

THE TRAGEDY OF BIAFRA: HOW FOREIGN INTERESTS CAUSED AFRICA'S SECOND-DEADLIEST WAR

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The Nigerian civil war shook the African continent. As Africa's most populous state, Nigeria set a precedent of infighting and widespread violence at a national level. The civil war is often thought of as a struggle between the Hausa-Fulani peoples of the north and the Igbo people of the south; however, in examining closely the inextricable legacy of Britain from the unfolding of the Nigerian civil war, the imperial power is clearly implicated and shows deeply-substantiated signs of perpetuating the upheaval. The relationship between Nigeria and Britain both predating and coinciding with the civil war illustrated exactly how this is so, and various Cold War European states' relationships with Nigeria run parallel in this fashion, further corroborating the narrative of foreign interests being culpable for the havoc in Nigeria. Additionally, the topic necessitates an assessment of the role of the OAU, which upon further inspection is concluded as unimpactful, if not marginally beneficial.

INTRODUCTION

On May 30, 1967, Africa gained its latest independent state in a decade characterized by colonial powers relinquishing control over their African colonies. Tragically, this new state, the Republic of Biafra, would not receive the recognition it had wished for, soon thereafter dissolving under the might of its primary adversary, Nigeria, and quickly becoming a victim of the Nigerian Civil War, Africa's deadliest internal conflict at the time. Biafra's secession took place in May 1967 in the southeastern part of Nigeria, and the civil war followed by breaking out in July of that year and spreading across the country, drawing in considerable levels of international attention for an African affair. Although many variables contributed to this attention, two stand out in explaining why and how the international community was so gripped by the Nigerian Civil War: post-colonial Nigeria at the time was widely touted to be a nascent power; a booming population with bountiful natural resources and British institutions, the West African state was poised to be Britain's marquee success in Africa. Further contributing to the world's captivation, the Nigerian Civil War had the most fatalities out of any conflict on the African continent to its date, taking the lives of an estimated 50,000 through warfare and an additional 500,000–5,000,000 to starvation and the numerous associated perils of civil war (World Peace Foundation 2015). This paper seeks to answer the question that gripped the international community in

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1967, and which civil war scholars and historians alike continue to probe to this day: why did one of Africa's most promising newly-independent states fall into civil war and become the setting for the African continent's second-deadliest conflict to date? To answer this question, one must look outward from the Nigerian borders. Indeed, Nigeria was burdened with external influences dating well before its independence, and continued under such a strain throughout the rest of the 20th century. This paper argues that the Nigerian Civil War was caused by foreign imperial interests both predating and during the outbreak of violence, with an emphasis placed on Britain's role in Nigeria's transition to independence and Cold War actors using the war as a platform to advance their foreign policy agendas. Furthermore, this paper refutes the commonly-held notion that the Organization for African Unity (OAU) was at fault for the conflict, instead positing that foreign actors' actions exonerate the OAU from its lack of groundbreaking accomplishments.

SOWING THE SEEDS OF WAR

"As Nigeria turned under England's indirect hand, so turned the continent." (-Diamond 2007, 345). This quote from the American anthropologist Stanley Diamond reveals exactly why Britain had such strong interests in Nigeria: consolidating control over the continent's most populous nation was tantamount to the success of Britain's colonial project in Africa. In 1914, under British rule, Nigeria was divided into two separate protectorates: Northern Nigeria and Southern Nigeria. The northern territory was home to the Hausa-Fulani, a largely Muslim ethnic group which adopted a tribal and communitarian way of life. The southern territory was occupied by the Christian-majority Igbos, who lived in hierarchical societies emphasizing upward mobility and individualism (Parker 1969, 8). This resulted in a materially poorer North and wealthier South, with the former having to be subsidized by the colonial government to remain fiscally viable (Uche 2008, 115). Although the division of the two Nigerias along cultural and ethnic lines promoted political stability within the colonies, the costs for the British taxpayer of having to finance Northern Nigeria became too great of a burden. Consequently, Britain proceeded to amalgamate the colonies and create a unified Nigeria where the South's oil revenue could offset the financial deficits of the North (Ibid, 115).

Britain establishing a single Nigeria through the process of amalgamation was a disastrous event for the trajectory of Nigerian stability and cohesion. Upon unification, Britain's first Governor General of Nigeria Frederick Lugard began to employ the strategy of indirect rule over the colony. To do so, Lugard needed willing chiefs to follow his command, so he turned to the poorly-educated Hausa-Fulani of the north, who were culturally accustomed to obedience, as opposed to the more rebellious Igbo whom he saw as a threat to British rule (Forsyth 1969, 18). What amounted was a swift political demarcation between the Hausa-Fulani of the north and the Igbo of the southeast, with the former being granted various governmental privileges and forming an amicable relationship with the colonizers, and the latter relegated to the peripheries

of the Nigerian colony where they suffered total subjugation (Ibid, 18). However, the north also did not appreciate amalgamation despite its newfound privileges and were similar to the Igbos with respect to their distaste for the unified state, citing a desire to continue their development without being bound to the south (Uche 2008, 119). Nonetheless, the Hausa-Fulani did agree to amalgamation under the condition they be awarded 50% representation in the new government. This effectively disabled the Igbo from decision-making because they had to share the remaining 50% of political representation with the minority Yoruba peoples in the west of the country, ultimately ingraining de-facto rule by the north into the fabric of the Nigerian state (Forsyth 1969, 16-21).

Tensions between the Hausa-Fulani north and Igbo south would only continue to intensify when Britain increased its interest in Nigeria's natural resources. The British crown exacerbated Igbo resentment towards the north when they began delegating local Hausa-Fulani leaders to expropriate Igbo land for mining operations and building the administrative offices they would occupy (Chimee 2014, 20). It should be noted that coinciding with Britain's assertion of the north as conservators of the south, Britain upheld a 'One Nigeria' policy whereby it insisted that its main interest was promoting peace in Nigeria to justify its indirect thrall vis-à-vis the north—this, however, was a complete farce, as their actions in pursuit of Nigeria's oil show. It became apparent to the British that most of Nigeria's oil being located in the Igbo southeast threatened their access, at which point the British sacrificed the 'One Nigeria' facade to overtly collaborate with the north to guarantee favorable purchasing terms; 40% of Nigerian oil ended up in British possession at this time (Uche 2008, 122). Nigeria now fiercely divided along ethnic lines, the Igbo rose up against the British-manipulated Hausa-Fulani, culminating in the secessionist movement of the Republic of Biafra and the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War.

THE PERILS OF FOREIGN PLAYERS

The involvement of foreign actors in the civil war accelerated Nigeria's plight, with each state's actions clearly exhibiting how their efforts to advance their interests would amount to tumult and turmoil for both the Hausa-Fulani Nigerian state and Igbo peoples in the Republic of Biafra. In addition to institutionalizing the ethnic tensions that paved the way for civil war, Britain—as Nigeria's closest European ally—played a pivotal role on the side of the Nigerian government in their counter-insurgency efforts against Biafra. General Yakubu Gowon, the Nigerian head of state and fierce opponent of the Igbos, was provided with a limitless supply of arms from British forces (Audifferen 1987, 148). This was viewed as a key factor in the civil war's protracted nature, with a key U.N. delegate from Denmark at the time stating, "In our view an arms embargo might have assisted those [peacemaking] efforts." (UNGA 1968, 63-65). Britain's excuse for its behavior at this time was two-dimensional: it was able to once again default to its pacifistic 'one Nigeria' position to conceal its desires for a monopoly on resources, and, given that the civil war was taking place at

the height of the Cold War, it was also able to stoke fears of an opportunistic Soviet Union that would jump to the support of the eventual victor (Audifferen 1987, 151). Beyond the boundless supply of arms, these disguises for Britain's intentions provided the justification for a naval blockade against the Biafran insurgents. The blockade was a deliberate attack on the Biafran people who mainly lived in coastal areas and led to an estimated 1,000,000 deaths over the twelve months following its imposition; moreover, it spoke to Britain's disregard for their detrimental role in the civil war, as international observers argued, a selective blockade that would have allowed food-stuffs for children would have proven equally effective (Forsyth 1969, 172). Another factor of Britain's involvement that prolonged the conflict was their effort to sabotage diplomatic efforts. As the war was being fought, there were numerous peace talks held across the continent, and African states friendly with Biafra informed them that British diplomacy was "working overtime" behind the scenes to convince players in the conflict that (i) Biafra was "finished," (ii) diplomacy was futile, and (iii) countries ought to ally with the Nigerian government to emerge alongside the eventual victors (Oluo 1978, 76). In an all-out attempt to consolidate control over unified Nigeria, Britain even went so far as to exploit its ties with the Shell-BP oil company. Shell-BP owed the Nigerian government a royalty of 5.5 million British pounds and, frustrated with the stagnating economic gains during the war, decided to solicit an advanced payment; Shell-BP, motivated by Britain's efforts, agreed (Uche 2008, 132).

Nigeria was a unique case in the broader context of the Cold War because, while the Soviet Union was vying for allyship with the Nigerian government, it took the same side as the British in the conflict. In addition to common interests with the British such as access to oil, the Soviet Union saw Nigerian allyship as an opportunity to fortify its relations in the Afro-Mediterranean Islamic sphere to compensate for its Cold War losses elsewhere in the Arab world (Diamond 2007, 354). To this end, the Soviets pumped their own steady flow of arms into the Nigerian forces, as well as multiple fighter jets—an act the British were unwilling to do (Audifferen 1987, 153). In concert with the Soviet Union, the short-lived United Arab Republic (UAR) procured a large number of arms for the Nigerian government as well, since they too wanted a stake in what they perceived to be the eventual victors of the war (Parker 1969, 9). Importantly though, Soviet influences on the Nigerian Civil War extended beyond material contributions—they were able to harness the power of propaganda. The Soviet Union stoked fears among African states of Biafra representing the infiltration of imperialism on the continent due to the secessionist state being organizationally-adjacent to Western democracies; in turn, this effort exacerbated and intensified armed resistance to the Biafran movement (Diamond 2007, 342).

Fanning the flames of war from the other side, France and Portugal saw the Republic of Biafra as a rare opportunity for strategic advances in Africa. France thought the deterioration of British influence over Biafra's oil fields could spell an opportunity to "fish in troubled waters," whereby amidst the dysfunction of the civil war and bolstering the Biafran project they could detract from British influence in the

region (Audifferen 1977, 154). To carry this out, the French provided Biafran forces with arms in secrecy via their Biafran-allied colonies—Cote d'Ivoire and Gabon (Ibid, 154). Additionally, France's support offered the disadvantaged Biafrans a "psychological boost" which empowered troops to engage in conflict to a further extent than they would have otherwise (Parker 1969, 9). Similarly, Portugal had its own imperatives in siding with the Republic of Biafra. Being far economically inferior to France, it only provided a modest supply of arms; however, Portugal's contribution held more symbolism than substance, as the primary role of its donations was as a gesture to distract from its misconduct elsewhere in Africa (Diamond 2007, 344).

THE ORGANIZATION FOR AFRICAN UNITY

Many scholars who study the Nigerian War devote a substantial share of the blame on purported inaction and shortcomings of the OAU. Those who do so frequently argue that the organization had an overly conservative charter that restricted them from fulfilling their mandate (Akuchu 1977, 43-44), and that the OAU's peace conferences failed to meet their objectives because no conclusive agreements were reached between Nigeria and Biafra (Forsyth 1969, 241-255). However, these perspectives are extremely limited in their scope of the issue and fail to account for underlying causes.

The clauses in the OAU charter of "non-interference in the internal affairs of states" (Article III, 2) and "respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each State and for its inalienable right to independent existence" (Article III, 3) are identified as constraining forces in the organization's peacemaking ability in the Nigerian Civil War (Akuchu 1977, 43). Indeed, these clauses may have hindered the organization's ability to ameliorate the conflict to great ends; notwithstanding, to understand why the OAU is absolved of fault for this, one must look at the successes it was able to achieve, as well as the external constraints and antagonism it was challenged with. This paper has already displayed precisely how devastating the effects of foreign influences were on Nigeria's descent into civil war. In light of this reality, the OAU impressively worked within its parameters of influence to ensure that wholesale support of either the Biafrans or Nigerians was avoided from being adopted by any African state—an effort that ought to be regarded as a marked success (Ibid, 43). Furthermore, the enmity the OAU faced from Nigeria and Biafra themselves cannot be understated in how it impeded the organization's decision-making capabilities. The Nigerian government explicitly lay forth that any attempt at resolution by the OAU would be interpreted as foreign provocation, creating an incredibly difficult position for the OAU to maneuver when trying to solve the conflict (Ibid, 44). Furthermore, the Biafran side refused to attend the proverbial negotiating table due to earlier events in which they felt their right to self-determination was being disrespected by the OAU (Ibid, 53). With both sides unwilling to engage with the very entity tasked with finding a resolution, it would be dishonest to try to place any of this failure on the OAU.

Another common accusation against the OAU is the futility of their peace

talks—a routine practice whenever African states were undergoing violent conflicts. Such an interpretation of these talks is ignorant to the challenges they faced, the diversity in their outcomes, and even successes. In September 1968, at a Nigerian Civil War conference hosted by the OAU in Algiers, British and American representatives were disseminating false narratives about the state of the conflict to try to sway sympathy away from Biafra. This plan worked, eliciting new sanctions against Biafra from the conference's attendees (Oluo 1978, 77). Both Nigerian and Biafran leaders were aware of this type of conduct and for this reason often eschewed attendance, instead electing to commission associates of theirs to attend and sit on their behalf (Forsyth 1969, 248). This echoed the parties' reluctance to participate in these dialogues and facilitated a difficult environment to explore positive courses of action. Looking beyond the case of Nigeria, the OAU was able to find success in its other conferences such as sponsoring a ceasefire in the Algeria-Morocco conflict and a disengagement of violence in the Somalia-Ethiopia conflict. This indicates that the OAU indeed had the competencies to resolve conflicts by the diplomacy of its conferences and suggests that the other factors highlighted in this paper as impediments of conflict resolution must instead be looked at to explain the conferences' shortcomings. Ultimately however, OAU peace conferences did yield a modicum of progress that seldom receives adequate recognition. In the 1967 OAU session in Kinshasa, the OAU drafted a resolution to send a consultative mission of six African heads of state to the Nigerian government to underscore the continent's and organization's commitment to a peaceful resolution of the civil war, marking a formidable effort which yielded tangible action (OAU 1967, 1243). Brought into the scope of the myriad limitations and adversaries the OAU faced in its two years of working towards settling the Nigerian Civil War, the fact that any resolution whatsoever was met in Kinshasa can be seen as a resounding success.

CONCLUSION

The day after the Nigerian Civil War broke out on the 7th of July, the British High Commissioner in Nigeria was quoted as saying, "Our interests, particularly in oil, are so great that they must override any lingering regret we feel for the disintegration of British made Nigeria." (Uche 2008, 122). It is this attitude which came to define the mandates of the various foreign powers who engaged in Nigeria leading up to and during the civil war and ultimately compelled them to act in self-interests so irrespective of Nigerian prosperity that they are now remembered as the central causes for the repression of a nation, millions of innocent civilian casualties, and enabling Africa's second-deadliest civil war in its history. Britain set the precedent for treating Nigeria with little regard for its autonomy as an independent state and would be the first to prove how the country's civil war was a symptom of these types of attitudes, as observed in the ethnic tensions crystalized from amalgamation and their ensuing accentuation as Britain concentrated control over the country's natural resources in the hands of the Hausa-Fulani. As more foreign powers cast their

agendas onto the backdrop of Nigeria, the civil war was only exacerbated. The arms procured, ideas promulgated, and strategies employed—from the southern shores of Biafra to the political epicentre of the Nigerian forces in Lagos—indubitably inflated the number of deaths and prolonged warfare. These conditions of foreign interference also provide the context for the legacy of the OAU. Often disparaged and blamed during the Nigerian Civil War for what many describe as a failure to resolve the crisis, when taken into perspective with the obstacles of European forces who inserted themselves in Nigeria's affairs, the OAU demonstrated strong fulfillment of their limited capabilities and exhibited entitlement to a degree of commendation in the Nigerian Civil War. To overlook the case of the Nigerian Civil War as a standard civil war typical of the global south in the 20th century would be to ignore a monumental chapter in the history of Africa and European foreign policy. The causes and effects of foreign intervention displayed by neo-imperial Europe consistently demonstrated adverse outcomes for the very populations they claimed to be helping, and, should adequate recognition of these patterns permeate mainstream scholarship and literature, the Nigerian Civil War has the potential to be a catalyst for change in how countries of the Global North conduct themselves in their foreign affairs for years to come.

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