The Spectre of Biafra

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The Biafran War: The Struggle for Modern Nigeria, by Michael Gould

This measure was meant to counteract the administrative and political inflexibilities of a unitary state. This did not go down well because people were participants in the conflict interested only in soothing their own egos or self-validation. Or else, they have an undistinguished ethnic agenda in mind, either as victims or heroes of the war. As such, it enabled the Nigerian and the Cameroons (NCNC) formed a coalition government and the AG became the official opposition party. But, as the 1964 elections approached, the alliance between the NPC and the NCNC broke down and a breakaway faction of AG led by the premier of the Western region, Samuel Ladoke Akintola, moved to become the NPC’s major alliance partner. Akintola’s actions were conceived as treacherous by another faction of the AG which had Awolowo as its leader. Akintola’s faction was declared winner of the Western regional elections and this sparked off widespread riots and mayhem in the region. The federal government pronounced a state of emergency while Awolowo was hauled off to jail on charges of treason. Handing out a ten-year sentence to Awolowo only seemed to worsen the unrest in the West and the federal government re-solved to quell the riots through armed action named ‘Operation no mercy’. This military operation was to occur on the 17 January 1966. This was not to be, as Nigeria’s first military coup happened just two days before. Several reasons have been adduced for the putsch:

[…] the 1962 Action Group and parliamentary crisis, the 1962-3 census crisis, the 1964-65 Western region crisis: added to these were the Tiv minority riots in 1960-61 and 1964-65, both being ruthlessly suppressed, and the quota system in the army, favouring the recruitment of Northern Nigerians which allowed for political bias and patronage. These together with the underlying historic causes of ethnicity, religious diversity, British divisive rule and political instabilities after the colonial period, all added up to the potential for coups and revolution (p. 27).

‘Operation Damissa’, which is the name for the coup, failed partly because it was carried out by a rebellious faction of the army as opposed to an overwhelming majority. However, the political turmoil in the West aborted. The five rebellious majors who hatched the coup plot were more or less left off the hook by General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, who assumed the helm in the affairs of the country following the demise of the First Republic. Ironsi has been described as a simple, poorly educated soldier lacking the degree of political acumen necessary to lead an entity as conflict-prone as Nigeria. Part of his undoing stemmed from his inability or unwisely to perceive the coup plotters. In addition, by enforcing Decree 34, which sought to transform the country from a federation to a unitary state, he fanned fears concerning a perceived Igbo drive to dominate other ethnic groups. Ahmadu Bello, Tafawa Balewa, the prime minister, and Samuel Akintola, who were all key political figures, lost their lives during the coup. No Igbo leader of similar stature was sacrificed, thereby subsequently provoking the ire of Northerners. Incidentally, the plotters had intended to install Awolowo as the country’s leader had they succeeded. This intent has tended to imbue the plot as a whole with genuine radical or revolutionary fervour.

On 28 July, Ironsi and his Western Nigeria hosts, Lt. Fajuyi, were arrested and then assassinated by a posse of soldiers led by Lt. Yakubu Danjuma. This was seen as a retaliatory coup by the North to resume its dominant position on the Nigerian political landscape. After much haggling inside a barracks, Yakubu Gowon defeated Murtala Mohammed, ‘a rather hot-headed and unpredictable Northern officer’ (p. 32) and assumed the mantle of leadership of the country. Lt. Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, the military governor of the Eastern region, felt Gowon had no authority to rule over him. Immediately, it became evident that the two military leaders were not about to get along. Ojukwu was clearly confrontational while Gowon’s more compliant nature seemed to embolden the former. Ojukwu’s blatant insubordination defi nitely made matters worse; Ojukwu reportedly remarked: ‘Militaryly Gowon is not my superior and the question of acknowledging him does not arise’ (p. 32). Ojukwu was not prepared to serve under Gowon and could only treat him as an equal, which from the point of view of running a country was quite untenable. Ojukwu’s aggressiveness enraged Murtala Mohammed, who was serving in Gowon’s military council. Meanwhile, in Northern Nigeria, the massacre of Igbo indigenes continued, which in turn gave Ojukwu a lot to rail about.

After Isaac Adaka Boro attempted to get the Niger Delta region to secede from the federation during the rule of the recently killed Ironsi, Gowon was compelled to create additional states bringing the total number to twelve. For many Nigerians, writing about the war is still a deeply troubling exercise and there is usually a partisan dimension to it. The first coup d’etat in Nigeria took place on 15 January 1966, and that date is often adopted as the point at which to commence a historical investigation of the causes of the war. The five army majors who hatched the putsch – Alexander Modise, Emmanuel Heajuna, Hillard Obi, Jokotade Ojukwu and Chukuma Kaduna Nzeogwu – all have their followers and advocates within Nigerian historical circles. Most of them, with the exception of Nzeogwu, have written about their experiences and involvement, however Heajuna’s controversial account remains unpublished. The coup plot was eventually perceived in Northern Nigeria as an Igbo attempt at political dominance. A retaliatory coup plot was hatched six months later in July during which the head of state, General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, together with his host, Colonel Fajuyi, were assassinated. In Northern Nigeria, pogroms directed against Igbo indigenes occurred leading to their mass exodus to Eastern Nigeria. Colonels Emeka Ojukwu, entertaining exaggerated fears of genocide, mastering the secession of Eastern Nigeria from the rest of the country. The war commenced in 1967 and lasted for thirty months.

Indeed, the cumulative effects of the events leading up to the war were quite intense. Equally, the dramatis personae that played various roles in the conflict were colourful and have included: the lore surrounding the war with considerable suspense and melodrama.

On the eve of national independence, three political parties dominated the landscape, the National Council for Nigerian Unity (NCNU), the National Congress for Nigerian Unity (NCNC), formed by the indomitable Herbert Macaulay and later led by Nnamdi Azikwe; the Action Group (AG), led by Obafemi Awolowo; and the Northern Peoples’ Congress (NPC), headed by the Sardauna of Sokoto, Ahmadu Bello. During the 1959 national elections, the NPC won 142 of the 312 federal states, the NCNC acquired 89 while AG secured 73 seats. The NPC and NCNC...
On 9 August, a Biafran offensive led by Colonel Victor Banjo attacked the Mid-West region. Banjo’s rag-tag troops encountered virtually no resistance from the region then governed by Lt. Colonel David Ejoor. Ejoor was not able to re-establish the wavy shadow over the tortuous path to reconciliation and total collective healing.

Colonel Victor Banjo attacked the Mid-West region, where he was executed for treason, a particularly ominous ring. Banjo was subsequently recalled to the Eastern region, where he was executed for treason. Could argues that Banjo’s dithering had proved costly in that he could have garnered useful information.

As casualties mounted on the Biafra side, its propaganda machinery kicked into gear, branding military action by the federal side as calculated acts of genocide. It did this by displaying droves of kwashiorkor-ridden infants on the verge of physiological collapse across graphic white and black TV screens. For the most part and for a while, the global media bought this.

Onitsha against the redoubtable Ojukwu’s previously unquestioned authority. But the reality was that Ojukwu’s consistently skilful manipulation of Biafran propaganda also brought along useful humanitarian assistance and support within international circles. Indeed as dusk approached both sides would lay down their arms, a local market would be set up and trading for locally produced food and drink for both sides would take place. These ‘attack markets’ were endemic throughout the war and throughout Biafra’s borders, satisfying Federal troops’ demands for food, drink and local women and creating income which helped sustain the Biafran economy (p. 83).

Gould reveals several instances of Biafra’s resistance and inarticulate. However, he equally recounts ‘the lack of co-ordination and communication within the state through all the functions of government filtering across all strata of Biafran society’ (p. 88). In a similar vein, mistrust and suspicion existed between the civilian population, the bureaucracy and the officer corps, with a large part of it stemming from the Mid-West invasion debacle. Gould goes to considerable lengths to describe the Biafran chains of command and bases of authority. He is careful to explain their particular characteristics and weaknesses. If a lack of understanding could be said to have existed between the military corps and the civilian population, the same cannot be said to have existed within intelligence services, which were quite efficient in penetrating federal lines and gathering useful information.

The war created a couple of notable war heroes. Colonel Joe Achuzia, an unconventionally trained officer (his prior war experience came from his involvement in the Korean War courtesy of the British, although no records of his being commissioned were ever found) who caused a lot of havoc on the federal side. Achuzia was very popular in Biafra for his boldness and resourcefulness and for fanning hopes that Biafra could actually emerge victorious. It did this by displaying droves of kwashiorkor-ridden infants on the verge of physiological collapse across graphic white and black TV screens. For the most part and for a while, the global media bought this.

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