

Burying the Divide: An Analysis of the USA and USSR Involvement in the Nigerian Civil War

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Introduction

The end of the Second World War ushered a new phase in the international system in which two superpowers, namely, USA and USSR (with divergent ideologies) became the key players. Each strove to surpass the other in the maintenance of a bloc of faithful allies. They encouraged the newly independent African states to be positively inclined towards their ideologies or exploited internal crises in such countries to establish their presence and also plant their ideologies. Between 1967 and 1970, Nigeria was embroiled in an internecine war that took a toll on her population and almost tore the country apart. One would expect the USA and USSR to confront each other by supporting opposite sides of the conflict. But rather than that, the USA adopted a policy of aloofness or neutrality while the USSR openly lent it support to the federal side through massive supply of arms, thus burying their ideological divide. This is evident in the fact that the war did not "seriously intensify tension between USA and USSR" (Stremlau 1977:4). This appears to be in utter defiance of the spirit of cold War superpower politics prevalent at the time and also a contradiction of their policies in the Congo and Vietnam conflicts.

This paper analyses the underlying reasons behind the reactions of the USA and USSR to the Nigerian Civil War. To achieve this, we will first assess the relations between Nigeria and the USA and USSR respectively prior to the outbreak of the civil war. Thereafter, the immediate cause of the war is highlighted, followed by an analysis of the belligerents' attempt to attract the support of

the USA, and the USSR. Next, the involvement of each of the powers is analyzed.

Nigeria's Relations with the Superpowers Prior to the Outbreak of the Civil War

In order to understand the official reactions of the superpowers to the Nigerian conflict, the reader must understand the relations 'between each of them and Nigeria prior to the Biafran secession on May 30, 1967 as "diplomacy...is a cumulative process, and Nigeria's previous behaviour influenced foreign reactions to the civil war" (Stremlau, 1977:4).

(a) Nigeria's Relation with the USA

Nigeria's relation with the USA at this period was very warm and cordial at was indeed on the upward curve. A number of factors, some as a result of the USA diplomacy during the Second World War and others dating to the colonial period, influenced the cordiality of the relations. In the first place, the effort of President Franklin Roosevelt of America had inspired the drafting of the Atlantic Charter on August 9, 1941. The self-determination clause of the charter served as a stimulus that galvanized colonized peoples, which Nigeria was part of to seek political independence as it empowered them to choose the form of government under which they would live. Secondly, the fact that the USA did not have direct colonial role in Africa was itself significant to most Nigerian nationalists and immediate post-independence leaders. These factors made them remain enamoured of the USA. At the attainment of political independence, their focus was on maintaining warm and friendly relations with her.

Another factor that accounted for the Nigeria-USA entente is what George Obiozor describes as "the role of individuals and groups" He argued that before the attainment of political

independence, some Nigerians had become exposed to the American society through acquisition of her education and other forms of interactive processes. Some of these Nigerians emerged as its political elite and expressed the impact of their exposure to American society through the "Americanization of Nigeria" (Obiozor 1992:22). Thus, this small but conspicuous Nigerian elite was a decisive factor in the development of Nigeria's foreign policy towards the USA and to some extent guided America's reactions to events in Nigeria. Indeed, the first political act of great importance in the development of Nigeria-USA diplomacy took place on October 7, 1960, on the floor of the General Assembly of the United Nations, as Nigeria was being admitted as the 99th member of the Organisation. The ceremony of admission of members into the UNO requires that an older member of the body should recommend or introduce prospective members to the General Assembly. The significance of the ceremony is so great that several countries lobby prospective members to be selected for this function. Often, colonial eleaving, existence of mutual interests and ideological persuasion determined the choice of prospective member countries. Nigeria on the auspicious occasion chose the USA to perform this important and symbolic function. The choice had far-reaching political significance as it pointed at the direction Nigeria's foreign policy was focused. Quite instructive was the speech made at the General Assembly of the UN by American Secretary of State, Christian A. Herter, while presenting Nigeria. He said:

The people of Nigeria have won their independence, but they have won our admiration by the way they have gone about the winning. They have done it by demonstrating time and again and in many fields that Nigerians are anxious to enjoy the satisfaction of independence and fully capable of assuming its responsibility. They have done it also by reaching agreement among themselves on the form and

structure of their federation as one of the most constructive acts of statesmanship of the past decade. (Quoted in Obiozor 1992:38)

Nigeria-USA relations received more warmth with subsequent developments. Between July 24 and August 1, 1961, the Nigerian Prime Minister, Sir, Tafawa Belewa, made an official visit to the USA during which he spoke in glowing terms about the USA. He declared:

We are highly gratified that in this part of the world far from our house we have found friends willing to listen to our point of view and understand the purpose and impulses that underline our actions and faults. (Quoted in Balewa 1964:59)

Again, the Congo crisis provided yet another proof of the USA-Nigeria entente. It is indeed worthy of note that the Congo crisis was the first major problem of international concern to the superpower which directly brought the cold war to Africa. And Nigeria lent its support to the USA policy on the matter through the recognition of the role of the UNO as the instrument which the constitutional rulers of Congo might be resorted via a UN supervised election. Obiozor captures the true significance of Nigeria's position on the matter as he describes it as "the first sustained and most serve test of the tenacity of Nigeria-USA relation" (Obiozor 1992:43).

The most important aspect of the USA-Nigeria relations in the period lay in the realization of the Nigerian leaders of the indispensability of the USA's capital and the expertise in the future economic development of the country. Earlier in 1957, the USA government had undertaken studies on Nigerian economic situation. The highlight of the study was the aspect of it that spoke of the growing interest in American private investment in Nigeria. According to Obiozor "... this study indicated that conditions

existed for mutually rewarding economic relations between Nigeria and the United States" (Obiozor 1992:48). Hence, after independence in 1960, it became evident to the leaders of Nigeria "that it was indeed the aim and hope of the American government and people to assist Nigeria move more rapidly towards its goal of economic development" (Obiozor 1992:52). Consequently, an avalanche of aids, loans and grants from the USA government inundated Nigeria. For instance, on December 12, 1961, the USA government announced its intention to provide \$225000000 to the Nigerian government in support of its 1962-1968 development plan. The significance of America's economic aid to Nigeria was most startling when viewed against the balance in trade relations between the two countries. Whereas less than a tenth of Nigeria's trade is with the United States, about half of the aid currently available to Nigeria is America's (Anglin 1964:249). Indeed, instances of America's aid to Nigerian government abound. Enumerating them will distract the focus of this paper. But suffice it to say that the USA government and agencies were deeply involved in the development of agriculture, manpower, education, provision of technical assistance, infrastructural facilities and medicare. The conspicuous presence of America in these areas attest to the goodwill and friendliness both countries enjoyed from each other and most significantly the increasing role of the USA in Nigeria. In fact, by the eve of the Nigerian civil war, the USA had become the greatest aid donor to Nigeria and its influence was palpably felt in all facets of Nigeria's national life.

(b) *Nigeria's Relations with the USSR*

Nigeria's relation with the USSR was at very low ebb, restricted to a few Trade Union and students' contact. This perhaps was predicted upon the views of Nigeria's leaders of the time on communism. There was amongst them an avid aversion for communism and strong suspicions of the USSR intentions in Africa.

The former was so strong that Soviet literature remained banned in Nigeria till 1965 and in some quarters communism was seen to be synonymous with atheism. Therefore, when Moscow eventually opened an embassy in 1961, unprecedented logistics and bureaucratic restrictions were imposed to limit its effectiveness. For instance, the number of diplomatic staff was limited to ten and only five diplomatic car plates were allocated to it (Okolo 1986;56). The wariness Nigerian government had for the USSR was reflected in the decision to delay opening an embassy in Moscow until 1963,

Nigeria's economic and social dealings with the USSR and indeed the communist bloc were negligible till the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war. Nigeria had rejected a forty-million-pound £40,000,000 interest-free loan extended to her by the USSR government. Furthermore, Nigeria did not directly establish any exchange programme between her citizens and those of the USSR. Nigerian recipients of Soviet scholarship could only travel to Moscow by first procuring travel documents to Ghana from whence they could then depart to Moscow (Oral communication with Dr, P.B. Nworah), The federal government considered this illegal and concluded that a cultural agreement was essential "to force an undertaking that all offers of scholarships and recruitment of students should be done only through Nigerian government approved channel" (Quoted in Stremlau 1977:9).

On her part, the Soviet government did not view Nigerian leaders in good light. In the first place, Moscow's assessment of Nigeria's internal structure was pessimistic. In view of her communist ideology, the Soviet government had described Nigeria's independence as a highly compromised affair under which no hope existed for genuine neutral and non-aligned foreign policy. This perhaps could be explained in terms of the extreme pro-west disposition of Nigerian leaders of the time and the failure of the socialist ideology to make any significant impact on them.

Consequently, Nigeria was placed in the category of Africa's Un- progressive states.'

But developments in the so-called progressive states jolted Russia and impelled her to make a detour in her policy. Rather than preach and export communism and revolutions to African states, she sought for avenues to expand trade relations with them. Nigerian foreign policy formulators capitalized on this change in the foreign policy thrust of USSR to explore areas of cooperation with her. Thus, the strong anti-Soviet and anti-socialist attitude of the Balewa administration began to thaw. In the same vein, development emanating from the coup and counter coup provided the Russians the opportunity to make inroads into Nigeria. By and large, it is worthwhile to state that Nigeria's relation with Moscow "during the pre-war years were correct but limited" (Stremlau, 1977: 16).

The Immediate Causes of the Nigerian Civil War

The major issues that caused the Nigerian-Biafran conflict had fundamental implications on the reactions of the international community to it. For most of their decisions on the matter were predicted upon their perception of the immediate causes of the war and the peculiar Nigerian circumstances. Certainly, the immediate causes of the war were the secession of Biafra and the federal invasion of the seceding territory to maintain the federation. But the key question here is What were those factors that predisposed Biafra for succession. The answer definitely lies in the fallout of the January 15, 1966, military coup which overthrew the Tarawa Belewa led Federal Government.

The immediate post-independent Nigeria leaders had become corrupt and decadent. Consequently, five Majors of the Nigerian army led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu staged a military coup that ousted the regime and in the process some leading politicians and military officers lost their lives. The skewed nature of the coup casualties gave the impression that it was ethnically configured in favour of the Igbo.

Ironically, the coup planners did not take the reins' of government. These fell into the hands' 'of Major' General Aguyi Ironsi, the highest Commanding Officer in the Nigerian army, who was also .of the Igbo extraction. It would appear that some of his politics attracted the ire and resentment of the northern segment 'of the country that felt he was' advancing the Igbo cause thereby. In reaction, a violent riot erupted in the North during which the Igbo residents' in the area were killed and their property 'looted: The tension 'heightened with the promulgation of Degree No. 34 '(Unification Decree) which abolished the regions 'and introduced a unitary .system of government.

The mounting tension resulted in the coup of July 29, 1966, in which Major General Aguyi Ironsi; the "Governor of "Western region, Lt Col. Fajuyi, and several Igbo military officers and men were killed, It would seem the coup was executed by the Northern officers with the aim of eliminating Igbo Officers as a revenge for the death of Northern politicians and' officers as a revenge for the death of Northern politicians and officers in the January 1966 military coup. This, was followed by yet another attack on the Igbo residents in the North.

Lt Co Yakubu Gowon emerged as the Head .of State after an initial statement. But Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, the Governor of the Eastern region, refused to lend his support to the new regime and insisted on a loose federation as the basis for the East to be part of Nigeria. Just as Lt. Col. Gowen had convened an ad hoc constitutional conference, of the representatives of the' regions' in Lagos to fashion modalities for the Nigerian federation. Another pogrom erupted in the North, still against the Igbo resident in the area. Consequently, the Igbo residents in different parts of the country were compelled to take refuge in their homeland. The gruesome experiences and tales of the pogrom accentuated the popular belief among the Igbo that they were no longer accepted in other parts of ' the country. At a meeting in Enugu on May 27, 1967, the chiefs, elders and' consultative assembly of the Eastern region endorsed the independence of the area.

Shortly after midnight on May 30, 1967, Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu declared the independent sovereign state of the Republic of Biafra. And on 7 June, 1967, the first shot was fired at Giakem to restore the seceding eastern region to the Nigerian Federation. Although, it would be stated that the skewed nature of the casualties of the January 15, 1966 coup, coupled with the policies of Major General Aguiyi Ironsi made the North believe that there was a calculated attempt to throne Igbo hegemony in the country. This was expressed in the counter coup of July 29, 1966 and the series of pogroms targeted against the Igbo in Northern Nigeria: The people felt threatened and not wanted in the rest of the country, hence the secession and declaration of an independent state of Biafra as the avenue for self-determination and preservation. The shots were fired to restore the seceding territory to Nigeria.

Attempts by the Belligerents to Attract the Support of the USA, and USSR Governments

Diplomatic activities surrounding the war started before the first shot was fired and continued as the war lasted. Each side had peculiar diplomatic challenges. Nigeria operated from the vantage point of a legitimate and an already existing authority, whereas Biafra grappled with the 'problem' of legitimacy and recognition.

In the superpower politics that pervaded the landscape of the international system at the time; the support of the superpowers was crucial to the belligerents' diplomatic success and the execution of the war. Therefore, each side of the conflict had to court their support and military assistance or in the least be assured of their neutrality.

As already indicated, Nigeria had all diplomatic odds in her favour. As a legitimate and an already existing authority, she had the apparatus, to initiate worthwhile diplomatic relations with other nations. She made two notable efforts to attract the support of the

USA. The first came when the threat of secession was at its zenith while the other; as the War raged. In the first instance, Gowen sought from the USA ambassador to Nigeria and his British counterpart for a joint support for Nigeria in case of the outbreak of hostilities. The USA ambassador is said to have replied "that while Washington hoped that Nigeria remained united, he was equally sure that the United States would decline to take sides in what it considered as purely an internal dispute" (Stremlau 1977: 64-65).

The second initiative was in June 1967, just as hostilities broke out. Chief Enahoro was sent to Washington to brief the USA officials on the Nigerian crisis. But he was appalled at American officials' perception of the Nigerian crisis. He did not extract any meaningful assurance of support from the USA.

Having been disappointed with the failure to get any meaningful promise of military assistance from the USA, Nigerian officials directed their attention to the {JSSR, where Moscow was ever willing to fill the gap created by America's aloofness. Okolo (1986) reports the series of Nigeria's officials contact with Moscow thus:

Then in March (19967) Edwin Ogbu, one of the super permanent secretaries of the Gowon era, traveled to Moscow, ostensibly to sign a cultural agreement with the Soviets but in reality to explore the possibilities of Soviet military help. That was followed in June by a formal federal delegation to the Soviet Union for arms, and in July, Ogbu went back' with Anthony Enahoro ... and concluded the arms deal which ... was on strictly commercial and cash basis (Okolo 1986:58).

Biafra was highly incapacitated in her effort to penetrate the international system. Legitimacy and recognition problems coupled with lack of proper network to' conduct diplomatic relations weighed heavily against her. Her, greatest challenge, therefore, was accessibility to foreign governments 'with 'a view to securing diplomatic: recognition.

But Ojukwu laboured to overcome these by evoking at different times the emotion of the pogrom against' the Igbo, self-determination for Biafra and the 'genocide war.' But Moscow appeared unconcerned by these.

As regards the USA, the Biafran propaganda had its greatest impact on public opinion; and to a lesser extent, (he Congress. The State Department, despite all pressures, remained steadfast .in her diplomatic recognition of Nigeria. All through the war, the Biafran students in the USA, and humanitarian organisations remained the most vocal group that advocated 'Washington' support for Biafra. (Qbiozor, 1,996:45).

The USA Government adopted a policy of neutrality in terms of sale, supply, and assistance to both sides in the conflict. Three Principles sphere of influence doctrine, the conviction 'that the war was an, African affair that could be effectively managed .by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), and diplomatic support for Nigeria on one hand and humanitarian ,and relief assistance to Biafra on the other) guided American policy on the war.

The Sphere of Influence Doctrine stems from the concentric circle policy of American alliance system in NATO. This confers colonists of African nations primary responsibilities' over affairs in their former territories, .reserving a" direct role for the USA only if the issues moved from a level beyond their control and into the arena of .superpower involvement (Obiozor 1993:10). It was perhaps in affirmation of this, policy that the then Secretary of State had said, "We regard Nigeria as, part of Britain's sphere of influence (Quoted in De St. Jorre 1979: 179). America therefore could not pre-empt Britain 'that had initially refused to take sides. But as the war progressed and Britian permitted' the sale of arms to the Federal, Government, America justified its neutrality on the ground that Britain was, standing in for American interest. The American choice of' aloofness' was also further re-assured by the

fact that British and Russian assistance converged to Nigeria. The USA government condemned the Russian supply of arms to Nigeria, but denied arms to both Nigeria and Biafra.

Secondly, the USA official perception of the conflict was that it was an African affair devoid of ideological persuasion and, therefore, could be managed by members of the OAU, who had indeed set up a consultative committee to settle it. The OAU's procedure and view appeared to be in tandem with America's expectation.

Finally, the official state department policy recognized the need to save Nigeria from disintegration and collapse which the conflict portends. It was also constrained to respect public opinion in America which was stridently in sympathy with Biafra because of the emotion of the pogroms, Self-determination and genocide was successfully evoked by Biafran propaganda. America's policy in this regard appeared double-edged. While it offered diplomatic support to Nigeria as a matter of state policy, it intensified relief assistance to Biafra through humanitarian agencies to placate public opinion.

The Russian involvement in the conflict in favour of the Federal Military Government was quite overt. As the pre-war Soviet relations with Nigeria was at a low ebb, it did not hesitate to exploit the opportunity offered by the tardiness of western powers and Nigeria's allies to render assistance in making inroad into Nigeria. When contacted, she willingly offered assistance. But in rendering the assistance, she was cautious not to spark off a superpower confrontation. Thus, she avoided direct interference at the outset and made the supplies through a third party. It was not until 1968 when the Russians fell out with their Czech agents that they began direct supply of arms to Nigeria. But this time also, British arms had begun to flow to the Federal Government. By and large, the Soviet did not disguise their support for Nigeria.

This study has showed that the Nigerian Civil War defiled the superpower politics that pervaded the landscape of the international system at the time. Both powers were cautious not to spark off a cold war confrontation from their involvement.

The US government stood 'aloof' because of the Sphere of Influence Doctrine which bestows primary responsibilities to Britain as well the confidence of the ability of the OAD to handle the matter which it perceived as an 'African affair,' On the other' hand, the Soviet supported the Federal side owing to a combination of the refusal of Nigeria's traditional allies to supply her the much needed arms and its assessment of the outcome of the war. The USA authorities became more complacent as British assistance and that of the USSR converged,

The overall assessment of the attitude of these powers could be judged from the fact that the Nigerian conflict was devoid of ideological underpinnings. It was against this background that Sidenko (1968) in astonishment exclaimed "... there for the first time in history, were the running dogs of imperialism (America and Britain) demonstrably shoulder to shoulder with the Soviet Revisionist for the whole world to see."

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