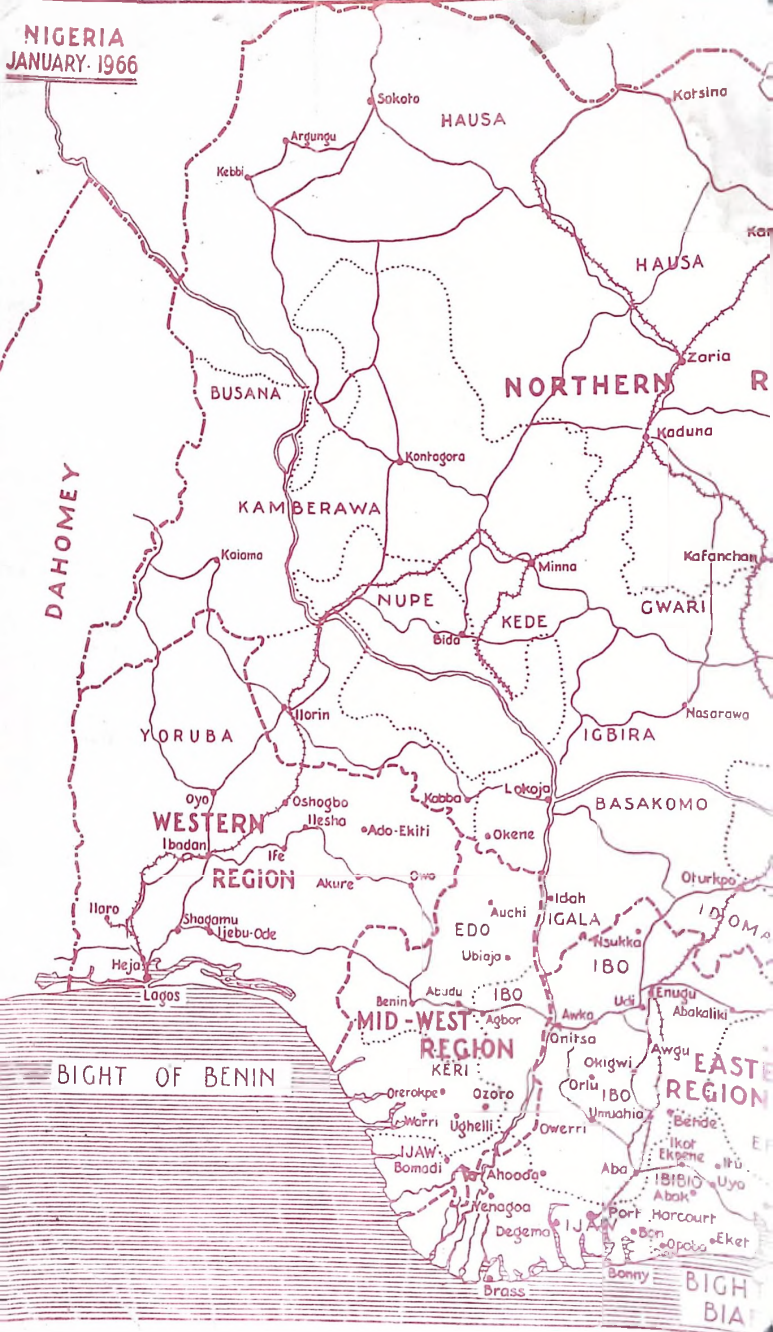
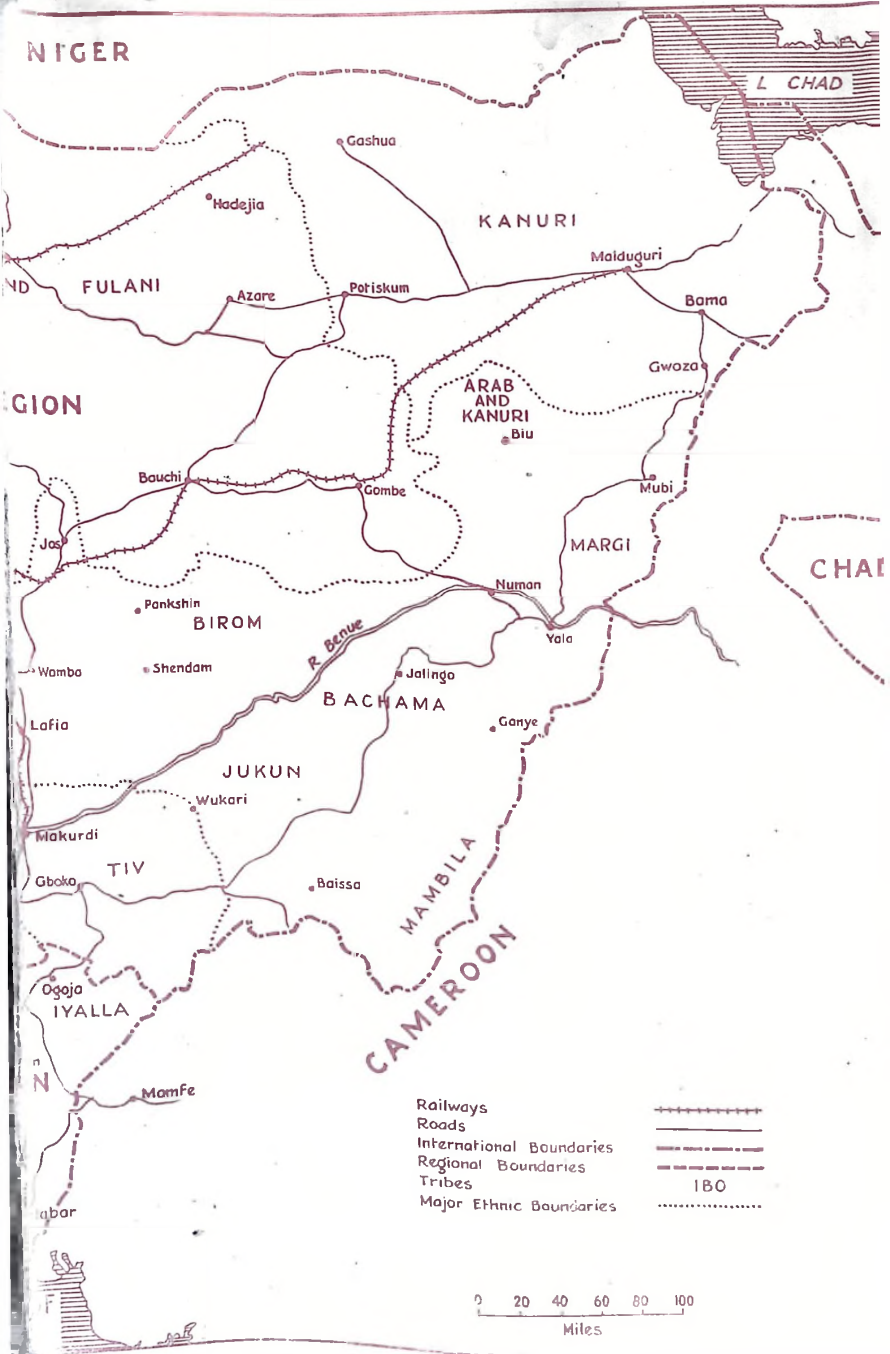


THE
Nigerian
Civil War

John de St. Jorre

NIGERIA
JANUARY 1966





NIGER

L CHAD

KANURI

FULANI

Maiduguri

Bama

Gwoza

ARAB AND KANURI
Biu

GION

Bauchi

Gombe

Mubi

MARGI

CHAI

BIROM

R. Benue

Numan

Yala

Wamba

Shendam

Jalingo

BACHAMA

Ganye

Lafia

JUKUN

Wukari

MAMBILA
CAMEROON

Baissa

TIV

Makurdi

Gboko

IYALLA

Mamfe

- Railways
- Roads
- International Boundaries
- Regional Boundaries
- Tribes
- Major Ethnic Boundaries



**The Nigerian
Civil War**

The Nigerian Civil War

JOHN DE ST. JORRE

The Nigeria



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7-4/5/83

F.A.L.

For Andreeva

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Nigeria

- NNAMDI AZIKIWE ('Zik'): Ibo. President of Nigeria. Leading Nigerian nationalist in colonial days.
- SIR ABUBAKAR TAFAWA BALEWA: Hausa-Fulani. Federal Prime Minister.
- SARDAUNA OF SOKOTO (Sir Ahmadu Bello): Hausa-Fulani. Prime Minister of the Northern Region. Leader of the Northern party and Nigeria's 'strong man'.
- CHIEF SAMUEL AKINTOLA: Yoruba. Prime Minister of the Western Region. Sardauna's political ally who rigged the Western Regional elections in autumn, 1965.
- CHIEF OBAFEMI AWOLOWO ('Awo'): Yoruba. Former leader of Federal opposition. Most popular Yoruba leader and, like 'Zik', an early nationalist.
- MAJORS NZEOWU, IFEAJUNA and OKAFOR: All Ibos. Ring-leaders of January coup, 1966. (Nzeogwu and Ifeajuna joined the Biafran army at secession.)
- MAJOR-GENERAL JOHN AGUIYI-IRONS: Ibo. Commander of the Nigerian Army. Head of State, January-July, 1966.
- LT.-COLONEL YAKUBU ('Jack') GOWON: Angas (Northern minority tribe). Became Head of State, July 1966.
- MAJOR HASSAN KATSINA: Hausa-Fulani. Military Governor of the Northern Region.
- LT.-COLONEL DAVID EJOOR: Urhobo (small Mid-West tribe). Military Governor of the Mid-West Region.
- COLONEL ROBERT ADEBAYO: Yoruba. Governor of the Western Region. (Succeeded Lt.-Colonel Fajuyi after his death in July coup.)
- LT.-COLONEL MURTALA MOHAMMED: Hausa-Fulani. One of the ringleaders in July coup. Gowon's rival for power and later commander of the 2nd Division.
- CHIEF ANTHONY ENAHORO: Ishan (small Mid-West tribe). Federal Minister of Information in Gowon's government.

- OKOI ARIKPO: Ekoi (Eastern minority tribe). Federal Commissioner for External Affairs under Gowon.
- COLONEL BENJAMIN ('Black Scorpion') ADEKUNLE: Yoruba/Bachama (Northern minority tribe). Commander of 3rd Division.
- COLONEL MOHAMMED SHUWA: Kanuri (Northerner). Commander of 1st Division.
- COLONEL IBRAHIM HARUNA: Hausa-Fulani. Took over 2nd Division from Murtala Mohammed.
- ANTHONY UKPABI ASIKA: Ibo. Federal administrator of occupied Biafra. Former lecturer in political science, Ibadan University.
- WOLE SOYINKA: Yoruba. Playwright and poet. Head of drama department, Ibadan University.

Biafra

- LT.-COLONEL EMEKA OJUKWU: Ibo. Military Governor of the Eastern Region. Biafra's Head of State.
- C. C. MOJEKWU ('C.C.'): Ibo and cousin of Ojukwu. Former Eastern politician. Biafran Commissioner for Home Affairs.
- FRANCIS NWOKEDE: Ibo. Former head of Federal Ministry of External Affairs. First Ironsi's then Ojukwu's special adviser.
- MICHAEL OKPARA: Ibo. Former Prime Minister of the Eastern Region. Political adviser to Ojukwu.
- SIR FRANCIS IBIAM: Ibo. Former Governor of Eastern Nigeria and president of World Council of Churches. Biafran government adviser.
- SIR LOUIS MBANEFO: Ibo. Former Chief Justice of Eastern Region and member of the World Court in The Hague. Biafra's Chief Justice.
- KENNETH DIKE: Ibo. Former vice-chancellor of Ibadan University. Roving Biafran emissary.
- ENI NJOKU: Ibo. Former vice-chancellor of Lagos University. Biafran delegate at peace talks and a senior emissary.
- PIUS OKIGBO: Ibo. Former economic adviser to the Federal government; held similar post in Biafra.
- BRIGADIER VICTOR BANJO: Yoruba. On the fringe of January coup. Led Biafran forces into the Mid-West.
- N. U. AKPAN: Ibibio (Eastern minority tribe). Chief Secretary of the Biafran government.

- MAJOR-GENERAL PHILIP EFFIONG: Ibibio (Eastern minority tribe). Biafran Chief of Staff. Conducted Biafra's surrender after Ojukwu left.
- COLONEL JOE 'HANNIBAL' ACHUZIE: Ibo. One of Biafra's most successful field commanders.
- CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO: Ibo. Poet. Younger brother of Pius Okigbo.
- CHINUA ACHEBE: Ibo. Novelist. Former head of Federal external broadcasting services. Worked for Biafran Information Services and Political Orientation Committee.
- CYPRIAN EKWENSI: Ibo. Former director of Federal Information Services. Novelist. Director of Biafran Information Services.

FACT SHEET

NIGERIA IS TRULY THE GIANT OF AFRICA. WITH A POPULATION OF OVER 50 million (1971) it is twice the size of Egypt, three times the size of South Africa and twelve times the size of Zambia! In area it is roughly equivalent to France, Italy, Belgium and Holland rolled together. From Lagos in the south-west to Maiduguri in the north-east is the distance between London and Warsaw. The country has over two hundred tribes and languages. There are three major tribal groups: the Yorubas in the West, the Ibos in the East and the Hausa-Fulani in the North; the minority tribes together, however, are more or less equal in number to the 'Big Three' combined. The most important minorities are the Edo, Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaw in the Mid-West; the Ijaw (again), Efik, and Ibibio in the East and the 'Middle Belt' tribes—the Tiv, Idoma, Igala, Bâchama, Birom—in the North; the latter are largely Christian or animist in contrast to the Muslim Hausa-Fulani and Kanuri of the 'far' North (also sometimes referred to as the 'true' or 'holy' North). Christianity has its strongest hold on the southern half of the country, notably in the East. There are no accurate census figures of Nigeria's population; I have therefore used the estimates calculated by Walter Schwarz in his book *Nigeria* (Pall Mall Press, London, 1968) for the year 1967, after the massive shift in refugees had taken place. The only difference is that I have allowed for a total of 1.5 million refugees returning to the East (1 million from the North, 0.4 million from the West and 0.1 million from Lagos) instead of his conservative estimate of 0.8 million. At the outbreak of war in 1967, therefore, the population of the four former Regions and Federal capital was as follows:

	Million
North	24.6
West	6.9
Mid-West	2.4
East	13.0
Lagos	0.5
	—
TOTAL	47.4
	—

These, I stress, are only approximate figures and throughout the book, for simplicity, I have used the rounded-up figure of 50 million. Nigeria is rich in agricultural and mineral resources producing cocoa, cotton, timber, groundnuts, palm oil, rubber, tin, and is now among the world's top ten oil-producing countries. The official language of government is English and many Nigerians, confusingly, have English-sounding surnames like Johnson, Graham-Douglas and Dickson. A kind of English ('pidgin') is also the lingua franca: a Yoruba man from the West whose car breaks down in Efik country in the East might well exclaim, with a reasonable hope of being understood, 'Left front foot no 'gree breeze-o!' (which freely translated means, 'Help, my left front tyre is punctured'). For those who wish to get closer to the feel and personality of Nigeria, the smallest and most humorous book on the subject is still, I think, the best: Peter Enahoro's *How to be a Nigerian*.

INTRODUCTION

THIS ACCOUNT OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR IS NEITHER INTENDED TO BE pure history nor pure journalism; it falls between the two and is thus susceptible to the strengths and weaknesses of all hybrids. I would rather call it the *story* of the Nigerian war—it has a beginning, a middle and an end—and leave it at that. In this story I flitted in and out as a working journalist: an observer, an outsider, a white man. However, like many in a similarly peripheral position, I was drawn deeper and deeper into the human and political complexities, tragedies and heroics presented by a nation at war with itself. Most civil wars generate more heat than light at the time they are being fought and, indeed, for long after the guns are silent. It is certainly too soon to know the whole truth about the Nigerian war; it may be too late to recapture its passions and its special atmosphere. Nevertheless this book is an attempt to put the record as straight as possible: to cut through the choking fog of myth and propaganda that obscured the conflict, and to clarify the causes and course of the war while highlighting its rights and wrongs.

These are the major aims of the book. But there is another, perhaps more ambitious reason for writing it. The human feelings and energies released by great upsurges in history astonish and reverberate at their moment of impact but quickly vanish or become distorted under the dust of time. Biafra has gone, wiped off the face of the earth; to many it already seems that it never existed. I have tried to write for the 'time-traveller' as much as for the historian: to catch and hold the reality of Biafra; to describe what it meant to Biafrans and Nigerians to fight for survival in their distant tropical land during the years 1966 to 1970; to tell it how it was when an African colossus fell to its knees. This aim may help to

explain the rather unusual form of the book in which narrative, analysis and personal reminiscence play leap-frog with each other throughout its length.

My own view of the war, which was far from fully formed when Biafra was overrun and I began seriously researching the book, will become clear enough as the story unrolls. Having visited Biafra three times, I never ceased to be bowled over by the spirit and sheer guts of the Ibos as a people. But after a time I came round to the view that perhaps it was not enough simply to admire their courage and indulge their emotional antagonisms towards their enemies. One had to face the crucial questions: was it *security* or *sovereignty* that was really vital to the Ibos' survival, and was a fanatical pursuit of Biafran sovereignty a justifiable policy when the human cost—principally in Ibo lives—was mounting astronomically and showed no signs of diminishing? In the end, I felt that the Biafran leadership had gone too far and was failing in the moral responsibility, inherent in all leadership, to guide its people away from the course of heroic but suicidal sacrifice on which Biafra was set. That the Ibos were in the main prepared to go through with the sacrifice placed an even greater burden of responsibility on the Biafran government.

I have tried to be objective and unbiased, giving each side a fair crack of the whip. Hindsight, however, both helps and hinders: it demolishes some of the more outrageous myths but sometimes, with its cool and persuasive rationality, leads the writer into forgetting or devaluing the power of important emotional and psychological factors which make nonsense of rational considerations during times of crisis. I have therefore drawn heavily on as many independent eyewitness accounts as possible.

Occasionally, I have compared certain aspects of the war, particularly the military side, with the experience of medieval Europe. This is meant neither to be patronising nor a cheap trick in the quest of 'colour'. Such imagery is, I believe, accurate enough in its proper place but it would be very wrong to assume that the Nigerian war was a primitive medieval joust. Modern weapons, modern communications and modern international power politics made this irrefutably a mid-twentieth-century conflict. And it was no more brutal, mindless or less meaningful than most other modern wars. Indeed, in some respects, despite the terrible loss of life through starvation, it was fought and concluded on more humane lines than several recent European conflicts of which the Spanish civil war, with its 100,000 cold-blooded political killings, is the most shocking example.

I owe many debts to many people for help in preparing this book and

would like to thank the following: Tony Kirk-Greene for allowing me to have an advance copy of his massive and invaluable documentary source-book, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria* (O.U.P., 1971) as well as for all his other kindnesses; Martin Dent and Robin Luckham for allowing me the same freedom with their own shortly-to-be-published works on the Nigerian army and politics; Professor Ulf Himmelstrand for permitting me to read the English translation of his book on Nigeria; Zdenek Cervenka, for lending me his manuscript on the Nigerian war and use of his extensive bibliography; also Michael Crowder, Billy Dudley, Anthony Mockler, James Hudson, Irene Kluzek, Kennedy Lindsay, Robert Armstrong, Christopher Wrigley and John Stremiau.

I would like to thank several colleagues on the *Observer* who have helped me more than they probably realise: Robert Stephens, Patrick Seale, John Silverlight and John Gale. To Andrew Wilson, Anthony Sampson, Colin Legum and Richard Hall, who pointed me in the right direction when the going was rough and read much of the manuscript, I am particularly indebted. I would also like to express my appreciation to the *Observer* for sending me to Nigeria in the first place and for allowing me to draw on material which originally appeared in its columns.

My thanks are due to: the staff of *West Africa*, notably David Williams, Kaye Whiteman and Danny Nelson; to Bridget Bloom of the *Financial Times*, Michael Wolfers of *The Times*, Walter Schwarz of the *Guardian*, David Paskov, John Hatch, Tony Hughes, Mick Delap, John Smith, Henrik Beer, Peter Lumb, Jan Orner, William Bernhardt, Count Carl Gustav von Rosen and his family, Harry Spengler, Tony Thomas, David Tomlinson, John Mackintosh, M.P., Hugh Fraser, M.P., and David Steel, M.P.

A writer constantly on the move, I have been fortunate in friends who neither objected to the clatter of the typewriter nor minded half a ton of paper arriving on their doorsteps from time to time. Gilly and Harry Leventis, Peter le Marchant, Antony Martin, Jenny Pell, Brian Shakespeare, George McDowell and my mother all suffered in this respect and also gave me much helpful advice. I am very grateful to them all.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to Romano Cagnoni, the only photographer who seized the unique opportunity to document, fully and movingly, the totality of Biafra at war; almost half the photographs in this book are his. My thanks are also due to Don McCullin for use of three of his dramatic pictures. I am very grateful to the *Daily Mail* for their kind permission to reproduce a copy of Emmwood's cartoon on the



Lisbon, July 1968. WAITING FOR THE NIGHT-RUN TO BIAFRA. FOR FOUR nights we sleep fitfully on unrelenting airport benches. At dawn, drained and dispirited, we check into hotels, abandoning them and their suspicious managements at dusk for another night-long vigil. The normal realities seem to be reversed: the city is the place of transit, the airport becomes home. Biafra? Whether you call it 'Beeafra' or 'Byafra', it, too, is fading into fantasy.

'When you get to Lisbon,' the flat, P.R. voice on the Geneva-London line had said, 'contact Sam. He'll be wearing a light grey suit. The jacket's a little on the long side. You can't miss him—there aren't many Spades dressed like that hanging around Lisbon airport at three o'clock in the morning.' It sounded simple enough. But we missed Sam—and the plane to Biafra. In three-star hotels I find myself self-consciously re-arranging my bag to minimise the disconcerting jingle of tins of corned beef, bottles of vitamin pills, cans of soup and salt and the rest of the Biafra survival kit.

Hank Wharton, the soft-spoken American mercenary pilot, has the franchise for the Biafra run and on him depend the precious supplies of arms. A diffident, morose figure, far removed from the popular image of a dashing operator of clandestine airlines, he makes his apologies. The aircraft is being repaired; the navigator can't be found and when he is, he's paralytically drunk ('you would be, buddy, if you had *his* problems'); the Biafrans haven't paid the crew—or they have, but the pilots don't like the cheque, it has to be dollars on the nail (twenty-five thousand of them

for the round-trip) or nothing; and, when all else fails: 'the British' are trying to sabotage the run.

'Jesus, did you see that old shaky guy with the pebble glasses?'

The waiting is getting on everyone's nerves.

'Yeah, so what?'

'So everything; that's our pilot for Biafra.'

Then, suddenly, we're off. There is a discreet understanding of how things should be done. 'Don't bother to fill in "destination", ' the Portuguese officials say as we complete our departure forms. Even the luggage is shot straight on to the conveyor belt, unlabelled, and the porters grin lopsidedly mouthing 'Biafra' with pleasure. It's three-fifteen a.m. We drive out along the tarmac in the balmy summer air as the tourists pour in from every corner of Europe. Only that oily strip of tar connects them and us; their holiday thoughts and that bitter war down there in Africa; their secure, ordered lives and our confusion of fluttering bellies, anxieties over the technical trivia of our trade—deadlines, telexes, news editors, 'the opposition'—and that irrepressible, glorious surge of animal excitement.

In a lonely darkened corner of the airfield, two blacked-out Super-Constellations loom high off the ground, infinitely patient and elderly, like a pair of graceful swans, dignified but past their prime. Twenty years ago they were the 'Queens of the Atlantic'. We scramble aboard.

The seats in the main cabin are gone. In their place, where the economy passengers used to sit and suck the proud airline's boiled sweets, boxes of ammunition are lashed to the floor in neat rows. There is a smell of wood—fresh, clean and rather homely. Ten tons deadweight, somebody reckons.

'If the wings don't fall off during take-off, we should be all right,' the young German co-pilot announces in his smart American accent.

The crew, apart from the American pilot and the humorous German, consists of an American engineer (he turns out to be the ageing gentleman with the pebble glasses) and a 'security guard'—another American, with a face like a bacon-slicer. This last is tough, mean and not at all polite. He wears a sweat shirt which shows a thatch of grizzled hair and some fading tattoos. He is alleged to have acted with remarkable presence of mind and hacked loose the jammed undercarriage of one of the 'Connies' with an axe as it came into land in Portuguese Guinea a few weeks ago. But he is really on board to forestall any attempts by the Nigerians (or the British) to hijack the aircraft.

The captain, a man who likes big cigars, is more friendly. He addresses us frequently as 'gennelmen' and pilots the plane with a brilliant and casual skill. Among the passengers are a number of Biafran emissaries—bright, intense young men with trendy, flat, black leather and chrome briefcases. These are the men who have done so much to keep Biafra's links with the outside world open. Also on board is the Biafran bishop of Port Harcourt whose episcopal see fell to the Nigerians a few months ago. He is a jovial and avuncular figure who joins us all in a beer at breakfast in Portuguese Guinea, our first staging post on the long journey down to Biafra. His presence somehow makes the trip more reassuring.

All day long we lumber round the West Coast of Africa, well clear of anyone's air space. The plane is grossly overloaded—it took us the length of Lisbon airport to peel ourselves off the tarmac—and the pilot says he is going to dump some of the arms in São Tomé.

We come down heavily in this Portuguese island in the late afternoon. We are in the Bight of Biafra (old hands on the Coast call it the 'armpit of Africa'), two hundred miles or so from our final destination. There is a grey haze over the airport, the air is hot, dense with moisture and smells a bit like an old wet blanket drying slowly in the sun. For centuries São Tomé has been a 'closed' island, the site of a large penal colony, but now the Portuguese have allowed the Biafran arms and relief traffic to use the military airport. This was before the great relief operation got under way but already there are a few chartered planes standing by. Another 'Connie', without markings like the rest of Wharton's aircraft, and painted a dark shade of silver is also on the strip. The pilots call it, affectionately, the 'old Grey Ghost'.

A few Irish missionaries from Biafra, dressed in dirty white soutanes, are busy with relief cargoes. They, like the Biafran officials, are on good terms with the Portuguese. We, however, are kept firmly corralled in the scruffy airport 'lounge' as a ton and a half of our deadly freight is unloaded. The tropical night snuffs out the grey twilight with a kind of deliberate casualness and arc lights flood the loading bays. The bustle on the tarmac contrasts strangely with the sleepy African tempo of life around the airport. The scene, with its white priests, tough mercenary pilots, sweating porters and night sound-effects looks like a studio mock-up for a 'B' thriller and nourishes that burgeoning seed of fantasy.

The last leg is flown at night and to avoid the Nigerian fighters and the flak a long devious route is followed doubling the normal flight time. An hour or so before landing, the cabin and navigation lights snap off without

warning. There is no radar, no identification or landing equipment of any kind, only a primitive radio, and for what seems an eternity the flight continues in total darkness. Then a neat pattern of microscopic lights appears momentarily below. Uli. A three-letter word, a famous airport, a symbol of hope. More pedantically, a fine stretch of metalled road running straight as an arrow through the African bush.

We are very high, again a security precaution. The pilot spirals down and down. The sensation is peculiar, almost soothing, like sliding down a gently graded children's shoot for ever. Now we are overhead and can see the lights and palm trees, though only intermittently through the gusts of rain and blotches of heavy tropical cloud. 'Put your heads down and hold your knees,' barks the guard. My hands are slippery with sweat and thoughts of a children's playground were in another life. The pilot circles, overshoots and then comes down with an awe-inspiring finality through the low-lying cloud and flying spume on to the road that is a runway. The plane lurches, lifts a little, then runs sweetly in. (*Jesus Christ.*)

'Christ,' a veteran correspondent beside me, his voice muffled in his knees, says it. 'I'm too old.'

And the young Biafran, across the aisle, on his seventh round-trip?

'Fine,' he says without emotion, 'I'm home.'

CHAPTER
ONE

The Soldiers Take Over

January 1966

First coup

Ironsi in power

Ojukwu governor of the East

FOR THOSE WHO STILL CHERISHED NIGERIA'S IMAGE AS THE STABLE AND democratic star of independent black Africa, the weekend of Friday, 14th January, 1966, began a little more hopefully than most. Under the dignified leadership of Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Federal prime minister since independence in 1960, Nigeria had been an excellent host only two days before to the first ever Commonwealth Conference to be held outside London. The great issue of the day was Rhodesia, which two months earlier had illegally declared itself independent from Britain. Mr. Wilson, the British prime minister, vulnerable at home with his razor's edge parliamentary majority of four, was being assailed from all sides by an outraged black Africa for his refusal to use force against the Rhodesian rebels. Nigeria, through initiating and staging the conference, had consolidated its already considerable reputation for moderation and statesmanship in foreign affairs. Delegates to the meeting recalled how the Federation in the past had sent soldiers and policemen to the United Nations' operation in the Congo; how Lagos had been the only acceptable site for an attempt to reconcile the rival pan-African blocks of Monrovia and Casablanca in the early sixties; and how Federal civil servants, lawyers and the Nigerian army had helped the three Commonwealth East African countries more recently. 'Salute to Nigeria', trumpeted an editorial headline in the London *Times* a few days before the conference began. It was generally felt to be a well-merited accolade.

Admittedly, those same delegates driving through the steamy heat and squalor from the old colonial airport at Ikeja into the heart of the city of Lagos had noticed the massive security measures laid on for their protection. They had heard of the rigged elections in the Western Region and

the violence—anarchy, said some—which was paralysing normal life in the area and now spilling over into the suburbs of Lagos itself. And those with their ears closer to the ground knew of rumours of coups and counter-coups; of military take-overs and pre-emptive government strikes.

The conference ended, the delegates flew away—Mr. Wilson for talks with President Kaunda of Zambia in Lusaka—and Nigeria turned inward on itself again. In the Federal parliament the crisis in the Western Region rose like a phoenix, hot and angry from its ashes. 'This country is on fire . . . we are sitting on a tinder-box,' warned one opposition member. From Kaduna, capital of the Northern Region, the pro-government newspaper turned the coin over: 'Only 153 People Killed in the West', ran one laconic, chilling headline.¹ This, in fact, was the official figure for the violent political deaths which followed the rigged elections held there the previous October, but it only represented a fraction of the true toll which soared to somewhere between one and two thousand. On Thursday, 13th January, Balewa announced that the Federal government was not going to intervene in the West despite the increasing chaos and the fact that such intervention was legitimate under the constitution and had, moreover, a precedent, created by Balewa himself four years before. The following day the prime minister of the Western Region, Chief Akintola, flew to Kaduna for urgent discussions with his political ally, the Sardauna of Sokoto, premier of the North, Balewa's party boss and undisputed strong man of Nigeria. Simultaneously, a top-level security conference was taking place in Lagos, attended by most of the country's senior army officers. Rumours eddied to and fro, stirred by this new activity. Then the tempo slackened again: it was Ramadan and the Muslim sabbath, Akintola returned home to Ibadan and the soldiers in Lagos went off to a party. It was hot and it was the weekend. People settled back ready to resume, as they had done for the past five years, that peculiarly Nigerian game of political 'brinkmanship' on Monday morning.

But old Nigeria was to die that weekend. In the small hours of the morning, the classic tryst for coups, political murder and the launching of new Utopias, the soldiers struck. Working to a carefully prepared plan, bands of armed troops led by a group of young officers went into action in Lagos, Ibadan and Kaduna. The coup, code-named 'Operation Damisa'

¹ *New Nigerian*, 15.1.1966. I have relied extensively on A. H. M. Kirk-Greene's *Conflict in Nigeria*, Vols. I and II (O.U.P., 1971) for references to the Nigerian press and radio. The Western Region election, in which both parties employed thugs, has been accurately described as a 'para-military election'. Not untypical of the times was the man who appeared in court on a charge of intimidation and, on being asked by the judge for his profession, replied, 'A daily paid thug, sir.'

(Operation Leopard) was swift, brutal and merciless: leading political and military figures were shot, others arrested, and strategic strong points seized. Earlier that night (Friday, 14th January) the ringleaders—six majors and a captain, all Ibos with one exception—had held meetings to brief junior officers who had hitherto not been privy to the plan. Most of them were swayed over by the argument, persuasively and passionately presented, that Nigeria had been betrayed by its corrupt politicians and it was time the army took over; threats convinced the few remaining waverers. Specific tasks were allotted, transport, weapons and ammunition earmarked and 'H' hour set for 0200 hours.

In Lagos, Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna, a Sandhurst-trained university graduate and the first Commonwealth athlete to clear six feet nine inches in the high jump (at the Games in Canada in 1954), who was one of the principal plotters, led a small detachment of soldiers to the Prime Minister's house. The police guard was quickly overpowered and Ifeajuna kicked Balewa's bedroom door open and took him away after allowing him to say his prayers. The soldiers then went next door to the house of Chief Festus Okotie-Eboh, the Federal finance minister, brushed aside his personal guard, armed with bows and arrows, gave him a severe beating and arrested him too. Meanwhile, another group of mutineers had driven to the port and commercial suburb of Apapa where several senior army officers lived. Three key men in the army hierarchy had been selected to die: the chief of staff, the quartermaster-general and the adjutant-general. All three were killed by the major in charge of the group (another ringleader) with bursts of his sub-machinegun, either in their houses or out on the road. The bodies were thrown into the vehicles and the party drove back to Lagos to rejoin the main group.

In Ikoyi, the smart residential suburb adjacent to Lagos island, there had been a hitch. Another detachment of the mutineers led by Major Okafor, commander of the elite Federal Guard Unit, had lost its prey when Brigadier Maimalari, one of Nigeria's most senior soldiers, had been warned by a telephone call and had escaped from his house just as the plotters broke in. The official Nigerian police report on the coup describes what happened next.

'At a point on the golf course adjacent to a petrol station, Brigadier Mairnalari was walking towards Dodan Barracks when he saw Major Ifeajuna's car. The brigadier recognised Ifeajuna [his chief staff officer and special protégé]² and shouted and beckoned him to stop. Ifeajuna

² Author's note.

stopped the car and, accompanied by another officer, went towards Brigadier Maimalari and killed him."³

Ifeajuna then went on to the Ikoyi Hotel with his men and forced the receptionist to go up to the room of Lieutenant-Colonel Largema, another senior officer, who had come down to Lagos for the security conference and had attended the party which many of the others, plotters and victims, had gone to earlier that evening. When Largema came sleepily to the door in his pyjamas, he was caught in a murderous cross-fire; his body was taken down and put in the boot of Ifeajuna's car. Some of the hotel's guests rolled over in their sleep muttering angrily about noisy Nigerian parties, though several, including a blind and bewildered Englishman who was in the room opposite, rushed into the corridor to find nothing except a trail of blood and a confused uproar.

However, within an hour and a half of the first shots, the counter-coup had begun. The post office exchange and external telecommunications office were successfully taken over but the plotters failed to secure the police headquarters and the radio station. At the former, they were confronted by Major-General Aguiyi-Ironsi, the 41-year-old bluff and no-nonsense army commander who, returning home from a party on a ship in the harbour, had been alerted by the wife of one of his murdered officers and had immediately raced round to the police headquarters in his Jaguar car. Pistol in hand, he ordered the soldiers back to their barracks and went off to Ikeja, ten miles outside Lagos, to rally its garrison against the mutineers, brow-beating his way through the roadblocks. One of the first men to come to his side was a young and rather earnest Northern lieutenant-colonel, just back from a course in Britain, who himself had been a target of the coup but had been tipped off that night by his Ibo girl-friend. His name was Yakubu (or 'Jack') Gowon.

Meanwhile Ifeajuna and Okafor had linked up and drove out of Lagos on the Abeokuta road in the former's car taking the Prime Minister with them. Along the road, Ifeajuna stopped the car, ordered Balewa out and shot him, dumping his body in a ditch. Later that afternoon (Saturday) Ifeajuna drove his blood-smeared Mercedes Benz into Enugu, capital of the Eastern Region, and went into hiding. (He was subsequently smuggled across the Dahomey border, with the help of the Ibo poet, Christopher Okigbo, in a relay of cars, and was welcomed by President Nkrumah as

³ The narrative of the January coup is based largely, but not entirely, on a detailed report prepared by the Special Branch of the Nigerian Police. A summary of this first appeared in *The Times* (London) on 6.11.1969. The report's background and reliability is discussed later in this chapter.



Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Federal prime minister of Nigeria, 1960-66; killed in the January coup.

Sir Ahmadu Bello, Sardauna of Sokoto, powerful premier of the Northern Region; killed in the January coup.

Chief Samuel Akintola, premier of the Western Region; killed in the January coup.



Dr. Michael Okpara, former premier of the Eastern Region; escaped death in the January coup and became one of Ojukwu's top advisers.

Major-General John Aguiy Ironsi, head of the Federal military government and supreme commander of the armed forces, who ruled Nigeria for seven months after the January coup.



Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe ('Zik'), Nigeria's first nationalist leader and President; he initially supported Biafra but changed sides during the war.





Dr. Okoi Arikpo, Nigerian External affairs commissioner during the war.



Chief Obafemi Awolowo ('Awo'), the Yorub leader and one of Nigeria's most influential politicians who, after some initial prevarication, supported the Federal side.

Anthony Ukpabi Asika, the Ibo political science lecturer who remained loyal to the Federal government and became administrator of the new East-Central State carved out of former Biafra.



Chief Anthony Enahoro, popular politician from the Mid-West, became Nigerian commissioner for information at the outbreak of war.

a national hero.⁴) The other main group of plotters took the army lorry in which the corpses of the officers shot in Apapa were lying and also drove out of Lagos, probably realising by this time that the game was up. The police report describes the scene in its customary deadpan style:

'Major Anuforo [one of the ringleaders] ordered the corpses to be unloaded into the road and then observed Okotie-Eboh, the Federal Finance Minister, still seated in the truck and asked: "Who is that man?" The minister replied, "I am Okotie-Eboh." Anuforo ordered him to step down. The latter complied whereupon the major informed him he was going to be shot. The minister commenced to plead for his life. This met with little or no response from Anuforo who is reported to have confined himself to stating that he was acting under orders. The minister was then forced to go into the bush, pushed along by Anuforo to the spot where the bodies of the senior officers had been deposited. Arrived there, without hesitation Major Anuforo killed Okotie-Eboh with a short burst of his SMG [sub-machinegun].'

→ The bodies were buried in shallow graves and the mutineers drove back to Lagos where they found that Major-General Ironsi had successfully rallied loyal troops. As dawn was breaking they quietly gave themselves up. The coup in Lagos was over.

The man chosen to lead the coup in the troubled Western Region was another Ibo, Captain Nwobosi, the artillery commander in the Abeokuta garrison. Nwobosi, who had only been taken into the confidence of the conspirators and briefed a day or two before 'Operation Damisa' took place, received a telephone call late on Friday night from Ifeajuna in Lagos giving him the go-ahead. At midnight he turned out a detachment of soldiers, told them they were going to Ibadan, the Western Region's capital, on internal security operations and drew weapons and ammunition from the armoury. The convoy then moved off but on the way out of town the captain considerably stopped to pick up a pregnant woman in labour and took her to the nearest hospital. The column reached Ibadan at 'H' hour—two a.m.—as planned. They first drove to the automatic telephone exchange and ordered all the staff to leave the building and then went to the city's main electric power station. Again the employees were ordered to leave but when some of them asked the captain to give them a

⁴ After Ironsi took over, Ifeajuna was persuaded to return to Nigeria and was detained in Enugu with several of the other plotters. He was to play another leading part in the story after the war had broken out.

lift into town, he obligingly did so. The deputy prime minister of the Western Region, Chief Fani-Kayode, was the next target. His house was quickly surrounded and Nwobosi broke in and arrested him, saying that it was 'a lawful arrest by the army'. From upstairs a woman's voice was heard pleading, 'Don't kill him.' The convoy moved on to the premier's lodge where the security lights were blazing, powered by an emergency generator. The premier, Chief Akintola, had been warned by his deputy's wife—the automatic telephone exchange, though occupied, had not, apparently, been immobilised—and had had time to prepare. But his police guards were swiftly overcome by the soldiers while Nwobosi neutralised the generator, plunging the house into darkness. The police report takes up the tale.

'Captain Nwobosi stood in the middle of the courtyard and shouted, "Akintola come down—you are under lawful arrest by the army on orders from H.Q. 2 Brigade." A voice from upstairs, presumably that of Akintola, replied, "Yes, I am coming." Nothing further happened. Captain Nwobosi repeated his summons a number of times without a reaction from Akintola. He then fired one round from his rifle at the building. When this produced no result, the captain ordered his men into the building. To gain entrance, Nwobosi was compelled to force the main door to the Lodge. They all entered and mounted the stairs. On the first floor they searched a number of rooms without encountering anyone until they came to Akintola's bedroom which was locked. When the captain was about to force this door, Akintola opened fire from inside the room with a sub-machinegun, shooting through the closed door. This burst of fire wounded Nwobosi and an officer and soldier with him. None of the injuries, however, were sufficiently serious to impede them. The captain and his men immediately returned the fire whilst retreating down the stairs. They then left the house in a hurry and sought cover amongst the flower-beds facing the building. . . . Akintola came to the room over the entrance porch and continued to fire at his assailants with his SMG without, however, hitting anyone. Captain Nwobosi ordered his men to return the fire which they did, massively. Akintola continued firing until he ran out of ammunition. Around this time Fani-Kayode [deputy premier] was heard shouting from the Land-Rover to Akintola urging him to surrender. Akintola, now defenceless, decided to surrender and was next seen coming out of the front room. . . . He raised his hands and went downstairs. Captain

Nwobosi, in the meantime, was heard shouting repeatedly, "Bring him out, bring him out". He then ordered two of his men to shoot the premier. These two opened fire on Akintola with their rifles, joined, shortly afterwards, by Nwobosi himself. Akintola fell down dead or dying with several bullets in his body.⁵

The captain regrouped his detachment and sent a sergeant back to Abeokuta to collect a 105 mm. field gun and take it to Ikeja which appeared to be the next target. The party then left Ibadan and drove to Lagos. Fani-Kayode begged Nwobosi to release him but was informed that he had orders to take him to the capital. However, on arrival Nwobosi and his men were themselves arrested by loyal troops and the badly shaken deputy premier of the West released. By daylight the coup in the West had fizzled out.

Events in the North followed a similar pattern to the operations in Lagos and the West but had a different ending. The ringleader in Kaduna, the Northern Region capital, was Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu, senior instructor at the Nigerian Military Training College, a Mid-Western Ibo and the only member of the inner circle of conspirators stationed outside Lagos. A brilliant, dedicated officer, Sandhurst-trained, he was highly popular with his men and one of the rising stars of the Nigerian army. In order to avoid suspicion, he had started a series of night training exercises which proved to be an excellent and convincing 'cover' for the coup operations. On the night of 14/15th January, however, Nzeogwu drew live ammunition and two Carl Gustav 84 mm. anti-tank guns. At one-thirty a.m., after the exercise was over, he called all the officers together and told them that a revolt was taking place in the rest of the Federation and asked them for their support. Some of them were already in the conspiracy and the rest agreed readily enough. The major then addressed the soldiers, nearly all Northerners, and they also pledged their support. 'They had bullets but I was unarmed,' he said afterwards; 'if they had disagreed they could have shot me.'⁶

Nzeogwu personally led the assault on the official residence of the Sardauna of Sokoto, premier of the Northern Region. After shooting his way into the grounds of the Lodge, he sited the Carl Gustavs and opened fire on the house which was soon ablaze. A man armed with a sword came running out and Nzeogwu disarmed him and ordered to be taken to 'the

⁵ Police Report, paras. 112-116.

⁶ *West Africa*, 29.1.1966.

master of the house'. Accompanied by some of his men, he went inside pushing his way through the wailing women and children. They found the Sardauna, put him up against a wall and shot him; his senior wife and bodyguard who tried to protect him were also killed. Meanwhile, in other parts of the town the operation was claiming more victims. The 1st Brigade commander, second in rank only to Ironsi in the Nigerian army, was shot in his bed and his wife killed beside him. The deputy commandant of the Defence Academy (Nigeria's 'Sandhurst') was also killed in bed only a few minutes after receiving a warning telephone call which he either ignored or came too late to save him; his wife, however, escaped with leg and hand wounds. The post office, radio and television station and Kaduna airport were seized and the governor of the Northern Region arrested but unharmed. The commissioner of police began to mobilise his men but soon realised that resistance to the army was useless. Nzeogwu then went to the house of Major Hassan Katsina, the easy-going, polo-playing Fulani aristocrat, son of the Emir of Katsina and commander of the armoured-car reconnaissance unit in Kaduna. Nzeogwu and Katsina had been classmates at Sandhurst, were of a similar age and shared similar views on Nigeria's discredited political order. Confronted by Nzeogwu with a sub-machinegun in his hand, Katsina was not, in any case, disposed to argue. 'Which side are you on?' Nzeogwu asked, 'Are you with me or are you with them?' 'Don't bother,' Katsina replied, 'I'm on your side.'⁷ Although the coup did not go off entirely as planned, by dawn Nzeogwu and his men, their ranks now swollen by new recruits, were firmly in control of Kaduna.

In Enugu, the capital of the Eastern Region, soldiers went into action in the night surrounding the premier's lodge, taking over the radio station and investing the Governor's residence, where Archbishop Makarios of Cyprus was staying the night at the end of a tour of the Federation. But there was no killing and it was not at all clear whether the military operations sprang from the coup or the counter-coup. Early risers heard the voice of a Radio Enugu engineer at six-thirty a.m.: 'This is Effiong Etu. The army are here with us in the studio and have ordered us to tune into N.B.C. Lagos.'⁸

Nigeria awoke on Saturday morning in total confusion. In three major cities (Lagos, Ibadan and Kaduna) there had been the most violent and bloody coup d'état Africa had ever seen; but only in the Northern capital

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Walter Schwarz, *Nigeria* (Pall Mall Press, London, 1968), p. 196.

had it been fully successful, leaving its leaders in control. In a third Regional capital, Enugu, it seemed to have gone off at half-cock, while in the fourth, Benin City in the Mid-West, nothing had yet happened. Finally, in the only remaining large garrison town, Kano in the far north, the local commander, a young and decisive Ibo lieutenant-colonel called Emeka Ojukwu, had quickly taken control and sealed off the city from the rest of the Federation and the outside world. One thing, however, rapidly became clear. The political leadership and government of the day had been swept away. The old order, for better or for worse, had gone.

Ironsi spent most of the morning in the Lagos police headquarters⁹ trying to piece together what had happened and consolidating his position over the armed forces. Meanwhile, Benin, which had no garrison of its own, had its first experience of the military. At ten a.m. a detachment of soldiers under an Ibo captain arrived from Enugu and surrounded the governor's and premier's houses. The governor had a pistol pointed at him and was told that the post office and telephone exchange had been taken over by the army. At two p.m. the troops withdrew after the captain in charge had obligingly signed the governor's visitors' book at the latter's request. In the East, the coup had already shot its bolt. The commander of the battalion based in Enugu, who had been staying at the Ikoyi Hotel in Lagos where his colleague Lieutenant-Colonel Largema had been shot in the night, rushed back to his command on Saturday morning. Archbishop Makarios was seen off by the governor and the Regional ministers who were then allowed to disperse to their home towns and villages.

In such a confused situation the only hope the public had of keeping track of events was by sticking close to their radio sets. It soon became clear that the battle lines lay between Nzeogwu and Ironsi; between Kaduna and the rest of the Federation. At noon on Saturday, Nzeogwu was the first on the air, broadcasting in the name of the 'Supreme Council of the Revolution of the Nigerian Armed Forces'. Speaking with a strong military emphasis—his statement was larded with 'not repeat nots'—the major declared martial law in the Northern Region. The constitution was suspended, the Regional government and assembly dissolved, and the administration was to be run by the civil servants for the time being. 'Our enemies', he said, 'are the political profiteers, swindlers, the men in

⁹ The police headquarters in Lagos became the rallying point in all the Federation's crises, especially during the two coups. This was partly due to the Nigerian police force's capacity to keep a cool head and withstand the tribal stresses and strains under which the army crumbled, and partly to the fact that it had the best radio communications network in the country.

the high and low places who seek bribes and demand ten per cent, those that seek to keep the country divided permanently so that they can remain in office as ministers and V.I.P.s of waste, the tribalists, the nepotists . . . we promise that you will no more be ashamed to say you are Nigerian.' He then listed ten proclamations which decreed the death penalty for a bizarre collection of offences including looting, arson, rape, embezzlement, bribery, corruption, homosexuality, 'obstruction of the revolution', 'false alarm', and tearing down proclamations of the day. 'Wavering' or 'sitting on the fence', doubtful loyalty, loitering and rowdy behaviour, though lesser crimes, would also be punished, at the discretion of the local commanders. He ended cheerfully enough: 'Thank you very much and goodbye for now.' The national anthem closed the broadcast.¹⁰

The same afternoon the national radio network in Lagos put out a short, terse statement. 'In the early hours of this morning, 15th January, 1966, a dissident section of the Nigerian army kidnapped the prime minister and the minister of finance and took them to an unknown destination. The General Officer Commanding (Ironsi) and the vast majority of the army remained completely loyal to the Federal government and are already taking all appropriate measures to bring the situation under control.' Kano radio was next on the air. The Emir, at Lieutenant-Colonel Ojukwu's request, broadcast a short message appealing for peace and calm.

In Lagos, Ironsi was trying to do three things at once: rally the army, reach a peaceful settlement with Nzeogwu and decide the fate of the Federal government. There were strong rumours—subsequently proved untrue—that Nzeogwu was marching south and had reached the crucial Jebba bridge, over the Niger river, which links the northern and southern halves of the country. In Ibadan, the Northern soldiers were in a particularly volatile state (their popular commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Largema, had been murdered in the coup) and began to dig in around the northern approaches to the University. The long-distance telephone line between Lagos and Kaduna buzzed with prolonged negotiating. Asked by a reporter how things were going, Ironsi replied tersely, 'Very badly indeed.' The Federal parliament, meeting probably somewhat in the frame of mind of Cromwell's Rump Parliament—only thirty-three out of 312 members turned up—adjourned its proceedings *sine die*. The Federal cabinet also met, with Ironsi and the British High Commissioner, Sir Francis Cumming-Bruce—specially invited—both present.

¹⁰ Kirk-Greene, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, Documents, p. 91, pp. 125-6.

The government was leaderless and jittery. The President, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe ('Zik'), was still in Britain, convalescing after an illness¹¹ and the prime minister was missing. (At this stage his fate, and that of the finance minister, was not known.) A wrangle between the two coalition parties developed over the appointment of a temporary successor to Balewa and Saturday ended with the *impasse* unresolved. The next day Ironsi summoned the ministers and warned them that, after sounding out the feelings of the army, he could only be sure of its loyalty if power was placed in his hands. Eyewitnesses at this meeting say that Ironsi was genuinely upset and had tears in his eyes when he spoke of the death of his military comrades. Faced with this uncompromising assessment of the situation, the cabinet had little choice but to agree. Shortly before midnight, the acting Federal President ('Zik's' deputy) came on the air and announced the government was handing over to the military. Ironsi then spoke. The Federal and Regional parliaments and governments were suspended, military governors, directly responsible to him, would shortly be appointed to all four Regions and day-to-day administration would be run by the civil servants. Ironsi, now head of the new 'Federal Military Government', stressed that the current disorders in the Western Region would be 'suppressed' and promised that a new popular constitution would be prepared for an eventual return to civilian rule.

A great deal of controversy later arose over the constitutionality of Ironsi's assumption of power, especially in comparison with Gowon's take-over seven months later. Since there was no provision for either action in the Republican constitution of 1963 both were clearly illegal and unconstitutional. And none of the careful wording that accompanied Ironsi's accession to power could disguise this central, immutable fact. The 'unanimous' and 'voluntary' nature of the Federal cabinet's 'invitation' to Ironsi and his reply that he had been 'formally invested with authority as head of the Federal military government' (he, significantly, omitted to say by whom) merely kept the affair on a gentlemanly plane and gave the impression—admittedly much-needed at that critical time—that everything was under control. But it could not disguise the fact that his (and later, Gowon's) governments were both *de facto* and not *de jure* administrations.

In terms of expediency, however, Ironsi was on firmer ground. Nobody knew how serious a threat Nzeogwu in Kaduna posed during

¹¹ Azikiwe condemned the use of force in Nigeria but offered his services to Ironsi. The latter, it seemed, was in no hurry to accept them and it was nearly two months before the former president returned to Nigeria. On the passenger list he was described as 'journalist'.

that confused weekend. The politicians themselves were in no mood to put up a stiff resistance and it was only with difficulty that a quorum was reached at the cabinet meetings. The popular rejoicing in Lagos and the South weakened their resolve still further and it did not require much pressure from Ironsi to persuade them that it was time to go. And on simple military grounds it clearly made sense that the army commander should have the fullest authority possible to deal with such an unprecedented and dangerous crisis. Nevertheless, a question mark still hangs over Ironsi's actions. A declaration of a national emergency by the government would have provided him with similar powers to deal with the army, with the difference that they would have been constitutional—but temporary. Moreover, by Sunday morning, Ironsi knew better than most that the coup had failed completely in Lagos, the West, Mid-West and the East and that the leaders were safely under lock and key or in hiding. Kano, under Ojukwu, had declared its loyalty the previous day and the military problem had narrowed down to Nzeogwu, who was showing signs of feeling his isolation, and the restless Northern rank and file in the army. And the point about the army was not so much rebelliousness against the old order and the civilian government as anger and confusion over the killing of the popular Northern officers. It is highly significant that Northern and Middle Belt soldiers in Ibadan killed a Southern officer that weekend—his death was, in a way, the first casualty of the Northern counter-coup that was to explode in July—and later refused to serve under another Southerner who was appointed by Ironsi to replace their own murdered commander. But, of course, these events were little known at the time and it was the wave of relief and the feeling of a new dawn that made Ironsi's take-over seem to many people both logical and the best solution in the circumstances.

While the general was consolidating his position in Lagos, Major Nzeogwu sat tight in Kaduna. Tension remained high in the town and it was only after some difficulty that a meeting was arranged between Nzeogwu and the civil servants. The major, his arm in a sling—the result of a wound inflicted in the assault on the Sardauna's house—and surrounded by armed soldiers, told the group that he had led the coup with four other majors but they had been let down elsewhere. The immediate and most pressing problem was to get money from the bank in Kano, 120 miles away, to pay the soldiers; if they were not paid on time there was a real fear that they might run amok. In normal times the specie came by road from Kano but this was judged to be too hazardous so a light

plane with the Northern Region's accountant-general on board was sent up to Kano. However, Lieutenant-Colonel Ojukwu immediately impounded the aircraft and arrested all those in it. (On the day of the coup he had dealt out similar treatment to a B.O.A.C. VC-10 en route to London from Lagos.) Fortunately, the crisis was overtaken by new developments in Kaduna.

On Monday morning, after lengthy long-distance telephone conversations with Ironsi in Lagos, Nzeogwu decided to give in. At one p.m. he announced that he had reached a five-point agreement with the Supreme Commander which included a guarantee of safety and freedom from legal proceedings for all those involved in the coup and an assurance that 'the people whom we fought to remove will not be returned to office'. By any standards these terms were extraordinarily favourable to the major, considering that his position was weakening hourly with the entire Federation rallying against him, and they allowed Ironsi much less room to manoeuvre later on than he perhaps would have liked. Still, the spectre of civil war with further fighting in the army faded away. In a typically Sandhurst way, Nzeogwu announced that he had 'surrendered his sword' to Ironsi who, in the same idiom, 'accepted' it. Before leaving Kaduna, Nzeogwu 'handed over' the administration to Major Hassan Katsina but would only fly to Lagos in the company of a close personal friend, another Mid-Western Ibo officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Conrad Nwawo.¹² On arrival he was imprisoned with the other ringleaders and the coup was finally over.

In the Federal capital, Ironsi was pressing ahead with the formation of his new administration. At his first news conference he confirmed that Nzeogwu had surrendered, but could throw no light on the whereabouts of the missing prime minister and finance minister. Asked how long he would stay in power, he replied that it would depend upon how long it would take for life to return to 'normal'. A constitution, prepared in accordance with the wishes of the people, would ultimately be put into effect. Asked whether, in the meantime, he would appoint a cabinet, he looked up at the ceiling for a full minute—and then passed without a word to the next question. 'Clearly,' wrote one eyewitness, 'it had never occurred to him.'¹³ The following day, Ironsi released the names of the new military governors of the four regions. They were: Lieutenant-Colonel Ojukwu (East); Lieutenant-Colonel Fajuyi (West); Lieutenant-Colonel

¹² He, like Ifeajuna, was to re-appear later in the story in the early part of the war.

¹³ Walter Schwarz, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

Ejor (Mid-West); and Major Katsina (North). Lieutenant-Colonel Gowon, the most senior surviving Northerner in the forces, was appointed army chief of staff. The next day, the bodies of the finance minister, badly beaten, and the four senior army officers murdered in Lagos and Apapa were found in their shallow grave off the Abeokuta road, and exactly a week after the coup, the government announced 'with deep regret' the death of Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. Three days' official mourning was declared and he was buried in his home town of Bauchi in the North.

The coup was greeted by a wild outburst of rejoicing in the southern half of the country. One commentator who was there at the time described the scene vividly.

'It had been a dream of a coup. "Bang, bang, you're dead!"—a satisfying infantile aggression fantasy. In a single night the Sardauna of Sokoto, symbol of Hausa-Fulani domination and of feudalistic reaction, Chief Akintola, high priest of election rigging, and Chief Okotie-Eboh, byword for luxury and ministerial corruption, had been killed. Scores of ministers, corporation chairmen and parliamentarians—all people who had occupied free houses, used up over-generous allowances and driven subsidised cars—were swept out of office.'¹⁴

In Lagos and other major southern towns there were popular demonstrations expressing support for Ironsi's military government. The press, the most outspoken and ebullient in Africa, indulged itself in an orgy of invention and high spirits. One of the best headlines of all, in West African pidgin English, ran: 'Bribe? E Done Die-O. Chop-Chop—E No Dey' ('Bribery is Dead. Corruption is Not There').¹⁵ The coup leaders became heroes and the violence in the West gave way, almost overnight, to an unaccustomed but very welcome state of calm. Incredulity, then relief, finally joy were the dominant emotions which washed over the South in those momentous first days. The political parties, even those which had lost most from the abrupt ending of civilian rule, pledged their loyalty and support to the new regime. The former ruling party, the Northern People's Congress, stated that it regarded the transfer of authority 'as the only solution to the many recent problems facing this country'. Of course, there was a large element of 'jumping on the band-wagon' in all this and.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

¹⁵ *Morning Post*, Lagos, 27.1.1966.

by a strange coincidence, a highly topical and prophetic novel by the Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe, was published the week of the coup. Towards the end of *A Man of the People*, a story of the rise and fall of an African politician ending with an army take-over, Achebe has this to say: 'Overnight everyone began to shake their heads at the excesses of the last regime, at its graft, oppression and corrupt government . . . newspapers, the radio, the hitherto silent intellectuals and civil servants—everybody said what a terrible lot; and it became public opinion the next morning.' Nevertheless, most people in the South genuinely welcomed the military government and felt that a new and more hopeful era of Nigerian history had dawned.

In the North it was different. Most eyewitnesses agree that the people were stunned and bewildered by the rapid succession of events. The loss of the Region's two most important political leaders and virtually all its senior army officers at one fell swoop had not yet really sunk in. Nor had the fact that Federal power, exercised continuously by the Northern leadership since independence five years earlier, had been torn from its grasp. There were no open signs of hostility, however, and the Northern press followed its Southern counterpart by calling for an end to corruption and nepotism in Nigeria. The traditional rulers, the emirs, also made public statements of loyalty to Ironsi. The radicals, like their colleagues in the South, whole-heartedly welcomed the coup but they were the only group that came out strongly and unreservedly in favour of the new order. The North as a whole, a slow-moving and somnolent giant at the best of times, slumbered on—but, the more astute observers noted, with one watchful eye open.

The 'majors' or 'January boys' coup—as it soon became known—was, in reality, the first round of the Nigerian civil war, though it was neither intended, nor appeared to be so at the time. Both the coup itself and the legends, which quickly grew round it like mushrooms in the rain, split Nigeria in two and sent it rolling down the road to a fratricidal war. Two essential questions have to be answered here, if the rest of the story is to make sense. Was it an Ibo coup? And was it, as later claimed, the prelude to an attempt by the Ibos to take over and 'dominate' Nigeria?

The full truth about the details of the first coup may never be known since all the principal conspirators are dead, killed in the July counter-coup or in the civil war. But sufficient evidence is available to illuminate some of its central mysteries. The best account is the Federal police report on which I have based much of the narrative. This document, prepared by the

Nigerian Special Branch, took three months to finish (it was ready in April 1966) and was written after 200 officers and men, including all the ringleaders involved in the coup, had been exhaustively interrogated. The body of the report is, I am convinced, a thoroughly honest, painstaking and politically untainted piece of work. (The astonishing detail and the formal police language substantiate both its authenticity and veracity.) But the introduction which may have been added later and the inferences drawn from the report after the fall of Ironsi's regime suggest an attempt to give it a political gloss which its contents belie, for by then the Federal government, in growing conflict with the Ibos in the East, was trying to prove that the January coup had been part of a monstrous Ibo plot while the Easterners were maintaining that the bloody events of January were no justification for the even bloodier sequel in July. Neither was right and the police report and other sources help to explain why.

The concept of a coup in Nigeria was not new. In the constitutional crisis of December 1964, several lieutenant-colonels, mainly Ibos and including Ojukwu, had talked of military intervention but nothing had come of it and the army, true to its British traditions, had kept out of politics. However, as the situation deteriorated, some of the younger officers began to plot seriously and it seems probable that the 'inner circle' of the January group had its genesis in August 1965, even before the disastrous, catalytic elections in the Western Region had taken place. Contrary to popular belief and Nzeogwu's own claim, it appears that the original caucus did not include him. Majors Ifeajuna (the high-jumper) and Okafor (commander of the Federal Guard) were the principal plotters and they brought Nzeogwu—dubbed by one writer, 'the Brutus of the coup'—in later since they needed an efficient and strongly motivated man to direct operations in the North. By the end of October 1965, there were seven officers in the conspiracy: five majors and a captain were Ibos and the remaining major was a Yoruba.

This tribal breakdown with its heavy preponderance of Ibos is a central plank of the 'Ibo plot' theory, but on closer examination it turns out to be a worm-eaten one. The fact is that about fifty per cent of the middle officer ranks in the Nigerian army, the pre-independence 'Sandhurst generation' who were commissioned between 1954 and 1960, were Ibos and it was from this group, some of whom had also been to university, that discontent with the old order and an older generation was likely to come. Their natural links were not with the establishment politicians (in or out of power) but with the young radicals among the educated elite.

Their motives were mixed: some were genuinely idealistic and wanted to rid Nigeria of the corrupt politicians and the feudalistic incubus represented by the Sardauna of Sokoto and his Northern party; others had more personal reasons—promotions in the army had slowed down markedly in recent years and there was some dissatisfaction with the military hierarchy as well as with the politicians. But here the young Ibo majors had the sympathy of many of their Southern, and even a few of their Northern peers. In this sense the coup could be seen more accurately as a 'Southern' movement rather than a purely Ibo one. Finally, there are strong indications in the weaving of the fabric of the plot that loyalties of classroom and rank mattered more than tribe; it was no accident that six of the seven ringleaders were majors.

But for the Federal government and many others it was the tribal pattern of the killings as much as the ethnic origins of killers that provides the most damning evidence to support the 'Ibo conspiracy' theory. The North lost its two top politicians and four of its most senior soldiers, and the West one politician and two high-ranking officers. No Ibo politicians were killed and only one Ibo officer, the quartermaster-general, died—unintentionally, it was later alleged, because he refused to surrender the armoury keys. Moreover, they argue, the coup left both the East and the Mid-West (the Regional prime minister was a Mid-Western Ibo) unscathed. Two points can quickly be demolished. First, the Ibo quartermaster-general, the Federal government's own police report makes quite clear, was on the plotters' original death list. He was shot as planned in his home, not for the sake of the armoury keys (the conspirators already had ample supplies of arms and ammunition and, in any case, Q.M.G.s are not in the habit of keeping bunches of armoury keys in their bedrooms), but because he was known to be a loyal member of the army's hierarchy. Secondly, with regard to the Mid-West, since there was no garrison in Benin City this small state would obviously have the lowest priority for an operation which was already short of manpower and dangerously over-extended.

The failure of the coup in Enugu and the East is more difficult to explain. It seems that this was Ifeajuna's responsibility after he had completed his tasks in Lagos. But again the priorities for anyone who intended to overthrow the existing order would naturally be Lagos and the North (rather than the East because of the concentration of political power in the former), and then the West—Ibadan is only eighty miles from Lagos—would present an easier target if, as the 'January boys' undoubtedly

were, one was short of reliable men. It seems clear that the collapse of the coup in the Federal capital and the fortuitous presence of Archbishop Makarios in Enugu contributed to the failure of the coup in the East. (The ringleaders had already shown their respect for foreign visitors by postponing the coup itself on account of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference.) But it is also conceivable that when actually confronted with killing their own kinsmen, they found they could not do it, though this did not deter the Ibo major who shot the unfortunate Ibo quartermaster-general dead in Apapa suburb.

The roles of Ironsi and Ojukwu—both Ibos from the East—have also caused a great amount of speculation; subsequent propaganda has either implicated (Federal) or exonerated (Eastern) them. The favourite interpretation of Ironsi's part is that he was told of the plot by the conspirators and replied something like this, 'O.K., boys, if you pull it off, I'm with you, but if you don't, you're on your own.' In a manuscript written by Ifeajuna after the coup, and now believed lost, he claimed 'our general, whom we expected to help us, let us down', but there is no real evidence for this. Ironsi, who had first commanded the Nigerian military contingent then the entire United Nations force in the Congo, was already at the pinnacle of success and was no radical firebrand. In fact, when he had heard that a military move against the government was in the offing in December 1965, he had informed the Prime Minister, but the story was discounted for lack of proof and the general feeling that military coups could not happen in 'stable' Nigeria. Ironsi, 41 years old at the time of the coup and a former N.C.O. in the colonial army, who had risen to be the first indigenous commander of the Nigerian army a year earlier, was poles apart in background, education and temperament from the idealistic and hot-headed young majors, even though he came from the same tribe. His actions on the night of the coup—the fact that he was at a party on a ship in Lagos harbour probably saved his life—and his shock at the death of his comrades (among other deficiencies, Ironsi could list acting) were too genuine to be written off as a clever piece of dissimulation. Moreover, he took quick and brave action, at some personal risk, to crush the coup as soon as he knew about it.

Ojukwu may also have had wind of the coup. But again he was outside the conspirators' group in terms of rank and background (as the son of a millionaire and a friend of the Emir of Kano he was thought to be too much of an 'establishment' figure to be trusted). Nzeogwu, in particular, who was in charge of the Northern end of the operation, disliked and mis-

trusted him deeply. By closing Kano airport, holding incoming aircraft and their passengers, encouraging the Emir to appeal for calm on the radio and discussing the situation with Ironsi over the telephone, Ojukwu could have equally been acting for or against the coup, or more simply—and the most likely explanation—consolidating his base, where he had a battalion of troops under command, until he saw which side was going to win.

The January coup, therefore, was not part of a Machiavellian Ibo plot to take over the Federation. The young majors who planned and executed it genuinely felt they were performing a painful but necessary piece of surgery to restore Nigeria's failing health. But they bungled—none of them appeared to have given a thought to post-operative care—and almost killed the patient. And in the contagious atmosphere of bewilderment and suspicion which clung to these events and which the government of the day did little to dispel, the botched result increasingly began to *look* like an Ibo nationalist conspiracy. In dwelling on the details, many of them befogged and warped in the telling, people forgot the grand design. Its daring, its idealism, even its limited success, for it did, after all, obliterate a discredited, unpopular regime, paled before the memory of the coup's blind, nihilistic violence; its renaissance treachery (Ifeajuna murdering his commander and mentor in cold blood) and the sacred and intimate comradeship of soldiers (had not the victims and killers been drinking and laughing together at that Lagos party only hours before the majors struck?) being shattered time and again during a few short hours in the depth of the night. All this set against the backdrop of a bumbling, but essentially moderate Nigeria with its *pukka* and proud little army was too sudden, too shocking for there not to be an equally violent reaction. And into the cracks seeped myth, legend and propaganda, fatally eroding and loosening the jerry-built Federal state. As the months went by what had actually happened in the early hours of 15th January mattered less to Nigerians than what they believed had happened.

CHAPTER
TWO

Ironsi's Two Hundred Days

January—July 1966

Ironsi's regime

5

MAJOR-GENERAL AGUIYI-IRONSI AND THE ARMY CAME TO POWER IN Nigeria on the crest of a wave of unprecedented popular support in the South and with the more muted but cautiously optimistic acceptance of the North. Less than seven months later another even more murderous coup d'état had ripped the army and country apart and Ironsi was dead. During that short space of time, Nigeria moved closer than even before to a unitary system of government and then all but disintegrated; riots broke out in the North and claimed several hundred Ibo lives; the army, once the most proudly 'Nigerian' of all the nation's institutions, became the biggest force for disunity and tribalism. How did such an auspicious beginning lead to such a disastrous finale?

Ironsi started well. His first problem was the army itself which was still in a restive mood. It is now known that serious trouble and even bloodshed continued for several days after Ironsi's take-over, with Northern and Middle Belt soldiers attacking Southerners suspected of taking part in the coup. Ironsi's ultimate success in restoring order was attributable less to an iron hand and parade-ground tactics, though these were more his natural style, than to tactful bargaining and the gradual achievement of an acceptable compromise. An illuminating example of this unmilitary juggling was the replacement of the dead commander of the troublesome 4th Battalion in Ibadan. Ironsi appointed an Ibo major to take command. At the latter's first meeting with the battalion's N.C.O.s (mostly Middle Belt men) he was asked: 'Please sir, why are our commanding officers¹ dead and why are you here to take their place?' The major, faced with similar hostility

¹ The 4th Battalion's current and former commanding officers (Largema and Kuru Mohammed) both Northerners, had been killed in the coup.

throughout the unit, decided he could not take on the job. The regimental sergeant-major then went directly to Ironsi, saluted smartly, and reported that he had no commanding officer. He was offered several Southern officers all of whom he respectfully refused until a popular Middle Belt major was mentioned and promptly accepted.² An ominous polarisation against the 'January boys' and their coup was already clearly taking place within the army in direct contrast to the joyous mood in the country at large.

Ironsi had chosen his Regional military governors pragmatically—army seniority mattered less than ethnic and administrative compatibility—and he wisely appointed the former civilian governors to act as advisers to the new men, thus ensuring a degree of continuity. Other factors helped the general to get off to a good start. The civil service, one of Nigeria's most effective institutions, was given its head and allowed to proceed with its work unhindered by interfering and corrupt politicians. The excellent Nigerian police force, unaffected by the coup, gained a valuable breathing space with the return of peace in the West where it had been seriously over-extended. Political appointees were removed from public boards and statutory corporations; probes into the financial affairs of the politicians were initiated; the number of ministries was reduced, saving the taxpayer about £3 million, and a refreshingly open and animated public debate on the future of the country began in the press, the universities and the street. In speeches Ironsi and the military governors stressed concern for the 'common man'; the light of the new dawn shone strong and pure.

But since Nigerians are an intensely volatile and political people, the post-coup euphoria could not in the nature of things last very long. People began to look eagerly for directional signs from the new regime. Broadly speaking there were two main political currents in the country at that time. The radicals or progressives, numerous among the urban elites in the South but also represented in northern intellectual circles, urged a unitary form of government. This group knew its own mind reasonably well, had the majority of the national press on its side and was generally far more articulate and impassioned than the exponents of the rival ideology. That was basically the voice of conservatism and found its clearest expression in the fears of the North which believed in a loose federation and strongly entrenched regional autonomy. There was also a cross-current, represented by some of the minority peoples (those of the

² Martin Dent, Royal Institute of International Affairs study group papers on material for his forthcoming book, *The Military and the Political Process in Nigeria, 1966-68*, to be published by the Oxford University Press, London.

Middle Belt in the North and the Eastern Region's smaller tribes, for example) who wanted local autonomy for themselves yet a stronger central government which could protect them from their more powerful neighbours. Their voice was to be heard more forcefully after the July coup. All shades of opinion, however, were united on the need for popular consultation. Even a firm supporter of the 'progressive' unitary view like Nigeria's leading independent newspaper, the *Daily Times*, could sound a note of warning on the dangers of moving too fast and interpreting rather than consulting popular feeling.

'There seems to be the misconception among some people that because of the myriad weaknesses of the last constitution, and because of the universal impatience with its shortcomings, we can now take it for granted that Nigerians have picked a unitary form of government for the Second Republic. Maybe. But only maybe . . . are we already satisfied that Nigerians necessarily want this?'³

Initially, it seemed that Ironsi and the military were going to hold the ring and assume the role of an impartial arbiter without prejudice. The general stressed the *temporary* nature of the military government, its constitutional continuity (the regions, for example, continued to function as they had done under civilian rule) and its 'cleansing' mission. He appointed a plethora of commissions or 'study groups' to enquire into practically everything, ranging from the constitution itself to the reform of the prison system. From the narrow but crucial viewpoint of tribal favouritism, Ironsi also created a good initial impression. His own 'attributionalism' was genuine and was reflected in his choice of personal staff—he appointed a Northern A.D.C. and a Northern private secretary. However, almost immediately, Nigeria began to move towards a unitary form of government. The army take-over itself constituted a lurch in that direction. With its hierarchical structure and rigid chain of command, it inevitably introduced a new degree of unity into the government from the very outset; the old Regions might be the same but the new governors, in Ironsi's eyes—for he was, heart and soul, a military man—were junior officers first and Regional administrators a long way second, and took orders from him in a way that no civilian Regional premier had ever obeyed the Federal prime minister. The story of Ironsi's two hundred days in power is like that of a man on a raft caught in a sea of powerful and

³ *Daily Times*, Lagos, 17.2.1966.

conflicting currents. There is no doubt that he personally favoured a unitary form of government (it matched all his military training and beliefs) and he paddled manfully, if somewhat blindly, towards it. He was helped on his way by a tide of radicalism but beneath there was a much more muscular undertow, the broad sweep of conservative and traditional fears, which was eventually to pull him down.

Ironsi soon made it clear where his own preferences lay. 'All Nigerians want an end to regionalism,' he baldly stated at the end of January. Three weeks later he was more specific: 'a rigid adherence to "regionalism" was the bane of the last regime and one of the main factors which contributed to its downfall . . . in the new order there should be no place for regionalism and tribal consciousness.' Meanwhile the military government had appointed a senior official, Francis Nwokedi, an Ibo from the East (like Ironsi), to report as a one-man commission of enquiry on the 'establishment of an administrative machinery for a *united Nigeria*' [my italics], and the 'unification of the five public services⁴ and judicial services in Nigeria'. Although Nwokedi's brief had nothing directly to do with the constitutional future of the country—that was to be decided later by another study group and put to the people through a referendum—it struck the vital nerve since it concerned Regional autonomy and the control of government jobs. Moreover, the terms of reference were loaded, there being no mention of the possibility of a *federal Nigeria*; neither was there any consideration of popular approval for any measures which the commission might propose. Finally, there was the real possibility of a contradiction if the constitutional commission should suggest—and the people approve—a federal form of government while the Nwokedi commission settled for a unitary system of administration. The entrusting of such a crucial task to one man immediately caused a furore and a second, non-Ibo, person was later appointed to assist Nwokedi.

With the setting up of the other study groups the situation was becoming more than a little confused. No one was sure of the relative importance of the various commissions and some appeared to pre-empt or overlap others. The findings of the Commission on Constitutional Reform, for example, were to be submitted to a constituent assembly and, ultimately, to a referendum. But administrative changes, many of which under Nwokedi's brief could cut deep into the Federal structure of the constitution, could apparently be implemented without popular consent. By early March the first rumblings of dissent were heard, significantly

⁴ The four Regional and the Federal civil services which were independent of each other.

from the hitherto quiescent and uncritical North. An editorial in the *New Nigerian* (the Northern government newspaper) on 1st March advised the Federal government to hasten slowly. The influential Sultan of Sokoto from the far North, addressing mainly Northern troops in Lagos, struck an oblique note of warning: 'We are confident that it is the intention of the Military Government to preserve and protect our good customs. . . .'⁵ In the North itself a more vicious movement was gathering strength at grass-roots' level in the vernacular press; a fairly typical instance was this editorial headline: 'Discipline these Insolent Ibos Living in the North' which appeared near the end of the month in the Hausa language daily.⁶ The Northern giant was stirring uneasily after its long sleep.

At the end of March it was plain that whatever the study groups proposed—they were still deep in their researches—Ironsi had decided firmly on some degree of administrative centralisation. On the 31st he gave a long and crucial broadcast on the occasion of the annual budget. The budget itself was not innovatory, but Ironsi made it sound so. 'For the first time,' he said, 'fiscal, economic and industrial projects are being considered and directed by one central authority.' He again stressed his interpretation of the general will: 'I am convinced that the bulk of our people want a united Nigeria and that they want in future one government and not a multitude of governments.' There was nothing in this key speech, his first major pronouncement for six weeks, to reassure the conservatives and the doubters. Many people see this as the turning point in the general's short-lived regime, the point where the *interim* nature of the military government had lost all credibility. Certainly serious opposition to Ironsi dates from this time.

Criticism in the North was becoming more vocal and widespread. By the end of April, while the Southern radicals were lauding Ironsi's first hundred days in office—the popular *Daily Times* columnist, 'Peter Pan', wrote two enthusiastic articles entitled 'To the Battlements, My General!'—the Northerners were turning against the government. In London, Northern students took to the streets, demonstrating against a unitary system of government. Editorials, articles and letters in the regional and national press and talks on Radio Kaduna all underlined what was coalescing into a broad majority view among the Northern elite. One notable letter to the *New Nigerian* of 19th April put the Northern

⁵ Federal Ministry of Information, PR. No. 257/1966.

⁶ *Gaskiya ta fi Kwabo*, Kaduna, 28.3.1966.

case with great clarity. Entitled 'Federalism is Good for Nigeria', the writer explained why the North had been so silent and apparently indifferent to the new order. 'I feel that our silence is neither born out of fear nor . . . out of lack of views to present . . . it is partly born out of shock.' He then listed some of the causes of that shock: the seemingly tribally selective killings of the politicians in the January coup and the murder of innocent army officers—again on a tribal basis; the failure of the Ironsi government to bring the coup leaders to justice and, revealingly, 'the mad rush of application letters for jobs pouring into the North from other parts of the country'. On unitary government he was equally trenchant. 'One sad fact which these journalists as well as some of the military top advisers refuse to admit is that a unitary government does not necessarily unite the people of Nigeria.'⁷

I have quoted this letter at length because I feel it accurately encapsulates the mood of the North at that time. The writer was not an important figure, simply an ordinary member of the educated and politically conscious class; but his views and fears were shared by many. There were two further points of significance: this broad ground-swell of concern had taken shape well *before* Ironsi had made any overt move to alter the system of government and it was too general, too compelling to be easily overlooked, except perhaps by those who did not want to see it.

But Ironsi was also being criticised by the Southern radicals who began to express their unease and disappointment with the government. An editorial in *Nigerian Opinion*, the Ibadan University journal, spoke of 'a haunting feeling about in the country that things are not fully right'. Its analysis, however, was based on the opposite premise to that of the Northerners. It attacked the regime for being too bourgeois, too busy on committees and government work to the detriment of the army itself and generally moving too slowly on the question of administrative and constitutional reform. It ended on a challenging note: 'the opportunities are there. Either we seize them or it will be the "fire next time".'⁸ Nowhere was Ironsi's painful dilemma of reconciling the radical South with the conservative North better illustrated than with the issue of the 'January boys'—the coup ringleaders. If he punished them he offended the South; if he didn't he angered the North. In the event, he did nothing. He apparently sounded out opinion about their fate among senior army officers but came to no decision. What incensed the Northerners more

⁷ Letter written by Sulemanu Takuma in the *New Nigerian* (see Kirk-Greene, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 121).

⁸ *Nigerian Opinion*, Ibadan University, May 1966.

than anything else, it transpired, was that the majors continued to receive their pay, allowances and, since nothing was done to stop it, presumably their seniority while in gaol, suggesting that the authorities did not regard them with total disfavour and hinting that their incarceration might be a temporary one.

The key man was now Francis Nwokedi. Since February he had been travelling widely in the Federation studying the question of unifying the regional and federal civil services. In the North he was warned on all sides of the dangers of rapid centralisation while in the South opinion was divided. However, it was becoming clear that Nwokedi, a clever and strong-willed person who was one of Ironsi's most influential advisers, had firm ideas of his own. When a group of leading Nsukka University professors presented a detailed paper arguing against swift administrative unification Nwokedi ignored it; nor did he submit his final recommendations for approval to the other members of the committee on administrative reform before handing them over to Ironsi. He must, without doubt, share a large portion of the responsibility for Ironsi's subsequent decisions.

Towards the end of May, Hassan Katsina, the Northern governor, returned to Kaduna from a Supreme Military Council meeting in Lagos and said to waiting reporters, 'Tell the nation that the egg will be broken on Tuesday.' It was a colourful and accurate way of describing what was about to happen. The following day General Ironsi announced two decrees. For Nigeria it amounted to another coup—executed by the stroke of a pen. The country was no longer to be called a federation, simply the 'Republic of Nigeria', ruled by a 'national' instead of a 'Federal' military government; the Regions were abolished and replaced by groups of provinces; the Federal and Regional civil services were unified and to be administered from Lagos; political and tribal organisations were dissolved and political activities banned for the next two and half years. Many of these changes, however, were more apparent than real. The new title of the government and the abolition of the Regions altered nothing except nomenclature since the new groups of provinces coincided with the former Regional boundaries and remained under the rule of the existing military governors. The political ban dated from the early days of the regime but its prolongation for such a long period was ominous since it suggested that the military government would remain in power and political activity would be forbidden while the constitution was being prepared and implemented.

But it was Decree No. 34 (the 'unification decree' amalgamating the federal and regional civil services) which really "broke the egg". In fact, only the most senior civil servants—160 in all, 29 of whom were expatriates—were directly affected. Nevertheless, many Northerners fearing Ibo or Southern 'domination', saw it unmistakably as the thin end of the wedge since the top civil servants, whose power had increased with the demise of the politicians, controlled the administration of the country and the distribution of government jobs. Ironsi himself admitted that it amounted to a 'rather drastic change' and went on to spell out what it meant. 'Every civil servant', he said, 'is now called upon to see his function in any part of Nigeria in which he is serving in the context of the whole country. The orientation should now be towards national unity and progress.'⁹ On the surface this would seem a reasonable and progressive goal; but in loosely knit, tribalistic Nigeria it was dynamite because it threatened Regional autonomy at its very roots. The North had most to fear since it lagged far behind the other regions in education—in 1960 it had 41 secondary schools against the South's 842—and administrative skills. Clearly, if educational qualifications alone were to be the criterion for government jobs—there was no mention of any other—the North was bound to be the loser. Northern posts would be snapped up by Southerners and the long-feared 'domination' by the South would at last become a reality.

Ironsi tried to soften the impact of the decree by stressing that it was without prejudice to the activities of the study group examining the country's constitutional future and that the ban on political parties might be lifted earlier than the statutory period if the government 'accomplishes its aims before then'. As with all Ironsi's major speeches this one manifested a curious 'stick and carrot' syndrome, not unlike the alternating threats and promises dished out by a parade-ground N.C.O. when faced with a squad of raw recruits. Twice on this occasion he emphasised that his was 'a corrective regime' and 'soldiers do not allow themselves to be diverted from, or obstructed in, the fulfilment of their objectives'.¹⁰

The following weekend (29th May) riots broke out in the North. The trouble began in Kano with, significantly, a demonstration by Northern civil servants and students (the civil servants of tomorrow). Similar demonstrations took place in Kaduna, Zaria and other Northern towns and then flared into popular riots in which several hundred Ibos

⁹ Ironsi's national broadcast. Federal Min. of Inf., PR. 610/1966, of 24.5.1966.

¹⁰ Ibid.

were killed. (The official figure was a totally unrealistic ninety-two.¹¹) The police tried to intervene, but could do little as the mobs swept by murdering, looting, burning. The army stood aside and did nothing. Placards carried by the civil servants and students proclaimed 'A Raba' ('Let us Secede'); 'No Unitary Government Without Referendum', and 'Down with Ironsi'. Those who had witnessed the anti-Ibo riots in Kano in 1953 noticed a similar pattern: peaceful demonstrations escalating into massacres, the elite setting the pace and organised groups of armed thugs, plus casual hangers-on, rushing in and finishing the job.

There were three immediate causes of the May riots. The initial spark seems to have been an offensive article which appeared in the popular monthly magazine *Drum* showing the dead Sardauna begging an Ibo journalist for forgiveness from his grave. Then the steep rise in food prices, following a bad harvest and the normal upward trend encouraged by times of political insecurity, also inflamed the situation. Thirdly, the 'unity decree' appeared to confirm the Northern elite's worst fears that the South, and more particularly the Ibos—by this time Ironsi's government was seen as an 'Ibo regime'—intended to establish control over their administration.

Deeper down, however, there were other forces at work. Fear, confusion and resentment had been building up slowly in the North from grass-roots' level as the Region gradually emerged from its state of shock after the first coup. The latter had overthrown the politicians but changed little else. Nigerians' fears were still the old ones of one tribe or region dominating another; of control of the centre and preservation of traditional ways of life in the provinces; of the division of the 'national cake' (a favourite metaphor); of the distribution of new industries, schools, clinics and piped water. And it was the North, the most populous and backward of the Regions, that was deeply concerned because it had lost most as a result of the coup. It is true that some people in the North—mainly the minority tribes and the young radicals who had no love for the conservative and autocratic rule of the Sardauna of Sokoto—welcomed the political changes the young majors had effected. But the Region as a whole was still very alien from the South and knew that, due to its educational shortfall, it could not compete on straight terms of merit with the South within a unitary system of government; unfair though it might

¹¹ David Loshak reporting in *The Daily Telegraph* from the North at the end of May, 1966, estimated that over 600 people had been killed. (He was later deported by the Ironsi government as was Walter Schwarz, one of the most experienced and balanced of the resident foreign correspondents in Nigeria.) The Eastern government later claimed that 'over 3,000' had died but Loshak's original figure seems to be the more realistic total.

seem, it needed a special protective arrangement while it caught up. The alternative was to throw its doors open to the Southerners and put at hazard its distinctive way of life.

There was also a feeling of deep insecurity arising from the sudden vacuum in the leadership. The Sardauna, a larger-than-life figure, could not be replaced overnight, if at all, but the additional loss of Balewa and the top Northern army officers made matters considerably worse. What concerned the Northerners was not numbers—only six of their political and military leaders had been killed in the coup—but the fact that it was their *best* people who had been wiped out. In the army, Gowon, a stripling of 31 years of age, was now their most senior officer; a major (Katsina) had to be appointed governor of the North, while all the other Regions had the luxury of several lieutenant- or full colonels to choose from; losses in the leadership and elites of the South could easily be made up whereas the North would find it a difficult, perhaps impossible, task.

Northern sensibilities were further frayed by the provocative and arrogant behaviour of many of the Ibos living in their midst. Pictures of the dead Sardauna and the triumphant Nzeogwu were displayed in Ibo shops and houses. There were even Ibo songs celebrating the overthrow of the Northern leader; a particularly inflammatory one called 'Machine Gun' was later banned, with similarly offensive pictures and posters, by Ironsi's government.¹² However, although popular feeling was mounting against the regime it needed, as always in Nigeria and indeed most parts of Africa, an embittered and determined elite to express it in terms of positive action. The disaffection of the civil servants and the students was swollen by that of the dispossessed Northern politicians who had lost much by the January coup and who, unlike their counterparts in the South, were still at liberty. It is significant that the May killings were confined to the areas where the former ruling party of the North (the Northern People's Congress) had once held sway and that, by and large, only Eastern Ibos were attacked. The subsequent wave of massacres four months later was to be markedly less discriminate.

The May riots rocked the government. Ironsi, falling back on the classic scapegoat of 'foreign incitement' as an explanation for these tragic events, was badly rattled. The Northern governor, Hassan Katsina, rushed back to Kaduna, breaking off a tour of the provinces, and ordered troops to move into the town and shoot rioters on sight. But it was a case

¹² Kirk-Greene, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 39, note 2.

of locking the stable door after the horse had bolted. In a valiant public relations operation, Katsina tried to make the new measures appear as innocuous and temporary as he could. He explained that it was merely the army's way of doing things and did not prejudice future constitutional arrangements. In the first public recognition by a member of Ironsi's government of the deep-seated anxieties over job and educational inequalities between North and South, Katsina promised to do something about them. In a radical speech to the traditional rulers he stressed that the North's backwardness was partly its own fault and it would have to pull itself up by its bootstraps or take the consequences. But the national government would help with 'a crash programme for education and training'. The emirs gave Katsina a secret memorandum, summarising their views, to pass on to Ironsi. Though unpublished, it is believed to have asked for the abrogation of the unification decree, which was rapidly becoming entrenched in Northerners' minds as the symbol of Southern interference, and for the trial of the 'January boys' as a test of the government's good faith. Ironsi, who was also conducting a back-tracking operation, refused to withdraw the decree or punish the majors but gave the rulers strong assurances of his willingness to consult them and popular opinion on any matters which affected the country as a whole, and there the matter rested.

In the subsequent mythology of the crisis, it is commonly claimed that Ojukwu, the governor of the East, called on the Ibos, fleeing from the North in the wake of the massacres, to return to their homes, only for them to be massacred in much larger numbers the following September. Feelings of deep personal guilt arising from this decision were then used to explain—and justify—his later intransigency in dealing with the Federal government. It is always a shock, I suppose, to find during the course of historical research that events were not as they seemed at the time; that 'facts' sometimes melt into thin air. Reporting the war, I, with many others, wrote more than once in the following vein: 'Ojukwu's actions must be seen in the mitigating light of his traumatic experience of sending the Ibos back to their deaths in May 1966.' The curious thing is that Ojukwu never said this—at least not in May or June 1966. He may have thought he said it, or he may have thought it would have been a good thing to have said when he referred to the disturbances six months

later. But there is no trace of the 'call to the Ibos to stay in the North or return there' in any of his speeches in the aftermath of the May riots.¹³

An uneasy calm settled over Nigeria. Ironsi continued to try to tighten his hold on the country and hammered away at 'tribalism'. Southern intellectuals gave him warm support and urged him to press on with unification. Ojukwu, in the East, also advocated swift action: 'I am personally convinced that a surgical operation is required . . . and [its] success depends on the promptness, decisiveness and the courage of the doctor—otherwise it may be too late.'¹⁴ In the middle of July, Ironsi announced a rotation of the military governors, a plan warmly welcomed by the Southern press but pointedly ignored by the North. He also announced that he was going to tour the Federation at the end of the month and since there had been some criticism of the way he rarely moved out of Lagos, it may have been at least partly in response to this that he decided to travel. In any event, it was to be a fateful journey.

About this time the transfer of several army units was ordered, notably the interchange of the restless 4th Battalion at Ibadan with the 1st in Enugu. For those who were already suspicious of Ironsi's motives, these troop movements, taken in conjunction with the proposed rotation of the military governors, indicated a tightening of military control and another step along the path to a unitary system of government. Meanwhile, Ironsi, never a man to shirk a physical challenge, set off on his national tour. Paradoxically, he received a big welcome in Kaduna, went on to the University of Zaria where he talked to many of his student critics, and then flew to Kano in the far North. After a short stay in Benin in the Mid-West, he travelled to Ibadan and addressed a national meeting of traditional chiefs. He was due to return to Lagos the next day but during the night of 28th-29th July, the soldiers struck again. Within a few hours Ironsi was dead, his dream of a genuinely united Nigeria, under his soldierly hand, dying with him as the breath left his body.

Ironsi fell because he failed to recognise the strength of the conflicting passions released by the January coup in Nigeria. Caught between a heavy cross-fire, he continued marching bravely but blindly down the crown of

¹³ Two writers (Walter Schwarz, *Nigeria*, and Frederick Forsyth, *The Biafra Story*) refer to Ojukwu's 'appeal' to the Ibos to return to the North but quote different sources. Schwarz refers to a 'broadcast' while Forsyth pins the 'appeal' down to a speech Ojukwu made on 27th June at Nsukka University, welcoming the Emir of Kano as the university's new chancellor. There is nothing in either of these statements to substantiate the 'appeal' nor any mention of it, at that time, in Ojukwu's *Selected Speeches*. But Ojukwu frequently referred to it later—in October 1966, at the Aburi meeting in January 1967, and on several other occasions.

¹⁴ Ojukwu's *Selected Speeches* (Harper and Row, New York, 1969), Vol. I, p. 27, 27.6.1966.

the road, neither effecting a cease-fire nor mollifying either of his assailants. Three broad factors, in combination, can be identified as responsible for his downfall. Firstly, he lacked the political judgment and sensitivity indispensable for the situation he inherited; deficiencies in his own character and those of his close advisers are mostly to blame. Brought up in the army, he had little formal education and worked his way up through the ranks to become its first Nigerian commander. A bluff, hard-drinking, extrovert soldier, cast in the British sergeant-major's mould, he had no tribal complexes of his own—one of the ironies is that if he had had a few he might have been more sensitive to those of others—nor was he as stupid as many of his critics have asserted. But he had a political blind-spot. He saw politics as if through a pair of military binoculars, identifying specific objectives and dashing off to tackle them, oblivious to the infinitely broader and more complex terrain, full of hidden dangers, around him. He felt he could abolish tribalism by decree and assuage regional fears with speeches. In common with many Ibos, he had a passion for dotting the i's and crossing the t's, thus attracting hostility where a more subtle approach would have avoided it. He clearly meant well and a lot of what he said and did made sense, but it was invariably carried out in the way most calculated to antagonise both his radical and conservative oppositions.¹⁶ His own life style did not help. He moved into the State House in Lagos, drove around ostentatiously in the presidential Rolls and his wife called herself 'Lady Ironsi'—all very much in the manner of the old politicians whom the army had just thrown out: His image was not improved by the cabal of Ibo advisers (notably Francis Nwokedi, Pius Okigbo, the government's economic adviser, and the Federal attorney general) who stuck close to his side and irresponsibly urged him on with his unification policy. Whatever their motives were, they must share the blame for his downfall and the guilt for his death.

Ironsi's second major error—and here he had less excuse—was his misjudgment of the mood in the army. Not punishing the 'January boys' (even their dismissal from the service would have gone a long way to placate the Northern soldiers) was a fatal mistake. It went against the fundamental military maxim that one unpunished mutiny invariably leads to another, and there was also the simple arithmetic consideration that three-quarters of the rank and file in the army were Northerners who, in the

¹⁶ Ironsi had some bad luck too: he ordered the release of the popular imprisoned Action Group politicians (Chiefs Awolowo and Enahoro) but he did not live to see them free and his successor received the credit. And whether or not he could have succeeded in imposing a greater unity on Nigeria by acting boldly and quickly after the January coup—before the North rallied against him—must remain a tantalising 'if' of history.

aftermath of the January coup, had shown clearly—and brutally—that they bore no love for their Southern officers.¹⁶ Finally, Ironsi and his advisers mistakenly interpreted quiescence in the North for acceptance of their policies. The warning signs came early enough and increased as time went on. The May riots made the point crystal clear but still, in the two months between them and the second coup, Ironsi appeared not to recognise the intensity of the opposition and made no move during that period to give his verbal assurances the tangible credibility that was so needed. He had forgotten, or never learned, one of the basic principles of Nigerian political life propounded in Peter Enahoro's enchanting and enlightening little book, *How to be a Nigerian*. 'No Nigerian arrangement is permanent except that which has been arrived at by negotiated compromise.'

¹⁶ The crucial break-down of authority in the Nigerian army is examined in more detail in the next chapter.



General Emeka Ojukwu in
front of Biafra's flag.



General Yakubu Gowon.

GOWON HATES YOU!



*He loves nobody
Gowon spares nobody
He destroys all*



(Above left)

'Gowon points the way': Ogoja, a 'minority' area of Biafra, liberated by Federal Nigerian troops during the first month of the war.

(Above right)

Biafran poster depicting genocidal fate of the Ibos if they surrendered to—or were overrun by—the Federal troops.

A popular poster in Federal Nigeria during the war: Ojukwu's head under the boot of unity.

CHAPTER
THREE

Counter-Coup And Pogrom

July—September 1966

Second coup
Ibo massacres in North
Gowon in power

A LITTLE BEFORE MIDNIGHT ON THURSDAY, 28TH JULY, 1966, WHILE Ironsi was still on tour of the Federation, a group of armed Northern subalterns strode into the officers' mess in the Abeokuta barracks and shot their garrison commander and two other senior Ibo officers dead. What had often half-jokingly been referred to as 'the return match' for the January coup had begun in earnest. Northern officers quickly seized control of the garrison, armed their N.C.O.s and men, and began rounding up and shooting personnel of Eastern origin. A telephone call to the Ikeja garrison alerted another group of conspirators and the same bloody pattern was repeated; by dawn the barracks and international airport were in mutinous hands. A second call set off the coup in the West and a cordon of Northern troops was thrown around the government lodge where Ironsi was staying as a guest of the Western governor, Lieutenant-Colonel Fajuyi. By this time, however, the Supreme Command H.Q. in Lagos had been informed of the trouble and Lieutenant-Colonel Gowon, the army chief of staff, had put all units on the alert, on the orders of Brigadier Ogundipe, the highest ranking officer in the army after Ironsi himself. Though surrounded by the mutineers and his own guard disarmed, Ironsi was, curiously, still able to contact people by telephone. He called Gowon and asked him to send a helicopter. Police headquarters in Lagos sent one, but by the time it had arrived the general had disappeared. A senior police officer in Ibadan, tipped off earlier by one of his men in Abeokuta that there was 'more trouble in the army', was told to keep away from the government lodge by the commander of the local garrison. At eight-thirty a.m. he tried again and found the lodge completely deserted. The following account, put out later by the Eastern Region

government and substantially correct, describes what had happened in the intervening hours.

'Finally, Major Danjuma (second-in-command of the 4th Battalion) took some of his men upstairs, confronted and questioned the Supreme Commander, saluted him and ordered his arrest. The general was led downstairs to join the others. The three captives (the Western governor, Fajuyi, who with great gallantry refused to leave his guest and commander, and Ironsi's A.D.C.) were now stripped and their hands tied behind their backs with wire. They were flogged, tortured and then put into separate police vans. [Major Danjuma returned to barracks and the convoy drove off out of town under the command of two young Northern lieutenants and some senior N.C.O.s—author's comment.] The captives were ordered out and led along a footpath off the right side of the road. These Northern officers and men beat and tortured the captives so badly that their bodies were swollen and bleeding profusely . . . the Supreme Commander and the governor, who were almost dead by now, were separately finished off by a few rounds of machine-gun fire.'¹

They were buried on the spot but found a week later by the police. Their deaths were not to be officially announced for another six months.

Meanwhile, Brigadier Ogundipe was trying to do what Ironsi himself had done in the January coup—rally loyal troops and put down the mutiny. From the police H.Q. he sent Gowon to Ikeja to parley with the mutinous troops. On arrival he was detained by the men who then asked him to be their spokesman. But it was already becoming clear that Ogundipe, a Yoruba from the West and, like Ironsi, an old soldier who had fought for the British in Burma, had little support within an army which had few Yorubas and was increasingly split on tribal lines. Nevertheless, he summoned all the available members of the Supreme Military Council, senior police officers, and a few permanent secretaries and tried to assert his authority as Ironsi's lineal heir. To the assembled group, shocked and shaken by the second upheaval within seven months, the situation that Friday morning seemed horribly confused. The North, East and Mid-West appeared to be quiet. But Abeokuta, Ibadan, Ikeja and the international airport were in the hands of the mutineers who were beginning to spill out of their barracks into the suburbs of Lagos

¹ *January 15th—Before and After*, Vol. 7 (Eastern Region Government, Enugu, 1967), pp. 46-47. Ironsi's son was saved by the police who hid him in the police mess and then sent him down to Lagos, disguised, in a third-class compartment of the train.

killing or molesting Eastern soldiers where they could find them and making do with civilians where they couldn't. The outside world received its first news of the coup when a B.O.A.C. airliner was commandeered at Ikeja by Northern soldiers to fly their families back to Kano.

A complicated series of negotiations, involving Northern civil servants and politicians as well as soldiers, began in Ikeja barracks. Lieutenant-Colonel Murtala Mohammed, a strong-willed but rather unstable Hausa, had emerged as the most powerful spokesman of the mutineers whose initial demands for a renunciation of the unity decree and a total separation of Eastern and Northern soldiers in the army quickly changed into an outright demand for secession and the establishment of a 'Republic of the North'. Ogundipe broadcast a statement at two-thirty p.m., repeated constantly throughout the afternoon on the national network, proclaiming a state of emergency in the Lagos-Abeokuta-Ibadan enclave and expressing the somewhat vain hope that he would be able to 'restore peace and tranquillity very soon'. Later that evening he broadcast to the nation reassuring his anxious listeners that things were under control and that there was no 'cause for alarm'. In his search for support in the Regions he had a mixed response. Ojukwu telephoned Ogundipe asking him to take over and assuring the brigadier of the Eastern Region's full backing. He said he would announce it on the Eastern radio within thirty minutes of Ogundipe's own public affirmation that he intended to step into Ironsi's shoes. The only flaw in this move was that Ojukwu himself was not in full control of his own Region at this time—the revolt was spreading fast—and was, in fact, telephoning from Onitsha where he had fled from Enugu for his own safety. The Mid-West governor also promised Ogundipe support, but the North adopted a cautious 'wait-and-see' attitude.

However, it was only when Ogundipe tried to stiffen his words with actions that the true frailty of his position became evident. Scraping together some loyal troops from the Army headquarters, he sent them out to Ikeja in a column under the command of an Ibo captain. They were ambushed several miles before their destination by a large body of Northern soldiers and driven back with heavy losses. Two Europeans driving along the airport road were killed in the cross-fire, the first non-Nigerian casualties of the crisis. Ogundipe, still struggling against the odds, despatched another column. But most of these men, from the Federal Guard and under a Northern major, sympathised with the mutineers and simply drove around Lagos in an elaborate circle and came

back to the police H.Q. without having fired a shot. When Ogundipe reprimanded them they threatened to shoot him—'I only take orders from my captain,' a Northern N.C.O., brandishing a sub-machinegun, told him brusquely²—and would neither obey him nor the Yoruba military governor of Lagos. He was asked by two junior Northern officers to resign and he complied, writing out a letter of resignation for the Ministry of Defence on the spot. He then changed into civilian clothes and sought refuge on a ship in the harbour, later to reappear as Nigeria's High Commissioner in London. It was not a very glorious end but, contrary to some versions of these events, Ogundipe did at least try to take over and only bowed out when it became obvious that he was hopelessly outgunned.

The North was next affected. It seems that either the conspirators had not been properly briefed or possibly were not so deeply involved in the plot because nothing happened in Kaduna for the first twenty-four hours of the crisis. And even when it did, it was the military authorities that acted first in response to the general alert from Supreme H.Q. in Lagos. The Ibo commander of the 3rd Battalion in Kaduna addressed his men on the Friday afternoon, told them there had been a mutiny in the South and appealed for their loyalty. Shortly afterwards, when radio and other reports began to give a clearer picture and likely outcome of the revolt, the Northern soldiers went into action. The battalion commander was tricked into going to the guardroom and shot by two of his own young officers. The soldiers then seized control of the other units in Kaduna and Zaria. The same grisly pattern of rounding up and killing Eastern officers and men followed, relieved by the only two recorded incidents of clemency in the whole affair when two Northern officers, acting independently of each other, protected their Eastern troops from the fury of the soldiers long enough to allow them to escape. Kano was spared major violence on this occasion, although four Ibo officers were shot two days later. (It was, however, units from the battalion based there which were to erupt and massacre on a far more ferocious scale during the Northern disturbances in September.) The role played by the Northern governor, Hassan Katsina, is obscure but it appears that he was initially held prisoner by the mutineers, later freed, but left in a powerless position with only the poorly armed police at his disposal for restoring order.

In Enugu, the coup also came late, probably for the same reasons as in the North—and it failed, but only just. The man who scotched it was the

² Verbatim account of the Aburi meeting in Ghana, January 1967. (Published by the Eastern Region Government, Enugu.)

Ibo commander of the 1st Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel David Ogunewe, a popular and highly professional officer, known affectionately by his men as 'Baba' (father). Three-quarters of his battalion were Northerners and in a dramatic confrontation with some of his junior Northern officers whom he encountered in the dead of night in the officers' mess dressed in battle kit, he managed, through a mixture of personal authority and persuasion, to cajole them into surrendering the keys of the armoury. But such was the degree of nervousness and mistrust at the time that a joint guard of Northern and Southern troops had to be placed on the armoury for the duration of the crisis. Meanwhile members of the government went scurrying off to their home towns and villages, repeating the experience of the January coup. Ojukwu first went to the police H.Q. in Enugu where he was protected by the armed mobile police, but later decided to go to Onitsha, sixty-seven miles away, on the banks of the Niger, for greater security. (It was from here that he telephoned Ogunwape in Lagos promising him the East's support.) 'Baba' Ogunewe held the fort in Enugu until the situation calmed down and Ojukwu and the government returned and reasserted political control. As in the first coup, Benin City and the Mid-West, still without a garrison, were not directly affected.

Back in Lagos it was clear that the Northerners' coup (or counter-coup) had succeeded everywhere except in the East. But it was still far from certain what was going to happen to Nigeria. For three incredible days (over the weekend of 29th July to 1st August) the country had no central government or leadership at all. The focal point was now Ikeja barracks where Gowon, Murtala Mohammed and several other senior Northern officers were engaged in a crucial and heated political debate about the future. From time to time Northern civil servants, politicians, senior police officials, and a judge or two took part, and the military governors of all the regions were hooked in by telephone. The British High Commissioner and the American Ambassador in Lagos hovered in the wings and occasionally came on stage to give their advice.

There were two vital issues: was the Federation to continue and, if it should, who would—who could—lead it? The battle lines were drawn between a cautious and uncertain Gowon leaning towards a maintenance of the *status quo* and the hot-headed, confident Murtala urging that the North should pull out. In the early stages, Murtala made the running and his secessionist plan, supported by some of the Muslim North politicians but bitterly opposed by the civil servants, policemen and lawyers, was

partially put into action. Northern families were flown back home; any Northern civil servants who were still in Lagos—many had actually left before the coup—were told to pack their bags; and Ilorin, a town just across the Northern border with the West, was alerted to be ready to accommodate Northern troops from the garrisons of Lagos, Abeokuta, Ikeja and Ibadan. Reports from civil servants in Ironsi's entourage, imprisoned by the mutineers in Ibadan, confirm the Northerners' firm intention of pulling out. Flushed with success at the overthrow of the Ironsi regime and the blood of their enemies still fresh in their nostrils, the mood, according to one eyewitness who spent much of his time trying to persuade his gaolers not to rush into secession, was apocalyptic and highly emotional.³ Middle Belters and the Muslim Northerners, normally at odds on key political issues, temporarily shared this feeling which could be summed up something like this: 'We Northerners are basically different from the South; now's our chance to get out—let's take it and hang the consequences.' But it was a spur of the moment phenomenon: there was no careful thinking behind a Northern secession, nor any detailed planning to put it into effect.

During these protracted and cliff-hanging discussions Murtala became greatly excited and interrupted Gowon continually. Eventually the latter insisted that if the other officers would not listen to his views he would step down. The opponents of a break-up of the Federation, however, persuaded Gowon to continue as their spokesman and gradually he won the upper hand over Murtala, though not before, one story has it, a Roman-style parade-ground confrontation with the fiery Hausa in front of the assembled troops had confirmed Gowon's superior popularity. Support for Gowon and the Federal concept came from Hassan Katsina in Kaduna and the Northern battalion commander in Kano. The Western governor had been killed, but other leading Yorubas agreed to accept him as did, a little later and with some initial hesitation, the governor of the Mid-West, Lieutenant-Colonel David Ejoor. Ojukwu also spoke to Gowon on the telephone and agreed to help him restore order but refused to recognise him as Supreme Commander. The British and American envoys strongly urged Gowon not to break up the Federation, but it is difficult to assess the impact of their advice since so many far more influential people, much closer to the realities of power (for example, the Northern permanent secretaries, the commissioner of police, the head of the special branch and the chief justice), were giving the same counsel.

³ A senior Federal civil servant in an interview with the author.

Although this strange and historic debate was not thus an exclusively Northern affair, it was the Northern soldiers, roaming around outside the conference room in their dark, satanic mood, who were the ultimate arbiters of power. Towards the close of the weekend, it finally became clear that the Northern secessionists would only accept a continuation of the Federation in its existing form under the leadership of a Northern officer, and that Gowon, as the most senior, most popular and most respected Northerner in the army, was the natural choice. Thus somewhat in the way the British Tory party used to choose its leaders, Jack Gowon 'emerged' by an arcane and tortuous process: selection being based on political necessity and personal background rather than egalitarian and democratic principles. But when one is looking down the wrong end of the barrel of a gun, as Nigeria was in July 1966, democracy cedes to the greater imperative of survival.

Gowon's own views in these early negotiations are not entirely clear, though it seems unlikely that he would have ever willingly wished to break up the Federation. His entire background, his upbringing and way of life were those of a 'One Nigeria' man. Born in the Pankshin Division of the Middle Belt thirty-one years before, he was the ideal ethnic and religious 'mix'—a 'Northerner' yet from a minority tribe (the Angas) and a devout Christian—for a country virtually paralysed by its big tribe nationalisms and rivalries. The son of an evangelist (his religious antecedents and inclinations are very similar to those of President Kaunda of Zambia, with whom he also shares characteristics of temperament and asceticism), he grew up and was educated in Zaria in the Muslim North. After his secondary education he joined the army and did his officer training first in Ghana and then at Sandhurst. He served with the Nigerian forces in the Congo and later went back to the United Kingdom to attend Staff College at Camberley. Handsome, charming and boyish, a good sportsman, a non-smoker and non-drinker, he seemed almost too good to be true—as well as impossibly young and immature—to take over a country of 50 million people in the wake of the worst military mutiny Africa had ever seen. But Gowon had two built-in sources of strength: he had—and still has—a deep and abiding love for the Nigerian army and an understanding of how it 'ticks'; and secondly, an ability to take advice graciously from any quarter and produce an intelligent and common-sensical consensus from it. Therefore, hopeless though the situation in the army seemed in July, it was consistent with his beliefs to try to clean up the mess and reconstruct the institution in which he had passed most of

his adult life. Similarly, his background and his known personal philosophy were those of the young modern Nigerian elite who had everything to lose and nothing to gain, ideologically or materially, from a dissolution of the Federation. Gowon, like the key Northern civil servants who backed him against Murtala and his secessionist backwoodsmen, were an interesting new breed of young African shortly to become known as the 'New Nigerians'.

It is often forgotten in later controversy about the legitimacy of Gowon's position that the vital priorities following the July coup were not constitutional legality or army seniority but stopping the bloodshed, getting the army back to barracks and preventing the country from disintegrating. It was a desperate situation⁴ for the threat of civil war—Murtala Mohammed later was only curbed with difficulty from marching on the East—was just as real in July as it had been in January and if expediency justified Ironsi's take-over, as the man most likely to hold the country together, Gowon was similarly vindicated. The first priority, as in January, was to reach an acceptable compromise in the army which would enable law and order to return and later, hopefully, a more effective method of government to emerge.

The uncertainties and ambiguities of the crisis were mirrored in the first broadcast⁵ Gowon made to a mystified nation on his return to Lagos from Ikeja on 1st August. The key phrases in his speech were 'the basis of trust and confidence in our unitary system of government has not been able to stand the test of time', and 'the base for unity is not there', which later became the subject of great controversy and endless speculation. Did Gowon mean that the Federation itself was no longer a viable political entity (the Eastern interpretation) or that the basis of a unitary system of government *à la* Ironsi, *within* the Federation had disappeared (his own and the Federal version)? The broadcast certainly shows signs of hasty redrafting and editing. Civil servant sources in Lagos confirmed to me after the war that the soldiers at Ikeja had failed to obey the golden rule of drafting: when a theme or policy changes, scrap the original draft and start afresh. But those were desperate days and the men involved obviously had little time to consider the niceties of speech-writing and polished prose. It seems highly likely that the speech was originally drafted to announce Northern secession and the break-up of the Federation but was changed

⁴ Graphically described, on the tape-recording of the Aburi meeting, by Commodore Wey, head of the Nigerian Navy.

⁵ The most accurate version of this key speech appears in Kirk-Greene, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, Document 37, p. 146, taken from the B.B.C. Monitoring Service.

at the last minute after Gowon had achieved a wide measure of support. And as such, it accurately reflected the three-day struggle between the secessionists and the federalists at the Ikeja barracks.⁶

That same evening Ojukwu spoke on Enugu Radio and underlined the realities of the new situation. Nigeria was, he pointed out, effectively divided into two parts: the North, West and Mid-West where the coup had been successful and the new regime accepted, and the East where it had failed, leaving power in the hands of the existing government. He made it absolutely plain that he would not accept Gowon's elevation to the post of Supreme Commander, that his own position was a strictly legitimist one, recognising Ironsi, if he were still alive, and Ogundipe, as the next most senior officer, if he were not, and finally, that the present arrangement was temporary and merely designed to secure a breathing space. This new posture of verbal cut-and-thrust between Lagos and Enugu was to continue with little change until it was replaced by a more deadly duel eleven months later.

Sporadic outbursts of violence continued in the army throughout August. A particularly unpleasant incident, reminiscent of the worst days of the Wild West, occurred when a column of Northern troops descended on Benin City, 'sprang' some of the January coup detainees and lynched them. For the second time within three months frightened, wounded and demoralised Easterners fled home to recount their personal tragedies to a well-primed and receptive audience. The Eastern government estimated the death toll with meticulous care: 43 officers, 170 other ranks.⁷ As an act of messianic vengeance, the July 'return match' for the swathe cut through the Northern officers' ranks by the 'January boys', was a resounding success. Revenge was certainly one of the motives. Separation from the South, in the early stages, was another; but this changed as tempers cooled and senior Northern officers reasserted their control over the mutinous rank and file. It then became evident that if the North was not going to secede, it was determined to fill the power vacuum in Lagos and the empty slot at the head of the army. The struggle for power between the Federally-minded 'doves' and the secessionist-inclined

⁶ Both Frederick Forsyth and Walter Schwarz cogently argue this interpretation, but the former goes further and suggests that the British High Commissioner, Sir Francis Cumming-Bruce, 'managed to persuade Gowon to strike out the words [announcing the dissolution of the Federation] and substitute other ones' (*The Biafra Story*, p. 144). This seems highly unlikely and does not square with accounts I have heard from senior Federal officials who were involved. One can accuse the British Diplomatic Service of many faults but sloppy drafting and editing is not one of them: if Cumming-Bruce had been so closely involved he would, presumably, have made a more workman-like job of the speech.

⁷ *January 15th*, p. 73. An accurate estimate; the Federal government listed only ten officers killed.

'hawks', personalised by the clash between Gowon and Murtala, ended in victory for the former. But it had been touch-and-go. Murtala and his secessionists then paradoxically turned their avenging energies towards imposing the new order on the East. He tried hard to send troops to attack the East and shatter the delicate truce that still existed between the Northern and Southern soldiers in Enugu. Had that happened it is highly probable, with the Northerners' immense superiority in the army and the East's total unpreparedness to withstand an invasion, that the Region would have been overrun and its leaders forced into exile or killed. Gowon and his moderate supporters prevailed but his own position was much more precarious for many weeks, even months, after the coup than was originally thought. And the Northern hardliners continued as a powerful faction within the Federal government, a force to be reckoned with, throughout the pre-war period and indeed the war itself.

The mystery and mythology that shrouds the Northerners' counter-coup are even more impenetrable than that which obscures the January events. Three official accounts, all strongly coloured by the post-coup political situation, exist. A Northern version stresses that there was a radical Ibo conspiracy afoot: a pre-emptive strike which was designed to crush the North, push aside the slow-moving Ironsi and replace him with Ojukwu. The Federal account paints a reasonably plausible picture of a spontaneous, haphazard mutiny.⁸ While the Eastern version, the most accurate in its detail though not necessarily in its conclusion, stands the Northern conspiracy view on its head and says it was all a Northern plot to kill Ironsi and Ojukwu and install Gowon as Supreme Commander and head of state. As usual in Nigeria, the truth lies somewhere near the central intersection points of conflicting rumour and theory. As in January, the air was buzzing with plots and counter-plots. Among the Northerners, there was a belief that the 'January boys'—or rather their supporters since they were still in detention—intended to 'finish the job'. The code-name, it was rumoured, was 'Operation Fifteen'—to commemorate the first coup launched on 15th January. Significantly, many Northern civil servants working in Lagos packed their bags and returned home. Similarly, some Easterners had wind of a Northern conspiracy and it is likely that at least two plots existed at this time.

To a large degree, the January coup detonated, on a seven-month time fuse, the July counter-coup. The young Ibo majors established the

⁸ The Federal government has, I believe, conducted its own investigations into the July events but has not made them public. This is hardly surprising since many of the coup leaders are in senior positions today and the whole brutal affair cast a deep shadow over the Nigerian army.

precedent of treachery within the army but it was, they discovered, a weapon with a double edge. They also demonstrated the vulnerability of the country's leadership and how simple it was to destroy a regime and transfer power into more acceptable hands. The unique fabric of army life, so much more intimately interwoven than that of civilian society, made the institution highly vulnerable once the normal bonds of loyalty and comradeship had been torn apart. Hate, suspicion, and fear spiralled viciously, driving out the cohesive martial values and producing their own dynamic. The January coup had made it all too clear that whoever struck first and struck hardest would stand the best chance of success. Between January and July a degree of fear and suspicion, similar to that found in the courts of medieval kings, infiltrated into the barracks and mess ante-rooms. These divisions were strengthened by the close identification that Nigerian soldiers—amounting to hero-worship often tinged with mysticism—have with their tribal leaders. This became increasingly obvious and an important military factor on both sides of the fighting in the civil war. Strange myths grew up around the Northern officers murdered in the January coup. The most senior, Brigadier Maimalari, it was rumoured, had been killed by Ironsi himself, who was alleged to have run him over in his car. Another version claimed that Maimalari was still alive and that Ironsi was tortured by his captors before being shot to try to make him divulge the brigadier's whereabouts. While civilian life settled back peacefully after the first coup, the army remained fearful. Gowon had had an armed bodyguard since March, though Ironsi, curiously insensitive to the growing discontent in the army (or perhaps just superbly brave), surrounded himself with Northern soldiers. The government added to the mystique of the dead Northern officers by failing to announce and honour their deaths or punish their murderers. For the average soldier this seemed doubly suspicious and confusing. Their 'captains' had disappeared into thin air, suddenly becoming non-persons. Senior officers spoke of the dangers of publicising the details of the first coup—'there was fear everywhere', one remarked⁹—but they later realised that saying and doing nothing further fertilised the rich soil of rumour.

The treatment of the 'January boys' was crucial. From the more relaxed view outside the barracks, this issue may appear exaggerated. But within a small army where hierarchical relationships, seniority, pattern of loyalty, and command are the blood and sinews of life itself, Ironsi's

⁹ Hassan Katsina, speaking during the Aburi conference.

thumb-twiddling over the majors was a failure of political courage, a fatal error of judgment for which he paid with his life. This coloured the Northerners' attitudes towards everything else that subsequently happened. Thus when Ironsi approved twelve promotions from major to lieutenant-colonel in May—a perfectly normal procedure—many Northerners read it as another move by the Ibos to take over the army since eight out of the twelve gazetted officers were Ibos and only one was a Northerner (Hassan Katsina). The army, which had been very rapidly 'Nigerianised' after independence, was already overstretched in the senior ranks but the January coup placed new strains on its limited manpower resources. And since the Ibos dominated the middle officer ranks, they naturally moved up. This was quite logical and fair and would not have aroused hostility—or even notice—in a normal situation. Unfortunately, the situation was anything but normal and the Northerners saw this as yet another stage in the Ibos' 'domination' conspiracy. Most of these new promotions put Ibos in operational command of infantry battalions, armoured car and artillery units and training establishments where they were in direct contact with the disaffected Northern soldiers. Before January Ibos had held five out of twelve of these positions. By May they had moved up into ten out of thirteen. The tribal imbalance ran through all the senior ranks of the army, but had been worsened by the killings of the first coup. Before January the Northerners had seven officers of the rank of major or above, while the Ibos had twenty-seven. By May, as a result of their losses in the coup, the Northerners only had *three* officers over the rank of major, compared with the Ibos' twenty-three. In contrast, about seventy per cent of the rank and file were Northerners.¹⁰

At the end of July the army was like an overwound spring; it had lost its normal tensile flexibility and had passed the point where a slow unwinding operation could have saved the mechanism. It broke and ran wild. Unlike the January coup, it was principally a military affair, a mutiny rather than a coup, and no leading civilians were killed. It was a revolt against its own commander who was also, of course, the head of the government; it removed that leadership and then went out of control. Contrary to the impression given by the Federal account, it was as pre-meditated as the first coup but less efficiently planned and executed. Civilian plotters, mainly dispossessed and disgruntled Northern politicians (like Inuwa Wada from Kano, a close kinsman of Murtala Mohammed, who is believed to have paid the Northern soldiers at Abeokuta a large

¹⁰ Robin Luckham, *The Nigerian Military, 1960-67* (C.U.P., London, 1971).

sum of money) were involved but only marginally. The real conspirators were junior Northern officers (it has been called the 'lieutenants' coup') who, like their January counterparts, were probably more influenced by their former school friends, now politically active in the civil service and the universities, than by the older generation of politicians. These junior officers had the loyal support of the N.C.O.s who played a key part in the execution of the coup.¹¹

But above the lieutenants were several important majors and lieutenant-colonels who took over once the operation was under way. Murtala was the most prominent of these, though not necessarily the leader, and he held a strategic position as head of the army's signals unit. However, the most senior Northern officers of all, people like Gowon and Katsina, were not involved either in the planning or the execution. The same doubts that had surrounded Ironsi's role in the January coup clung to Gowon's in July. And, curiously the answer may be the same, or very similar. It would have been odd if Gowon had not known there was something in the wind since he was in the central position as the army's chief of staff. The struggle for power during the coup itself showed it vividly enough to be a desperate attempt to fill a sudden vacuum and to improvise in a set of unforeseen circumstances. Nor does the evidence, sparse though it is, point to a well-laid plot (to take over the Federation) and then a dramatic falling out of the chief plotters. Shakespearean though a great deal of Nigerian events were at this time, the facts of the July coup do not oblige to complete the drama. Gowon, I am convinced, whatever his state of pre-knowledge, was brought in after the deed had been done as the only acceptable compromise leader who could command a consensus among the majority of the army and the country.

One of the odd characteristics of both coups was the readiness on the part of the executors to hand power back to their seniors once the job was done. In the July coup, there was a strong desire to have the senior officers 'legitimise' their actions, and in this sense the army structure did manage to survive and later fight a war. Euphemisms like 'I have my orders' were used by plotters in both coups when arresting or even executing their victims. In July, Northern N.C.O.s turned on their own officers on several occasions when the latter tried to prevent the killing—but always respectfully: 'Put your hands up, sir' was heard more than once. Army

¹¹ Due to the shortage of Northern officers, N.C.O.s were often used for key tasks. A classic example, with unexpected results, was the take-over of Ikeja international airport by an Idoma (Middle Belt) sergeant-major called Paul Dickson. A tough, independent-minded and somewhat unpredictable character, he remained in command of the airport where the coup had left him for the next two-and-a-half years, having been quickly promoted to captain.

phraseology was used in a macabre way. One Northern soldier, having shot an Ibo officer, justified it to his own commander as, 'Accidental discharge, sah!' An even more grisly language of their own emerged during the holocaust. 'Take him to the house of chiefs' meant take him away and shoot him. Some soldiers apparently thought they could assume the rank of the men they had shot and wore their badges of rank for days afterwards. Others performed ritual killings, the most terrible being that of an Ibo captain, caught at Ikeja airport, who was tied to an iron cross, whipped to the point of death and thrown into a guardroom to die.

For the next six months the pendulum of fortune in Nigeria swung erratically between hope and despair. Throughout August Gowon tried hard to assert his authority but the mutiny in the army rumbled on. On radio and television he assured Ibo officers of their safety but privately advised them to find their way back to the East. Ten days after the coup, the first formal step to divide the army took place with the repatriation of Northerners from the East and Easterners from the North. The farewell scene in Enugu, where bloodshed had been avoided, was a sad one, but demonstrated that there were still human ties between the soldiers. 'Baba' Ogunewe, the Ibo commanding officer, had resisted attempts by the Eastern government to wreak vengeance on his Northern soldiers with the same courage and determination with which he had stopped the latter from mutinying during the coup. The send-off was preceded by drinks with his Northern officers in the mess, an official photograph, and accompanied by tearful scenes at Enugu railway station. This exchange, which effectively created two power centres in Nigeria, helped to ease tension. But the Federal government kept its troops—mainly Northerners—in the Western Region and Lagos, thus contravening an agreement, reached by representatives of the Regional military governors and Gowon in Lagos on 9th August which ordered all soldiers back to 'their respective Regions of origin'. However, Gowon managed to broaden the base of his regime by immediately announcing the abrogation of Ironsi's 'unity decree', promising a three-phased return to civilian rule and, most important of all, releasing the popular politicians, Chief Obafemi ('Awo') Awolowo, the Yoruba leader, and Chief Anthony Enahoro, the Mid-Westerner, imprisoned three years earlier by the Balewa government. It was one of the many tragedies of the Ironsi government that the decision to release these men had been taken before he was killed, but not implemented. Gowon thus received the credit and finessed it with the gesture of going out to the airport to meet Awolowo and greeting him humbly

with the words, 'We need you for the wealth of your experience.' A new and free-ranging debate began on the country's future with the politicians much more prominent than they had been in the post-January coup period. Groups of spokesmen, consultative assemblies and 'leaders of thought' proliferated on all sides, and people began to question the continued existence of the Federation in a way rarely done in the past.

In the East tension remained high as more refugees, many of them wounded and exhausted and all of them with a story to tell, continued to stream in. The popular mood expressed elements of shock, anger and a mixed desire for vengeance and secession, but it was too early for a positive expression of the general will to emerge. The East, however, began to knit together, and overnight Ojukwu and his government were transformed from probably the most criticised of all the new military governments into the most popular. Ojukwu, in particular, became a folk hero—he, too, released several politicians, notably Michael Okpara, the former Regional premier whom he had imprisoned in March—and grew a beard as a sign of mourning for the coup victims.

Communicating with Gowon by telephone (the tone of these conversations was still informal—'Jack and Emeka'—and not unfriendly) Ojukwu made it clearer than ever that he would not recognise the Northerner as head of state. There were at least six officers in the Nigerian army who were senior to Gowon (including Ojukwu himself), and he stuck by his claim that each of these had more right to take over than Gowon since it was now obvious that Ironsi had been killed. (No announcement, however, was made of the general's death until the Aburi conference in January 1967, for fear of inflaming public opinion.) Behind these legalistic and hierarchical considerations was Gowon's personal unacceptability. To Ojukwu the idea of being subordinate to a junior, less educated, less experienced officer of Gowon's calibre—he had a low estimate of the latter's intelligence—was anathema. He pointed out later (at Aburi) that he was prepared to work with Gowon as an equal or a titular head but accepting him as his chief was quite another matter. 'Militarily Gowon is not my superior and the question of acknowledging him does not arise,' Ojukwu said flatly.¹² To make matters worse, although neither had blood on his hands from the two coups, each suspected the other of having tried to kill him. These personal elements of mistrust and incompatibility were to deepen as time went on and were a crucial solvent in the disintegration of the country and the slide to war.

¹² *West Africa*, 15.10.1966.

The need for a full-blooded and properly organised debate on Nigeria's future was recognised and in mid-September Gowon opened the 'Ad Hoc Constitutional Conference' in Lagos to which each Region sent representatives of their 'leaders of thought' (i.e. politicians, lawyers, civil servants, and others with standing in the community). At any other moment such a meeting would have been of great value, but these were fearful times and neither the security situation in the country at large nor the degree of freedom allowed to the delegations by their military masters back in the Regional capitals was sufficient to check the momentum or alter the direction of events. The leading soldiers stood aside from the conference's deliberations; Gowon made an opening speech and then left. ('Hamlet without the Prince', one Nigerian newspaper later neatly summed it up.) Shortly before it began, violence surged forth again, notably in the North where soldiers went on private rampages, beating up and killing Ibos, often in the open streets and other public places. Counter-terrorism spread to the East where several Northerners were killed, and on the eve of the conference's opening, an explosion, set off by an Ibo lecturer who later blew himself up, rocked the Federal Palace Hotel in Lagos. It is not too fanciful to compare the atmosphere of brooding, creeping anarchy with the deteriorating situation in Spain in early 1936 as the Cortes vainly tried to halt the impetus to war. The result, ultimately, was the same.

Gowon submitted four possible choices to the conference as a future basis for the government of Nigeria: (a) a federal system with a strong central government; (b) a federal system with a weak centre; (c) a confederation; or, (d) 'an entirely new arrangement which may be peculiar to Nigeria and which has not yet found its way into any political dictionary'. Secession was ruled out and no mention was made of the creation of new regions (or states) within the federal structure, both issues, presumably, being regarded as undesirable or too explosive in the current situation. The Regional delegations took widely differing stands. The North and East suggested a confederal arrangement, the former offering the East African Common Services Organisation—a kind of common market linking a group of sovereign states—as a model. The West suggested the creation of more states within the existing Federation, on linguistic principles, or, failing that, a confederation. Only the small multi-tribal Mid-West Region (population: 2.4 million) stuck firmly to a federal structure, with a strong central government, but proposed the creation of more states within it. Apart from the Mid-West's view, the

basic assumption of the conference seemed to be that the country should pull apart considerably, largely on the basis of the existing Regions, with little or no thought for the feelings of the minorities within those areas who opposed the idea. Nigerian politics were still dominated by the fears and ambitions of the 'Big Three' tribal groups though not, it soon became clear, for much longer.

A week after the conference opened there was a dramatic development. The Northern delegation swung through almost 180 degrees and pressed for a federation with a strong centre and suggested the possibility of the creation of more states providing the East and West also agreed to further sub-divisions. The reasons behind this volte-face have been hotly debated ever since. One school of thought ascribes it to pressure exerted by Middle Belt soldiers and politicians, while the opposing view denies these pressures and accounts for it by a genuine and responsible change of heart on the part of the Northern delegates themselves. The essential point seems to be that the Muslim Northerners and Middle Belt minorities were not at each other's throats in the way the controversy suggests. The July coup and its aftermath had witnessed the high point of Northern unity. (The same process of Regional consolidation was going on in the East under Ojukwu, and in the West under Awolowo who had been given the inward-looking tribal title of 'Leader of the Yorubas'.) All sections of the North had lost men in the first coup, had jointly feared Ibo domination during Ironsi's regime, had been aroused by the 'unity decree' and had taken an active part in the July coup and subsequent attempt to secede. Much of the steam had been siphoned off from the Middle Belt's (especially the Tiv's) traditional grievances with the Kaduna government even before the January coup had removed their arch-enemy, the Sardauna of Sokoto. But by September, the Northern minorities were beginning to take a cooler look at their future and did not relish the idea of playing second fiddle to Kaduna and the Hausa-Fulani majority in the event of a confederal arrangement. The Middle Belt had a long history of demands for its own state within the federation and now, through its leading politician, Joseph Tarka, and its army officers, began to mount pressure on the Northern delegation.

Simultaneously, several of the Northern delegates themselves were either having second thoughts on the implementation of a confederation or being strongly influenced by people outside the conference. The arguments used included the chaos which might well accompany a break-up of the Federation—for confederation would entail a rupture of

many critical links, like the army, police and civil service, and the division of assets and liabilities—and the loss of several important economic advantages such as a share in the booming oil revenues and, perhaps, access to the sea. The Northern civil servants who had stayed in Lagos—those with 'New Nigerian' (i.e. Federal) rather than Regional or tribal sentiments—played a key role in these back-stage discussions, and the British High Commissioner and the American Ambassador, never far from the epicentre in those days, also pressed similar pro-Federal arguments on the delegates.

The deliberations of Nigeria's wise men were cut short, shelved and finally wrecked by a terrible new cataclysm in the North which made all the year's preceding violence look like a barrack-room brawl. Ever since the July coup, persecution of the Ibos in the North had gone on with varying degrees of intensity. On 19th September a band of Northern soldiers from the now infamous 4th Battalion, recently transferred from Ibadan to Kaduna, drove down to Makurdi and Gboko in Tiv country and started killing Ibos. The news of these massacres triggered off violence against Northerners living in the East and this, in turn, put out by Radio Cotonou in Dahomey and re-broadcast by Kaduna Radio, launched a veritable pogrom. On 29th September soldiers from the 5th Battalion in Kano tore Ibo refugees off a B.O.A.C. aircraft and shot them. Troops and mobs raced through the *sabon gari* (strangers' quarters) of all the major towns in the North, killing, looting and burning. The police, who had acted with courage and humanity during the May riots, were seriously paralysed from the outset because three of their Ibo officers had been shot by Northern troops in Kaduna and the force was preoccupied with the evacuation of its own numerous Ibo personnel when the full impact of the new outbreak struck it.

As in the May troubles, students, civil servants and local politicians led demonstrations and helped to get the mobs out on to the streets. Once again the killings were organised though the form of planning is obscure. In many cases it was simply an awareness that the government and officialdom did not disapprove of—or would make no effort to stop—people who took the law into their own hands. The spasmodic violence which had almost become part of everyday life suddenly became 'official'; the gloves were off and 'law and order had fallen to the ground, authority had melted away', was how one police sergeant in Makurdi put it.¹³ One significant indication of government involvement was the re-broadcast by Kaduna Radio of the Dahomey news bulletin about Northerners being

¹³ Martin Dent, *op. cit.*

killed in the East. This almost certainly came from the American monitoring service in Kaduna which automatically passed all its material to the Regional government. Since the item was in French it required more than a casual effort for it to be translated into English and Hausa to be re-broadcast. It was the crucial spark, like the *Drum* magazine article denigrating the Sardauna in May, which set the North alight. There were several notable differences with the May massacres. This time the army was deeply involved and the killing spread out of the Muslim North into the Middle Belt areas where it was particularly savage. It was also much more indiscriminate with Christians and pagans as active as the Muslim soldiers among the killers, and Southerners from all tribes among the victims. (Only those with traditional tribal scars on their faces, like many of the Muslim Yoruba, could count on being completely safe.)

Some attempts were made to halt the killings by people in authority and thousands of Ibos were hidden and later smuggled back to the East by well-disposed Northerners and expatriates. But for much of September and October the Northern government lay supine as the pogrom burnt itself out. By that time thousands were dead or maimed and the entire Ibo population of the North, about a million, had abandoned everything it possessed and was trekking back to the East. The Eastern government later produced a vivid and detailed account of the massacres and there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the tragedy it depicts. The following extract will give some idea of the horror of these events.

'A sergeant ordered that all Easterners should raise up their hands. . . . The sergeant asked us whether we could remember what happened on January 15th when the prime minister [Balewa] and the premier of the North [the Sardauna of Sokoto] 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 five 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.'¹⁴

While nothing can excuse or condone the terrible wrong done to the Ibos in the North, Ojukwu, the Eastern government and, later, Biafra's supporters played an irresponsible 'numbers' game' with the death toll of

¹⁴ Pogrom-1966. *The Nigerian Crisis*, Vol. 3 (Eastern Region Government, Enugu, 1967), p. 18.

the October massacres, converting it into one of the hoariest of the civil war's myths. Ojukwu himself escalated the figure on four separate occasions without, apparently, anyone noticing. In the foreword of the Eastern Region's booklet, *Pogrom*, he spoke of 'more than 7,000 dead'. At the Aburi conference in January 1967, long after all the casualty returns were in, he said 10,000 had died. By the time the war was under way, this had leapt to 30,000—the figure most often used by Biafran propaganda and most often accepted unthinkingly by outsiders (including, I hasten to add, myself). And then in the Ahiara Declaration, Biafra's blueprint for revolution, published in June 1969, he claims 50,000 were killed. The true figure will probably never be known but most reliable estimates converge on something between six and eight thousand, although Ojukwu's Aburi figure might just be within the realms of possibility. Several hundred Northerners were killed in reprisals in the East.¹⁵

The motives behind the pogrom are more baffling than those which caused the May massacres. The January slate had been more than wiped clean by those killings and the bloody July counter-coup. Nor was there any longer a fear of Ibo or Southern domination and Gowon, a Northerner, was reassuringly in the saddle in Lagos. In many ways, the October holocaust was a continuation, a crescendo to the Northerners' vengeance for their humiliations, real and imagined, under Ironsi's government. The separatist current was still running strongly—even though it had changed direction at the Ad Hoc Conference in Lagos—in the North as a whole and there is no doubt that the prime aim of the killings was to drive the Easterners out of the region. (Ironically, as the killings were going on Northern leaders were changing their minds, a decision that led ultimately to more killing, to keep the Ibos in Nigeria.) But lower down, there was a host of historical, social and economic factors—envy, resentment, mistrust and fear—buried, yet slowly building up into an explosive force. These had erupted in the past (the last time had been the Kano riots of 1953) and the situation in Northern Nigeria had much in common with other countries in which an alien minority of aggressive, clever and clannish people dominate trade and technology, often to the virtual exclusion of the indigenous race, such as the Chinese in Malaysia and Indonesia, the Jews of the European Middle Ages and the Indians in East Africa. Whatever the causes of the massacres, the effects were disastrous

¹⁵ Henceforth in the story I will use the figure of 10,000 for the total number of Easterners killed in the disturbances of May, July and September/October 1966. This, I believe, is a 'rounding-up' rather than a 'rounding-down' but should allow for a reasonable margin of error.

to the unity of Nigeria and, more than any other single factor, sent it slithering down the slope of disintegration and war.

A massive transfer of the civil population took place, not only from the North but also from other parts of the country as the Ibos left their homes and jobs in increasing numbers and returned to the East, repeating the pattern of separation which had already occurred in the military sphere. It is difficult to quantify but the million Easterners who fled from the North were eventually to be joined by probably half a million from other parts of the Federation, producing a total of something around 1.5 million refugees in the East by the time war broke out.¹⁶ The influx presented a tough resettlement problem for the Eastern government and mounting pressure to secede or have a crack at the North. As the atmosphere—and accompanying propaganda—became white hot, the dialogue between Lagos and Enugu grew more acrimonious. The East refused to send its delegation back to the Ad Hoc Conference and all attempts to find an acceptable place for meetings between representatives of the East and the rest of the country (at one stage a ship or even an off-shore oil rig were suggested) broke down. The Federal government, having been powerless to prevent or stop the killings, made matters worse by failing to condemn them, although Hassan Katsina, governor of the North, went on record as saying the whole affair had been a terrible blot on the Region's reputation. A squabble then developed over compensation for the victims and their relatives. The Eastern government donated £3 million while Lagos only managed £300,000, though its reluctance to give more may have been conditioned by the knowledge that Ojukwu had ordered himself an executive jet and the discovery that the East was beginning to arm itself.

In October, Ojukwu ordered the expulsion of all non-Easterners from his Region on the grounds that he could no longer assure their safety. It was a controversial move open to several interpretations. Many thought he was clearing the decks for secession, and that he did not want non-Ibos around to see what was going on. The fact that Ibos from the Mid-West were exempt from the order added some weight to this, although the room and jobs needed for the returning refugees must also have been a factor. It caused real hardship, especially for the 20,000 Mid-Westerners who had to get out, who had had no complaints about the

¹⁶ The estimate for the total number of refugees given by the Eastern Region government was 1,800,000 (*The Meeting of the Nigerian Military Leaders: Aburi*, p. 2, published in the spring of 1967 at Enugu.) I feel this is too high; 1.5 million is a more realistic assessment. With the East's original population standing at 11.5 million this made Biafra's total population thirteen million by the time it seceded.

security situation in the East—much better than in most parts of the country—and who were very reluctant to go. The expulsion became a sore point later with the Mid-West government and hammered another nail into the partition wall which was rising steadily along the banks of the Niger. Gowon and Ojukwu were still talking on the long-distance telephone but more infrequently and with noticeably less of the jocularity of their old days in the officers' mess together. As the disastrous year drew to a close, it became apparent that both sides were arming. A German-American gun-runner pancaked his overladen plane in Cameroon in October, spilling arms and ammunition destined for the Eastern Region out over the wreckage.¹⁷ A little later, a Northern major set off for Europe on an arms-buying mission for the Federal government. With the country drifting increasingly into the doldrums, Gowon suddenly seemed to take a grip of himself and delivered his toughest and most illuminating address since he had come to power; it was also a seminal speech laying down the general lines of his thinking which he was to follow with remarkable consistency in the future. In it he gave notice of his determination to stop the army and the country disintegrating, ruling out a temporary confederation as unworkable since there would be 'no effective central authority' and that each Region 'as a virtually sovereign state could contract out or refuse to join any common service'. He went on to commit the government to the creation of new states—'not less than eight and not more than fourteen'—promised to summon a constituent assembly and to bring civilians, but 'not the old politicians', into the government. In order to add some muscle to his words he declared that Northern troops would remain in Lagos and the West until enough local men had been trained to take over, and finished ominously, 'If circumstances compel me to preserve the integrity of Nigeria by force, I will do my duty.'

¹⁷ See Chapter XII for further details of this incident.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Things Fall Apart

January—May 1967

Aburi Conference
The cold war hots up
Eastern minorities
Ojukwu's Consultative Assembly
Secession

AT NOON ON 4TH JANUARY, 1967, A GROUP OF YOUNG NIGERIAN ARMY officers, a naval commodore and a couple of senior policemen were sitting around a large polished table, adorned with a bowl of flowers, in former President Nkrumah's luxurious weekend lodge in Aburi, Ghana. The officers, immaculately turned out in crisply starched uniforms and gleaming Sam Brownes, were listening intently to an older man, General Ankrah, head of the Ghanaian military government which had ousted Nkrumah almost a year before, who was talking in slow, measured tones. Apart from a couple of confidential secretaries there was no one else in the room, but over in a corner on a small table stood a tape-recorder; a spool of tape revolved slowly and the voice-level needle flickered with the rise and fall of the general's voice. Outside there was a cordon of heavily armed guards and security men, a couple of light aircraft standing by, a restless helicopter whose clattering rotors occasionally jerked the tape-recorder's needle to its maximum limit, and a gaggle of pressmen kicking their heels and telling each other increasingly improbable stories.

It was a curious and historic meeting. For the first and last time during the Nigerian drama, the two principal actors—Gowon and Ojukwu—sat face-to-face, calling each other 'Jack' and 'Emeka', and talking over the problems which had estranged them. Such was the state of fear and mistrust in Nigeria at the time that the only acceptable venue for a meeting of the country's Supreme Military Council—a suggestion of a British aircraft carrier off Lagos had been turned down—was outside the country itself.¹ And even then the participants insisted on flying back to

¹ Malcolm MacDonald, Britain's roving envoy in Africa, was one of the principal moving forces in arranging the meeting.

their regional capitals at the end of the first day and returning on the morning of the second. Aburi is probably unique in the annals of historic confrontations. The entire two days' proceedings, apart from two short breaks, were recorded by the Ghanaians who, afterwards, gave each military governor and Gowon a copy of the tapes. The Eastern government later issued its own in sets of twelve ten-inch long-playing records, one of which I have and on which I base the following account.² Everything is there, the asides, the tension, the belly laughs, the confusion and anger and, not least, the human frailties of a group of young, inexperienced military men groping to find some sort of workable solution to fill a deep political vacuum and prevent their colossus of a country from falling apart. For once the outsider can be the fly on the wall of history and hear what the leading characters said, the way they said it at the time they said it, cutting through the web of conflicting interpretation and propaganda that later throttled the truth; it makes fascinating listening.

The Aburi meeting was a watershed in the Nigerian crisis. Despite the brief moment of euphoria which followed the apparently successful discussions, it was, henceforth, to be downhill all the way. It is vital to see Aburi in the context of the pre-conference state of mind of the principals as well as in the atmosphere of the Nigeria to which they flew back after the champagne toasts and mutual congratulations were over. Ojukwu came to the meeting from the traumatised and aggrieved Eastern Region, which had already developed something of a siege mentality. His secessionist 'hawks' were flying high and opposed his attendance. His own position was, however, secure enough as long as he showed no weakness, real or imagined, with the Federal government; this was one of the reasons why he turned up with a bevy of advisers and the most carefully prepared brief of all. Ojukwu's strategy was to bring back a concrete agreement on something as near to a confederal system of government as possible. He stated it elegantly and persuasively, 'It is better that we move slightly apart and survive. It is much worse that we move closer and perish in the collision.'³ He came to Aburi to re-write the Nigerian constitution—and largely succeeded.

Gowon and the other military governors arrived in Ghana in a very different frame of mind. They saw it less as a constitutional conference with full powers and much more as an informal, ice-breaking gathering

² The Federal and Eastern governments both issued 'verbatim' accounts which, like the official minutes of the meeting, do not conflict though the East's was a much fuller version. Neither the Federal government nor any of the other Regional governments has ever issued its set of tapes.

³ *Aburi Verbatim Report* (Enugu).

in the style of an officers' mess committee meeting, the first, they hoped, of many to come. Few advisers attended, little detailed preparation was done beforehand and the politicians were kept out of it. General Ankrah, somewhat naively, echoed this in his opening speech: soldiers are statesmen, he said, and if you could cut the politicians out altogether and leave things to the military men there would be no more wars. There was an assumption, evident in the content and tone of the remarks on the Federal side, that the main priority was to get on talking terms with the East again, patch up the basic problems in a general way and leave the 'small print' and the follow-up action to the civil servants and the 'legal boys'. There was an equally firm assumption that, with such an improvement in personal relations, future meetings of the Supreme Military Council in Nigeria would present no difficulty and would, therefore, occur frequently, enabling residual problems to be ironed out. There was, however, another reason for the amorphous and loosely knit nature of the Federal strategy. It is often assumed that Aburi was a straight fight between Ojukwu and the rest; nothing could be further from the truth because, as the records make clear, the Federal camp was both divided and confused. The West was bitter about the Northern troops still stationed there—'This is where I am hit,' cried the governor, Colonel Adebayo. The Mid-West was out of line with the North (Mid-Westerners had also suffered in the July coup and September massacres) and, to a certain extent, with Lagos too. But underpinning the Federal side and its assumptions was a strong, though ill-defined corporate feeling that, despite all the disasters and bloodshed, a basis of trust still existed among the leadership—after all, none of the men seated around that gleaming table had blood on his hands—that the situation was now improving and that they all genuinely continued to believe in the ultimate aim of 'One Nigeria' (i.e. a federal Nigeria) and a unified, national army.

But did Ojukwu also subscribe to those sentiments? Was Aburi for him a serious attempt to preserve the unity of Nigeria by arranging a *temporary* 'pulling apart' in order to move together again when passions had cooled? Or was it merely a convenient device—and an excellent window-dressing—to gain time and disguise his secession plans? The Aburi meeting, for all its detail and 50,000 words, is inconclusive. But it does reveal, perhaps better than anything else, the contrast in character and style between Ojukwu and Gowon and the fundamental difference in approach by the Eastern and Federal delegations. Seated on opposite sides of the table Ojukwu and Gowon were as different from

each other as chalk is from cheese. The former with his broad, powerful face, covered with a bushy beard, high forehead, the hair receding prematurely and his strong compact body; the latter, smaller, lighter, more delicate in build and facial outline, boyish yet with a purposeful military moustache and a soldierly bearing. Ojukwu: 33 years old, the son of a self-made transport millionaire knighted by the Queen of England; like many Ibos, a Catholic, born in the North and given the best education that money could buy (King's College, Lagos—Nigeria's 'Eton'—Epsom and Oxford); served for two years in the Nigerian administration then joined the army in 1957, officer training not at Sandhurst, but Eaton Hall where British national service infantrymen used to go; like Gowon, served in the Congo; a good battalion commander, a good disciplinarian, a good diplomat and an establishment figure par excellence; clever rather than intellectual, a complex man with undeniable star quality. Gowon, whose much more humble origins I have already described, looked and sounded far less assured, certainly honest and well-meaning but naive and lacking in confidence with none of the incisive logic of the burly bearded man, yet with none of the controlled histrionics either. From the Aburi tapes, there is no doubt who is the stronger, more determined, and more mature personality.

The Eastern government's proposals, nearly all of which were accepted by Gowon and the others, appeared to be reasonable enough on the surface. From the Eastern viewpoint a cooling-off period was essential. Eastern troops could no longer live in the same barracks as Northerners. A *de facto* separation of the army was agreed, but Gowon stressed that 'we should keep the army's oneness as much as possible'. Discussion of the army inevitably led on to the nature of the country's government. 'Is there a government in Nigeria today? Is there a central government?' Major Johnson, the administrator of Lagos asked, striking at the heart of the problem. Ojukwu said there was not; after the July coup the country 'resolved itself into three areas—the Lagos, West, North area; the Mid-West area; and the East area'. No one disagreed. Ojukwu refused to accept Gowon as Supreme Commander, as successor to Ironsi—whose grisly end was delicately discussed out of earshot of the microphones—and put forward a suggestion that the Federal government should have a titular head. On the second day, another proposal from Ojukwu on these lines was accepted. Gowon was to be down-graded from 'Supreme Commander' to 'Commander-in-Chief' and head of the Federal military government. The titles mattered less than the new powers which were

given to the Regions. Apart from controlling their internal affairs, the concurrence of each Region was now required for any major decision affecting the country as a whole. This, in effect, gave each Region the power of veto over a host of crucial subjects ranging from declaring war on an outside power and the signing of treaties to the appointment of senior army and police officers, Federal civil servants and ambassadors. The complex details and difficult task of squaring the new system of government with the old pre-January 1966 civilian constitution, which was to remain in force, were left to the law officers and civil servants to sort out. Meanwhile, to placate the West, it was agreed that massive recruitment of Yorubas into the army should begin and that Ibo civil servants who had fled from Lagos would continue to be paid from Federal funds until 31st March, the end of the financial year.

Aburi amounted to a *de facto* confederation, though no one on the Federal side of the table appeared to realise it at the time. The recalcitrance, or even just the non-attendance of one Region at Supreme Military Council meetings could throw a spanner into the whole machinery of government and paralyse the country. Whether it could have worked in practice—and confederations, even in ideal conditions, have never worked for very long⁴—is impossible to say because it never came to the test. But it seems highly unlikely considering the bitterness, mutual mistrust and uncertainties of the time.

For Ojukwu, Aburi was a perfect solution. It provided him with a piece of paper to wave at his secessionist 'hawks' back home and say, with justification, that he had not sold out. It also gave him ample room to manoeuvre in the future: he could either move back towards the Federation or away from it still within the letter, if not the spirit, of the agreements. He had, moreover, shown both the Easterners and the outside world—of growing importance to the Eastern cause—that he was a reasonable man but not a subservient one. Finally, it enabled him to disguise his own feelings about secession—if indeed they were irrevocably

⁴ The terms 'federation' and 'confederation' have been bandied about so freely in connection with the Nigerian crisis that perhaps some clarification may be useful. A confederation is a loosely knit union of basically sovereign states, formed usually for mutual defence and/or economic benefit. Unanimous decisions are normally required from all the states for matters which affect them all; each state has the right to secede from the confederation. Federations are quite different: member states surrender much of their sovereignty to the central authority; unanimous decisions are not needed for joint action and there is no provision for secession. Switzerland began as a confederation but is now, in fact, a federation, though it confusingly retains its original name. The Swiss cantons have many powers but all Swiss citizens have to pay national defence taxes, serve in a national army and fight national wars; no canton has the right to secede. The U.S.A. also began as a confederation; it lasted for seven years before it was found to be unworkable and then became a successful federation. The only existing confederations today are organisations like the East African and European common markets.

formed—under a cloak of expediency and gained him extra time to prepare whatever contingency plans he considered necessary.

But if Aburi was made for Ojukwu and if the opposition was neither very astute nor very determined, he still played his hand brilliantly—and with feeling. His manner, somewhat theatrical (the rise and fall of his voice was about as exciting as the rhythm of a metronome) nevertheless conveyed the terrible sense of loss and shock in the East and pointed up the contrasting attitudes on each side of the Niger at that time. He crushed Gowon's repeated attempts to put the whole thing on the level of a jolly 'get-together-of-the-lads-in-the-mess' with bitter scorn. One of the most symbolically revealing remarks of the meeting comes after Gowon has made a particularly poor attempt at a joke. Ojukwu snaps back, 'We are obviously not talking the same language.' (Listening to the tape, one feels sympathy for Gowon, but, at the same time, it is impossible not to recall the 10,000 Eastern dead.)

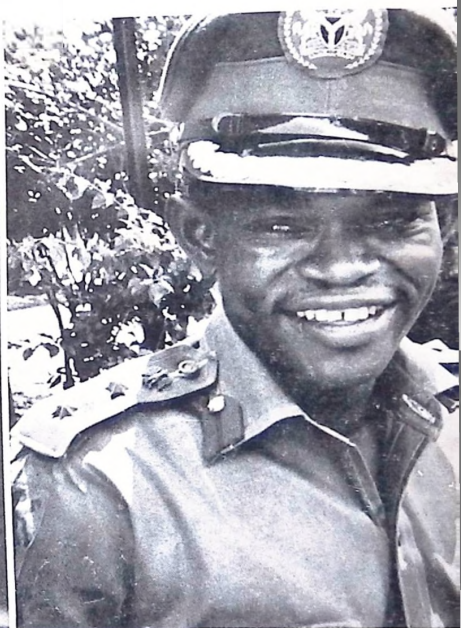
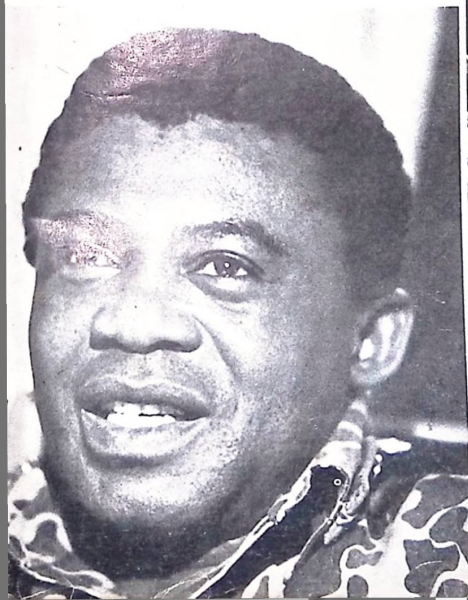
For Gowon himself, Aburi was a complete reversal of the strong policy lines he had sketched out in his seminal speech on 30th November. The creation of states was never mentioned; confederation, previously ruled out, stepped smartly in again through the back door; and the use of force—his ultimate sanction—was solemnly renounced on the first day of the meeting. In obligingly agreeing to practically everything that Ojukwu proposed—the latter, it became apparent, had prepared statements, proposals, even communiqués at his side for every contingency—Gowon and his colleagues eased the current tension momentarily at the cost of redoubling it, if or when Aburi backfired. By transferring Nigeria's sovereignty from an executive leader to the Supreme Military Council which was henceforth dependent upon the unanimous agreement of *all* its Regional members for decisions, it clearly required ideal conditions of peace, mutual trust and a united dedication to keep the country together if the Council (and the agreements) were to work at all. That such conditions were not present was evident almost as soon as the military leaders left Nkrumah's luxurious lodge and returned to the bitter realities of their own country. And as the aftermath was to show, Gowon and his colleagues at Aburi hopelessly underestimated both the mood and strength of the secessionist forces in the East and the determination of the federalists in Lagos. The civilians had tried to produce a solution of their own (the Ad Hoc Conference in September) and had failed; the soldiers had now, similarly, made an attempt and they also were to fail. Inevitably they



Colonel Joe 'Hannibal' Achuzie, his English wife Ethel, and son; a former electrical engineer, Achuzie became one of Biafra's most successful and enterprising soldiers.

(Right)

The 'Black Scorpion', Colonel Benjamin Adekunle, of the 3rd Marine Commando Division—Nigeria's most successful and controversial Biafran commander to emerge during the war.



(Left)

Major-General Philip Effiong, Biafra's chief of staff; Ojukwu handed over power to him at the end of the war and he signed Biafra's capitulation in front of his former Sandhurst classmate General Gowon, in Lagos.

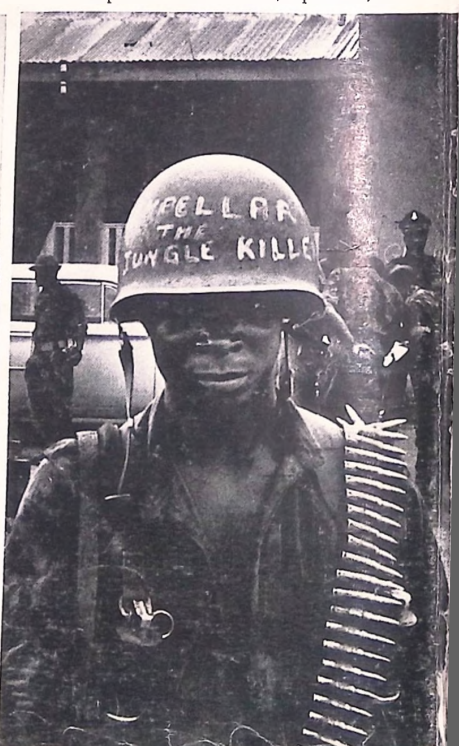


Young men going to war; Biafran recruits, stripped to the waist and their heads shaved, arrive in a training camp.

A Nigerian soldier adapts the old to the new; Federal troops in the forward sector, Agwu front, September, 1968.



'Bellar the Jungle Killer' and other less creative Nigerian soldiers in Aba the day after its capture from the Biafrans, September, 1968.



recognised that they needed each other, but by then it was too late and the East had gone.

Aburi, as one writer later put it, was 'to die on the vine'.⁵ Even the early publicity acclaiming it as a success helped to kill it, for the more people talked about the agreements the more confusing and contradictory they became. Ojukwu set the ball rolling with a press conference in Enugu the day after he returned from Ghana. 'It was unanimously agreed . . . that the Regions should move slightly farther apart than before,' he said. 'The East believes in confederation . . . we have gone a long way towards that as a result of this meeting.'⁶ Meanwhile, the Federal civil servants in Lagos were passing a cold and critical eye over the document the soldiers had brought back so triumphantly. The more they read the more appalled they became for, whatever they thought of the integrity and intentions of Ojukwu and the Eastern military they had no doubts that their own former colleagues—top Ibo civil servants like Francis Nwokedi, Pius Okigbo, and Cyprian Ekwensi—having lost all were hell bent on secession and would use the Aburi accord to further that end. They immediately wrote a devastating memorandum, punching holes through virtually every clause of the agreement, spelling out its unworkability, how it would lead to the break-up of the Federation, and adding a few gratuitous political ideas of their own. (Although marked 'Top Secret' this document was smuggled to Ojukwu by an Eastern agent and later published in full in Enugu.)

Then Gowon, like Ojukwu, under pressure from his 'hawks', told the country what he thought Aburi meant at a press conference in Lagos on 26th January. Clearly much influenced by the civil servants and other federalists, he back-tracked some distance and produced quite a different interpretation, highlighting both the discrepancy between the basic assumptions of the two sides and the 'all things to all men' nature of the accord itself. 'We did not go to Aburi to write a new constitution for Nigeria . . . however, we did agree to return to the *status quo* of January 17th, 1966.' He reasserted his position as 'supreme commander' with direct and sole operational command over the entire army ('we definitely decided against Regional armies,' he said) and promised the supporters of new states that the 'issue will have to be given early consideration'.⁷ The 'Aburi spirit', three short weeks after the meeting, was already flickering out and both principals were to blame: Ojukwu for not resisting the

⁵ Frederick Forsyth, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

⁶ Eastern Region Ministry of Information, P.R. 97 and 102/1967, of 6.1.1967.

⁷ Federal Ministry of Information, press release, 26.1.1967.

temptation to spell out his 'confederal' victory the moment he got home and thus opening the old wound, and Gowon for not ignoring the challenge and then publicly reneging on certain crucial parts of the agreement. However, serious attempts were made to try and reconcile the different interpretations of the ill-starred accord. Prolonged meetings of top civil servants and the 'legal boys' from all the Regions took place during February in Benin. Unable to agree among themselves, all they could do was to give their opinions and then refer the problem to the Supreme Military Council. But the latter could not meet—Ojukwu claimed it was too dangerous for him to travel outside the East—to discuss the issues, let alone reconcile them. The result was stalemate and drift at government level and a new upswelling of bitterness down below.

* * *

An account of the events after Aburi until the East's secession five months later, a period which witnessed an irreversible lunge towards war, without some attempt to convey the feeling of the time and the attitudes of the ordinary people is like eating a dish of Nigerian pepper stew without the pepper. It was one of those rare, emotional times in history when it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to distinguish the roles of leadership and the led; first one, then the other seems to be making the running until events themselves appear to assume a terrible will of their own and plunge everyone into the dark abyss. The process had started in the North a year before but had found a temporary catharsis in the May, July and September killings. This in turn, however, led to much more profound developments in the East. The great exodus from the rest of the Federation began after the July coup and intensified after the September/October massacres. The first brought the soldiers and the embittered elites back home; the second pulled in the artisans, the traders, technicians, servants and labourers. Then a conscious policy by the Eastern government of calling people back completed the process and rounded up the stragglers. By March 1967, there were 1.5 million refugees (or 'returnees') in the Eastern Region—a huge and unprecedented shift of population in Africa—and crucial in its effects on the areas it had left and the Region it now inhabited.

In the North, the exodus seriously affected business, transport, especially the railways which had been largely manned by Ibos, and the tin mines

on the Plateau, Jos losing two-thirds of its labour force almost overnight. In Lagos, and to a lesser extent in the West, public services such as water, electricity and the telephone suffered, good car mechanics disappeared and the expatriates lost their highly prized Ibo servants. But, contrary to the general expectation (especially in the East) the Federation did not grind to a halt; it simply slowed down and the country's vast reservoir of un- or under-employed labour poured into the vacuum.

A British journalist in Enugu in October 1966, describes the exodus thus: 'The scenes in the Eastern Region continue to be reminiscent of the ingathering of exiles into Israel after the end of the last war. The parallel is not fanciful.'⁸ It was bound to have severe repercussions on the homeland in which it sought refuge. But the various elements within it were to have a disproportionate influence on subsequent events. The masses as a whole, the traders, artisans, etc., mainly from the North, were traumatised and numbed by their experience; they had lost everything, often a life-time's effort, and saw no chance—nor had any desire—to go back. It is probably true that every Ibo family in the East—and many of the minority tribes too, though in different ways—were affected directly or indirectly by what had happened in the North. The refugees' need for food, shelter, money and jobs could not be ignored by any government which wished to stay in power in Enugu. But, although their bitterness ran deep and their grievances, salted by the lack of a Federal apology or significant monetary compensation, soured into hatred, they were basically passive. The focus of their venom, when it broke through the surface, was Kaduna, not Lagos, and without encouragement and leadership it was very likely that they, in common with most other refugees in the world, would have reluctantly settled down, accepted their misfortune and gradually picked up the threads of a new life.

But they were not alone. Preceding the mass exodus of the autumn was a small yet crucially influential group of Ibo intellectuals which packed its bags for the last time and returned to the East around the time of the July coup. They came principally from the Western Universities of Lagos, Ibadan and Ife, tired of competing with the Yoruba on their own ground—the Ibo vice-chancellors of Lagos and Ibadan Universities (Eni Njoku and Kenneth Dike) had both recently lost prolonged and spectacular tribal struggles for their jobs to Yoruba opponents—and ready to abandon their hard-won gains in the Federation for a new life in an independent Eastern state. Some had even left *before* July, recognising the signal of the

⁸ Colin Legum in the *Observer*, 16.10.1966.

May riots as the end of Ibo and Eastern pre-eminence in the Federation. (A number of Ibo staff at Ibadan University were planning an Eastern secession before the May riots—their role will be discussed later in the chapter.) They also included embittered civil servants and diplomats, international stars of the Ibo elite and the former regime, people like Nwokedi, Pius Okigbo, Onyuike (Ironsi's Attorney General), Tim Eneli and Cyprian Ekwensi, novelist and former Federal director of information. For them, the die was cast, Nigeria was finished—the autumn massacres had yet to happen it should be remembered—and all that remained was to fashion a new state, and new jobs, out of the oil-rich East. Some of these men went to the Eastern University of Nsukka and formed the core of the 'Nsukka secessionist group'. Others joined the Eastern government and became the Woleseys, Norfolks, Cranmers and Thomas Cromwells at the court of Emeka Ojukwu. Their persuasive message, however, was not religious alliance or marriage—Ojukwu was already married to an attractive divorcée—but secession, and at all costs. Overnight it seemed they had been transformed from the keenest supporters of 'One Nigeria' into fanatical 'Ibo nationalists'.

There were two other important elements in the exodus, both similarly within the Ibo elite. There was the Ibo nationalists' 'second division', the middle-grade civil servants and the university students who also left *en masse* in the summer of 1966—again before the September massacres. They were frightened by the sudden reversal of prospects which the July coup seemed to augur and strongly influenced by the example of their seniors; they fled hoping to derive from a second independence in the East the advantages that their predecessors had reaped from the first in the Federation. This group were to be the loyal and passionately motivated foot-soldiers of the secessionist barons and theologians described above.

The second category could be called the 'reluctant refugees'. These were Ibos and a few other Easterners who had stuck it out in Lagos, Ibadan, and other places (including overseas) as long as they could—in many cases well after the autumn massacres—but eventually gave up, partly because of genuine fears for the safety of their families and themselves and partly as a result of the compelling call to come home from kinsmen, friends and the government of the East. A few resisted the call. Anthony Asika, lecturer in political science at Ibadan University and future Federal administrator in the East was one. By April 1967, he cut a lonely figure,

the only Ibo left in the senior common room.⁹ Ben Enwonwu, the Ibo sculptor, was another. But the vast majority fled, again abandoning everything, to swell the secessionists' ranks, though often with markedly less enthusiasm than those who had blazed the trail across the Niger in June, July and August. These people, to my mind, deserve the greatest sympathy and understanding; they also provide the best clues to the intolerable atmosphere of the time which, on both sides of the Niger, grew increasingly like that of Hitler's Germany in the thirties. One seasoned observer described it thus:

'Visiting Nigeria in November 1966, I was conscious of the extreme gulf between the attitude towards the massacres in the East and that in the rest of Nigeria. It was astonishing how many people, not only in Kano and Kaduna but in Ibadan and Lagos, merely commented that, while it was very sad, "the Ibos had it coming to them", and that, despite evidence that the massacres were planned by political groups for political ends, they were somehow "God's will".'¹⁰

This was bad enough at any level but it had a particularly traumatic effect on the Ibo intelligentsia who had expected sympathy from their Yoruba and Northern peers. Chinua Achebe, the novelist and former head of the Federation's external broadcasting services, put it like this.

'One afternoon in Lagos, somebody said to me, "If I were you, I should leave your house." When I asked why, he said, "The troops are looking for you." I was not a criminal, I had done nothing. Eventually I did leave and sought refuge in a friend's house with my family. Yet, for about a week, I still did not believe—I simply thought that things had temporarily got out of hand—it would be all right. After a week, I decided to send my family home, and as we were doing this the people were jeering and saying, "Let them [the Ibos] go, food will be cheaper in Lagos. . . ." We expected to hear something from the intellectuals, from our friends. Rather what we heard was, "Oh, they had it coming to them", or something like that. . . . That kind of experience is so powerful; to me it is something I could not possibly forget.'¹¹

⁹ Forty to fifty Ibo staff left Ibadan university between the July coup and the September massacres and about 700 Ibo students. Non-Ibo Eastern minorities, significantly, stayed on at the University.

¹⁰ Kaye Whiteman, deputy editor of *West Africa*. From his absorbing and balanced chapter—'Enugu: the Psychology of Secession'—in *Nigerian Politics and Military Rule: Prelude to the Civil War*, edited by S. K. Panter-Brick (University of London, Athlone Press, 1970), chapter 6, p. 116.

¹¹ *Transition*, No. 36 (1968).

The trauma was deepened by the suddenness of the eclipse. Ironsi's brief regime had given the Southern intellectuals a freedom, a sense of purpose and a pre-eminence unprecedented in their experience. 'For the first time since the early days of the nationalist struggle the intellectuals had a voice in the nation,' Peter Enahoro, editor-in-chief of the *Daily Times* group of newspapers, wrote later when he himself (though not an Ibo) had quit Nigeria, disgusted with the brutality and callous indifference shown to the Easterners after the July coup.¹²

Of equal importance to the 'reluctant refugees' was the witch-hunt which followed the autumn massacres. Their personal experiences vary but possess a common thread: a visit to their homes by a group of Northern soldiers while they were at the office; a knock on the door at the dead of night: Ibo diplomats abroad suddenly being removed from circulation lists of confidential papers; Ibo civil servants at home, equally suddenly, finding themselves on special lists—containing only other Ibos; and all this during a period when the authorities had patently lost control over a mutinous and dangerously volatile army. The result was predictable, only the bravest and the least conspicuous stayed. These totalled several thousand, mainly in or around Lagos, and principally from the non-elite. Those who left were the communicators, the 'think-tank' men, the opinion-formers in the widest sense; they had lost everything and were, understandably, the most bitter. Their attitudes, by and large, coincided with the groups already in the East—the hard-core secessionists in Nsukka and Enugu and the ordinary folk who had fled from the North—and together they spread their fears, disillusion and ripening desire for vengeance to their countrymen who had not been directly affected by the crisis.

* * *

In a dawn broadcast from Enugu on 25th February, Ojukwu threw down the gauntlet. If the Aburi agreements were not fully implemented by 31st March—the end of the financial year—he would take unilateral action to put them into effect. He called on the East to remain vigilant and be ready to defend itself: 'It is not our intention to be slaughtered in our beds,' he said, and concluded, 'On Aburi we stand. There will be no compromise.'¹³ Most people understood this to be notice of the East's

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Ministry of Information, P.R. No. 123/1967 (Enugu).

impending secession. Three days later in a private address to African diplomats in Lagos, Gowon countered by reasserting his determination to use force if anyone tried to destroy the unity of the country, the Aburi renunciation of force notwithstanding. 'In the event of any section of this country acting unilaterally . . . we will have to take the necessary police action to contain the situation and maintain the integrity of the nation.' He also gave his interpretation of the controversial and central issue concerning the powers of the Supreme Military Council and the Regions decided at Aburi. 'I emphasise that it was never the intention that any military governor should have the power to veto decisions taken by the Supreme Military Council.'¹⁴ (It may not have been the *intention* but this is undeniably what the final agreement amounted to.) The contents of this confidential chat were promptly leaked to Ojukwu.

While the Eastern government was nailing its colours ever more firmly to the Aburi mast (a steady flow of material on the meeting was being published in Enugu and culminated in the release of the twelve gramophone records containing the entire proceedings), the Federal authorities were drafting a measure to implement the Aburi decisions and on 10th March the Supreme Military Council, meeting in Benin, approved Decree No. 8. All attempts to persuade Ojukwu to attend this critical meeting failed. He made it clear that the Federal government's refusal to honour the August agreement stipulating the withdrawal of troops to their Regions of origin (Northern soldiers were still in the West and Lagos) ruled out his attendance of the Council's meetings.¹⁵ Decree No. 8 was a compromise between the Aburi agreements and the Federal civil servants' criticisms. It delegated more powers to the Regions than existed under the civilian constitution, or indeed under any of Nigeria's previous constitutions since the country had been formed in 1914. It undid the constitutional bolts to the point where Nigeria could be described as a loose Federation with a weak centre, and represented the maximum the Federal government was prepared to move towards the East's entrenched confederal position. But the decree contained a sting in its tail. It authorised the Supreme Military Council (which, in most matters, required the unanimous consent of its members) to declare a state of emergency anywhere in the country, if the situation demanded it, with the consent of only *three* out of the four

¹⁴ 1.3.1967 (Kirk-Greene, op. cit., Vol. I, Document 92, p. 290).

¹⁵ Ojukwu gave two additional reasons in his address to the Consultative Assembly in Enugu, 26.5.1967. ' . . . Secondly, all the confidence and marks of good faith generated at Aburi had been systematically undermined by Lagos. Thirdly, the passing of the right decree had been my pre-condition for attending such a meeting.' (Kirk-Greene, op. cit., Vol. I, Document 110, p. 348.)

Regional governors. This was clearly directed against the East—though it could equally be invoked to deal with other rebellious Regions—and represented the ultimate sanction for holding the country together. Whether it would have been used to arrest a situation of 'drifting secession', which might well have taken place if the East had accepted the decree with its new Regional freedoms, remains academic for Ojukwu rejected the measure out of hand.

Frantic attempts to mediate followed. Publication of Decree No. 8 was held up for a week; the Ghanaians offered their good offices again and both Gowon and Ojukwu visited Accra on separate occasions during March. The Western governor, Colonel Adebayo, whose interpretation of Aburi fell somewhere between Ojukwu's and Gowon's, flew to the East, and Ojukwu himself landed in a helicopter on the Mid-Western governor's lawn in Benin for talks with Ejoor, two days after he had refused to travel to the same city for the meeting of the Supreme Military Council. The British High Commissioner in Lagos, Sir David Hunt, went to Enugu to warn Ojukwu of the international consequences of secession, especially in terms of the unlikelihood of being recognised by Commonwealth African countries. While Federal strategy centred on presenting a reasonable but firm image with Decree No. 8, the East was working towards realising the old dream of a 'Southern alliance', detaching the West (concerned about its Northern troops of 'occupation') and the Mid-West (unhappy over its defenceless man-in-the-middle position and its own 600,000 Ibos) from Gowon and the Northerners. The temperature, especially in the North and East, was rising fast. Enugu and Kaduna Radios and the Regional press, all government-controlled, poured out a lethal stream of propaganda. Hassan Katsina, the Northern governor, boasted that the East could be crushed in 'a matter of hours', if push came to shove. Enugu Radio took to broadcasting political 'weather reports': '*Lagos*: fiddling; *West*: breaking the fetters; *Mid-West*: re-assessing, and *Eastern Nigeria*: counting down.' Crowds marched through Enugu's streets shouting for guns, and posters exhorting people to 'Be Prepared and Avoid Panic' (including detailed instructions, most of them blood-curdling, on how to deal with the 'enemy') or showing an armed soldier, with the caption, 'This is Your Region. This Man is Ready. Are you?' covered the walls of government buildings. Abroad, British and American newspaper headlines echoed the mood of dark foreboding: 'Nigeria's Young Colonels Bring Country to the Brink',

ran one in the *Observer*, and 'A Time-bomb Ticks in Nigeria' appeared in the *New York Times*.

Ojukwu, already somewhat in the style of an international statesman, invited the world's press to a news conference in Enugu, three days after Decree No. 8 had been approved by Gowon and the other governors in Benin. A day earlier he had told a foreign journalist, 'We really have come to the line of no return—and crossed it',¹⁶ but he denied that his promise of 'unilateral action' at the end of the month necessarily meant secession. However, the East would secede if it were attacked—or blockaded, 'We all know that when you pick up a pistol and shoot somebody it is called murder; equally so when you strangle him.' Ojukwu gave a persuasive presentation of the East's view of Aburi and its disappointing aftermath. He saw the struggle as the progressive South against the reactionary North. 'What the North objects to is a government controlled perhaps by the Ibos or an effective government.' But, he admitted, 'It is not the Ibos themselves that they are against.'¹⁷ He felt the West and Mid-West fully supported his stand but lacked the power to do something about it, and he confirmed that he could not accept Gowon ('only a front man in Lagos') as the executive head of the Federal government because he was 'heading a government of rebels' who had kidnapped and killed Ironsi. He would only recognise him as 'chairman' of the Supreme Military Council with the limited powers allowed him by the Aburi accord. The events of the past year, he stressed, had made it impossible for Easterners to move freely outside their Region and now Nigerians no longer wanted unity but 'association'.¹⁸

After all this, 31st March came as an anti-climax for, instead of seceding, Ojukwu merely issued an edict appropriating all Federal revenues in the East. This was quickly followed by three other 'survival edicts', taking over Federal corporations, railways, rolling stock, schools and courts. Only the important oil revenues, normally paid in Lagos and London, were left untouched for the time being. But the end of March did constitute the last hillock on the slope down to secession. For the East, in possession of its own armed forces, a fully fledged governmental

¹⁶ *Sunday Times* (London), 12.3.1967.

¹⁷ Ojukwu and his government were to change this line several times in the course of the propaganda war; see Chapter XIII.

¹⁸ Ministry of Information, P.R. No. 140/1967 (Enugu). Ojukwu's firm stand on his own 'legitimacy' (as opposed to Gowon's 'illegitimacy') had much to commend it but there were two important considerations which many Easterners overlooked: firstly, that two of the other Regional military governors had accepted Gowon (Hassan Katsina and David Ejoor), and were equally 'legitimate' since they had also been appointed by Ironsi, and secondly, Ojukwu's 'legitimacy' allowed him to rule the East but not to secede and break up the Federation.

machine, master of its economy and finances and imbued with a white-hot separatist passion, was demonstrably no longer part of Nigeria.

* * *

While the duel between the two young colonels dominated the stage, important developments were happening among their supporting casts in the wings. The two coups and the fast-moving events of the past fifteen months had broken the log-jam of Nigerian politics releasing a number of new forces. The two major currents affected the old balance of power between the 'Big Three' tribes (Yoruba, Ibo and Hausa-Fulani) and the new voice of the Federation's minority groups. But many people, blinded by the emotions of the times, failed to recognise these crucial changes. Ojukwu himself plainly saw the situation as the old, straightforward North and South power struggle of the civilian days in which the East, West and North—all taken to be monolithic with little thought for the wishes of their minorities—wheeled and dealt, jockeying for power at the centre. He was not alone in this for many leading Yorubas, Ibos and Hausas thought the same way. This blindness was most marked among the 'hawks' in the North and East (the two Regions with the largest minority groups). 'The North is more united than ever,' was typical of the Hausa-Fulani view, and 'the question of states is dead', was a common feeling among Eastern Ibos. They could not have been more wrong.

The Federal side was particularly volatile. The essential fact of life during the period from the July coup until the East's secession was that the Federal government was never very united or strong while the Regions were correspondingly powerful and wayward. This helps to explain, though not necessarily excuse, Gowon's vacillations and inconsistencies over the Aburi agreement. Far more than Ojukwu, who was already in a relatively strong, entrenched position, Gowon had to feel his way gingerly, balancing the forces surrounding him, mediating, searching for a consensus with little initially in his favour except that he was personally acceptable to the bulk of the army. He began very shakily but grew more confident as time went on and even his lack of political commitment and experience—his only dominating political ideal was to keep the Federation together—turned into an asset in the new fluid situation. And while Ojukwu's options became increasingly limited—partly through his own actions—Gowon's remained open and he was able to reconcile the conflicting forces which not only enabled the Federation to present a united

front to the East at the time of secession, but also successfully carried it through the long civil war that followed.

The first of Gowon's problems was the creation of new states. Pressure was mounting from the Middle Belt minorities in the North, who had further strengthened their position in the army as a result of the July killings and the subsequent exodus of Ibo officers and men, and from representatives of the Eastern minorities in Lagos. Gowon, from a Northern minority tribe himself, favoured the concept but was deeply concerned about the reaction of the 'Holy North' (the Muslim Hausas, Fulanis and Kanuris) which had always fiercely opposed the break-up of the Region. The North, rather like a concertina, expanded and contracted several times during this period in a manner quite bewildering to people used to its monolithic face under the Sardauna of Sokoto. Three other factors, however, coincided with minority pressure to shatter this unity once and for all. Firstly, the death of the Sardauna himself removed an irreplaceable unifying force: it immediately became apparent that no one was going to step into his shoes and that the North had not been so united as everyone had previously supposed. Secondly, many influential Northerners who helped to fill the vacuum were, in fact, 'New Nigerians' whose first loyalty, material interests and ideals lay with the Federation rather than with the Northern Region. Many, such as Issa Walli, Nigerian Ambassador to Ghana, M. D. Yusufu, Head of the Police Special Branch, A. A. Atta, Permanent Secretary of the Federal Ministry of Finance, Judge Bello and Sule Katagum, head of the Federal Public Service, played a crucial part in keeping the North in the Federation in July and September 1966, and persuading it to accept the creation of new states in early 1967.

But the final element was the most compelling of all. Gowon and the Federalists, having placed all their cards face upwards on the table at Aburi, desperately needed a trump to play against Ojukwu, to keep the East in and check the other centrifugal forces in the Federation. The creation of states was the answer for, in political terms, it meant a profound redistribution of power in the country. It would break the power monopoly of the Ibos, Yorubas, and Hausa-Fulani, bring the underprivileged and under-represented minorities in for the new share-out, offer the five million Eastern minorities a potentially better deal than Ojukwu was giving them and, by reducing Regional power through its sub-division, strengthen the ailing central government. It amounted to a radical and daring strategy, but it was dangerous too because, badly handled, it could have frightened the North—and possibly the West—out of the

Federation. It was also dynamite because it was extremely unlikely that any government in Enugu would passively accept the removal of its minority areas where most of the oil lay. It had to have the consent of the North and West therefore and it could, at best, only be a contingency plan, for its unilateral implementation by Lagos would undoubtedly drive the East out of the Federation.

The 'softening up' process on the Northern opponents of new states strategy began during the Ad Hoc Constitutional Conference in September 1966. Gowon put the idea firmly forward in his 30th November broadcast and, after temporarily shelving it at Aburi, mentioned it again in late January. That progress was being made was shown when Northern 'leaders of thought', meeting in Kaduna at the end of January, recommended the creation of eleven states in Nigeria.¹⁹ Awolowo in the West was not opposed to the idea in principle—he had long supported it, in fact, as a means of breaking the monolithic power of the North—but his criterion for the sub-division was linguistic²⁰ and it was clear that he was not yet ready to commit himself. However, there is good reason to believe that when Ojukwu threatened, at the end of February, to implement the Aburi agreements unilaterally on 31st March, Gowon and his advisers drew up a 'new states' plan to be put into action if the East seceded. But it was only a contingency plan. They were still uncertain of Northern and Western reaction—the Mid-West, a small and multi-ethnic state, was known to be in favour—and, in any case, they did not want to provoke the East until it was seen how uncompromising Ojukwu was going to be.

The second of Gowon's major problems now began to cause considerable concern. The West, and to a lesser extent the Mid-West, seemed to be responding to Ojukwu's advances to join a Southern alliance against the North, or, at the very least, to stand aside while the North and East fought it out. In the West, relations were especially strained over the continued presence of Northern troops which the Aburi promise of eventually replacing them with newly recruited Yoruba soldiers did little to ease. Awolowo, supported by the bulk of the Yoruba masses and the radicals in the intelligentsia, adopted a tough anti-Federal government stand on this issue to the point of declaring on 1st May, 'If the Eastern Region is allowed, by acts of omission, or commission, to secede from or opt out of Nigeria . . . then the Federation should be considered to be at an end, and

¹⁹ *Morning Post* (Lagos), 23.1.1967 and 4.2.1967.

²⁰ Awolowo's division would have grouped all the Yoruba-speaking peoples in the same state and would have meant a larger West absorbing Lagos and Ilorin.

the Western Region . . . should also opt out of it.²¹ This was taken by many to mean that the West would automatically follow the East out of Nigeria but, significantly, Awolowo said nothing about what the West would do if the East were *not* allowed to secede.

Opposition to using force against the East came from other quarters. Colonel Adebayo, governor of the West, opposed it, as did the army chief of staff, and then the Mid-West governor, David Ejoor, conscious no doubt of his large Ibo minority, declared that his state would not be used as a base for one Region to fight another. The feeling was growing, especially in the West where the Northern troops remained the focus of anti-Federal sentiment ('an army of occupation', Awolowo called them), that if the East pulled out it would be pointless to try to prevent it, and the remaining Regions should then form a loose confederal association. Just as it seemed as if the Federal ranks were disintegrating, the North finally made up its mind on the question of states. At a meeting of emirs and chiefs and 'leaders of thought' in Kaduna in early May, it was decided that the North 'should continue to support a federation with an effective centre as the only form of political association for Nigeria. The North is irrevocably committed to the creation of states—whether or not they are created elsewhere—as a basis for stability in the North and also in the entire Federation.' The meeting urged the Federal government to take 'immediate action' to set up these states and recommended that there should be between eleven and thirteen.²² This decision was revolutionary—and ironical. Throughout Nigeria's history the East and West had constantly demanded more states, while the North had fiercely resisted the idea. Under Southern pressure during Ironsi's regime, the North had pulled closer together and tried to secede and now, to keep Nigeria united and the East in, it was dividing itself. It was too early to tell how genuine this division was going to be but it was a big enough step in the right direction to rally and reassure the Federation against the larger threat posed by an Eastern secession. Gowon now had Northern consent for his contingency plan safely in his pocket. Awolowo had already begun to swing round with the Northern declaration on states but he was finally brought back into the Federal fold by a belated decision to move the Northern troops out of the West (announced on 25th May—five days before the East's secession) and the offer of the post of commissioner of finance and vice-chairman of the Supreme Military Council

²¹ Western 'Leaders of Thought' meeting, Ibadan, 1.5.1967.

²² *West Africa*, 6.5.1967.

in a new mixed government of soldiers and civilians which Gowon was planning. Ejoor in the Mid-West reaffirmed his state's consistent support for a multi-state federation with a strong centre but declined to accept military reinforcements stressing that he regarded the Mid-West to be a 'demilitarised zone'. However, the state's most popular politician, Chief Anthony Enahoro, also agreed to join Gowon's government and the Federation was ready, in the nick of time, for the show-down with the East.

* * *

In Enugu, the end of the long road to secession was in sight. Throughout the tragic war that was to follow as a direct consequence of the Eastern Region's decision to break away and form the Republic of Biafra, controversy raged over its rights and wrongs and will doubtlessly continue to do so as long as great human events exercise the minds and passions of mankind. Was the East's secession inevitable? Was it justified? Where does Ojukwu really stand? Was he the architect or merely the builder? Was he swept along by an irrepressible tide which he strove to stem but failed, or was he the principal dynamic force within that current?

It may never be possible to answer these questions with any convincing degree of accuracy; it is almost certainly too early, with the present dearth of documentary evidence, to try. Nevertheless, I feel that since my intention is to tell the story of the Nigerian war, I have to make an attempt to sketch the broad outlines of the path to secession and, for what it is worth, hazard an opinion on some of the controversies it raised. One of the major problems in analysing the forces behind the East's secession is that the lessons of Nigeria's past were devalued by the advent of several totally new and powerfully disruptive factors, all within the short space of eighteen months. The military take-over, the virtual destruction of the Nigerian army, the unprecedented massacres of one section of the country's population followed by an exodus of Jewish proportions, the youth and inexperience of the new leaders and the soaring oil production, with its long-term economic and political implications, imposed a huge strain on a vast and loosely knit country of 50 million people which had only been independent for a little over five years. In many respects, it seems remarkable that Nigeria did not break up earlier.

But if the internal tensions were immense there were also many forces—a number of them previously concealed or latent—working in the opposite direction. Nigeria had existed as a country for more than sixty years, albeit under a foreign master and governed, for some of that time,

in separate entities. In African terms, however, with its relatively advanced educational and economic system from which the indigenous people themselves had fully benefited, Nigerians were infinitely more conscious of their national identity than, say, the far more backward and under-privileged Congolese, Zambians and Tanzanians. The basis of unity was not rock-like, but it was, whatever Gowon had thought or said when he was first jostled into power, undoubtedly there.

The threat of secession itself by one or other of the large tribal groups in Nigeria was not new. Indeed it had been one of the most popular and effective weapons in the politicians' armoury. The North had threatened to pull out several times in the fifties and had almost done so after the July coup, but had retreated from the brink at the last minute. The East, similarly, had threatened to leave the Federation—at the time of the 1963 census controversy and again after the Federal elections the following year. The West, in its turn, had toyed with the idea in the past, and returned to it with Awolowo's statement that if the East were allowed to go the West would follow. Like the Bomb, it was the ultimate deterrent; but setting it off was quite another matter: an unprecedented and—as it proved—catastrophic breaking of the rules.

The history of the East's secession movement can be traced back to April 1966—before Ironsi's 'unity decree' and before the first wave of Ibo massacres—when a small group of Ibo lecturers began holding informal meetings on Sundays at Ibadan University. By June they had produced a blueprint for the East's secession; it ended with the declaration, 'Long Live the East! We have a new nation!'²³ At the end of the academic year (late June) these men, the hard core of the Ibo nationalists, had returned to the East for good, washing their hands of the Federation they had so enthusiastically helped to build. It is important to remember that they had taken this decision *before* the July coup and the September massacres had occurred and provided the justification many of them later claimed for it. The next positive move towards secession came during the confused period of the coup itself. When it looked as if the North were going to secede, the East, not unreasonably, since the Federation appeared to be dissolving into its constituent parts, also started to make moves towards an independent status though many people felt this was done with precipitous haste—no one thought of consulting the Eastern minorities—and that it smacked more than a little of a prepared contin-

²³ A. U. Asika, 'Why I am a Federalist', *Transition*, No. 36 (1968). Asika says he attended these early meetings.

gency plan being put into action. Ojukwu himself admitted later, 'As early as July, I was in a position—I had the full paraphernalia with which to set up an alternative government.'²⁴ His attorney general at that time, Dr. Nabo Graham-Douglas, a minority man from the Rivers, later wrote that the 'Instrument of Secession' had already been drawn up and that even after Gowon's first speech on his assumption of power in Lagos on 1st August, Ojukwu, strongly supported by his cousin, C. C. Mojekwu, the Eastern Region's solicitor general and a 'super hawk', was still intending to take the East out of the Federation without further ado. For the first time the word 'Biafra'²⁵ was heard along the corridors of power in Enugu. But, according to Graham-Douglas, Ojukwu and his supporters were eventually dissuaded from seceding because it was not yet clear that Ironsi was dead, Northern troops in Enugu still presented a threat and a million and a half Easterners were potential hostages in other parts of the Federation.²⁶

Whatever the accuracy of this account of Ojukwu's personal feelings, there is little doubt that the Ibo nationalists had got the secessionist bit between their teeth by this time and had begun to make steady inroads on the Eastern government's thinking. Following the removal of the Northern troops from Enugu in early August, a policy of what Graham-Douglas calls 'total disengagement' was followed: Easterners were called back from other parts of the country and from abroad and, at the end of September, non-Easterners (except Mid-Western Ibos) were expelled from the Region. The secessionists were very active at Nsukka University where the student body had increased from 2,500 to about 4,000 after the July coup and where feeling started to run high against all non-Easterners. 'Our colleagues began to show an untypical coolness towards us—we felt in hostile territory,' a Yoruba lecturer told me later.²⁷

The radio and the press, especially the government-controlled paper, the *Eastern Outlook*, were in full spate by this time, pouring out hatred of the Northerners and totally ignoring the exposed position of Easterners

²⁴ Ojukwu in an interview with the B.B.C., Enugu, 13.3.1967 (Kirk-Greene, op. cit., Vol. I, Document 97, p. 313.)

²⁵ There was an ancient kingdom called 'Biafara' in the seventeenth century; I have a print of a map from that time showing it where central Cameroon is now; the Bight of Biafra—the off-shore waters south of the Eastern Region—was probably named after that, though I can find no trace of a 'Biafra' or 'Biafara' formerly within the borders of present-day Nigeria.

²⁶ Dr. Nabo B. Graham-Douglas, *Ojukwu's Rebellion and World Opinion*, published in London, 1967, by Galatzine, Chant and Russell—the P.R. firm Nigeria hired during the war. Although with a Federal—and more particularly, a Rivers—bias, this pamphlet contains a lot of interesting, first-hand material, not all of it unsympathetic either to Ojukwu or to the East's basic grievances.

²⁷ Dr. Babs Fafunwa, Dean of Education at Nsukka in 1966 and now holding the same post at Ife university.

who were still in the North. (Kaduna Radio was quick to reply in kind.) The July coup was a god-send for the Ibo nationalists and was the real turning point for many of the elite who had not previously shared their view that there was no future for the Ibos in the Federation. From the tone of the propaganda of the time it seems clear that its guidance was already in the hands of the deeply committed and that its message was being increasingly directed towards the Eastern population as a whole.

'We had embarked [in the summer of 1966] upon a programme of propaganda designed to canvass the evils of Hausa-Fulani domination, to inflame feelings with published stories of Northern atrocities perpetrated upon "innocent Eastern civilians", and generally to persuade the Eastern peoples that there was no alternative to a complete break with the rest of the Federation.'²⁸

All the Regions and the Federal government used propaganda, which played such a key role in the run-down to secession and war, but the East was in a special position because it had the most effective and cohesive machine (the other Regions often attacked each other) and the most aggrieved and susceptible audience. And, like any government which controls its media, the East had three choices of how to use it; it could report and comment on the situation objectively, free-wheel, and let people make up their own minds; it could use its authority to cool the crisis down; or it could whip up popular fervour and keep it at fever-pitch. From June 1966, onwards, it was only too clear that Ojukwu's government had chosen the third alternative; and they, like the creator of Frankenstein, were eventually to become their own monster's captive.

In August, the Eastern government began to buy arms. Francis Nwokedi, Ironsi's maladroit commissioner on unification and one of the leading Ibo nationalists, travelled to France and then on to Israel, explaining the East's case and appealing for assistance, especially military hardware. During the same month, Christopher Okigbo, the poet, negotiated a plane-load of arms from the French dealer, Paul Favier, but, after several long delays, the plane crashed in Cameroon on its way to the East in October. Recruiting and training of an Eastern army also started that summer and the government, while keeping its options open in the Federal sphere—it sent a delegation to the Ad Hoc Conference in September, but with strict instructions to stick to its confederal brief—continued to prepare for an eventual break. Whether this was simply a contingency

²⁸ Graham-Douglas, *op. cit.*

plan (to be implemented if the Federation fell apart or if the North attacked the East) or a positive move to pull out anyway, is difficult to say and perhaps Ojukwu himself had not made up his own mind, though many around him clearly had.

The September massacres were crucial in the move to secession. They led directly to the point of no-return and a factor which should never be lost sight of in the story of Biafra. For the Ibo masses—less so for the Eastern minorities—they had the same catalytic effect as the May riots had had on the top Ibo elite and the July coup on that elite's 'second division'. But the fact of the massacres alone probably would not have been enough to produce the kind of sustained popular support that the government needed to carry the East out of the Federation. It was only when their horrific detail had been hammered home in a pervasive and gifted propaganda campaign over a prolonged period, reinforcing fears of mass killing and forging a solidarity unprecedented in their history, that the East was ready both to pull out and to fight for its newly won independence. Visitors to Enugu in late October and the following March noticed the remarkable change in mood: from a shocked yet resigned acceptance to an electrifying militancy which had already passed the point of rational compromise. The September massacres were the clinching factor which transformed secession from a contingency plan—one of several alternatives—into an inevitability. This was not so much because the massacres themselves intrinsically rendered any future compromise with the Federal government impossible—though that, too, was a possibility—but because the secessionist forces within the Eastern government used them in such a way that agreement, in the deepening atmosphere of mutual suspicion and mistrust, became impossible.

From September onwards, the East began to slip its moorings. It withdrew its delegates from the Ad Hoc Constitutional Conference and never sent them back; leading Ibos talked quite openly about secession being 'the only acceptable alternative' for the East;²⁹ in February 1967, the Eastern government hired a public relations firm in the United States and instructed it to stress two points in its publicity: that the 1966 killings in the North had been a form of genocide against the Ibos, and that the East had never shared a similar culture or history with the rest of Nigeria.³⁰

²⁹ Dr. Pius Okigbo in the autumn of 1966 to a friend of the author.

³⁰ The P.R. firm was Ruder and Finn in New York who were hired by the Eastern Region government on 14.2.1967—six weeks after the Aburi meeting—for a monthly fee of \$5,500. (Karen Rothmeyer, 'What Really Happened in Biafra', *Columbia Journalism Review*, autumn 1970.) See Chapter XI for the role of public relations in the war.

Arms buying and recruiting continued and in March an official of the Eastern government was picked up by the police at London airport and found to be carrying designs and specimens of currency notes and stamps for the 'Republic of Biafra'.³¹ In its drive towards secession, Enugu was often aided and abetted by the actions of the Federal government. The failure of the Federal government to express its regret publicly over the massacres and to compensate the victims adequately, Gowon's tough 30th November speech, threatening to use force, the confusion, blundering and back-tracking after Aburi and, particularly, the failure to pay Eastern Federal civil servants their salaries up to 31st March, promised unequivocally in the Aburi agreements, all made the Eastern government's task of convincing the people that Gowon and his supporters were devils incarnate, immeasurably easier.

Secession did, however, have its opponents within the East, although the Enugu government skilfully presented a united front to the rest of the Federation and the outside world. This opposition fell into three broad categories: the radicals, the moderates and the minorities. The first consisted mainly of the 'One Nigeria' reformists who had plotted or sympathised with the January coup. Two of the most prominent coup leaders, Nzeogwu and Ifeajuna, who owed their lives to the fact that they had been imprisoned in Enugu and thus escaped the holocaust in July, had been released by Ojukwu but opposed secession. With other young radicals like Philip Alale, a Rivers man who had been trained in Moscow and was a talented demagogue, they were basically 'One Nigeria' men who still believed in the feasibility of ridding the country of its 'reactionary' Northern elements and installing a 'progressive' government in Lagos. Ojukwu kept them firmly on the sidelines until war broke out—Nzeogwu, still a popular hero in the East, openly expressed his opposition to secession³²—and then gave them junior positions in the army. They were too few to present much of a threat to the secessionists and were finally eclipsed by the death of Nzeogwu in action and the execution of Ifeajuna, Alale and two others shortly after the war began.³³

Stronger and more sustained opposition came from a larger though amorphous group of moderates—those who were to be known later as the Biafran 'doves'. They included the majority of the old politicians, people like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nigeria's former president, and Matthew

³¹ Raph Uwechue, *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War* (O.I.T.H. International Publishers, London, 1969), p. 89.

³² *West Africa*, 12.8.1967.

³³ See Chapter VI.

Mbu, a former Federal minister; also a few civil servants (N. U. Akpan, the chief secretary), lawyers (Sir Louis Mbanefo) and several leading business men. Opposition was particularly strong in the important market town of Onitsha on the banks of the Niger. Several senior soldiers (Lieutenant-Colonel 'Baba' Ogunewe, the man who had saved the day in Enugu during the July coup, and the police commissioner, Patrick Okeke, for example) also felt the same way and tried to exert a cautioning influence on the government throughout the crisis. Their influence waxed and waned: particular high-points were just after the July coup when Ojukwu wanted to secede and over Gowon's Decree No. 8, which many felt was the best possible deal the East would ever get from Lagos and should be accepted, if only because it allowed scope for a gradual 'drifting' secession, which the Federal government would have found extremely difficult to oppose. But by that time, the tide was running too strongly towards secession to be reversed. There is a story that just before secession, Ojukwu was presented with a detailed memorandum arguing cogently against a breakaway by a group of leading Easterners. He read it and then took their spokesman into a room stuffed with Biafran flags, uniforms and posters and said, 'It's too late to go back now, they'd kill me if I did.'

The five-million-strong minority peoples of the East, over a third of the Region's total population, were the crux of the Federal case against secession. Some people later wrote off the minorities with the argument that in all great nationalist movements of history (the British, French, etc.) smaller ethnic groups within those nationalisms (the Scots, Bretons, etc.) are necessarily and inevitably submerged by the greater force and, ultimately, for the common good. Apart from its doubtful morality, this line of argument is simply not good enough in the Nigerian context. Firstly, the minorities were too numerous to be blithely written off; their land, half the total area of the East, not only included ninety-five per cent of the oil but all the Eastern Region's ports (Port Harcourt was ninety per cent Ibo before the war but had been built on non-Ibo land³⁴) and a large proportion of its richest agriculture and fishing resources. Secondly, there was a long tradition of demands for their own states in the Calabar, Ogoja and Rivers areas—noted by the thorough Willink Commission report conducted under the British in 1958—well before anyone had considered an Eastern secession or a Biafran state. And thirdly, the

³⁴ On Ekwerre land, to be precise; the Ekwerres are an Ibo-speaking people but regard themselves as non-Ibo in a general sense and are often called 'marginal' Ibos.

Eastern minorities had been as neglected by the Ibos as the Northern and Western minorities had by the Hausa-Fulani and the Yorubas in the days of civilian rule and, in common with most small ethnic groups that live under the shadow of large tribes in Africa, wanted control over their own local affairs. Ojukwu recognised this and produced a new twenty-province structure for the Region which went some way towards administrative decentralisation, but it had not really made an impact when Gowon outbid him and carved up the Federation into twelve new states, giving the Eastern minorities much greater autonomy with two of their own.³⁵ The thing that worried the minorities was less Enugu's political domination—though distant Lagos was more acceptable—than the powerful grip that the individual Ibos living amongst them had over their economies and everyday lives as traders, administrators, professional men and artisans. In many ways the pattern resembled that in the North and the resentment it built up was also similar.

Both sides claimed the minorities' loyalty during the war and both, in a sense, were right since one found leading personalities on each side of the Niger. Traditionally, they had kept one foot in each camp and some divisions existed between the tribes themselves. Ojukwu rejected the idea of a plebiscite before the war but later proposed one, though this move lost much of its conviction since by then virtually all the minority areas were in Federal hands. But he knew even before secession that his hold on them was tenuous: the Ibo-dominated police and army were always heavily deployed in the minority areas and some of the worst civilian-inspired massacres and counter-massacres took place there. The earlier killings in the North, where many minorities had suffered along with the Ibos, had paradoxically united and divided the two peoples: some of the minorities moved closer to their fellow sufferers but others blamed their misfortunes on the Ibos themselves. Contrary to the Federal government's hopes, the Eastern minorities never rose against Enugu—security was always tight—but their passivity was undoubtedly Federally inclined as their co-operation with the Nigerian forces during the war showed. It was significant that the minority people did not join the great Ibo trek from Lagos and the West back to the East in 1966-67 and their homelands were relatively quickly overrun by Federal troops while the Ibo heartland offered a much tougher resistance. And the bitter hatred of the Ibos that manifested itself after the war—Ibos are still almost totally banned from

³⁵ The Rivers State (capital Port Harcourt) and the South-East State (capital Calabar).

the Rivers State to this day—was too deep and virulent just to have sprung up overnight.

Biafra's supporters often argued that the minorities supported Enugu because they had representatives in the Eastern Region's Consultative Assembly, a body similar to other Regions' 'leaders of thought' groups and later sometimes regarded as a sort of Biafran 'parliament'. On the surface the Assembly appeared democratic: politicians, lawyers, trade unionists, all the major professions and traditional chiefs and elders were represented. But it was, in truth, a rubber-stamping organisation. Its members were selected, not elected, mainly by Ojukwu himself—though he called them 'the accredited representatives of the people'³⁶—his powerful cousin C. C. Mojekwu, Dr. Ikoku, former leader of the opposition in the Regional parliament and a minority chief from the Rivers. Some genuinely free debate did take place and local grievances occasionally secured an airing but this was the Assembly's only concession to democracy. Resolutions were drafted in advance by a small cabal of extremists; sometimes there was not even a quorum and resolutions were *always* passed 'unanimously'. Dr. Azikiwe, who attended some of the meetings but was shouted down at the crucial secession debate as 'an old politician', later wrote: 'because legislative and executive powers were vested in one person, Ojukwu, the impression created that decisions of the Consultative Assembly had mandatory effects was a colossal deception.'³⁷ In the ultimate analysis, however, it was the Ibos who needed the minorities—their land, their ports and their oil—more than the minorities needed the Ibos; without Calabar, Ogoja and the Rivers, Biafra ceased to be a viable state. And, as throughout modern Nigerian history, what mattered most for the mass of the people were jobs, control over their own affairs, security and the minimum of interference ('domination' in the Nigerian political dictionary) from outside. In the contest between Enugu and Lagos to satisfy these desires, the Federal government, once it had plucked up courage to divide the country into twelve states, offered the Eastern minorities an attractive incentive which they had singularly lacked in the past. It proved a trump card.

And where does Ojukwu fit into this complex story? Unlike Gowon, he is a man both imbued with political ambition and the vital instinctive qualities essential for survival and success. His role in the secessionist movement in the East is more easily understood in the light of a man who

³⁶ In an interview with the author, Enugu, June 1967.

³⁷ Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Morning Post* (Lagos), 24.2.1970.

has got into power and intends to stay there rather than in terms of strong feelings for or against the concept of secession itself. It is worth remembering that during Ironsi's regime, Ojukwu was the most unpopular of the Regional governors. While the nepotistic excesses of the old order were being widely condemned, Ojukwu appointed his father chairman of two public corporations ('The past is too recent for Nigerians to appreciate the choice,' commented the *Lagos Daily Times* acidly³⁸), incurred much unpopularity through purging the local radio and press, and alienated 'Zik' and his supporters by removing him from the chancellorship of Nsukka University; his rather arrogant, aloof personal style did not endear him to the people either. The July coup changed all this overnight and he became the hero of the hour and increasingly the symbol of resistance against the North and the Federal government. 'Governing the East is like riding a pack of wild horses,' he once wrote, and there is no doubt that, like his rival, Gowon, he had to maintain a delicate balancing act during the tense months that followed. But Ojukwu was no cipher, nor even a consensus figure; he was '*le vrai patron*' and everyone around him knew it. From the beginning of the crisis until after Biafra's collapse he identified himself totally with the cause as he saw it, 'They want to get their hands on Ojukwu,' he said in 1966 and, later, justifying his flight to the Ivory Coast, he said, 'I did this knowing that whilst I live Biafra lives. If I am no more it would only be a matter of time for the noble concept to be swept into oblivion.'³⁹

Whether Ojukwu himself favoured secession as early and ardently as the Ibo nationalists who surrounded him is impossible to tell. But what is clear is that he did little to resist their pressure—except, perhaps, agreeing to attend the Aburi meeting—and nothing to halt the vicious stream of propaganda which contributed so much to making secession inevitable. A leader's responsibility sometimes entails swimming against the tide and a willingness to step down if all else fails. There was a great deal of opposition in the East to secession, much of it on the fully justified grounds that the Region was in no state of preparedness (as will become clear later in the story) to take on the might of the Federation, but by that time popular forces were sweeping the government towards the brink and Ojukwu knew that, if he was to stay in power, he had no alternative but to go along with them. 'Once separatist influences are at work it is easier to ride them

³⁸ 17.2.1966.

³⁹ Ojukwu's final speech recorded in the Ivory Coast just after his flight from Biafra and put out by Markpress in Geneva in January 1970.

than to arrest their progress,' a leading Ibo nationalist had written in another context.⁴⁰ It equally applies to Ojukwu in 1966-7 and he chose to stay on the tiger's back.

Although a brilliant tactician, Ojukwu was a poor strategist. He constantly narrowed his future options and manoeuvrability for the sake of the short-term advantage. The East's uncompromising confederal stand at the Ad Hoc Conference; its refusal to take part in any of its future discussions; the rigid adherence to the letter of the Aburi agreements—ambiguous though they were; Ojukwu's point-blank refusal to attend any future Supreme Military Council meetings and the outright rejection of Decree No. 8 all put him in a position where compromise, especially in the inflamed atmosphere of the times, became impossible even if he had wanted it. He also surrounded himself with a self-interested group of advisers, the inner circle being almost entirely his blood relatives from his home town of Nnewi of whom Mojekwu and Nwokedi were the most influential. A certain arrogance—carefully concealed in interviews with foreign journalists and others, but there all the same—helped to poison relations with other Nigerians, some of whom were valuable potential allies of the Eastern cause. He alienated Awolowo when the latter visited him in May by his off-hand and brusque treatment of the older man and later boasted that he had 'run rings' round his military colleagues at Aburi.⁴¹ And although he talked a lot about reactivating the 'Southern alliance', his actions worked against its revival. The expulsion of non-Easterners from the East and, even more crucially, his failure to woo Chief Awolowo, the key political figure at this time, left the East more isolated than it need have been.

* * *

From April onwards, Eastern secession was expected at any time: the 'count-down', as Radio Enugu had called it, continued unchecked. Ojukwu's 'survival edicts' were answered with a Federal blockade. A Nigerian Airways Fokker Friendship aircraft was hijacked in Benin and flown to the East, propaganda intensified and there was wild jubilation in Enugu when Awolowo announced that the West would follow the East out of the Federation if the latter were allowed to go. Early in May, Ojukwu told Reuter's news agency, 'I think we are now rolling down-

⁴⁰ Dr. Pius Okigbo, *Africa and the Common Market* (Longmans, London, 1967).

⁴¹ *West Africa*, 6.5.1967.

hill—and it will take a great deal to halt the momentum. We are very close, very, very close.’ The Federal cabinet, united on the decision to impose economic sanctions on the East, was divided on the use of force to combat secession. The West, in particular, was still sore about the presence of Northern troops, and Awolowo was alleged to have said, ‘The maintenance of unity of the Federation is not worth one drop of blood.’ The mood in the East was sulphurous; anyone who opposed secession was likely to be branded as a ‘saboteur’, but strangely the word ‘Biafra’ was rarely heard and the general feeling was that either the Region would have to withstand an attack from the Northerners or that the government would launch an assault of its own against the North—but all still within the Federal context. There was a last-minute attempt at conciliation with Chief Awolowo leading a four-man delegation to Enugu on 7th May. However, Ojukwu snubbed it, calling it ‘an ill-conceived child’ and treated Awolowo cavalierly—in contrast to Gowon’s tactful and respectful handling of the elder statesman—and this probably played some part in swinging the Yoruba leader back into the Federal camp a few weeks later.

On 26th May, the Eastern Consultative Assembly was convened by Ojukwu. In a marathon address he outlined the history of the crisis, asserted that the East was fully prepared to defend itself—‘There is no power in this country or in Black Africa to subdue us by force’—and gave the Assembly three loaded alternatives to choose from: ‘(a) accepting the terms of the North and Gowon and thereby submit to domination by the North, or (b) continuing the present stalemate and drift, or (c) ensuring the survival of our people by asserting our autonomy.’ The Assembly took the hint and on 27th May unanimously passed a resolution mandating Ojukwu to declare the sovereign Republic of Biafra ‘at an early practicable date’. Ojukwu said he had already sent ‘a final letter’ to Gowon telling him that he had ‘no alternative but to make plans for a separate existence in the interests of self-preservation’. This did not actually amount to secession but it was clear that the East had gone past the point of no return and Gowon immediately activated his own contingency plan only a few hours after the Consultative Assembly’s announcement of its resolution. He assumed full powers, declared a state of emergency, abrogated Decree No. 8 and, most far-reaching of all, divided the country into twelve new states, abolishing once and for all the old Regions. The North was carved up into six new states, the East into three (only one, the landlocked East-Central State, for the Ibos), the Mid-West stayed as it was and the West lost a slice of its southern section to join with the Federal

capital to form Lagos State. It reduced the monolithic power of the majority tribes, gave the minorities a place in the sun at last and was, as one writer put it, 'the third coup'.⁴² But it was also the straw that broke the camel's back for the East. At two a.m. on 30th May diplomats and journalists in Enugu were summoned to State House, Ojukwu solemnly proclaimed that 'the territory and Region known as Eastern Nigeria, together with her continental shelves and territorial waters, shall henceforth be an independent sovereign state of the name and title the Republic of Biafra'. Over the building fluttered a new flag in bold horizontal bars of black, green and red backing a rising sun, its rays fanning out in an eloquent symbol of hope and a golden future. Glued to their radio sets, Nigerians heard the strains of a new national anthem composed, it later transpired, by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the 'father' of the country which was now divided against itself.

⁴² Walter Schwarz, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

CHAPTER
FIVE

The Phoney War

June—July 1967

Eve of war
Mid-West and Biafra
Ojukwu
West and North
Oil
Economic blockade

mere anticipation. 'Phoney' wars also have a dream-like quality of their own and Nigeria was no exception. The threat of war hung menacingly in the sodden air, but no one seemed to know quite when and in what shape it would come. The only constant was its inevitability. Lagos, a city which takes trouble easily in its elastic cosmopolitan stride, was the best general listening post. But then, as throughout most of the war itself, the capital was a long way from where the action was and insulated from the localised but strong currents of feeling in the provinces. During the three weeks I spent in Nigeria in this uneasy limbo period, I took a series of 'rural rides' through the Mid-West, West and Biafra. The giant North seemed of lesser immediate importance because it had already made up its mind to oppose Biafra's secession and because much of it was physically far-removed from the likely area of conflict.

I first drove along the narrow bumpy road to the ancient city of Benin, the capital of the Mid-West. For 200 miles the road slices through massive primeval forests, which give way, reluctantly it seems, to occasional rubber plantations. It dips and lifts over rickety bridges crossing fast-flowing streams of thick muddy water, threading together the important towns and market centres between Lagos and the Niger river, like beads on a string. It is, even without the shadow of war, a dramatic and haunting road.

Crossing the Mid-West/West border after passing through the strategic cross-roads town of Ore—destined a few weeks later to become one of the key battlefields of the war—one became aware of a new tension. Traffic which had been heavy, raucous and extrovert, thinned out and seemed desperately preoccupied to get to its destination with the minimum of fuss. Roadblocks manned by Mid-Western soldiers increased and finally we ground to a halt just after dark on the outskirts of Benin City. A long column of heavy lorries, 'mammy' wagons, and private cars lined the road. A huge crowd of colourful, shouting, gesticulating people swirled up and down. There was a curfew, we were told, and we would have to spend the night on the roadside. The lights of the city gleamed invitingly but the officer in charge was adamant. We slept amid the mosquitoes and huge night moths under a double canopy of the tropical stars and the great rain forest.

The Mid-West was caught in an unpleasant dilemma which grew more acute as the war crept closer. It was the classic man-in-the-middle, small, frightened, facing both ways at once. Brigadier David Ejoor, the gentle and upright governor of the state (a contemporary of Gowon and Ojukwu, he was reputed to be the best staff officer in the Nigerian army),

was desperately trying to perform the virtually impossible tight-rope act of bringing Lagos and Enugu together while at the same time removing his state from any involvement in a future conflict.

A complicating factor was the cross-currents of opinion within the state itself. The Mid-Western Ibos, about a quarter of the total 2.4 million population, and some of the non-Ibos, too, sympathised with the East on many counts. They had shared much of the Northern violence; in the political days there had been close links with the East which had helped to create the Mid-Western Region, and the peoples of the Mid-West had much more in common with other Southerners than they had with the Muslim North. Everyone realised, too, that if war came the Mid-West would inevitably become one of the battlefields unless both sides miraculously resisted the temptation to break their promise not to march across it.

However, the Mid-West also proudly regarded itself as a successful experiment in showing how a number of diverse tribes could live together under a federal government. It was in many ways a microcosm of the Federation itself. And it had, of all the former Regions, been the most fervently and consistently 'federal' throughout the crisis. It realised that it was too small to survive as an independent state if the Federation broke up. Apart from its agricultural riches (timber, rubber, palm oil) its new mineral-oil wealth—a third of Nigeria's current production and half of its reserves—made it a tempting morsel for its powerful neighbours. Finally, Gowon's new twelve-state structure fitted in well with the Mid-West's own political philosophy and the recent inclusion of its most popular politician, Anthony Enahoro, in the Federal Military government gave the state some weight and prestige in Lagos councils.¹

Just how jittery the situation really was became clear through talking to people in Benin and then driving on to Asaba on the west bank of the Niger. The basic division followed tribal lines: the Mid-Western Ibos felt a strong sympathy for Biafra (apart from ties of language and blood, Ojukwu had exempted them from his expulsion of non-Easterners the previous September) while the other Mid-Western tribes adopted a neutral or pro-Lagos stance.

This division was reflected in a power struggle within the Mid-Western leadership, particularly in the army. The army was small, about 1,300 men all told, due to the fact that few Mid-Westerners had enlisted

¹ Gowon broadened his government to include twelve leading politicians early in June as part of his strategy of pulling the Federation together to counter Biafra's secession.

and to Ejoor's policy of maintaining freedom to manoeuvre by keeping non-Mid-Western soldiers out of the state. This made him very unpopular with the Federal 'hawks' in Lagos who wanted to line the banks of the Niger with troops in order to enforce the blockade against the East. But Gowon, who had offered Ejoor reinforcements—they would have been mainly Northern or Middle Belt troops—accepted Ejoor's argument, trusted him and did not try to force his hand. The army in the Mid-West was also top heavy and tribally unbalanced. It had eight colonels—all Mid-Western Ibos—including the area commander, Colonel Nwawo.² Although nominally under the command of General Gowon, many were suspected of being in secret contact with the Biafrans, and Ejoor, who comes from a small Mid-Western tribe, felt that he could only keep his meagre force together and loyal to himself as long as he did not drive his Ibo officers into the arms of the Biafrans. This was another reason for not accepting the Federal government's offer of reinforcements. He subsequently lost his gamble, but it was a brave try and did not seem an unreasonable policy given the limited choice of alternatives open to him at that time.

Driving the eighty miles from Benin to Asaba, it did seem that the 'Biafranists'—much of the Mid-Western civil service was run by the Ibos whose loyalties were also suspect—were dominant. There were far fewer roadblocks and military precautions. It was a strange paradox. The Mid-West was an integral part of the Federation and therefore, it could be argued, logically and legally opposed to Biafra's secession. Yet, militarily, and in some ways politically, too, it clearly regarded Lagos, not Enugu, as the real enemy. In Lagos and Benin we had been told that all river traffic had been stopped and the economic blockade against Biafra was totally effective. But, driving through the milling crowds in Asaba, the soldiers themselves obligingly directed us to a side road which, they said, would lead us to someone who could get us across the river. The impressive, brand-new £6½ million Niger bridge was closed but it had been open until the day before in defiance of the Federal government's orders.

Throughout this period there was also a struggle which was to continue up to the day of the Biafran invasion, between the Mid-Western army command and the police. The police chief and his deputy (both non-Ibos) were strongly pro-Federal and tried to implement the blockade.

² The officer who had escorted Major Nzeogwu, the January coup leader in the North, from Kaduna to Lagos after the latter's surrender to Ironsi.



The crippled helping the blind; wounded Biafran soldiers outside a hospital.

Wounded Biafran soldiers on their way to hospital in a vegetable lorry, after being routed by the Nigerians.



Biafra's agony: wounded man awaiting surgery.





A man who does not like cameras—or publicity—and is rarely photographed: Jacques Foccart, Secretary-General of France's African Affairs Office, and the master-mind of a complex and diffuse intelligence network directly responsible to the French President.

Colonel Rolf Steiner, the ex-Foreign Legionnaire who led Biafra's 4th Commando Division against the Nigerians; he left Biafra in handcuffs and disgrace. The death skull was the Division's insignia.

Count Carl Gustav von Rosen, the Swedish grandfather, flying ace and idealist who came near to changing the course of the war with his hedge-hopping 'Minicon' raids on Nigeria.



But no sooner had their men closed the bridge or stopped boats crossing the river than the army came along and threw traffic open again. Ejoor visited the Ibo areas—they lie principally along the west bank of the Niger—at about this time and emphasised that the Mid-West would defend itself against any aggression. The state, he said, 'has suffered from actions of both the North and East' and would not allow itself to be used as a battleground. Still on his tight-rope, Ejoor spent a lot of the phoney war in Lagos explaining his position but he also secretly crossed the Niger bridge on at least one occasion to meet Ojukwu at Onitsha on the other side to try to maintain good relations with the Biafrans.

Sitting on the banks of the broad river it seemed not a bad idea to follow Ejoor's example and have a look at Biafra. The photographer who was with me agreed, so we drove a little way north of Asaba and found a spot where dug-out canoes were plying a thriving if somewhat hazardous trade with the new republic. After some ritual bargaining a deal was struck for a one-way ticket at the cost of £5. Included in the price was a full feet-dry embarkation, which simply meant we were whisked off our feet by a brawny coxswain and dumped unceremoniously on sacks of flour at the bottom of the narrow boat.

The fast-flowing current pushed us downstream but we arrived safely enough in Onitsha, Africa's largest and probably most famous market town. Again, there was that curious feeling of unreality. Life appeared perfectly normal; people, looking remarkably like Nigerians, were going about their daily tasks and the sun shone in a warm reassuring way. Was it credible that these cheerful people on opposite banks of this magnificent river were seriously contemplating a fight to the death?

There was virtually no indication of warlike preparations and no Israeli-style mass mobilisation, though the Biafrans frequently compared themselves to the Israelis when searching for illuminating precedents. Between the Niger river frontier and Enugu, sixty-seven miles away, there was only one military roadblock. (Curiously, the midway village on this road is called 'UDI').

But there was one major difference between Biafra and Nigeria. It was a carefully disguised but nevertheless profound feeling of physical and psychological isolation. The first was relatively new and still incomplete, as our own presence showed. But the blockade was beginning to have an effect. The Niger bridge was closed and was to remain so for the duration of the war; the northern border was barred by hostile troops and tribesmen; the southern coast was at least partially blockaded by the Nigerian

navy; and the Cameroon border to the east was becoming more difficult to cross. Telegraphic, postal and telephone links with the outside world had been cut. The siege had begun in earnest.

But a siege *psychology* was already a reality. Ever since the second coup and the subsequent massacres a year before, the Easterners, especially the Ibos, had been drawing in their horns and looking fearfully across the Niger. The mood of heady nationalism with which they had greeted the declaration of Biafra's independence a fortnight ago had passed. In its place was a more sombre appreciation of their present diplomatic and physical isolation and a gnawing unease induced by the war which they, too, knew had to come.

Few people, however, allowed these doubts to mar their natural confidence and charm. There was a certain gusto and verve in the way they went about things. Even the soldiers in their Cuban-type *k'pis*, carrying brand-new Czech or Spanish Cetme assault rifles, with the Biafran 'sun' badges prominent on their sleeves, seemed so more alert and proud than their brothers across the river.

'Welcome to Biafra,' they would say with a grin, having thoroughly searched you first. 'Biafranisation' of everything was the order of the day, sometimes with odd results. Driving into Enugu we passed the 'Hail Biafra Bar' and the 'End of Nigeria Garage'.

Enugu was crowded. Refugees from all parts of Nigeria were still being absorbed; recruiting for the expanding Biafran army, civil defence and Red Cross was in full spate; everywhere there was a bustle, a sense of purpose and a marked degree of efficiency. Lagos, behind its perpetual curtain of rain, seemed blowzy, anarchic and indolent by contrast.

We stayed at the newly completed, ultra-modern, two-hundred-bed Presidential Hotel. There were four other guests. A smart, dark-suited Ibo manager catered smoothly and unobtrusively for our every need. The Ministry of Information equipped us with press passes, badges, voluminous literature, and crisp answers to our questions. The Biafran public relations machine, though freshly out of the factory, was already clearly running sweetly. At our request to interview Ojukwu, we were told that it might be possible but we would be rung at noon the next day with a definitive answer.

Precisely at mid-day, my phone rang. I could barely believe my ears. During three years of reporting in Africa and the Middle East I had observed that most African and Arab officials had one thing in common: they rarely rang you back at all and never when they had made a point of

saying they would. 'His Excellency [first contact with that excessively formal title which was to become the hallmark of Ojukwu's style] the governor will see you at three.'

The style of a leader, especially in war, is vital. It expresses itself through his clothes, his physique, his mannerisms, his voice, but above all through the image he has of himself. And with Ojukwu that image was one of power and, I think, grandeur. Not the crude, bombastic variety but the subtle, sophisticated, almost gentle manipulation of power and the pleasure of basking in its ego-warming after-glow.

We were taken to the former Eastern Region parliament building, another modern construction high up overlooking the green hills on which Enugu is built. Military police, as tall and as awesome as Guardsmen, searched us meticulously three times. Then a briefing by some of Ojukwu's aides. Finally into a large conference room where several more young—everyone seemed to be young—Biafrans, immaculate in neat grey suits, sat around the table. No sign of Ojukwu. After ten minutes or so, another door opened and he walked in. He was wearing a neatly pressed camouflaged combat uniform without badges of rank but with heavy gold-braid epaulettes and the inevitable rising sun of the republic on each arm. About average height, he is a burly, powerfully built man. His beard, grown after the second coup as a symbol of mourning, was then thick and bushy, heightening the aura of power and authority. A great reader of Shakespeare, he has been described as 'an African Hamlet' or 'Orson Welles playing Othello'. But, to me, he looked more like Orson Welles playing Orson Welles (the black version), striding on to the film set, totally in command. Only his voice, which is remarkably soft and gentle, was out of character.

Ojukwu is a born talker. He loves words, their sound, articulation and infinite subtleties of meaning. Some of his interviews, even at the height of the war, went on for hours. His speeches tended to run into marathon length. He speaks slowly in a monotone, often very pedantically, searching for the right word or turn of phrase. He has a politician's sense of theatre but the result, his voice suddenly rising, is often hammy. His mind is uncluttered and astute. At his best he can be highly subtle, producing several shades of meaning, piled lightly but confusingly one on top of the other. Above all, he creates a marvellously reassuring atmosphere of sanity, patience and moderation. Leaving his presence it was difficult not to feel, well now, here is a very reasonable man. In this sense he was not only the oracular voice of Biafra's public image, he *was* Biafra.

On this occasion he was very relaxed, chain-smoking 'Three Fives' (he was faithfully supplied with this brand throughout the war), and he answered our questions slowly and thoughtfully. Confidence exuded from him like warmth from a fire. 'I have throughout anticipated where the Lagos-Kaduna axis [the Federal government] might step wrong.' He went back over the history of the crisis and insisted that Biafra had been 'kicked out' of the Federation. War was expected. 'Gowon will hum and haw for some time. The North will be impatient and start to hare down here with a ramshackle army. Once they cross [the frontier] we'll take the war straight to them. I have the *wherewithal* to ensure that a large part of what is the North is completely destroyed and put under the control of Biafra. [Pause.] A lot of lives will be lost.'³

There were occasional boyish sallies and point-scoring off the other side. 'In order to get Adebayo [governor of the West] to accept his recent promotion to brigadier, he had to be threatened with detention' (deep chuckle and laughter from the aides). Recognition of Biafra would 'minimise the bloodshed', 'bring Gowon down to earth' and 'stabilise the area'. But the Western powers 'were hanging back waiting for the African powers and the Africans were hanging back waiting for the West' (another chuckle). But this point was probably worrying the Biafran government more than any other at this time. Many of the more extreme civil servants and advisers in Enugu had clearly expected some form of recognition and were bitterly disappointed. Ojukwu shared this disappointment but tried to cover it by saying that he had not yet asked for recognition. This seemed highly improbable since Biafran emissaries had been hard at work for months lobbying in Africa, Europe, and the United States. He knew that Africa was the sluice gate and a fresh group of emissaries had recently left Biafra, via Cameroon and the Spanish island of Fernando Po, for East and Central Africa. The ill-timed announcement on Radio Biafra of five 'recognitions' on the day after secession, apart from deeply embarrassing the countries mentioned (four African states and Israel) had made even Biafra's friends ultra-cautious about the whole subject of recognition.

A final question. Was Biafra's predicament historically unique (Ojukwu had read history at Lincoln College, Oxford)? In many aspects there were precedents and parallels, but in one it was unique. 'Biafra is the first nation-state in Africa south of the Sahara,' Colonel Ojukwu concluded.

³ All the comments by Ojukwu in this chapter (unless stated otherwise) are from this interview; a tape-recording of it is in the author's possession.

The Somalis and the Biafran non-Ibo minorities would probably have hotly disputed this claim, but it was important for it became a popularly held tenet of faith by the mass of the Ibos during their ordeal.

The next time I was to see Ojukwu, a year later under very different circumstances, his capital, his ports and air-fields and two-thirds of his country had gone. But, curiously, the same pomp and circumstance surrounded him, the confidence was only slightly dimmed and his view of himself, the leader of a viable and proud nation, remained inviolate while his political fortunes and those of his 'nation-state' were spinning dizzily into an inconceivable abyss of misery and despair.

Perhaps one of the most poignant things about the atmosphere in Enugu during the phoney war period was the knowledge that Biafra *was* a viable and exciting prospect as a new nation. Even the expatriates spoke glowingly about its economic potential (oil, coal, palm oil, railways, good roads, a 13-million internal market); its vast fund of administrative, technical and business skills; its uniquely industrious population. This, of course, glided over the mountainous issues of the quarrel with Nigeria, the ownership of the key oil industry and the true feelings of the Eastern minorities. (It is perhaps important to point out that I did not visit the minority areas at this time and these observations apply primarily to the feeling in the Ibo heartland.) But, being bigger, richer, more dynamic than half of Africa's banana republics, yet not allowed to prove it to the world in normal peace-time conditions, brought a new sense of anguish. However, Ibos do not easily curl up their toes at adversity. These resourceful people, for the first time in their history, were turning their powers in on themselves. The result was an almost audible hum, spurred on by an intense nationalism and the ever-present threat from outside.

We eventually got back to Onitsha where, not untypically, the situation had changed completely. Trade in Nigeria is like a powerful stream seeking the sea. It is difficult to dam up for long. The Niger was alive with craft of all kinds and even the old iron ferry-boats were operating again, discreetly though, up-river from the bridge. It cost us sixpence each to cross. I looked back over the swirling brown water to Onitsha. The next time I was to see it, the scorched breath of war had swept over the town, and reduced it to a blackened, echoing ruin.

Back in Lagos, the slow, inexorable grind towards hostilities was continuing. Foreigners' families, many of them reluctant to go, were being evacuated via the Federal capital from Biafra and the Mid-West. There had been several sabotage attempts, the worst one against the police

headquarters which failed but killed an Ibo family. The Nigerians blamed the Biafrans who blamed the 'Yoruba nationalists'. Army recruiting went on apace, many veterans of the Burma campaign in the Second World War rejoining the colours. The decks, one felt, were being cleared for action at last.

Three main political developments dominated this period. They were the silent struggle for the Mid-West, which I have already described, Gowon's consolidation of his position in the Federation, and Ojukwu's battle to squeeze royalties out of the oil companies.

Gowon's declaration of a state of emergency and the sub-division of the country into twelve states, three of them to be carved out of the East, has been aptly described as the coup of the minorities. But anything that pleased the minorities (as this measure undoubtedly did) was bound to upset the majorities. The Ibos were out of the Federation, the Hausa-Fulani were in, but the Yorubas could not seem to make up their minds.

The West was a traditional trouble spot. Many people see it as the key to Nigerian politics. But if it is not quite that it certainly is, to change the metaphor, the barometer. I went to Ibadan, a marvellous, sprawling, vital city, to try and read it and got very confused. But the general impression was that the Yorubas did not want to fight the East—or anyone—at that time. Their immediate quarrel was not with the Ibos but with the Northerners, for there were still Northern troops stationed in Ibadan and Abeokuta and these appeared, and often behaved, as troops of occupation. (The extremely pleasant Northern permanent secretary in the Ministry of Information in Lagos agreed with the nub of my assessment and passed my story for transmission to the *Observer* in London. It was then torn to shreds by the censor—a Yoruba, and the only man I have ever seen literally foam at the mouth—and finally handed over to the Police Special Branch with dire threats of locking me up, throwing me out of the country or—an astonishing prospect—both simultaneously).

On the surface the West had not done well out of the twelve-state structure. It had lost its southern flank (the old Lagos Colony portion which included the Ikeja district) to Lagos State and it was now one among twelve—or nine if you discounted the East. On the other hand, it had not been broken up like its old rivals, the North and East; it retained its linguistic and ethnic unity; and its size and economic strength meant, in real terms, that it was the strongest state in the Federation.

However, it was divided: Awolowo claimed the title of 'leader of the Yorubas' and his majority support in the West probably did justify that

rather heroic description. But there were dissidents, notably in the Ibadan and Oyo areas, who demanded their own state. Ojukwu and the Biafrans were convinced that the West was also in a secessionist, revolutionary mood. 'I know that the Westerners are unhappy,' Ojukwu told me in Enugu, 'The people can push out a little army of occupation and I think in due course they will.' Biafra, however, continually misread the true mood of the West, both at this time and later during every important phase of the war. Discontent with the Federal government did not necessarily mean the Yorubas would fight it. Neither did an Eastern secession automatically mean a Western one. Indeed, the East's departure provided some very cogent reasons for the West staying in. The Yorubas were, for a start, already benefiting across the board from the jobs which the Ibos had abandoned.

But the crucial question was, which way would Awolowo jump? As an old and wily politician he, in fact, remained motionless, until the dust cleared a little and he could see where his advantage lay. He owed a debt to Gowon for his release from prison but the Northern military presence in the West was a genuinely unpopular issue and he took a firm stand against it. However, he was still smarting from the treatment he had received during his attempt at reconciliation with Ojukwu so that when Gowon flatteringly invited him to join the Federal government as vice-chairman of the Executive Council and commissioner of finance, Awolowo did not hesitate.

It was the first time that 'Awo' had been in a Federal government, though he had been premier of the Western Region in the fifties. It wasn't the whole loaf but it was certainly better than the uncertain crumbs which an alliance with Ojukwu offered. Neutrality was the only alternative but, as Ejoor in the Mid-West was to discover, neutrality in a civil war cannot be maintained for long. Sooner or later one has to take sides. Awolowo's defenders have pointed out that he remained consistent to his anti-war policy and made no statement in support of crushing the East until Biafran troops poured through the Mid-West and entered the West itself in August. But this is sophistry. It is rather like saying that Attlee's decision to join Churchill's war cabinet gave him the right to oppose the war with Germany until the Germans stepped on British soil. By joining the government and holding important positions in it, 'Awo', a man of great political weight in Nigerian politics, had committed himself and his followers to opposing Biafra's secession by whatever means proved necessary.

Gowon's appointment of civilians to be commissioners (in effect, ministers) in the government—one from each of the new states—was a masterly move. It completed and consolidated his 'coup'. The men concerned were popular politicians in their own areas but several of them also possessed a national—even international—charisma. They included Anthony Enahoro from the Mid-West, Joseph Tarka, the Tiv leader, and Okoi Arikpo, a strong Federalist from the Eastern minorities who was to become a highly effective foreign minister for the Federation.

For the first time since the January coup, a marriage of sorts between the soldiers and the civilians had been effected. There was a bit of a shotgun atmosphere about it and there was no doubt who wore the trousers, but it survived remarkably well and served its primary purpose of steadying the Federal alliance against Biafra. It was certainly good for Nigeria's image—a move, however token, towards civilian rule—but it had some solid practical benefits too. The mistakes of the soldiers in the past eighteen months had demonstrated that the *political* skills of the civilians (though not their excesses) were badly needed in the daily handling of the country's affairs. The new states quickly followed suit and brought leading civilians into their own governments.⁴

This knitting together of the Federation, however, did not mean that it spoke with one voice. The pattern of Federal 'hawks' and 'doves' that was to run throughout the entire war was already clear. The principal division at this time was over the method of ending Biafra's secession. Brigadier Adebayo, the Western governor—all the governors had been promoted when Gowon himself became a major-general—advocated force 'only to be used as a last resort'. The influential Northern newspaper, the *New Nigerian*, also favoured first trying to bring Ojukwu to heel with the blockade and economic sanctions. But the hardliners, strong in the Northern states, the army and most of the top civil servants in Lagos wanted to march on the East as soon as it was physically possible.

The North was in a rather curious position. It had been divided into six new states by Gowon's decree but still retained an administrative council, of which the former governor, Hassan Katsina, was the chairman. This interim arrangement, which was a very necessary administrative measure since so many of the Northern corporations and organisations could not be split six ways overnight, gave the impression, however, that the division of the North was a sham. This is how it was seen in Biafra.

⁴ Ojukwu had also brought civilians into his administration, including several from the minority areas.

But the North was no longer a monolith and had, in fact, ceased to be one the night the Sardauna fell dead, riddled with bullets, in his own garden. No one of similar stature had—or perhaps could—replace him. The true unhomogenous nature of the North then became more apparent and the Middle Belt minorities, the Tivs, Idomas, Igalas, etc., in particular, began to assert themselves. Gowon gave them what they wanted with his twelve-state decree and they were in the forefront of the 'crush Ojukwu' movement. They were well-placed to make their voice heard—and implement their policy—since they were the dominant tribal group in the Federal army. But the Hausa and Fulani elites of the 'holy' or far North, the former rulers of the Region and those who had apparently lost most from the new order, also had a vested interest in holding the Federation together. They held some of the power in Lagos and in the army and if Nigeria broke up, the Region as a whole, particularly their own extreme northern part, cut off from the sea and with few natural resources, would undoubtedly have had most to lose. Thus, the North, though divided on many local issues and gradually dissolving and crystallising into six new entities, was the most united and determined part of the country over the necessity to keep the East in the Federation at all costs.

By early July, tension began to mount. The various sabotage attempts in and around Lagos had brought it home to people that the crisis could affect *them* after all even though they were hundreds of miles away from Biafra. The war of words was already on in earnest. 'To Keep Nigeria One is a Task that Must be Done' was the key Federal slogan repeated endlessly on the radio, television, in the press, on wall posters, in government offices, wherever one turned it seemed. Minds were bending daily to denigrate the enemy. Ojukwu's Biafra became a 'dream empire'; even the image of poor Tshombe, gaoled in Algeria, was dragged in and some ingenious new adjectives coined, as in 'the traitorous and Tshomberian regime of Ojukwu'; and a particularly frightening poster appeared, slightly reminiscent of the worst of the 'Keep Death off the Road' genre, showing Ojukwu's head on the ground underneath a heavy black boot with the caption 'Crush Rebellion' above it.

The same sort of thing was, of course, going on across the Niger. There were occasional processions in Enugu with the crowds singing popular war songs and, on both sides, there was a general, grass-roots' level identification with the 'cause'. This usually expressed itself through letters to the newspapers, though sometimes an especially well-known figure would launch a public statement. Dick Tiger, the former world light-

weight and middleweight boxing champion, announced that he was a Biafran and, furthermore, he would die a Biafran. (He later joined the Biafran army but managed to get out of the country from time to time and channel his fighting instincts back in the ring.)

It is always difficult to gauge public feeling in situations like this but there seemed little doubt that the incessant flood from the mass media, much of it either government-controlled or influenced, was having an effect. There were different levels of expressing it though. I remember one Nigerian telling me in a bar in Lagos—and he was quite serious—that there was a real and profound division between the tribes now because 'the Ibo prostitutes will no longer dance with the rich Northerners'. Lagos was a fertile breeding-ground of misinformation, conjectures, rumours, even fantasy. The expatriates, by and large, were among the worst offenders, sitting in their long shorts on high bar-stools in their clubs nodding knowingly and repeating with a sort of meaningless profundity, 'WAWA, old boy, WAWA' ('West Africa Wins Again'). They were particularly absorbed with the fighting qualities of the different Nigerian tribes—most of it paternalistic and uninformed—and, to a man, wrote the Ibos off as 'a bunch of clerks, cooks and bottle-washers'.

Early July also saw the climax of round one in the 'oil war'. The struggle between the Nigerians and Biafrans over the lucrative revenues, with Shell/BP in the middle and the British government hovering like a worried nanny at the ringside, contained all the dramatic elements of 'The Power Game' or 'The Trouble-shooters'. The two main protagonists used every trick in the game—and quite a few outside it—culminating in the Biafrans' arrest and detention of the 'Man from Shell'; top executives in London jumped into jets at a moment's notice to wheel and deal on both sides of the Niger; such astronomical sums were at stake that £250,000 could lightly be described as a 'token' payment; Swiss banks, vital strategic interests, not to mention naval blockades, played a part, and in the middle of it all the war broke out, depriving the thriller of a clean and tidy end.

At issue were the oil revenues for the first half of 1967, estimated at roughly £7 million and due to be paid to the Federal government in late July. Shell/BP, by far the largest operator in Nigeria, was the only company immediately involved. (SAFRAP, the French company, was also producing in Biafra but its payments were not due until later in the year. The American Gulf Oil Company produced exclusively in the Mid-West.) Biafra's main concern was foreign exchange and the degree—

indefinable but important—of international recognition that payment of the royalties would bring. One of the accepted attributes of sovereignty is the ability to collect revenue and taxes. The Federal government's aim was to deny the Biafrans both the cash (and pocket it, because Lagos, too, was hard up) and the implied recognition.

There were, however, other considerations. Virtually all the Mid-West's oil, a third but a growing proportion of the total production, was shipped out through the Bonny terminal in the East via the Trans-Niger pipeline. The Federation's only oil refinery, near Port Harcourt, was also under Biafran control. Therefore any sanction imposed by the Nigerian government against Ojukwu was bound to boomerang on Lagos. This helps to explain why oil shipments were exempted from the general blockade of Biafra during the month of June while Shell/BP was trying to nose its way out of its nasty dilemma.

The oil companies' principal interest was to keep the oil flowing, protect their multi-million-pound installations, pay their dues and offend neither side.⁵ The British government came into the picture because, rightly or wrongly, both sides saw it as the power behind Shell/BP and, indeed, with its forty-nine per cent shareholding in British Petroleum, the government could hardly not be involved. Half-yearly oil revenues were traditionally paid in London and this also gave the government a lever—a crucial one, as it turned out—in the struggle. Britain had a strategic interest in Nigeria's excellent, almost sulphur-free oil which then met ten per cent of her needs. The Suez Canal closed abruptly as the result of the Six Day War in the Middle East, at the height of the crisis, and increased the importance of the Nigerian source.

In an attempt to hammer out a compromise, a meeting took place in New York near the end of June. The Biafrans put forward a suggestion that 57.5 per cent of the revenues deriving from operations in the East should be paid to the Biafran government by Ojukwu's deadline of 1st July. The rest should go into a suspense account pending a political settlement. The companies agreed but the Nigerians flatly rejected it. They went further. Any attempt by the companies to deny the Federal government its normal revenues would be countered with an extension of the blockade to tankers and the terminal at Bonny. The industry, the Nigerians warned, would grind to a halt.

But the Biafrans held the whip-hand over the companies since they

⁵ In mid-1967, Shell/BP had approximately £150 million invested in the East and £100 million in the rest of the Federation, mainly the Mid-West.

were in effective control of all the operations and installations east of the Niger. 'If you are operating in Biafra, you pay Biafra—it's as simple as that,' Ojukwu had told me in Enugu. And this, finally, gave Shell/BP a convenient, though not wholly satisfactory, loophole out of its contractual obligations to the Federal government. It declared *force majeure* and promised, within hours of the deadline expiring, to pay the Biafrans a 'token' payment of £250,000.

This was a bombshell. The following day (2nd July) the Federal government implemented its threat and cracked the blockade down on the tankers and thus completed the process, begun a month before, of sealing off Biafra's coastline. The fur was also flying at the British High Commission in Lagos. Sir David Hunt, the High Commissioner, had apparently not been consulted by Shell/BP about its decision and was in a towering rage. He was bitterly opposed to the idea of any oil revenue payment to the Biafrans and had done his best to halt every move in that direction. But the game was not yet over.

There was a sudden flurry of diplomatic activity. Behind-the-scenes pressures on Shell/BP mounted—to pay less, to pay more, to pay nothing at all. The Biafrans were determined to get the full £7 million though, even if one accepted their argument of *de facto* sovereignty, the maximum they could justifiably claim would be the revenues due since the declaration of independence, a little over £1 million. George Thomas, British minister of state in the Commonwealth Office, having reluctantly agreed to Shell/BP's token payment, flew out to Lagos and, unwisely, criticised Gowon's tanker embargo. The Nigerians promptly pointed out that in international law they had the right to impose a blockade on their own coastline and that in company law the oil revenues indisputably belonged to the Federal government. Then a Nigerian delegation appeared in London shopping for arms, introducing a new element into this highly complex power game. Any connection between oil and guns, however, was tartly denied by a British government spokesman. 'There's no question of horse-trading,' he said, throwing in a new metaphor for good measure.

The British government repeatedly stressed to the Nigerians that payments by Shell/BP to the Biafrans would not imply any form of recognition by the government itself. But the Nigerians dug in their heels and let it be known that the blockade on oil exports would remain in force until the companies had paid their dues in full. Then the fighting broke out. On 25th July, Bonny and its oil terminal were captured by a

Federal sea-borne assault. Anti-British feeling rose in the East—British oil-workers and other employees were accused of helping the Federal invasion—and Stanley Gray, Shell/BP's manager, was arrested in Enugu. A few days later the Biafran government took over all the company's installations, including the Port Harcourt refinery. A top Shell executive was despatched from London to intercede with Ojukwu on Gray's behalf. The Biafrans were trying to prise £3.5 million out of the company and for eleven days Gray was a pawn in the game. However, with the war hotting up and other more important things to deal with, Ojukwu finally let him go. No ransom or royalties were paid. And with this, the oil crisis went off the boil.

But one mystery remained. What had happened to the 'token' payment of £250,000? Stanley Gray had written a letter to Ojukwu, which was delivered on 1st July, promising him the money but stressing that he was acting under duress. The Biafrans originally asked that it should be paid into the Africa Continental Bank in London where they had their main U.K. account. However, they suddenly changed their minds, probably fearing an attempt by the Nigerians to recover it through legal action, and gave instructions for it to be paid into a numbered account in Geneva. The money never arrived. The Bank of England, presumably instructed by the Treasury (i.e. the British government), refused exchange control permission and the money was frozen. The Biafrans were furious and not the slightest bit mollified when Shell/BP showed them the Bank of England's letter rejecting their request. To them it looked like an elaborately hatched plot to take away what had been solemnly promised. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (as it now is) sheltered behind the transparent defence that it was 'purely an exchange control matter' and had nothing to do with them. But there seems little doubt that the Federal 'hawks' within the Commonwealth Office, and particularly the fast and furious reaction of Sir David Hunt in Lagos, had played a major part in blocking the payment. The ultimate irony, however, is that it was the Biafran's own decision to have the money paid in Switzerland that gave the British government time to ponder and act. If they had accepted the original sterling cheque they might have got away with it.

The Biafrans were also running into trouble as a result of the Federal blockade which, though far from total in the early days, was beginning to throttle the Biafran economy. A Federal spokesman admitted that the blockade itself would not bring Biafra down but said it was designed 'as a

softening-up process to lower Eastern morale'. Feeling was running so high in the East that although prices rose, it was doubtful whether it achieved this. However, in the longer term it was one of the main causes of Biafra's defeat.

What the Biafrans forgot—or did not realise—was that by simply declaring a blockade the Federal government could, and did, scare off the bulk of the foreign shipping that operated in the area, whether it had a navy to enforce it or not. (The Biafrans continually pooh-poohed the effectiveness of the Nigerian navy. Asked about the threat it posed, a Biafran commissioner, who had once been a Federal minister, replied, 'What navy? I was minister for the navy.') Under international law ships and cargoes are liable to confiscation if they disregard a blockade. But the Nigerian navy, though small, did have teeth and proved it by holding one Panamanian ship that tried to run the blockade and seizing another. Nevertheless, several ships did get through and Biafra managed to send out one or two valuable cargoes of palm oil before the war started.

The biggest loophole was not the sea at all but along the Cameroon border. The Nigerians persuaded the Cameroon government to suspend all movement on the frontier and temporarily rescind the visa abolition agreement which existed between the two countries. But African borders are notoriously difficult to control and there was a steady flow of smuggled goods, Biafran V.I.P.s and charter flights until the fighting imposed its own deadly and far more effective blockade. Trade also continued spasmodically across the Niger throughout the war and played an important part in keeping Biafra going. However, as with the oil embargo, Nigeria itself suffered from the effects of the blockade, and coal—the Enugu mines were, of course, under Biafran control—had to be hurriedly shipped from West Germany and later Poland to keep the railways and thermal power stations running.

Another prong of Federal policy to undermine Biafra before launching a military attack, was the encouragement of the 5-million-strong minorities in the East to rise up against Enugu. Two new states, the Rivers and the South-East, under Gowon's twelve-state system, had been drawn up to satisfy the traditional demands of the minorities for greater autonomy and, of course, to underpin the impressive unity of Biafra. Many of the Eastern minority leaders were already in Lagos and urged their people to act. At the time of the first coup there had been a revolt in the Rivers and clearly Lagos hoped that this would be repeated. But there was no uprising—or indeed any significant sign of opposition to

the Biafran government. This did not, however, necessarily mean that the minorities supported Enugu and rejected Lagos and the new state system. Some did, others didn't; I have already described in more detail their feelings during this period,⁶ but the following extract from a young Biafran soldier's memoirs of the war may help to illuminate the mood in the Eastern minority areas. He was an Ogoja (north-east Biafra) man and is writing about the time of secession.

'On hearing that [the declaration of Biafra's independence], I switched off the radio set and went to the kitchen to tell my illiterate mother that she is no more a Nigerian but a Biafran. When the old woman heard of this she looked at me with uncomprehending eyes and said: "What do you mean, my son?" To answer her question, I had to tell her the whole story in our language. She sighed and said, "Do you mean that another war like the one the Hausas and Ibos were fighting will be fought here amongst us?" I simply said: "I don't know, Mama." Well, poor woman, to her, like most peasants in the Eastern minority areas, what they abhorred most was a Hausa-Ibo war being fought on their land. Otherwise being Nigerians or Biafrans made no difference.'

The feeling among the Ibos was quite different as the writer makes clear.

'I dressed up and went out. My first place of call was at an Ibo barber's shop; an old friend of my family, who has been very fond of me since my childhood. He beamed with a smile and called, "Hullo, small Paul! Today, now good day for we all, we done be Biafra now; we done got Independence! We done leave that dirty Nigeria people way them done kill all our brothers for Northern Nigeria. All we East we done be one, oh! God there!" he said in pidgin English. The aged barber showed his happiness by buying two bottles of Star beer which we both drank to our health and to the continuous existence of Biafra.'⁷

What is certain is Ojukwu and his government (which contained some minority men) themselves regarded the minority areas as weak links in their defences and potential centres of subversion. Strong detachments of police and the army kept a tight rein on these provinces and many leading

⁶ See Chapter IV.

⁷ From an unpublished manuscript entitled, 'The Day the Biafran Republic was Born', by Paul J. made privately available to the author.

figures were either detained or put under house arrest. Ojukwu did not attempt to hide the problem. 'Gowon tried to get the minorities to rise up against the government in the East and I had to act very swiftly to ensure that this did not happen,' he told me in Enugu in June. He concluded with a slightly ominous turn of phrase which I had often heard from government spokesmen in Rhodesia and South Africa. 'We pride ourselves on our ability to maintain internal security here.'

The phoney war was coming to an end. Federal statements made it increasingly clear that it was no longer a question of 'hawks' and 'doves' holding up the launching of military operations but logistical—it was the height of the rainy season—and administrative problems. General Gowon had issued a 'Code of Conduct' to his soldiers stressing that the Ibo people as a whole were not their enemies, especially the civilians. Mercenaries, however, would not be spared. Threats from both sides took on a sharper, more urgent tone. Hassan Katsina had said earlier that once Gowon gave the go-ahead, Ojukwu 'would be crushed within hours'. Now, one of the new Northern governors added, somewhat bloodthirstily, that once the operation had begun, 'it would continue until the last rebel had dropped dead'. Ojukwu, who had boasted that he would line the bottom of the sea with the Nigerian navy and that no black power in Africa could defeat the Biafran army, came on the air on 30th June and announced: 'Fellow countrymen and women, we have arrived at zero hour.'

Zero hour did not, in fact, come for another six days. But then fighting between Nigerian and Biafran troops broke out in a small village on Biafra's northern border. Who opened fire is interesting—both sides claimed the other did—but irrelevant. By nightfall, Federal columns were advancing on two fronts, and the agency wires were carrying the news to the four corners of the world.

CHAPTER
SIX

Ojukwu's Mid-West Gamble

War—1

July—October 1967

The front line

Mid-West invasion

Biafran occupation and withdrawal

THE FIRST SHOTS HAD HARDLY BEEN FIRED WHEN IT BECAME APPARENT that there were two wars going on in Nigeria: the one on the ground and the communiqué war. The latter resembled Passchendaele, Jutland and the Battle of Britain rolled into one. Thousands of the enemy had been 'wiped out', ships had been sunk, warplanes shot out of the sky (or, alternatively, had inflicted 'serious damage'), vast hoards of war material had been captured or destroyed, and great coffles of P.O.W.s and 'mercenaries' (sometimes 'painted black') were being brought in. There was little to choose between the inventive imaginations of the communiqué strategists. The scripts of Radio Nigeria and the Voice of Biafra were virtually interchangeable. Federal claims of Biafran casualties, if true, would have meant the total destruction of the Biafran army, while Biafra's assertions conjured up a dramatic, but equally unfounded image of Nigeria tottering on the point of collapse.

But when it came to looking behind the mirror both sides turned to stone. Asked what sort of campaign it was, a Federal spokesman replied that it was raining, though not, he added helpfully, as much as it was in Lagos. For the first few weeks correspondents were not permitted to visit either front. This was very frustrating at the time but, in the circumstances, not surprising. Few countries at war like journalists under their feet and the more internecine the struggle—the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965 is a case in point—the more sensitive the combatants are about outsiders witnessing what is going on.

It is possible, however, to reconstruct a realistic account of the early days of the war from eyewitness reports and personal descriptions by soldiers who took part. The Federal offensive was initially confined to the

northern border of Biafra and advancing on two fronts, on Ogoja in the east towards the important university town of Nsukka in the west. Ogoja, a minority area, and only apparently lightly defended, fell to the Nigerians five days after the war began. Its fall established a pattern that was to be repeated throughout the war in many of the other minority areas of Biafra. The population melted into the bush at the first sound of the guns and stayed there until well after the fighting had stopped. Looting by the victorious Federal troops was widespread. Then the civilians began to return cautiously and welcome their new masters—'Keep Nigeria One' posters miraculously appeared on trees and walls—and join in the looting of Ibo shops and houses. Most of the Ibos themselves, including the top officials, policemen and businessmen, never returned. In the case of Ogoja a few Ibos did trickle back but were herded together in a church mission and kept there for their own safety. The Federal advance through Ogoja province, important as a meat-producing region and strategically situated on the Cameroon border, continued rapidly. It seemed as if Enugu had realised that, despite all its own morale-boosting propaganda about Biafran solidarity, the Ogojans were only at best half-heartedly behind the government, and thus had been half-hearted about the province's defence.

But Nsukka, a star in Ojukwu's crown and part of the Ibo 'heartland', was quite another matter. Reputed to be the cradle of the secessionist movement in the East, the town put up a stiff resistance. An account by one of the Nigerian battalion commanders who led the attack—it appeared in the 1st Division's magazine, the *Flying Horse* (July 1969)—gives some idea and 'feel' of the battle. All battalion commanders were summoned for a briefing on 4th July and told that 'D-Day' would be on the 7th (in fact, the fighting began a day earlier). The writer, Isa Bukar, a Northerner and a mere captain at the time, had been ordered to recruit a battalion the previous month in Kaduna from the volunteers who had answered Gowon's call to arms. Highlighting the Federal army's desperate shortage of officers, his battalion, consisting mainly of ex-servicemen, had only five other regular army officers besides himself. These included another captain and four lieutenants who took over the command of companies. The battalion was well armed with light weapons, including six new Italian mortars and supported by a squadron of British-made Ferret armoured cars. But clothing, Bukar notes in his meticulous way, was a problem. 'However,' he adds, 'morale among the men was high as we set out.'

Although a rather 'stiff upper lip' account, something of the panic of the first contact with the enemy comes across. 'Our leading Land-Rover turned a bend in the road and almost had a head-on collision with a Peugeot car full of Biafran officers speeding towards it.' At first no one could believe their eyes, then everyone, it seemed, opened fire at once. Most of the Biafrans, he adds laconically, were killed. But a mere month of training, the dearth of officers, the unfamiliarity with sophisticated weapons and the terrifying experience of being shot at for the first time produced a constant element of danger and disorder in addition to the threat posed by the Biafrans. Bukar, with great candour, describes how, on the outskirts of Nsukka, a gunner in one of the three Ferret armoured cars attached to his unit, panicked and opened up on his own men, killed eleven of them on the spot and wounded seven, several of whom died later in hospital. 'I ordered his arrest,' notes Bukar with Sandhurst punctiliousness, 'and sent him back to headquarters for court-martial.'

The battle for Nsukka itself did not last long, but Bukar (unlike the Federal spokesman in Lagos) gives the 'rebels' full credit for their tenacity and courage. Somewhere among the Biafrans facing him were the popular Major Nzeogwu who had led the first coup in the North and killed the Sardauna, and the Biafran poet, Christopher Okigbo. Okigbo, passionate, idealistic and mercurial, had, it is said, simply grabbed a gun and with no military training whatsoever, recklessly put himself at the head of a group of Biafran soldiers. He was killed early on in the battle. Nzeogwu survived but only to die a week or two later, under somewhat mysterious circumstances, in another sector of the northern front. Gowon, to the annoyance of some of his officers, gave him a military funeral and described him as 'a misguided but gallant officer with principles'.

By the 15th July, the Nigerians were in control of the town, which had been fairly badly damaged by mortar and shell fire. For Bukar, the battle had a dramatic—and painful—finale.

'All of a sudden, two shells dropped near the Bn. H.Q. The last I remember was that my hand was in the air trying to order the men to take cover. I was later woken up confused and frightened by the noise of another shell. I rolled myself into a ditch without rifle and jungle hat. . . . I felt a sharp pain in my back which gradually increased as more blood rushed out . . . and became numb in the legs and waist. About 20 feet away was what used to be my runner—dead with two

other soldiers. At about 1830 hrs., shelling ceased. I sent a voice signal myself lying on a stretcher—BOMBSBALL CAPTURED.'

But the marked difference between Nsukka and Ogoja lay not only in the military aspect. As soon as the Federal army crossed the border, ten miles to the north, the population, overwhelmingly Ibo, vanished. It was not to return, in any significant numbers, until the war was almost over. A correspondent visiting the area shortly after the fall of Nsukka described the scene.

'What was left on that drive [from the border down to Nsukka] was a dripping tap; a dog scavenging in a ditch, chickens preening in the dust; a few goats startled by the convoy. House doors hung at an angle, a bicycle, a splayed carton of Sunlight soap, a gramophone . . . suggested their owners had gone urgently on some errand. The kiosk of a Total petrol station, its forecourt burned black, still had a table with the account books neatly laid out . . . all the trivia of life that you see along any Nigerian road—the headloading, the waving, the eyes shielded from the dust, the old man bent double under his firewood—all had gone.'¹

This story of desolation and abandonment was to be the story of the Ibo areas as they gradually came under Federal control. The war was beginning to exact its savage toll from the civilians and the poor. The tragic Ibo people were on the move again, obeying the remorseless logic of the big guns.

While the raw, inexperienced armies struggled on the ground, the war moved into the skies. The Biafran air force was first up with its antiquated B-26—later joined by an equally aged B-25—and a few Alouette helicopters. (Was this, one wondered, Ojukwu's much-vaunted 'where-withal' with which he was going to carry the fight into the North?) Piloted by 'Kamikaze' Braun, a Czech mercenary of the same vintage as his aircraft, the B-26 carried out a number of raids on military and civilian targets. Lagos was first bombed a few days after the fighting started. Makurdi, Lokoja, Oturkpo, Kaduna, Kano and several other Northern towns were hit. A few people were killed and many more wounded. The raid on Kaduna airfield—quite a professional affair according to eyewitnesses—killed a member of the West German training

¹ *West Africa*, 5.8.1967.

team. The Germans, who had been training pilots of the Nigerian air force to fly Dorniers, left *en masse* the next day. The helicopters also went into action and though very limited in an offensive role were effective enough for Captain Bukar to record in his diary that 'the stubborn choppers were much of a nuisance to us'.

However, the real impact of the Biafran raids was psychological. For people who have never experienced air raids, especially for unsophisticated peasants with a natural apprehension of any kind of machine, they constitute a terrifying experience, quite incommensurate with the actual threat or risk involved. Nigeria was totally unprepared for this experience. There were no anti-aircraft guns, no air-raid shelters, no warning or preparation of any kind. And as with the later Federal raids on Biafra, the military advantages were heavily outweighed by the antagonism aroused among the civilian population which bore the brunt of the attacks. The Nigerians did not immediately reply in kind. Whether this was because they deliberately held their hand—as Gowon declared, stressing that his 'police action' precluded the use of indiscriminate weapons like aircraft—or, more simply, because they did not have the planes and pilots is difficult, perhaps impossible, to disentangle. But what is indisputable is that the Biafrans launched the air war, thereby triggering off an escalation which was to rebound on them with tragic consequences.

In the first month of the war the strategic aims of each side seemed clear-cut. Gowon, sticking to his limited police action formula, was aiming at a swift-moving military operation, from carefully selected points and backed up by a tightening of the economic blockade to bring down 'Ojukwu and his rebel gang'. The political card of new states for the minorities in the East, he hoped, would also help to clinch the trick. Ojukwu's stated aims were to 'preserve the integrity of the Biafran republic', suggesting a defensive operation while hoping to win outside recognition for the new state. His political card on the opposite side of the Niger was the hope that the West would actively oppose or, at worst, passively defy the Federal government. Both aims suggested a limited military conflict. In fact, the reverse occurred.

On 25th July, pursuing his strategy of strangulation, Gowon's forces captured Bonny island on the Biafra coast in the first sea-borne assault of the war. This was a blow for Biafra for a number of reasons. It gave the Nigerians a toe-hold on the coastline; enabled them to enforce the blockade more effectively, especially against the oil for which Bonny was the only sea terminal (there were about 3 million barrels of crude oil in

the tanks); and it brought them within thirty-five miles of Port Harcourt, Biafra's major port and most important commercial city. The successful landing, in which the much-ridiculed Nigerian navy played a vital part, was led by a young, newly promoted lieutenant-colonel called Benjamin Adekunle.

Then, as was to happen frequently after periods of action, the war drifted into the doldrums. But quite a lot was going on behind the lines. In and around Lagos sabotage attempts continued. None of them were serious militarily, but several innocent people were killed, the worst explosion killing eight civilians in the suburb of Yaba when a parked petrol-tanker blew up near a cinema. Anti-Ibo riots flared in the capital and Ibadan and were only kept under control with difficulty. Already compelled to register and carry identity cards, Ibos came under even stricter security surveillance; hundreds were rounded up and detained. Conversely, anyone who was regarded as a potential ally was warmly welcomed into the Federal camp. Thus Isaac Boro, an Eastern minority man and the leader of an abortive revolt in the Rivers area during Ironsi's time together with his main collaborator who rejoiced in the name of Nottingham Dick, were pardoned and released. Boro later joined the Federal army and was killed fighting for the cause he had once so bitterly opposed. Sabotage, air-raids and riots, failed nevertheless to dampen Lagos's ardour for the good life and its infinite capacity to enjoy itself. A fortnight after the war began the Obas (traditional rulers) and chiefs of Lagos State solemnly banned 'drumming and merry-making', pointing out that there was, after all, a war on.

Much more serious, however, was the continued uncertainty about the West. Awolowo, though undeniably a member of the Federal government, had yet to make a public statement supporting its war policy. Northern troops were still stationed in the state and the demands from the Ibadan and Oyo people for a separate state to be carved out of the existing West were becoming increasingly shrill. In early August, the Federal government ordered all newspapers and other elements of the media to stop publishing demands for more states, thereby revealing its concern. If the minority areas in the East were the 'soft underbelly' of Biafra there is no doubt that the West fulfilled the same role on the Nigerian side.

In Biafra the quality of the tension resembled static electricity. Each new Federal advance added a little more to the invisible charge, but not enough to make it dangerous. The cry of 'sabotage', however, was

becoming more hysterical, though perhaps it was necessary as a sort of catharsis, a salve for Biafra's dented *amour propre*. But the power struggle between the radicals and the conservatives in the Biafran government and army was clearly still going on and may have affected military operations. After the fall of Nsukka, a spokesman on Enugu Radio, describing himself as 'the public relations officer and political commissar of the revolutionary wing of the Biafran army', blamed the defeat on 'a mysterious order' from Biafran headquarters. The 'saboteurs', he added, were not necessarily from the 'so-called minority areas'. But the minorities were a constant source of concern to the government and so was the tendency of many of the Ibos to over-react against the potential threat of minority subversion. Sir Francis Ibiem, one of Ojukwu's advisers and a former governor of the East who was soon to renounce his British knighthood, broadcast an appeal to Ibo civil defence workers to treat the minorities properly. 'A house divided against itself cannot stand,' he said, dipping into Gowon's Lincolnian philosophy. In fact, this was a thin veil drawn over the reprisals that were being taken against relatives of minority leaders who were openly backing the Federal government in Lagos.

A month after the fighting had broken out it seemed as though the war had ground to a halt. The rain continued to pour down relentlessly, remarkable even for Nigeria. Roads turned into swamps, swamps into lakes. Supply lines, communications, stores, reinforcements took precedence over killing. Predictions of 'a quick, sharp surgical action' became sour, almost sick, jokes. Then without any warning, probably the most dramatic—and certainly the most momentous—event of the war happened.

* * *

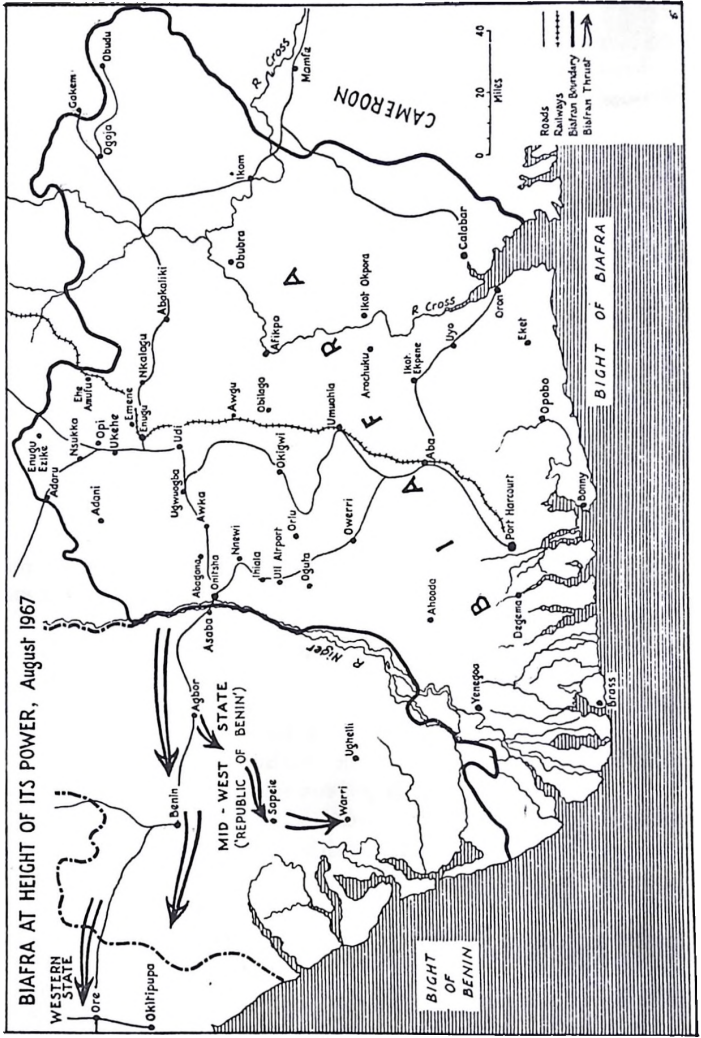
A little before dawn on 9th August, the elaborate roadblocks at each end of the Niger bridge were quietly removed. Revving engines, spinning and crunching gears and muffled voices floated thinly through the damp night mist to the waiting soldiers at the Asaba end. And then, moving with a slow menace, a seemingly endless convoy of vehicles rumbled across the broad expanse of the Niger into the Mid-West. Ojukwu, with a gambler's throw, was striking (as he put it later) at the 'serpent's head'.

By dusk, Benin, the Southern river ports of Sapele and Warri, the oil centre at Ughelli and virtually the whole of the Mid-West had been overrun. Contact between Benin City and Lagos was lost at about ten

a.m. Vague rumours spoke of fighting between Biafran and Mid-Western troops. More substantial ones described a continuing Biafran advance along the main Benin-Lagos trunk road towards Ore in the West. At three-thirty p.m. a broadcast on Benin radio declared the Mid-West had been saved from the 'dark shadows of Fulani-Hausa domination as a result of the liberation act by Mid-Western troops backed by friendly forces from Biafra'. The operation had been a spectacular success.

In retrospect, it could be said that the Biafran strike through the Mid-West was the Nigerian equivalent of General Lee's march north to Pennsylvania in the American civil war or the German panzer thrust through France in 1939. And in strictly relative terms there are many similarities. (The tables were eventually turned in Nigeria, too.) But there is a continual danger of examining the military operations during the Nigerian war through heavily fogged European spectacles. Thus, though the effect of the Biafran invasion was one of a *blitzkrieg*, the term—and others like it—give a misleading impression of what really happened. The Biafrans 'stormed' through the Mid-West not in the usual massive impedimenta of modern warfare but in a bizarre collection of private cars, 'mammy' wagons, cattle and vegetable trucks. The command vehicle was a Peugeot 404 estate car. The whole operation was not carried out by an 'army' or even a 'brigade' (as the Biafrans claimed) but by at most 1,000 men, the majority poorly trained and armed, and many wearing civilian clothes because they had not been issued with uniforms. At Agbor, on the road to Benin, the column fanned out into three directions, south to Sapele and Warri, north to Auchi and straight on for the Mid-West capital. Not a shot was fired in anger until Benin and then, it is believed, it was the result of a 'misunderstanding'. The other Mid-West towns also fell without even a token resistance. It was only when the Biafrans penetrated the Western State more than a week later that the fighting began.

But however much the Biafran invaders resembled Fred Karno's army, the seizure of the Mid-West had the desired effect. Lagos was thrown into a panic. The city had been bombed the day of the invasion (Enugu called them 'warning' bombs) and the Federal government was caught badly off balance with the bulk of its army in the North. Its military resources were now stretched over a 1,000-mile front from Ogoja to Bonny. In Lagos there were about 500 men of the crack Federal Guard unit—in effect Gowon and the government's bodyguard—and a few support units. The West was also lightly defended. The days immediately following



the invasion were charged with drama. Anti-Ibo riots broke out in the Federal capital and Ibadan. The West, finally shaken off its fence, was showing signs of severe shock induced by simple fear and, ironically, called urgently for the very Federal troops it had been trying to rid itself of for the past year. Awolowo, also realising his fence-seat was equally no longer tenable—or desirable—jumped down and, with amazing aplomb, declared that he was 'irrevocably committed to Nigerian unity'. The Yoruba people had constantly supported unity, he went on, and they must now be ready to 'resist any attempt by rebel forces from the East and the Mid-West to violate their territory and subjugate them'.²

Two days after the invasion, Gowon ordered 'total war' against the Biafrans. This, he said, was in retaliation against the bombing of civilians in Lagos and elsewhere. Converted Dakotas and jet trainers bombed Onitsha and Enugu the next day. Federal troops were sent to secure the West/Mid-West border and a small sea-borne force landed on the island of Escravos in the estuary leading to Warri. The Eastern blockade was extended to the Mid-West. There were reports that a contingency plan had been prepared involving the transfer of the Federal government (and its financial reserves) to the North if the Biafrans got any closer to Lagos. Later, an inner 'war cabinet' was formed to prosecute the war more vigorously. A dusk-to-dawn curfew was clamped down on Ibadan and troops and armoured cars patrolled the streets of Lagos.

Meanwhile, the situation was clearing in Benin. The Biafran invasion had, it rapidly transpired, been supported by a carefully-timed coup. Mid-Western Ibo officers, who dominated the state's small army, had prepared the ground for the Biafrans and literally opened the gate and let them in. This at least partly explained the lack of resistance. Army units had also been scattered (the largest contingent numbering scarcely 400 was based in Benin), and were even less well armed, for reasons which will be clearer shortly, and trained than the invading Biafrans. Lacking leadership, confused by conflicting orders from Ibo and non-Ibo officers—many of the rank and file were Ibo anyway and sympathised with Biafra—and caught unawares, the army simply melted away. There was also the psychological factor, not unimportant amongst unseasoned soldiers, that they never expected they would have to fight either side.

The dramatic events in Benin City during the early days of the occupation can perhaps be best recounted in the form of a scenario.

² *Ibid.*, 19.8.1967.

CAST

Principal Characters

Brigadier David Ejoor. Governor; the man on the tight-rope; from a Mid-West minority tribe; conciliatory (weak, his enemies would say); efficient, trusting, a little naive; sympathies basically pro-Federal but staking everything on keeping the Mid-West out of the war.

Colonel Conrad Nwawo. Mid-West army commander; Ibo; former military attaché in Nigerian High Commission, London; escorted Nzeogwu, January coup leader in the North, to Lagos and detention; respected but uncharismatic figure and easily swayed by stronger personalities; pro-Biafran.

Colonel Michael Okwechime. Ibo. Closely identified with Ironsi; at school with Ejoor and protected by him when Northerners were gunning for him after July counter-coup; charming, smooth, very ambitious; trusted by Ejoor and a strong influence on Nwawo; probably most determined pro-Biafran plotter.

Major Samuel Ogbenudia. Most senior non-Ibo officer in garrison; from Benin (Bini) tribe; Q.M.G., i.e. in charge of the armoury; pro-Federal.

Commissioner Joseph Adeola. Mid-West police chief; non-Ibo; old-style 'British' policeman; opposed to meddling in politics and implacably loyal to constituted authority, i.e. the Federal government.

Brigadier Victor Banjo. Commander of the Biafran 'Liberation Army'; Yoruba; made alleged attempt on Ironsi's life after January coup, detained in East; formerly an electrical engineer; good soldier, highly popular with his men; confident, intelligent and very charming; apparently a 'One Nigeria' radical at heart; certainly a confused idealist and intensely ambitious.

Supporting Cast

The *Oba* (paramount chief) of Benin; the *British Deputy High Commissioner*; six more Ibo colonels; policemen, Nigerian and Biafran soldiers; expatriates.

PROLOGUE

Tension between the Ibo officers on the one hand, and the police and non-Ibos on the other, has been rising for some time. A month of war and the economic hardships caused by the Federal blockade (the Ibos in the Mid-West blame Lagos, the non-Ibos Enugu) have brought matters to a crisis point. The governor is gamely trying to hold the ring but is beginning to lean publicly towards the Federal corner. Shortly after the

outbreak of war, he claims that plans are being made to send Biafran troops into the Mid-West. A little later, after a visit to Gowon in Lagos, he points out that the Mid-West cannot remain totally neutral in the struggle because both the army and the police are paid by the Federal government. (Everyone knows this, of course, but it has never been mentioned publicly before.) Ejoor's opponents, the pro-Biafrans, see this as a significant shift of position. He also reproves 'certain' Mid-Westerners (i.e. mainly the Ibos) 'who seem to endorse and applaud every utterance and action of the Biafran leader'.

ACT I

Two days before the Biafran invasion. Major Ogbemudia, the quartermaster, is ordered by Colonel Nwawo to hand over the armoury keys to an Ibo captain. Weapons are withdrawn from the men in the garrison for an 'inspection'. Throughout the Mid-West there is a great deal of confusion over arms. Recently, new rifles have been sent up from Lagos for the Mid-Western troops. All units were intended to hand in their old rifles in exchange for the new. But, either through accident or design, some men have two while others, like the fourth little piggy, have none. There are only four Bren guns, two 81 mm. mortars in the whole state; no armoured cars, artillery or anti-tank weapons. The police chief has been receiving Special Branch reports about a Biafran attack; the latest date he has is 15th August—a week hence. He is deploying his crack Mobile Force widely to try and plug the holes left—or created—in the blockade by the army. One of the Ibo colonels in the Benin garrison has been seen by the Asaba police repeatedly crossing the river. He is thought to be the Ibos' main 'link' man with the Biafrans. There are also reports on Adeola's desk of senior Ibo officers and civil servants gathering daily in Benin military hospital—it is known in police H.Q. as the 'one o'clock meeting'. Adeola reports all this faithfully to the governor. Ejoor takes note but asks rather hopelessly, 'What can we do?' Adeola advises a request to Lagos for reinforcements. Ejoor, however, feels this would be disastrous politically and would automatically invite an Ibo coup, a Biafran attack—or both. A general feeling of expectancy is in the air that 'something' is about to happen.

ACT II

Ninth August, shortly before dawn. At four a.m. Adeola is woken up by a telephone call from one of his men in Asaba. The Biafrans are pouring

in unopposed across the Niger bridge. He immediately calls the governor. 'We've had it,' Ejoor says despondently, and asks to be kept informed. Adeola has hardly put the receiver down when his own phone rings. It's Nwawo, the army commander. 'What measures are you taking? What about the Mobile Force?' Adeola says it is dispersed all over the Mid-West apart from a small detachment at the H.Q. in Benin. One unit stationed a little way outside the city, and manning a road block at the Asaba road, suddenly reports that four Jeeps, full of troops, have just left Benin driving in the direction of Asaba. Further investigation reveals them to be barely a mile away, turned off into a siding, with their headlamps shining across the road. Not long afterwards, the Biafran column, led by a Peugeot 404 estate wagon, is sighted. It is almost daylight. A little later there is a hurried meeting in the army H.Q. Nwawo, Ogbemudia and two other senior officers are present. The offices and the camp are deserted; Benin is a ghost town; communications with Asaba are cut and the governor has disappeared. The four men, sitting opposite each other in the unfriendly silence can hear the faint rumble of the Biafran vehicles on the outskirts of the town. Nwawo, as the senior officer, takes the lead. 'The Biafrans are here in force,' he says, 'there's nothing we can do except split up and save ourselves.' No one dissents and they divide into pairs. Nwawo and another Ibo officer (the alleged 'link' man) jump into a car and drive round to the British Deputy High Commissioner's house and ask for asylum. He replies he cannot do that but gives them some civilian clothes to change into and they hide in the house next door. Ogbemudia and his companion (like him a non-Ibo) hide in a girls' school near Benin, having discarded their uniforms and personal weapons. They later split up and move from village to village until they eventually reach Lagos, whereupon Ogbemudia is given command of a unit in the liberation force while the other man, who arrives much later, is locked up in a detention camp for the rest of the war, suspected of 'collaboration with the enemy'. The Biafran troops move into the city, head straight for the Mobile Force H.Q. and disarm the detachment there. There is some sporadic shooting but it soon dies away.

ACT III

Ninth August. Later in the day. Brigadier Banjo, describing himself as the head of the 'revolutionary forces of the liberation army', contacts Adeola and asks him to make a radio appeal to the police to report for duty and to the public to come out of hiding. Adeola agrees and broadcasts from

the radio station with a Biafran soldier standing behind him pointing a gun at his back. Banjo tells Adeola he is heading for the West, then Lagos, and remarks cheerfully 'the war will be over in a couple of weeks'. Adeola is impressed and slightly snowed by the man's charm. Colonel Nwawo, now back in uniform, also broadcasts to the army. Governor Ejoor and the Oba of Benin have disappeared and are thought to have been kidnapped by the Biafrans. The following day, however, the Oba comes on the air and puts out a forceful denial, rather like a man refuting his own obituary. But still no word of Ejoor. Banjo orders a dusk-to-dawn curfew but agrees to help expatriates and their families (there are about 600 British and Commonwealth citizens involved) move down in convoys to the ports of Warri and Sapele for evacuation by sea to Lagos. Enugu Radio announces the 'total liberation' of the Mid-West. Lagos Radio names Nwawo and Okwechime as the leaders of the 'collaborators and mutineers'.

EPILOGUE

A few days later, Adeola and three other leading non-Ibo Mid-Westerners are sent to Enugu to discuss with Ojukwu the administration of the 'Republic of Benin'. (They are detained in Biafra for the rest of the war.) Banjo, now well installed, confuses everyone by a series of statements. He denies he had tried to murder Ironsi in January 1966. The Mid-West will, he says, be independent of both Biafra and Nigeria and his next objective would be the 'liberation of the West and Lagos' (he is a great man for telegraphing his punches) from 'Northern feudalistic control'. 'I am a Nigerian,' he declares. 'I believe in the Nigerian nation and I am fighting for a Nigeria in which no people will be dominated by any other.'³ He adds that Ojukwu had promised his assistance in these undertakings. But, apparently, Ojukwu does not share this view—presumably he did not give command of his army to Banjo to fight for Nigeria—and Banjo is abruptly recalled to Enugu to explain himself. A not untypical Nigerian lull sets in and the scene fades.

* * *

A week later the Biafrans were on the move again. Enugu Radio called upon the Yorubas to rise against the Federal government. Banjo, who had returned to Benin, had lost his job as administrator of the Mid-West but retained his command at the head of the army. As informative as ever,

³ *Ibid.*

he telephoned Governor Adebayo of the West and told him he was coming to take over his state. Ojukwu appointed a little-known Mid-Western doctor, Major Albert Okonkwo, as Banjo's replacement in Benin. Okonkwo, a vain, ambitious man, had been trained in the United States and joined the Nigerian army as a doctor not long before the war broke out. He was in charge of Benin military hospital and at the centre of the 'one o'clock meetings' of Ibo conspirators. His appointment was not calculated to reassure the Mid-West's majority non-Ibo population. In his first public statement, however, Okonkwo announced that Brigadier Ejoor, whose fate had remained a mystery since the invasion, was 'alive and well'.⁴

On 17th August, Biafran troops crossed the Ofusu river after a small skirmish and were in the Western State. The following day they reached Ore (pronounced 'Oray'), seventeen miles inside the West, a small but strategic town. From here four roads intersect: north to Ibadan, south to Okitipupa, the creeks and the sea, and west 135 miles to Lagos. A Federal spokesman announced tersely, 'The next twenty-four hours will be crucial.' Every available soldier, including the 'cooks and bottle-washers' were thrown into the defence. Radio Biafra came on the air (it could be heard clearly in Ibadan and Lagos); an attack on Lagos was imminent, it said: 'Biafran troops are also advancing towards Ibadan.' Banjo, leading his men with his customary panache, pressed on through the town but finally came to a halt at a bridge, blown up by the Nigerians, on the Lagos side. Another bridge had been destroyed on the Ibadan road, blocking the Biafrans' advance in that direction, too. It was the high-water mark of Biafra's military fortunes. For several days the struggle for Ore continued and though probably not more than a total of 1,500 men were involved, it was a decisive battle, as decisive to the Nigerians as Gettysburg had been to the Unionists in the American civil war. But it was typical of the confused military history of the war that, even today, it is not absolutely clear whether the Biafrans were soundly trounced at Ore or simply checked by the blown bridges and then compelled to withdraw because the Nigerians threatened to outflank them by moving east along the network of smaller roads to the north of the town. In any event, by the end of August the Biafrans were on the retreat, blowing up bridges as they went.

The military history of the Biafran defeat in the Mid-West, which took

⁴ Ejoor eventually turned up in Lagos having covered the last seventy-five miles on a bicycle. After the liberation of the Mid-West he was replaced as governor by Major Ogbemudia. At a press conference he defended his actions: 'My crime', he said, 'was to trust my fellow-countrymen.'

a little over a month to accomplish, makes dull reading. It was a dour affair with the Nigerians moving slowly and laboriously eastwards through the dense tropical rain forest along small roads north of the main Ore-Benin highway. They also had to contain a thrust down to Okitipupa and the creeks which, in fact, brought the Biafrans much closer to Lagos—as the crow flies—than they had been at Ore. A new Division (the 2nd) was hastily raised and put under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Murtala Mohammed, the Northerner who had featured prominently in the July coup and the subsequent power struggle. Many of the officers under him who were 'blooded' in this campaign were to fight well for Nigeria later in the war.

By the third week in September, the Nigerians were threatening to cut the Biafrans off by slicing through the Benin-Asaba road from the north. Troops began pulling out of the Mid-West capital—many Ibo civilians had left some time before—and rumours spread like wildfire that the Nigerians were approaching. It was with some surprise then that at seven a.m. on 20th September, Major Okonkwo solemnly announced on the radio the birth of the 'independent and sovereign Republic of Benin'. It was the world's shortest-lived republic. By one o'clock on the same day the Nigerians were shelling the city and within a couple of hours they had occupied it. The only fighting that took place was when a Biafran motorised column retreating westwards entered Benin, not knowing the city had been taken. They turned a bend and met a Federal detachment head-on near the general hospital and were decimated. Major Okonkwo, it transpired, was already with the rest of the senior Biafran officers, safely in Asaba. His independence declaration had been pre-recorded.

Federal forces continued to advance but found the toughest resistance of the campaign as they entered the Ibo areas of the Mid-West at Agbor. However, within two weeks of the fall of Benin, Colonel Benjamin ('Black Scorpion') Adekunle pulled back temporarily from Bonny, had cleared the riverine districts of the state with another sea-borne landing and Murtala Mohammed (dubbed, perhaps prematurely, the 'Monty of the Mid-West') had captured Asaba. The retreating Biafrans streamed back across the Niger bridge to the safety of Onitsha and blew up two of its spans to halt the Nigerian advance. The Biafran occupation of the Mid-West had lasted two months.

'We are becoming very adaptable; we have had three governments here in six weeks,' a civil servant remarked drily in Benin after the

Federal reoccupation. As with all territories which are suddenly converted into battlefields, adaptability became the key note for life and survival in the Mid-West during the Biafran occupation. But what made things doubly difficult in the Nigerian context, was the closeness of tribal animosities to the surface, even in the Mid-West which had hitherto been regarded as a model example of the nation's slogan, 'unity in diversity'.

The Biafrans, however, did make a genuine attempt to win the 'hearts and minds' of the non-Ibo people. They knew that with their limited resources it was the only way to consolidate their grip on the state. In the early days, in particular, they behaved well, bought rather than stole, cajoled rather than commanded and treated the local population humanely. A few Northerners were killed but most of them were either evacuated with the expatriates or hidden by Mid-Western friends. There was a lot of coming and going by top officials and other leading figures who visited Enugu to discuss the situation with Ojukwu. But it soon became apparent that the Biafrans were not accepted; the bulk of the Mid-Westerners remained fearful and hostile and the Biafran presence was an 'occupation' not (as Radio Biafra claimed) a 'liberation'.

Perhaps the most significant—and fascinating—proof of this was the steady Ibo exodus from non-Ibo areas. In some places, like Warri, Ibos who had spent most of their lives there were beginning to move out within *ten* days of the Biafrans' arrival. In Benin, top Ibo civil servants were also on the move, many of them commuting to work from the Ibo towns of Agbor and Asaba. Even though their own tribesmen were in total control and the Federal troops were a long way off, they felt the deep hostility of the local people and reacted in the most positive way imaginable to it. As the tide began to turn these feelings gradually came out into the open and invited a Biafran reaction. Lists of names of prominent non-Ibos were ominously drawn up; great quantities of food and goods were commandeered and sent to the East; transport was taken over by the army; rapings, beatings, and a small number of killings by Biafran soldiers occurred. The oppression and atrocity syndrome of an enemy occupation had started. The stagnation of the economy (the exodus of expatriates and the imposition of the Federal blockade were primarily responsible) brought rising prices and added to the general discontent.

There was no uprising but the swelling wave of hostility undoubtedly persuaded the Biafrans to pull out from many parts of the state earlier than the military situation demanded. The Biafran troops and Ibo elites were the first to withdraw when it became clear that the Nigerian advance

was not going to be rolled back. They often left several days before the Federals arrived—in Warri, for example, there was a three day interregnum. That was when the killing usually began. The Ibos who suffered most were the poorer people who could not afford to leave or those who felt that their personal relations with the locals would protect them. Many tried to get out but found that the Biafran army had commandeered all the available transport.

A reliable and impartial eyewitness described the scene in Warri to me after the war.

'Benin fell [to the Nigerians] on Saturday. The following Tuesday the Biafrans left town as suddenly as they had entered it. They took all the trucks they could lay their hands on and filled them with loot although there were hundreds of Ibos clamouring to get out. On Wednesday morning there wasn't a soldier in sight. People ran into the streets shouting and cheering and began rounding up the 600 or so Ibos left in Warri. Ibo stores were looted and the police just stood idly by, though the police chief did try and intervene. On Thursday night the first Federal soldiers entered the town—mainly seasoned and well-disciplined Northern troops under Adekunle who, in those days, was fairly subdued. On Friday the killing of the Ibos began. It was done principally by the civilians, especially the Urhobos (a tough, warlike minority tribe), though occasionally some of the Yoruba and Mid-Western soldiers—but not the Hausas—joined in. Friends told me the same thing was going on in Sapele. For the most part the army and police stood aside. It went on for three days reaching a crescendo on the Sunday. The police finally made a move and locked up the remaining Ibos in the local prison for their own safety. The massacres were completely indiscriminate, men, women and children were hacked to death and I reckon between 250 and 450 Ibos died in Warri.'

Similar massacres occurred in Benin and other Mid-Western towns, again perpetrated mainly by non-Ibo civilians though sometimes Federal soldiers would join in when the victims had been 'pointed out' to them. Signs like 'Urhobo man lives here' 'Bini man's shop', or 'One Nigeria' suddenly appeared on peoples' doors and, inevitably, many old scores were settled before law and order returned. The worst massacre of all, however, happened in Asaba in the direct aftermath of the successful Federal assault on the town. Myth has grown thick and crustily around this disgraceful episode but there seems little doubt that it fits in with

the local tribal pattern of the killings elsewhere in the Mid-West. The differences though were the extent of the massacre (800 men and boys were killed), its coldbloodedness (they were lined up and shot), and the fact that the Federal army instead of the civilians was responsible. There had been a fierce fight for the town and the Nigerians entered it, according to an eye-witness, 'red-eyed'. As they were rounding up prisoners, an Ibo shot at a senior Nigerian officer and hit him in the chest, almost killing him. An Ibo-hating major from Benin (a Bini) then apparently took charge, herded all the Ibo men and boys together and had them machinegunned to death. They were later buried in a mass grave. It was an appalling and bloody epitaph to the Biafran incursion into the Mid-West and, with a later massacre in Onitsha, played no small part in strengthening the determination of the Ibos to fight on, whatever the cost.

* * *

The Biafran invasion of the Mid-West—the 'Benin boomerang'—one commentator called it⁵—was a major turning point in the war. It had immense political, military, economic and psychological repercussions. And, in retrospect, it can be seen to have played a significant part in sealing Biafra's fate. Why did Ojukwu do it? What went wrong? And what was the price of failure?

'We went into the Mid-West purely in an effort to seize the serpent by the head . . . our motive was not territorial ambition or the desire of conquest . . . we were going to Lagos to seize the villain Gowon, and we took the necessary military precautions.'⁶ This is Ojukwu's own version and as a statement of the overall objective of the campaign there is no reason to doubt that this is what it was all about. (One should perhaps add that Ibadan, closer than Lagos, was an alternative objective which, if achieved, would probably have also toppled the Federal government.)

Militarily, the operation offered the bonus of easing pressure on the occupied parts of Biafra, especially the ominous advance on Enugu, and prevent the Nigerians from using the Mid-West as a launching pad for a new front. Politically, it offered the chance of unpinning the loosely constructed Federal alliance—notably the wavering West—and throwing the whole of Nigeria into spectacular disarray. The concept of a 'Southern front'—it had a long political history—against the North was again close

⁵ *West Africa*, 26.8.1967.

⁶ Ojukwu, *Selected Speeches*, Vol. I, p. 198.

to the surface in Biafran thinking. And then, even if Lagos or Ibadan were not taken, the threat alone might bring the Federal government closer to Biafra's peace terms. (In fact, at the height of the Biafran occupation of the Mid-West, Ojukwu launched a 'peace initiative', its essence being a proposal for a sort of common market link between 'an association of states' in Nigeria.)

But there was more to the operation than a simple surgical slicing of Nigeria in two. Ojukwu himself may not have originally intended territorial conquest but it was plain to any military man that, if only to secure lines of supply and communication, some sort of military control and policing of the Mid-West would be necessary. Ojukwu claimed just before the operation that the Nigerians were building up their forces in the Mid-West—he mentioned two battalions at Warri—and warned Ejoor about keeping the state neutral. This information which he claimed came from 'Biafran intelligence' was totally false but presumably helped to justify the attack for propaganda purposes. It was clear from the way the Biafran forces immediately fanned out—to the riverine areas in the south and beyond the Mid-West/North border in the north—that Lagos and Ibadan were not the only targets. Ojukwu himself gave the new expansionist game away when he broadcast shortly after the attack that 'apart from fighting to maintain our sovereignty' Biafra was 'prepared to help liberate any part of Nigeria from the domination of the North'. The invasion, he declared, was 'a crusade of liberation'.⁷ Radio Enugu then adapted Lagos's 'Keep Nigeria One' call into an equally clumsy but politically significant slogan—'to free Southern Nigeria is a task Biafra must accomplish'. Biafran thinking had moved a long way from the 'leave us alone' theme. But it was to return: military misfortune, like the prospect of hanging, has a wonderful way of concentrating the mind.

Apologists for Ojukwu have tried to claim that he did not want to interfere with the Mid-West or any other part of Nigeria: he simply wanted to finish the war off quickly by getting to Lagos: the real fault lay, they continue, with the ambitious, disloyal Biafran officers and political advisers. This, I feel, is a travesty of the truth. Certainly, Ojukwu was initially reluctant about the operation—but this was more because he could not find a suitable commander whom he could trust than because he opposed the idea itself. Certainly, he was let down by Banjo and others. Certainly, his principal aim was to reach Lagos. But it is crucial here to remember what Ojukwu wanted more than anything else: an inde-

⁷ *West Africa*, 19.8.1967.

pendent, internationally recognised, secure Biafra with himself as its leader. Thus some sort of influence, whether through physical occupation or a kind of satellite relationship, over his neighbours and cast-iron boundaries were central to his political creed. Faced with the hostile might of Nigeria, this was quite understandable and he made no bones about it. Before the war he had talked about the Benue river being the 'natural' northern border of Biafra—involving a considerable northward shift of the existing border and the incorporation of the bitterly anti-Ibo minority tribes in the area.

Additional evidence is provided by a document captured by the Federal troops at the fall of Enugu, recording a 'dialogue' between Ojukwu and Philip Alale, one of his radical advisers, dated 7th September, at the height of Biafra's power in the Mid-West. Some people think this is a forgery but the balance of evidence points to it being genuine and several highly-placed Biafrans have attested to its authenticity. It makes interesting reading. First, it confirms Ojukwu's vision of Biafra reaching up to the Benue river in the north. Secondly, Ojukwu poses only two alternatives for the fate of the Mid-West: incorporation or 'a guarantee of neutrality' (presumably somewhat different from the previous 'neutrality' provided by Governor Ejoor and his troops and police in Federal pay). Thirdly, Ojukwu expresses doubts about Banjo's 'hidden motives' showing that he was already aware of possible problems of disloyalty. Finally, the conversation between the two men reveals very clearly the basic division between the Enugu radicals (people like Nzeogwu, Alale and Banjo) who still hankered after a unitary Nigeria, and were not true Biafran (or Ibo) nationalists at heart and Ojukwu who put Biafra before everything else.⁸ This division was finally dragged into the open by the Mid-West invasion and contributed to its disastrous finale.

The choice of Banjo to lead the operation was another pointer to its aims and the political calculations behind it. As a Yoruba, his appeal could hardly have been directed towards the Mid-West which only four years ago had resoundingly voted itself out of the former Western Region because of the popular dislike of 'Yoruba domination' from Ibadan. Banjo, a radical, dashing figure, clearly appealed much more to the Westerners and to the intelligentsia of Lagos. An Ibo or Eastern-minority commander, on the other hand, would have been too blatantly open to accusations of 'Ibo' or 'Biafran' domination. Nzeogwu, the January coup hero and himself a Mid-Western Ibo, seemed an obvious choice at the

⁸ *Nigeria: The Dream Empire of a Rebel?* (published by the Federal Ministry of Information, Lagos, 1968).

beginning of the war, but his tribal origins and the fact that Ojukwu did not trust him ruled him out. (His early death on the northern front, however, removed the possibility of a hostile reaction if he had been passed over.) There were very few non-Eastern or non-Ibo officers in the senior ranks of the Biafran army and Ojukwu was highly suspicious of virtually all of his former peers, but particularly so of those who had shown themselves to be 'political soldiers'. Banjo was, of course, an intensely political man but with his appeal both to the troops and to the potential radical fifth column in Lagos and Ibadan, the choice finally settled on him as the senior Yoruba officer in the Biafran army.

Given Biafra's sparse military resources and the huge distances involved (Asaba to Lagos is the rough equivalent of London to Newcastle, but over nineteenth-century roads), the Mid-West venture assumed a Napoleonic dimension of bold, breath-taking imagination. Seen from the Biafran side it could be said that it was a fair and calculated risk justified by the glittering prize of a quick victory and end to the war. However, the calculations were finely honed and it required a matching Napoleonic execution if it were to stand even the smallest chance of success. This it singularly failed to receive.

I first heard the Biafran version of what went wrong under rather strange circumstances. It was at a 'charity entertainment', raising funds for refugees, in Biafra a year later. There had been singing and dancing and speeches but the set-piece of the evening, to which all the notables of Aba town had been invited, was a melodrama, depicting the bloodstained history of Biafra. The two coups, the massacres in the North, the Aburi meeting, the outbreak of war—it was all there, cleverly acted on a small stage in the dimly lit Aba town hall. Federal MiGs had been over us at dusk, spitting fire and flame, but nobody bothered about them now. The audience, entirely Biafran apart from myself, was rapt in what I can only describe as a deeply religious glow. The highpoint of the play was the invasion of the Mid-West. The audience, a little like that of a Victorian music hall, participated eagerly but reverently. Then came the fall of the Mid-West. (Groans.) Incredible characterisation. There was Banjo, my neighbour pointed out, talking blithely to Ojukwu about reaching Lagos and Ibadan soon, and there he was again hatching a dreadful plot with Alale and Ifeajuna (the gold medallist high-jumper who shot the Federal prime minister in the first coup). And now, quietly from the shadows of the wings, came an unmistakable figure. Tall, long white gown, paunchy stomach (two cushions), and small round spectacles on wire frames. Of

course, Awolowo! (Deeper groans.) In his hand, a symbolic bag of gold. He is doing a deal, on behalf of the Federal government (and himself) with Banjo, Alale and Ifeajuna. They are to sell out the Mid-West, return to Enugu, kill Ojukwu, take over Biafra, bring the war to an end and then, the final Machiavellian twist, with Awolowo, turn on Gowon, depose him and take over Nigeria. A perfect historical scenario written perhaps by a Biafran Holinshed for a Biafran Shakespeare. The pact is sealed. Banjo orders his bewildered men not to fight and to allow the Federals through; the advance from Ore turns into a retreat; the retreat into a rout; town after town falls; the Mid-West—and all hopes of a quick end to the war—are lost. But (thank God), the wicked plotters are found out in time to save Ojukwu's life. Banjo and Ifeajuna confess; Ojukwu reluctantly (Alale is his relative by marriage and he was once friends with Banjo) agrees that justice must be done; the rot must be stopped. At dawn the traitors (a fourth joins them) are shot by firing squad. Biafra and 'H.E.' (His Excellency) live to fight another day. Curtain. Cheers. (Collection.)

The Biafran lobby, not content with such stark black and white drama, has added a few rich touches of colour. The British and Americans were, naturally, deeply involved, too. Gowon panicked when the Biafrans got to Ore and would have run off to the North if the British High Commissioner and American Ambassador in Lagos had not 'intervened' and stopped him. Worse still, the British Deputy High Commissioner in Benin was directly involved. He, according to this version, relayed messages in German—a language presumably thought to be sufficiently exotic to confound any interested eavesdropper—to another British official in the High Commission in Lagos for onward-passing to Awolowo. The British, one assumes, therefore knew all about the plot and its final detail of overthrowing their great friend, Gowon. This, in its essence, is what has come to be known as the 'Banjo plot'.⁹ Where does dull fact shed glossy myth?

The first thing that has to be said about the Biafran invasion of the Mid-West is that though the design was grandiose, its preparation was hopelessly slipshod. Banjo, much to his astonishment, was appointed commander a day before the attack. His last job had been in charge of Nigerian P.O.W.s. The invading army was scratch, to put it mildly. Alale in his dialogue with Ojukwu points out that 'Biafra's troops are a

⁹ The most colourful account I have read appears in Frederick Forsyth's book *The Biafra Story*, pp. 118-121.

rush-rush improvisation of what they should actually be'.¹⁰ It was very fortunate that the Mid-West's forces were so small and scattered. (If those Federal reinforcements had really been there—'the only effective force now in Nigeria', Ojukwu had described them—the Biafrans would have had a hard time.) The Ibo colonels' coup was crucial and smoothed the path very effectively.

Secondly, the Biafran government hopelessly misjudged the reaction of the non-Ibo peoples of the Mid-West and the West, revealing a political blindness that was too often repeated to be just a chance phenomenon. It is likely that the Mid-Western Ibo officers gave Ojukwu a much too rosy picture of feelings in the state and it is possible that if Banjo had got to Lagos or Benin there might have been some support for him, though the reaction of the Yorubas at the Ore incursion was overwhelmingly hostile.¹¹ And it is relevant to remember that Awolowo made his first definitive pro-Federal speech on 12th August, well before the Biafrans had penetrated into the West.

From the moment Banjo reached Benin, little went right for the Biafrans in the Mid-West. Instead of pushing on to Ibadan and Lagos, he dawdled, making speeches, setting up his own administration and confusing Enugu as much as the enemy. Many observers have concluded that had he concentrated all his forces on a continuous westward thrust he would have got to Ibadan within a few days—there was virtually nothing to stop him—with incalculable results. But the delay of almost two weeks, lost Biafra the campaign and, ultimately, much more besides.

Banjo already saw himself as an independent military commander, a dynamic political force, and showed every sign of trying to continue the grand revolutionary design sketched out by the young majors in January 1966. 'I still do not think,' he said, 'that we [the military leaders] have the right to destroy a nation that was handed over to us to save at a moment of crisis.' And the secession of Biafra had, he claimed, 'begun the dismemberment of our nation'.¹² Slipping out of control, disobeying orders, calling himself a 'Nigerian' and announcing his intention to fight for One Nigeria, naturally infuriated Ojukwu who abruptly recalled him to Enugu. But the Biafran leader, reluctantly, had to send him back because of his immense popularity with the troops in the Mid-West. Brigadier Ejoor later said that Banjo had approached him in Benin and suggested a

¹⁰ *Nigeria: The Dream Empire of a Rebel?*

¹¹ The Federal Government was, however, worried about an intellectuals 'fifth column' in the West; Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian playwright, was arrested about this time.

¹² *West Africa*, 19.8.1967.

wild scheme for liberating the rest of Southern Nigeria from 'Northern domination' and to abolish the new twelve-state structure. But there is no evidence that he was in touch with Awolowo, either personally or through an intermediary, in German, Chinese, or any other language. Nor is there any for a deliberate and 'treacherous' withdrawal from Ore and the rest of the Mid-West. More simply, the Federal troops were stronger, more determined, fighting on friendly territory, and continuously outflanked the Biafrans in the North, forcing them to pull back for their own good. ('Sabotage' and 'treachery' were the great scapegoats in Biafra and in a later speech Ojukwu blamed the losses of Nsukka, parts of Ogoja and Enugu as well as the entire Mid-West on treasonous activities by Biafra's hidden enemies.¹³)

The 'Banjo plot' however was not all myth. A conspiracy to overthrow Ojukwu and make peace with the Nigerians did exist. The following account is not complete and may contain inaccuracies of detail, but I believe it to be substantially true. Ifeajuna, the January coup leader in Lagos, and a Foreign Service official called Sam Agbam—both strong anti-secessionists—visited Nsukka when things were going badly for Biafra and talked to the army commander there about abandoning secession and trying to do a deal with Lagos before the situation got worse. They complained that Ojukwu never took their advice. The commander said nothing could be done without support of the key civilian leaders who were either behind Ojukwu or not prepared to make a stand against him. Ojukwu, whose security service within Biafra was first-class, heard of this meeting and got most of the story out of the badly scared army commander. Philip Alale, the Moscow-trained political agitator who had once worked for Nkrumah and who gained some notoriety as the 'Political Commissar of the Biafran Armed Forces' in July, shared the 'One Nigeria' and radical beliefs of Ifeajuna and Agbam, and was also involved. It was not clear whether Banjo was in the plot or was roped in by the government for his rebellious and incompetent conduct in the Mid-West. Anyhow, the four were court-martialled, sentenced to death and shot on 24th September, four days after the fall of Benin.

So, the Mid-West gamble failed. The real criticism of Ojukwu and the Biafrans is not that they put their shirt on the horse but that they failed to study form and train it for the race. The selection of leaders, first the unstable Banjo, then the egregious Okonkwo who, as a Mid-West Ibo, immediately resurrected all those 'Ibo domination' fears which the choice

¹³ Ojukwu, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 215.

of Banjo had elaborately and at cost been designed to allay, was faulty. The political assessment of the invasion—Mid-Western and Western sympathy for Biafra did not in fact, mean a desire to become involved in the war on its behalf—was equally wrong-headed. And the lack of proper planning and preparation made matters worse than they need have been.

There were, nevertheless, some initial gains for the Biafrans. It was a dramatic, bold, exciting stroke which gave a much-needed boost to Biafran morale; it showed Nigeria and the world that the war was not going to be a push-over for the Federal government; it had Lagos and the West shaking in their shoes for a short but salutary period; and a considerable amount of valuable booty—arms, transport, food and at least £2 million from the vaults of Benin's Central Bank—found its way into the Biafran war chest. But these, as Ojukwu would be the first to admit, were consolation prizes. Lagos/Ibadan had been the target and it had been missed, though only by inches, but the cost of failure was, as we can see with hindsight, enormous and far worse than the Biafran leadership had expected. The invasion greatly extended the war; henceforth no holds were barred, no territory sacrosanct. It slowed it down, turning the struggle into a war of attrition which, in the long run, was to the greater disadvantage of smaller, weaker, blockaded Biafra. By invading the Mid-West, the Biafrans opened up a new front and brought the Nigerians on to their western doorstep. They lost the valuable loophole which Ejoor's Mid-West, despite its leanings towards Lagos, had provided in the Federal blockade. The immediate military effects were bad, too. Biafra's small army could hardly cope with the existing threats, let alone take on new commitments outside the country. The long gallop through the Mid-West weakened the defence of the north and Enugu fell in early October to the Federal forces as the final retreat was taking place. It converted the non-Ibo parts of the Mid-West from worried but reasonably sympathetic onlookers into an implacable and deeply committed enemy. (This bitterness was to live on after the war, the Mid-Western Ibos finding it difficult to return to their homes and jobs.) The attack also effectively pushed the West into the war where all Gowon's blandishments and diplomacy had failed. 'All Yoruba people', Awolowo said just three days after the Biafran army had crossed the Niger, 'must lose no time and spare no effort in giving every conceivable support to the Federal troops in defence of their homeland, and of the fatherland.'¹⁴

The invasion shook the Nigerians out of their complacency. Massive

¹⁴ *West Africa*, 26.8.1967.

recruiting of Yorubas and non-Ibo Mid-Westerners into the Federal armies dates from this time. 'The Biafrans had been talking endlessly about fighting for survival,' the new governor of the Mid-West, Samuel Ogbemudia, told me after the war, 'but after their attack we realised that we, too, had to fight to survive. It did a lot of harm to our state but a lot of good to Nigeria.' The really tragic side, though, was the fate of the Mid-West Ibos. The elites who planned the pro-Biafran coup and ruled the roost during the brief occupation all got away safely to the East before the Nigerians returned, leaving the innocent mass of the people to face the red-eyed wrath of the civilians and Federal troops. The Mid-Western Ibos who had been, through no desire of their own, dragged into the eye of the storm were to be buffeted mercilessly for the rest of the war.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly of all, the invasion seriously undermined the integrity of Ojukwu's claim that he merely wanted to defend the original boundaries of Biafra and protect the lives and property of Ibos. The Mid-West presented no threat to Biafra's security at that time and its poor Ibos were in no need of his protection. Ojukwu had overreached himself and, in doing so, cast a deep shadow across his real intentions.

The end of the Mid-West campaign marked the beginning of the war of attrition. By late October it seemed that Biafra was on its last legs. Enugu fell on 4th October after a lot of fighting around but not inside the city. (Curiously, the victorious Federal sector commander had been posed the task of 'capturing' Enugu as part of his captain-to-major promotion examination some years before and used the same tactical plan with equal success.¹⁵) Ikom, a key town on Biafra's eastern border with Cameroon, had fallen in mid-September. Then the indefatigable 'Black Scorpion' Adekunle, fresh from his victories in the Mid-West captured Calabar with a sea-borne assault on 18th October. His forces slowly moved north and later linked up with the 1st Division at Ikom, sealing off the Cameroon border and completing the encirclement of Biafra. With over 100,000 men under arms, Nigeria's Soviet and Czech-supplied MiGs and Delphins had now become operational and were bombing and strafing daily.

At about the same time Biafra's gimcrack air force gave up the ghost. The B-25 and B-26 bombers and Alouette helicopters had either been destroyed or grounded through lack of spares. But there was one last extraordinary raid on Lagos by a Fokker Friendship, hijacked from

¹⁵ Major Danjuma, the man who had arrested Ironsi in the July coup.

Nigeria Airways before the war. On a quiet Sunday evening in October this plane suddenly appeared over Lagos and, watched by party-goers circled slowly over the docks and oil depot dropping small bombs—despatched, apparently, by hand. Nigerian anti-aircraft guns opened fire. Then, as it was turning for a new run, it blew up in a spectacular series of explosions ('like a firework display', said an onlooker) directly over the Lagos Motor Boat Club. Wreckage and bodies hurtled down over diplomat's houses and gardens and the Czech Ambassador received a corpse through his living-room window. The identity of the crew—reported to consist of four European mercenaries and four Biafrans—was never established, neither was the background to the mission, though there were colourful stories of it being preceded by a drunken party which led to a *kamikaze* attack on Gowon's headquarters. The Nigerians claimed they shot the aircraft down, but it seems more likely that one of the bombs went off in the cabin.

The Biafrans were also in a bad way on the ground. The quick succession of military defeats had demoralised the army; large stocks of arms and other supplies had been lost in the fall of Enugu; and the Nigerians then seized a Dutch ship called the *Jozina* off Calabar: it was loaded with weapons for Biafra. There was no sign, however, of the Biafran government coming to heel. Instead renewed defiance streamed out of Biafra's energetic radio station, now based in Umuahia but still calling itself 'Radio Enugu'. Ojukwu called a meeting of the Consultative Assembly in October and delivered a long speech, seeking a fresh mandate to fight on. He blamed the military reverses on 'sabotage and treachery' but admitted that Biafra's troops had been 'ill-prepared, inadequate and poorly equipped' at the start of the war (a remarkable admission in view of the 'no power in black Africa can defeat us' boast he had made three months earlier). Even Enugu had been shelled 'for days by Biafran traitors', he alleged. He left no doubt as to what he thought would happen if the struggle did not continue. 'Capitulation or surrender would mean . . . defeat and slavery.' There was no mention of a compromise solution. 'Let us not forget our repeated vow,' he cried in a moment of passion, 'our sovereignty is not negotiable!' He offered his resignation and I think it is worth quoting the whole of this passage because it gives a revealing glimpse of Ojukwu's style and his handling of the Assembly.

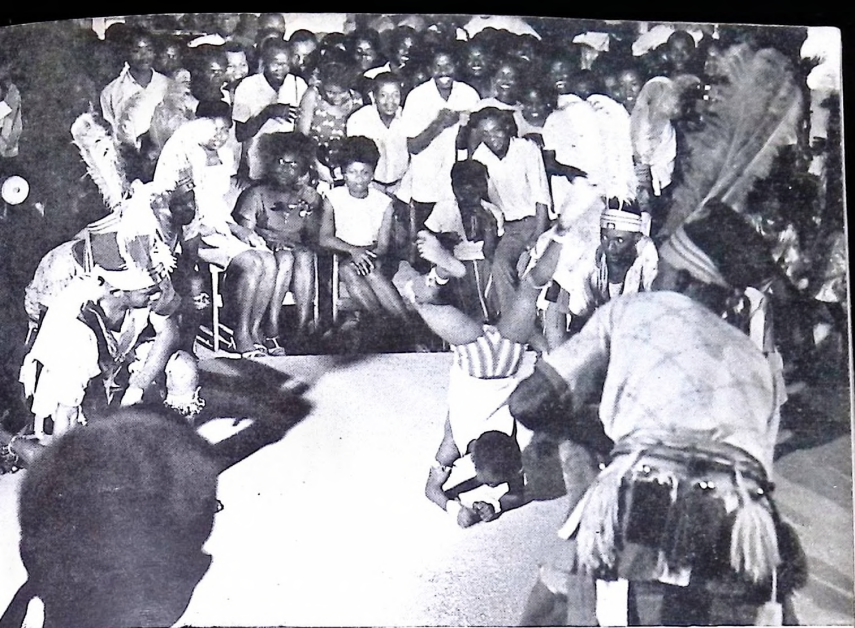
'We have in recent weeks heard Lagos call upon you to choose a new leader, a suggestion which I should have thought every man and

woman with soul in this Republic would regard as insulting. But if . . . our enemy is echoing what they know to be the feeling in this Republic about leadership, it is for you to take a decision, uninfluenced by any external enemy.'

He ended with words of praise for Biafra's unity and efforts and highlighted that almost macabre but central inconsistency which so baffled people outside Biafra. 'Our young men,' he said, 'are dying for our survival.'¹⁶ Ojukwu got his mandate. Its value depends on how one assesses the importance of the Consultative Assembly. Although a puppet-body it did, nevertheless, provide that image of a popular forum which was important to Ojukwu and the general war effort. But it never failed to take the hint—usually resoundingly dropped—and unfailingly backed its approval of Ojukwu's line with a symmetric 100 per cent majority vote.

The loss of Enugu, though a blow to Biafran prestige, was not as psychologically damaging as might have been expected. A British administrative creation, it was never regarded as a truly Ibo city. Umuahia, Aba and Owerri were the real heartland Ibo towns while Onitsha and Port Harcourt both out-stripped Enugu commercially. The war had clipped off much of Biafra's outer, protective, but expendable, peel and, with Enugu taken, the Nigerians were facing the astonishingly hard core. Ojukwu's speech to his Consultative Assembly denoted the end of Biafra's aspirations of grandeur and 'foreign' adventures and the beginning of the real siege. The Ibos, fond of Jewish parallels, had consciously started preparing for their Masada.

¹⁶ Speech to the Consultative Assembly, 11.10.1967. *Selected Speeches*, Vol. I, pp. 211-218.



For a brief moment the war is forgotten as folk dancers entertain in Owerri.

Mutilated Biafran soldiers play one-legged football.

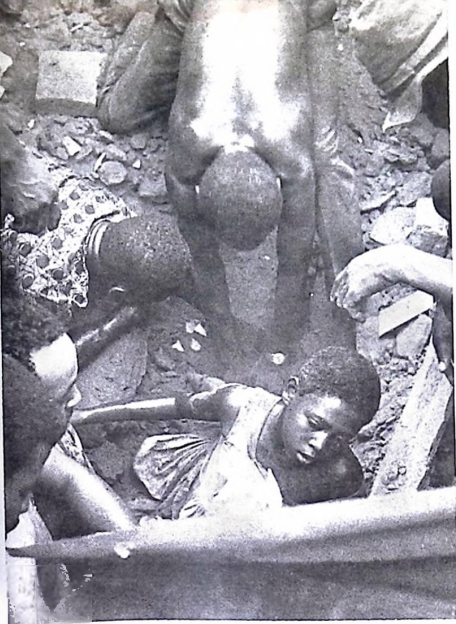




Biafran Red Cross volunteers and soldiers recover the body of a child after an air-raid by Federal MiGs and Ilyushins on Umuahia.



A young girl is miraculously dug out alive from the debris of a house after a Nigerian bombing raid on Umuahia.



A helping hand for a shell-shocked Biafran soldier.



Constant hunger, and later starvation, undermined strength of the Biafran army as well as that of the civilian population.

Federal soldier in Owerri with four 'liberated' watches, the end of the war.

A wrecked 'mammy' wagon with a philosophic message in Enugu, Biafra's former capital, after its capture by Federal troops.



CHAPTER
SEVEN

Outsiders Step In

War—2

November 1967—May 1968

Arms race

Russians

Czechs

Chinese

Peace talks

African recognitions

'WE REGARD NIGERIA AS PART OF BRITAIN'S SPHERE OF INFLUENCE,' SAID Mr. Dean Rusk, the United States secretary of state at the outbreak of war.¹ A monumental and patronising gaffe by any standards which crudely indicated the American desire to dump the whole ugly business into Britain's lap. But it was also a remarkably honest reflection of the United States' attitude towards the conflict and one which did not change materially throughout the war. And it mirrored a common feeling among Western nations at that time. To them Nigeria resembled nothing so much as a hot but delectable potato. While it still sizzled from the cinders it was advisable to pass it on, but prudence dictated remaining in the friendly circle around the fire ready and poised to take a bite once it had cooled.

This caution—adopted by everyone except the Portuguese who had a clearer idea of where they were going—might have worked had it not been for the belligerents themselves. The 'outsiders' had two vital and, to a certain extent, related commodities which they needed for a successful prosecution of the war: diplomatic recognition and arms. The Nigerians, although in a strong starting position, had most to lose from any form of international involvement that went beyond accepting their view that the war was a purely domestic affair and allowing them to purchase arms freely. The Biafrans starting from scratch, had nothing to lose and everything to gain by maximising foreign intervention. The outsiders did not cause the war but the interaction of their own interests in Nigeria, the rivalry of others with similar interests and the activating agent of the combatants' needs, drew them into it. Civil wars have a peculiar and

¹ *West Africa*, 22nd July 1967.

EMMWOOD



'Whoever can be responsible for this terrible thing?'

deadly whirlpool effect of their own and with Nigeria's riches at stake—a poorer country like the Sudan, also at war with itself, never attracted such attention—it was perhaps inevitable that foreign powers became involved. And, as in the Spanish civil war, once in the vortex, they became the ultimate arbiters of victory; similarly, non-intervention was as important as intervention.

The arms race, which intensified as the war got under way, immediately put the outsiders in the quandary they had hoped to avoid until the situation became clearer. Pressed by both sides to sell them arms, they had to take a position. Britain, while maintaining it was 'neutral', continued its 'traditional' (small arms, armoured cars, etc.) and 'purely defensive' (anti-aircraft guns) supplies to Nigeria but resisted Federal pressure to sell aircraft, bombs, tanks and heavy field guns. The United States government, with far less at stake, preoccupied with Vietnam and its own internal problems and confident that Britain would hold the Western line against Communist infiltration, declared a formal arms embargo against both sides. All this was nothing new for the Biafrans who were accustomed to sneaking round to the back door. But it was galling for the Nigerians who had, they argued, a legitimate reason—the suppression of an internal revolt—and the hard cash to back their desire to buy arms. So, they looked around for some unsentimental, hard-headed pragmatists, and found them in Moscow.

A Nigerian delegation had visited Russia in late June, before the war started, ostensibly to inspect the Nigerian embassy in Moscow but, in fact, to talk to the Russians about arms. A month later another mission went to the Soviet Union and was later joined by the commissioner of information, Anthony Enahoro, who on 2nd August signed a cultural agreement, previously initialled in Lagos in March. Less than a fortnight later, two Czech Delphin L-29 jet fighters with Nigerian air force insignia painted on their tails refuelled in Accra on their way to Nigeria. Four more followed later. Kano airport was abruptly closed to civilian traffic and Soviet Antonov freighters rumbled in with twenty crated MiG-15 fighter-trainers on board. Two hundred Soviet technicians poured into Nigeria to assemble and test the aircraft. By the end of August the jets were in the air, piloted by Egyptians—the Russians stipulated that no Westerner should be allowed to fly their planes—rocketing and strafing Biafra and introducing a new military, psychological and political element into the war.

There *was* a cultural agreement between the Nigerians and Russians

but there was also a detailed and toughly-bargained arms deal. The Nigerians paid cash or bartered cocoa and groundnuts. The Russians, at first, were only prepared to sell small obsolescent aircraft but later supplied MiG-17 fighters, Ilyushin bombers, heavy artillery, vehicles and small arms. Russian technicians accompanied all deliveries and often stayed on to train the Nigerians. The Soviet presence grew in other ways, notably in the technical assistance field when an agreement was signed in Lagos in November 1968, providing for the construction of Nigeria's first iron and steel mill by Russian technicians and with a Russian loan of £60 million. The Soviet embassy in Lagos doubled in size, a military mission set up shop and Soviet-Nigerian friendship societies proliferated. The left-wing trades unionists, the former focus of Communist activity in Nigeria, felt the tight official rein loosen a little and quickly adopted a more outspoken attitude in national affairs.

Why did the Russians step in so boldly where others feared to tread? In the days of the civilian government Soviet influence in Nigeria had been minimal, restricted to a few trade union and student contacts by the conservative and pro-Western Federal government and carefully watched by an efficient, British-trained Special Branch. Disillusioned and made wary by their failures in the Congo and Ghana, the Russians became cautious but at the same time less doctrinaire in their attitude towards black Africa. (The Russian Ambassador in Lagos, Alexander Romanov, with his aristocratic name and relaxed extrovert personality, was typical of the new breed of Soviet diplomat serving in Africa.) Nigeria, however, clearly remained the greatest prize. The Ironsi regime struck a more sympathetic note with its emphasis on centralism and reform. An aid agreement was signed to undertake development projects in each of the then Regions. The July coup and Gowon's take-over were at first viewed ambivalently in Moscow. His close British and American support and the return of Northern influence—assumed by the Soviets to be reactionary—were worrying factors. Soviet commentators showed great sympathy for the suffering of the Ibos and praised their 'progressive' qualities. But, again, caution was the keynote and Moscow joined the ranks of the Western powers who were also backing unity but keeping their options open with the East. Accordingly, a Soviet technical aid delegation spent three months in Nigeria in early 1967. Various loans and the iron and steel complex were first discussed with the Federal government but the Regions also received attention and the East was promised a six-hundred-bed hospital in Enugu and help with the extension of Nsukka University. Even secession

failed to shake the Russians down off the fence. The Soviet press reported Nigerian events quite objectively. And though the Nigerians began pressing hard for arms in June, Moscow refused to be hurried.

The decisive factor, which brought the Soviet Union down irrevocably on the Federal side, seems to have been a combination of the refusal of the Americans and British to supply the arms the Nigerians requested and its assessment of the likely outcome of the war at the end of July when Chief Enahoro arrived in Moscow. The West's nervousness about embroilment in the crisis left a partial vacuum. The African states were sheltering warily behind the O.A.U. thesis that this was a domestic problem. Support of Lagos therefore could not be faulted on either ideological or political grounds. But at the same time, America's diplomatic approval and Britain's limited military support of the Federal government meant that a Soviet commitment to the same cause would not provoke a dangerous 'Cold War' confrontation. This was very much in keeping with Moscow's post-Khrushchevian pragmatism. The Soviet decision was made before Biafra's lightning invasion of the Mid-West when it seemed that Nigeria was on the road to a quick victory. However, the prospect of a long war or even a Federal defeat did not dismay the Soviet strategists; they must have considered both. Their early commitment consisting of a few old planes was not large; they were making useful foreign exchange out of it; there was no danger of annoying their other African allies (all of whom were technically on Nigeria's side, too); or the O.A.U.; and the potential gain, a real foothold in Africa's most populous state, was enormous. On top of all this, the Russians had a stroke of luck: their jet fighters began to arrive at the lowest point in Nigeria's military fortunes. They could begin to feel their gamble—if such a cool piece of calculation can thus be described—had paid off when a Nigerian journalist warmly wrote: 'The old saying, "one old friend is better than two new ones" is now used in Nigeria in the reverse.'

Having taken the plunge, Soviet public and press comment, nevertheless, continued to be moderate and far from committed for several months after the aircraft sales. An analysis in June saying that Biafra was not comparable to Katanga was followed by others giving due weight to the secessionist's grievances. Even in early 1968 there were criticisms of 'the present uncompromising positions of the opposing sides'. However, Radio Biafra's blandishments—'these people [Gowon and his government] would have made a more compatible friendship with the dead Czar of Russia than with the modern leadership of the progressive Soviet

Union'—had no effect. By 1968 the tone was growing sharper—and the military commitment larger—and the old Katanga bogey was resurrected as a justification of Russian policies, but it was never the cause. Typical of the later hostility towards Biafra were statements like: the war was caused by 'oil not tribalism';² its prolongation was due to 'the rivalry between the foreign oil monopolies';³ 'the imperialist West is responsible for the Nigerian peoples' tragedy'.⁴ But the Biafrans kept on trying to woo the Russians—the latter were never vilified in the same bitter terms as the British and Americans—and even sent a delegation to Moscow in July 1969. The Russians, however, were becoming more deeply enmeshed with the Nigerians and showed no signs of wanting to change horses anyway, for by then either of the two most likely eventualities—a Federal victory or a prolonged struggle—suited their basic aim of extending their influence. And, unlike the Western powers, the Russians felt no constraints from public disapproval—though, even in Moscow, there were a few pro-Biafran demonstrations—to exert a moderating influence on Nigeria's conduct of the war and thus jeopardise the rewards due to a stalwart ally.

Of the other Communist powers only Czechoslovakia and China are relevant or interesting. (The East Germans were later alleged to have replaced the Egyptians on the MiGs and Ilyushins but this turned out to be as mythical as the allegation—by Count von Rosen—that the Nigerians were employing regular British R.A.F. crews.) Czechoslovakia, traditionally a large armament manufacturer and an aggressive salesman to non-Communist countries, was selling arms to both sides before the war began. Then, on Moscow's orders, the Czech government delivered the Delphin jet fighters to the Nigerians and continued supplying the Federal side with a variety of weapons until the liberal Dubcek regime, responding to the growing outcry over Biafra's plight, banned all arms sales in May 1968. Three months later the Russian invasion—Biafra really did have the worst luck in every conceivable field—led to a reversal of the ban and Nigeria continued to get its Delphins and other weapons.

Peking first began supporting Biafra when it was clear that the Russians were backing Nigeria. This was undoubtedly the main motive for Communist China's unwavering support for the Biafrans throughout the war, riding roughshod over the unrevolutionary, even bourgeois,

² L. Laptev, 'From Katanga to Biafra', *New Times*, No. 52, 1967, pp. 17, 18.

³ L. Laptev, *International Affairs*, Moscow, No. 4, 1969.

⁴ Y. Sidenko, 'The Nigerian War', *New Times*, No. 36, 1968, p. 12.

nature of the Biafran regime and state, and the O.A.U.'s support for Lagos. Later, radical Tanzania's and Zambia's recognition of Biafra allowed the Chinese to rationalise their policy a little though the concurrent recognitions of 'bourgeois' and 'neo-colonial' Ivory Coast and Gabon did not help. In the broader picture, the civil war was an ideological gift to the Chinese: there, for the first time in history, were the 'running dogs of imperialism' (America and Britain) demonstrably shoulder-to-shoulder with the Soviet 'revisionists' for the whole world to see. The Biafrans were not slow to make the point even though it sounded more than a little bizarre coming from the pen of Ojukwu, son of a millionaire and an ex-public school and Oxford man. 'It is with pleasure,' he wrote in a message to Mao Tse-Tung, 'that I send you and our dear comrades, the Chinese people, in my name and that of the government and people of Biafra, our profound gratitude for the understanding and sympathy you have manifested for our struggle against Anglo-American imperialism sustained by Soviet revisionism.'⁵ But, again, the Biafrans were out of luck. Despite many stories about Chinese aid, 'instructors', and arms flooding into Biafra from Dar-es-Salaam, there was never any evidence to show that Peking's backing went beyond a torrent of jargon over the air waves. It did, however, produce several 'Chinese scares' in Federal Nigeria which sent the small Formosan-oriented Chinese community of Lagos (there are two excellent Chinese restaurants in the city) scuttling round to the government to declare its undying loyalty to the Federal cause. For others it was more confusing than worrying. An American journalist friend of mine—an austere Bostonian—was travelling close to the front one day and was stopped by a Nigerian soldier manning a roadblock.

'Hey, you dere'—the soldier shouted, shoving his rifle in through the car window—'are you Chinese?'

'Do I look like a Chinese?' replied the American.

'I don't know, I've never seen a Chinese.'

* * *

By the end of 1967 the war had sunk into a deep slough from which it showed little sign of emerging. The only excitements came in the form of costly military reverses for each side. The impetuous Murtala Mohammed,

⁵ Quoted during a broadcast by Radio Ougadougou (Upper Volta) in French, 30.9.1968. Nigeria and Communist China established diplomatic relations after the war.

who had once studied tactics under Ojukwu, sought to crown his liberation of the Mid-West with an 'El-Alamein': the capture of Onitsha. Accordingly, in October, after a heavy bombardment of the city which completely gutted the famous £250,000 market, Murtala launched a hastily organised amphibious assault force across the mile-wide Niger. A senior Nigerian officer who took part in the attack described it to me with great candour. 'There was heavy fire from the other side but we got across all right and landed upstream, north of the town, in the middle of the industrial sector. 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. It was our fault really for being over confident and not consolidating after landing. And a frontal attack, you know, is not the best way to take Onitsha.'⁶

But Murtala thought differently and was not to be deflected from his chosen course. Twice more before the end of the year he threw his men across the exposed, fast-flowing river that separated him from his goal with the panache and boneheadedness of a latter-day Lord Cardigan. (He later explained, with a somewhat convoluted logic, that he felt he had to repeat the attack at least once because otherwise his soldiers, seeing him fail, would have lost faith in him.) In terms of lives, these crossings cost the Nigerians more than any other single engagement in the war. No accurate estimate of casualties is available but it seems certain that not less than 2,000 men died. To be fair to Murtala—no one referred to him now as the 'Monty of the Mid-West'—it should be said that his division, a scratch affair formed in the panic of the Mid-West invasion, was the rawest and worst-trained in the Nigerian army. After the third failure, he turned north, crossed the Niger at Lokoja—firmly in Federal hands—and began the long trek down the other side.

Meanwhile in the South, the Biafrans were desperately trying to prise the Nigerians out of their coastal toe-holds at Calabar and Bonny. A French mercenary-led attack on Adekunle's troops in Calabar—again a tactically mistaken frontal assault—was bloodily repulsed. But down on the island of Bonny, thirty-five miles south of Port Harcourt, the Biafrans,

⁶ Conversation with the author after the war.

without the help of mercenaries, came within an ace of dislodging the Nigerians in one of the few genuinely sustained and cliff-hanging battles of the war where each side fought with great tenacity and courage. It was not a large affair, like the Onitsha 'set-piece' battles, but from a military point of view, it was in a different category from the arm's-length artillery and mortar duels or the hit-and-run skirmishes that characterised so much of the fighting.

Gowon opened the New Year (1968) with a rash prediction: the war would be over and Nigeria one again by the end of March. But then, in one of the most effective Federal moves of the conflict, it was announced that the Nigerian currency was to be changed. A mere nineteen days was given for the operation which had been kept a closely guarded secret and took the Biafrans completely by surprise. (The Biafran government had been planning to issue its own currency eventually but was not prepared for this sudden development.) Overnight, all Biafra's carefully husbanded reserves—foreign exchange, of course, was not affected—were threatened with being reduced to worthless scraps of paper. The Biafran government mounted a panic operation off-loading Nigerian currency notes at rock-bottom prices to anyone who would take them. Inevitably, with such a short deadline, things went wrong. Mysterious men carrying bulging suitcases stuffed with Nigerian money fanned out to the world's currency centres. Some were successful, but more were not and were either caught or, having missed the deadline, simply dumped the now worthless notes. Nigerian currency worth £230,000 was found in seven abandoned suitcases at London airport a day after the issue of the new notes; £300,000 turned up in Rome four months later; and £7 million was impounded by the Togolese authorities when an unmarked aircraft coming from Biafra landed to refuel at Lomé. Even after the war was over, the occasional hoard of old notes continued to surface. The Biafran government is reliably estimated to have lost £30 million altogether, and although it managed to put its own new currency efficiently and rapidly into circulation, the operation dealt a massive blow at the country's financial resources.

The early part of 1968 saw an increase in Federal air activity—Ilyushin bombers had joined the MiG and Delphin fighters—and the growth of world-wide publicity for the sufferings of the Biafran civil population as a result of these raids and the worsening food situation inside the country. Relief flights from the Portuguese island of São Tomé and the Spanish one of Fernando Po had been started by the Catholic and Protestant

Churches in January, but as Biafra continued to contract under Federal pressure, the food and medical plight of the civilians grew worse.

In late March, Murtala and his 2nd Division finally captured Onitsha, advancing on it from the east along the road from Awka which had fallen earlier. The Nigerians were now deep in Ibo country and constantly harassed by the lightly-armed but highly mobile Biafran forces. The Nigerians' greatest problem was their lines of supply which were continually in hazard. With a sympathetic local population, living for the most part in the bush, the Biafrans found it relatively easy to range up to Nsukka and the northern border and to cut, but not hold, the main roads. A 'final' Federal push had begun in early March, but Murtala could only maintain the most tenuous contact with the 1st Division based in Enugu which was also under pressure. Nevertheless, with characteristic doggedness and at great cost in men and material he forced his way along the heavily defended road to Onitsha. The entry into the town was something of an anti-climax because it was virtually empty and half-ruined from the Nigerians' own shelling.

The Biafrans, led by their most energetic field commander, Colonel Joe 'Hannibal' Achuzie, an unknown figure before the war who claimed he had served in the British but not the Nigerian army, gave them little peace and counter-attacked almost immediately cutting the main Enugu road and surrounding the town. Discipline, always on a razor's edge in the 2nd Division, weakened and looting and wanton destruction followed another inexcusable atrocity. The soldiers massacred 300 or so of the few inhabitants who had dared to stay, including several local leaders and a number of women and children, in Onitsha cathedral where they had gathered to pray. This was as senseless and brutal as the Asaba killings and had the same long-term effect of toughening the Ibos' resolve. The Biafrans managed to maintain the gap they had cut in the Onitsha-Enugu road—its width varied between six and twelve miles—until the closing days of the war. The Nigerians, with unconscious irony, I think, called it the 'link-up' sector and it proved a real thorn in their side. Instead of supplies coming down from the north or from Enugu by road they had to be humped across the Niger river; Onitsha, with only its western waterfront properly secure, was continually vulnerable to Biafran attacks; and the gap gave the Biafrans a crucial corridor through which they could pass to fight in the northern areas and obtain food and other supplies. It was in this area, near Abagana some sixteen miles from Onitsha, that the Biafrans under 'Hannibal' Achuzie sprang the most spectacular ambush

of the war. A supply column carrying munitions and petrol and minimally escorted by two armoured cars had been sent down from Enugu to Murtala's hard-pressed force in Onitsha. It was close to Abagana and moving slowly due to the bad road and fear of mines when it ran straight into the ambush. The first few shots set a petrol tanker ablaze near the head of the column—disastrously tightly packed with only a few yards between each vehicle—and the flames spread like a bush fire backwards, enveloping the rest of the convoy. Nearly all the drivers and their escorts were killed, every single truck destroyed, and vast quantities of ammunition and other supplies lost. The wreckage, looking like a monstrous, charred centipede from a distance, became a show place for foreign journalists visiting Biafra for months afterwards.

At the end of March, Nigeria was all too plainly still at war with itself. Gowon and Federal spokesmen henceforth became much more cautious in their estimates of victory. On the home front the new twelve-state structure formally came into operation. The two non-Ibo states in the East and, of course, the Ibo areas themselves were still largely in Biafran hands but the others appointed civilian administrations and, under their military governors, began to function rather in the manner of the old Regions. Some managed it better than others, lack of money and trained personnel proving the major handicaps, especially for several of the new states in the north. A common service organisation for the six Northern states remained in being in Kaduna for the duration of the war to help the embryo administrations and run the former Northern Region's public corporations. Subtly, beneath the fog of war, Nigeria was changing: old desires and grievances were being assuaged or, sometimes, simply atrophying; new roots were going down. This quiet metamorphosis amounted to a revolution in the Nigerian context and it was to be the least violent and most fruitful of them all.

Shortly after the fall of Enugu, the Federal government had appointed an administrator for the 'East-Central State'—the name given to the Ibo state in the East under the new order. He was a young Ibo from Onitsha called Tony Asika, a rather doctrinaire 'Ivory Tower' figure who had been teaching political science at Ibadan University when Gowon gave him what one Nigerian commentator rightly called 'the least-wanted job in the Federation'. Asika's task was to establish an office in Enugu—the town did not prove safe enough to do this until the end of the year—get an administration going and woo the Ibos back out of the bush and, if possible, across the lines. Inevitably, he appeared as a hated quisling to

most loyal Biafrans and was treated as such by the full weight of the Biafran propaganda juggernaut. I met him almost a year later on his still lonely and sad pinnacle in Enugu and initially found him unattractive—he talked as if he had never left the senior common room—but later came to admire both his consistency and his guts.⁷

The outside world was now becoming increasingly agitated about Biafra's plight. Pressure for a peaceful settlement had been mounting for some time but neither leadership had shown a sufficiently wide loophole in its basic negotiating position to encourage potential mediators to step forward. The essential fact of life about all the peace efforts initiated during the war was that, if they were to get anywhere near success, they had to take account of, and be closely integrated with, the realities on the ground. As in most wars, peace moves in the Nigerian conflict were regarded by both sides as just another item in their armouries, along with the military, political and economic weapons, for pursuing their objectives. Anyone who failed to appreciate this, as many of the 'peace-makers' did, was foredoomed to failure. And the explanation of the tough, mutually exclusive stand taken by each side lay in the way they read the situation on the ground. The Nigerian and Biafran leaderships, their 'hawks' perpetually in the ascendant when it came to the nub of the political problem, looked at it from opposing poles. The Nigerians, after the Mid-West shock, had an unshakeable belief that they were winning. The Biafrans held a similarly rock-like conviction that they could not lose. (For those, mainly the 'doves', whose faith was not so secure, their fall-back position was that since death or degradation was the only alternative, a major concession to the Nigerians was equally unacceptable.) Of course, there were dissidents on each side who felt that a genuine and fair compromise was possible, but these never managed to assert themselves sufficiently to disrupt the inexorable logic of the hardliners.

Reduced to its essentials, the Federal government's minimal demand was a return to the fold: Biafra should give up its independence and accept the new twelve-state structure dividing the old Eastern Region into three states, only one of which—the East-Central—would be primarily for the Ibos and under the control of an Ibo government. The Biafran leadership took the line that sovereignty was not negotiable—it alone could, they argued, ensure the Ibos' and other Easterners' security—and no permanent settlement was possible without it. Biafra, in short, had come to stay. At different stages in the war, there were minor—and

⁷ See Chapter XIV for more details on Asika.

hints of major—modifications in these positions. Lagos, for example, seemed to be initially uncertain whether Ojukwu was personally acceptable as a spokesman for his people. On the Biafran side, 'sovereignty' was flexibly interpreted, sometimes permitting a kind of confederal solution, but more often rejecting everything except the loosest form of economic common market structure. However, under the tides of conflicting interests, fortunes of war, outside pressures and suffering masses the bedrock of 'unity' on one side, and 'sovereignty' on the other, remained immovable until the military collapse of Biafra washed away the problem and the man who had come to personify it.

The first international organisation to take a serious interest in the crisis was, not surprisingly, the Organisation of African Unity (O.A.U.). The Biafrans, aware that African recognition was the most effective pass key to outside involvement and help, called on the O.A.U. to intervene and assiduously lobbied the summit meeting in Kinshasa in September 1967. But they were on shaky ground for the very existence of Biafra challenged two of the pillars on which the Organisation had been built: non-interference in the internal affairs of a member state and a rigid respect for the colonial boundaries. 'Secession' was a dirty word in the African vocabulary, implying big power interference, economic exploitation and white mercenaries. It was, perhaps, doubly unfortunate for the Biafrans that the first O.A.U. summit of the war was held in the Congo where past memories (Katanga) and the present problems ('Black Jack' Schramme with his mercenaries and mutinous Katangese gendarmes still entrenched in Bukavu on the Congo's eastern border, cast a distant but malignant shadow over Africa's assembled leaders) vividly portrayed the dangers of secession movements, no matter how justified the cause might be. Nevertheless, the Kinshasa summit did go farther than most observers expected by discussing the conflict—it was not on the agenda—and appointing a consultative committee of six member-states with Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia as chairman. But the resolution appointing the committee left no doubt about whose side it was on. It reaffirmed respect for the 'sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states', condemned secession, and accepted that the solution of the crisis was 'primarily the responsibility of the Nigerians themselves'. The committee itself appeared to have no other brief than the vaguest, non-mediatory one of going to Lagos and reassuring Gowon of the O.A.U.'s desire for 'the territorial integrity, unity and peace of Nigeria'. This left the Biafrans out on a limb, especially since only one of the six members of the Consultative

Committee—Ghana, whose brain-child it was—was positively sympathetic to their cause. Moreover, the committee showed little sign of rushing to work, arriving in Lagos, after repeated delays, a full two months after its appointment. From the start, it became apparent that it was not going to visit Ojukwu. Radio Biafra announced a few days later: 'By deciding to consult only one party to the dispute, the mission has demonstrated its lack of objectivity and doomed itself to failure.'

In the diplomatic war, the Kinshasa summit was a milestone. Its deliberations, essentially negative and timorous, nevertheless laid out rough guide-lines for both the African states themselves and other powers, looking earnestly for an African lead, to follow in moulding their attitudes to the unprecedented complexities of the crisis. The O.A.U., reflecting faithfully the fears and inherent caution of its individual members, decided predictably to rock the boat as little as possible, and wait and see. Many African leaders were already aware that Biafra was not another Katanga (Mobutu himself admitted that the parallel was false), but it was asking too much from this new and fragile organisation to swing around against its basic principles at such an early stage, although what would have happened if a few states had recognised Biafra before the summit is another matter. The decision of the O.A.U. to endorse the *status quo* was greatly to Nigeria's advantage but it eliminated the organisation as a credible and impartial mediator, though for the first time outside powers either followed its lead or were critically influenced by it. Peace-making, for the time being, had to be left to someone else.

The Commonwealth Secretariat, under its secretary-general, the capable Canadian diplomat, Arnold Smith, stepped smartly into the breach. Gowon had asked Smith as early as September 1967 if he could act as an intermediary for exploratory talks with both sides to see if there was any chance of reaching a settlement within the context of 'One Nigeria'. Secret talks began in London in October but broke down before any progress had been made. Smith continued his probings for common ground with each side individually during the following months and was beginning to despair when what appeared to be an important breakthrough gave him new hope early in the new year (1968). Biafra, still reeling from the effect of the Federal currency change and aware that a new Nigerian offensive was in preparation, had its back up against the wall. Three top emissaries (Michael Okpara, former premier of the Eastern Region, Kenneth Dike, former vice-chancellor of Ibadan University, and C. C. Mojekwu, Biafra's powerful home minister and chief emissary in

Europe) called on Arnold Smith and said they were prepared to sign a document agreeing to a *confederal* 'One Nigeria' providing there were 'certain guarantees' for the Ibos. The British government was *au courant* and had helped to fly the delegates to London. While the document did not meet Lagos's full demands it nevertheless represented a departure from the standard Biafran position. Arnold Smith, with it in his briefcase and full of hope, flew off to Lagos in early February. But to the Nigerian leadership, the days of a confederal solution (the Aburi agreement had essentially been that) were past and Gowon told Smith that the Biafran proposals were unacceptable. However, even if he had accepted them, it seems likely that Ojukwu would have disowned the initiative, for I have been reliably informed that the Biafran delegation did not have full powers—it was certainly curious that Biafra Radio made no propaganda out of the Federal rejection of the move—and their proposals were peremptorily rejected by Ojukwu himself when he heard of them. The intentions of at least one of the delegates, C. C. Mojekwu, were also suspect. During much of the time that his colleagues were hammering out the agreement with Smith, he was in Paris busily buying new supplies of arms for Biafra.

Disappointed but not deterred, Smith continued his search for peace and finally succeeded in arranging a full-scale conference in Kampala, the following May. But before this took place, a dramatic series of events which threatened to change the entire course of the war occurred. On 13th April, Tanzania recognised Biafra; on 8th May Gabon followed suit; less than a week later, the Ivory Coast had recognised, and on 20th May Zambia brought the total to four. People in Biafra went wild with joy, dancing at night in the brilliantly lit streets every time a recognition was announced. 'Tanzania' hotels, 'Ivory Coast' bars and even 'Gabon' football pools mushroomed overnight—one of the highest forms of approval the West African public can bestow. The country took a deep breath and the general feeling expressed itself through the often-repeated phrase, 'the tide has turned at last'; a rider to this, commonly felt among the leadership and elites, was, 'If we can only hold on now, victory will eventually be ours. God is on our side.'

'He did the wrong thing for the right reasons,' an experienced observer of African affairs said on hearing Nyerere's announcement. This put the matter in a nutshell. It is one of the major tragedies of the war that the initiator of the snowballing recognition movement, President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, did not take such a perilous step isolating himself

from the rest of Africa, in order to help the Biafrans to *win*, but primarily to give more power to their elbows and drive the Nigerians to the negotiating table to ensure that they *survived*. Kaunda of Zambia, strongly influenced by Nyerere, recognised Biafra for the same reason. Both presidents clearly made a distinction between Biafran security and Biafran sovereignty and did not necessarily accept—as Ojukwu did—that either the two were inextricably linked or that sovereignty was the *only* way of ensuring security. Significantly, the two countries never appointed ambassadors to Biafra, never went through the other ritualistic but reassuring niceties that usually follow recognition and—unlike the Ivory Coast and Gabon—gave Biafra very little material support. (Tanzania helped the Biafrans marginally in purchasing von Rosen's 'Minicon' fighter planes and Zambia gave Ojukwu two DC-3 transport aircraft.) This attitude cannot simply be explained by the distance of Tanzania and Zambia from Biafra. The overall aim of the two presidents was not to continue the war until Biafra won but to end it with as many Biafrans alive as possible. To do this, it was essential to get Nigeria to the talks table. But since Nigeria was in a commanding military, political and economic position, there was little reason why it should go anywhere except deeper into Biafran territory. 'Tanzania would still like to see some form of co-operation or unity between all the peoples of Nigeria and Biafra,' Nyerere wrote explaining his action, but 'it seemed to us that by refusing to recognise the existence of Biafra we were tacitly supporting a war against the people of Eastern Nigeria. . . . We could not continue doing this any longer.'⁸ This was clearly redressing the balance, tipped, unfairly Nyerere thought, overwhelmingly in Nigeria's favour to the point of pretending that the problem did not exist at all.

All the recognition statements by the four countries concerned had one thing in common: their disappointment and frustration at the failure of the Federal government to settle the crisis by peaceful means. A senior Biafran diplomat, one of the two to be decorated by Ojukwu for his services to Biafra, later wrote penetratingly and lucidly about the recognitions.

'It [recognition] was not an approval of the political choice of Eastern Nigeria to secede. This was made clear by the fact that the first recognition did not come until full ten months after secession. It was the magnitude of the war and enormity of the suffering it produced that

⁸ *Observer*, 28.4.1968.

made the leaders of these countries revolt against the method adopted by the Nigerian government to solve the problem . . . [recognition] like secession itself, was more a *reaction against* than a *decision for*. [The italics are his. He also underlines the results of recognition.] Like most acts born of reaction it produced unexpected counter-reactions. Not only did it encourage the 'hawks' on the Biafran side to unnecessary intransigence as far as peace negotiations were concerned, it also provoked in the Nigerian government an increased determination to make nonsense of, by military means, whatever gains Biafra might have scored diplomatically.⁹

I know from other sources that this was only too true on the Biafran side. Ojukwu, having instructed his emissaries to seek recognition in order to strengthen his hand at the table, when he had got it, promptly took a tougher line and later told the same emissaries that abandoning secession would 'be letting our African friends down'.

Why did these four African states break ranks? And why did they choose this late moment, ten months after the outbreak of war, to do so? Curiously, Nyerere, though important, was not the original focal point of Biafran strategy. This was Felix Houphouët-Boigny, President of the Ivory Coast, a man as far removed in style, outlook and ideology from Nyerere as their two countries are separated in distance. The easy explanation for Houphouët's conversion to the Biafran cause is that President de Gaulle, the dictatorial father-figure of francophone Africa, told him to do it. I believe that the truth is, if anything, the other way round—though when talking of any dealings with de Gaulle 'persuasion' is perhaps a better word.¹⁰ The wooing of Houphouët by the Biafrans began early and was conducted with great ardour wherever the Ivory Coast President happened to be. Kenneth Dike, the ex-vice-chancellor of Ibadan University, spent a lot of time in Abidjan and struck up a warm friendship with the President. On his frequent visits to France and Switzerland he was pursued by the Biafran envoy in Paris, who operated from a discreet suite of offices near the Arc de Triomphe, known as the 'Biafra Historical Research Association'. And the French came into the picture obliquely here through de Gaulle's special adviser on African affairs, Jacques Foccart, ensuring that Houphouët was exposed as much as possible to television and press coverage from Biafra.

⁹ Raph Uwechue, *op. cit.*, pp. 127, 128.

¹⁰ There are other more subtle ramifications to this which are discussed in Chapter VIII.

Three major influences seem to have coalesced into Houphouët's final decision to recognise. Firstly, emotionally and instinctively, he is anti-Muslim and anti-Communist. A Catholic, like Nyerere and Ojukwu, he shares the traditional coastal West African's fear of the Muslim hinterland: the Ivory Coast, in common with the other states in that Region, has its own 'Muslim North'. Soviet support of Lagos in the war merely confirmed his worst fears and he often spoke of an 'unholy alliance' between Moscow and the Arabs. (He kicked the Russian mission out of Abidjan the following year for allegedly fomenting student riots.) Secondly, without any secessionist problems of his own—at least at that time—Houphouët harboured an intense dislike for federations. When his own country became independent he had played a dominant role in breaking up the old French West African Federation. (Significantly, Gabon had performed the same role in the destruction of the French Equatorial Federation and also recognised Biafra.) At that time Houphouët had been accused by other nationalists of destroying African unity, a charge which he resented and wished to disprove by demonstrating that federations never worked. His final major motive was a genuine and strongly felt humanitarianism. He was deeply affected by the sufferings of the Biafrans—he was in Europe for most of the spring in 1968 when coverage of the war began to assume massive proportions. Houphouët has a remarkable record of humanitarianism in his own country which he has ruled as a benevolent dictator since independence in 1960. No one has been executed for criminal or political offences under his rule and he even released an opponent who had led a coup against him after a few months of imprisonment. Few leaderships in Africa can match such clemency.

But Houphouët is a cautious man. He told the Biafrans that he was ready to recognise but did not want to break the ice. Somebody else had to go first and then he would come out into the open. Nyerere obliged him. This was an unexpected bonus because Tanzania's socialist non-aligned image made it easier for capitalist, pro-France Ivory Coast to follow and not be accused of collusion or 'neo-colonialism' as undoubtedly would have been the case if another conservative francophone country had made the first recognition. Even then, Houphouët played a cat-and-mouse game. Tanzania recognised on 13th April and two days later, in Paris, he announced that he would be making a statement 'in two days' time when I return to my country'. On 22nd April he was still in France and publicly praised Nyerere's initiative and declared that negotiations were the only way out. (Preparations for the Kampala peace

conference were going on at this time.) The President of Gabon, Albert Bongo, was also making similar statements. It was a sort of 'creeping' recognition and had both the Nigerians and Biafrans on tenterhooks. A day after Gabon recognised Biafra, Houphouet, still in Paris, made his famous—and highly inaccurate—statement that more people had been killed in Nigeria in ten months than had been in the entire Vietnam war.¹¹ Finally, with Tanzania and Gabon safely across the Biafran Rubicon, he returned to Abidjan and then had to overcome some resistance in his cabinet. Typically, he left the actual announcement to his foreign minister. The following day the British and Russian Ambassadors were summoned and asked by Houphouet to call publicly for an end to the war and to stop all arms supplies to the Nigerians. The Russian envoy, whose French was not up to scratch, posted his chauffeur outside and supplied him with a short-wave receiver and tape-recorder to ensure that he did not misinterpret the President's message. This concern for accuracy had no noticeable effect on the Soviet Union's Nigerian policy.

'There is no doubt that Tanzania's recognition of Biafra has left many people, particularly Africans, bewildered. The African young intellectuals, who had been looking up to President Nyerere as a leader who could be a model for Africa, have been extremely disillusioned. . . . Many Africans are still asking why, why, why?'¹²

With reason, for Nyerere, ever since the fall of Nkrumah, had been Africa's most passionate and consistent advocate of unity. He had also acquired something of the charisma of a Nasser, a Tito or a Castro, with his 'self-reliance' brand of socialism at home and his sturdy non-alignment policies abroad. When Biafra seceded he deplored the break-up of the Federation and he later endorsed the O.A.U.'s support for Nigerian unity at the Kinshasa summit meeting. And by the time he recognised Biafra he was aware of the link with the Portuguese with whom he was in direct confrontation on his own southern border.

Nyerere, however, was frankly appalled at the slaughter in Biafra and

¹¹ Houphouet said that 200,000 Biafran lives had been lost in ten months of war—'more than in Vietnam in three years'. President Nyerere halved this figure, claiming that 100,000 people had been killed in the war by the time he recognised Biafra (*Observer*, 28.4.1968). The final casualties of the war are dealt with in the Epilogue.

¹² Anthony O. Ojigbo, *Pan-African Journal*, Vol. II, No. 3 (Summer 1969). The whole question of the African recognitions of Biafra and foreign involvement in the Nigerian war is comprehensively dealt with in a long and interesting article by Colin Legum in Makerere University's *International Review*, Vol. I, No. 1 (Autumn 1970, Kampala).

the image this presented both to Africa and the outside world. Dedicated to an African unity that would improve the lot of the African, wring respect, no matter however grudgingly, from those who despised Africans, and eventually dislodge the white regimes of the south, Nyerere regarded the Nigerian civil war as the most calamitous impediment to the realisation of these dreams. Uppermost in his mind were not the problems that caused the war—every African state had those in one shape or another—but the war itself which was killing Africans, shaming Africa and threatening to provide the kind of interventionist foothold that Africa's enemies were looking for. 'The break-up of Nigeria is a terrible thing,' he later wrote, 'but it is less terrible than that cruel war.'¹³ His main aim therefore was to stop the war. His and Africa's tragedy is that the means he chose had the opposite effect.

Nyerere was helped in his decision by the skilful lobbying carried out by the Biafrans in Dar-es-Salaam, especially by the resident envoy who outshone his Nigerian opposite number. (The latter did not endear himself to the Tanzanian President by reminding him, in a patronising way, that Nigeria had supplied troops after the 1964 army mutinies to help him keep order in his own backyard.) Nyerere also had bad memories of the corrupt, bourgeois Northern-dominated Nigeria he had visited in the bad old days of civilian rule. The Biafra that was vividly described to him by the high-powered envoys was that of an intensely Christian, 'self-reliant', progressive phenomenon, something quite new and exciting in West Africa. Nyerere, with his own experiment in unity—the loose union with Zanzibar—still in the early stages, believed in a gradualist approach, and, though not a complete paragon of virtue himself on the use of selection coercion, he abhorred the idea of massive force and indiscriminate violence. He, like Houphouët, knew that he stood on a lonely pinnacle, opposed even by many members of his own government. But Nyerere is a man with the courage of his convictions—witness his costly break in diplomatic relations with Britain over Rhodesia—and once his mind was made up on Biafra he had no qualms about being the first to step forward. (He got round the cabinet opposition by the simple expedient of not consulting it.)

Kaunda of Zambia, Nyerere's greatest admirer and loyal friend, added his weight because he, too, believed Biafra's cause was just and that the tactic—strengthening Biafra diplomatically at the forthcoming Kampala

¹³ Document written by Nyerere and circulated privately at the O.A.U. Conference in Addis Ababa, 14.9.1969 (see Kirk-Greene, *op. cit.* Vol. II, Document 218, p. 429).

peace talks—was correct. Gabon, a mini-francophone state close to Biafra and notable mainly for its valuable uranium and manganese deposits and its loving relationship with France, presented a more curious—and dubious—case. No one was more surprised than the Biafrans themselves when President Albert Bongo announced his recognition. They had not even bothered to lobby him. It seems likely that Houphouët-Boigny and the French had been to work on him, the French having special pride of place in the hearts of the Gabonese leadership ever since they intervened with paratroops to save Bongo's predecessor from a coup d'état in 1964.

The recognitions crowned a long and arduous diplomatic campaign by the Biafrans which had begun well before secession. The quality and breadth of talent among the emissaries played a crucial part and it is arguable that if the tireless, constantly moving delegations had not contained so many 'stars', the results would have been much less satisfying. Most of the principal emissaries were already known to, and respected by, the leaders they were lobbying and had made a name for themselves not only in Africa but outside the continent, too. The fact that the plea for recognition came from academics, lawyers, churchmen and diplomats as well as politicians and soldiers significantly increased its impact. Men like Sir Francis Ibiyam, a former president of the World Council of Churches and governor of the Eastern Region, the gentle and scholarly Sir Louis Mbanefo, a member of the World Court in the Hague, two distinguished former vice-chancellors (Kenneth Dike and Eni Njoku), and the ex-premier of the East, Michael Okpara, were all deeply involved in the 'recognise Biafra' operation. But the man who decisively swung the key states of Tanzania and the Ivory Coast round was the former president of Nigeria, Nnamdi Azikiwe. 'Zik's' impact cannot be over-stressed. The 'father' of Nigerian nationalism and an international figure of many years standing, he had been one of Nyerere's and Kaunda's early heroes. That he, the leading architect of Nigeria's unity, should now be advocating its demolition, was an argument of considerable force. It is significant that 'Zik' made a long tour around Africa, including the Ivory Coast, Tanzania and Zambia, just before the recognitions and, unlike the other Biafran emissaries who had to creep in by the side door, was treated in the 'red carpet' style of the president he used to be.

The recognitions were a landmark in the war. They suddenly injected new hope into Biafra just when everything seemed without hope. (Port Harcourt, the last major town and airport, which had been under attack throughout April, fell to the triumphant 'Black Scorpion' in May.) The

recognitions split the O.A.U. and the fact that two francophone and two anglophone, two conservative 'capitalist' and two radical 'socialist' states had taken the plunge together, effectively smothered the accusation that it was all part of an elaborate 'neo-colonialist' plot. Taken together, they were obviously not a flash in the pan; they carried credibility and conviction. And, most important of all, the recognitions swung the war off its rather limited parish-pump level into the international sphere and paved the way for non-African involvement which the previous lack of public support for Biafra had not wholly excluded but certainly drastically inhibited.

The Kampala peace talks opened in the third week of May in a cloying atmosphere of mutual suspicion and mistrust. This deepened to something near paranoia when, while the conference was still in its opening stages, one of the Nigerians' confidential clerks with the common but—with the memories of the Mid-West campaign still fresh—highly ominous Yoruba name of Banjo, mysteriously disappeared. The Biafrans were naturally accused of kidnapping and wringing all kinds of Federal secrets out of him before disposing of him. This incident—poor Banjo's body was eventually found though his killer or killers were never traced—with its overtones of tragi-comedy and melodrama almost wrecked the conference before it had begun. The basic trouble was that the real focus of interest was anywhere but in Kampala. It was rather like an elaborate waltz danced by two people who detested each other, their eyes continually over each other's shoulders searching desperately for a sign of their true loves. The Nigerians' attention was riveted on the battlefields, particularly the struggle for Port Harcourt and the military collapse which they felt would follow its capture. The Biafrans, in their first heady flush of international recognition, were waiting for the expected diplomatic landslide. Both were to be disappointed, for although Port Harcourt fell (the Nigerians had deliberately delayed the preliminaries so that this could have due impact on the talks) and although four African recognitions had been chalked up for Biafra by the time the conference opened, the anticipated sequels failed to materialise.

But this is hindsight and could not influence the high expectations held by each side in Kampala in May 1967. Their respective terms were tailored to these expectations. The Federal delegation under Chief Anthony Enahoro offered a 'package' deal which amounted to Biafra giving up secession and accepting the new order in the Federation. The Biafrans, led by Sir Louis Mbanefo, insisted on a cease-fire, an end to the blockade

and withdrawal of all troops to pre-war positions before they would discuss terms for a political settlement. 'We did not come all this way simply to surrender,' he said. There was little to choose between these two granitic intransigencies. Both had their own persuasive logic. The Nigerians' position was closely related to the situation on the ground where they had overrun roughly half of Biafra, captured all its major towns, airports, industrial centres and oil refinery; the rich oilfields were in sight and the stream of victory still appeared to be in full spate. It would have been madness to have accepted the Biafran conditions for a cease-fire, during which it would have been impossible to enforce an effective arms embargo, with absolutely no guarantee that the subsequent talks would have led to a permanent and acceptable political settlement. But looked at from the other side, especially from the viewpoint of those who wanted, above all, an independent Biafra, it seemed equally pointless to give up everything they had suffered and fought for when a miracle—albeit a diplomatic miracle—was happening before their eyes.

If either side had shown a bit more resilience in their basic terms, it is just possible that the talks could have achieved something. President Obote of Uganda, his foreign minister and the Commonwealth secretary, Arnold Smith, all tried their utmost to stake out common ground between the parties, but whatever the delegation heads thought personally—and there is some evidence for thinking that Mbanefo wished to take a 'softer' line on Biafra's sovereignty than his brief allowed—the 'hawks' were firmly in control in Lagos and Umuahia.¹⁴ After six days of procedural delays, alarms and excursions over security and a brisk propaganda war in the wings that more than once threatened to fill the centre of the stage, the talks broke down. It was the end of Arnold Smith's role as chief peace-maker, a warning sign along the cul-de-sac of a negotiated peace and the impetus for a new plunge into the labyrinthine toils of a seemingly unending war. Biafra was exactly a year old and approaching its darkest—and some would say, its finest—hour.

¹⁴ Anthony J. Hughes who covered the Kampala talks for the *London Observer* described the atmosphere and Mbanefo's feelings to me as follows: '... The Federals were cocksure and relaxed, holding endless chatting-up sessions, cocktails and luncheon parties with journalists. The Biafrans, by contrast, were going through emotional hell. Mbanefo definitely would have compromised on something short of total sovereignty at Kampala if Ojukwu had not sent a very stiff message on the last day of the talks.'

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Biafra's Darkest Hour

War—3

June—September 1968

Front-line: Biafra

France

Portugal/South Africa/Rhodesia

Arabs/Israel

Life in Biafra

Annang Sector, Biafra. July 1968. WE HAD TURNED OFF THE MAIN ROAD A hundred yards or so before a bridgehead which marked the front-line. The Biafrans had blown the bridge and now the Nigerians were cautiously probing through the bush on either side of it, fanning out over a six-mile area. It was almost midday; the sun, a shimmering, malignant presence, sat high on our shoulders and beat down through the saturated air. We drove down a sandy jungle track to a point two miles behind the line where reserve troops were resting; they had no rifles but laughed and chattered among themselves. In the distance, muted but menacing, came the hoarse rattle of machineguns and the occasional cough of a mortar. The sounds hung enmeshed in the heavy air; an oil palm stirred gently, a rich smell of dust rose from the road and for one enchanted moment our small fragment of the world seemed to stand still in peace. We left our Jeep and walked down a long path to a stream, its bridge, buckled and blown, lying in the sandy bed. The Biafrans had lost then regained the valley and, that morning, had repelled yet another assault.

A captain, a small frail-looking man, met us and led the way down the slope to his company headquarters. He wore bright polished boots, a camouflaged combat uniform and a Castro-style *képi*. He carried a captured Nigerian automatic rifle and possessed an unpronounceable Ibo name. He told us he had spent twelve years in the Nigerian army and had served in the Congo. As he spoke he shook nervously, at first I thought, from fear. It wasn't an attractive trait. He talked implacably of the 'vandals' and mentioned some unpleasant things the Biafrans were planning to do to them. We had noticed something that looked like telephone wires running back from the opposite slope to the rear H.Q. (The efficient Ibos,

I thought, even have their field telephones out.) But the wires, the captain informed us, were connected to a series of *ogbunigwe* ('destroyers of all') buried in the sand on the other side of the stream. These were Biafran-made land mines constructed out of milk-churns filled with a terrifying assortment of scrap metal and altogether a truly devastating weapon. It wasn't fear, I then realised, that made the little captain quiver, it was a finely distilled hatred. (He had, we learnt later, a reputation of being a fearless leader and a killer.) As we approached the rear headquarters, a young, tough-looking soldier was thumping a hysterical recruit who had either refused to go up to the front or, having got there, had run away again. He chose the lesser of two evils and slouched off in the direction we were going, weeping and sniffing like the simple school-boy he had undoubtedly been a few weeks before. Beside the narrow stream a petrol tanker full of crude oil stood with a pipe leading from it into the water. This was another of the Biafrans' 'do-it-yourself' defences. When the Nigerians reached the stream, the *ogbunigwe* would explode and the water would turn into a sheet of flame. Milk-churns, scrap metal and crude oil were in plentiful supply in the summer of 1968 but more conventional—and effective—weapons of war were not. The soldiers around the broken bridge had rifles, which they gave up to their replacements when they were relieved, but only five rounds per man. Most of the rifles were single-shot bolt action ('Check and repeat,' said the captain, 'fire one, check and repeat—one dead vandal') and those that were automatic had been specially soldered so that they would only fire one shot at a time. This, for me, graphically told the military story of that summer—and much of the war itself. There were no mortars, no heavy machineguns, no bazookas, nothing other than 'check-and-repeat' rifles, a few sub-machineguns, several hand-grenades and, of course, an apparently limitless supply of *ogbunigwe* and of one of the world's finest petroleum.

We climbed slowly up the slope on the other side of the stream. Now the quietness held a different quality, strangely claustrophobic in that open verdant countryside drenched in brilliant sunshine. Even the myriad insects of the African noonday appeared to understand and lie still. The human inhabitants had long since fled for the treacherous safety of the fetid refugee camps—malnutrition killed more surely than the Nigerian armoury in this war—and we walked on in the sunlit vacuum they had left. A young soldier was coming down the track; he walked with a kind of lopsided stagger, as if he had a gravity problem. His eyes were glazed and his stunned mind knew nothing except the friendly path and the way

it was pointing. 'Shell shock,' said the captain unnecessarily. Two more soldiers passed us. One wore a blood-soaked uniform and a helmet; something was wrong, but he laughed and shouted 'Biafra win' as he went by, waving an automatic F.N. rifle over his head. Ah yes, it was a *Nigerian* uniform.

The shooting was over when we reached the front-line under some palm trees and close to a village school. Three Federal soldiers lay dead on the sandy path. The Biafrans had stripped them and seemed prouder of the captured uniforms, rifles, ammunition, grenades, packs and water bottles than of the fact of destruction of three more 'vandals'. The Nigerians were big and well fed; a sergeant looked down at the genitals of one of the corpses and said, 'There's a real Hausa for you.' One of his men pulled out a machete and was about to cut off the penis when the captain came up and stopped him. In the dead man's bulging wallet they had found a letter from his brother in Western Nigeria wishing him Allah's guidance and grace in the task of 'crushing the rebellion'. (This man was probably not a 'Hausa' but a Muslim Yoruba from the West.) No one seemed to be at all concerned about the possibility of a counter-attack. There were no trenches, no dug-outs, no precautions of any kind and I felt as exposed as an astronaut on the surface of the moon. But the captain said not to worry, the Nigerians were having their lunch, then there would be a siesta, normally respected by both sides and, with a bit of luck, darkness would preclude any further fighting until the next day. It was, as they say, that kind of war.

* * *

The summer months of 1968 were the most action-filled of the entire war. During that brief space of time Biafra hovered on the point of death as the Federal noose inexorably tightened. It was also the wet season and the lean season, two immutable factors which intensified tenfold the sufferings of those trapped inside the Biafran enclave. As the rain poured down and thousands starved to death, three major towns—Aba, Owerri and Okigwi—fell. One airport, Obilagu, was overrun, and another—the vital Uli—came within Federal shelling range, closed temporarily, reopened and finally, after a desperate struggle, was made secure. After the fall of Port Harcourt (Biafra's last seaport) in May, Ojukwu had announced that the civil war had entered 'a second phase' in which his troops would adopt guerrilla tactics. 'We shall all have to return to our

provinces and villages. We shall torment and harass the enemy at every turn and chase him out of our land.' In a nation-wide broadcast in late August, Gowon confirmed that the 'final offensive' was under way. 'We have resolved', he said, 'that we must now press on with all our might to defeat the rebels militarily and remove all traces of the tyranny and terror of the rebel regime from the face of the country.' Federal forces from the north and south closed in on Umuahia, the last remaining town of any size and Biafra's makeshift capital. Arms flights became increasingly irregular and at a particularly desperate stage dwindled to one a week. By the end of September, Biafra had been reduced to roughly half the size of Ireland, a quarter of its original area. All the non-Ibo and most of the oil-producing areas, as well as a large slice of northern Iboland, had been overrun. Two new Federal States—the Rivers and the South-East State—had been set up by Lagos, complete with their capitals (Port Harcourt and Calabar), governors and civil administrations. Packed like pilchards in this tormented fragment of the land of the 'Rising Sun' were an estimated 8 million people—a third of them refugees—who were, according to the relief agencies, dying at the rate of 3,000, 5,000 and finally an astronomical 10,000 a day.

Internationally, these were hectic months, too. The 'outsiders' were well over the threshold now and one or two showed signs of taking up permanent residence. In Western Europe and North America concern over Biafra's plight was mounting, helped by the energies and skills of the public relations men ('Markpress' had almost become a synonym for 'Biafra'¹) and the modern techniques of 'telly war' reporting. But the message was beginning to transcend the medium. The archetypal starving Biafran baby with its pathetic pot belly, matchstick legs, fleshless rib-cage and soulful eyes which had been appearing in comfortable European living-rooms with the frequency of the soap adverts, stirred people's consciences and encouraged them to dip into their pockets. The lines between genuine humanitarians, guilt-ridden 'do-gooders', religious crusaders, romantic adventurers and plain nut-cases grew progressively blurred. But the world did, after all, care and began to make a profound impact both on the governments at home and on the rapidly deteriorating situation in Nigeria and Biafra.

One of the first domestic results of this new force was the banning of arms sales. Czechoslovakia's embargo on Nigeria in late May was quickly followed by similar bans by Holland, Italy, France and Belgium in June

¹ Biafra's Geneva-based public relations firm—see Chapter XI.

and July. As the relief situation deteriorated, the cry for international intervention grew more powerful. Repeated appeals by humanitarian organisations and well-known individuals were made to the United Nations, the O.A.U., the Commonwealth and the Big Powers. The Pope again offered to mediate but, as with a new protracted series of peace talks—searching for either a political or a relief agreement—which took place first in Niamey, then in Addis Ababa, every attempt to bring the fighting to a halt failed.

International interest remained riveted on the relief situation. The International Committee of the Red Cross (I.C.R.C.) called it unequivocally 'the gravest emergency' it had handled since the Second World War. The relief agencies all agreed in July, after a tour of Biafra, that unless massive help came quickly 1 million people would be dead by the end of August and another 6 million would perish in the following six months. The U.N., the British and the American governments all became involved in the subsequent rescue operation and in its contorted politics. The complex triangular jousting between the relief organisations and the Federal and Biafran governments adopted its barren ritualistic form this summer.² At one stage the relief operation seized up altogether. Federal air-raids increased and anti-aircraft fire both intensified and improved in accuracy. Fernando Po, the Spanish island where the I.C.R.C. had stored most of its supplies, proved more of a liability than an asset since it closed its airport at night when the relief planes could fly and opened it during the day when they could not. Then trouble with Hank Wharton's monopolistic airline on São Tomé suddenly closed the pipeline completely. It was only when a Swedish grandfather, with an aristocratic name and a background to match, flew a heavily-laden relief DC-7 over the tree-tops in broad daylight that the blockade was broken.

The countries most directly involved—Britain and France—came under the greatest pressure and, partly as a product of that pressure, became more involved. The wave of public feeling was largely, but not exclusively, pro-Biafran. In Britain, despite the long summer recess, three major debates on the Nigerian crisis took place in the House of Commons. Though never near defeat the government nevertheless had its back pressed firmly and uncomfortably against the wall. While unwavering on the central issue of its arms supplies to the Federal side, the British government, through the foreign secretary, Michael Stewart, did feel

² See Chapter IX.

constrained to promise that it would 'more than reconsider' its policy if the Nigerians practised genocide against the Ibos. Strenuous efforts were made by the Wilson government to soften the effects by frenetic activity on the non-political margins. A quarter of a million pounds was given to the relief effort; a 'relief supremo' (Lord Hunt of Everest fame) was appointed; rather in the manner in which Victorian prime ministers used to despatch gunboats, Lord Shepherd, minister of state in the Foreign Office, was sent out post-haste on two separate occasions. ('This particular Lord cannot be our Shepherd,' commented Ojukwu); and, as the August offensive began to roll into the Ibo heartland, the British government successfully persuaded Lagos to accept the presence of an international observer team to examine the conduct of the Federal army in the battle zones and report on the Biafran allegation of genocide.

* * *

But while Britain refused to withdraw its support from the Federal government, France moved in on the Biafran side. At the end of a cabinet meeting on 31st July, the French minister of state for information, Joel le Theule, announced in Paris that the bloodshed and suffering endured by the Biafrans for over a year had shown 'their will to assert themselves as a people'. Faithful to its principles, he went on, 'the French government believes, as a result, the present conflict should be settled on the basis of the right of the people to self-determination and should involve the setting in motion of the appropriate international procedures.' Asked whether the announcement—a fairly good example, incidentally, of de Gaulle's virtuosity with a verbal smoke-screen—meant France recognised Biafra, le Theule replied, 'That is an interpretation which is not false.' In response to another question, he said that France wished 'to be able to recognise Biafra', although the 'appropriate procedures' leading to formal recognition would not necessarily follow immediately. As with Presidents Houphouët-Boigny of the Ivory Coast and Bongo of Gabon, it looked as if the French were engaged on a course of 'creeping' recognition, an impression greatly strengthened by a statement from de Gaulle himself on 9th September. 'France', he said, 'has aided and aids Biafra within possible limits.' Steps had not been taken 'to accomplish the final decisive act—the recognition of the Biafran Republic—because [France] considers that the matter is above all the affairs of Africans.' Recognition, however, was 'not excluded in the future'. For France it was the halfway

house but from inside Biafra, where I was at the time of the first statement, recognition was thought by many to be home and dry. Morale visibly improved and, later, French weapons, routed via Abidjan and Libreville, began to pour in. In fact, full recognition and open-ended support never materialised³ but this limited move was sufficient to encourage the Biafrans to fight on, to provide the means for them to do so, and to ensure that countless thousands of them needlessly died. For French intervention decisively saved the Biafrans from defeat, decisively prolonged the war, and—equally decisively—fell short of enabling them to win it.

The motives and actions of the French government constitute one of the great enigmas of the Nigerian civil war. Why did France support Biafra? Why did it choose the nadir of Biafra's fortunes as the moment to intervene? And, having intervened, why did it not go the whole hog and recognise? First, one has to be clear about the provenance of policy-making in the French government. The presidents—first de Gaulle and then Pompidou, after June 1969—directed Nigerian policy in a general sense. But day-to-day supervision, execution and, quite often, initiation took place in a suite of offices at number 138, rue de Grenelle in Paris's elegant seventh arrondissement under the watchful eye of a small, plump, bald-headed man in his mid-fifties with the impassivity and parsimonious smile of a successful Chinese war-lord. Jacques Foccart's official title under de Gaulle was *Sécrétaire-Général aux Affaires Africaines et Malgaches auprès de la Présidence*. This splendid pomposity was a convenient umbrella for his real functions: the chief steward of the government's much-criticised *domaine réservé*; the president's right-hand man in the arcane cloak-and-dagger upper reaches of French politics and the trusted confidant of a dozen African presidents, many of whom owed more to him than they did to their electorates. Foccart had spread his interests from his secure franco-phone base into English-speaking African countries before the Nigerian war, but it was this crisis that gave him his biggest opening into the Anglo-Saxons' own *domaine réservé* and he did not hesitate to take it.

There were, of course, other French institutions interested in Nigeria. The French parliament followed events closely, but like the mass of French public opinion, did not present a threat to Foccart's preserve because it had little real power and largely supported Biafra anyway. The Quai d'Orsay (French Foreign Office) which, institutionally, should have been

³ But de Gaulle appeared to offer renewed hope when, during discussions with Houphouët-Boigny in Paris, in February 1969, he described the Biafran cause as, 'just, great and noble—a cause we support unreservedly'.

responsible for policy, disagreed with Foccart and de Gaulle, possessing much more sympathy for the Federal side. But it, too, was almost powerless and, not regarding black Africa as the most vital area of French interest, had traditionally, though perhaps reluctantly, accepted Foccart's supremacy.⁴ In fact, this dual aspect of the French governmental machine admirably suited the two-handed game that de Gaulle and Foccart chose to play in Nigeria. The Quai could—and did, with monotonous regularity—put its hand on its heart and deny arms shipments to Biafra, while de Gaulle, through maintaining relations with Lagos, preserved a fall-back position if the Biafran adventure misfired. But the Quai d'Orsay was worried and did, I think, exert a cautionary influence on French policy without ever reaching the stage of decisively controlling it. Apart from a short, unexpected but temporary tumble from power during Alain Poher's interim presidency after the defeat of de Gaulle in May 1969, Foccart remained the ideas man and driving force behind France's Nigerian policy. Even the advent of Pompidou, which cost Foccart his easy access to the Elysée palace and the intimate position of trust he had held under de Gaulle, did not materially affect either the policy or the power of its chief architect. Indeed, Pompidou seemed to be of the same mind as his predecessor, though perhaps a little bored by the whole confused and remote affair, and even made an ill-timed announcement after the war was over to the effect that Biafra would again press 'its right to self-determination'.

The motivation behind the de Gaulle-Foccart Biafran policy is not hard to find. Three major considerations—all political—were decisive. First, a united, successful Nigeria presented a strong pole of attraction to the weak, fragmented francophone states around it and threatened to upset the balance of power in West Africa to the detriment of French influence. General de Gaulle had no love for federations and favoured a patchwork of small states grouped together in a loose confederal relationship as embodied in the *Organisation de la Communauté Africaine et Malgache* (O.C.A.M.) which provided a useful economic link between fourteen of Africa's francophone countries. The General had agreed to the break-up of France's own Western and Equatorial African Federations at the time of independence and he and Foccart had worked for the same end—with less success—to divide the Congo into several parts during the Katanga crisis in the early sixties. Secondly, the concept of Biafra, as seen in Paris,

⁴ It is significant that many key ambassadorial posts in black Africa were held by non-career diplomats, many of them Foccart's colleagues and leading Gaullists.

appealed to all the General's political and ideological instincts. Biafra was a 'nationalism' struggling for self-determination—it was significant that he equated it with Quebec—against an abhorrent 'supranationalism' represented by the Nigerian Federation. A fighter himself, he admired the Biafrans' guts—'brave petit peuple!' he once exclaimed, 'Foccart, il faudrait faire quelque chose pour eux.' And by doing something for Biafra, France itself would be fulfilling its historic and Gaullist-inspired destiny of encouraging true nationalism, strengthening the middle way between the world's two power blocs and asserting France's own independence from the Anglo-Saxons and the Russians who, in this case, were all conveniently lined up on the Nigerian side. De Gaulle rarely missed an opportunity to 'have a go' at the British and Americans, and Biafra, with Britain particularly bogged down in the Federal camp, provided an excellent and not too risky opportunity. Lastly, there was the role of the Ivory Coast President, Houphouët-Boigny, de Gaulle's oldest and most respected African friend. Who really persuaded who has become a subject of tantalising controversy. I do not claim to have the 'fly on the wall' solution but feel that while Houphouët was guided by Foccart and his collaborators towards the 'Biafran door',⁵ nobody but he could open it (by according recognition) even though de Gaulle was waiting, perhaps a little impatiently, perhaps a little hesitantly, on the other side. Certainly, the African recognitions enabled France to come out in the open, increase indirect aid to Biafra and channel it through the Ivory Coast and Gabon. Houphouët's passionate partisanship of the Biafran cause was decisive not so much in designing French policy as in helping to slot the prefabricated pieces together and then gently ease it down the slipway. Houphouët, like de Gaulle, had his own reasons for supporting Biafra⁶ and by no means slavishly followed France's lead in foreign affairs as, for example, his strong and outspoken criticism of the French government's pro-Arab stand in the Middle East demonstrated.

Curiously, economic factors hardly entered the assessment. French investment was almost equally balanced, about £17 million worth on each side of the Niger. And when the first 'semi-recognition' statement came, most of the French oil concessions were already under Federal control. SAFRAP, the French state-owned oil company which had concessions on both sides, played no significant part in the story. Like Shell/BP, it had been under Biafran pressure in the early stages of the war

⁵ One of Foccart's senior collaborators, Jean Mauriceau-Beaupré, was an adviser in the President's Office in Abidjan.

⁶ See Chapter VII.

to pay royalties to Enugu, but had managed to employ delaying tactics until its main producing fields were overrun by Federal forces. The Nigerians, however, immediately accused the French government of secretly buying up Biafra's mineral wealth. A fascinating document, dated July 1967, showing the sale of Biafra's oil and other minerals to the Rothschild Bank in Paris for £6 million, was produced as evidence. At the time it was generally thought that the accusation, but not the evidence, was well founded. In fact, the reverse is the case. The Biafrans paid for the greater part of their French military hardware and there was no 'oil deal'. But the document is genuine even though it looks a little suspect, containing as it does two spelling mistakes, one of them being the word 'Rotchild' (the French phonetic pronunciation). Francis Nwokedi, now one of Ojukwu's top advisers, came to Paris with the document in the summer of 1967 and concluded the sale with a French businessman called J. P. Mallet, whose name appears on it as one of the concessionaires. Mallet had impressed the Biafrans no end by flying out to Biafra in a *Mystère* executive jet and giving several officials a lift back to Paris. There was a last-minute hitch when Mallet insisted on having the papers sealed and no Biafran seal was available; a seal was eventually procured locally and the agreement signed. Rothschilds denied any knowledge of the affair and were not, apparently, involved. But Mallet never paid the Biafrans a penny and disappeared, some think to the Federal side where he may have sold the document to the Nigerians. Biafra's oilfields gradually fell into Federal hands and that was the end of the matter.

For de Gaulle, French support of Biafra had another smaller, but useful, merit. It pleased public opinion and many of the more vociferous lobbies. But this was not a central consideration, for de Gaulle invariably showed an Olympian disdain towards the feelings of the mass of Frenchmen on foreign affairs, unless it was something that affected home politics, such as Algeria. His Israeli arms embargo, for example, was intensely unpopular with the general public but this fact, well known to the General, made not the slightest impression on the direction of his policy. Humanitarianism also came into the picture and the French Red Cross, which acted independently of the I.C.R.C., played an important part in sustaining the relief lifeline from Libreville to Uli. But humanitarian concern was not the spring of French involvement.

There is a short answer to the question, 'Why did the French support Biafra so late in the day?' They didn't. Even before secession Foccart's organisation was helping the Biafrans. But it was indirect, limited and

painstakingly clandestine. The normal pattern after the war had broken out was a request to Foccart for arms, mercenaries, or aircraft by a visiting Biafran emissary. Foccart would put the Biafran in touch with one of his many contacts in the twilight world of the arms trade—leading dealers like Paul Favier and Pierre Lorez were often involved—and leave them to do business. Roger Faulques, the veteran mercenary leader who had worked for Foccart in Katanga, was hired by Ojukwu in this way.⁷ But whatever the service or commodity, the Biafrans paid for it—often through the nose—in foreign exchange, usually U.S. dollars or French francs. The full story of these tortuous transactions may never be pieced together, but what is known has the ring of an Eric Ambler or Len Deighton thriller and showed how much the Biafrans were at the mercy of unscrupulous dealers. A consignment of artillery bought in Switzerland turned out to be unusable because of rust; over £100,000 was paid to a middleman for an American executive jet aircraft for Ojukwu which was never delivered; two Fouga Magistère fighters were purchased but only the bodies were sent to São Tomé for onward delivery to Biafra—the wings never arrived; and a businessman of indeterminate Central European origin who had been friendly with Ojukwu before the war was authorised (by Ojukwu) to draw £40,000 from the Biafrans' bank in London and another £35,000 from their Paris account in order to buy arms; he drew the money in cash and disappeared off the face of the earth.

The French are highly skilled practitioners of the arms game. An expert in the subject has awarded them this accolade. 'Among Western nations, France best understands the influence arms sales can command. There is a minimum amount of ideology (as opposed to politics) attached to any French arms sale; it is done primarily to enhance the country's prestige and influence.'⁸ At the outbreak of war, the French government, unlike the United States, did not take a formal stand on arms sales. It was only a year later (June 1968) that the foreign minister, Michel Debré, announced an arms embargo. In the meantime, several Panhard armoured cars, already in the pipeline to Nigeria when the war began, had been delivered, and supplies negotiated by private dealers in France had continued either with the explicit permission or the 'blind eye' connivance of the government. Most of these went to Biafra but the occasional

⁷ See Chapter XII (on the mercenaries).

⁸ George Thayer, *The War Business* (Paladin, London, 1970), pp. 238-9.

planeload was also sold to the Nigerians. The French did, however, refuse Federal requests to buy jet fighters and heavy weapons.

The African recognitions changed the emphasis but not the rationale of France's arms policy. From May 1968 until the end of the war, the French government took a direct hand in supplying weapons to Biafra, routing them through the Ivory Coast and Gabon. Until de Gaulle's pro-Biafran statement of September, the supply was an uncertain trickle⁹ but after that it grew to massive proportions, reaching an estimated peak of 200 tons a week in the autumn of 1969. As a simple 'cover' the Ivory Coast and Gabon governments supplied the Biafrans from their own stocks which the French then replenished. On other occasions, weapons destined for French army units based in these two countries were sent to the Biafrans. This helped the French government to maintain the fiction that it was not aiding the Biafrans. Some consignments were paid for, others were gifts. But neither the amount nor the nature of the arms—few heavy weapons were supplied—was adequate to ensure that the Biafrans stood the remotest chance of winning the war.

It almost seemed as if the French did not *want* Biafra to win the war. 'Semi-recognition' and half-hearted assistance hardly reflected total commitment. The truth was that France decided to play the game both ways, partly because of the unexpected solidarity and strength of Nigeria's allies and partly due to innate caution. There were other pressures deterring a complete alienation of the Nigerians. Francophone Africa, France's primary interest in the continent, was deeply riven by the crisis. Niger and Cameroon, two of Nigeria's French-speaking neighbours were as warmly pro-Federal as the Ivory Coast and Gabon were pro-Biafran.¹⁰ The General's Arab friends were, to a man, behind the Federal government. The French were beginning to find themselves out on a highly precarious limb, in the bizarre and not entirely congenial company of Portugal, South Africa, Rhodesia, Communist China and—oddest of all—Israel. Biafra's four African friends provided some comfort but as the war dragged on and the expected recognition landslide did not come, France's isolation increased.¹¹ In the later stages, Federal lobbies at home

⁹ The student revolution in France in May 1968 and the subsequent election presumably deflected much of the French government's attention from Biafra and other foreign problems.

¹⁰ Niger's President, Hamani Diori, is a close friend of Houphouët-Boigny but consistently opposed his Biafran policy. Cameroon, in deference to the Federal government's susceptibilities, refused to allow Douala to be used as a base for relief operations into Biafra.

¹¹ De Gaulle's 9th September statement suggested that French recognition of Biafra was possible 'if Africa willed it', implying that more African recognitions would enable France itself to take the plunge.

began to make themselves felt, greatly helped by a marked improvement in the quality of the staff in the Nigerian embassy in Paris. French military intervention in Chad on the side of the government against the Northern rebellion in May 1969 showed signs of being a long-drawn-out, messy affair and pointed up the dangers of open-ended military commitments in Africa. So, having radiated all sorts of positive vibrations indicating an imminent recognition of Biafra, the French began to pull back and hedge their bets.

They were greatly helped in this back-tracking operation by the Nigerians who, throughout this episode, had shown remarkable sang-froid and refused to be rushed into a hasty or emotional reaction. They took none of the obvious reprisals: breaking off diplomatic relations, confiscating French property, harassing French nationals. The main reason for this was that the Nigerian External Affairs Ministry feared that such a reaction would push France over the brink to full recognition of Biafra. The Nigerians also had a healthy—and possibly exaggerated—respect for the French government's capacity for ruthlessness in pursuing its African policies. The memory of French paratroopers fluttering down over Libreville and swiftly crushing an attempted coup against President Bongo's predecessor in 1964 was never far from their minds. The Chad intervention—this time by the even tougher Foreign Legion—merely confirmed these fears. If France recognised, they argued, there was no knowing what an irascible de Gaulle might do; massive shipments of heavy armaments, jet planes, Legionnaires and mercenaries, money and diplomatic support—nothing could be ruled out, everything would be possible. And Nigeria's allies—Britain and Russia—could not be counted on to match such an escalation. French recognition would also, it was felt, finally break the diplomatic log-jam which the four African recognitions of Biafra had so far failed to do. Another factor was Nigeria's exports to the E.E.C. countries which are considerable, the latter together representing a larger market than Britain; France takes almost half of Nigeria's groundnut crop. Therefore, the Federal government limited the expression of its pent-up rage to formal notes of protest to the Quai d'Orsay, the occasional demonstration in Lagos and a lot of wishful thinking. But it worked. The Quai d'Orsay, with some relief since it was fundamentally pro-Federal in its politics and sentiment, played the game. This stylish but essentially hypocritical arrangement had the added advantage of leaving a door open for the French if and when they decided to make their peace.

France had tried to exploit a vacuum in the war and, through a lack of

moral courage and a deep concern not to go down with the losing side, fallen into a similar trap that had ensnared the British on the other side. Britain had no cause to bang the drum but at least it made less attempt to hide its true intentions. At some undetermined stage it seemed as if the French government decided that the war was unwinnable and that by providing enough arms to keep Biafra going and yet simultaneously maintaining diplomatic relations with Lagos, it would retain a valuable degree of flexibility and protect its existing interests on both sides while standing to profit enormously if Biafra, through Nigeria's default, should eventually emerge victorious. It was a coldly calculated, cynical policy but it succeeded even though it missed the jackpot. For, today, France is on good terms with Federal Nigeria, its business interests are flourishing,¹² and nobody with the smallest modicum of diplomatic manners mentions the nightly caravan of old planes laden with weapons of destruction which used to drone over the forests of Eastern Nigeria. The effect of France's Biafra policy was like that of drugs on cancer: it kept the recipient alive but ensured—barring a miracle—a lingering death. The difference was that the Biafran invalid perished in a long dark tunnel of terrible pain. Nobody today, in the interests of Franco-Nigerian relations, 'traditionally warm and close', mentions that either.

* * *

Biafra also had 'friends' in southern Africa. But Portuguese, South African and Rhodesian support refreshingly lacked the hypocrisy and ambivalence of the French and stemmed from pretty obvious motives. By helping to sustain a civil war in Africa's most populous and potentially strongest country, these three white-supremacist governments undermined African unity, weakened the African liberation movements' drive against themselves (Nigeria had been one of the largest contributors to the O.A.U.'s 'freedom fighter' funds) and nourished their own propaganda message depicting black Africa's inherent and incurable instability. That these white states should find themselves tucked up in the Biafran 'bed' with two of their arch enemies—Tanzania and Zambia—provided another of the war's international alignment ironies but did not worry them unduly.

Portugal's assistance was the most valuable to the Biafrans mainly because the airports at Lisbon, Bissau (Portuguese Guinea), and São Tomé,

¹² The French oil company, SAFRAP, had its concessions and its operations 'frozen' by the Federal government after the war, but the rest of France's considerable commercial interests in Nigeria were unaffected. (Eventually SAFRAP was allowed to resume production after the Nigerians had bought a third share in its local operations.)

constituted an excellent staging link. Biafra also had its chief arms-buying mission based in Lisbon. However, the Portuguese did not supply armaments, heavily charged the Biafrans for their airport services and generally maintained a low profile. This is their traditional way—the help they had given to Tshombe in Katanga and later, the rebellious Congo mercenaries, had been similarly cautious—for while believing firmly in fanning the flames they saw no merit in getting too close to the fire, particularly since they were under constant attack from the outside world for the conduct of their own African wars.

Rhodesian and South African aid was also limited, principally because of distance and the fear of exposure. Ojukwu initially refused an offer of South African help but as the military situation deteriorated he accepted it on the basis that Biafra could justifiably turn to 'the devil himself' if doing so contributed to survival. Rhodesia, through the medium of semi-clandestine airlines run by its own nationals and already involved in the arms uplift, sent small but regular supplies of weapons throughout the war. Ironically, the Rhodesian government provided the rockets for the B-26 bomber whose early raids on Federal towns were indirectly responsible for bringing Mr. Ian Smith's arch enemy, the Soviet Union, into the war on Nigeria's side.

The Arab-Israeli conflict, like the East-West and the Sino-Soviet confrontations, were also reflected in the war. The Arabs had traditionally strong religious and cultural links with Northern Nigeria. A huge pilgrimage to Mecca takes place every year and the Sardauna of Sokoto had always maintained that the North did not recognise Israel even though there was an Israeli embassy in the Federal capital. Moreover, the radical 'African' Arabs like Algeria and Egypt had firmly backed Lagos on the grounds of African unity from the beginning of the crisis. Arab support was invaluable to the Nigerians, both materially and diplomatically. (Ojukwu once referred to the O.A.U. as the 'Organisation of Arab Unity!') Egypt supplied pilots and technicians for the air force and Sudan and Libya, traditional users of British weaponry, sold Nigeria some of the equipment Britain refused to provide. The only Arab waverer was Tunisia, its president being strongly influenced by the French, but it never crossed the line.

In Israel, public opinion, greatly influenced by the parallel between the Ibo's plight and the Jews' own tragic history, was solidly behind Biafra. Strong pressure was exerted in the Knesset (Parliament) to compel the government to break diplomatic relations with Nigeria. But even though

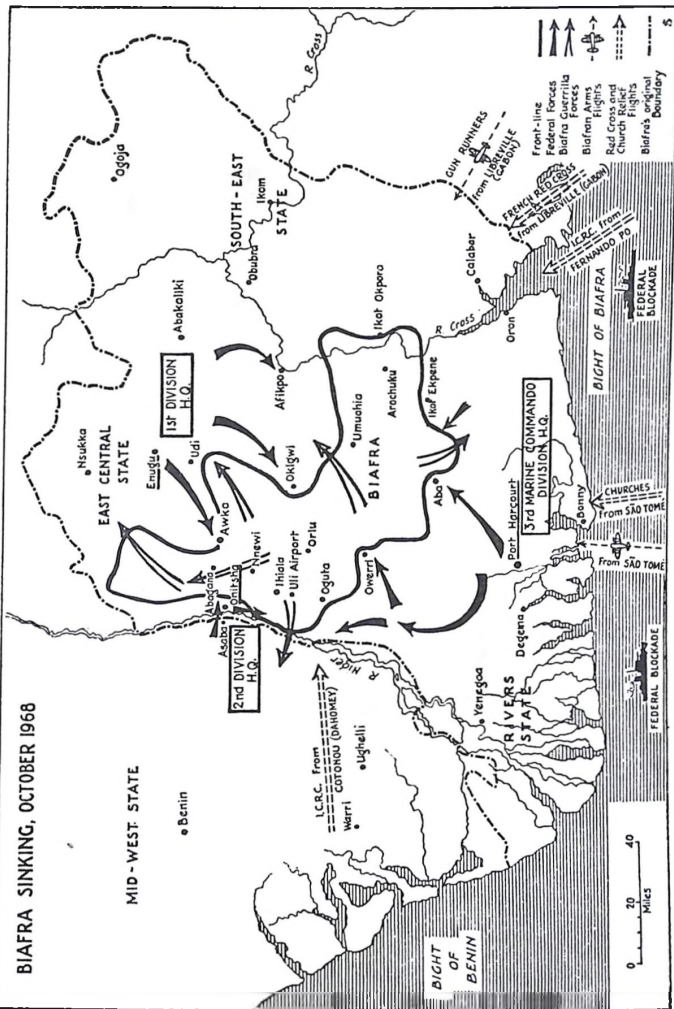
the Nigerians' links with the Egyptians and the Russians grew more intimate as the war went on and the Federal government voted consistently against Israel in the United Nations, the Israeli government stood firm. The Biafrans had selected Israel as a target for their diplomatic offensive as far back as August 1966—two months before the worst massacres and almost a year before the birth of Biafra—when Francis Nwokedi, the same emissary who had signed the abortive oil deal with the French businessman, went to Tel Aviv to shop for sympathy and arms. The Israelis gave him the first but withheld the second. Later, however, they did supply small quantities in various heavily camouflaged ways, much of it Soviet equipment captured in the Six Day War and designed, presumably, to have a 'psywar' effect on the Nigerians and their Russian and Egyptian backers.

* * *

Besieged, bludgeoned, starving—Biafra simply had to crack. Or so it seemed in September 1968. In Lagos and Umuahia the military pundits were back in the breach having only just recovered from their rout at the beginning of the war. Every possibility, every variation of each possibility was minutely examined: Biafra would collapse/surrender/take to the bush; Nigeria would commit genocide/be merciful/fall apart. The overthrow of Ojukwu by the Biafran 'doves' was mooted; a 'hawkish' coup by the Federal field commanders (notably by Adekunle, at the height of his popularity) was not ruled out. There was much erudite chit-chat on the Lagos diplomatic cocktail party circuit about the 'quick kill', 'hearts and minds' 'Vietcong tactics', and 'prolonged and bitter guerrilla warfare'.

For anyone who spent time on both sides of the line during that period—as I did—there was a grave danger of becoming schizoid, if not schizophrenic. The atmosphere in Biafra was electrifying. 'If you gave us the choice of 1,000 rifles or milk for 50,000 starving children', a Biafran official told me in Aba, 'we'd take the guns.' A callous, inhuman, brutal statement it would appear, but the preference was widely held and seen to make sense. When I asked a humane and apolitical Scottish doctor if he was surprised or shocked to hear that the aircraft I had flown in on was stuffed with arms but did not have a single box of drugs or medicine on board, he replied without hesitation, 'Not at all, if I were in their position I'd do precisely the same.' The Biafrans—mainly, but not exclusively, Ibos by now—believed with varying degrees of conviction

BIAFRA SINKING, OCTOBER 1968



EAST CENTRAL STATE
 Nisukka
 Enugu
 Udi
 Abakaliki

MID - WEST STATE
 Benin

1st DIVISION H.Q.

2nd DIVISION H.Q.

3rd MARINE COMMANDO DIVISION H.Q.

SOUTH - EAST STATE
 Ikom
 Ogoja

RIVERS STATE
 Port Harcourt
 Decena
 Yenegoa

BIGHT OF BENIN

FEDERAL BLOCKADE

BIGHT OF BIAFRA

FEDERAL BLOCKADE

BIAFRA'S ORIGINAL BOUNDARY

LCRC From COTONOU (DAHOMEY) Warri

Front-line

Federal Forces

Biafra Forces

Biafran Arms Flights

Red Cross and Church Relief Flights

Biafra's original Boundary

GUN RUNNERS from (LORRAINE) COLABAR

FRENCH REG from LIBREVILLE (GABON)

LCRC from FERNANDO PO

CHURCHES from SAO TOME

From SAO TOME

0 20 40 Miles

5

that they were fighting for their lives. From all sides, refugees, peasants, drivers, servants, lawyers, businessmen, nurses, soldiers and intellectuals, presented you with the same grim and hopeless equation. The lowest common denominator—personal fear, personal survival—was constantly present in the minds of the uneducated and semi-literate mass of the people and was usually expressed like this: 'We have no alternative; if we surrender or are defeated, the Nigerians will wipe us out, so we might as well die fighting.' The elite put it similarly but with a subtle shift of emphasis, revealing a vested interest but also, I think, a vision. 'We are fighting a war of survival', they would say, 'for ourselves and for the generations to come.'

Probing beneath this alien and fearsome aspect of the Biafran general will was like trying to dig a hole in dry sand: every time you made a little progress the hole would fill up presenting you with the original bland surface. The isolation, the suffering, the propaganda, the countless personal horror stories—real and imagined—the strong colours of war that admit no pastel shades or half-tones made 'survival' the central pivot of life and death. The Biafrans sang about it in wonderful melodious voices ('The Lord is on our side, we shall survive'), they prayed for it, taught the children about it, named things after it (I came across several 'Survival Bars') and talked about it morning, noon and night. For some, I believe, a death wish, like the vultures on the hospital rooftops, had already taken up patient residence. But others, especially the educated people, when hard-pressed, admitted that 'economic' genocide was also at the back of their minds. They were convinced that there was no future for them in Federal Nigeria where once they had played such an able, ubiquitous and often arrogant role. Even if it were safe to go back—and some of them conceded that the Nigerians would not kill them all—they would not be allowed to earn a decent living. To grasp the mood in Biafra one had to stick severely to the human issues and try to ignore much of the political wrangling and incessant propaganda. The bitterness, disillusion and almost pathological hatred and mistrust of the Nigerians generated by the 1966 massacres and refuelled by fourteen months of warfare and traumatic isolation were rather terrifying. (I found myself, like the nervous little captain, beginning to think of the Nigerians as a race of pariahs, blood-thirsty 'vandals' to a man.)

In such an atmosphere, political formulae and constitutional semantics, no matter how ingenious and conciliatory, were brushed contemptuously aside if they added up to anything less than an independent sovereign

Biafran republic. The issue of 'security' had, it seemed, become inextricably entangled with 'sovereignty' by this time. Whether the two could have been separated again and the Ibos persuaded to settle for proper safeguards within a federal Nigeria, abandoning their costly and still incomplete independence, is impossible to say. It would have demanded an enormous effort of re-indoctrination on the part of the Biafran leadership and a major and demonstrably genuine act of conciliation on the part of the Federal government. Neither was forthcoming, then or later, so the 'fight or die' philosophy continued to flourish in Biafra's unhealthy hot-house atmosphere. Indeed such is the dreadful dynamic of wars, especially civil wars, that as the situation became more desperate so the determination to struggle on hardened.

There was no denying that the people were behind Ojukwu; ever since the July coup and the subsequent massacres he had been a popular hero and was to remain one even in the dark days of the defeat and reconstruction. His appeal lay largely in the way his personality matched the messianic feeling of the times. He was seen as a big man in all senses, a man who had lost his own vast fortune and given up a privileged and secure way of life to lead Biafra, a man who dealt with the outside world as an equal yet maintained contact with the common people. Ordinary folk had an implicit and touching faith in his capacity to win the war, and quite a personality cult developed which the government did nothing to discourage. Most people in Biafra referred to Ojukwu as 'H.E.' (His Excellency) including some of the resident foreign journalists. It was amusing but a bit nauseating in the midst of the 'people's war'; at a checkpoint on the Ikot-Ekepenne road I saw a sign to cap all signs: STOP! EVERYONE MUST HALT EXCEPT HE AND MRS. HE.

But though Ojukwu was supported by the masses, it should be remembered that he governed by autocratic if not outright dictatorial methods. Two former Biafrans have described his style. In an interview with a magazine after the war, Major-General Philip Effiong, Ojukwu's chief-of-staff, was asked why the senior Biafran army officers who did not approve of secession had not removed Ojukwu by a coup. 'It wasn't easy,' Effiong replied, 'make no mistake about it. The sentiment of the people was very strong in favour of the ideas and ideals propounded by Emeka [Ojukwu]. I hate to say this because it makes me feel like a coward. Ojukwu was a dictator, you know. It wasn't always safe or easy to point out the dangers to Ojukwu. If you didn't know when to stop shooting your mouth, he

could easily throw you in detention.¹³ Another insight comes from Raph Uwechue, who was Biafra's emissary in Paris until he resigned in December 1968. Referring to Ojukwu's wealthy, privileged background and the way he kept all the main levers of power in his own hands, Uwechue had this to say: 'He found himself more often at the "giving" rather than the "receiving" end. Such a combination of circumstances could hardly have failed to leave its mark on his character and bearing . . . constantly enveloped in an atmosphere of superiority, it made him, as a matter of habit, distrustful and disdainful of other people's judgment, impatient with their opinions and finally simply authoritarian.'¹⁴

The quality of popular support for the government helps to explain why, in defiance of all the normal functional laws of the modern state, life inside Biafra kept going. 'From an economist's point of view, the present situation doesn't make sense,' Dr. Pius Okigbo, Biafra's chief economic planner told me one day just before Aba fell. 'But it is the human factors and the context that matter here, and they make nonsense of theoretical economics.' Improvisation was the order of the day. Electrical engineers and chemists were making rockets, hand-grenades and the famous *ogbunigwe*; there had been no schooling for over a year, the buildings having become training camps and the occupants recruits. 'Mammy wagons' (buses made from small lorries) had been transformed into the 'National Emergency Transport Service'. Villagers were manning roadblocks, camouflaging buildings against air-raids and feeding troops in their area. There was a very efficient Biafran Red Cross, a Women's Voluntary Service and the schoolgirls, their hair invariably bound up neatly in those spiky 'Sputnik' plaits so common in West Africa, were knitting, sewing and cooking for the 'boys at the front', many of whom were their former classmates.

The single-track railway which had linked Port Harcourt, through Umuahia and Enugu, to the north, was functioning along the stretch which the Biafrans still controlled. Petrol was rationed but home-made refineries were soon to be put into operation—the low-sulphur oil was 'cooked' and distilled in huge water tanks set up on trestles—which kept essential transport moving until the collapse. Ingenious 'cannibalisation' and mechanical miracles surmounted the dearth of spare parts and the Biafrans made several 'armoured cars' out of lorries and bulldozers. Government offices, increasingly 'decentralised' as part of the new phase

¹³ *Drum* magazine (Nigerian edition), April 1970.

¹⁴ Raph Uwechue, *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War* (revised edition, Africana Publishing Corporation, New York, 1971), pp. 146-7.

of the war, functioned normally, though some of them, like the Ministry of Education, must have had precious little to do. Civil servants had adapted themselves to their reduced circumstances. Those smart grey suits which had seemed a uniform a year ago in Enugu had given way to a variety of loose and colourful Biafra-made shirts; and formerly clean-shaven chins were now covered with bushy 'Ojukwu-style' beards. This small change, I remember, impressed me: the men inside them were the same but they seemed less like stiff marionettes playing the guardians of the brand-new republic of Biafra and more like true patriots struggling in improvised bush offices to maintain the reality as well as the appearance of their country. And what a galaxy of talent in Biafra! So many of Nigeria's top civil servants, diplomats, soldiers, academics and technicians—the envy of under-manned black Africa. In the towns policewomen, crisply turned out, were on point duty, bewigged and robed judges sat and solemnly gave judgment in the courts after prosecuting and defending counsel, similarly attired, had had their say, and once I saw a laughing, gloriously happy, newly married couple, the bride in a white trousseau, the groom in a dark suit, making a dash through the confetti throwers to a waiting car.

Outside the hospitals and refugee camps life really did appear deceptively normal. There were less vehicles and more people on the roads than before but all the main services—water, electricity and even telephones—functioned, if somewhat erratically. There were no beggars, people did not complain and there was an extraordinary feeling of 'togetherness' which the Biafrans were fond of comparing with the spirit of wartime Britain. (A reflection which made Britain's arms policy all the more hard for them to understand and bear.) But there was no doubt that the average person was suffering as a result of the phenomenal rise in prices and the shortages and hardships imposed by the blockade. Beef had risen from three to sixty shillings a pound, but was rarely obtainable; eggs, formerly four shillings a dozen went up to thirty-eight; a chicken which cost perhaps fifteen shillings before the war rose to first £5, then £15, and just before the war ended was fetching £30. Dried fish—one of the main sources of protein for the population, had risen from five shillings a pound to sixty and, most dramatically of all, salt, formerly one penny a cup, was twenty shillings. Rats, snails and mice all fetched a good price from a population desperate for protein. Soap, cosmetics, most items of clothing and, of course, medicines were in short supply. Cigarettes and beer were unobtainable, although several fiery

'Biafra products' (Biafra Gin, Biafra Brandy, etc.) came on to the market and we used to drink palm wine, delicious when fresh, with our meals. Biafran currency had been issued the previous March—Nigerian coins were still legal tender—and some lovely postage stamps almost designed as collector's pieces, one felt, were also in circulation.

The curfew used to descend and rise with the sun in most places and the rumble of the Nigerians' guns and the pathetic columns of refugees constantly reminded one that there was not only a war on but it was uncomfortably close, yet there was a rich quality, an impressive style to Biafran life in those days. The natural vivacity and quick-witted charm of the Ibo people shone through their terrible adversities. There was a strong determination not only to survive but also to survive with a flourish, to show the outsiders and themselves that life could go on, to parade their pride in defying the world. You couldn't dance at night so afternoon 'tea dances' were held in the Aba Town Hall—anyone could join in, including soldiers back from the front, with or without boots (or sometimes with Nigerian boots); there was no newsprint so newspapers appeared on school exercise books with their blue lines and red margins plainly visible through the print; there were no films, no television, no contact with the world except through the radio, so plays—often highly topical—were put on, new bands were formed and the troops entertained by a kind of roving ENSA entertainment group. As I was leaving Biafra the head of the press service asked me to remind a colleague who was already back in London not to forget the August issue of *Playboy* magazine he had promised him. And a charming young man working in the same office rather diffidently made a request: not for the usual baby food, salt, cigarettes, cosmetics (one girl asked me to send her two wigs, one brown the other black, via Hank Wharton's gun-runners in Lisbon!) but a sixpenny Littlewoods' Football Guide for the coming year. On the long tedious flight back to Lisbon, propped up against the bulkhead of an aged 'Connie' I wrote in my diary:

'How can anyone in this mutilated, bleeding butt of a country still follow the British football pools? Perhaps this is what really keeps them going—the illusion of normality. Survival in the narrow Biafran context today means the ability to import arms, especially ammunition, and to contain the slowly advancing Nigerian forces. Biafra is now under full siege and everyone, rich and poor, knows and feels it. The odds against Biafra are lengthening. Virtually everything is in short

supply, everything except human energy, ingenuity and an extraordinary collective and relentless will to struggle on. The war is far from over.'

That my view was substantially correct is no source of comfort now: so many of those bright and beautiful people died for a Biafra that is also dead.

* * *

The summer of 1968 witnessed an intensification of the struggle around the negotiating table. Indeed, the most promising peace initiatives of the war took place at this time, first in Niamey, capital of Nigeria's French-speaking northern neighbour, the Niger Republic, and then in Addis Ababa. The failure of the Kampala talks had not wrecked the conception of a negotiated peace, though hopes were never high at any of the subsequent meetings, but it changed the catalytic agent. Henceforth the O.A.U., particularly the Consultative Committee on Nigeria under the chairmanship of Haile Selassie, assumed full responsibility for bringing the two sides together. Ojukwu and Gowon both personally presented their cases at the Niamey talks, but on different days, before returning home to get on with the war. The atmosphere at Niamey was the most relaxed of all these tense confrontations and the delegations intermingled in a relatively friendly way, most of the people involved knowing each other well from the old days. This did not please Ojukwu, however, who was already beginning to feel the pressures of a 'doveish' compromise movement among some of the leading Biafrans. He sent a stern telegram to his chief representative, Eni Njoku, saying that he had heard on the B.B.C. that Njoku had been seen embracing one of the Nigerian delegates and that this directly contradicted his explicit orders of 'no fraternisation with the Nigerians'. Nothing fundamental was agreed at the Niamey talks—a relief pact broke down at the last moment—but both sides accepted the proposal for a full-scale peace conference in Addis Ababa under the chairmanship of the Ethiopian Emperor.

These talks, under the auspices of the O.A.U., opened on 5th August amid great hopes outside, though markedly less within Nigeria that they would produce a peaceful way out of the deadlock. Ojukwu opened the proceedings in Addis Ababa's imposing Africa Hall, by delivering a marathon two-hour speech going over the whole history of the crisis in immense and tedious detail. It was aimed partly at the Emperor himself by

identifying Biafra's struggle with Ethiopia's own against the Italians—Ojukwu began astutely by quoting from Haile Selassie's dignified appeal to the League of Nations in 1936—and partly at the world in general. It sounded to many of the delegates and O.A.U. officials, who knew Biafra's case inside out from the efficient Biafran lobbying and propaganda machine, more like a publicity stunt than a serious attempt to create an atmosphere in which a peaceful settlement might be reached. This impression was reinforced by the huge size and high-powered nature of the Biafran delegation that accompanied Ojukwu and the undisguised determination of the Biafrans to make the most of their first chance to present their case in Africa's most important and respected forum. The message was clearly to place Biafra on level pegging with Nigeria, as an independent state, equally sovereign but brutally and unjustly oppressed. The Emperor was furious with this display, especially since he had received an undertaking from Ojukwu, through the O.A.U. Secretary-General, that there would be no propaganda and that a conciliatory note would be struck. The meeting (Chief Anthony Enahoro led the Nigerian delegation), off to a shaky start, went from bad to worse. Nothing, it soon transpired, had materially altered in each side's basic position—the Nigerians were planning another 'final push' in Lagos and the Biafrans were waiting for the military and diplomatic fruits of the French 'semi-recognition' to ripen—and the talks, which dragged on until the end of August, finally petered out.

Even before the Addis Ababa talks had collapsed interest was moving westwards to Algiers where the annual O.A.U. summit meeting, the second since the war started, was due to take place in mid-September. The meeting and its timing were important to each side: Biafra was hoping, with the help of its new African and European friends, to pick up further support and send a delegation to the conference itself, while Nigeria expected to have some new victories in the field to show that the Biafran cause was irretrievably lost. At a meeting of the Federal Supreme Council in Lagos in the middle of August, it was decided by Gowon and his field commanders that a last massive offensive ('Operation Tall Man') should be launched to finish off Biafra as quickly and as humanely as possible. But the actual date of the attack was left to his own judgment. The first news that the offensive was under way came on a British television interview with Gowon himself which was shown in the United Kingdom on the eve of a parliamentary debate on the Nigerian crisis. It caught most people, especially the British government and its High

Commission in Lagos, on the hop. 'The trouble with Jack Gowon', a diplomat told me in Lagos, 'is that he can't help but blurt out the truth in front of a camera.' It seemed to have caught two of the Federal army's three divisions on the wrong foot, too, for while Adekunle's Third Marine Commando began to make spectacular progress—he had, in fact, been quietly on the move for some time before the offensive 'officially' began—the other two, based on Enugu and Onitsha, appeared rooted to the ground. The tactical aim was what the Nigerian field commanders were fond of calling the 'other O.A.U.'—the capture of Owerri, Aba and Umuahia before the Algiers summit meeting on 13th September. In fact, only Aba fell before the deadline though Owerri was also in Federal hands by the time the conference was over.

In Algiers, Biafra's four African allies succeeded in forcing a full-scale debate on the crisis but not in persuading the conference to allow the Biafran delegation, waiting patiently in Tunis, to attend. The result backfired because under the dour and doctrinaire chairmanship of Houari Boumedienne, the Algerian President, the O.A.U. passed its toughest and most pro-Federal resolution of all calling on the Biafrans to give up secession and return to a united Nigeria. (President Kaunda of Zambia, one of Biafra's supporters, walked out when Boumedienne referred to Ojukwu's backers as 'imperialists'.)

The conference was even more notable, perhaps, for provoking the first and only major division in the ranks of the Biafran leadership. A week before the summit, on 7th September, in the Hotel Napoléon, along Avenue de Friedland, a small and discreet hotel in the heart of Paris, a crucial meeting took place. Present were top French officials from Jacques Foccart's office, 'Zik', Michael Okpara, former premier of the Eastern Region and Ojukwu's special political adviser, two top emissaries—Dr. Kenneth Dike, vice-chancellor of Nsukka University, and Francis Nwokedi—and a couple of Biafran officials. It was a long and thorough meeting, the all-absorbing subject being the extent of French military and financial assistance to Biafra in the future. By the time it was over, one thing was crystal clear: French support would be maintained at its current substantial level, which would enable Biafra to survive, given a little luck, but it could not be increased until more states, especially African nations, had recognised Biafra. The Biafran leaders held their own meeting after the French officials had left and decided with one dissenting voice (that of Nwokedi) that the time had come to try and genuinely come to terms with the Nigerians. A cable was drafted and

sent off to Ojukwu suggesting that in the light of the limitations of French assistance, the precarious military situation—Aba had just fallen and Owerri was under siege—and the appalling suffering of the Biafran civil population a new initiative was imperative. The course of action they proposed was cautious and tentative. A secret approach, before the Algiers summit began, should be made to Haile Selassie with the hypothesis that if the Biafran government were prepared to give way on sovereignty and accept the principle of 'One Nigeria' what could the Nigerians offer in return in terms of a special arrangement for Biafra. The Emperor, who was known to have a personal interest in bringing the war to an end, should, they suggested, be taken completely into their confidence and the whole matter should be treated with the maximum secrecy. There was also a suggestion that Britain, the U.S.A. and Canada should guarantee any eventual settlement. This was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a revolutionary or treacherous step to take and it committed Biafra to nothing: the proposals amounted to an Aburi-style confederal solution. But Ojukwu's reaction was that of a king who suddenly feels his crown slipping. A furious telegram came back (I have seen it) accusing the group of treason, stressing with an almost hysterical emphasis that Biafra's sovereignty was not negotiable under *any* circumstances, and peremptorily ordering them all back to Biafra forthwith. Meekly, rather like naughty schoolboys who had been caught talking after lights out, they obeyed—except for 'Zik' who decided that this was the turning point. He went to London and laid low for several months, eventually re-emerging on the Federal side. Another leading Biafran, Raph Uwechue, the Paris envoy, resigned on the same grounds in the following December. This 'hawks' and 'doves' showdown (the former were undoubtedly greatly strengthened by the military impact of the recent inflow of French arms) had repercussions in Britain, too. The government was informed that a group of Biafrans with moderate views was ready to talk and Lord Shepherd was once again despatched to Lagos. His arrival was so unexpected that no Nigerian officials were at the airport to meet him. His task was to act as a go-between, if necessary, and to exercise a conciliatory and reassuring influence on the Federal government. But his mission foundered before it had got under way. The Biafran 'doves' had either dispersed or recanted and the day after Lord Shepherd's arrival, Ojukwu made a defiant speech announcing Biafra's determination to fight to the bitter end. Addressing the Consultative Assembly during the same month he claimed that 'our real victory lies in our ability to prevent the extermination of our people

by a heartless enemy. In so far as these aims are concerned, we have not failed.'¹⁵ It was a tortured logic for the 10,000 Biafrans who were dying daily.

Faithful to its perverse nature, the war did not follow any of the wide choice of paths predicted for it during that summer and autumn. Nigeria did not fall apart under the pressure of imminent victory any more than it had done under the threat of imminent defeat. Biafra survived external assaults and internal dissensions and pulled through as a result of its own Herculean efforts and the help of a friend of dubious loyalty and shaky morals. Standard economic, political and military arithmetic no longer seemed to apply in charting the course of the civil war. And as for the future: 'We will fight on', the quivering little Biafran captain with the brightly polished boots and the unpronounceable name had said to me in Biafra, 'The future is a blank wall for us, but if you want something philosophical you could do worse than that mammy wagon slogan over there.' In a ditch, on its side, lay a blackened and charred bus. The lettering on the head-board in blue and gold was just legible: 'No Condition is Permanent' it proclaimed to the empty road.

¹⁵ Biafra: *Ojukwu's Selected Speeches*, Vol. I, p. 353.

CHAPTER
NINE

The Humanitarians

Anatomy of Relief

August Lindt

Federal and Biafran 'hawks'
and 'doves'

I.C.R.C.

Churches

Vatican and the Pope

WALKING BESIDE THE SPARKLING BLUE WATER OF LAKE LEMAN ON A warm summer's day in July 1969 (I had been sent to Geneva to report on the International Committee of the Red Cross) a dedicated, professional and immensely effective humanitarian outlined his philosophy to me.

'If I see a small, helpless child fall into the lake,' he said, 'I naturally dive in and rescue it even though there is a notice on that spot saying "Bathing Strictly Prohibited".'

'What if there is a man with a gun standing by to enforce the prohibition?' I asked.

'I show him the Red Cross flag.'

'And if he takes no notice?'

'I take a calculated risk and try to get round his gun, or hope it is not loaded, or that, if it is, he won't shoot.'

'And if he makes it clear that he will shoot?'

'Then, and only then, is the time to think again.'

Few humane people would disagree with these sentiments yet, of all the complex issues in the Nigerian civil war, the interaction of the humanitarians and the belligerents unleashed more controversy and emotional energy than any other. What began as an apparently cut-and-dried humanitarian problem finished in an inextricable tangle of politics, personal rivalries and passionate commitment. The 'politics of relief' is too narrow in term to cover the broad spectrum of events for, like an engine backfiring, the spark lit in Nigeria travelled back the way it had come, causing an explosion which laid bare the anatomy and psychology of the humanitarian organisations and is still echoing today.

From the humanitarian viewpoint the Nigerian war was not unique.

Under the Geneva Conventions, to which the Federal government subscribed, it was an internal conflict into which outside agencies could only be invited by the government concerned. There were many similarities with the Spanish civil war: two front-lines, two distinct territories, a 'legal' and a 'rebel' government and an acceptance by both sides of the unique supra-national role of the International Committee of the Red Cross (I.C.R.C.). The scope of the crisis and intransigency of the combatants invited comparison with the Algerian and Vietnamese wars, but differed from both in that the I.C.R.C. was allowed to work on each side of the fighting. The Federal government, like Republican Spain, invited the I.C.R.C. to perform its normal functions of relief and medical assistance, P.O.W. care and exchange and tracing of missing persons. At the same time, the Churches, already well-established in Nigeria and Biafra, reacted to a steadily worsening situation and also became progressively more deeply involved.

Throughout the war there was a fundamental dichotomy in the approach of the humanitarian agencies and the belligerents to the relief problem which throws an illuminating and infallible shaft of light down every twist and turn of the dark labyrinth of their relationship. The Nigerian and Biafran leaderships had one central overriding aim: to win the war by fair means or foul; all other considerations, including the starving thousands, were secondary. Biafra's primary object was sovereignty while Nigeria's was to deny that sovereignty. That Ojukwu and Gowon were determined to achieve this whatever happened, whatever the cost in money, material or human lives, was amply proved by their matching determination to carry the war to its logical, military conclusion. And apart from the struggle on the battlefield, the major tactic employed by each side to further its cause involved the outside world, irrespective of whether it was governments, organisations or individuals. Nigeria wanted to shut the world out and localise the conflict; Biafra was determined to let the whole world in and internationalise it. Given this inherent tension, it was inevitable that the relief agencies should be sucked into the middle of the current and buffeted mercilessly by the superior forces around them. But they could not stay on the bank, their humanitarianism, like that of my friend in Geneva, dictated that they should dive in and save the drowning child. Their order of priorities was thus the reverse of the belligerents', their overriding aim being to save lives ignoring, where possible, political considerations of boundaries, front-lines, nationalities, tribes, flags and anthems.

On this axis all the major humanitarian controversies of the war turned. Was starvation a legitimate weapon of war? The hardliners in Nigeria and Biafra thought that it was, the former regarding it as a valid means of reducing the enemy's capacity to resist, a method as old as war itself, and the latter seeing it as a way of internationalising the conflict through appealing to the humanitarian instincts of the outside world. But those outsiders who had drafted the Geneva Conventions to protect civilians in wars emphatically rejected the concept of starvation as a weapon. The problem of how relief materials should reach the needy ran into similarly opposed interpretations, dividing the humanitarians themselves. The Geneva Conventions allow their signatories to supervise the transport of such assistance to its destination but when Biafra refused to accept aid this way, a number of relief agencies endorsed the decision and accepted it as a valid reason for adopting other methods. Should relief organisations raise and spend money which directly assists the recipient's war effort? The humanitarians felt that this was perhaps deplorable but inevitable since the essential task was to get food to the hungry, medicine to the sick and save lives. The belligerents—both, in fact, benefited—regarded it as a sinister plot to support the enemy and prolong the war to their own detriment.

Starvation, malnutrition and infant mortality have always had a high incidence throughout Nigeria—the last rising to a phenomenal fifty per cent in some places. But even before the war began the situation was deteriorating in the Ibo areas of the East. By far the most densely populated part of the country—only Rwanda, Burundi and the Nile valley match it in Africa—it relied traditionally and heavily on imported food, especially high-protein foods. These imports were paid for by the export of palm oil and kernels and by the remittances sent home from Ibos working outside the East. Even then the level of feeding and protein intake was dangerously low. The troubles of 1966, which created a million and a half refugees in the East, cut off the valuable remittances and destroyed the precarious balance. The outbreak of fighting eliminated further sources of protein, notably the cattle-raising districts of north-east Biafra, much of the fish from the riverine areas and the vital imports of Norwegian stock-fish. By the end of 1967, the situation had reached crisis proportions and the Churches in Biafra made their first public appeal for help. The basic needs were, in order of priority, protein-rich foods, medicines and, later, bulk foods. The overall problem was starvation but it was a twin-barbed killer—even its names, *marasmus* and *kwashiorkor*,

have a deadly ring. Marasmus produces the living skeleton, featured so often in atrocity and fund-raising pictures. Caused by not having enough to eat, the body simply wastes away producing a terrifying appearance but, in fact, allowing its victims a much better expectation of life than kwashiorkor. This is extreme protein deficiency which leads to the body cannibalising itself. The symptoms became one of the most familiar sights of the war. Tiny children were the worst hit with their soft, fluffy ginger hair and almost fleshless skulls; shoulders like miniature coathangers and ribs that stood out in delicate relief. From the breast-bone downwards, an obscene contrast began: swollen bellies and over-blown legs and ankles where the flesh had started to peel off like the skin of a tomato fresh from boiling water. (The Biafrans, never short of a propaganda phrase—they really understood journalists' needs—called this terrible phenomenon 'Gowon's Boots'.) Protein, not medicine, was the cure for kwashiorkor. Caught in time it could be quickly and dramatically reversed; left too long it either killed or maimed—through brain damage—for life. The great majority of civilian deaths on both sides of the fighting came from kwashiorkor.

By early 1968, it was clear that a major catastrophe was developing in Biafra where the ravages of these two diseases were getting out of hand. The Catholic and Protestant Churches had begun to respond in January through buying space on Hank Wharton's gun-running airline and sending relief supplies into Biafra. Sometimes the Churches chartered an entire plane, but on other occasions the food went in mixed up with the arms shipments. However, they did not have the resources or organisation at that time to cope with the crisis unaided. The I.C.R.C., which had offered its customary services to the Federal government—and had them accepted—at the outbreak of hostilities was permitted to work on both sides and given the task of co-ordinating all relief and medical operations. But it had to adhere to legality and, while the Churches flew into Biafra from São Tomé without consulting Lagos, the I.C.R.C. had to seek an arrangement for their relief flights from Fernando Po. This allowed Red Cross aircraft to fly into Biafra at night 'at their own risk', a formula which though far from satisfactory, nevertheless got the I.C.R.C. off its legalistic hook and enabled it to join the Churches in their mission of mercy for the next fifteen months.

The relief operation began to grow until by the summer of 1969 it had surpassed all other similar crises since the Second World War. At its height a little over forty flights, carrying 500 tons of supplies, were

pouring into Uli nightly. At times there were as many as fourteen aircraft 'stacked' in the air over the strip, each waiting its turn for the momentary flash of the landing lights to come down and deliver its precious cargo. A relief worker who spent almost a year as the Protestant Churches' representative on 'Airstrip Annabelle' (Uli) gives some idea of the hazards involved.

"The danger moments were always while a plane was landing and immediately after it had landed, for then the bomber had had his target clearly lit up for about thirty seconds during which time he could make his bombing run. Tactics varied—at first there were large numbers of fragmentation bombs, then the policy seemed to change and six heavier bombs were used. Latterly a bomber at high altitude dropped flares in the light of which a jet at low altitude flew in to strafe whatever it could see with machineguns or cannon. Miraculously casualties were mercifully light, and the relief flights continued through it all."¹

By the summer of 1968, world opinion had been aroused and money from individuals, private organisations and governments began to flood into the coffers of the I.C.R.C. and the Churches. Both bodies worked on each side of the line but the I.C.R.C. played the larger part in Nigeria and the Churches the most effective role in Biafra. Each group had its own problems within its chosen field of operation though the Churches', with their superior local knowledge and skills, were less of their own making. The I.C.R.C. moved too slowly in the initial stages of the crisis and then panicked and over-reacted, trying to create a crash organisation overnight. The wrong food, wrong packaging, wrong personnel and, above all, the wrong tactics in handling the sensitive Nigerians often hindered the I.C.R.C. operation on the Federal side. One hundred and fifty Swiss were sent to Santa Isabel (capital of Fernando Po), many of them entirely unsuitable for the job. (I remember meeting a very jolly and very fat Swiss-German chef in the I.C.R.C. headquarters in Enugu once. He was also an excellent cook, but there was no need for him to be there at all since a hundred perfectly adequate Nigerian cooks were available.) The 'high life' enjoyed by a number of the I.C.R.C. Swiss personnel in Lagos became something of a scandal. Astonishing food shipments had the habit of turning up from well-intentioned but misguided 'do-gooders' in various parts of the world. The most incongruous I heard of was twenty

¹ William Aitken, 'On the Airstrip at Uli', *Venture*, July/August 1969.

tons of cocktail sausages and biscuits. And then thousands of tons of dried milk from Holland had to be thrown away because it was packed in thin-walled sacks without a plastic lining.

On the Biafran side the protection of food supplies, once they had been flown in, became a serious problem as the famine grew worse. The Protestant Churches representative at Uli had this to say about it:

'The attacks on the lorries between the airport and our central store became more determined. At first, villagers and local people would try to jump on to the back of a moving lorry, cut down the barrier and throw something off on to the road. When we put the lorries into convoys, a log would be rolled across the road in front of the last one in order to cut it off from the rest. As the attacks became more subtle so we tightened our security, until finally we came in March [1969] to an armed hold-up organised by the sort of black marketeers and deserters that every war produces. The [Biafran] air force responded with an armed escort and a week or so later one of the attackers had his leg shattered. After that the attacks ceased.'²

But with all its faults, the relief operation soon began to make an appreciable impact on the hunger and sickness. Its lowest point was July/August 1968 when flights were down to one a week. Then, after von Rosen's daylight blockade-breaking run in early August, the tide started to turn. By the end of September an average of fifteen flights a night were going in producing a marked improvement in the health of the population. New relief organisations sprang up (NORDCHURCHAID representing the Scandinavian countries; CANAIRELIEF in Canada, AFRICA CONCERN from Ireland); larger planes were bought, many with the help of foreign governments; 'relief co-ordinators' (Lord Hunt for Britain, Clyde Ferguson for the United States) were appointed and several leading international figures like Hubert Humphrey, Sir Alec Douglas-Home and Leonard Cheshire produced their own schemes for beating the crisis.

All attempts to reach a mutually acceptable relief agreement failed though every conceivable possibility—daylight flights, land, sea and river corridors, parachute drops, aircraft carriers, helicopters—was exhaustively examined. And as the war went on and the prospects of a decisive victory or a negotiated peace receded, the grim dynamics of the situation drew the

² Ibid.

humanitarian organisations deeper into its political toils. The Nigerians were becoming embittered with not winning the war and began to look around for reasons or excuses—the end-product of frustration and anger was the same—concluding that the relief operations into Biafra, especially those run by the Churches, were prolonging the war unacceptably. Arms kept Biafra going and it was well-known that, in the early days, the Churches had condoned the despatch of mixed cargoes to Uli. This poisoned relations between the Churches and the Federal government throughout the rest of the war. Mixed cargoes stopped when the Churches acquired their own aircraft but night-flying provided an invaluable 'shield' for the gun-runners. This was highly prized by the Biafrans to the extent that they resisted all attempts to transfer the relief flights to day-light hours. Foreign exchange was equally vital to the Biafran war effort—to buy the arms and other essential supplies—and here again the Churches and other relief organisations indirectly helped by depositing large sums into Swiss, French and British bank accounts to cover their expenses in Biafra. The Nigerians thus began to tamper with the relief operations; anti-aircraft fire was improved, night bombing raids on Uli began (significantly, in the autumn of 1968 when French arms shipments suddenly escalated); pressure was exerted on Fernando Po to stop night flights, and field commanders, like Adekunle, took the law into their own hands sanctioning or curbing the relief agencies in a wilful, not to say whimsical, manner.

About this time (autumn 1968) the Biafrans made an important discovery and, as a result, also joined in the political relief game. It had become apparent to them during the mass starvation of the preceding months that a hunger-wracked skeleton of a child was more effective in internationalising Biafra's cause than any other single or combination of factors. By striking at the heart of the Western world's moral conscience with the real threat of millions starving to death if the war continued, backed up by the imagined one of genocide if they surrendered, they succeeded where all their other tactics—intensive lobbying, signing the oil away, repeated appeals to the religious, ideological and political sensibilities of the outside world—had failed. (Even the four African recognitions six months earlier had been strongly influenced by humanitarian considerations.) Starvation had finally put Biafra on the map. And Ojukwu recognised it: 'Our aim all along,' he told the Consultative Assembly in Umuahia in September 1968, 'has been to delay the enemy

until the world conscience can effectively be aroused against genocide.³ If you ask anyone outside Africa, even today, what they knew or thought about Biafra, they invariably reply, 'Oh, that was the place where all those kids were being starved to death by the Nigerians, wasn't it?' The immediate benefits of such concern were useful enough, especially the money, the lobbying, publicity, and public support that followed each new starvation newspaper story or television film. But it was the prospect of further internationalising the conflict that gave hope to the Biafran leaders and encouraged them to resist compromise and to continue the struggle. Already the pressure of public opinion in several European countries had resulted in an arms embargo on the Federal government and as the relief situation worsened in Biafra the outcry and pressure increased in Europe and America.

The spark that turned the politics of relief into a conflagration was Count von Rosen's intervention with his miniature air force in May 1969. The fact that he had originally flown relief supplies into Uli for the Churches further blackened their name in Federal eyes. The Federal reaction was to shoot down a Swedish Red Cross aircraft in June 1969,⁴ and formally ban all unauthorised night-flying through its airspace. It also ended the I.C.R.C.'s mandate to co-ordinate the relief operation in Nigeria and handed it over to the Nigerian Red Cross. Simmering personality problems became overheated and rose to the surface. Having recently been arrested for trying to fly from Lagos to Cotonou in Dahomey without airport control permission, August Lindt, the Swiss co-ordinator of the Red Cross operation, was expelled by the Federal government and declared unacceptable as the I.C.R.C.'s representative. All this provoked a passionate but tactless outburst from the new I.C.R.C. president, Marcel Naville, in July at his Geneva headquarters. The I.C.R.C.'s exclusion from Nigeria was, he said, 'a conscious affront to all the principles of humanity' and 'a calculated insult' to the Committee. He moved on to even more sensitive ground by adding that the I.C.R.C. had a 'mandate'—from the donors of relief supplies—to operate in Nigeria. Although stemming from the purest humanitarian motives this sort of talk was, nevertheless, pretty abrasive stuff, especially in the wake of the deep resentment, misunderstanding and mistrust bequeathed by Lindt.

He was the most controversial of all the foreign relief officials and

³ *Biafra: Ojukwu's Selected Speeches*, Vol. I, p. 353.

⁴ For a detailed description of this incident see Chapter XII.

curiously epitomised the good and the bad, the efficient and the inept, the idealistic and the arrogant in that unprecedented, sprawling rescue operation. Born into a wealthy Swiss chocolate family, Lindt's father had gone bankrupt and it had been left to him to recoup the family fortunes. He had been a successful and adventurous journalist, an excellent United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and a top-ranking diplomat (he was Switzerland's ambassador in Washington, Moscow and, after the Nigerian episode, New Delhi). He was, above all, a man of action, an operator rather than a negotiator. With tremendous energy he got the relief operation going, especially on the Nigerian side, secured the 'at your own risk' concession from the Federal government to fly into Biafra, and injected into the task a much-needed inspirational spirit. But he was temperamentally unsuited to cope with the complex political subtleties of the crisis and the sensitivities of the belligerents. Lindt thought he could not only produce a mutually-agreed relief plan but also, it seems, act as a peacemaker and bring the war to an end where everyone else had failed. Here he came unstuck. He flitted tirelessly from side to side arousing everyone's suspicions and causing appalling confusion in his own Geneva office, rarely telling them where he was and sometimes disappearing for days at a time. He also tended to take the law into his own hands and some of his negotiating techniques were closer to those of a nineteenth-century mill-owner handling the labour than those normally associated with an ambassador who had served his country in Washington and Moscow. 'If he spoke to the Americans and Russians as he does to us,' a Nigerian diplomat once complained to me after a particularly gruelling round of relief negotiations in Lagos, 'it's a wonder that Switzerland is still around.' Even after he was expelled, Lindt apparently nursed his illusions and refused to believe that the Nigerians did not want or need his services any longer. But the role he had been given was also partly to blame. Using a single delegate to co-ordinate operations on both sides was a bad mistake and the I.C.R.C. should have known better since it had done the same thing initially in the Spanish civil war—a success story in the Committee's annals—and had found that the system was intolerable. It had solved the problem by appointing a permanent delegate to each side, co-ordinating the operation in Geneva.

* * *

The relief crisis not only added more gall to the well of bitterness between the Nigerians and Biafrans but split them within themselves. In

the Federal camp the hardliners, who included some of the leading soldiers, politicians (notably Awolowo) and many of the top civil servants who were concerned about the growing internationalisation and cost of the war, advocated the 'quick kill'.⁵ For them, starvation was a legitimate weapon of war and Awolowo defended the concept publicly. The humanitarian rationale behind this argued that a strict enforcement of the blockade and an all-out military effort to overrun Biafra would bring the war to a relatively rapid end and, in the long run, save more lives. In political, or even humane, terms there was nothing wrong with the 'quick kill' strategy, *provided* it was carried out efficiently and speedily. If, for example, the arms and relief flights had been cut off in the autumn of 1968 and Federal forces had swiftly overrun the country with a massive relief operation following in their wake, many thousands of Biafrans would still have died but far fewer than the hundreds of thousands who did die in the ensuing eighteen months of war. But the rub was the Federal armies did not appear to have the capacity to execute the 'quick kill' with that crucial speed and efficiency. And failure to maintain a fast-moving offensive would drag all sorts of other problems in its train such as the possibility of guerrilla operations behind poorly consolidated lines of advance, reprisals, and the danger of civilians becoming trapped in battle zones. With every day that dragged by more people, deprived of their normal relief supplies, would die of starvation and the greater would be the possibility of fresh shipments of arms finding a new way in and further slowing the Federal advance.

The moderates on the Federal side, led by Gowon, thought differently. While sharing the hardliners' conviction that the war should not be internationalised any more and that foreign relief organisations should respect Nigerian sovereignty they felt that a slower tightening of the noose—the 'slow squeeze' policy, if you like—was politically wiser and more realistic. Help for the civilian victims could continue, they argued, even under the far from ideal circumstances of night-flying which gave cover for Biafra's arms. For, as Gowon often said, the war was not against the innocent Ibo masses, but was designed to win them back to the Federal side. Nourishing their bodies was one way of retrieving their hearts and minds and it consistently featured in Gowon's thinking and actions. The 'slow squeeze' also made more sense in practical terms because the Federal forces were not up to the swift, co-ordinated *coup de grace* which so many of their friends urged on them. Little credit has been given to Gowon for having

⁵ Coined and advocated by Mr. Nigel Fisher, Conservative M.P.

a relief policy of his own—moderation was invariably ascribed to 'British influence' or 'world opinion'—and even less to that policy ever supplanting, in practice, the hardliners' 'quick kill' strategy. This, I think, unfairly maligns his intentions and underestimates his authority. He did, after all, not only fulfil Nigeria's commitment to the Geneva Conventions but go some way beyond it.⁶ He turned a blind eye to the illegal night-flying into Biafra for fifteen months; he accepted the presence of an International Observer Team to allay fears of genocide and keep an eye on the conduct of the Federal troops (that the team was a British suggestion does not detract from Gowon's merit in accepting it); and he did agree to daylight relief flights to Biafra provided that the planes were checked by the government and followed routes of its choice—both normal controls under the Geneva Conventions. That the Biafrans did not accept these conditions does not mean Gowon was insincere in his offer.

In Biafra there were similar divisions. The hardliners, led by Ojukwu, urged a path of no compromise (as in peace negotiations): food and relief supplies were unacceptable unless they came from sources and through channels that had no connection with the Federal government. Ojukwu told Lord Carrington during the latter's visit to Biafra in late 1969 that he could not accept the daylight flight scheme proposed by the I.C.R.C. in the summer and autumn of 1969 because of 'mainly political reasons'. Secondly, there were military considerations since it was reckoned that the opening of the relief corridors—especially the much-discussed land route—would give the Nigerians crucial tactical advantages. Any relief pact, whichever route or method it adopted, would automatically remove the need for night mercy flights and the shield they provided for the arms planes. Even after the Red Cross had stopped its night-flying in June 1969, the Churches continued to fly and provide this essential cover. The Biafrans correctly gauged that the Federal government would exercise some care in avoiding the inevitable outcry and adverse publicity which would follow another shooting down of a relief plane. In any case, they took care to 'mix' their gun-runners in with the relief flights as much as possible. Corroboration of this comes from one of the relief pilots who strikes an aggrieved note:

'We bore some resentment towards them [the gun-runners] because they would get preference over us at Uli. They came in on our corridors to

⁶ Colonel Robert Scott, in his famous and critical report published in the *Sunday Telegraph* the day the war ended had this to say: 'It is perhaps ironic that this is the first time in the history of warfare that one belligerent has permitted outside agencies to succour its opponent.'

disguise themselves as relief planes. They were getting much, much more money than we were, and taking less risk because they came in only once a night, and they could wait around until the 'Intruder' [the Federal bomber] had gone.'⁷

The third point made by the Biafran hardliners was that the relief operation as it stood, though far from satisfactory in terms of saving lives at home, was doing Biafra a power of good abroad, publicising its case and filling its coffers. A relief pact with the Nigerians would have taken the steam out of the first and dried up the second. A final point made was that, quite apart from the key issue of sovereignty, Biafra could not accept food from the Nigerians because it was 'poisoned'. I never saw any evidence of this though it was a real fear in Biafra. But it did seem to be a fear that could have easily been removed if the authorities had ensured that the food was tested—relief officials could have done this—and then told the masses that it was *not* poisoned. The poor, starving Ibos who fought each other to get to the Nigerians' 'poisoned' food when Biafra collapsed had no such fear.

The Biafran moderates, weaker than their Federal counterparts and inaudible in the international relief forum, felt that the scale of suffering had reached such a pitch that an uncompromising attitude towards the Nigerian relief proposals was no longer tenable. They argued that the Nigerians, with their hands firmly around Biafra's throat, were not in a mood to make major concessions over the political and military aspects of relief and that a tough line by the Biafran leadership was totally unrealistic. The moderates' stress lay on the suffering civilians who were being killed by a war whose primary objective had been their security and prosperity. And it was, after all, the Biafrans who were doing the dying, not the Nigerians; the onus for concessions thus lay unmistakably with the Biafran leadership. But concessions—such as agreement to land corridor or daylight flights under the Geneva Conventions—need not have ruined Biafra's military capacity. A single, narrow land corridor, internationally supervised and heavily defended at the Biafran end, would not have laid the country wide open, and other airfields were available for the vital arms flights (Uga, for example) if Uli were handed over for relief or suddenly immobilised by a treacherous Nigerian attack. Finally, a massive injection of food, medicines and other supplies would have

⁷ Peter Knox, Canadian relief pilot, in an interview with freelance journalist James Hudson, Palma, Mallorca, May 1970.

saved thousands of lives, boosted morale and infinitely strengthened Biafra's will and capacity to continue the struggle.

The striking difference between the extremists and moderates on each side was that in Nigeria first one then the other was in the ascendancy, producing a confused, at times tortuous but never unrelentingly inhumane policy, while in Biafra the hardliners ruled the roost from beginning to end, allowing no deviation from the stony, corpse-strewn sovereign path they had chosen to follow. If Ojukwu and his government had followed the moderates' policy and accepted relief strictly under the terms of the Geneva Conventions, it is probable that they would have forfeited some of the immediate political, economic and military advantages which they gained by not doing so. But it does not follow that such a policy would automatically have lost them the war, for the reasons I have outlined above. And their own strategy also carried risks, mainly those of an eventual collapse through sheer exhaustion due to inadequate food and medical supplies. Ojukwu chose the short-term benefits, even though it meant a heavy cost in Biafran lives, because he believed that it would quickly bring about the sort of international involvement which would either enable him to win the war or force a stalemate. On a number of occasions it nearly came off—European countries banning arms sales and the mounting pressure on Britain's policy, for example—and encouraged him to continue. The human cost of this policy was rising steeply but could still have been justified if it is accepted that either the victims themselves had of their own free will, knowing all the alternatives, chosen to pay this price for a still-remote Biafran victory, or the scale of suffering would have been even greater if an alternative policy—acceptance of relief under the Geneva Conventions or surrender—had been adopted. In the end, Ojukwu's strategy failed and Biafra collapsed under the combined impact of famine, exhaustion and the military superiority of the Federal forces.

Is it possible to apportion guilt in this fearsome tangle? A senior Church official in Geneva whose sympathies lay with the Biafrans told me after the war that it was an impossible task, but Solomon's judgment ('six of one, and half a dozen of the other', was the way he put it) seems to be close to the truth. The natural tendency throughout the war was to blame the Nigerians, the giant, the bully, for insincerity and sabotaging the negotiations at every turn. This is only half the story. The other half is Biafran insincerity, Biafran sabotage. The rigidity of Ojukwu's policy was shown by the fact that he never once tried to call the Nigerians'

bluff—he could have, for example, accepted day flights for a short period without undue military risk—by agreeing to one of their proposed relief corridors. Politically, it would have been an astute move since if Gowon had refused to play fair the whole world would have seen clearly who was at fault, Ironically, Biafra's share of the responsibility for scuppering relief agreements was not properly revealed until the Federal government, this time with its hardliners in the saddle, had enforced its ban on unauthorised night-flying in the summer of 1969. Throughout the protracted negotiations with the I.C.R.C. that followed, it became evident that the Biafrans were as obstinate as the Federals on the two central issues of exercising their sovereignty over the despatch of relief supplies and protecting their military operations. The powerless Biafran moderates had, I think, the strongest moral case. A special burden lay on the shoulders of the Biafran leaders for it was their people who were suffering, it was they who had promised them security of life, limb and property, and it was their responsibility to exercise the immense power in their hands to pursue these ends, even if it meant a scaling-down of their original political goals.

* * *

The shooting down of the Red Cross DC-7 which almost stopped the Biafran airlift altogether—the Churches seriously considered halting operations as well as the I.C.R.C.—drove the wedge of self-doubt painfully deep into the relief organisations and subjected the whole concept of humanitarian action in wars, especially the uncharted waters of Third World conflicts, to a new and stringent scrutiny. For the I.C.R.C., criticised from without and divided within, it was the worst crisis in the century of its existence. It had already been feeling the strain due to the unprecedented size of the Nigerian operation (by June 1969, its monthly budget for Nigeria/Biafra was £1,400,000 whereas its normal *annual* budget before the civil war had been £500,000) and because the Committee was a relative newcomer to the work of relief. The League of Red Cross Societies, the federation of the world's national societies and also Geneva-based, was better equipped for this kind of task and was, in fact, doing valuable work under the umbrella of the I.C.R.C.

Lindt's expulsion and the halting of its Biafran night-flights, brought 'La Maison's' (the I.C.R.C.'s 'in' name) own hardliner/moderate divisions out into the open, and in doing so rocked that august body to the essence

of its being. The debate centred around whether the I.C.R.C., like the Churches, should defy the Federal ban on night-flights or obey it even though this would drastically reduce the help it was giving to the Biafrans. The moderates, after a prolonged struggle, won. The key argument was the I.C.R.C.'s mondial responsibilities and its mandate, which comes from governments voluntarily signing the Geneva Conventions and demands a strict adherence to legality no matter how pressing the humanitarian considerations might be. I.C.R.C. teams in Biafra continued helping the Churches distribute relief supplies but it was the end of the Red Cross airlift although repeated attempts were made by the Geneva H.Q. to secure agreement on a relief corridor, without success. However, a little lost ground was regained with the Nigerians which resulted in a smoother and slower phasing out of its co-ordinating role on the Federal side than might have been the case if the I.C.R.C. had defied the night-flying ban, and some good work in building up the Nigerian Red Cross (N.R.C.) which was to pay dividends at the end of the war when the N.R.C. took overall responsibility for relief operations. Lindt's successor, Enrico Bignami, a more subtle though equally tough operator, played an important but discreet part in achieving this improvement.

The relief problem had turned full circle and had come back to the helpless child drowning in the lake while a man, with a loaded gun and a steely look, stood by to enforce the no swimming prohibition. Should relief agencies defy a sovereign government in order to save life and fulfil their humanitarian mission? The I.C.R.C. had opted for the path of legality, the Churches, less encumbered by sets of rules, precedents and international obligations, chose defiance, and the airlift went on. Given the Protestant and Catholic Churches' deep missionary commitment in Biafra—the most intensely 'missionised' part of Africa—it is difficult to see how they could have acted otherwise. Their *local* interest dictated that they should defy the Federal government, whereas the I.C.R.C.'s *international* responsibility had, with a similar cogency, demanded that it should be obeyed.

But it still was not an easy decision, although some of the Church organisations, notably Caritas Internationalis, the Vatican relief group and the Irish missions, took it more blithely than others. The Churches also had their international ramifications and responsibilities, particularly their followers and clergy in Nigeria.⁸ Many of the international Church

⁸ Nigerian and Biafran Church leaders managed to maintain discreet contacts throughout the war on neutral ground outside Nigeria.

organisations, like the Protestant World Council of Churches, were divided and by no means endorsed their members' actions. The most crucial and publicised split came near the end of the war at a meeting of the World Council of Churches at Sandefjord in Norway when, for the first time in public, the wisdom of continuing relief supplies and helping to keep Biafra going was questioned but not, in the event, seriously challenged. In fact, this debate had been going on for most of the war, except again within the deeply-committed Irish Catholics. For the Churches, like the International Red Cross, were subject to many conflicting pressures. They always saw their role as a temporary one and were continually pressuring national governments to step in and take over, or exert their influence on the combatants to agree to a relief pact or, better still, to a political settlement. Their manpower and finances were stretched to the limit and as their involvement grew—and Nigerian enmity correspondingly increased—so the divisions deepened. As if this were not enough to bear, pressure also came from the Biafrans who felt, with some justification, that sympathetic governments were avoiding direct assistance and recognition by settling their moral debts through donating money to the Church relief operations. Ojukwu gave vent to this frustration—and demonstrated how Biafra's human plight was linked with its government's diplomatic strategy—in a speech to the Consultative Assembly in September 1968. 'Those governments motivated by humanitarian considerations have a responsibility now to ensure that Biafrans are enabled to defend themselves by providing them the wherewithal so to do.'⁹

Legitimate criticism, however, can be levelled at the Churches not so much for their policy but for the way in which they carried it out. Their contribution to Biafra's foreign exchange was large and immensely valuable especially in the latter stages when funds for arms were running low. How large this was is a matter of controversy; one figure (anti-Biafra) puts it as £8.5 million,¹⁰ another (pro-Biafra) pegs it at £1.5 million.¹¹ Joint Church Aid (J.C.A.), the Churches co-ordinating body, regards the first as 'wildly exaggerated' and, while having no exact figure of its own, feels that 'somewhere near' the second estimate is more likely. Some of the Churches' purchasing in Biafra (local food, services, etc.) in any currency, let alone foreign exchange, seems inexcusable since this surely was the responsibility of the Biafran government and it was

⁹ Ojukwu's *Speeches*, Vol. I, p. 357.

¹⁰ For 1969 only—Kennedy Lindsay—*Venture*, February 1970.

¹¹ *Peace News*, 17.4.1970.

not short of its own money to cope with needs of this kind. But the Nigerians also profited from the relief organisations' immense spending programmes (and commandeered Red Cross planes for moving troops and supplies to the front), although Biafra's need for foreign exchange was more pressing throughout the war and if it had not been for the relief agencies it would have been hard pushed to find an alternative source. The Churches have also been criticised for not exerting pressure on the Biafran government to soften its terms for a relief corridor. They claim they were continually doing this but when faced with unrelenting intransigency stopped short of using their ultimate weapon—the suspension of the airlift—because this would have amounted to playing a game of blackmail with innocent peoples' lives.

Another accusation levelled against the Churches was that they went far beyond their humanitarian brief and made a bad situation worse by becoming active Biafran propagandists. This was most true of the Catholics, particularly Caritas, Africa Concern and the Irish Order of the Holy Ghost which had more than a hundred priests and nuns in Biafra. They did a tremendous job and saved countless thousands of lives but many of them were 'political priests' who tended to become more Biafran than the Biafrans. The fact that Ireland's old enemy, Britain, was on the other side no doubt helped to keep passions high. They were immensely brave, hard-working, colourful, practical people, sharing some of the charm and resilience of their beloved Ibos. One who flitted to and fro between Biafra, Ireland, Western Europe and the United States, raising funds, buying aircraft, lobbying high and low—he was reputed to have 'a hot line' to the Pope—was known as the 'Green Pimpernel'. Another also passed into legend. 'Father X was built like a Texas wrestler, about 250 pounds, six foot two; he used to knock the shit out of the Ibos, swear, kick their asses. He once took two of them and banged their heads together for stealing. Hungry soldiers tried to hijack a food convoy, and he beat them to a pulp. All in the name of the Lord. Once in a while he would say, "forgive me, Father". And then get on with it again.'¹² But they paid the price of their emotional involvement: every one of them was expelled at the end of the war and it seems unlikely that they will ever be allowed back to their African home.

The Pope took a deep personal interest in the humanitarian aspect of the war and tried to bring the two sides together on several occasions. But

¹² Peter Knox, Canadian relief pilot, *op. cit.* Incredibly, only one missionary was killed in Biafra throughout the entire war—a nun whose car was strafed by a MiG.

he seems to have been badly briefed and badly advised for many of his statements were tactless and inept (his public comment after the collapse that genocide of the Ibos could still happen was especially disastrous) and he seemed oblivious to the dilemma that his actions posed for the millions of Catholics in Nigeria. Caritas, the international organisation which groups all the Church's relief agencies directly under the Pope, probably influenced his judgment; it also infuriated the Vatican diplomats who saw the broader, more symmetrical picture, and had to deal with the international problems which Caritas's fanatically pro-Biafran position inevitably raised. As with many other maladroit interventions in the conflict, the Catholic Church's humanitarian motive was unquestionable but ignorance of the true facts of the situation, or worse still, a one-sided knowledge, resulted in unnecessary mistakes. There were fundamental failures in human understanding too. The Pope and Caritas, for example, showed the same lack of tact and sensitivity towards the Nigerians as Lindt had done.

Outsiders, time and time again, thought they could dictate to the Nigerians because they felt passionately that humanitarian need transcended all other considerations. Leonard Cheshire, V.C., British war hero and founder of the 'Cheshire Homes' for orphans, is a classic example; after Biafra's collapse, he threatened to fly into the enclave without Federal permission and later arrived, without a visa and unsolicited, in Lagos itself. He was puzzled and hurt when the Nigerians put him back on the same plane, saying they did not want or need his help. The humanitarians, unfortunately, often exhibited some of the worst characteristics of Nigeria's former colonial masters, showing remarkably little respect for the country's sovereignty and even less understanding of the fact that for many Nigerians the civil war was as much a struggle for survival as it was for the Biafrans. But the final assessment must be a positive one. The world did care, it did raise millions of pounds as proof of its concern; the humanitarians did risk their lives; and today a number of them lie buried close to the stretch of lonely road that was 'Airstrip Annabelle' in mute testimony of their belief.

CHAPTER
TEN

The Front-Line

War-4

October-December 1968

Front-line: Nigeria
Life in Nigeria (war diary)
Observer team
'Genocide'
Massacres

Aba Sector, Nigeria. September 1968. WE WERE DRIVING TO WAR IN A bus with a hymn-singing Nigerian soldier whose helmet proclaimed him to be 'Jim Bullet', but whose real name, he confided, was 'Corporal Churchill'. After an abrasive week with Colonel Adekunle at his Port Harcourt headquarters which had seen us through several parade-ground harangues, two arrests, one execution and an incarceration in the world's worst hotel, three other journalists and myself had been allowed to go forward and inspect the 'Black Scorpion's' latest acquisition, the erstwhile Biafran town of Aba. It was a particularly poignant trip for me since only a month before I had spent a fortnight there when the town had been securely in Biafran hands. In streaming rain we set off and were soon clattering across the Bailey bridge which Nigerian engineers had built across the broad, swirling Imo river. This obstacle had held up the Federal advance for many weeks but even beyond, along the excellent main road, it was clear that progress had been slow. The road had been cut time and again, deep ditches dug and huge forest trees thrown across at regular intervals. The civilian population had disappeared to a man, leaving their pathetic charred and crumbling homes to the predatory greed of the African bush. Several defenders lay where they had fallen, their corpses ballooning obscenely in the unrelenting rain. Shell and mortar bomb cases and spent ammunition littered the length of the road. There was an astonishing number of abandoned boots around. Soldiers drenched to the skin sprang Guard-like to attention as our cavalcade, which included Colonel Godwin Ally, Adekunle's chief of staff, swept by. 'Invest in Biafra Pools' urged a billboard on the outskirts of Aba; Corporal Jim Bullet Churchill abruptly stopped halfway through 'Onward,

Christian Soldiers' and giggled. The town looked much as I had left it, hardly damaged at all, and appeared to have changed hands as a result of a non-battle. The Nigerians said they had lost only three men and a few wounded and Biafran casualties were not thought to be much higher, though losses had been more severe in the continuous fighting along the Port Harcourt—Aba road. Two days before the Nigerians had intercepted a despairing radio message from the Biafran commander to his headquarters: 'too late, Aba is lost.' The market was strewn with an incredible amount of broken bottles—'our soldiers drank everything they could lay their hands on,' explained a Federal officer—but they were all soft drinks, beer having run out in Biafra months ago. One civilian lay dead among the debris and the cars without wheels. Colonel Ally, a dapper and businesslike Sandhurst man accustomed to his role as Adekunle's Sancho Panza, was addressing representatives of the living. The rain pouring off his sunglasses, he told them they would be kept together for the time being, food and medicines would be sent up from Port Harcourt and he and the Federal troops had no quarrel with them, 'We are only fighting for "One Nigeria",' he said simply.

Out of the three to four hundred thousand people who had been packed into the town a month before probably not more than a few hundred were left; it induced a strange feeling of unreality, it was the same town, the landmarks, the buildings and the roads were certainly the same and yet it was also a totally different town as if someone had cried 'Plague' and the entire population had decamped on the spot. I asked if I could go back to the Progress Hotel where I had lived. Colonel Ally smiled at this European nostalgia but took me along. It was a little forlorn now, not greatly changed but with the weeds and creepers already laying claim to what one felt was rightfully theirs. There was little left to record the defiance of the Biafrans—even the vultures had abandoned their old roost on the dining-room roof—except a few tattered posters. GOWON HATES YOU said one in large black letters over a drawing of a wounded man. Another, my favourite, read:

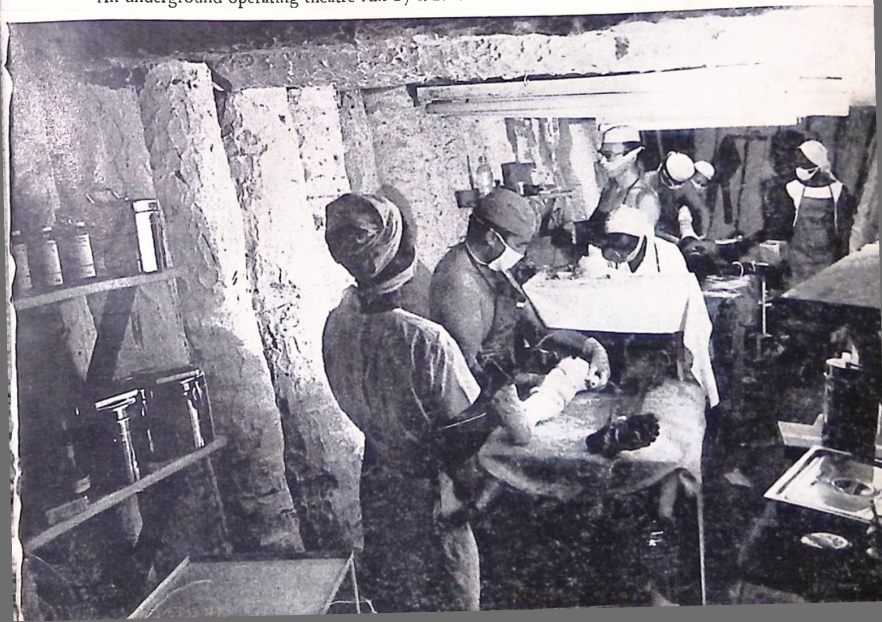
WATCH OUT !!!

For People
Who Spend Money
The Way
They Should Not



Documentation was one of the Biafran's strongest points and a welfare state of sorts existed, with family allowances, pensions and health benefits paid by the government.

An underground operating theatre run by I.C.R.C. doctors for wounded Biafran soldiers.





The other side of the death and destruction in Biafra—a wedding in Owerri.

Though to many Biafrans Britain was 'public enemy number one', British traditions died hard; Biafran lawyers discussing a case in a Umuahia court-room—the courts functioned in Biafra for most of the war. +GLUC



And there on the notice-board neatly typed, was a note from the manager informing the staff that all leave had been cancelled for the 'duration of the emergency'.

Back in the centre of the town, in the square opposite the Rex Cinema, Federal troops were setting up a row of mortars; brand-new Saladins and Ferrets whined past crashing their gears and probing along the road that led down to the Ogbor river which divides the town in two; a battery of 105 mm. howitzers, the standard NATO field gun, swung into the square but did not seem to know where to go. The Biafrans held the hill on the other side of the river where the radio and television station stood. Bullets spun through the air over our heads and received a deafening mortar barrage in reply. If the Biafrans had had anything heavier than a machinegun over there they could have wiped the lot of us out—including the 'Black Scorpion' who had joined us—with one round where we stood, as if at a public display, in front of the Rex Cinema.

The Federal advance from Port Harcourt to Aba illustrated the general pattern of military operations during the war. With their superior fire power, the Nigerians 'softened up' the Biafrans who took it for so long and then, not being able to reply in kind, finally cracked and withdrew, often leaving good defensive positions behind them. Meanwhile, the civilians poured out of the area, encouraged and sometimes threatened by the Biafran authorities, but also following the relentless logic of the big guns. Few people in their right minds run towards artillery and mortar fire—hence the ever-swelling population problem of shrinking Biafra—and the very sound of exploding shells tended to reinforce the Biafran myth of genocide. By the time the Nigerians had moved cautiously in, sometimes leaving their objective empty as a sort of no-man's-land for several days, few civilians had waited to find out whether all the horror stories were true or not. And those who did stay, as in the case of Aba, were almost entirely from the minority tribes.

The autumn of 1968 was a time of high hope in Nigeria. It was felt that the war really was coming to an end, that a black period in Nigeria's history would soon be closed and the good life (for the past with all its faults seemed golden compared with the present) would begin again. I had arrived in Lagos to witness the final act and complete the state of mental and emotional confusion which afflicted all those who spent some time on each side of the line. At the risk of transmitting that confusion I will put down some of my impressions of that period in the form of the 'war notebook' I kept during the two months that I spent on the Federal

side. It includes material from visits to all three divisional fronts and some of their forward sectors.

* * *

Ikeja airport into the city of Lagos: surely one of the most depressing initiation drives in the world. The first irony to a mind attuned to starving Biafran children: a vast bill-board announces WELCOME TO NIGERIA WHERE BABIES ARE HEALTHY AND HAPPY over a Michelin-tyre black baby, its ecstatic smile wrapped around a spoonful of protein-packed baby food.

* * *

With Biafra's brimstone breath lingering in my nostrils, Lagos and its inhabitants seem incredibly nonchalant, friendly and, yes, one has to admit it, human. (Don't they *know* there is a war on?) There are sandbags stacked up around the entrance of the Independence Building on Race Course Square and the posters proclaiming Nigeria's indivisible unity are still there, but everything to do with the war looks a bit half-hearted. The fact is the war is 400 miles away and hasn't had any personal contact with the city since the Fokker Friendship 'bomber' blew up over the Motor Boat Club almost a year ago.

* * *

Maybe they are bloodthirsty 'vandals' as the Biafrans call them, but, with luck, you can have some fine conversations in Nigeria. The driver of the car I hired had fought under the British in Burma. 'We fought for you,' he says putting me on the spot straight away, 'so why isn't Britain fighting for us in our war, then?' (The Biafran answer would undoubtedly be, Britain *is* fighting for Nigeria through providing arms, moral and technical support.) His car is old and battered and at least once a day the gear-lever comes away in his hand, like a plant being plucked out bodily by the roots.

'You got a cold?' he asks one morning.

'Yes.'

'I use Codeine at night and Aspro in the morning. And always Nivaquin for malaria.'

'Very interesting.'

'But my big problem is smoking—how can I give up smoking?'

'Try a little will-power.'

'Thank you, I will. Does it come in liquid or tablet form?'

* * *

Port Harcourt: It's raining and the 'Black Scorpion', whose fief we are in, doesn't want to know; so we are put in the humid water-less, power-less, and drink-less Cedar Palace Hotel ('Seedy Palace' they call it, with reason) and forgotten about for a few days. The proprietor, a Lebanese, was one of the few to stay in the town throughout the fighting. 'I live here, I die here,' he says mournfully. He is also making a fortune here. We have just discovered that the beer he is selling us for ten shillings a bottle and the tinned food sold at similarly exorbitant prices is a gift from the army.

Finally, we receive a summons to the 3rd Marine Commando's Divisional headquarters, situated comfortably in the Shell/BP compound. A truck comes to pick us up and on the way we see another—a huge armoured personnel-carrier—on its back, twenty feet down an embankment. Miraculously, the driver and several soldiers are still alive and have managed to scramble out. We are on the best stretch of road for miles around—wide, well-surfaced and virtually no traffic. What on earth happened? 'Oh,' says our escort, 'the G.O.C. (General Officer Commanding, i.e. Adekunle) was coming the other way in his Jeep and the armoured truck driver got so frightened he fell off the road.'

Once again we are lined up like recruits on parade in front of Adekunle's office. Out he comes, small, with a nipped-in waist, a starched and ironed uniform that is a work of art, red tabs of a colonel on his collar and 'scrambled egg' gold braid on his hat. He also wears a scowl and lectures us firmly on the iniquities of the Red Cross ('the army looks after relief in my command'), the Churches and the foreign press. Finally, relenting, he says, 'Gentlemen, you came down here for a story and a story you shall have. You will now witness an execution. Good morning.' And we did.

* * *

Another occasion there was a crisp exchange with a tough *Daily Express* man, which reveals something of Adekunle's style and his knack of having the last word.

'Are you really in control of your men, Colonel?' asks the reporter.

'Is that Mr. B. of the London *Daily Express*?' counters the 'Scorpion', moving swiftly to the attack.

'Yes!'

'I am reliably informed you lost your nerve the other day at the front.'

'I bloody well did nothing of the kind.'

'My soldiers tell me you funked it.'

'I was a tank commander in the last war while you were still in short trousers,' yells Mr. B. 'And what's more I got wounded.'

'Ah, but that, Mr. B.,' says Adekunle, softly, 'was a long time ago!'

* * *

Port Harcourt, once Nigeria's leading boom town, was captured by Federal forces four months ago. Today it is still a sombre, empty place, gently decaying in the interminable rain. Life is beginning to return as the tide of war washes north to Aba and beyond, but it is more symbolic than real. There are perhaps a couple of thousand people in and around the town which used to have a population of a quarter of a million before the war; ninety per cent were Ibo then, but now there are only 500 herded together in a special refugee camp under army protection. We talk to them and they agree it is the safest place for the time being; feeling among the Rivers people against the Ibos and Biafra is very high and there is much talk of 'Ibo atrocities' before they pulled back from the town. It seems that they have lost the town which was their creation, their pride and joy, for ever. Perhaps they knew, for the worst destruction was done by the Biafrans themselves when mobs burnt down several large British-owned stores and offices in protest against British arms supplies to Nigeria. The oil refinery is out of action but most of the fires lit by the retreating Biafrans on the oilfields have been extinguished. There is, however, no running water, no electricity, no power of any sort. Shops and offices are closed, transport, including bicycles, is virtually non-existent and elephant grass is already pushing up through the shattered streets. 'There are two main problems,' a visiting British businessman tells me as we eat beans out of a fifteen-shilling tin in the impenetrable, humid gloom of the Cedar Palace Hotel, 'security and a market.' A third would appear to be Colonel Adekunle who, tenuously linked with Lagos by an erratic air-service, a slow boat journey or a shaky, army radio set, rules an

area the size of Scotland with the authoritarian and arbitrary hand of a medieval king.

* * *

He is quixotic all right: without warning, he befriends the four of us who have stayed on. We get our trips to the Aba and Ahoada/Elele fronts and are moved into the Shell compound and put in a guest house just across the road from his own. He lends us his excellent cook—an Ibo—who drops the hint in the evenings when the colonel wouldn't object to our company for a drink. With guilty feelings, I join the champagne toast to the fall of Aba. There are several small parties, a lot of visiting brass from Lagos, intending no doubt to keep an eye on the 'Scorpion' as well as to measure progress at the fronts, and a constant stream of European businessmen, government and relief officials, priests in soiled white soutanes, and a great war-time miscellany of down-at-heel applicants, supplicants and mendicants. Throughout it all Adekunle is the tireless producer/actor/director, setting the scene, playing the leading role and sometimes standing slyly aside and examining his handiwork. It is difficult to know when he is serious and when he has his tongue in his cheek; but the prudent take him at face value for his sting lives up to his nickname. He takes a strong racial, almost Black Power, line on many issues, especially 'the interference of the white do-gooders' in the war; on the other hand, he is proud of his Sandhurst background, maintains a strict discipline around him—often by un-Sandhurst methods—and is a tremendously hard-working, diligent, proud professional soldier. He hardly eats, is a non-smoker, doesn't drink a lot and seems to get by on about four hours sleep a night. He believes in burning fast and brightly, 'Life ends at forty,' he says (he is 30). One minute he will be sitting with us, small, polished, the quality and colour of an ebony carving in his black silk kimono, listening to 'soul' music (Sam Cooke and Wilson Pickett) and talking about his personal and bitter experiences of racial discrimination in Britain, while the next he will be in the back rooms of the villa where he has several radio sets and a full-scale operations room rigged up. Orderlies, sleepy signallers, women's army corps clerks, in crisp khaki uniforms, flit to and fro; the radio crackles, a Jeep pulls up, messages and papers are handed over and signed, boot-shod feet crash on the tiled floor, text-book salutes are exchanged and he is back picking up the conversation on the precise phrase at which he had dropped it. The

whole effect is a little mesmerising, a blend of a British army officers' mess, a Lagosian 'high life' party, a successful film producer's office and just a touch of the court of Genghis Khan.

* * *

Awgu Sector. 1st Divisional Area. Colonel Mohammed Shuwa's troops are advancing rapidly over open countryside southwards to Biafra's Obilago airport. Avoiding the main roads, they are following a small bush track through rich green fields of ripening cassava and yams. Long lines of sweating, heavily armed men move up and down the column. Most are Middle Belt or Northern Nigerians with craggy, tribally scarred faces; one has 'Killer' painted in white across his helmet and quite a few want their photograph taken. A broken bridge has caused a temporary halt, but the infantry are wading through the shallow stream and pushing ahead to the front. A young and rather shy engineer lieutenant is making painstakingly precise calculations with a tape measure at the bridgehead. Off the track, as if waiting in the wings for their cue to go on stage, stand camouflaged 105 mm. howitzers and Saladin armoured cars. Overhead in the dazzling sunlight, two Czech-built L.29 Delphin strike aircraft piloted by Nigerians (I saw them kitted up at Enugu airport) circle and swoop whistling over our heads at tree-top level. Small mushroom-shaped puffs of smoke from Biafran anti-aircraft fire appear suddenly in the shimmering air. This sector is no chaotic Congo, no mindless tribal skirmish; these men are professionals, well-equipped, well-disciplined and, by the look of them, well-accustomed to their deadly trade.

* * *

Under a tiny clump of trees an almost symbolic group of emaciated refugees sits quietly in the warm dust: two old men, one in his thirties but looking 50, two women with children at their breasts, and a small girl. All are Ibos, all too exhausted, too sick, too stunned to run any more. The soldiers feed them but their faces are empty and reflect nothing but the dumb misery of the uncomprehending innocent overwhelmed by war.

* * *

Lieutenant-Colonel Danjuma (recently promoted from major), Shuwa's cool and intelligent chief of staff, admits frankly—so refreshing after the

bombast and platitudes of the military communiqués and diplomatic briefings in Lagos—that the Biafrans move at will in much of occupied Iboland, foraging for food and even running a sort of rudimentary administration north of Onitsha. As if to prove his point, three hours before I travelled down the pock-marked road from Enugu to Awgu, accompanied by a Federal escort bristling with weaponry, a Nigerian army lorry was ambushed by the Biafrans. They blew it to smithereens with a home-made rocket, killing the driver and another soldier.

* * *

(‘The present advance has the same inexorable and steam-roller qualities that marked Colonel Adekunle’s successful push in the South. There now seems little hope that the Biafrans can reverse the tide,’ I wrote in the *Observer* on 22nd September, 1968. Well, that’s how it seemed then, but how wrong I was!)

* * *

Enugu. The 1st Division is a very different kettle of fish to the ‘Scorpion’s’ outfit. It subscribes strongly to the concepts of orderliness and organisation and sticks as close to the book as possible. Colonel Shuwa, a small and rather mercurial man, typifies that attitude. In his Enugu headquarters, with the sounds of a drilling competition floating in from the barrack square, a small clump of immaculately-attired officers under some trees noting down meritorious points as the squads march briskly by, he tells me that he believes in keeping things as normal as possible. ‘We may be fighting a war,’ he says, ‘but we are also training an army and helping to run an administration’. On one side of his desk lies a very small sub-machinegun, neatly folded like a Pac-a-Mac; on the other, a copy of John Toland’s *Last Hundred Days*. But Shuwa, like most of his senior officers, does not think the Biafrans will suddenly collapse and surrender, German-style.

* * *

In contrast with the out-of-touch view of the civil servants, diplomats and armchair pundits in Lagos, most of the officers I speak to up here have both a healthy respect for the Biafrans’ fighting capacity and some under-

standing of their motivation and will to fight on. 'The rebels [Nigeria's denigratory reply to the Biafrans' 'vandals'] are an ingenious lot,' says Lieutenant-Colonel Abdul Wya, commander on the Awgu front, a bright young modern man who tends to call you 'baby' soon after the introduction stage (his army nickname is 'Show Boy'). 'Rightly or wrongly, they feel they are fighting for a cause, and if you value your skin you watch out.' The war is far less of a game here, with reason, and one catches more of that strange and special intimacy of a civil war where each side knows the other often at a personal, and sometimes even at a family level. When I say I have recently been inside Biafra, the officers cluster around me asking eagerly after their old friends and class-mates. Some they now reject as traitors, but others receive warm praise and comments like 'we must have him back in the army after the war'. There is a bit of talk about how the Biafrans have made a great play—for the benefit of the outside world, the Nigerians think—of religion in the war. 'They say God is on their side,' says a Christian minority man from the North, 'but he's not, you know, he's behind the big battalions as usual.'

* * *

Almost a year after its capture by Federal troops, Enugu, Biafra's former capital, on its cool green hills, is still an echoing and looted shell, rich with souvenirs of the past rather than living proof of the present. The roads are full of shell-holes, houses stand gaunt and empty, and the railway line has disappeared beneath an avalanche of elephant grass and weeds. The superb Presidential Hotel, probably the best in black Africa, where I stayed fifteen months ago has been stripped and wrecked inside. Out of a pre-war population of some 100,000 only about 2,000 have returned. A shattered 'mammy' wagon, its front axles shot away, seems to be kneeling in the gutter. The sign on the back, singularly appropriate, reads, 'God's Will'.

* * *

Outside Enugu the situation is a little brighter. People are beginning to flow back to their villages and even in the town during the day there is quite a bustle, especially around the newly re-established market place, though nightfall empties the streets and reimposes a ghost-like presence. People are coming out of the bush and the remoter villages to collect food

and medicines from the relief teams and to sell their produce in the markets. It is now evident that thousands of villagers never fled with the retreating Biafrans but escaped from the tide of war by 'disappearing' into the rural areas well away from the main roads. There are even isolated cases of columns of refugees being led back from behind the Biafran lines, often trekking for weeks through the bush. One relief worker tells me of a whole village, three hundred strong, which managed to come out in its entirety, led by an astonishingly resourceful 16-year-old who made contact with the Nigerian troops and the authorities in Enugu. (The story reminded me of those long columns of refugees I had seen in Biafra, walking purposefully in single file along the roadside, several generations on the march, their worldly possessions on their heads, moving steadily away from the heavy pulse of war.) Some of the villagers in the Enugu area expressed the growing feeling of resignation. 'We might as well stay and die here now,' they said, 'we've been on the run long enough.'

* * *

As in most wars, it is the need for food, medical attention and the bare necessities of life rather than a radical change in ideology or political feeling that is drawing these people back into the enemy camp. The International Red Cross has several teams at work and is receiving maximum co-operation from the army. 'We couldn't do the job at all without help from the military,' says the American head of the relief operation. (Colonel Shuwa is an enthusiastic member of the competitive 'Scrabble' school in the Red Cross mess.) I see and hear nothing to support the strident Biafran claim of genocide—or the *intention* to commit genocide. At a village called Owelli on the way to Awgu, a Swedish doctor tells me that the villagers have complained about some looting and rape by the soldiers but he and others who travel widely in the rural areas have no atrocity stories to retail. (Though this, one would have thought, should be 'genocide country' par excellence: true Iboland, no proper civilian administration, a war still very much in evidence and a 'red-eyed' Federal army on the advance.)

* * *

One of the Red Cross's main worries is its colleagues on the other side, a team in Okigwi and another in Obilago. They have been ordered to

stay put whatever happens and not retreat with the Biafrans. (Two weeks after I wrote this Federal troops captured Okigwi and a wild and probably drunken soldier murdered two European relief workers and a missionary couple. This was all the more shocking because it was the 1st Division, by far the best disciplined and most professional in the Nigerian army. It proved nothing, however, except that war is unpredictable, indiscriminate and brutal.)

* * *

Onitsha. 2nd Divisional Area. While the Biafrans are being relentlessly pushed back on all the other fronts, here, close to the banks of the majestic Niger, they have punched a hole in the encircling armies and immobilised a crucial part of the Nigerian offensive. Onitsha is the headquarters of Colonel Ibrahim Haruna's 2nd Division, the least loved, the least visited and certainly the least glamorous formation in the Federal army. The Divisional emblem is a clenched fist with the index finger imperiously outstretched. But it is all too clear the 2nd Division isn't going anywhere. (In Lagos, it is known as the 'Tortoise Division'.) The Biafrans have cut the vital Onitsha-Enugu road and control an eight-mile stretch only six miles from the centre of this town. Through this gap they operate north of Onitsha and prevent a link-up between Haruna and Shuwa's Division in Enugu.

* * *

I am taken to this misnamed 'link-up' sector by one of Haruna's brigade commanders. There is some desultory firing on the right flank where the Nigerians are well dug in and behaving as if there is a war on. On the other side of the road there is less action but more clues to the faults and failures of this Division. From a milling mass of scruffy and poorly disciplined soldiers, a young lieutenant appears. He staggers and then salutes with a familiar, studied precision. 'He's drunk,' says the officer accompanying me, a trifle sententiously. It is half-past ten in the morning. Several other soldiers are also drunk, but they insist on leading us down to the forward positions and point out Biafran-held territory 200 yards across the valley. Nothing moves, no one fires. We retire to a less exposed place and the lieutenant, still spasmodically saluting, tells me brokenly that all Nigerians are brothers and the fighting should stop.

The history of the 2nd Division helps to explain its present misfortunes. It was the last formed divisional unit, a scratch affair raised in the panic of the Biafrans' sudden plunge through the Mid-West. Under the impetuous command of Colonel Murtala Mohammed it swept back through the state where it enjoyed the crucial support of the anti-Biafran civilians, but then was traumatically mauled in three disastrous attempts to capture Onitsha by frontal assaults across the Niger river. Eventually the town was taken overland from the north-east but the Division never properly recovered and promptly lost control of the Onitsha-Enugu road. Colonel Haruna, a highly intelligent, easy-going Northerner with an Ibo wife, took over from Mohammed in June (1968) and is still engaged in reshaping and retraining the Division. 'My first task,' he tells me, 'is to establish an effective military presence in the Mid-West where the Biafrans are operating in guerrilla units against us.' The superb £6.5 million Niger bridge is still cut and communications with Lagos are poor; supplies for his men at Awka, only twenty-two miles east of here on the Enugu road, have to travel over 400 miles via the North. 'The men appeared to have good morale when I took over,' the colonel says, 'but if I set them off bashing through this countryside we might find it would only last a mile or two.' As a former logistics officer, he is very solicitous of their feeding and medical needs, their families, uniforms, weapons, and even their burials. There is no mistaking the lack of dynamism in Onitsha. Colonel Haruna intends to move at his own pace and is not ashamed of it. For him, the 'final push', ordered by General Gowon two months ago, has not really begun.

* * *

A visit to the 'Nnewi sector', so named because seventeen miles down the road to the south (of which the Nigerians have only covered six) is the village of Nnewi, Ojukwu's home town. Huge stretches of the road have been bulldozed away by the retreating Biafrans and further made impassable by the rains. The Nigerians are still using their French Panhard armoured cars here (I wonder who supplies the spare parts?) at which the Biafrans frequently fire their newly acquired French armour-piercing rockets. In Lagos the capture of Nnewi—home of the 'arch rebels' and the 'Nnewi secessionist clique'—has high political priority. Here it hardly rates at all, the forward troops not having moved either way since June. 'We seem to drink a lot of beer around here,' observes one officer back at the mess, 'Must be the tension or not having much else to do, I suppose.'

Onitsha town is the worst casualty of the war mainly as a result of the terrific artillery bombardments it received from across the Niger while still in Biafran hands, but partly also because it has continued to be an embattled town, virtually under siege and without a civilian population. Its magnificent market is gutted; houses, factories, schools and churches have been destroyed and every house bears war scars and has been looted. Like an army itself, the bush is advancing on the abandoned suburbs. There is one small refugee camp in the centre, close to the battery of 105s which lay down a deafening barrage at dusk and dawn with a regularity that you can set your watch by. The authorities say there are 3,000 Ibos in the camp, but the Red Cross puts it more realistically at 700. Most of the refugees are old men and women and a lot of young children and all of them look well fed and healthy. But it is a drop in the ocean compared with Onitsha's pre-war population of a quarter of a million. A small primary school is functioning though the great problem seems to be boredom. I ask the camp leader what he does all day. 'I read my Bible,' he replies.

* * *

The Biafrans' main weapons, according to the Nigerian officers, are small arms, rockets and hunting guns. Again there is a more realistic appreciation, here in the front-line, of what Nigeria is up against. 'I never underrate the rebels,' says a lieutenant-colonel who has been with the Division since it was formed. 'Everything depends on supplies—as long as they get arms and food they'll continue to fight us. Their minds have been engineered by Ojukwu and his government,' he adds. There is no discernible anti-Ibo feeling among these men. 'I want no part in crushing them,' says a Middle Belt officer who fought and won a medal in the United Nations Congo operation. 'We're not fighting for that.' 'It's their sense of insecurity,' says another. 'They are literally frightened to death—so they will either die in battle or of despair.'

* * *

There is no sign of 'give' on the other side. The Biafrans are not in the habit of surrendering and there are few prisoners of war. One officer tells me he has seen women helping the Biafran soldiers in their trenches. 'We

tried urging them to surrender by shouting at them through megaphones,' he says. 'All we got in reply was a hail of bullets.'

* * *

This is indeed a strange corner of the war. There is far less contact with the enemy, far less action and infinitely less excitement here than anywhere else along the fronts, yet one receives a more profound and electrical feeling of what it is all about: its confusion, its implacability, its ineptitude, its naivety, its self-knowledge and its mind-boggling casualness. But beneath the static, beneath the nonchalance, the bombast and the bravado there is a heavy, cancerous coil of inadequacy and shame. Nigerians know that a civil war must not be lost but victory can bring no glory, nor can it eradicate the memory of the original failure.

* * *

The Biafrans appear to have withdrawn some of their troops recently, probably through fear of being cut off in the south by the advancing 1st Division. Colonel Haruna believes they may choose the town of Orlu for their last stand should Umuahia, Colonel Ojukwu's present capital, fall. The 2nd Division—Cinderella without a fairy godmother—will then have an opportunity to prove its paces. Meanwhile, the affable Colonel, an excellent host, contents himself with inflicting savage punishment on his visitors and fellow officers alike upon the Scrabble board.

* * *

Back in Lagos from the front one notices that the city, never a lovely place, has lost its pre-war spring and vitality; ordinary life goes on; the street lamps are off at night but that seems to be one of the few overt concessions to the war. Nevertheless, unless I am imagining it, the war has had a psychological and depressive effect on people. This even mutes good news. I was in the home of a permanent secretary (an Ibo, incidentally, from the Mid-West) with some other senior civil servants when the phone rang. He answered it, put the receiver down and said in a quiet voice, 'Owerri's fallen'. There was no jubilation, no hand-shaking or back-slapping—not even smiles, just a collective relaxing of tension which, I am sure, none of us had been aware existed until it was removed. They

all thought, with relief in their voices, that the war would be over soon.

* * *

This is the time of the massive International Red Cross build-up in Lagos and in the field. The city, saturated by the heaviest rains in living memory, is also subjected to a cosmopolitan torrent of relief workers, international emissaries and foreign observers. Straw-haired Scandinavians, the colour of tomato sauce, sprawled beside hotel swimming-pools recall the heyday of the Congo. While many of the relief people are professionals and know their way around, a lot of them have never done this sort of work before nor ever been outside Europe. Apart from the more dramatic clashes with soldiers like Adekunle, there is a great deal of friction at lower levels. Even in the Enugu area where relations between the army and the Red Cross are generally excellent there are still some difficulties. Some of the army officers voice their criticisms. 'To begin with many of these relief people thought they ruled the place and didn't seem to realise that in a war the army must have priority,' said one sector commander. 'There were one or two of them who treated us as if we were still up in the trees,' said another highly sophisticated Sandhurst man. 'But they've got over that now,' he added kindly.

* * *

I decide to go back to the front and so launch myself on the long process for getting a pass. Bearding the Nigerian bureaucracy is nightmarish. It is Kafka in the gloomy, humid corridors, but vintage *Catch 22* in the waiting-rooms. A joust with the Director of Information's secretary.

'Can I see the Director, please?'

'Do you have an appointment?'

'No, I am afraid not, I couldn't get him on the phone.'

'Ah, then you can't see him.'

'Can I make an appointment?'

'The Director makes his own appointments.'

'Well, can I see him to make an appointment?'

'No, I've just told you, no one can see him without an appointment.'

I am somewhat mollified, after this exchange, when I read this story in

the local paper the next day: 'Entries are invited for the 1969 beauty competition for MISS INFORMATION, a spokesman of the Ministry announced today.'

* * *

The tide began to turn for Biafra in mid-September (1968) with the recapture of the small lakeside town of Oguta, only ten miles from Uli. (Ojukwu was said to have led the assault personally and reprimanded the triumphant Biafran soldiers when they started looting.) But the change of fortune did not become apparent until late October by which time Obilago airfield (second in importance to Uli) and Okigwi had fallen to the Nigerians, though Umuahia, the big prize, continued to elude them. The steady injection of French arms—an average of twenty tons a night—the improving relief situation, burgeoning world interest and concern and the unexpected fillip of President de Gaulle's statement in support of Biafra on 9th September, all helped to boost Biafran morale and to stiffen the leadership's determination not to compromise on the key issue of sovereignty. These factors undoubtedly enabled the 'hawks' to crush the peace proposals, formulated by the 'doves' after their crucial meeting with the French in early September and the subsequent discussions with the British government in London, without any difficulty.

Once again, things were looking up for Biafra, for although victory seemed as distant and as fantastical as ever, a stalemate which would serve Biafra's purpose well now appeared to be a distinct possibility. Once again also, that deadly syndrome of suffering and resistance—'we've lost so much, it would be stupid to give up or compromise just when the sun is beginning to shine through the clouds'—came into play. Biafran strategy underwent a shift of emphasis at this time. After the disappointment of the O.A.U. summit in Algiers ('the pro-Federal resolution has scotched further African recognition of Biafra for at least the next six months,' estimated one member of the government in Lagos), the Biafrans looked less towards Africa for their salvation and more in the direction of Western Europe, Canada and the United States. At home, however, nothing changed. 'Holding the line' and waiting for the disappointment and frustration at yet another abortive 'final offensive' to take its toll on the Federation's fragile unity, or soften its terms for peace, remained the keystone of Ojukwu's war policy.

In Lagos, the opposite, in fact, was happening. The conviction that military victory was the only way out of the crisis had been growing for

some time, but now it hardened into something close to dogma. The Federal offensive had failed for other reasons—poor logistics and co-ordination, over-extended lines of communication and exceptionally heavy rains—as well as French arms and Biafran guts, but Lagos singled out the interventionist element for almost exclusive blame in its post-mortem. The result was a closing of ranks, a strengthening of the 'hawks', even though their 'quick kill' policy had just been discredited, and a new determination to 'finish the job'. For the Federals, too, the suffering-and-resistance syndrome applied, for they felt that to give up or compromise now when Biafra had been reduced to a quarter of its original size would also render worthless *their* fifteen months of effort and sacrifice. A senior government official expressed the current feeling like this: 'negotiations with champagne and embraces all round would have been the best way out, but now it's clear that the rebellion must die an unnatural and painful death. The Biafrans need a shock to shake them out of their trauma—total military defeat is the only answer.' (This same official predicted Ojukwu's final escape: 'he will get out, he's not a Castro or a Guevara.') For those outside the conflict, the situation added muscle to the argument, now espoused by many commentators and even by some governments, that the Nigerians could not win the war, or, depending on the sentiments of the assessor, the Biafrans could not lose it.

The rest of the year was, however, not entirely devoid of interest. Federal bombing attacks on Uli—night raids began in October—intensified but without affecting the arms supplies. Biafra carried the war back into the Mid-West with guerrilla incursions in the Ibo areas along the Niger's west bank. The International Observer Team after a slow start—the Polish member, a colonel, was particularly tardy and the current joke in Lagos had it that he was still holed up in his tank in Czechoslovakia—produced several reports denying genocide against the Biafrans and commending the Federal troops for their treatment of civilians. Gowon announced that the promised early return to civilian rule had been delayed and a new date would be set after the war. Anti-tax riots broke out in several places in the West, requiring tough measures to contain them but the basic unity of the Federation behind the war effort was not disturbed. Abroad, Biafra received new hope from a statement by Richard Nixon, speaking as Republican candidate in the 1968 United States presidential election campaign. Nixon, from the safety of the election stump and pandering to the popular feeling in America for Biafra, alleged, 'genocide is what is taking place right now—and starvation is the grim reaper.'

and called on President Johnson not to stand on 'diplomatic niceties' in dealing with the war. By a curious coincidence he made this sweeping claim on the same day (9th September) that President de Gaulle also for the first time personally spoke out in support of Biafra. Canada, too, showed positive signs of interest and talked of bringing the humanitarian side of the crisis to the United Nations.



This period of military stalemate, not total by any means but unproductive of any significant strategic changes, provides a good opportunity to take a closer look at the nature of the war itself. It was black Africa's first large-scale war fought with modern weapons in which the armies were manned, trained, led and sustained by Africans. (The white mercenaries played a relatively minor and negative role.¹) It was the first war in Africa to come under the penetrating eye of the television camera, and the first war anywhere to have a team of international observers travelling around the fronts examining the conduct of the troops. The military nature of the struggle is certainly one of the most obscure and confusing aspects of the story, a confusion that is partly ascribable to the immense distance which separated the orderly worlds of the leaders, surrounded by their sophisticated aides back at general headquarters, and the raw reality of the front-line. It was compounded by the paucity of accurate information that reached the outside world about conditions in the field. Government war communiqués and briefings were couched in splendid military prose and invariably depicted progress on all fronts, few casualties amongst own troops (whereas enemy losses would be 'heavy'), and the impending annihilation of the enemy, all with a jingoism and flavour reminiscent of the First World War. Regrettably, this false impression was sometimes deepened by the partisan reporting of a few of the small number of foreign observers who managed to visit the front. Memories are short and first-hand accounts by soldiers who fought in the war, so far, few. Moreover, even the participants' own stories are likely to be strongly influenced by political considerations and hindsight. My own experiences at the front on each side are by no means exhaustive but they do, I think, enable me to recognise 'coloured' reporting when I see it, and to explore the subject, with an eye which is neither too romantic, too jaundiced nor, I hope, too patronising.

¹ See Chapter XII.

But it is necessary to be frank. By normal Western military standards, it was a shambles of a war. Command structure, tactical co-ordination, proper logistics, adequate communications and medical services hardly existed. The picture painted in Lagos or Umuahia or even at divisional level was rarely recognisable at the front. In the general headquarters the calibre and efficiency of the senior soldiers were often impressive but it was spread far too thinly over the huge armies and complex structures that came into being almost overnight. There was a great shortage of technical officers of all kinds, more noticeable on the Federal than the Biafran side. In both G.H.Q.s a leisurely, orthodox and thoroughly gentlemanly pace characterised the opposed armies' work and life styles. Some of this passed down the line to the divisional commands but there, the real power houses of the two war machines, different influences were at work.

On the Federal side, the divisional commanders were like feudal barons, owing, it often seemed, only the most nominal fealty to their overlord in Lagos. Adekunle's refusal to allow the International Red Cross to operate in his area after Gowon had given it permission to work behind all the fronts was perhaps the most blatant expression of this independence. The divisional commanders exercised supreme power over life and death both in military and civil matters within their commands and were treated with a subservient respect commensurate to that position by their junior officers and the civilians alike. The fact that their headquarters were a long way from Lagos and difficult to reach because of poor communications reinforced their autonomy. The only material considerations which made them at all beholden to the central government were the need for money, supplies and patronage. But even here, most of the commanders managed to provide for themselves to a certain extent by begging, borrowing or, occasionally, stealing money locally and by commandeering transport and provisions. There seemed to be no shortage of Nigerian currency for local purchasing, which was usually haphazard, and could be bizarre. Adekunle was particularly fast off the mark when he needed something urgently. On one occasion, he called the British Leyland representative (an Englishman) into his office in Port Harcourt and ordered forty Land-Rovers on the spot. When the representative asked for the customary down payment, the 'Black Scorpion' promptly paid him £50,000 in cash over the top of his desk and promised the balance on delivery. The astonished salesman was given the money in a large cardboard box formerly used for detergent and sent on his

way. Unfortunately, he could not get an aircraft out for two days so went everywhere with his precious soap box tucked securely, though uncomfortably, under his arm. Another time, Adekunle walked into a large store in Lagos and bought half a dozen typewriters for his divisional offices. He told the two expatriate salesmen to come with him to Ikeja airport where he would settle the account. They did so—it was in the morning—but when they got there Adekunle simply put them on his plane and flew them off to Port Harcourt, 400 miles away. There they were paid in cash and sent back to Lagos in his aircraft, arriving just before nightfall.

More serious, however, was the rivalry between the three Divisions. This covered every field from the honour and glory deriving from the capture of significant Biafran towns to the most cut-throat competition for arms, supplies and reinforcements from Lagos. Co-operation and co-ordination, hard enough to achieve in view of the huge mass of men, the vast tracts of difficult terrain and the poor communications, were rendered virtually impossible by these rivalries which greatly harmed the Federal war effort. Competition was particularly pronounced between the most active Divisions: the 1st based in Enugu and the 3rd in Port Harcourt. Each had its own officers watching and waiting for the arms ships in Lagos docks; the Shell oil depot in Apapa also had permanent representatives vying with each other over petrol supplies. Adekunle was especially prone to flying back to Lagos suddenly and personally supervising the routing—and sometimes 're-routing'—of ammunition and other supplies to his own Division. Recruits waiting at Ikeja airport for transport to take them to the 1st Division would suddenly find themselves on a plane heading for the 3rd, and vice versa. The 1st Division became so suspicious of the 3rd, which usually seemed to come off best in this silent struggle that, even when the war was over, it refused to allow its petrol supplies to be shipped through Port Harcourt despite the time and expense this route saved. Yet more extraordinary was the fact that at least two of the Divisions had their own arms buyers operating in Europe independently of the Federal government—though sending it their bills—at different stages in the war.

In Biafra there was far less divisional autonomy. The smallness of the defended area and Biafra being on the defensive nearly all the time made a tighter control by the centre possible. Ojukwu never fully trusted his senior army officers—many of them had opposed secession while the Banjo/Ifeajuna plot had shown the risks of a military coup—and was

worried that some of his field commanders might become too powerful. So he kept a strict eye on them and changed them round if they became too popular or successful. Biafra's most effective soldier, Colonel Joe 'Hannibal' Achuzie, lost one command in this way, and so did Lieutenant-Colonel Timothy Onweatuegwu, one of the January coup boys who was withdrawn from the Aba sector where he had been a tower of strength during a crucial period. These tactics, while maintaining Ojukwu's tight grip on the army, probably did Biafra more harm in the long run through the removal of effective men from the places where they were most needed.

The capacity, character and style of the individual commanders at all levels, but especially at the top, were central to the conduct of the war. The three Federal Divisions varied enormously for a number of reasons but the imprint of their respective commanders' personalities gave them their distinctive characters. The 1st Division under Colonel Mohammed Shuwa was cautious and orthodox; the 3rd Marine Commando, led by Adekunle, aggressive and dynamic—among its soldiers terror of the fiery and unpredictable 'Black Scorpion' often outweighed fear of the enemy—and the 2nd Division changed from being rumbustious and chaotic under Murtala Mohammed² to easy-going and plodding under the dilettante Haruna. It is probably no accident that the two most successful field commanders (Adekunle in Nigeria and Achuzie in Biafra) thrown up by the war were similar in temperament, shared the same magnetism, employed identical fear-inculcating disciplinary methods and rejoiced in resounding nicknames. Adekunle and his officers always carried riding crops or golf club handles (never seen in the more seasoned and orderly 1st Division) which were used liberally on the men for the smallest military misdemeanour and supplemented by loud shouting and incessant saluting, even in tricky places like the turrets of armoured cars. Achuzie, on the other side used to whip and beat his men into battle which, as with Adekunle, seemed to be acceptable at least partly because both commanders were known to be scornful of their own personal safety.

Adekunle is half Yoruba and half Bachama (one of Nigeria's most warlike minority tribes from the Middle Belt) and was trained at Sandhurst where he was regarded as something of a 'loner' and not above average ability. He served as a normal infantry officer and only came into prominence when he led the sea-borne assaults on Bonny and the Mid-

² Murtala also sustained the feudal image: 'His H.Q. faintly resembles the court of some medieval warrior king, with flags strung over the entrance and vehicles instead of horses churning up the mud outside.' *West Africa*, 21.10.1967.

West early in the civil war. His Division was an amorphous mixture of old and new soldiers from practically every tribe in the Federation but with a large contingent of Yorubas. (Adekunle gradually came to regard himself as more Yoruba than Northerner as a result of his rivalry with Shuwa and Murtala Mohammed in the other Divisions and because of Northern officers' alleged discrimination against him before the war.) His greatest achievement was to weld his Division into a recognisable though loose organisational shape and breathe something of his own sulphurous spirit into his men. The result was some spectacular successes (Calabar, Port Harcourt, Aba and Owerri) before over-reaching himself in a desperate attempt to 'beat' the 1st Division to the main prizes of Umuahia and Uli. He came a cropper and lost Owerri which was one of the reasons—though probably not the main cause—for his removal in the complete change-round of Divisional commanders in May 1969. But he had in the meantime become a Yoruba and, to a lesser extent, a national hero. In the West he was seen in the tradition of the Yoruba war-lords of the nineteenth century and as a potential military leader if the West should ever decide to go it alone. He was made a chief and was immensely popular with the man in the street. (The Yorubas called him, delightedly, 'na cinema'—pidgin English for 'a great show'.) He always denied political ambition (he told me once that he wanted to become a farmer when he retired from the army, but then most Nigerian officers tended to tell you that); however, it seems clear that his withdrawal to take over the directorate of training under the eye of Gowon in Lagos, was at least partly designed to head off any intentions he had in that direction and to curb his ever-growing independence and unruliness in Port Harcourt. Rather like the allies' race with the Russians across Europe in the closing stages of the Second World War, the Federal government did not want a victorious Adekunle in control of most of former Biafra. (After the war, however, Adekunle's remarkable talents for 'getting things done' were once again put to good use: this time in the more pacific area of relieving the appalling congestion in the Lagos docks, a task in which he was again immensely successful.)

Colonel Joe 'Hannibal' Achuzie is a more mysterious figure since he had never served in the Nigerian army. He claimed that he had fought in the British army in Korea and Suez but this has never been confirmed. Before the war he ran an electrical business in Port Harcourt and before that he had lived in Britain where he married his English wife, Ethel. His nickname is also a mystery—there is nothing remotely resembling

either the Alps or elephants in Biafra—but presumably it came as recognition of his general military prowess which was genuine enough. He was a rough and tough soldier who inspired the same fear and respect in his men as Adekunle did; he also had a good tactical sense and could move his troops around with more speed than most of the commanders on either side. He was responsible for the huge ambush at Abagana, and played a leading part in the recapture of Owerri. But, unfortunately for Biafra's military fortunes, Ojukwu pulled him back at about the same time that Adekunle lost his command, and he was put in charge of petrol rationing, a waste of talent if there ever was one. He came into prominence at the end of the war when he was alleged to have declared that whatever happened, he would fight on. But, in fact, he supported Effiong in carrying out the surrender after Ojukwu had flown away. A rather charming picture of his wife, laughing in obvious relief with a group of Federal soldiers on Uli airstrip, appeared in the Lagos papers a few days after the collapse.

At the front itself, it was a nine-to-five affair, with recognisable breaks for meals and siestas and no night fighting. There were few set-piece battles, no hand-to-hand or street fighting and few heroics. Some European correspondents have produced a highly romanticised but erroneous impression of the nature of the war, the most notable offender being Frederick Forsyth, who spent a long time in Biafra and wrote a strongly partisan book called *The Biafra Story*. Typical of this kind of military reporting were phrases like, 'true to Hausa tradition [Murtala] Mohammed massed his troops in solid phalanxes and thus they moved down the road'³ (there were very few Hausas in the Nigerian army, though Murtala was one, and they are not the traditional fighters of the North; the Federals were much too cautious to 'mass' their troops in 'solid phalanxes' on the roads), and, describing the Abagana ambush, 'into it the next morning rolled the main force, a 102-lorry convoy with 6,000 men on board and 350 tons of equipment.'⁴ (A simple calculation makes this an incredible sixty-man and three-and-a-half-ton load per truck for an army whose main transport vehicle was the three-ton Bedford R.L.!). Fortunately, more realistic reporting came from a variety of sources, one of the best being Michael Leapman, also a Biafra sympathiser and then diplomatic correspondent of the *Sun*.

³ Frederick Forsyth, *op. cit.*, p. 124. Forsyth spent many months in Biafra and the deepest disappointment of his book is not its Biafran partisanship but its failure to give a realistic and detailed picture of what life in Biafra was really like.

⁴ *op. cit.* p. 126.

'In military terms [he wrote after a spell on one of the Biafran fronts], it is a poor joke of a war. . . Sandhurst training is fine for officers who can count on a fair level of competence among their men, or alternatively who do not have wars to fight. It gives few clues to the handling of illiterate, inexperienced boys, fresh from the villages, understandably terrified at the sound of gunfire.'⁵

Federal tactics relied heavily on their massive superiority in fire-power for pre-assault 'softening up' tactics, rather like the Americans in Vietnam. A good summary of the pattern of the fighting comes from Major-General Alexander, the first British member of the Observer Team in Nigeria (O.T.N.) and Nkrumah's former chief of staff who had led the Ghanaian contingent in the Congo.

'Federal forces advance astride the road towards the town, and when they get within three or four miles of it they halt. They then start building up their ammunition. Before the assault they subject the outskirts of the town to artillery and armoured car fire. The Biafrans do not carry out a staunch defence of this objective. Once they have decided that the Federals are about to attack they pull out, taking everything movable with them, and the Federals move in firing every round of ammunition they have. After occupying the town, the Federal forces sit down and wait for their ammunition to be replenished, and the Biafrans carry out a counter-attack by fire. Ammunition control as we understand it is non-existent on the Federal side, and during an advance a Federal soldier fires every round in his possession, whether he is meeting resistance or not.'⁶

Contrary to popular belief, however, the Nigerians' British-supplied Saladin, Saracen and Ferret armoured cars did not play a crucial role in the fighting except, possibly, as morale boosters. Many of them were 'off the road' due to poor maintenance, there was a continuous shortage of spare parts and proper mechanics and, above all, the Federals were ultra-cautious in their use of them, fearing Biafran ambushes or being cut off, with the result that the armoured cars rarely spear-headed the attack but were kept well behind and used to consolidate any ground gained. Much more decisive were the Nigerians' mortars, artillery, heavy

⁵ Michael Leapman, *Venture*, July/August 1969, p. 11.

⁶ Major-General Alexander, *Sunday Telegraph*, 11.5.1969.

machineguns and apparently limitless supply of small arms ammunition. However, to suggest the Biafrans were the 'Vietcong' of the Nigerian war would be false. There were attempts in the earlier stages to organise guerrilla operations, notably the 4th Commando Brigade under Steiner and the mercenaries.⁷ But these were only partially successful. The basic problem was that the experienced officers and men in the Biafran army had been trained for conventional warfare. For most of the war they clung stubbornly to their Sandhurst ideals, of which they were immensely proud,⁸ even though these were totally unsuited to the capability of the army, the terrain, the overwhelming fire-power of the enemy and the psychological nature of the conflict itself. An American reporter summed it up thus:

'in fact, it was the code of Kipling that influenced the conduct of the war on both sides. Until the very end, Effiong [Biafra's chief of staff] looked like a British staff general—a polished Sam Browne belt, a sword for ceremonial occasions and a chauffeur-driven, khaki-coloured English Humber car bearing a general's flag. His officers were similarly indoctrinated—moustaches, swagger sticks, batmen, officers' messes.'⁹

There was also a great emphasis on educational qualifications—another source of pride with the Ibos—to the detriment of other more useful qualities, such as leadership, bravery and staying power on the battlefield. For a long time no one could become an officer unless he had a minimum of school certificate and there was also a reluctance to promote promising soldiers in the field. As in the Federal army, strong class distinctions between officers and men were maintained—another imprint of the British that was deeply engrained—which did not lend themselves to guerrilla tactics. I remember asking a P.O.W. in an officers' camp in Owerri at the end of the war why he and his comrades looked so fit in view of the widespread starvation. 'Oh, we are *officers*,' he answered disdainfully.

In the last year of the war, however, Ojukwu made a serious attempt to launch a proper guerrilla operation. This was the Biafran Organisation of Freedom Fighters (BOFF), a para-military force of youths, under his own direct control, which had some political education and ideological motivation. It was designed to 'swim' in the 'sea' of Ibo civilians in the

⁷ See Chapter XII.

⁸ Confirmed by Count von Rosen, in an article in *The Times* (London) by Suzanne Cronjé, 27.2.1970.

⁹ James Wilde, *Time* magazine, 26.1.1970.

Federally occupied areas of northern Biafra and along the west bank of the Niger in the Mid-West. It was part of Ojukwu's new policy of nationalistic self-reliance and was quite successful in a limited way. However, it came too late to be decisive because by then the civilians were already tired of the war and the Federal troops had too strong a hold to be easily dislodged. But the key to victory, in the tactical sense, undoubtedly lay in weaponry, supplies and ammunition. (One of the ironies of the opening stages of the war was that the Federal army had been well-equipped by Ojukwu himself who had been quartermaster-general in the pre-coup era.) Biafra's military fortunes ebbed and flowed according to the state of its armoury and the prodigal expenditure of ammunition by the Nigerians (60 million rounds of 7.62 mm. was estimated as the minimum needs for the final Federal offensive by the Lagos G.H.Q.¹⁰) was only matched by the devices to which the Biafrans were compelled to resort to supplement their meagre supplies, such as home-made rockets and mines and the simulating of machinegun fire by beating traditional drums or running a stick up and down a piece of corrugated iron. Summing it up, Colonel Robert Scott, defence adviser in the British High Commission in Lagos, said in his famous report which appeared in the pages of the *Sunday Telegraph* the weekend Biafra collapsed, 'it can be fairly said that the military attributions and shortcomings of both sides are self-cancelling. It is a situation where the biggest and best battalions will win in the end.'¹¹

* * *

The really striking thing about the Nigerian civil war, however, is not that the armies functioned in an unorthodox or shambling way, but that they functioned at all. When one considers how small the original Nigerian army had been (8,500 men); how its officer corps had been decimated by two bloody coups; how the tribally fragmented sections had then been confronted with a civil war and expanded a hundredfold—the Federal army was 200,000 strong at the end of the war—with raw, uneducated, half-trained recruits ('by any standard, an incredible expansion', noted Major-General Alexander); and taking into account the crucial dearth of properly trained officers and N.C.O.s; the difficult terrain, the debilitating climate, the uneven and motley supplies of weapons and the terrifying newness of the whole experience, it is indeed

¹⁰ Colonel Robert Scott's report, *Sunday Telegraph*, 11.1.1970.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

a wonder that the opposed armies did not disintegrate with the opening shots. For however critical one is of the way the war was fought, it was not just another mindless African tribal skirmish with a bunch of motiveless tribesmen knocking each other over the head because it happened to be the open season. Like the American and Spanish civil wars, it was a modern war, fought with modern weapons, albeit haphazardly, for modern ideals under the eyes of the world.

Nor was it another 'Congo'. From a military point of view the Nigerian war is often compared to the Congo, especially by white racialists and other denigrators of black Africa. But it was, in my view, a totally different affair. The Congo represented true anarchy and even though the scale of the fighting was much smaller than in Nigeria it was far more barbarous and indiscriminate. I spent a year there during the height of the troubles and I remember it was the unpredictability, the lack of rhyme or reason for the killing and brutality that was so frightening. I never felt half as scared in either of the front-lines in Nigeria as I had done simply driving down an empty Congolese road not knowing whether the soldiers at the next roadblock round the corner were going to wave you on, beat you up, shoot, or even eat you. In Nigeria you could explain, in the Congo communication hadn't been invented. The Congo disaster had a big influence on the belligerents in Nigeria for they, as soldiers, diplomats and policemen in the United Nations operation, had helped to bring some sense of order into that tragic, anarchic land. And the leadership on both sides was determined not to unleash a similar 'blood-dimmed tide' in Nigeria. Neither was entirely successful but by the time the war was over, particularly with its unprecedented and extraordinarily merciful ending, even the white supremacists of southern Africa had to admit that at least some Africans possessed guts, determination and compassion. On the other hand, the Nigerian war did not compare with a modern European war. Indeed if it had done so, it is arguable that many more thousands, perhaps millions would have been killed with such a weight of fire-power placed in skilled and experienced hands.

Both leaderships tried desperately hard to conduct the war professionally and reasonably humanely. Neither saw the army as simply a blunt instrument for bludgeoning the enemy; it was equally a key political weapon which was intended to play an integral part in the grand design. Perhaps the most interesting manifestation of this was Gowon's 'Code of Conduct', a revealing and unique document in its way, which he issued to his armed forces at the outbreak of war. Invoking the inter-

national reputation of the Nigerian army prior to the first coup, the 'Code' outlined the reasons for going to war, demanded exemplary loyalty, patriotism and discipline from officers and men alike and exhorted them to behave humanely. Heavy stress was laid upon the political nature of the war. 'You are not fighting a war against a foreign enemy. Nor are you fighting a religious war or *jihad*. You are only subduing the rebellion of Lieutenant-Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu and his clique.' Detailed instructions were given for the treatment of civilians, P.O.W.s, foreigners, churches, mosques and private property. The only jarring note concerned foreign mercenaries: 'they will not be spared: they are the worst of enemies.' Consciousness of a wider audience was striking. 'You must bear in mind at all times', the 'Code' stated, 'that other nations in Africa and the rest of the world are looking at us to see how well we can perform this task.' Typically, the document ended: 'you must remember that some of the soldiers Lieutenant-Colonel Ojukwu has now forced to oppose you were once your old comrades-in-arms and would like to remain so. You must therefore treat them with respect and dignity except anyone who is hostile to you. Good luck.'¹² Of course, as with most aspects of the war there was a large gap between intention and execution. The Nigerian army, often fighting on a diet of 'juju', marijuana and 'Star' beer (beer sales rocketed during the war) was guilty of many excesses including several well-documented atrocities, but the 'Code' went some way to meet the ordinary soldiers' need for political education and gave the officers a set of stiff moral values to live up to. It also helped to curb brutality—several soldiers were executed or imprisoned for infringing the 'Code'—and provided a useful yardstick for the international team of observers.

The invitation to a group of military observers—known as the Observer Team in Nigeria (O.T.N.) and drawn from Britain, Canada, Poland, the United Nations and the O.A.U.—to inspect the behaviour of the Federal troops at the fronts and investigate the Biafran charge of genocide was a unique and civilising contribution to the history of warfare. The idea, first suggested by the British government, was acceptable to Gowon but opposed by his military and civil service 'hawks' who argued, with some justification, that the presence of foreign observers implied an infringement of Nigeria's sovereignty and a further internationalisation of the conflict. However, the team was invited and spent sixteen months working at the fronts producing voluminous and detailed reports on the

¹² 'Operational Code of Conduct for the Nigerian Armed Forces.'

conduct of the Federal soldiers, treatment of Biafran civilians, P.O.W.s, the relief situation and investigating charges of specific brutality. The O.T.N. had limitations: it only saw one side of the fighting (it refused a Biafran invitation to go there because this would have been unacceptable to the Nigerians); it was ultra-cautious in both its dealings with the Federal field commanders—though this did not prevent a flaming row with Adekunle which Gowon himself had to sort out—and its findings; and by sticking limpet-like to its brief it temporarily abandoned the front at the most crucial time of all when Biafra collapsed, in order to return to Lagos for fresh instructions. Nevertheless it did more good than harm, exercising a moderating and cautioning influence on the Federal army—to the direct benefit of the Biafran civilians caught in the war zones—and occasionally producing frank and hard-hitting public criticism as in the case of its investigation into the killing of two European relief workers and a missionary couple at Okigwi in October 1968 ('unprovoked and inexcusable' was its verdict) and the massacre of Ibo villagers by Federal soldiers near Afikpo during Christmas 1969. In the end the O.T.N.s presence and work also benefited the Nigerian cause since it undermined, if not totally destroyed, the Biafran claim of genocide.

What of genocide? The Ibos' experience in the North and elsewhere in 1966 was certainly a form of genocide, although many non-Ibos were also killed simply because they were non-Northerners. The intellectual argument often used to sustain the genocide theory, notably by Conor Cruise O'Brien, the Irish historian, diplomat and writer, who issued the first public warning in September 1967, when he alleged that 'mass murder on a scale unprecedented as yet in Africa' was imminent,¹³ was that ever since the 1966 massacres it had been the *intention* of the Federal government to eliminate the Ibos; whether or not it succeeded was not strictly relevant. According to this line of argument—and this is how most Ibos within Biafra also expressed their fears—the fact that hundreds of thousands of their tribesmen, possibly several millions in the latter stages of the war, were safe and living reasonable lives in Federal-controlled areas did not alter the validity of the claim. Given the chance, they argued, the Nigerians would annihilate the Ibo race.

The essential points here—and it is important since the cry of 'genocide' became one of the major issues of the war—are, firstly, to distinguish between the Ibos' pre-war tragedy and their war-time experience and, secondly, to understand the brutal context of this war (and all wars) and

¹³ O'Brien made the statement in New York after returning from a visit to Biafra.

examine the Federal government's alleged genocidal intentions and actions within it. The Northern massacres occurred in peace-time, were perpetrated by the local people (civilians and soldiers) against an alien, economically dominant minority and were designed to drive the Ibos out of Nigeria.¹⁴ Curiously, the Eastern government never referred to these genuinely genocidal massacres as 'genocide' but reserved the term for the war-time deaths. The later killings took place during a full-scale war whose primary aim was the opposite: to keep the Ibos in the Federation. All wars witness massacres, atrocities, indiscriminate and gratuitous brutality; all modern wars feature the aerial bombing of civilians. The Nigerian war was no exception but it was, contrary to popular and, particularly, pro-Biafran belief, more humane than most wars. It had no 'Andersonvilles' or 'Libby Prisons'¹⁵ that had shamed the American civil war; only rarely were defenceless opponents put up against a wall and shot in the way that an incredible hundred-thousand people died in the Spanish civil war.¹⁶ The main causes of death were 'legitimate' war-time killers: starvation (by far the biggest but as I have pointed out each side played politics with relief and equally shared the responsibility for this¹⁷), the actual fighting, accidents and lack of medical attention for the wounded.

Massacres did, of course, occur, and were perpetrated by both sides, usually in the heat of battle or during its immediate aftermath. There was, however, no constant 'genocidal' pattern or theme or even agent in these atrocities for, on the Federal side, civilians were as prominent as soldiers, Westerners and Mid-Westerners as guilty as Northerners. Nor was there a 'genocidal' focus: Eastern minorities were also victims. The causes of the atrocities were usually local and varied enormously: the shooting of Ibo civilians in Asaba after the reconquest of the Mid-West by Federal troops was sparked off by a Biafran attempt to kill a Nigerian officer and organised by a bitterly anti-Ibo Mid-Westerner. The Federal shootings near Afikpo just before the end of the war were classical anti-guerrilla reprisals of the My Lai kind in Vietnam; *Biafran* atrocities against the Rivers people in Port Harcourt fitted in with the pattern of a retreating army that considers itself betrayed by the local people. Adekunle razed the historic Calabar prison with 300 Biafran policemen and soldiers

¹⁴ See Chapter III.

¹⁵ Notorious P.O.W. camps in the Confederacy where thousands of Union soldiers died through starvation and disease.

¹⁶ Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, 1962), p. 606.

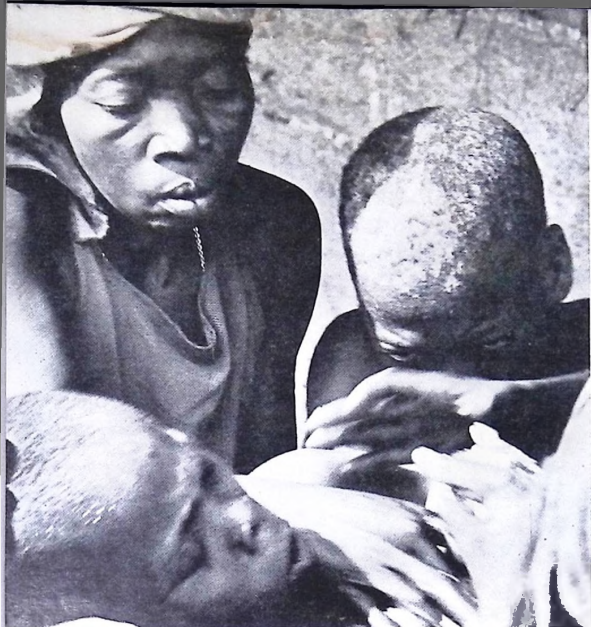
¹⁷ See Chapter IX.

inside because they refused to surrender, proving nothing except the indomitable courage of the defenders and the professional ruthlessness of the attacker. The Biafran massacre of the eleven Italian oilmen—as deliberate as any of the other atrocities—was designed presumably to discourage other foreign oilmen working in the Mid-West. None of these acts had the approval of the two leaderships and most of them happened without even the knowledge of the local field commanders. They were inexcusable but typical of the sort of horrifyingly brutal incident that occurs in every war. The whole essence of Federal policy was the reverse of genocide precisely because there had already been an experience of that nature in the North and the political aim was now to bring the victims of that outbreak back into the fold. At a lower level this was enforced, where possible, by draconian measures such as the execution of officers and men alike if they were caught ill-treating defenceless Ibos.

Many correspondents and Biafra supporters tended to clinch their 'genocide' arguments by citing the effect of Federal air-raids on civilian centres of population. This seems to me an astonishing inference and suggests an irresponsible naivety or a hypocritical double-standard on the part of the people who made it. Aerial bombing, by its nature, is indiscriminate; it becomes even more haphazard in the hands of poor pilots such as the Nigerians used for most of their operations. Whatever the intentions of the Federal pilots, therefore—and there is no proof that they were genocidal—the effect of their bombing was inevitably exceedingly indiscriminate. But the real point is that air-raids on civilian targets have become an accepted part and parcel of modern warfare. The Biafrans themselves launched the war in the air and killed a number of innocent Nigerian civilians in the process. No one accused them of genocide. Similarly, when the Germans killed thousands of British civilians during the Second World War they were not accused of genocide. Over 1,600 people were killed in Guernica in the Spanish civil war in a deliberate air attack to destroy the town; 35,000 people died in one terrible night when the British and Americans bombed Dresden; and 78,000 men, women and children were killed with one bomb at Hiroshima—yet no one accused the perpetrators of genocide. In Biafra there were no reliable figures for the casualties from air-raids but they probably did not exceed a couple of thousand and yet even today, Biafra's supporters are still talking and writing of the Nigerians' 'genocidal' air attacks.

The truth about genocide is that while it was mythical, like all myths,

particularly those concocted of fear, it exerted a tremendous influence over people's minds. 'Genocide cannot be proven until it is done,' said Ojukwu with his usual ruthless logic. The fear, deeply implanted by a traumatic past constantly revitalised through government propaganda and rationalised by the naive and dishonest corroboration of eager, impassioned foreigners, remained embedded in the Ibo psyche even after the myth had been triumphantly and demonstrably demolished by the bloodless end to the war. The Nigerian struggle, like other similar internecine conflicts, was a dirty war: a war in which human life was often worth less than a bottle of beer or a packet of cigarettes; a war in which both sides were terrified of each other, and sometimes killed as much from nervousness as from premeditation or hatred; a war in which most of the fighting troops, officers and N.C.O.s included, had virtually no military training worth the name; a war where uneducated or semi-literate men easily went on the rampage in the anarchical, sanctionless desert of the battlefield. It was, in short, a war not very different from any other and it is disturbing that we Westerners should have been so shocked, so blind, so patronising and so remarkably devious in our interpretation of its worst manifestations. We can perhaps be forgiven for not understanding its lack of dynamism, its casualness and inefficiency, because they are basically alien to our ethos. But there is no excuse for failing to grasp its indiscriminate brutality and murderous intent for these, as our history shows, we understand and still, from time to time, practise more proficiently than most.



An air-raid victim,
mourned in Biafra.

Sympathy for a Biafran casualty after a Federal air-raid.





Passionate and efficient bureaucrats, the Biafrans held their administration together even as the fronts crumbled; the 'desk' on the right is made out of an old packing case.

Biafra survived until the last hours as an organised state: Bank of Biafra, Owerri branch; the girls are wearing their hair in the 'sputnik' plaits characteristic of West Africa.



CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Britain's Cloaked Dagger

War-5

January-April 1969

British involvement
Markpress and PR

THE NEW YEAR (1969), MARKING THE EIGHTEENTH MONTH OF THE WAR, opened with a new Federal offensive. Government spokesmen in Lagos, so wrong so often in the past, were becoming increasingly circumspect about predicting a date for victory and confined themselves to: 'we are confident that the war will end this year.' The Biafrans, however, were also on the offensive, striking south-eastwards to the Cross river delta, south to Owerri, which they had encircled by the end of January and still deeper into the Ibo areas of the Mid-West. The war was becoming more dogged and dirtier. Federal air attacks were stepped up (Russian Ilyushin-28 bombers had joined the MiG and Delphin fighters) and markets, hospitals, churches, villages and other non-military targets were indiscriminately strafed and bombed, killing large numbers of civilians. As usual this had the opposite effect to the one intended: it stiffened rather than undermined popular support for the war in Biafra and added substance to the fears of genocide. Abroad the air-raids had become a scandal and raised a new outcry which was particularly intense in Britain after a series of long and detailed articles by Winston Churchill, grandson of the statesman, describing the effects of the bombing, had appeared in *The Times* in March.

The war on the ground had reached a peculiarly indecisive stage which seemed to confirm the views of those who regarded a military victory impossible for either side. The Nigerians tried to hide their concern by referring to the American and Spanish civil wars, both of which had lasted almost four years. But the Biafrans were beginning to feel that time was on their side and that they could withstand a prolonged stalemate better than their enemy, although it was difficult for the outsider to

discern the reasons for, or share, this confidence. The military situation was rather like a soft balloon, if you pushed in one side a bulge would immediately appear on the other. In spite of their overwhelming superiority in numbers and fire-power and their domination of the skies, the Nigerians seemed to lack that final nut-cracking capacity to crush Biafra. In April the fighting reached a new and bloody pitch. The International Red Cross reported 19,000 wounded soldiers in Biafra's hospitals and clinics. In Lagos, Ibadan and Benin, the hospitals were also overflowing with wounded men. Then, late in the month (three days after Gowon's marriage to a young nurse), Umuahia, Biafra's improvised capital and the final letter in the Federal commanders' ironic 'O.A.U.' (Owerri, Aba and Umuahia), was overrun by Federal troops. But this serious loss was almost immediately offset by the recapture of Owerri by the Biafrans. The town had been under siege for months and had been supplied by air-drops. The beleaguered garrison, several thousand strong, was decimated by the triumphant Biafrans as it made a break for safety. By the beginning of May, as the skies opened announcing the onset of a new rainy season, military honours were just about even with the Biafrans more than content in the knowledge that they had once again repelled a 'final offensive'.

Peace hopes never rose above freezing point during this period. The Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference in London in January, the first since the meeting presided over by Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa in Lagos, what seemed to many Nigerians a decade but was, in fact, only three years ago, kept the Nigerian crisis carefully in the background. Sierra Leone's prime minister, Siaka Stevens, tried to persuade the Commonwealth countries to launch a new peace initiative through Emperor Haile Selassie or the Liberian President, William Tubman, but Nigeria's head of delegation, Chief Awolowo, headed this off, stressing the O.A.U.'s exclusive right to act as mediator. Officially, the Federal position remained rock-hard. 'Bluntly,' said Awolowo, 'one side or the other has to give in. You could say we're both fighting for the soul of Nigeria.' However, he did see Presidents Nyerere and Kaunda, Biafra's two Commonwealth backers, privately and explained his government's uncompromising attitude in more detail and in less abrasive language. The next development came when the O.A.U.'s Consultative Committee on the conflict managed to persuade both sides to send delegations to Monrovia, capital of Liberia, in April. It almost succeeded in securing a truce during which serious peace negotiations could take place, but the

wording of the agreement was unacceptable to the Biafrans—it contained the phrase 'a united Nigeria'—and this initiative, like its three predecessors, failed to unlock the combatants from their deadly embrace. A little earlier, in February, Dr. Azikiwe, who had been lying low in Britain since his disagreement with Ojukwu the previous September, broke his long silence with a fourteen-point peace plan involving the United Nations in a supervisory role. Both sides rejected the proposals which contained attractive features for each, but predictably failed to reconcile the irreconcilables of Nigerian unity and Biafran sovereignty, and 'Zik' returned to an obscurity to which even he was growing accustomed. It was during this time that Biafra received its last, least expected, most bizarre, and only non-African diplomatic recognition. On 22nd March, the Republic of Haiti recognised Biafra and even senior government officials in Umuahia could not take it seriously, dissolving into laughter when Ojukwu read out the cable from 'Papa Doc' Duvalier, who signed himself 'president for life'. The circumstances surrounding this move are obscure, but it seems to have sprung from a fit of pique against the British—Graham Greene's highly critical novel about Haiti, *The Comedians*, had just been made into a film—and the fact that nobody but the Biafrans apparently had ever solicited 'Papa Doc's' opinion or assistance in world affairs before.

This period of diplomatic stalemate and military see-saw witnessed the final flowering of one particular vine that had woven its way throughout the story. At the end of March, Harold Wilson, Britain's prime minister, and Nigeria's staunchest foreign ally, arrived in Lagos. He had offered to come the preceding Christmas to try to arrange a temporary truce but the Federal government had made it plain that he was not welcome. This time the mediating motive, officially denied by both Lagos and Whitehall, was hidden under a 'fact-finding' cloak, but was none the less there. It was the apotheosis of British policy, the time when it became crystal clear that Britain was not only firmly behind Nigeria but intended to remain there. The presence of a British prime minister in Lagos and visiting Federal-occupied parts of Biafra making public speeches declaring Britain's support for 'One Nigeria' constituted the final imprimatur of a policy which had in turn been ill-informed yet logical, hesitant but consistent, shame-faced yet realistic and, latterly, more than a little anguished. This might perhaps be a suitable point to trace its origins and examine its effects.

As the creator of modern Nigeria, it was inevitable that Britain should

become the most involved of all foreign powers in the Nigerian war. The transition from colonial subject to independent nation had been one of the most amicable on record and under the conservative pro-Western Balewa government the 'special relationship' between Nigeria and Britain had, with one or two minor fluctuations, continued undisturbed. By the time of the January coup, British interests were deeply entrenched; investment totalled over £400 million—£250 million of it in oil; there were 15,000 British nationals living in the Federation; the British High Commission in Lagos with its Regional offices was the United Kingdom's fourth largest diplomatic mission in the world; and Britain was Nigeria's biggest single trading partner. With such a profound historical and economic involvement in the country, it seemed inconceivable that Britain could passively stand aside and play no role in the crisis. But participation became a certainty when the belligerents themselves took the initiative and appealed for assistance. In common with other foreign powers, Britain was drawn reluctantly into the crisis, became increasingly enmeshed in its toils and played a crucial part in its outcome.

From the first coup until the East's secession, Britain had no hard and fast policy except it was generally felt preferable that the Federation should hang together rather than fall apart. British influence was important, though not decisive, in pursuing this aim. During both coups, the British High Commissioner, Sir Francis Cumming-Bruce, was called in by the Federal leaders and placed Britain's moral support firmly behind the 'One Nigeria' men. Again, during the Ad Hoc Constitutional Conference in September 1966, he and the American Ambassador helped to dissuade the North from seceding. In the recurring crises between the September massacres and secession, Malcolm MacDonald, Britain's roving envoy in Africa, was active in several attempts to reconcile Gowon and Ojukwu and he was the principal moving force behind the well-intentioned but ultimately disastrous Aburi meeting. Britain was also ready to provide troops or a warship to enable the Nigerian leaders to meet in conditions of absolute security after Aburi, but Gowon never formally requested them because Ojukwu and the Western governor rejected the proposal.

In February 1967, when it was already clear that Aburi had gone sour and the momentum towards secession and war was going to be difficult to reverse, Sir David Hunt arrived in Lagos as Britain's new High Commissioner. He was no newcomer to Nigeria, having served as Deputy High Commissioner a few years before, and he was to become one of the

most controversial figures in the story of the war, hated by the Biafrans and their foreign supporters as a Federal 'super hawk', but not loved by the Nigerians either, who thought him cold, arrogant and paternalistic. In personality terms Hunt was probably a misfit in Africa—he had been an unpopular High Commissioner in Uganda¹—for he is essentially a 'European' man. Stubborn and arrogant he may be, but equipped with a fine lucid intelligence and a man of more than usual courage, Hunt was both consistent and candid in his view that Britain's national interest lay with whole-hearted support of the Federal side. He made this assessment early on in the crisis, despite the fact that £150 million of the oil investment and two-thirds of the production were in the Eastern Region, and went to Enugu in March 1967, to advise Ojukwu against secession. His major point was that neither Africa, especially the Commonwealth countries, nor the rest of the outside world (i.e. Britain included) would be likely to recognise the East if it seceded. The British Deputy High Commissioner in Enugu, James Parker, also twice warned Ojukwu of the predictable international consequences of secession and Britain's support for a united Nigeria, in February and March 1967, on instructions from the Commonwealth Relations Office (as it was then). There is no reason to believe, therefore, that Britain deluded the Enugu government into thinking that it might withdraw its recognition and backing from Lagos if the East seceded, as has often been suggested since. (However, it is highly probable that the Biafrans deluded themselves; the emotional atmosphere of the East at that time and the sympathetic personality of Parker may well have helped to foster the feeling that Britain would at worst remain completely neutral in the event of war and at best recognise Biafra; but there was no rational basis for arriving at this conclusion.) But Hunt and Parker did not see eye to eye over the situation on the ground. Hunt felt that, whatever happened, British interests lay with a united Nigeria, that Gowon was both a reasonable and sincere man who commanded a wide measure of support in the country, and if it came to war, it was unlikely to be a long affair providing Britain backed Lagos to the hilt and Ojukwu did not receive significant outside support.² Parker's view was that secession would not necessarily be incompatible with British interests and his assessment of the likely outcome of the crisis, based on living in the East and liking and getting on well with the Ibos, was different in two major respects: that the Easterners had a good

¹ But a popular one in Cyprus.

² On 26th April, 1967, the C.R.O. and several Whitehall departments assessed the possibilities of a war and estimated that it would last for at least six months and possibly end in deadlock.

case and that they would fight bitterly to defend it. In other words, he questioned, by implication if not directly, the morality of automatic support for Lagos and the assumption that a war, if it came, would be over quickly. Parker reported on these lines—he had a telegraphic link direct with London for urgent traffic—and Hunt accepted his advice but discounted it in his overall assessment of the situation.³

When Biafra seceded, British policy seemed to be out of gear if not totally immobilised. There was a basic dilemma. British assets and nationals were on both sides of the Niger, the preponderance being on the Federal side. Overt support for either belligerent thus involved serious risks, so the British government adopted a cautious 'wait-and-see' attitude, a policy neither so pusillanimous nor so haphazard as it seemed to many at the time. But it did not please the Nigerians or the Biafrans and it could not last for long. The tussle over the oil royalties in June⁴ forced the British government down off the fence, but even then it initially appeared to be prepared to let things take their course—in this case, allow Shell/BP to pay Ojukwu £250,000 in oil revenues—until those who knew their own minds best, people like Hunt in Lagos and some of the Federal 'hawks' in the Commonwealth Relations Office in London, filled the vacuum. (Hunt and Harold Wilson had been friends at Oxford and this probably helped to establish mutual confidence.) From then on a positive pro-Lagos policy began to take shape, albeit hesitantly and continually hedged with reservations and misgivings. One of the initial fears of the government was for the safety of British nationals in the fighting zones: the spectre of the Congo was never far from officials' minds and the Wilson government was particularly sensitive to public pressure at home. But with the evacuation of foreigners from Biafra and the Mid-West, the oil revenues' problems temporarily shelved and the Federal forces moving into Biafra on several fronts, a more coherent assessment became possible.

Britain's declared aims throughout the civil war were to help stop the fighting and maintain the unity of Nigeria (i.e. to ensure that Biafra abandoned secession by peaceful or military means). In fact, the government's true priorities were the other way round though, for some time, it tried to give the impression that it was a neutral party in the dispute. Lord Shepherd, speaking in parliament for the government in January 1968, said, 'We are neutral to both sides . . . we certainly are not helping

³ In divided situations such as these, strongly conflicting views within diplomatic missions are not uncommon; a similar disagreement occurred between the British embassy in Léopoldville and the consulate in Elisabethville during the Congo/Katanga crisis in the early sixties.

⁴ See Chapter V.

one side or the other.⁵ (Four days later he admitted, 'we have been supplying Nigeria with pretty well all its military equipment.'⁶) From August 1967, when the Nigerians asked the government for permission to buy fighter planes and heavy artillery, both the pattern and limitations of Britain's support for Lagos were established.⁷ The formula of 'traditional' supplies—small arms, armoured cars, ammunition, vehicles—was adopted and rigidly adhered to in kind but not in quantity for the duration of the war. This made nonsense of any claim to be 'neutral' and it would have been more honest—as well as ultimately better for its image—if the British government had admitted its pro-Federal bias (and its involvement in a foreign war) from the outset. As it was, it found itself in the awkward position of continually playing down the amount of weaponry it was supplying in order to mollify its critics at home, while simultaneously stressing their quantity and value in Nigeria to please the Nigerians. This helps to explain the apparent contradiction of statements in parliament that Britain was only supplying the Federal government with 'fifteen per cent' of its arms, with those in Nigeria by Hunt that 'the bulk of the weapons in the hands of the Federal forces have come from Britain'.⁸

But it does not fully explain it. Arms were the essence of British support for Lagos and the symbol of Britain's involvement in the war. Their value was much more than just part of the Federal armoury—an essential part since British arms undoubtedly helped the Nigerians to defeat the Biafrans on the battlefield—for their existence implied moral, political and diplomatic backing as well. And a cessation of those supplies would have been seen throughout the world as a withdrawal of the other forms of support, whether it was intended by Britain or not. Following the trail of British arms supplies during the crisis—from the January coup onwards—it is clear that not only was Britain's support for the Federal government consistent but that it actually escalated as criticism of it mounted. There had been no break in arms supplies, of the 'traditional' kind, during the eighteen months preceding Biafra's secession and, despite enormous pressure from every side, the government stuck by its guns, literally and metaphorically, throughout the war. There was, in fact, little opposition

⁵ *Hansard*, 25.1.1968.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.1.1968.

⁷ Britain balked at supplying heavy armaments because it felt they would cause unnecessary civilian casualties and not be of any real military value. This assessment was right on both counts but, all the same, supplying *any* arms helped to escalate the war and automatically involved the supplier politically and morally.

⁸ Hunt speaking in Kaduna, 22.1.1968.

to the arms shipments to Nigeria in the early days, and it was only when the Federal bombing of Biafran civilians—ironically, with Russian aeroplanes and Russian bombs—became a scandal, that the policy came under attack. It was then that the government, to explain and minimise its role, produced the magic 'fifteen per cent' formula, thus unwittingly opening a controversy which continues to this day.

No government in the world publishes details of its arms sales but it was felt in Whitehall that some guidance on Britain's contribution to the Nigerian war effort would be useful. The essential point about Britain's claim to be only providing fifteen per cent of Nigeria's total arms purchases was that the figure was in terms of *value* not *quantity*. Thus Britain could supply Nigeria with the 'bulk' of its small arms, armoured cars, ammunition, etc., and yet still remain within fifteen per cent—or thereabouts—of the total value when the Nigerians' enormously costly MiGs, Delphins, Ilyushins and heavy Russian artillery were also chalked up on the same slate. It was also sometimes forgotten that throughout the war many other countries—Germany, Switzerland,⁹ and particularly Spain—were also selling large quantities of arms to the Nigerians. The Federal trade figures show a marked escalation of British arms purchases in the last year of the war (and the percentage probably did rise over fifteen per cent from time to time) but, significantly, there is no mention either of the Russian imports, which must have been heavy since that was the year the Nigerians acquired their 122 mm. guns, or of purchases from Spain. What is indisputable, however, is that the major part of the Nigerian *army's*—as opposed to the *air force's*—military supplies came from Britain.

The quantity of British arms became a kind of irrelevant 'numbers' game'; whether the amount was ten, fifteen or twenty-five per cent mattered far less than the morality and justification for supplying any arms at all. The story of British involvement and growing commitment to the Federal cause revolves around the arms policy. Could it have been otherwise? Couldn't Britain, like the United States, have imposed an arms embargo on both sides at the outset? And what factors persuaded the British government to support Lagos unswervingly, though beset by doubts, for the duration of the war? These are vital questions since there is no doubt that Britain's intrinsic support (arms, technical assistance, advice) and the immeasurable but profound influence Britain's backing had in shaping other governments' policies (those of the United States,

⁹ Three directors of Oerlikon, the Swiss arms manufacturers, were gaoled for selling arms to Nigeria without export licences during the war.

Canada and several key Commonwealth African countries, for example) were critical, perhaps decisive, in ensuring that Nigeria won the war.

Once the brief 'wait-and-see' period at the beginning of the war was over there were three major considerations which moulded British policy. The first was the 'national interest', a broad term which covered Britain's huge economic stake in Nigeria—much larger on the Federal than on the Biafran side, incidentally—the safety of British nationals, the strategic importance of the oil which then supplied ten per cent of Britain's needs, was in the sterling area and became even more valuable with the closure of the Suez Canal in June 1967, and political 'invisibles' such as support in world councils like the Commonwealth and the United Nations. No other foreign country had anything like Britain's stake in Nigeria and therefore they could afford to opt out as, in fact, the United States, Canada and several European nations did. If, however, one accepts that it is the duty of governments to defend their national interests wherever they may be, Britain clearly had no alternative but to become involved. Thereafter it was the nature and direction of the involvement that became polemical, but standing comfortably on the sidelines was no longer a valid possibility. Defence of the national interest, once the war had begun, seemed to be best served by strengthening support for Lagos and, within a short time, despite the set-back of the Mid-West invasion, the odds settled heavily on the Nigerians. British nationals were out of the war areas, including Biafra, Bonny, the oil terminal, was already in Federal hands—oil shipments were blocked anyway—and it looked as if the war would be over soon. It was often argued that Britain's economic interests could flourish as well in a divided Nigeria as they did in a united country. This might be true—though a single unit is usually economically preferable to multiple units—but only if the country broke up in a peaceful and amicable way. Since there was no sign of this, international business wanted more than anything else, the war to end quickly. Unmoved by sentiment, quixoticism or long-shot gambles, it not unnaturally fell in behind the side with the big battalions. Protection of the national interest also had to take into account the attitudes of other African countries. Britain still had black Africa on its back as a result of Rhodesia's illegal breakaway and by supporting Nigeria it conveniently kept in step with the O.A.U. and the bulk of African opinion.

The second broad consideration which shaped Britain's policy was one of morality and sentiment. The essential question here was: is it morally right for a former colonial power to deprive its offspring of the means to

maintain its existence and nationhood when faced with distintegration? Michael Stewart, foreign and commonwealth secretary through most of the war, an uncharismatic but unfairly maligned man, who both understood and defended the Nigerian policy better than most, gave the answer unequivocally in the House of Commons.

'There are circumstances in which it is entirely right for a country to say we must push our economic interests aside because there are overwhelming moral considerations. That is the view which the government took over the sale of arms to South Africa . . . but in this case [Nigeria's], who can say that it is axiomatic, that it is morally right, to cut off arms supplies from a country facing a rebellion of this disastrous character? It is not axiomatic, and I do not believe it to be true. . . .'¹⁰

If the situation in Nigeria had been more clear-cut (as in South Africa), if moral rectitude had been exclusively on the Biafran side, then Britain would not have had a moral leg to stand on. But this, as I hope I have shown in describing the origins of the war, was not the case: there were rights and wrongs on each side. There was a morality in supplying arms and a morality in not supplying them and it was up to the government to make the difficult choice. It was often pointed out that in similar situations, Britain had cut off arms supplies to its former colonies, Cyprus and Uganda being quoted as examples. But these were false parallels. The Cypriot request for arms was turned down in January 1964, because it had already been agreed that a joint Greek, Turkish and British peace-keeping force should police the island and the communal fighting was already under control; while the Ugandans, in the same year, having dismissed the British officers in their army, turned of their own accord to other sources for arms. When the Kabaka crisis came two years later, Britain was in no sense Uganda's 'traditional' arms supplier and, anyway, the government did not receive a request for armaments at that time.

The Nigerian problem was unique: there were no convenient precedents to follow. Part of the moral argument that flowed into the vacuum concerned the 'balkanisation' theory, held by many liberals and people who generally wished black Africa well. The break-up of the Federation would have a 'domino' effect on other African states, it was argued, and Africa, already fragmented by the colonial carve-up in the nineteenth century, would never manage to progress if it became

¹⁰ House of Commons, 13.3.1969.

further sub-divided. This was certainly a fear widely felt by most African leaders themselves who resolutely backed Nigeria in the O.A.U. on these grounds more than any other, but whether a successful Biafra would have meant a rash of secessions across Africa is doubtful. Where the 'balkanisation' theory was valid with infinitely greater force was within Nigeria itself. There seems little doubt that if Biafra had survived, the rest of the Federation would have almost certainly fallen apart in chaotic and warring pieces and this, as much as any other factor, set the course of British policy. Its cogency increased as the war continued, especially once the Biafran minority areas were under Federal control, for there really did appear to be no workable alternative to the existing Federal structure. If it had been a case of the three large tribes (the Ibos, Yorubas and Hausa-Fulani) wanting to go their own way, a peaceful solution might have been found. But the Federation's minorities (including thirty-five per cent of Biafra's original population) who, together, almost totalled the majority tribes combined, were also entitled to a place in the sun and a say in the country's future. And their only hope—most of them individually were under a million strong—lay in a federation with a fair distribution of power, local autonomy and a strong centre.

There was an element of sentiment in British policy, too. The Nigerian Federation had been Britain's pride, the only federation that showed signs of working, and the show-piece of enlightened and civilised decolonisation. There were many British officials both in Nigeria and in the old Commonwealth Relations Office in policy-making positions who, as old-fashioned imperial romantics, loved Nigeria and were determined to do all they could to prevent it from falling apart. Some of them were more 'hawkish' than the Nigerians themselves and not a few of them had always disliked the Ibos for being too 'uppity'. Their influence was undoubtedly strong at the beginning of the crisis, especially when policy was in a state of flux. But it waned rapidly when the Commonwealth and Foreign Services were merged, bringing in a more worldly and realistic type of official, and when the crisis, due to the publicity and criticism it was receiving, began to involve the fortunes and standing of the government itself. Sentimental and nostalgic attachment to the Federal concept were never the decisive force behind British policy after the war had begun.

The third major influence on the British government was the Russian involvement. In a sense, combating the Russians was part of defending the national interest, but it had wider implications. The lessons of the

Congo, where the Russians had also made an early bid for advancement, were uppermost in British thinking. There the Americans had borne the brunt of the struggle, now with the United States' support,¹¹ it was Britain's turn. By August 1967, when Nigeria took its first delivery of MiGs, the Cold War had come to West Africa and it could not be ignored. The Nigerians' decision to turn to the Russians was a two-sided statement of intent: that they would take arms from any quarter and, if necessary, sell their moderate, pro-Western souls to the Communists to win the war. (The Biafrans were similarly hocking theirs to the devil by accepting assistance from the South Africans, Rhodesians and Portuguese.) There were two ways of keeping Russian influence at bay: stopping the war so that there would no longer be any need for the Soviet hardware; or, if that were not possible, joining the race for the Nigerians' friendship which, in the short term, meant assisting the Federal war effort. In common with many others, Britain tried to mediate, but even if it had been in a genuinely neutral position (which it wasn't) it would have almost certainly been unsuccessful for the simple reason that neither side was prepared to moderate its mutually irreconcilable demands and each—as events proved—was prepared to fight it out to the bitter end. The idea that if Britain had stopped its arms supplies the Soviet Union would have been shamed into halting its own—a suggestion often put forward by the Biafran lobby in Britain—seems to me to be ludicrously naive. There is no precedent for this kind of action, the Russians were under no pressure to change their policy and anyone who has ever dealt with them would, in fact, expect the opposite reaction: a cheerful escalation of arms, filling the vacuum and a corresponding increase of influence in a territory they had long coveted.

The British government's estimate of the length of the war was, like most other people's, wrong. And as the war dragged on killing increasing numbers of innocent civilians, so the arms policy came under mounting attack. The Nigerian war turned into the biggest and most heated foreign debate in Britain since the Suez crisis in 1956. Ironically, Nigeria received more attention in parliament during the two and a half years of its civil war than it had done in its sixty of colonial rule. In 1969, the ruling Labour Party's national conference and executive condemned the government's policy and the opinion polls revealed that two-thirds of the electorate were also opposed to it. On several occasions, the government looked in

¹¹ Part of the *quid pro quo* of American backing was British support for the United States' Vietnam policy.

danger of being defeated in the House of Commons; but the greatest opposition of all came from local and influential pressure groups in many walks of life, much of it channelled through M.P.s of all parties.

Should the government have bowed to this popular pressure? Since it was democratically elected it had a mandate to conduct the nation's affairs and a duty to protect its interests. But are there limitations to that mandate? And did the bulk of the British population really care enough about Biafra to, say, accept an increase in the price of petrol as the possible penalty for a reversal of the arms policy in the way that the Lancashire mill-workers willingly took a cut in wages rather than support the Confederate cotton-producers in the American civil war? For, in a simplified way, the Nigerian war amounted to that: it presented Britain with a choice between the righteous and comfortable feeling of not being involved in a nasty, complex African war, and the protection of a number of assets which made a significant contribution to the country's economic well-being, and the fulfilment of a moral obligation to help an offspring in its hour of need. It is one of the limitations of our political system that this question was never asked. In fact, the danger to the government was more apparent than real; the parliamentary debates, though sounding like 'cliff-hangers' in the press, were poorly attended—the government never felt the need to organise back-bench support—and the largest number to vote against the government was sixty-two. The Conservative opposition, whose leadership strongly supported Lagos, resisted the temptation to make political capital out of the issue and consistently backed the arms policy.

But the nation-wide criticism had the salutary effect of ensuring that the government constantly reviewed its policy and was compelled to exert the maximum influence on the Nigerians in their conduct of the war. The extent of this 'influence' which loomed so large in the government's defence of its policy, is difficult to estimate. Certainly, the presence of the International Observer Team in Nigeria was the result of a British initiative, and although Wilson received no categorical assurance that the bombing of civilians in Biafra would stop when he talked with Gowon in Lagos, it was perhaps significant that the bombing did ease off after that visit and never reverted to its former indiscriminate pattern. The remarkably human end to the war justified British confidence in Gowon and the Federal forces and, in the end, Britain could point to the successful defence of its national interest and the fulfilment of its moral obligations to the Federal state of Nigeria.

The real criticism of Britain's role in the Nigerian war was not that it was wrong or wilful—there was no practicable alternative—but that it was too often a confused, guilt-ridden and deceptive policy. Attempts to try and make it appear that Britain was 'neutral', that peace rather than Nigerian unity was the principal aim, conflicting and foggy information on the arms supplies, and the impression that the government was often about to change tack (Stewart's famous 'we will reconsider, more than reconsider' the arms policy if the Federal government showed signs of committing genocide) when, in fact, it wasn't—all these stratagems robbed both the government and the policy of its proper credibility. Also, it can be argued, that in the early confused stages, Britain's potential for bringing the two sides together was not fully exploited, for it, like the other outsiders, had been content to sit back and watch while events took their course. Like the Nigerians themselves, Britain presented its case badly, continually fearful of the reaction it might have amongst the millions who watched starving Biafran children on the television. It was a courageous policy cravenly presented, and not at all helped by Wilson's meretricious 'instant' style of government, especially those ministers continually dashing off to Lagos. In retrospect, it was conducted rather like a bull-fight: in the early stages there was nothing but a flapping cape, swinging uncertainly, bemusing but not harming the bull; then followed the passes with the sword stiffening the cape but still hidden; and finally, the cape fluttered to the ground leaving the sword, naked and glinting in the sunlight, poised for the kill. But in the context of protecting the national interest, it was for the hard-headed men in Whitehall one of the few success stories in the conduct of British foreign affairs since the end of the Second World War.

What of its effects? Ironically, British support for Nigeria had been at its weakest in the early part of the war when Nigeria needed it most and at its firmest when Lagos needed it least in the latter stages of the conflict. The Nigerians have not forgotten this and though Britain secured the short-term benefits it sought, the longer term may not be so advantageous, especially if the peace does not meet the rising political and economic expectations bred by the war. Britain, which became increasingly expendable as the war brought other allies to the Federal side and a new confidence within the people and government of Nigeria, may yet be the scapegoat if the peace turns sour. And the cost of British policy? A million Biafrans died. Many people, as I have pointed out in different parts of this book, were responsible for their deaths including the Nigerian and

Biafran governments and outsiders like the French and the Russians. Britain cannot be exonerated but neither can it be held solely responsible. Guilt is collective but difficult, perhaps impossible to apportion. I do not subscribe to the view that Britain was more culpable than anyone else, but I believe that it must, as the price of its policy, shoulder its share of the blame.

★ ★ ★

During one of the emergency debates on Nigeria in the House of Commons in 1968, a well-dressed, neatly groomed man in his mid-fifties sitting in the Strangers' Gallery was startled to hear himself singled out for a scathing attack by a junior member of the Labour government. But he was not displeased for publicity, even hostile publicity, is the element in which William Bernhardt, owner and director of Markpress, Biafra's Geneva-based public relations firm, feels most at home. The Nigerian conflict was not the first war to be 'sold' by P.R. men—Katanga employed a public relations company in the early sixties—but it was notable for the further development and far-reaching effects of P.R. techniques and the style of its most colourful exponent, the American P.R. artist, William Bernhardt. Contrary to the popular image of the profession, Bernhardt, once dubbed 'the man who sold a war',¹² is not at all brash. With a military moustache, a soft-voiced British accent and a slightly mannered line in English country clothes, he seems a long way from his early Californian public relations background. But he has a good fund of stories, a knack of sliding elliptically around the tough question, and he laughs a lot. Bernhardt set up his firm, H. Wm. Bernhardt Inc., in Switzerland in the early fifties and developed a broad and satisfactory range of business including hotels, holiday resorts, cosmetics and airlines. Before Biafra came up he had never handled a political account though he had helped to sell the ill-fated Starfighter jet aircraft to the German government, and had once, ironically, through a London associate, represented the Western Region of Nigeria. He conducts his operations from a secluded nineteenth-century mansion in one pleasant suburb of Geneva and lives with his American wife and daughter in a luxury penthouse apartment in another.

Late in 1967 he received a telephone call from the Biafran mission in Paris asking him to handle the account. 'I thought "Biafra" was a new kind of toothpaste,' he told me later beside the private swimming-pool behind his block of flats. But he accepted, on the condition that he could

¹² *Daily Mail* (London), 21.1.70

re-write, edit and generally adapt material from Biafra before it went out to the press, and put out his first press release in February 1968, under the masthead of 'MARKPRESS' (an abbreviation of 'Marketing Press' and, in fact, an old-established section of his business) 'BIAFRAN OVERSEAS PRESS SERVICE'. The name Markpress was a good one and eventually became synonymous with the Biafran cause. Success, however, did not come quickly, Bernhardt had to work hard, flying to Lisbon, Biafra's main base and communications centre in Europe, and once to Biafra itself to untangle several knotty problems. The essential factors, as he saw them, were good communications, background briefing for the media, 'cross-fertilisation', which meant referring enquirers to articles written by journalists rather than directly to Biafran government handouts, and arranging trips to Biafra for leading pressmen, M.P.s and other opinion-formers. The big breakthrough came in April when starvation in Biafra was becoming acute and after the first organised group of correspondents' stories hit the headlines; thereafter Markpress remained in the forefront of the Biafran story.

At its height, the agency, linked by telex to Biafra via Lisbon, was distributing press reports, war communiqués, briefings and photographs to five major news agencies and to 3,000 addressees, including the entire House of Commons, the United States Congress and, during the presidential campaign of 1968, both candidates. Bernhardt's Geneva headquarters also acted as a sort of unofficial embassy for the Biafrans and Bernhardt himself became involved in negotiations with the International Red Cross. He attended all the peace talks and remembers travelling up and down daily in the same lift with Chief Anthony Enahoro, Nigeria's head of delegation, in the Apolo Hotel in Kampala. Bernhardt always claimed that he made very little out of the Biafran account—at the end of the war he was left with several thousand gold coins commemorating Biafra's second anniversary of independence on his hands¹³—and he told me that he had lost two clients who had connections with Nigeria. Whatever the truth of this, he undoubtedly did well in terms of publicity for himself and his firm. The world press and even Nigeria's own London-based P.R. company praised his professional skill and zeal unstintingly, and he picked up a valuable account with the Uganda government during the latter part of the war. Bernhardt never admitted that the Biafra

¹³ This was Bernhardt's own idea, first suggested in March 1969; but due to various delays the coins (3,000 sets) were only minted in late December, a few days before Biafra's collapse. Biafra received its revenue royalty but Bernhardt was left with the coins. He told me that Ojukwu had declined to take up his option of ten sets due to 'impecunious circumstances'.

account was political (he always called it 'humanitarian') but he seemed to get a kick out of the operation and many of his staff became emotionally involved with the cause they were publicising. Markpress effectively projected Biafra into the world's conscience, but it did not 'create' Biafra as many Federal supporters have suggested. The country was already there and it is arguable that Biafra launched Markpress as much as Markpress launched Biafra. The starvation story—and that's what finally put Biafra on the map—would probably have got out anyway, with or without Markpress. It is significant that Bernhardt was experiencing difficulty in putting the Biafra story across, from January to April 1968, until starvation became widespread and reached crisis proportions. Bernhardt's 'overkill' methods also boomeranged with the more sophisticated media and enabled Nigeria's backers, notably the British government, to make valuable political capital of his P.R. excesses.

But the clattering telex machines at no. 136 Route de Chêne in Geneva and the urbane Mr. Bernhardt were not the sole manifestations of P.R. initiative in the war. As early as February 1967, three and a half months before Biafra's secession, Ojukwu's Eastern Region government had hired a New York public relations firm called Ruder and Finn for \$5,500 a month.¹⁴ This contract lapsed when Bernhardt took over the Biafran account in Europe, but three months later another American firm, Robert S. Goldstein Enterprises of California, was taken on. The contract called for a \$10,000 payment to Goldstein before signing in March, then \$400,000 in December 1968. This relationship ended in disaster when Goldstein complained that the Biafrans were using the starvation issue for political ends and later called a press conference at which he denounced Biafra. (The Biafrans alleged he had been paid \$35,000 by the Nigerians to switch sides.) The Nigerians were slower on the uptake, hiring a British firm, Galitzine, Chant and Russell, in March 1968, and an American, Burson-Marsteller Associates, in July of the same year. The British group, continuously fighting an up-hill battle with the inefficiencies of the Federal Ministry of Information in Lagos, managed to make some headway though never matched their rivals in Geneva, but the American P.R. men gave up in 1969 declaring that they felt they could no longer be effective. As with propaganda, the Biafrans emerged triumphant in this novel but important addition to the art of warfare.

¹⁴ See Chapter IV, p. 114.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

The Hired Guns

Mercenaries
Relief pilots
Egyptian pilots
Count von Rosen

IT WAS IN BIAFRA DURING THE GRIM SUMMER OF 1968 WHEN THE NIGERIANS were closing in on all sides that I first came into contact with the mercenaries. It was a slightly unnerving experience, not the least because it contained one of those bizarre coincidental encounters which occur in Africa more frequently than one would believe possible. By chance rather than design, I found myself at the headquarters of the newly formed Biafran 4th Commando Brigade, commanded by the German-born, ex-Foreign Legionnaire, Colonel Rolf Steiner. The camp was a former boys' school and as I stood in the thickening gloom of the tropical evening in what appeared to be an improvised officers' mess, someone called my name. I turned sharply to see a man emerging from the darkness in a smart French 'para' uniform, complete with red beret. A sub-machinegun swung loosely from his shoulder. The last time I had seen him was a little less than a year before in Bukavu in the eastern Congo. Then he was behind a much larger gun, mounted on a Jeep, blazing away at Mobutu's Cuban pilots as they closed in on 'Black Jack' Schramme's mercenary band. Most of the mercenaries had escaped by throwing their arms into the lake and fleeing into neighbouring Rwanda. After months of agonised haggling the International Red Cross had flown them out to Europe on the strict understanding they would never return to Africa.

For this man, however, as for several others, the call of a new war—and new money—had overcome the paper promises. Recruited in Lisbon, he had arrived in Biafra a fortnight earlier. The next thing I remembered, with a jolt, were one or two deflating comments I had written about mercenaries after a week's stay with them in Bukavu. He mentioned them with some precision and a tight little smile. But he was friendly enough

and when, having recovered my cool, I jokingly suggested that he seemed to be on the losing side again, he spoke glowingly, and with uncharacteristic warmth (in the Congo, all blacks had been 'fucking Kaffirs') about the Biafrans, their fighting capacity and their cause. Curiously, he was not alone in this and unlike the Congo or the Yemen, the Nigerian war (notably the Biafran side of it) did involve some mercenaries emotionally, although not to the point of mass conversion or of attracting large numbers of idealistic foreigners to come and fight, as the Spanish civil war had done in the thirties. This man apparently fought well for Biafra but was finally wounded and invalidated out. The last I heard of him he was fighting for his third lost cause in Africa—though presumably equally well paid—in the Southern Sudan.

Mercenaries were an elusive, intriguing but, with one notable exception, an ultimately inconclusive element in the war. The Nigerians and the Biafrans were equally reluctant to use them—senior officers in each army had fought against them in the Congo under the United Nations flag and knew their failings and limitations—but they needed their technical skills, especially as pilots, and so, often against their own better judgment, employed them. However, neither admitted their existence although this did not inhibit each accusing the other of using them by the legion. The roles the mercenaries played differed according to the needs of their employers. On the Federal side, they were mainly pilots while in Biafra both airmen and soldiers were signed on. The relief pilots, hired by the humanitarian organisations to fly supplies into Biafra, formed a third group and their part in the story will be examined separately. (Other foreigners involved in the war, such as the Egyptian airmen who flew the Russian planes for the Nigerians, and the Swedish pilot, Count von Rosen, were not mercenaries in the strictest sense of the term but are also discussed later in this chapter.) The combat mercenaries cost their respective masters a fortune and were, by and large, an exceedingly poor investment. They left no imprint on the nature of the conflict itself except in one profound, startling and thoroughly negative respect. This was the Federal mercenary pilots' deliberate failure to close Uli airport, the most crucial strategic target of the entire conflict, which I will be examining in detail below.

But if the mercenaries made little impact on the war, the war took its toll on them: on their lives and, perhaps more significantly, on their reputations. Very soon in the struggle most of the mercenaries found they had bitten off more than they cared to chew—a good mercenary never

takes unnecessary risks—and the Nigerian war performed one useful service in destroying what remained of the legendary invincibility of the white soldier of fortune in Africa. A. E. Housman's defensive epitaph on mercenaries:

Their shoulders held the sky suspended;
They stood and earth's foundations stay;
What God abandoned, these defended,
And saved the sum of things for pay.

struck no answering chord in the Nigerian civil war. A factor which limited greater mercenary activity was the fear of internecine strife within the brotherhood. This prompted Colonel John Peters, the English mercenary leader of Congo fame (now on the Federal side) to telephone his fellow countryman Alistair Wicks (employed by the Biafrans) to warn him, 'Don't recruit for Biafra. I don't want my boys fighting yours.'¹ One should add, perhaps, that the clear-cut international alignments—Britain behind Nigeria and France backing Biafra—made it an easier choice for those mercenaries who harboured deep-seated tribal hatreds of their own. Marc Goosens, the Belgian mercenary, was reported to have said with some relish only hours before his death in the bush near Onitsha, 'One good thing about this war is that we're fighting the English on the other side!'² The result was that for the first time since the Carlist wars in Spain in the nineteenth century, mercenaries fought each other. The most dramatic example of this was the shooting down of a Swedish Red Cross aircraft by a Federal MiG: both pilots were mercenaries. The war upset other cherished mercenary principles. Famous mercenary captains who had made their reputations (and fortunes) in the halcyon free-booting days of Tshombe and the Congo and the royalists' struggle in the Yemen, men like Roger Faulques, 'Mad' Mike Hoare, Bob Denard and John Peters, found themselves much more circumscribed by the big power politics of war in Nigeria. The role of governments behind the mercenaries, though still shadowy, became more pronounced. And even on the ground, the Biafrans and Nigerians exercised a more scrupulous control of their employees than the latter had been accustomed to elsewhere.

But to begin with, both sides were genuinely reluctant to hire mercenaries. The outbreak of the war coincided with the mercenary revolt

¹ David Paskov, *Gemini News Service: White Men in a Black War* (GY, 2. April 1970).

² *Ibid.*

against Mobutu, and the first O.A.U. meeting which discussed the Nigerian crisis actually took place in the Congolese capital under the shadow of 'Black Jack' and his men holed up in Bukavu. With Africa ranged against the activities of mercenaries of any kind ('human vermin', was the phrase President Kaunda of Zambia used to describe the mercenaries), their employment by either side in the African civil war clearly involved serious political risks. These were greater for the Nigerians.

The Federal government realised that the use of white mercenaries reflected upon its own capacity to prosecute the war and, in some critical African eyes, constituted an infringement of its sovereignty. Moreover, on a wider plane the Nigerians were determined to show the world that they could cope with their 'internal problems' themselves, and for this the moral and diplomatic backing of the O.A.U. was vital. But the Biafrans, the underdogs, could afford to worry less about appearances. They took the attitude, viewed sympathetically by their supporters, that they were fighting for survival and would therefore deal with the devil if necessary.

The war opened with hysterical accusations by both sides about the enemy's 'mercenaries'. Radio Biafra once charged the Nigerians with using two battalions of British troops. Lagos claimed Ojukwu was employing 'Chinese' (or 'Chinese-looking') soldiers and white mercenaries painted black. Throughout the war the Nigerians were constantly being accused of hiring foreigners to fight in their armies, but I can find no evidence to support this. I do, however, remember once meeting a gentleman at a party in Lagos who assured me that he was the only *black* mercenary fighting for Nigeria; he was, it later transpired, a Gambian colonel. But there were one or two foreigners—a Pole and an Indian—who worked in the supply and logistic sections of the army and several other Commonwealth officers in the Nigerian navy.

A colourful figure who made a fleeting appearance was Colonel Hubert Fauntleroy Julian, known as the 'Black Eagle' of Harlem. He was an American negro pilot who had flown for the Ethiopians against the Italians in 1935. He suddenly turned up in Lagos and undaunted by his age—he was at that time in his early seventies—offered his services to the Nigerians, which were politely declined. But this was the sum total of the mercenary involvement in the army and navy on the Federal side.

It was a different matter when it came to the war in the air. The Russians would not fly the planes they had sold to the Nigerians, nor would they permit Westerners to do so. The choice, unfortunately for Lagos, eventually fell on the Egyptians, but before that there was need for pilots to train Nigerians and fly transport and light aircraft. In July 1967, John Peters, a tough, ruthless English mercenary and 'Mad' Mike Hoare's successor in the Congo, had arrived in Lagos and signed a lucrative contract with the Federal government to recruit pilots to fly converted DC-3s on bombing raids over Biafra. There were rumours that Peters had been engaged by the Nigerians on the advice of the British. But this seems unlikely since, like most good mercenary leaders, he had an excellent nose of his own for a 'market' and was not the kind of man to need prompting about the possibilities of business in Nigeria. (At this stage Nigeria had no answer to Biafra's air force.) However, it is more than probable that the British did nothing to stop his enterprise. Indeed, they would have found it difficult even if they had wanted to since British subjects can, quite legally, serve in Commonwealth but not foreign, armed forces. British, Rhodesian and South African pilots were hired at £1,000 a month paid into Swiss bank accounts. All living expenses in Nigeria—including drinks and girls—were covered by the Federal government. Peters received a large commission for every man he hired but neither flew nor fought himself. The pilots, a motley crew, were put on to converted DC-3s and DC-4s and later flew British jet Provosts. For the time being, however, they were kept strictly off the Russian and Czech aircraft.

This did not stop them getting on extremely bad terms with the Egyptian pilots right away. Rousing renditions of 'Jerusalem the Golden' (it was just after the Arab-Israeli June war) whenever they came into contact with the Egyptians probably did not help. Some of them soon became known as the 'whisky pilots'—the Nigerians' attempts to keep them out of sight and mind inevitably failed—the most notable example being a remarkable figure called 'Boozy Bonzo Bond'. A South African and ex-RAF pilot, he flew wearing a Muslim praying cap and was reputed to knock back a bottle of whisky before reaching the target. He took a great pride in being shot up and was not happy unless his aircraft returned to base looking like a flying sieve. The Nigerians, with understandable prudence, flatly refused to fly with him.

Peters tried to get his old commander, Mike Hoare, involved in a ground operation on the Nigerian side. Hoare who had been quietly

sounding out the Biafrans did, in fact, turn up in Lagos early in the war. He was surprised by the Nigerians' cordial reception. 'I found on my arrival in Lagos a disarming friendliness and an unflattering indifference to what I might have been doing in Biafra,' he later wrote.³ But the Nigerians had decided against employing mercenary soldiers ('they will not be spared: they are the worst of enemies,' said Gowon's 'Code of Conduct', conveniently forgetting his own foreign pilots) and, despite their polite front, were probably not too keen to pick up the goods their enemy had just rejected.

The mercenary involvement fluctuated very little on the Federal side during the war. There were usually never less than a dozen pilots, sometimes rising to twenty, with a rapid turnover. As the struggle dragged on the Federal government decided to move some of the mercenaries on to the MiG fighters because it was clear that the Egyptians were useless and there seemed to be no other alternative. The burning problem was Uli airstrip through which Biafra armed and fed itself. Selected mercenaries were sent for conversion courses on MiG-15s (a jet trainer) and then MiG-17 fighters in northern Nigeria. It is not clear whether the Russians were consulted but they must have known and turned a blind eye. DC-3s and DC-4s were adapted and, piloted by mercenaries with Nigerian crews, were used to bomb Uli at night while the MiGs kept watch over it during the day. (The Nigerians, like their enemies, had a few pilots of their own but not nearly enough to man their rapidly expanding air force.) The night bombers were based in Benin and one of them became known to the relief pilots by the sinister name of the 'Intruder'. It took to slowly circling Uli at night, its pilot calling the relief planes up on his radio and warning them off. Another mercenary had a more developed sense of the macabre and pilots on the relief run into Biafra recall him vividly. He was, apparently, a South African who used to repeat monotonously in a heavy accent, "Ullo, 'ullo, this is "Genocide" calling.'

As the war went on the task of the mercenary pilots on the Federal side changed from strafing and bombing a wide range of targets in Biafra, to a concentration on the vital gun-running operation into the country and the closure of Uli airport. This emphasis became particularly pronounced after the fall of Biafra's last proper airport (at Port Harcourt) in May 1968. The failure to knock Uli out seems to me to be the most crucial aspect of the military history of the war and deserves a special scrutiny. There were, of course, other small improvised airfields in Biafra (the one at Uga was

³ *The Times* (London), 1.12.1967. Reprinted in *Africa Report*, February 1968.

second in importance to Uli) but Uli was the best equipped, the best known (by the relief and gun-running pilots who risked their necks to land there in often appalling conditions), and the best protected. It was also an important psychological symbol of resistance and hope for the beleaguered Biafrans and was far more renowned internationally than Biafra's former capital of Enugu had ever been. With typical bravado the Biafrans proudly claimed it was the 'busiest airport in Africa'. It was as vital for the Nigerians to neutralise it as it was for the Biafrans to keep it open. And for the last eighteen months of the war it was genuinely Biafra's lifeline along which shuttled the essential supplies of food, arms, spare parts and medicines needed to keep Biafra going. Without Uli, Biafra would have collapsed in a matter of weeks, perhaps days.

The enduring military enigma of the war was the Nigerians' failure to close the airstrip. Why, people kept asking, don't they, with their overwhelming military superiority, wipe that ridiculous little piece of road off the face of the earth? And why couldn't they with their complete control of the skies eliminate the gun-runners? The Federal government understood the strategic and political significance of Uli only too well. (Gowon's emotional refusal to allow it to be used for relief operations at the end of the war showed the depth of feeling on the subject.) Their trouble was finding an effective way of doing something about it. They had tried to move within shelling range and had nearly succeeded in September-October 1968, when Federal forces had briefly occupied Oguta, some ten miles from the airstrip. But the Biafrans had chased them out again and even the heavy Russian field guns, brought in towards the end of the war, were never close enough to do any serious damage. This left the air. But there again there were some difficult military problems. During the day the airfield was never used. Its disguise was simple but quite masterly. The widened road verges, loading bays and airport buildings were camouflaged with palm fronds to blend them into the surrounding countryside while the main runway was left uncovered so that from the air it reverted to its original appearance: a long boring stretch of open road. Even if the Federal bombers managed to locate it, the worst they could do was make a few holes in the runway which the Biafrans could easily fill up again. Uli was thus essentially a night target. But even then it was not an easy proposition: it was difficult to find especially in the rainy season with its tropical storms and low-lying cloud; the landing lights only went on for thirty seconds at a time; and it was heavily defended by anti-aircraft guns. To make matters worse, the

Nigerians initially used the wrong aircraft, their fast sophisticated MiGs and Ilyushins, badly piloted by the Egyptians, being totally unsuited for the job. Small, relatively slow planes armed with cannon, light bombs and machineguns were the real answer.

Unfortunately for the Nigerians, night-flying operations against Uli and the gun-runners were almost exclusively in the hands of their foreign employees, the mercenary pilots based on Benin City in the Mid-West. The Egyptians had either refused to fly at night or failed to achieve any results and the Nigerian pilots flying converted DC-3s and DC-4s were too few in number to make much of an impact. Uli presented the mercenaries with a double-edged dilemma: if they knocked it out, the war would quickly come to an end and they would all be out of a most lucrative job; and then, to close the airport and keep it closed they would have had to shoot down a number of the relief and arms planes thus killing their mercenary comrades on the other side. Since they wished to do neither of these things, they decided, not unnaturally, that Uli should not close—at least not through their own efforts. That this was of direct and momentous benefit to the country they were being paid to fight and totally contrary to the interests of their employers mattered not a wit. Several of the mercenary pilots flying for the Nigerians knew the men on the other side (some even had friends there) and it was inevitable that a pact of a kind, tacit and not always observed, but a pact none the less, should be concluded. Count von Rosen who had flown relief supplies into Biafra for the Churches before launching his air force, confirmed this to me later in Sweden. 'They [the bomber pilots] told us on the radio once that they were bombing Uli for the money and they wouldn't shoot up another mercenary in the air.'⁴

Bombing of the strip and general harassment—to allay the Nigerians' suspicions—were regarded by the Federal pilots as fair game but more ruthless action which would have scared the relief and gun-running pilots off for good and closed Uli permanently was ruled out. Further corroboration comes from a Canadian relief pilot who flew on the São Tomé-Uli shuttle for over a year. '“Genocide” was there every night,' he said, 'like death and taxes. We sort of got used to him and didn't mind too much having him around. He was kind of like an old mistress. We all had the feeling that he wasn't out to get us.'⁵ Occasionally this 'dog doesn't eat dog' pact—a golden rule of the mercenary brotherhood anyway—was

⁴ Interview with the author, June 1969.

⁵ From a tape-recorded interview between Peter Knox, the pilot, and James Hudson, a freelance journalist and film producer, in Palma, Mallorca, Spain, May 1970.

threatened by a maverick who for one reason or another bucked against the general line. The Canadian pilot described one such case. "Then "*Genocide*" left and another character came. He was scary because he *was* out to hit us. Everyone was afraid of him. You felt he was really out to get you—to get something. And he did. He hit three aircraft on the ground; the crews had gotten out, but he killed people standing around the planes. This guy was something else. He only talked once. I had just taken off from Uli in a Connie and I passed a friend going in. "How is it? Is he around?" he asked. "Yeah, he's around. I wouldn't worry about him, though," I replied, "I'd go in anyway." Suddenly his voice came over: "I'M GOING TO GET YOU!" I came back and said, "Ah, go get stuffed," and he said, "I'm going to stuff you on the second shuttle."⁶

But even threats of this kind did not destroy the strange balance of interest that existed between the rival groups. (One side-effect of greater Federal aggressiveness was more money for the relief and arms pilots from their humanitarian employers to compensate for the new risks.) The only genuine upset came in the unusual circumstances surrounding the shooting down of the Swedish Red Cross DC-7 in June 1968, which I will be describing shortly, but that, too, only caused a temporary dislocation of the 'system'. There is, moreover, evidence that the Federal mercenaries ensured that their 'keep Uli open' campaign—for this, ironically, is what it amounted to—was strictly enforced among their own number. A well-authenticated story will illustrate how this bizarre situation was sustained.

In June 1969, a 40-year-old British ex-R.A.F. pilot was signed on by the Nigerians. He was an excellent flier and did a conversion course on MiG-17s in Kaduna. However, he was then switched to converted DC-3s and posted to the 'Genocide' squadron at Benin. His first seven sorties were night bombing missions over Uli with other mercenaries in command. Each time they dug up an excuse for him—and for the Nigerians—to cover their failure to hit Uli. They could not find the airfield; the weather was too bad; Biafran flak prevented a proper attack. But the new recruit found himself in the situation of the small boy who realised all along the emperor was naked. Nothing he had seen on these missions really substantiated the mercenaries' claims. The next time, in the face of open hostility, he insisted on leading the sortie with an all-Nigerian crew. He had no trouble finding Uli and when the landing lights were on—this was at the height of the relief and arms airlifts—he told a friend afterwards that it looked 'a bit like Heathrow'. In order to avoid the

⁶ Ibid.

anti-aircraft fire and make best use of the short-lived runway lights, he simply sat on the tails of the relief planes as they queued up to land and followed them down. His Nigerian crew then hurled out twenty-kilo bombs by hand. It was crude and improvised but it worked. Several planes were hit on the ground and the rest turned back to their points of origin. Uli was closed for a couple of nights. The Nigerian air force command was as delighted as the other mercenaries were furious. Their whole future was in jeopardy and they knew they had to move quickly. The new pilot had a slight hearing defect but nothing that would have affected his capacity to fly DC-3 'bombers' over Uli. However, much against his will, he was quickly taken off operations and eventually invalidated out of Nigeria under obscure circumstances. Uli stayed open for the rest of the war.⁷

One military expert told me in Lagos after the end of the war that if the mercenaries had concentrated effectively on Uli they could have closed it—and, more important, kept it closed—eighteen months before the war ended. His suggestion for the Federal government's failure was that it mistakenly paid the mercenaries monthly (in Swiss bank accounts) whereas it should have paid them much larger irregular sums but for results only. Of course, mercenary collusion was not the only reason for the Nigerians' inability to close Uli. The technical difficulties I have described were genuine. World pressure behind the Biafran relief operation and Gowon's own fears of shooting down relief instead of arms planes (the Biafrans mixed the two up as much as possible⁸) inhibited an all-out attack on the airport. Nevertheless, even if one accepts that all these factors tied one of the mercenaries' hands behind their backs, the other still retained enough freedom of movement and power for the knock-out blow which they singularly failed to deliver. Some damage was done to the relief operation and the airport by bombing aircraft on the ground, several relief planes crashed in flying accidents and Uli itself was closed more than once. But it is an eloquent commentary on the whole affair that only one Biafran freighter, relief or arms carrying, was shot down by Federal action throughout the entire war. And Uli remained open, active and defiant—Ojukwu even took off from there the day before Biafra collapsed—until the first Nigerian soldiers danced along it in triumph at the end of the war.

⁷ From a reliable military source in Lagos who knew the mercenary pilots well.

⁸ See Chapter IX.

In Biafra, foreign mercenaries were more deeply involved than in Nigeria. There were other important differences, too: mercenaries were used extensively in ground operations both in combat and as instructors; a foreign government, the French, played an active role in helping Biafra to recruit them (as opposed to Britain's passive one in Nigeria); and some of the men, like my acquaintance from Bukavu, caught the 'Biafra fever' and became emotionally committed to the cause they had been paid to defend. (This untypical mercenary behaviour never, to my knowledge, occurred on the Nigerian side.)

The first mercenary Ojukwu signed on did not fight at all. He was Hank Wharton, the German-American air-line operator. He contracted to run guns to Biafra (then the Eastern Region) almost a year before secession, but his first trip ended in disaster. He had picked up a large load of rifles and ammunition supplied by the French arms dealer, Paul Favier, at Zestienhoven airport in Rotterdam using a DC-4 which had immediately aroused the suspicions of the Dutch authorities. They knew the aircraft well, having impounded it after another gun-running episode, held it for ten months at Schipol airport, Amsterdam and watched fascinated as the rain washed away the Panamanian registration number to reveal the previous Canadian one. Wharton told the Dutch he was delivering arms to Birmingham and since his papers were in order they had no alternative but to let him go. Three thousand pounds overweight, the plane took off and headed for England. But in mid-flight Wharton radioed Birmingham airport and said that he had received 'orders' to divert the aircraft to Mallorca. He landed in Palma, refuelled and flew on to Nigeria. Unfortunately, he ran out of fuel and crashed near Garoua in Cameroon, the plane breaking into four sections, scattering arms along a marshy riverbank. Wharton suffered a mild concussion and the co-pilot broke a leg. Several months later they were convicted by a Cameroon court of illegally importing arms, fined a small sum of money and sentenced to a month's imprisonment. (Christopher Okigbo, the Biafran poet, should have been on this ill-starred flight but decided at the last minute to stay in Birmingham—where he had been arranging the arms shipment. His personal effects were found in the wreckage of the plane.) This attempt to smuggle arms into the East featured prominently in the Federal case against Ojukwu at the Aburi meeting but it was only the beginning of Wharton's chequered involvement with Biafra.

By the time war broke out Wharton had established himself in Lisbon, in a comfortable suite in the Tivoli Hotel, and was operating three aged

Super-Constellations in what was known cynically or proudly, depending on the speaker, as 'Biafra Airways'. The route to Biafra was entirely dependent on the goodwill of the Portuguese, starting in Lisbon and encompassing Bissau, in Portuguese Guinea on the 'elbow' and the strategically placed São Tomé in the 'armpit' of West Africa. The planes were brought from anyone prepared to sell cheaply, were at least twenty years old, carried no markings and dispensed with frills such as airworthiness certificates and safety aids. The crews consisting mainly of Americans and Germans, were taciturn and cynical men. Many had flown in the Congo and had been mixed up in crazy ventures like 'Royal Air Burundi'—the airline no one, including the Burundi government, wanted. Wharton's shoe-string operation was, for many critical months, *the* Biafran 'pipeline' on which the country's very existence depended. Arms, emissaries, money, journalists and, later, medical and relief supplies, shuttled back and forth weaving a tenuous but remarkably sturdy lifeline between Biafra and Europe.

Attempts were made to sabotage the planes, one or two crashed on the run into Uli and another burst into flames on landing in Portuguese Guinea. Wharton, undismayed, continually expanded his operations—he charged the Biafrans \$25,000 payable in advance and in cash, for the round trip—but eventually clashed with the relief organisations in São Tomé and, finally, with Ojukwu himself in the critical autumn of 1968. Down to one arms flight a week, Biafra was in desperate straits and Wharton was accused of deliberately holding up supplies. He pleaded increased Nigerian anti-aircraft fire and shortage of spare parts as an excuse, but he was also asking for more money. He had made enemies among some of the relief workers and pilots. Count von Rosen told me in Sweden a year later that he did his best to 'work' Wharton out of São Tomé because 'his mixture of airlifting food and gun-running was bad for the Churches. I managed to get him away from there and he then operated from Lisbon again.' A little later Ojukwu summoned and sacked him. On his return to São Tomé, Wharton was arrested by the Portuguese and held for several weeks. He finally returned to Europe and wrote long letters to Ojukwu from a hospital in Basle where he was recovering from an illness, still pleading his innocence. Other independent operators had taken over the link, however, and Wharton faded out of the story.

Another buccaneering figure on the Biafra run was Alistair Wicks, an elegant old-Harrowian, who had emigrated to Rhodesia after the war and

had served under Hoare in the Congo. Wicks struck a deal with Ojukwu to airlift arms and supplies using a small independent Rhodesian airline operated by another Rhodesian ex-mercenary, Jack Mulloch, a bulky gentleman, known to the other pilots as 'Minnesota Fats' or, alternatively, 'Twiggy'. But like Wharton, their first flight came to grief. In early 1968, at the time of Nigeria's sudden switch of the currency, Wicks, Mulloch and four other Europeans, flying out of Biafra, were forced to refuel at Lomé in Togo. The Togolese authorities, their suspicions aroused by the fact that the aircraft carried no markings or identification, searched it. On board they found £7 million in old Nigerian notes and some small arms. The plane and money were seized—the currency was returned to the Federal government—and Wicks and the others spent four uncomfortable months in a Togolese gaol. Sharing Wharton's resilience, however, the two men treated disasters of this kind as merely a temporary setback. Mulloch reappeared when the Libreville-Uli arms airlift was in full swing a year later and did well out of it. (Some of his pilots were making a phenomenal \$750 a night at its peak.) But bad luck continued to dog him. His chief pilot, a Canadian, disappeared one night after returning from Uli with the pilots' pay packets and the airline's expenses. In his pocket were \$250,000. Neither he nor the money was seen again.

A few mercenaries also flew in a combat role for Biafra. The famous B-26 which carried out the first raids of the war on several Nigerian towns was piloted by a colourful Czech known as 'Kamikaze' Braun, who had flown for the R.A.F. against the Luftwaffe during the Second World War. Ironically, one of his former enemies, a German pilot called Fred Herz, flew Biafra's second fighter plane—a B-25—after Braun's aircraft became immobilised due to lack of spare parts.

The Biafran government, like the Nigerian, was initially divided over the use of mercenaries in ground operations. It, too, was concerned about its image with the O.A.U. whom it was keenly courting for recognition. But Ojukwu was finally persuaded, partly as the result of advice tendered by Jacques Foccart, General de Gaulle's powerful secret service chief and special adviser on African affairs. Foccart had already been active in obtaining arms for Biafra through French arms dealers although there was no direct French aid until later in the war.⁹ He was a firm believer in the use of mercenaries to back French policies and had employed them before, notably in Katanga and the Yemen.

⁹ See Chapter VIII.

But before the French became involved, the energetic Mike Hoare had visited Biafra briefly and discussed the hiring of a mercenary force with Ojukwu. Later in a television interview,¹⁰ Hoare claimed idealistic and political reasons were behind his decision not to intervene. But more central was his price, which was too high, and the degree of autonomy he demanded for his mercenary force—to be several hundred strong—which was too great. Rather disarmingly, he partially let the cat out of the bag in the same interview. 'Mine was a political decision and I was helped to a very large degree in spite of myself by Ojukwu saying I can't afford you.' Having failed to sell his services to either side, Hoare later assumed a mantle of respectability, the final adornment being a signed leader-page article in *The Times* calling, with solemnity, on the British government 'to take steps to halt the Biafra war'.¹¹

Biafra's first batch of mercenaries—'foreign volunteers' was the standard euphemism—was organised by Jacques Foccart's office and a former French Foreign Legion officer called Roger Faulques. Another French mercenary 'captain', Robert Denard, the leader of the mutinous 6th Commando in the Congo, had applied for the job but Faulques was chosen. Faulques is the archetypal mercenary hero cast in the *Beau Geste* mould. A battle-scarred veteran, he had fought with conspicuous bravery in the Second World War, Indo-China, Algeria, Katanga and the Yemen. His appearance is faithful to the image, 'His right thumb is missing, a long scar slices across his right cheek, he walks with a limp because of a disjointed hip and his legs are heavy with shrapnel'.¹² He was probably the most respected of the mercenary leaders but was well past his prime and only visited Biafra once to discuss the contract with Ojukwu. In return for providing 100 men for a period of six months, the Biafrans paid him £100,000 through a Paris bank. However, only forty-nine mercenaries actually arrived in Biafra in late 1967. Their first major engagement was an ill-judged attempt to dislodge Adekunle from Calabar. But the Nigerians, with their Sandhurst-trained officers, proved to be a more daunting military proposition than the Congolese. The mercenaries were ambushed and five killed—'twenty Chinese-looking mercenaries died,' announced the Federal government blandly with its obsessive 'Chinese bias'—and several others seriously wounded in one day, a disastrously high toll for a mercenary band where morale is much more

¹⁰ B.B.C. '24 Hours'. Transcript of a television telephone recording, 30.7.1970

¹¹ *The Times* (London), 1.12.1967.

¹² George Thayer, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

susceptible to casualties than in a normal army. This was the effective end of the force and by early February 1968, all but four—the French government insisted all French nationals should leave, another indication of its involvement—were out of Biafra, most of them having given little more than six weeks' service in return for their six months' salary. Faulques, who had also promised to deliver a few Mirage fighters, claimed that the Biafrans had broken their side of the contract by not supplying his men with the necessary modern weapons and equipment. He made no attempt, however, to explain the 'missing' fifty-one mercenaries who had never been recruited, or to return the balance of the huge sum of money he had received.

The most important mercenaries of the four who stayed on after this fiasco were Rolf Steiner, a German, and 'Taffy' Williams, a South African of Welsh origin. Steiner had joined the Hitler Youth at the age of 16 and had fought in the last days of the Second World War. Like many other Germans he enlisted in the Foreign Legion, fought in Indo-China (he lost a lung at Dien Bien Phu and was flown out on the last plane) and later in Algeria where he was involved in the anti-de Gaulle O.A.S. terrorist movement. Twice demoted from the rank of sergeant in Indo-China for unruly behaviour Steiner was, nevertheless, a first-class soldier. Williams is a tall, rangy, sombre-looking soldier of fortune. He had fought in the Congo and became Tshombe's bodyguard after the latter's exile to Spain. (But, with commendable prudence, he was not on board the light aircraft in which Tshombe was hijacked to Algeria in the summer of 1967.) Williams became quite attached to Biafra's cause, stayed the longest of all the mercenaries and was probably their most effective fighting soldier. (Steiner, like Schramme in the Congo, adopted an African child, and Williams became well-known for his love of the children. However, he is alleged to have remarked once that his trouble was he didn't like them when they grew up because then 'I have to kill them'.) These two were joined, in the summer of 1968, by a handful of new mercenaries including my acquaintance from Bukavu, a Rhodesian demolition expert and several others from the Congo/Yemen circuit.

The 'Steiner group', as it became known, specialised in training and leading the Biafrans in guerrilla-style operations. Even the best trained and most experienced Biafran officers had no conception of this kind of warfare and Steiner's men gave value for money in this respect. In July 1968, the 4th Commando Brigade under Steiner's command and a French-speaking, half-Togolese, half-Biafran officer as deputy, was formed.

(Steiner always insisted on speaking atrocious 'Legionnaire' French on duty though his English was quite competent.) The Brigade, initially 3,000 strong, quickly became an elite force in the Biafran army and, as an earnest of intent no doubt, adopted the skull and crossbones as its insignia. All the mercenaries in Biafra were treated as officers—Steiner became a colonel—and while not rendered the demi-god adoration they had received in the Congo, nevertheless held a privileged position. They were paid \$1,000 a month on the average—in dollar bills. This presented, as the months went and the money piled up, some difficulties of portage and concealment and most of the mercenaries hired their own personal bodyguards, more to protect their earnings than their lives. So much liquidity also posed other problems. A mercenary was once discovered making love to a Biafran girl, his money belt at his side, grasping a huge fistful of dollars.

While Steiner and his men were bending the rigid Sandhurst tactics of the Biafran army into a more flexible and realistic shape, a new group of mercenaries turned up. This consisted of fifteen Frenchmen led by Maurice Lucien-Brun (he used the alias Paul Leroy in Biafra), a former French cavalry officer who had fought in the Congo for Tshombe and with Faulques's first Biafran group. When he returned to Biafra he was still limping from the wounds he had received in the back of both legs during the Calabar disaster. Lucien-Brun had convinced Ojukwu that the formation of Vietcong-style commando units, which could infiltrate behind Federal lines and play a political and economic role in the occupied area, was desirable. But from the moment the group arrived—the Federal offensive against the town of Aba was in full swing—things went wrong. Disputes broke out between Lucien-Brun and senior Biafran officers over the distribution of the meagre supplies of weapons and over military tactics. He also quarrelled with Steiner and an intense rivalry sprang up between the two mercenary groups. The outcome was the sudden withdrawal of Lucien-Brun's men, first for Gabon and later for Europe. Each mercenary had received two months' pay in advance, spent three weeks hanging around the bars in Libreville and just a little over a week in Biafra.

Meanwhile new faces had joined the Steiner group. Their names read like the cast of *Guys and Dolls*. There was Johnny Korea, a West Indian of mixed racial origin who had run a bar in Biafra before the war. There was Commandant Kochanowsky, a 50-year-old Pole who had fought with the British 8th Army in North Africa and then in the Foreign Legion. He

refused any pay and fought—well, by all accounts—for idealistic reasons, but left Biafra after three months as mysteriously as he had arrived. Then there were Armand (the 'Brave') Iaranelli, a Corsican, Johnny Erasmus, the Rhodesian explosives expert, and a 54-year-old Irish engineer who had spent twenty-two years in Africa and was known appropriately—and solely—as 'Paddy'. It was about this time that I noticed the sound Runyonesque name of 'Nathan' in the guest book at the Progress Hotel in Aba. He turned out to be Abbie Nathan, Israel's famous 'peace pilot' who had come to Biafra—in someone else's plane—to try and persuade Ojukwu to make peace.

* * *

The summer of 1968 was no picnic in Biafra. The Nigerians were advancing slowly in the south and along two different axes in the north. The mercenaries, attached to different commands for a period to stiffen the defences, shared the brunt, shoulder-to-shoulder, with the Biafrans. Two mercenaries were wounded but no one was killed during that offensive. The strain, however, was beginning to tell, especially on Steiner who had been ill and showed signs of an incipient nervous breakdown. He was also under pressure from senior Biafran officers who disliked the semi-autonomous position he held and he was blamed, with some justification, for several of Biafra's military reverses. Relations deteriorated a stage further when a large Biafran assault on Onitsha near the end of October failed disastrously. Steiner publicly accused the Biafran officers of incompetence and they retaliated by keeping his Brigade short of supplies. He promptly escalated the dispute by commandeering food and medicines, often from the relief organisations.

Steiner had already been showing traces of a Napoleonic megalomania, doubtless encouraged by his rapid rise from a *corporal chef* in the Legion to a colonel in the Biafran army, commanding thousands of men. (His Brigade had expanded into a Division by the autumn of 1968.) In September he had proposed to Ojukwu a hair-brained scheme to launch an attack on the Nigerian navy with a flotilla of 'Zodiac' inflatable rubber boats. He managed to raise about \$25,000 from a West German charitable organisation, flew out to Libreville, banked the money, recruited a few more mercenaries from the bars of the town and returned to Biafra announcing that the 'Zodiac' idea was not feasible after all. His plan for the abortive and costly attack on Onitsha had included a grandiose project

for outflanking the Nigerians, crossing the Niger, seizing Asaba and rounding it off with a swift 250-mile dash to Lagos. The Onitsha battle which he conducted with a suicidal frontal attack, against all the precepts of his Commando Division, marked the end of it as an effective force and the closing act of Steiner's Biafran adventure. The final scene with Ojukwu resembled something out of a bad 'B' film. He was ordered to present himself at State House, Umuahia, and explain why he had commandeered three Swedish Red Cross Land-Rovers. He arrived drunk and belligerent. Refusing to hand over his weapon at the gates, he demanded a beer but rejected it when a glass was offered saying it was too warm. Cursing and swearing he got into an argument with Ojukwu's bodyguards, assaulted one of them, sparking off a free-for-all brawl. Hearing the noise Ojukwu came rushing out and personally saved Steiner from being shot. Far from being grateful, Steiner then turned round and directed his insults against his saviour. Together with five other mercenaries, he was arrested and bundled out of the country the following night. They arrived in Libreville with their hands still bound but they were lucky to escape with their lives and the Biafran government even paid their return fares to Europe. Steiner later moved on to the Sudan and joined the rebels in the South. But during a visit to Uganda he was arrested and handed over to the Sudanese government in Khartoum.

This left Williams, Armand the 'Brave', and three Belgians who had arrived in September. In early November, the remnants of Steiner's Commando Division led by the mercenaries launched another suicidal frontal assault on Onitsha. The battle, in which the Biafrans were again decimated, was brilliantly captured by a French television team in the best piece of action filming of the war. In an extraordinary sequence one of the Belgians, a huge Fleming called Marc Goosens who had fought in the Congo and Yemen, was killed and another mercenary wounded. Biafran soldiers, at great risk to themselves, managed to drag his vast bulk back to safety. Goosens had not intended to go to Biafra at all but had had a row with his girl-friend and left on an impulse. During this battle, Williams, who rather enjoyed his reputation of being mad, strode around with a swagger stick thwacking Biafran soldiers who showed a reluctance to go up to the line and cursing the enemy, quite oblivious to the bullets that sizzled around him. '*Très britannique*,' one of the French reporters noted drily in his diary.

This defeat spelt the virtual end of mercenary operations in Biafra. Williams and Armand the 'Brave' stayed on until early 1969 but in a

training, non-combat capacity. Then, at the expiry of their contracts, they left and did not return. Biafra had had enough of them and perhaps they enough of Biafra. It had been far tougher than either the Congo or the Yemen and mercenaries believe more than most soldiers in living to fight another day.

The mercenary involvement was, in sum, no more successful in Biafra than it had been in Nigeria. Although useful as guerrilla-warfare instructors, the mercenaries surprisingly failed to follow their own teaching in battle. Biafra's major military successes—the Mid-West invasion and the recapture of Owerri—were achieved without mercenary help. Faced with stronger and better armed opponents the mercenaries seemed unable to adapt their tactics with any real success. Biafra got very little in return for the vast sums of precious foreign exchange that were doled out to the mercenary leaders. There was constant friction between the latter and senior Biafran officers who bitterly resented their presence. But Ojukwu himself was remarkably lenient and indulgent with them. Little happened on either side of the lines to alter the unflattering image which 'Les Affreux' had originally created for themselves in Katanga and has remained with them ever since.

* * *

'They wouldn't give me the secret code on São Tomé. They called it a trade secret which indicated it was business to them.'¹³ The speaker was Count von Rosen, talking about his first contact with the pilots hired by the Churches and the International Red Cross to fly relief supplies into Biafra. The relief pilots were, in fact, mercenaries, but they flew instead of fighting for their money. And because their risk was greater they were paid roughly three times as much as their comrades flying the Federal Dakotas and MiGs. Many of them earned as much as eight to ten thousand dollars a month, paid in cash. They worked for their money, however, and twenty-five pilots and aircrew, buried in a neat bush cemetery beside the road that was Uli provide mute evidence of the hazards they faced. Their background was similar to that of the Federal mercenaries, many of them having flown in the Congo or Yemen for a variety of dubious airlines, sometimes ferrying relief supplies, often running guns. The conversations between these men, crackling out over their radios in a Babel of accents as they circled warily around each other over Uli in the pro-

¹³ Von Rosen, interview with the author, Malmö, Sweden, June 1969.

fundity of the tropical night, created a unique drama. The following account by the Canadian relief pilot mentioned earlier gives some idea of what it was like to fly into Uli with a Federal predator lurking in the darkness above the air-field.

'He was "Yellow Bar"¹⁴ sometimes, "Genocide" others. We changed our code every two weeks or so in the hope that he couldn't stay up with the changes. He became chatty after a while and it had a great psychological effect on us because we never knew where he was. He came over one night when we were holding and giving Biafra ground control hell because we wanted to land and get out. After all the talk was over, his voice came on the air. "This is *Genocide*. I have fourteen and a half hours' endurance. What are your intentions?" I think his mission was not to bomb us, it was to prevent us from landing which served the same purpose. If they could prevent five aircraft from landing a night, it meant a hundred thousand pounds of food less. It would thwart the whole operation.

'Sometimes he would pick out a certain pilot and call him by his name. This happened to one of our men who got cocky and said to him, "Is that *Genocide*? Well, this is *Homicide* and one day I'm going to get your ass." This started a personal vendetta between the two of them. *Genocide* started calling the pilot, a man called Lucas, by his name every night saying things like, "The rest of the planes can come in, but *you* I'm going to get. I'm waiting for you." He started calling his registration number, calling him by name, threatening him. Lucas finally broke, *Genocide* got to him so badly. He got psyched out, he just packed his bags and left. He then started on me, but it didn't bother me much because I got to like the guy. We got quite chatty. Nobody had any idea what he was being paid and we used to talk about that. He would ask us why we were doing what we were doing. How much were we getting paid? I asked him the same question and he laughed. That's when he came out and said, "I'm not interested in hitting the food planes—I'm only after the arms planes." I replied, "Why don't you come down here and smell this goddam aircraft full of stock-fish?" And he said, "I'm sorry, I can't distinguish at night-time between you and an arms plane."

'One night, just after I had asked Biafra control for clearance, he came up and said, "Yeah, go in, Pete." He had picked up our names over the

¹⁴ The first full-length feature film on the Nigerian war—mainly about the relief operations into Biafra—has been made by an American-Norwegian company (producer: James Hudson) using three of the pilots who flew on the mercy run. It is named after one of the Federal MiG pilot's call-signs, *Yellow Bar*.

cockpit conversation. As we were on the air every night he got used to our voices and could identify them. Anyway, we went in and landed and he dropped a couple of bombs and then said, "Hey, that was pretty close, eh Pete? Next time I'll do a little better." I used to retaliate by telling him to fuck off and things like that which were frowned on by the Churches. But what can you say to something like that?¹⁵

There were some strange outfits involved in the relief operation. The humanitarian organisations were desperate for aircraft and pilots and were not too fussy about whom they hired, even though their public image suffered as a result. One such airline was a Californian firm called Flight Test Services which had been supplied with some old C-97 freighters, formerly in use with the National Guard, by the United States government. The aircraft were given a hurried coat of paint and marked 'Joint Church Aid—U.S.A.' By the time one of these planes had reached Palma airport in Mallorca on its way to São Tomé, the old 'U.S. Air Force' markings were beginning to show through. This turned ultimately to the pilot's advantage since the Spanish military authorities, assuming him to be on some kind of secret C.I.A. mission, gave him free landing rights and V.I.P. treatment in one of Palma's best hotels.

The delicate equilibrium between the relief and Federal fighter pilots was only upset once during the war. This occurred in June 1969, and, ironically, it was the sudden intervention of another foreign pilot, who had himself been on the relief run nine months earlier, that did it. The Nigerians were furious when von Rosen stepped into the war with his own deadly little air force and threatened to tip the balance against them. They immediately increased pressure on their mercenary pilots to strike back, and threatened to sack them all unless a Biafran arms or relief plane was forced down so that it could be examined and Nigeria's sensitive sovereignty be seen, by the whole world, to be respected. This put the Federal pilots in a quandary since they knew through talking to the relief crews that the latter would refuse to land. The result was tragedy.

Early in June, a few weeks after von Rosen's first wave of attacks, the relief operation to Biafra was in full swing. Some of the pilots, in order to fly as many missions as possible were edging their initial flight of the night back into twilight or even daylight hours. A Swedish Red Cross DC-7 was caught by a Federal MiG flying towards Uli a little before nightfall. The MiG pilot, an English mercenary, ordered the Swede to alter course and land at Federal-held Port Harcourt, otherwise he would have no

¹⁵ Peter Knox, *op. cit.*

alternative but to shoot him down. The Swede, probably cursing his fellow countryman von Rosen and fearing the worst if he and his crew fell into Nigerian hands, refused. It is also possible that he had some non-relief materials on board, perhaps smuggled goods which would have compromised the reputation of the Red Cross operation. And then he may well have thought that he could call the Englishman's bluff. The MiG's radio crackled again: 'Port Harcourt or else.' Still the Swede refused. There was a quick burst of cannon fire and the DC-7, its enormous red crosses crumpling in the fire and smoke, spiralled down into a fatal spin and crashed in the jungle far below killing all its crew. The incident shocked the world—the Nigerians first denied it, then claimed the aircraft was carrying arms—and brought the International Red Cross's vast Biafran operation to a halt. The English pilot was reported to have had a breakdown afterwards and was killed (the only mercenary to die on the Federal side) trying to land his MiG at Port Harcourt later in the war.¹⁶

The Canadian relief pilot who also flew on the night of the encounter, gives this version of what happened. 'It was daylight and I was coming over Uli. The [Swedish] Red Cross plane was five minutes behind me and I was happy about being the first in. I had just come over the field and was heading downwind. I had a Hawaiian co-pilot and a Mexican as flight engineer. As we were turning downwind control tower came on and said, "There's a MiG on your tail!" You know, Christ! I turned around and asked "What did he say?" Saf said, "I'm not sure, but I think he said something about a MiG." And Biafra control came on again and said, "There's a MiG on your tail, sir!" I turned to Saf and said, "Bull-shit." And he came on a third time, "THERE'S A MiG ON YOUR TAIL!" I still didn't believe it but headed for some cloud a few hundred feet above us. In about five minutes I was cleared to land. I said, Jesus those bastards are uptight, seeing things down there.

"When I got to the ground, the aircraft was swamped by ground personnel, Red Cross personnel, tower personnel. They asked, "Have you heard from our DC-7? We got a message from him that his number three and four engines were on fire, that he was attacked by a MiG and he's going in." And they said, "You were tail-chased as well." They had lost all contact with him. I never had any contact with the MiG; I never even saw him, but he must have read my marking—JOINT CHURCH AID OF THE U.S.A.—and peeled off and got the Swedish Red Cross

¹⁶ See Chapter IX for the political and other repercussions of this incident.

plane in direct retaliation against von Rosen. I'm sure he could have shot me out of the sky if he had wanted to. He couldn't have missed.¹⁷

* * *

Other foreigners involved in military operations—the Egyptian pilots and the Swedish flying ace, Count von Rosen—were not mercenaries but can most conveniently be dealt with here. The Egyptians, brought in at the Russians' suggestion to fly the MiGs and Ilyushins, were a mixed bag. Some were former Egyptian air force pilots, a few had no connection with the services at all, but the majority were from the active list. They were supplied on a rotation basis, usually about twenty-five at a time with ground crews and technicians. Most military observers in the Nigerian war agree that the Egyptians were useless. One critic described their activities as being 'characterised by low-level strafing runs at 20,000 feet and pin-point bombing over the *Bight of Biafra!*' A not untypical story of their prowess tells how two Ilyushin-28 bombers, both piloted by Egyptians, set out from Enugu to bomb Uli. Their flight report read: 'Intercepted by two enemy Fouga Magistères; fought them off, may have downed one; on to Uli, bombed it accurately and thoroughly; returned to base.' The true version was somewhat different. The Egyptians mistook their own MiG-17 escorts, piloted by Nigerians, for the enemy (the Biafrans, in any case, had nothing larger than a few flea-sized Swedish Minicons and a couple of Harvard trainers), carried out evasive action and were completely lost not long after leaving Enugu. One finally landed at Ikeja airport, just outside Lagos, while the other came down on his last pint of fuel in Cotonou, capital of Dahomey, five hundred miles from Biafra and nearly caused a diplomatic incident. The effect of the Egyptians' bombing when they did manage to stay on target was haphazard in the extreme. One experienced reporter in Biafra summed it up as follows:

'the aiming was amazingly imprecise considering that the Biafrans had no means of harassing the planes' Egyptian pilots except a very few anti-aircraft guns. There did not seem to be a deliberate policy of bombing civilian concentrations, although many civilians were inevitably killed. The pilots' main concern seemed to be to drop their load as quickly as they could, then head off for home.¹⁸

¹⁷ Peter Knox, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Michael Leapman, *Venture*, July/August 1969, p. 13.

'For the first raid we took off in formation about midday,' Count Carl Gustaf von Rosen told me at his home in Malmö, Sweden, in June 1969 just after his return from Biafra. 'We flew low, skimming over the forest. It was blistering hot but we wanted to get them when they were sleepy after their lunch. The target was Port Harcourt. As we got close to the coast one of the pilots spotted some big oil tankers and got excited and began to talk on the radio. Any military pilot would have wanted to have a go and sink them. Anyway, the cat was out of the bag: the Nigerians knew we were coming. We came in low over the tree-tops and saw the whole runway being covered with leaves by soldiers running all over the place. All the guns were pointing up at us so we had quite an interesting time. They let us have everything they had. I almost flipped over in the backlash of their Bofors anti-aircraft guns (Swedish, of course). But suddenly the Nigerians were looking right into our rockets and then we really shot that place up. We knocked out the Bofors on the first sweep and then got one of the MiGs. Its wings snapped off and cartwheeled into the air like kindling.'¹⁹

This was the first of the Swedish count's daring and devastating hedge-hopping raids which introduced a totally new element in the war and put the initiative back into Biafra's hands. The attack on Port Harcourt by four light aircraft fitted with rockets and led by von Rosen himself, wearing a golden yellow baseball cap back-to-front as protection against the sun, occurred in late May 1969. It was quickly followed up by similar lightning raids on Benin and Enugu airfields, where several Russian-built aircraft of the Nigerian air force were destroyed on the ground, and on vital oil and power installations in the Mid-West. The attacks continued, somewhat erratically, until the end of the war as the Biafran air force, virtually defunct for eighteen months, acquired more light aircraft and challenged the Nigerian jets where they were most vulnerable—on the ground. This development was as sudden as it was dramatic and took the Nigerians completely by surprise. But the idea was not new and preparatory planning had been in progress for some time before the first raid. 'Operation Biafran Baby' (as it was called), von Rosen told me, had been first conceived when he visited Biafra during Christmas, 1968. 'I soon realised that every priest, every doctor, every black and white man in Biafra was praying for arms and ammunition before food . . . the Biafran army could handle the Nigerians on the ground but they had

¹⁹ Interview with the author, Malmö, Sweden, June 1969. (Much of this material originally appeared in the *Observer* of 6.7.1969.)

nothing to match them in the air.' (von Rosen had previously flown as a relief pilot and co-ordinator for the Scandinavian Churches, NORD-CHURCHAID, and during a particularly difficult moment in August 1968, he and a Swedish crew had broken the blockade by flying a heavily laden DC-7 into Uli at tree-top level in broad daylight.)

'My son was working as an apprentice at an aircraft factory in Malmö,' von Rosen continued, 'and asked me to teach him to fly in a little two-seater called an MFI-9B. I liked the plane and saw a sketch of the military version, designed primarily for counter-insurgency operations. This is the Minicon.²⁰ Then I thought of Biafra and realised that they would never be able to buy or fly in jet fighters. Maintenance and fuel would pose an insurmountable problem anyway. The Minicon has many advantages: it cannot easily be hit by anti-aircraft fire nor detected by radar because it flies too low. Extra fuel tanks can be fitted in the second seat, extending its range which could comfortably cover sorties to places as far afield from Biafra as Lagos and the Jebba bridge in the north. It's easy to fly and simple to service. It's a new weapon of war. I mentioned the idea to Ojukwu and he asked me later if I would like to come back and see if it would work out.'

The next problem was to buy the aircraft and get them out to Biafra. The Swedish manufacturers of the Minicon, the Malmö Flyg Industri (M.F.I.), a subsidiary of SAAB, the motor and aeronautical firm, were approached by the Tanzanian embassy in Stockholm early in 1969 and asked about the suitability of the MFI-9B (the non-military version) as training aircraft. The Tanzanian government, which had recognised Biafra, was interested in establishing a small flying school back home, the ambassador let it be known. An additional smoke-screen was laid when word went out in Sweden and Denmark that Tanzania was looking for pilot instructors for the new school. Finally, the 'Tanzanian government' (in fact, the Biafrans) bought five aircraft, a total cost of £21,500. There was no danger of contravening Swedish export licensing laws since the MFI-9B, unmodified, is not a military aircraft. The planes were flown to France by M.F.I.'s own pilots and technicians who were still under the impression that the ultimate destination of the aircraft was Tanzania. But they were a little surprised when they were directed to land at a military airfield just outside Paris, and even more so when the French authorities suggested that one of the aircraft should be despatched to another military

²⁰ The correct abbreviation is MINICOIN (*Mini Counter-Insurgency*) but Minicon has passed into popular usage.

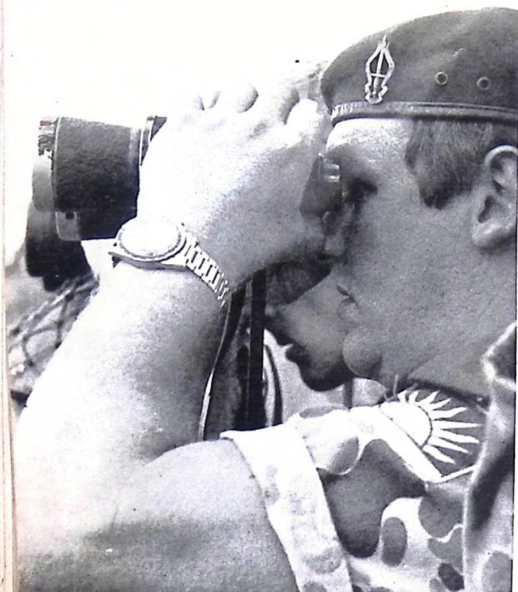
airfield near the Atlantic coast for 'testing'. For the Swedes who went along on this flight, surprise turned to astonishment when French air force technicians began to measure rocket fittings under the plane's wings and switched the electrical system from the normal twelve volt circuit to twenty-four volts. The aircraft returned to Paris—no rockets were actually fitted in France—and dismantled with the other four, crated and loaded into a couple of Super Constellation freighters.

All but one of the Swedes flew back to Malmö, a little mystified but their duty done. The man left behind, Per Hazelius, whose job it was to reassemble the aircraft when they reached Tanzania, climbed into one of the Constellations and began to look forward to a few days off on the palm-fringed beaches of Oyster Bay in Dar-es-Salaam. But when the plane finally landed he found himself on the other side of Africa, in Libreville. Waiting to greet him on the tarmac was a smiling Count von Rosen. The count, two other pilots and two ground crew—all Swedes and unpaid volunteers—had been tipped off in Europe a few days earlier by the Biafrans. They were told 'everything is ready' and caught the next available flight to Libreville, capital of Gabon, which had also recognised Biafra. Von Rosen told the bewildered Hazelius, somewhat implausibly, that the 'Tanzanian flying school' had been moved 'temporarily' to Gabon. The aircraft were off-loaded, assembled in Libreville and flown to a secret bush airstrip some way outside the capital. When von Rosen and the crew began to fit French-made Matra rockets under the wings of each plane—six per wing—and painted out the Swedish markings with camouflage colours, it finally dawned on Hazelius what was happening. Suddenly, the innocent MFI-9B trainers had become lethal Minicons. Von Rosen tried to persuade Hazelius to accompany them to Biafra but he refused, hitched a lift with a French farmer in a light aircraft back to Libreville and returned to Sweden still, one imagines, a little bemused. The count and his men spent several days in their bush hide-out, testing the aircraft and rockets. They also went over their operational plans for the first target, Port Harcourt, which they were to attack direct from Gabon, flying in low over the sea.

There were seven of them all told, including von Rosen himself. The number two was another Swede called Martin Lang, a 31-year-old pilot from Norrköping in central Sweden and this was his first visit to Africa. The third Swedish pilot was Gunnar Haglund, who normally worked for A.S.E.A., the big Swedish steel manufacturers. He had never been outside Europe before and had the somewhat doubtful honour of



Execution of a Federal lieutenant by firing squad for killing an unarmed Biafran prisoner; Port Harcourt, September 1968.



Goosens and other white mercenaries reconnoitre the Nigerian positions.



Biafran soldiers of the 4th Com

Death of a mercenary in Biafra: Marc Goosens, a Flemish m

Biafran soldiers, poorly armed and clothed, at





...ondo Division drag Goosens' body back.



Goosens had \$4000 in his pocket when he was killed.
... about four months' pay.

...nary, is killed in a frontal assault on Onitsha, November 1968.

...e front; the boy, third from the right, is 13 years old.





Biafran troops collect their dead in the forest before retreating from the advancing Nigerian Army.

A time for God: an Irish missionary hears a Biafran soldier's confession; the soldier, like many in Biafra's hard-pressed army, is barefoot but has a modern automatic rifle, probably captured from the Nigerians.



rocketing his own firm's installations when the squadron attacked the Ughelli electric power station in the Mid-West. The remaining two pilots were Biafrans and there were two Swedish ground crew.

When I first met von Rosen in Sweden I found it difficult to conceive any connection between that rather tired old man, a 60-year-old grandfather, with his greying hair and deep-sunken blue eyes, and the astonishing, romantic legend that is his life. His ancestors include Crusading Knights Templar, fighters for Greek freedom and intrepid explorers of Africa. He went to—and got expelled from—Sweden's Eton; he has hobnobbed with royalty and owns a seventeenth-century castle in an Ingmar Bergman setting of sunlit lakes and forests in central Sweden. In his youth he taught himself to fly and earned pocket money by speedway riding and stunt flying at summer fairs. He once broke the world record for the longest single flight in a small plane. He flew missions for guerrillas in western Ethiopia during the Italian invasion, fought for the Finns against the Russians, flew in relief supplies to the smouldering Warsaw ghetto and, to round it off as it were, knocked out half the jet-studded Nigerian air force with an aeronautical equivalent of an Austin Mini.

Von Rosen does not fit into a common mould. He is not a simple foot-loose adventurer. Neither is he a swashbuckling twentieth-century buccaneer of the mercenary leader brand, like 'Mad' Mike Hoare or the battle-scarred Roger Faulques. He is equally far removed from the semi-mystical and hopelessly incompetent 'Black Jack' Schramme or the brilliant professional soldier of the Otto Skorzeny breed. Much of his life has been spent as an ordinary commercial airline pilot and he has not always sought out trouble—he avoided involvement in the Spanish civil war for example. He had been an active humanitarian, flying for the Red Cross in Ethiopia and then in Biafra. (After leaving the Scandinavian Churches' relief operation in São Tomé he had travelled half-way round the world unsuccessfully lobbying Haile Selassie, the I.C.R.C. and the United Nations with a relief plan of his own.) But he lost the right to that title when he fired his first rocket at the Nigerian MiGs on Port Harcourt airfield. There is no denying, however, that fighting for the underdog in foreign lands and a taste for adventure run deep in the von Rosen blood. The secret is perhaps that the count is an old-fashioned mixture of a man of conscience and a man of action who, when he encounters what he regards to be a burning injustice, promptly does something about it. People may criticise his judgment and his methods but they can hardly question his motives.

He and his family were pro-Biafran up to the eyebrows and typified much of the passionate conviction of Biafra's supporters abroad. Nothing could budge von Rosen from his belief that right lay exclusively on the Biafran side and his admiration for Ojukwu was as unstinted as it was uncritical. His own attitude developed from that of humanitarian 'hawk'—the suffering must be succoured by any means regardless of legal restrictions but stopping short of violence—to that of a combatant who shouldered arms on behalf of the afflicted. 'The idea', he told me, 'was not to add fuel to the war but to keep the sophisticated war machine that the Nigerians had at their command—the Saladin armoured cars, the MiGs and Ilyushins—away from the little children.' Von Rosen clearly felt that, like a surgeon, he could walk into the operating theatre and quickly remove the most dangerous part of the tumour without becoming involved in the rest of the operation. It was a politically naive belief for, even if his plan for wiping out the Nigerian air force on the ground, Israeli-style, had been successful, it is highly unlikely that this would have stopped the war or brought the Nigerians to the talks table with an acceptable compromise solution.

As it was, the Minicon raids only partially succeeded. Several Nigerian aircraft were destroyed, but enough survived to continue nightly bombing attacks on Uli and other targets, and although the flow of oil exports from the Mid-West, and with them Nigeria's most important source of foreign exchange, were significantly reduced by the raids the Nigerian war machine survived without undue difficulty. And, not surprisingly for those who knew the mood on the Federal side, von Rosen's intervention produced the opposite effect to the one he had intended: the tempo of the struggle quickened. Aerial bombing, which had eased off in April/May, intensified; the ill-fated Swedish Red Cross plane was shot down by an English mercenary under pressure from a furious Federal government (there seems little doubt that this was a direct reprisal for the Swedish count's raids); the I.C.R.C. was compelled to halt its huge night relief operation into Biafra, thereby reducing the vital supplies of food and medicines to the very Biafran children whom von Rosen was trying to protect, and also to wind up its valuable ground work on the Nigerian side: and humanitarians in general were viewed in Lagos with a new mistrust since von Rosen himself had been one less than a year earlier.

The count later claimed that if his plans for more frequent and more ambitious attacks on Nigeria's vulnerable points, such as the Apapa oil terminal and docks in Lagos and the Jebba road and rail bridge, the

South's sole link with the North, had been implemented he would have achieved his aim of forcing the Federals to make peace. He blamed corruption and inefficiency among the Biafran leadership—exonerating Ojukwu himself—for this failure. And he remained unrepentant for his actions. 'In the end,' he told me in Malmö, 'if you are an honest man and you have gone to fight for Finland because it was close to your own country and because they were white people, there is no excuse for backing out of a similar situation because it is farther away and because the people are black.' The excitement and heroic nature of the Biafran experience clearly fired the ageing count as it did many others. 'Once you have seen something like Biafra you cannot turn your back on it. It is really fantastic what they have done. The Biafran struggle will go down in history, like Thermopylae. I am proud to have been associated with men who fought as they did.'²¹ Like many other foreigners who stepped into the Nigerian quagmire, von Rosen discovered that the bland surface hid a volatile and unpredictable interior, and nothing was as simple as it had originally seemed. From the historical viewpoint von Rosen's role was unique. Neither Nigerian, nor Biafran, nor even a mercenary, he came near to altering the course of the war in a truly spectacular manner. That he failed was probably less his own fault than the strength and determination of the Nigerians combined with the mistakes of the Biafrans. Morally, however, his intervention in the Nigerian war is as indefensible as that of any outsider.

²¹ von Rosen, *op. cit.*

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

The War of Words

War-6

May—October 1969

Propaganda
World Press
Lobbies

IN LATE MAY 1969, VON ROSEN FOLLOWED UP HIS PORT HARCOURT raid with attacks on Benin and Enugu airfields in quick succession. Biafran morale soared. On the ground things began to go better too. Earlier in the month there had been a considerable increase in Biafran guerrilla activity in the Mid-West, notably between the Niger and Ase rivers. In what appeared to be a deliberate raid, since it took place just before dawn, eleven Italian oil workers on an exposed AGIP rig were killed by Biafran troops and another eighteen taken prisoner. The latter were tried and condemned to death for 'aiding the enemy', but eventually released after some frantic backstairs diplomacy involving the Italian government, the Pope, Caritas, Ivory Coast, Gabon, France and Portugal. It is also believed, but not confirmed, that several million dollars were involved, constituting a payment to the Biafrans by the Italian government for the men's freedom. The incident, handled untypically maladroitly by the Biafrans, knocked a lot of the stuffing out of Biafra's image in Italy and Western Europe but it also sent a shudder down the spines of the other oil companies working in the Mid-West. And then, a fortnight later, the first wave of Minicons came over the tree-tops adding a new hazard to exploration and drilling operations. The Biafrans also managed to push southwards from recently recaptured Owerri, which had become their new capital, the third since the war began, to the oilfields near the Imo river. Their intention was to retake Port Harcourt (a spectacular coup if it had come off) and although they edged close to the town from time to time, it remained firmly in Federal hands for the rest of the war.

Gowon's reply to these developments was to shake up his army command and pull back the 2nd Division to protect the Mid-West, leaving

the 1st to look after Onitsha and the whole of the northern sector east of the Niger. In a typically Nigerian move, Gowon announced the replacement of all *three* Divisional commanders—a piecemeal change-over might have had serious political or Regional repercussions. Colonel Obasanjo, a cautious engineer and fellow Yoruba, went to Port Harcourt to replace the 'Black Scorpion' who was given a quiet headquarters job as head of training; the easy-going Haruna handed over command of the 2nd ('Tortoise') Division to his burly and energetic deputy, Colonel Jallo; and Colonel Bissala became head of the 1st Division in Enugu, replacing the meticulous and worthy Shuwa. (In fact, the latter stayed on in command until the following September, probably in recognition of his solid if unspectacular achievements both as a soldier and an administrator.) The important tribal balance of the field commands remained virtually unchanged: one Westerner (Obasanjo) and two Middle-Belt men (Jallo and Bissala).

With the failure of the Federal army once again to overrun Biafra before the rains settled in and the revival of hope, engendered by von Rosen's 'instant' air force, within the embattled enclave, there came one of those natural lulls in the war. Both sides appeared to have run out of steam but not determination to carry on when their energy returned.

* * *

The military struggle in and over the bush and jungles of eastern Nigeria was accompanied by a bitter war of words: a conflict, it often seemed, pursued with greater energy and more imagination than the one on the ground. Its weapons were newspapers, pamphlets, books, photographs, posters, even postage stamps and, above all, the radio and the television. The Nigerian war was one of the world's first 'telly' wars, where people thousands of miles away from the dank humidity, the heat, the suffering and the dying in the forests of West Africa could settle back comfortably in their armchairs and have an intimate view of that alien and fearful corner of Africa. Its tactics encompassed propaganda, pure and applied (i.e. public relations firms), the world press and foreign lobbies. In the days of the 'global village', a war of words and images could not fail to influence the course of events and the Nigerian conflict was no exception though the precise effect is difficult to disentangle since propaganda, lobbying, etc., had formed such an integral part of the political process long before hostilities broke out. Its strategic influence

was also significant for it helped to bring the 'outsiders' in and continually highlighted the central dichotomy of honest 'humanitarianism' versus self-interested 'interference' in their motives and their actions. And out of it arose the sociological phenomenon of 'Biafra', still an emotional word for many today. Rarely has such a distant, complex and localised conflict aroused such passion among foreigners, particularly among the sophisticated and normally dispassionate Anglo-Saxons of Europe and North America.

The propaganda war was fought on two fronts: internally and abroad. Domestic propaganda received less publicity but certainly had the greater influence in shaping the course of the war. Historically, the old Regions possessed the means (government-controlled newspapers and radio stations) to propagate their views and mould public opinion. But it was only after the second coup that they began to exercise and develop them to their full capacity. A running battle between the East and the rest of the Federation developed with the North often taking an unusually 'hawkish' stance of its own. As the crisis deepened, the North closed ranks but retained enough of its former independence to embarrass Lagos and the Federal Ministry of Information, which was supposed to control the whole country's information media, from time to time. Radio Kaduna was the worst culprit, peddling a consistently extreme and sometimes downright murderous anti-Biafran line, often directly contradicting Lagos's conciliatory tone and reinforcing the Ibos' genocidal fears while the Federal government was trying to allay them. Pamphleteering by the North, especially in the early days of the crisis, struck a shrill note and four pamphlets which appeared in late 1967 explaining the North's attitude to the East were withdrawn on Gowon's orders a fortnight after they appeared.

In a country of about 50 million people where a large proportion cannot read—the literate Nigerian, though, is an avid newspaper reader—the radio assumes a vast importance as the sole means of regular contact between the leadership and the mass of the population. If the conflict was a 'telly' war outside Nigeria it was even more a 'transistor' one inside. Not only was the radio the principal weapon but it also became a symbol of nationhood. Whenever Federal troops made a breakthrough, it was always the Biafran radio station that was first moved to safety.

The dominant theme behind each side's propaganda was the imperative need to maintain unity and marshal support behind the leadership and the war effort. The radio became the greatest source of political education for

the masses. Every imaginable device was used: slogans, thudding traditional drums (Lagos prefaced its news bulletins with a particularly blood-curdling war chant), fiery speeches, dramatic presentation and long turgid 'commentaries'. Several near geniuses in this kind of propaganda emerged, the most notable probably being Okonkon Ndem, often known as Biafra's 'Lord Haw Haw' (he had worked in Federal broadcasting before the war) whose Shakespearean imagery and resonant voice became well known throughout the country.

Beyond forging unity and 'educating' the people, the aims of the combatants diverged. In Biafra, the critical issue was to boost morale and convince the masses that their terrible sacrifices were worthwhile because victory would ultimately be theirs. Hence the fiction of 'Radio Enugu' which after the fall of the capital in the fourth month of the war was anywhere but in its rightful place, usually well-hidden in a clump of bamboos deep in the bush. The Biafran government concentrated its attack on the traditional political targets of the pre-coup days, singling out 'Northern domination', the 'Hausa hordes' and the 'Muslim threat' for the heaviest bombardment. Gowon and the leadership in Lagos, assumed to be totally Northern-dominated, received regular broadsides. The Biafran propagandists became masters in dressing up misfortune in the finery of optimism, but their biggest weapon was the threat of genocide. Ever since the shocked and traumatised Ibo refugees had poured into the East from the North in the autumn of 1966, Biafran propaganda had played incessantly on the fears aroused by these terrible events. It was a key factor in preparing the general mood for secession and equally crucial in maintaining an appropriately bellicose fervour during the war, especially in the later desperate stages. The beauty of the genocide concept for the propagandist was that it left no loophole. It ensured that the masses, which firmly believed it, would support the leadership's decision to fight on to the very last—even beyond the point where all reasonable hope of victory had faded—because they were convinced that there was no alternative. The genocide theme was, therefore, ubiquitous in Biafran propaganda.

The curious thing though was that the Biafrans, mainly the Ibos, I should say, actually seemed to enjoy perpetuating the memory of their suffering. I had a personal experience of this in Aba, then in Biafran hands, when I was invited to watch an 'entertainment' in the town hall to raise money for refugees.¹ For more than two hours on an improvised stage

¹ See Chapter VI for further details of this event.

the history of Biafra was re-enacted with heavy and morbid emphasis on the bloodiest incidents. The performance, attended by all the notables of Aba, was an immense success and £2,000 was raised for the refugees. But the significant point was the audience reaction. Although familiar with every detail, they lapped it up. I was the only foreigner in that crowded hall and the evening was certainly not arranged for my benefit, nor for the foreign press nor for anybody but the Biafrans themselves, just in case, one felt, they had become a little rusty on the horrific details. Everywhere in Biafra one was reminded, in a way that left nothing to the imagination, of the 1966 massacres and the terrors of the war: the radio and the newspapers (such as they were) poured it out as if it were hot news instead of history; official pamphlets reproduced atrocity pictures and personal accounts in loving detail: posters screamed the message: THIS IS GENOCIDE; and even the new stamps showed a headless bleeding corpse. A year after my 'Aba evening', the theme had neither changed nor lost its macabre appeal. A British journalist visiting Biafra for the first time in July 1969, reported:

'the most popular act by the 'Armed Forces Entertainment' group (Biafra's equivalent of Britain's wartime ENSA) was a two-hour poetic tragedy sub-titled 'The Body Without a Head'—based on an incident that occurred during the massacres in the North when a decapitated corpse was sent south by train to Enugu. The unidentifiable body has become an anonymous symbol of the struggle.'²

The inescapable conclusion was that the Biafran authorities were determined not to allow the people to forget.

In Federal Nigeria, the pressures and needs were different. Since the Federals were demonstrably winning the war most of the time the problem was not to convince people that victory lay round the corner but to keep them interested enough so that it did not elude them by default. Nigerians, like most people, are only really absorbed by their own local affairs and it was an easy step from boredom or disinterest with the war to active disaffection when it affected local interests, as in the case of war taxation which produced serious rioting in the Western State, but significantly only after the physical threat of the war had receded to the banks of the Niger. There was also the problem, inherent in all civil wars, of the victor having to live with the vanquished after the war was over. Gowon,

² Francis Wyndham, *Sunday Times*, 27.7.1969.

who disliked all forms of propaganda and public relations, was acutely aware of this and insisted that the Ibo people as a whole should be left out of the propaganda struggle. The official policy was to blame the crisis on 'Ojukwu and his rebel (or Nnewi) clique' thus advancing the declared Federal aim of bringing the Ibos back to the fold, separating them from their leadership and allaying their fears of genocide. In practice, however, much of this was undermined by contradictory and tougher statements from Radio Kaduna, individual politicians and soldiers and by the natural tendency of the Ibos, wherever they happened to be, to believe the Biafran rather than the Federal message.

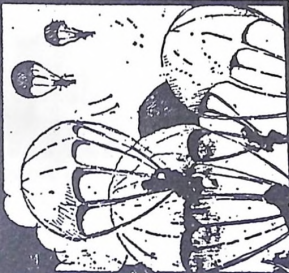
The press on both sides of the line came out of the war of words badly, succumbing with hardly a token resistance to the pressures exerted on it by the military governments. For all intents and purposes, the local press became part of the official propaganda armoury. In Nigeria there were a few brave exceptions (*Drum* published several articles which were unpopular with the military government; Peter Enahoro, the distinguished journalist brother of Chief Anthony Enahoro, chose a self-imposed exile rather than condone the situation after the second coup; and one or two papers in the West and Mid-West criticised the government occasionally) but on the whole the press lost its nerve and censored itself into a state of grovelling sycophancy. This reached such a pass that it eventually upset the army commanders themselves by embarrassingly claiming military victories long before they were a fact. One of the worst but not untypical 'whitewash' examples I came across was by the formerly highly reputable *Daily Times*, which bills itself as 'The Independent Newspaper', when it reported the International Observers Team's report on the killing of four European relief workers by Federal troops in Okigwi. The deep banner headline on the front page read: 'TROOPS CLEARED ON OKIGWI DEATHS'. Lower down, the sixth paragraph had this to say, 'The report, however, claimed that soldiers "deliberately and without provocation by the persons concerned shot and killed two Red Cross officials and two World Council of Churches representatives".'³ An astonishing contradiction by any standards! However, Nigerian journalists retained their flexible skill with the English language and coined a few choice euphemisms which might well prove useful in other countries burdened with military regimes. The one I liked best was approved house-style when reporting a spot of looting, rape or breaking and entering: 'soldiers', 'Federal troops', etc., disappeared under an acceptable cloak of anonymity

³ *Daily Times*, Lagos, 9.10.1968.

Designed, Produced and Distributed by
THE MINISTRY OF INFORMATION, ENGL.

PARATROOPERS

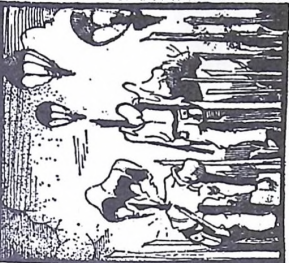
WHEN THEY COME . . .



SCAN THE SKIES AND REPORT.



STAKE ALL OPEN FIELDS . . .



THEY WILL FALL INTO THE
JAWS OF DEATH . . .



FIGHT WITH EVERY AVAILABLE
WEAPON . . .



LEAVE SKULL BASHING TO
WOMEN



STAB THEM TO DEATH . . .



AND OUR NATURAL FORCES
WILL FIGHT IN THE WILDS . . .



BIAFRANS-
GOD IS ON OUR SIDE
WE SHALL VANQUISH!

called 'armed men in uniform'. Having worked closely with Nigerian and Biafran pressmen on both sides of the line, one cannot blame them for their caution because the military governments had the power to harass and lock them up—and frequently used it—without redress. The famed freedom and outspokenness of the Nigerian press, the liveliest and most independent in black Africa, died with civilian rule and there is still little sign of its resurrection.

It is a mistake to think that because the internal propaganda was crude, untruthful to the point of ridicule and totally lacking in credibility to outsiders it was ineffective. The posters, slogans, ditties—all in inimitable West African style—that characterised the war of words may seem small beer to those accustomed to more sophisticated and subtle propaganda machines, yet they had an enormous impact. In Biafra fairly typical were the THIS IS GENOCIDE poster and air-raid warnings like, 'What to do in the event of an air-raid: get under cover, and if you see the enemy, mow him down.' In Nigeria: 'GOWON' ('Go On With One Nigeria') and on television:

In case of a bomb, look out,
Do not scream and shout;
If in the market place,
Fall on the face;
Do what you are told,
And live till you are old.
JOIN THE CIVIL DEFENCE!

Propaganda excesses, like the atrocities, were perpetrated by both sides. The Nigerians and Biafrans were particularly addicted to 'killing' each other off, especially in the top ranks of the army and civil service. Several times on each side I met people allegedly shot dead or blown up months before. Propaganda created new myths (like the Biafrans were using Chinese, or the Federals British troops) and gave many of the old ones a new lease of life. As for influencing the course of events, three examples will show the power of the media. The *Drum* article which appeared in May 1966, describing the murdered Sardauna of Sokoto pleading from the grave to his Ibo killers, is known to have played a large part in sparking off the Northern anti-Ibo riots during that month. Similarly, the re-broadcast, by Radio Kaduna, of a Radio Dahomey report of Northerners being killed in the East set off the even greater wave of killing the

following September. And, thirdly, the publicity given to the 'headless corpse', mentioned earlier in this chapter, was immensely important in rallying Eastern feeling behind Ojukwu's government and conditioning a 'secessionist atmosphere'.

People often forget that war, especially civil war, generates a very special kind of human electricity. This is even more true where the mass of the population is not well-educated and is already traumatised by a disaster which, to them, has neither rhyme nor reason. The result is that their credibility threshold, never very high, sinks to new depths. They believe virtually all they hear, partly because it tends to fit the pattern of their own personal suffering but even more so because the propagandists themselves, invariably from the ranks of the educated elite and the natural leaders, are deeply revered due to their status in the community and their word accepted unquestioningly, especially in periods of crisis. The tragedy is that it is usually the recipients, not the formulators, of propaganda who have to pay the ultimate price. As George Orwell observed in his book on the civil war in Spain, *Homage to Catalonia*, 'One of the most horrible features of war is that all the war propaganda, all the screaming lies and hatred, comes invariably from people who are not fighting.'⁴

In the internal propaganda struggle honours were just about even, each side achieving its own limited purpose. But on the broader front outside Nigeria, the Biafrans won hands down and in doing so greatly enhanced their diplomatic and political aims. The efficient projection of the Biafran cause and image abroad was an integral part of the drive for international recognition, humanitarian involvement and material assistance. Well before the war began the East, often through Ibo members of Nigerian embassies, was propagating its view of the crisis abroad. Later, full-time emissaries were appointed most of whom were highly skilled and dedicated diplomats and who, as individuals, tended to put their Nigerian opponents in the shade. The Biafrans then mustered an impressive band of international 'heavyweights', men who were already well known in international circles: politicians such as 'Zik' and Okpara, lawyers like Mbanefo, Church officials like Ibiam, academics—Dike and Njoku—and writers such as Ekwensi and Achebe. Historically, the Easterners had one of the most efficient information services and some of the best people in the Federal service.

Although the ground was well-prepared by the time war broke out, the

⁴ *Homage to Catalonia* (Secker and Warburg, 1967), p. 67.

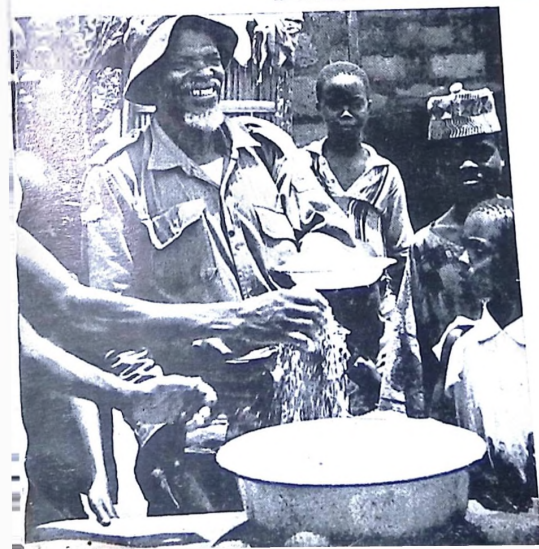
Biafrans were strangely slow in projecting themselves until the starvation story virtually did the job for them nine months later. One of their major difficulties was that they were torn between the merits and disadvantages of the 'invincible' and the 'beleaguered' images of Biafra. The first fitted Ojukwu's early claims (and his personal predilection) and was desirable for attracting speedy recognition, new investment and for squeezing money out of the oil companies. It was also the only possibility for the home market and was maintained throughout the war even though the external theme had swung through 180 degrees and became the 'brave little starving Biafran underdog' projection. I remember well how striking this contradiction was on the ground. Biafrans would take you round the refugee camps and hospitals, stressing the mass starvation and the appalling medical situation and then, almost in the same breath, point out that their country had a right to recognition and survival because everything—bewigged judges presiding over courts, policewomen on point-duty, cold drinks for visitors on the immaculately kept lawn at Ojukwu's State House—was 'normal'. Radio Biafra, though broadcasting in four foreign languages, apparently made no real attempt to establish its credibility abroad—it began disastrously by announcing five 'phantom' recognitions the day after secession—and concentrated on the internal and Nigerian spheres of influence. The 'beleaguered' Biafran theme for foreign consumption became inevitable as the military and relief situation deteriorated, but it was also better calculated to arouse genuine sympathy and action abroad.

The other major aspect of Biafran propaganda which deserves attention is its content and the way in which first one then another theme received the strongest orchestration. In the early days, the 'religious' war was played up. The Muslim Northerners, backed by the Arabs and the Russian anti-Christians, it was argued, were bent on a fanatical *jihad* against the Christian Easterners. But this made little mileage, its palpable fallacies—Gowon himself and two-thirds of his cabinet were Christians, while the bulk of the Federal army was non-Muslim—soon being exposed. Deliberate mass starvation and genocide then came to the fore, the latter having the longest and most effective run. And when this was being gradually demolished by the reports of foreign correspondents, the increasing numbers of Ibos living in Federal zones, by the International Observer Team and other visitors to the fronts, the Biafrans cleverly switched to 'genocide by starvation' and even 'economic genocide'. Throughout the war, the underdog image helped Biafra considerably and



A Hercules freighter of the Swedish Red Cross being loaded with eighteen tons of relief supplies for the night-run into Biafra from Fernando Po.

A missionary priest at Uli cemetery where the pilots and crews who crashed flying in relief supplies to Biafra are buried.

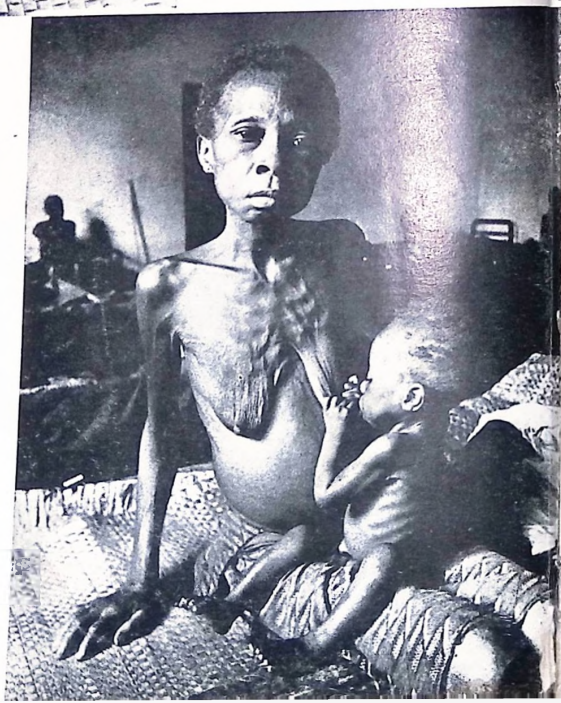


A Nigerian army veteran of the Second World War hands out food to civilians in Federal-held Biafra.

Kwashiorkor, the war's biggest killer.



The worst starvation in Biafra came in September/October 1968, an estimated five to ten thousand dying daily; adults, especially nursing mothers, joined the emaciated ranks of the very young and very old.



so did the Jewish comparison in which there was more truth than any of the preceding themes. In the last year, much play was made of Biafra's phoney 'socialism' and its genuine nationalism, though neither of these matched the power of the starvation/genocide appeal.

The Federal effort to match the Biafrans failed for a number of reasons. Firstly, the Nigerians were terribly slow off the mark. Their information services, weakened by the loss of key Eastern staff, were never very good and got worse. There had been a running feud with the Ministry of External Affairs for years over the control of information work and this rivalry, further complicated by the army and Ministry of Defence muscling in on the act, inevitably affected the quality of the Federal effort. Then there was Gowon and the government's early naive belief that Nigeria's case was so self-evident that it would speak for itself. The Federals also thought that the only thing that mattered was the reality on the ground; words, propaganda, publicity, lobbies, they felt, could surely not alter the remorseless logic of the battlefields. Moreover, to launch a massive public relations effort abroad would invite the very internationalisation of the conflict that the Federal government was concerned, above all other considerations, to prevent. The army, particularly in the field, also presented an obstacle to good public relations. Unlike the Biafran army it was not tightly knit, each divisional commander being a law unto himself. Thus even special guests of the Federal government, invited to Nigeria at great expense and trouble, sometimes proved to be counter-productive in that, having run foul of the army, they produced an unflattering picture of Nigeria at war. A fairly typical example of the army cutting off its nose to spite its face was when the British prime minister visited Adekunle's Division in Port Harcourt in March 1969. Waiting for Wilson to arrive, having threatened to arrest a group of us who were covering the event, if we did not obey his order to remain rooted on the spot when the prime ministerial plane touched down, Adekunle then went and actually locked up the Nigerian producer of the Federal television network who was making a crucial publicity film on Wilson's Nigeria visit. The poor man was only released by the personal intervention of the Nigerian chief of staff, Brigadier Hassan Katsina. Censorship (in the war's opening stages), administrative inefficiencies and continuous misunderstandings all sapped the Federal foreign propaganda operation at its roots. The employment of a British public relations firm in the second half of the war did help as did the posting of some excellent diplomats to key countries like France. And it was noticeable that towards

the end of the war as people became aware that there was another side to the crisis, Biafra's credibility gap widened while the Federals' narrowed. Much of this recaptured ground was lost by the spectacular outbreak of inefficiency and xenophobia with which the Federal government greeted the press at the end of the war. By then, however, it was clear that the Nigerians, reckoning that they had had a raw deal in the world press, were past caring since they had, despite all the gloomy and paternalistic punditry, won the war.

For the world news media, the Nigerian war—especially the Biafran side of it—was 'a rattling good yarn'. Nothing like it had been seen in Africa since the heyday of the Congo in the early sixties. Even the trip there was a good story and I remember one British weekly journalist mustering 3,000 words of lively copy, which was later published, when he was no nearer Biafra than Lisbon. News coverage was spasmodic, generally following the action-stalemate-action pattern of the war, but occasionally prone to sudden patchiness due to the pressures of rival world events. And it was, on the whole, shallow, emotional and biased, reflecting little credit on a profession whose primary task is to establish facts and analyse them with an objective and critical eye.⁵ There were, of course, some mitigating factors. Early censorship on the Nigerian side, the truly appalling inefficiency of the Federal Ministry of Information for much of the war and the often inspired (or so it seemed) obstructionism of some of the top civilian and military officials in Lagos, made the pressman's job a more than usually arduous one. The scarcity of good correspondents actually based in Nigeria and the expulsion of the best of those who were (Walter Schwarz of the *Guardian* and Lloyd Garrison of the *New York Times*, for example) dried up a valuable flow of day-to-day information. And then Nigeria was unlucky in the competition for news space. The Arab-Israeli war of June 1967, and the Aden crisis deflected interest from West Africa just as the civil war was about to begin; the Democratic Convention in Chicago in August 1968, stole some of Ojukwu's thunder in his big bid for world publicity in Addis Ababa; and the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia later in the same month switched the limelight from the war as it entered its most active stage.

But even so the press performed badly, particularly, and with less excuse than the others, the British press, giving some weight to Humbert

⁵ 'The main victims of the relief as well as the shooting war have been those Western journalists whose dire predictions have once again been proved false. They will go down in Nigerian history as the "scum of international society",' said Allison Ayida, a Federal permanent secretary, summing up many Nigerians' view of the world press at the end of the war. *Morning Post*, Lagos, 14.3.1970.

Wolfe's famous jingle:

You cannot hope to bribe or twist,
Thank God, a British journalist;
But seeing what the man will do
Unbribed, there's no occasion to.

One of the principal crimes was an extraordinarily patronising attitude by much of the media. Black Africans, their sovereignties and their sensibilities, were clearly not taken seriously. That Nigeria was a fully independent state, and had been one for almost a decade, was either not grasped or conveniently forgotten by many pressmen and editorialists. For many news editors, strongly personalised 'crocodile-infested river' and 'cannibal' copy was all that they required from their reporters in darkest Africa, unless, of course, their own nationals or other whites were involved—witness the huge international outcry when the Italian oilmen were killed by the Biafrans—or a big competitive story demanded a minimal scratching of the political surface of the problem. By and large, the old rule-of-thumb for African reporting—one dead white equals a hundred dead blacks—held good in all its many ramifications, and it is interesting to contrast the responsible, in-depth reporting of the Rhodesian independence crisis in 1965–66 with that of the Nigerian war as an exercise in the inherent racialism of the Western press. Perhaps it should be said, however, that the Nigerians were also guilty of racial stereotyping. 'All foreigners are held personally responsible for the actions of their governments at home,' wrote Peter Enahoro.⁶ This throwing of everyone into the same bag, regardless of individual merit and performance, was the root of much of the misunderstanding between the Nigerians and the international press, for the Federal authorities seemed to expect foreign governments to influence or control their press in the way they did theirs; that, at least, was the impression they often gave.

Another failing of the media was to succumb to the complexities of the crisis, giving the whole affair a dramatic gloss from time to time but never putting in the essential groundwork that was crucial to a reasonable understanding of the issues involved. Sir Alec Douglas-Home once complained (he was in opposition at the time), 'the trouble with Nigeria is that it is so complicated, I'm surprised anyone understands it.'⁷ Well, it

⁶ *How to be a Nigerian*, *Daily Times*, Ibadan, 1966.

⁷ Quoted by Kaye Whiteman in *Venture*, July/August, 1969, p. 38.

was complex, and alien to boot, but no more so than the Vietnam or the Arab-Israeli conflicts and the means of coming to grips with the complexities were as readily available; indeed, more so than in the case of Vietnam where access to the North is denied to most Western pressmen. One of the troubles was that too many journalists reckoned there was only one worthwhile story—in Biafra—and neglected to visit the other side or, at best, gave the fleshpots of Lagos a cursory glance and assumed that they had seen Nigeria. (Neither the Nigerians nor the Biafrans liked people flitting to and fro like this but they rarely raised any serious objections, at least none that I encountered during several trips to both sides.) There was also a tendency to allow home politics to influence editorial writing and reporting, using the Nigeria story as a ready-made stick to crack over the heads of political opponents. In this sense, the press and the lobbies, which I shall be examining shortly, were indistinguishable.

But the international press deserves some credit. It played a major role in exposing the starvation in Biafra and in keeping the issue alive. Indirectly, it helped to minimise military excesses, particularly on the Federal side, by reporting the effects of the bombing in Biafra and the occasional brutality or atrocity committed by Federal troops which it witnessed. This not only helped innocent civilians but also reduced the possibility of a massacre at the end of the war and formed part of the general surveillance of the conduct of the Nigerian army in the second half of the war. Some sections of the press tried hard to be fair. It must be admitted that even for those who had done their homework, leader-writing on the Nigerian conflict was a ferociously difficult task and reporting any civil war is perhaps the greatest challenge of all to a correspondent's skill, integrity and objectivity. Occasionally, a respected and knowledgeable publication, like *The Economist* for example, had the courage to change its editorial course in mid-stream and then later admit it had been wrong, but this was rare in a profession which does not easily beat its own breast under the public gaze. The press, especially in Britain, also adequately performed its traditional function of sniffing out and exposing deceptions such as the quantity of arms that the British government was supplying to the Nigerians and the secret French and South African support for Biafra.

Though millions of words were written about the war the most direct impact on the outside world came from the television cameras—shooting in glorious Technicolor—and the voice-casts of the radio reporters. Film of

the fighting, an execution, an interview with Gowon or Ojukwu, or a baby dying in a bush hospital could be on European or American screens within twenty-four hours, with the astonishing consequence that television audiences in the American mid-west or northern Sweden were sometimes more immediately aware of what was going on in the war than the governments in Lagos and Umuahia or London and Washington. The immediacy of the 'telly' war can be illustrated by two examples. On the eve of a crucial debate on the crisis in the House of Commons in August 1968, a television film was shown in Britain of an interview with Gowon during which he stated categorically that the 'final' Federal offensive was under way, thereby directly contradicting the line which the British government had been defending throughout the run-up to the parliamentary debate and altering the course of the debate itself. On another occasion a television film showed a Federal lieutenant shooting an unarmed Biafran prisoner. A few days later another film, also viewed by a wide audience in Western Europe and America, recorded the execution of the guilty officer by a military firing-squad in Port Harcourt. Television helped to bring the true nature of the war a little closer to its distant audiences and made the leading actors familiar in a way that photographs and words failed to achieve. There is little doubt, too, that television film of the relief situation in Biafra had the greatest effect in stirring the conscience of the Western world, even more so than the evocative pictures which the humanitarian organisations used in their posters and appeals.

A final mention should perhaps be made of the B.B.C. It was bitterly attacked by both sides for bias (in Biafra, I recall, its name passed into the language: if you wanted to call a man a liar, you said, 'He's a B.B.C. !') which was, in a back-handed way, a measure of its success in trying to achieve impartiality. Biafra named it public enemy one early in the war (its own radio had to be called the 'Broadcasting Corporation of Biafra'—B.C.B.—to avoid confusion) and banned it, while the Nigerians expelled the B.B.C.'s resident correspondent in the summer of 1969. Nevertheless both sides listened to it avidly, if with a new scepticism, and together with the Voice of America it remained the most reliable source of daily information throughout the war.

* * *

The 'passionate whites' someone once called the foreign lobbies which developed during the war and became one of its most extraordinary and

interesting phenomena. Biafra, in particular, aroused the passions of normally placid and balanced people in a curious way which no other foreign issue, such as Vietnam, the Middle East or even racial problems, could quite match. I remember once seeing two well-known and respected journalists swapping obscenities in a heated argument about Biafra which threatened to tip over into violence at any minute in the salons of a learned institution in the heart of London. The civil war turned people, reputations and traditional alliances on their heads. The bizarre political and ideological line-up behind the belligerents added to the general confusion and put keen ideologues and party men on the spot. The British-American-Russian backing of Nigeria, for example, placed Communists in a difficult dilemma. The position of the white liberal and the Left in general was especially nerve-racking. On one hand, the Nigerian cause, meaning unity, existing frontiers, a large economically viable unit and O.A.U. backing, seemed a natural choice for the liberal. But on the other, Biafra, representing self-determination, an exciting new nationalism with a socialistic gloss and a gutsy fight by an underdog, appeared to fit even more comfortably into the traditional libertarian mould of the West.

Different people became involved for different reasons. The largest lobby was the amorphous humanitarian one which mainly supported Biafra since there the need—and the publicity—were greatest. This has sometimes been called, unfairly I think, the ‘phenomenon of the fat white cats’, meaning the comfortable, wealthy, but guilt-ridden whites of the West seized upon Biafra, a problem which they neither understood nor deep down seriously cared much about, as a way of assuaging that guilt. The real difficulty for those people who acted from humanitarian motives was that relief was inextricably entangled with politics in the war and if a well-meaning donor went beyond making a simple monetary contribution to a *bona fide* charitable organisation it was likely that he, too, would, sooner or later, become politically involved and thereby suspect. The classic example of this metamorphosis, advanced to its logical end, was the case of Count von Rosen. The magnificent response of the West in the humanitarian field was one of the rare flashes of light in the otherwise sombre landscape of the Nigerian war, but emotions often took over and the lines between humanitarian and political (or other) motivation became increasingly blurred. This was specially true on the continent of Europe, notably in Scandinavia and Germany, the latter reacting strongly to the Biafran charge of genocide from subliminal feelings of guilt produced by Hitler’s treatment of the Jews. Biafran starvation also gave out-

siders a chance to act positively in a way that other major foreign crises failed to do; this, too, tended to suck people deeper into the complexities of the conflict and inflame their emotions. If Nigeria had received similar attention—there were after all millions of afflicted people on their side of the line—the lobbies would have balanced each other more evenly, giving the Federal government less cause to rail against ‘interference’ in Nigeria’s internal affairs. But this did not happen; the overwhelming weight of the active lobbyists espoused the Biafran cause.

Although some people seized on Biafra as a useful brickbat to hurl at political enemies much nearer home than West Africa, the civil war, in fact, split most political parties within themselves. In Britain, for example, the Conservative Party leadership supported Nigeria—and the Labour government’s policy of supplying arms—while back-benchers on both sides of the House of Commons lobbied for Biafra. Religion also played a part. Biafra’s strong Christian heritage and image, especially the Roman Catholic part of it, attracted many sympathisers abroad and it is no accident that some of the most vociferous lobbyists in Britain were Roman Catholics. There were business and ‘sentimentalist’ lobbies, too. The former consisting of people and companies with large commercial interests in West Africa, were largely pro-Nigerian, while the latter—mainly people who had served in Nigeria or Biafra in the civil service or in the universities—were more evenly divided. The academics, as in Nigeria itself, tended to be among the most militant of the armchair warriors and fought several stirring actions between themselves in the columns of the press and learned journals. They served a useful purpose, however, by shedding as much light as heat and illuminating the true complexities of the crisis in a way that few other lobbyists, hell-bent on proving that exclusive right lay on their side, managed to do.

Another aspect of Biafra’s seductiveness was its self-sufficient nationalistic appeal. This was particularly attractive to jaded white liberals who, having become progressively disillusioned with Africa’s post-colonial disappointments like the Congo, Ghana and ineffectual freedom fighters, were on the point of despair. Suddenly, here were black men, intelligent, well-educated, charming black men, standing virtually alone and successfully defying an enemy four times their size backed by the world’s super powers. ‘Africa’s first genuinely independent black state’, ‘a nation ruled by Africans, run by Africans, for Africans’, ‘I watched a black African dream coming true’ . . . phrases like these recurred time and again in articles in the Western press revealing the excitement of discovery and the

deep pleasure of fading hopes unexpectedly fulfilled. I knew this feeling well because after my second trip to Biafra I experienced the same surge of heady optimism which Biafran nationalism in its undiluted war-time form invariably induced. (But, as I was later to discover, Nigeria was also passing through a similar, though more muted, creative phase.)

There were, therefore, many good and worthy reasons for siding with Biafra, but why the passion, the huge expenditure of emotional energy, the extraordinary fanaticism of many of the Biafran lobbies? Here I think one has to make a distinction between continental Europe and North America which, by and large, did not have much previous knowledge of Nigeria, and Britain, which as the ex-colonial power, knew the area intimately. In the former, Biafra fitted neatly into the anti-establishment (the home governments supported Nigeria), Vietnam, even racial (America's Black Power movement sympathised with Biafra) slot. And if one did not know too much of the background details which, as Sir Alec had pointed out, were frightfully complex, Biafra's with its starving but indomitable population struggling courageously for their freedom against a brutal oppressor, did seem to be an open-and-shut case. The Biafra story coincided with the crest of the wave of university unrest. The French student-led revolution in 1968 which almost overthrew de Gaulle was at its height as Port Harcourt fell and as Biafra itself began to hit the headlines. It filled a deep-seated but still inchoate and directionless dissatisfaction with a smug, secure and inward-looking materialistic society. The breadth of the Biafran appeal (there was something in it for everyone, young or old, conservative or radical, Catholic or Protestant) struck home like a fragmentation bomb. And, unlike Vietnam or the Middle East, it was more tangible, more familiar: the Biafrans were everywhere, it seemed, eloquently putting their case in excellent English, quoting neat European or American parallels, pointing out, with obvious truth and conviction that they were the most 'westernised' of all Africans, indeed, perhaps, of all Third World peoples. No wonder people went overboard, especially the natural rebels and mavericks who were running short of causes.

In Britain there was the same fervour among Biafra's supporters—Hugh Fraser, the Conservative M.P., who was the most active of all the lobbyists, ran a sort of information centre at his London home which was known as 'M.I. 52'⁸—but much more confusion about the rights and wrongs of the war in general. On the Continent the Left solidly backed Biafra; in Britain it was unhappily divided with many of its champions, like Michael Foot,

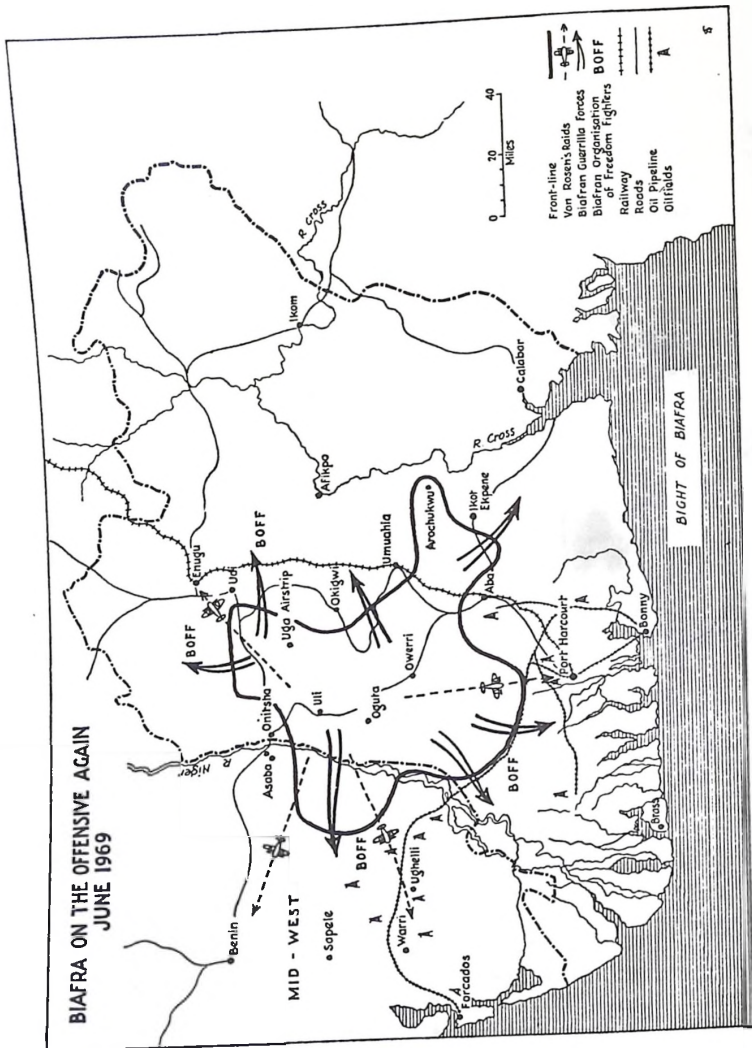
⁸ After his address: 52 Campden Hill Square.

the Labour Party's radical conscience, *Tribune* and the *New Statesman* supporting the government's arms policy while the right-wing *Spectator* and the left-wing *Peace News*, bedded down in a bizarre alliance in the Biafran lobby. In Britain, too, one could actually find Nigerian lobbies, markedly absent in most other countries. People coming to the U.K. from the Continent or North America were continually surprised at the failure of many politicians, journalists, academics and other British 'leaders of thought' to reach the simple and decisive view of the crisis which they themselves had achieved long ago. The British government, they felt, had both a special responsibility as the former colonial power and a critical vulnerability as the supplier of arms to the Nigerian aggressors, so why on earth weren't the British people, with their long traditions of liberalism and fair play, exerting far more pressure on it to change its policies? The answer is simple, though it may seem facile: the more one got to know about the Nigerian war, the less positive one was compelled to become about its rights and wrongs; the picture which had seemed so crisply black and white gradually, with every additional piece of knowledge, turned into a horrible and confusing mish-mash of greys. The open-minded and honest admitted that perhaps their original assessment had been wrong and thought again; the less honest emulated two of the three wise monkeys, closing their ears and eyes—but not their mouths—and blundered passionately on. Even the acknowledged experts were not spared this shaming but ultimately therapeutic ordeal. Dame Margery Perham, the highly respected Oxford historian and biographer of Lord Lugard, creator of modern Nigeria, courageously and publicly admitted after a visit to Nigeria that her initial pro-Ibo position did not represent the whole story.

* * *

For most of the period late April to early November 1969—from the 'exchange' of Umuahia for Owerri to the launching of the last Federal offensive—the war seemed to be frozen in an unbreakable military stalemate. Two anniversaries (Biafra's second birthday on 30th March and two years of war on 6th July) came and went. Large-scale ground operations seemed to have ceased entirely; the fronts took on an air of growing permanence with some opposing sectors swapping trade and pleasantries more frequently than shot and shell; corruption eased its way into both sides and people began to talk of the field commanders having a 'vested interest' in perpetuating this West African brand of non-combatant war-

**BIAFRA ON THE OFFENSIVE AGAIN
JUNE 1969**



fare. But the war in the sky was real enough and von Rosen's Minicons continued their raids, concentrating on the Mid-West oil rigs, storage tanks, terminals and power stations. Resembling nothing as much as the tropical mosquito, the Minicon menace was extraordinarily difficult to eradicate and had already begun to wear the patience and sap the strength of the victim. (By June it was evident that Nigeria's crude oil exports were steadily falling whereas before von Rosen's appearance they had been rising fast.) It had yet to be shown, however, that the mosquito possessed a lethal sting.

In the Federation, fresh political troubles kept the government occupied. Tax concessions announced the previous December to placate the serious discontent in the Western State failed to prevent new riots in July when the Oba (traditional ruler) of Ogbomosho was beheaded by a mob. The underlying causes of the unrest were political and followed the pattern of the pre-coup cleavage between the Action Group (Awolowo's party), which wanted to unite all Yorubas in one state, and the N.N.D.P. (formerly led by Chief Akintola, the premier of the West who had been killed in the first coup) which advocated the carving up of the West into two or more states. Eventually, Awolowo himself stepped in with a set of conciliatory proposals—as Federal commissioner of finance he was unpopularly associated with the war taxes—but the trouble continued spasmodically though in a slightly less violent form.

In mid-August, another political development caught everyone by surprise, including the man around whom it centred. One morning at Ikeja international airport just outside Lagos, a Nigerian official thought he saw a very familiar face among a group of transit passengers who were waiting for the aircraft to refuel after an unscheduled stop-over in Lagos on the way to Liberia. He recounted what he had seen to an incredulous superior officer who, nevertheless, telephoned Dodan Barracks, Gowon's official residence in Lagos. In a surprisingly short time, Gowon himself was at the airport pumping the hand of the bewildered and apprehensive elderly gentleman who was the cause of this drama but who had had no intention of coming to Nigeria (a country whose president he had once been), in the first place. But the unexpected re-routing of the aircraft and his meeting with Gowon turned out well for 'Zik' who had decided during his self-imposed exile in Britain to return to the fold, if the fold would have him. Gowon gave him assurances for his safety and invited him to come back and tour the Federation. After making a statement in London expressing his full support for Nigeria and calling upon the Ibos

to renounce Ojukwu, 'Zik' returned to Nigeria and travelled round the country repeating his message and drawing the crowds with something of his old magnetism and style. But his political acrobatics had lost him much support on both sides of the Niger and his latest 'conversion' was not a resounding personal success.

But it was a brilliant feather in the cap of the Federal government, for here at last was the most famous, the most politically versatile and the most internationally-known Ibo of them all. 'Zik's' return was well timed for the Nigerians because the O.A.U. annual summit meeting was about to take place in Addis Ababa and there were renewed pressures on the Federal government to come to terms with Ojukwu. Gowon, with 'Zik' at his side, attended the summit in September and, in the event, the O.A.U. stuck by its pro-Nigerian unity resolutions which had characterised all its previous dealings with the crisis. The only notable development was a forty-five-minute private meeting between Gowon and President Nyerere of Tanzania (the first African head of state to recognise Biafra) which did not radically alter each man's view of the war but cleared some of the bad air that had existed between them.

What was going on in Biafra during this curious limbo period? An eyewitness account by an experienced American journalist who covered both sides of the war provides a good overall picture.

'There is no sign of collapse in Biafra [he wrote] no hint of surrender. Yet anyone who knew the area before the war cannot ignore the cruel contrast. . . . Food, of course, is the main problem. . . . Starvation and kwashiorkor have been brought somewhat under control, although the suspension of the Red Cross flights has hampered relief efforts, but Biafra has not slipped back to the horror of a year ago, when a few thousand people died of malnutrition every day. The harshness of life strikes an outsider wherever he looks. . . . More significant and depressing, cruelty and meanness have come to Biafran society. Soldiers sometimes evict refugees from camps and seize whatever food has been planted there; or they beat up relief-agency drivers and commandeer their trucks to transport arms. Army deserters use their weapons to waylay relief trucks and steal food.

In their pronouncements, Biafran officials sometimes sound intent on blinding themselves or deceiving others. "There are indications from the other side," said Brigadier E. U. Okon, the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Information, "that they are more tired of the war than

we are." T. C. M. Eneli, the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Finance, insisted that Nigerians "prefer our currency to their currency". There are echoes of decay in these hollow words. Yet there is another side to Biafra, as astonishing as the hungry side is depressing. The Biafran government continues to administer what is left of the country; life is orderly, not anarchic. The government's chief sources of strength are the army and the relief agencies. Biafra's soldiers, defending the borders and policing the countryside, have enough power to control the enclave's security. The relief agencies, by distributing food and drugs and running medical clinics, have prevented chaos among the many hungry and homeless Biafrans. At times village life even has an air of normalcy. On Sunday villagers don their cleanest, least tattered clothing and sing hymns in Biafra's numerous churches. Churchgoers greet visitors with "good morning, sir", or "good time, brother".

There is weariness in Biafra and a deep desire for peace. But in talking with educated Biafrans, visitors find that the old bitterness, intensity and defiance remain. "If they are going to kill us," says a young journalist, "let them kill us. If they are going to be the lords and we the conquered, let it happen. But we have sacrificed too much to give up Biafra." The spirit of Biafra, though battered, is still defiant.⁹

And so it was to remain until the end: the final act which was fast approaching.

⁹ Stanley Meisler, Africa correspondent of the *Los Angeles Times*, article in *Africa Report*, November 1969.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

Behind The Lines

War-7

November-December 1969

Nationalisms

Elites

Masses

Ideologies

Economies

IN LATE OCTOBER 1969, THE NIGERIAN CHIEF OF STAFF, BRIGADIER HASSAN Katsina, sent identical sets of orders under conditions of unusual secrecy to his Divisional commanders. For months the war on the ground had been locked in a stalemate which neither side seemed capable of breaking. In recent weeks, however, it had been noticed that the Federals were building up their supplies and moving more men and armaments up to the front. Katsina's orders—'to liberate what was left of the rebel-held areas'—gave the green light for what was to be the last of Nigeria's many 'final' offensives. The aim, clearly stated, was the military defeat of Biafra before the onset of the rains in April. This time there was no fanfare, no confident broadcasts, no predictions, nothing but a deafening silence in Lagos and a discreet bustle in field headquarters. Indeed, it was not until early December that it became fully apparent that a massive attack was in progress and even then the world received a false impression of its fate. Count von Rosen was confident that Biafra would hold out and promised an intensification of the war in the air. 'You wait until January,' he said, 'you'll see a big air circus open up.'¹ BIAFRA FIGHTS OFF 'FINAL' LAGOS ATTACK proclaimed a headline on the front page of the *Observer* on 7th December. Under it, Frederick Forsyth, just back from Biafra, wrote: 'What was apparently the third and most secret of all the Nigerian army's "final assaults" on Biafra has now petered out—with less to show for it than either of its predecessors.' He couldn't have been more wrong, but he was not the only one and a complete and deliberate news blackout by both sides compounded the obscurity that enveloped the last stage of the death struggle in the forests of eastern Nigeria.

¹ *Guardian*, 9.12.1969.

In the absence of accurate information from the battlefield, there was another flurry of diplomatic, fact-finding and peace-making activity. Maurice Foley, British parliamentary under-secretary at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, visited Nigeria just before yet another parliamentary debate on the crisis in London. This was a favourite strategem of Harold Wilson's: on the eve of crucial debates it was rare not to find a minister or plenipotentiary on the night plane down to Lagos. (If you kept an eye on Ikeja airport, the Nigerians used to say, you would have a fair idea of the House of Commons' agenda.) The Conservative Party, under some pressure from its backbenchers, sent Lord Carrington, its shrewd and tough-minded leader in the House of Lords, to look at both sides and thus become the first senior member of either party to visit Biafra. On his arrival, Ojukwu kept Carrington waiting for an hour and then lectured him for a further two in the now characteristic marathon manner. However, Carrington left impressed with both the spirit of the Biafran army—the Biafrans chose this rather than the starvation problem as the centrepiece of the Tory leader's visit because of his own military background—and the improvisational skill of the Ibos in retaining, as he put it, 'the fabric of a civilised life'.² After visiting the Federal side Carrington produced an assessment which was as gloomy as it was accurate. Neither Gowon nor Ojukwu showed signs of budging from their respective fixed positions on Nigerian unity and Biafran sovereignty and peace-making was likely to prove abortive until there was 'some change either in the military or political situation'.³ Privately, Carrington expressed the opinion that the Federal army could achieve its object of over-running Biafra before the rainy season.

But poor peace prospects did not stop Haile Selassie from trying to mediate once again, this time on a personal basis. Just before Christmas—the third of the war—he had made progress to the point that a Biafran delegation had actually arrived in Addis Ababa and a Federal one was packing its bags in Lagos. Then Radio Biafra suddenly announced that the meeting would be under the Emperor acting in a personal capacity and not as chairman of the O.A.U. Committee on Nigeria. The Nigerian delegation stopped in its tracks to await clarification and it soon transpired that Haile Selassie, in a sincere attempt to get both sides round the same table, had blurred the exact framing of the invitation in the hope that each party would read it to suit itself and not insist on dotting the i's and

² *Sunday Times*, 21.12.1969.

³ *Ibid.*

crossing the t's. Biafra's statement, however, did just that and left the Emperor, one of the founding fathers of the O.A.U. and chairman of the Consultative Committee on Nigeria, with little choice but to declare that the meeting was indeed under the O.A.U.'s auspices. The Biafrans promptly announced that such a framework was unacceptable and withdrew their delegation from Addis Ababa. It was the last bid to settle the crisis by peaceful means. The year 1970 opened with Nigeria still at war.

* * *

Before the drama of the finale, however, it might be valuable to take a closer look at the quality of life behind the lines in order to see how the Nigerians and Biafrans sustained the war and how they, in sustaining it, were themselves affected by the experience. In a war where religion and ideology played no major part and where economic considerations, though important and pervasive remained veiled, the most striking and exciting phenomenon was the rise of two new, virulent and diametrically opposed nationalisms. 'Survival' was the appropriately emotional name they usually gave it on each side of the line. 'We are fighting for survival,' a sweat-soaked, bearded Biafran colonel once told me on the Aba front. 'If we don't fight we will be killed by the Nigerians; if we die, others will take our place; and when they go the next generation will fight on.' His men, poorly armed, in tattered uniforms and very frightened, nodded their agreement. 'We, too, are fighting for survival,' echoed a Nigerian permanent secretary in Lagos some time later. 'Not, I grant you, in the same physical sense the Ibos claim, but for the political and economic survival of Nigeria, the ultimate survival of 50 million people. If the Federation could neatly divide into three or four viable parts *peacefully*,' he continued, 'that perhaps would be the best way out. But we all know (the Ibos included) it would not happen like that. If Biafra secedes, Nigeria will shatter into a dozen warring fragments. It would be anarchy, far worse than the Congo.'

These views masked a great deal more than they revealed. The new nationalisms emerged from the fire with a sharp cutting-edge and a tensile strength very different from the blunt pliable weapon which had won the bloodless battle for Nigeria's independence in the fifties. Neither side began the war nor finished it as a true nation-state; but the conflict welded together many of the national attributes that each possessed. Part of the process was authoritarian and negative; both sides bullied, locked-

up and, occasionally, shot their internal oppositions; corruption and nepotism, the old familiar diseases ran their customary havoc-strewn course only marginally curbed by the new purgative spirit. But by far the greater part was spontaneous and positive: the war turned Nigerians and Biafrans alike in on themselves, made them more self-reliant, and compelled them to examine the meaning of their national existence in a way that nothing else in their previous colonial and independent experience had ever remotely achieved. The tragedy was that the new nationalisms sprang from a bitter fratricidal conflict and each tempered its steel (and measured its value) by its capacity to destroy the other. Equally tragically, each side seemed blinded by the heat of its own passion to the fact that the same process was affecting them both and, as a result, they continuously and disastrously underestimated each other's capability to sustain the war. The only place I could discover where there was an inkling into the enemy's motivation was, significantly, at the fronts. Elsewhere one constantly encountered scorn, arrogance and a marked absence of understanding or sympathy for the other side's viewpoint. Most Nigerians and Biafrans turned deaf or became upset if one put the other side's case or tried to suggest the most heinous hypothesis of all, the 'balancing view', that it was not a war of 'right and wrong' but one of two conflicting 'rights'. But this blind fanaticism is, perhaps, a characteristic of all civil wars.

Biafran nationalism was more striking, passionate and articulate than its Nigerian counterpart because everyone in that embattled country had been directly affected by the war and most people had personally suffered. It embraced virtually all the Eastern and a large proportion of the Mid-Western Ibos, and a small but unknown segment of the Eastern minority tribes. It reached down to the grass roots and produced a 'people's war'; it soared upwards and enshrined Ojukwu as a charismatic, popular leader and symbol of resistance and hope. It was compounded of a hybrid mixture of fear, hatred, racial pride and an unaccustomed introspection. It was stiffened by a strong dose of Christianity and shot through with the Ibos' marvellous evangelical spirit, the reverse of which—a morbid death-wish of lemming-sized proportions—was also present and dogged it like a cold shadow. In the later stages, a new radicalism which looked to Franz Fanon, Che Guevara, Julius Nyerere and Chairman Mao for inspiration, emerged on the periphery of the leadership though was too small to produce any real change. The impact of Biafran nationalism was heady, moving and contagious, and its product was a fighting, self-reliant spirit rarely seen in Africa.

In Nigeria the new nationalism was more muted, diffuse, harder to pin down, infinitely more difficult to identify with and enthuse over. But it was there. Moreover, it played as crucial a part in the defeat of Biafra as the Russian MiGs, British backing and the oil revenues, for it was the blood, sinew and nervous system that activated the muscle. Even some of Biafra's most convinced supporters recognised it, Jonathan Aitken, an ardent Biafra supporter, fresh from the exultant atmosphere of Biafra which he lauded, wrote in the *Evening Standard* towards the end of the war, 'Ask the question [in Lagos]: "Does it really matter to you if the Biafrans secede?" and from high and low alike you get an emphatic affirmative.'⁴ Nigerian nationalism was not all-pervasive—the people far removed from the battlefields cared little about the war or the new Nigeria that was on the anvil—but it went deep enough to affect all the politically active strata of society as well as many millions of ordinary people who came in direct contact with the war. Faced with a common enemy, the conflict drew the diverse parts of the Federation together in a way that had never happened before. The Biafran bombing (light and scattered though it was); the incessant propaganda (people in the far North knew all about the youthful Adekunle whereas they had never heard of his far more politically renowned tribesman, the ageing Awolowo, who had been one of the 'founding fathers' of Nigeria); and the massive turn-over of men, from virtually every tribe and district, in the Federal armies all helped to mould a new Nigeria. Still traumatised and stumbling from the two coups when war broke out, many Nigerians realised with a surge of excitement and anguished hope that here was a chance to absorb the lessons of the past and start afresh with a clean slate. The oil boom reinforced the feeling that Nigeria could still fulfil its promised destiny of becoming black Africa's most powerful and successful nation. But Biafra's secession threatened this dream not so much because of the oil—about half of the reserves were in Mid-Western Nigeria anyway—but because of the dangers of total disintegration. 'Things must *not* fall apart, and the centre *must* hold,' Nigerian nationalists were fond of saying. And then in the way that Ojukwu's personality brilliantly matched the apocalyptic mood of Biafra so Gowon's, free from the 'dominant tribe' (Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, Ibo) spectre that had haunted Nigeria for so long, modest, uncorrupt and patently sincere, met Nigerian's need for reassurance and self-respect. In emotional Biafra, the Biafran 'loved' Ojukwu ('power, power' the crowds used to shout when they saw him); in calmer

⁴ *Evening Standard*, 10.10.1969.

Nigeria, people 'respected' Gowon whose very lack of charisma made him attractive. Unspectacular though it was, Nigeria's war-time nationalism, removed from the naked personalised fear and hatred that formed the main ingredient of the Biafran variety, was in many ways the more healthy of the two. Its durability is more problematical but if it follows the pattern of human relationships where 'respect' invariably out-distances 'love', the war will not have been fought in vain.

It is significant that the activists who developed and nurtured these nationalisms were young men. The war was fought by the early- and mid-thirties like the leaders themselves: Gowon was 32 and Ojukwu 34 when war broke out. In the Federation they called themselves the 'New Nigerians'; in Biafra, 'Biafran' was enough. They scorned the older generation of politicians, lawyers and administrators who had failed old Nigeria and pushed them into the background where many, bewildered and not a little fearful of these young men with their forthright ruthless ways, were only too happy to be. (I remember one brilliant young Federal civil servant in Lagos opening his 'on the record' briefing for correspondents with the words, 'Don't take any notice of that old fool Awolowo'—who had just been appointed Gowon's deputy and Commissioner of Finance—'it's up to us, the "New Nigerians", to hold this country together.') Many people, more abroad than at home perhaps, had great hopes that 'Zik', the most famous of all Nigeria's older generation, would, after his defection from Biafra, become the Cincinnatus of Nigeria and bring peace to the country, but the hard fact of life on both sides of the line was that the young men had come to stay.

They had been the technocrats of the *ancien régime*. They had grown up together, gone to the same schools and universities and worked side by side in the administration and the army. They had developed a comradeship, an *esprit de corps*, and a national identity—they came from nearly every tribe in the Federation—through serving abroad as admired and respected Nigerians helping other less fortunate Africans to help themselves. They had formed the administrative vertebrae of Nigeria and kept the crippled giant upright throughout the recurring political crises of the First Republic, the bloody coups, the massacres and the Ibo exodus. They had married across the tribal barriers and treated any part of the country they happened to be working in as 'home'; and if you visited both sides of the war they constantly asked after each other. Ironically, for these young men were the Federal and Biafran 'hawks' of the war, they had been the most 'Nigerian' of all Nigerians. During the conflict they filled all

the key jobs in the army, the civil service and the diplomatic posts abroad. They were talented, hard-working, less corrupt than most and prepared to take responsibility—and risks: a completely new generation of Africans, unfamiliar to former colonial overlord and old-time African nationalist, to paternalist and racist, alike. And not a few, I think, had a vision.

The cynical view of the Nigerian war is that, reduced to its essentials, it was a vicious struggle between these elitist leaders for jobs, influence and power, carrying on where the politicians had left off, and using the illiterate and gullible masses as the necessary cannon-fodder. The elites certainly had most to win or lose in the war. And as a class they showed a marked reluctance to risk their skins, their survival rate being somewhere close to an incredible hundred per cent. Students, the future elites, on both sides of the line but particularly in the Nigerian universities, were the greatest armchair warriors of all. I can find no record of a single student from the Western Universities of Ibadan and Ife rushing to join the colours though they were invariably fierce advocates of crushing the 'rebellion'. Once I thought I had found an exception. It was a news item which began, 'Students of the University of Ife were suspended for acts of violence today.' (Ibos being massacred? Students shouting for guns? Perhaps even an anti-war 'demo'? But no. . . .) 'The students had objected to the new arrangement that they should carry their plates to the kitchen after their meal.'⁵ This was not the whole picture, of course, and many of the elite took an active part in the war either as officers in the armed forces or using their skills in a war-time capacity—Nigerian doctors, for example, did a six-month stint at the fronts. There is a glowing tribute from a foreign Red Cross worker who spent much of the war in Federal-occupied Iboland which is worth mentioning.

'One of the most lasting impressions must be the zeal and dedication of the many hundreds of mostly young Nigerians, students, teachers, nurses, who were themselves victims of the war, jobless and often homeless, who volunteered to join up with the I.C.R.C. teams, often for no more than a few handfuls of rice a day, and performed gruesome tasks so cheerfully.'⁶

But the fact remains that the proportion of actual casualties among the elite compared with the masses is minute and must constitute something of a record in the history of warfare. With a few courageous exceptions, the

⁵ Culled from the local press by the *Nigerian Diary of Events* (Lagos), 8, 5, 1968.

⁶ An article by an anonymous relief worker in *Venture*, July/August 1969, p. 21.

Nigerian and Biafran intellectuals, unlike their counterparts, say, in the First World War or Spanish civil war, did not believe in picking up a rifle to defend the cause. The Nigerian war produced its 'Wilfred Owen' (the Biafran poet, Christopher Okigbo, who died in action in Nsukka early on in the fighting), but we have yet to see the Nigerian or Biafran equivalent of a Robert Graves, a George Orwell, or a Norman Mailer emerge.

But though neither of the elites threw themselves bodily into the front-line, both appearing to fight the war vicariously on the backs of the masses, it does not necessarily mean that their motives were purely selfish. In most wars the elite plays a relatively small part in physical combat. The difficulty here, as with all situations which have been reduced to the grim *cul-de-sac* of a military solution, is to disentangle political idealism from economic self-preservation. In fact, the two became inextricably mixed, although it was the strength and familiarity of the economic undertones at play in the crisis that initially aroused and motivated the majority of the educated people. For each side the ambitions of the other, to unite or to secede, spelt 'domination' (that is, unjust economic deprivation), the most emotive and fearsome word in the Nigerian political/tribal dictionary. The Biafran elite, when pressed, admitted that the loss of economic opportunity ('economic genocide', some called it) was a major factor in fighting on. The Nigerian intelligentsia blamed the Biafrans for delaying the realisation of the country's vast economic potential which would ultimately be for the greater benefit of all. With the Nigerians trying to 'dominate' the Ibos and the Ibos trying to 'dominate' the Eastern minorities—in whose territory most of the Eastern oil lay—the war, it seemed, had little to do with the noble ideals of patriotism, security and freedom, and appeared to have descended to the base level of territorial conquest and economic aggrandisement.

But is this the whole picture? Was the war, after all, a monstrous confidence trick, pulled by those smooth young army officers, diplomats and permanent secretaries? The masses in Nigeria are, in general, poorly educated, often totally illiterate rural people who naturally look towards the traditional and modern (i.e. educated) elites in their communities for guidance and leadership. And they usually follow the lead given them without too much trouble, especially in periods of unusual stress or uncertainty when the natural tendency is to close ranks and face the common enemy. However, Nigerians, more than most Africans I would say, are a volatile, politically conscious and intensely independent-minded

people, and sooner or later, whatever the odds, they buck against the system if it does not enjoy their basic approval. The Tiv troubles in the Middle-Belt in the early sixties, the catastrophic disturbances in the West that finally destroyed the First Republic and the Western tax riots against a stern military government during a national emergency clearly demonstrate the limits of popular docility in Nigeria. Of course, the war situation gave the leaderships more licence than peace-time would have allowed; thus both Ojukwu and Gowon could imprison and detain opponents in the most arbitrary manner and get away with it. Nevertheless, grass-roots support was vital for the prolonged and bitter siege that the war turned into, and there is no doubt that each leadership possessed it.

A 'people's war' was a phrase bandied about by journalists and writers freely enough in Biafra, but I think it was a fair description. When half-starved, bare-footed, ragged soldiers, numb with fear, speak glowingly of their 'Biafra'; when poor peasant boys march singing to the front-line with five rounds of ammunition apiece, proudly toting rifles they have never fired before; and when an illiterate village woman who has just watched her second child die of starvation dedicates its spirit to the success of Biafra it is impossible not to accept that the masses—the Ibo masses at least—were behind the war. But so, I believe, were the Nigerians. I once visited a Nigerian P.O.W. camp in Biafra and was shown about thirty prisoners. They were all in poor physical shape, weak and demoralised after almost a year in captivity on a near-starvation diet. Under the noses of their Biafran guards and to a man, however, they said they had been proud to fight for Nigeria and if they were released tomorrow they would go back and fight again. The striking thing was that most of these men were Yorubas from the West, a people not noted either for their martial spirit or for much enthusiasm for a war which they had initially regarded as an exclusively Hausa-Ibo quarrel. Of course, unlike the Biafrans who, at the drop of a hat, would give you half a dozen reasons for fighting, some of them personal ones, the average Federal soldier was less articulate and rarely got beyond the slogan 'One Nigeria'; but it was sincere enough at that level and, in any case, how many ordinary soldiers of the line in any war can produce a clear and cogent rationale for their actions? As in other wars, the majority tended to follow blindly, believing what they were told, and dying without thinking too carefully about what they were dying for. In the Nigerian war the original causes of the conflict—and many of the myths generated by the war itself—penetrated and took a firm hold of the Biafran and Nigerian people as a whole.

The nature of public feeling, however, was far from constant during the conflict. In the early days, a virulent 'war fever' ran through the land and neither side needed to resort to conscription: idealism and the material benefits and prestige derived from 'having a job' (doubly important in a society where unemployment is endemic and the 'extended family' is the strength of the social system) brought men flocking to the recruiting stations. Later, as in the American and Spanish civil wars, conscription became necessary—and unpopular. News of the casualty rate and life at the front had a dampening effect on people's ardour, notably in Biafra where the material advantages—free food, beer, uniforms and excellent pay (the Nigerian private soldier earned the relatively huge sum of £18 a month)—faded away as the general economic situation deteriorated. 'There is no doubt about the vigour of the Biafran army, but the present large wave of conscription does not raise great enthusiasm. Many young people are hiding in the bush to escape it,' an impartial International Red Cross report from Biafra noted in May 1969.⁷ Young men of military age resorted to all sorts of stratagems to avoid the draft. Count von Rosen observed that there were 10,000 men in the Biafran air force and not a single aircraft.⁸ A former senior Nigerian civil servant, who spent the war in Biafra but took no active part in events, described the general pattern to me after the war. 'Conscription was not at all necessary in the early stages; but later, especially in the last six months of the war, each village had to provide seven men and army recruiting teams came round, though they could often be bribed off. My son avoided the draft by first joining the Red Cross and, when total exemption no longer applied to that organisation, he became a special constable. When the constables were, in their turn, conscripted he ran off and hid in the bush.' Desertion grew increasingly common in each army—there were periodic sweeps by military police in Lagos and Ibadan, deserters sometimes being shot on the spot if they were discovered—but despite the appalling conditions under which the war was fought there were no significant mutinies or mass surrenders on either side.

'The fact is that every war suffers a kind of progressive degradation every month that it continues, because such things as individual liberty and a truthful press are simply not compatible with military efficiency,' wrote George Orwell from Spain.⁹ The Nigerian war also became

⁷ I.C.R.C. report produced by a three-man team which visited Biafra to examine the relief and agricultural situation in April/May 1969.

⁸ *The Times* (London), 27.2.1970, in an interview with Suzanne Cronjé.

⁹ Orwell, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

degraded by corruption, nepotism, and arbitrary oppression, characteristics shared equally by both sides. There was also a curious paradox that appeared in the last year, especially between the long lull from May to October 1969. On the one hand there was a marked inertia on the battlefield where the armies appeared to have established a reasonably amicable *modus vivendi*. Considerable trading went on across the lines (known as the 'attack' trade in Biafra where beer, unobtainable for months, was one of the most prized items and the Biafran traders with typical business acumen used to return the empty bottles in order to secure the deposits) and fraternisation developed before the final Federal offensive to the point of Nigerian/Biafran football matches in some sectors! On the other hand, a terrible momentum gripped the war at higher levels. In Biafra one was told time and again that if Ojukwu gave up on the Nigerians' terms he would be ousted and the war would continue under another leader. In Nigeria the field commanders gave a strong impression that they meant to finish the war militarily whatever Lagos thought. And neither leadership, until the very end, lost the belief that it could win. There was little hope, either inside or outside the country, of this momentum being slowed or arrested, for a determined minority which knows what it wants, in situations such as these, usually gets its way. Another observation of the Spanish civil war from the man who opened this paragraph may equally appropriately close it: 'Nobody wants to lose the war, but the majority were chiefly anxious for it to be over. You noticed this wherever you went. Everywhere you met the same perfunctory remark, "This war—terrible, isn't it? When is it going to end?"'¹⁰

What of the Nigerian and Biafran 'everyman'? How did the average non-combatant, non-involved civilian view and survive the war? Once the initial enthusiasm and euphoria had been replaced by the harsh realities of the war itself, I think that most Nigerians and Biafrans wanted nothing more than a quiet and peaceful life. I recall asking an Irish Catholic priest—a strong supporter of Biafra—at a mission near the front-line, how did the local people regard the war. 'They have one thought,' he answered with commendable candour, '—to be left alone by both sides.' Millions of Nigerians were only marginally affected by the crisis—a rise in food prices, a lot of talk on the radio—but three groups felt its impact most powerfully: the Biafrans themselves, Ibos and others, who spent the war in the enclave; refugees in the war zones outside Biafra; and Ibos living in other parts of the Federation. The most fortunate people

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

inside Biafra were the elites, who always seemed to have enough food, and those who were never forced to flee, whose home areas escaped the scourge of war. The African 'extended' family system in which even the most distant relatives are regarded as part of the same family unit and looked after accordingly, was undoubtedly the main reason for the avoidance of an even greater disaster than that which actually occurred. The 'system' was stretched to breaking point but it ensured the survival of millions, particularly the very young and the very old, providing they stuck together. And this they usually managed to do, even when they were on the run. It was commonplace in Biafra during the war to see a whole village on the march. A Nigerian friend of mine whose mother was Ibo went to the enclave just after the war to look for her. It took him a week, but when he eventually caught up with the old lady he found her in reasonably good health though thin and emaciated, and still with about 300 of her own villagers in a similar condition. But they were eighty miles from their home and had moved *en masse* seven times, trekking progressively deeper into the Ibo heartland. Only three people in the entire village had died in this biblical march through the bush, which had lasted almost two years. These people, Ibos from south of Aba, had somehow managed to survive through the combined efforts of a few of their number who worked in the government or for the relief organisations, from food they received from the Churches and Red Cross, and what little they could grow themselves as they moved along. This marvellous tale of corporate effort and compassion was repeated countless times on each side of the lines and constitutes one of the truly heroic, but rarely publicised, feats of the war. The end of the war revealed these experiences which account for the much lower total death toll than originally estimated.¹¹ The other main factor which saved lives was the huge international relief operation on both sides of the lines, which fed not only the refugees in the camps but also provided the crucial protein foods, which the blockade of Biafra had cut off, for people still in their home villages. The worst sufferers, however, were those who had become separated from their extended families or those who had been driven vast distances from their homes and found themselves in a totally alien environment. Many of the Eastern minorities from the periphery of Biafra fell into the latter category, which was doubly tragic since they, by and large, had always been lukewarm on secession and an independent Biafra. One found whole refugee camps full of these people, some of whom had been

¹¹ See Epilogue for final casualties.

on the move since the day war broke out. The basic problem of the refugee, however, was the same for everyone during the war. As soon as the fighting approached it brought with it the dilemma of whether to stay or run. The policy of the Biafran government was to pull the civilians back into the shrinking enclave. (Even on the eve of defeat this did not change, though the civilians stopped obeying the order to move.) The fear of genocide was strong, reinforced in peasant minds totally unused to war by the sound of the Nigerians' artillery and the general din and panic of battle. Invariably, the civilians left well before the fighting actually reached them and then the task of going back became almost impossible since it meant passing through two front lines, two sets of trigger-happy soldiers. And because the civilians rarely stayed, or rarely returned, the genocide myth continued to thrive and intimidate since it was never, until very late in the war, properly put to the test. The only people who did venture back after a prudent sojourn in the bush were minority tribes which did nothing to disprove 'genocide' since it was, the Biafrans claimed, primarily directed against the Ibos.

Life in much of the Federal-occupied areas of the East remained in a strange limbo during the war. A few of the minority districts which had been overrun in the early campaign managed to return to a normal existence but they were the exception rather than the rule. In an especially anomalous position was the civilian government of the new 'East-Central State' (roughly 'Iboland', which had been carved out of the old Eastern Region by Gowon's twelve-state decree), an entirely Ibo administration, led by Anthony Ukpabi Asika and set up by the Federal government in Enugu after its capture from the Biafrans in October 1967. Asika, a political science lecturer in Ibadan University before the war, had been one of the few Ibo intellectuals to resist the call to return to the East after the 1966 massacres and later accepted the tough job of administering the war-ravaged areas of Iboland. His initial problem was to find people to administer since most of the Ibos were either inside Biafra or hiding in the bush. Attacked by a virulent Biafran Radio as the arch-quisling of all time, held in suspicion by many on the Federal side and in constant fear of a sudden Biafran counter-attack which might engulf Enugu, Asika's position was not an enviable one.

I visited Enugu a year after its capture and was struck by the classic loneliness, even pathos, of Asika's situation. Surrounded by his police guard, living in splendid isolation in an echoing Government House, and overlord of a large group of administrators who seemed to spend most of

their time in empty offices pondering over what distant day they would have something to administer, Asika, with his small goatee beard and professorial manner, cut a sombre figure. He appeared to make matters worse by an aloof disdain for the people around him, a tendency to theorise rather than act—in conversation one felt back in the university lecture hall—and a marked intellectual vindictiveness towards his peers on the other side of the line. He was inclined to write the Biafran intelligentsia off completely as a force to be reckoned with either then or in the future. Both the army (the 1st Division, then under Colonel Mohammed Shuwa) and the International Red Cross operation, led by an able and tactful American, were critical of Asika at that time. One major criticism was that he and his assistants spent too much time in Lagos or away from their districts outside Enugu and had become too dependent on the army for transport, supplies and technicians. While I was in the town Asika refused to see the visiting head of the Nigerian Red Cross or the Swedish secretary-general of the League of Red Cross Societies.

At the heart of these difficulties and quite apart from the obvious problems of lack of money from Lagos, shortages of practically everything and the general uncertainty produced by the war were, I suspect, the deep psychological disabilities which afflict most people who find themselves, by accident or by choice, siding with the enemies of their own kith and kin. All the administrators in Federal Iboland had close relatives inside Biafra (including Asika, whose wife and children were there) and most of them had mixed feelings about the rights and wrongs of the war. Being assailed, often personally, by Biafra Radio and unpopular in the Federation as a whole, produced an element of schizophrenia and a curious apathy in the administration. Neither the present nor even the future appeared to hold much solace for them. 'None of us consider life very pleasant in Lagos these days,' one civil servant told me in Enugu, 'but we like it here even less.' Another expressed fears of future relationships with their fellow Ibos after a Federal victory: 'they will have been through the fire; what will they think of us plump "quislings"?' (No one speculated about their fate in the event of a *Biafran* victory.) Several I talked to, however, could not conceal their pride in the way the Biafrans had held out for so long against such terrific odds.

These feelings were reflected elsewhere in the Federation among the Ibos. Their predicament was a difficult and far from happy one. It deserves some attention not only for these reasons but because the lot of the Ibos

under Federal rule during the war was crucial to the substantiation or rebuttal of the Biafran charge of 'genocide'. The Federal government often felt aggrieved, with justification, that no one appeared to listen to their claim that there were hundreds of thousands of Ibos (millions towards the end of the war) in Federal Nigeria and that they were alive and well. Mid-way through the war (October 1968) I spent some time in Lagos and other parts of the Federation putting this claim to the test and reproduce below the results.¹²

'Frankly, it's unpleasant, rather like being a Negro in America. If you've got a top job, you're tolerated and fairly secure. But lower down the scale it can be pretty grim. . . .'

'It's not that bad, but there is no real security. After I leave you tonight I may be arrested as I go across Carter Bridge. I probably won't be, but the nagging feeling is always there. . . .'

'I want go back; I want kill at least two Hausa men before I die. But Gowon, he block de road. . . .'

These are the voices of three Ibo men, from very different walks of life, talking in Lagos in October 1968. What they were saying was important for it reflected the feelings of many of their kind and concerned one of the central issues of the war: the treatment of Ibos outside Biafra but inside Nigeria. And their consensus, though far from cheerful, was a long way from 'genocide'. There was a vital distinction to be made between the Eastern, that is those from Biafra itself, and the Mid-Western Ibos. The latter were not involved in secession nor in the early stages of the war and though many of them left the North in the wake of the massacres those in other parts of the Federation, unlike their Eastern kinsmen, stayed put. Outside the Mid-West itself where, as a result of the short-lived Biafran occupation, feelings ran high against them, the Mid-Western Ibos incurred less suspicion—and less aggravation—than the Easterners. Most of the 'show-case' Ibos in high positions in the Federal government, including the sole and much-publicised Ibo to hold the top-rank civil service post of permanent secretary, were Mid-Westerners. It is perhaps worth mentioning in passing that both the Nigerians and the Biafrans played the 'prestige' game for the benefit of visitors, showing off the number of senior positions filled from the ranks of their tribal opponents. This was interesting enough, like the presence of Irishmen in the British administration during the troubles in Ireland, but not significant—and it was largely self-cancelling. In Lagos or Umuahia everyone would

¹² Much of the material reproduced here originally appeared in the *Observer* of 20.10.1968.

point out these symbols of unity and fair play to you: in Nigeria, it was stressed, the deputy manager of the railways was an Ibo; Gowon had an Ibo major on his staff; the head of the navy had an Ibo A.D.C.; in Biafra, the propaganda spotlight turned on the Eastern minorities—Ojukwu's chief secretary and army chief of staff were from small, non-Ibo tribes—or on the Yorubas: there were two of them in the Biafran army and so on. The numbers were small and for every Ibo 'exhibit' on the Federal side, the Biafrans could produce a non-Ibo on theirs, and vice versa. All it really showed, of course, was that in every conflict there is a dissident minority view.

There are no reliable figures for the total number of Ibos outside Biafra. But the bulk of them—discounting those in the Mid-West and the East, their indigenous area—lived in or around Lagos. There were none in the North, but considerable numbers in the West. Before the crisis there had probably been about 100,000 living in the Federal capital out of a total population of 600,000. Registration took place early in the war and the Federal government estimated that there were over 30,000 Ibos—Easterners and Mid-Westerners—still in the city. The Ibos themselves thought ten thousand of each a more realistic number. Most of the ones I talked to admitted that they had not been ill-treated. Arbitrary action and discrimination against them, when it came—usually at times when the war was going badly for the Nigerians or during a wave of Biafran-inspired sabotage attempts—was invariably at the hands of petty officialdom or the lower ranks of the army. The Federal government was quite successful in separating the image of the 'tyrant Ojukwu and his clique' (as they called it) from that of the average peace-loving Ibo man in its propaganda. Nevertheless there was a marked unity of feeling among the Ibos in Lagos and a strong identification with the Biafran cause. At times it was almost like listening to the official Biafran line in Biafra; only some of the more emotional trimmings were missing; most Ibos outside Biafra respected and even admired Gowon, for example. This provided an interesting insight into the Ibo psyche with its obsessive emphasis on racial solidarity. It also helped to explain the almost superhuman, last-ditch resistance in Biafra at the very end. Three anonymous but representative case-histories of Ibos living in Lagos throughout the war may shed a little more light on feelings at this time.

'Jacob.' A poorly educated, £4 a month office cleaner. Only Ibo left in his office, which is run by an expatriate. Listens avidly—and illegally—to 'Radio Biafra'. Quite unashamed and fearless in expressing

his pro-Biafran views in front of non-Ibos. 'I would have gone home last year before the war when everyone else went but Gowon wouldn't let me because he wants us in "One Nigeria".' Still wants to return to Biafra and join Ojukwu's army, despite the appalling conditions over there, and even though he has recently doubled his earnings by working as a part-time servant for his European boss. This idealism is all the more marked because 'Jacob' has, unlike some Ibos, never been arrested, threatened or harmed in any way in Lagos.

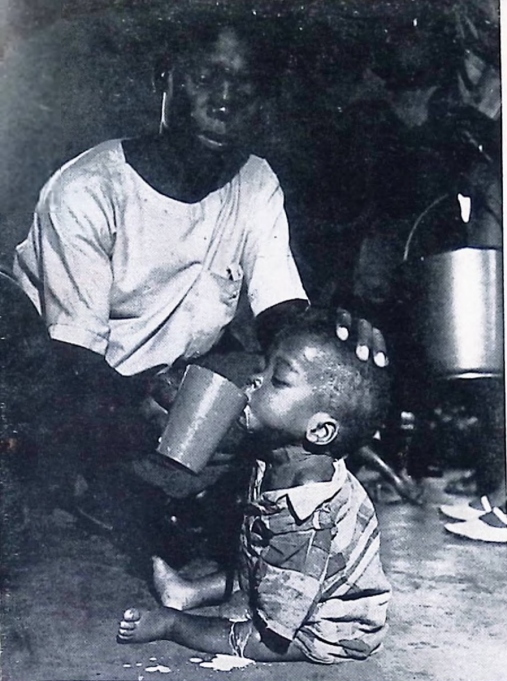
'*Emeka.*' A top furniture salesman from Aba but has lived in Lagos for fourteen years. Like most Ibos his family is back in the East. Nine of his close relatives have died in the war through disease, famine or cross-fire. 'I've been arrested three times by the army (the police are all right) but I got off. It cost me two transistor radios and some cash, but I survived.' Works late, doesn't go to the pictures; receives some feeling of security from the protective umbrella provided by his European manager. But has lost his authority among his junior non-Ibo staff. 'You may not believe this but if I could go back, even now, I would and die with my people. My life here is, well . . . rubbish.'

'*Peter.*' Civil servant—middle grade. 'Physically, we are all right. And among the top men security of employment is there but lower down other people, particularly the Yoruba, are moving in—and they intend to stay, no matter what the Government says.' (The government 'pegged' the Federal civil service intake at pre-war levels and promised to keep Ibos' former jobs available for them; this policy was not really successful for the replacements could not be arbitrarily removed when the war ended.) 'I feel that it was wrong to declare secession but my sympathies are with them; you've got to admire them, haven't you? I can't help them now, but I eat only one meal a day, out of respect.'

In all this there was a solid core of racial pride which transcended considerations of pocket and peace of mind. The Federal government had indeed vindicated its claim to protect the 'lives and property' of the Ibos outside Biafra but through the long years of the war it singularly failed to win their souls.

* * *

The Nigerian war was in no sense an ideological war, although this will probably not prevent Marxist and other ideologically-minded historians from 'discovering' a theme to suit their purposes, but each side had its



One of the more fortunate babies being fed at an I.C.R.C. transit centre in Federal-held Biafra.

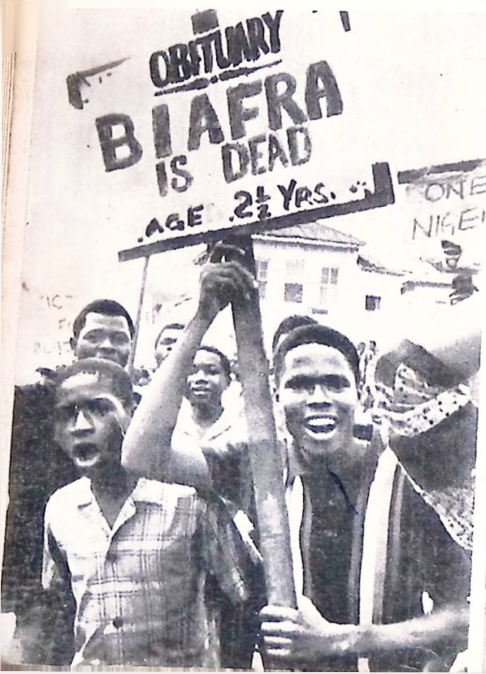


Biafran children, their names and registration numbers taped to their foreheads, waiting to be flown out of Biafra to the Ivory Coast. (After the war 5,000 children were returned to Nigeria by the governments of the Ivory Coast and Gabon.) A religious mural in the background symbolises Biafrans' deep attachment to the Christian faith.



Nigerian soldiers race jubilantly along Uli airstrip as the Biafran government surrenders.

Celebrating crowds in Lagos proclaim Biafra's 'death' at the end of the war.



General Gowon embracing Sir Louis Mbanefo, Biafra's chief justice, at Dodan Barracks at the end of the war. Major-General Philip Effiong is between them in the background.



radicals and ideologues who tried to repair the omission or, failing that, give the existing ethnic/nationalist/economic realities an ideological imprint. In Nigeria the radical movement, such as it was, represented a continuation of trends already clearly discernible on the left wings of the political parties in the days of civilian rule. The presence of the military regime and the preoccupations of the war—politics were officially banned anyway—combined to produce a highly unfavourable climate for such ideas. Nevertheless, the radicals, mainly young politicians, academics and lawyers, were active enough on paper and behind the scenes. The best-known group called itself the 'Committee of Ten' and contained at least one of the Federal commissioners (ministers). The direction of the radicals' thinking mainly concerned post-war Nigeria and was aimed principally at ensuring that the old politicians did not return to power. But attacks were also made on the growing corruption within the Federal army and administration and it was this familiar West African blight which also partly motivated the radicals on the other side of the Niger.

By mid-1969, although the Biafran army had stopped another Federal onslaught, it was clear that things were not going too well inside Biafra. Corruption, nepotism, war profiteering, a lively black market in relief supplies and a growing 'attack' (illegal) trade across the lines were highlighting the embarrassing gap between rich and poor, well-fed and starving, non-combatant and combatant. It was in an attempt to stop the rot that Ojukwu launched his 'Biafran Revolution' on 1st June, 1969, with a manifesto called the 'Ahiara Declaration', taking its name from the village where it was first proclaimed. Published later in a small green booklet by Markpress, Biafra's Geneva-based public relations firm, the *Ahiara Declaration* is an extraordinarily confused and ultimately vacuous document. It must be the only revolutionary statement in history to begin with an expression of thanks to 'Papa Doc' Duvalier's godless Haitian republic (which had recognised Biafra three months earlier) and end by invoking the will of God. Its appearance is not improved by an unfortunate picture of Ojukwu on the inside front cover where he is described as 'General of the People's Army' and dressed in a Castro-style combat uniform, carrying a rifle but smoking a cigarette. (Cigarettes cost several pounds a packet in Biafra at that time.) The philosophy of the 'Biafran Revolution' (half the booklet has nothing to do with it and consists of a statement of Biafra's squabbles with the Federal government and a run-down on the current situation) boils down to a Utopian, vaguely socialist, strongly Christian society. It is singularly unrevolutionary—apart from a

mild attack on excess property and lazy, corrupt or inefficient civil servants—in thought and offers no practical suggestions for the implementation of what it calls the 'New Biafran Social Order'. 'Our Revolution has its foundation in the Role [*sic*] of Law,' it says, but nowhere elucidates this baffling concept.¹³ Although clearly modelled on President Nyerere of Tanzania's justly famous 'Arusha Declaration' (even the name, one suspects, was chosen for its similarity) it only gives a passing glance at his central self-reliance concept and again no ideas for its realisation. Its main targets are the heritage of British and Nigerian attitudes and institutions, the anti-black racial alliance of 'Arab-Muslim expansionism and white economic imperialism' supported by 'Bolshevik Russia', and the 'Nigerianism' (i.e. corruption, nepotism, etc.) still present in Biafran society.

The Ahiara Declaration's real importance lies less in its expression and embodiment of the 'Biafran Revolution' (for, in truth, there was no such thing) than in its revelations of the state of Biafran society during that period. 'We have forced a stalemate on the enemy,' Ojukwu says at the end . . . 'if we fail, it can only be because of certain inner weaknesses in our being. It is in order to avoid those pitfalls that I have proclaimed the principles of the Biafran Revolution.'¹⁴ There is a strong attack on Biafra's current ills:

'we say that Nigerians take bribes, but here in our country we have among us some members of the police and the judiciary who are corrupt and who "eat" bribes . . . even while we are engaged in a war of national survival we see some public servants who throw huge parties to entertain their friends . . . we have members of the armed forces who carry on "attack" trade instead of fighting the enemy. We have traders who hoard essential goods and inflate prices, thereby increasing the people's hardship.'¹⁵

Ojukwu now seemed to have become a radical himself, having opposed at least some of their ideas in the past and shot leading left-wingers like Ifeajuna and Philip Alale for opposing him.¹⁶ A group of intellectuals, including the writer Chinua Achebe, had been working on the future structure of Biafran society for months in an organisation called the Political Orientation Committee. The Ahiara Declaration took this

¹³ *Ahiara Declaration* (published by Markpress, Geneva), p. 39.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 25.

¹⁶ See Chapter VI.

forward and set up a 'National Orientation College' under a Marxist, designed to politicise and reconstruct the army and administration. All this seems rather fantastical when one considers the general state Biafra was in at the time—there appeared to be no doubt in the minds of these intellectuals that there *was* going to be a Biafra to reconstruct after the war—but the sincerity and idealism of most of these men were perfectly genuine. Nor should one doubt the nationalistic, as opposed to revolutionary, fervour of the Ibos. But none of this amounted to a social, political or an economic 'revolution'. Indeed, mild though the Ahiara Declaration was, it rebounded on Ojukwu within a few months and he was forced to withdraw the sections which threatened the bourgeoisie. The Ahiara Declaration, without holding out anything more tangible than hope to the Biafran masses, nevertheless alienated a considerable portion of the powerful Ibo elite and exposed the growing division in Biafran society.

How did each side keep its economy moving and manage to pay for the war? In Biafra, the blockade and the continually tightening military noose reduced life to its barest essentials. Normal economic factors hardly applied, for the task of survival was reduced to two stark necessities: food and arms. The Biafran government was very tardy in launching an emergency food production programme—this came with the formation of the 'Land Army' in January 1969—and it is doubtful whether it made much of an impact on the overall situation. The relief supplies remained the biggest source of protein though bulk foods, with the help of the relief agencies which provided seed, were produced locally. Abroad, the great need was for foreign exchange to buy arms and maintain a number of Biafran missions. Money salted away before secession, private donations from Biafrans (and Biafra sympathisers) overseas, proceeds from the sale of stamps, coins, etc., and the most consistent and perhaps the largest single source—money from the relief organisations—provided Biafra with sufficient foreign exchange for its needs. There was also some evasion of the blockade and trading across the lines though it is unlikely that much of the return from these operations found its way into the government's pocket.

On the Federal side, it was an infinitely more complex business. The government's economists—a small group of realistic and tough-minded permanent secretaries—were determined not to fall into debt and insisted on paying for all arms purchases with cash or (in the case of some of the Soviet deals) by barter. As a result, Nigeria's foreign exchange reserves

plummeted from £60.8 million at the outbreak of war—they had been steadily falling since the July coup (1966)—to £28.2 million in May 1968. Thereafter they climbed back to about £60 million¹⁷ at the end of the war, due mainly to the oil reserves, but by then, in fact, Nigeria was virtually broke since it owed something near that figure in delayed repatriation of foreign companies' profits and other internal debts. But it owed nothing abroad and with the oil industry expanding at a spectacular rate the long-term future was bright. There had been a nasty patch in the middle of 1969, when von Rosen partially disrupted the oil production. If the war had not ended before the rains in April 1970, and if von Rosen had continued or extended his raids, the Federal government might have been in serious financial difficulties. Foreign exchange was husbanded by delaying companies' remittances by anything up to a year, delaying payment for imports and by stringent import licensing controls. Internally, large bank loans, high import and excise duties and special war taxes kept the government afloat.

The result was not all bad. Capital investment and growth were severely curtailed but new local industries sprang up to fill the gap left by the ban on many imported goods; life became tougher for the expatriate (butter, caviar and whisky disappeared off the shelves of the Lagos supermarkets) but not necessarily for the average Nigerian, though basic food prices did rise in the latter part of the war as inflation set in. And, ironically, unemployment, Nigeria's largest economic problem, eased considerably due to the huge expansion of the armed forces. The administrative infra-structure held together surprisingly well under the double strain imposed on it by the Ibo exodus and the shock of the war. There was a slowing down of the general pace but the railways (forty-five Indian engine-drivers were brought in as an emergency measure), the docks, power and all the mechanisms of a modern economy continued to function. The Nigerians, like the Biafrans, pulled out the stops under the stimulus of the crisis.

The war also revealed the free-booting instincts of big business when the normal restraints are removed. Having failed to sell its oil to French businessmen, the Biafran government granted prospecting rights over six million acres of oil-producing land to an American pipe-drilling company called 'Geothermal Resources International Inc.' of California, for an undisclosed sum.¹⁸ Shell, though hit on its production side, made a

¹⁷ This figure embraces Nigeria's total external reserves, including foreign exchange, gold and I.M.F. drawing rights.

¹⁸ 2.5.1968. Mentioned in *An Extract from a Service of Standard & Poor's Corporation*; also referred to in Geothermal Resources International Inc.'s Annual Report of 1967.

killing in sales. To the chagrin of its competitors in Nigeria it won the lucrative contract of supplying the Federal armed forces. Then, through a complicated operation run from The Hague, it supplied the bulk of the aviation fuel for the relief and gun-running airlifts into Biafra via São Tomé and Libreville. The relief organisations and the Biafrans settled their accounts in dollars through a Paris bank.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

The Biafran Sun Sets

War-8

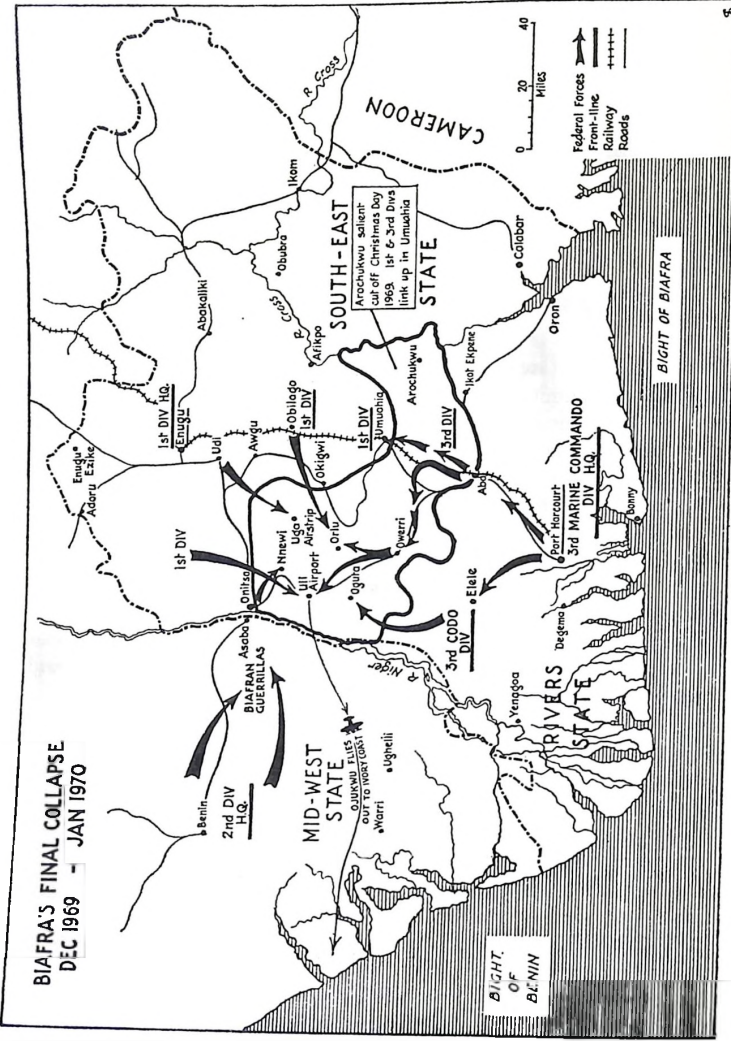
January 1970

Biafra's collapse
Relief
Reconciliation
End of the war

THE END OF THE WAR CAME LIKE A FLASH OF TROPICAL LIGHTNING, momentarily illuminating a half-remembered landscape, and reimposing itself on the consciousness of a world which had already pigeonholed the conflict, along with Vietnam and the Middle East, as 'insoluble'. It took everyone by surprise, including the victorious Nigerian armies as they raced across great tracts of Biafran territory long denied to them. The initial reaction was one of disbelief: the cry of 'victory' had been heard too often in the past to retain much credibility. Then, outside Nigeria, there was an emotional cloudburst of unprecedented proportions as the whole world—or so it seemed—expressed the direst fears for the fate of the Biafrans in the enclave and frantically tried to rush relief and other supplies in, only to have the door slammed firmly in its face by an angry and xenophobic Federal government.

The first news that something serious was happening appeared in the Paris evening papers on Saturday, 10th January. French relief workers, evacuated from Biafra to Gabon, carried tales of a Federal breakthrough in the southern sector: Owerri and even Uli appeared to be threatened. I was in Paris at the time, waiting for permission to go out to Biafra but had been delayed for a week—'we are having some communication problems,' a Biafran official had told me. I telephoned Markpress in Geneva. They, too, were having 'communication difficulties' but had been in touch with Biafra by telex a little earlier after trying unsuccessfully all day, and confirmed that Uli was still secure. The next morning in the London *Sunday Times*, Richard Hall, the last foreign journalist to leave Biafra, opened his dramatic account with the terse sentence, 'Biafra is dying.' Four days later, after two and a half years of anguished but

**BIAFRA'S FINAL COLLAPSE
DEC 1969 - JAN 1970**



heroic existence, the Republic of Biafra, 'Land of the Rising Sun', was dead.

The crucial Federal breakthrough had occurred as far back as Christmas when the 3rd Marine Commando Division had linked up with the 1st Division in Umuahia, isolating the important food-producing salient of Arochukwu to the east and cutting Biafra in two. The attack was spear-headed by the 17th Brigade, led by a 26-year-old major—a reflection on the Federal army's acute shortage of trained officers—who later told me the story of the final advance in his headquarters at Aba. The major, a wiry and decisive-looking Yoruba wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with '17 Codo Bde', had been given the task of taking Owerri by his Divisional Commander, Colonel Obasanjo. With the support of the new Russian 122 mm. medium guns, he had caught the Biafrans by surprise, attacking from the south-west. After the first thrust, instead of waiting for more reinforcements and supplies in the customary Nigerian manner, he had pressed on and, to his astonishment, encountered no resistance. The southern front facing him, Biafra's 12th Division, had crumbled and melted away into the bush. The way to Owerri was open. The town was shelled on 9th January and occupied late the next day. 'On Monday [12th January] we were moving north again towards Uli and Orlu,' said the major. 'It was then that I knew Biafra was finished.'¹

Inside Biafra there had been a marked deterioration over the New Year but nobody could quite put their finger on it and swear that this was the end. The relief pilots, however, soon began to get the message. 'Things grew progressively worse,' said one who had been on the airlift from São Tomé for over a year, 'the radios were on the blink all the time. Eventually we started pulling people out that we never would have pulled out before . . . even missionaries who had been in there for fifteen years . . . loads of Red Cross personnel, priests, nuns, and social workers.'² A British correspondent, touring Biafra a week before the collapse, pointed out that the fear of genocide was waning. 'People are now choosing, in large numbers, to risk massacre at Federal hands rather than die slowly from starvation in a shrinking enclave. . . .' But the Biafran government was still trying to wield this deadly weapon of unity. . . .

'It was in order to reinforce civilian dread of the Federals that the Biafran authorities staged a few days ago a public opening of a "mass grave".

¹ Major Samson Tumoye, in an interview with the author.

² Peter Knox, *op. cit.*

This was in Owerri, Biafra's emergency capital; three hundred bodies were produced and the claim made that they were murdered while the town was in Federal hands last year. The Federals, naturally, have denied the charge. But the truth of the matter is, for the moment, less significant than the use the Biafrans make of it.³

Another eyewitness account described the fall of Owerri.

"Throughout that Thursday [8th January], Owerri went about its business. I went into the post office to buy some stamps and people were queuing to send registered letters. In the main street, shops were open selling the few bits and pieces left for the Ibo shopkeepers to trade in. The car repairers were hammering away; the palm wine drinkers were at it as usual. When the shells came over, I was in the bath. . . . "They are near," the Biafran "watchnight" shrieked at me, and ran into the darkness. Someone banged on my door and shouted, "We are all going. You must go." I picked up my possessions, locked the door. . . . As I turned and went up the drive, I saw ahead that appalling, unforgettable sight, lit by the headlamps of cars edging forwards through the mass. It was the great exodus. The lines were endless, moving with a queer, dream-like slowness. From this army of fear there was a muttering, indefinable but pervasive in the dark. The people went along with basins, suitcases, boxes, bedding, all balanced on their heads. Small boys and girls clung to their parents' hands. There were people wheeling bicycles without tyres. Now and then soldiers came by, stumbling amid the civilians in a dazed way and helping one another. There were no orders given, everybody just knew this was the end for Owerri. It was to fall, as Port Harcourt had fallen, and Aba, Onitsha, Umuahia. There was no real place left.⁴

Owerri had gone but Uli remained. On the Friday (9th) night seventeen relief aircraft managed to get in. But the fall of Owerri, which had now changed hands three times, was the psychological breaking point for Biafra. The Federal troops were still some distance away, but they spread a contagious panic in front of them and suddenly Biafra's nerve cracked: doctors and nurses disappeared into the bush; the wounded dragged themselves out of their beds to follow them; soldiers went on a rampage

³ Antony Terry, *Sunday Times*, 11.1.1970.

⁴ Richard Hall, *Gemini News Service* and the *Sunday Times*.

of looting and, from all sides, people converged on Uli airfield. In this atmosphere of panic and turmoil, Biafra's leaders met for the last time. 'General Ojukwu's final meeting with his cabinet and military advisers were long, sad affairs . . . for hours on Thursday, Friday and Saturday he sat grim-faced and calm, his inevitable packet of cigarettes by his hand. Some of his colleagues wept bitterly, others were beyond tears, as he called them to face reality. . . .⁵

There was, however, no question of a last-minute coup. A group led by Major-General Effiong, the chief of staff, Sir Louis Mbanefo, the chief justice, and Patrick Okeke, the head of police, urged that Ojukwu should leave so that they could sue for peace. Further resistance from the bush was ruled out. Ojukwu who, a year earlier, had vowed that he would stay in Biafra, 'even if I am the last person I will go forward with my rifle', agreed meekly enough that it would be best for all concerned—as it indeed was—for him to remove himself from the country as soon as possible. But he insisted on taking a 'token' government with him which included the heads of all three armed services, the chief secretary (top civil servant) of the government, his political adviser (Okpara, former premier of the Eastern Region) and his closest confidant of all, C. C. Mojekwu, commissioner of home affairs. The trouble was that some of those chosen to go with him did not want to leave, and others, not selected, did. In the latter category were two extreme Biafran nationalists, Pius Okigbo, the economic adviser, and Cyprian Ekwensi, the novelist and director of information. Ojukwu also ensured he had the last word. Early on Saturday evening a mobile recording unit was ordered to come to Uli. Ojukwu then recorded his last speech from Biafra saying that he was 'leaving the country temporarily to continue the search for peace'. Like the famous announcement of the 'Republic of Benin' in the early days of the war, this statement was later broadcast from a country that had virtually ceased to exist by a leader who had already removed himself to safety.

The Nigerian press later produced some superbly colourful and creative versions of Ojukwu's departure. He is alleged to have taken his white Mercedes staff car, and his wife and children with him on the aircraft. In fact, he left the car behind (another story had it that it was a white *cat*) and his immediate family were already in the Ivory Coast. Another version described him perched on top of three tons of personal luggage and the nicest of all had him being carried on board, prone on a stretcher, disguised as a priest. The truth is a little more prosaic, but fairly macabre

⁵ Boniface Offokaja, *Agence France Presse* correspondent in Biafra at the end of the war.

none the less. A European relief worker who was at Uli on the night Ojukwu left (two a.m., Sunday, 11th January) described the scene.

'We had brought 200 seriously sick children to the airstrip in an attempt to fly them out to Libreville before it was too late. There were several planes ready to go. Hungry, shouting, frightened people were everywhere, stumbling over each other; a lot of looting was going on and all order had broken down. In the dark one smelt rather than saw the fear—everyone was driven together by the single obsessive fear to get out. Somehow two of the aircraft got off, one carrying foreign relief workers to Libreville, the other I.C.R.C. people to São Tomé. We started to load one of the remaining planes with the children, but some Biafran soldiers rushed up and ordered us to unload. Argument was pointless. The soldiers were in a wild and undisciplined mood, and quite frankly, we were more frightened of them at that moment than we were of the approaching Nigerians. Then Ojukwu, surrounded by his staff, was hurried on board a Super Constellation. There were a few girls and women in the group and, unmistakably, a European—a *barbouze* [French secret agent]. The plane was far from full but the door was slammed shut as people tumbled over each other in a desperate last attempt to clamber on board. The propellers were turning before the door was closed, and the sudden forward movement of the aircraft sent the gangway steps flying, hurling bodies in all directions. Several people, including some of our children, were badly hurt in the confusion. Another plane took off virtually empty, bound for São Tomé, I think. It was just after two o'clock in the morning; we went back to the hospital to wait for the Federal troops. It was all over.'⁶

Yet not everything in those grim last days was either so chaotic or so ignominious. During Owerri's evacuation Richard Hall found this scene:

'at the Overseas Press Service there was a frenzy of activity. As at every other government office in Owerri a "de-gutting" process was going on. Every file, every typewriter, the defiant posters on the walls, the fans and furniture—all were being removed. Nothing would be left for the "vandals". The job went on through the night and into the next day, as the Nigerians came closer to Owerri. It was absurd, yet heroic.'⁷

⁶ French relief worker in an interview with the author, January 1970, in the former Biafran enclave.

⁷ Richard Hall, *Gemini News Service*.

And to the very end the Biafrans tried hard to maintain a brave face and keep up an appearance of normality even though this stepped over into the bounds of fantasy more often than not.

'To the last hours there were crazy hopes for a sudden flood of arms from France, or you were assured that Denmark was just about to recognise Biafra, that Harold Wilson had lost faith in the Lagos administration, that the long-threatened revolt in the West had really begun. Any straw was transformed into a liferaft. . . . I was exuberantly told about a raid by two of Count von Rosen's Minicons on a port far away in the Mid-West. "This is great news!" cried an official of the Biafran Information Ministry, as he gave me a neatly cyclostyled press release. By dawn the following morning, he and his colleagues and their wives and children and I were sheltering in a large shed, on the edge of a village ten miles north of Owerri.'⁸

Even after Ojukwu had left and the Biafran army was crumbling in front of the now irresistible tide of the Federal advance, a few brave relief pilots continued to fly precious supplies in and exhausted workers out. Uli, Biafra's lifeline for so long, fell on the Monday. A photograph, which later appeared in the Lagos newspapers, showed the first group of triumphant Federal soldiers running helter-skelter down the famous airstrip, waving their rifles in the air and laughing with joy. Enveloped in the silence of the dead, the busiest, the most bombed, the most improbable airport in Africa lay prostrate and abandoned with nothing to show for its role in history except a few wrecked and burnt-out aircraft, an empty control tower, some scattered palm fronds and a quiet graveyard.

But still the relief planes kept flying over, desperately searching for another airfield and another way of keeping the airlift going. One of the pilots who flew to the bitter end described his last run in.

'It was on the second last flight that I knew the war was over. We had sent Tony Johnson (the Iclander) in to look at Uga airfield. It was a military strip that had been used sometimes by the gun-runners. But we had never been there and didn't know where it was or what kind of approach beacon it had, or nothing . . . but we decided to go in anyway. We told Biafra control, "We don't care how many lights you have, turn them all on. AND LEAVE THEM ON. Don't mind about the bombs

* Ibid.

or anything else—I'm coming over now. Keep your goddam gun battery quiet." I was just turning downwind when they put on the lights. There weren't many but a few went on on the right-hand side. All the way in we kept telling them, KEEP ON THE LIGHTS. DON'T TURN THEM OFF. We were worried that since we were on final, they would suddenly turn them off. But they didn't and we came in very short. It was a heavy landing. We came to a halt. Max brakes. Everything was burning, and you could smell it. We turned round but there was nobody there. We taxied in between the bomb holes. The Nigerians were two miles away. The Biafrans had all seemed to have gone.

All of a sudden, out of the bushes came eighty-six white people: nuns, priests, relief workers. We had eighteen tons of food on board but there were no fatigue workers anywhere around. There were two Biafran guards standing some distance away with machineguns. I knew them and they knew me. The whites were frightened, really frightened. They were trying to get on the loaded aircraft. I said, "Get off, we've got to unload this plane." They got it unloaded in ten minutes, eighteen tons out of the back door. The people we took out were in very bad shape. They were nervous wrecks. But I've got more admiration for those people than any of them on the airlift because they had to live with that shit and we only saw it two or three times a night. We took off. I pulled my gear up. Biafra control came on and said, "I advise all incoming aircraft that the airport is closed until further notice." The airport fell that night.⁹

On the Monday, 12th January, at four-thirty in the afternoon, Radio Biafra, which had been playing Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, announced that the new leader, Major-General Philip Effiong, to whom Ojukwu had handed over power before he flew out, would make a statement. In slow, measured tones, Effiong called upon the army to lay down its arms. 'I am convinced now that a stop must be put to the bloodshed . . . that the suffering of our people must be brought to an immediate end.' In a reference to the departure of Ojukwu, Effiong said, 'Our people are now disillusioned and those elements of the old regime who had made negotiation and reconciliation impossible have voluntarily removed themselves from our midst. Throughout history,' he continued, 'injured people have had to resort to arms in their self-defence where

⁹ Peter Knox, *op. cit.*

peaceful negotiations fail. We are no exception. We took up arms because of the sense of insecurity generated in our people by the events of 1966. We have fought in defence of that cause.' He ended, 'may God help us all in this hour of our need.' The following day, Nigerian field commanders made their first contact with the Biafran leaders. The Yoruba major in command of the 17th Brigade which had made the initial breakthrough, described this meeting to me afterwards. 'We discussed security, Uli airfield and weapons. They said they wanted their seven thousand policemen to stay on duty in "unoccupied Biafra" and a joint force to guard Uli. This annoyed me. I told them nothing was "unoccupied" and there was no "Biafra"—nor was there any need for a joint command at Uli. After that it was fine and we all hugged each other.'

The next evening (Wednesday) a weary group of travellers arrived in Lagos on a chartered Nigeria Airways aircraft. They were driven to a hotel and picked up early on the Thursday morning and taken to Dodan Barracks on Ikoyi Island, a suburb of Lagos, where General Gowon had lived ever since he had come to power. And there, four years to the very day after the young Ibo officers had murdered their leaders in the night and set off the train of gunpowder that had finally engulfed the country, Nigeria's civil war came to an end. In the first formal surrender ceremonies to mark the end of a major conflict since the Second World War, Effiong, dressed in civilian clothes, surrendered to Gowon, who had been his friend and classmate at Sandhurst, and introduced a surrealistic note by saying, 'Lieutenant-Colonel [his pre-war rank] Philip Effiong reporting for re-deployment, sir.' (Once in Biafra I had asked Effiong if he could shoot his old comrade should the opportunity arise on the battlefield. Effiong looked startled and then exclaimed in his cultured British accent, 'Shoot Jack? Good God, no. I could never shoot old Jack!') With the formal surrender went the reality, the aspirations, the effort, the suffering, the crazy, cock-eyed heroism and even, finally, the fantasy that had been Biafra.

Nigeria's Appomattox was a simple, moving ceremony but for the people—*en masse*—it was, as ever, the transistor radio which brought the message home. While confusion still reigned and as his men were racing across exhausted Iboland, Colonel Obasanjo, the 'Black Scorpion's' successor at the head of the 3rd Marine Division, had broadcast on the captured Biafran Radio. Punctilious to the last, the Biafran Radio engineers and producers (among them was Okonkon Ndem, Biafra's 'Lord Haw-Haw') had carefully rehearsed him, but he had chosen the format. Ibo

cyclophone drums and 'This is Radio Biafra', the normal call-sign procedure, had opened the transmission which was eagerly listened to by the waiting millions. His message was short and soldierly: the war was over, all Biafran troops should lay down their arms, the police would be taking over soon. Then, without warning, the broadcast ended with Nigeria's drum tattoo and the Federal national anthem. This small gesture, perhaps more than any other, snuffed out Biafra and drew the curtain down on the war.

* * *

In the Federation, the reaction to victory was as unexpected as it was revealing. Instead of wild rejoicing, celebrations, parties and the like, for which West Africans are renowned, there was nothing but a profound feeling of relief and a sudden upwelling of compassion for the defeated Ibos. Gowon, quoting Lincoln, talked of 'binding up the nation's wounds' and decreed three days of national prayer. In a war that had 'no victors and no vanquished', he told his army that this was one campaign for which no medals would be struck. I had arrived in Lagos a couple of days after the collapse and remember the curious impact of this low-keyed reaction, rather as if a well-loved but troublesome member of the family had just been released by death from an agonisingly painful and incurable disease. One realised again that beneath that bombast, the inconsistencies, the sheer bloody-mindedness which had characterised so much of the crisis, Nigerians, high and low, had been deeply ashamed of their war. A short account of the way in which the news was received by one group of Nigerians in the Mid-West, a key part of the country that had been buffeted by both sides in the war, may help to recapture something of the flavour of that time. It is by a Canadian newspaper administrator who was working for the *Nigerian Observer*, the Mid-West government's paper, in Benin City. The staff of the newspaper had gathered to listen to Effiong's broadcast on Radio Biafra two days after Ojukwu had fled. "To me the newsroom of the *Nigerian Observer* will always remain an unforgettable scene. Members of the corporation's staff from every department and representing practically every tribe that make up this multi-ethnic state and, yes, Ibos too, had huddled around the radio, tense and expectant. Exactly at four-thirty p.m. the Biafran national anthem was played in full and then Effiong, in a short speech, announced the capitulation and threw Biafra at the mercy of General Gowon. There were

no cheers, no jubilation or arrangements for celebrations. Most of the listeners had tears in their eyes and the editor wept.¹⁰

Outside Nigeria, quite the reverse was happening. The Western world, its conscience tugging at it from all angles—compassion, concern, guilt, pique, anger—let off a huge blast of emotional steam. Offers of aid for the starving Biafrans were quickly followed by demands that Nigeria should open up its airfields, particularly Uli, and allow relief organisations to get on with their jobs unhindered by Nigerian red tape and such minor considerations as sovereignty. The Pope promptly expressed fears of genocide. President Pompidou of France, while pressing assistance on the Nigerians with one hand, raised the other to hail the spirit of Biafra which he thought would live on. The British parliament launched on another full-scale debate of the crisis in which doubts of the Nigerians' sincerity and reservations about their capacity to prevent millions of Ibos from starving to death were strongly voiced. President Nixon called up the British prime minister, Harold Wilson, twice on the 'hot line' to discuss the crisis. Leonard Cheshire, the British war hero and humanitarian, threatened first of all to fly into former Biafra then arrived uninvited and visa-less in Lagos and was smartly put back on his plane.

Gowon, for once on the side of his 'hawks', reacted angrily. All the countries, like France, South Africa, Portugal and Rhodesia which had supported Biafra, were told to keep their aid and stay out. Relief organisations in a similar position, notably Caritas and the World Council of Churches, were also barred. 'Let them keep their blood money,' Gowon cried. 'Nigeria will do this itself.' The Catholic priests and nuns in the enclave were gradually rounded up and expelled. They came to no harm physically but their removal left a crucial gap in a rapidly deteriorating relief situation. For the British government, what should have been a moment of glory and gratitude as a reward for its steadfast support of Lagos, turned sour on the eve of the Federal victory. The day of Ojukwu's escape a confidential report written by Colonel Robert Scott, the defence adviser at the British High Commission in Lagos, was published in the London *Sunday Telegraph*. The report, which mainly concerned the Federals' last offensive, gave few secrets away (though this did not prevent it becoming the subject of a subsequent trial under the Official Secrets Act in Britain) but painted a critical picture of the Federal army and was larded with unstilted phraseology like, 'the Nigerian army, in

¹⁰ Erwin Swangard, the Canadian administrator of the *Nigerian Observer*, in a private account given to the author.

the advance, is the best defoliation agent known'.¹¹ Its explosive impact on Lagos—the army officers whom it criticised were in a 'sulphurous' mood, I was told—was only slightly mitigated by the fact that Scott, with his reservations about the Nigerians' capacity to win the war before the rains in April, was proved resoundingly wrong. He was expelled and the British government deeply embarrassed, losing at a time when it needed it most its capacity for exerting a moderating influence on the Federal government. (The only concession Gowon made was to allow Lord Hunt, Britain's relief adviser, to make a short tour of the enclave.) A replacement for Scott also found himself back on a plane to London after less than a week in Lagos. This was a fate shared, a little later, by one of President Nixon's relief representatives who had produced an unfavourable report on the relief crisis. For reasons not easily discernible to the outsider but all too clear to those who had followed the course of the war and who were in Nigeria at the end, the Nigerians' blood was up. With untypical bitterness Gowon told foreign diplomats in Lagos that his government would not tolerate 'further unwarranted interference by any foreign government or organisation in the internal affairs of Nigeria'.

How serious was the relief situation in Biafra at the end of the war? And why did the Nigerians close the door so ungraciously to what were, after all, sincere offers of help?

Together with eighty other foreign pressmen I toured the Biafran enclave a week after the collapse. During the tour I also walked for ten miles through a series of 'bush' villages north of Owerri in the worst affected area. This and a further two months spent in different parts of Nigeria after the end of the war produced certain firm conclusions. Firstly, there was no 'genocide', massacres or gratuitous killings; in the history of warfare there can rarely have been such a bloodless end and such a merciful aftermath. Secondly, the expectations (and some of the reports) of mass starvation were not fulfilled. Phrases in the popular press like the 'missing millions', 'the brutality of peace' and 'silent genocide' were utterly misleading. But there was mass hunger and there were concentrations of starving, sick and exhausted people, usually refugees caught a long way from home, some of whom died because aid was too slow in reaching them. There is no accurate figure for this category and probably never will be, though it ran into thousands, possibly even hundreds of thousands, but certainly not millions. (The estimated population of the enclave, which was about the size of Yorkshire, at the collapse was between three

¹¹ Colonel Robert Scott's report, *Sunday Telegraph*, 11.1.1970.

and four million.) The sudden end to the war had two immediate consequences, one bad, the other good. It caught the Nigerians with their administrative pants down; there appeared to be no contingency planning for an emergency relief operation in the event of a Biafran collapse. But for the first time since the war began the million or so refugees in the enclave could move freely and return to their villages; wherever one went in the war zones one saw great columns of refugees walking steadily home. This did much to ease the strain on the overburdened relief infrastructure. Lastly, there was widespread looting, raping and a callous indifference to the fate of the Ibos by many of the Federal soldiers; this was particularly pronounced in the southern part of the enclave which was occupied by the poorly-disciplined 3rd Marine Commando Division. Whether this was 'acceptable' as the natural aftermath of war or not depends on one's standards for judging the crisis; worse things happened in defeated Germany in 1945. But such behaviour in the enclave was an undeniable fact, did contravene Gowon's 'Code of Conduct', and generally contradicted what the Federal government had been saying about the situation from Lagos.

If the Nigerian government had opened its doors to the humanitarians and foreign governments that were clamouring to come in, it is possible that more lives would have been saved. But it does not necessarily follow. There was no shortage of food on the periphery of the afflicted area: the principal difficulties were lack of transport and personnel to take it where it was needed, an acute shortage of medical staff and equipment for the abandoned hospitals, an absence of any proper kind of administrative structure though the vastly improved Nigerian Red Cross did its best—and did not, in the event, perform at all badly—and, finally, the presence of the unruly Federal army. To let in the world's humanitarians and not remove the soldiers first would almost certainly have led to disastrous misunderstandings and, very likely, serious trouble. But what government, which has just won a hard-fought war, especially a civil war, is going to withdraw its troops from the conquered area at the moment of victory? The political and military dangers of a new revolt would be too great even to consider this proposition.

In any case, the Nigerians' mood was far too bitter and xenophobic to think along these lines. To the Western world it seemed brutal and incomprehensible that the Federal government should slam the door. It was as if a poor country had suffered some natural disaster like an earthquake and then refused to allow anyone, including the International Red

Cross to come to succour the victims—and all for some prickly and ridiculous notion of 'sovereignty'. The central fact, however, was that the relief situation at the end of the war could not be suddenly taken out of the context of the war itself; almost from the beginning relief had been inextricably mixed with the politics of the crisis and it was impossible to separate them overnight, especially, as it seemed, at the whim of the deeply mistrusted foreign humanitarians. Rightly or wrongly, Gowon and most Nigerians felt that the action of many of the relief organisations, particularly the Churches and the countries which had supported them, had unjustifiably prolonged the war—hence the angry cry from Gowon, normally the mildest of men, about 'blood money'. Unprecedented foreign pressures, doubts and seemingly endless criticism during the war had taken their toll on the Nigerians. The sudden and virtually bloodless end came as a great relief to an emotionally and physically exhausted people. The internal reaction was not vindictiveness, as many people had expected, but mercy and magnanimity. Nobody had ever believed them during the war, the Nigerians complained, even when what they were saying was demonstrably true as, for example, the fact that more Ibos were eventually living safely on the Nigerian side of the line than hazardously in Biafra. Even with the war over, still the feeling of suspicion, the hectoring tone, the incredulity of the foreigners, especially the whites of the West with their own ugly record of wars, brutality and true genocide, persisted. There was also a political reason for keeping the foreigners out. Throughout the war it had been Gowon's firm policy to show the Ibos as a people that he had nothing against them personally. Turning over the whole relief operation to the Nigerian Red Cross, which incidentally had many foreigners working for it, was designed to prove to the defeated that the Federal government did, after all, care for their welfare. Having won the war, Gowon was determined to win the peace.

Not surprisingly, the Nigerians over-reacted. They immediately set themselves impossibly high standards. Instead of giving visiting journalists a realistic appreciation of the problems, measured by the yardstick of the 'war is war' kind, and then allowing them to visit the enclave as soon as possible, the Federal government initially refused to allow anyone to move—expelling four correspondents who disobeyed—and tried to fob the press off with the line that everything was completely under control and there was no real crisis at all. Uli, which could have been usefully used for *internal* flights without reflecting in any way upon Nigeria's

costly reassertion of sovereignty over that airfield, became the most sensitive issue of all. At a press conference in Lagos I remember Gowon, quite uncharacteristically, losing his temper when Uli was mentioned. 'Let us forget about it,' he cried. 'Uli has been too involved in international politics.' A few days later bulldozers and giant scrapers were ripping up the pock-marked runway, literally wiping Biafra's most powerful symbol of resistance off the face of the earth. Propaganda took a nasty turn. A talk on the Nigerian radio one day, given by none other than Biafra's own former arch-propagandist, Okonkon Ndem (there was some pretty fast 'horse-swapping' in those days) casually dropped 'priests, do-gooders and journalists' all together in the same neo-colonialist, imperialist bag.

Apart from the patchy handling of the relief situation the most outstanding feature of the end of the war was the remarkable atmosphere of reconciliation, especially at the top levels but also lower down. It was marvellous to see officers and men who had been facing each other over the barrel of a gun for two and a half years embrace and weep tears of joy. 'There will be no Nuremberg trials here,' Gowon promised shortly after the collapse and the spirit behind this statement went right down the line. Later, senior army officers and civilians intimately associated with Biafra's secession were screened and some detained for varying periods of time, but the worst known sanction taken against them was the refusal to re-employ them in government service. When one considers the brutality, the proscriptions, the carefully nurtured, immensely durable hatreds that have so often followed wars in the 'civilised' West (the terrible aftermath of the Spanish civil war, fought not so long ago is one example) it may be that when history takes a longer view of Nigeria's war it will be shown that while the black man has little to teach us about making war he has a real contribution to offer in making peace.

What caused Biafra's sudden collapse? It was a combination of factors but the three most obvious—starvation, lack of arms and the strength of the Federal offensive—were not, in fact, as significant as several more profound causes. Food was in short supply, especially since the loss of the rich agricultural Arochukwu area during Christmas. The 12th Brigade which collapsed in the South and let the Federals through what Colonel Scott rightly called their 'thin, defensive crust' was seriously undernourished though troops on the other fronts appeared better fed. The Biafrans were relatively well-armed at the end—indefinitely better than they had been during the dark summer of 1968—but they still lacked the

heavier type of weapon (artillery, armoured cars, heavy mortars) which might have enabled them to go on the offensive. The much-vaunted Russian 122 mm. medium guns played only a minor part in the Nigerians' assault since they were deployed in one sector alone (near Oguta) and were soon rendered unnecessary by the speed of the Federal advance on the eastern flank. A profound lassitude and a weakening of morale during the preceding nine months hastened Biafra's defeat. The gap between the elite and the masses had been widening steadily while many people made fortunes—soon to be lost when the Biafran currency collapsed—as others starved. Corruption in the government had spread alarmingly. Ojukwu had tried to stop it and strengthen his position among the people with the Ahiara Declaration, but had failed. Conscription became increasingly unpopular and disillusion with the war grew more general. Many people had been on the run, in constant fear of their lives and under-fed ever since the Northern pogrom in 1966 and the war itself had lasted for two and a half exhausting years. They began to yearn for peace at any price. The impressive national unity, at least of Iboland, started to crack a little although there were few traces of overt opposition to Ojukwu. Aba province in the south, however, was an exception for here, in June, the local leader and former Nigerian minister of foreign affairs, Jaja Wachuku, had been detained and the province put under martial law; it was also believed that the small but powerful Cherubim and Seraphim religious sect had weakened the morale of the troops by telling them they would die if they fought on certain days of the week; whatever the truth of this, it was here, significantly, that the Federal columns made their final breakthrough.

Throughout Biafra, however, the most important factor which undermined the will to resist was the waning of the fear of genocide. The long military stalemate between May and November 1969, had led to fraternisation across the lines, a growing freedom of movement in the zones not actually occupied by troops of either side, news filtering through about how Ibos were living in Federal-held territory and a kind of lethargy of the 'live-and-let-live' variety. When the final attack came, many people, instead of moving at the first sounds of battle in the normal way, simply side-stepped into the bush and re-emerged a few days later after the fighting had passed by. The limit of an almost superhuman endurance had been reached; the Biafrans had nowhere to run and they could run no more.

EPILOGUE

Uli, Biafra. THE BIAFRANS LOVE THE FORMALITIES AND RITUAL OF GOVERNMENT; no matter how desperate and crazy the situation is, things must be done properly ('by gosh, yes,' says a senior civil servant). A few hundred yards down the road from 'Airstrip Annabelle' (Uli airport) we pass methodically through 'port health, immigration and customs'. Uli, to the Biafrans, is still 'Enugu', their long-lost capital, and we have a stamp in our passports to prove it. It all takes time but no one is left in doubt of its essential seriousness even if there are Federal bombers overhead.

'Any antiquities to declare?' asks the customs man, and by that stage I almost believe it myself.

We lumber out of Uli—it is our third night of waiting, but this time we're lucky—in a battered 'Connie' arms-runner and they haven't had time to put the seats back in. But there is a mattress on the floor of the main cabin among the wood chips, bent nails and pieces of wire from the ammunition boxes and ten of us roll around on it in a sort of crazy 'love-in', clutching on to the bulkheads and each other as the plane lurches and banks. We climb and climb, the aircraft steadies and our sweat dries in the cool night air; tension drains away leaving the body and mind limp; nothing can go wrong now we feel, and who the hell cares if it does; it's that marvellous moment between fulfilment and reaction: the time that memories flood the brain more vividly than the original impact of the events themselves; rich, spiky fragments of human experience that are all too often later flattened by the steam-roller of formal logic, socio-political trends and dusty academic research.

I understand the rationale behind Britain supplying arms to the Nigerians—and defend it—but I also remember the man in Aba who had devoted his life to educating his three lively, intelligent, teenage children. One afternoon when he was at work and they were at home, a bomb fell on the house killing them all. The Ibos are probably the most anglicised of Africans and to be hit by a British bullet or chased away from one's

home by a British shell, produces a deep and lasting psychological wound which often appears to cause more pain than the physical hurt itself. The Reverend A. N. Ekpunobi, a venerable 90-year-old who can remember the first Europeans dying like flies on the Coast in his youth, asked me in Obosi, near Onitsha, 'have you seen Harold Wilson, young man? Well, if you do, tell him to stop giving the Nigerians arms to kill us, will you? I would be most grateful.'

The reality and fantasy of Biafra: a continual struggle in the mind to nail it down; the best thing to do, as the old aeroplane drones on over the forests of the place they still call Biafra but is now beyond a shadow of a doubt the 'Rivers State', an integral part of the Federation of Nigeria, is not to try too hard. A personal fragment from the kaleidoscope of the past sometimes helps in a strange way. During an evening of songs, dancing and plays in the Aba town hall to raise money for Biafra's refugees, one of those remarkable coincidences which weld time and space occurred. A Biafran about my age tapped me on the shoulder and asked if, by any remote chance, I had picked strawberries on a farm camp near Wisbech in Cambridgeshire in the summer of 1957: I had.

'Hullo,' he said, 'I am Tony Chukwurah, you must be John from Oxford.'

He dashed off and returned with a photograph of a group of international students; and there we were striking juvenile poses in front of some tents and a rich strawberry field; the faces in the faded picture came sliding back into my memory: a couple of Spaniards, one fat, the other thin; the three Belfast boys who sang incomprehensible tribal songs about good 'King Billie'; the Frenchman whom no one liked, the gentle Indonesian who fell asleep every afternoon in the strawberry fields; the four 'Nigerians' (they all turned out to be 'Biafrans'); the Danish girls with their flaxen hair; it all came flooding back, and for a few minutes Tony Chukwurah and those carefree students in the flat fields of the Fens were more real than the rumbling of the Nigerians' guns a few miles away down the road to Elele.

Nonyem Anyaoku: a lovely, passionate defender of the Biafran cause. She was my graduate guide in Biafra and probably the best advocate of her country that I ever met. Unlike many of the top elite—those who subsequently emerged from their ruined land, fat, sleek and strong—she had no job-stake or vested interest in the country; in fact, she would have been better off in a united Nigeria. A recent graduate from Nsukka University, she had already begun teaching when the war came. She worked

for the Biafran Red Cross and then joined the Ministry of Information—one of whose boasts was to provide a graduate guide for each group of foreign visitors. She regarded it as part of her duty to accompany correspondents personally to the front line and had often been under fire. She also had an answer for everything—an intelligent and heartfelt answer. Inescapably, one left her a little Biafran oneself. It seems likely that the concept of Biafra supplied an ideal for people like her that Nigeria, with its placid pace towards independence and its disappointing failure afterwards, had singularly failed to provide. Much later, I was to receive a dramatic dust-stained letter from her when Umuahia was being bombed. She had dropped the letter, half-finished, on the ground as the MiGs swooped in but retrieved and completed it in an air-raid shelter. Her closing words had an air of exultation which transcended the war-time jargon. 'The Nigerian vandals cannot exterminate us. Biafra really has come to stay whether Wilson likes it or not. . . . You have to be a true Biafran to understand how we feel and I am not being emotional when I say that I will live and die for Biafra, a consecrated nation.'

It was people like Nonyem, the young and the forthright, who carried—and still carry—conviction when they talk of what Biafra meant to them. Perhaps not many of them died in the front-line, perhaps they were not thin and emaciated at the end, perhaps they even had some money and possessions while thousands were starving and penniless, but I believe that they believed and suffered for their beliefs.

Sitting beside me, propped up against the bulkhead on the mattress, is Chinua Achebe, the novelist. He is a fine and gentle person, but now deeply embittered by the war for which he blames Britain as much as the Nigerians. He has given up creative writing for the time being and is busy working with a team of Biafran intellectuals on the Political Orientation Committee which, he enthusiastically explains, is planning the structure of Biafran society and its institutions after the war. He, like Nonyem and many other Biafrans, assumes that the country will survive, that defeat and annihilation are unthinkable. Drifting in neutral gear, I am carried along by his dreams; then suddenly I plummet back into reality: an embattled and entirely surrounded country, a few tired old aircraft bringing in uncertain supplies of arms to a strip of tarmac they call 'Enugu', and where they check to see if you're smuggling antiquities: a hopeless, fantastic cause, surely? Are these dreams of the future the only way the Biafrans can face the present? Or is it something special in the Ibo psyche—a kind of irreversible momentum that must not, cannot, be

deflected once the die has been cast, otherwise things will indeed fall apart?

'What sort of unity do the Nigerians want?' Achebe asks as the Constellation tips its nose down towards São Tomé, 'the unity of the dead?'

* * *

The pursuit of Nigerian unity killed between half a million and a million Nigerians.¹ (The Spanish and American civil wars exacted a similar human price.) The cost of unity was around £500 million and reconstruction has been estimated at a further £200 million.

Gowon kept his word: there was no proscription, no 'Nuremberg trials'. Peace brought pain but mercy too. Many Biafrans returned to Nigeria, including Sir Francis Ibiem and N. U. Akpan and the 5,000 starving children flown out of Uli to Gabon and the Ivory Coast during the war were repatriated fit and well.

The mighty have been humbled but they have survived. Eni Njoku went back to Nsukka University to teach, Pius Okigbo, after a spell in gaol, turned his economic skills to private business, Sir Louis Mbanefo is living quietly in the East, Chinua Achebe picked up his pen again and Cyprian Ekwensi, filmed not long after the war selling plastic toys and buckets, quickly pointed out that this was an example of no matter how low the Ibo man sinks, he will always rise again.

Of the exiles, Francis Nwokedi became a successful publisher in Sierra Leone, Kenneth Dike took up a post at an American university, Dr. Azikiwe wrote his memoirs in London, Michael Okpara went to France and C. C. Mojekwu finally left Lisbon for Chicago. At the end of one letter applying for a job he signed himself, 'Biafra's most senior refugee'.

Tony Asika became governor of the Ibo's East-Central State, and reminded Biafra's former leaders that it was never intended that the 'general amnesty should lead to general amnesia'. Several senior Biafran army officers (Effiong, Achuzie, Nwawo—of Mid-West fame—and a few others) were gaoled, and in far-off Khartoum, Colonel Rolf Steiner went on trial for his life for fighting with the southern rebels against the Sudanese government.

Ojukwu, who slept heavily on his dramatic flight out to the Ivory Coast, has remained there ever since. His application for political asylum in Switzerland was rejected but he is free to remain in Houphouët-

¹ There are no official figures and, since accurate records were not kept by either side, a reliable estimate of casualties may never emerge. My figure is a consensus of informed opinion and I personally feel that something around 600,000 — for total deaths — may be nearest the mark.

Boigny's comfortable country estate at Yamoussoukro as long as he wishes.

His belief in Biafra is undimmed. He justified his departure in a final statement faithfully put out by Markpress several days after the collapse. 'I did this knowing that whilst I live Biafra lives,' he said. He felt that the concept of Biafra would disintegrate and die without him.

Many of Ojukwu's fervent admirers abroad were upset or disillusioned by his escape, feeling that he had lacked courage and let them down. But this heroic last-ditch, 'die-in-your-bunker' attitude is surely an Anglo-Saxon concept which has little meaning among the pragmatic Ibos. Certainly, immediately after the war—and probably to this day I suspect—Ojukwu remained the adored folk-hero he had become. The Ibos had no criticisms, no recriminations, no regrets: 'we fought until we could fight no more' they told me in the stricken enclave in January 1970; 'but Ojukwu is our brother and we would like him back.'

This strange, complex, fascinating man is now sharing the lonely fate of Nkrumah and Obote, Africa's other fallen giants. A statesman without a state, a leader without a people, an orator without a platform, an actor without a stage; for a man such as Ojukwu exile must be a living death. Perhaps the last word should come from his chief-of-staff, Philip Effiong, who knew him well.

'He was no devil. Everybody admired his personal courage, his ability for hard work. But he had one weakness—he did not know when to apply the brakes. But it's purely because he was ambitious. He was a very able chap.'²

With Biafra gone—even the 'Bight of Biafra' has been erased from Nigerian maps—the four African states which had recognised Ojukwu quickly mended their fences with Gowon. A little later Nigeria established diplomatic relations with another of Biafra's supporters, Communist China.

Other wounds are healing less rapidly. Nigeria has a new unity but many old problems. The unity is not absolute or eternal, yet it has given a huge and rich country and 50 million or more people a fresh chance to develop their potential in peace and for the benefit of all. The war destroyed a generation of Ibos but it gave a new confidence to those who kept Nigeria together. They showed Africa and the world that the shaming, anarchic age of the Congo was past; they demonstrated that Africans could finance and fight a modern war and conclude a compas-

² *Drum* magazine (Nigerian edition), April 1970.

sionate peace; although dependent on outsiders, they displayed maturity and skill in keeping them at arms' length; and they buried the mercenary myth deep in African soil.

The war of Nigerian unity also threw up the kind of leader the country needed so desperately. Gowon is not of Lincolnian stature but he is cast in a similar mould; his faith, humility and plain good sense played a considerable part in saving Nigeria. Whether he can perform the same service in peace as he did in war remains to be seen.

The Nigerian war stepped outside its narrow physical confines and raised several larger issues. The conflict between morality and pursuance of the national interest in the formulation of foreign policy; the hurdle of legality and sovereign rights for professional humanitarians; the responsibilities of leadership in situations where illiterate masses are dominated by small, often self-centred elites; the destructive power of tribal (or regional) pressures; the nature and techniques of neo-colonialism and the inter-play of the great powers in international crises; the rights of minority groups within larger nationalisms; and the crucial importance of employment and a safe and secure base to run to when times are bad. No black and white solutions emerged from the war, but each problem was highlighted and examined in turn with a new critical eye and from that process something of value will, it is to be hoped, rub off in the future.

But nothing can justify the deep evil of war itself. Equally, nothing should blind the onlooker to the identity of the real victim. In this sense the Nigerian war was as nihilistic and as terrible as any other. An Ibo domestic servant wrote to his expatriate employer after he had fled to the East in 1967; he said everyone over there was talking about secession and war and added his own prophetic commentary.

'The Big Men will fight and the poor men will suffer.' An epitaph for all wars, perhaps.

When you have finished,
And done up my stitches,
Wake me near the altar,
And this poem will be finished.³

³ From *Limits*, by Christopher Okigbo, Biafran poet, killed in action, Nsukka Front, July 1967.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Section I BOOKS AND BOOKLETS

NOTE

This is confined to books and booklets (Section I) and official pamphlets (Section II). There is a great wealth of material in the form of speeches, articles and monographs which is too extensive to include here but can be consulted in the detailed bibliography provided by A. H. M. Kirk-Greene in his documentary sourcebook on the civil war (*Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria*, 2 Vols., Oxford University Press, London, 1971).

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