



**University of Calgary**

**PRISM: University of Calgary's Digital Repository**

---

University of Calgary Press

University of Calgary Press Open Access Books

---

2020-06

# Secession and Separatist Conflicts in Postcolonial Africa

Thomas, Charles G.; Falola, Toyin

University of Calgary Press

---

Thomas, C. G., & Falola, T. (2020). *Secession and Separatist Conflicts in Postcolonial Africa*.

University of Calgary Press, Calgary, AB.

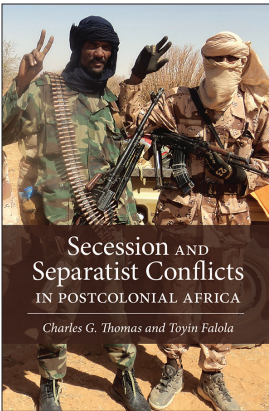
<http://hdl.handle.net/1880/112216>

book

---

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

*Downloaded from PRISM: <https://prism.ucalgary.ca>*



## SECESSION AND SEPARATIST CONFLICTS IN POSTCOLONIAL AFRICA

By Charles G. Thomas and Toyin Falola

ISBN 978-1-77385-127-3

**THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK.** It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at [ucpress@ucalgary.ca](mailto:ucpress@ucalgary.ca)

**Cover Art:** The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

**COPYRIGHT NOTICE:** This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence. This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

**UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY:**

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

**UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY NOT:**

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.



**Acknowledgement:** We acknowledge the wording around open access used by Australian publisher, **re.press**, and thank them for giving us permission to adapt their wording to our policy <http://www.re-press.org>

## Map of Nigeria and Biafra



Copyright © 2014 Nathan E. McCormack and Charles G. Thomas



## The Secession of Biafra, 1967–1970

The Nigerian Civil War, fought in an attempt to secure the secession of its breakaway eastern region known as Biafra, is remembered primarily by the world as a human tragedy of epic proportions, one where countless lives were lost when hunger became a weapon against the besieged Igbos. However, the case of Biafra was to have far more wide-ranging effects on the world, although they would prove more subtle than images of starving children. The war confirmed the supremacy of the Nigerian federal government, but it also signalled the end of the traditional power structures in the new multi-state nation. It also brought forth the understandable African cynicism of the motives of the greater world in their affairs, as arms poured into Nigeria from a multitude of would-be patrons but food and medicine was far less forthcoming. And finally, although none would notice at the time, the death of Biafra marked the final end to any hopes of Civil Secession on the continent of Africa.

### THE CONTEXT OF BIAFRA

The Nigerian Civil War, like all civil wars and certainly the majority in this volume, did not exist in a vacuum. One may trace the earliest roots of the conflict back to the British administration, which welded three distinct regions into Southern Nigeria, administering the West, the Mid-West, and the East all as a coherent unit. These three regions were dominated by two majority ethnic groups, the Yoruba in the West and the Igbo in the East, with the Mid-West being inhabited by a mixture of these groups and a variety of minority peoples. There was a delicate balance between the regions,

and as each were developed under the British “Dual Mandate,”<sup>1</sup> they became economically linked and yet still culturally distinct. British racial conceptions at the time led them to believe that the more Westernized and Christianized Igbos were the more promising material, and they quickly began developing the East as a centre of education and administration. While this did not please the Yoruba, the balance was maintained. However, this began to change in 1914 when Britain connected the previously separate Northern Nigeria to the South, making a single colony united under a single administration. At the time, the North was far less developed and remained a very conservative Islamic society due largely to Britain’s policy of Indirect Rule, which had left traditional Islamic rulers and social systems in place. This, along with the size of the region, immediately set it as an imposing entity within the newly minted unified colony. However, this did not come to a head until Nigeria began to press for self-determination, with the Federal Republic of Nigeria gaining its independence on October 1, 1960. It was in the newly elected parliament of Nigeria that the size and monolithic leadership of the North stepped to the fore, allowing the conservative North to often dictate the course of the nation, even as Igbos had spread over the nation to function as necessary administrators.<sup>2</sup>

These feelings of the Easterners that they were subjects as opposed to citizens were exacerbated by the resource distribution within the nation. While the North was easily the largest of the regions, it consisted largely of grasslands that were used for herding and agriculture. While these provided an economic base, it was the West and the East that provided the true engine to the Nigerian economy. The West, while also agrarian, held the city of Lagos, which was the capital and also primary port of the nation, bringing with it considerable trade and economic activity. However, even this economic power was dwarfed by the East, where oil had been discovered in the Niger River Delta in 1956. The discovery of commercially viable oil deposits and their development by Shell–British Petroleum, Mobil, Texaco, and Gulf Oil, quickly caused the value of the region to skyrocket. However, despite the massive oil wealth of the region, upon independence much of that wealth fell under the control of the Northern-dominated government despite the environmental costs and local involvement in the East, with the soaring production eventually providing nearly half of the revenue of the whole country. This led many Eastern leaders to question the rights of the

North to control what they saw as their resource, especially as they watched much of the wealth drawn forth leave their region to enrich the other parts of the country.<sup>3</sup>

It was these essential political and economic tensions between the large, conservative North and the small, developed East that would form the backdrop leading up to the Civil War itself, but it would be first a pair of failed coups that would rend the nation apart. The first coup occurred on January 15, 1966, when a small group of young army officers who were predominantly Igbo struck across the nation in an attempt to seize power from what they argued was a corrupt system of governance.<sup>4</sup> The final straw for this movement was the Western regional election, where mass confusion, corruption, and irregular reporting led to hotly contested results and over 300 persons were arrested for various electoral violations. In the end, Chief Samuel Akíntólá was elected premier of the West and his party, the Nigerian National Democratic Party, was awarded the majority of the seats, but the fiercely contested election became symbolic of the decay of the Nigerian democracy.

Despite their stated goals of overthrowing corrupt elements of the government, the young officers' coup itself failed, succeeding only in spilling a large amount of blood and driving the country into the control of the ranking senior army officer, Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi,<sup>5</sup> who had rallied the loyal troops into a counterweight to the mutineers and secured the surrender of the young dissidents. However, it was not so much the success or failure that was notable, it was the blood that was spilled: the political leadership of the Northern power bloc. In a single night the officers of the coup killed Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto and chief political power of the North; and Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the Federal Prime Minister and also a northerner; as well as Akíntólá, premier of the Western Region and a key political ally of the Sardauna. Beyond these political casualties, the plotters also managed to slay Brigadier General Maimalari and Lt. Col. Largema, two senior officers and both Northerners themselves. While there were several other casualties, in the wake of the failed coup and the arrest of the plotters these losses were sorely felt in the North.<sup>6</sup> In one night the majority of their political and military leadership had been slaughtered by a handful of Southern junior officers, and there were few if any likely candidates to replace them. It did not escape the notice of the

Northerners that of the plotters, five of the six were Igbos and that General Ironsi, himself an Igbo but a political neutral, did nothing worse than imprison them. However, despite organized acts of violence against the Igbos in the North, Ironsi was able to keep the fragile nation together under four regional military governors, one for each region and representing its interests along with the regional administrations now under military control. The nation seemed to be stabilized and perhaps even on the road to a restoration of a renewed democratic government. Then on 29 July a second coup attempt rent the fragile nation apart a second time.

The reasons for the second coup attempt were far more straightforward than the supposed motives of the first. The North had been marginalized and the majority of its citizens were confused and angry at the losses of their leadership and the non-punishment of the youthful mutineers. Stories and theories of an Igbo plot to control the nation began to make their way through the North and the halls of the military.<sup>7</sup> It did not help that while a large percentage of the enlisted and non-commissioned personnel of the army were Northerners, the highest ranks of the military were from the South and a plurality of these positions were held by Igbos.<sup>8</sup> With the government now run by the military and with a majority of the army's leadership and potential leadership from the South, the North found itself in a difficult and dangerous position. It already hungered for revenge for the losses of its traditional leaders, and now the government seemed to be slipping further and further from its grasp. The final straw was General Ironsi's well-intended but politically tone-deaf declaration of an abolishment of the federal system of government.<sup>9</sup> He had intended to place the nation under a unitary government that would control the nation as a whole without the worry of regional interests. Unfortunately, this only confirmed the hysterical fears of dominance that were driving the North further from the central government and sent the Northern elements of the Army into revolt.<sup>10</sup>

When the coup erupted on that July evening, it unleashed a torrent of bloodshed that far surpassed the earlier deaths of the first coup. Unlike the January coup, which narrowly targeted the political and military leadership the plotters saw as corrupt, the July coup wrought indiscriminate violence upon any and all Easterners in the military. General Ironsi and his host in Ibadan, Lt. Col. Fajuyi, were both beaten and killed by a young Northern



officer and his men.<sup>11</sup> At army garrisons in Abeokuta, Ibadan, Ikeja, Lagos, Kaduna, and Kano, Eastern troops and officers were arrested, tortured, and killed by their Northern colleagues. The final toll was reported as 43 officers and 170 other ranks killed.<sup>12</sup> However, much as in the first coup, the young officers in charge could not seize total power and were finally brought under the control of the military governors, and Lt. Col. Yakubu “Jack” Gowon was placed into the position of head of state. Although Brigadier General Ogundipe was the senior officer of those remaining, he refused the position and instead endorsed Gowon’s ascension, which was also supported by Commodore Wey of the Navy and Lt. Col. Adebayo as the smoke cleared over the fractured military. In the end, the coup was brought to heel with two major demands still hanging in the air: that the republic be split into its constituent parts and that both Northerners and Southerners be repatriated to their regions of origin. Neither of these was to be accomplished, although the North did reportedly come within a hair’s breadth of declaring its own secession.<sup>13</sup> Instead, on August 1, Gowon took to the airwaves to assure the nation that he would do “all in my power to stop any further bloodshed and to restore law, order, and confidence in all parts of the country.”<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, this proved far more easily said than done. While Gowon attempted to bring together an ad hoc constitutional conference in September, the North would only accede to a loose federation before turning a neat about-face a few days later. While the delegates were still dealing with these developments, news of a new outbreak of violence interrupted the proceedings. However, this time it was not the military but the civilian populace of the North, which began a massive wave of organized violence against the Igbos still living there. In the towns of Makurdi, Gboko, Zaria, Gombe, Jos, Sokoto, and Kaduna the communities of expatriate Easterners were beaten, robbed, and killed with abandon.<sup>15</sup> This set off a massive exodus of the Northern Igbos who wished to return to their home region. As they arrived, even greater tales of cruelty and malice emerged. Young women had been accosted and forced to watch their children killed. Men were beaten to death in the streets. A lifetime’s worth of possessions were stripped and burned out of sheer hatred. In the end, estimates of the dead ranged anywhere from 3,000 to 10,000 and there were anywhere from 500,000 to 2 million Igbos driven from their homes, but the numbers past

a certain point were immaterial.<sup>16</sup> While initially the North looked to be a potent source for secessionist sentiment, now their feeling of marginalization had passed and instead the East burned with rage at both the North for their violence and the central government for not intervening to end the pogrom.

This was not the first time violence had broken out against Easterners living in the North. Following the first coup there had been riots targeting the Eastern communities, with hundreds of casualties, that had also sparked a wave of migration back to the East. However, in the weeks following the coup the military governor of the East, Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, prevailed upon the Igbos to return to their Northern homes for the good of the nation's economy.<sup>17</sup> Now, as the leader of the dissenting and increasingly separatist Eastern state, Ojukwu could not countenance such violence again. When the ad hoc Constitutional Committee reconvened in October there were no Easterners present. The leadership of the Eastern region had decided that a united Nigeria held nothing for them and were already on their way to secession. While there was some delay in the process due to a meeting between Gowon's federal government and Ojukwu in Aburri, Ghana, in January 1967 that seemed to produce a confederal solution, the agreement itself was later rejected by the federal government as unworkable. While both sides still attempted to hammer together an agreement, the North, West, and Mid-West fell into line behind Gowon's initiatives to withdraw Northern troops from the West and create a number of new states within the federation to spread power more evenly throughout. However, for the East this plan had many problems. The Eastern government saw this as an attempt to partition their areas of control and divide their power. In addition, this would have removed the valuable oil-producing areas from their control, a complete non-starter as far as the Enugu government was concerned.<sup>18</sup> In the end, diplomacy could be taken only so far, and on 27 May 1967 the Consultative Assembly in Enugu declared the Eastern region "a free sovereign and independent State by the name of the Republic of Biafra."<sup>19</sup>

## THE BIAFRAN WAR

The war did not start immediately, but by this point it was inevitable. The first shots fired on 6 July must have come almost as a relief for both sides after waiting so long for the final shoe to drop. While the Federal forces still looked upon the conflict as a limited police action, the Biafrans were in deadly earnest. However, it was the Federals who would take the initiative, seizing Ogoja, Nsukka, and the valuable port terminal of Bonny in the first two weeks of the conflict and seeming to be firmly in control of the military situation.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately for the Federal cause, these early gains were to be answered in shockingly short order with the eruption of the boldest stroke of the war on August 9. Biafran forces mounted in a column of more than 100 vehicles began a lightning dash west across the Niger and into the Mid-West state. A simultaneous mutiny of Mid-West officers gave the Biafrans control of the region with hardly a shot being fired, and the column continued its hasty advance toward the Western seats of power at Ibadan and Lagos.<sup>21</sup> In their wake a Mid-Western separatist regime was already being put into place, further fracturing the Federal government. However, there was no parallel uprising of Yorubas in the West and the column itself was halted by the hastily assembled Federal 2<sup>nd</sup> Division outside of Ore and forced to turn back.<sup>22</sup> Their retreat was hastened by the collapse of the separatist Mid-Western government in a cloud of political infighting and the region's reoccupation by Federal forces on the 22nd of September.<sup>23</sup> The military situation did not get any better for the Biafrans on the other fronts, as Federal amphibious operations claimed the port of Warri and in the North the 1<sup>st</sup> Division of the Federal forces threatened Enugu, the Biafran capital. The Biafran military and political administrations subsequently were moved to Umuahia. The only offsetting victories the Biafrans could claim were a series of counteroffensives that recaptured Nsukka and Opi, which had previously fallen to the Federals.

October brought only worse news for the beleaguered Biafran forces, as Enugu finally fell on October 4 to rapturous applause in Lagos. Eleven days later the important port of Calabar fell to another amphibious operation. By the end of the year the Federal troops advancing from the southern coast and Northern command had captured Ekong, the last remaining gateway the region had to Cameroon. Meanwhile, the Biafran forces managed to

hold the important town of Onitsha on the Niger River, but only barely, and they were slowly being squeezed out of the border regions and cut off from the rest of the world. The beginning of 1968 did not prove to be any different, although the Biafrans carried out several counteroffensives and won a surprising amount of territory back from the advancing Federals. The Biafrans announced the recapture of Opi and Adaru and fell into a fierce fight for the industrial centre of Akwa. However, these gains were rapidly overshadowed by the Federal offensives in late March. Onitsha was again their objective, and this time the Federal forces were successful after a five-hour battle on 21 March 1968.<sup>24</sup> However, no matter how low morale might have been after this loss, the Biafrans were rejuvenated on 13 April when Tanzania officially recognized the state of Biafra. This was followed by recognition by Gabon on 8 May, the Ivory Coast on 14 May, and finally Zambia on 20 May.<sup>25</sup> This was an extraordinary step, one that set off peals of joy in besieged Biafra, as with international recognition they might actually be given their sovereignty by the greater international community. This was unfortunately not to be, as the intentions behind these nations' recognition were certainly not to break the internal dynamics of the war or the Federal government's prerogative in waging the war. Instead, each did so for political reasons that will be dealt with in the following sections. And despite this brief period of exultation, the war continued to be lost one battle at a time. By 19 May, the vital port and oil refining facility of Port Harcourt fell to the Federal 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Commando Division.<sup>26</sup> Not only did this deprive the Biafrans of their best refinery, but with the loss of Port Harcourt Biafra was now completely isolated from the outside world. The only way outside aid could enter was by being airlifted, a tenuous lifeline given the Federal side's marked air superiority. The Biafran side had begun the war at a marked disadvantage in terms of both manpower and equipment, and the loss of these lifelines essentially closed the door on any chance of evening the scales.

Despite now being in what militarily was an untenable position, the Biafrans refused to end their struggle. In June they launched another series of counterattacks that retook several towns along the Imo River and drove the Federal forces five miles back. These counterattacks were the last major operations before a lull in the war centred around the peace talks being held in Niamey, Niger, under the auspices of the OAU. When these talks

collapsed in July, both sides returned to their previous states of aggression and the Federal troops began operations aimed at dissecting the Igbo heartland. Drives toward Nnewi and Aba met stiff resistance but were not halted, and on September 4 the Federal forces captured both Aba and the rail junction at Oworo. The capture of Owerri on the 16th reduced Biafra to a small rectangle of territory that was supplied by two makeshift airports on opposite sides of the state. All signs pointed to a collapse of Biafra by the end of 1968. However, as often happens in war, the circumstances altered and the conventional wisdom was upended.

Until this time Biafra had been depending largely on sparse shipments of outdated small arms and large quantities of locally fabricated ordinance, most notably the homemade mines known as *ogbunigwe*. It was not unusual to see sentries handing their relief their own rifles, as there were not enough arms to fully equip the whole army.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile they were facing a Federal army that was well equipped with state-of-the-art arms bought from the international market. Britain continued to supply small arms and munitions in what they considered their traditional role. When they refused to provide larger ordinance or aircraft, the Nigerians turned to the Soviets, who leapt at the chance to gain a greater toehold in Africa's most populous state and access to the oil of the delta once the conflict was ended. Before long, large quantities of Soviet arms, along with Czech Delfin fighters and Russian MiGs, were streaming into the Federal armouries. While it cannot be said that the differential in armaments was solely responsible for the Biafran reverses, it is impossible to contend that it did not have a considerable effect on the conflict. This concept was driven to the fore when in late 1968 a large shipment of modern arms arrived at Uli and immediately changed the tenor of the conflict. With these new materials of war, the Biafrans surged forward again and recaptured Okigwi and threatened the Federal hold on Onitsha and Owerri.<sup>28</sup> A subsequent advance on the Aba front threw back Federal forces but could not capture the town. Several local counteroffensives forced the Federal forces back on their heels, and the year ended with the Biafrans having risen from near collapse to seize the initiative from the Federal Nigerian forces.

The early months of 1969 passed without any significant changes in the battlefronts. The Biafran forces seemed to be marshalling themselves for another effort while the Federals were continuing their now-frequent

air raids in an attempt to further weaken Biafran logistics and morale. It took until April for either side to be ready to move, and then it was again the Federal forces that leapt forward. Now using tracked armour for better off-road capability, the Nigerian forces thrust toward the provisional capital of Biafra at Umuahia.<sup>29</sup> The Biafrans could slow but not stop the assault and began to evacuate the town. With the fall of Umuahia, the only connection left with the outside world was the radio transmitter at the Uli airfield, and the remaining territory of Biafra was about to be split in two. In this desperate situation, the Biafrans again launched an offensive hoping to stave off final defeat, and yet again they succeeded. They retook Owerri and drove back the vaunted 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Commando Division several miles, badly damaging the Nigerian Division's morale and reputation. They also launched a successful offensive north of Umuahia and smashed a significant number of Federal formations, halting yet another Nigerian "Final Push" on Biafra. By May 1969 the situation was still dire for the Biafrans, who had been reduced to 10 percent of their original territory, but they had again staved off the Federal forces, which halted to reorganize and reshuffle the leadership of the three divisions engaged while the rainy season caused a general halt to the conflict.<sup>30</sup>

However, by mid-1969 the writing was on the wall. The Biafran forces were reduced to a single airstrip for supply, and even the humanitarian relief flights from Joint Church Aid were arriving with less frequency than ever. The Federal military had established a fierce blockade of all food and military supplies since the beginning of the war, and since the fall of Port Harcourt the only supplies for Biafra came via limited air flights. Their nation was starving and running out of any and all necessities of conflict or even life. In this dark hour Ojukwu, still the supreme leader of Biafra and the embodiment of its struggle, issued the Ahiara Declaration, which demanded an alteration to what he claimed was the "Biafran Revolution."<sup>31</sup> Property was to become communal, the administration was to be stripped of its fat and indolence, and the military was to be transformed into a "Peoples' Army" to better pursue the goals of revolutionary Biafra. More than this, Ojukwu's pronouncement lambasted the perceived corruption in Biafra, declaring that some were profiting from the peoples' misery, taking bribes or living expansively while others suffered. Ojukwu declared that

the revolutionary principles he laid down would transport Biafra beyond these ills and allow a final victory.

While revolutionary fronts had been tasting success in Africa for years, by the time of his declaration, Biafra did not prove to be revolutionary. Instead the Ahiara Declaration became a *cri de coeur*, a last unrealistic demand from a leader who had led his people into ruin in a fight against their larger hosts. It would also become emblematic of Ojukwu's overall leadership of the secession, wherein impossible demands had already been placed on his people and only excuses offered for the failure against a stronger foe. Six months later the final collapse of Biafra began and none of the Ahiara principles had come to pass, the battered secessionist state too weary and beleaguered to bother with creating a revolution while they continued to starve. The November 17, 1969 offensive of the Federal troops met little resistance, and the first major breakthrough began on the Southern front, where the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Commando Division shattered the fragile Biafran lines. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division captured the Aba-Umuahia road and pressed on to link up with the 1<sup>st</sup> Division in Umuahia itself. Owerri fell to the Federal forces for the last time on January 9, 1970, and their forces continued advancing toward Uli and the last airstrip in the nation. It was captured on January 12, but this was essentially an afterthought. Ojukwu and several members of his cabinet had flown out the previous day and left General Philip Effiong, his chief of staff, to conclude the war. On the 12th, in the face of continuing Federal advances on all fronts and the withdrawal of the central leadership of the struggle, General Effiong broadcast an announcement of Biafra's surrender. On January 14 he made his way to Lagos to seal the unconditional surrender of Biafra, and on the 15th the Republic of Biafra ceased to exist and its territory was formally reintegrated into the Federal structure of Nigeria.

As a coda to the conflict, it must be noted that despite the acrimony with which the war was waged and the widespread fears of genocide harboured by many of the Igbos, the aftermath of the conflict was surprisingly gentle. General Gowon decreed that in this war there were "No Victors and no Vanquished"<sup>32</sup> and that the nation must be made whole again. To promote this reconciliation, the Federal government promised no "Nuremberg Trials" and a general amnesty was declared for all of the secessionist combatants. While several Biafran senior army officers and administrators

were detained for a period of time, there was no further action taken against them except for the occasional barring from further government employment. Further down the chain of command, the Nigerian forces in general behaved well. While there was looting and violence on the part of many occupying troops initially, this regrettable action still paled in comparison to the normal aftermath of such civil wars. For the most part, it has been reported that throughout the conflict the Federal forces had behaved well within the “Code of Conduct” that had been established by General Gowon at the start. Overall, it was a very mild way to end the war, despite the widespread starvation and bombing and the deep pathological fears of annihilation held by the Igbos. In fact, the only true anger displayed by the victors was toward the outside powers who rushed in offering humanitarian aid following the collapse of Biafra. To the Federal government, this offer of aid by such nations as France and Portugal following their integral roles in prolonging the conflict was insulting and crude. As will be discussed, overall the world at large had not altered the course of the conflict so much as prolonged it. It was Nigerian arms that began and ended it, and they now wished to reconcile themselves without the continuing interference of the outside world.

## CIVIL SECESSIONS COMPARED

It was increasingly common during the Biafra conflict to compare it to the previous attempt at secession by Katanga, if for no reason than temporal proximity and the fact that they both occurred on the continent of Africa. Biafran commentators and those sympathetic to their cause aggressively opposed these comparisons, as the case of Katanga was anathema to the other African nations and any comparisons to this earlier case could only hinder the attempts of the Biafrans to gain vital foreign recognition of their struggle and sovereignty. In the details these commentators were indeed correct. Whereas Katanga nakedly courted hated neo-colonial powers such as Belgium and Rhodesia, Biafra was engaged in a struggle for the self-determination of an oppressed region.<sup>33</sup> Few could argue that the Katangans were exploited economically within the Congolese system,<sup>34</sup> no matter what their political difficulties, but the Igbos and the many peoples of the East could argue that their struggle was about security and the failure of



their host state to provide it.<sup>35</sup> In these differences the Biafrans were indeed correct, and while the Katangan ideology was abhorrent to the states of Africa the Biafran one found sympathy; nevertheless, their methods and structures of secession had many parallels—hence their grouping in this volume under the heading of Civil Secessions.

To begin with, like Katanga, Biafra existed in the form of a state before the secession began. The Eastern region had existed as a constituent state within the federation well before the coup attempts fractured it, with its boundaries having been established with the earliest political divisions of the country and official limited self-government codified in the Regional Assemblies set up in 1946.<sup>36</sup> By Nigerian independence in 1960, control of this state was placed in an administration and government that were democratically elected and put into place by the people of the region—although again this changed following the coup attempts, when Ojukwu was put into place as the military governor of the region.<sup>37</sup> However, even then the administration of the region existed in its pre-set form; it simply functioned under a different chief executive until the day the secession began. Even after secession this same framework was retained, although now the region took on even more sovereign duties. This was made easier by the large number of skilled administrators and politicians who fled to the Eastern regions following the pogroms in the North. Thus, at the time of secession and throughout the majority of it, Biafra was a civil state, with set borders and a pre-set administration defining its existence. Put simply, it was a state in search of its sovereignty, not a nation seeking a state.

However, this pronouncement and this volume's opposition of the ideas of a state and a nation might need clarification in terms of Ojukwu's definition of Biafra as "Africa's first Nation-state."<sup>38</sup> In this he obviously had Biafra in mind as a state of the Igbos, constituted for their protection and the promotion of their economic and political goals. However, this is problematic for a simple reason: Biafra at the time of its secession contained a number of minority ethnic groups, such as Ibibios, Efiks, and Ijaws.<sup>39</sup> These groups were even represented within the higher ranks of the secessionist state, such as Philip Effiong, Ojukwu's chief of staff. In fact, it was even these marginal peoples that felt the horrors of the war first, as they tended to live in the border regions of the Eastern State and their homes were battlegrounds long before the Igbo heartland was. Of course,

it was also during this period when the paranoia of the Igbo leadership cast away the minority groups, as they blamed the rapid Federal advances on sabotage by their minority neighbours, only to have the same military failures happen in the Igbo heartland where a supposedly loyal populace would have made them impossible.<sup>40</sup> In any event, the conception of Biafra as a nation-state only applied following their losses of 1967 and early 1968, when indeed Biafra was reduced to simply the Igbo heartland and the fears of an ethnic genocide forced the populace into a siege mentality. This does little to change the fact that the original formation of Biafra remained one of a pre-existing civil multi-ethnic state that only changed during the long, psychologically torturous struggle for the Igbo lands.

In addition, much as Katanga argued its case for sovereignty based on the original separate administration of the *Comité spéciale du Katanga*, the Biafrans also pointed to colonial administration and boundaries to justify their separatist goals. The Eastern Region, much like the other regions of Nigeria, had essentially been administered separately until their being joined first with the Lagos Colony into Southern Nigeria in 1912 and then combined with the North to form the state of Nigeria in 1914. With this in mind, the Biafrans argued that they had always been a separate state within a federation and now that that federation no longer was able to provide safety to their region, they were free to remove themselves.<sup>41</sup> This sentiment was compounded by the confusion following the two coups of 1966. While the civilian government had been corrupt, it had been the sovereign government of the Federation of Nigeria and embodied the constitution that held that union together. Following the first coup, General Ironsi assumed power in what can be at least thinly painted as a legal assumption of authority—while there was no constitutional provision for the military assumption of power, it was granted to him by the federal government, which saw him as the lone figure able to control the situation.<sup>42</sup> Ironsi was in the process of reforming that central government when he was slain in the July coup that overturned the system—and here is where the crux of the argument lies. Whereas Ironsi was invested with his power by the constitutional government of Nigeria, General Gowon never was.<sup>43</sup> In the wake of the July coup Gowon was simply placed at the head of the government by a military that was already bucking the constitutional government. As such, the Biafrans could argue that their secession from the state of Nigeria

was historically correct: the federation they had belonged to had ceased to exist upon the military seizure of the government. In the absence of any future agreement (such as the failed Aburri Agreement) the Eastern region returned to its own separate sovereignty. Again, and as will be witnessed repeatedly throughout secession attempts, the historical legitimacy of the secession was stressed and argued throughout the military campaign to win that sovereignty.

Much like in Katanga as well, the leadership of the Biafran secession was composed of “New Men” of Africa and the idea of the state was imposed in a “top-down” method. The primary figure of the secession and the one who would come to dominate the struggle was Lt. Col. (later General) Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu.<sup>44</sup> There are few figures who inhabit the history of their struggles as much as Ojukwu, who from the first to the last was the motive power of the rebellion and remains a controversial figure in Nigerian history. Emeka Ojukwu was born in 1943 to a self-made shipping millionaire who had been knighted by the Queen of England. He grew up in a world of privilege, receiving an exceptional education both in Nigeria and abroad and finished his schooling at Oxford. He served in the administration of Nigeria for two years but then found what he felt was his true calling, in the Army. He joined in 1957 and underwent officer training at Eaton Hall, earning his commission shortly after. Ojukwu served in the UN force in the Congo like most ambitious young Nigerian officers of his generation and proved himself an excellent officer. During the January 1966 coup attempt he was serving in Kano and quickly took control of that northern city and declared its loyalty to the federal government shortly after. For this loyalty he was declared the military governor of the Eastern Region under Ironsi’s government. It was during this time that he urged the refugee Igbos to return to their homes to repair the economy of the North. In the aftermath of the July coup, he refused to rejoin the new central government, and thus sparked the secession of Biafra.

Throughout the secession Ojukwu controlled all aspects of the state. Throughout the conflict a series of official and unofficial peace talks were held, in which Ojukwu’s vision of Biafra dominated whether he was present or not.<sup>45</sup> In terms of the military he determined to a great extent where men and material were allocated, as was extremely apparent in the case of his period of favouritism toward mercenary officer Rolf Steiner, who saw his

command grow from a company to a brigade during a period of a little over a year.<sup>46</sup> As the conflict began to look more hopeless, Ojukwu entrenched himself further, and in a final attempt to turn the tide issued his “Ahiara Declaration,” a last-ditch attempt to create a revolutionary state that could withstand the growing tide of the Federal military. Even in the end it was deemed necessary that he should flee the failing state to allow it to surrender. The stated reason was that he was leaving “in search of peace.”<sup>47</sup> It seems far more likely that he indeed believed his statement that “I did this [fleeing Biafra] knowing that whilst I live Biafra lives.”<sup>48</sup> Seeing how completely he embodied the state, it is hard to argue with either his contention that Biafra as an idea would live on or the connection between his leaving and the East’s relatively peaceful reintegration into the federation.

This is not to say he was the only major figure of the Biafran state but simply that he overshadowed the rest to such a degree that they seem to have had far less import in the state itself. However, several leading figures, both in the military and without, indeed embodied the new bourgeois elite of Africa. General Philip Effiong, Ojukwu’s chief of staff, had also served as an officer in the Nigerian military before the coups wracked the nation. He was connected by the old ties across the forces and considered General Gowon an old friend. Beyond this, he embodied the old Sandhurst training-based class-consciousness of the military, with one reporter noting, “Until the very end Effiong looked like a British Staff general—a polished Sam Browne belt, a sword for ceremonial occasions and a chauffeur-driven, khaki-coloured English Humber car bearing a General’s flag.”<sup>49</sup> In many ways, he reflected the bourgeois nature of the militaries on both sides. As far as the administration of Biafra, a large number of the senior administrators had been the educated elite of Nigeria before the breakup. Such figures as Dr. Kenneth Dike, Dr. Michael Okpara, the renowned author Chinua Achebe, and N. U. Akpan all served within the Biafran state. Admittedly this was easier for the Biafrans, as they had made up the majority of the trained administrators and middle management of the old federation before the split, but the fact remains that militarily and politically, the ideology and programs of the state of Biafra were an elite project from beginning to end, guided by the pre-secession officialdom of the region and peoples. While Ojukwu’s Ahiara Declaration did make grand gestures

toward mass nationalism and a “people’s war,” these concepts never arose, with the Biafrans’ army at that point simply unable to continue the struggle.

Although it did eventually give way, the Biafran army performed acts of untold valour and nearly impossible bravery. This was even more astonishing given the ad hoc basis of its training and founding, which had its roots in the initial surge of nationalism and the employment of the high number of Igbo army officers who chose to serve the Biafran cause.<sup>50</sup> Recruitment proceeded at a brisk pace from the time that secession seemed probable, and by the high point of the war the army most likely had 30,000 to 40,000 men under arms.<sup>51</sup> These in turn were organized into five divisions that consisted mostly of infantry. There were also a number of special formations, including the Biafran Organization of Freedom Fighters (BOFF), a force hand-picked and trained to serve as a behind-the-lines guerrilla force.<sup>52</sup> They were mostly active in the latter years of the war and had little effect overall on the conflict. Perhaps the other major “special” force to emerge in the conflict was the 4<sup>th</sup> Commando Brigade, commanded by the German ex-Foreign Legionnaire Rolf Steiner. These fighters were recognizable by the death’s head patch their commanding officer chose as their unit insignia and were trained to mostly fight as light infantry and skirmishers, with quick raids and ambushes being their forte.<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately the unit, which eventually reached reported numbers as high as 10,000, took high casualties in a number of engagements where it was committed to frontal assaults, including outside of Onitsha and Owerri. Steiner himself was eventually arrested after getting drunk and striking Ojukwu in a rage after one such headlong attack was ordered. After he was deported from Biafra the unit passed from the notice of history. Still, overall the Biafran army was notable for its high morale and endurance, with its members obviously fighting on and even counterattacking long after the war itself was strategically unwinnable.

Unfortunately for the Biafrans, throughout the conflict they had to deal with shortages and inadequacies of equipment. At the outbreak of the conflict the Biafrans had only what arms those soldiers deserting the Federal Army for the Biafran cause had brought with them and the sparse equipment held in the Eastern region’s arsenals. While immediately arms-buying expeditions were sent out across Africa and Europe, all too often the Biafrans were sold substandard equipment or even just plainly robbed of

their funds by untrustworthy gun runners. There were reports of artillery that had been bought ending up rusted beyond repair, of planes purchased whose wings were lost in transit, and of agents simply drawing money from accounts and disappearing.<sup>54</sup> That Biafra ended up armed at all was primarily due to two reasons: clandestine French intervention and the magnificent ingenuity of the Biafrans themselves. On the matter of the French, they drifted into semi-support of Biafra in 1968, coming extremely close to recognition but never quite crossing that line.<sup>55</sup> What they did do was begin to filter arms and ammunition into Biafra through their francophone African allies in the Ivory Coast and Gabon. At its high point the stream was reported to be 200 tons a week of arms and ammunition airlifted into Biafra.<sup>56</sup> These went a long way toward equipping the secessionist forces with modern weaponry and were almost entirely responsible for the stiffening of Biafran resistance from 1968 on. As to the natural ingenuity of the Biafrans themselves, this was readily apparent in the massive amount of fabricated arms that made their presence known on the battlefield. Although the Biafrans had no armour to speak of, jury-rigged armed cars were made out of tractors and large trucks with armoured plates welded to them.<sup>57</sup> Their ordinance was certainly not ever anything magnificent, originally consisting of a battery of 105 mm howitzers and several 81 mm mortars. This was quickly supplemented by a mind-boggling variety of homemade weaponry, often taking advantage of the large amount of petroleum available to the Biafrans at the beginning of the war.<sup>58</sup> Shops made their own rockets fabricated from old pipes. Grenades were put together from scrap metal. Perhaps the single most well-known weapon of the Biafrans was the *oghunigwe*, the homemade landmine, made often from spare metal drums filled with explosives, old petroleum, and scrap metal for shrapnel. These deadly creations made their appearance all over the war zone and quickly became an easy and formidable weapon to use against the Federal forces. It is admirable that this late-arriving stream of imported weaponry and the hasty creation of homemade arms was enough to sustain the volunteer and amateur Biafran military for the duration of the war, especially against a Federal Army that was equipped with the best weaponry money could buy from the British, the Czechs, and the Soviets.

Of course, despite their valour and ingenuity, the Biafrans were not served well by the strategy and tactics adopted by their leadership. Given

the spit-and-polish Sandhurst roots of the Biafran officer class, their adoption of static and conventional formations was not entirely unexpected, but it did not offer any advantages against the larger, better-equipped, and equally Sandhurst-officered enemy. What this matchup generally devolved into was a very strange conventional engagement, where the Biafrans would dig into defensive posts strung across the Federal line of advance. These could take any form, from quickly dug ad hoc earthworks to well-sited and well-constructed concrete emplacements. The Biafrans would fight well from these positions for a time but then generally pull back from them when Federal forces strengthened their push or increased the mass of artillery fire on the Biafran positions.<sup>59</sup> The Biafrans then would regroup in the next set of prepared positions to await the cautious Federal advance and the pattern would repeat itself. When the Biafrans took the offensive, it often took the form of battering frontal assaults, such as the ones outside Onitsha and Owerri. While occasionally these took the Federals by surprise and forced them back, they often proved to be very costly, in victory or defeat.

This is not to say that the war was not without imaginative tactics. The Biafran stroke across the Mid-West at the outset of the war was a masterful idea that could have altered the course of the conflict within its first few weeks. Unfortunately, after its failure there never were the resources to try it again, especially against a now wary Federal Army. The Biafrans also tasted considerable success with more irregular tactics. The ambush at Abagana by the troops of Joe “Hannibal” Achuzie was a huge boost to morale and caused severe shortages in petrol for the Federal Onitsha front for a considerable length of time.<sup>60</sup> Rolf Steiner’s 4<sup>th</sup> Commando had several notable successes behind the Federal lines before being bloodied in the conventional struggles around Onitsha. Lastly, the aforementioned BOFF was trained specifically for guerrilla operations to hopefully harass, isolate, and destroy Federal formations in the final year of the war. Unfortunately, these guerrilla tactics never became widespread for a number of reasons, the first being that the war zone that was Biafra could never support a popular guerrilla movement nor offer it the concealment it would need to consistently operate. Successful guerrilla struggles require either wide-open spaces within which fighters can spread themselves out or challenging terrain where large numbers might be concealed; Biafra at the time offered neither. It had been reduced to a small enclave surrounded

by a formidable blockade, an enclave that offered neither space nor concealment. The other major reason was that Ojukwu rightly saw a resort to guerrilla operations as a final admission of failure—that Biafra could no longer exist as a formal state and that the Federals had defeated it. In the end, the Biafran forces ended up fighting a mainly conventional war, one that they were ill-equipped to fight against a larger, better-armed, and motivated opponent. Although their tactics did not help them win it, again it is extraordinary that the conflict lasted as long as it did.

Although the basis of the Biafran secession was as different as night and day from that of the Katanga secession, it did share some of its characteristics. Like the Katanga secession, it was a Civil Secession, meaning a secession of a pre-structured state from its host political structure. While later on the Biafran struggle took on ethnic nation-state overtones, this was only after the original state was compromised to such an extent that secession on any terms was essentially impossible. In addition, this secession was offered quasi-legality by the constitutional history of the secessionist state and its relation with the host political body. The secession was also an elite project, constructed primarily by Emeka Ojukwu and shaped by his fellow educated bourgeois allies. While, as with Katanga, it did have popular internal support, its philosophy and ideology was entirely determined by the elites of its society. The army itself was a structured conventional affair staffed by professional officers. While its ranks remained generally amateur and some formations took on alternate structures, the general structure of the military was a conventional one shaped by European military tradition. Likewise, the tactics adopted were those of conventional warfare, of positional attack and defence against an enemy that used the same military philosophy. In the end, much as in the Katanga affair, these tactics were to prove disastrous against a better-armed and determined opponent.<sup>61</sup> Thus, while the secessions may be argued to have been worlds apart in a moral and political sense, they both bear the characteristics of the Civil Secessions.

## THE FAILURE OF CIVIL SECESSION

While the conflict over Katanga began to define the limits and weaknesses of the Civil Secession in Africa, the events and ramifications of the Nigerian



Civil War rendered the practice of Civil Secession an impossibility, and none has been attempted since on African soil. This is due to a number of developments both in Africa and in the greater world political arena, but taken together they doomed the Biafran effort and established the ironclad precedent against Civil Secession—the declared secession of a governed territory with a hoped-for international recognition. The five major factors that combined to make Civil Secession impossible began with the denial of international legitimacy or a world forum for any secession attempts. The second factor was related, and it was the blanket condemnation of secession on the continent of Africa. While both of these had been hinted at in the Katanga case, the fact that they arose again in a moral case such as Biafra's set them in stone. The third was the relative paucity of military aid to the secessionists, in terms of both hardware and expertise. The Biafran war saw a mass failure of international military intervention and of the mercenaries who had been such a terror of African states since the Congo. The fourth was the readily apparent increasing ability of African states to act with strength. That the first secession occurred in the weak and anarchic Congo gave the undue impression that the average African state was unable to act swiftly in its own interest. Nigeria was a different animal altogether and altered the conception of an African state's military capabilities. Lastly, while it was easy to argue that Tshombe had been a cat's paw of the Belgian interests, Biafra and its collapse showed enough parallel weakness to close the door on the top-down conception of secession. The elite project of Biafra could no more sustain itself as a sovereign entity than could Katanga, and it became increasingly apparent that only a popular movement pushing from below could effect real change in African states. However, each of these factors is itself a complex action and reaction to the secession of Biafra and will be dealt with on an individual basis.

The international stage for secessions became very small during the course of the Nigerian Civil War. This is not to say that the world did not know of the war—it certainly did, and there are many excellent works currently in print discussing the foreign perception and projection of both the Federal Nigerian and Biafran sides to the conflict.<sup>62</sup> This pronouncement is also not intended to minimize the international relief efforts for the wounded and starving on both sides of the battle lines. However, one of the first major differences between the Congolese and Nigerian conflicts was

the altered political role of the international community. In Katanga the international community was waist deep in the conflict. Belgium supplied copious amounts of arms, technicians, and officers to sustain the Katangan regime. The United Nations sent military formations from a dozen or more nations into the Congo to restore peace to the shattered country and bring the Katangans back into the fold. The conflict over the secession of Biafra would not see international intervention on nearly the same level. To begin with, the United Nations could only intervene directly if so requested by a member nation. This had been the case in the Congo when Patrice Lumumba requested UN peacekeepers be deployed to help quell the disturbances in his country. However, in the case of Biafra, UN intervention would require a direct request of Nigeria, a request that obviously was not forthcoming.<sup>63</sup> It therefore follows that the official UN policy was that it legally could not take part in the Nigerian conflict.<sup>64</sup> This inaction on the UN's part then left the door open for individual nations to take part in the conflict, and the Biafrans hoped for the help of one of the greater states of the world in their struggle. Such hopes were pinned on the United States, Britain, the USSR, and France, and with the limited exception of the last, the Biafrans were to be sorely disappointed.

At the outbreak of the conflict, the United States was already becoming more committed in their conflict in Vietnam and was growing increasingly concerned with Communist expansion. While they had already intervened to place Mobutu at the head of the Congolese state, they were loath to become heavily invested again in Africa. As such, they were suspicious of Biafra as a breakaway state and opposed it from the beginning, as Nigeria had always been seen as a potential US ally and a strong capitalist state. In addition, several US oil companies had interests in the region and preferred a strong central government to ensure their investments. As the conflict wore on, the Americans became more concerned with the humanitarian aspects of the conflict, but these concerns warred with the political desire to support the "One Nigeria" platform the United States had adopted from the start. In the end, although there were strong political clashes within Congress, the American position remained in support of the Federal side, and moreover that Nigeria itself was more properly within the British sphere of interest and should be left to them and the OAU.<sup>65</sup>

The British themselves were shocked and appalled at the bloodshed and conflict beginning in what had been perceived as a stable and economically developing Commonwealth nation. Unfortunately for their relations with all sides, this shock apparently led to a hesitant reaction on their own part, and after several sharp confrontations in Parliament the government was still undecided on what to do. Initially their instinct was to stop supplying arms to the Nigerian military, but this quickly became an impossible position to maintain, for two glaring reasons. The first was the massive amount of British business holdings in Nigeria that could be affected by such an unfriendly act. The second was the wholesale entrance of the Soviets into the Nigerian political arena, which forced Britain's hand. While initially they attempted to limit their own arms sales to the Nigerian military to what they defined as their "traditional" supply of arms such as small arms, anti-aircraft guns, light armoured cars and the like, following the whole-hog support of the Soviets in terms of arms, the British were forced to follow suit to retain their political influence in the country and also to support their access to the oil resources within the region. Despite acrimonious debate over the arms trade, the British began the war trending toward the Federal side and quickly entrenched themselves there for the duration of the conflict.<sup>66</sup>

Whereas the United States saw Nigeria as a keystone anti-communist state in Africa and Britain saw it as a member of its extended family of the Commonwealth, the USSR saw Nigeria as an opportunity. When the conflict blossomed into a full-scale conflagration and Britain faltered on supplying arms, the Soviets stepped quickly into the breach. In early 1967, Nigeria and the USSR signed a pact for cultural cooperation, and it was rumoured that an arms deal had been signed between the two as well. While this was denied, in short order Soviet cargo planes arrived at Kano airport bearing loads of aircraft parts and combat planes. By 1968 another agreement was signed providing for the exchange of experts between the two nations, and in 1969 Soviet warships officially visited Nigeria. Simply put, the USSR weighed its options and thought the case for Nigerian success and a future relationship was far more compelling. They supported the Federal government against the "imperialism of secession" from the start and supplied them with the materials and expertise to crush the rebellion.<sup>67</sup>

Lastly, of the four major powers France was the most mercurial. Initially holding themselves aloof, the French government only began issuing statements pertaining to the conflict a year after it had begun in earnest. Even these initial releases were only to inform the world that they had pronounced an arms embargo on both sides of the conflict. However, only six weeks after this statement of neutrality, the minister of information, M. Theune, enunciated a position supporting the ending of the war on the basis of self-determination for the Biafran people. The effect this had was electric, with numerous news venues clamouring for more information on the government's plans to assure this policy. On September 9, 1968, President de Gaulle himself all but recognized the state of Biafra with his proclamation, "In this affair France has aided, is aiding Biafra as far as possible. She has not carried out the act which would be decisive, the action of recognizing the Republic of Biafra, because she considers that the management of Africa is above all an affair for Africans."<sup>68</sup> However, despite his stopping short of outright recognition, he left the door open and was already said to be pressuring his francophone African allies to recognize Biafra themselves, as some already had. From this point on, France supplied arms, ammunition, medicine, and any other aid that they could surreptitiously ship to Biafra or route through their African allies. However, France was to be a false hope for the Biafrans. While it provided the methods to wage the war, it never provided them in the amount needed to win it. Instead French aid simply prolonged the struggle far longer than it was projected to be, for little merit at all.<sup>69</sup>

The remainder of the world outside Africa had very little bearing or comment on the conflict aside from humanitarian concerns. The latter became especially pronounced from 1968 on, when the Biafran propaganda began to be broadcast on the world stage. This information campaign, which was carefully coordinated and constructed to elicit sympathy, managed to bring a significant amount of global consciousness to the struggle. Especially as the struggle became one of hunger and privation on the Biafran side, the Biafran claims of genocide gained new life with the release of photos and press releases showing starving children. This in turn helped marshal a significant amount of humanitarian support for the Biafrans, although that did little to help them militarily.<sup>70</sup> There was some heartening of the Biafran cause when China declared its support, but this amounted

to very little in terms of diplomacy or materials in the end. Perhaps the last farcical act was the recognition of Biafra by the Haitian regime of “Papa Doc” Duvalier. However, the fact remains that in the Biafran conflict there was no outside interference of the magnitude of either the United Nations or Belgium in the Congo. The most that any of the larger powers contributed to the conflict was an occasionally galling stream of armaments and, in the case of France, a maddeningly vague show of diplomatic support for the secessionist regime. As noted in the previous case, the Organization of African Unity had been founded in the interim and was generally viewed as the proper mediator of the conflict, under the assumption that African states were declared African business. So what of the OAU and the nations of Africa in this conflict?

Like many facets of the Biafran conflict, this is a question with both a long answer and a short answer. The short answer involves the Organization of African Unity, which from the outset attempted to serve as an arbiter and peacemaker within the conflict.<sup>71</sup> At their meeting in Kinshasa in 1967 the OAU immediately invoked article III and declared that the Biafran conflict was primarily an internal affair of the Federal Government of Nigeria.<sup>72</sup> Although they resolved to send a six-member consultative panel to Nigeria, they assured the federal government that they supported the territorial integrity of the state of Nigeria. This meeting was followed later by a second, in July 1968 in Niamey, which opened the possibility of lasting arbitration, but these hopes grew thinner as no real progress was made at subsequent meetings at Addis Ababa in August or the OAU Algiers summit in September. The problem at the heart of the matter was that although the OAU desired peace, they could not and would not recognize the Biafran government. Secession remained a proscribed act under the OAU charter, and the Biafrans and their struggle was, notwithstanding all other factors, illegal in the eyes of the organization.<sup>73</sup> This essentially crippled all hopes for either binding OAU arbitration on the matter or recognition of Biafra, both of which the secessionists had hoped for. Instead, in the resolutions adopted in both Kinshasa and Algiers, they and their struggle were written off aside from appeals for the federal government to work with them to ensure peace within the framework of Nigerian territorial integrity. The final resolution adopted following the Addis Ababa conference in September 1969 was the succinct restatement of the OAU’s position: “Appeals solemnly

and urgently to the two parties involved in the civil war to agree to preserve in the overriding interest of Africa, the unity of Nigeria.<sup>74</sup> Simply put, the OAU would not accept secession and Biafra would accept nothing less. Given this context, the OAU could only condemn the Biafrans' actions. This position was likely largely informed by other members of the OAU, such as Sudan and Ethiopia, who faced their own secessionist challenges and so did not want to legitimize Biafran ambitions.

However, beyond the OAU there were several African nations that not only sympathized with Biafra but even granted it that rarest of all diplomatic statuses: recognition.<sup>75</sup> Four African nations broke ranks diplomatically with their peers to formally recognize the state of Biafra, although their reasons for doing so were not all of a piece. These four were Tanzania, Zambia, the Ivory Coast, and Gabon. The latter two declared their recognition within a week of each other in May 1968. Bound together by their francophone heritage, these two were generally felt to have recognized Biafra as stalking horses for French ambitions in Biafra. Gabon in particular has been singled out for these reasons, as the Biafrans had not even lobbied them for recognition! As for the Ivory Coast, while it is true that France (and de Gaulle in particular) had considerable sway with its president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, their reasons for recognition are often held to have been slightly more complex. Houphouët-Boigny's latent distrust both of the Muslim hinterlands shared by the west African coastal states and Soviet influence are credited with having swayed his decision, although considerable emphasis is also laid upon his humanitarian nature.<sup>76</sup>

In comparison to these conservative francophone states, Tanzania and Zambia were socialist anglophone states, strange bedfellows for de Gaulle's former African colonies. As might be expected, their reasons for recognizing the state of Biafra were rather different. Perhaps the best description that has been given of their actions was directed at Julius Nyerere of Tanzania: "He did the wrong thing for the right reasons."<sup>77</sup> Nyerere did not recognize Biafra in 1968 to help it secede; he recognized it because the terrible suffering of the Biafran people affected him deeply and he felt the only way to end the bloodshed was to give the Biafrans some leverage in their peace talks. He thought that with his recognition, they might be able to force a compromise at the negotiating table and end the looming humanitarian disaster in Eastern Nigeria. President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia was a

great admirer of Nyerere's and was often of the same mind as him. His country's following of Tanzania's lead was largely for the same reasons: the hope that recognition might offer a way to end the conflict. In the end none of the four recognitions, no matter what the reasoning behind them, made a tangible difference. What is worth noting, though, is that although Tanzania and Zambia recognized Biafra the state, they continued to condemn the act of secession; while they would recognize the people of Biafra's right to exist, they would not recognize their right to exist separately. Thus, with a few minor exceptions, the continent of Africa established a continental consensus against the act of secession that remained in force for twenty-one years.<sup>78</sup>

Although the recognition of the Ivory Coast and Gabon did little to aid the Biafran cause internationally, they did serve as the main conduits for arms shipments that resuscitated and sustained the Biafran struggle in 1968. However, despite the influx of arms that prolonged the conflict itself, the amount of actual international equipment and expertise involved in the conflict was a fraction of that seen in the Congo. While Katanga's secession was supported by hundreds of Belgian technicians and officers as well as a significant number of mercenary soldiers, Biafra saw just a faint echo of these previous interventions. The arms shipments from France were the most significant portion of this. Night relief flights into the Uli airport brought in an estimated 200 tons of armaments per week from French sources, often shuttled through the Ivory Coast or Gabon for a level of plausible separation between the two nations.<sup>79</sup> Given the paucity of heavy weaponry, modern assault rifles, armour, and planes on the Biafran side, it is perhaps best estimated that most of this tonnage was ammunition for the vast variety of weaponry the Biafran side used. In terms of other internationally provided weaponry, there was little to be had: Britain, the United States, and the USSR did not sell or provide armaments to the Biafrans, and as has been noted the black market weapons deals often went spectacularly awry. The only notable success of the independent Biafran arms search was the series of Minicon trainer planes that served as an ad hoc air force in the final stages of the war.<sup>80</sup> Essentially, while the Katanga mercenaries and gendarmerie were more or less directly equipped by the Belgian government, the Biafrans had much less international support in terms of supplying their armed forces.

This was borne out in expertise as well. While the Katanga struggle and the Congo Crisis as a whole lifted mercenary soldiering into the spotlight, the Biafran war served to break the reputation of the mercenary soldiers. Ojukwu's army employed a variety of mercenary soldiers and overall got a very poor return on its investment. Perhaps the best of the poor lot was the previously mentioned Rolf Steiner, who gave adequate service in organizing the 4<sup>th</sup> Commando Brigade and leading it in several irregular raids on the Federal Army. However, in the end he was criticized heavily for commandeering supplies from both the Biafran Army and the Red Cross and ended his service under a cloud.<sup>81</sup> As for the other major mercenary interventions, they were, with few exceptions, a disaster for the Biafran side. Colonel Michael Hoare of Congo fame made a brief appearance, but his terms were unacceptable to the Biafrans. The Federals had no intention of hiring him and he withdrew from sight. In late 1967 the French directed Ojukwu to the services of the large network of mercenaries with ties to France, mostly ex-Foreign Legionnaires. This led to the dubious employment of Captain Roger Faulques, another hardened veteran of the Congo, who promised to provide 100 veteran mercenaries to help turn the tide of the war.<sup>82</sup> Instead he arrived with 49 troops, who then were bloodily repulsed at Calabar with significant losses. A scant few weeks later they left, taking with them six months' pay for 100 men, a salary all out of proportion to what they had accomplished.<sup>83</sup> Although admittedly both sides were already loath to use hired guns, when taken in comparison with the effectiveness of the mercenaries in Katanga and the subsequent troubles in the Congo, the work of the mercenaries in Biafra was certainly a disappointment and served to close the chapter on their general use in Africa until a brief revival after the Cold War.<sup>84</sup>

Of course, with several of the mercenaries employed having also served in Katanga, there was something more afoot in the Biafra conflict than the local hesitation to employ outside military contractors. The two conflicts were not comparable in that while in Katanga the Gendarmerie initially faced off against a fractured and ill-trained ANC and then against a divided UNOC force with an unclear mandate, the Biafrans faced a unified and enthusiastic Nigerian Federal Army with clear goals and a sound strategy. To put it simply, the Biafran conflict illustrated the increasing ability of African states to project their power. When the conflict broke out in 1967,



the Federal forces had less than 9,000 members and only 184 officers under arms.<sup>85</sup> While an army of this size was not uncommon in most postcolonial African states, it was hardly large enough to wage a widespread conventional war. As such, it underwent a massive recruitment and training effort and expanded itself to well over 100,000 personnel by 1970.<sup>86</sup> By that point its sheer size made it one of the largest militaries in sub-Saharan Africa. Beyond this, thanks to the needs of the war and the international alignments Nigeria took advantage of, this military was well equipped with the most modern military technology that it could acquire. By the end of the war Nigeria could boast of having one of the largest and most modern military forces in all of Africa. Beyond this, if outside observers occasionally remarked upon the clumsiness, the sluggishness, or even the incompetence of the army itself, the scale of its accomplishments must be remembered.<sup>87</sup> During wartime, the federal government expanded its armed forces tenfold (including the creation of its own air force), trained an entire generation of new officers to lead it, and managed to put down a supremely motivated opponent who was fielding 40,000 soldiers on his home ground. While certainly there were no feats of military genius, the Nigerian command managed to end the war with a mostly green army and kept the bloodshed to a minimum in the aftermath of conflict. This illustrated the increasing ability of the African state to project its strength as needed, and Nigeria emerged from the war as an African Great Power because of its exercising of these abilities. The experiences of the Federal military served to place the capabilities of African militaries back on an effective level and erase part of the embarrassing memory of the corrupt and ineffective ANC of the Congo.

The combination of decreasing external involvement and effectiveness with the increasingly potent centralized African state put an incredible strain upon the attempted legitimacy and sovereignty of the Civil Secessionist state, but in the end it was a fundamental failure of the state structure that caused its collapse. With the factors already discussed in the Introduction to Part I serving as the general framework for the existence of the Biafran State, it still was the creation and separation of a created state led by a cadre of elites and effected by the pre-existing political apparatus of the region. Biafra, like Katanga before it, was a project of the elites that founded and ran it, particularly Ojukwu himself. As has been

noted, Ojukwu was essentially the heart of the rebellion and of the separatist state. His military and civilian subordinates were also elites, and it was their combined vision of Biafra as a state that served as the blueprint for the secession. The input of the vast majority of the population was not considered in its creation. This is not to say that the population at large did not share in the waging of the conflict or share the sense of being a part of Biafra. If anything, the sacrifices and heartbreak that the Biafran people, particularly the Igbos, underwent in their quest for their own state remains one of the most notable aspects of the conflict. However, it is not their participation in the general existence of Biafra that would define it as a populist movement but instead the stake that the general populace had in the definition of their state and its outlook, something that neither the leaders of Biafra nor Katanga cultivated. Instead Biafra tended to be a singular state, run by a leader who was described afterward by his fellows as “a dictator.”<sup>88</sup> The only time that the governing philosophy of Biafra itself was questioned was in the bombastic Ahiara Declaration of June 1969, where Ojukwu made the bold statement:

When I speak of the ordinary Biafran I speak of the People. The Biafran Revolution is the People’s Revolution. Who are the People? you ask. The farmer, the trader, the clerk, the business man, the housewife, the student, the civil servant, the soldier, you and I are the people. Is there anyone here who is not of the people? Is there anyone here afraid of the People—anyone suspicious of the People? Is there anyone despising the People? Such a man has no place in our Revolution. If he is a leader, he has no right to leadership because all power, all sovereignty, belongs to the People. In Biafra the People are supreme; the People are master; the leader is servant. You see, you make a mistake when you greet me with shouts of “Power, Power”. I am not power—you are.<sup>89</sup>

Throughout the lengthy document Ojukwu makes numerous attempts to redefine the Biafran war as a populist revolution and suggests several radical alterations in the composition of the Biafran ideology. He even

attempts to position the “Revolution” as one of global populism, opposing the imperialism of outside states and seeking solidarity with the rest of the postcolonial world. However, despite these firebrand words, Biafra never actually altered its structure and remained under the unitary structure it had always assumed. By the time the Ahiara Declaration had been distributed to the populace, Biafra itself was so depleted that the remaining populace could not carry out any of its precepts, and it was only a mere seven months later that Ojukwu fled the secessionist state and the war ended.

The cases of Biafra and Katanga both show the limitations of the top-down imposition of the state. The case of Biafra is perhaps even more poignant in that it reveals the ultimate limitations of the state structure even with the full engagement of the populace. With the elites imposing the conception and idea of the state and determining the methodology of attaining the state itself, a certain inflexibility entered the struggle: the elites insisted upon a state existing and their status within it. This in turn led to the necessity for a conventional struggle that was not necessary in terms of the more flexible popular struggles. Simply put, the elite projects became limited to the idea of an existing state proving its legitimacy and thereby gaining recognition,<sup>90</sup> which became unworkable in the geopolitical environment of the decolonization of Africa and the creation of the OAU.

In the final accounting of the Civil Secessions, Katanga set the stage for their ultimate failure as a strategy, but Biafra proved the concept a stillborn one. The elite conception and presentation of the Civil Nation posited the existence of the state itself as the sole immediate goal of the secessionist conflict, a goal that set a generally smaller and weaker state in a conventional struggle against its internationally recognized host state. The goal of maintaining the facets of legitimacy within the secessionist state by the regime were temporarily successful in Katanga because of the massive external military aid to Tshombe’s regime as well as the weakness of the Congo’s response and the muddled ideological goals of the United Nations. This central attempt at legitimacy became infinitely harder to achieve in the Biafran case due to the paucity of external aid given to the secessionists as well as the strength and clear goals of the federal government. Of course, in terms of international legitimacy, the United Nations set the precedent of recognition in the Katanga case, but this in turn would be reinforced by the construction of the Organization of African Unity and its precepts. By

the end of the Biafran war it was clear that the idea of the creation of a civil state and then struggling for its legitimacy and recognition on a global or even continental stage was a dead end in terms of the secessionist goals on the continent of Africa. However, parallel conflicts occurring elsewhere on the continent would take a different evolutionary path and would set the stage for more successful outcomes for separatists and secessionist groups in Africa.