

Exploring the Roles Played by Some European and Asiatic Powers during the Nigerian Civil War, 1967 – 1970

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Abstract

The Nigerian civil war broke out on 6 July, 1967. The beginning of the war was described by the Federal government of Nigeria as a “police action” meant to arrest leaders of a rebellion (the Biafran regime), which was later to metamorphose into a full fledged war. Both parties engaged in propaganda activities designed to win the support of the outside world, consequently leading to the internationalization of the conflict. The focus of this paper is to give a historical discourse on the roles of certain European and Asiatic powers during the Nigerian civil war. Those powers to be examined include: France, United States of America, Portugal, China and Israel. The paper examined the roles played by those powers, that is, the motivating factors behind their involvement in the war, the modus operandi of such involvement and its extent as well as the implications of such external involvement. The paper concluded that the implications of the involvement coupled with other external influences had contributed to the prolongation of the crisis and provides a good case material for understanding the influence of the external factors in inter- African conflicts.

Keywords: Exploring, Roles, European powers, Asiatic powers, Civil war, Military assistance

1.0 Introduction

This section provides a brief illumination of Nigeria’s external relations with these powers before the outbreak of the war so as to provide some understanding of subsequent developments. In the field of international politics, Nigeria’s relations with the west particularly Britain and USA were very cordial. Because of Nigeria’s historical evolution, post independence era was highly committed towards establishing firm relations with Britain and its Western allies including the USA. It has been indicated that before the civil war, fifty percent (50%) of aids Nigeria received from foreign countries came from the U.S.A (Ate, 1980). Also, Britain and the U.S.A supplied the equipments for the Navy and the Army after Nigerian independence. Franco – Nigerian relations were not very cordial before the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war, as France was the only country with whom diplomatic relations were terminated by the post independence civilian regime. (Ajibola, 1978). The federal government of Nigeria severed diplomatic relations with France, owing to the latter’s atomic test in the Sahara. Relations were only restored in 1965. In addition, Nigeria was surrounded by weak French speaking African countries that were still largely in France’s sphere of influence. Hence, France could be expected to be watchful of developments in Nigeria especially with the fear of a united and successful Nigeria presenting a strong pole of attraction to the weak and fragmented Francophone states around it, and so by implication threatening to upset the balance of power in the region to the detriment of French influence. Nigeria’s relations with Portugal before the war were far from being cordial. This was because of Nigeria’s strong commitment to the cause of the liberation movements of those African countries that were still under the yoke of her colonialism – Angola, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, Sao Tome and Principe (Ogunbadejo 1976). Similarly, Nigeria’s relations with China before the war were far from being friendly as Nigeria followed the western lead and bluntly refused to recognise peking. Also the bourgeois nature of the civilian regime in Nigeria did not basically help the situation (Ogunbadejo 1976). The Arab – Israeli conflict was also reflected in the war. (Jorre, 1972). We shall proceed to examining the roles of European and Asiatic powers in the Nigerian civil war.

2.0 European Powers and the Nigerian Civil War

This section examines the roles played by certain European powers during the Nigerian civil war. The countries under the search light include France, United States of America, and Portugal.

2.1 France

It was while Britain refused to withdraw its support from the federal military government of Nigeria that France moved in on the Biafran side on 31st July 1968. Biafra was virtually on her knees by 1968, when France intervened (Jorre, 1972). And it is arguable that had France not come in on the side of the Biafrans during this period, Biafra would have collapsed and the war ended in 1968 as France was the only notable power that provided military hardwares to Biafra through Ivory Coast and Gabon. The question of French attitude and policy constitute one of the great enigmas of the Nigerian Civil War. Why did France support Biafra? Why did it choose the nadir of Biafra's fortunes as the moment to intervene? And, having intervened why was it reluctant to complete the whole process by according recognition to Biafra? These questions seem intractable but shall be resolved. The motives for French intervention shall firstly be examined. One motive has been indicated in de Gaulle's philosophy of Nationalism and self assertion as exemplified in his resistance to American domination of Europe and in the encouragement of separatist feelings in Quebec and Katanga (Ajibola, 1978). In fact de Gaulle equated the Biafran cause with Quebec. Biafra was seen as fighting against an abhorrent "supranationalism" represented by the Nigerian federation. In support of this Uwechue (1971) reported that Mr. Joel le Theule, the French Minister of Information declared on 31st July 1968 after a cabinet meeting that: "the French government notes that the bloodshed and sufferings endured for over a year by the populations of Biafra have demonstrated their will to affirm themselves as a people... faithful of its principles, the French government considers that as a result, the present conflict should be resolved on the basis of the right of a people to self – determination involving setting in motion the appropriate international procedure to this end". Corroborating the above stand, Ajibola (1978) maintained that when hostilities started in Nigeria, it was feared that France might support Biafra, not only because she was catholic (as much of Biafra was) or as a reaction to Britain or even from a political wish to diminish the only black nation that could challenge French hegemony in West Africa, but also because of her attitude to secessionist forces elsewhere.

Closely tied to the above, was de Gaulle's distrust of the Anglo – Saxons. This has been supported by the fact that de Gaulle rarely missed any opportunity to embarrass the British and Americans, and Biafra, with Britain particularly behind Lagos, provided an excellent opportunity. Also by supporting Biafra, France itself would be fulfilling its historical and Gaulist – inspired destiny of strengthening the middle way between the world's two power blocs and asserting France's own independence from the Anglo – Saxons and the Russians who were conveniently behind the Federal government (Jorre, 1972). More importantly, however, was the fear of a united and successful Nigeria presenting a strong pole of attraction to the weak and fragmented francophone states around it, and so by implication threatening to upset the balance of power in the region to the detriment of French influence (Ogunbadejo, 1976). De Gaulle particularly had no love for federations and favoured a patchwork of small states grouped together in a loose confederal relationship as embodied in OCAM which provided a useful economic link between fourteen of Africa's Francophone countries. De Gaulle has agreed to the breakup of France's own Western and Equatorial African federations at the time of independence. Perhaps this point can be better understood through a quotation taken from President de Gaulle's speech at a press conference in October, 1968 as reported by Southern Africa (7/10/1968). He said:

I am not sure that the idea of a federal state is always a very good one or even very practical especially in Africa. This concept, in a nutshell, means forcibly putting people together who are different and sometimes opposed to one another and who are not interested in being joined together. We see it in Canada, Malaya and Cyprus. And of course in Nigeria. Why indeed should the Ibos- Christians for the most part, who live in the south and have a language and way of life of their own – why should the Ibos have to accept domination by another ethnic group within the federation. For that is what happens when the coloniser goes. It was difficult to see how Nigeria could survive in the face of the upheavals it was going through. And then comes this atrocious, this enormous tragedy – a Biafra that has proclaimed independence and a federation in its determination to destroy it employs war, blockade, genocide and famine. Who can imagine the peoples of this federation.... Will be able to take up any semblance of a common life again.

It has also been suggested according to Uwechue (1971) that the French policy was instigated to some extent by the roles of Ivory Coast and Gabon and that of M. Foccart, the Secretary – General for African Affairs at the Elysee which were decidedly pro – Biafra in the Nigerian Civil conflicts. (Ogunbadejo 1976). Though it was argued that on the contrary, France would have instigated Ivory Coast and Gabon (Uwechue 1971). Other sources counteracted this as being untrue. For instance, they argued that Ivory Coast and Gabon being among the richest Francophone nations could afford as much independence from French official line on foreign policy matters as the rest of OCAM members. On such important international issues like the Middle – East crisis or attitude to the People’s Republic of China, France and Ivory Coast had consistently disagreed. The breakthrough which Biafra achieved with Houphouet – Boigny of Ivory Coast and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania encouraged the impression that respected Africans were now on the Biafran side. Houphouet- Boigny in particular, who was greatly respected in France, seemed to have considerably influenced the French government to take a more serious and positive decision in line with his stand. (Uwechue, 1971). Moreover, Ivory Coast and Gabon provided a vital outlet through which France’s aid could reach Biafra.

Finally, there was the allegation that France had vested economic interests in Biafra, and that pressures of financial interest groups were in combination the motives for French policy (Jorre, 1972). This was based on the allegation of oil concessions between SAFRAP, (State- owned French Oil Company) and another by the French branch of the House of Rothchild on the one hand and Biafra on the other. However, the allegations have no basis as no detailed evidence of any Franco-Biafran deals has so far come to light (Cervenka, 1972). In fact, the position of France unlike Britain was less vulnerable. This is because France was buying only three percent of its total oil purchases from Nigeria, in 1966, and the SAFRAP’s refineries in Nigerian – held territory (primarily in the Mid – West) were also twice the size of those located in Ibo heartland (Cervenka, 1972). Thus it seems that the French support of Biafra was not really based on the issue of oil concessions but was rather rooted in de Gaulle’s apprehension of the role which a united Nigeria might play within the common market, in particular, vis – a – vis the French speaking West African countries. Even then, France’s military aid to Biafra was limited. Thus neither the amount nor the nature of the arms – few heavy weapons were supplied – was adequate to ensure that the Biafrans stood the remotest chance of winning the war. (Jorre, 1972). In this way, France also contributed to the prolongation of the Nigerian war as this limited move was sufficient to encourage the Biafrans to fight on and to ensure that thousands of them died needlessly. Hence, though French intervention saved the Biafrans from defeat, it seems to have prolonged the war. It almost seemed as if the French deliberately did not want Biafra to win the war since half – hearted assistance and semi – recognition hardly reflected total commitment. About three factors might account for this policy.

Firstly, France decided to play the game both ways, partly because of the unexpected solidarity and strength of the federal allies and partly due to innate caution (Ogunbadejo,1976). Thus by providing enough arms to keep Biafra going and yet simultaneously maintaining diplomatic relations with Nigeria, it would retain a valuable degree of flexibility and protect its existing interests on both sides, while standing to profit enormously if Biafra, through Nigeria’s default should eventually emerge triumphant. Also, it is significant to point out that Francophone Africa which constitutes France’s primary interest in the continent was deeply riven by the crisis. For instance, Cameroon and Niger were warmly pro – Federal, as the Ivory Coast and Gabon were pro-Biafran. For instance, Jorre (1972) reported that Niger’s President; Hamani Diori was a close friend of Houphouet Boigny (of Ivory Coast) but consistently opposed his Biafran policy, while Cameroon, in difference to the federal government’s susceptibilities refused to allow Douala to be used as a base for relief operations into Biafra.

Furthermore, the sophisticated diplomacy exhibited by the Nigerian government should not be ignored. The government refused to take any of the obvious reprisals like breaking off diplomatic relations, harassing French nationals or confiscating French property (Ogunbadejo 1976). Various reasons could account for the stand taken by Nigeria. Firstly, the External Affairs Ministry harboured the fear that such a step could prompt France to fully recognise Biafra. Again, the possibility of the Nigerians having an exaggerated respect for France’s ruthlessness in pursuing its African policies cannot be entirely dismissed (Jorre, 1972). This could be demonstrated by the rapidity and skilfulness with which French para – troopers crushed an attempted coup against President Bongo’s predecessor in 1964 and the Chad intervention in 1969 by the even tougher foreign legion (Jorre, 1972). All these indications may have sharpened and confirmed Nigeria’s fear, thinking that any ill – conceived step could make France to unreservedly declare support for Biafra, thereby pumping into Biafra not only heavy artilleries but also financial backing.

Also, it was felt that French recognition might be a turning point in the war by finally breaking the diplomatic log-jam which the four African countries recognition of Biafra had so far failed to achieve. (Ogunbadejo, 1972).

2.2 The United States of America

The United States right from the outset of the war had expressed a policy of neutrality in the Nigerian conflict. This is because she believed that the conflict fell within Britain's spheres of influence. Thus it was a British rather than an American problem. Quoting Dean Rusk, U.S Secretary of State, West Africa (27/07/1967) reported that, the United States Government regarded the situation as the "primary responsibility of Britain", and America was sure that Britain would be equal to the task of continuing to maintain "Western influence in Nigeria" (Ajibola, 1978). No wonder then that few days after the outbreak of the war, the U.S announced that it would neither sell nor supply arms to either side, in order not to deepen the conflict. (Ogunbadejo, 1976). Other reasons accounted for this posture. It must be noted that the costly and controversial involvement in the Vietnam war which had created some internal difficulties coupled with the memory of American involvement in the Congo made the U.S more hesitant about another foreign involvement (Uku, 1978). In the light of this, one can understand the U.S. government's statements reiterating support for the Nigerian government, while hoping that the internal conflict would be settled peacefully. Even when the Soviet Union declared support for Lagos and began to effectively arm the federal side, the U.S did not make a reversal of her initial policy partly because it believed that Britain's commitment to the federal cause would check if not neutralise Russia's efforts and partly because it had reached the conclusion that since Gowon was hardly a socialist the extent to which he could flirt with the Russians was greatly limited (Ogunbadejo, 1976).

With the prolongation of the war, and the reports of starvation and suffering among the population of Biafra, coupled with effective secessionist propaganda, the U.S policy of non-intervention came under fire from a strong pro- Biafran lobby. Eventually, the Americans opted for a low – profile approach. But by declaring an arms embargo and political support for Lagos and the one Nigeria concept, the U.S was able to provide relief for Biafra. In the process, Washington became the largest contributor to the relief efforts. President Johnson in justifying the humanitarian intervention explained that "while we have no intention of interfering in Nigerian affairs, we do not believe innocent persons should be made victims of political manoeuvring. (Cervenka, 1972:11). In spite of a change of administration in 1968, the policy of remaining aloof from all commitments other than relief operations was strictly adhered to throughout the conflict. In this way, Washington hoped to calm the storm of the war and emerge in the post - war peace with American interests on both sides intact. (The U.S investments in Nigeria totalled almost \$162 million, representing 15 percent of the total foreign investments in Nigeria). In support of this view, the authors of "The Other Side of Nigeria's Civil War", felt that: "the strategy of relief agencies performed a pivotal role by providing the neutral instruments needed to keep the channels of influence open" (African Research Group, 1970:26). However, the low – profile policy led to the Americans falling foul of both the Nigerians and the Biafrans as the U.S relief intervention had some clearly political implications which to some extent indirectly contributed to the prolongation of the Nigerian civil war. Firstly, it involved direct dealings with the secessionist authorities which indirectly strengthened the status of Biafra in striving for international recognition. Besides, the establishment of the relief contacts with the Biafran regime intensified the pressure by the ever- active Biafran lobby in the U.S for some form of diplomatic relationship. And this in turn created false hopes within Biafra (Ogunbadejo, 1976). It is note – worthy however, that recognition never came for the Biafrans as the Americans became increasingly impatient of Ojukwu's apparently non – challant attitude towards the starvation and suffering of his people (Ogunbadejo, 1976). Instead, America became even more pro – federal.

2.3 Portugal

Nigeria's relations with Portugal before the war were far from being cordial. This was because of Nigeria's strong commitment to the cause of the liberation movements of those African countries that were still under the yoke of her colonialism-Angola, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, Sao Tome and Principe. Thus, Portugal's motives just like that of South Africa and Rhodesia stemmed from the desire to undermine African unity and weaken the African liberation movements against themselves and rationalize their charges that Black Africans were incapable and not ready for self – government. Portugal's assistance perhaps was the most valuable to the Biafrans principally because the airports at Lisbon, Guinea Bissau (Portuguese Guinea) and Sao Tome, constituted excellent links for Biafra. (Jorre, 1972). Besides, Biafra also had its chief – arms buying mission based in Lisbon (Jorre, 1972).

However, the Portuguese did not supply armaments, heavily charged the Biafrans for their airport services and generally maintained a low – profile policy towards the Nigerian war.

3.0 The Asiatic Powers

This section examines the role of Asiatic powers in the Nigerian civil war especially China and Israel

3.1 China

Nigeria's relations with China before the war were far from being friendly as indicated earlier. However, according to Zagoria (1965) it was the global Sino – Soviet rivalry that made China to declare support for Biafra as the Soviet Union backed Nigeria. Peking's support for Biafra ignored the volatile behaviour of the Biafran regime, which was sometimes bourgeois, sometimes apparently revolutionary, and sometimes reactionary (Ogunbadejo, 1976). Later, while radical Tanzania's and Zambia's recognition of Biafra allowed the Chinese to rationalise their action, the concurrent recognition by "bourgeois" and "neo-colonial" Ivory Coast and Gabon neutralised this effect (Ogunbadejo, 1976). Although, there is paucity of evidence to back the allegation that the Chinese supplied arms to Biafra, this was widely believed at the time. Chinese military assistance was said to have been channelled through Tanzania. The Chinese support for Biafrans also contributed to the refusal of the Soviet Union to stop arms sales to Nigeria because her involvement had also assumed the dimension of competing with China for influence in Nigeria (Akinbi, 1991).

3.2 Israel

The Arab – Israeli conflict, like the East – west and the Sino – Soviet confrontations were also reflected in the war. The Arabs had traditionally strong religious and cultural links with Northern Nigeria. (For instance, a huge pilgrimage to Mecca is observed annually by the Northern Muslims). Arab support was invaluable to the Nigerians both materially and diplomatically. Egypt supplied pilots and technicians for the airforce and Sudan and Libya, traditional users of British weaponry, sold to Nigeria some of the equipments Britain refused to provide (Jorre, 1972). But in Israel, public opinion, greatly influenced by the parallel between the Ibos' plight and the Jews' own tragic history, was solidly behind Biafra. However, its assistance was limited since it did supply small quantities of arms in various heavily camouflaged ways to Biafra. (Jorre, 1972).

4.0 Conclusion

The paper has given a historical discourse on the roles of certain European and Asiatic powers which included France, United States of America, Portugal, China and Israel during the Nigerian civil war. Specifically, the paper has examined the motivational bases behind the involvement of the powers, the modus operandi of their involvement as well as its extent. The implications of the involvement of these European and Asiatic powers in the war, coupled with other external influences already discussed elsewhere by Akinbi (2015a) and Akinbi (2015b), had contributed to the prolongation of the war and provides a good case material for understanding the influence of the external factors in inter – African conflicts.

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