

## The Biafran War

Nigeria was born out of conflict. The British control over Nigeria in the 1950's began to gradually lessen as the Africans held privileged positions in their own government, and increasingly became more 'autonomous'. Nigeria was a British colony until its independence in 1963, when Nigeria became a republic with four regional governments, in which the ruling party dominated the new nation (Owhonda, 43). The new nation was elated about independence and democracy, but leery of how they would go about pacifying over two hundred ethnic groups that resided in the country (Nwankwo, 10). Two of the main ethnic groups, the Igbo and the Hausa-Fulani, carried significant differences between them. The Igbo were from eastern Nigeria, and were largely Christian. They have very decentralized villages, and a system of strong family ties. The Hausa-Fulani were Islamic, and set up a series of small states, with efficient and complex judiciary and fiscal system Both ethnic groups hold a strong animosity toward each other. Biafran leader Ojukwu went as far as claiming the Hausa-Fulani to be "ignorant, decadent and feudalistic" (Ojukwu speech). This dislike between the two tribes lead to future disagreements between the two.

In 1965, disorders broke out after the ruling political and ethnic group, the Hausa-Fulani, manipulated elections in the Western Igbo region. Outraged, a coup was led by army officers belonging to the Ibo tribe. In July 1966, northern officers of the Fulani and army units staged a coup of their own in retaliation. The officer named Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon, a Christian from a small ethnic group, was a compromise candidate to head the Federal Military Government (FMG). Gowon had not been involved in the coup, but he enjoyed wide support among northern troops who subsequently insisted that he be given a position in the ruling body (Nwankwo 125). Throughout the remainder of 1966 and into 1967, the FMG sought to create a constituent assembly that would revise the constitution, and enable a return to civilian rule. Nonetheless, violence increased. In September, bloody attacks were made on the Igbo in the north by Muslim traditionalists with the aid of northern political leaders. The estimated number of deaths ranged as high as 30,000, although the figure was also estimated at 8,000 to 10,000

(Stremlau 74). The murder of Ibos living in the north led to a mass migration of over one million Ibos to their native eastern region.

The four regions attempted to negotiate a return to a civilian government from September to November 1966 (Nwankwo 91). The military commanders and governors, including Ojukwu, met in Lagos to consider solutions to the regional strife. But they failed to reach a settlement, despite concessions offered by the northerners, because it proved impossible to guarantee the security of Igbo outside the Eastern Region. In January 1967, the military leaders and officials met at Abauri, Ghana, at the invitation of the Ghanaian military government. By now, the Eastern Ibo Region was threatening secession. In a last-minute attempt to hold Nigeria together, the military reached an agreement that provided for a loose confederacy of regions (Nwankwo 229). The federal civil service strongly opposed the Abauri Agreement, however. In May, Gowon issued a decree implementing the Abauri Agreement. Even the Northern Region leaders, who had been the first to threaten secession, now supported a creation of a multi-state federation. Ojukwu's government threw out the plan for reconciliation. The eastern leaders had reached a tense point in their relations with Lagos and the rest of Nigeria. Despite offers made by the FMG that met many of Ojukwu's demands, the Eastern Region Assembly voted May 26 to secede from Nigeria. In Lagos, Gowon proclaimed a state of emergency and unveiled plans for eradication of the regions, and to divide the country into twelve states. It was a highly strategic move, which pleased the eastern minorities and deprived the 'rebellious' Igbo's of their control over the oil fields and access to the sea. Gowon also appointed outstanding civilians, including Awolowo, in positions in the federal and new state governments, thus increasing his political support (Stremlau 36).

On May 30, Ojukwu answered the federal decree with the announcement of the independent Republic of Biafra, named after the Bight of Biafra. He cited as the major cause for this action the Nigerian government's 'inability to protect the lives of easterners' and suggested its liability in genocide, depicting their independence as a measure taken unwillingly after all efforts to protect the Igbo people in other regions had failed (Stremlau 38). At first, the Federal Military Government began "police measures" to restore the authority of Lagos in the Eastern Region. Army units attempted to march into secessionist territory in July, but rebel troops easily stopped them. The Biafrans struck back with a surprise push into the Midwestern Region, where

they took control of strategic points. However, efficient control of the delta region remained under national control in spite of several insurgent attempts to capture the non-Igbo area. The federal government began to mobilize large numbers of recruits to supplement its 10,000-member army and prepare for combat (Stremlau 39).

By the end of 1967, federal forces had regained the Midwestern Area and secured the delta province, which was restructured as the Rivers State and Southeastern State, cutting off Biafra from direct access to the sea. But a planned raid of the rebel-held territory, now set aside to the Igbo heartland, delayed along the Biafran defense boundary. A stalemate developed as federal attacks on key towns broke down in the face of obstinate Biafran resistance. Ill-armed and trained under fire, rebel troops still had the benefit of superior leadership and outstanding morale. Although vastly outnumbered and outgunned, the Biafrans took weak points in the federal lines, making quick tactical gains, cutting off and surrounding advancing columns, and launching raids behind federal lines. Biafran strikes across the Niger River managed to pin down large concentrations of federal troops on the west bank (Stermlau 61).

Early in 1969 the federal army, expanded to nearly 250,000 men, opened three fronts in what Gowon called the "final offensive" (Stremlau 322). Although federal forces flanked the rebels by crossing the Niger, they failed to break through the lines. The Biafrans consequently began fierce fighting again, and threatened to push on to Port Harcourt until disrupted by a refreshed Nigerian offensive in the south (Ifejika 236). That offensive tightened the noose around the rebel enclave without choking it into submission. By this point in the war, Biafrans on the field as well as the home front were really experiencing the horrors of war.

Biafran propaganda, which stressed the threat of genocide to the Igbo people, was extremely effective abroad in winning sympathy for the secessionist movement. Food and medical supplies were scarce in Biafra. Humanitarian aid, as well as arms and supplies, reached the embattled region from international relief organizations and from private and religious groups in the United States and Western Europe by way of nighttime airlifts over the war zone. The majority of Biafra's military supplies were bought on the international arms market with unofficial help provided by France, through former West African colonies (Owhonda 53). The starving nation was recognized as a legitimate government by Tanzania, Zambia, Gabon, and

the Ivory Coast, but it was considered a third world uprising in the eyes of most African and European states. Britain extended diplomatic support and limited military assistance to the federal government. The Soviet Union became an important source of military equipment for Nigeria. Modern Soviet-built warplanes, flown by Egyptian and British pilots, interdicted supply flights and inflicted heavy casualties during raids on Biafran urban centers. In line with its policy of noninvolvement, the United States prohibited the sale of military goods to either side while continuing to recognize the Federal Military Government (Stremlau 128-30). Biafra was considered a joke by many nations, but not by Ojukwu and his people. In his Ahiara Declaration on June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1969, he states;

Our struggle has far-reaching significance. It is the latest recrudescence in our time of the age-old struggle of the black man for his full stature as man. We are the latest victims of a wicked collusion between the three traditional scourges of the black men racism, Arab-muslim expansionism and white economic imperialism... For two years we have been subjected to a total blockade. We all know how bitter, bloody and protracted the First and Second World Wars were. At no stage in those wars did the white belligerents carry out a total blockade of their fellow whites. In each case where a blockade was imposed, allowance was made for certain basic necessities of life in the interest of women, children and other non-combatants. Ours is the only example in recent history where a whole people have been so treated.

In October 1969, Ojukwu appealed for United Nations (UN) mediation for a cease-fire as an introduction to peace talks (Stremlau 277). But the federal government insisted on Biafra's surrender, and Gowon observed that rebel leaders would fight to the finish and that no concession will ever satisfy them. In December, federal forces opened a four-pronged offensive, involving 120,000 troops, that sliced Biafra in half. Ojukwu fled to the Ivory Coast, leaving his chief of staff, Philip Effiong, behind as "officer administering the government." Effiong called for an immediate, unconditional cease-fire January 12 and submitted to the authority of the federal government at ceremonies in Lagos (Stremlau 358). Estimates in the former Eastern Region of the number of dead from hostilities, disease, and starvation during the thirty-month civil war are estimated at between 1 million and 3 million. The end of the fighting found more than 3 million Igbo refugees crowded into a 2,500-square-kilometer closed society. Prospects for

the survival of many of them and for the future of the region were not bright. There were severe shortages of food, medicine, clothing, and housing. The economy of the region was shattered. Cities were in ruins; schools, hospitals, utilities, and transportation facilities were destroyed or out of order. Overseas groups instituted a major relief effort, but the Federal Military Government insisted on directing all assistance and recovery operations and barred some agencies that had supplied aid to Biafra (Ifejika 253).

Because charges of genocide had strengthened international sympathy for Biafra, the FMG allowed a team of international experts to observe the area and to look for evidence of genocide. The observers testified that they found no evidence of genocide or destruction of property, although there was considerable evidence of famine and death as a result of the war. Furthermore, under Gowon's close supervision, the federal government pledged that Igbo civilians would not be treated as defeated enemies (Stremlau 239). A program was launched to assimilate the Biafran rebels into a unified Nigeria. Igbo personnel soon were being reenlisted in the federal armed forces. There were no trials and few people were imprisoned. Ojukwu, in exile, was made the scapegoat, but efforts to have him extradited failed. An Igbo official, Ukapi Asika, was named administrator of the new East Central State, comprising the Igbo heartland. Asika had remained loyal to the federal government during the civil war, but as a further act of appeasement, his all-Igbo cabinet included members who had served under the secessionist government. Asika was unpopular with many Igbo, who considered him a traitor, and his administration was characterized as inept and corrupt. In three years under his direction, however, the state government achieved the rehabilitation of 70 percent of the industry incapacitated during the war (Stremlau 368). The federal government granted funds to cover the state's operating expenses for an interim period, and much of the war damage was repaired. Social services and public utilities slowly were put back in place, although not to the previous levels before the war.

In the beginning, Biafra was established by Igbos who felt they could not develop under Nigerian rule. They lacked cultural similarities with the Muslim Hausa-Fulani, and were oppressed in attempts at conversion to Islam (Nwankwo 124). Seeking to maintain national unity, Nigeria imposed economic sanctions on Biafra from the start of the secession, and fighting between Nigeria and Biafra broke out in July 1967. After initial Biafran advances, Nigeria

attacked Biafra by land, sea and air, gradually reducing the territory under its control. The breakaway state had insufficient resources at the start of the war and depended heavily on its control of petroleum fields for funds to make purchases abroad. It lost the oil fields in the war, and more than one million of its civilian population was thought to have died as a result of severe malnutrition. At the time of its surrender on Jan. 15, 1970, Biafra was greatly reduced in size, its inhabitants were starving, and its leader, Ojukwu, had fled the country. During its existence, Biafra was recognized by only five nations, although other countries gave moral or material support. Civilian groups were organized in a number of countries to publicize the case for Biafra and to raise funds for the secessionist state. The attempt at liberation from the oppressive rule of the Hausa-Fulani was well intentioned, but impossible.

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