

**“Such a Place as Atlantis”:
Biafran Propaganda, Diplomacy, and Identity, 1966 – 1970**



Samuel Levine
Undergraduate Senior Thesis
Department of History
Columbia University
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Seminar Advisors: Professor Elizabeth Blackmar and Professor Rhiannon Stephens
Second Reader: Professor Gregory Mann

*Should storms, as may well happen,
Drive you to anchor a week
In some old harbour-city
Of Ionia, then speak
With her witty scholars, men
Who have proved there cannot be
Such a place as Atlantis:
Learn their logic, but notice
How its subtlety betrays
Their enormous simple grief;
Thus they shall teach you the ways
To doubt that you may believe.*

W.H. Auden, "Atlantis" (1941)

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I attempted to structure my thesis as an institutional study above all, as the story of Biafra and the Biafrans is one difficult to tell without more intimate knowledge of the state that was. Thus, my broadest acknowledgement extends to the members of the Biafran civil service. They served, often in silence, a cause that they believed to be righteous.

Lastly, to Mom, Dad, and Elizabeth: thank you for everything. I don't think I need to explain.

Introduction: “An Association of Nations”

*Everybody talks about the love of unity, when in actual fact what exists in Nigeria is the fear of unity. ... The history of this country is replete with condemnation of those who strive for unity so much so that the country went to war against the proposed unity of the civil service.*¹

- Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, *Because I Am Involved* (1989)

The Conference

It was hardly a major event. Columbia University's Earl Hall could hold three hundred individuals standing. Workshops ran as low as twelve and mainstream news coverage was virtually nonexistent.² Attendees came inside from the freezing December morning as Walter Ofonagoro, a young Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History and future Nigerian Minister of Information, began to give an unanticipated speech.³ Ofonagoro launched into a scathing criticism of postcolonial Nigeria, equating it to “an association of nations” rather than a cohesive state.⁴ He argued that the ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis were inevitabilities, given the inherent incompatibilities between ethnic groups on grounds of cultural and religious differences and colonial favoritism. Ofonagoro then condemned British and Nigerian policies that he linked to a series of targeted killings and the repudiation of the January 1967 Aburi Accord. Evidently, Ofonagoro was not a representative of the Nigerian Federal Military Government (FMG).⁵ An Igbo from Port Harcourt, he instead conveyed the outward sentiments of his young state's

¹ Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, *Because I Am Involved* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1989), 186.

² “Report on Workshop on Public Education and Information,” in *First International Conference on Biafra*, 1st ed. (New York: Columbia University, 1968), 81–83, Folder 6, Box 3, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. There were no mentions of the First International Conference on Biafra in major publications such as the *New York Times* and *New York Amsterdam News* or local publications such as the *Columbia Spectator*.

³ *First International Conference on Biafra*, 1st ed. (New York: Columbia University, 1968), 2–3, Folder 6, Box 3, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. In the attached pamphlet and list of speakers that was distributed in advance, there is no mention of Ofonagoro. At 8 A.M. on December 7, 1968, the recorded temperature was 30° F.

⁴ Walter Ofonagoro, “The Birth of a Nation,” in *First International Conference on Biafra*, 1st ed. (New York: Columbia University, 1968), 4–14, Folder 6, Box 3, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

⁵ I will refer to the Nigerian government as the “FMG,” “Lagos,” or the “Federal” government from this point on.

primary ethnic group.⁶ These opening remarks outlined key talking points from the First International Conference on Biafra, held between December 6 and 8, 1968.⁷

Although he would later rise to prominence, Ofonagoro was not the main attraction. With him at the conference was an international cohort of speakers, spanning professions from the noble, such as diplomats and clergymen, to the more unsavory, such as mercenaries and attorneys.⁸ Some were repeat visitors.⁹ All shared a connection with the polity at the conference's center.

The Republic of Biafra was an Eastern Nigerian secessionist state that existed between May 1967 and January 1970. It was governed by Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, an Igbo military officer and former governor of the Eastern Region. Biafra seceded from Nigeria after a series of coups, escalating ethnic violence against Eastern residents of Northern Nigeria, and failed negotiations. Major General Yakubu Gowon, the Nigerian head of state, elected to mend this rift through military force, sending Federal troops into Biafra on July 6, 1967.¹⁰ Despite several Biafran military successes, Federal forces captured the city of Port Harcourt on May 19, 1968, blockading the region and escalating a major humanitarian crisis. By the time of the First International Conference, a former UNICEF consultant cited U.S. State Department estimates of two to four hundred and personal estimates of three to six thousand

⁶ Law Fejokwu, ed., *Nigeria: A Viable Black Power: Economic Development Plans, Programmes, Policies, and Projections* (Lagos: Polcom Press, 1996), 296.

⁷ The conflict in discussion, if not yet obvious from the title and context, is the Nigeria-Biafra War. Other common names for the conflict include the Nigerian Civil War and the Biafran War. Naming the conflict continues to be a politically charged affair, as different names imply different levels of legitimacy for the participants. As Biafra achieved partial diplomatic recognition and because this thesis primarily focuses upon it, I will refer to it as the Biafran War.

⁸ *First International Conference on Biafra*, 2–3.

⁹ Jim Shaw, "Students Asked to Aid Biafra by Pressing for U.S. Action," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, October 22, 1968, Columbia Spectator Archive. The First International Conference was evidently not the first Biafra conference held at Columbia.

¹⁰ John Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), xv–xix.

daily civilian deaths due to starvation and military action.¹¹ The letter that greeted conference attendees stated that the conflict was heading toward “a horror equaled only by Hitler’s final solution.”¹²

Though largely forgotten, the conference was an interesting microcosm of the pro-Biafra community. There existed a significant diversity of thought toward the conflict, often leading to clashing perspectives on its causes and concerns. Some, such as Emeka Ojukwu, diverted blame toward the “Northerners” and their “deep seated hatred” of Eastern Nigerians.¹³ Ojukwu notably categorized the conflicting demographics by geographic region rather than ethnicity. Conversely, Ofonagoro grouped peoples by ethnicity and condemned the prior British colonial administration for its lack of effort in integrating the region’s population.¹⁴ Both mentioned the failed Aburi negotiations. Non-Biafran speakers focused less on prewar politics, instead centering their narratives around religious demographics and the ongoing mass starvation.¹⁵

Politically, Biafra had many things working in its favor. Assisted by violent waves of pogroms, Biafran propagandists wrote compelling narratives of both exceptionalism and victimhood while Biafran representatives held conferences at Ivy League schools. An international pro-Biafra lobby formed in a wave of popular recognition, surpassing any prior interest in the African continent. Biafra also emerged during a pivotal period of political turmoil

¹¹ George Orick, “The Relief Situation in Biafra: An Overview,” in *First International Conference on Biafra*, 1st ed. (New York: Columbia University, 1968), 28–32, Folder 6, Box 3, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

¹² Paul Connett et al., Letter, n.d., Folder 6, Box 3, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

¹³ Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, “Telegram from Lt. Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu to the International Conference on Biafra,” in *First International Conference on Biafra*, 1st ed. (New York: Columbia University, 1968), 1–3, Folder 6, Box 3, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. As we will soon see, this was not necessarily Ojukwu’s definitive stance on those matters. “Emeka” is a nickname for Chukwuemeka.

¹⁴ Ofonagoro, “The Birth of a Nation.”

¹⁵ Maxwell Cohen, “Genocide in Biafra,” in *First International Conference on Biafra*, 1st ed. (New York: Columbia University, 1968), 24–27, Folder 6, Box 3, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library; Orick, “The Relief Situation in Biafra.”

and revolutionary change. Given the remarkable alignment of circumstances, how did Biafra fail to secure its nationhood?

While subject to debate, Biafra's collapse wasn't just due to meddling foreigners, Ojukwu's blunders, or Federal military might. My thesis argues instead that Biafra suffered from a deeply internalized identity crisis. Biafran officials struggled to pinpoint a national identity and basis of sovereignty, harnessing a wide array of narratives that simultaneously portrayed Biafra as a strong and a weak polity. The identity crisis proved to be an institutional issue that manifested in Biafra's two primary lifelines: the diplomatic and propaganda apparatuses. Consequently, the institutions failed to secure an effective body of support, both domestically and internationally. As such, Biafran sovereignty was nigh impossible from its conception.

Historiography

The historiography of the Biafran War falls into two waves of scholarship characterized by their distinct accesses to sources and methodologies. This framework applies to works originating from both in and outside of Nigeria, though their exact chronologies vary slightly. The first wave began during the conflict and continued through the following decade, written by a diverse array of scholars, soldiers, diplomats, and journalists. Outside of international and domestic overviews of the war, common themes of first wave scholarship encompass ethnoreligious conflict, national consciousness, and anticolonialism. The first wave also includes an extensive output of fictional literature examining many of the same themes.¹⁶

¹⁶ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 1st ed. (1958; repr., New York: Anchor Books, 1994); Wole Soyinka, *The Interpreters*, African Writers Series (1965; repr., London: Heinemann, 1970). While too large and divergent a topic to include, these are some of the pieces of Biafran War literature that I found invaluable in enhancing my understanding of some of this thesis' themes. I will attach a reading list with the bibliography. They, along with some of the memoirs, often grounded me amidst the sea of propaganda pieces that I studied.

Published in 1977, John Stremlau's *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War* is arguably the seminal international history of the conflict. Stremlau, an academic and policymaker, centers his fairly comprehensive work around the extremely convoluted diplomatic history of the conflict. Drafted from numerous interviews with policymakers, statesmen, soldiers, and everything in between, the work is gargantuan in scope.¹⁷ However, while an indispensable index of individuals, locations, dates, and events, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War* often declines to make strong assertions on the many topics that it covers. When it does, these assertions often appear with a slight Federal tilt. For example, the book's discussion of the failed Kampala negotiations wholly places the blame on the Biafran inability to compromise, with little mention as to why beyond vague mentions of Biafran sovereignty demands.¹⁸

Figures such as Billy Dudley and Raphael Uwechue provided political commentaries on the war as they personally engaged with it. Raphael Uwechue was Biafra's first representative in Paris between May 1967 and December 1968, resigning after repeated failed negotiations and an uncompromising Biafran insistence upon sovereignty.¹⁹ His *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War* provides a critical take on the concept of a cohesive Biafran state and Ojukwu's leadership, asserting the artificiality of Biafran identity and arguing that Ojukwu's policies often came at an excessive human cost.²⁰ Billy Dudley, a Federal contemporary of Uwechue, also published numerous books and articles on the conflict. One particularly notable example is a paper lamenting the self-inflicted harm that he believed the Igbos brought upon themselves through

¹⁷ Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 405–18. This is the section where Stremlau runs through his sources.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 170–72.

¹⁹ Raphael Uwechue, *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War: Facing the Future*, 2nd ed. (1969; repr., New York: Africana Publishing Corp, 1971), 17–22.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 62–63, 132–34. The individual role of Emeka Ojukwu, the Biafran Head of State for the near-entirety of the war, in the domain of decision-making and governance is subject to contention. While Uwechue placed the blame upon Ojukwu, others inside of the Biafran government, such as Ntieyong Akpan and Cyprian Ekwensi, wrote that Biafran institutions played an equally important role in the state's trajectory.

secession.²¹ Notably, Dudley's work writes solely of "Ibo" people instead of "Biafran" people. The relationship between these two identities is a recurring conflict throughout my thesis.

There are other first wave works with more narrow foci. Adepitan Bamisaiye's postwar rundown of the conflict's coverage in Western news outlets asserts the exploitative and condescending nature of Western journalists who sensationalized suffering for personal gain.²² The paper concludes with a statement about the lack of awareness and dialogue on African affairs in the West, pinning the blame of inaccurate and propagandized coverage upon the Anglo-American press.²³ Oye Ogunbadejo's paper on Federal foreign relations during the conflict argues that Anglo-American support for the Federal Military Government was an inevitability given British economic interests and Ojukwu's "cavalier" attitude toward his people.²⁴ Ogunbadejo makes little mention of any propaganda campaigns in his diplomatic analysis. Godfrey Warren's 1979 assessment of foreign oil investment in the conflict concludes that petroleum was a major motivator of Great Britain, although it portrays the French government in a more humanitarian light.²⁵ It is worth noting that French representatives retrospectively denounced any motivators beyond oil interests.²⁶

Many of the aforementioned first wave authors, especially Nigerian and Biafran, had actively participated in the conflict. Consequently, they often had unparalleled access to firsthand

²¹ Billy Dudley, "Nigeria's Civil War: The Tragedy of the Ibo People," *The Round Table* 58, no. 229 (January 1968): 28–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358536808452718>. "Ibo" is a somewhat archaic spelling of "Igbo."

²² Adepitan Bamisaiye, "The Nigerian Civil War in the International Press," *Transition*, no. 44 (1974): 30–35, JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2935103>.

²³ *Ibid.*, 34–35.

²⁴ Oye Ogunbadejo, "Nigeria and the Great Powers: The Impact of the Civil War on Nigerian Foreign Relations," *African Affairs* 75, no. 298 (1976): 14–32, JSTOR.

²⁵ Godfrey Warren, "Petroleum and the Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970," *The Fletcher Forum* 3, no. 2 (1979): 66–81, JSTOR. It is worth noting that Warren was a graduate student at the time.

²⁶ Central Intelligence Agency to Alexander Haig, "The Early Response of the French Government to the Fall of Biafra," Telegram, January 14, 1970, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 742, Country Files, Africa, Nigeria, Vol. I, National Archives.

accounts of its various facets, providing their works with a certain degree of human credibility and skirting the line between primary and secondary literature. However, there exists an obvious downside – many of the works are extremely politicized, with the authors making no effort to conceal their prejudices. A perfect example of this is Emeka Ojukwu’s collection of speeches and personal reflections.²⁷ Although it provides a sanitized look into Ojukwu’s personal attitudes toward the conflict, the book boils down to another collection of propaganda materials. While slightly less egregious in this regard, Raphael Uwechue’s work is his reflection on the perceived failings of the Biafran state – a corresponding critique of Ojukwu’s Biafran nationalism.

Additionally, many first wave works use interviews and public information out of necessity, as other sources remained classified or unavailable during the period. Although John Stremlau avoids many of the aforementioned bias-related pitfalls due to his relative detachment from the conflict, his work is methodologically limited in this regard. A look at his bibliography reveals an extensive use of interviews and diplomatic transcripts.²⁸ Stremlau also appears to exhibit some favoritism toward Gowon when he outlines his personal impressions of the two leaders – a risk when relying so heavily upon interviews.²⁹ Other historians of the period appear to experience similar issues. In his analysis of the war’s press coverage, Bamisaiye is largely confined to publicly available releases.³⁰ Ogunbadejo suffers from the same limitations, citing newspaper and journal coverages of diplomatic occurrences.³¹ While undoubtedly important, finalized press releases represent only a small portion of a much larger dissemination process.

²⁷ Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, *Biafra: Selected Speeches and Random Thoughts of C. Ojukwu, with Diaries of Events*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

²⁸ Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 405–18.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 41–43.

³⁰ Bamisaiye, “The Nigerian Civil War in the International Press,” 34–35.

³¹ Ogunbadejo, “Nigeria and the Great Powers.”

For my thesis, I have had the privilege of following releases from conception to reception through the examination of Biafran government materials and those of associated institutions.

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of scholarship on the Biafran War, with many historians focusing upon the international humanitarian response to the conflict. Lasse Heerten's *The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism: Spectacles of Suffering* attempts to place studies of the conflict within the theoretical framework of the emerging international humanitarianism of the period.³² Broad in scope, *Spectacles of Suffering* avoids diving into specifics regarding Biafran public relations operations.³³ It does, however, extensively focus on a variety of humanitarian actors and their differing motivations – Heerten argues that Biafran sovereignty was often a secondary concern for these groups. With historian Anthony Dirk Moses, Heerten also curated a compilation of scholarly articles focusing directly on different international responses to the war, again emphasizing humanitarian efforts.³⁴ Michael Gould's 2012 volume, titled *The Biafran War: The Struggle for Modern Nigeria*, acknowledges the effectiveness of Biafran propaganda, though he dismisses its humanitarian narratives as political machinations designed to garner international support.³⁵ However, despite his interviews with leaders on both sides, he largely centers his narrative around international responses to the conflict. When discussing casualty counts, Gould defers to British government estimates.³⁶ There is little focus on the potpourri of ideologies and identities that comprised Nigerian and Biafran narratives of the conflict.

³² Lasse Heerten, *The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism: Spectacles of Suffering*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316282243>.

³³ *Ibid.*, 83–107.

³⁴ A. Dirk Moses and Lasse Heerten, eds., *Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide: The Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967–1970* (New York: Routledge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315229294>.

³⁵ Michael Gould and Frederick Forsyth, *The Biafran War: The Struggle for Modern Nigeria*, New Paperback Edition (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 60–62.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 203.

Like their conflict-adjacent counterparts, contemporary historians occasionally publish on more niche facets of the conflict centered around Biafran propaganda and its effects. Writing for *The Journal of African History*, Douglas Anthony focuses on the specific concept of “modernity” and its role in Biafran propaganda narratives.³⁷ Anthony asserts that Biafran propagandists linked Nigerian genocidal intentions to a resentment of Biafra’s progressivism.³⁸ Notably, Anthony pins the generalization of Biafrans as “Ibos” on “supporters abroad.”³⁹ Roy Doron further analyzes aspects of the Biafran propaganda apparatus, attributing the decline of the Biafran narrative to external political factors such as Nnamdi Azikiwe’s renunciation of support.⁴⁰ While Doron attempts to explore the functions of the Biafran propaganda apparatus to an extent, such as acknowledging the sponsorships of journalists, he appears conflicted about the roles of external press agencies.⁴¹ He simultaneously asserts that Markpress primarily reprinted material and was largely responsible for creating and spreading the genocide narrative. Declassification policies have enabled historical study of previously inaccessible institutions such as intelligence organizations. Through access to declassified governmental reporting, Judd Devermont asserts that United States Intelligence Community production consistently leaned pro-Biafra, exemplifying a bias present in many policy-influencing institutions.⁴²

Scholarship of the Biafran War is atomized overall, with many books and journal articles focusing on smaller facets or themes of the conflict. These range from institutions such as the oil

³⁷ Douglas Anthony, “‘Resourceful and Progressive Blackmen’: Modernity and Race in Biafra, 1967-70,” *The Journal of African History* 51, no. 1 (2010): 41–61, JSTOR.

³⁸ Ibid., 45–46.

³⁹ Ibid., 46–47.

⁴⁰ Roy Doron, “Marketing Genocide: Biafran Propaganda Strategies during the Nigerian Civil War, 1967–70,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 16, no. 2–3 (July 3, 2014): 227–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2014.936702>. Dr. Nnamdi “Zik” Azikiwe was the first President of Nigeria. Known as the “father of Nigerian nationalism,” Azikiwe initially backed Biafra but withdrew his support as the conflict progressed.

⁴¹ Ibid., 241–43.

⁴² Judd Devermont, “The U.S. Intelligence Community’s Biases during the Nigerian Civil War,” *African Affairs* 116, no. 465 (October 1, 2017): 705–16, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adx032>.

industry to themes like humanitarianism and modernity.⁴³ Historians of the Biafran War often center their narratives around their own countries and fail to disseminate them elsewhere, further compartmentalizing scholarship despite a wide array of topics. Consequently, although the historiography of the conflict is rather holistically comprehensive in terms of subject matter, room remains for intervention. Many scholars also treat Biafran propaganda and diplomatic institutions as a monolith. Essentially, the narrative that the Biafran government expressed during a specific scenario becomes the Biafran hardline of the period. Despite how miscalculated the Biafran government's employment of its narratives was at times, I disagree with this notion. I seek to write my thesis as an institutional study, demystifying the chaos within Biafra's most critical lifelines.

Thematically, my thesis shares more with first wave literature. In line with contributors such as Dudley, Uwechue, and Achebe, I explore the various ideologies and identities that incorporated themselves in Biafran narratives, with a focus on diplomatic and propagandistic, rather than humanitarian, repercussions. Although figures such as Stremlau and Uwechue studied the war's international diplomacy immediately after its end, they only had access to sources of the period. Conversely, recent historical scholarship generally eschews Biafran and Nigerian international relations in favor of humanitarian studies, as exemplified by historians such as Heerten and Gould. Given the periodic declassification of governmental archives, it is now both easier and more useful to intervene in diplomatic studies of the conflict.

⁴³ Kairn Klieman, "U.S. Oil Companies, the Nigerian Civil War, and the Origins of Opacity in the Nigerian Oil Industry," *The Journal of American History* 99, no. 1 (2012): 155–65, JSTOR; Kevin O'Sullivan, "Humanitarian Encounters: Biafra, NGOs and Imaginings of the Third World in Britain and Ireland, 1967–1970," in *Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide: The Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967–1970*, ed. A. Dirk Moses and Lasse Heerten (New York: Routledge, 2017), 259–77, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315229294>; Anthony, "'Resourceful And Progressive Blackmen.'"

My thesis separates into three chapters. Because they trace the evolution of Biafran narratives from their formulation to their reception, sections are roughly chronological. The first covers the Biafran identity crisis through the lens of its propaganda, which I define as the collection of narratives and techniques harnessed by the Biafran state to garner international and domestic support for the Biafran identity and cause. Incorporating the work of sociologist Jacques Ellul, I argue that Biafran propaganda and identity were synonymous: propaganda built and sold Biafra to Biafrans. I then categorize these conceptions of Biafra into a dichotomy between “Strong Biafra” and “Weak Biafra” narratives. I assert that these ideas, despite alterations as the conflict progressed, were distinctly Biafran creations that predated the formal Biafran secession and conflict rather than those of foreign entities. Many of them were founded in truth or genuine belief. Although genocide is by far the most well-known talking point of the conflict, there were numerous others that significantly affected the trajectory of the Biafran state. Notable sources for this section include prewar Eastern Nigerian Ministry of Information materials, personal accounts, and diplomatic transcripts.⁴⁴

The second chapter discusses the manifestation of the aforementioned identity crisis in Biafra’s externally-facing institutions. To do so, it argues that the Biafran propaganda and diplomatic apparatuses were intrinsically intertwined, sourcing these assertions primarily from Biafran government agencies and memoirs and by tracing earlier narratives through the international system. Consequently, the Biafran diplomatic corps transitioned from an experienced, professional organization to an ineffective one. In addition to those of preceding chapters, sources include journalistic records from the *New York Times* Foreign Desk, U.S.

⁴⁴ Eastern Nigeria’s Ministry of Information differed from Biafra’s in name and date only. The apparatus moved almost entirely under the Biafran government after secession.

intelligence reporting from institutions such as the CIA and the FBIS, and the most comprehensive collection of Biafran Overseas Press Service (BOPS) releases attainable.⁴⁵

The third and final chapter assesses the international ramifications of Biafra's identity crisis. I argue that foreign perceptions of Biafra were often mixed due to Biafran diplomatic blunders and the realities of the international stage, tying this to Biafra's conflict of national identity. Biafra consequently failed to secure governmental or institutional support abroad and collapsed under Federal military pressure. I also discuss how the overseas pro-Biafra lobby failed to sway the conflict in Biafra's favor, instead prolonging the conflict. Sources come from governmental archives such as those of the U.S. State Department, memoirs and interviews of involved diplomats, records of pro-Biafra organizations, and the international press. I conclude my thesis with a short discussion on the end of the conflict and lasting legacy of my essay's themes across Nigeria and the world.

The Biafran experiment was rife with contradictions. It was a state that championed black liberation, yet found itself aligned with white supremacist polities such as South Africa and Rhodesia. Biafran voices iterated narratives of political unity, yet found themselves unable to pinpoint a national identity. Biafra's enigmatic leader said everything and, as such, said nothing. *The New York Times* codenamed Biafra "Atlantis" upon its founding. However likely a coincidence, the label of utopia seems rather fitting.

⁴⁵ Between 1946 and 2005, the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) monitored open-source media for the Central Intelligence Agency. In addition to intelligence reporting, I also cite news coverage linked to the Biafran government. Alternatively referred to as the BOPD, the Biafran Overseas Press Service was a subordinate entity within Biafra's Propaganda Directorate. Between 1968 and 1970, it provided Western news outlets with Biafran coverage of the war.

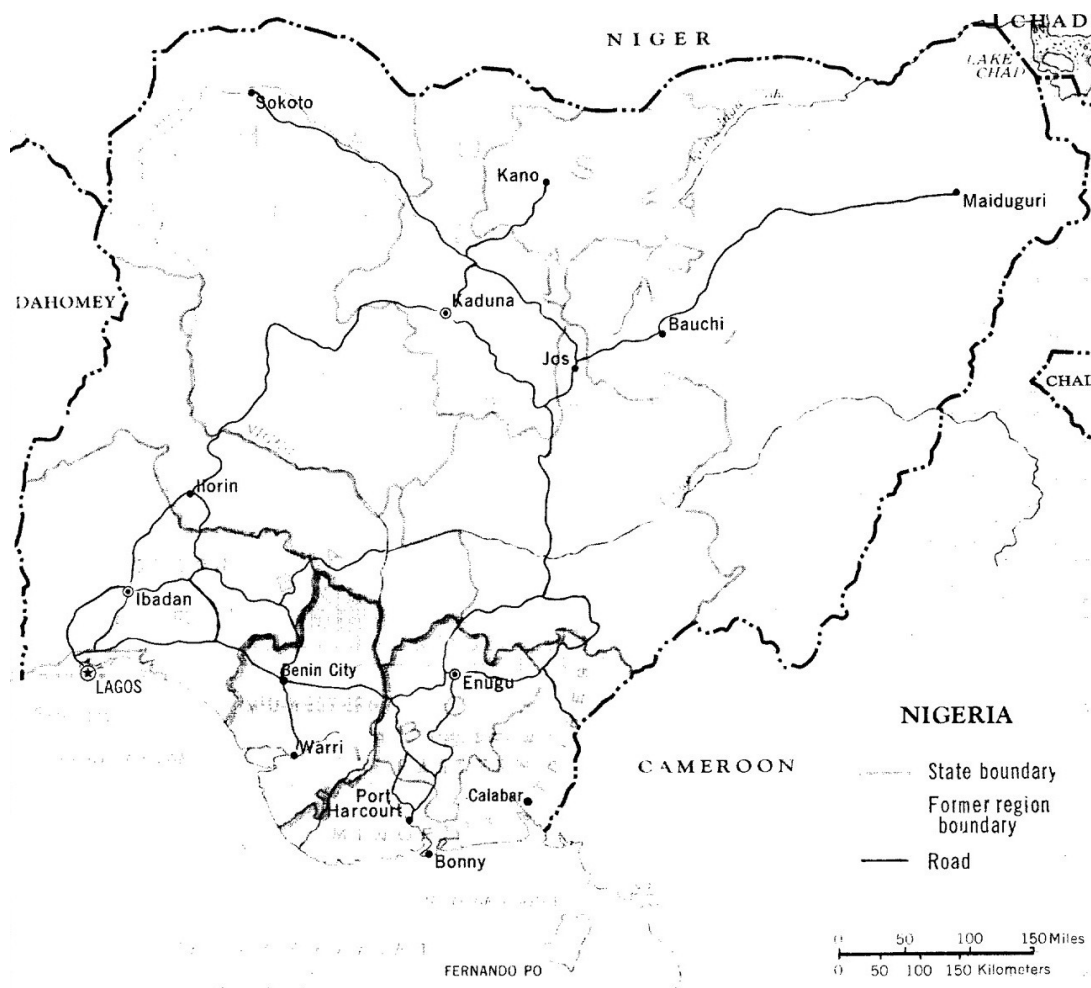


Figure 1: An early-war U.S. intelligence map of Nigeria and Biafra outlining borders and key cities

(dated September 1967)⁴⁶

⁴⁶ "September 1967 Central Intelligence Bulletin," Central Intelligence Bulletin (Washington: Directorate of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, September 2, 1967), 8, General CIA Records, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp79t00975a010300020001-4>.

Chapter 1: The Two Faces of Biafra (January 1966 – May 1968)

*It did not begin as propaganda, nor did it have any pretensions that it was propaganda. Rather it was one loud persistent cry of a people who felt oppressed, persecuted, and unwanted in their own country and therefore prayed to be left alone.*⁴⁷

- Cyprian Ekwensi, Biafran Bureau of External Publicity

The Propagandist

Before the outbreak of hostilities in Eastern Nigeria, Arthur Nwankwo appeared to be a typical white-collar expatriate worker. Born in the Igbo-speaking Eastern Nigerian town of Ajalli, he looked across the Atlantic to the United States for higher education and corporate employment.⁴⁸ After earning a master's degree in African affairs from Duquesne University in 1967, Nwankwo secured a lucrative consulting job with Gulf Oil's Pittsburgh office.⁴⁹ However, the rapidly-changing world found better use for his skills and education. By the end of the year, Nwankwo had left the United States for Biafra. There, he worked for the Directorate of Propaganda, writing and editing pieces designed to elicit sympathy and support for Biafra in both the domestic and international arenas.⁵⁰ Some of Nwankwo's works were disseminated by Western publishers, such as C. Hurst in the United Kingdom and Praeger in the United States. However, his path to Biafra wasn't entirely clear. Whether his actions were motivated by altruism, ethnic solidarity, or any number of ideas is up for debate. According to an autobiographical blurb, he studied the works of a wide array of vaguely-associated political figures, ranging from Pan-Africanists to

⁴⁷ Quoted from full interview in *The Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970: History and Reminiscences*. Dated 1990s.

⁴⁸ Toyin Falola, Ann Genova, and Matthew M. Heaton, *Historical Dictionary of Nigeria*, 2nd ed., Historical Dictionaries of Africa (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 300.

⁴⁹ Arthur Agwuncha Nwankwo, *Biafra and the Liberation of Africa: Towards the Last Stage of the Liberation of Blackman*, 1969, 22, Folder 7, Box 1, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

⁵⁰ There are numerous variations of the title "Biafran Directorate of Propaganda" within the source materials. For consistency's sake, I will refer to it henceforth as the Biafran Directorate of Propaganda. This name specifically refers to the establishment initially under Biafran Ministry of Information, along with subordinate entities such as Biafran Overseas Press Service. However, "Directorate of Propaganda" is not synonymous with "Ministry of Information," as the former gained increasing autonomy from the latter as the conflict progressed.

anti-colonialists and communist revolutionaries.⁵¹ He also later became involved with the Igbo literary community, collaborating with figures such as Chinua Achebe and Flora Nwapa and managing a publishing service in Enugu after the war.

Nwankwo was part of an apparatus greater than himself. Between 1966 and 1970, Eastern Nigerians from all walks of life worked to sustain their fledgling state through a momentous propaganda campaign. Nwankwo's wartime publications reflect some of the many ideologies and narratives that these propagandists harnessed. While he authored pieces that appealed to domestic audiences or Biafrans abroad, such as *Biafra: The Making of a Nation*, his 1969 publication *Biafra and the Liberation of Africa* stood out in particular. In contrast to some of Nwankwo's other publications, the work's narratives extended beyond Biafran borders with the intent of appeal to a wider international audience.

In the booklet, Nwankwo focused on several key themes, positioning them within a broader story of black liberation. This narrative began with an homage to African achievements in culture, commerce, and education, establishing a tone of historical superiority.⁵² However, despite clear appeals to the resurgent Pan-Africanist movement of the period, the tone quickly shifted upon the "despoliation" of the African continent by European colonizers. Obviously condemnatory of this development, Nwankwo lamented the ensuing "wave of degeneration" that befell African societies.⁵³ Although he acknowledged prior attempts at black liberation, he argued that they fell short.⁵⁴ Using the examples of the Congo's Patrice Lumumba, Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, and Nigeria's Nnamdi Azikiwe, alongside the detriments of their purported deference to "tribalism" and "fragmentation," the piece subtly prepared readers for the role of

⁵¹ Nwankwo, *Biafra and the Liberation of Africa*, 22.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 7–8.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

Biafra in this narrative. Given these prior failures, Nwankwo found the only solution in armed struggle.

Citing Frantz Fanon's assertion of violence as a "cleansing force," Nwankwo argued that such action was necessary for the successful liberation of Africa from colonial corruption.⁵⁵ In order to broaden the appeal across ideological grounds and legitimize the necessity of violence in establishing the Biafran state, he mentioned numerous other revolutions across the political spectrum, chronologically spanning between the Enlightenment and the postwar era. Notably, despite the title and subject matter of the booklet, Nwankwo hardly discussed Biafra until the end.⁵⁶ However, being "born from violence," the booklet posited the idea of Biafra as the logical culmination of this story. It asserted that Biafra was many things beyond a state: a "philosophy," a "gift," and a "nation mature and concrete." However, most importantly, Biafra was an "irreversible occurrence" – the liberating body of Africans both within and outside of its borders rather than the product of a civil, or even colonial, dispute.

While extensive, the motifs found in *Biafra and the Liberation of Africa* exemplified only a few of the many Biafran propaganda narratives. These narratives often found basis in the tumultuous and sometimes mutually exclusive ideologies of the period, spurred by the chaos of the postwar and postcolonial spheres. Often, Biafran propagandists put their own spin on swathes of preexisting narratives and ideologies in order to appeal to as many audiences as possible. This was a gradual process, beginning before the war and evolving with the conflict. Importantly, the use of the term "propaganda" in describing these narratives is neither an epithet nor an attempt to discredit their validity, as I will soon discuss.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 17–19.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 18–21.

Interestingly, Nwankwo's biography in *Biafra and the Liberation of Africa* omitted a small detail. When discussing his return to Biafra in 1967, it stated that "he returned to his homeland ... immediately after his graduation."⁵⁷ There was no mention of his stint with Gulf Oil, an American petrochemical company with vested interests in the region.⁵⁸ Whether to emphasize Nwankwo's image as a selfless Biafran patriot or to prevent any potential discreditation or denunciation, the omission is an interesting example of the more subtle side of propaganda work. Rather than fabricating narratives, effective propaganda reshapes them – something that the Eastern government understood even prior to the war.

Defining "Biafran Propaganda"

In a postwar interview with John Stremlau, the Federal Ministry of Information's press chief lamented that "the propaganda battle with Biafra was lost in Europe and America before secession was even announced."⁵⁹ While this conceptual war was undoubtedly a critical front in the eyes of many participants, one must understand the bounds of its domain to study it, much less to assess whether or not Biafra truly won it. After all, "propaganda" is a label that is often liberally applied.

Studies of propaganda often take the form of sociological surveys or political theory, with applications rarely appearing in historical literature beyond case studies of the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany. Numerous scholars such as Ellul, Lasswell, Walton, and Silverstein have established frameworks.⁶⁰ However, while all of them possess degrees of merit, I most closely

⁵⁷ Ibid., 22.

⁵⁸ Klieman, "U.S. Oil Companies, the Nigerian Civil War, and the Origins of Opacity in the Nigerian Oil Industry."

⁵⁹ Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 69. The interviewee in question was L.E. Scott-Emuakpor.

⁶⁰ Harold D. Lasswell, "The Theory of Political Propaganda," *The American Political Science Review* 21, no. 3 (1927): 627–31, JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1945515>; Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973); Douglas Walton, "What Is Propaganda, and What Exactly Is Wrong with It?," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (1997): 383–413, JSTOR; Brett Silverstein, "Toward a Science of Propaganda," *Political Psychology* 8, no. 1 (1987): 49–59, JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3790986>.

align my analysis in this chapter with the framework of sociologist Jacques Ellul's 1962 *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (Ellul is perhaps more well known for his *The Technological Society*, the Unabomber's "Bible"). In *Propaganda*, Ellul acknowledges the validity of prior definitions of propaganda as a means of intentionally influencing groups of individuals to "predetermined ends" via psychological manipulation.⁶¹ He then elaborates upon these definitions by focusing his analysis on group and individual psychology, the concept of "encirclement," and the end goal of incorporation into action within a greater body.⁶² Ellul also establishes a taxonomy for propaganda materials organized into four major dichotomies: political vs. sociological, vertical vs. horizontal, rational vs. irrational, and agitation vs. integration propaganda.⁶³ Another key takeaway from *Propaganda* is the distinction between fact and fiction and its role in such campaigns. Ellul argues that it is crucial to distinguish between truth and the falsehoods of "intentions and interpretations."⁶⁴ When discussing the direct manipulation of facts, he posits that these most often take the form of omissions and misrepresentations instead of mistruths. However, those take secondary precedence. Ellul instead diagnoses the "real realm of the lie" to be that of obfuscated intentions and interpretations.⁶⁵ Essentially, effective propaganda reframes the truth – it is an "enterprise for perverting the significance of events," rather than fabricating them. While Biafran propagandists likely did not intentionally apply Ellul's framework, many of its aspects clearly fit their work well. However, I do not want to examine Biafran narratives and propaganda protocol through one preexisting lens. As such, I will

⁶¹ Ellul, *Propaganda*, x–xii.

⁶² *Ibid.*, x–xvi.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 61–87.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 52–61.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

partially conceive of my own when identifying important motifs, their goals, and their consequences.

Within the domain of this thesis, I define “Biafran propaganda” as a collection of narratives and techniques harnessed by the Biafran state to garner international and domestic support for the Biafran identity and cause, with its specialized propaganda apparatus playing the greatest role.⁶⁶ Many of these narratives and concepts were not original, although the Biafran government often asserted a series of original intentions and interpretations when pushing them.

However, equally important as the nature of these narratives was the apparatus disseminating them and exerting them upon domestic and international populations. Although I will discuss the functions of the Biafran propaganda apparatus in more detail later, it is important to provide some context. Upon the secession of Eastern Nigeria as Biafra in May 1967, the new government subsumed many of the existing regional institutions within its territory. One of the most notable agencies was the Ministry of Information, which ostensibly provided information on government initiatives and activities from Enugu, Biafra’s capital.⁶⁷ However, due to a combination of internal politics and the impending October 1967 Federal capture of Enugu, the Biafran government established the Directorate of Propaganda under the Ministry of Information.⁶⁸ In the coming months, the Directorate of Propaganda would come to dominate the

⁶⁶ Sources about the changing structure of Biafran governmental institutions are essentially limited to oral histories and personal collections, as nearly all Biafran archives were destroyed in the closing stages of the conflict out of fear of reprisals. As such, sourcing of the Biafran side of the conflict is limited largely to oral histories, personal collections, and Biafran propaganda materials. For more information on Biafran archival sources and the changing structure of the propaganda apparatus throughout the war, see Samuel Fury Childs Daly, *A History of the Republic of Biafra: Law, Crime, and the Nigerian Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 20–33; Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 110–17.

⁶⁷ Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 110–17.

⁶⁸ As far as I have seen, there hasn’t been an exact date on the establishment of the Directorate of Propaganda. However, Godwin Onyegbula wrote of the shift from ministries to directorates in his memoir. For more information, see Godwin Alaoma Onyegbula, *Memoirs of the Nigerian-Biafran Bureaucrat: An Account of Life in Biafra and within Nigeria* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 2005), 149.

propaganda apparatus in size and funding. Under the Directorate, subordinate entities formulated and disseminated propaganda narratives, with the Biafran Overseas Press Service concentrating on the international arena while the Political Orientation Committee handled village-level contact within Biafra.

However, as Jacques Ellul repudiates the passing of “ethical judgements” upon the ends of propaganda, I do not mean to use “propaganda” as a disparaging term in this thesis.⁶⁹ Rather, it was simply a tool of the Biafran government, serving its status as the objective underdog in the conflict and comprising the name of one of its most important directorates. Foreign and domestic entities alike understood this, with Biafran institutions often acknowledging material disadvantages directly.

The reaches of Biafran propaganda extended far beyond the Ministry of Information and its subordinates. Biafra was a young state at the intersection of many often-clashing ideologies and faced with an existential threat. Although the general populace was both fearful and enraged, it came to political officials to bring order. As such, the new government needed to consolidate authority as rapidly as possible. Consequently, in line with Ellul’s treatise, propaganda often introduced Enugu’s conception of Biafran identity to the Biafran people. The concept of a Biafran identity as an ideology of circumstance is not entirely novel. In his study of Biafran legal systems and their legacy, historian Samuel Daly argues that identification as a “Biafran” was “first and foremost a statement of ideological commitment.”⁷⁰ However, while Daly states that the legalism was the force that the government used to “assert its legitimacy,” I postulate that propaganda was a more delicate, though equally compelling, instrument.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Ellul, *Propaganda*, xiv.

⁷⁰ Daly, *A History of the Republic of Biafra*, 60–61.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

As Ellul discusses the necessity of propaganda in integrating populations into a new state with a veneer of populist will, Biafran propagandists pushed narratives of popular nationalism through all means at their disposal.⁷² These manifested, under Ellul's framework, as "propaganda of agitation" and "propaganda of integration."⁷³ While many narratives roused Biafrans against the FMG, hence the "agitation," others more subtly acclimated Biafrans to the new government. I will discuss thematic details shortly. From a doctrinal perspective, Ellul identifies the necessity of "total propaganda," or a fusion of all media in order to immerse a mass of individuals in state narratives.⁷⁴ The Biafran government understood this, finding opportunities in even the mundane.⁷⁵ To impart this new nationalism, Biafran propagandists embarked on a systematic effort to saturate the Eastern milieu. Materials such as newspapers, pamphlets, and press conference transcripts appealed to educated elites, while radio broadcasts, posters, cartoons, and music reached the largely illiterate middle and lower classes.⁷⁶ From the moment of secession, the Enugu Domestic Service reported the widespread "jubilation" across the cities of Enugu, Calabar, and Onitsha.⁷⁷ As with many existing Eastern institutions, this preexisting radio infrastructure was then quickly consolidated into Radio Biafra.⁷⁸ Biafran integration propaganda soon found its way into staples of ordinary life.⁷⁹ Magazine advertisements for breweries, parishes, insurance companies, and swimming pool contractors all expressed goodwill toward

⁷² Ellul, *Propaganda*, 125–32.

⁷³ Ibid., 70–79.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 9–13.

⁷⁵ As I will soon discuss through archival materials, the widespread promotion of the Biafran identity was also assisted by the fact that the groundwork was laid before secession.

⁷⁶ Doron, "Marketing Genocide," 230. Doron outlines the demographic literacy of Biafra here.

⁷⁷ Enugu Nigeria Domestic Service, "Populace 'Jubilant,'" Daily Report (Foreign Broadcast Information Service, May 31, 1967), NewsBank.

⁷⁸ For further reading on the evolution of Radio Biafra, see Arua Oko Omaka, "Conquering the Home Front: Radio Biafra in the Nigeria–Biafra War, 1967–1970," *War in History* 25, no. 4 (November 2018): 555–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0968344516682056>.

⁷⁹ For more detailed reading on Biafran life on the home front, primarily focusing on music and radio, see Tony Amadi, *The Other Side of Biafra* (Ibadan: Safari Books Ltd., 2022).

the new government.⁸⁰ Nigerian soldier and author Elechi Amadi attested to the seemingly universal reach of these materials, writing that “even before the declaration of secession, they had painstakingly manipulated the world into a sympathetic and receptive mood.”⁸¹ He attributed an almost mythical presence to some elements, describing both the music of the radio programs and its “Golden Voice of Biafra” with his mastery of the “gamut of human emotions.”⁸² In a similar vein, Eastern civil servant Ntieyong Udo Akpan wrote of “emotional songs” over the radio and cultural figures who toured to promote the war effort.⁸³ While the above may sound authoritarian or dystopian in nature, I argue that this effort was a wartime necessity. Materially disadvantaged and in need of consolidated domestic and international support, the Biafran government used the most accessible means at its disposal to exert its influence as quickly and efficiently as possible.

⁸⁰ Nelson Ottah, ed., *Biafra Time*, vol. 1 (Aba: Biafra Time Limited, 1968), Folder 7, Box 1, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

⁸¹ Elechi Amadi, *Sunset in Biafra: A Civil War Diary* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1973), 57. Amadi spent most of the war in Biafra, although his status as a former Nigerian Army officer led to his arrest on multiple occasions. As such, he was far from a Biafra sympathizer. More nuanced Biafran perspectives that I will later discuss include those of Ntieyong U. Akpan, Godwin Onyegbula, and Raphael Uwechue, among others.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 58.

⁸³ Ntieyong Udo Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession, 1966-1970: A Personal Account of the Nigerian Civil War* (London: F. Cass, 1972), 109.

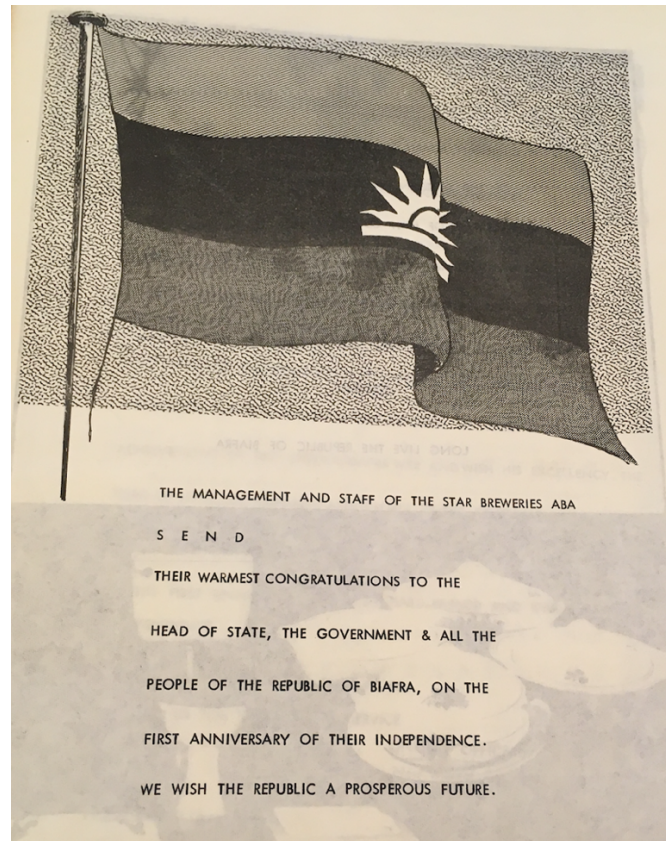


Figure 2: An example of “integration propaganda”: an advertisement for a brewery congratulates the Biafran regime
(dated May 1968)⁸⁴

However, while Ellul’s framework applies well to a broader picture of Biafran propaganda campaigns, it is equally important to address the specific materials and narratives that comprised Biafran propaganda. From a topical perspective, this chapter analyzes the most critical recurring motifs in Biafran propaganda. It then groups them in a dichotomous framework based around two different images of Biafra – a strong one and a weak one. Narratives of “Strong Biafra” centered around political legitimacy and self-sufficiency in comparison to Federal Nigeria, while those of “Weak Biafra” appealed to the passions of target audiences through messages of persecution. The specific narratives employed were Biafran or Eastern

⁸⁴ Ottah, *Biafra Time*, 1:1.

Nigerian creations, though many of the underlying ideologies and motifs existed before the start of hostilities throughout Nigeria and the greater postcolonial sphere. As such, they were harnessed instead of created, with their prior existence arguably both assisting and hindering the Biafran propaganda apparatus. Undoubtedly, they were used in unprecedented ways in the creation of the Biafran state to effective and ineffective ends.

Particularly noteworthy is the classification of these motifs within Ellul's taxonomy. While Ellul states the incompatibility of many of his categories with each other, the Biafran government nonetheless attempted to cover most of them.⁸⁵ The result was an amalgamation of differing and often contradictory narratives which I detail in this and following chapters. To contextualize and analyze them, I employ a fusion of Ellul's framework and analysis of assorted contextual materials to broaden the scope beyond pure sociology.

Strong Biafra

Biafra was born out of political crisis. A series of coups and counter-coups in early 1966 left heads of state dead and unprecedented demographics in power.⁸⁶ However, this political turmoil provided Biafran propagandists with a lucrative opportunity to seize legitimacy out of the chaos. The importance of an outwardly strong Biafran nation could not be understated. Domestically, it improved morale and was significantly less alienating than motifs of ethnic or religious oppression. It also inspired international support, as I will discuss in the later chapters. At its core, the "Strong Biafra" narrative posited that Biafra was the nation that rightfully existed in the region formerly known as Eastern Nigeria.

Self-sufficiency was an important motif of "Strong Biafra." Logically, sustainability is a critical component of a functional nation. A 1967 booklet titled *Introducing the Republic of*

⁸⁵ Ellul, *Propaganda*, 61–62.

⁸⁶ John De St. Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), 29–32.

Biafra asserted the economic sustainability and modernity of the Biafran state.⁸⁷ The booklet included images and a map of Biafran industries and natural resources – beyond oil, the map highlighted various Biafran enterprises, ranging from pharmaceuticals to soft drinks. The publication also highlighted a divide between the North and East, positing that the East embodied a standard of relative “efficiency and prosperity,” along with a commitment to commerce and economic partnerships unattainable by the backwards North.⁸⁸ However, on July 25, 1967, Federal forces successfully captured the coastal town of Bonny.⁸⁹ Bonny was the country’s primary petroleum terminal; its loss largely impeded the narrative credibility of economic self-sufficiency. Federal control over Bonny also cemented British support for the FMG in the form of military equipment.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ *Introducing the Republic of Biafra*, vol. 1 (Port Harcourt: The Government of the Republic of Biafra, 1967), Folder 1, Box 1, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

⁸⁸ I am hesitant on whether or not this was intentional to showcase material wealth for potential support. I have concluded that Biafrans understood their strategic location/Niger Delta and access to resources. Some anti-communist sources argued that the FMG offered the Soviet Union oil in exchange for support, according to internal press releases from early 1968. Additionally, the Biafrans would later try to court the British government, urging them that support for Biafra was in the best interest of London.

⁸⁹ Chukwuma C. C. Osakwe and Lawrence Okechukwu Udeagbala, “Naval Military Operations in Bonny during the Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970,” *Advances in Historical Studies* 04, no. 03 (2015): 232–38, <https://doi.org/10.4236/ahs.2015.43018>; Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 76. The exact date of the Federal victory appears to be disputed between July 25 and 26, 1967.

⁹⁰ Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 76–77.

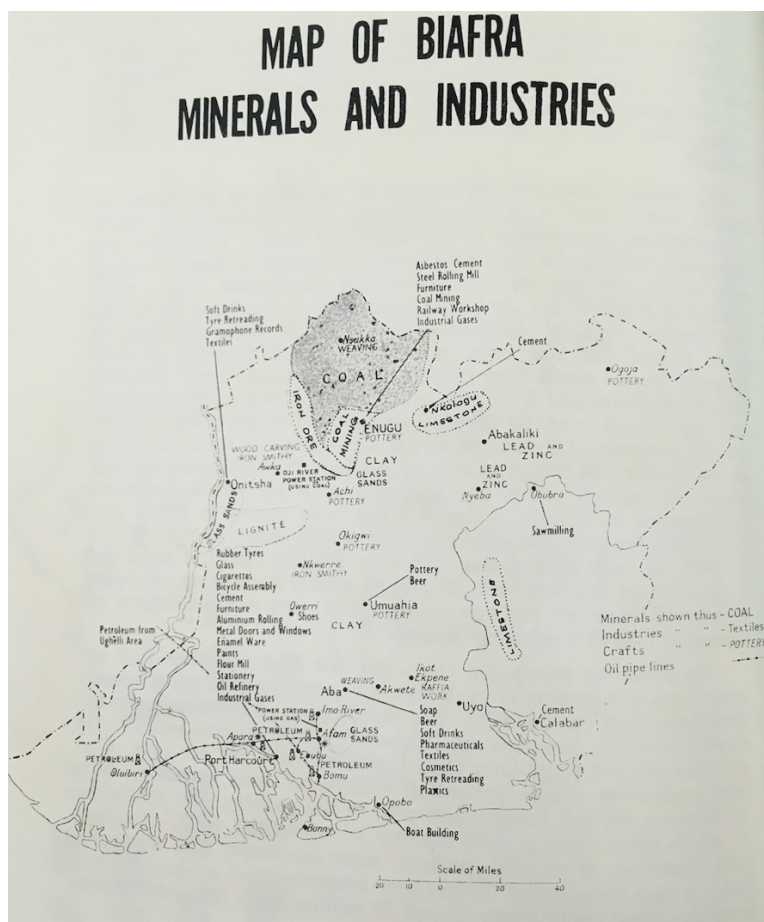


Figure 3: The aforementioned map of Biafran industries (dated 1967)⁹¹

Thus, the more pressing side of the self-sufficiency narrative pertained to military matters. Prior to secession, the Eastern Region was materially ill-prepared for war, with its arsenal purportedly amounting to approximately 120 bolt-action Lee-Enfield rifles in police surplus.⁹² The prewar chaos of Eastern armament remains largely relegated to legend. Emeka Ojukwu, a former quartermaster general in the Nigerian Army, claimed that he covertly acquired arms for the Eastern Region with family money between 1966 and 1967.⁹³ Upon the onset of

⁹¹ *Introducing Biafra*, 1:18.

⁹² Stremmlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 48–49. The Lee-Enfield was a trusty British design that remained largely unchanged from its Boer War debut. Federal forces, equipped with automatic Kalashnikovs and FALs, were considerably better armed.

⁹³ The arming of Biafra between secession and the start of hostilities seemingly remains a gray area. Sourcing is largely relegated to personal accounts—Sebastian Mezu even admits that his account is not a wholly factual recollection of events, even beyond the various proxy characters.

hostilities, the Biafran government reportedly enlisted 27-year-old Sebastian Mezu, a recent Ph.D. in Romance languages, to facilitate black market arms deals in continental Europe.⁹⁴ Biafran troops were inexperienced and low in number, and while the formerly incarcerated January 1966 coup plotters remained within the ranks, Ojukwu was hesitant to give them any meaningful command.⁹⁵ However, from inside the Biafran government, Ntiyong Akpan wrote that the initial prevailing attitude was one of genuine optimism.⁹⁶ Biafran government officials believed that their commitment to national unity would surpass that of the FMG, enabling a military victory through a superior will to fight. However, he also concerningly noted that many Biafran officials were unfamiliar with the concept of total war, viewing three months as long duration for a conflict.

Luckily, in the early months of the conflict, Biafra enjoyed some conventional military success. Assuming little organized Biafran resistance, Gowon initially shied away from full mobilization, considering “the affair as a matter for police action.”⁹⁷ The conflict proceeded accordingly through July 1967. Federal forces seized towns along the southern coast, while the Biafran military possessed little to counter their aircraft and armored vehicles.⁹⁸ However, on August 9, 1967, Biafran troops under Colonel Victor Banjo invaded the Mid-Western region.⁹⁹ Ojukwu and the propaganda apparatus capitalized on this opportunity, broadcasting the next day

⁹⁴ Sebastian Okechukwu Mezu, *Behind the Rising Sun* (London: Heinemann, 1971), 1–74; Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 49. By his own account, Mezu and his delegation came across major procurement difficulties, often finding themselves deceived by all sorts of shady figures. His novel, while a fictionalized account of events, is an intriguing read overall.

⁹⁵ Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession*, 90–91.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 89–90.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 90–91; Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 76.

⁹⁹ Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession*, 100. It is worth mentioning that after capturing Benin (the Biafran name for the Mid-Western puppet state), Banjo attempted to secede from Biafra, purportedly to found a Yoruba state. Banjo was consequently executed for treason. Elechi Amadi, a minority dissident, wrote critically of the ethnic element behind his execution.

on the “jubilation” upon the liberation of the Mid-West.¹⁰⁰ Ojukwu also boasted of the development of soon-to-be operational rockets, further iterating the narrative of Biafran modernity.¹⁰¹ Other materials directly targeted Federal Nigerian soldiers and their martial prowess. While likely not directly authored by a Ministry of Information propagandist, a government booklet titled *Nigeria: Big-For-Nothing* lambasted Nigerians, labeling them “inferior human beings,” “neo-colonialist stooges,” and the “Biblical Cain,” alongside many other epithets.¹⁰² The Biafrans in this narrative were Biblically-backed “leopards,” fighting valiantly against the “bush pigs,” “yahoos,” and “vampires” of the FMG – clear assertions of both physical and moral superiority.

Besides asserting Federal deficiencies in martial spirit and prowess, Eastern propagandists often worked to undermine Federal political legitimacy. The most direct narrative in this regard was one of foreign collaboration. In *39 Accusations against Nigeria*, the Biafran government accosted the FMG of bartering Biafran oil to foreign powers for much-needed military assistance.¹⁰³ The same booklet also accused Britain of sending 1,000 troops to fight alongside Federal forces. A 1968 government booklet, titled *British Involvement*, expanded upon this, describing the war as “another exercise provoked by the British Government for its own

¹⁰⁰ Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, “Ojukwu Broadcasts on His Seizure of Benin,” in *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria*, ed. Anthony Kirk-Greene, 1st ed., vol. 2, 2 vols. (1967; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 153–55.

¹⁰¹ Ojukwu is specifically speaking of the Ogbunigwe weapons system, or “Ojukwu Bucket.” These were essentially a collection of improvised rocket-propelled explosives. Nonetheless, they reportedly proved effective, serving as unguided anti-personnel, anti-tank, and anti-aircraft weapons. For more information on these contraptions, see Ubong Essien Umoh, “The Making of Arms in Civil War Biafra, 1967-1970,” *The Calabar Historical Journal* 5 (2011): 339–58.

¹⁰² *Nigeria: Big-For-Nothing*, National Opinion Series 1, n.d., Folder 2, Box 1, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. While there is no listed publication date, it likely lies near the beginning of the conflict, as the author estimates civilian casualties to be around 5,000. These would exponentially increase after the Federal blockade of the Eastern Region.

¹⁰³ *39 Accusations against Nigeria* (The Government of the Republic of Biafra, 1968), Folder 1, Box 1, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

purposes.”¹⁰⁴ The booklet then went on to list instances of British assistance of the FMG, bringing into question the idea of an “independent state.” Ministry of Information press releases through June 1968 implicated the United Kingdom and Soviet Union, along with the United States.¹⁰⁵ One asserted that American aircraft with USAID markings were caught transporting munitions to the FMG.¹⁰⁶ By implicating the FMG in involvement with more powerful foreign governments, these narratives removed Federal autonomy in political decision-making. This worked twofold. While assertions of foreign collaboration undoubtedly delegitimized the Federal government, they also served as a diversion of culpability. Whether intentional or not, these narratives diverted responsibility for the war and ensuing humanitarian crisis away from the Federal government and toward foreign actors, arguably mitigating some of the animosity between North and East. Regarding intent, however, I find this doubtful when considering the abundance of works that directly attacked the inhabitants of the North.¹⁰⁷

Accusations of Federal-foreign collaboration also represented Biafra’s attempt to assign the war to two of the prominent international playbooks of the period: the anti-colonial struggle and the Cold War proxy conflict. While contemporary and historical consensus concurs that both narratives were unlikely, the Biafran government applied the labels due to their relevance in international politics of the period and as an attempt to court both sides of the Cold War. I have

¹⁰⁴ *British Involvement*, vol. 4, The Nigeria/Biafra Conflict (The Government of the Republic of Biafra, 1968), Folder 2, Box 1, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

¹⁰⁵ Commissioner for Information, “Statement by the Commissioner for Information,” Press Release (Biafran Ministry of Information, June 19, 1968), Folder 3, Box 1, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

¹⁰⁶ USAID, or the United States Agency for International Development, was founded as a humanitarian organization. The Biafran government pushed these narratives aggressively. However, they have the most overt instances of outright falsification (something that Biafran propagandists were good at avoiding) that I’ve seen in Biafran materials, such as accusing British troops of fighting alongside Federal forces and the United States of directly supplying munitions to the FMG. According to the historical consensus, none of the aforementioned happened.

¹⁰⁷ *Nigeria: Big-For-Nothing; Introducing Biafra*.

already discussed the multitude of Biafran propaganda pieces that denounced British involvement in Nigeria and equated the conflict to a neo-colonialist struggle. Propagandists leveraged the works of prominent left-wing and anti-colonial figures: Arthur Nwankwo purportedly read Frantz Fanon, Mao Zedong, and Che Guevara.¹⁰⁸ However, the second major playbook of Cold War geopolitics was entirely incompatible with the first.

Often directly alongside anti-colonialist motifs were accusations of Federal collaboration with communist countries and possible integration into the Communist Bloc. A booklet accused Nigeria of being a “communist beach-head in Africa,” referencing “African patriots” who had previously fallen victim to communist influences, such as Patrice Lumumba and Kwame Nkrumah.¹⁰⁹ However, the “feckless” Gowon did not fall among their ranks, instead collaborating out of apparent weakness. One of the *39 Accusations against Nigeria* was that “Nigeria signed away to Russia all the means of production.”¹¹⁰ Purportedly, nothing would save Africa from “Communist nonsense” against the wishes of other African states. Biafran government rhetoric expressed extreme distrust in communist influences in the region, arguing that they were incompatible with African liberation. However, the involvement of communist interlopers in the Biafran War was more opportunistic than geopolitical inevitability. Ideologically, communism was unlikely to gain any major foothold in Nigeria. During the period, U.S. intelligence estimates from both CIA and INR wholly discounted the purported

¹⁰⁸ Nwankwo, *Biafra and the Liberation of Africa*, 22.

¹⁰⁹ *Nigeria: A Communist Beach-Head in Africa* (The Government of the Republic of Biafra, n.d.), Folder 2, Box 1, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

¹¹⁰ *39 Accusations*, 4.

threat.¹¹¹ Nonetheless, the virulent anti-communism in Biafran propaganda conflicted with many of the left-wing anti-colonialist motifs present in its other publications.

Some materials condemned the FMG of tarnishing Pan-African principles and “degrading the blackman’s image” in the eyes of the world, highlighting the Biafran challenge to Nigerian authority in the domain of postcolonial African nationalism.¹¹² The reality of the situation was far more complex. As Walter Ofonagoro accused Nigeria of being an “association of nations,” or a geographic state of incompatible peoples, Biafra suffered from similar (though far less violent) pitfalls.¹¹³ The prewar political turmoil had ethnic and religious aspects as opposed to national, the difference lying in the inherent fragmentation of the former two.

Weak Biafra

The lasting images of the Biafran War were not of battlefields but of emaciated children. Directly opposing the “Strong Biafra” narrative was one of persecution on ethnic and religious grounds. While portions of the narrative were deeply rooted in truth, they also worked to atomize Biafran society into ethnic and religious components – something that would possess major ramifications, both within the Biafran government and internationally. The “Weak Biafra” narrative is probably the most prominent in terms of both popular opinion and historical scholarship. However, fewer studies exist on prewar elements in this domain. While the “Weak

¹¹¹ “The Soviets and Black Africa: New Approaches and the African Response,” Memorandum (Washington: Office of National Estimates, Central Intelligence Agency, March 13, 1969), Central Intelligence Agency Files, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve05p1/d1>; “Nigeria: Communist Influence and Aid,” Memorandum (Washington: Directorate of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, December 8, 1967), General CIA Records, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79T00826A003000300001-9.pdf>; Thomas Hughes, “USSR-Nigeria: Bilateral Tensions Increase as War Drags On,” Research Memorandum (Washington: Bureau of Intelligence and Research, April 2, 1969), National Archives, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve05p1/d53>.

¹¹² 39 *Accusations*.

¹¹³ Ofonagoro, “The Birth of a Nation.”

Biafra” narrative reached its greatest international prominence only as the conflict progressed, it was deeper rooted than many realize.

While historical assessments are disputed even to this day, the general scholarly consensus supports deeply rooted anti-Igbo sentiments in the North.¹¹⁴ Igbos were disproportionately represented in the civil service and academia. Reasons for this regional split stemmed from British colonial policies toward missionary activity and education, along with the governmental structures of both British and Nigerian bodies of authority. Because the officers who launched the coup on January 15, 1966 were predominantly Igbo, tensions quickly boiled over. A counter-coup and waves of pogroms emerged throughout the North. This turned into a major justifier of secession, with a legitimate fear of ethnic persecution cementing itself within the Igbo population. However, although the Igbo desire for security brought many individuals toward Biafra, Igbo security was not an effective narrative for the state. As the war progressed, the Biafran cause became intrinsically tied to the Igbo desire for safety, furthering divides within the Biafran government.

Although less prominent and concerning than anti-Igbo persecution, a religious narrative also emerged in Eastern propaganda materials. At the start of the conflict, it manifested in a conjunction of Christian exceptionalism and victimhood, although accusations of systematic eradication were rare. In the months of tension before the war, Ntieyong Akpan wrote an internal memorandum, titled “The Fateful Decision,” advising members of the Eastern government against secession.¹¹⁵ The memorandum expressed an attitude of Christian exceptionalism:

God has endowed this Region with natural blessings unsurpassed and hardly equaled in any part of Black Africa. We have all the natural resources that can make a people great. We are endowed with people of impressive intelligence, initiative, enterprise, and spirit

¹¹⁴ De St. Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War*, 76–79.

¹¹⁵ Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession*, 76–79.

of adventure. It is those which have sent our people to other parts of Nigeria and Africa. For these we have been envied by those with the will and ability to work and get on, and hated by those without those qualities.¹¹⁶

In the same work, Akpan asserted that faith in the Biafran cause would be finite under a military government while expressing apprehensions with the long-term efficacy of a propaganda campaign. He also expressed concern with the potential of Igbo domination, instead asking to wait and see the impacts of the provincial administration system. Motifs of this nature made their way into Biafran propaganda narratives from the start of the conflict, albeit through a different lens.¹¹⁷ *Introducing Biafra* asserted that Biafran superiority regarding “industry, resourcefulness, and drive ... was enhanced by religion.”¹¹⁸ Although the religious narrative existed even before the war, it evolved and rose to greater prominence as religious institutions took interest in the conflict – a factor that Biafran propagandists would realize.

A notorious booklet simply titled *Pogrom*, published by the Eastern Nigerian Ministry of Information in 1966, perfectly highlighted the many of the early-war “Weak Biafra” narratives that would eventually lay the groundwork for fully-fledged genocide.¹¹⁹ While the word “genocide” did not appear in the booklet, *Pogrom* alluded to the fates of the “Armenian Christians in the Ottoman Empire [and] the Jews in Nazi Germany.”¹²⁰ It then accused the “Muslim elite,” along with a cadre of former Northern politicians, of conspiring to “massacre”

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 78. Notably, Akpan does not explain what “we” constituted beyond the religious appeal. Whether it was also an ethnic, political, or geographic distinction is not specified.

¹¹⁷ For more information on Biafran narratives of modernity and exceptionalism in their propaganda without the Christian swing, see Anthony, “‘Resourceful And Progressive Blackmen.’” While I don’t entirely agree with parts of Anthony’s analysis, as covered in the historiography portion, his paper as a whole is a very interesting look into that side of the Biafran narrative.

¹¹⁸ *Introducing Biafra*, 1:1.

¹¹⁹ *Nigerian Pogrom: Crisis 1966*, vol. 3, Crisis 1966 (Enugu: Publicity Division, Eastern Nigerian Ministry of Information, 1966), Folder 2, Box 1, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 3:1.

all of the Easterners.¹²¹ Although the mid-1968 starvation campaign rose to greater international prominence, the pogroms of 1966 laid the groundwork for narratives of genocide. One image of a decapitated and disemboweled man, purportedly taken in the city of Jos, gained particular infamy, with both Biafran sympathizers and detractors noting its visceral impact.¹²² Elechi Amadi wrote that the image continued to circulate in the months leading to secession, describing posters with the image from March 1967 labeled “THIS IS GENOCIDE.”¹²³ Decades later, the famed author and Biafran propagandist Cyprian Ekwensi recalled images of “headless body of a robust male, like a hunk of raw meat” that were “issued extensively ... at home and abroad.”¹²⁴ As a result of the pogroms, genocide became a legitimate fear of many Biafrans, though it is difficult to gauge the impact outside of Igbo demographics. Outside observers also attested to this. Lloyd Garrison, *The New York Times*’ recently-expelled man in Lagos, lamented in a letter that an Igbo “first class asset” was fleeing Lagos in wake of pogroms and imminent war, however agreeing that this was entirely justifiable.¹²⁵

In contrast with some of the other materials in discussion, *Pogrom* eschewed emphasis on anti-Igbo persecution in favor of a message of Eastern solidarity.¹²⁶ However, this Eastern solidarity was built on religious grounds. *Pogrom* stated the Muslim incompatibility, resentment, and oppression of Eastern Christians. It also alluded to genocide. Narratively, *Pogrom* was ahead of its time, although not necessarily for the good of the Biafran state.

¹²¹ Ibid., 3:3.

¹²² Ibid., 3:23. I am not going to include the image.

¹²³ Amadi, *Sunset in Biafra*, 34–38.

¹²⁴ H. B. Momoh, ed., *The Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970: History and Reminiscences* (Ibadan: Sam Bookman Publishers, 2000), 917.

¹²⁵ Lloyd Garrison to Seymour Topping, June 1967, Folder 4, Box 135, Foreign Desk Records, New York Times Company Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library. The author and recipient of this letter will feature more prominently in later chapters.

¹²⁶ Almost all of the news coverage in the booklet generalizes Eastern Nigerians as “Ibos.” Whether or not this was an attempt to synonymize the two it up for interpretation.

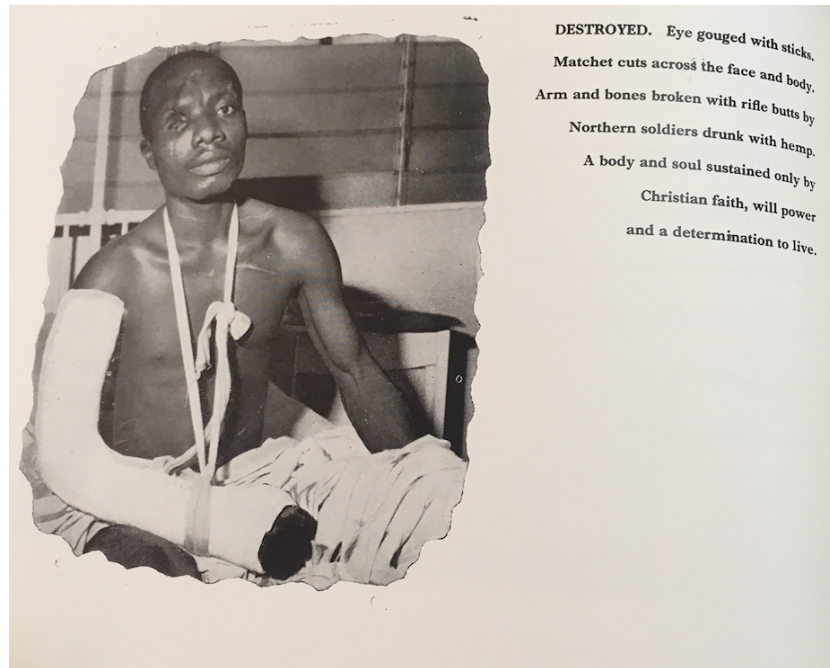


Figure 4: A page from *Nigerian Pogrom: Crisis 1966* (dated 1966)¹²⁷

According to the Genocide Convention of the United Nations, genocide can be committed against a national group rather than an ethnic or religious one.¹²⁸ While commonly referred to as the “Biafran genocide” in casual context, publications often boiled the targeted demographics down to “Igbos” or “Christians,” including those from Biafra and prewar Eastern Nigeria. *Pogrom*, for example, although inherently about Northern anti-Igbo sentiments, began to lay the foundations of the religious persecution narrative.¹²⁹ As the war progressed, international coverage further amplified these narratives in Biafran and foreign materials. Ellul also writes of the necessary consideration of the “fundamental [current] of society,” or the “presuppositions and myths” that are shared by all of the individuals in its bounds.¹³⁰ While this approach was a logical continuation of the 1966 anti-Igbo pogroms and an effective appeal to the

¹²⁷ *Pogrom*, 3:18.

¹²⁸ United Nations, General Assembly, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*.

¹²⁹ *Pogrom*.

¹³⁰ Ellul, *Propaganda*, 38–40.

Igbo and Christian demographics in Nigeria, the narrative alienated the sizable remaining population.

Accurately assessing the demographics of prewar Nigeria in order to examine the true effectiveness and reach of these narratives is a complicated endeavor. While controversial, the 1963 census is the most comprehensive source available on the demographics of Biafra. The census estimated the Christian population of the East to be 77.2 percent, with the rest largely belonging to local religions.¹³¹ Although I do not have exact figures for ethnic composition, Ntieyong Akpan wrote of alienated Eastern minority populations.¹³² Some of the aforementioned materials, even from the prewar and early-war eras, painted the conflict as a struggle for Igbo or Christian survival rather than a Biafran fight for legitimacy. In *Propaganda*, Ellul notes the importance of differentiation between the “tendencies of the local group” and the broader society.¹³³ He stresses that the propagandist must choose the body of thought that will triumph. If Biafra were entirely Christian or Igbo, the narratives of persecution would have composed a rational propaganda campaign. However, Biafra was not.

The Identity Crisis

This prompts a question: what *was* a Biafran? The distinction between “Biafran,” “Igbo,” and “Christian” appeared to be fluid, according to the multitude of governmental publications. I posit that this embodied the crux of the identity crisis. Both Biafra and Nigeria were young states, with much of their recent history spent under colonial rule. As such, colonial policies had a major role in establishing Biafra’s identity-adjacent narratives while doing little to consolidate the peoples within. The assortment of demographics within Biafra, many with differing motivations,

¹³¹ Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 114. Although I obtained a copy of the 1963 census, it was missing the section on the Eastern Region.

¹³² Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession*, 118.

¹³³ Ellul, *Propaganda*, 42–43.

obfuscated answers to the nationality and sovereignty questions. At different stages of the war, the Biafran government attempted to define Biafra's national identity, employing world-class academics and cultural figures in a series of attempts to prove the historical ties behind the Biafran people. As the next chapter discusses, these attempts fell short. The question of Biafran identity only became an increasingly severe problem as the scope of the conflict expanded and the Biafrans appeared under the international spotlight.

Another dilemma arises: did the propaganda stem from preexisting attitudes or did it come from the desks of a few bureaucrats? To answer this, I argue that the dissemination of propaganda had an amplifying effect. It spread preexisting narratives and worsened the identity crisis through saturation of the Biafran milieu. As the next chapter discusses, adherence to the "Strong/Weak" dichotomy was a sliding scale. Many Eastern officials brought their backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences to their positions within the Biafran government, wherein they clashed.

From a technical standpoint, Biafran government propagandists and their Eastern predecessors understood how to formulate and disseminate propaganda. Their narratives were compelling and the propaganda was undoubtedly adaptable with a wide range of appeal. As the conflict progressed, a wave of popular support arose for Biafra. Nonetheless, the Biafran government found itself increasingly at odds with its own people and important parts of the international diplomatic community. If the FMG "lost the propaganda war" and suffered from such a poor international image, why was Biafra unable to garner international support to the same extent? Although the United Kingdom would have likely backed the FMG sans a Biafran military miracle, the international stage was a large one with enormous potential.

While some parts, such as the self-sufficiency portion of the “Strong Biafra” narrative, proved increasingly difficult to posit sans falsification by 1968, military-adjacent developments detracted little from the struggle for political legitimacy and concurrent delegitimization of the FMG. Yet, from a historical standpoint, the “Weak Biafra” narrative prevailed internationally. I argue that this occurred for several reasons. As covered in this chapter, as a deeply rooted sentiment of the Biafran Igbo population, the narrative of ethnic persecution almost inevitably arose after the start of hostilities. Similar narratives regarding religion also proved deeper rooted than often credited. As the next chapter will cover, the Biafran government – specifically the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, civil service, and propaganda apparatus – was partially responsible. The aforementioned institutions pushed the “Weak Biafra” narrative onto foreign press institutions and the diplomatic stage. The lack of internal cohesion inside the Biafran government along similar lines also contributed to its mismanagement. Finally, as per my third chapter, Biafran representatives misused their arsenal of narratives and spent diplomatic resources on futile endeavors. The inherent difficulties of the international stage did little to help. Holistically, the aforementioned elements evolved into a worst-case scenario that prolonged the conflict with little to no hope for Biafran sovereignty.

On June 30, 1968, following the failed Kampala negotiations and Federal capture of Port Harcourt, Emeka Ojukwu addressed an audience of Biafran elders and government officials. Though one of many, this particular speech represented a point of transition between the two portrayals of Biafra. Instead of the optimism, revolutionary zeal, and emphasis on battlefield success that characterized many of Ojukwu’s earlier speeches, the tone was bleak.¹³⁴ In line with

¹³⁴ Enugu Nigeria Domestic Service, “Ojuku ‘Confident’ of Victory in Enugu Talks,” Daily Report (Foreign Broadcast Information Service, July 17, 1967), NewsBank; Enugu Nigeria Domestic Service, “Enugu Press Comment on Outbreak of War,” Daily Report (Foreign Broadcast Information Service, July 10, 1967), NewsBank.

his earlier speeches, Ojukwu condemned British involvement with the Federal government. However, in contrast to his earlier defiance, he characterized the conflict as a “struggle for survival ... involving all Biafrans.”¹³⁵ He then issued a plea to the United States to intervene and stop “[British] support for Nigeria’s genocidal aggressions on Biafra.” It was here that the notion of Biafran strength was superseded by an international cry for assistance, beginning the terminal trajectory of the young state.

¹³⁵ Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, *His Excellency’s Address to a Joint Meeting of the Consultative Assembly and the Council of Chiefs and Elders on Sunday 30 June, Nineteen Sixty-Eight* (Biafran Ministry of Information, 1968), Folder 2, Box 1, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

Chapter 2: The Interpreters (May 1968 – February 1969)

*Starvation is a weapon of war, and we have every intention of using it against the rebels.*¹³⁶

- Allison Ayida, Federal Ministry of Economic Development and Reconstruction

On the other hand, the propagandist must use various instruments, each in relation to all the others. ... Everything can serve as a means of propaganda and everything must be utilized.

*In this way diplomacy becomes inseparable from propaganda.*¹³⁷

- Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (1973)

The Diplomat

Raphael Uwechue witnessed the birth of Biafra from the Nigerian Embassy in Paris. Educated at University College Ibadan and fluent in French, Uwechue initially aligned himself with Biafra, citing the failure of the FMG to guarantee Igbo security.¹³⁸ His colleagues attested to his expertise, with Godwin Onyegbula referring to him as “one of our most competent young diplomats.”¹³⁹ However, despite rising to Biafra’s first representative in Paris, Uwechue’s reservations grew. Once firmly dedicated to the cause, he gradually became “passionate in his disillusionment.”¹⁴⁰ By the end of 1968, he had resigned from the diplomatic corps. Uwechue’s personal discontent manifested in his *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War*. Amidst discussions of the causes of the war and issues of governance structure, he summarized his qualms with Biafra’s handling of the conflict:

Thus did an insensitive group clinging to sovereignty at all costs succeed in taxing to exhaustion the resources of one of Africa’s most gifted races. The cause for which the Ibos fought and died – to ensure their inalienable right to a decent life in adequate security – was and still remains a just one. It was the leadership’s inability to distinguish

¹³⁶ Quoted July 1968 in Niamey during negotiations that led to the Addis Ababa talks.

¹³⁷ Ellul, *Propaganda*, 12–13.

¹³⁸ Uwechue, *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War*, xxvi. University College Ibadan is now known as the University of Ibadan.

¹³⁹ Onyegbula, *Memoirs of the Nigerian-Biafran Bureaucrat*, 166. A career civil servant under the Nigerian and Biafran governments, Godwin Onyegbula served as Biafra’s chief ambassador and as a civilian aide to Ojukwu during the war.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

between its own limited interests and those of the Ibos as a race that brought them disaster.¹⁴¹

Here, Uwechue provided his own take on the Biafran identity crisis. He related it to the fragmentation within the Biafran government, arguing that the desires for security and sovereignty could be independent.¹⁴² Uwechue centered this divide around an ethnic element, arguing that a minority of “hardline” political appointees pushed the necessity of sovereignty to the point of harming Igbo interests.¹⁴³ However, I believe that the dichotomy between the political interests of a few and the interests of the Eastern masses is a generalization. Uwechue wrote that the “Ibos and the minorities alike” of the East initially formed a strong reactionary secessionist element after the 1966 pogroms while the smaller class of “intelligentsia” advocated for a more rational guarantee of security. In reality, the situation proved even more fragmented, with different bodies within the Biafran government pushing their own narratives and agendas. An Igbo, Uwechue openly backed Biafra due to ethnic concerns rather than any strict commitment to Biafran national sovereignty. The worsening military situation and humanitarian crisis likely weakened, rather than bolstered, his resolve. Like many involved with Biafra, both in and outside, Uwechue possessed his own motivations and intentions.

This chapter discusses how Biafran ideological conflicts manifested in its externally facing institutions. I argue that the two most important institutions in this regard were those of propaganda and diplomacy; the chapter centers its narrative around the two. It also establishes the Biafran government’s control over its narratives and argues against notions of foreign faculty in their creation and dissemination.¹⁴⁴ Finally, the chapter continues to trace the evolution of

¹⁴¹ Uwechue, *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War*, 143.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 20–21.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 50–53.

¹⁴⁴ As the next chapter discusses, the lack of foreign faculty does not apply in the arena of interpretation – the one aspect out of Biafra’s control.

Biafran narratives as the conflict developed. As the military situation worsened, Biafra found itself facing a major humanitarian crisis in the form of mass starvation. Consequently, the conflict internationalized further as the Biafran government turned to its externally-facing institutions in hope of decisive intervention. This necessitated a change in political strategy, as the narrative of outright invincibility became increasingly less feasible.

Evolving Narratives

Port Harcourt fell to Federal forces on May 19, 1968.¹⁴⁵ A major petroleum export hub with access to the Atlantic, the city had provided Biafra with an economic and geographic lifeline.¹⁴⁶ While Biafra experienced some military success in the opening months of the conflict, Federal forces progressively gained the upper hand. Enugu, the first Biafran capital, fell in October 1967.¹⁴⁷ Bonny and Calabar, both cities of strategic importance, fell in July and October of the same year, respectively. Biafra's capital city would change three times over the course of the conflict. By mid-1968, the FMG controlled Biafra's geographic connections to the outside world, along with many cities important to its control over natural resources. With each industrial city captured by Federal forces, Biafra's economic leverage over foreign powers decreased.

The capture of Port Harcourt also precipitated the beginning of a major humanitarian crisis.¹⁴⁸ The Eastern Region was a "substantial food importer," lacking the natural infrastructure of sustenance.¹⁴⁹ With few adventitious means of supply, the death toll from starvation skyrocketed. Stremlau writes that "by mid-1968, the need for massive humanitarian aid was

¹⁴⁵ Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, xvi.

¹⁴⁶ Momoh, *The Nigerian Civil War*, 97.

¹⁴⁷ Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, xvi.

¹⁴⁸ The Biafran humanitarian crisis has been the subject of an entire wave of scholarship. For baseline reading, see Arua Oko Omaka, *The Biafran Humanitarian Crisis, 1967-1970: International Human Rights and Joint Church Aid*, The Fairleigh Dickinson University Press Series in Law, Culture, and the Humanities (Madison; Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016); Heerten, *Spectacles of Suffering*; Moses and Heerten, *Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide*.

¹⁴⁹ Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 205–6.

indisputable.”¹⁵⁰ The Federal campaign of mass starvation was arguably the most significant development of the war from an external perspective. The resounding civilian death toll on the Biafran side only solidified the already-existing genocide narrative.¹⁵¹ Although the FMG ostensibly permitted relief flights, Federal attempts to counteract or justify the starvation campaign were mixed at best. An interview with Rear Admiral Akinwale Wey, the Nigerian naval officer in charge of the blockade, quickly morphed into an opportunity for the Biafran propaganda machine.¹⁵² Wey responded to reports of starving babies:

Certainly, they are dying, my friend. Certainly. And I also said that war is war. It is only that it seems to me unjust to judge the rightness and the reason of a war because children are dying. Hunger has always been our friend. We know all about hunger. If you like, I'll take you around Lagos to the peoples' quarters and will show you the spectacle of hundreds of our children, Nigerians, with bones sticking out and stomachs blown up like balloons. They too, like Biafran children, tomorrow or the day after will be dead. And so?¹⁵³

Consequently, the humanitarian crisis provided the Biafran government with ammunition for its propaganda campaign, along with a greater sense of urgency for some form of international mediation.

Assisted by representatives of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), Biafran and Federal representatives attempted to engage in negotiations on several occasions. The most significant negotiations were the January 1967 Aburi, the May 1968 Kampala, and the August

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 205.

¹⁵¹ Besides the humanitarian crisis, Federal military actions led to the deaths of Biafran civilians on numerous occasions. From August 1967, the Egyptian government provided the FMG with jet aircraft and aircrews. However, Egyptian pilots gained a reputation for bombing civilians. The FMG consequently replaced them with East Germans in mid-1969. For more information, see Ibid., 333–34.

¹⁵² Gian Franco Vene, “I Am the Man Who Is Starving Biafra,” trans. Clearing House for Nigeria/Biafra Information, *L'Europeo*, October 24, 1968, Folder 10, Box 1, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. Clearing House, the translating body, was a pro-Biafra religious organization based out of the United States.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 4.

1968 Addis Ababa talks.¹⁵⁴ While conducted at different stages of the war, all ended in impasse.¹⁵⁵ At Aburi, Ojukwu laid the foundation for a Biafran claim of sovereignty, stating that “centralization is a word that stinks in Nigeria today.”¹⁵⁶ While Ojukwu initially pushed for a Nigerian confederation rather than a federation (a step from full Eastern autonomy), Federal contentions with the Aburi Accord only strengthened this stance.¹⁵⁷ Even as Biafra’s negotiating position weakened throughout the war, its diplomats continuously expressed a lack of faith in security without sovereignty. At Kampala and Addis Ababa respectively, Biafran representatives uncompromisingly asserted that “unity [was] impossible” and the “existence of Biafra as a sovereign and independent nation should be accepted.”¹⁵⁸ A statement issued by the Biafran Office of the Special Representative (OSR) in New York similarly iterated a series of requirements centered around the security of Eastern peoples and Biafran integration into international systems.¹⁵⁹ The piece concluded that “[those] security requirements can only be met by the sovereignty of Biafra.”¹⁶⁰ Godwin Onyegbula lamented the “hopeless” search for an “honest peace broker” that could “impose a settlement on the two deadlocked parties.”¹⁶¹ The message was clear: Biafra would need firmer international backing in order to mediate favorably.

¹⁵⁴ For far more comprehensive coverage of wartime negotiations, see Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*.

¹⁵⁵ By “different stages,” I mean prewar and before and after the fall of Port Harcourt, which I consider the point where international mediation became necessary to guarantee the survival of Biafra.

¹⁵⁶ Anthony Kirk-Greene, ed., “Attitudes at Aburi,” in *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria*, 1st ed., vol. 1 (1967; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 331–33.

¹⁵⁷ For more detailed discussion of Aburi, see Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 39–48.

¹⁵⁸ Njoku, “Biafra Puts Forward Counter-Proposals,” in *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria*, ed. Anthony Kirk-Greene, 1st ed., vol. 2, 2 vols. (1968; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 279–80; Louis Mbanefo, “Mbanefo Presents Biafra’s Case at Kampala,” in *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria*, ed. Anthony Kirk-Greene, 1st ed., vol. 2, 2 vols. (1968; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 229–32.

¹⁵⁹ Office of the Special Representative, “The Ineffectiveness of Guarantees,” *The Nigeria/Biafra Conflict* (New York: Government of the Republic of Biafra, n.d.), Folder 5, Box 1, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. The OSR was an informal ambassador. While the report is undated, it was written no earlier than September 1968, judging by its contents. It is worth noting that while it refers to the “Biafran problem” rather than the “Ibo problem,” the piece appears to use the two terms interchangeably.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁶¹ Onyegbula, *Memoirs of the Nigerian-Biafran Bureaucrat*, 162.

Biafran narratives adapted to these evolving circumstances, albeit questionably. The Biafran government doubled down on “Weak Biafra” narratives, often pushing those of systemic ethnic and religious persecution above assertions of political legitimacy.¹⁶² Biafran press releases from the period exemplify the kinds of narratives that circulated both internally and externally.¹⁶³ A piece titled “The World’s Most Desperate Refugee Problem” cited Biafra’s “highest death rate in the whole world” as a consequence of the Anglo-Nigerian “war of genocide” against the Biafran people.¹⁶⁴ While some publications reiterated the “Biafran” or “Igbo” genocide, a religious element remained. Although such narratives had existed before the beginning of the conflict, the involvement of religious relief organizations such as the Joint Church Aid (JCA) and Caritas Internationalis provided the Biafran government with lucrative targets. Catholic officials within Biafra appealed to the “conscience of the world” and praised relief efforts in a divergence from the hardline push for sovereignty present in prior diplomatic negotiations.¹⁶⁵ Many of the aforementioned materials understandably pushed for humanitarian action instead of mediation.

Federal efforts to counteract allegations of genocide appeared in the form of “international observer teams.”¹⁶⁶ Comprised of civilian and military officials from the Commonwealth, OAU, and UN, the teams periodically visited Federally-occupied Biafran

¹⁶² For now, I am keeping the materials limited to ones directly from the Biafran government. I have decided to explicitly differentiate between Biafran propaganda and pro-Biafran propaganda in the next chapter. As the next chapter covers, many of the Biafran narratives primarily stirred interest in popular lobbies while falling short in the governmental sector.

¹⁶³ Although most of the materials that I cite here come from Markpress’ compilation of *Press Actions*, the narratives that they published were essentially unadulterated from their original Biafran conceptions. The motifs that I discuss were so prevalent that I am forced to pick out a few examples. However, I could flip randomly through *Press Actions* and likely find similar pieces.

¹⁶⁴ Markpress News Feature Service, ed., “The World’s Most Desperate Refugee Problem,” in *Press Actions: Abridged Edition*, 1st ed., vol. 1, 3 vols. (1968; repr., Geneva: The Division, 1970).

¹⁶⁵ Francis Arinze et al., “Open Letter Containing World Appeal Sent by the Catholic Bishops of Biafra,” in *Press Actions: Abridged Edition*, ed. Markpress News Feature Service, 1st ed., vol. 3, 3 vols. (1969; repr., Geneva: The Division, 1970).

¹⁶⁶ Heerten, *Spectacles of Suffering*, 280–84.

territories between September 1968 and January 1970. On every visit, they reached the conclusion that there was no genocide. The Biafran rebuttal came as a statement from the Special Representative in New York, questioning how “such a small number of persons who have seen so little of the situation [could] reach a decision on genocide.”¹⁶⁷

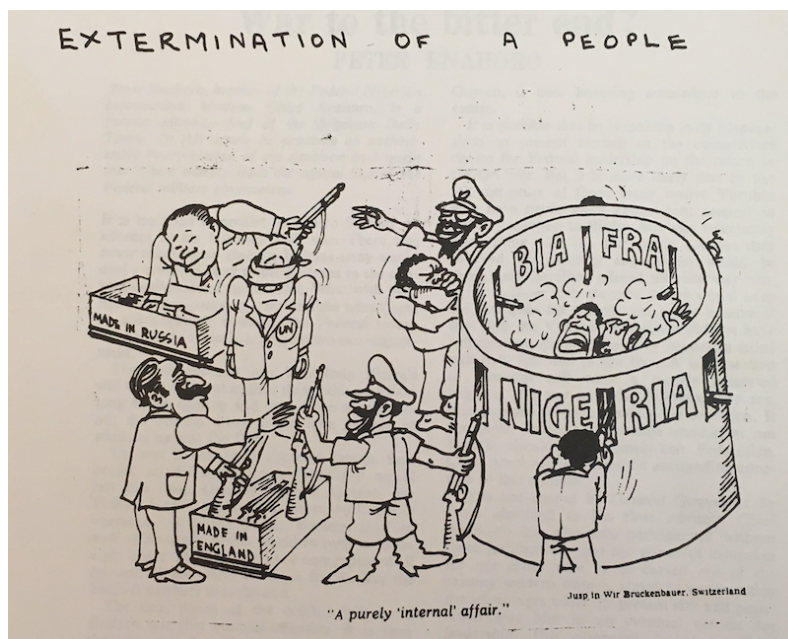


Figure 5: A political cartoon titled “Extermination of a People” attached to a diplomatic correspondence from the Biafran Special Representative (dated October 1968)¹⁶⁸

Admittedly, it is perplexing why the Biafran government would continue to push the genocide narrative if such prominent international bodies had agreed otherwise. Seemingly, the Biafran government placed its eggs in the popular basket. The OSR piece deferred to “independent foreign observers,” listing missionaries, journalists, Canadian Parliamentarians, and a human

¹⁶⁷ Office of the Special Representative, “Nigeria’s ‘International Observer Team’ in the Nigeria/Biafra War” (New York: Government of the Republic of Biafra, October 29, 1968), Folder 5, Box 1, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

¹⁶⁸ Office of the Special Representative, “Extermination of a People” (New York: Government of the Republic of Biafra, October 17, 1968), Folder 5, Box 1, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

rights lawyer as individuals who could verify the genocide.¹⁶⁹ This was a systemic blunder:

Biafra's overreliance on popular support failed to provide the backing necessary for mediation.

At this point, one must ask: did the humanitarian crisis necessitate narratives of Biafran weakness? I argue that it did not – while notions of military victory disappeared, narratives of political legitimacy remained ripe with potential.¹⁷⁰ On occasion, the Biafran government did attempt to mitigate earlier contradictions and inconsistencies in its narratives. A statement issued by the OSR attempted to identify and justify a consolidated Biafran identity, grouping Eastern demographics such as the Efik, Ijaw, and Ikwerre together with Igbo.¹⁷¹ Although not all were directly Igbo, the piece cited long-standing linguistic and cultural ties, stating that “the peoples of Biafra had co-existed harmoniously for thousands of years before the creation of the political unit called Nigeria.”¹⁷² A 1968 booklet titled *Present British Policy in Biafra* abandoned the unadulterated Biafran animosity for one of pragmatic outreach.¹⁷³ Clearly intended for British audiences, it cited Biafran oil wealth as a reason for British support. Meanwhile, narratives condemnatory of communist interlopers evolved into a battle against the imperialism of “the Soviet revisionist ruling clique,” with Biafra riding the Sino-Soviet split.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Biafra was also fairly uncontested in the public relations sphere, as the next section discusses.

¹⁷¹ Office of the Special Representative, “Who Are the Biafrans?,” *The Nigeria/Biafra Conflict* (New York: Government of the Republic of Biafra, October 25, 1968), Folder 5, Box 1, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

¹⁷² Ibid., 7.

¹⁷³ *Present British Policy in Biafra: A Threat to British Investments* (Biafran Ministry of Information, n.d.), Folder 2, Box 1, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. While the booklet is not dated, it seems to have been written around the fall of Port Harcourt, as it mentions the fighting going on near the city.

¹⁷⁴ “Text of Statement by China on the Chinese Attitude to the Nigerian Federal Government,” Press Release (Biafran Ministry of Information, 1968), Folder 3, Box 1, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. While a reprint of Chinese government materials, the press release signifies Biafra's willingness to justify communist support.

One of the most controversial examples of late-war “Strong Biafra” narratives was the June 1969 Ahiara Declaration.¹⁷⁵ Historians and other writers of the war place the declaration amidst an increasingly worsening situation for Biafra, though they often struggle to explain it.¹⁷⁶ While many of the later-war “Strong Biafra” narratives were a step in the right direction, the Ahiara Declaration seemingly attempted to combine them all into one. Published and disseminated by Markpress, Ojukwu’s declaration spread a potpourri of narratives to domestic and international audiences. It aggressively iterated the “revolution” against the forces of “Arab-Muslim expansionism,” “white economic imperialism,” and “Bolshevik Russia.”¹⁷⁷ The declaration then turned inward, condemning “wayward Biafrans” who exploited the crisis for personal gain. It then asserted that “all property belongs to the Community.”¹⁷⁸ Unsurprisingly, internal reception to the declaration was contentious, with figures inside the Biafran government struggling to rationalize it. Ntieyong Akpan painted it as a last-ditch effort in response to waning public support, stating that the government sought to incentivize people with narratives of an inevitable Biafran utopia.¹⁷⁹ Godwin Onyegbula provided two possible justifications: one an overture to the Soviet Union and the other an assertion of Biafra’s superior ethos compared to Nigeria’s.¹⁸⁰ Undoubtedly, parts of the Ahiara Declaration existed to promote a narrative of Biafran unity. However, notions of Biafran nationalism were lost amid a bombardment of narratives that, while not necessarily contradictory, were often unrelated. As such, the Ahiara Declaration became another example of division within the Biafran cause. The extent to which it

¹⁷⁵ Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, “The Ahiara Declaration,” in *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria*, ed. Anthony Kirk-Greene, 1st ed., vol. 2, 2 vols. (1969; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 376–93. Full text of the declaration is also available online.

¹⁷⁶ De St. Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War*, 385–86.

¹⁷⁷ Ojukwu, “The Ahiara Declaration,” 379–83.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 387.

¹⁷⁹ Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession*, 122–23.

¹⁸⁰ Onyegbula, *Memoirs of the Nigerian-Biafran Bureaucrat*, 170.

had any tangible effect is uncertain at best. Holistically, the sheer volume of materials of ethnic and religious persecution drowned out any narratives of Biafran strength, legitimacy, or unity.

As exemplified in many of the aforementioned materials, the international reach of the conflict's narratives coincided with the developing military and humanitarian situations. Equally important was the apparatus that enabled these narratives to reach foreign peoples and institutions.

Biafran Propaganda and Public Relations

After the October 1967 fall of Enugu, the Directorate of Propaganda gradually took precedence over the Ministry of Information in managing Biafran information campaigns. Ostensibly created to streamline governmental functions in lieu of the bureaucratic ministries, the directorates began to supersede their predecessors. Godwin Onyegbula wrote that they came to “[undertake] virtually all of the functions of a government.”¹⁸¹ While all of the new directorates were headed by experienced civil servants or private sector figures, the Directorate of Propaganda took special precedence.¹⁸² First run by Ifegwu Eke, a Harvard-educated academic, the Propaganda Directorate came to encompass a wide array of Biafran social and political elites, many of whom were poached from the Ministry of Information. Biafran government officials and dissenters alike attested to this. Ntieyong Akpan wrote that political appointees headed most directorates, with civil servants transferred under their leadership.¹⁸³ This allowed a wide array of prominent cultural figures to commandeer Biafran narratives. According to Elechi Amadi, Biafran propagandists “were handpicked for their devotion and expertise.”¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 149–50.

¹⁸² Friction between civil servants and private sector appointees is another important factor of consideration in relation to the Biafran conflict of identity. This will be discussed shortly.

¹⁸³ Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession*, 98.

¹⁸⁴ Amadi, *Sunset in Biafra*, 57.

Although this thesis has examined Biafran propaganda campaigns in the domestic arena, the workings of similar international efforts are of equal importance. One of the most important components of the Directorate of Propaganda was the Biafran Overseas Press Service, along with its related elements that managed international coverage of the war.¹⁸⁵ Given the poor military and humanitarian situation by mid-1968, Biafra's image on the international stage rose to paramount importance. From a perspective of policy, foreign involvement could circumvent Federal advantages and allow Biafra a more favorable negotiating position.

While the Biafran government maintained diplomatic missions and other direct forms of representation, the radio and the press remained key platforms of narrative dissemination to international audiences. Internal reporting from *The New York Times* outlined Biafran difficulties in establishing communications with Europe.¹⁸⁶ Initially, *Times* and BBC correspondents had to use a ship radio off of Port Harcourt to pick up on Radio Biafra transmissions.¹⁸⁷ The alternative option was a telephone line between Douala and the Eastern Region, staffed by a "barely literate clerk ... unskilled at taking dictation." Correspondents noted that the East was working to establish a radio link to France via the Ivory Coast. By August 1968, Biafra had established another covert radio link to Europe through Lisbon.¹⁸⁸ Codenamed "Biscaia," the radio station communicated with London and Paris as "The Secessionist State's Overseas Press Division." However, disseminating Biafran narratives beyond continental Europe proved to be a separate challenge. The solution laid in public relations firms.

¹⁸⁵ Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 115.

¹⁸⁶ Garrison to Topping, June 1967; Lloyd Garrison to Seymour Topping, June 11, 1967, Folder 4, Box 135, Foreign Desk Records, New York Times Company Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Seely and Kriebel to Clark and Scheur, "Cable to FBIS Puerto Rico from FBIS Washington, D.C.," Cable, August 29, 1968, General CIA Records; Seely and Kriebel to Clark and Scheur, "Cable to FBIS Puerto Rico from FBIS Washington, D.C.," Cable, September 17, 1968, General CIA Records.

Before and throughout the conflict, Eastern officials understood the importance of effective PR.¹⁸⁹ Assistance often came in the form of foreign firms. Prior to June 1967, the Eastern government hired Ruder & Finn (R&F), an American agency, to assist with its account.¹⁹⁰ R&F primarily dispatched press releases and provided interim office space for the OSR.¹⁹¹ The Biafran government concurrently retained the services of Robert S. Goldstein Enterprises.¹⁹² However, both agencies were phased out by early 1968.¹⁹³ Run out of Geneva by an American named William Bernhardt, “Marketing Press” (commonly referred to as Markpress) became the most prominent example of Biafra’s public relations support. Bernhardt was somewhat of a Western media darling, with the BBC referring to him as a “charming, lone-wolf operator.”¹⁹⁴ Despite extensive coverage, however, external PR outlets assisted with narrative dissemination rather than creation. From the beginning of 1968 to the end of the war, Markpress functioned as an intermediary between the Biafran government and Western print media. As U.S. intelligence reporting surmised, the aforementioned Lisbon radio link was Biafra’s line of communication to Markpress.¹⁹⁵

The Biafran government possessed substantial agency in matters related to foreign news coverage of the war. Biafran representatives facilitated visits, courting *The New York Times* in October 1967 with mentions of a “vicious genocide being practiced by bloodthirsty Northern

¹⁸⁹ In the following paragraphs on public relations, I primarily seek to elaborate upon a fairly well-established portion of the conflict, only providing as much contextualization as necessary. For a far more detailed and interesting look into the public relations campaigns of the Biafran War on both sides, see Morris Davis, *Interpreters for Nigeria: The Third World and International Public Relations* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977).

¹⁹⁰ Aggrey Oji to Alfred Paulson, June 19, 1967, General DOJ Records.

¹⁹¹ Davis, *Interpreters for Nigeria*, 48–49.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 108–16.

¹⁹³ R.S. Goldstein Enterprises remained on retainer through August 1968 but did minimal work from early 1968.

¹⁹⁴ *Extracts from BBC Documentary on Markpress PR Agency*, 2011, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00fz9gc>.

¹⁹⁵ Seely and Kriebel to Clark and Scheur, “Cable to FBIS Puerto Rico from FBIS Washington, D.C.,” September 17, 1968.

Nigerian troops.”¹⁹⁶ The cable also promised safe passage and accommodation upon arrival. However, this came at a price. Foreign correspondents found themselves under constant supervision from Ministry of Information officials, with one cable lamenting a staffer who remained hindered by “Ojukwu’s aides.”¹⁹⁷ Censorship only grew more severe after the reporting influx of mid-1968. A “lengthy memorandum” from mid-1969 outlined protocol for *Times* reporters entering Biafra.¹⁹⁸ Although reporters were permitted to send their copy to Markpress, the Ministry of Information censored all outgoing reporting. Guidelines on what reporters could cover were case-by-case.

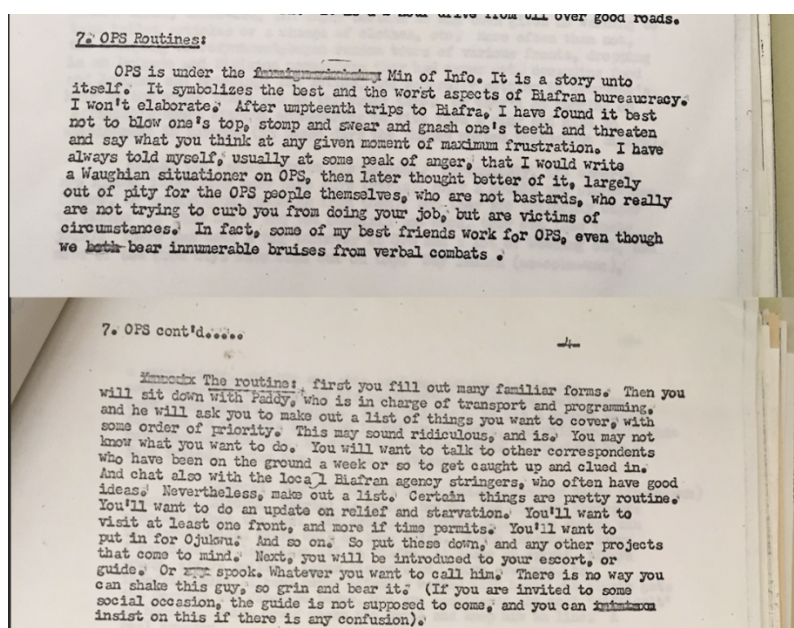


Figure 6: Excerpts from the *Times* memorandum concerning Ministry of Information supervision of incoming journalists (dated July 1969)¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ Aggrey Oji to Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, October 28, 1967, Folder 9, Box 113, Foreign Desk Records, New York Times Company Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

¹⁹⁷ Eric Pace to Seymour Topping, 1968, Folder 9, Box 113, Foreign Desk Records, New York Times Company Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

¹⁹⁸ Lloyd Garrison to Eric Pace and Gloria Emerson, “Prospectus: Biafra,” Memorandum, July 31, 1969, Folder 9, Box 113, Foreign Desk Records, New York Times Company Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. Please note that although Garrison uses the term “spook” to describe the Ministry of Information escort, I do not believe that he means the racial slur, but rather the slang for “government agent.” However, there is an unfortunate possibility that it could be both.

Consequently, through both contract press agencies and domestic personnel, Biafran perspectives of the war and humanitarian crisis made major headlines. Conversely, the FMG made matters difficult for journalists. In the early days of the war, the FMG expelled the *Times*' Lloyd Garrison, along with other correspondents, over accusations of "anti-Federal bias."²⁰⁰ In mid-1969, Lagos forbade foreign journalists from interacting with military officials.²⁰¹ Consequently, journalists had a considerably easier time covering the Biafran side, assisting the spread of Biafran narratives.

Foreign governmental actors sometimes provided covert assistance with the dissemination of Biafran narratives, the full extent to which is still unknown. Recent publications have highlighted the French SDECE's assistance disseminating Biafran narratives within France.²⁰² Markpress remains a special enigma. At the end of the conflict, Markpress published a short letter providing only vague motivations, such as "freedom of the press" and "basic human rights."²⁰³ Information released in more recent years has further complicated the image of Markpress as an independent actor in the conflict sans Biafran contacts. A BBC interview with William Bernhardt yielded more questions than answers.²⁰⁴ In the interview, Bernhardt, speaking with a pronounced Transatlantic accent, mentioned that his "client" would not like to discuss unnamed alternative sources of funding. Internal reporting within CIA, dated to November 1969,

²⁰⁰ Garrison to Topping, June 1967. Internal *New York Times* coverage is consequently spotty on the Federal side, compared to the wealth of materials on Biafra.

²⁰¹ Gerald Gold to Daniel, Reston, and Rosenthal, June 24, 1969, Folder 4, Box 135, Foreign Desk Records, New York Times Company Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

²⁰² Christopher Griffin, "French Military Policy in the Nigerian Civil War, 1967–1970," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 26, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 124, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2014.959766>. The *Service de Documentation Extérieure et de Contre-Espionnage* (SDECE) [External Documentation and Counter-Espionage Service] was France's foreign intelligence service of the period.

²⁰³ Markpress News Feature Service, ed., "Signing Off," in *Press Actions: Abridged Edition*, 1st ed., vol. 3, 3 vols. (Geneva: The Division, 1970).

²⁰⁴ *Extracts from BBC Documentary on Markpress PR Agency*.

emphasized that “MARKPRESS IS NOTT A BONA FIDE PRESS AGENCY.”²⁰⁵ While the above information could support the assumption that Markpress was affiliated with foreign governmental actors or institutions, the answer will likely remain unclear for the time being.

However, while foreign actors certainly assisted with distribution, it does not appear that they dramatically altered or created any narratives. From available reporting, foreign governmental actors did not change much. Although Griffin writes that the SDECE instructed media outlets to use the term “genocide” in their publications, the Ministry of Information had been using the same rhetoric in international publications since before Biafra officially existed.²⁰⁶ Similarly, press releases moved between hands with few alterations beyond minute details.²⁰⁷ Rhetorical parallels between later-war Markpress materials and the original Biafran content are already well-established.²⁰⁸ In his BBC interview, Bernhardt stated that his agency assisted with “phrasing” but that the text came from the Biafran government.²⁰⁹ Thus, the overwhelming array of Biafran narratives reached Western audiences essentially unscathed. However, despite control over the creation and spread of its narratives, the Biafran government would face greater tribulations elsewhere.

Diplomatic Connections

In the international domain beyond press releases and public relations, Biafra possessed a small but well-trained and experienced diplomatic corps. The wide-scale Igbo and Eastern

²⁰⁵ Borel and Kriebel to Williams and Mueller, “Cable to FBIS Puerto Rico from FBIS Washington, D.C.,” Cable, November 5, 1969, General CIA Records, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp81-00770r000100110015-2>. “NOTT” is not a typo but rather an expression of additional emphasis.

²⁰⁶ *Pogrom; The Problem of Nigerian Unity*, vol. 2, Crisis 1966 (Aba: Eastern Nigerian Ministry of Information, 1966), 23, Folder 2, Box 1, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library; Griffin, “French Military Policy,” 124.

²⁰⁷ By “minute details,” I mean aspects like the location of publication. For example, the Biafran Ministry of Information continued to sign their press releases from “Enugu,” even though Enugu had fallen the previous year. For further reading, see Davis, *Interpreters for Nigeria*.

²⁰⁸ Davis, *Interpreters for Nigeria*, 134–35.

²⁰⁹ *Extracts from BBC Documentary on Markpress PR Agency*.

representation in the civil service played to Biafra's benefit, with the new government largely inheriting a professional body of representatives. Diplomatic missions represented Biafra from before its founding: the Biafran OSR established a predecessor office in New York in early 1967.²¹⁰ Immediately upon secession, Eastern diplomats flocked to the Biafran Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²¹¹ Many worked at their old posts under the new flag. In conjunction with the propaganda apparatus, the diplomatic corps was the second international arm of Biafra. While ostensibly separate from the propaganda apparatus, the two institutions were closely intertwined. As such, they faced many of the same trials and tribulations.

In terms of composition and personnel, there was significant overlap between the two institutions. Oftentimes, diplomats moonlighted as propagandists and vice versa. Aggrey T. Oji, the first Biafran Special Representative in New York, maintained direct affiliation with the Ministry of Information and coordinated the R&F contract.²¹² Chinua Achebe, the acclaimed author who worked for the Propaganda Directorate, served alongside the Special Representative as a Biafran envoy to the United Nations.²¹³ At first glance, the overlap appears nonsensical. A personnel shortage within the Biafran government is a possible explanation. However, this fails to explain why such high-ranking officials took on multiple roles. Jacques Ellul answers this by invalidating the distinction between the two.²¹⁴ He writes that the difference lies between the groups that make propaganda and those that consume it. Here, the Biafran pitfall laid. As the two

²¹⁰ Ibid., 49.

²¹¹ Onyegbula, *Memoirs of the Nigerian-Biafran Bureaucrat*, 147–48.

²¹² Alfred Paulson, Registration Statement (Washington: United States Department of Justice, 1967), General DOJ Records.

²¹³ Biafran Mission to the United Nations to U Thant, November 11, 1968, Folder 9, Box 2, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

²¹⁴ Ellul, *Propaganda*, 212.

elements are “closely related” in Ellul’s framework, the repercussions of the Biafran identity crisis carried into the workings of its governmental institutions.²¹⁵

To this point, I have focused on the triumphs of the Biafran propaganda and diplomatic apparatuses. Staffed by competent individuals and relatively uncontested by the FMG, they effectively projected their narratives domestically and internationally. However, this was not the whole story. Conflicts of bureaucracy and governance first allowed the identity crisis to manifest in Biafran civil institutions. The shift from ministries to directorates prompted an influx of political appointees from outside of the civil service. Often, they were hired in positions of leadership.²¹⁶ Many experienced civil servants took objection to this development: Raphael Uwechue wrote bitterly of the “diehards” who, despite competence in their respective non-governmental sectors, “were novices in the torturous game of politics.”²¹⁷ Likewise, Ntieyong Akpan condemned the “arrogant so-called intellectuals” who “exhibited open contempt ... towards the civil service.”²¹⁸ Judging from personal accounts, the conflict between civil servants and appointees was most prominent in the diplomatic corps compared to other institutions.²¹⁹ This clash extended beyond resentment toward serving under political appointees. Within the civil service, internal apprehensions with the Biafran cause grew. Perhaps a consequence of an inherited civil service instead of a wholly voluntary institution, Biafran civil servants expressed apprehension with the “revolutionaries” and their aversion to “supple realism.”²²⁰ Tensions within the government moved beyond an issue of subordination to an ideological conflict.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Onyegbula, *Memoirs of the Nigerian-Biafran Bureaucrat*, 149.

²¹⁷ Uwechue, *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War*, 53.

²¹⁸ Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession*, 116–17.

²¹⁹ A possible explanation could be the volume of experienced civil servants that the diplomatic corps inherited.

²²⁰ Uwechue, *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War*, 53; Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession*, 117.

The Biafran cause meant something different to everyone. In the broadest terms possible, I will attempt to separate the elements of the governmental identity crisis. In line with “Strong Biafra” narratives, many intellectuals in the government possessed a true belief in the Biafran right to sovereignty. Chinua Achebe wrote of his involvement in the creation of the Ahiara Declaration, expressing genuine idealism in its multitude of guarantees.²²¹ Conversely, many Igbo in the civil service fell behind fears of ethnic persecution, prompted by the 1966 pogroms and amplified by “Weak Biafra” narratives. Although they desired security, they saw Biafran sovereignty as a necessity to obtain it. Accordingly, Godwin Onyegbula wrote that Biafrans, facing an “internationally recognized genocide,” had no other options.²²² The final group desired security as well, but was willing to accept Federal terms. Although he instead resigned, Raphael Uwechue was one such example. While some scholarship attempts to paint the Biafran diplomatic line as a monolith, it was far from. An important division between sovereignty and security emerged, although Biafran representatives abstained from openly expressing this during negotiations.²²³ Raphael Uwechue placed the debate between security and sovereignty (and consequently, concession or not) as a question of realism or idealism.²²⁴ However, while some Biafran figures retrospectively argued the merits of surrender, very few doubted the widespread and legitimate fear of extermination. As such, I consider a realist to be an individual who understood Biafra’s disadvantageous situation; a subscriber to the “Weak Biafra” narrative.

As established, “Weak Biafra” narratives won out domestically and internationally, implying that realist voices prevailed. However, Biafra expressed no willingness to concede

²²¹ Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 157–62.

²²² Onyegbula, *Memoirs of the Nigerian-Biafran Bureaucrat*, 180–81.

²²³ Regarding this, Ntieyong Akpan wrote of a pervasive fear within even the highest levels of government of the “intelligence network” and “special tribunal” that would crackdown on dissidents. See Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession*, 112–15.

²²⁴ Uwechue, *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War*, 53.

during negotiations. Instead, Biafran representatives reiterated the requirement of sovereignty, continuing the war and implying an idealist ideological victory. There are several plausible explanations. Because Biafran actions outside of the propaganda domain expressed intent to continue the conflict, the prevalence of “Weak Biafra” narratives could have been pragmatism on part of the idealists seeking to prolong Biafra’s existence. Given that many political appointees were cultural figures rather than career civil servants, it also could have been a political blunder. There is also a distinct possibility that narratives of “Strong Biafra” and “Weak Biafra” were not mutually exclusive in the sovereignty debate. Sovereignty was realistically attainable under one and an absolute necessity under the other. However, this would do little to mitigate deeply-rooted ideological differences. As Godwin Onyegbula wrote, “one cannot conduct a successful and effective diplomacy from a weak domestic foundation.”²²⁵ While disunity arguably drives societal development, it is the last thing any government needs during wartime. The circumstances of Biafran secession did not provide any leeway for debates over identity.

The Biafran government was unable to cement itself amid the taxing circumstances of secession. Consequently, it suffered from a lack of cohesion at a time that did not permit the slightest. This stemmed from ideological differences linked to conceptions of governance, ethnicity, and nationality. However, this was not the culmination of the Biafran identity crisis. Biafra fully suffered the repercussions in the international arena only after its narratives had run the gamut of their audiences. Accordingly, the next chapter discusses the trials, tribulations, and ramifications experienced by Biafra in this sphere.

²²⁵ Onyegbula, *Memoirs of the Nigerian-Biafran Bureaucrat*, 179.

Chapter 3: The End (February 1969 – January 1970)

“Charity,” he thundered, “is the opium of the privileged...”²²⁶

- Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987)

The Journalist

On April 18, 1969, David Robison was formally removed from the Biafran account for the second time.²²⁷ Far from the type that one would expect to wander around postcolonial Africa, Robison was a New York native who had graduated from Columbia’s School of International Affairs.²²⁸ By March 1968, he had established a routine as a stringer for *The New York Times*.²²⁹ Robison entered the East through the Portuguese island of São Tomé, providing his supervisors with a Ministry of Information contact who ostensibly facilitated his visits.²³⁰ For over a year in total, he contributed copy and photographs covering “Atlantis,” the paper’s internal name for Biafra. However, Robison soon ran into difficulties. Lloyd Garrison and Seymour Topping, his *Times* supervisors, noted that his coverage of the conflict was taking a toll on his psyche, writing that he allowed “emotion to permeate his copy.”²³¹ His supervisors failed to replace him, considering that the only alternative was a “Biafran Reuters man ... restricted solely to onpassing official handouts.”²³² Beyond concerns with Robison’s emotional investment in his writing, Garrison and Topping continuously grappled with the financial investment required to keep a

²²⁶ Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* (London: Heinemann, 1987), 93.

²²⁷ David Robison to Seymour Topping, July 30, 1969, Folder 10, Box 113, Foreign Desk Records, New York Times Company Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library. Note that the “second time” is merely the second time on record.

²²⁸ David Robison’s biography is from an OPC award dated August 1968. SIA later became SIPA. SIA’s focus during the period was largely Soviet matters, only being reorganized into regional studies departments in 1967.

²²⁹ Armida Gaeta to Manno, Memorandum, March 20, 1968, Folder 10, Box 113, Foreign Desk Records, New York Times Company Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

²³⁰ Lloyd Garrison to Seymour Topping, September 18, 1968, Folder 10, Box 113, Foreign Desk Records, New York Times Company Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

²³¹ Lloyd Garrison to Seymour Topping, June 18, 1968, Folder 10, Box 113, Foreign Desk Records, New York Times Company Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

²³² Lloyd Garrison to Seymour Topping, June 20, 1968, Folder 10, Box 113, Foreign Desk Records, New York Times Company Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

stringer in Biafra. However, Robison stayed, likely saved by his willingness to insert himself into life-threatening situations in the name of journalistic coverage. After leaving the Biafra account in 1969, he went on to cover the Anya-Nya, a Southern Sudanese separatist movement with many narrative links to Biafra.²³³ However, while his supervisors made getting to Biafra difficult, many of Robison's journalistic woes came directly at the hands of the Biafran government. As aforementioned, Robison found himself under regular Ministry of Information supervision. This affected him on several occasions, being declared *persona non grata* in 1968 and leaving due to Biafran clearance issues in 1969. On other occasions, Robison found his coverage to be unnecessary – the Biafran government sometimes skipped the middleman and sent its own reports directly to the *Times*.

ROBISON BIAFRA STRINGER

XXMMX
CAUMARTIN

TANNER FOR GARRISON WOULD PREFER DROP ROBISON STOP
POINT IS NOT MONEY BUT RATHER WAIT FOR PERIODIC
WRAPUPS BY STAFFER RATHER THAN RELY ON MAN WHO
IS INVOLVED EMOTIONALLY AND INSUFFICIENTLY TRAINED
TO MEET OUR NEEDS THANKS

TOPPING

2:20 P.M.-ang
6/20/68

Figure 7: Seymour Topping's concerns over Robison's coverage (dated June 1968)²³⁴

²³³ Robison began to cover South Sudan on May 22, 1969. The conclusion will discuss parallels between the South Sudan conflict and the Biafran War.

²³⁴ Seymour Topping to Lloyd Garrison, June 20, 1968, Folder 10, Box 113, Foreign Desk Records, New York Times Company Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

As the humanitarian crisis worsened throughout 1968, waves of foreign journalists flocked into the country. An international interest quickly took hold, with the Biafran government rushing to manage an unprecedented volume of public relations and diplomatic needs. Robison's trials and tribulations were not unique. He was one of many ordinary individuals spurred into action by the wide-reaching influence of Biafran narratives – an example of the international psyche that positioned the conflict on the center stage. Although the Biafran government maintained a watchful eye over foreign coverage of the conflict, the situation escalated beyond Biafran control.

The second chapter discussed how the Biafran identity crisis affected the function of key Biafran institutions. However, it is equally crucial to discuss how the same conflict affected foreign attitudes and policy toward Biafra. Although the Biafran government exerted control over the creation and dissemination of its narratives, it had little control over how its audiences interpreted and leveraged them. The realities of the international stage meant that support for Biafra never consolidated to advance even the basic Biafran aim of Eastern security. While partially due to the realities of the international arena of the time, Biafran diplomatic and public relations blunders cemented the impossibility of nationhood. A plethora of scholarship exists on the international responses to the Biafran War and ensuing humanitarian crisis.²³⁵ As such, this chapter focuses on several facets most pertinent to the narrative of my thesis.

Diplomatic Failings

By mid-1969, the war had reached a stalemate.²³⁶ Both sides had attempted breakthroughs throughout the preceding months; neither succeeded. However, Biafra's position was not

²³⁵ My go-to reference materials on the diplomatic and humanitarian sides of the conflict are Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*; Heerten, *Spectacles of Suffering*; Onyegbula, *Memoirs of the Nigerian-Biafran Bureaucrat*.

²³⁶ Moses and Heerten, *Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide*, 11.

sustainable. Federal forces controlled the oil fields of the Niger Delta, all land corridors, and many of Biafra's larger cities, cementing the starvation and refugee crises.²³⁷ Although relief flights regularly provided food and medical supplies, this quickly changed. A June 1969 Federal crackdown on relief flights led to a cessation of all International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) flights and a drastic reduction in all others.²³⁸ The ICRC estimated a majority reduction in tons of incoming relief between June and August 1969.²³⁹ Consequently, international influence remained of the utmost importance in maintaining Biafra's external lifeline.

Godwin Onyegbula recounted the Biafran diplomatic strategy toward foreign governmental actors and institutions:

The ploy was: catch Paris and you got the Francophone states; court London, and the Commonwealth came with it; infiltrate the U.S.A. public, and they would drag the Government along. Finally, for the Christian world, we had an advantage, by our religious profession, to persuade the Vatican, to bring its influence to bear, on the faithful. Our Missions were located to meet these criteria.²⁴⁰

At first, there appeared to be potential. Biafra's strategic location positioned it within the economic interests of foreign powers. In conjunction, colonial grudges provided Biafra with allies, as was the case with France. While a secondary concern, Cold War geopolitics also played a role. The Sino-Soviet split urged Chinese support, while South Africa supplied Biafra with arms to curtail Soviet regional influences.²⁴¹

The reality of the situation was grimmer. Biafran efforts to court international institutions such as the OAU, Commonwealth, and United Nations ended in failure. Although Biafra

²³⁷ Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 323.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 335.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 338.

²⁴⁰ Onyegbula, *Memoirs of the Nigerian-Biafran Bureaucrat*, 163.

²⁴¹ Henry Kissinger to Elliot Richardson, "Conversation with Ambassador Ahoua of the Ivory Coast," Memorandum, April 15, 1969, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 741, Country Files, Africa, Nigeria., National Archives, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve05p1/d56>.

attempted to leverage British oil interests through propaganda and diplomatic representation, the British government “remained hostile.”²⁴² Without support from London, the Commonwealth continued to side with the FMG. The abundance of anti-Anglo narratives in Biafran propaganda likely didn’t help. Diplomacy with the OAU proved similarly fruitless. Although Biafran officials understood that courting the OAU would be an “uphill battle,” they recognized its potential as a mediator.²⁴³ Biafran representatives consequently targeted members of the Casablanca bloc (the “progressive states” of the OAU) for support.²⁴⁴ Yet, the “duplicity” of those countries prevented backing within the OAU.²⁴⁵ This failure also affected Biafran efforts in New York. There, the OSR managed relations with the United Nations, with Onyegbula attesting to the size and competence of the office.²⁴⁶ However, U Thant deferred to the OAU; Biafra would not receive UN backing.²⁴⁷ Thus, the presence of the OSR was futile.

France and the United States prolonged the conflict by supplying Biafra with arms and humanitarian assistance, respectively.²⁴⁸ However, neither country mediated the conflict nor recognized Biafra as a sovereign nation. The Johnson administration maintained a position of passivity. A State Department cable from early 1968 mentioned Igbo sympathies but advised a policy of neutrality.²⁴⁹ More potential appeared to lie in the Nixon administration. Nixon, a Biafra sympathizer, mentioned the “grim reaper” of starvation during his 1968 presidential run

²⁴² Onyegbula, *Memoirs of the Nigerian-Biafran Bureaucrat*, 164; *British Policy in Biafra*.

²⁴³ Onyegbula, *Memoirs of the Nigerian-Biafran Bureaucrat*, 162.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession*, 115; Onyegbula, *Memoirs of the Nigerian-Biafran Bureaucrat*, 173–74.

²⁴⁶ Biafran Mission to the United Nations to U Thant, November 11, 1968; Onyegbula, *Memoirs of the Nigerian-Biafran Bureaucrat*, 171. I will discuss the failures of the second mission in the next section.

²⁴⁷ Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 279. U Thant was the Secretary General of the United Nations between 1961 and 1971.

²⁴⁸ Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession*, 115. Akpan states that the war would have ended in September 1968 without foreign assistance.

²⁴⁹ US Embassy in Lagos to Department of State, Airgram, March 7, 1968, POL 1 NIGERIA–US, Department of State Central Files, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/d395>.

and called for American aid.²⁵⁰ Recent scholarship argues that the American intelligence apparatus also maintained a pro-Biafra slant throughout the war.²⁵¹ However, narratives of Biafran weakness circulated within the American government. Despite the personal sympathies of some, pragmatism prevailed. A State Department memorandum from mid-1969 suggested moderate relief options to alleviate public pressures.²⁵² Henry Kissinger, Nixon's National Security Advisor, dismissed the outcry as "an amalgam in part of genuine concern and left-wing guilt feelings over Vietnam."²⁵³

France was a slightly different story. The bulk of foreign governmental support for Biafra came from France in the form of weaponry.²⁵⁴ Although the French government outwardly supported the Biafran cause, its internal motivations were purely pragmatic.²⁵⁵ An American intelligence cable from the final days of the war shed light on French motivations:

There are at present no plans for French support to Biafran guerrilla resistance. The rationale for this position as expressed by Mauriceau-Beaupre to individuals concerned with executing Biafran operations was as follows: "France supported Biafra because of the oil and ERAP, but not the Ibo revolution. The support was actually given to a handful of Biafran bourgeoisie in return for the oil. There is no popular support in Biafra for a guerrilla war now. The real Ibo mentality is much farther to the left than that of Ojukwu and even if we had won, there would have been the problem of keeping him in power in the face of leftist infiltration."²⁵⁶

²⁵⁰ Richard Nixon, "Nixon's Call for American Action on Biafra," in *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria*, ed. Anthony Kirk-Greene, 1st ed., vol. 2, 2 vols. (1968; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 334–35.

²⁵¹ Devermont, "The U.S. Intelligence Community's Biases during the Nigerian Civil War."

²⁵² Henry Kissinger, "Next Steps in Nigeria-Biafra," Memorandum (Washington: Department of State, July 7, 1969), Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 741, Country Files, Africa, Nigeria, Vol. I, National Archives, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve05p1/d82>.

²⁵³ Henry Kissinger, "U.S. Options in Biafra Relief," Memorandum (Washington: Department of State, January 28, 1969), Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 741, Country Files, Africa, Nigeria, Vol. I, National Archives, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve05p1/d25>.

²⁵⁴ Griffin, "French Military Policy," 122.

²⁵⁵ For more information on French policy toward Biafra, along with their African strategy of the period, see Griffin, "French Military Policy."

²⁵⁶ Central Intelligence Agency to Haig, "The Early Response of the French Government to the Fall of Biafra," January 14, 1970.

Albeit cynical, the French response exemplified the pitfall of material interest. Paris was largely invested in geopolitical concerns rather than ideological. As ideology exited, so did commitment.

Biafra's range of narrative appeal and willingness to align itself with any source of assistance led to an interesting assortment of allies. As Godwin Onyegbula stated: "Ideology was out of the question. Survival was all that mattered."²⁵⁷ Most notably, Biafra received weapons from South Africa and possibly from Rhodesia: two of the era's most notorious white-supremacist polities.²⁵⁸ A State Department cable from April 1969 stated that South Africa pledged two million dollars of covert humanitarian aid to Biafra after talks with Ivorian diplomats.²⁵⁹ The South African justification was "based on concern of the Soviets' growing influence in Nigeria and their feeling that it would be just as well for the Biafrans to remain independent of this influence." Biafra also maintained diplomatic ties with Israel, though little came of it beyond platitudes.²⁶⁰

The diplomatic chaos of the conflict was a reflection of Biafra's desperation and a manifestation of its ideological turmoil. However, while the Biafran government pushed questionable narratives and spent precious diplomatic resources on the wrong institutions, the international climate was inherently unforgiving. The conflict proved to be a strong endorsement of realist theory, with the FMG prevailing by might rather than institutional finesse. Biafran efforts in the non-governmental arena ultimately proved fruitless as well.

The Pro-Biafra Lobby

The international popular support that emerged during the conflict was, at first glance, the great external triumph of the Biafran government. In Godwin Onyegbula's words, "the Biafran case,

²⁵⁷ Onyegbula, *Memoirs of the Nigerian-Biafran Bureaucrat*, 163.

²⁵⁸ Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 233–35.

²⁵⁹ Kissinger to Richardson, "Conversation with Ambassador Ahoua," April 15, 1969.

²⁶⁰ Onyegbula, *Memoirs of the Nigerian-Biafran Bureaucrat*, 179.

greatly assisted by our external publicity, reached virtually all the corners of the earth; and turned men and women into activists for the cause.”²⁶¹ This pro-Biafra community consisted of non-Biafran, non-governmental organizations that aligned themselves with the Biafran cause. Many of these entities created their own propaganda, harnessing Biafran narratives to their own means. As such, it is important to differentiate between Biafran and pro-Biafran propaganda.

On the positive side, pro-Biafra groups could effectively tailor their presentations to their targets. However, even more so than the Biafran government, the pro-Biafra lobby suffered from major issues of cohesion. As fragmented and counterproductive as their actions often were, Biafrans possessed a common desire for Eastern security. The motivations of the pro-Biafra lobby retained no such unifying element. The Biafran government was partially responsible – components of the pro-Biafra lobby positioned themselves around narratives that the Biafran government actively formulated and disseminated. I will primarily use American examples to highlight the problems with the popular foreign reception of Biafran narratives.²⁶²

The United States possessed one of the most comprehensive microcosms of the pro-Biafra community. With its wealth of humanitarian and religious organizations, young activists, and an increasing Black American international consciousness, the United States was a congregating ground for pro-Biafra interest groups.²⁶³ Religious organizations such as Joint Church Aid, Catholic Relief Services, and Caritas Internationalis rallied around the Biafran humanitarian crisis. During the period, humanitarian and religious organizations were often one. Besides the ICRC, which deferred to the FMG when coordinating relief flights, religious

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² For detailed reading on popular responses from countries such as the United Kingdom, West Germany, Israel, and more, see Moses and Heerten, *Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide*. A large portion of the book is split into chapters per country or demographic.

²⁶³ Onyegbula, *Memoirs of the Nigerian-Biafran Bureaucrat*, 171.

organizations were the closest analogue of the modern NGO.²⁶⁴ Religious elements of the pro-Biafra community often unified around faith rather than specific religions. A mid-1968 bulletin from Catholic Relief Services highlighted Jewish and Christian cooperation in the organization.²⁶⁵ Parts of the Black American community aligned themselves with the Biafran cause, forming groups such as the Joint Afro Committee on Biafra (JACB) and the Black American Aid To African Starvation organization (BAATAS).²⁶⁶ BAATAS gained the backing of notable political figures, such as Senators Edward Brooke and Edward Kennedy. Cultural figures in the Black American community made statements as well. Nat Adderley, jazz trumpeter and younger brother of the famed Cannonball Adderley, named the leading track of his 1968 album *Calling Out Loud* after Biafra.²⁶⁷ However, the greater Black American community remained notoriously divided on Biafra – Nigeria enjoyed the status of “a model for the rest of the continent.”²⁶⁸ Organizations such as the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive are harder to categorize.²⁶⁹ Founded by former Peace Corps volunteers and college students, the American Committee rose to prominence due to its “advanced advertising campaign, political connections in Washington, DC, and fundraising ability.”²⁷⁰

²⁶⁴ Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 210–12.

²⁶⁵ “Assistance to Victims of Nigeria/Biafra Conflict,” Quarterly Information Bulletin (Catholic Relief Services, August 1968), 12–14, Folder 7, Box 2, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

²⁶⁶ For further reading on Black American debates surrounding the Biafran War, see James Farquharson, “‘Black America Cares’: The Response of African-Americans to Civil War and ‘Genocide’ in Nigeria, 1967–1970,” in *Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide: The Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967–1970*, ed. A. Dirk Moses and Lasse Heerten (New York: Routledge, 2017), 301–26, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315229294>.

²⁶⁷ Nat Adderley, “Biafra,” track 1 on *Calling Out Loud*, CTI, 1968, Spotify.

²⁶⁸ Farquharson, “‘Black America Cares,’” 304.

²⁶⁹ For further reading on the American Committee, see Brian McNeil, “‘And Starvation Is the Grim Reaper’: The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive and the Genocide Question During the Nigerian Civil War, 1968–1970,” in *Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide: The Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967–1970*, ed. A. Dirk Moses and Lasse Heerten (New York: Routledge, 2017), 278–300, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315229294>.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 279–284.

AN INTERNAL AFFAIR?

WHY ARE THE NIGERIANS SLAUGHTERING THE BIAFRANS?

Because the Biafrans refused to accept the killing of 30,000 of their people by Northern Nigerians BEFORE the war. Because they refused to live in a country where their lives, loved ones, and property were not protected by their government. Because they believe in the right to live and be free on their "own piece of land."

WHY HAS THE WORLD KEPT SILENT?

Because Russia wants a foothold in Africa at any cost.
Because Britain wants to protect its economic interests and she places more value on British money than African blood.
Because there are American business interests which support British policy.
Because the U.S., which pretends to be neutral has in fact supported Nigeria diplomatically and because the U.S. which pretends to be humane has supported a 'quick-kill' of Biafrans.

WHAT KIND OF NATION IS BIAFRA?

The kind of nation that can still fight on against unpardonable and unbelievable odds.
The kind of nation despite their being massacred and bombed can still maintain electrical and postal services, a stable currency, community morale, an active diplomatic service, and process its available resources.
The kind of nation that is one with its people.
The kind of a nation which could establish a true "Pan African Unity", a unity based on mutual respect, love and cooperation, not one forced upon them by British bullets and Arab piloted Russian jets.

WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE ARE THE BIAFRANS?

They are not the 'yes, Suh' types.
They are the kind of people who will not give in to being bullied by the world powers.
They are the kind of people who can say to their former 'masters', "You don't have to love me, I love myself."
They can use their brain power, muscle power, soul power for survival and advancement.
They are capable of extracting, processing and marketing their own natural resources. In fact, they are the kind of people who offer great hope to Africa and black people everywhere.

SOME HAVE SPOKEN OUT!

President Nyerere of Tanzania for one:
"Africa needs unity...But the basis of our need for unity and the reason for our desire for it, is the greater well-being and the greater security of the people of Africa. Unity by conquest is impossible...There is no unity between the dead and those who killed them and there is no unity in slavery or domination...We therefore recognize the State of Biafra as an independent sovereign entity...Only by this act of recognition can we remain true to our conviction that the purpose of society...is the service of man."

Republic of Tanzania, Cues for Recognition of Biafra, 4/13/68

Some Nigerians have spoken out against the slaughter of their brothers. Yoruba writer Wole Soyinka did:
"Every the man, woman and child believes today that he is fighting a last-ditch battle for his home and his dignity", he says. "What that means in practical terms to the nation is that the Federal Government is faced with a choice of waging out the entire life span or administering a nation that has built into itself a core of implacable hate."
TIME MAGAZINE, 8/23/68
but since then Wole Soyinka has been silenced by the Federal Nigerian Government.
Peter Enahoro, former Editor of the DAILY TIMES (LAGOS) was another Nigerian who spoke out:
"The Biafrans...have fought valiantly, bravely and, so help me God, bravely. They have been a pride to Africa and to the black peoples of the world...What more do a people have to do to show their indomitable will? They have starved, they have bled, and they have died."
but Peter Enahoro is now a Nigerian in exile.

NOW IT IS UP TO BLACK AMERICANS TO SPEAK OUT!

and say there is no acceptable reason for the slaughter of our black brothers in Biafra. Some have protested. Will you?

"With my own eyes I saw the atrocities inflicted by Nigerians, I saw the suffering, the starvation on all levels...I saw churches that were bombed, homes burnt and bodies mutilated."
Charles Kreyatta, Recent Visitor to Biafra, Amsterdam News 11/23/68
"We believe this issue to be one of the most important issues of this decade...This writer stands unequivocally for the recognition of Biafra as a state and nation."
Flord McKelvie, National Director, CORE - Amsterdam News 8/31/68

Biafrans are people, black people, and we have the power to save them. Let no 'ism' or other propaganda fool you into inaction and cause the blood of our Biafran brothers to be on our hands. This is another Cain and Abel story.

Send this message (write, telegram or phone) to your black representatives in Congress

"I urge you to use the power of your office to stop the massive slaughter of our Biafran brothers."

Adam Clayton Powell, New York	House of Representatives, Washington, D.C.
Shirley Chisholm, New York	" " " "
Louis Stokes, Ohio	" " " "
Augustine F. Hawkins, California	" " " "
William L. Clay, Missouri	" " " "
Robert N.C. Nix, Pennsylvania	" " " "
William L. Dawson, Illinois	" " " "
John Conyers, Jr., Michigan	" " " "
Charles C. Diggs, Jr., Michigan	" " " "
Edward Brooke, Mass. Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C.	" " " "
Julian Bond, State Senator, Atlanta, Georgia	" " " "

To: Joint Afro Committee on Biafra
Executive Secretary
1334 Prospect Place
Brooklyn, New York 11213
(212) 736-2624

I/We enclose a check for \$...for a sustaining membership donation to aid in this life saving work.
I/we cannot stand by and let this terrible thing happen to our Biafran brothers.
I/we would like to help you in your campaign to save them.
Please let me know what else I can do.

Name _____
Address _____
Phone _____
Occupation _____

This ad sponsored by:

JOINT AFRO COMMITTEE ON BIAFRA
Executive Secretary
1334 Prospect Place
Brooklyn, N.Y. 11213
Telephone: (212) 736-2624
Charles Konyatta, Honorary Chairman

National Executive Committee:

Arner Brown, Teacher, Venice, California	William Hambrick, Businessman, San Francisco, California
Shirley Washington, Student, Howard U., Washington, D.C.	Pearl Townsend, Housewife, E. St. Louis, Missouri
Johanna White, Nurse, Highland Falls, New York	Jeannette Banker, Teacher, Miami, Florida
Russell Harden, Laborer, Brooklyn, New York	Marlette Gonsky, Librarian, Bennett, South Carolina
Yvonne De Crome, Teacher, N.Y.C.	Edward Bell, Publications, N.Y.C.
Christina Neale, Race Relations, Queens, N.Y.	Lee V. Jones, Practical Nurse, Brooklyn, N.Y.
Ezra Jones, Businessman, Brooklyn, N.Y.	Mary Harden Umble, Educator, N.Y.

Figure 8: A pro-Biafran piece in the *New York Amsterdam News* urging Black American constituents into action

(dated February 1969)²⁷¹

The shortcomings of the pro-Biafra lobby stemmed from ideological differences. As such, it is essential to consider these organizations in terms of pro-Biafran rather than Biafran ideology. Nearly all of the involved institutions possessed motivations of involvement beyond Eastern sovereignty or security. Instead, they latched onto the wealth of Biafran narratives, spinning them toward their own ends. Religious organizations were often motivated by narratives of Christian persecution. A 1968 memorandum by members of Catholic Relief Services stated the dangers of "militant Mohammedanism and Marxist Communism" toward

²⁷¹ "Display Ad 73," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 1, 1969, 40, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Amsterdam News.

“Christian Biafra.”²⁷² Pro-Biafran elements of the Black American community pushed an array of narratives. While the JACB linked the necessity of Biafran self-determination to the Black Power movement in its materials, the BAATAS organization remained committed to humanitarian aid.²⁷³ The American Committee took a particularly interesting approach – by “wedding the Biafran people to the concept of a nation, activists within the [organization] claimed that the prosecution of the war itself by the Nigerian government was a genocide.”²⁷⁴ The Biafran identity crisis, as it manifested in its externally-facing institutions, proved to be a double-edged sword. While it maintained a wide range of appeal, it led to the atomization of popular support.

Many of the bodies in discussion attempted to influence policy when circumstances permitted. While they sometimes reached policymaking circles, their efforts largely failed beyond humanitarian gestures. An April 1969 White House memorandum from Henry Kissinger notified Nixon of Americans for Biafra Relief, calling it a “high-powered new organization” and warning of incoming legislative pressures.²⁷⁵ As aforementioned, Kissinger later dismissed the lobby. In the Black American camp, elected officials sided with the FMG. Representative Charles Diggs Jr., who later helped found the Congressional Black Caucus, visited Biafra and Nigeria on a “fact-finding tour.”²⁷⁶ Ultimately, Diggs referred to Biafra as a “dying cause.”²⁷⁷ Some pro-Biafra organizations directly intervened when they could. Religious organizations

²⁷² Fintan Kilbride and Raymond Kennedy to Richard Cushing, “A Memorandum on the Nigeria-Biafra Situation to His Eminence Cardinal Cushing,” Memorandum, July 18, 1968, Folder 6, Box 2, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

²⁷³ Farquharson, ““Black America Cares,”” 313–14.

²⁷⁴ McNeil, ““And Starvation Is the Grim Reaper,”” 279–80.

²⁷⁵ Henry Kissinger to Richard Nixon, “Congressional Criticism of Nigerian Policy,” Memorandum, April 24, 1969, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 741, Country Files, Africa, Nigeria. Confidential, National Archives, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve05p1/d60>.

²⁷⁶ “Rep. Diggs, Others In Biafra, Nigeria,” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 15, 1969, 226534589, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Amsterdam News.

²⁷⁷ Farquharson, ““Black America Cares,”” 317.

such as Joint Church Aid and Caritas engaged in humanitarian efforts, airlifting food and medical supplies.²⁷⁸ Although some pushed for mediation, such as the Joint Afro Committee and the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, none possessed the authority to do so.²⁷⁹ Thus, direct intervention by the pro-Biafra lobby was consigned to the humanitarian camp.

Rather than an incongruous alliance between figures such as John Lennon, Edward Brooke, and Ian Smith, pro-Biafran sympathizers remained confined to their respective spheres.²⁸⁰ As such, the pro-Biafra community never reached a critical mass. No unified political body emerged in favor of Biafran sovereignty and no mediation came. Meanwhile, the war continued, with Biafra weakening by the day. The death blow came on December 23, 1969, with a Federal offensive that consolidated control over the cities of Aba, Bende, Ikot Ekpene, and Umuahia.²⁸¹ With the remaining Biafran territory split in two, military resistance went from difficult to impossible. On January 10, 1970, the Biafran cabinet and military advisors met to discuss options for surrender.²⁸²

²⁷⁸ Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 251.

²⁷⁹ McNeil, ““And Starvation Is the Grim Reaper,”” 279; Farquharson, ““Black America Cares,”” 316.

²⁸⁰ John Lennon famously returned his MBE in protest of the British government’s involvement in the war.

²⁸¹ Momoh, *The Nigerian Civil War*, 151.

²⁸² This thesis is not a military history of the conflict. Numerous works from Federal, Biafran, and scholarly perspectives discuss the late-war military situation in far greater detail. For further reading, see Olusegun Obasanjo, *My Command: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970*, African Writers Series 249 (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1981); Momoh, *The Nigerian Civil War*; Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession*; Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*.

Conclusion: The Beginning (January 1970 –)

*An old star departs, leaves us here on the shore
Gazing heavenward for a new star approaching;
The new star appears, foreshadows its going
Before a going and coming that goes on forever...*²⁸³
- Christopher Okigbo, “Elegy for Alto” (1967)

“No Victor, No Vanquished”

On January 12, 1970, Major General Philip Effiong formally announced the secessionist surrender over Radio Biafra.²⁸⁴ Within a week, the Republic of Biafra was no more.²⁸⁵ Effiong, the former Biafran Chief of General Staff and Vice President, found himself the Head of State for four days. Ojukwu had fled to the Ivory Coast on January 11 – an unceremonious finish for the face of the Biafran cause.²⁸⁶ Thus, Colonel Olusegun Obasanjo, the commander of the Federal Third Marine Commando Division and future Nigerian Head of State, accepted the Biafran surrender from the less famous Effiong.²⁸⁷ On January 14, Obasanjo broadcasted a statement from Radio Biafra, this time under Federal control, formalizing the end of hostilities and guaranteeing the safety of Eastern residents. Okokon Ndem, the “Golden Voice of Biafra,” performed a final program for the entertainment of Federal troops. The radio, an instrumental arm of Biafra’s domestic propaganda machine and voice of many a hope or sentiment, finally found itself subdued.²⁸⁸ Physical remnants of the Biafran cause quickly disappeared as well. Facing Federal occupation and potential reprisals, Biafran officials had hurried to destroy all

²⁸³ Christopher Okigbo, *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder* (London: Heinemann, 1971), 72. Okigbo was killed several months later while fighting in the Biafran Army.

²⁸⁴ Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, xix.

²⁸⁵ The formal Biafran surrender was signed on January 15, 1970.

²⁸⁶ For a more detailed account of the final days of the war and Ojukwu’s flight, see Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession*, 165–75.

²⁸⁷ Obasanjo, *My Command*, 121–32.

²⁸⁸ Admittedly, this doesn’t capture the whole situation. Stations calling themselves “Radio Biafra” continue to broadcast to this day.

official records of the state. Godwin Onyegbula recalled piles of burnt documents and the “painful task reliving the experience of Biafra, and dumping into the toilet-bin, documents which stirred emotion.”²⁸⁹ Thus, firsthand accounts of Biafra remain only in its propaganda and the words of participants. While officials such as Onyegbula expressed attitudes of defiance in the face of occupying forces, a pervasive fear of reprisal remained. The Eastern desire for sovereignty originated from one for security – without it, there were no guarantees.

However, despite widespread Biafran fears, the massacres never came in force. While some Federal units committed grave crimes of murder, looting, and rape at the immediate end of the war, there was no systematic eradication of Igbo peoples.²⁹⁰ On January 15, Gowon addressed the nation:

Now, my dear countrymen, we must recommence at once in greater earnest, the task of healing the nation's wounds. We have at various times repeated our desire for reconciliation in full equality, once the secessionist regime abandoned secession. I solemnly repeat our guarantees of a general amnesty for those misled into rebellion. We guarantee the security of life and property of all citizens in every part of Nigeria and equality in political rights.²⁹¹

Gowon’s speech outlined the principles of “no victor, no vanquished,” or the notion of a magnanimous reincorporation into Nigeria. Walter Ofonagoro and Raphael Uwechue resumed their careers as Nigerian civil servants, while Godwin Onyegbula became an entrepreneur. Chinua Achebe and Cyprian Ekwensi continued to write. Ntiyong Akpan and Emeka Ojukwu both returned to Nigeria and became involved in local politics.²⁹² Ojukwu remained a staunch advocate for Biafra until his death in 2011. Despite enduring years of mortal conflict, life simply

²⁸⁹ Onyegbula, *Memoirs of the Nigerian-Biafran Bureaucrat*, 190–95.

²⁹⁰ De St. Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War*, 405–7.

²⁹¹ Yakubu Gowon, “The Dawn of National Reconciliation,” in *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria*, ed. Anthony Kirk-Greene, 1st ed., vol. 2, 2 vols. (1970; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 457–61.

²⁹² It took until 1982 for Ojukwu to secure a pardon and passage to Nigeria.

went on. Even after reading and listening through a mountain of postwar memoirs, interviews, and literature, it is impossible to know how they truly felt.

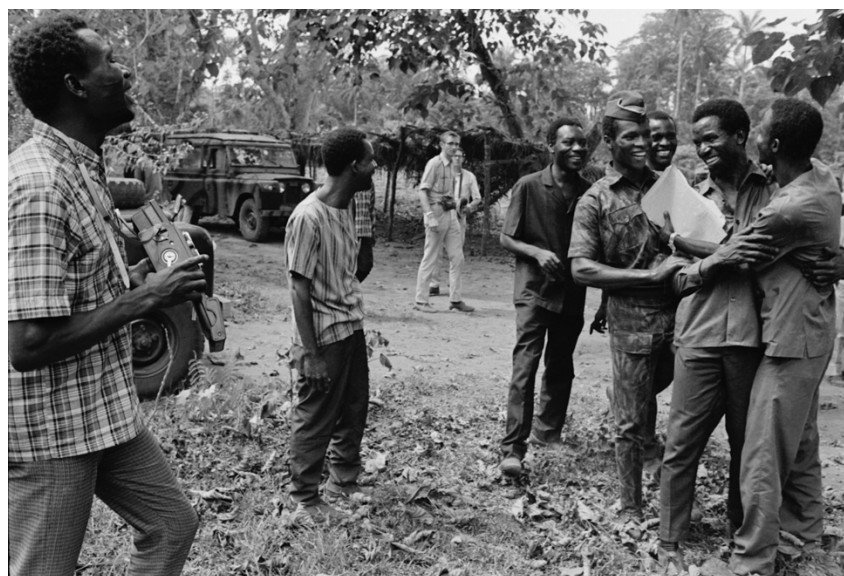


Figure 9: Cyprian Ekwensi (center right) meets occupying Federal troops and journalists (dated January 1970)²⁹³

Despite Biafra's collapse, declaring the end of the war to be the end of anything beyond formal Biafran institutions would be a gross misstatement. Although records and mechanisms of state were destroyed, memories proved harder to scrub out.²⁹⁴ The war left over one million dead, with more liberal estimates ranging up to three.²⁹⁵ The majority were Biafran civilians. Thus, while many Biafrans continued their lives and complied with the reunified government, the costs of war lingered.²⁹⁶ Anugwom writes of a collective memory perpetuated by contemporary violence and political injustices in the Niger Delta, all too reminiscent of the events that begot secession.

²⁹³ Abbas, *End of Biafra*, photograph, Magnum Photos, 1970.

²⁹⁴ For more detailed reading on the collective memory of the war, see Edlyne Anugwom, "Memory as Social Burden: Collective Remembrance of the Biafran War and Imaginations of Socio-Political Marginalization in Contemporary Nigeria," in *Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide: The Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967–1970*, ed. A. Dirk Moses and Lasse Heerten (New York: Routledge, 2017), 387–411, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315229294>.

²⁹⁵ Momoh, *The Nigerian Civil War*, 191–92; Achebe, *There Was a Country*, 228–32.

²⁹⁶ Anugwom, "Memory as Social Burden," 393–95.

Biafra's International Legacy

Outside of Nigeria, it is easy to believe that Biafra faded into the annals of unsuccessful postcolonial experiments. This is wholly untrue. Although one may not know it by name, Biafra's legacy extended far beyond its statehood. The Biafran War ushered in a new era of humanitarianism, permanently changing the roles of governments and institutions. In the United States, Black American legislators moved American foreign policy toward the Global South in a humanitarian direction.²⁹⁷ The war expedited the development of the modern NGO, with the taxing circumstances of the air corridor allowing relief organizations ample practice for future operations. Additionally, the Biafran cause spurred countless individuals into humanitarian action. This appeal across ethnic and religious boundaries likely assisted the shift of humanitarian NGOs from religious to popular organizations.

Narratives first harnessed by the Biafran government appeared in conflicts across the world. Within months of Biafra's fall, analogous rhetoric appeared in the materials of the South Sudan Liberation Front, the political wing of the Anya-Nya militant movement. Southern representatives lobbied the UN, citing the Northern Muslim genocide against their people.²⁹⁸ A booklet titled *Resistance* called for action against the "Islamization" of the Christian South.²⁹⁹ However, Sudan was only the beginning. Biafran propaganda narratives inadvertently shaped Western perceptions of the entire African continent. Archetypal settings such as the civil war, famine, and war-crime-ridden failed state originated from numerous sympathy-eliciting ads, pamphlets, and conferences. As the Sudan and Tigray conflicts flared up, or when the Rwandan

²⁹⁷ For further reading on American policy toward Africa in the post-Biafra years, see Benjamin Talton, *In This Land of Plenty: Mickey Leland and Africa in American Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

²⁹⁸ L. Wol Wol and F.B. Maggott to Edvard Hambro, December 1970, Folder 2, Box 3, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

²⁹⁹ *Resistance: The Story of Southern Sudan* (South Sudan Liberation Front, 1970), Folder 2, Box 3, Biafra War Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

genocide began, the images of those tragedies were not only of Ethiopia, Rwanda, or Sudan, but subconsciously of Biafra for many. As long as we interact with others outside of our suburbanite bubbles, it is essential to understand from where our preconceived notions stem.

Truly a Failure?

Take a seat at a bar in Owerri, Enugu, or Onitsha and order a Hero. Known as “Oh Mpa” [Oh my father] with a rising sun across its label, the beer is a homage to a state that once was.³⁰⁰ The nickname began as a coincidence: Ojukwu died shortly before Hero Lager’s Onitsha brewery opened. However, it came to embody the spirit of the Eastern “history and struggle.”³⁰¹ Nostalgia for Biafra is abundant within its former borders. Multiple secessionist groups have taken the name, with the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), and the Biafra Zionist Front (BZF) being three of the most prominent.³⁰² Different Biafran revival movements pose different ideas for secession. While MASSOB advocates for secession through non-violent means, IPOB and BZF currently wage low-level guerilla warfare against the Nigerian government in the former Eastern Region. However, they all seek the same thing.

³⁰⁰ Linus Unah, “In a Local Beer, a National Hero,” *Eater*, November 26, 2019, <https://www.eater.com/2019/11/26/20960522/hero-lager-beer-nigeria-igbos-history>.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Radio Biafra continues to broadcast under MASSOB. Ironically, it does so from the United Kingdom.



Figure 10: A 2019 advertisement for Hero Lager in Onitsha³⁰³

I titled my thesis after a line from W.H. Auden’s “Atlantis”: a poem about the search for utopia.³⁰⁴ The narrator toils through conflicting islands of ideology on their journey, with each one more nonsensical than the last. Finally, stranded alone in the forsaken wilderness, the narrator learns to “stagger onward rejoicing” and find fulfillment in their search. At its core, Biafra was both narrator and utopia. It painted itself as many things and manifested as an ideal for many. While it failed to survive as a tangible state, it persists today as an ideology, an entity that will likely outlive many of the peoples, institutions, and nations that surrounded it.

Against all odds, Biafra prevailed.

³⁰³ Unah, “In a Local Beer, a National Hero.” This thesis is not an advertisement for Hero Lager, nor does it endorse the excessive or underage consumption of alcoholic beverages.

³⁰⁴ Wystan Hugh Auden, “Atlantis,” in *The Collected Poetry of W.H. Auden* (1941; repr., New York: Random House, 1945), 20–22. I recommend that the reader read through the poem.

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John Stremlau Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.
Nixon National Security Files, National Archives.

Archives (Digital)

BBC Documentaries
CIA FOIA Reading Room
DOJ Records
FBIS NewsBank
Foreign Relations of the United States

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