

# THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR AND THE SOVIET UNION'S INVOLVEMENT INTO THE CONFLICT

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*The Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Biafran War, took place between July 6, 1967 and January 13, 1970, and was a political conflict caused by the attempted secession of the southeastern provinces of Nigeria as the self-proclaimed Republic of Biafra. This attempt led the young nation into a civil war which resulted in estimated casualties of one million.*

*During the conflict, both the then Federal Military Government of Nigeria and the defunct Biafran regime had the desire to secure diplomatic support as well as military assistance from both the West and the East. This desire coupled with other reasons attracted many countries to declare support and assistance to either the Government of Nigeria or the Biafran regime. The "great powers" sided with opposing parties. The focus of this work is to examine the Soviet Union's involvement into the conflict and the moves made by Nigerian diplomatic missions in Moscow, analyze the previous relationship between Nigeria and USSR and its development during all stages of the civil war, and venture to understand the reasons underlying this strange and interesting alliance.*

*Keywords: Nigerian civil war, USSR, international relations, diplomatic support, Soviet involvement*

Created as a colonial entity by the British, Nigeria was divided between the mainly Muslim North and the mainly Christian and animist South. Following independence in 1960, three provinces were formed along tribal lines: the Hausa and Fulani dominated the Northern Region, Yoruba - the Western Region, and Igbo - the Eastern Region.

Tribal tensions increased after a military coup in 1966 which resulted in General Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo, taking power as President. This was followed by a northerner-led counter coup a few months later. Aguiyi-Ironsi was killed and widespread reprisals were unleashed against the Igbo. Fearing marginalization within the state, on May 30, 1967 the Igbo-majority province declared its independence as the Republic of Biafra.

## CAUSES OF THE WAR

The causes of the Nigerian civil war were exceedingly complex. The conflict was the result of economic, ethnic, cultural and religious tensions among the various peoples of Nigeria. Like many other African nations, Nigeria was an artificial structure initiated by the British, who had overlooked to consider religious, linguistic, and ethnic differences.

The coexistence of different ethnic groups in Nigeria played a crucial role in the outbreak of war: Nigeria consists of between 250 to 300 ethnic groups forced to co-exist within the artificial boundaries constructed by Great Britain. "The ethnicity of Nigeria is so varied that there is no definition of a

Nigerian beyond that of someone who lives within the borders of the country" [12]. However, only three ethnic groups have attained ethnic majority status in their respective regions: the Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Igbo in the southeast, and the Yoruba in the southwest. These groups make up about three-fifths of the total population of Nigeria. The Hausa-Fulani are mostly Muslim, while many of the Igbo and Yoruba are Christian.

After independence from Britain, the governmental reorganization resulted in the formation of three major political parties that corresponded to the major ethnic groups in the country, each vying for control.

In particular, *The National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroons* (NCNC) dominated the Eastern Region, being comprised of the ethnic group Igbo; *The Action Group* (AG) dominated the Western Region, being comprised of the ethnic group Yoruba; and *The Nigerian Peoples Congress* (NPC) party of the Muslim area in the Northern Region was comprised of the ethnic group Hausa-Fulani. The different political systems among these three peoples produced highly divergent sets of customs and values.

Regional and ethnic distinctions within Nigeria literally tore the country apart. Their different religions and political ideologies, the structural imbalance of the Nigerian federation and, most importantly, the asymmetrical distribution of power among the various ethnic and geopolitical groups, created increasing tension among these peoples. A growing demand for self-determination contributed greatly to the secessionist Republic of Biafra.

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In this scenario, we must consider also the economic causes, including the factor of oilfields, first discovered in the Niger delta in 1958 and which quickly formed the basis of Nigeria's economy.

Beers [7] speculates that one of the major reasons the Hausa-Fulani objected to the Biafran secession was the vast supply of oil reserves in the southern Niger delta. According to his theory, the northerners violently opposed the Biafran secession not only to protect Nigerian unity, but also to maintain access to the eastern oil supply.

In addition to this already fragile situation, two events that added to growing political tensions were the electoral boycotts during the first general elections in 1964, and the violent rioting after the NPC was charged with rigging political party elections in the Western Region.

Furthermore, claims of electoral fraud were the ostensible reason for a military coup on January 15, 1966, led by General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo and head of the Nigerian Army, who took power as President and became the first military head of state in Nigeria.

In July of 1966, a group of northern army officers staged a counter-coup, assassinating General Aguiyi-Ironsi. Lieutenant Yakubu Gowon, a northerner and the army chief of staff, became head of the new Federal Military Government (FMG). Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, military governor of the Eastern Region, refused to accept Gowon as the head of state and, on May 30, 1967, declared the Eastern Region an independent republic called Biafra. According to historian Burton F. Beers, Ojukwu and the Igbo felt secession was justified, "charging persecution and seeking to protect their oil wealth".

## **INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE CONFLICT**

The beginning of the war was described by the Federal government of Nigeria as a "police action" meant to arrest leaders of the rebellion - the Biafran regime, but it later metamorphosed into a full-fledged war. Both parties engaged in propaganda activities designed to win the support of the outside world to secure diplomatic assistance, as well as military aid, consequently leading to the internationalization of the conflict. This desire coupled with other reasons attracted many countries to declare support and assistance to either the FMG or the Biafran regime.

To understand official foreign reaction to the conflict in Nigeria, one should be aware of the federal government's role in international affairs prior to the Biafran secession on May 30, 1967.

Diplomacy, after all, is a cumulative process, and Nigeria's previous behavior influenced foreign reaction to the civil war [9]. Because of Nigeria's historical evolution, post-independence era was highly committed towards establishing firm relations with Britain and its Western allies. Before the civil war, in terms of aid received from foreign countries, it has been asserted that virtually all aid was received directly from Western sources, especially Britain and the U.S.A., or indirectly through the World Bank and the United Nations [1]. During the same period, the Nigerian government "rejected from the Soviet Union a soft loan of \$20 million (about N40 million) at two percent (2%) interest as against 2.8% from the western countries" [2].

## **RUSSIAN AND NIGERIAN RELATIONSHIPS BEFORE AND DURING THE CONFLICT. THE EARLY CONTACTS**

Prior to independence, Nigeria had received more Soviet attention than any other West African State, but afterwards the USSR criticized the federal constitution and the power of northern elements. Nevertheless, Russia would have liked to have established closer ties, but Nigeria refused offers of Soviet political and economic contacts.

Nigeria was probably one of the most consistently anti-Soviet and pro-West countries in Sub-Saharan Africa in the early 1960's: during those years, in fact, Nigerian foreign policy was generally pragmatic, conciliatory, pro-Western and pro-United Nations.

From Moscow's point of view, when it came to Soviet relations with independent Africa, the 1960s was a period of high but eventually dashed hopes. Under Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviets exerted considerable efforts courting the newly independent African states. Khrushchev was confident of Africa's eventual 'progressive' choice, pushing robustly for the expansion of diplomatic ties with the continent.

In a poll conducted in 1963-64, over 40% of Nigerian parliamentarians opted for closer ties with the United States and Britain, while less than 2% of the polled expressed any interest in expanding contacts with the Soviet Union [10].

As observed at the time by Robert Legvold and by Sergey Mazov [13], these strings of failures combined with Khrushchev's departure from the scene pushed the Soviets towards a more balanced and less emotional conduct of foreign affairs.

In Africa, Moscow's general disillusionment with the continent's potential for a speedy socialist transformation translated into a "new realism", a recognition of a simple if disagreeable fact that the

Soviet Union would have to contract with African nations regardless of their leaders' ideological preferences.

## ON THE EVE OF THE BIAFRAN WAR

As indicated earlier, Nigeria external relations with the USSR up to 1966 were not very cordial. But the relations began to improve from 1967 onwards and reached its apogee at the end of the war.

Considering the generally icy relationship between the Tafawa Balewa administration and the Soviet Union, Moscow's initial response to the January 1966 military coup, led by General Ironsi, that removed Balewa from power, was predictably favourable.

'The success of the coup has demonstrated the precariousness and unpopularity of the former regime which had been pictured by Western propaganda as a "model democracy" and "governmental wisdom" for the rest of Africa', asserted a *Pravda* article.

The Soviets expected the new head of state, General Ironsi, to modify or even reverse his murdered predecessor's "reactionary" approach to the conduct of Nigeria's foreign affairs, a change that, in their view, entailed laying "a foundation for further ways of creating and strengthening an independent Nigeria" [14].

But very soon Ironsi's power began to diminish and it became clear that his popularity was waning. However, the USSR was oblivious to the significance of political developments in Nigeria.

In June, a Soviet commentator wrote: "On balance, the progressive forces of the country support the new regime and hope that (...) it will promote real changes in Nigerian policy..." [17].

A few weeks later, in July, 1966, during the counter-coup, Ironsi was overthrown and there was a massacre of Igbos living in the North. As previously mentioned, Lieutenant Yakubu Gowon, a northerner, headed the new Federal Military Government.

Ironically, the Soviet Union had always championed the Igbos as a forward-looking people, but after the repeated massacres the Soviet press remained silent.

The USSR had not initially liked Gowon's July coup. It assumed that under Gowon a British-Northern coalition might form again and regain control of the country. Nevertheless, after he released Chief Obafemi Awolowo [6], Moscow began to adopt a more conciliatory attitude towards Gowon, and by August the Soviet press was praising him.

At this stage there were no ulterior motives behind this rapprochement, beyond a desire to maintain profitable economic contacts.

In January 1967, a Soviet team of economists, metallurgists and engineers went to Nigeria to undertake a study of the possibilities for developing an iron and steel industry.

Thus, Russia had already made a de facto commitment to Gowon, and it was only a matter of time before its sympathies for the Igbos would be abandoned in favor of open support for Gowon.

The decisive break came on 31 March, 1967: Colonel Ojukwu announced the Eastern Region's firm intention to "decentralize" Nigeria.

Moscow then accused Ojukwu of pursuing tribal separatism under the protection of "Western imperialism". It signed an important cultural agreement with Gowon on March 28, which was employed five months later for negotiating an arms deal. In effect, it chose sides.

## THE ROLE OF THE SOVIET UNION IN THE CONFLICT

With the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war in July 1967, the USSR abandoned its posture of non-involvement in Nigerian affairs and openly backed the Federalists.

As pointed Yevgenii Korshunov, "Nigeria is one country and the successful solution to the problem lies not in a greater or lesser autonomy for her regions but in the uniting of all progressive forces on a basis of wholly national interests in the struggle for a better life for the working masses in all regions and all nationalities in the country" [19].

This stance was one of the several options available to Moscow at the time: it could have given aid to neither side and remained politically neutral; it could have publicly given political support to the Federal Government but withheld material aid; conversely, it could have supported Biafra but withheld material aid; provided material aid to the Federalists; or provided material aid to the secessionists.

The first alternative was entirely feasible, because Moscow's involvement in civilian Nigeria had been minimal, and the civil war had not provoked a confrontation with outside powers, in which the Soviet Union would have been obliged to participate. Moreover, Moscow's previous non-committal policy gave the USSR a free hand in a situation in which ideological factors were relatively unimportant [11].

The weeks following the announcement of Biafran independence by Colonel Ojukwu were filled with feverish attempts by the FMG to procure arms. Although the Soviets at first moved cautiously, striving to keep open as many options as possible, Britain's refusal to supply Lagos with air force

equipment, the declared neutral posture of the U.S.A. at the outbreak of the war, and the role of the radical members of General Gowon's war cabinet, all helped the Kremlin reach a decision.

In late June 1967, a four-man Nigerian mission headed to Moscow, prompting immediate rumours that the visit was in fact an arms-procurement expedition [3]. Both Moscow and Lagos issued terse denials, but less than a month later another Nigerian delegation went to the Soviet Union. The delegation included Chief Anthony Enahoro, the Commissioner for the Ministries of Information and Labour in the FMG.

On 2 August, 1967, Enahoro met in the Kremlin with a Soviet deputy prime minister, ostensibly to sign a cultural agreement, which seemed like a frivolity for a country confronting an existential crisis. Despite the mounting evidence to the contrary, both sides continued to insist that arts and sports, and not the aircraft and the bazookas, constituted the subject of the talks.

Furthermore, on 8 August, Gowon admitted to signing a deal for the procurement of an unspecified number of Czech aircraft but also stressed the strictly commercial nature of the transaction.

In the months following the signing of this deal, Soviet-friendly groups began to proliferate in Nigeria. Such front organizations as the Nigerian-Soviet Friendship Society, the Committee of Solidarity with Asia and Africa, and the Nigerian Trade Union Council popularized Soviet achievements and way of life through their publications, numerous meetings, symposia and film screenings.

In the fall of 1967, the Soviets opened a new US \$15,000 cultural centre in the district of Surulere in Lagos, and four Moskvich car dealerships opened doors around the country.

In addition to this, Soviet military equipment and aircraft began arriving in Nigeria, and it is reasonable to assume that the two Nigerian missions to Moscow were related to an arms deal. From this time on, arms supplies were steadily increased, and Soviet journals, newspapers, and radio broadcasts began a sustained bitter campaign of condemnation against the Biafran leaders.

By mid-autumn 1967, the alliance between the Kremlin and the Federal Military Government had been acknowledged by both sides. On 17 October, Lagos made public a letter to Gowon dispatched a few days earlier by the Soviet premier Alexei Kosygin. The letter left little doubt that the Soviets had chosen sides in the conflict and it articulated Soviet support for the FMG in no uncertain terms. 'The Soviet people', explained Kosygin, 'fully

understand the desire of the Nigerian government to preserve the unity and territorial integrity of the Nigerian state and to prevent the country from being dismembered' [4].

During the war the USSR continued to supply arms. The federal government and Moscow consistently claimed that these arms purchases were "strictly for cash on a commercial basis" [15].

In November 1968, an important Soviet-Nigerian agreement was signed: Russia promised to help finance the Kainji dam, and it also supplied money and assistance for the creation of the Nigerian iron and steel industry. The Soviet commitment throughout the war was entirely consistent. It was based on a calculated scheme, non-ideological in content, limited to supplying arms and gradually increasing economic and cultural ties [5].

The last year of the war saw a flurry of activities underscoring and showcasing the expanding bilateral ties - ministerial exchanges, the inauguration of a weekly Aeroflot route between Moscow and Lagos, an opening of the Nigerian-Soviet Chamber of Commerce.

In the meantime, on the battlefield, the military of both sides had continued to fight tirelessly. The final strategy of the FMG was to block supplies to Biafra.

Hostilities continued until 1970, at which point the federal forces had starved the Biafran ones into submission. The Nigerian federal forces launched their final offensive against the Biafrans on January 7, 1970. A cease-fire was called January 12, 1970, ending the Nigerian Civil War and ultimately reabsorbing Biafra into Nigeria.

Soviet aid and assistance was an important element in the Federal government's success in maintaining the unity of Nigeria. Certainly this was the view of the Nigerian ambassador in Moscow, Brigadier Kumbo, who maintained that, in the final analysis, Russian support was "responsible for the Federal victory more than any other single thing, more than all other things put together" [16]. The Soviets responded in kind, hailing Nigeria's triumph as "the victory of the progressive force of the whole African continent over imperialism" [17].

This exchange of pleasantries bookended one of the strangest alliances in the history of the Cold War, an alliance that seemingly defied the conventions of the ideological age and revealed the gap between Soviet theories of Third World development and the pragmatic needs of Soviet foreign policy.

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The Soviet decision to support the federalist side in the Nigerian Civil War marked a decisive departure from Moscow's previous ideology-driven

commitments of the Third World and particularly in Africa. By throwing their weight behind a side whose leadership had exactly zero interest in “socialist orientation”, the Soviets effectively accepted the primacy of pragmatic geopolitics over ideology.

The fundamental reason for Soviet support of the FMG was that it controlled one of Africa’s most important countries, not because it was one of Africa’s most progressive regimes. It was a region of strategic importance which had long been under British aegis, and Russia, unexpectedly, had the opportunity to replace Western influence, because of the initial reluctance of the British and Americans to supply arms to the FMG.

Moscow’s main motive for intervention was that it had the opportunity to fill a convenient power vacuum, with no danger of antagonizing the West and provoking a confrontation.

The USSR did not intervene in the war until it was clear that the Federal Military Government would win. By making sure that it was on the winning side, Moscow hoped to increase its credibility among other nations. Even if Biafra had remained a separate state, Russia would still have increased its influence in Lagos.

Russia intervened in the Nigerian civil war quietly and gradually, with little ideological

commitment, stressing the “commercial” nature of the arms deal. The risks involved in the Nigerian situation were small and the potential advantages great.

More important, perhaps, than these economic links are the close diplomatic ties between Nigeria and the Soviet Union, which certainly did not exist in the period before the civil war.

Soviet-Nigerian relations have remained cordial since the end of the civil war. In May, 1974, General Gowon visited the Soviet Union. That visit, the first by a Nigerian head of state, enabled the General, among other things, to convey his country’s appreciation of “the moral, political and material support the Soviet Union provided for Nigeria in the period of the struggle to safeguard her unity and integrity” [8]. The Head of State also held detailed discussions with the Kremlin leaders on “questions concerned with the further development of Soviet-Nigerian co-operation in economy, science, technology, trade and culture”. Agreements for co-operation were to be concluded in areas of oil exploration and geology, the petroleum industry, agriculture, technical education, public health and the training of Nigerian personnel as well as the further development of trade on a long-term basis.

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