam, Civil Rights “and other difficult problems which daily confront you.”<sup>77</sup>

Other writers had more practical requests. In a joint letter by several leading religious figures from the Boston area, the religious leaders asked why the United States had not offered any logistic means to transport the food.<sup>78</sup> Another letter, from Conrad Brown, an editor from one of the publishing houses in New York, wrote “let us counter America’s bad world image resulting from civilian casualty figures in Vietnam by loading long range bombers with food for the starving children of Biafra.”<sup>79</sup>

The Israeli government was also the target of a large amount of letters urging the Jewish state to assist the Biafrans. Israel’s position was unique, as the Biafrans went to

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<sup>77</sup> Letter from Edward Riley, 5/3/1968; B. 96 Biafra Letters folder, LBJ Archives.

<sup>78</sup> Letter from Bishop James Mathews (Boston Methodist Church), Rabbi Roland Gittelsohn, President Dana Greely of the Unitarian Universalist Organization and Right Rev. Frederic T. Lawrence (Bishop of the Episcopal Church of Massachusetts, n.d.; B. 96 Biafra Letters folder, LBJ Archives.

<sup>79</sup> Letter from Conrad Brown, 7/30/1968. B. 96 Biafra Letters folder, LBJ Archives.

great lengths to tie their suffering to that of the Jews during the holocaust. In one letter, sent to the Israeli Ambassador in Washington, Yitzhak Rabin, Simon Obi Anekwe, a prolific letter writer throughout the war, wrote to Rabin, saying

I am left with the impression that neither Israel nor the AJC or other agency, has been moved to assist the people who in happier days had been their friends and have extended the welcoming hand. Even over the objections of Nigeria's Muslim leaders. I am puzzled to think that not a bottle of aspirin or a vial of penicillin; not a rubber ball are dying has gone from the state and the people possessed of such military and financial strength that they could stand up to the whole Islamic Middle East: not an ounce of eight to Biafra from those they thought of his friends.<sup>80</sup>

Anekwe concluded by saying

The hour is late but not too late for you to reflect on the role you played in the face of Nigeria's attempt to do to Biafra. What Nazi Germany did to Jews in Europe. Justice and morality are universal. Genocide is genocide; extermination is extermination, whether by gas or the bullet. I hope when the history of the Biafran struggle is written, it can be said that Israel and American Jews reverted to the kind of role played by Pres. Roosevelt and setting the right course to a people whose plight parallel today in Biafra was crying out to the conscience of mankind.

In another letter, sent to the Israeli consulate in New York, the President of the Biafra Students Association in the Americas, Godwin Anyaogu stated that “having been

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<sup>80</sup> Letter from Simon Obi Anekwe to Ambassador Yitzhak Rabin, 26 June, 1968; Nig. 103.1, Non Gov. 1/68 –9/68, Israel State Archives

called ‘the Jews of Africa’, we are now passing through similar historical process [sic] as the Jews of Europe and Israel”, and continued by saying “our cries for help have gone unheard, and the same forces which have conspired to destroy the State of Israel are seeking to annihilate the Biafran people.”<sup>81</sup>

Biafran students studying in Israel also formed student organizations and embarked on a letter writing campaign to try to sway the Israeli government to its side. A senior Israeli official, Yochanan Bein was visited by a Biafran Okey Anyadike, who introduced himself as the Publicity Secretary of the Biafran Union of Israel. Anyadike gave Bein a letter that read much like the letter from Anekwe, urging Israeli support, stating “very often people have pointed out the similarities between Israel and Biafra [...] thus, by recognizing Biafra, Israel will gain a true friend among the progressive nations of Africa. We Biafrans are eagerly expecting the government of Israel to recognize our young republic soon.”<sup>82</sup>

Bein attached a memo to the letter, which he circulated to the foreign ministry and the Israeli embassy in Lagos, stating among other points, that “I explained because of its size and struggle, official Israeli recognition might add prestige, but will bring diplomatic

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<sup>81</sup> Letter from the Biafran Students Association in the Americas to Consulate-General of Israel, New York. 17 September, 1968; Nig. 103.2, Non Gov. 10/68 –8/69, Israel State Archives

<sup>82</sup> Letter from Okey Anyadike to Yochanan Bein, Director Africa Dept. Israeli Foreign Ministry. 14 April, 1968; Nig. 103.1, Non Gov. 1/68 –9/68, Israel State Archives

harm without any gains to Biafra and Biafra first needs recognition of a large country outside of Africa.”<sup>83</sup>

Because the Nigerian press repeatedly accused Israel of actively assisting the Biafrans militarily, the Israeli government was extremely cautious in dealing with the Biafrans and kept its involvement only to humanitarian aid. In all, The Israeli government sent two military medical teams to rebel held territory, the first time the Israeli Government committed any troops to overseas deployment.<sup>84</sup> The Israeli government also donated 20 tons of canned meat to Biafra, which was actually captured from the Egyptian Army during the 1967 war. The labels were replaced and sent to Biafra, though the source of the meat was not publicized at the time.<sup>85</sup>

Clearly, the Biafrans hoped to enlist some material help from the Israeli government. However, the Israeli government, reluctant to take sides in the conflict, declined to openly assist the Biafrans in any way other than humanitarian aid.

#### **PRACTICAL EFFECTS**

Biafran propaganda’s main aim was to rouse global public opinion to such an extent that citizens all over the world would exert pressure on their governments to intervene to end the war. The Biafrans hoped that their public media blitz would sway

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<sup>83</sup> Memo from Yochanan Bein 15 April, 1968; Nig. 103.1, Non Gov. 1/68 –9/68, Israel State Archives. Translated by author.

<sup>84</sup> Aside from Search and Rescue teams to earthquake sites, the Israeli government would not commit military personnel overseas again until 1994, when a similar medical team was dispatched to Rwanda.

<sup>85</sup> Foreign Ministry Memo, n.d.; Nig. 103.2 Gov. 8/68-12/68, Israel State Archives



organizations, governments and individuals to assist in the war effort by either giving the Biafran army the means to combat the Nigerians, or by internationalizing the conflict and thereby granting a reprieve for the besieged secessionist enclave.

### **Pressure to intervene**

The Biafran media campaign was one of the most effective in the history of warfare and led to a global outcry against the conduct of the Nigerian military and government in Biafra. More importantly, the campaign influenced British policies supporting Nigeria and forced the British to deal not only with the political and diplomatic situation abroad, but also created a groundswell of public pressure that forced the British government to react to the pressure and is widely cited as one of the reasons for Harold Wilson's defeat in the 1970 general election.<sup>86</sup>

Elsewhere, Biafran propaganda served as one of the main catalysts that convinced Charles De Gaulle to support the Biafran cause, becoming the major supplier of arms and ammunition to the secessionist enclave. In the United States, Israel and elsewhere, support for the Biafrans put pressure on governments to help Biafra, if not militarily, at least with humanitarian aid. Most importantly, as the next chapter shows, Biafran pressure on the world helped to create the political and diplomatic climate where a political solution to the issue of secession could be resolved. The fact that the war did not end until Biafra's surrender in 1970 despite intense global pressure that resulted in

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<sup>86</sup> William D. Rubenstein, *Twentieth-Century Britain: A Political History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

political, diplomatic and moral urgency to end the war is discussed at length in the next chapter.

## Chapter V

### Analysis of Biafran Propaganda

#### INTRODUCTION

Biafran propaganda, despite its effectiveness, did not prevent Biafra's demise in January 1970. However, while many commentators foresaw Biafra's collapse in mid-1968, the Biafran government continued its ill-fated fight for independence for nearly two years.<sup>1</sup> The fact that the Igbo remained galvanized in the defense of their lives and country and largely believed that the Nigerian military was waging a war of extermination against them was testament to the efficacy of the Directorate of Propaganda and its overseas arm at Markpress.

Throughout the war, the Biafrans used their propaganda as an effective weapon, both tactically and strategically. Tactically, propaganda created breathing space for political and military maneuvering throughout the war. At home, propaganda provided the will to fight, to suffer, to starve and to die for Biafra. Abroad, the images of starving children horrified and enraged the world, putting pressure on governments, especially in the West to act to end the suffering. This pressure translated into diplomatic recognition, peace conferences, humanitarian aid and military supplies.

Karl von Clausewitz, one of the foremost military theorists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is best known for his treatise *On War*; considered by many the father of modern military theory, Clausewitz established an overt connection between the political and military

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<sup>1</sup> Many commentators, such as Cervenka, Stremlau and de St. Jorre recalled the Biafrans as having very little chance at succeeding in secession.

aspects of warfare.<sup>2</sup> For Clausewitz, the act of war was not the failure of politics, but rather a part of the political process. On the tactical level, his work focused on connecting the goals and means of warfare in a simple way that had not been articulated before. War, as a political instrument, should only be used to achieve clearly articulated goals.

Though propaganda has been part and parcel of warfare for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the study of propaganda and its effects in wartime has largely been the focus of the political sphere and not been the subject to serious analysis from military historians. Biafran propaganda serves as a unique case study for several reasons. First, the Biafran government used propaganda as a central instrument of their war effort. Second, Biafran propaganda responded quickly and with relative agility to the changes in the military situation, both in its internal propaganda and to the messages it was sending out to the rest of the world.

Analyzing Biafra's demise through the lens of the propaganda campaign is both challenging and useful. Though it is tempting to dismiss the Biafran propaganda campaign by stating that wars are won on the battlefield, Biafra's propaganda served as an integral part of the war effort. The Biafrans were acutely aware of the developments in the war theater and enforced strict discipline in how propaganda was disseminated and what messages would be pursued. Further, the Biafran side was largely fighting a defensive war, and thus the Biafrans did not have to win the war, but only had to avoid losing. A stalemate would have forced the Nigerian side to negotiate a settlement. Propaganda thus served an important role because by focusing on a message that stressed

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<sup>2</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. J.J. Graham (Ware: Wordsworth, 1997).

that the Igbo were literally fighting for their lives, the Biafran government made certain that the siege mentality remained; thus both the military and the civilian population would continue to fight.

Also, the Biafrans sought to internationalize the conflict. Very early in the conflict, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) created a committee to help mediate the conflict. After a meeting in Kinshasa, the OAU's committee, labeled the "consultative committee", comprised of the heads of state of Ethiopia, Zaire, Liberia, Niger, Cameroon and Ghana. Though the committee, in its resolution stated that the committee's purpose was "to assure [Gowon] of the assembly's desire for the territorial integrity, unity and peace of Nigeria", the Nigerian government was skeptical, and feared that the committee would serve to internationalize the conflict.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the OAU's initial public support of Nigeria ensured that the Biafran question would never reach the United Nations and remain, if not a local matter at least a regional one. Further, by acknowledging Nigeria as the only legitimate sovereign, the OAU essentially agreed to Gowon's one Nigeria, and thus refused to acknowledge Ojukwu as any kind of partner for peace until he accepted that Nigeria was to remain unified. This tactic further isolated Ojukwu in the international sphere and contributed to his waging the international conflict in the court of public opinion.

When Ojukwu declared Biafran independence on 30 May 1967, the goal was to achieve independence from Nigeria. However, by the end of that year, it became apparent

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<sup>3</sup> John Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 103.

that Biafra's viability as an independent state was severely limited. Faced with an untenable military goal, Biafran propaganda ultimately failed to adapt to the situation. Furthermore, Biafran propaganda was so successful in the global arena that it created an atmosphere where continuing the war could have more gains than ending it through negotiations. Moreover, it appeared that no real goals of the war were ever articulated, and the success of propaganda created an ad hoc political atmosphere where the political aims were consistently shifting based on the momentary gains.

Propaganda's importance was also magnified due to the effects of global pressure. The Biafran government, buoyed by the global outcry and the pressure it put on governments in the West, thought that the international pressure would force the Nigerians to accept a ceasefire that would be beneficial to the Biafrans. However, as the situation shifted from despair to hope, the Biafrans became less receptive to any end to the war. Only in the final days, in January 1970, Ojukwu actively searched for a solution that would give him any advantage other than abject capitulation. However, when Ojukwu realized the immediacy of his defeat, there was little he could do to avoid fleeing the country.

Thus, propaganda created the political climate for a political solution that would secure Biafra's return to Nigeria while safeguarding the rights and security of the Igbo. However, the Biafran political elites, namely Ojukwu, could not use the leverage granted to them by the global pressure to secure a political resolution to the war, choosing instead to use propaganda as a weapon to prolong the war, which eventually led to Biafra's ignoble demise in January 1970.

### **PROPAGANDA AND PEACE TALK DIPLOMACY**

The peace talks in Kampala coincided with the Federal offensive on Port Harcourt. By the time talks began on May 23<sup>rd</sup> 1968, Bonny and Port Harcourt had fallen to the Federal Military. The Federal government made a concerted effort to capture the last port city under Biafran control before the beginning of the talks to underscore Biafra's lack of viability as an independent state. However, according to StremLaw, "Biafra's chances of achieving complete and lasting sovereignty were negligible. [...] By 1968, Ojukwu's overriding concern was to ensure maximum opportunities for Ibo political and economic self-determination within a new Nigerian entity."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, even during the height of Biafran euphoria during the Midwest offensive, Ojukwu made overtures to the Commonwealth secretary to broker a ceasefire and negotiate a settlement.

Though Biafra's prospects were bleak, the Biafran leadership hoped that they could hold out at least long enough to broker some kind of deal. The British International Institute for Strategic Studies surmised in their 1967 report that the Nigerians would not be able to effect a solely military solution to the conflict, citing in part that "the Nigerian Army of 8,000 men [...] was never intended as an instrument of invasion."<sup>5</sup> However, by mid-1968, the FMG's military numbered significantly more than at the time of the IISS's report, and more than enough to lay siege to, and eventually overwhelm, Biafra. Thus, by

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 149.

the time the talks in Kampala began, the Biafran delegation had only one major bargaining chip: official renunciation of secession.

On the other hand, the Nigerian government's official position throughout the conflict was that any cessation of hostilities would only occur after the Biafran government accepts the twelve state federal solution of May 26<sup>th</sup>, 1967 and officially renounce secession. Further exasperating the Nigerian position, Gowon was under increasing pressure to end the war, especially considering his remarks that the Biafran government's back would be broken by March of 1968. Though Gowon never intended this as a deadline to end the war, the Nigerian press did, and several papers used March 31<sup>st</sup> as the official deadline to end the war, with one paper even publishing a daily countdown to victory box.<sup>6</sup> The frustration within Nigeria for lack of progress in the war was palpable and Gowon was under increased pressure to achieve final victory.

Though Gowon was correct in his assumptions regarding Biafra's military capabilities, the Biafran government was not willing to renounce secession until negotiations regarding the future status were negotiated. However, for Gowon, the only acceptable solution was that of the twelve states, and any cessation of hostilities was contingent on Ojukwu accepting that solution. The Biafrans thus sought to increase international pressure on the Nigerians to agree to negotiations that could lead to a compromise and an end to the war. Failing that, the Biafrans hoped to achieve some kind of de facto recognition by allowing relief agencies to work freely in the country, and to internationalize the conflict by bringing in foreign aid workers under international

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 129.



auspices. To this end, the Biafran government, already suffering from acute material shortages for both military and civilian needs enlisted the directorate of propaganda to create a campaign that emphasized the genocidal nature of the Nigerian campaign. The Biafrans hoped that public pressure, especially in Britain and the United States, would pressure the Gowon government to the table and allow for the peace talks to go forward without preconditions.

Biafran propaganda thus created a groundswell of public opinion all over the world, and Ojukwu hoped that this public opinion would pressure western governments to influence the Nigerian government to soften its stance and allow for talks that would stop the war, even if only temporarily and to allow relief supplies to flow into Biafra to alleviate the civilian suffering.

The first attempt at a peace conference came in Kampala, Uganda with a conference sponsored by the British Commonwealth that began on 23 May 1968. Commonwealth Secretary, Canadian Arnold Smith, hoped that the direct talks between the Nigerian delegation, headed by Chief Anthony Enahoro and the Biafran representatives, led by Sir Louis Mbateno would yield an agreement that would end the war, at least long enough for substantial peace talks to ensue. However, the talks quickly descended into a standoff, which Stremlau referred to as the “Kampala Confrontation.”<sup>7</sup>

Both sides received strict orders not to deviate from their opening positions. For the Nigerians, this meant that the renunciation of the secession was a precursor to any talks regarding the final status of the Igbo within a united Nigeria. In fact, the Nigerian

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

proposal on any ceasefire had the stipulation that twelve hours before the agreed ceasefire, the “Rebels will renounce secession, order their troops to lay down their arms as from the Cease-Fire Hour and announce the renunciation and the order publicly and simultaneously.”<sup>8</sup> In his opening address to the conference, Enahoro stated that “the concept of Biafra is now dead”, reiterating the fact that most of the area that the Biafrans now controlled was part of the Southeastern State in Gowon’s federal plan for Nigeria. Concluding, Enahoro said “I suggest we address ourselves here at this meeting to the need to lay a sound foundation for a political solution”; a solution that hinged upon the Twelve States. However, Enahoro made one important concession when he agreed that the Igbo concerns regarding their security did indeed have merit. This concession paved the way to the softening of the Nigerian stance in the ensuing talks in Addis Ababa.<sup>9</sup>

For the Biafrans, this stipulation meant nothing less than total surrender, and Mbafeno rejected the demands. In his opening address to the conference, Mbafeno reiterated Biafra’s propaganda, citing that the Nigerians were waging a genocidal campaign against the Igbo; and accompanied his talk with graphic literature depicting starving Biafran children alongside images from the Holocaust.<sup>10</sup> For the Biafrans, any talk of a permanent settlement could only come after a ceasefire that would ensure security for the Igbo.

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<sup>8</sup> "Summary Record of Discussion", (Kampala, May 28 1968).

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Enahoro, "Opening Address to the Kampala Talks" (May 23 1968).

<sup>10</sup> *London Times*, May 24 1968.

Because of the media circus and the Biafran determination to seize the international stage at the conference, the Nigerians and Biafrans would not be able to compromise their public positions. Furthermore, talks nearly collapsed after five days when a member of the Nigerian delegation, Johnson Banjo, disappeared and was presumed kidnapped. Both sides blamed each other for the disappearance of Banjo and the Biafran delegation threatened to leave if negotiations did not resume immediately.<sup>11</sup> After several days of wrangling, the sides returned to the talks where Enahoro laid out his plans for a comprehensive ceasefire and end to hostilities. In Enahoro's plan, the Biafrans would lay down their arms and a force consisting of Igbo and non-Igbo would be responsible for security in the Igbo areas. Mbafe and the Biafran delegation rejected the Nigerian proposal, stating that it amounted to little more than Biafran surrender.<sup>12</sup>

Secretary Smith proposed closed door informal sessions where the Nigerian and Biafran delegations could discuss their positions. Despite what Smith described as a positive atmosphere in the private talks, they did not reach fruition, with Smith blaming Ojukwu personally for the breakdown in negotiations. In reality, both Ojukwu and Gowon intervened to collapse the talks. Gowon instructed Enahoro that

The federal government must insist on the following:

1. There must be explicit reference to the acceptance by the rebels of the twelve state structure.

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<sup>11</sup> Banjo's body was discovered in a marsh outside Kampala several months after the end of the peace conference. Though the murder was never officially solved, the Ugandan authorities blamed the kidnapping and murder on Bugandan separatists.

<sup>12</sup> Stremmler, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970*, 170-72.

2. No elements of the rebel forces can be included in the mixed force for disarming rebel troops. Rebel police must also be disarmed.
3. Ibos will, like other Nigerians only be recruited individuals into the Armed Forces. There is no question of recruitment and formation of Ibo units for integration into the Armed Forces.
4. There will be no question of an interim commission for rebel held areas. As soon as possible after renunciation of session and establishment of a cease-fire, the federal government will appoint a military government for the East central state.
5. Cease-fire lines should be demarcated on the map and accepted as part of a cease-fire arrangement.
6. With regard to an observer force, this may only come at the invitation of the federal government.<sup>13</sup>

Ojukwu, in a speech to mark Biafra's first anniversary, declared that the Nigerians "believe in nothing but a military solution and would prefer that to peaceful negotiations. Their insincerity about the current talks has been borne out by Nigeria's delaying maneuvers, first during the preliminary talks and now during the full scale negotiations."<sup>14</sup> Ojukwu then ordered Mbafeño to conclude the talks and leave Kampala. On 31 May, the talks concluded without settlement and the Biafrans left Uganda. The

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<sup>13</sup> Cable from Gowon to Enahoro, 28 May, 1968

<sup>14</sup> Markpress Release 30 May 1968, quoting Ojukwu's State of the Nation address.

next day, Radio Biafra announced that the talks were only intended to mask what they called “the Anglo-Nigerian war of total extermination of our people.”<sup>15</sup>

After the collapse of the Kampala talks, the OAU stepped in to attempt to broker some kind of ceasefire that would let negotiations for a final settlement take place. Many in the OAU were desperate for a solution, because the crisis was threatening to split the organization. Not wanting to risk another failure like Kampala, the OAU decided on a second round of talks to be held in Addis Ababa in August 1968, with preliminary talks in Niamey.

The OAU was formed in the aftermath of the Katanga Crisis in the Congo with the aim of preventing a repeat of the western intervention that created and propagated the crisis in the Congo. The Nigerian Civil War served as its first real test and threatened to tear the organization apart, due to the differences between the various members of the fledgling organization. To avoid a repeat of the failure of the Kampala talks, the OAU decided that before the meeting in Addis Ababa, preliminary talks were to be held in Niamey, Niger to formulate an agenda and secure at least an agenda for the talks that were to be mediated by Emperor Haile Selassie, with the consultative committee all in attendance.

Though Gowon initially refused to attend the talks in Niamey and sent Obafemi Awolowo, the highest ranking civilian in the military government, in his stead, the OAU’s mediating committee requested he arrive to discuss several key issues. Gowon agreed, and flew to Niamey, but stated that the Nigerian Government would “prevent any

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<sup>15</sup> Radio Biafra, cited in Africa Research Bulletin, 15 July, 1968.

diplomatic maneuver which will enable the rebel leaders to sustain the rebellion and secession which they have lost on the battlefield.”<sup>16</sup> Gowon’s assertion that Biafran secession had failed was mirrored by the events on the ground. The Federal forces had succeeded in seizing control of all parts of Biafra except the Igbo heartland, most of which was to be designated as the East Central State in Gowon’s twelve state federal structure. In essence, for the Nigerian Government, the task that remained was to quell the rebellion in one of the states, as de facto formation of the new structure was mostly completed.

The committee, however, wished Gowon to discuss two main points. First, the immediate humanitarian crisis required attention, and the OAU was eager to mediate a solution to feed the starving civilian population. Second, the consultative committee wished to mediate a long term solution to the crisis. Though the OAU had stated at the beginning of the conflict that it was at the disposal of Gowon to broker a deal based on One Nigeria, it was even more eager to avoid a split in its ranks, which could threaten the organization’s goal of keeping the conflict and its resolution squarely in a regional setting rather than allowing growing public pressure in Europe and the United States to transfer the crisis and its settlement to a more global setting.

Ojukwu himself was not accorded the same courtesy as Gowon. However, Gowon agreed to allow Ojukwu to travel to Niamey to meet with the consultative committee, if

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<sup>16</sup> "Statement by His Excellency Major-General Gowon to the Resumed Conference of the Oau Consultative Committee in Niamey," ed. Ministry of Information (Lagos 1968).

only to assuage public opinion that both sides of the conflict were being properly consulted. Gowon however made sure to leave Niamey before Ojukwu's arrival and gave strict orders that the entire Nigerian delegation was to be confined to its hotel for the duration of the Biafran leader's visit. Further, the exact text of the committee's declaration was finalized with Gowon's approval even before Ojukwu left Biafra. Though Ojukwu had several powerful friends in the OAU,<sup>17</sup> his government was not recognized as legitimate by the organization, and he was only offered an invitation to attend the talks in Niamey as a way to assuage public opinion and the groundswell of support for Biafra and its people's suffering.

Once Ojukwu arrived on July 18<sup>th</sup>, the Nigerian government ensured that the Biafran leader would speak only to the committee. In his address, Ojukwu conceded that the rebellion had failed militarily, and that he would seek a solution to the conflict.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, Biafran propaganda succeeded in two key aspects of internationalizing the conflict. First and foremost, Biafra's propaganda campaign helped change the attitude of the OAU's Consultative Committee toward the conflict. Rather than simply an assembly that would meet with Gowon, the six members of the committee realized that in order to prevent a fissure in the OAU ranks that could lead to the United Nations taking up the issue the assembly would have to treat Ojukwu's Biafra, if not as a legitimate political actor, at least as a party to the dispute. Second, the issue of relief, either by air or by land,

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<sup>17</sup> He flew from Fernando Po to Niamey in Ivory Coast President Houphouët's private Mystere jet.

<sup>18</sup> Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970*, 190.

was effectively separated from the wider question of solving the conflict. The Nigerian government, cognizant of the outcry over the suffering of the Igbo people, and Gowon under personal pressure from the consultative committee, had no choice but to mediate their demands. Allison Ayida, one of Gowon's top advisors stated "when five heads of state who are patently your friends ask you, how can you refuse?"<sup>19</sup>

With formal talks scheduled to begin in Ethiopia on August 5<sup>th</sup> 1968, the Biafran Foreign Ministry began a media blitz to prepare for the upcoming talks. Ojukwu fully expected Gowon to arrive to the talks, and the Biafran media referred to the talks as the "Addis Ababa Summit". Gowon, on his part repeatedly rejected such a meeting, and presented his position to *West Africa* stating "I cannot enter discussions on equal terms with a man who, even before he became a rebel, was only one of my military governors."<sup>20</sup>

Because the talks in Niamey failed to produce anything but the most rudimentary of schedules for the Addis Ababa round, low level delegations were sent by Nigeria and Biafra to pave the way for higher level talks. Though Ojukwu hoped for the talks to end in a meeting between the two leaders, Gowon made clear that no such meeting would take place. Further, Gowon was adamant that any high level talks regarding the final status of Biafra would only be held once the Biafrans agreed to a One Nigeria solution, a position that the OAU, eager to prevent the balkanization of Nigeria, supported.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>20</sup> "General Gowon Talks to the Editor," *West Africa*, August 24 1968, 971.



Similar to Kampala and Niamey, the Nigerian demand for an end to secession as a precursor to any permanent settlement did not change. The Nigerians did, however, present a proposal that they hoped would counter the Biafran claims of genocide. Anthony Enaharo, the head of the Nigerian delegation presented a nine point proposal which Emperor Selaisse conveyed to the members of the consultative committee. The proposal read:

1. The renunciation of secession by a joint declaration which would proclaim the unity of Nigeria, but would not require the other side to make a unilateral pronouncement of secession.
2. In the view of the federal government such a joint declaration, given agreement in other areas, could be immediately followed by the cessation of hostilities and should be followed by the disarming of the rebel forces.
3. After disarming the rebel forces, the normal policing of rebel held areas should be the responsibility solely of the police, and that the police units in these areas should consist mostly of persons of Ibo origins.
4. Until mutual confidence is restored an external force should be stationed in Iboland composed of forces from Ethiopia, India and Canada and the functions, its composition, numbers, command, financing, and the duration of the force could be negotiated.
5. The military governor and members of his executive council should be Ibos. The Executive Council should be drawn in part from among

persons who supported the rebel cause in proportion to be agreed by negotiations.

6. A general amnesty will be granted in most cases; other claims for amnesty could be examined at the talks.
7. Public servants will be reabsorbed into public employment and that the Ibos as a people will be assured a fair share of employment in federal public services, including Federal Statutory Corporations.
8. Arrangement will be made for a constitutional conference. The composition of such a conference, selection, procedures, etc. could be negotiated.
9. Once there is agreement on the reunification of Nigeria, all routes will be open for rushing relief to the needy areas.<sup>21</sup>

However, because Gowon refused a meeting with Ojukwu, the Biafran delegation responded with a short list of demands that was largely per functionary. The Biafran response essentially delegated any renunciation of secession to future talks and stressed, as before, that “the maintenance of law order in Biafra must be the sole responsibility of the Biafran government.”<sup>22</sup>

The Nigerian proposal demanded an end to secession before any talks regarding a final peace could commence. However, the Nigerian proposal was very similar to the Biafran demands in all but that one point. For the Nigerians, formal renunciation of

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<sup>21</sup> Cable from Selassie to the consultative committee, cited in Stremmlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970*, 203.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

Biafra as an independent state served as a precursor to any and all talks. For the Biafrans however, agreeing to rejoin Nigeria could only happen at the end of the negotiations, as it was the last bargaining chip remaining for Ojukwu's government.

The preliminary talks in Addis Ababa showed not only how wide the gap was between the Nigerian and Biafran sides, but more so, that ultimately, only Ojukwu would make the required decision regarding the end of the war. Nonetheless, without a "summit" between Ojukwu and Gowon, any settlement of the conflict was increasingly a remote possibility. Despite this, Ojukwu sent a high level mission to Addis Ababa led by Professor Eni Njoku; and included Ojukwu's second in command, Philip Efiang, who arrived in Ethiopia after a long and arduous trip.

Efiang's account of his travel to Addis Ababa is especially telling, as it highlights both the lack of power the delegation had, and the dire straits that Biafra found itself in August 1968. Efiang left Biafra on August 12<sup>th</sup>, 1968, but did not arrive in Addis Ababa until August 23<sup>rd</sup>, having been put on the wrong flight out of the airstrip at Uli. Instead of the flight to Sao Tome, which would have connected him to Europe and then to the Ethiopian capital, Efiang arrived in Libreville, Gabon. President Bongo treated the Biafran general as an honored guest. However, Efiang remained in Gabon for more than a week before he could depart to Athens. In his memoirs, Efiang stated that "President Bongo had helped out with some funds; otherwise we would have been stranded at

Athens. As it happened, we were able to pay for our accommodation and await the connecting flight.”<sup>23</sup>

Efiong’s finances were not simply the result of poor planning and a mistaken flight. By July 1968, Biafra was effectively broke, due in no small part to the loss of the oil rich minority areas and the various port cities, most significantly Port Harcourt.<sup>24</sup> The Biafran pound was useless outside of the rebel held areas, and the Nigerian government’s monetary policy made any prewar Nigerian Pounds invalid tender. The Biafran military was in full retreat before the onslaught of the Federal forces, and the massive airlift that eventually stabilized Biafra’s fortunes had not yet begun. Further, Ojukwu’s acknowledgement to the consultative committee in Niamey that the rebellion had failed gave hope that the talks mediated by Haile Selassie would reach a solution to the conflict.

When Efiong finally reached Addis, he arrived for the final preliminary meeting with Emperor Selassie. In a formalized meeting, Selassie urged Efiong’s delegation to accept the OAU’s mediation. Efiong recalled the formality of the meeting and how the emperor was barely audible in his muted address to the delegation, speaking in Amharic through his translator. After learning that Efiong was Ojukwu’s second in command, Selassie broke with protocol, ushered the Biafran general aside and implored him in perfect English, rather than the barely audible Amharic he normally used in formal

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<sup>23</sup> Philip Efiong, *Nigeria and Biafra: My Story* (Princeton, Abuja, Owerri, Lorji: Sungai Books, 2003), 241.

<sup>24</sup> Stremmlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970*, 165.

meetings as Emperor, to convince Ojukwu to accept not only political mediation, but to agree to end the war.

Ultimately, Ojukwu was unwilling to make any concessions without meeting with Gowon. Further, the Biafran delegation was not allowed to make any concessions or declarations without explicit guidance from Ojukwu. Efiog stated that for Ojukwu to agree to Nigeria's terms would require "courage and a sense of diplomatic genius to [...] 'stoop to conquer'". In the event, the Biafran dream vanished in a puff of gun smoke after much suffering and the senseless and almost fateful determination of one man."<sup>25</sup>

With no hope of ending the conflict at Addis Ababa, talks shifted to the third point on the agenda, namely securing relief supplies to the civilian population. By August 1968, the situation in Biafra had become increasingly desperate. The Igbo heartland, which had a long history as a net importer of food was surrounded and cut off from its traditional breadbasket, both from domestic and imported sources.<sup>26</sup> Further exasperating matters, the massacres in Northern Nigeria prompted many Igbo in the rest of the Nigeria to "return" to their ancestral homes, even though many of those people were second and

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<sup>25</sup> Efiog, *Nigeria and Biafra*, 243.

<sup>26</sup> Most of the food staples came to the Igbo heartland from other parts of Nigeria, with much of the vegetable staples coming from the Cross Rivers east and most of the beef supplies coming from Northern Nigeria. However, much food came from abroad, with much of the fish arriving from as far away as Iceland. For a full account of agricultural history to Nigerian independence, see Gerald K. Helleiner, *Peasant Agriculture, Government, and Economic Growth in Nigeria* (Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1966).

third generation descendants in their adopted lands. By some estimates, around one million people fled the violence to the relative safety of the Igbo heartland in 1966.<sup>27</sup> After Port Harcourt fell, the Igbo heartland was effectively surrounded and food became a scarce commodity. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) estimated that at the height of the food scarcity in Biafra, around ten thousand were dying daily, mainly children and the elderly.<sup>28</sup>

Biafran propaganda was very effective in portraying this humanitarian crisis as evidence of a genocidal campaign against the Igbo. Biafra's effective propaganda campaign mobilized global opinion against Nigerian actions, and rallied a plethora of nongovernmental organizations (NGO) to provide relief to the besieged enclave. The global outcry that resulted in the spring and summer of 1968 prompted the OAU consultative committee to reach an agreement regarding the transfer of aid to Biafra. Selassie took an especially active role in mediating the issue of relief for several reasons. First and foremost, the emperor was, according to Stremlaw, "moved by the enormity of human suffering in Biafra, even after allowing for any politically motivated statistical inflation" wished to see relief efforts to the civilian population increased.<sup>29</sup> Second, the issue of genocide had penetrated the international system to such an extent that Selassie

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<sup>27</sup> Murray Last, "Reconciliation and Memory in Postwar Nigeria," in *Violence and Subjectivity*, ed. Veena Das, et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 318.

<sup>28</sup> "Nigeria's Civil War: Hate, Hunger and the Will to Survive," *Time*, August 23 1968.

<sup>29</sup> Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970*, 209.

feared that the conflict would be further internationalized and sought to minimize foreign intervention in Nigeria.

The issue of relief was complicated by the sheer amount of official, quasi-official and independent actors all determined to supply both relief to the Biafran population and arms to the Biafran military. While organizations such as the ICRC worked closely with the Nigerian government and the international community, other organizations like the Catholic Caritas, and the Protestant World Council of Churches organized clandestine relief flights and motivated individuals such as the Israeli Abie Nathan and Carl Gustav Von Rosen of Sweden helped both the airlift and the Biafran military directly.<sup>30</sup>

Ojukwu continued to maneuver to further internationalize the conflict, or failing that, to grant an aid corridor that would be immune from both the Nigerian military and from inspection, thus allowing the Biafran to smuggle arms unabated. Further, any large scale ICRC mission to Biafra would require some kind of protection, or would force a limited ceasefire that would help the Biafrans rearm. Ojukwu was further buoyed by Von Rosen's successful running of the Nigerian air blockade, which opened up the besieged Biafra to what would become the largest private airlift in world history.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Abie Nathan would later become a peace activist, meeting with Yasser Arafat in the 1970s and 80s, and spending time in prison for those acts. He also founded the Peace Ship; a pirate radio station devoted to peace in the Middle East. Nathan also flew missions to Nicaragua and Guatemala after earthquakes left large areas devastated. In 1997 he received the Nuremberg Award for his humanitarian efforts.

<sup>31</sup> Von Rosen flew into Uli on August 13, 1968, flying at treetop level and thus avoiding both Nigerian planes and ground defenses. Most of the pilots on the Nigerian side were

Many western countries came under intense internal pressure to assist the suffering of the civilian population. In the United States, the Johnson administration was deeply concerned with the crisis in Nigeria. In fact, the administration issued almost daily status reports on the peace talks in Addis Ababa, how the humanitarian crisis was unfolding and what different groups were doing to bring aid to the afflicted areas.

Getting the Nigerians and Biafrans to agree on any kind of supply route would prove extremely difficult. The only two ways to supply the offer would be either by road or by air. By road, the Nigerian Government proposed two corridors to supply food to the breakaway republic. The first corridor was to run from Enugu south into rebel held territory. The second corridor was to cross the river Niger at Onitsha and from there continue east into Biafra. The Nigerians wanted the land corridors because that would ensure that all aid originates from Nigerian territory and thus could be inspected for weapons. Also, the Nigerians would refuse any land corridor that was not previously agreed-upon so that these food supplies would reach the civilian population and not the Biafran military.

The Biafrans, on the other hand, were vehemently opposed to any aid originating from Nigerian territory. After all, according to Biafran propaganda, the Nigerians were

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East German and Egyptian; Czech pilots would arrive in September 1968, after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. For a full account of the air aspect of the war, see Michael I. Draper, *Shadows: Airlift and Airwar in Biafra and Nigeria 1967-1970* (Aldershot: Hikoki Publications, 2000). For an excellent analysis of Soviet – Czech relations vis-à-vis the Nigerian Civil War, see S.E. Orobator, "The Nigerian Civil War and the Invasion of Czechoslovakia," *African Affairs* 82, no. 327 (1983).



trying to exterminate all the Igbo and thus would try to poison the aid shipments. The Biafrans wished to continue the relief flights that were now being made extremely difficult due to the antiaircraft fire since the federal forces now controlled all the approaches into Biafra. The Biafrans wished to demilitarize the airstrip outside of the new capital at Umuahia. However, the war was not going well for Biafra and the new capital was now under siege as well. The Nigerians saw this offer as an attempt to stall the federal push towards Umuahia and more importantly, to put international troops on the ground in Biafra, very close to the front lines. Obviously, coming to an agreement would not be easy.

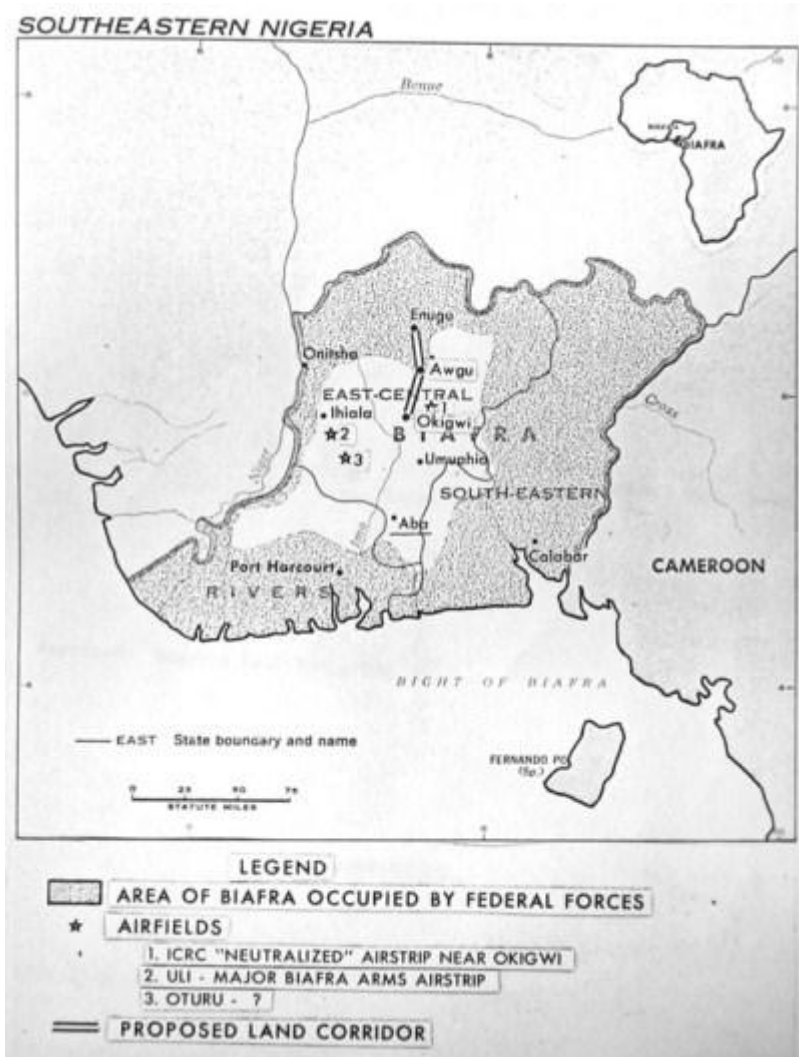


Figure 11: U.S. State Department Map depicting Biafran Airfields and proposed relief corridor.<sup>32</sup>

Having gone thither to Addis Ababa, the nexus of the peace talks revolved around the establishment of a protected corridor to ferry relief supplies to Biafra. For Johnson, this was the moment where the US could exert its influence, not only in the limited

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<sup>32</sup> Nigeria Situation Report, Nigerian Task Force. 19 August 1968; B. 96 D. 94, LBJ Archives

fashion with regards to the conflict, but also in a more expanded role with the international aid organizations, such as the Red Cross. To this effect, the Johnson administration mobilized George Christian and Robert Moore in Geneva to intervene with the ICRC in order to create a consensus on how to establish these corridors. Moore was sent to become part of the very senior four-man committee that included UNICEF Director Henry Labouisse and United Nations special representative Nils Goron Gussing, and headed by the Swiss ambassador to the Soviet Union, Auguste Lindt, which would handle all the aspects of any relief program to Biafra, should any relief efforts be agreed upon.

One of the stickiest points in the peace talks was the opening of the air corridor to Biafra. Though both sides agreed that aid should arrive, the federal government insisted on a land corridor, because an air corridor would leave Biafra open to weapons smuggling. Ojukwu, on the other hand, would not consider any type of aid coming through the Federal government, officially because of fear that any shipment of food from Lagos would be poisoned to kill more Igbo.

Ed Hamilton, in a memo to George Christian regarding the situation at the beginning of the Addis Ababa conference, said

The political situation remains as before. The Nigerians would permit the relief by land, but not call off their anti-aircraft against planes ... The Biafrans will accept help by air, but not by land. The current Red Cross focuses on getting an agreement to establish a Red Cross operated

airstrip in Biafra to receive daytime flights for mercy purposes only.<sup>33</sup>

On the U.S. role, Hamilton was rather sober, saying

The first truth is that the US cannot control the situation without major troop commitments. And we are not thinking in any such terms [...] because of our policy against arms sales or other military aid to either side. We are unloved by both, though not totally without influence with either. In summary, we can only exert marginal insolvency [sic] for peace help with relief if relief is permitted and offer the considerable advantage of our worldwide communications facility to be sure that no stone is left unturned.<sup>34</sup>

Hamilton summed up the situation by saying,

It is clear that the problem is Nigerian and Biafran governments getting in the way of their own people despite the best efforts of the rest of us short of direct interference in the war. Without some minimal agreement from the two sides, which will be excruciatingly difficult for both, no outside force is going to mount a massive relief program necessary to rescue upwards of 4 million people.<sup>35</sup>

Another major concern for the administration was not just helping but making sure the American public was aware of the efforts that the government was making. In an

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<sup>33</sup> Memo from Ed Hamilton, 12 August 1968; B. 96 D. 109, LBJ Archives.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

internal memo, Christian asked "are we getting across what we're doing to help."<sup>36</sup> Christian and Schwartz were so confident of Moore's efforts in Geneva that they decided to make him the voice of the government on this crisis. However, Moore was running into difficulties with the negotiations in Geneva. It became clear that the Biafrans would under no circumstances accept a land corridor subject to the scrutiny of the Federal Military Government and so all efforts now focused on opening an air corridor to arrange for relief flights into the country and hopefully build some level of trust between the warring sides so that future agreements would not be out of the question.

Further complicating matters was the fact that the Red Cross seemed unwilling to work with the Federal Government. The relationship between the ICRC and the FMG was quickly deteriorating and would remain at loggerheads for the rest of the war. Eventually all sides in the Johnson administration, including the president's office and State Department, would agree that the ICRC's proposals were little more than Ojukwu's proposals. Furthermore and possibly more damaging was the fact that the ICRC was alienating the Nigerian Red Cross. Saidu Mohammed, the former national secretary of the Nigerian Red Cross expressed concern over the bad impression building up in the minds of the public against the activities of the ICRC. Thus, the Red Cross and the Nigerian government were on a collision course that would end in violence in 1969.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Memo from Lou Schwartz, 14 August, 1968; B. 96 D. 129, LBJ Archives.

<sup>37</sup> The animosity between Gowon and the ICRC would become increasingly strained over the course of the war and Gowon ordered the Nigerian Air Force to shoot down a Swedish ICRC relief plane in June of 1969. The Swedish target was chosen, perhaps as

Ambassador Lindt was very skeptical from the outset of the Nigerian federal government's desire to reach any agreement. In a memo from Geneva, Moore stated "Lindt foresees possibility that FMG may not reject proposal, but accept it subject to a number of new conditions. If FMG response seems to be only a delaying tactic he will not be patience [sic]. But if it seems serious he is prepared to be patient because he believes FMG Biafran agreement can be highly important psychologically." Lindt continues to say, that should no agreement on an airfield be found, the ICRC would fly food and airfield construction material directly into Biafra without any agreement. Lindt stresses from conversations with Ojukwu that "if FMG Biafran agreement is obtained on neutralized airfield and it works well, agreement on land corridor may become possible."<sup>38</sup>

Gowon soon came to the conclusion that the ICRC was obviously pro-Biafra and that any agreements could not be made. This was not entirely without foundation. During the negotiations for the airstrip, Lindt was in constant contact with Ojukwu and gave Ojukwu several months to come up with the airstrip proposal in Umuahia. On August 15, 1968, Gowon informed the US ambassador in Lagos that the Nigerian Government would not be able to accept the Red Cross's proposal. Gowon gave several reasons for his refusal. First and foremost was the way the negotiations were handled with Ojukwu as compared to with Nigeria. While the Biafrans were given months to present a proposal

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a message to the Swedish Government due to the high profile assistance that Von Rosen was giving Ojukwu in creating the infamous Biafran Minicon air squad.

<sup>38</sup> Telegram from Robert Moore, August 1968; B. 96 D. 112, LBJ Archives

once the proposal was presented to the Nigerian delegation, the Nigerians were expected to give a positive reply within 24 hours. Furthermore, while the Nigerian delegates were considering the proposal, Lindt held a press conference in Geneva publicizing the offer. The Nigerians found this unacceptable because it seemed to be an attempt by the ICRC to present the Nigerian government with an ultimatum or a dictate. Either way, Gowon could not submit to this kind of international pressure and still maintain control domestically.

In a last-ditch effort to secure Nigerian support for the airlift, President Johnson in a rare personal intervention on the subject wrote a private message to Colonel Gowon urging the latter to accept an airlift. In the letter, Johnson says,

Your Excellency, the conscience of the world has been deeply moved by reports of starvation in Nigeria and tons of food are already in position near the most needy areas. The world will not easily understand any failure on the part of those most concerned to agree to effective international humanitarian arrangements to alleviate the suffering. I therefore most earnestly urge you to make it possible for relief supplies to move rapidly into the hands of the needy by facilitating the establishment of this relief corridor on an urgent basis.<sup>39</sup>

On August 17, 1968, the Red Cross decided not to wait for FMG approval of the airstrip in a statement. The ICRC decided upon agreement with the Biafran government to open up relief flights without an agreement with the FMG. The ICRC wished to put more pressure on the Nigerians and in their statement declared, “The ICRC deplors the

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<sup>39</sup> Telegram from George Christian, 14 August, 1968; B. 96 D. 108a, LBJ Archives

fact that the Federal military government has not accepted the solution to the problem of transporting relief supplies quickly to the victims in Biafran held territory. It hopes the Federal military government will revise its decision.”<sup>40</sup>

After the Red Cross decided on this course of action the Nigerian government became increasingly infuriated. US ambassador to Nigeria, Elbert Mathews, placed the onus of the deteriorating relationship between the ICRC and the FMG squarely on the shoulders of Ambassador Lindt. In a State Department memo Mathews lambasted Lindt by saying, “we fear that if Lindt proceeds he has been, FMG may well be placed in position or public opinion will make it impossible to continue cooperation with ICRC.”<sup>41</sup> In a separate memo dated August 16, Mathews realized the precarious situation of the Gowon government. The ambassador stated that Gowon could not accept the ICRC proposal, and even if he could personally be persuaded, the rest of the government would not be brought along “on issue which most Nigerians will consider clear case foreign intervention.” Mathews concluded by saying that “Lindt handled the matter in way to ensure FMG rejection.”<sup>42</sup>

Ultimately, the month of talks in Addis Ababa proved fruitless as the Nigerians and Biafrans could not agree on a ceasefire or any framework for a permanent solution to the war, nor could they agree on a formula for providing aid to the needy in the country. However, the talks helped the Nigerian side deflect international pressure and helped the

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<sup>40</sup> ICRC press release, 17 August, 1968

<sup>41</sup> U.S. State Dept. telegram, 16 August, 1968; B. 96 D. 122, LBJ Archives

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



OAU and the British Government deflect some of the criticism about their lack of intervention in the war. As Gowon later recalled “we were ready to talk as long as the war continued. It was the only way to parry the threat of greater foreign intervention. As long as you talk, people will wait”, and one of his advisors in Ethiopia, Okoi Aripko, echoed the sentiment saying

The peace talks accomplished what we wanted. While they did not influence those who supported the rebels they did a great deal to reassure our friends, particularly the British Labor government which was under great pressure from the Left Wing and public opinion. Our willingness to talk had an important impact because by not insisting on a military solution we spiked much of the criticisms.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, both the strengths and limitations of such a heavy handed propaganda campaign became painfully to the Biafrans. While the language of genocide did push many in the OAU, the Commonwealth and in the United States to agitate for a settlement and a program of relief to the war ravaged Igbo, the same propaganda emboldened Ojukwu to take a most rather inflexible position. Further, his demand for a meeting with Gowon as a precursor served only to make his position seem that much more unreasonable. Ojukwu would later say “if Gowon had gone to Addis, I would have been able to force him to sign a cease-fire in Africa Hall in front of the Emperor.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970*, 214.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

Biafran propaganda was most effective around the world in the spring and summer of 1968. The global outcry against what was being effectively marketed as genocide against the Igbo people forced Western governments to answer to the intense public pressure put on them. That a catastrophic humanitarian catastrophe was unfolding in Eastern Nigeria was without doubt, and the fact that Biafran propaganda equated the suffering of the Igbo with that of the Jews during the Holocaust created a sense of urgency and put increasing pressure on the Nigerian government to either end the war, or at the very least, allow relief supplies to into Biafra.

Though the Nigerian government never strayed from its insistence on reunification, and conditioned any meaningful negotiations to end the war on the immediate renunciation of secession, Gowon's government did make several important concessions. Most importantly, the Nigerians agreed that any final status would be negotiated at a later date. Also, the issue of aid to the famine stricken areas was given priority in the talks. Gowon was personally concerned with the starvation in the secessionist east, and at times was criticized for being "too soft" by several of his top military commanders.

However, Nigeria was not immune to the international criticism. As the protests against the war in the United States, France and especially Britain threatened Nigeria's relations. In France after the failure of the Addis Ababa talks, De Gaulle shifted his position and openly supported Biafra, becoming the major supplier of arms to Ojukwu. In Britain, Nigeria's most important ally, the Harold Wilson government came under increasing public pressure to withdraw support for the Nigerians, which he never did. As

Gowon stated, Nigeria's shifting of its hardline stance helped Wilson deflect some of the criticism about his staunch support of the Gowon government.

For Biafra, the peace talks served as a forum to with three main goals. First and foremost, Ojukwu felt that had he met with Gowon, the war could have been brought to an end. In the buildup to the talks in Ethiopia, Ojukwu placed such primacy on the "summit" aspect, it became virtually impossible for him to agree to any end to the conflict without a meeting with Gowon. Second, the Biafrans used the global forum to attempt to internationalize the conflict, even if informally by trying to establish an aid corridor and bridgehead. Establishing any kind of formal foreign presence would have done much to ease Biafra's isolation and suffering.<sup>45</sup>

The entire process of peace talks from Kampala to Addis Ababa showed both the influence of Biafran propaganda in getting the sides to talk and to compromise, but also the limitations in relying on propaganda as a weapon of war. Though Biafra's global initiative succeeded in putting intense pressure on the Nigerian Government and its allies, eventually bringing the Nigerians to the negotiating table with more flexible demands that could have ended the war, enhanced Ojukwu's standing in any final agreement and cemented the OAU's standing as a regional organization, in the end, the global outcry, supported by the ICRC's insistence to aid Biafra regardless of a deal, embolden Ojukwu to take a harder stance and ruined any chance of a deal, despite Ojukwu's humble speech in Niamey. Instead of a ceasefire deal that would have ended the war and paved the way

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

to negotiations for a final settlement, Biafra remained under siege for seventeen more months.

### **BIAFRA'S FIRST COLLAPSE: MAY – NOVEMBER 1968**

The series of peace talks in 1968 coincided with a disastrous military campaign for the Biafrans. If the Biafrans were winning the war in the press, the Nigerians were winning the war on the battlefield, though much slower than the Nigerian people and press had hoped. Though the Federal forces secured most of the ports in Biafra and the border with Cameroon by March 1968, the Biafrans put up stiff resistance, especially on Murtala Mohammed's 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, which only succeeded in capturing Onitsha on the 3<sup>rd</sup> attempt and afterwards became largely an occupation force and could not break through the resistance that the Biafrans put up.

By 4 April 1968, the 1<sup>st</sup> Division in the north of Biafra had captured Abakaliki, setting the stage of a push into the Igbo heartland, which culminated in the capture of Awgu a month later. Three months of bitter fighting followed, during which the 1<sup>st</sup> Division captured the airstrip at Obilagu and the town of Okigwi in late September.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Division finally succeeded in its assault over the Niger and took Onitsha on 23 March 1968, but by then morale had deteriorated to such a point that Col. Murtala Mohammed and his successors could not form a cohesive fighting unit out of the division. In one spectacular incident at the end of March, a supply convoy of 100 vehicles was destroyed by a Biafran commando raid with much of the convoy captured intact and

its contents added to the Biafran army.<sup>46</sup> This failure to link the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Divisions essentially destroyed the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division's capability as a fighting force. Though the Division withstood several Biafran attempts to retake Onitsha, it would not factor in any offensive capacity for the remainder of the war.

Though Gowon wanted the peace talks to succeed, he also wanted to put as much pressure as possible on Ojukwu to acquiesce to laying down his arms and renouncing secession. By keeping up the military pressure, Gowon hoped Ojukwu would respond to the hopelessness of secession and agree to end the war. Several factors gave the Biafrans some respite during their first collapse and the Biafrans ultimately did not agree to enter into any kind of ceasefire or renounce secession. In fact, Ojukwu never articulated any clear strategy for ending the war short of achieving secession either in public or to his direct subordinates. Neither Efiang, Akpen or Madiebo mentioned any discussion of the sort except Efiang, and only when Ojukwu fled Biafra in January 1970.

After the initial successes that culminated in the capture of Port Harcourt, the Nigerian Army largely faltered during the ensuing advance. Despite capturing Owerri and Aba, the Nigerians were unable to take the new capital in Umuahia, either from the North or the south. In fact, Adekunle's reckless assault on Umuahia, discussed in detail later in this chapter, led to the near collapse of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commando Division and to his dismissal

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<sup>46</sup> This convoy raid was reported in several outlets, both during and after the war. The exact number of vehicles in the convoy has been disputed, with Momoh stating the number at 96, and Stremlau placing the figure at "over 100". Regardless of the exact number of vehicles involved, this was a substantial supply convoy with food fuel and ammunition that was spectacularly destroyed.

as Division commander. In the wake of his failed assault, the Biafrans succeeded in mounting a counterassault that culminated in both the recapture of Owerri in May 1969, and a failed attempt at retaking Onitsha in November 1968.

One of the mercenary commanders, Rolf Steiner was the commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> Commando battalion, a battalion skilled in the hit and run tactics that were becoming ever more popular among Biafran forces increasingly pressured and ill equipped. At the end of November 1968, Ojukwu ordered Steiner to plan a frontal assault on Onitsha using his forces. Codenamed Operation “Hiroshima”, Steiner’s troops were massacred because his troops were untrained in a frontal assault against fortified positions with little air and artillery support. Steiner went back to Ojukwu, enraged that half his men were killed and accused the Biafran president of murdering his men and slapped Ojukwu. Rather than kill Steiner, Ojukwu sent him out of the country the next day saying “it cuts across everything we believe here, to find our struggle for survival led by white mercenaries.”<sup>47</sup>

Despite the very public renunciation of the mercenaries, it was another European, Von Rosen, who successfully broke the Nigerian aerial blockade on Biafra on 19 August 1968 when he successfully flew his Constellation plane at tree level and landed at the Biafran airstrip at Uli. Von Rosen’s flight ushered in the airlift, which would supply the besieged country until its collapse in January 1970.

Closely related to the airlift, French President Charles De Gaulle openly declared his support for Biafran secession. Though he stopped short of recognizing the country,

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<sup>47</sup> Zdenek Červenka, *The Nigerian War, 1967-1970. History of the War; Selected Bibliography and Documents*. (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard & Graefe, 1971), 68.

the French Red Cross assisted the government in supplying much of the material support needed to continue to wage war.<sup>48</sup> Though the ICRC only ferried civilian relief supplies, the French Red Cross, along with Caritas and other private organizations, was a major carrier of the arms smuggling that Gowon feared would allow the Biafrans to continue their fight.

Despite all indications that Ojukwu would agree to halt hostilities and negotiate a return of Biafra to Nigeria the softening of Nigeria's stance, along with the increased global involvement in the conflict, due in no small part to the effect of Biafran propaganda on world opinion, allowed Ojukwu to harden his position. Rather than agree to end the war, the diplomatic recognition, French support, the increase in arms supply, coupled with the successes on the battlefield convinced the Biafran leader that continuing the war would lead to more tangible results. However, no clear plan to ending the war was ever articulated, and even after the relatively modest military gains that ended in May 1969, the Biafrans never used the semblance of resistance as leverage toward ending the war. Despite the military gains, the Biafrans never regained enough to make secession a viable option.

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<sup>48</sup> Draper, *Shadows*.

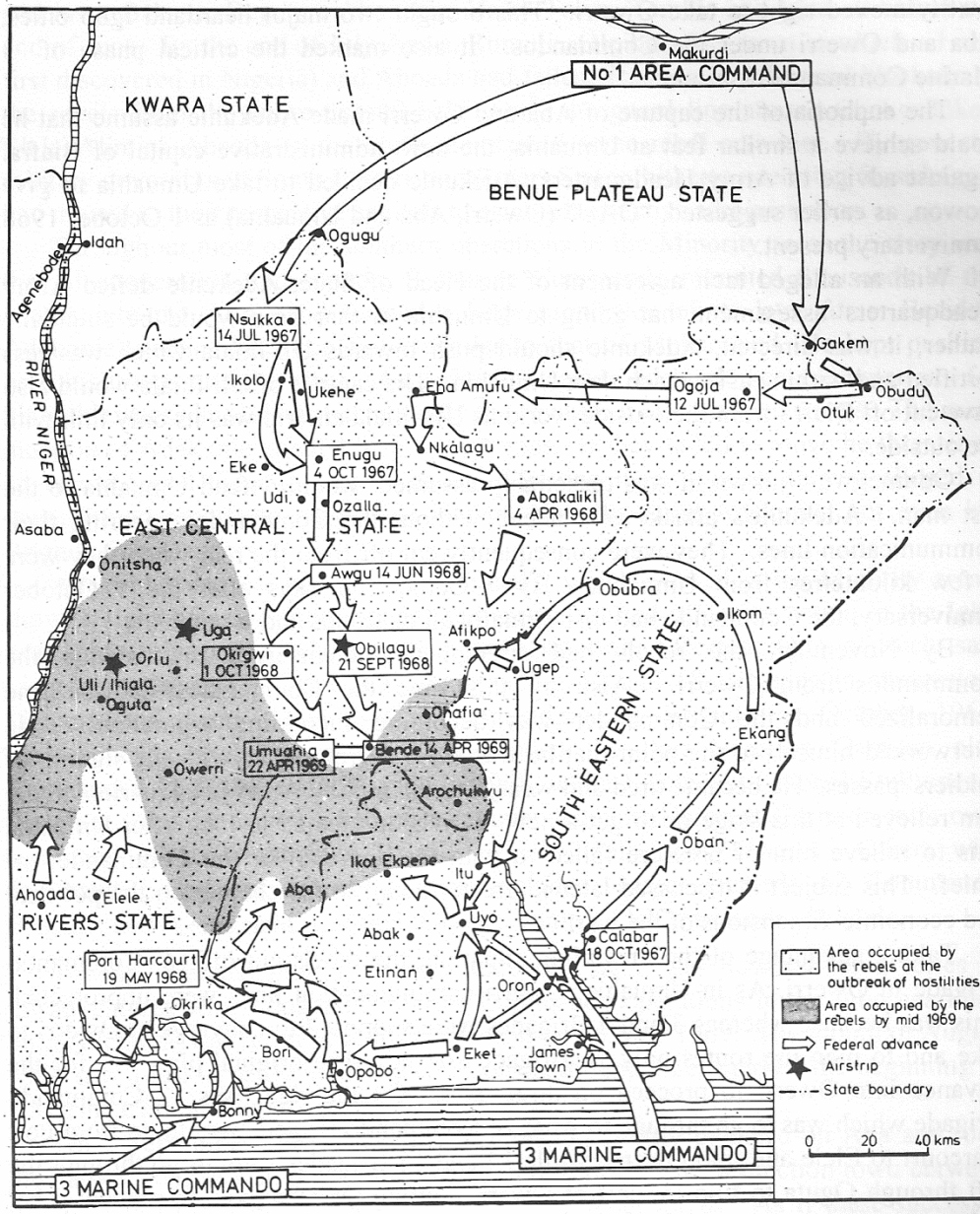


Figure 12: Map showing Federal advances on Biafra until the capture of Umuahia in April 1969<sup>49</sup>

<sup>49</sup> H.B. Momoh, *The Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970: History and Reminiscences* (Ibadan: Sam Bookman Publishers, 2000), 106.



### CONTINUATION OF PROPAGANDA

During the military collapse, Biafran propaganda worked to stabilize the war torn country and elicit support from abroad in defending the Biafrans, now almost exclusively Igbo, against what they termed a genocidal war led by a Hausa-Fulani elite dedicated to their destruction. While the Biafrans no longer put the religious aspect of the war at the forefront, either at home or abroad, Catholic and Protestant Christian charities were at the forefront of the airlift and the aid supplies to Biafra. Though the French took the lead in supplying the arms to Biafra, mainly through Gabon and the Ivory Coast, most of the pilots were not only English speakers, but from South Africa and Rhodesia. One Rhodesian pilot told *Time Magazine* about his motives for flying into Biafra, saying “that Harold Wilson is a bastard. He's against Biafra and he's bugging us too. This is a chance to bugger him.”<sup>50</sup> Clearly, British support, so maligned by the Biafran side and publicized as abetting the genocidal Nigerian campaign, was having the desired effect.

One of Biafra's major image problems was the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in the county. Ever since the massacres of 1966 and the mass exodus that came in its wake, the centerpiece of Biafran propaganda had been the issue of genocide. By focusing on the very real fears of annihilation, the Biafran government kept the Biafran population willing to fight, starve and die for the cause. Despite the success of the imagery of starving children, and the painting of the war as a new genocide, as the war dragged on, many commentators abroad came to the conclusion that the only way to

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<sup>50</sup> "Keeping Biafra Alive," *Time Magazine*, 6 December 1968.

alleviate the starvation was to end the war, or at the very least agree to a ceasefire. As *Time Magazine* reported in its 23 August 1968 issue, “they are not only losing the war: slowly but surely, eight million Biafrans are starving to death. Gradually, the image of Biafra's human agony has unsettled the conscience of the world.”<sup>51</sup>

#### **LAND ARMY**

As the military situation stabilized at the end of 1968, the Biafrans made several inroads and as 1969 began, the Nigerian advance that seemed destined to end the war had stalled. Now that the war had settled into another stalemate, the need to feed the population and deflect criticism led to the creation of the Land Army Program. The program, envisioned as a sort of agricultural sharing program between the farmers and the Biafran government, served three important purposes. First and foremost, the Land Army actively engaged the shortage in food in a way that was never practiced before. The Land Army officials cooperated with the farming communities and encouraged food production that would benefit both the local communities and the Biafran military. Ojukwu commissioned a quasi-military force made up of youths and those unfit for military service. The land army was tasked with preparing land for cultivation. The stated objective was for each village to be allocated around 100 acres of land, which was cleared by the Land Army. Farmers would grow crops on that land, while being protected by the Biafran military. The Biafran state would then get half of the harvest for redistribution to the military and the starving in other parts of the country.

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<sup>51</sup> "Nigeria's Civil War: Hate, Hunger and the Will to Survive."

Second, the Land Army played an important role in the internal propaganda mechanism. Though the Biafran government had many difficulties in explaining their plan to the people, Ojukwu lauded the program as one of the important first steps in his “Biafran Revolution that he articulated in the Ahiara declaration on Biafra’s second Independence Day. In his speech, he lauded the Land Army’s efforts boasting that

We seem to have overcome the once imminent danger of mass starvation and can now look forward to a period after the rains of comparative plenty. Our efforts in the Land Army programme give visible signs all over our land of imminent victory in the war against want.<sup>52</sup>

Ojukwu went even further, stating that the Land Army would be the basis of agrarian reform and the creation of individualistic communes that resemble a mix of Jeffersonian yeoman ideals and the communal spirit that embodied the kibbutz project in Israel. The Land Army served not only as an emergency food production system in war, but also would serve to germinate a postwar system that would

Achieve balanced development between industry and agriculture, between regions or provinces within Biafra, between town and country and finally between Biafra and other African countries who desire to do business with us.<sup>53</sup>

However, the Land Army program never deeply penetrated the Biafran consciousness. The report “What Biafrans Know about the Nigeria/Biafra War” showed

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<sup>52</sup> Ahiara declaration

<sup>53</sup> Ahiara declaration

that the program suffered from a severe lack of knowledge about the project and were especially suspicious about it.

Lastly, the Land Army Program served to show the world that despite the setbacks and the genocidal campaign against them, the Biafrans were able to feed themselves and were indeed a viable nation, despite the collapse of their military in mid-1968. Many commentators agreed that the war in Biafra was hopeless; the only way to end the civilian suffering was to end secession and surrender. Harvard University's newspaper, *The Harvard Crimson*, took an especially deep interest in the famine, due in no small part to Jean Meyer, a Harvard nutrition professor, being included in a special diplomatic mission to Biafra and Nigeria led by New York Senator Charles E. Goodell in February 1969.

The mission examined many aspects of public health, nutrition, and even explored Biafran claims that the Nigerians were deliberately poisoning the food supply. For example, the mission took 1487 samples of salt, stating that the samples taken "could not have been 'fixed' by the Biafrans." According to the mission, salt was taken because it was the primary commodity being smuggled across the lines to reach the civilian population in Biafra. All of the samples were given to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), who found that 20 of the samples contained arsenic and 50 had traces of cyanide.<sup>54</sup> Despite the toxic findings, a summary of the original Biafra Mission report published several months later in *Clinical Pediatrics* by Roy Brown, an Associate

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<sup>54</sup> Jeffrey D. Blum, "Who Cares About Biafra Anyway?," *Harvard Crimson*, February 25 1969.

Professor of Preventive Medicine at Tufts University and also a member of the Biafra Mission, made no mention of any deliberate poisoning of the population by the Nigerian military. Brown's article, however, emphasized the nature of the bombing campaign against Biafra, stating in one instance "hospitals were no longer designated by large Red Cross signs since these not only provided no protection, but seemed specifically attacked from the air."<sup>55</sup>

Just as Johnson's administration was unable to mediate any agreement at Addis Ababa, Nixon could not take any concrete steps to aid the Biafran population. In both cases, any large scale involvement would either require a ceasefire, or at the very least a demilitarized zone. The report did however make special mention of the Land Army and recommended supplying it with tools and seeds to help feed the starving population.

Ultimately, the Land Army did not significantly increase Biafra's food supply for any extended period. Though Biafra's propaganda arm portrayed the program as one step toward alleviating the besieged nation's suffering, many Biafrans either did not know about the plan or were unwilling to cooperate with it because they were not properly informed about its aims. Abroad, however, the plan was much better received abroad, as the Goodell mission saw in the Land Army a significant way to improve access to food. More importantly, the program was designed to sell, both at home and abroad, that despite the starvation and war, the Biafrans were determined to both fight the enemy and feed their own people.

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<sup>55</sup> Roy E. Brown, "Mission to Biafra (January 1969) : A Study and Survey of a Population under Stress," *Clinical Pediatrics* 8, no. 6 (1969).

Though the Land Army was effective in a limited way in showing that the Biafrans were capable of beginning to feed their people despite the hardships and privations of war, the specter of genocide was simply too great to be successfully countered by a mere agricultural program. In a way, Biafran propaganda, which portrayed the Civil War as a war of extermination, was simply too effective and even its own progenitors could do little to put the genie of starvation and genocide into its bottle.

#### **OBASANJO AND THE END OF THE WAR**

Biafra's unexpected resurgence caught many in the Nigerian military by surprise. Thanks to the largest airlift since the Berlin Blockade, and the help of French arms, the Biafran military stabilized the warfront by November 1968. In fact the three Nigerian divisions made little headway for over six months between October 1968 and April 1969. The 1<sup>st</sup> Division, which had captured Enugu in October 1967, did not advance south for nearly a year before taking Awgu in June 1968 and the airstrip at Obilagu in September. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, headed by Murtala Mohammed remained in Onitsha for much of the war, after failing to link with the 1<sup>st</sup> Division in Enugu.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Commando Division, led by Benjamin Adekunle, captured Port Harcourt on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1968 and made little headway into the Igbo heartland, going as far as Aba on September 4<sup>th</sup>, 1968.<sup>56</sup> Though Adekunle attempted several times in 1968 to

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<sup>56</sup> Though originally simply called the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, Adekunle felt that because he was in charge of securing the coastal regions, his division should be called the Marine unit.

capture the Biafran capital at Umuahia, poor planning, lack of supplies and Adekunle's reputation for barbarity took a toll on Nigerian morale. H.B. Momoh, in his volume The Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970: History and Reminiscences, stated that "the mere mention of Adekunle elicited fear in the troops. If they failed to move he threatened he would 'send them to Lagos' meaning getting them shot as he was alleged in unconfirmed reports to have done in fact."<sup>57</sup>

In his recklessness, Adekunle nearly destroyed the entire 3<sup>rd</sup> Division in October 1968. In his zeal to end the war, he ordered a broad assault from the south of Biafran positions, codenamed Operation Leopard. Wishing to give Gowon his own "OAU" gift, Adekunle endeavored to capture Aba and Owerri, two of the three major urban centers still under Biafran control.<sup>58</sup> After the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division captured Aba and Owerri in September, Adekunle's decided to continue to Umuahia (the U of the OAU gift), despite Army headquarters' opinion that such a move would be "suicidal", proved to be just that.<sup>59</sup> Adekunle's division lost 5 brigades and had just one defending Owerri, which was now surrounded and could not be resupplied. By May 1969, after five months of siege, a demoralized and outmanned 16<sup>th</sup> Brigade retreated from Owerri, leaving it to the Biafrans.

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Further, he felt that adding the word "commando" to the division's name would create a sense of fear and respect from the enemy.

<sup>57</sup>Momoh, *The Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970: History and Reminiscences*, 104.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>59</sup> Olusegun Obasanjo, *My Command: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War 1967-70* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1980), 80.

While the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division collapsed, the 1<sup>st</sup> Division finally succeeded in breaking the stalemate in the north of Biafra. Though Murtala Mohammed's 2<sup>nd</sup> Division captured Onitsha on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1968, all attempts to link to the 1<sup>st</sup> Division ended in catastrophe, most spectacularly with the destruction of a major supply convoy on the Onitsha – Awka road.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, the 1<sup>st</sup> Division was stalemated for over six months after capturing the airfield at Obilagu. However, at the end of March 1969, Mohammed Shuwa, the cautious commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> division set out to accomplish what the reckless Adekunle had tried six months before – to capture Umuahia. Proceeding cautiously, it took the 5 battalions involved in the capture of the city nearly a month to reach the city. On April 22<sup>nd</sup>, the Nigerian army entered the city. Major (later General) Mamman Jiya Vatsa, the commander of the operation, summed up the action thus:

At 1500 hours, 22<sup>nd</sup> April, 1969, the troops entered the town. It was a ghost town. Umuahia was liberated. Unlike in Enugu, the rebels had refused to defend the town within. Seventy-seven people stayed behind. They had concentrated themselves mainly around the Police Station, expecting their end, for 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. That was the type of war we were fighting – family war.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> On March 23th, 1968 a major supply convoy of over 100 vehicles attempted to reach the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division on the road, and was attacked by a Biafran force. The Biafrans destroyed a fuel tanker that was close to several trucks carrying ammunition. The ensuing chain reaction destroyed the entire convoy within minutes.

<sup>61</sup> Momoh, *The Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970: History and Reminiscences*, 905.



Adekunle was finally relieved of command on May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1969 after overseeing the near complete destruction of his division. Though Adekunle was relieved for his ineptitude, it was his brutality that helped Biafran propaganda instill the fear of genocide. Eyewitness accounts of massacres of captive Igbo, Adekunle's statements to the media, both foreign and domestic, coupled with his eccentric and unpredictable behavior toward his own troops created a sense of dread among the civilian population, especially the Igbo. His actions, together with his reckless tactics also effectively destroyed the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division as any kind of effective fighting force.<sup>62</sup>

Many in the Nigerian Command criticized Gowon's decision to leave Adekunle in command until May 1969. Joseph Garba, in his work Revolution in Nigeria: Another View, chronicled the tension that existed in the command structure in the Nigerian Military even before the war. According to Garba, the Nigerian field commanders found Gowon and the headquarters in Lagos as out of touch with the war on the ground. Further, Momoh stated repeatedly that Gowon was unwilling or unable to intervene to "check the excesses of the field commanders until they had become thoroughly discredited."<sup>63</sup>

When Obasanjo finally took command of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Commando Division, he inherited a unit on the brink of collapse. In a directive issued a week before he took command, the divisional command stated its top priority to stabilize the front,

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<sup>62</sup> Interview with Ekwere Peters

<sup>63</sup> Momoh, *The Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970: History and Reminiscences*, 173.

anticipating a Biafran offensive to retake Port Harcourt.<sup>64</sup> Von Rosen's Minicon raids, the massive airlift, Adekunle's catastrophic offensive and French arms buoyed the Biafrans, both militarily and in spirits. Obasanjo's first priority, then, was to restore the morale of his troops. Returning the men to a semblance of a fighting force "would produce officers and men imbued with loyalty [and] create harmony between the military and the civilians." Creating such a harmony was instrumental in countering the image, encouraged by Adekunle, that the Nigerian military was a bloodthirsty, genocidal army. For Obasanjo, then creating a trust between the military and the population was instrumental, not only to counter the Biafran will, but because if he had the trust of the population, "success in my operational tasks – my second priority – would be assured."<sup>65</sup>

Creating internal discipline is instrumental in any wartime situation, and is the first step toward establishing a relationship with the civilian population. One of Obasanjo's first directives toward the troops was to clamp down on looting. While not accusing his troops of looting, he forbade the purchase of "attractive and durable articles" that were usually sent from the war theater to the soldiers' homes.<sup>66</sup>

To the north of Biafran positions, the 1<sup>st</sup> Division was finally able to connect with the 2<sup>nd</sup> in Onitsha in June 1969, and Murtala Mohammed was replaced by Colonel I.B. Mohammed Haruna. However, Haruna was unsuccessful in reorganizing the division in the same way that Obasanjo stabilized the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division and was quickly replaced once

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<sup>64</sup> Obasanjo, *My Command: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War 1967-70*, 69.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

again by Lt. Col. Gibson Jalo, who relocated the division to the Midwest, where it served until the end of the war.

After stabilizing the front, Obasanjo organized the division in preparation to link up with the 1<sup>st</sup> Division in Umuahia. Called Operation “Finishing Touch”, the objective was to break the back of the Biafran military and link up the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Divisions in Umuahia. The operation commenced in October, and despite several initial setbacks, by the end of October, the Nigerians had regained much of the ground they lost since the counterattack that saw the Biafrans recapture Owerri. The second step of the operation, which ended on Christmas day with the linkup of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> divisions in Umuahia, essentially split the remaining Biafran territory in two. The eastern enclave, centered in Arochukwu, was quickly overrun by two brigades from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. Having thus broken much of the Biafran army, the stage was set for Operation “Tailwind”, which started in January, and proved to be the final operation of the war.

Biafrans held hope that in the air their fortunes would be kept alive. In May 1969 Von Rosen arrived in Biafra with 5 Malmö Flygindustri MFI-9 aircraft, followed by four more in July. After attaching rocket launchers to the wings of the single prop trainer aircraft, the MiniCOIN (Miniature Counter-Insurrection) squadron was born, though it was widely known during the war as the Biafran Babies, or more popularly as Minicons.<sup>67</sup> The Biafrans had purchased several T-6 Texan trainers early in the war, but they were abandoned in Lisbon, but several of them finally arrived in 1969, bolstering the

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<sup>67</sup> The squadron was known in the press as the Biafran Babies, or also as Minicon, which was presumably a corruption or misprint of original intended name: MiniCOIN.

Biafran Air Force even more. Further, Von Rosen created a training facility in Gabon and trained several pilots for combat missions. The air raids proved very effective and destroyed fuel silos, raided the Nigerian Air Force Base in Benin City and provided support for the ground forces. However, despite their ingenuity, the Minicons and Texans could stall, but not halt, the Federal advances.

June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1969 signaled the beginning of the end for Biafran military success and the beginning of the military's final collapse. The animosity between the FMG and the ICRC turned to violence when the Nigerian Air Force shot down a Red Cross plane piloted by a Swedish crew. The Nigerian government targeted the Red Cross plane for several reasons. Several organizations were ferrying humanitarian aid and military supplies into Biafra. However, most of the private organizations, such as Caritas and the Join Church Aid kept their flight records secret, but the ICRC, as a quasi official organization, was transparent with their flights and cargo. As such, the ICRC immediately reported the event and halted all flights into Biafra; the rest of the aid organizations quickly followed suit, temporarily halting the relief and supply flights into Biafra. Further, the fact that the downed flight comprised a Swedish crew was seen by several commentators as a veiled notice to the Swedish government, as Von Rosen's active help to Biafra was well publicized.<sup>68</sup>

For the Nigerians, equally important was to counter Biafran propaganda and break the will of the Biafran people to continue the war. Ojukwu went to great lengths to ensure that the war would continue despite the collapse of the military. To counter the Federal

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<sup>68</sup> Draper, *Shadows*.

offensive Ojukwu created a new force called the Biafran Organization of Freedom Fighters (BOFF). Based on the fighting tactics of the Vietcong, Ojukwu hoped to transform the conflict into one of hit and run tactics and to continue fighting indefinitely.<sup>69</sup>

Even though BOFF helped the Biafran war effort, the population's will to fight was evaporating. The most visible sign of the country's dire straits happened on August 17<sup>th</sup>, 1969 when former Nigerian President, the Igbo elder statesman Nnamde Azikiwe arrived in Lagos and met with Gowon, rather unexpectedly. Reportedly, none in Nigeria or Biafra knew of Azikiwe's move until he arrived. The move was met with shock, both in Biafra and Nigeria, and in Biafra the shock turned to rage when on August 28<sup>th</sup> Zik, as he was popularly known, formally announced that he no longer supported Biafran secession. Further, the Associated Press reported a press conference he held on the 28<sup>th</sup>, saying "he termed Biafran charges that Nigeria seeks to exterminate the Igbos a 'cock and bull fairy tale', and said that the fighting could end 'if those who rule Biafra would forget about their puny selves'."<sup>70</sup>

Azikiwe expanded on his defection by saying

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<sup>69</sup> Many of the mercenaries that fought in Biafra also fought in the French Foreign Legion in Indochina and some of them, such as Maurice Lucien-Brun and Rolf Steiner, realized early in the war that guerilla tactics would be more effective against the formal military tactics that the Nigerians used.

<sup>70</sup> Associated Press, August 23 1969, cited in Luke Nnaemeka Aneke, *The Untold Story of the Nigeria-Biafra War* (New York: Triumph Publishing, 2007), 539.

Knowing that the accusation of genocide is palpably false, but bearing in mind the widespread killing of 1966, which must always hunt 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?<sup>71</sup>

For many in Biafra saw the fact that the Igbo elder statesman, who wrote the Biafran national anthem, had so publicly abandoned the cause as a serious blow. Biafran propaganda seized on the issue, calling Azikiwe a traitor. The *New York Times* commented on the Biafran reaction to Azikiwe's change in position citing a mixture of outrage, shock and bewilderment. Further, the paper reported on Biafra's accusations against Azikiwe that he was in cahoots with the British oil industry and "he always ends a crisis by sacrificing the people's interests once he has found a personal accommodation."<sup>72</sup>

Zik's defection was emblematic of the dire straits that the Biafrans found themselves militarily and Biafran propaganda tried to offset the increasing desperation that Nigeria's advance was inflicting on the civilian population. Though the Biafrans were able to stall the Nigerian final offensive, several signs that the Biafran side was close to collapse became increasingly apparent. First and foremost, military morale and

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<sup>71</sup> Anthony Hamilton Millard Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: A Documentary Sourcebook*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

<sup>72</sup> Eric Pace, "Biafrans Shocked at Azikiwe's Views," *New York Times*, September 1 1969.

with it the very command and control structure that kept the Biafran army intact was beginning to collapse.

One of the major signs of the deterioration of Biafran morale and command was the emergence of the “spiritual churches”. According to Efiog and Ben Gbulie, these churches came to prominence as a direct result of the collapse in Biafran morale. These churches guaranteed the besieged Biafran soldiers and officers that by deferring to the church leaders, they would all survive the war. Though this caused a breakdown in the command structure and sapped the Biafran soldiers will to fight, Efiog recalled that “in the long run, this ‘spiritual’ surrender may have helped to save a lot of lives, since the advancing Nigerian troops did not have to fight to capture every inch of the land.”<sup>73</sup>

The privations that the civilian population endured caused several desperate acts on the part of the civilians. In one case near Aba,<sup>74</sup> residents of a village killed and cannibalized several Biafran soldiers. Ojukwu immediately ordered the village razed, removed the local chief and installed Ben Gbulie as military governor of the area.<sup>75</sup>

Naturally, the propaganda directorate attempted to counter the collapsing morale. However, by this point both the military situation had deteriorated to the point where any attempt to counter it became increasingly futile. Biafrans verbal assaults on Azikiwe,

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<sup>73</sup> Efiog, *Nigeria and Biafra*, 281.

<sup>74</sup> Though the city of Aba had been in Nigerian hands for almost a year, the Federal military was not able to advance north of the city until Operation “Finishing Touch” began.

<sup>75</sup> Efiog, *Nigeria and Biafra*, 280. Gbulie, like Nzeogwu, was one of the leaders of the January 1966 coup.

explained in detail in chapter 3, amounted to little more than rage and name calling. Furthermore, the propagandists' attempts to help the war effort largely backfired, because there was little hope convincing the population that all was not lost. In one instance, detailed in Chapter 3, the appraisals committee rebuked Radio Biafra for attempting to foment an uprising in the areas held by the Nigerian army. Though they no doubt wished to see such an uprising, the radio broadcasts emphasized the depravity of the enemy and the suffering of the Biafrans living under such ruthlessness. However, the appraisals committee was well aware that, toward the end of the war, the excesses that Adekunle encouraged were not tolerated by Obasanjo. Thus, the Appraisals Committee criticized the propaganda writers for undermining their own message without understanding the situation in Federal held territories.

On January 7<sup>th</sup> 1970, Operation "Tailwind" commenced. Two days later, the Federal forces recaptured Owerri, the last major urban center still in Biafran hands. On the 10<sup>th</sup>, Ojukwu held his final meeting with his cabinet where he revealed his intention to flee the country. That night, at 2am, Ojukwu departed From Uli on one of the Constellation aircraft donated to the Biafrans by Lyndon Johnson. The scene at Uli was chaotic as the airfield was besieged by Biafran officials and their families, all desperate to leave. Ekerette Urua Akpan, Ojukwu's chief secretary, described the scene saying "the news of the number of people who had left the previous night [...] had gone round, and people who could make it had traveled to the airstrip to leave or at least send their



families, if they could.”<sup>76</sup> Shortly after 2am on the night between January 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>, the aircraft departed with Ojukwu, Akpan and Biafran Army chief Alexander Madiebo.<sup>77</sup>

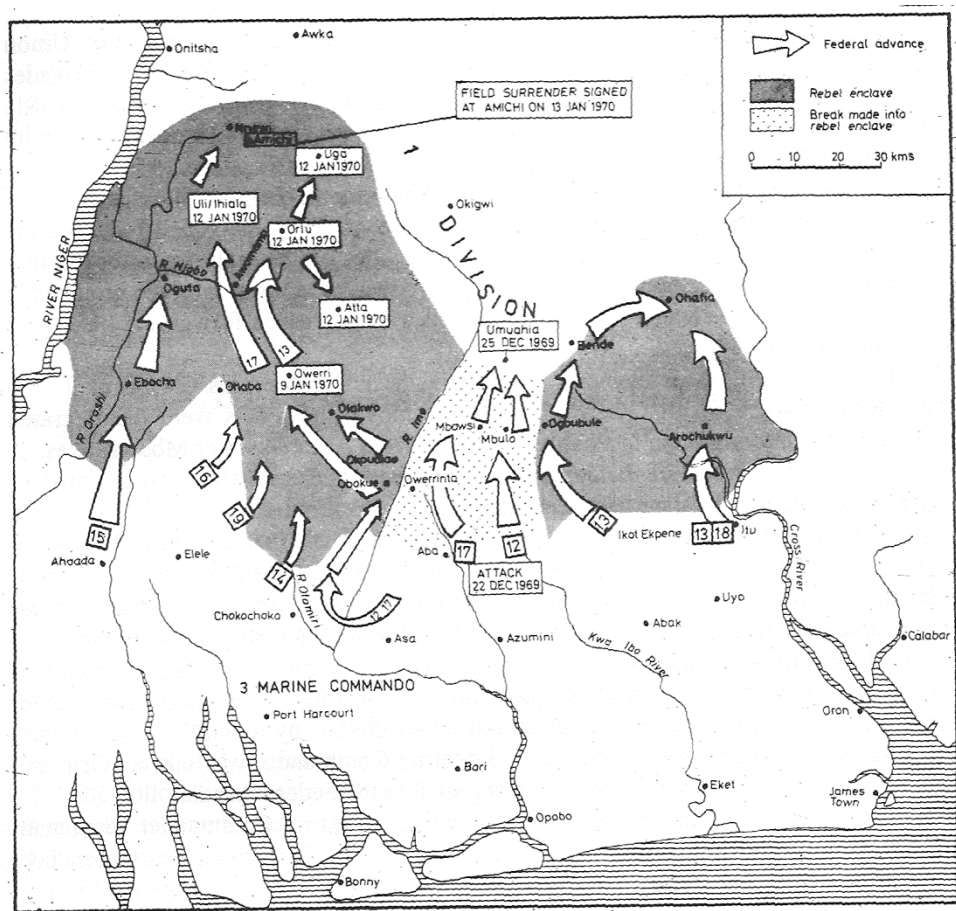


Figure 13: Final Nigerian Offensive on Biafra. Arrow numbers denote brigade number designations.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Draper, *Shadows*, 255.

<sup>77</sup> There is some confusion regarding the date of Ojukwu’s departure. Efiong claims to have gone to see off Ojukwu on the 9<sup>th</sup>. However, both Draper and de St. Jorre place the date as the night between the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup>, with de St. Jorre stating it was at 2am on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>78</sup> Momoh, *The Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970: History and Reminiscences*, 109.

Another flight was set to leave that night carrying several French doctors and some sick Biafran children. However, several vehicles arrived carrying the wives of some Biafran officials and demanded to be evacuated. The soldiers defending the airfield were in near panic and prevented the children and doctors from boarding. In the ensuing chaos, the soldiers fired into the mass of people attempting to board the aircraft, and the Rhodesian crew left the airfield with an empty plane.

Before leaving, Ojukwu prepared a lengthy speech that was delivered after his departure. Titled “Ojukwu's Call from Exile”, the speech reaffirmed his commitment to Biafra, claiming that he was only leaving to secure peace abroad. Much like his attempts to secure some kind of foreign presence during the talks at Addis Ababa, and evoking the propaganda lines of the holocaust, Ojukwu claimed that “Nigeria's aim is to destroy the elite of Biafra. The only possible way of preventing such a catastrophe is by interposing between the contesting forces some neutral force to prevent a genocide that would make 1939-45 Europe a mere child's play.”<sup>79</sup>

However, he also named Efiog as his successor. Efiog wrote in his memoirs:

He [Ojukwu] knew we had lost the War and that he was “checking out” for good and leaving the rest of us to survive if indeed we would at all have such a chance. [...] I was left to carry the can – to be the sacrificial lamb.<sup>80</sup>

The next morning, Efiog, charged with the unenviable task of deciding to surrender, held a staff meeting. Ojukwu had hoped that Efiog could hold out at least two

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<sup>79</sup> Ojukwu's call from exile, printed in *The Times*, 16 January 1970

<sup>80</sup> Efiog, *Nigeria and Biafra*, 290.

weeks; however, the latter knew that the situation was dire and it was doubtful that he would be able to hold out for even two days. In an interview with *Drum Magazine*, he described the meeting thus:

Military Officers: General, when are you making the statement?

Efiong: Which statement?

M.O.: Of course, you know what we are talking about.

Efiong: How do you expect me to know what you have in your mind? Tell me.

M.O.: Are we going to continue like this? We think we should stop fighting.

Efiong: Are you suggesting we surrender?

M.O.: Will that amount to surrender?

Efiong: Of course. Yes.

M.O.: Ah! Well, if that amounts to surrender, let's stop fighting all the same. The people are suffering unnecessarily.

Efiong: Okay, gentlemen. Go and put it in black and white, I will be guided in my decision by the greater interest of our people.<sup>81</sup>

On January 12<sup>th</sup>, Efiong went to the well camouflaged headquarters of Radio Biafra. On the road to the station, Efiong recalled the sight of the refugees fleeing the collapsing front.

The fleeing refugees we saw were a study in human tragedy. No one can fully describe the spectacle we saw. The people were ragged, footsore, and haggard from hunger and starvation. Some women were with babies and some of these were hanging on and sucking the dry breasts

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<sup>81</sup> Drum Magazine. Obasanjo was incensed at this interview and imprisoned Efiong for nearly three months after the interview was published.

of their mothers. It was a scene of pathetic suffering and agonizing endurance. [...] To me, every single one of these people was a hero. They were the real heroes of the war.<sup>82</sup>

At 4:40pm, Efiog gave his speech on Radio Biafra ordering the cessation of hostilities saying

I am convinced now that a stop must be put to the bloodshed, which is going on as a result of the war. I am also convinced that the people are now disillusioned and those elements of the old government regime who have made negotiations and reconciliation impossible have voluntarily removed themselves from our midst.<sup>83</sup>

On the 14<sup>th</sup>, Efiog flew to Dodan Barracks in Lagos where he signed the official surrender notice. The notice was short and simply read

I, Major-General Phillip Efiog, Officer Administering the Government of the Republic of Biafra, now wish to make the following declaration:

1. That we affirm that we are loyal Nigerian citizens and accept the authority of the Federal Military Government of Nigeria.
2. That we accept the existing administrative and political structure of the Federation of Nigeria.
3. That any future constitutional arrangement will be worked out by representatives of the people of Nigeria.

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<sup>82</sup> Efiog, *Nigeria and Biafra*, 293-94.

<sup>83</sup> Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: A Documentary Sourcebook*, 451.

4. That the Republic of Biafra hereby ceases to exist.<sup>84</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Biafran propaganda was instrumental in the prosecution of the war, but ultimately could do little once the tide turned irrevocably. Further, at no time in the war was Biafra in any position to realistically secure its independence. Once Port Harcourt fell to the Federal forces, even the most optimistic supporters of Biafra could not but realize that there was no future for Biafra as an independent country.

Biafra's propaganda campaign had a two pronged method. First, it galvanized the public, especially the Igbo to suffer through the deprivations of war, starvation and terror with the end result to secure a stable future.

Internationally, propaganda served to create a global outcry about the humanitarian conditions in Biafra. The Biafran government, labeling the war as genocidal and evoking the holocaust in Europe as equivalent what the Igbo were suffering, created a groundswell of protests, political interventions and debates all over the western world. Domestic pressures on the western governments, especially in the United States, Britain and France put pressure on the Nigerian government to agree to negotiate with the Biafrans. Though the French openly supported the Biafran cause with aid and arms, in other places propaganda could not change government policy, such as in Britain where the Wilson government stood steadfastly by Gowon's government. Yet, even in Britain,

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<sup>84</sup> Biafran Surrender Instrument, dated 15 January, 1970 (though it was signed the evening before)

and to a lesser extent in the United States, the Biafran media campaign put intense pressure on the government, which in turn pressured the Nigerian government to soften their stance enough to allow for a political solution to the war.

Even more so, the global outcry against what was very effectively marketed as a genocidal war against the Igbo prompted many international organizations to fly aid supplies and armaments to the besieged republic. Caritas, the Red Cross and the Joint Church Aid, a hastily formed coalition of mostly Scandinavian church organizations all flew flights in what became the largest non government supported airlift in history, and second in size only to the American airlift to Berlin.

Despite all its successes, propaganda had one catastrophic shortfall. While propaganda created pressure on the Nigerians and strengthened the Igbo resolve to fight, in the end, all political decisions rested with Ojukwu. Many of Ojukwu's top commanders came out against him, both during the war and after. For some, like Victor Banjo, criticizing Ojukwu meant death; while Hilary Njoku was spared only because the officers in charge of his execution refused to obey Ojukwu's orders. Others, like Madiebo, Akpan and Efiog wrote scathing criticisms of Ojukwu's cult of personality, both regarding the military conduct of the war and the failure to end it several times when the military, political and diplomatic situations would have allowed Ojukwu to end the war in a relatively respectable manner. Efiog even likened Ojukwu, mistakenly, to Sancho Panza in Miguel de Cervantes' classic novel *Don Quixote*.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Efiog wrote that it was Sancho Panza tilting at the windmills, when in Cervantes' work *Don Quixote*, it was the title character who launched a full frontal assault on the

Biafran propaganda served as an important strategic weapon in the war and helped to soften the Nigerian political and military stance against the Biafrans. During the peace talks in 1968, the Nigerians agreed to send high ranking delegations, including the head of state, to the meetings despite their initial stated position that renunciation of secession was a precondition to any negotiation. Further, the images of starving Biafrans, shown around the world, places such intense pressure on Gowon (who himself was personally distressed by the suffering of the innocents) that the Nigerian government even agreed to separate the discussion of immediate relief from the talks on a permanent settlement.

Biafran propaganda ultimately could not bring about an end to the war, but to say, as Momoh stated, that “propaganda cannot win wars”,<sup>86</sup> is an oversimplification of the use of propaganda. Momoh equated propaganda to military intelligence, claiming that though both are important in waging the conflict; neither alone can win the war. Biafran propaganda was instrumental in one important way: it created a climate where the Nigerian demands were eased to the point where a political solution to the conflict was both tenable and preferable to the continuation of the war. Thus, Biafran propaganda acted more as a support mechanism to the political and diplomatic warfare, and can be more likened to artillery support of the front line it that it softened the enemy’s position, if not literally, then at least from a diplomatic point of view.

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windmills. Efiang likened Ojukwu’s military tactics to that of Don Quixote, stating that “no saboteurs could have been more effective.” Efiang, *Nigeria and Biafra*, 335.

<sup>86</sup> Momoh, *The Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970: History and Reminiscences*, 189.

Thus, it was not the propaganda that failed, but rather the political climate that it created was not utilized properly to gain concessions. Despite his conciliatory speech to the OAU consultative committee in Niamey, Ojukwu became emboldened by much of the political wrangling in Addis Ababa, especially the debate over relief supplies. Rather than shift his efforts to ending the conflict, Ojukwu instead sought to provide for foreign “boots on the ground” in a way that would internationalize the conflict, and create a buffer between the Nigerian 1<sup>st</sup> Division and his own armies, rather than end the war and negotiate a settlement to return to the Nigerian fold.

Equally important, French military assistance, the European mercenaries and the unprecedented airlift served to further embolden the Biafran military. The military successes that came with Adekunle’s catastrophic assault on Umuahia and ensuing counterattacks gave the Biafrans the military clout that would have allowed a more favorable end to the war. However, these successes only encouraged Ojukwu to continue rather than sue for a peace that would secure the Igbo’s future in Nigeria. By May 1969, the Biafran counteroffensive stalled and Obasanjo, the new commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, managed to reorganize the division, break the back of Biafran resistance and, along with Shuwa and the 1<sup>st</sup> Division, end the war.



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