

The Fall of Biafra. Landmark in Nigerian History

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January 15th is a significant date in Nigerian history. On that day in 1966, a group of middle-ranking army officers staged a mutiny which overthrew the civilian government that had ruled Nigeria since it had been granted independence from Britain in October 1960. It began a concatenation of violence which led to a 30-month civil war that formally ended on January 15th 1970.

Tracing a line from 1966 to 1970 is clear enough: the mutiny which was led by officers drawn mainly from the Igbo ethnic group came to be viewed as an attempt to establish a form of ethnic hegemony over the rest of the country, a perspective which was consolidated by the [Unification Decree](#) announced by the Igbo Head of State, Major-General J.T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi in May 1966. The decree abolished Nigeria's federal structure and created a unitary system of governance. The reactions came in the form of anti-Igbo pogroms in the Northern Region in May and September, as well as a [counter-coup](#) in July 1966 which led to the murders of Igbo army officers and soldiers. The frustration of peace efforts, notably that of the meeting in Aburi of members of the Supreme Military Council and Lieutenant-Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the military governor of the Igbo-dominated Eastern Region who disputed the legitimacy of the successors to Aguiyi-Ironsi, led to the secession of the Eastern Region and the creation of the Republic of Biafra in May 1967. This paved the way for the civil war which officially commenced on July 6th 1967.

But Nigeria's drift towards regional and ethnic violence did not begin in 1966. A conglomerate state put together by imperial draughtsmen in the early part of the 20th century, the country was composed of over 250 ethnic groups who spoke over 500 different languages. The Northern Region was largely Islamic while the south, with its Western and Eastern regions (a Mid-West Region was carved out of the West), was largely Christianised. The south also led the north in terms of economic development and educational attainment. Thus, the stability of this artificially created multi-ethnic state was always certain to be tested.

The multiple elements of the Nigerian polity have often meant that a multiplicity of perspectives are in perpetual competition. For instance, the hegemony feared by sections of the country in the wake of the Igbo-dominated first coup was one effectively practised by the leaders of the Northern Region over the rest of the country. And violence related to the desire of the leaders of the North to ensure northern domination occurred in the Western Region as well as in the mainly Christian 'Middle-Belt' of the Northern Region. Corruption among the political elite, a fraudulent census, electoral fraud and trade union strikes created the requisite tinderbox which ultimately led to a bloody civil conflict.

Ojukwu's declaration of independence was a measure undertaken with widespread support among the Igbos who dominated the Eastern Region. Most felt that they had been chased out of the federation and had been left with no alternative. The federal position enunciated

by Gowon also resonated. If the Eastern Region was allowed to split from the rest of the federation, there was every reason to believe that Nigeria would chaotically splinter into smaller parts and that foreign powers would become involved in backing each of the warring entities.

The Biafran propaganda machinery driven by Mark Press, a Geneva-based public relations company, was skillful in setting out the grievances of the Igbos. The themes disseminated began by positing the rationale of the creation of Biafra as one that was predicated on the need for tribal emancipation. It also portrayed the Igbo cause as one based on a religious conflict between a feudal-minded Muslim leadership hell-bent on continuing the pre-colonial Sokoto Caliphate which intended to expand southwards, routing the animist and Christian peoples, until euphemistically, they would dip the Koran into the Atlantic Ocean. And as the war developed, Biafran propaganda utilised the images of starvation as a means of emphasising the claim that they were being purposefully subjected to a policy of genocide.

The evidence assembled appeared to back up the claims. The series of pogroms against Igbo civilians, the massacre of Igbo soldiers, the rise of northern Muslim soldiers to positions of military and political power, as well as the mass starvation symbolised by Kwashiorkor-afflicted children all offered strong corroborative evidence.

But this presented a one-sided and uncomplicated view.

Many of the minority groups within the Eastern Region, as well as in the Mid-West Region which was invaded by Biafran troops early in the war, did not want to live under what they perceived as Igbo domination. And many minority communities were subjected to brutal occupation by Biafran forces. The conflict was also not simply a case of Muslims waging a jihad against Christians. Many of the soldiers involved in the counter-coup of July 1966 were Christians from the Middle-Belt, and, indeed, the man who emerged as the Head of State after that coup, Gowon, was himself a Christian. Also the claim that the blockade mounted by the federal government was inflexible towards the idea of relief supplies being allowed into Biafran territory was not true. The federal side wanted such relief to pass through Nigeria while the Biafran government asserted their belief that such supplies would be tainted by poison deliberately introduced by the Nigerian side.

As military and civilian casualties mounted dissent arose within Biafran ranks. Some saw what some in the international community saw: that the starving millions were being used as part of a high-stakes political game through which the Biafran leadership hoped foreign military aid or even intervention would materialise. The leadership of Ojukwu was also seen as having a malign affect on the interests of his people. As Ralph Uwechue put it:

In Biafra, two wars were fought simultaneously. The first was for the survival of the (Igbos) as a race. The second was for the survival of Ojukwu's leadership. Ojukwu's error, which proved fatal for millions of (Igbos), was that he put the latter first.

Divisions within the Biafran military led to the development of two factions: the 'Port Harcourt Militia' and the 'National Militia'. Internal sabotage, one fruit of this division, severely undermined morale, as well as the effort of national self-defence. The early memoirs of the likes of Uwechue and N.U. Akpan, as well as later ones by Alexander Madiebo laid bare the divisions existing within Biafra: the civil servant against the

intellectual, the soldier against the mercenary, the Igbo against minority groups, and the 'Nnewi clique' against the others; a dynamic based on the allegation that Ojukwu promoted nepotism in regard to his Nnewi kinsmen.

Added to this was the gap in knowledge between the elites and the masses, with the latter being manipulated by a highly efficient propaganda machinery and according to Uwechue possessing "neither the facts nor the liberty to form an independent opinion" about the option of seeking a negotiated peace with the federal side.

The skillful use of propaganda by the Biafrans, which included the organising of relief concerts, the use of Igbo celebrities such as the writer Chinua Achebe and [Dick Tiger](#), the world boxing champion, was successful to a good degree in projecting Igbo pleas for self-determination to a global audience. But decisive help from the major world powers save for an infusion of a limited amount of French arms in the later stages of the war, eluded them. They had been subjected to a blockade and encircled early in the war. While [Gowon](#) continued to insist that Biafra had to surrender unconditionally, [Ojukwu](#) attempted to rouse his people whose ill-equipped army began to increasingly rely on what would be contemporarily termed child soldiers. After much delay, Nigeria began a final offensive on December 23rd 1969, using the Third Infantry Division.

The end was soon in coming.

At a meeting of his cabinet held in Owerri on January 8th 1970, Ojukwu presented what he would describe as the "grim hopelessness of continued formal military resistance." He left Biafra soon after, claiming that he was going in search of a peaceful settlement. His deputy, Philip Effiong, previously a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Nigerian army, took over the reins of leadership and sued for peace. The surrender was arranged on the ground with Colonel Olusegun Obasanjo, the commander of the Third Infantry Division, and a formal ceremony of surrender took place before General Gowon at Dodan Barracks in Lagos. Dressed in civilian attire, Effiong made the following [declaration](#):

I, Philip Effiong, do hereby declare: I give you not only my own personal assurances but also those of my fellow officers and colleagues and of the entire former Biafran people of our fullest cooperation and very sincere best wishes for the future.

It is my sincere hope the lessons of the bitter struggle have been well learned by everybody and I would like therefore to take this opportunity to say that I, Major-General Philip Effiong, officer administering the government of the Republic of Biafra, now wish to make the following declaration:

That we are firm, we are loyal Nigerian citizens and accept the authority of the federal military government of Nigeria.

That we accept the existing administrative and political structure of the Federation of Nigeria.

That any future constitutional arrangement will be worked out by representatives of the people of Nigeria.

That the Republic of Biafra hereby ceases to exist.

Ojukwu's final [statement](#) as leader released through Mark Press to Reuters reiterated the

claim that there had been no alternative other than to have declared a Biafran state. He emphasised the valour of its people in fighting against tremendous odds while enduring enormous privations and criticised what he termed the “international conspiracy against the interest of the African”, which he felt had played the biggest part in Biafra’s demise.

That demise, it was feared in some quarters, would be accompanied by mass killings of Igbos. From the Vatican, the Pope was quick to call for concerted efforts to prevent “massacres of a defenceless population exhausted by hardship, hunger and the lack of everything.” Such fears, stoked by Biafran propaganda were repeatedly referred to by Ojukwu in his statement who wrote that the aim of the Nigerian government had been to “apply the final solution to the Biafran problem away from the glare of an inquisitive world”.

It did not happen.

Gowon’s post-war speech emphasised the need for national reconciliation via the rhetoric of “No Victor, No Vanquished”. It was a claim backed by the fact that no medals were awarded to federal soldiers. Some Igbo officers were reabsorbed into the Nigerian military as were civil servants. And Igbos gradually returned to the north and other parts of the country.

The reabsorption of Igbos has over the decades nonetheless been accompanied by claims of marginalisation. This has often centred on two main issues: the amount of money allocated for the development of states composed of Igbo majorities and the fact that no Igbo has been allowed to lead Nigeria in the period since the end of the war.

In recent times movements have been created that have called for the resurrection of a Biafran state, the most prominent being the now proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra (Ipub) and the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (Massob). But protests organised by these groups have been violently put down and their leaders hunted down by Nigeria’s security forces.

In July 2017, a specially convened meeting of Igbo leaders consisting of state governors, legislators, traditional and religious leaders issued a statement giving their “full support” to a “united Nigeria”. It was a gesture aimed at diffusing mounting tensions, but their call for a restructuring of the country in order to achieve a “just and equitable society” underlined the sense of grievance many feel decades after the civil war.

Renewed agitation for separation has also served to reopen fears among minority groups of the former Eastern Region who alarmed at the inclusion of their territories in various versions of maps of a new Biafran state felt compelled to issue statements of their own. For instance in July 2017 the Efik Leadership Foundation (EFL), after impliedly disavowing their previous incorporation into a historical entity known as Biafra, accused the leaders of Ipub of attempting “to annex or conscript us surreptitiously or use our people, land and territory as (the) basis for bargaining” an exit out of the federation.

Aside from the persistent and widespread misgivings of neighbouring minority groups are doubts over the historical existence of a kingdom of Biafra for which no records, archaeological or other, can be offered as evidence. There is no oral chronology identifying who its rulers were, no accounts as to how it was formed or of its system of laws.

Today, there appears to be a generational divide on pressing for a separate Biafran entity with much of the rhetoric coming from younger people with little or no memory of the civil

war. And with other parts of the federation implacable in their resolve to maintain the territorial unity of Nigeria, the catastrophic failure of the war commenced over fifty years ago must serve as a cautionary note for those intent on pursuing the path of secession.

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