

Bangor University

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

The Other Side' of the Nigeria-Biafra War:
A Transnational History

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Award date:
2018

Awarding institution:
Bangor University

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'The Other Side' of the Nigeria-Biafra War: A Transnational History

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A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

November 2017



Ralph Steadman, 'Requiem for Biafra', *Scanlan's Monthly*, March 1970.

Abstract

During the civil war between Nigeria and the separatist south-eastern state of Biafra, a famine developed that became a global media event in the summer of 1968. Graphic images of starving children captured the public imagination and became a hallmark of the media coverage of famines and humanitarian crises to come. Biafra committees sprang up all over the world and began to support Biafra's bid for independence and to protest the inactivity of foreign states in the face of what they believed to be a genocide. Expatriate Biafrans and Nigerians in Europe or North America lobbied governments to support their respective side and set up organisations for that very purpose. While the churches and other humanitarian agencies launched fund-raising campaigns to finance the greatest relief effort since the Second World War, most foreign governments hesitated to get involved. The humanitarian effort during the Nigeria-Biafra War became the catalyst of the development of the modern humanitarian industry as well as the breakthrough of the interventionist humanitarianism associated with the borderless movement. A growing number of studies on the global history of the Nigeria-Biafra War have begun to reconstruct the roles of various countries during the war, trace changes in the landscape of humanitarian organisations, and explore the discursive forms of engagement with Biafran suffering. This thesis adds to the existing body of knowledge by studying the transnational dimension of the war and highlighting the intersection of various agents, including the media, governmental institutions, and advocates. The overall argument is that a particular constellation of institutions and converging developments – namely the backdrop of 1960s activism, the media interest in publicising Biafran suffering, and the reluctance of governments to actively intervene to bring about peace – resulted in the rise of the modern humanitarian industry. Simultaneously, the visceral albeit simplifying narrative of human suffering turned the Biafran famine into an almost global *cause célèbre* and strengthened paternalistic views of the Third World as a space for continued foreign intervention.

Acknowledgements

Without the patience, support, and faith of my doctoral supervisor, Alexander Sedlmaier, this thesis would not have been written. My other two supervisors, Marcel Stoetzler and Kachi Ozumba, helped me with their input during discussions of various aspects of the project. The responsibility for any errors is mine alone, of course.

I am indebted to all those who have helped me along this journey, especially staff in libraries and archives, who have made navigating the sources easier and pointed me to helpful collections.

My family and friends were extremely supportive during what has proven to be a very difficult time. During my holidays, the home of my sister Miriam Blaschke, her husband Falk, and my two lovely nieces, Linnea and Freyja, has been a refuge and a sanctuary. My mother, Monika Schneemann and her husband Dietmar likewise deserve my gratitude.

Sven Greitschus was a long-suffering companion on my Ph.D. journey, who after first being my office- and then flat-mate, has become a true friend. Dina Kafiris helped with encouraging conversations and inspiring me with her enthusiasm. I benefitted greatly from our many discussions of the writing process, the Ph.D. experience, and life more generally.

Dilshara Jayasinghe has shown me the meaning of determination, commitment, and pure grit. I would also like to thank Amala Koutiaga for all the inspiration, yoga classes, and vegan recipes. Beatrice Viviane Vetter provided many much-needed pep-talks and trek bars, a semester spent with Miriam Grigorean brought back the flair of undergraduate days, and Sarah Schuhmacher helped create a garden out of an uncared-for backyard that has then given me many moments of meditative distraction from my thesis. Anastasia Schrader, 'these clouds we're seeing, they're explosions in the sky': without your help, everything would have been so much harder. I look forward to an opportunity to return the favour.

Last but by no means least, I want to dedicate this thesis to my partner, Shashank Mishra, who patiently awaited my graduation without ever complaining about the sacrifices my Ph.D. journey entailed for both of us.

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List of Abbreviations

ABH	<i>Aktion Biafra-Hilfe</i>
ACKBA	American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive
BBA.....	Britain-Biafra Association
FMG	Federal Military Government of Nigeria
HMG.....	Her Majesty's Government, British Government
IRC/ICRC.....	International Committee of the Red Cross
JCA.....	Joint Church Aid
MSF	<i>Médecins Sans Frontières</i>
OAU.....	Organisation of African Unity
SCF	Save the Children Fund
SBC	Save Biafra Committee
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WCC	World Council of Churches

Introduction

In April 1970, three months after the end of the Nigeria-Biafra War, a group of American scholars from Boston published a pamphlet on the Nigerian civil war titled *The Other Side of the Nigerian War*, criticising what the authors believed to be the distorted nature of the public debate on the war. According to the Africa Research Group, the way in which the war was discussed in public overlooked important aspects of the conflict, while focusing on the spectacle of genocide and on the overwhelming compulsion to choose a side and act, rather than to reserve judgement and reflect. With the publication of images of starving children, the war became an international media sensation during the summer of 1968. Press, radio and television spread news of the first African famine and resulted in a mass mobilisation of sympathy abroad. The images of emaciated children were accompanied by allusions to genocide and the Holocaust, specifically; it spread a sense of urgency that moved the audiences. Newspapers reported receiving large numbers of calls from their readers asking what they could do to help those suffering in Biafra and advised them to contact or donate to relief organisations. Biafra action committees sprang up all over Europe and North America with the goal of raising awareness of Biafran suffering and collecting funds for the relief effort organised by church relief organisations of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Biafra mobilised a rather diverse group of supporters for its cause and the relief effort launched was the biggest since the Second World War; it transformed the landscape of aid organisations and constituted an important juncture in the development of the modern humanitarian industry.¹

This thesis considers ‘the other side’ of the war in a twofold sense. It is not focused on events in Nigeria and Biafra but instead engages primarily with the responses in Europe. Moreover, it does not examine the military aspect of the war but what might be termed the meta-war of struggles over representation and perception. My central interest thus revolves around the question of how the specific narrative of the war with its focus on the suffering of Biafrans initially came in to being, and why this narrative galvanised public interest and sympathy to such a remarkable degree. From the outset, the war was internationalised, and the outcome of the military conflict depended on external attitudes. After escalating tensions

¹ Alex de Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa* (Irthlingborough, 1997), p. 76.

between the East and Lagos, on 30 May 1967, Nigeria's Eastern region declared its independence as the Republic of Biafra. Subsequently, the Nigerian military governor Gowon announced a 'police action' to put a quick end to the secession. With assurances of this kind, Nigeria hoped to secure international support, especially from Britain. Although initially advising Nigeria against military action in a non-committal way, Britain eventually decided to support Gowon's approach. Along with the Soviet Union, Britain supplied arms to Nigeria. The United States, on the other hand, professed neutrality considering Nigeria, in the words of an American diplomat, as 'a responsibility of Britain'.² After May 1968, Nigeria successfully enforced an economic blockade of the secessionist state, having reduced Biafra to a land-locked enclave with a single airstrip as a connection to the outside world. The Biafran famine that developed due to the blockade attracted intense international media attention to the war a year after it had begun. The hope for international recognition, the relief effort that brought food and medicine to the enclave, and support from foreign governments, including France, Portugal, and South Africa, allowed the Biafran leadership to continue its resistance despite a militarily unfavourable situation. The war turned into a stalemate. Ultimately, in early January 1970, after two and a half years, Biafran resistance collapsed.

The notably sympathetic representation and perception of Biafra abroad must be located in the context of a changing global order in the wake of decolonisation.³ Responses to the Biafran famine are indicative of the rise of a new kind of internationalist, humanitarian politics during the 1960s and 1970s that is carried not by states but increasingly by non-state actors such as NGOs. States not wishing to intervene in any direct way contributed to aid organisations, who found their first major challenge in Biafra. Humanitarian organisations like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) were changed by this experience and adapted to the logistical, practical, and theoretical challenges it brought with it. In this context, the Nigeria-Biafra War was represented, primarily, as a humanitarian crisis in light of the famine that broke out in Biafra and was initially portrayed as a genocide by the media as well as its advocates. Attitudes towards the Third World changed but remained marked by ambivalence. An emerging solidarity with the Third World often went hand in hand with paternalism, a tendency increased by the focus on human suffering and the provision of aid.

² John J. Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (Princeton, 2015 [1977]), p. 65.

³ The term 'Third World' is discussed below.

The Nigeria-Biafra War serves as a case study to illuminate the multitude of channels through which conflicts abroad are refracted before they reach European audiences, the multiplicity of sources and filters that determine the information transmitted, and the factors that influence the way in which such information is received, understood, and acted upon. In the case of Biafra, I will argue that it became an international media event because various groups had an interest in the publication of Biafran starvation, from missionaries and church organisations, the media, advocates, aid organisations, and the Biafran state including its organs for propaganda and public relations. This was unmatched by the efforts of Nigeria and its allies to present a counter narrative.

In Biafra both understanding and raising awareness was mediated by images accompanied by eye-witness accounts. While neither the act of eye-witnessing nor the images produced were novel, in the age of mass media, their origins, use, and dissemination had to be increasingly questioned, critically. As the history of propaganda and public relations shows, the managing of perceptions was always an integral part of war, and the Nigeria-Biafra War was no exception. Remarkable, however, is the role of voluntary groups, missionaries, humanitarian organisations and advocate networks in strengthening and promoting Biafra's case. This study will clearly demonstrate how various institutions contributed to a specific representation of the war that emphasised the humanitarian aspects – namely, starvation – over the socio-political and military issues at stake.

A Brief History of the Nigeria-Biafra War

Largely because Nigeria is still plagued by the problems that contributed to the war, much of its history is contested and controversial – even its proper designation as a 'war' is a politically charged affair. 'Nigerian Civil War' is commonly used in the early literature, especially since Nigeria prevailed as the victor, but this eliminates the multiple associations and memories that the name 'Biafra' still invokes, not only for Nigerians but for audiences abroad for whom the name is irreversibly connected with the news coverage of the famine. On the other hand, including the name of the secessionist state may – now as much as during the war – award Biafra a legitimacy that remains contested. In this study, the war will mainly be referred to as Nigeria-Biafra War in order to capture the many connotations of the name Biafra that are of such central importance to the argument I present.

In the wider context of the history of many African states after decolonisation, separatism, military takeovers, and conflicts concerning the borders previously drawn by the colonial powers were a common feature,⁴ and the civil war in Nigeria was no exception to the rule. The promise of wealth from natural resources has often failed to benefit the wider population of African states and brought with it political conflict, as was the case in the Congo and later in Sierra Leone and Sudan.⁵ Ongoing external involvement in African affairs did little to alleviate these issues, and during the Cold War, superpower rivalries often exacerbated them.⁶ Generalisations can be overdone, but it is important to place Nigeria's war against the Biafran secession in this context to link it to the broader patterns of African history that transcend individual differences. The conflict in Nigeria was thus not a unique occurrence by nature, but it was the unprecedented impact abroad that transformed it into an international spectacle of suffering. At the time of its independence, Nigeria was considered a success story of decolonisation – the peaceful transition to self-rule stood in stark contrast to the bloodshed following the partition of, for example, India upon independence.⁷ The large Nigerian federation was, moreover, the most populous state in Africa, and its oil reserves, discovered in 1956, promised economic prosperity.

There is much about the history of the Nigeria-Biafra War and the years immediately preceding the conflict that is still disputed or for which there is not enough documentary evidence to reconstruct related events in much detail. For instance, to this day, the scope of the famine – the most controversial and internationally recognised aspect of the war – is unknown, and relevant figures are usually based on estimations of aid organisations. The ICRC estimated in June 1969 that around 1.5 million Biafrans had died.⁸ In his history of military coups in Nigeria between 1966 and 1976, Max Siollun writes on the subject:

⁴ Cf. Paul Nugent, *Africa Since Independence: A Comparative History* (London, 2004).

⁵ Cf. Kenneth Omeje, *Extractive Economies and Conflicts in the Global South: Multi-Regional Perspectives on Rentier Politics* (Aldershot, 2008).

⁶ Cf. Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our World* (Cambridge, 2005).

⁷ Iain Macleod, Colonial Secretary, cited in: 'Nigerian independence "a model": reflection of mutual trust', *The Guardian*, 16.07.60.

⁸ It is very difficult to arrive at realistic mortality figures for famines and estimates diverge widely. Arua O. Omaka, *The Biafran Humanitarian Crisis, 1967-1970: International Human Rights and Joint Church Aid* (Madison, 2016), p. 110. For the Ethiopian famine in the 80s, Susan Moeller makes a similar case noting that there are no credible mortality figures. S. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*, p. 121.

It is often said that history is written by the victors. In many cases in Nigeria, history is not written at all. A combination of official reluctance to divulge combustible past events in a country permanently poised on an ethnic and religious powder keg, and the determination of the *dramatis personae* to avoid having their misdeeds exposed, means that early Nigerian post-independence history is in many places a collection of folk tales and fables.⁹

Indeed, much historical writing relies on the oral testimony of protagonists;¹⁰ an issue of even greater relevance when addressing the period of the civil war because the continued importance of those socio-political problems initially leading to it have made it difficult for scholars to arrive at balanced accounts. History, here, is perhaps written less by the victors than by those who became deeply involved in the war: the reports of journalists, missionaries, aid workers, advocates, and protagonists of both sides remain influential.

Accounts of journalists published during or immediately after the war, including the work of Frederick Forsyth and Suzanne Cronje, as well as John de St. Jorré, provided the early basis for scholarly engagement with the war outside of Nigeria.¹¹ Forsyth and Cronje became ardent supporters of Biafra and their writings largely present a Biafran perspective, although, to my mind, Cronje achieves more balance than Forsyth. Likewise, some Nigerian and Eastern Nigerian historians present narratives that restate the case of their respective sides.¹² Most notably, Chinua Achebe's memoirs, *There was a Country*, and the controversy the book caused demonstrate the ongoing contests over the memory and interpretation of the war.¹³ In fact, Nigerian literature has engaged with the war to an extraordinary degree and Chimamanda Adichie's novel *Half a Yellow Sun* is a case in point.¹⁴ It comes as no surprise, then, that a recent volume by Toyin Falola and Ogechukwu Ezekwem explores the war's history through literary

⁹ Max Siollun, *Oil, Politics, and Violence: Nigeria's Military Coup Culture, 1966-1976* (New York, 2009), p. 2.

¹⁰ For instance, Michael Gould, *The Biafran War: The Struggle for Modern Nigeria* (New York, 2012). Despite a strong empirical basis, some key explanations provided by Stremlau also rely on the accounts of protagonists. J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*; John de St. Jorré, *The Nigerian Civil War* (London, 1972).

¹¹ Frederick Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend* (London, 1969); Suzanne Cronje, *The World and Nigeria. A Diplomatic History of the Biafran War, 1967-1970* (London, 1972); John de St. Jorré, *The Nigerian Civil War* (London, 1972).

¹² Historian Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, for instance, attempted to prove an Igbo genocide in Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, *Biafra Revisited* (Dakar, 2006).

¹³ Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (London, 2012).

¹⁴ Chimamanda Adichie, *Half a Yellow Sun* (New York, 2006); Chidi Amuta, 'The Nigerian Civil War and the Evolution of Nigerian Literature', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 17:1 (1983), p. 96.

accounts.¹⁵ In the wake of the war, scholars analysed various aspects and accounts that remain influential for contemporary work on the subject, such as John Stremlau's rather comprehensive study of the international politics of the war or Morris Davis' work on the role of public relations agencies.¹⁶ Recently, there has been a surge of interest in the war's international history and its significance for the history of humanitarianism, human rights, and visual representations of suffering.¹⁷ The following pages are thus intended to provide a historical background for the subsequent chapters rather than an in-depth analysis of the causes of the war.

The Nigerian colony was established in 1914 by amalgamating a Northern and a Southern Protectorate under the supervision of Frederick Lugard. Despite the formal integration of both parts, colonial administration was very different in each. In the South, missionaries were allowed to operate, building churches and schools, introducing Christianity and Western education, while colonial rule in the North was indirect and left existing hierarchies and social structures intact; religious and educational matters continued to be controlled by existing Muslim elites.¹⁸ Missionaries were prohibited from preaching in the North until 1927, when the new Governor in the North, Graeme Thomson, decided that mission stations could be set up at sites to be identified by the regional administrators.¹⁹ This administrative separation of North and South laid the foundation for later conflict. Later, the Nigerian federation was at first comprised of three different administrative regions: a large, mainly Muslim North, mostly inhabited by Hausa and Fulani, a South-Western state, religiously heterogeneous and a successor to the pre-colonial Yoruba kingdoms, and the South-East, dominated by the Igbo people. In fact, Nigeria's diversity defies this simple threefold formula.²⁰ Nevertheless, the bureaucratic division of Nigeria into these three parts reflected pre-existing differences among these areas, but it also strengthened and cemented the differentiation.

¹⁵ Toyin Falola and Ogechukwu Ezekwem (eds.), *Writing the Nigeria-Biafra War* (Woodbridge, 2016).

¹⁶ John J. Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (Princeton, 2015 [1977]); Morris Davis, *Interpreters for Nigeria: The Third World and International Public Relations* (London, 1977).

¹⁷ Relevant literature will be discussed below.

¹⁸ Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* (New York, 2008), p. 172.

¹⁹ Andrew E. Barnes, "Evangelization Where It Is Not Wanted": Colonial Administrators and Missionaries in Northern Nigeria during the First Third of the Twentieth Century', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 25:4 (1995), p. 414.

²⁰ J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 30; T. Falola and M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, p. 4.

The decolonisation process unfolded in a series of successive constitutions for the colonies, each transferring a larger share of the administration to Nigerians in an attempt to forestall nationalist demands for independence. By 1950, the British accepted that self-rule was imminent for Nigeria and British interests were best served by directing the process.²¹ A nationalist, pan-Nigerian movement headed by Nnamdi 'Zik' Azikiwe and represented by the party Azikiwe had founded in 1944, the National Congress of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC). The Macpherson constitution of 1951 made provisions for a first-ever round of elections scheduled for 1952. In the North and West, elites established parties to represent local interests, and parties developed out of local cultural organisations.²² Northern elites voiced fears that the 'Nigerianization' of the civil service and decolonisation in general was tantamount to domination by the more economically developed South. The British hoped to prevent Northern secession by protecting Northern interests within the constitutional arrangements of the federation as well as by refraining from forcing reforms on the local government in the North.²³ In the run up to independence, especially once the federal, tripartite structure had been established by the Lyttleton Constitution of 1954, party politics became increasingly regionalised and support was mobilised by appealing to local ethnic identities.²⁴ Upon independence in October 1969, the Northern-based NPC was the ruling party with Abubakar Tafawa Balewa as Prime Minister and in coalition with the NCNC – the Nigerian pioneer-nationalist Azikiwe became Nigeria's first-indigenous governor general, a 'largely ceremonial title'.²⁵

The government faced challenges early on. The contestation of census results in 1963, the general strike of 1964, and the unrest and corruption during the federal elections of the same year proved the early optimism of foreign observers wrong.²⁶ In January 1966, a first military coup was led by young officers whose declared aim of ending the corruption of the first post-independence government was reportedly welcomed by Nigerians but ultimately not

²¹ Cf. Ronald Hyam, *Understanding the British Empire* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 244-246.

²² Martin Lynn, "'We Cannot Let the North Down': British Policy and Nigeria in the 1950s", in M. Lynn (ed.), *The British Empire in the 1950s: Retreat or Revival?* (London, 2006), pp. 145-149.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 152-156.

²⁴ Samuel K. Panter-Brick, *Nigerian Politics and Military Rule: Prelude to the Civil War* (London, 1970), p. 6.

²⁵ T. Falola and M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, p. 156.

²⁶ Cf. Larry Diamond, *Class, Ethnicity and Democracy in Nigeria: The Failure of the First Republic* (London, 1988), p. 137, 178, and 192.

entirely successful.²⁷ The leadership was assumed by General Aguyi Ironsi, not the coup leaders. Under Ironsi, North-South tensions increased for three reasons: firstly, the coup planners who executed the elected political leaders were not tried for their crime; secondly, the fact that the coup planners and Ironsi were Igbos reawakened old fears of Southern domination in the North; and finally, Ironsi's decision to centralise the federation further exacerbated and played upon these very concerns.²⁸ A counter-coup was led by Northern officers in July of the same year and brought the Christian Northerner Yakubu Gowon to power, who, after considering secession with the Northern region, restored Nigeria's federal structure.²⁹ The coup failed in the East, however, and the local military governor from the previous coup, Chukwuemeka Ojukwu, remained in power.³⁰

In June and September 1966, two waves of massacres of Easterners occurred in the North. Biafra advocates produced rumours that these were instigated by Northern politicians and police, and both Biafra advocates and Biafran politicians referred to them as pogroms. It is unknown exactly how many people died in these mass killings, and the figures given diverge widely.³¹ It is fruitless to hierarchise human loss and suffering in terms of numbers, and, therefore, the exact figure is of less interest, here, than the politics of using figures of casualties as part of war-time propaganda: these massacres became the plausible historical precedent underpinning Biafra's genocide narrative. As a result of this violence, around two million Easterners living in other parts of the federation fled to the East. A standoff ensued between Lagos and the Eastern region. In an attempt to bring both sides together and resolve the escalating conflict diplomatically, Gowon and Ojukwu met in Aburi, Ghana, in early January, to come to an agreement on the future of the federation.³² Stremlau argues that the extent of autonomy gained by the Eastern region by the provisions decided in Aburi was not fully grasped by Gowon and his delegation at the time, and, therefore, Lagos did not implement the

²⁷ T. Falola and M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, p. 172. Cf. also the account of one of the officers, Adewale Ademoyega, *Why We Struck: The Story of the First Nigerian Coup* (Norwich, 1981), pp. 78-95. On reactions of Nigerians to the coup, cf. Nicholas I. Omenka, 'Blaming the Gods: Christian Religious Propaganda in the Nigeria-Biafra War', *Journal of African History* 51 (2010), p. 371.

²⁸ M. Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence*, p. 97.

²⁹ Robin Luckham, *The Nigerian Military: A Sociological Analysis of Authority and Revolt, 1960-1967* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 312.

³⁰ M. Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence*, p. 116.

³¹ For a discussion of these figures, see chapter 2.

³² J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 41.

agreement.³³ To coerce the East into submission, Gowon's government implemented economic measures culminating in an economic blockade of the Eastern region.³⁴ On 30 May 1967, the day after Gowon decreed the restructuring of the Nigerian federation into twelve component states, Ojukwu formally declared secession. The twelve-state decree was a concession to the minorities within Nigeria, who had long hoped for better representation in the central government. However, the decree effectively cut off the Igbo heartland from the oil-rich Niger delta as well as the trading and oil-refining centre around Port Harcourt, and, therefore, placed the Igbos at an economic disadvantage within the federation. The importance of this decree is noted by Ojukwu, who argued after the war that he would have renounced secession if Nigeria had reverted to the old four-state structure.³⁵

The war began less than a week later on 6 June 1967 and was announced as a 48h 'police action' by Gowon, although it ultimately lasted around two and a half years until January 1970.³⁶ Soon after the campaign began, the Biafrans made advances and were halted just before reaching Lagos, a development that complicated the forecasts of foreign observers.³⁷ Subsequently, however, the Biafrans were pushed back and the Nigerian forces had Biafra surrounded by early summer 1968, now able to militarily enforce the blockade. For Biafra, these months of military failure before the media attention to its suffering population and the influx of substantial amounts of relief, July and August 1968 were the bleakest.³⁸ Change finally occurred when, during the on-going media attention, help began to arrive in the form of both clandestine military aid from foreign states as well as the direct and indirect support resulting from relief. Subsequently, the war slowed to a stalemate.

The famine was the basis for the conflict's successful internationalisation. The territory that Biafra claimed was densely populated and historically relied on the import of protein-rich foods.³⁹ The situation was exacerbated when, in the aftermath of two waves of massacres of Easterners in the North in 1966 and generally heightened ethnic tensions, Easterners returned to the South-East. As the Nigerian army captured Biafran territories, more people fled into

³³ Ibid., p. 48; R. Luckham, *The Nigerian Military*, p. 314.

³⁴ J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 73.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 144.

³⁶ Walter Schwarz, 'Nigerian stalemate brings the prospect of a long war', *The Guardian*, 24.07.67.

³⁷ See chapter 3.

³⁸ J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 239.

³⁹ Charles C. Diggs and J. Herbert Burke, 'Report of Special Factfinding Mission to Nigeria, February 7-20, 1969', United States Congress, 12.03.69, p. 9, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/3/3/1/19.

what was left of Biafra. The blockade was a siege tactic that failed to bring about the Biafran surrender, instead the famine attracted aid organisations and media attention and fuelled Biafran hopes for external intervention in its favour. To this day, the extent of the famine is unknown, but for the entire war including the famine, scholars estimate 1 to 3 million deaths,⁴⁰ and a memorandum from January 1969, prepared for U.S. President Nixon, argues that between 1.5 to 3.5 million Biafrans were in danger of starvation during the subsequent 4-6 months.⁴¹ The relief effort mounted was unprecedented and suffering in Biafra was considered the 'gravest crisis' since the Second World War.⁴²

Unwilling to compromise, 'both regimes eventually regarded peace-talk diplomacy as the cutting-edge of the internationalisation process. While the plight of Biafra's starving masses captured the attention of world public opinion, the parties to the conflict sought to use the conference table as the forum to convince interested foreign governments that the opposition was responsible for the continuing violence.'⁴³ Moreover, Gowon admitted: 'we were ready to talk as long as the war continued. It was the only way to parry the threat of foreign intervention'.⁴⁴ The Biafran's thought in similar ways and Onyegbula, the head of the Biafran Ministry of Foreign Affairs, argued that if Ojukwu appeared to be too ready to talk, it might seem that Biafra was willing to surrender secession. On the other hand, once public opinion abroad was sympathetic with Biafra due to the famine, the secessionists could not appear too uncooperative.⁴⁵

Before this backdrop, all peace initiatives failed. At a summit of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), scheduled for September 1967 in Kinshasa, Gowon refused to discuss the matter since he regarded it as a strictly internal affair. However, the war was informally

⁴⁰ Olukunle Ojeleye, 'Local Writers and Commitments to Ethnic Sentiments', in Toyin Falola and Ogechukwu Ezekwem (eds.), *Writing the Nigeria-Biafra War* (Woodbridge, 2016), p. 202; Al J. Venter, *Biafra's War, 1967-1970: A Tribal Conflict in Nigeria That Left a Million Dead* (Solihull, 2015).

⁴¹ Henry Kissinger, 'Memorandum for the president: U.S. Options in Biafra Relief', *The White House*, 28.01.1969. An intelligence memorandum prepared by the CIA estimates several hundreds of thousands of deaths from starvation in 1968. After October 1968, the situation improved due to a main harvest of yams and the relief effort. According to the report, however, accurate figures were unavailable and forecasts for the following few months ranged from relatively low death rates to mass starvation. 'Intelligence Memorandum: The Biafran Relief Problem', *Central Intelligence Agency*, 29.01.1969. Both sources are online in *Foreign Relations, 1969-1976, Volume E-5, Documents on Africa, 1969-1972*, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/nixon/e5/c15646.htm> (accessed 02.05.2017).

⁴² A. de Waal, *Famine Crimes*, p. 76.

⁴³ J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, pp. 144-45

⁴⁴ Gowon, quoted in J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 214.

⁴⁵ Onyegbula, quoted in J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 159.

discussed, and the communiqué issued after the summit reaffirmed the organisation's respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its member states.⁴⁶ A first peace conference was arranged by the Commonwealth Secretary Arnold Smith under the auspices of the OAU in Kampala, Uganda, in May 1968. The African states were suspicious of the interference of the Commonwealth Secretariat and the implicit undermining of the authority of the OAU. Neither Nigeria nor Biafra were ready to compromise: Nigeria demanded that Biafra renounce secession before peace talks could begin, and Biafra was unwilling to negotiate on the basis of a united Nigeria. Louis Mbanefo, the head of the Biafran delegation, published an article on the conference in *The Spectator* with the title 'Nigeria's phoney talks', arguing that the Nigerians were not genuinely interested in a negotiated peace.⁴⁷ The negotiations that followed in Addis Ababa were difficult and protracted, and the breakdown of the talks reduced the prospects for a negotiated peace and an agreement on a relief route acceptable to both parties.⁴⁸ When Anthony Enahoro left after the talks had already come to an end, he commented that he had not 'come to liquidate Nigeria.'⁴⁹ In the face of the hopelessness of political negotiations between the two sides, the relief agencies, including the ICRC, became bolder in their attempts to deliver aid. A final unsuccessful attempt to bring both sides together was made in April 1969, when the OAU arranged another peace talk in Monrovia, Liberia.⁵⁰

Eventually the war ended with Biafra's collapse and Nigeria's military victory. Ojukwu fled Biafra on 11th January 1970, and two days later, Biafra's army commanders formally surrendered to Nigeria.⁵¹ Nigeria's victory was overshadowed by the problems of post-war reconstruction and reintegration of the secessionist state as well as the fear of continued foreign intervention in its affairs. Oil companies continued to extract and refine Nigeria's oil – in fact, during the last two years of the war, Nigerian oil production steadily increased, and after the war, Nigeria experienced an oil boom in the early 70s and joined OPEC in 1971.⁵² After the war, the press reported the ongoing food shortages and relief problems but struck

⁴⁶ T. Falola and M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, p. 178.

⁴⁷ Louis Mbanefo, 'Nigeria's phoney talks', *The Spectator*, 07.06.68.

⁴⁸ J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 213.

⁴⁹ Anthony Enahoro, cited in J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 204.

⁵⁰ J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 208.

⁵¹ George Clark, 'Gowon accepts surrender of Biafran forces', *The Times*, 13.01.70.

⁵² During the war, the Mid-West became the main oil producing area. Josephine O. Abiodun, 'Locational Effects of the Civil War on the Nigerian Petroleum Industry', *Geographical Review* 64:2 (1974), pp. 254-255.

an optimistic tone with regard to the spirit of reconciliation.⁵³ The country saw more military coups in the decade to come and returned to civilian rule in 1999. Today, Nigeria faces two major problems: the emergence of the radical Islamic group Boko Haram in the North and the militant opposition in the Niger Delta, fighting the destruction of the environment and the livelihood of locals caused by the oil production. At least in parts, both seem to spring from the same problem of lacking political representation at the local level that caused the crises leading to the civil war.

Literature Review: The Nigeria-Biafra War in Transnational Perspective

Current historiographical approaches of global and transnational history have recently been applied by historians to study the impact of decolonisation on the societies of the former colonial powers and to assess the role of Third World,⁵⁴ both on the world stage as well as in the Western political imagination during the 'long 1960s'.⁵⁵ The emerging idea of the Third World was influenced by an increased exchange of information and people as well as the transformation of relations between former colonizers and colonies; it was a precondition for the sympathetic responses to the famine in Biafra. Solidarity with Biafra borrowed both rhetoric and strategies from other 60s protest movements and needs to be located within the 'global 1968'. At the same time, concern about Biafran suffering war crucial for the rise of the humanitarian industry, the modern human rights discourse, and for the emerging particular mode of remembering the Holocaust.⁵⁶ Humanitarian agents like missionaries and NGOs drew on a long history of humanitarian action as well as charity and became important organs to publicise Biafran suffering. This development was tied to the growing importance of visual media for the understanding and engagement with the Biafran war; images of starving Biafran

⁵³ Hugh de West, George Clark, and Michael Wolders, 'Misery, despair and hunger in the Ibo heartland', *The Times*, 22.01.70; Michael Wolfers, 'Nigerian begin to rebuild a nation', *The Times*, 23.01.70; Colin Legum, 'After the tragedy', *The Guardian*, 18.01.70; 'The Ibos are still starving', *The Guardian*, 06.03.70.

⁵⁴ Following Christoph Kalter, throughout this thesis, the term 'Third World' refers to a multivalent and perpetually re-negotiated concept rather than a fixed geographical space that subsumes diverse societies in a reductionist fashion.

⁵⁵ Marwick's periodisation of the long 1960s dates from 1958 to 1974. Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, ca. 1958-1974* (Oxford, 1998).

⁵⁶ Lasse Heerten, 'The Dystopia of Post-Colonial Catastrophe: Self-determination, the Biafran War of Secession and the 1970s Human Rights Movement', in Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn, *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia, 2012), pp. 15-32; Lasse Heerten, 'A as in Auschwitz, B as in Biafra: The Nigerian Civil War, Visual Narratives of Genocide, and the Fragmented Universalisation of the Holocaust', in H. Fehrenbach and D. Rodogno (eds.), *Humanitarian Photography* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 249-274.

children reminded audiences of photographs taken of emaciated bodies of the inmates of concentration camps. However, media stories and advocates' narratives were decisively influenced by Biafran propaganda, and Biafrans – as well as Nigerians – played an active role in shaping the perception of their conflict abroad. The Biafrans hoped to win the war not by emerging victorious from military campaigns but by convincing external audiences to support Biafran self-determination as the only way to protect the newly imagined Biafran nation from genocide. With the Biafran famine, the media discovered the humanitarian crisis as a novel news genre. Recent examinations of the ethics of the spectatorship of distant suffering and the limitation of humanitarian action in response to political conflict contribute to an understanding of the consequences of the visual and emotive representations of the Biafran famine abroad and the responses these engendered.⁵⁷ The literature reviewed below presents Biafra as an important turning point for the development of a new postcolonial order in which transnationally acting agents, such as humanitarian NGOs, the media, and advocates, take on a more important role than they did before.

Global History, Decolonisation, and the Third World in the Global 1960s

Global and transnational history have emerged as trends that highlight the global interrelations of historical processes and the transnational links of historical agents that operate increasingly beyond the level of the nation state. Akira Iriye emphasizes the importance of this historiographical shift away from the nation state as the primary unit of investigation. Iriye notes that although historiography has gradually expanded its subject matter with the social and cultural turns of the 1960s, moving away from the study of elites to include marginalised groups in society as well as the phenomena of mass consumption and popular culture as valuable fields of study, the work on these subjects, nonetheless, often remained focused on the nation state as a framework and often presumed national 'mentalities'. Moreover, the need for moving beyond the nation state was evident in the fields of comparative, diplomatic and international as well as imperial history, although these approaches, likewise, treated nation states as given compartments. In the 1980s, the first historians began to use the term

⁵⁷ Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media, and Politics* (Cambridge, 1999); Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley, 2012); Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York, 2003).

'transnational'.⁵⁸ In his study on the Japanese American War, *Power and Culture*, Iriye discovered that cultural phenomena could develop their own dynamic rather than follow the logic of power relations or political developments.⁵⁹ Some processes were important across national boundaries and developed independently out of purely national contexts. An example of agents that perfectly fit the transnational model are international organisations, examined in another more recent monograph by Iriye.⁶⁰ Yet, transnational and global approaches do not presume a total and holistic approach in the way pursued by earlier world histories that attempted to capture world history in its entirety; they now also focus on confined geographical spaces.⁶¹ The emphasis in global histories is on synchronic developments over diachronic processes as well as on the importance of developments in distant places to understand local, national histories. This is indicative of the close relation of global and transnational historiographical approaches and the history of globalisation as well as the presumed ever-increasing entanglements of developments on a global scale implied by the notion of globalisation. To the degree that the histories of countries beyond the West are considered,⁶² exchanges and transfers are highlighted, and the agency of the formerly colonised is restored. This brand of history borrows from post-colonial theory the project of correcting a Eurocentric understanding of history.⁶³

⁵⁸ Cf. Akira Iriye, *Global and Transnational History: The Past, Present, and Future* (Basingstoke, 2013).

⁵⁹ Akira Iriye, *Power and Culture: The Japanese American War, 1941-1945* (London, 1981).

⁶⁰ Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organisations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (London, 2002).

⁶¹ 'Global' and 'transnational' history are terms that are used almost interchangeably, although there is a nuanced difference in so far as that 'transnational' relates more easily to local or regional cross-border movements and actions, while 'global' connotes a much broader scope. Moreover, Osterhammel notes that scholarship often lacks the necessary distinction between 'transnational' and 'international' (as opposed to 'global') and uses the former to clearly differentiate from earlier approaches to international history that used the nation-state as the basis of analysis. Jürgen Osterhammel, 'Transnationale Gesellschaftsgeschichte: Erweiterung oder Alternative?', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 27:3 (2001), pp. 471-474. On global and transnational historiography, cf. Sebastian Conrad, Andreas Eckert, and Ulrike Freitag (eds.), *Globalgeschichte: Theorien, Ansätze, Themen* (Frankfurt, 2007); Gunilla Budde, Sebastian Conrad, and Oliver Janz (eds.), *Transnationale Geschichte. Themen Tendenzen und Theorien* (Göttingen, 2006).

⁶² 'The West' is used as a shorthand for the liberal, capitalist, industrialised societies, which, during the Cold War, formed a socio-political and ideological opposition not only to the societies of the Eastern bloc, associated with the Soviet Union, but also to the newly decolonised countries that did not share the same value system. It is used, here, as a simplifying concept, not a geopolitical entity.

⁶³ Kalter, *Entdeckung*, p. 13. Slobodian notes the 'perverse legacy of Said's *Orientalism*' that inspired interpretations of the Third World, or 'the other', as a mere mirror or projective space, specifically in West Germany in the 1960s, arguing that it served the construction of a purely Western self-understanding. This reading ignores the agency of people from the Third World within West Germany and thus the exchanges among them and West German activists. Moreover, the use of Western political language for human rights

Recent assessments of the impact of decolonisation on the societies of the former colonial powers fall broadly within this category. Decolonisation was long seen as only having a 'minimal impact' on the former colonising societies, but this view has recently been revised with a view to exchanges between the colonies and the colonial metropole.⁶⁴ The process of decolonisation is far from clear-cut and uniform, not even for the colonial possessions of a single colonial power or for certain regions, although by 1975, most colonial territories had gained independence. But the process began long before independence was officially recognised, and, of course, it extended well beyond.⁶⁵ Decolonisation, or more specifically, the third wave of decolonisation after the Second World War, was one of the most significant developments of the 20th century,⁶⁶ even if one treats with caution Alfred Sauvy's contention that the rise of the Third World after decolonisation, like that of the third estate before it during the French Revolution, would transform the world and overcome the bipolar cold war order.⁶⁷ Post-war Europe has to be examined in the threefold context of the Cold War, the growth of Western capitalist economies, dominated by the economic, political, and cultural power of the U.S., as well as the impact of decolonisation.

These are important elements of the background of the long 1960s and their legacy. In a recent publication, Samantha Christiansen and Zachary Scarlett widen the perspective on the long 1960s – thus far mainly focused on developments and interconnections in Europe and the U.S. – by surveying protest movements in the Third World.⁶⁸ An earlier volume has done the

and political freedom by Third World activists further contradicts this dichotomy. Slobodian, *Foreign Front*, pp. 10-12.

⁶⁴ An overview is provided in Sebastian Conrad, 'Dekolonisierung in den Metropolen', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 37:2 (2011), pp. 135-156. For France, cf. Christoph Kalter and Martin Rempe, 'La République Décolonisée: Wie die Dekolonisierung Frankreich verändert hat', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 37:2 (2011), pp. 157-197. While West German historiography seems to place an emphasis on the significance of decolonisation in European societies, British historians are more concerned with the lingering decline of Imperialism and its consequences. For example, cf. Kwasi Kwarteng, *Ghosts of Empire: Britain's Legacies in the Modern World* (London, 2011); Andrew S. Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back. The Impact of Imperialism from the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Oxon, 2005).

⁶⁵ Martin Thomas, Bob Moore and L. J. Butler, *Crises of Empire. Decolonisation and Europe's Imperial States, 1918-1975* (London, 2010).

⁶⁶ Andreas Eckert, 'Spätkoloniale Herrschaft, Dekolonisation und internationale Ordnung: Einführende Bemerkungen', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 48 (2008), p. 3.

⁶⁷ Cf. Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War*.

⁶⁸ Samantha Christiansen and Zachary Scarlett (eds.), *The Third World in the Global 1960s* (New York, 2013). For the links between West Germany and the U.S., cf. Belinda Davis, Wilfried Mausbach, Martin Klimke, and Carla MacDougall (eds.), *Changing the World, Changing Oneself: Political Protest and Collective Identities in West Germany and the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s* (New York, 2012); Martin Klimke, *The Other Alliance: Student Protest in West Germany and the United States in the Global Sixties* (Princeton, 2010).

same for the year 1968, demonstrating how the year represented a seminal break not only in Western countries but in many societies around the globe in which students mobilised around similar issues. Moreover, the Third World was a crucial point of reference for 60s protest in the West. Transnational activist networks enabled a degree of exchange and activists across the globe believed they were fighting for a common cause.⁶⁹ In this context, two studies have provided an inspiration, Christoph Kalter's *Discovery of the Third World* and Quinn Slobodian's *Foreign Front*.⁷⁰ Both map the connections between the Third World and the new radical left in France and West Germany, respectively. Kalter examines the development of a particular concept of the Third World by the French radical left, tracing its significance for the ability of the radical left to differentiate itself from the 'old left'. An important aspect for Kalter are 'globalising processes' of mobility, communication, and exchange between people from Third World countries and the French new left that made it possible to connect global developments to local issues. For Kalter, the development of the radical left in France over the long 60s was intricately interwoven with its concept of the Third World, which was itself an expression of the tension between Eurocentric categories and a postcolonial, decentralising perspective; a tension thus located between a belief in and a break with the older categories, and as such a tension that has remained unresolved to date, visible in the complexities of current debates on globalisation or migration among other themes.⁷¹ Slobodian, on the other hand, examines the relationship of the West German new left with the Third World. He emphasises the efforts of students from the Third World to put the issues in their home countries on the agenda of the new left in West Germany, but also notes that the understanding of the Third World often remained abstract and idealist. The transnational context often disappeared behind local debates. Neither Kalter nor Slobodian concern themselves with the responses to the Nigeria-Biafra War. It seems to be off their radar, although Slobodian remarks its absence from the pertinent literature, and Kalter refers to the roots of the 1970s Third World movement, which included, besides the new left, especially left-liberal and church-related groups.⁷² The latter were also prominent in Biafra activism.

⁶⁹ Carole Fink, Philip Gassert, and Detlef Junker (eds.), *1968: The World Transformed* (Cambridge, 1998).

⁷⁰ Christoph Kalter, *Die Entdeckung der Dritten Welt: Dekolonisierung und neue radikale Linke in Frankreich* (Frankfurt, 2011); Quinn Slobodian, *Foreign Front: Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany* (Durham, 2012).

⁷¹ C. Kalter, *Entdeckung*, p. 492.

⁷² Q. Slobodian, *Foreign Front*, p. 263; C. Kalter, *Entdeckung*, p. 485.

Despite its nature as an international media event that sparked widespread public sympathy, inspired the creation of action committees, and facilitated the rise of a modern humanitarian industry, the Biafra-Nigeria War has remained marginal in the histories of the global 1960s as well as in the literature on 1968, specifically. However, an article by Konrad Kuhn has attempted to locate responses to Biafra within this context and compares these to the public solidarity with the protest movement against the Cahora Bassa dam project in Mozambique.⁷³ Whereas the protests in the context of the Mozambique dam project were openly political, Biafra was discussed in terms of the humanitarian crisis resulting from the famine. Yet, for Kuhn, responses to Biafra demonstrate that the processes of decolonisation and related post-colonial Third World issues were reaching a broad audience and that paternalist imaginations of the Third World were gradually changing towards an attitude of solidarity. The works of Third World intellectuals, like Fanon, were widely read in the 60s and resistance against capitalism and imperialism was not only a characteristic of the student left but also of the wider peace movement and church-affiliated groups. In May and June 1968, several action groups were founded across Europe that undertook information campaigns, collected donations, and combined political with humanitarian concerns. Their efforts were welcomed by the public as well as high ranking personalities, including scholars and politicians. Yet, the debate on Biafra in the wider societal circles was based on sympathy for the starving Biafrans, and the war was debated in humanitarian, not political terms. For Kuhn, this was a consequence of the heterogeneous nature of those groups in support of Biafra; a characteristic that prevented a political debate or consensus on the subject and resulted in a more humanitarian approach to the conflict. Kuhn, moreover, hints at one of the reasons for the absence of Biafra from the literature so far reviewed: the German Socialist Student Union (SDS) never officially embraced the cause of the starving Biafrans. A similar observation is made by Lasse Heerten on the position of the British left, although individual activists tried to put the case on the agenda, they failed.⁷⁴ An article on the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive (ACKBA), founded by Paul Connett, who had become a student volunteer for McCarthy's

⁷³ Konrad J. Kuhn, 'Liberation Struggle and Humanitarian Aid: International Solidarity Movements and the "Third World" in the 1960s', in Samantha Christiansen and Zachary A. Scarlett, *The Third World in the Global 1960s* (New York, 2013), p. 69–80.

⁷⁴ Lasse Heerten, 'The Biafran War in Britain: An Odd Alliance of late 1960s Humanitarian Activists', Conference Paper, *Journal of the Oxford University History Society* 7 (2009).

presidential campaign, does not mention the American new left in any way. The ACKBA initially hoped to bring about a humanitarian intervention to prevent a Biafran genocide but then came to believe that only a political solution pressed for by influential foreign governments, such as the United States, could succeed. The focus of ACKBA shifted from genocide to self-determination as a political solution to the genocide threat.⁷⁵ Much of the literature on the 1960s and 1968, specifically, is concerned with the new left or the student movement; a highly diverse group, according to a recent study on the German 1968, held together by a shared 'cognitive orientation' of political critique and common strategies.⁷⁶ Another recent study on 1968 in Germany notes that despite the popular association of 1968 with generational conflict, parts of the older generation supported the demands of the new left, and changes occurred as much from cooperation as they did from confrontation. Of course, in order to further scrutinise the social, cultural, and political transformations that 1968 stands for in popular memory, they must be located not merely within the history of the long 1960s but also within the ever-dynamic international context from they ultimately emerged.⁷⁷ In this context, the observation of Kuhn and Heerten that solidarity with Biafra was not truly a part of the new left's core ideology raises the question of what role Biafra committees and activists played in the context of 1968 and with which broader developments these groups associated.

Imagining the Third World, Humanitarianism, and Human Rights

If for the radical new left in France and West Germany, the Third World was the contemporary space of liberation struggles, as a multivalent concept, it certainly carried different meanings in other contexts. The concept of the Third World, in the sense that the term summarised newly decolonised countries, was closely intertwined with the idea of 'development' and thereby related to paternalist imperial or missionary projects of civilisation and improvement.⁷⁸ This attitude towards the Third World is also present in the nascent

⁷⁵ Brian McNeil, "And starvation is the grim reaper"; the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive and the genocide question during the Nigerian civil war, 1968-70', *Journal of Genocide Research* 16:2-3 (2014), pp. 317-336.

⁷⁶ Joachim Scharloth, *1968: Eine Kommunikationsgeschichte* (München, 2011), pp. 29-32.

⁷⁷ Cf. Christina von Hodenberg and Detlev Siegfried (eds.), *Wo „1968“ liegt: Reform und Revolte in der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik* (Göttingen, 2006).

⁷⁸ O'Sullivan, Kevin, 'Humanitarian encounters: Biafra, NGOs and imagining the Third World in Britain and Ireland, 1967-70', *Journal of Genocide Research* 16:2-3 (2014), p. 307.

humanitarian movement during the Nigeria-Biafra War. In the literature on the history of humanitarianism, the relief operation in Nigeria and Biafra is considered a watershed moment in the development of the modern humanitarian industry, and the first to be dominated by NGOs in the absence of official or UN relief.⁷⁹ In addition, it was the origin of *sans-frontiérisme*, an approach to aid pioneered by the *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) that broke with the values of neutrality and respect for state sovereignty espoused by the *International Committee of the Red Cross* (ICRC).⁸⁰

Kuhn observes that Biafra became a 'formative event for a new kind of humanitarian aid that strongly shaped the view of the aid-receiving "Third World" within Western societies'.⁸¹ Kevin O'Sullivan's analysis of 'humanitarian encounters' with Biafra in Britain and Ireland arrives at the same conclusion.⁸² Although responses to the Biafran famine were rooted in the completely different national histories of Britain and Ireland, their respective humanitarian movements and corresponding concepts of the Third World were remarkably similar. In Britain, it was the need to create a new national self-identity after the dissolution of the empire, and there were demonstrable continuities between late colonial engagement and early humanitarian campaigns.⁸³ In Ireland, the rationale for solidarity with Biafra was rooted in anti-colonialism as a consequence of the Irish colonial experience as well as in the belief of a shared tragic history of famine and civil war with Biafra. Moreover, since many Biafrans were Roman Catholics, shared faith was another link. As a result of Biafra, the number and size of humanitarian organisations grew. The media coverage of the famine brought in vital funding for relief operations and organisational expansion to deal with the new challenge.⁸⁴ During this

⁷⁹ Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, 2011), p. 133; A. de Waal, *Famine Crimes*, p. 72-73.

⁸⁰ Marie-Luce Desgrandchamps challenges this origin story, when she argues that the 'break' of the French doctors working in Biafra was not as sharp as sometimes portrayed in histories of the MSF. Rather, the ICRC was bound by operational imperatives and welcomed the publicity that the French doctors generated for the relief operation in Nigeria and Biafra. Marie-Luce Desgrandchamps, 'Dealing with "genocide": the ICRC and the UN during the Nigeria-Biafra war, 1967-70', *Journal of Genocide Research* 16:2-3 (2014), pp. 281-197.

⁸¹ K. Kuhn, 'Liberation Struggle', p. 70. Africa historian Eckert sees responses to the Nigeria-Biafra War as a beginning of a humanitarian movement. A. Eckert, 'Spätkoloniale Herrschaft', p. 9.

⁸² Kevin O'Sullivan, 'Humanitarian encounters', p. 311.

⁸³ Cf. Anna Bocking-Welch, 'Imperial Legacies and Internationalist Discourses: British Involvement in the United Nations Freedom from Hunger Campaign, 1960-70', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 40:5 (2012), pp. 879-896.

⁸⁴ Figures on funding and spending as well as an evaluation of relief operations in Biafra, to be discussed below, can be found in Morris Davis, 'Audits of International Relief in the Nigerian Civil War: Some Political Perspectives', *International Organisation* 29:2 (1975), pp. 501-512.

time, aid organisations became the primary mediator between the countries of the Third World and Western audiences; in Ireland, they replaced the missionaries that formerly held this role and now some became active in humanitarian relief, and in Britain, similarly, former colonial servants were associated with early humanitarian campaigns. The church, moreover, began in the 1960s to increase its interest and activities in the Third World.⁸⁵ Yet, the response to Biafra is not simply an extension of the Christian mission and imperial benevolence. It needs to be seen in the context of the rise of instruments of ‘liberal global governance’, a defining feature of what Michael Barnett terms the era of neo-humanitarianism, beginning at the end of the Second World War.⁸⁶ O’Sullivan sees Biafra as an example for the characteristics that Barnett identified with neo-humanitarianism: although the language of humanitarianism changed, the paternalist relationship to the Third World remained intact. Humanitarianism began to become professionalised, university courses in subjects such as development studies sought to prepare students for a humanitarian career. This professionalisation further emphasised the superiority of Western science and technology to relieve crises in the Third World, and, at the same time,⁸⁷ this technocratic approach rendered the ‘otherness’ of the Third World into something that could be known.⁸⁸ In the wake of Biafra, the pattern of crisis and NGO response became a norm and NGOs’ legitimacy as international agents grew.⁸⁹ Another characteristic of humanitarian responses to Biafra was, as Kuhn notes, the depoliticization and simplification of the conflict. O’Sullivan suggests that this was a necessary part of appealing for funds in a way that was most likely to be effective; a way that focused on emotions rather than complex analyses. The publicity methods were not new in humanitarian campaigns, and according to O’Sullivan, ‘generations of Irish people [were] brought up on ‘penny for a black baby’ fundraising campaigns and could, therefore, easily recognise images of Biafra in this context. Seen in conjunction with Kuhn’s article, it becomes clear that advocacy was closely interwoven with the humanitarian effort. The image of Biafra that emerged from the statements of humanitarians, donations appeals, and advocates’ narratives remained simplistic, apolitical, and paternalistic in its aim to attract support from a mass audience. This

⁸⁵ K. O’Sullivan, ‘Humanitarian Encounters’, p. 305.

⁸⁶ M. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, pp. 107-108.

⁸⁷ On the depoliticising effect of the technocratic approach to relief, cf. A. de Waal, *Famine Crimes*, p. 70-71.

⁸⁸ K. O’Sullivan, ‘Humanitarian Encounters’, p. 307.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

imagination of the Third World seems far from that of the new left as sketched by Kalter and Slobodian and results from a logic related to the practical necessities of aid.⁹⁰

A recent monograph on the Nigeria-Biafra War's global history by Lasse Heerten examines in depth some of the ideas that developed in response to the various engagements with the conflict, such as the emergence of a particular mode of remembering the Holocaust and the significance of the war for the development of the modern human rights discourse.⁹¹ For Heerten, the war is an important turning point that is defined by the temporary opening of new possibilities for the African continent and the global political order by decolonisation. Parts of the monograph have previously been published, where Heerten examines what role the notion of human rights played in public debates on Biafran suffering.⁹² Building on Samuel Moyn's work in *The Last Utopia*,⁹³ Heerten analyses whether solidarity with Biafra used the form of the modern human rights discourse, theorised by Moyn as emerging in the 1970s in the context of the end of appeal of other universalist ideologies, and exemplified by Amnesty International's campaign against torture, the Helsinki Accords of 1975, and Jimmy Carter's Human Rights policy.⁹⁴ This modern concept of human rights defined them as rights of an individual, whereas earlier variants, such as the *droits de l'homme et du citoyen* of the French Revolution, were bound to citizenship and guaranteed by the state. This change recognizes the need to protect people from the state, and occurs in the context of the rise of international regimes that transcend state sovereignty to a certain extent and uphold international law, like the United Nations. Referring to Biafra, Samuel Moyn notes on the relationship of human rights and humanitarianism that 'various movements sprang up around the succour of distant suffering, but these campaigns rarely invoked rights and seemed to have been based more often on Christian solidarity and hierarchical philanthropy.'⁹⁵

In the context of decolonisation, secessionist movements were common, and Biafra was recognised by only few states. The Biafran nation was the conflation of the group of the Igbo, the dominant ethnicity in the Biafran state, and the minorities that existed in the territory of

⁹⁰ Cf. A. de Waal, *Famine Crimes*, p. 65; M. Desgrandschamps, 'Dealing with "Genocide"', p. 293-294.

⁹¹ Lasse Heerten, *The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism: Spectacles of Suffering* (Cambridge, 2017).

⁹² Lasse Heerten, 'The Dystopia of Postcolonial Catastrophe: Self-Determination, the Biafran War of Secession, and the 1970s Human Rights Movement', in Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (eds.), *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia, 2015), pp. 15-32.

⁹³ Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, 2010).

⁹⁴ Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (eds.), *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia, 2015), p. 2.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

the new state. The assumption of a shared community was not unproblematic since some minority leaders opposed Biafra's secession. Therefore, convincing foreign audiences of the viability of this new nation was a key aim of Biafran propaganda. The support of secession, moreover, hinged on persuading external audiences of its necessity, and Heerten notes that expatriates began to advocate their cause. Decolonisation universalised the principle of the nation state as guarantor of rights; however, especially in the Third World, the sovereignty of nation states was frequently questioned. The loss of support for Biafra was partly due to the impression that both sides in the war were engaged in a 'poker game of power politics'; a game only temporarily concealed by spectacles of suffering. The mobilisation of support for Biafra was based on humanitarian concern and hindered rather than furthered the project of creating a Biafran state. Moreover, advocacy and propaganda were intertwined: the narrative of suffering was presented in ways prefigured by Biafran propaganda. British officials believed that public sympathy for Biafra was the result of a misleading public relations campaign engineered by the Biafrans and Western public relations firms. Governments that faced harsh criticism either for arms sales, such as Britain, or inaction, like Germany and the United States, were forced to respond to the rising tide of public concern over Biafran suffering. The politics of the conflict, the failure to negotiate a settlement or feasible relief routes, seemed to put in question the stated intentions of the Biafrans of saving their people from genocide. Heerten observes a change of tide in public debates of the Nigeria-Biafra War after mid-1968, when sympathy for Biafra began to wane after the genocide narrative lost credibility. With few exceptions, Biafra activism collapsed after the war.

Advocacy, Propaganda, and Genocide

Biafra was publicly debated in the context of the Holocaust. The role of genocide debates for the understanding of the Nigeria-Biafra War and its international context has been explored in a double issue of the *Journal of Genocide Research* and has since appeared in book form with a few new chapter additions.⁹⁶ For Heerten, the connection of Biafra with the Holocaust began with the images of starving Biafran children that were likened to those showing emaciated

⁹⁶ A. Dirk Moses and Lasse Heerten (eds.), 'Special double issue: The Nigeria-Biafra war, 1967–1970: postcolonial conflict and the question of genocide', *Journal of Genocide Research* 16:2-3 (2014); A. Dirk Moses and Lasse Heerten (eds.), *Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide: The Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967-1970* (New York, 2017).

inmates of concentration camps in 1945, and indeed references to the Holocaust were widely used to mobilise support. Opponents of Biafra, on the other hand, were mainly concerned with unravelling this connection to discredit the secessionist project and to prove the genocide-claim wrong.⁹⁷ Applying Michael Rothberg's concept of multi-directional memory,⁹⁸ Heerten argues that the discussion of Biafra in the context of the Holocaust changed the way both events were perceived and remembered by emphasising some aspects and glossing over others. Ultimately, like the focus on humanitarian issues, the comparison to the Holocaust was detrimental for the political project that was Biafra. When suffering in Biafra did not quite live up to the comparison, in discussions of whether genocide was an accurate label for suffering in Biafra, the atrocities that were part of the war, like the bombing of civilians, the use of starvation as a deliberate siege strategy, and the massacres moved to the background. Rothberg's concept, however, postulates that memories do not simply compete with one another as critiques of the dominance of Holocaust memory over that of other atrocities sometimes seem to imply. Rather, developing Freud's concept of screen memories, that is, memories covering other submerged traumatic or painful memories that are not consciously remembered, Rothberg argues that dominant cultural memories can become vehicles for the articulation of other atrocities or injustices, which, in turn, draw legitimacy from the former. In this way, the multi-directionality opens 'new lines of sight'; new interpretations of the remembered events that can inspire acts of solidarity.⁹⁹ This fluidity is not abstract, but since the construction of collective memory is a social act, it is also embedded in a political economy of memories in which not all memories are invested with the same amount of power.¹⁰⁰ Holocaust references were a common feature of the political discourse of the 1960s, notably in the context of Vietnam.¹⁰¹ Biafra advocacy in 1968, despite its differences to the new left, cannot be seen as completely separate, and activists borrowed both strategies and rhetoric from other movements of the time. Holocaust awareness, increasing in the 1960s, was an important source of legitimacy for the West German 1968 protest movements as well as the

⁹⁷ L. Heerten, 'A as in Auschwitz, B as in Biafra', pp. 249-274.

⁹⁸ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in an Age of Decolonisation* (Stanford, 2009).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18-19.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Wilfried Mausbach, 'Auschwitz and Vietnam: West-German Protest Against America's War during the 1960s', in Andreas W. Daum, Lloyd C. Gardner, and Wilfried Mausbach (eds.), *America, the Vietnam War, and the World: Comparative and International Perspectives* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 279-298.

rapidly expanding humanitarian movement; although, as in the case of Biafra, its use was often rather instrumental.¹⁰²

Advocacy, politics, and propaganda were deeply intertwined. The representation of the Biafran famine as part of a genocide perpetrated by Nigeria originated in early Biafran war propaganda. John Stremlau provides an account of the workings of Biafra's propaganda organs in which he argues that the genocide argument, based on the massacres of Igbos in Northern Nigeria in 1966, was intended to ensure support for the war effort. External audiences were supposed to be convinced not of Nigeria's intention to commit genocide but of a sincere belief among Biafrans that this was the case.¹⁰³ It was an ingenious idea that provided a persuasive rationale for secession without the need to prove Nigeria's intent. The emphasis of the threat of genocide by Biafran propagandists was intended to ensure morale within Biafra and generate support among the population for secession and the subsequent war. References to the 1966 massacres in Northern Nigeria made these claims plausible and tapped into existing fears and traumatic memories. Viewing the North as the primary enemy enabled Biafrans to portray the war as religiously motivated, further adding to the credibility of the genocide claim. The North, predominantly Muslim, was cast as continuing an older, religious conquest southward, whereas the South-East, where Biafra was located, was among the first regions to embrace the education and religion missionaries brought into Nigeria.¹⁰⁴ Although this view belies the diversity of Nigeria, these stereotypes have their roots in the colonial era.

Douglas Anthony shows that Biafran propaganda, rather than inventing its own language, latched on to several pre-existing discourses, relating to modernity and race. These connected to stereotypes of the Igbo ethnic group as essentially modern, progressive, and innovative. Comparisons of the Igbo to the Jews, which were later useful in drawing parallels between the Holocaust and Biafran claims of genocide, similarly reached back at least to the colonial era. At the outset, notions of modernity were more important in the sense that Biafrans promoted their vision of a progressive post-colonial Biafran republic. In 1969, the last year of the war, after the genocide narrative was widely discredited, the themes of neo-colonialism and racism became more important in Biafran rhetoric, the argument being that an alliance of neo-colonial

¹⁰² Cf. Harold Marcuse, 'The Revival of Holocaust Awareness in West Germany, Israel, and the United States', in Fink et al., *1968: The World Transformed* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 426-429.

¹⁰³ J. Stremlau, *International Politics*, p. 111-113.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

interests was backing Nigeria and that racism was hindering foreign countries from recognising Biafran independence and supporting its progressive nation building project. Anthony argues that tapping into European discourses as well as casting Biafrans as essentially modern, similar to how Europeans conceive of themselves, made Biafrans more relatable to the European public.¹⁰⁵ When seen in the context of O'Sullivan's notion that humanitarian interventions render the otherness of people in the Third World as something to be understood and shaped, then Anthony shows how the Biafrans actively contributed to this effort to further their aims.

However, in order for Biafra's cause to receive attention – and, therefore, for propaganda to be widely disseminated – two factors were crucial according to Stremlau. First, human suffering had to be on a level high enough to interest foreign attention, and secondly, 'a catalytic agent with enough international influence and credibility to sound the alarm' was needed. The latter was found in the missionaries. They had been active in Biafra from before the outbreak of the war and had decided not to evacuate. Instead, they continued their missionary work running schools and hospitals, and when starvation began to take hold, first among the refugees that returned to the East from other parts of the federation after the massacres of 1966, missionaries tended to the starving.¹⁰⁶ Missionaries from Biafra travelled around Europe and North America to publicise the famine and liaise with other organisations. Missionaries were the first to turn the attention of journalists to starvation, when the Biafran leadership was not yet interested in having it publicised.

Ken Waters shows how missionaries from Biafra worked to bring the suffering of Biafrans to world attention and portray the fate of the Biafrans in a way most likely to receive support from other religious organisations as well as the public at large. Besides tours to mobilise the support of other organisations, missionaries were key sources for journalists and influenced the news coverage.¹⁰⁷ An article by Nicholas Omenka similarly shows how Christian religious bodies became involved in war propaganda, often on Biafra's side by supporting the notion that the war was, at least in part, religiously motivated. Some groups, even the Vatican, initially, were strongly in favour of Biafra, but later the concern over alienating Nigerian Christians by supporting the view of a religious war changed attitudes. Nonetheless, Omenka confirms the

¹⁰⁵ D. Anthony, "'Resourceful and Progressive' Blackmen", pp. 41-61.

¹⁰⁶ J. Stremlau, *International Politics*, p. 118-119.

¹⁰⁷ Ken Waters, 'Influencing the Message: The Role of Catholic Missionaries in Media Coverage of the Nigerian Civil War', *The Catholic Historical Review* 90: 4 (2004), p. 697-718.

importance of religious groups in spreading Biafran propaganda and accounts of Biafran suffering.¹⁰⁸

Aside from voluntary supporters, Biafra engaged public relations firms to disseminate its propaganda abroad. Morris Davis has written an account on the involvement of public relations firms in the Nigeria-Biafra War and shows how both sides employed a variety of firms to improve their image abroad. Although public relations firms see their role as one of translation from one view point to another, of revealing a common interest of their client and the target audience, Morris argues that the support expected to result from the work of public relations firms might lead contestants to become entrenched in their position rather than seeking negotiations.¹⁰⁹ Almost all the literature discussed, here, at least mentions the role of public relations firms. During the Nigeria-Biafra War public relations firms, especially the firm employed by Biafra, Markpress, were discussed to an unusual degree. Ironically, this focus on public relations became itself part of the propaganda war, but it raises important questions about the implications of public relations efforts on the news coverage, advocacy, and humanitarian organisations.

Suzanne Cronje discusses the propaganda efforts of Biafra and Nigeria with particular focus on their impact in Britain. As a former member of the Britain-Biafra Association, a connection she chooses not to mention in her book, she has a more favourable attitude towards Biafra. Unlike most, her account emphasises the propagandist nature of the support rendered to Nigeria by the British government. In effect, once Britain decided to support Nigeria in the war and to supply arms to the country's war effort, it became an official promoter of the Nigerian view of the war and a powerful critic of its opponent, Biafra. Generally, the British government regarded public outrage over Biafra as a misled, emotionally charged response to propagandistic imagery and rhetoric that were uncritically reproduced by the media and advocates. In turn, attempts were made to convince journalists and editors not to publish sensational accounts of Biafran suffering, Biafran propaganda was publicly denounced, and the Nigerian government was persuaded to allow a team of international observers inside the country to investigate the conduct of Nigerian troops at the frontline. The observer reports

¹⁰⁸ N. Omenka, 'Blaming the Gods', p. 367-389.

¹⁰⁹ Morris Davis, *Interpreters for Nigeria: The Third World and International Public Relations* (London, 1977), p. 160.

appeared from October 1968 onwards and countered the genocide claim.¹¹⁰ The team's operations have rarely been critically considered in the literature on the war, but Cronje's critique echoes that of Biafra advocates at the time. Firstly, all observers were military men and possessed no expertise in the investigation of genocidal violence; secondly, they did not visit Biafran territories, although it was the genocide of Biafrans they were meant to investigate; thirdly, the team was entirely dependent on the Nigerian military for transport and could therefore be shown convenient places at convenient times – this latter point was conceded by a member of the observer team. Overall, Cronje concludes that propaganda efforts were on the whole far less important than the genuine reporting of human suffering in Biafra 'based on a hard core of facts'.¹¹¹ This raises the question what role exactly public relations and propaganda efforts played, to what degree advocacy and journalistic or humanitarian efforts were echoing propagandistic narratives, uncritically.

Cronje's notion of genuine reporting based on facts warrants further examination. It presupposes a naive conception of 'facts' as something that exists rather than something that is made. Bolaji Akinyemi has analysed the coverage of the Nigeria-Biafra War in the British press and assessed its accuracy. To do so, he examined different topics, including the British arms supply to Nigeria, relief supplies, political settlements, as well as the civilian bombings and genocide that the media reported on, and then analysed five papers and their positions on those topics. His conclusion is that most British papers were biased in favour of Biafra by publishing accounts that were highly sensational, geared to cause emotive responses to graphic depictions of Biafran suffering, and often not free of racism.¹¹² A similar critique is expressed by Adepitan Bamisaiye, who refers not only to the press coverage but the entire public debate of the war. For him, it was marked by a lack of mutual understanding, by a certain one-sidedness in which the accounts of Western 'instant experts' were paramount, even if these experts were in no way qualified except for their involvement in the war, as in the case of journalist Frederick Forsyth, for whom reporting from Biafra was the first assignment in Africa.¹¹³ Similar to Heerten's discussion of Biafra in the context of the Holocaust, Bamisaiye looks at the wider public debate, highlighting issues that tend to remain obscure when the

¹¹⁰ Suzanne Cronje, *The World and Nigeria*, pp. 210-224.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

¹¹² A. Bolaji Akinyemi, *The Godfather Complex*.

¹¹³ Adepitan Bamisaiye, 'The Nigerian Civil War in the International Press', *Transition* 44 (1974), pp. 30-35.

focus is set solely on the media, as is so often the case. Nevertheless, the media hold a key position as the primary source of information on the war for large parts of the population, and as of yet, there is no balanced analysis of newspaper articles that clearly reveals the complexities behind the oft-simplistic journalistic visions that were ultimately presented to European audiences. Here, the most prominent theme – and, of course, the most important intersection between the media, humanitarian organisations, and propaganda – remains the imagery of suffering employed by all to rouse attention and appeal for support; but as this study will show, it is also merely the idiomatic tip of the iceberg.

As many scholars have pointed out, it was only with the starvation in Biafra and the publication of images of suffering that the tide began to turn in favour of Biafra. In her essay *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag is concerned with the role of images communicating suffering, how these have been used to depict war, and what implications result from our 'camera-mediated knowledge of war'.¹¹⁴ Sontag engages with crucial questions of how images affect our response, whether they compel us to action or numb us in the recognition of our impotence, or simply lose impact over time by desensitising us to sights of violence. An important thread throughout is the subject of authenticity, early war photography was often manipulated, scenes were changed or staged. The Vietnam War changed this and the raw and untainted image, even a certain amateur quality of photography, became the standard and the foundation for the moral authority of atrocity images.¹¹⁵ At this juncture, images of starvation in Biafra found their way into the mainstream media, although some editors in Britain were initially hesitant to publish them.¹¹⁶ Such images were by no means new and had been used prior to the Biafran famine by humanitarian organisations to mobilise support. Yet, Sontag's overall verdict, as a correspondent who has experienced war, is that images remain inadequate in communicating even a vague sense of this experience.¹¹⁷ Their depictions remain superficial and subject to the social construction of their meaning.

In order to understand this social construction of meaning, 'framing' is an important concept used in various disciplines. Important, here, is its significance in media analysis and social movement theory. Regarding the news media, framing denotes the presentation of a

¹¹⁴ Susan Sontag, *Regarding*, p. 21.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 24 and 51.

¹¹⁶ Paul Harrison and Robin Palmer, *News out of Africa: From Biafran to Band-Aid* (London, 1986), p. 28.

¹¹⁷ S. Sontag, *Regarding*, p. 113.

particular issue: its display, images, headlines, and the context of surrounding articles or themes. Todd Gitlin, in his analysis of the impact of media coverage on the American new left, defines framing in the following way: it denotes 'persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual.'¹¹⁸ Frames include the cultural and social norms embedded in communication: the use of symbols, metaphors, and comparisons. They suggest ways of looking at an issue. Regarding the news media, frames are often taken over from earlier coverage of similar events or from sources that influence a journalist's perception of events. Frames are not necessarily determining how audiences think about a subject, and it is possible to 'break a frame' by contrasting it with alternative views. Gitlin introduced the concept of framing to the study of social movements but did not yet apply the concept to the framing of messages from social movements.¹¹⁹ In the theory of social movements, framing has become a central category of a movement's success, along with political opportunities and resource mobilisation. Frames, here, in a nutshell, refer to how movements communicate their issue within the context of competing views. An important foundation is the Gramscian idea of cultural hegemony, which, when applied to framing, means that in the contest of various interpretations some become dominant, or hegemonic, as a result of differences in power or resources of those who promote a given interpretation.¹²⁰ This idea was also developed by Michel Foucault in his theoretical work on the concept of discourse. In short, 'discourse', here, refers to the sum of knowledge produced on a given subject and to the *dispositif*, that is, the entire social and intellectual framework that makes it possible for a specific discourse to arise or thrive, sometimes translated into English as 'apparatus'.¹²¹ Erving Goffman's work on frame analysis – although he uses the term in its

¹¹⁸ Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching: The Media and the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley, 1980), p. 7.

¹¹⁹ Hank Johnston and John A. Noakes, *Frames of Protest: Social Movements and the Framing Perspective* (Lanham, 2005), p. 3.

¹²⁰ Cf. Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilising Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge, 1996); Kai-Uwe Hellman, 'Paradigmen der Bewegungsforschung. Eine Fachdisziplin auf dem Weg zur normalen Wissenschaft', in Ansgar Klein, Hans-Josef Legrand, and Thomas Leif (eds.), *Neue Soziale Bewegungen: Impulse, Bilanzen und Perspektiven* (Wiesbaden, 1999), pp. 101-102. For a historical approach to social movements around the globe, cf. Stefan Berger and Holger Nehring (eds.), *The History of Social Movements in Global Perspective* (London, 2017).

¹²¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge, Vol. 1* (London, 2008).

widest sense as the way in which we frame our perception of reality – posits that frames organise meaning by effectively reducing the complexity of reality. For Goffman, frames are vital in organising involvement as well – a crucial point for the study of social movement framing, but also for propaganda.¹²² To understand the success of Biafran propaganda or of pro-Biafra groups abroad, therefore, it is important to understand the context within which the Biafran narrative was understood by contemporaries as well as the investment of power that went into its production. Biafran agency was crucial in forming a specific interpretation of the war, and this view succeeded abroad, at least partly, because it fit into the universe of contemporary ideas about sub-Saharan Africa and because of a specific constellation of institutions at the time that was facilitating this view.

In an international context, Clifford Bob shows how Third World movements frame their issues to attract the support of major international NGOs that can provide them with resources, advice, access to the media, and legitimacy. One movement he considers in detail is the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), one of multiple ethnic groups of the Niger delta area that Biafra earlier claimed as a part of its territory. The movement initially mobilised around a nationalist separatist agenda, as did other ethnic movements in the region, but increasingly shifted the focus onto the ecological grievances caused by the pollution of the environment due to oil extraction mainly by Shell-BP. While these were certainly serious, the shift reflected strategic considerations: framing their aims in ecological terms made it possible for the Ogoni to appeal to powerful ecological NGOs like Greenpeace and ultimately explains why the Ogoni movement succeeded in gaining recognition and support where others failed.¹²³ In analogy, then, earlier Biafran propagandists similarly looked for a frame to present their cause to the world. They found it when missionaries drew the attention of Western journalists to their starvation and Biafran suffering became a spectacle in the Western media, often framed in ways prefigured by Biafran propaganda and aided by public relations firms.

Distant Spectatorship and the Politics of Suffering

Given Biafra's importance for the expansion of humanitarian organisations, their scope, legitimacy, and proliferation, as well as the beginning erosion of state sovereignty in the name

¹²² Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organisation of Experience* (Boston, 1974).

¹²³ Clifford Bob, *The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media, and International Activism* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 54-56.

of humanitarian intervention, it is interesting to note that recent analyses of humanitarianism offer a terminology with which to understand responses to Biafra and the crucial role of mediating representations of humanitarian crises. Luc Boltanski's remarks that the spectatorship of distant suffering is at the same time a form of altruism and a selfish edification of oneself. Boltanski calls this the 'spectator's dilemma'.¹²⁴ A related issue is what Didier Fassin calls the 'politics of suffering' in which representations of suffering replace the discussion of violence or inequality: 'inequality is replaced by exclusion, domination is transformed into misfortune, injustice is articulated as suffering'. What is overlooked are both the 'effects of domination expressed through suffering' as well as the 'construction processes of which suffering is the object', or, in other words, the politics that produce suffering and govern its representation. The effects of the depoliticization of a war represented, mostly, as a humanitarian crisis provide the analytical basis for the subsequent chapters, which will highlight the agency of Biafrans and Nigerians in shaping the view of the war abroad.

Recent critiques of humanitarian action broadly fall into two categories, those denouncing its instrumental nature or unintended negative consequences, and those who argue for the benefits of a politics of compassion despite the shortcomings of current humanitarian practice.¹²⁵ These issues became apparent during the famine in Biafra, which Alex de Waal regards as humanitarianism's 'totem and taboo'. The relief effort for Nigeria and Biafra was an unprecedented undertaking of formative significance for future humanitarian operations, but humanitarian agents were faced with many of the dilemmas that reappeared in later interventions, such as whether or not the humanitarian intervention was doing more harm than good by prolonging conflict.¹²⁶ During the Nigeria-Biafra War aid organisations were drawn deeply into the political conflict and the question to what extent aid organisations should also take political measures to ensure that relief reached the people in need split humanitarian agencies. These issues were linked to the representation of suffering in aid campaigns of aid organisations and the news media and indicated the increasing interdependence of humanitarian agencies and the media.¹²⁷ When the French doctors broke their confidentiality agreement with the Red Cross and decided to speak about the suffering in

¹²⁴ L. Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*, p. 20.

¹²⁵ Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (London, 2012).

¹²⁶ A. de Waal, *Famine Crimes*, pp. 72-73.

¹²⁷ Cf. Jonathan Benthall, *Disasters, Relief and the Media* (London, 1993); Jonathan Benthall, 'The Disaster-Media-Relief Nexus', *Anthropology Today* 24:4 (2008), pp. 4-5.

Biafra to the press in summer 1968, one of these doctors, Bernard Kouchner, believed that this would lead to a political intervention that would end Biafran suffering. Oxfam used images of starving children to promote its cause and raise funds; efforts that strategically build upon contemporary public morality but also reflected on-going changes in the media landscape.

The humanitarian response to Biafra was not entirely new: moral sentiment as a foundation for a politics motivated by compassion, the proliferation of representations of suffering, the ambiguities of humanitarian action that naively conceived of itself as apolitical had existed before. However, these elements converged in the responses to Biafra and facilitated the rise of supranational institutions, the reconfiguration of the international order after decolonisation, and the shift in the style of news coverage with the advent of television. The specific mode in which the Nigeria-Biafra War was represented, as a humanitarian disaster rather than war, contributed to the imagination of Africa as a continent of continual conflict and crisis,¹²⁸ a view that invited paternalism and proved beneficial for a number of institutions, including foreign governments, the media, and humanitarian organisations.

Hypothesis and Research Questions

Scholarship has begun to discuss how and why the Biafran famine mobilised sympathy, globally, and as such on a remarkable scale. It has frequently been pointed out that the perception of the war centred on the humanitarian dimension. Visual imagery of suffering and the resulting urgency to act left little space for a reflection of the political issues that led to the war. The representation of the war seems to have been an ambivalent project, which involved various institutions, such as governments, the media, humanitarian organisations, the church as well as missionary orders, and advocates, including students and professionals, who organised Biafra committees. It is thus the aim of this thesis to trace the multiple interconnections between these various agents by allowing each chapter to focus on the involvement of one, specifically, in relation to the others. The constellation of institutions, media, activists, and NGOs – indeed, their influence as a constellation not merely on the representation of the war but ultimately also on the representation of the responses to it – has not received the attention it deserves in the current literature.

¹²⁸ Andreas Eckert, 'Only Bad News from Radio Africa. Das nachkoloniale Afrika als Kontinent in der Dauerkrise', in Thomas Mergel (ed.), *Krisen Verstehen. Historische und kulturwissenschaftliche Annäherungen* (Frankfurt, 2012), pp. 85-86.

Three questions are of importance in this context. The first one is how contemporaries perceived the war, to what degree the war in Biafra was politically discussed, and why the humanitarian angle became dominant. Secondly, what role did Biafrans and Nigerians, including expatriates, play in raising awareness, mobilising support, and influencing the representation of the war abroad. This is set in the context of the processes of globalisation, such as migration, improved communication channels, and the growth of an almost global public sphere. A final guiding question is what image of the Third World arose from the encounter with Biafran suffering, how it relates to other notions of the Third World, such as the one held by the new left, and what consequences this particular view of the Third World resulted in.

Sources

As diverse as the themes explored in this thesis are the sources used to reconstruct the perception and representation of the Nigeria-Biafra War and the famine within Biafra. The focus will be on West German and British sources. Britain was the former colonial ruler of Nigeria and continued after the country's independence to have close economic and political relations with the former colony. The government-owned oil company Shell-BP had the largest concessions for oil extraction at the time, and although its investments in Nigeria were significant, British business relations with Nigeria went beyond the operations of the oil company. Military cooperation and development aid were further links between the countries. Moreover, during the 60s, Britain was adapting to the end of the empire and was seeking ways to preserve in some form its role in international politics. The Suez Crisis had shown that Britain was no longer able to assert its interests internationally without U.S. support. Germany, on the other hand, lost all colonial possessions after the First World War. For the West German state, decolonisation was an opportunity and a challenge. It provided opportunities to develop economic and political ties with the newly independent countries, but posed the risk that newly independent countries might enter alliances with the Eastern bloc rather than the West. The partition of Germany and the desire of West German politicians to politically isolate the GDR were important factors in West German-Nigerian relations during the war. Finally, Germany was the country that perpetrated the Holocaust. As a conflict that was understood as a genocide, the Nigeria-Biafra War presented a particular problem to the West German government of balancing interests and moral imperatives. Moreover, in this context, West

Germany experienced a livelier protest movement during the 1960s, and in particular in 1968, than Britain, and the government thus had another reason to respond to public concern. Although sources from other European and North American countries will occasionally be used, the focus remains on these two countries. Due to their differing positions, Britain and West German not only offer the benefit of comparison, but also allow for an in-depth assessment of attitudes and policies.

Archival material from the national archives of Britain and West Germany, parliamentary debates, and memoirs elucidate the positions of governments and their responses to public sympathy for Biafra. Moreover, these sources give an insight into the humanitarian response as well as the attempts to shape the public perception of the Nigeria-Biafra War. Newspaper articles of broadsheets as well as tabloid papers are used for an analysis of the representation of the war and humanitarian issues as well as for supplementary sources on governmental policies, debates on public relations, and humanitarian operations. Newspaper accounts are also of much importance because they are the only way of gauging the impression of the war that the public at large had formed.

Part of the research for this thesis included visiting several archives that held student journals and materials of student organisations, such as the Archive of the German extra-parliamentary opposition at the Free University in Berlin, the Institute for Social Research in Hamburg, the Archive of Social Movements in Freiburg, and the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam. Unfortunately, Biafra does not seem to have been a major issue for German student organisations at the time and not much material on the subject can be found in these archives.

Advocacy for Biafra is examined on the basis of governmental documents on Biafra committees, sources published by and about these groups, such as books, pamphlets, as well as news articles, and materials found in the archives of two important organisations, the West German *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* and the Britain-Biafra Association. The documents of the former are held by its successor organisation, the Society for Threatened Peoples, in Germany. What survived of the materials of the Britain-Biafra Association can be viewed at the Bodleian Library in Oxford. These documents include published books, pamphlets, news bulletins or articles, letters, flyers, and posters. The chapter on humanitarianism is especially concerned with the role of Oxfam, an organisation split into those supporting direct political action and those who

were in favour of an apolitical humanitarianism. Oxfam's archives are also held at the Bodleian Library since June 2017.

Chapter Structure

The thesis examines a series of institutions, or agents, and the chapters roughly reflect this process. Each chapter focusses on an institution, the media, advocates, public relations agencies, governments, and humanitarian organisations, respectively. These are analysed in turn for their contribution to how the war was perceived and represented as well as their interrelations.

Chapter 1 demonstrates that newspapers, despite using some elements of what could be termed Biafran propaganda, did so not out of political support for Biafra but for the sake of the spectacle, changing their coverage once a committee of observers had published their reports that no genocide was occurring.

Chapter 2 argues that although both Nigeria and Biafra employed public relations firms, discussions of public relations efforts in the media and statements by British politicians emphasised and arguably exaggerated the effectiveness of Biafran propaganda in order to undermine its genocide claim, while simultaneously underplaying Nigerian efforts. Nigerian public relations efforts, in the broadest sense, were in turn aided by the British government in its responses both to the war and to public opinion in Britain.

Chapter 3 analyses governmental measures designed to respond to public pressure, while safeguarding political interests in Nigeria. Britain and West Germany contributed to the relief efforts and emphasised the humanitarian disaster but did not change their political support for Nigeria. In order to counter public opinion, Britain hoped to counter the Biafran narrative with its own perspective on the war and thereby helped strengthen Nigeria's image, internationally.

Chapter 4 shows that advocates of Biafra and humanitarians were mobilised by early news reports of suffering in Biafra. Despite the increasing internationalist focus of the new left, in West Germany and Britain, the new left was more or less uninterested in the conflict, which led the founder of the *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* to state that the group was part of 'the other 1968.' Yet, Biafra activists borrowed rhetoric and strategies from the new left and anti-war protesters despite their focus on humanitarian rather than political concerns.

Chapter 5 examines the impact that the responses to Biafra had on the landscape of humanitarian agencies, and how the tension between the political and the moral or humanitarian split organisations into those who supported a more active political stance and those who preferred neutrality as a concession that allowed agencies to operate in politically difficult situations such as the Nigeria-Biafra War. The experiences of relief agencies in Biafra were crucial for the rise of the modern humanitarian industry and the questions raised at the time have so far remained unresolved.

1. The Discovery of the 'Humanitarian Crisis': Representations of Biafran Suffering

*'For three years, westerners have grown accustomed to glancing at the latest body count, or staring, unbelievably, at the week's best atrocity photo.'*¹²⁹

On 12th June 1968, Michael Leapman's article 'Land of no Hope' in *The Sun* broke the story of the Biafran famine.¹³⁰ That same evening, footage of the famine shot by Alan Hart was broadcast on ITN; it was the first time an African famine was televised in Europe. As German author Günther Grass put it in the popular weekly *Die Zeit*, after dinner families in Europe could watch Biafrans 'starve and die'.¹³¹ The news coverage placed hunger and suffering in Biafra in the context of genocide, and not only in German papers, references to the Holocaust became common. It was one of the first media events to bring about a 'transnational surge of humanitarian sentiment',¹³² and 'within hours, people worldwide were asking how they could donate money to stop the suffering, while demanding that their governments put aside political considerations and mobilise resources to help'.¹³³ The German periodical *Der Spiegel* declared: 'never have appeals for help found such a response'. The article continued to list various acts of kindness for those suffering in Biafra: a prisoner at Dartmoor donated the little money he had earned in prison, a pensioner donated his life savings, a restaurant in Switzerland served sausages instead of steaks and donated the difference in cost, and there were benefit concerts by Sammy Davis Jr. in Britain and Jimi Hendrix in the United States.¹³⁴ Later in the 1970s, American musician Jello Biafra took his name from the secessionist republic. The foundation of celebrity charity events such as Live Aid, established in response to the famine in Ethiopia in the early 1980s, was laid in response to Biafra. As a result of the news coverage, people in Europe and America donated money to relief organisations, took part in rallies, and organised as citizen's committees taking up the Biafran cause. In total, \$170 million

¹²⁹ 'The Other Side of the Nigerian Civil War', *Africa Research Group* (April 1970).

¹³⁰ Michael Leapman, 'Land of No Hope', *The Sun*, 12.06.68.

¹³¹ Günther Grass, 'Völkermord vor aller Augen: Ein Appell an die Bundesregierung', *Die Zeit*, 11.10.68.

¹³² L. Heerten, 'Dystopia', p. 15.

¹³³ K. Waters, 'Influencing the Message', p. 698.

¹³⁴ 'Biafra – Völkermord – Nur Beten', *Der Spiegel*, 19.08.68.

were spent on relief for Biafra and Nigeria, mostly from governmental sources, and almost half of the entire sum from the United States.¹³⁵

The narrative that arose from the debates on the war abroad, primarily in the media, but influenced in important ways by Biafra advocates and humanitarian workers, focused on the famine that developed from early 1968 in Biafra. The famine was seen by some observers as part of a genocide of the Biafrans, perpetrated by Nigeria, and compared it to the Holocaust and Vietnam. At the centre were depictions of Biafran suffering, especially of starving children. The graphic imagery of distant pain seemed to imply an appeal to action, and the need to relieve starvation was emphasised. Political debates on the conflict, its causes, and possible solutions were pushed into the background in response to the overwhelming urgency to aid the Biafrans. Didier Fassin notes in his recent critique of *Humanitarian Reason* that there is a tendency to abstract suffering from the circumstances in which it is created: 'What, ultimately is gained and what lost, when we use the terms of suffering to speak of inequality, when we invoke trauma rather than recognising violence, [...] when we mobilise compassion rather than justice?'.¹³⁶ For justice, we might substitute politics. While emotion and reason, pity and politics are not necessarily mutually exclusive, Hannah Arendt's notion of the 'politics of pity', first emerging during the French Revolution, is in tension with genuine politics because pity depersonalises its objects and implies a hierarchical relation. In contrast, Arendt's understanding of the political involves an exchange on an equal basis.¹³⁷ Pity, according to Arendt, was loquacious and produced elaborate descriptions of suffering. This relates to the way in which imagery of suffering and a rhetoric of pity proliferated in response to the Biafran famine. Biafra constituted the discovery of the 'humanitarian crisis' as a novel news genre in which conflicts were covered from the angle of human suffering. This presentation highlights distant suffering as well as the urgency of aid and thereby mobilises compassion and promotes symptomatic relief but distracts from the political context and struggles within which suffering takes place. This chapter is thus also an attempt to historicise a specific discursive approach to distant suffering.

¹³⁵ Morris Davis, 'Audits of International Relief in the Nigerian Civil War: Some Political Perspectives', *International Organisation* 29:2 (1975), p. 503.

¹³⁶ D. Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, p. 8.

¹³⁷ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Middlesex, 1973), pp. 85-86.

The main part of this chapter analyses key features of the representation of suffering based on news articles and ads appealing for donations placed by humanitarian organisations in broadsheets and news magazines. This includes the role of the rhetoric of genocide, which was woven around images of starving children and descriptions of their bodies changed by Kwashiorkor. Frequent comparisons with the Holocaust roused the sympathy of many observers but overshadowed important aspects of both events and ultimately failed to serve Biafra's political project.¹³⁸ Going beyond Heerten and drawing inspiration from Kevin O'Sullivan's work on the humanitarian response to Biafra and its effect on the understanding and representation of the war, the ambivalence of representations of Biafran suffering will be discussed as an expression of genuine concern, which is simultaneously rooted in and perpetuates paternalistic views of the Third World.¹³⁹ Media descriptions of missionaries, nurses, doctors, and aid workers in their daily struggle to help the starving and wounded Biafrans complement descriptions of suffering and mediate between victims and donors across the distance. Despite the importance given here to the depiction of victims and their saviours, political discussions of the war as well as historical sketches as a background to the war featured both in news articles and reinforced paternalistic interpretations of the conflict. It will be shown that historical explanations in various papers created a rather reductionist view of the war that highlighted ethnic rivalries and discussed them in terms of 'tribalism'; a term that underscored the presumed exoticism and distance separating Africa from Europe.

Portraying Biafran Suffering

Distance is an important category because it awards greater importance to intermediaries and eyewitness accounts, who authenticate the suffering of the victims. The story of the Biafran famine was largely told in the form of eyewitness accounts by journalists, advocates, or official delegates. These described the adventurous journeys into the enclave, their meetings with local aid workers or officials, their impressions of the Biafrans, the military and relief situation, and the extent of suffering more generally. Such eyewitness accounts underlined the authenticity of images and video, emphasised the need to witness, and communicated a sense of adventure, not unlike earlier travel literature. Many of these eyewitnesses had never before

¹³⁸ L. Heerten, 'A as in Auschwitz, B as in Biafra', p. 267.

¹³⁹ K. O'Sullivan, 'Humanitarian Encounters', p. 306.

been to Africa and lacked knowledge of local affairs and customs and thus the necessary distance in a cultural sense.

The story of the Biafran famine was publicised only as the result of a series of coincidences. When TV journalist Alan Hart visited Biafra in 1968, he filmed battles between Nigerian and Biafran troops. On his way back to Britain, he was held back by missionary Kevin Doheny of the order of the Holy Ghost Fathers. Doheny asked Hart if he wanted to see the real story to be discovered in Biafra, and showed him children starving in make-shift hospitals.¹⁴⁰ Initially, the Biafran leadership was not interested in drawing attention to the toll the war was taking on the population lest it should appear weak. Michael Leapman waited with several other journalists, including Hart, for a plane back to Europe, and after learning from Hart about the famine, he went to cover it before their plane arrived. Initially, when journalists, deeply shocked by the suffering they witnessed or intrigued by the discovery of a good story, brought back graphic images of starving Biafrans, their editors were not interested in the story. David Cairn's images of the famine were rejected by the editor of the *Daily Express* 'as mere Oxfam posters of no news value or interest whatever to the British people.'¹⁴¹ Frederick Forsyth had a very similar experience with the *BBC* and later said he believed the *BBC* tried to manage the news and avoid drawing attention to a political debacle in which Britain was involved.¹⁴² Leapman and Hart were luckier. Once they broke the story in the *Sun* and on *ITN*, respectively, other media outlets followed suit.

The war was on the cover of several news magazines, such as *Time*, *Life*, the German *Spiegel* and *Stern*, as well as the French *L'Express*, mostly with cover images of starving children.¹⁴³ Daily newspapers published feature articles, exploiting the famine to provide a new perspective on the war between Nigeria and Biafra that had thus far not attracted much attention. The media reported the estimates of relief organisations and missionaries in terms of daily death rates, and the numbers appeared to vary drastically over time. For example, on July 4 1968, an article in *The Times* cited 300 deaths; a week later, when tabloid papers had run articles on the famine, a *Times* editorial wrote that the Biafran '[children] drop dead like

¹⁴⁰ K. Waters, 'Influencing the Message', p. 697.

¹⁴¹ Paul Harrison and Robin Palmer, *News out of Africa: From Biafran to Band-Aid* (London, 1986), p. 28

¹⁴² Michael Stewart, 'Biafra: Fighting a War without Guns', *BBC*, 30.07.95.

¹⁴³ 'Starving Children of Biafra War', *LIFE*, 12.07.68; 'Biafra's Agony', *TIME*, 23.08.68; 'Bilder klagen an: Die verhungerten Kinder von Biafra', *Stern*, 28.07.68; 'Biafra – Todesurteil für ein Volk', *Der Spiegel*, 19.8.68; 'Biafra: La Fin', *L'Express*, 07.10.68.

flies at the rate of an estimated 3000 a day'.¹⁴⁴ An editorial in the *Guardian* provides the same figure and adds that 'the rate goes up by compound interest'.¹⁴⁵ Moreover, *The Observer* headlined, '[t]hree million Biafrans dying from starvation', and in yet another article, a journalist reported that 'help from abroad will be too late and too little to avert the death of more than a million people within this month'.¹⁴⁶ In West Germany, the coverage was similar. An article in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* was meaningfully titled 'Only swift aid can save the Igbos', *Die Zeit* warned that Biafra would soon become 'a single pile of dead bodies', and *Der Spiegel* reported 6000 deaths from starvation alone on a daily basis and that there would 'soon be no children under 15 in Biafra'.¹⁴⁷ Despite their rather abstract nature, the numbers were used to create a sense of urgency and stressed the necessity to act swiftly.

The central motive in journalistic representations of the famine in Biafra was thus images of starving children. These images accompanied articles as well as the numerous ads placed by humanitarian organisations, including Oxfam, UNICEF, Save the Children Fund, and War on Want. In June 1968, *The Times* published an ad, paid for by an anonymous organisation 'concerned with human suffering',¹⁴⁸ that ran over an entire page, more than half of which was filled with the image of a young boy showing the symptoms of Kwashiorkor, sitting under a bed frame. The ad was subsequently referred to in an article in a German paper, which noted that Eton pupils and their teachers had sponsored it.¹⁴⁹ The ad carries the title 'we cannot sit and wait for a million people to die'; it explains that within Biafra four million refugees were threatened by starvation and highlights that children were the most vulnerable. It concedes that the refugees were the 'by-product of a complex and virulent war'. The moral imperative, however, was above and beyond the political: 'we cannot accept that this is inevitable', argues the ad and notes that relief organisations had already made food and medical supplies

¹⁴⁴ 'One man who will die waiting for aid in Biafra', *The Times*, 04.07.68; Garry Lloyd, 'Dying children wait for help,' *The Times*, 12.07.68. Similar numbers can be found in John O'Callahan, 'Need for shuttle service', *The Guardian*, 06.07.68.

¹⁴⁵ 'Three thousand every day', *The Guardian*, 08.07.68.

¹⁴⁶ Matthew Rosa, 'Three million Biafran dying from starvation', *The Observer*, 23.06.68; Matthew Rosa, 'Race against time to save starving Biafra', *The Observer*, 07.07.68.

¹⁴⁷ 'Nur schnelle Hilfe kann die Igbos retten', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 05.07.68; 'Rettung für Biafra?', *Die Zeit*, 26.07.68; 'Nur Beten', *Der Spiegel*, 19.8.68.

¹⁴⁸ 'We cannot sit and wait for a million people to die', *The Times*, 25.06.68.

¹⁴⁹ Dieter Schröder, 'Mit englischen Waffen ein afrikanisches Blutbad', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 02.07.68. This ad is similar in design and language to an ad placed by Oxfam: Oxfam, 'Biafra emergency appeal: How can we sit and wait for a million people to die?', *The Guardian*, 28.06.68.

available but no open, secure, and viable supply routes to bring them to the people in need had been agreed on by Nigeria and Biafra. The article then lists some action points to guide readers: firstly, donations are needed; secondly, those concerned should spread awareness of the issue; and thirdly, pressure should be brought on the British government to bring it to use its influence on both sides for securing relief routes as well as ending the war. Finally, it argues that ‘it is not necessary to take sides in this war’; rather, the innocent victims need to be helped ‘in the name of humanity’.¹⁵⁰ In tone and content, this ad, although running over an entire page, is similar to the usually much smaller ads of Oxfam, many of which showed images of starving children, sometimes accompanied by taglines such as ‘Biafra: Innocent children are looking to us for help’.¹⁵¹ Fewer yet similar ads with images of children were placed by UNICEF, the Save the Children Fund, and the Joint Biafra Famine Appeal.¹⁵²

News articles featured graphic descriptions of the bodies of starving children. Journalists tried to capture the horror of the scenes they witnessed and communicated it to their audiences. In one such article in *The Times* titled ‘Dying children wait for help’, Garry Lloyd wrote:

Sunken eyes stare starkly from heads that seem too large for bamboo-thin bodies. Ribs, shoulders, and hipbones protrude. Tufted hair is red with kwashiorkor and fleshless arms and legs are puffed with fluid that leaves fingermarks if you press it: Children lie on the ground, too weak to stand.¹⁵³

A German paper echoed this description with reference to the image printed in the ad discussed above: ‘half-starved, with a bloated belly and apathetic gaze a naked black child sits under the frame of his sick bed’.¹⁵⁴ Children were especially vulnerable to Kwashiorkor because their growing bodies need more protein, and along with the elderly, they were the first to die

¹⁵⁰ ‘We cannot sit and wait for a million people to die’, *The Times*, 25.06.68.

¹⁵¹ Oxfam, ‘Biafra: Innocent children are looking to us for help’, *The Guardian*, 20.06.68.

¹⁵² UNICEF, ‘Save and Help the Lives of Children in Nigeria/Biafra’, *The Times*, 18.09.68; Save the Children Fund, ‘Nurse Sally Goatcher cares what happens to helpless children’, *The Times*, 27.06.69; Joint Biafra Famine Appeal, ‘Is one Meal a Day Too Much to Ask?’, *The Times*, 18.07.69. For more on relief organisations, see chapter 5.

¹⁵³ Garry Lloyd, ‘Dying children wait for help’, *The Times*, 12.07.68.

¹⁵⁴ Dieter Schroeder, ‘Mit englischen Waffen ein amerikanisches Blutbad’, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 02.07.68. Similar descriptions can be found in Matthew Rosa, ‘Race against time to save starving Biafra’, *The Guardian*, 07.07.68; Oliver Todd, ‘Auch die Hölle braucht ihre Siegel’, *Der Spiegel*, 17.02.69; Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, ‘Belsen in Biafra?’, *Die Zeit*, 12.07.68; James Wilde, ‘Nigeria. Agony in Biafra’, *Time*, 02.08.68.

from starvation. Due to the shock value of these images, they were often used by Biafra supporters and relief organisations to mobilise compassion and appeal for funds. Contemporaries credited these images with bringing about the breakthrough of the story on the Biafran famine, the journalist and Biafra advocate Frederick Forsyth, for example, felt that with the publication of such images 'quite [...] suddenly we'd touched a nerve'.¹⁵⁵ The images and descriptions filed by Forsyth and others from Biafra moved audiences in Europe and North America.

Susan Sontag's observations on how we regard the pain of others through images, and how they trigger a certain reaction, are useful when considering the Biafran case. The mode of communication of images is seemingly direct. In Sontag's words, by providing the 'basic unit' of memory, they appear to reflect reality.¹⁵⁶ For Don McCullin, a photographer who won an award for his images of the Biafran famine, 'photography [...] is not looking, it's feeling. If you can't feel what you're looking at, then you're never going to get others to feel anything when they look at your pictures.'¹⁵⁷ According to an oft-cited observation by Walter Lippmann, 'photographs have the kind of authority over imagination today, which the printed word had yesterday, and the spoken word before that. They seem utterly real.'¹⁵⁸ This tendency to seem 'utterly real' was amplified by the ideal of raw, authentic images of war and atrocities, without staged scenes or changed elements. An aesthetic shift towards more amateurish, spontaneous photographs took place during the Vietnam War, a war with unprecedented media presence and freedom still intact, when the Biafran famine made international news headlines.¹⁵⁹

Moreover, Biafra was the first televised African famine. What Lippmann wrote about photographs in 1922, by the late 60s and in the context of the coverage of the Vietnam War, it was just as true for television, perhaps to an even larger degree.¹⁶⁰ Although its importance should not be overestimated, contemporaries noted the effect of this new medium. Forsyth remarked that 'this kind of tragedy was new to [television] viewers. Most hadn't seen a starving child in glorious Technicolor.'¹⁶¹ The medium of television, in addition to the press and radio

¹⁵⁵ P. Harrison and R. Palmer (eds.), *News Out of Africa*, p. 33.

¹⁵⁶ S. Sontag, *Regarding*, p. 19.

¹⁵⁷ Don McCullin, *Unreasonable Behaviour: An Autobiography* (London, 1992), p. 165.

¹⁵⁸ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (Mineola, 2012 [1922]), p. 50.

¹⁵⁹ S. Sontag, *Regarding*, pp. 51-52. Cf. also Daniel C. Hallin, *The 'Uncensored War': The Media and Vietnam* (Berkeley, 1986), p. 6.

¹⁶⁰ Gary S. Messinger, *The Battle for the Mind: War and Peace in the Era of Mass Communication* (Amherst, 2011), p. 176.

¹⁶¹ F. Forsyth, quoted in K. Waters, 'Influencing the Message', p. 697.

reports, is significant to the extent that it made the coverage more easily accessible for audiences and raised the importance of visual representations of suffering. Video coverage was a most suitable medium for a news story that depended on visual imagery. In contrast to photographs, video footage captures entire scenes at a length of time. Thus, compared to photographs, video appears to be less easily manipulated, and Violet Bonham Carter argued in the House of Lords in August 1968, 'our guilt is brought home to us nightly on our T.V. screens. Thanks to the miracle of television we see history happening before our eyes. We see no lbo propaganda; we see the facts, and not one of us can say, "I did not know"'.¹⁶² Bonham Carter's countering of British claims that Biafran propaganda exaggerated the extent of the famine with reference to television news betrays two naïve assumptions: the first one being the idea that knowledge leads, automatically, to action or at least to complicity in the crime in case of inaction; and the second, that television imagery shows a sort of absolute truth, 'the facts'.

It is true that photographs and videos showed the famine as it existed. Far from being simple reflections of reality, however, images – whether photographs or video – only capture fragments. These are shown from specific angles and include a specific and limited scene within its frame. In a recent study on the media coverage of atrocities, we are reminded that 'it takes not just a camera, but an entire network of editing, transmitting, distributing, and viewing technologies – and agents – that extend out from the camera' to achieve the almost instantaneous transmission of information in the form of news.¹⁶³ Images, and by extension videos, are artefacts, whose composition and selection influence their interpretation as much as the processes they undergo until they reach their audiences. This interpretation is not dictated by the images themselves, but by the context, the news frames, within which they are necessarily embedded.¹⁶⁴ Images are presented with captions, accompanying articles, slogans, or appeals – in the case of video, by the spoken report and introduction – which make them readable. Framing refers not only to the 'packaging' of a news story but to the inherent cultural translations of the story, the use of explanations, comparisons, or metaphors that suggest, but do not determine, a specific interpretation.

¹⁶² Lady Asquith, 27.08.68, *Hansard* HL vol. 296 col. 700.

¹⁶³ Thomas Keenan, 'Media, Surveillance, and "Humanitarian Intervention"', in Joram ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer (eds.), *Killer Images: Documentary Film, Memory and the Performance of Violence* (New York, 2012), p. 24.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. T. Gitlin, *The Whole World*, p. 13.

Framing Biafran Victimhood

One frame that guided the Western understanding of the Biafran famine portrayed it as part of a genocide perpetrated by Nigeria. Genocide as a concept was a relatively new invention. Raphael Lemkin coined the term in 1942, three years before concentration camps were liberated by allied forces and images proliferated. Forsyth made this connection early on, when he commented on the images of starving children and their impact; he believed that audiences had not seen anything similar since the publication of images of the inmates of liberated concentration camps in 1945.¹⁶⁵ Tabloids in Britain picked up the reference and West German papers followed the example. 'Belsen in Biafra?' was the title of a frontpage article in *Die Zeit*;¹⁶⁶ 'Death sentence for a People' was that of an entire issue of the weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel*, and 'Biafra is the Belsen of our Days' was the tagline of an article in the daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. In Britain, only tabloid papers made the comparison, and broadsheet papers used the term genocide only in quotation marks if they did at all; they made no comparisons to the Holocaust, although these could occasionally be read in reported statements of missionaries from Biafra or advocates.¹⁶⁷ Descriptions of emaciated bodies, ghost-like and without hope of survival, or images of scenes of destruction after aerial bombing, of streets strewn with bodies, or even of voluntary recruits for the Biafran army lining up supported the interpretation of the war as genocide and used imagery reminiscent of the Holocaust. Journalists wrote haunting descriptions of the suffering and ubiquitous death to great effect. One article begins as follows:

An atmosphere of death and despair hangs over this hilltop Roman Catholic seminary – now an emergency hospital for more than 300 starving children. It is a hospital in name only. The children, all skin and bones, lie on straw mats on the floors of dormitories and classrooms. There is no resident doctor and virtually no medicines.

It adds that 'a new grave is dug every morning' and 'vultures circle overhead' waiting for people to die, 'there is no time for funerals'.¹⁶⁸ According to another article, there were 'more than

¹⁶⁵ Alexander de Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics & the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa* (Irthlingborough, 1997), p.74.

¹⁶⁶ Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, 'Belsen in Biafra?', *Die Zeit*, 12.07.68.

¹⁶⁷ M. Dönhoff, 'Belsen in Biafra?'; 'Biafra: Todesurteil für ein Volk', *Der Spiegel*, 19.08.68.

¹⁶⁸ Lloyd Garrison, 'Children starve in Biafra seminary', *The Times*, 02.08.68.

600 refugee camps containing over 600.000 people' in Biafra, and in 'one of the bleakest camps, near Aba', co-warden Augustine Chude spoke of burials without ceremony, quietly only with close family in order 'to save the feelings of the others, many of whom will soon join them'.¹⁶⁹ The scene evoked, here, is desolate and bleak, and the overwhelming suffering portrayed thus contributed to the creation of a public imagination of genocide.

However, the situation in Biafra was far from clear cut. The famine was the consequence of a military strategy that isolated Biafra, economically. The blockade was a controversial measure. Whereas some Nigerian officials like Obafemi Awolowo stated that they considered hunger as a legitimate weapon of war,¹⁷⁰ the legality of siege warfare was put into question since 1919.¹⁷¹ In the summer of 1968, the famine reached dramatic proportions. Apart from children and the elderly in general, the most vulnerable part of the population were the refugees that had come to Biafra before and after the secession, or those who fled from the advancing federal troops.¹⁷² Many of these were housed in refugee camps and hit worse by the famine. A night airlift of relief supplies begun in early 1968 by the Red Cross and Joint Church Aid but was largely suspended in June 1969 after a Red Cross plane was shot down by the Nigerian air force.¹⁷³ Apart from the famine, the bombing of civilian targets and massacres during the military conquest were other reasons given by the advocates in order to make their case that a genocide was being perpetrated. Moreover, like Biafran propagandists, they referred to the historical precedent of massacres of Easterners in the North prior to the war in 1966, fuelled by ethnic resentment against Easterners. Ethnically motivated hate is illustrated by the genocidal remarks – widely cited by advocates – of Colonel Adekunle, who commanded the Nigerian forces advancing south of Biafra. He said in the Biafran heartland, his troops would

¹⁶⁹ Garry Lloyd, 'Dying children wait for help', *The Times*, 12.07.68.

¹⁷⁰ Obafemi Awolowo said: 'All is fair in war, and starvation is one of the weapons of war. I don't see why we should feed our enemies fat in order for them to fight harder', quoted in Peter Baxter, *Biafra: The Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970* (Solihull, 2014), p. 41.

¹⁷¹ The purposeful starvation of civilians is listed as a violation of the laws of war in the report of the 'Commission on the Responsibility of the Authors of the War and on Enforcement of Penalties', *The American Journal of International Law* 14:1-2 (1920 [1919]), p. 114. The rule was added to the Geneva Convention in the Additional Protocols of 1977 in part as a result of the Biafran famine. A. de Waal, *Famine Crimes*, p. 75.

¹⁷² '10,000 Biafrans will die this week', *The Observer*, 22.09.68.

¹⁷³ 'Biafrans again face starvation threat', *The Guardian*, 30.06.69; Michael Wolfers, 'Minister's flight to mend Lagos split with Red Cross', *The Times*, 03.07.69. The fears over renewed starvation, expressed by missionary doctor Herman Middlekoop, are presented in Julian Mounter, 'Alarming rise in Biafra deaths', *The Times*, 05.06.69; Joseph Minogue, 'Over the razor's edge', *The Guardian*, 26.06.69. For more on relief, see chapter 5.

‘shoot everything, even if it doesn’t move’.¹⁷⁴ As the territory of Biafra diminished, the counterarguments were that more and more Igbos remained in the federally controlled zones, living in relative safety, and that after the completion of the conquest of Biafra by Nigerian forces, no extermination or expected ‘kill-off’ of the Igbo occurred. Instead, members of the Biafran leadership went to Lagos to negotiate the secessionist state’s surrender, and Nigeria promised to reintegrate the Igbo into the federation. Reconciliation efforts after the war were part of an attempt to improve Nigeria’s image and that of her allies, as were earlier attempts at civilising the war by the issuance of codes of conduct to soldiers and air force pilots, or allies putting pressure on Nigerian leader Gowon to allow relief in.¹⁷⁵ Certainly, the reintegration of the Igbo was limited, and as an ethnic group, the Igbo lost power and resources during the war.¹⁷⁶ Ethnic resentment arguably worsened as a result of the war.

Although the famine was the result of a deliberate policy – the economic blockade – and Nigeria accepted the starvation deaths as its consequence, what happened in Biafra still fell short of being recognised as a genocide. In October 1968, after a tour of a section of the Nigerian front lines, a team of international observers reported that there was no genocide in Biafra.¹⁷⁷ The reports failed to convince Biafra’s supporters abroad, who cited the UN Genocide Convention of 1948 to demonstrate how the situation in Biafra fit the UN definition of genocide.¹⁷⁸ The UN definition was based on Raphael Lemkin’s concept of 1942, which he developed in the context of the Nazi occupation of Europe by envisioning a universally applicable concept to classify a type of crime.¹⁷⁹ In the second article of the UN convention, genocide is defined as ‘acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group’, where the acts include killing as well as more indirect forms of engagement leading to the destruction of the group by the imposition of

¹⁷⁴ Adekunle quoted in Auberon Waugh, ‘A Plea to Michael Stewart’, *The Spectator*, 12.09.68. On the well-documented massacre in the village of Asaba in Biafra, cf. E. Bird and F. Ottanelli, ‘The History and Legacy of the Asaba, Nigeria, Massacres’, *African Studies Review* 54:3 (2011), pp. 1-26.

¹⁷⁵ For more on Nigerian efforts to improve its image abroad, see chapter 3.

¹⁷⁶ Lasse Heerten and Dirk A. Moses, ‘The Nigeria-Biafra war: postcolonial conflict and the question of genocide’, *Journal of Genocide Research* 16:2-3 (2014), pp. 89-90.

¹⁷⁷ ‘Report dated 2 October 1968 on International Observer Team’s visit to 1st Nigerian Division’, UKNA FCO 65/178. For more on the observer team, see chapter 3.

¹⁷⁸ For instance: Auberon Waugh and Suzanne Cronje, *Biafra: Britain’s Shame* (London, 1969), pp. 108-110.

¹⁷⁹ Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (Clark, 2005 [1944]).

harsh conditions of life or the prevention of procreation of the group.¹⁸⁰ Subsequently, during the 1960s and in the context of debates around the uniqueness of the destruction of the European Jews, the Holocaust came to shape the understanding of the concept of genocide in a way that made it difficult to apply in other contexts due to the specificity of the former. A key category of the genocide concept is 'intent'. Intent is difficult to prove and may be intentionally covered up by perpetrators; nonetheless, it seems crucial to distinguish genocide from other atrocities. Here, it is irrelevant whether the state or only certain groups intend genocide, such as the army for instance. One characteristic of genocidal violence is the asymmetry of power between perpetrators and victims, as well as the fact that the latter are generally civilian groups, who are *constructed* as 'collective enemies'.¹⁸¹ Two scholars, Leo Kuper and Robert Melson, arrived at the study of genocide and the Holocaust from African history and were acquainted with the example of the Nigeria-Biafra War. They argued against viewing the Biafran experience in terms of a genocide because they wanted to avoid widening the concept.¹⁸² Melson criticises the UN convention for its conflation of what he terms 'partial' and 'total' genocides as a single crime,¹⁸³ and likewise, Kuper coined the term 'genocidal massacre' for large-scale racially motivated violence that is not part of a policy of a premeditated, systematic destruction of an entire group – a concept applicable in Biafra.¹⁸⁴ In this context, Michael Mann's use of murderous 'ethnic cleansing' is an attempt to circumvent the problematic concept of genocide, and include various degrees of genocidal violence,¹⁸⁵ it is now widely used by the UN.¹⁸⁶ The lack of conceptual clarity in many historical studies of genocide makes it difficult to distinguish genocide from other atrocities and warfare.

¹⁸⁰ 'Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide', *United Nations*, 09.12.48, Article II, http://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf (accessed 09.05.2017).

¹⁸¹ Martin Shaw, *What is Genocide?* (Cambridge, 2015), p. 4 and 131.

¹⁸² L. Heerten and D. Moses, 'The Nigeria-Biafra war', pp. 81-82.

¹⁸³ Robert Melson, 'Paradigms of genocide: the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide, and contemporary mass destructions', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 548:1 (1996), p. 163.

¹⁸⁴ Leo Kuper, *Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, 1981), pp. 73-76.

¹⁸⁵ Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge, 2005).

¹⁸⁶ According to the UN, the term 'ethnic cleansing' originated from an investigation into the 'violations of international humanitarian law committed in the territory of the former Yugoslavia'. It denotes crimes that 'could fall within the meaning of the Genocide Convention', *United Nations*, <http://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/ethnic-cleansing.html> (accessed 29.04.17)

Genocides often occur within the context of war and specifically civil wars tend to blur the lines of war and genocide since ethnically-charged violence is a frequent feature of the former.¹⁸⁷

In accordance with the conventional interpretation of the genocide concept as well as the history written by the victors – in this case, Nigeria and her allies – the literature on genocides and extermination, generally, does not include the Biafran experience.¹⁸⁸ In the context of the multitude of large-scale violence, omission should perhaps be less notable than inclusion, and Bloxham writes in a study on the Armenian genocide that most genocides elude public consciousness and are deeply enmeshed in a geopolitics of memory.¹⁸⁹ Ultimately, the arguments for as well as against genocide were part of the ‘politics of naming’ and embedded in the propaganda efforts of and for both sides.¹⁹⁰ It seems, therefore, more insightful to study the dynamic of the use of the genocide concept and the Holocaust as a precedent rather than to discuss in depth whether the Biafran case merits this classification. It is hard to prove Nigerian intent to destroy the Igbo as a group;¹⁹¹ rather, from a Nigerian perspective, the state was applying millennia-old siege tactics to prevent the secession of a part of its territory that held most of the country’s oil. It is difficult to move away from the use of genocide in the context of attempts to destroy entire groups because this makes it applicable in a huge variety of cases: the UN definition that includes the destruction of groups ‘in part’ depends on expert interpretations of each case. The understanding of the Biafran famine in terms of a genocide simplified the complexity of the conflict. This view emphasized the innocence of the Igbo victims and glossed over the Igbo leadership’s role in shaping the course of the war and famine. This is not to say that no overlaps existed in the form of large-scale ethnically charged violence but rather to assert that the brutality of the means should not be any less worthy of

¹⁸⁷ M. Shaw, *What is Genocide?*, p. 1; Martin Shaw, *War and Genocide* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 4-7. Shaw discusses the Biafran example in the context of other ethnically charged violence caused by secession. Martin Shaw, *Genocide and International Relations: Changing Patterns in the Transitions of the Late Modern World* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 113.

¹⁸⁸ L. Heerten and D. Moses, ‘The Nigeria-Biafra war’, p. 183. There is no treatment of Biafra in Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven, 2007). However, Mann mentions Biafra alongside other civil wars with ‘ethnic coloration’. M. Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy*, p. 428.

¹⁸⁹ Donald Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 6-7 and p. 207.

¹⁹⁰ Mahmood Mamdani, ‘The Politics of Naming: Genocide, Civil War, Insurgency’, *London Review of Books* 29:5 (2007), pp. 5-8, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n05/mahmood-mamdani/the-politics-of-naming-genocide-civil-war-insurgency>.

¹⁹¹ Biafran leader Ojukwu remarked that one can only prove genocide once it has been perpetrated, cited in: ‘Nur Beten’, *Der Spiegel*, 19.8.68.

condemnation for not being labelled as genocide.¹⁹² Senior Biafran officials admitted that no genocide was being perpetrated. Among them were Namdi Azikiwe, Nigeria's first president, who defected from Biafra in 1969, arguing that genocide fears were unfounded and that he had secured assurances from Nigerian leaders that the Igbo would not face economic discrimination, and the Biafran Director of Propaganda, who admitted that by 1969 'the threat of genocide was no longer credible and simply not true'.¹⁹³

Debates on the Biafran experiences in the context of the Holocaust were not without consequences. Applying Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory, Heerten argues that comparing the Nigeria-Biafra War to the Holocaust not only shaped how the former was interpreted, but also how the discourse of Biafran suffering arguably simultaneously shaped the memory of the Holocaust in important ways. Rothberg noted that Holocaust memory was shaped by the engagement with the developments precipitated by decolonisation. The comparison highlighted and overshadowed elements of both events and ultimately failed to serve Biafra's political project because the support that was mobilised was mainly humanitarian, not political in nature. Furthermore, the Holocaust rhetoric set the bar high and debates turned to the question of whether genocide was in fact occurring in Biafra instead of further engaging with the realities of the war and the famine.¹⁹⁴

The comparison of Biafra to the Holocaust did not happen in a rhetorical vacuum. Awareness of the Nazi genocide increased over the course of the 'long 60s', when a specific memory of it was being formed and analogies to the Holocaust had already been drawn in the context of the Algerian War and later the Vietnam War. References to the Holocaust were a common source of legitimacy of the protest movements of 1968.¹⁹⁵ Indeed, because of the widespread popular protests against the Vietnam War, the latter formed another point of comparison for Biafra in West German papers. One article claimed that in Biafra, more people had died already than in three years of the war in Vietnam; another article dating from March 1968, that is, before the widespread attention to the famine, was titled 'The war without

¹⁹² According to the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Convention, much of what happened during the Nigeria-Biafra War is recognised as war crime since 1977,

¹⁹³ Patrick Keatley, 'Call for Ibos to desert Biafra', *The Guardian*, 09.10.69; Uche Chukwumerije, Biafran Director of Propaganda, quoted in J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 328.

¹⁹⁴ M. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*; L. Heerten, 'A as in Auschwitz, B as in Biafra', p. 274.

¹⁹⁵ Harold Marcuse, 'The Revival of Holocaust Awareness in West Germany, Israel, and the United States', in Fink et al., *1968: The World Transformed* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 421.

Publicity' and argued that 'the war in Vietnam rouses people. [...] For the other war on our planet no one is taking to the streets'.¹⁹⁶ In British news, this comparison featured mainly when the positions of advocates were stated. The news articles did not make this comparison, which may be due to the fact that the anti-Vietnam War movement was stronger in West Germany.¹⁹⁷ Generally, it is hazardous and difficult to compare these wars, but some background figures might be helpful. For the entire period of the Vietnam War, including side theatres like Cambodia and Laos, it is estimated that 5 million people died, the majority of whom were civilians. The French military lost 76,000, the Americans nearly 60,000, the South Vietnamese 130,000, and the Viet Cong about 1,1 million soldiers.¹⁹⁸ During the Nigeria-Biafra War, we can assume between 1 and 3 million deaths, including deaths from starvation.¹⁹⁹ Rates of 3000 to 6000 deaths by starvation per day in Biafra in the summer months of 1968 are at the higher end of the spectrum and were the basis for comparisons to Vietnam. It is fair to conclude that, even at the time, this comparison was incorrect and based on inflated forecasts of Biafran deaths. Long-term consequences, such as, for example, the lasting damage done to children from malnutrition or long-term health risks from the pollution of the environment in Vietnam by agent orange, are not reflected by these figures.

Rather than being factual, this comparison, like that to the Holocaust, served as a rhetorical device to create an effect. It implied that if Vietnam was worthy of protest and outrage than Biafra would be all the more so: the comparison conferred legitimacy. Cardinal Heenan, the Archbishop of Westminster and an advocate of Biafra, noted that there had been many marches against the war in Vietnam and asked rhetorically, 'but how many marches and demonstrations have there been against the massacre in Biafra?' He then asserts, 'we should not join only the popular protests'.²⁰⁰ Similar complaints were expressed by West German Biafra activist Tilman Zülch of the *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe*,²⁰¹ when he argued that the new left was

¹⁹⁶ 'Nur Beten', *Der Spiegel*, 19.8.68; Dieter Döllken, 'Der Krieg ohne Publicity', *Die Zeit*, 08.03.68; Werner Holzer, 'Keine Einheit durch Eroberung', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 20.05.68; Oliver Todd, 'Auch die Hölle braucht ihre Siegel', *Der Spiegel*, 17.02.69.

¹⁹⁷ Lord Ritchie-Calder, quoted in: "Holocaust" warning', *The Guardian*, 13.12.68.

¹⁹⁸ Andrew Wiest, *The Vietnam War, 1956-1975* (New York, 2002), p. 83.

¹⁹⁹ Al J. Venter, *Biafra's War, 1967-1970: A Tribal Conflict in Nigeria That Left a Million Dead* (Solihull, 2015).

²⁰⁰ 'Cardinal Protests on Biafra', *The Guardian*, 03.06.68.

²⁰¹ The *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* is discussed in chapter 4.

so vocal about Vietnam but had nothing to say about Biafra.²⁰² In the House of Lords, a peer noted that ‘civilian deaths in Nigeria already had exceeded the deaths in the Vietnam War, and were at least three times as great as the total deaths, military and civil, which Britain suffered in the Second World War. [...] The situation was advancing remorselessly and ruthlessly towards a holocaust of proportions such as the world had never witnessed’.²⁰³ Such hyperbole was common and established a hierarchy of suffering in which Biafra was near the top.²⁰⁴

Comparisons to the Holocaust or Vietnam were used in a rather instrumental and superficial fashion, although advocates went to great lengths to make the case that the war was genocidal. It was a rhetorical weapon that created a sense of urgency, appealed to an assumed historical responsibility, and made the Nigeria-Biafra War understandable and relatable within a European frame of reference. References to World War II and the Holocaust remained important frames of reference in the coverage of humanitarian crises;²⁰⁵ but Biafra was not the first instance in which such comparisons were drawn. A year before the Biafran famine became an international media sensation, very similar descriptions were employed with regard to the famine in Bihar, India, in 1967. Bihar had not seen rain since the summer of 1965, causing harvest failure and famines. ITN broadcast a video in 1967 later described by a journalist as showing ‘pictures of slowly starved bodies and hopeless faces that matched the German concentration camp news reels.’²⁰⁶ This was linked to the evolving memory of the Holocaust, a term that initially denoted any kind of atrocity and became primarily associated with the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis in the 60s and 70s.²⁰⁷ As a case in point, an earlier famine in the Congo in 1961 had not yet been discussed with references to the Holocaust. Oxfam, UNICEF, Red Cross, and War on Want among others campaigned for funds for relief in both countries and a *Guardian* article already referred to ‘the booming business of

²⁰² Tilman Zülch und Klaus Guercke, ‘Plädoyer für die Republik Biafra’, in T. Zülch und K. Guercke, *Soll Biafra Überleben? Dokumente, Berichte, Analysen, Kommentare* (Berlin, 1969), p. 12.

²⁰³ Peter Ritchie Calder, 12.12.69, *Hansard* HL vol. 298 col. 672, reported in ‘“Holocaust” warning’, *The Guardian*, 13.12.68.

²⁰⁴ Later, Biafra became itself a point of comparison. For example, cf. John Windsor, ‘Pakistani famine is “worse than Biafra”’, *The Guardian*, 14.08.71.

²⁰⁵ Valerie Gorin, ‘An Iconography of Pity and a Rhetoric of Compassion: War and Humanitarian Crises in the Prism of American and French Newsmagazines (1967-95)’, in Josef Seethaler, Matthias Karmasin, Gabriele Malischek, and Romy Wöhlert (eds.), *Selling War: The Role of the Mass Media in Hostile Conflicts from World War I to the ‘War on Terror’* (Bristol, 2013), p. 135.

²⁰⁶ Stanley Reynolds, ‘Television’, *The Guardian*, 14.04.67.

²⁰⁷ Cf. Gary Weissman, ‘Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust’ (Ithaca, 2004), p. 24.

relief'.²⁰⁸ Oxfam reported having received £20,000 in the mail following the first reports in the media,²⁰⁹ and a study on Canada's involvement in the Congo at the time notes that 'no other issue caused as great a public reaction as did the famine'.²¹⁰ While the Congo famine was not televised, the press coverage alone, despite being comparatively modest and using 'mild' pictures, engendered 'a massive outpouring of public generosity' in the form of donations.²¹¹ Yet, relevant news articles did not yet make any references to the Holocaust. By 1967, however, this had become an established rhetorical device for the description of famines.

In contrast, images of suffering children had been used to draw attention to humanitarian issues since the beginning of humanitarianism.²¹² After the First World War, images depicting children in distress on their own, rather than in groups or with guardians, spread, and during the Second World War, this trend further intensified in the context of a growing number of humanitarian organisations and the increasing media coverage of global conflicts.²¹³ Images of starving children showing the signs of Kwashiorkor had also been published in the context of the 1961 famine in the Congo. Public representations of the Biafran famine were therefore embedded in a tradition of how humanitarian crises and especially famines were represented, and in turn, it contributed to the style in which humanitarian crises were depicted later.²¹⁴ In the wake of the Biafran War and partly due to the proliferation of visual media, the image of the starving child became iconic in the coverage of famines.²¹⁵

The figure of the child is significant. Idealist views of childhood developed a 'grip on the Northern cultural imaginary' because they came to signify 'the self, the innermost, precious core of subjectivity, within us all'.²¹⁶ A specific notion of childhood, generally accredited to

²⁰⁸ 'The booming business of relief', *The Guardian*, 22.02.61.

²⁰⁹ '1961. Congo Captures Hearts', Oxfam, <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what-we-do/about-us/history-of-oxfam> (accessed 25.04.2017).

²¹⁰ Kevin A. Spooner, *Canada, the Congo Crisis, and UN Peacekeeping, 1960-64* (Vancouver, 2009), p. 221.

²¹¹ Maggie Black, *A Cause for our Times: Oxfam the first 50 years* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 65-66.

²¹² Cf. H. Fehrenbach and D. Rodogno, *Humanitarian Photography*, p. 165.

²¹³ Heide Fehrenbach, 'Children and Other Civilians: Photography and the Politics of Humanitarian Image-Making', in H. Fehrenbach and D. Rodogno, *Humanitarian Photography*, p. 167.

²¹⁴ Comparative perspectives on the representations of humanitarian crises and famines are found in Joel R. Pruce, 'The Spectacle of Suffering and Humanitarian Intervention in Somalia', in Tristan Anne Borer (ed.), *Media, Mobilization, and Human Rights: Mediating Suffering* (London, 2012), pp. 216-239; Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War, and Death* (New York, 1999), pp. 111-155.

²¹⁵ Cf. S. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*, p. 98; Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 178.

²¹⁶ Erica Burman, 'Un/thinking Children in Development: A Contribution from Northern Antidevelopmental Psychology', in Gaile S. Cannella and Lourdes Diaz Soto (eds.), *Childhoods: A Handbook* (New York, 2010), pp. 13-14.

Rousseau, arose from the 18th century onwards and construes the child as yet untainted by civilisation; a being that is close to nature, essentially good, and innocent. Yet, these ideas implied as their counterpart the attributes of malleability, helplessness, and dependence. The need of children for protection and care was an opportunity for control and management of the potentially 'rebellious and aggressive attitudes of the young'.²¹⁷ The accusatory gaze that some Biafra advocates read into images of children looking directly into the camera invoked a desire to protect them and appealed to paternal feelings. At the same time, the images potentially caused feelings of guilt and a fear of retribution. German historian Golo Mann wrote in the preface of a volume on Biafra, 'if we don't help now, then nobody shall help us either'.²¹⁸ Seen from this perspective, philanthropy is a form of management and compassion a form of fear. The use of starving children appealed to the need to protect the vulnerable but at the same time universalised this response for the entire conflict and helped perpetuate the view of Africa as a place ravaged by wars, disease, and hunger, unable to save its own children and to hope for the future. Imperial paternalism, in an attempt to justify domination, infantilised Africans, and in a similar way, the use of images of children in aid appeals '[infantilises] the wider problem of North-South economic inequalities'.²¹⁹ Children are the perfect representation of victimhood because their assumed innocence and dependence denies them agency similar to the passivity usually ascribed to victims.

Separating the Humanitarian and the Political

The famine turned Biafrans into a nation of victims of a 'genocidal' war against their project of independence. Incidentally, photographer McCullin also believed, initially, that his work in Biafra was not political, but rather he felt that he was consistently taking the side of the underprivileged. Later he changed his mind, believing that standing by the victims was a form of politics, though not necessarily partisan.²²⁰ Similarly, Bernard Kouchner, who later co-founded

²¹⁷ Erica Burman, 'Discourses of the Child', in Chris Jenks (ed.), *Childhood: Critical Concepts in Sociology* (Oxon, 2005), p. 32.

²¹⁸ Golo Mann, 'Ein Krieg, in dem englische "Imperialisten" und russische "Kommunisten" am gleichen Tau des Verbrechens ziehen', in T. Zülch and K. Guercke, *Biafra – Todesurteil für ein Volk* (Berlin, 1989), p. 10, Archive of the Society for Threatened Peoples.

²¹⁹ William B. Cohen, 'The Colonized as Child: British and French Colonial Rule', *African Historical Studies* 3:2 (1970), pp. 427-431; E. Burman, 'Un/thinking Children', p. 18.

²²⁰ D. McCullin, *Unreasonable Behaviour*, p. 270 and p. 125.

the MSF, felt compelled to help victims, regardless of which side they were on.²²¹ The Red Cross was founded in the context of the Battle of Solferino in 1859 with the aim to provide care for wounded soldiers of both sides, but the MSF connected this principle with the duty to bear witness to atrocities, thus becoming inevitably politically involved by denouncing an atrocity and standing by the victim.²²² For Kouchner and the MSF, there was no hierarchy of victimhood, there were no good or bad victims, there were only victims and perpetrators. The resulting image of Biafran victims on one side and Nigerian perpetrators propped up by foreign governments on the other was Manichaeian and ignored the political complexities of the conflict. The Biafran elite, at least, were not only victims of a brutal war but active participants, who subordinated humanitarian to political or military imperatives. A West German government official felt obliged to point out to a class of pupils who together with their teacher had written to the Foreign Office that it would not be true to see this as a war in which 'one of the peoples is good and the other evil.'²²³

In the context of Biafra, the conflation of the population and its leadership as a victimised group originated in the partly opportunistic but perhaps merely naïve assumption of aid workers that their work was humanitarian rather than political. The Red Cross, the Holy Ghost Father missionaries and Africa Concern were among the relief organisations expelled after the war for what Nigeria regarded as their political role in supporting Biafra and weakening Nigeria's position in the war.²²⁴ In fact, workers of the Red Cross as well as missionaries of the Holy Ghost order were prohibited from speaking out about the suffering they witnessed, so that they would not risk their ability to continue to operate within Nigeria and Biafra.²²⁵ Whereas missionaries, advocates, and the 'French doctors' working for the Red Cross clearly supported Biafran secession as the only way to prevent genocide, many humanitarian workers abroad separated the humanitarian from the political in order to safeguard themselves from being drawn into, or accused of involving themselves in, the politics of the war. For instance, Nigerian leader Gowon considered Oxfam as a hostile organisation that followed political intentions – presumably, because it publicised Biafran suffering and organised relief, but

²²¹ 'Founding of MSF', MSF, <https://www.msf.org.uk/founding-msf> (accessed 30.08.17).

²²² 'The beginning of the Red Cross Movement', British Red Cross, <http://www.redcross.org.uk/About-us/Who-we-are/History-and-origin/Beginning-of-the-Movement> (accessed 23.08.17).

²²³ Zimmermann, BPA, Letter, 29.01.70, BAK B122/11623.

²²⁴ K. O'Sullivan, 'Humanitarian Encounters', p. 309.

²²⁵ N. Omenka, 'Blaming the Gods', p. 381; M. Desgrandchamps, 'Dealing with "Genocide"', p. 291.

deputy director of Oxfam, Nicholas Stacey, argued in response that ‘nothing could be further from the truth’ since Oxfam provided relief to both sides and focused its appeals on the Igbo only because they were in the greatest need.²²⁶ Lesley Kirkley, the director of the organisation, declared Oxfam would never take political sides.²²⁷ This was consistently pointed out in Oxfam’s appeals. One ad showed a malnourished child next to the tagline, ‘This Child doesn’t Care which General Wins’. Moreover, the accompanying text declares, ‘Oxfam is not concerned with the rights and wrongs of this conflict’, but then adds in slight contradiction, ‘only with the fact that millions of innocent people face untold suffering as a result of it’.²²⁸ This separation of the political and the humanitarian, although frequent and emulated by governments seeking to remain neutral, was a difficult balancing act. The lines between humanitarian and political support were blurred, and as an organisation, Oxfam was split into those who supported making a political stand and those, including Stacey and Kirkley, who were against it. Yet, the graphic images employed in Oxfam’s donation appeals were considered partisan by Nigeria because they emphasised Biafran victimhood and created problems for Oxfam staff in Lagos.²²⁹

Humanitarian organisations promoted a representation favourable for their endeavour through campaigning and donation appeals in the media. In Biafra, missionaries and aid workers were the first to draw the media’s attention to the famine in an effort to mobilise help from abroad to end the suffering of Biafrans.²³⁰ Aid workers constitute important sources for journalists visiting disaster zones; they appear in interviews and discussions on television. They are easily accessible sources, often have an intimate knowledge of local affairs, and provide journalists with stories. In turn, as a sort of *quid pro quo*, aid workers as well as the entire humanitarian effort are generally portrayed in a favourable light, and problems or dilemmas of relief are rarely written about in the media.²³¹ From this dynamic, a common representational formula emerged in the course of the Biafran famine; one that creates a story in which victims, rescuers, and villains are continuously juxtaposed.²³² Descriptions of the work of missionaries, doctors, and nurses, who worked with those affected by the war and the famine, complemented depictions of Biafran victimhood. During the Nigeria-Biafra War, there

²²⁶ Nicholas Stacey, ‘Must Biafra Starve’, *The Spectator*, 11.07.68.

²²⁷ Lesley Kirkley, cited in L. Heerten, ‘Dystopia’, p. 20.

²²⁸ Oxfam, ‘This child doesn’t care which general wins’, *The Observer*, 16.06.68.

²²⁹ For more on Oxfam and debates within the organisation, see chapter 5.

²³⁰ K. Waters, ‘Influencing the Message’, p. 697.

²³¹ S. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*, p. 108.

²³² *Ibid.*, p. 104.

were two main humanitarian agents, the ICRC that administered relief to federally held areas, and church aid organisations that were mainly active in Biafra. Missionaries had been widely active in Biafra before the war, they transformed schools into makeshift hospitals for the starving, ran refugee camps, and helped with the distribution of aid supplies. An article in the *Times* describes the hard work and frustration of the missionary Aloysius, an Irish Marist, as having a 'craggy head deeply lined with fatigue' and sitting 'hunched over' being 'close to tears'. He is quoted as saying, 'I am fast losing faith in humanity. I do not know how the Lord can permit this.'²³³ The latter point he makes echoes a classic problem of theology or theodicy: the paradox of the existence of suffering in the presence of an omnipotent and all-merciful god. It is perhaps because of the large presence of Christians among the relief organisations, or due to the origins of humanitarian aid in Christian charity, that theological imagery is common place when aid operations are depicted. Aid workers working for the Red Cross in Nigeria and Biafra, including the French doctors later to form the MSF as well as the missionaries of the order of the Holy Ghost, became heroic figures in a tragic fight against suffering, and 'images on TV and in newspapers and magazines transformed several Irish priests of the Holy Ghost Order into the role of international celebrities'.²³⁴

Aid workers and missionaries bridged the distance between Biafran victims and foreign audiences. Their work offered a point of identification as well as an opportunity to act. Audiences overwhelmed with the imagery of suffering were given a possible solution to the problem: aid. Across the distance and in an almost symbiotic interrelation of the news, media, and humanitarianism, it seems that the media in the form of 'television has become the principal mediation between the suffering of strangers and the consciences of those in the world's few remaining zones of safety. [...] It has not merely become the means through which we see each other, but the means by which we shoulder each other's fate.'²³⁵ This development began in earnest with the coverage of Biafra. Empathy with those suffering at a distance in Biafra was effectively channelled to several aid organisations with the capacity and expertise to provide relief, mainly the Red Cross or Joint Church Aid. Oxfam ads called for action 'in the name of humanity' and of compassion.²³⁶ Rather than attempting to solve a complex

²³³ Lloyd Garrison, 'Children starve in Biafra seminary,' *The Times*, 02.08.68.

²³⁴ Waters, 'Influencing the Message', p. 698.

²³⁵ Michael Ignatieff, 'Is Nothing Sacred? The Ethics of Television', *Daedalus* 114:4 (1985), pp. 76-77.

²³⁶ Oxfam, 'How can we sit and wait for a million people to die?', *The Times*, 22.06.68.

and protracted political issue, the relief operation was presented as a feasible solution to the suffering, and even if political solutions to the conflict were outstanding, 'crisis, followed by NGO response [...] became the norm'.²³⁷ The tendency to reduce violent political struggle to a 'morality tale' of the fight between good and evil has been observed by Mamdani in the context of current representations of the civil war in Sudan: 'where yesterday's victims are today's perpetrators, where victims have turned perpetrators, this attempt to find an African replay of the Holocaust not only does not work but also has perverse consequences. [...] the depoliticisation of violence has given its proponents distinct political advantages.' Framing the famine as part of a deliberate policy aimed at destroying the Igbo or Biafrans as a group distracted from the political dynamic of the conflict, although it raises pertinent questions about the applicability and uses of genocide as a label in the context of civil wars; a subject discussed by Mamdani in his comparison of public discussions of the civil wars in the Congo and Sudan.²³⁸

Depictions of the famine were not merely paternalistic but also ambivalent. The iconography of Biafran victimhood – and the accompanying, oft-graphic descriptions – was complemented by observations of the dignity and determination of the Biafrans: 'a quiet dignity pervades the suffering and dark depression. Fights over food are almost unheard of.'²³⁹ Their attempts at restoring the dignity of those whose suffering they describe so graphically point to an ambivalence in this kind of reporting. Nevertheless, the centrality of Biafran suffering, even though debates on the war linked to a diverse range of discourses, images, and currents, reproduced and perpetuated the view of Africa as a dark place, and of its people as in need of Western aid and sympathy due to its focus on Biafran victimhood and the brutal consequences of the war. The tendency to reduce the war to the famine abstracted suffering in Biafra. The emphasis on the victimhood of Biafrans – what the Biafran leadership initially sought to prevent in order to continue to promote the view of a viable and strong Biafran nation – perpetuated paternalistic views of the Third World and of Africa, specifically, as a space open to intervention and development.

The most adventurous aspect of these reports was how relief, as well as arms and visitors, were flown into Biafra. At night, planes flew to the single make-shift airstrip remaining

²³⁷ K. O'Sullivan, 'Humanitarian Encounters', p. 303.

²³⁸ M. Mamdani, 'The Politics of Naming'.

²³⁹ Garry Lloyd, 'Dying children wait for help', *The Times*, 12.07.68.

in Biafra, landing in total darkness to prevent the Nigerian air force from being able to identify the airstrip. One account from *The Times* states: 'while some 500 tons of food and medical supplies for Biafra await air shuttling on the Spanish island of Fernando Po, the merest trickle is flown in, at great risk.' The journalist wrote that 'we have been told that about half the aircraft that arrive contain food and medicine'; the other half contained arms. The journalist was told that one plane was shot down by Nigerian jets, and with regard to the old planes, one crew member joked he would not drive his car if it looked as run down. The aircrafts were old Super Constellations flown by American crews, many of which are cited to be 'Congo veterans'. Later, the same article reports that one of the pilots and his wife were killed, while trying to land shortly after the journalist flew with them.²⁴⁰

Besides a sense of adventure and mission, the administration of relief, its supply by airbridges and distribution across Biafra emphasised a certain technocratic belief in the ability of science and technology to improve the conditions in Third World countries. Much of the relief work was made possible by donations to aid organisations from the public as well as states, who primarily responding to public concern. There is a self-reflexive dimension at work when perceiving the pain of others and the subsequent response of aid organisations, which is best illustrated in the accounts of public sympathy in news articles. Descriptions of the willingness to donate to the effort would make audiences feel good about themselves. Relief agencies offered an immediate answer to the aid appeals by offering the possibility of immediate action, although the West German liberal newspaper FAZ quoted the French left-wing group *combat* in an opinion article on the relief effort for Biafra: 'The rich world is buying a clean conscience with the cheapest means at its disposal: its money'.²⁴¹ Certainly, donating money was appealing for the very ease with which it offered the moral satisfaction of not remaining a bystander to the suffering of strangers, when other means of helping seemed elusive. As an appeal of Africa Concern put it: 'now you can do something' [emphasis in the original], and further below, 'send a donation'.²⁴²

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ 'Stimmen der Anderen', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 21.08.68.

²⁴² Africa Concern, 'Biafra', *The Guardian*, 28.03.69.

The Politics of Suffering

Ironically, the relief administration generated more political controversy than any other issue besides arms sales. Relief work had far-reaching political and military implications. It boosted Biafran morale, and the airlift effectively breached the blockade that was part of Nigeria's military strategy, allowing relief planes to cover arms deliveries arriving at the same time. Moreover, the purchases that aid organisations made in Biafra generated a source of foreign exchange for the secessionists.²⁴³ The issue discussed most widely in the media was the problem of securing an effective route for relief to be brought into Biafra to which both sides agreed. From the outset of the famine, this was a problematic issue that was not to be solved during the war. Suggestions put forward by Nigeria were rejected by Biafra and vice versa. Reports of one particular set of negotiations on a land corridor for relief are illustrative. In early 1968, when relief was flown in only at night and with the grudging toleration of Nigeria, Nigerian leader Gowon agreed to allow relief into Biafra over land. Subsequently, the Biafran leadership voiced fears over relief food being poisoned by Nigerians.²⁴⁴ When Nigeria agreed to a modified proposal that relief could be inspected and sent exclusively by the Red Cross via the land route, the initiative was again rejected by the Biafrans, and relief supplies were piling up in Lagos and on Fernando Po.²⁴⁵ In response, Nigeria banned air relief altogether, arguing that Biafran 'insistence on neutralised airstrips and air corridors is mainly to relieve military pressure'.²⁴⁶ In August 1969, the unwillingness of both sides to reach an agreement on relief caused the Red Cross to consider 'withdrawing from the Nigeria-Biafra scene' altogether; increasingly, it began to make public that Biafra, too, was obstructing aid.²⁴⁷

Before Biafra's rejection of the land corridor plan, a *Guardian* editorial speculated that Biafra was concerned that accepting aid from Nigeria would render the genocide argument implausible. Oxfam director Kirkley was on his way to Biafra to persuade Ojukwu to compromise on the matter: 'if [Kirkley] is unsuccessful, [Ojukwu] might lose some of the sympathy he now enjoys. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the war, it is, after all, his people

²⁴³ 'Biafrans "are using food relief cash for arms"', *The Observer*, 16.02.69.

²⁴⁴ 'Relief for Biafrans blocked', *The Guardian*, 21.06.68.

²⁴⁵ 'Biafra rejects mercy route', *The Observer*, 14.07.68.

²⁴⁶ 'Nigeria bars air relief to Biafra', *The Times*, 16.08.68.

²⁴⁷ 'Red Cross ready to give up the relief battle', *The Guardian*, 23.08.69.

and not General Gowon's who are starving.'²⁴⁸ A later editorial was more sympathetic, conceding that 'in the macabre propaganda war being fought over the plight of the starving Biafrans, Nigeria [...] seems to have won a round. By offering an overland route through Enugu, it puts on Colonel Ojukwu the onus of refusing to take food.'²⁴⁹ The editor argued that Nigeria's uncompromising position was ultimately 'self-defeating' because starvation would strengthen Biafra by increasing international support.²⁵⁰ Relief was not only political due to its military and strategic consequences, but its agencies became important in emphasising and validating Biafran suffering, mobilising sympathy abroad. Public sympathy was as important to the secessionists as the material aid, if not more, as the example of the relief route issue suggests. Both sides were locked in a contest over the representation and perception of the war, unwilling to compromise, and ultimately revealing to the public that the Biafran leadership was pursuing its own goal with little regard for the imperatives of relief. On the other hand, if a relief compromise would, indeed, have such grave effects for Biafra's international support or its military outlook, accepting it was tantamount to giving up secession. The editorial added that in the absence of an agreement on relief, the pressure for Nigeria to bring the war to a quick end mounted, and that the impending military invasion and its consequences might still realise 'Biafra's melodramatic fears of genocide'.²⁵¹

Relief was a major issue in public debates throughout the war, but naturally, newspaper accounts followed the development of the war. Early on, newspapers in Britain were concerned with the oil production in Nigeria, which became more important due to the lack of Middle Eastern supply following the closure of the Suez Canal since June 1967.²⁵² Politically, *The Economist* advised to 'steer clear here' and not get involved, which would probably necessitate military backup; *The Times* emphasised Britain's special responsibility and argued that Britain should mediate and seek a negotiated peace; and the *Guardian* presented a similar line of argument, forecasting 'a futile war' and noting that Biafra could not be recognised until the leadership proved its control over the territory and Gowon should be made to understand

²⁴⁸ 'Relief for Biafrans blocked', *The Guardian*, 21.06.68.

²⁴⁹ 'A final solution for Biafra?', *The Guardian*, 15.07.68.

²⁵⁰ 'Starvation only helps Ojukwu', *The Guardian*, 03.07.69.

²⁵¹ 'A final solution for Biafra?', *The Guardian*, 15.07.68.

²⁵² 'Oil firms silent on dearer petrol', *The Times*, 30.06.67; 'Petrol rationing in the autumn?', *The Guardian*, 07.07.67; Terence Prittie, 'Britain still trying to keep up flow of oil from Nigeria', *The Guardian*, 11.07.67; 'Oil will decide', *The Economist*, 03.06.67; 'Shell chief in Biafra talks', *The Times*, 05.08.67; 'Caught in the middle', *The Times*, 01.08.67.

that the war will not lead to a 'stable solution', as would be in the interest of Britain.²⁵³ As the war continued, newspapers commented on the developments of the war and diplomacy, including several abortive negotiations initiated by the Organisation of African Unity and the diplomatic missions of foreign governments. In May 1968, Port Harcourt, a major Nigerian oil-shipping port city on the Eastern coastline, was captured and the Nigerian army; a victory that completed the blockade of Biafra, leading to an aggravation of the famine. Once Biafra's army was on retreat, the Biafrans were consistently portrayed as the militarily weaker party. In December of the same year, an article in *The Times* observed, 'the Biafrans are losing. Outnumbered and outgunned, they have been inexorably driven into a landlocked circle of rainforest entirely surrounded by federal forces.'²⁵⁴ At this time, only a single airstrip connected Biafra to the outside world. An article on the refugee problem in 'blockaded, embattled Biafra' asserts that 'the Biafrans know they cannot win militarily. With half a dozen great foreign powers, led by Britain, shuttling arms to the Federal Government, the Nigerians are virtually assured of [victory].'²⁵⁵ Despite these assessments, the war dragged on, lasted another year and a half, and several premature announcements of a final push of the federal forces left Nigeria and its allies embarrassed, resulting in pressure on the British government.²⁵⁶

Biafra, too, received arms from abroad: from France, South Africa, Rhodesia, Israel, China, and early in the war also from Czechoslovakia, before it was invaded by the Warsaw Pact troops.²⁵⁷ Arms transports channelled via French colonies were widely reported.²⁵⁸ Despite the bleak situation portrayed in the news, there was rarely any doubt in the newspapers that Biafrans were determined to fight the war and believed that they would otherwise face extermination following Nigeria's victory; a situation possibly resulting in a form

²⁵³ 'Steer Clear Here', *The Economist*, 10.06.67; 'Britain's responsibility', *The Times*, 18.08.67; 'Nigeria's coming civil war', *The Guardian*, 03.06.67.

²⁵⁴ 'Nigeria's Civil War: Hate, Hunger, and the will to survive', *The Times*, 23.08.68.

²⁵⁵ Garry Lloyd, 'Dying children wait for help', *The Times*, 12.07.68.

²⁵⁶ John Young, 'Nigeria prepares final assault', *The Times*, 17.07.1968; 'Nigerian army may now be poised for final onslaught', *The Times*, 19.08.1968; 'Too partisan to mediate', *The Guardian*, 28.08.68; Michael Caine, 'Nigeria's choice: attack or wait for Ibos to starve', *The Observer*, 15.12.68.

²⁵⁷ Colin Legum, 'Secret arms dealers help Biafra rebels', *The Observer*, 13.08.67; Walter Schwarz, 'Who armed Ojukwu?', *The Guardian*, 29.01.70.

²⁵⁸ Patrick Keatley, 'France starts a big airlift of arms to Biafra', *The Guardian*, 02.10.68; 'French arms airlift to Biafra continues', *The Guardian*, 03.10.68; Colin Legum, 'Secret arms dealers help Biafra rebels', *The Observer*, 13.08.67; Charles Hargrove, 'French in Gabon load arms for Biafra', *The Times*, 04.10.68; 'Nächtliche Waffentransporte nach Biafra', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 16.10.68.

of guerrilla war. The *Guardian*, for instance, suggested: 'if [Ojukwu] gave up now, he would probably be replaced and resistance would continue.'²⁵⁹ These speculations were, perhaps, influenced by Biafran propaganda, or the impression the secessionist state made on visitors, and were proven wrong, when Ojukwu fled the collapsing enclave in January 1970. There was no continued resistance, nor was there the predicted extermination of Biafrans. An article argued that Biafran 'hawks' did not believe a 'literal genocide' would occur but rather an 'economic strangulation';²⁶⁰ and as the losing party, the Igbos did face degrees of discrimination after the reintegration of Biafra into the Nigerian state.²⁶¹ More often, however, debates about a genocide of Biafrans used the label in a literal way, referring to the planned and systematic execution of an entire people.

During the war, British papers consistently criticised official responses to the war, especially the British arms trade with Nigeria.²⁶² *The Observer* noted that 'arms sales to either side in a civil war is plainly reprehensible',²⁶³ *The Times* called on the British government to 'stop supplying arms and munitions, as they have been urged to do since the war began',²⁶⁴ and *The Spectator* attacked the government's policy of 'murder by proxy'.²⁶⁵ This critique was widespread in Europe and an article in the *Observer* titled 'Do we care about Biafra?' noted that 'anti-British demonstrations' were held in several European countries, protesting Britain's arms deliveries to Nigeria.²⁶⁶ The article went on to state that a Gallup poll in France asked people to identify the issues they felt most strongly about and showed that 42% named Biafra, 31% Czechoslovakia, and 17% Vietnam, whereas the journalist speculated it might be in the reverse order for Britain. This implies that the British public was less concerned than the French public with regard to Biafran suffering, which may be linked to the support of the British government for Nigeria and the presence of pressure groups for Nigeria as well as for Biafra.

A strong critique of government policy was expressed by journalist Walter Schwarz in the *Guardian* in November 1969, two months before the end of the war. Schwarz had covered the war since its beginning and had been detained by the Biafran authorities, when he tried to

²⁵⁹ 'Three thousand every day', *The Guardian*, 08.07.68.

²⁶⁰ Walter Schwarz, 'Final Federal assault on Ibo heartland may be under way', *The Guardian*, 19.08.68.

²⁶¹ Cf. L. Heerten and D. Moses, 'Postcolonial Conflict', pp. 89-90.

²⁶² On the arms trade, see chapter 3.

²⁶³ 'Nigeria: stopping the arms', *The Observer*, 09.06.68.

²⁶⁴ 'Stop the arms', *The Times*, 28.05.68.

²⁶⁵ 'Murder by proxy', *The Spectator*, 13.06.68.

²⁶⁶ For more on demonstrations against Britain's arms sales to Nigeria, see chapter 4.

enter Biafra at the beginning of the war.²⁶⁷ Schwarz believed that the British government ignored any information that ran counter to the official foreign policy line, including early reports of the commissioner in Eastern Nigeria, James Parker, that Nigeria would not have been able to enforce and uphold the blockade without British support. For Schwarz, this was tantamount to supporting Nigeria's strategy of starving Biafra into submission. Like other journalists and Biafra advocates, who warned of the possibility of continued guerrilla struggle, Schwarz believed that Biafrans were 'in good heart for a long war to come.'²⁶⁸ Likewise, Winston S. Churchill, the former prime minister's grandson, published a series of articles in *The Times* after visiting Biafra in which he questioned the government's portrayal of the war and criticised British support of Nigeria's war: 'convinced that reports of civilian bombing were mere Biafran propaganda, and that reports of famine and starvation had similarly been [...] exaggerated by the churches and the Red Cross, only a few days in Biafra were enough to shatter these [...] misconceptions.' He came to the damning conclusion that 'Britain must bear a very grave responsibility for what is seen'.²⁶⁹

Opinions on the war and its likely outcome were divided, but explanations of the war in the press and public debates followed a common pattern. Many accounts of the war begin by pointing out that Nigeria was divided into three administrative regions, each dominated by one ethnicity: the North by the Hausa-Fulani, the West by the Yoruba, and the East by the Igbo. Together these three groups made up almost 60% of Nigeria's population, the rest was comprised of the minorities of the Niger Delta, the Benue Plateau, and the North-West.²⁷⁰ During the war, minorities became a contested issue. Biafra attempted to include the minorities of the Niger Delta in its imagined nation and relied on their support. Nigeria and its supporters, on the other hand, challenged Biafra's legitimacy by arguing minorities were oppressed by Biafra. Newspapers and magazines put a special emphasis on the cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity of Nigeria.²⁷¹ This depiction has its basis in reality but simplifies

²⁶⁷ "'Guardian" reporter detained by Biafra', *The Guardian*, 10.07.67; Walter Schwarz, 'Eleven days submerged in a Biafran prison', *The Guardian*, 20.07.67.

²⁶⁸ Walter Schwarz, 'The blind lecturing the brave: Wilson's blind eye over Biafra', *The Guardian*, 14.11.69.

²⁶⁹ Winston S. Churchill, 'An eye-witness report on starvation in Biafra', *The Times*, 03.03.69.

²⁷⁰ Figures from 1963 are provided in J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 30.

²⁷¹ Cf. 'Nigeria's Civil War: Hate, Hunger and the Will to Survive', *Time*, 23.08.68; 'Nur Beten', *Der Spiegel*, 19.8.68.

matters to the point of distortion. The conflicts arising from the diversity of African states have conventionally been attributed to tribalism.

Tribalism denotes the continued loyalty of people in Africa to the tribe they belong to, a category that is considered to trump other identities, such as national identities, for instance.²⁷² The term tribalism is not unproblematic, but it has been taken over by Africans as an explanatory category, despite its pejorative connotations of primitivism and exoticism.²⁷³ Although inter-ethnic conflict is relevant beyond Africa, tribalism is used predominantly in African contexts. *Time* magazine called tribalism ‘the black man’s burden’ and published an entire article on the subject as part of its coverage of the Nigerian civil war. The article defined tribalism as the ‘tenacious loyalty of [...] Africans to primitive subgroups that represent certainty amid bewildering social and economic upheaval.’²⁷⁴ The author of the article conceded that ‘at some point in history all men belonged to tribes.’ By implication, Africans were considered as stuck in an earlier stage of the development of human societies, unable ‘to accept the abstract idea of nationhood’.²⁷⁵ According to *Time*, tribal ties brought people back to South-Eastern Nigeria from overseas, following Colonel Ojukwu’s call, when Easterners faced harassment and discrimination in the other parts of Nigeria.²⁷⁶ The underlying assumption was that tribal differences could not be bridged by what might be called nation-building. On the one hand, tribalism in combination with artificial state territories was often referred to as the prime source of conflict in Africa, yet Africans are implicitly criticised for being unable to arrive at a modern kind of nationhood. Emphasising the latter was a motive for Portuguese, South African, and Rhodesian support for Biafra. Highlighting the problems that black African states had encountered after the end of colonial rule served to justify Portuguese colonialism and white minority rule in South Africa and Rhodesia. The nation state is portrayed as the goal in African politics, but it is at the same time not believed to succeed where a multitude of tribes, or ethnic groups, share a state. A *Times* journalist asserted, ‘the

²⁷² The stereotype that African conflicts are caused by tribalism persists today. V. Gorin, ‘A rhetoric of compassion’, p. 145.

²⁷³ Walter Schwarz, ‘Who’ll put Nigeria together again?’, *The Guardian*, 16.01.67; Roy Lewis, ‘Tribalism still Africa’s political roots’, *The Times*, 25.08.67.

²⁷⁴ ‘On Tribalism as the Black Man’s Burden’, *Time*, 23.08.68.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

fact is that tribal loyalty and identification is still the grass roots political experience in Africa outside the growing cities', for which the war in Nigeria seemed 'conclusive proof'.²⁷⁷

In this way, the problems of the Nigerian federation and the rivalry among the peoples inhabiting it were portrayed as though they naturally emerged from the diversity of their languages, faiths, and customs.²⁷⁸ With regard to the Congo, a *Time* article argued that 'the Congo's latent disorder stems from its stubborn attempt to throw a skein of nationhood over no fewer than 200 tribes'.²⁷⁹ This presentation is problematic because the differences between tribes are postulated as absolute and insurmountable, and therefore ahistorical and abstracted from the economic and political context within which these rivalries developed. The categories of tribe and nation reflect the rather long process of social and political transformations that made not only the modern nation-state possible but also all those socio-political developments subsequently brought about by its emergence. Nigeria's political history is complex. The nationalist politics of the pre-independence years in Nigeria were led by Nnamdi Azikiwe's pan-Nigerian movement, but after independence, Nigerian politics became more regionalised. Each regional elite established its own party and political support was increasingly mobilised by appealing to tribal identities fearing domination by another group. Rivalries were fuelled by the economic and educational differences of Northern and Southern Nigeria.²⁸⁰ Colonial structures are rarely mentioned, although the *Time* article admitted that in some cases colonial rulers did not attempt to integrate people. This was the case in Nigeria, where the Northern Protectorate that was amalgamated with the South in 1914 continued to be ruled indirectly, a situation leaving many traditional social and political structures intact, while the South was transformed by British institutions of administration and missionary education. The first post-colonial government of Nigeria enjoyed British support but was soon overthrown by a military coup that is widely reported to have been welcomed by the public. It was carried out by young, idealist officers, who hoped to end foreign influence in Nigeria as well as internal corruption.²⁸¹ Moreover, a *Time* article conceded that 'most freed colonies were simply handed over to African regimes whose legitimacy had not been tested by revolutionary struggle'²⁸² but was

²⁷⁷ Roy Lewis, 'Tribalism still Africa's political roots', *The Times*, 25.08.67.

²⁷⁸ A view held, for instance, by Leo Kuper, an African historian who later turned to genocide studies: L. Heerten and D. Moses, 'Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide', p. 182.

²⁷⁹ 'On Tribalism as the Black Man's Burden', *Time*, 23.08.68.

²⁸⁰ M. Gould, *The Struggle for Modern Nigeria*, p. 13.

²⁸¹ T. Falola and M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, p. 172.

²⁸² 'On Tribalism as the Black Man's Burden', *Time*, 23.08.68.

derived from the former colonial ruler and the decolonisation process. By using tribalism as the recurrent explanation, however, the coverage of the Nigeria-Biafra War perpetuated the stereotypes that are still relevant in public debates on African wars today; for example, those taking place in the Congo and Sudan, where conflicts with complex historical, political, and economic dimensions are implicitly reduced to factional, ethnically inspired violence.



'It makes people think. Does it make people buy?', *The Sunday Times*, 1970.

The above advertisement for the *Sunday Times* from 1970 displays a photograph taken by Don McCullin that depicts a Biafran soldier lying low on the ground with a rifle in his right hand, dressed in a knit T-Shirt, and looking straight at the camera. His expression, a mixture of fear and sorrow, betrays the futility and brutality of war. In stark contrast to the image, the text below – with its purpose to 'sell' the *Sunday Times* as an excellent space for product advertisement – is triumphant in tone and remarks that McCullin won an award for his photo-coverage of the war in Biafra, while the *Sunday Times* gained more readers. 'It's editorial

excellence that does it', the ad concludes, thus using the war for financial gain by praising its own reputation, 'a reputation that can help you sell your product.'²⁸³

The ad clearly blurs the fine line between sensationalism and responsible journalism, where the former is geared towards self-gain, while the latter is concerned with raising awareness. For McCullin, his photography was not a way of seeing but a way of feeling, of being in touch with the world around him and of engaging with pressing issues in the absence of any other action that could be taken to remedy the situation.²⁸⁴ In this sense, his work may have been a search for atonement for his inability to solve the evils of the world, similarly to the *Médecins Sans Frontières* emphasising the importance of bearing witness. Nonetheless, the news coverage of the Biafran war was, at the same time, an expression of the newspapers' desire to sell issues as well as of individual journalists' aspirations for fame.

The way in which the Nigeria-Biafra War was debated highlights several problems of the representation of distant suffering. Across the distance, complexities are less visible and can easily be flattened by the contributors to the discussion, who may represent the war in ways most suited to their own interests. The campaigns of humanitarian agencies put the famine in Biafra to the foreground, while explicitly avoiding political assessments of the situation. Oxfam ads, regularly printed in the press, emphasised suffering and the urgent duty of providing aid, regardless of the politics of the conflict, thereby ignoring the political implications of aid. Likewise, journalists relying on missionary and aid worker accounts, always in need of newsworthy material, found in starvation a suitable subject, more sensational than the developments of the military situation that were so hard to verify. Representing the war in Nigeria and Biafra as a humanitarian crisis with an emphasis on the emotive visual stories of human suffering had the tendency to conflate the Biafran public with their leadership, and together, it cast them as the innocent victims of a genocide perpetrated by Nigeria. The formula of Biafran victims and Nigerian villains was effective in mobilising public sympathy, but it was ultimately cast into doubt by the emerging political complexities of the civil war. The observer reports argued that no genocide was occurring in Biafra and the question of viable relief routes made the political manoeuvring of the Biafran leadership apparent.²⁸⁵ Saving the

²⁸³ 'It makes people think. Does it make people buy?', *The Sunday Times*, reprinted in *Pogrom 3* (1970), GfbV Archive.

²⁸⁴ D. McCullin, *Unreasonable Behaviour*, p. 165.

²⁸⁵ On the observer reports, see chapter 3.

starving Biafrans may have been the primary motivation of Biafra's advocates abroad, but for the Biafran leadership, it was secondary to securing political autonomy from Nigeria. Moreover, representations of Biafran suffering abroad established the image of the starving African child as a famine icon and helped shape the image of the 'aid-receiving Third World'.²⁸⁶ Kevin O'Sullivan's notion that humanitarian NGOs became the primary mediators between the Third World and the West after Biafra needs to be expanded by pointing to the importance of the media and advocates in facilitating this process.²⁸⁷ The interests of the media, advocates, and NGOs in publicising Biafran suffering converged in the coverage of humanitarian crises that offered good stories for journalists and publicity for relief operations. This convergence increased the legitimacy of NGO interventions in distant conflicts and provided an alternative to more traditional political measures in response to conflict elsewhere, such as negotiations, sanctions, or the end of arms sales. Nevertheless, public debates of the Nigeria-Biafra War were marked by an ambivalence in which older discourses of colonial paternalism and Christian mission were transformed into the language of an emergent humanitarian industry.

²⁸⁶ K. Kuhn, 'Liberation Struggle', p. 70.

²⁸⁷ K. O'Sullivan, 'Humanitarian Encounters', p. 300.

2. The Marketing of Secession: The Role of Public Relations and Propaganda

*'The political emancipation of oppressed people, the religious angles, pogrom and genocide – these had limited successes – but the pictures of starving children and women touched everybody.'*²⁸⁸

The press coverage of the Biafran famine was the first instance when public debates thematised the efforts of professional public relations firms for a Third World country. During the war, Biafra managed to appeal to the 'conscience of the world' and garner support from various groups. In 1968, when attention to starvation in Biafra was at its peak, the subject of public relations and propaganda began to enter the discussions, and public relations activities for Biafra were emphasised by supporters of Nigeria. Propaganda, politics, and advocacy were deeply interwoven in responses to the Nigeria-Biafra War, and the question of what role public relations firms played in the dissemination of propaganda is therefore interesting for several reasons. Although the practice is now commonplace, the fact that public relations firms were employed demonstrates the importance of managing public opinions of the conflict abroad, while the revelation of their involvement then served to discredit Biafran claims as mere propaganda. Whereas Biafra's public relations agency in Geneva, Markpress, received notoriety, firms working for Nigeria were rarely mentioned. As paid agencies, public relations firms are suspicious as sources of information: their task, unlike that of the media, is not functioning as a watchdog but 'the creation and maintenance [...] of a justifiably favourable public impression' of the client, using such materials that support this purpose without regard for balance.²⁸⁹ In this way, public relations firms influence the public perception of a specific subject or context. The public relations firms employed by Biafra and Nigeria, respectively, produced information handouts, arranged press conferences, lobbied influential personalities, and advised clients in political, economic, and communication matters. Markpress, for instance, relayed official statements of the Biafran leadership to Europe and sent news bulletins to editors and politicians. In this way, public relations firms amplified official

²⁸⁸ Patrick Davies, Biafran Propaganda Secretariat, speaking in: Michael Stewart, 'Biafra: Fighting a War without Guns', *BBC*, 30.07.95.

²⁸⁹ M. Davis, *Interpreters*, p. 159.

narratives of the war, adjusted them to suit target audiences, and strove to win support abroad for their client.

Biafran propaganda and the involvement of European and American public relations firms in the internationalisation of the war have received attention both at the time of the war and in the scholarly literature. A study of the work of public relations firms for Biafra and Nigeria concludes that although these companies assume a 'harmony of interest' among their client and the target audience, in a political struggle, public relations become 'just one more weapon in the partisan armoury' and results in opponents' positions becoming more entrenched.²⁹⁰ To the extent that they improve their clients' chance of success, public relations campaigns discourage compromise and thereby diminish the prospects of early settlements of conflicts. Sympathy for Biafra, promoted by images of starving children and the genocide rhetoric, resulted in material help that could sustain the secessionist state, enabling it to continue the war. Moreover, due to favourable public opinion abroad, sympathetic media coverage, and a rather broad range of advocates, Biafra could hope that governments might be persuaded to recognise its secession. The longer Biafra resisted, the more pressure would be on governments abroad to reconsider their policy due to public concern about Biafran starvation. This chapter will argue that public relations firms facilitated the promotion of Nigerian and Biafran views among the audiences most receptive to them, but their influence in shaping the narratives about the war was limited in comparison to other groups, who voluntarily took up Biafra's cause, such as missionaries, advocates, and humanitarian organisations that helped publicise Biafran suffering.

This chapter begins by reviewing Biafran propaganda, that is, the source of the material that public relations agents would then receive for editing and transmission. Propagandists in Biafra had to make the most of the scarce resources available during the war to mount their domestic propaganda efforts.²⁹¹ To construct the propaganda narrative, Biafran propagandists effectively latched on to existing discourses of modernity and race. Besides providing them with a ready formula and frame of reference, this connection to European patterns of thought arguably appealed to external audiences.²⁹² In a further step, the chapter will then assess the

²⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 160.

²⁹¹ Roy Doron, 'Marketing genocide: Biafran propaganda strategies during the Nigerian civil war, 1967-1970', *Journal of Genocide Research* 16:2-3 (2014), pp. 227-246.

²⁹² Douglas Anthony, "'Resourceful and Progressive Blackmen': Modernity and Race in Biafra, 1968-70', *The Journal of African History* 51:1 (2010), pp. 41-61.

effectiveness of the work of public relations agents for both Nigeria and Biafra. The open debate of public relations operations, mainly by pro-Nigerians and mainly regarding Biafran propaganda and Markpress activities, became a weapon in the rhetorical battle between proponents of either side, used to discredit shocking reports coming out of Biafra. Many of those who were sympathetic to Biafra, such as missionaries, journalists, and other advocates who visited Biafra, were overwhelmed by the scale of human suffering and wished to aid the Biafrans. Based on the existing literature, parliamentary debates, newspaper articles, as well as documents from advocacy groups, it will be shown that Biafran public relations firms were neither the efficient advertising agencies that opponents of Biafra made them out to be, nor were professional public relations efforts the primary reason for the many advocate groups to take up the cause of Biafra. The missionaries and religious leaders, sympathetic journalists and politicians, and other advocate groups were more important in spreading the Biafran view of the conflict and promoting the aid effort to alleviate the suffering of the Biafran population, and their motivations for supporting Biafra were varied and based on their own interests. Nevertheless, advocacy and professional public relations and propaganda were deeply intertwined, and public relations firms like Markpress were important as facilitators, for instance, by bringing foreign visitors into Biafra and widely distributing information that advocates could use in campaigns.

Biafran Propaganda

For their campaigns, public relations firms used materials produced by the secessionist state's own propaganda organs. Early in the war, Biafran troops achieved spectacular military successes and were only forced to retreat just before reaching Lagos. At first, Biafran propaganda stressed the viability and military strength of the newly imagined nation to reassure other states that Biafrans had the power to enforce secession and that secession would neither result in another drawn-out civil war, as was the case in the Congo, nor would it create a state hostile to foreign economic interests, specifically from the United States and Europe.²⁹³ After the loss of the Mid-West and the capital Enugu to Nigeria by October 1967, Biafran propaganda underwent a change. In addition to the Ministry of Information that

²⁹³ Kairn A. Klieman, 'U.S. Oil Companies, the Nigerian Civil War, and the Origins of Opacity in the Nigerian Oil Industry', *The Journal of American History* 99:1 (2012), p. 162.

handled propaganda early in the war, Ojukwu established the Directorate of Propaganda to improve the effort and devise a new strategy. The directorate was staffed by well-known Biafran intellectuals, artists, and musicians, who created propaganda material in the form of songs, plays, texts and images.²⁹⁴ According to a member of the directorate, the example of propaganda in Nazi Germany and Mao's China were studied to inform their work.²⁹⁵ This directorate was initially part of the Ministry of Information, but it soon obtained more funding than the ministry and gained a large degree of autonomy. The purpose of the new directory was to find a rationale that explained why it was impossible for Biafra to submit to Nigerian rule and design a propaganda campaign that would communicate this message effectively to internal and external audiences. The rationale found was genocide, but the aim was not to argue that Nigeria was planning a genocide – this would be difficult to prove and was simply not true – but rather that the Biafran people believed they faced extermination in the event of surrender and therefore would willingly resist to the end. It was an ingenious strategy. If it could be shown that Biafrans would not surrender, despite deprivations, suffering, and losses, other countries would eventually have to intervene in favour for a cease-fire and negotiations to settle the war, peacefully, securing a degree of autonomy for Biafra in the process, lest Nigeria's war should become unending. The Biafran leadership hoped that if their struggle was portrayed in this way, 'the United States and other Western democracies would be compelled for moral and political reasons to press Nigeria for a cease-fire that would respect Biafra's autonomy.'²⁹⁶

It is instructive, at this point, to embark on a comparison of Biafra to Katanga since the genocide narrative was also meant to counteract parallels between oil-rich Biafra's secession from Nigeria and mineral-rich Katanga's secession from the Congo in 1960; the narrative was designed to rid Ojukwu of the 'Tshombe stigma' of seceding for purely economic reasons and being a 'stooge for Western corporate interests'.²⁹⁷ The genocide narrative was directing issues away from economic concerns to focus on ethnic rivalry and grievance, an old issue in Nigeria and one that would resonate with audiences abroad and their understanding of post-colonial Africa. As in Nigeria, in the Congo revenues from the extraction of resources were shared

²⁹⁴ P. Davies, *The Use of Propaganda*, p. 259.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 180 and 265.

²⁹⁶ John J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 111.

²⁹⁷ K. Klieman, 'U.S. oil companies', p. 162.

between the central government and the regional administration controlling the resources. Secession enabled Katanga to collect the entire revenue from local resources, thereby offering opportunities for local political and business elites. Likewise, Biafran leader Ojukwu was reported by the Eastern region commissioner, James Parker, to have admitted that his motivation for secession was 'solely to determine [the] recipient of oil revenues.'²⁹⁸ Oil was crucial for Biafra's claim to economic viability as a state; it was an important issue in the political manoeuvring prior to the war because the revenues from oil were a potential source of financing the war. Ojukwu blocked the passage of oil to the North before the war, met with the heads of oil companies, and excluded some of them from the decree that forced companies operating in the East to pay taxes to the regional government rather than to Lagos.²⁹⁹ Biafra procured arms as early as October 1966³⁰⁰ and hired the first PR agencies Ruder and Finn of New York in February 1967,³⁰¹ several months before secession was formally declared on 30 May 1967, the day after Gowon declared the reorganisation of the federal state comprised of four regions into twelve new states. The new division of Nigeria effectively cut off the Igbo heartland from the oil-rich territories of the Niger Delta that the secessionist state laid claim to. Before secession, Ojukwu hired law firms in Washington to investigate Biafra's chances of collecting oil revenue on the advice of his Ruder and Finn advisers.³⁰² Although the initial report of the law firm was optimistic, the upshot was that oil companies would have to pay royalties to Biafra only if the latter could assert *de facto* control over its territory, thereby incentivising Nigeria to escalate the conflict in order to challenge Biafra's claim to it. This was unlikely because even the acceptance of the principle of *de facto* territorial control was not firmly established either in U.S. American or British political practice.³⁰³ Biafra's chances of procuring payment from the oil companies were slim, and Ojukwu and his opponents knew this by June 1967. When Ojukwu demanded payment of oil revenues from Shell and SAFRAP in late June 1967, it was a last-ditch effort, just before Nigeria extended its blockade of Biafra to include oil as well. Shell's attempt to pay a token sum was prevented by the British government, which

²⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 163.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 162

³⁰⁰ J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 49; Zach Levey, 'Israel, Nigeria and the Biafra Civil War, 1967-70', *Journal of Genocide Research* 16:2-3 (2014), p. 267.

³⁰¹ M. Gould, *The Struggle for Modern Nigeria*, p. 178.

³⁰² Morris Davis, 'Negotiating about Biafran Oil', *A Journal of Opinion* 3:2 (1973), p. 26.

³⁰³ Ibid., p. 25.

refused permission 'not to the consortium's great surprise', as Morris notes.³⁰⁴ The oil companies were rather disinterested in the conflict, although they preferred peace as more conducive to the smooth operation of their business, companies like Shell-BP 'could ride out the storm' and remained neutral as far as possible not to anger either side.³⁰⁵

Despite the obvious relevance of oil as an incentive for secession and its role in contributing to the preference for warfare over negotiations, oil played no part in contemporary debates of the war, not even in Nigerian propaganda. Fears over Biafra becoming another Congo, embroiled in protracted civil warfare, were voiced occasionally, but the official British position that Ojukwu was a leader lacking both popular support and the military capacity to enforce secession only loosely resembled earlier events in the Congo. The 'Tshombe stigma' was an issue much more relevant in African responses to the crisis than elsewhere. To create a persuasive narrative, Biafran propaganda emphasised ethnic rivalry and difference based on the oppositional identities of North/South, Muslim/Christian, and Hausa/Igbo. Nigeria with its more reluctant public relations strategy created no alternative narrative and settled for countering Biafran claims and focusing on the war effort. In fact, Moise Tshombe had employed a rhetoric of ethnic difference to justify Katanga's breakaway from the rest of the Congo, and Tshombe believed his party, CONAKAT, to represent 'authentic Katangans', that is, the Lunda and Bayeke peoples indigenous to Katanga.³⁰⁶ Tshombe was thereby exploiting resentment against the growing numbers of migrants from the Kasai province north of Katanga. As in Nigeria, there was no ethnic homogeneity. The Baluba, for instance, inhabited both Kasai and Katanga, and the Katanga Baluba initially also supported Tshombe's CONAKAT. The pattern of political mobilisation along ethnic lines had a long history in Africa, and ethnic identities were entrenched in the colonial era by classification and differential treatment by the colonisers.³⁰⁷ Yet, Ann Hironaka challenges the persistent but reductionist emphasis of the importance of tribalism and ethnic polarisation in the scholarship on African civil wars: 'the Congolese civil war did not feature a homogeneous and cohesive ethnic opposition, but was instead an example of a multi-ethnic coalition linked by common

³⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 28.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 25.

³⁰⁶ Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley, 2000), p. 255.

³⁰⁷ Cf. P. J. Marshall, 'Conclusion: Empire in Retrospect', in P. J. Marshall (ed.), *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 377.

geography and economic concerns.’ Rather than examining purely local factors, such as tribal rivalries, it is more instructive to consider the wider context and understand the war as a result of the ‘opportunities presented by the weakness of the newly independent state combined with the influence of the Cold War and substantial interstate intervention.’³⁰⁸ A similar case can be made for the war between Nigeria and secessionist Biafra. The Cold War had a different impact on this war since the Soviet Union supported the same side as did, however indirectly, the United States. The convergence of Cold War interests allowed for an unprecedented degree of NGO intervention, which provided resources both in terms of material assistance and publicising Biafran suffering. Whereas Ojukwu lacked committed support by powerful states, Biafran genocide propaganda was based on the historical precedent of massacres of Easterners in the North and disseminated by professional public relations companies as well as voluntary supporters, including NGOs and private advocates, who highlighted the suffering.

Before presenting the case to the outside world, Biafran propagandists worked to ensure the support of ordinary Biafrans for their narrative, a crucial step not only to ensure domestic support for the war effort but to convince external observers and visitors of the legitimacy of the secessionist project. To convince ordinary Biafrans of Nigeria’s genocidal intentions, Biafran propagandists operated with scarce resources and faced several obstacles, such as the widespread illiteracy of their target audience. They therefore had to resort to radio programmes, plays, and cartoons to reach a wider audience. The main organ to disseminate propaganda to mass audiences both internally and externally, before Markpress was hired to distribute materials of Biafran propaganda ministries to a wider audience in Europe and North America, was Radio Biafra. Propaganda work, therefore, included such tasks as bringing batteries to villages for radios and setting them to Radio Biafra.³⁰⁹ The propaganda material was expected to follow strict centrally-formulated guidelines and was evaluated in several surveys that were carried out during the war despite difficulties. These attempted to assess how people perceived the war and whether propagandistic messages were reaching them. Visitors to Biafra never failed to note in their reports the extraordinary determination of the

³⁰⁸ Ann Hironaka, *Neverending Wars: International Community, Weak States, and the Perpetuation of Civil War* (Cambridge; MA, 2005), p. 92.

³⁰⁹ R. Doron, ‘Marketing Genocide’, p.231.

Biafrans to resist, so this must have had a degree of success.³¹⁰ In the *Times*, for instance, Winston S. Churchill noted in his eye-witness account of the situation in Biafra: 'perhaps the most striking of all to an outsider is the self-discipline and dignity of these people in their adversity.'³¹¹ Given the situation, however, it is doubtful how rigorous and sophisticated these surveys as well as internal propaganda really were. An example of a propaganda directive was to avoid verifiable lies that would threaten the credibility of the entire effort,³¹² but Cronje enumerates untrue propaganda stories of the Biafrans that provided British officials with examples of Biafran propaganda lies. One such story claimed that a football club visiting Nigeria in May 1968 were in fact 70 paratroopers sent by Britain to aid Nigeria in its war effort.³¹³ This demonstrates the limited control of centralised propaganda directives.

In Biafran propaganda, the negative scenario of an imminent genocide should Nigerian troops not be resisted was juxtaposed with the positive vision of a modern and prosperous Biafran nation should secession be achieved. These ideas at first seem contradictory because the genocide scenario emphasises Biafran victimhood and passivity, whereas the vision of a Biafran nation was casting Biafrans as independent and strong agents of their own fate. Yet, they can be considered complementary in the sense that 'the narratives combined to present the war as simultaneously a desperate battle for Biafra's survival and an occasion for the emergence of a visionary society threatened precisely because it dared to move boldly forward.'³¹⁴ This implied that the opponents of Biafra rejected African emancipation and progress. The view of the Igbo as essentially modern, an ethnic group that readily accepted new ideas – including Christianity and missionary education – and that was generally very industrious and aspirational, were commonplace in Nigeria.³¹⁵ This image of the Igbo can be traced back to colonial era British stereotypes that subsequently became part of the self-identity of the ethnic group.³¹⁶ Moreover, the characterisation of the Igbo as modern,

³¹⁰ For example, Margot Parish of the Britain-Biafra Association, 'Impressions of Biafra', *Labour Monthly*, June 1968, BLO MSS. Afr. S. 2399/1; 'Can the Ibos rejoin Nigeria?', *The Guardian*, 06.10.67; William Norris, 'Biafrans confident in the face of heavy odds', *The Times*, 22.04.68.

³¹¹ Winston S. Churchill, 'An eyewitness report of starvation in Biafra', *The Times*, 03.03.69.

³¹² R. Doron, 'Marketing Genocide', p. 240.

³¹³ S. Cronje, *The World and Nigeria*, p. 213.

³¹⁴ D. Anthony, "'Resourceful and Progressive Blackmen"', p. 45.

³¹⁵ On this characterisation, cf. M. Siollun, *Oil, Politics, and Violence: Nigeria's Military Coup Culture, 1966-1976* (New York, 2009), pp. 16-17.

³¹⁶ D. Anthony, "'Resourceful and Progressive Blackmen"', p. 47.

resourceful, and adaptive mirrors essentialist stereotypes conventionally attributed to Jewish people. This similarity is no coincidence and the belief that Igbo were one of the lost tribes of Israel existed a long time before they compared their fate to the Holocaust as Biafrans.³¹⁷ During the war, these stereotypes were revived in propaganda and taken over by Biafra's advocates. One example is the frequent emphasis on the resourcefulness of Biafrans, who developed their own oil refining process and built their own arms.³¹⁸ This narrative of 'Biafran modernity helped to make [Biafrans] less exotic and more sympathetic for a public whose understanding of Africa was generally unsophisticated – and often tainted by racism.'³¹⁹

Northerners feared domination by the economically more developed South, where most oil resources were located. The Igbo, having benefitted from missionary education, migrated throughout Nigeria in a kind of diaspora to take up professional posts in the local administration, army, or business. In Northern towns, along with other 'native foreigners' from the rest of the federation, they lived segregated in foreigner's quarters, so-called *sabon garis*. In the 1950s, responding to fears over the growing Southern influence in the North, the regional government promoted a policy of 'Northernisation', striving to replace civil servants of Southern origin with locals.³²⁰ The relative lack of integration of Southern migrants, the competition for jobs, and separate administration of the *sabon garis* exacerbated tensions among Northerners and the South-Eastern Igbo, specifically. Northerners portrayed the coup of January 1966, plotted by five mainly Igbo officers to bring the Igbo Aguiyi-Ironsi to power, as an attempt to establish Igbo domination over the federation.³²¹ In May, when Ironsi decreed the centralisation of power in Nigeria and created a unitary state out of the federation, riots broke out in the North, leading to massacres of Igbos and other Easterners. A month later, a counter-coup installed Gowon, a Northern Christian, as the Federal Military Governor. Another wave of massacres of Easterners in the North followed in October, caused by rumours

³¹⁷ Z. Levey, 'Israel, Nigeria, and the Biafran Civil War', p. 265. Christian Igbos also sometimes trace their origin back to the Israelites, cf. Edith Bruder, *The Black Jews of Africa: History, Religion, Identity* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 142-145.

³¹⁸ M. Gould, *The Struggle for Modern Nigeria*, p. 89.

³¹⁹ D. Anthony, "'Resourceful and Progressive Blackmen"', p. 45.

³²⁰ Richard L. Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties: Power in an Emergent African Nation* (Trenton, 2004 [1963]), p. 327.

³²¹ T. Falola and M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, pp. 172-174. Plausible criticism of the interpretation of the first coup as an ethnic takeover by the Igbo is found in Akachi Odoemene, 'Literary Separatism: Ethnic Balkanization in Nigeria-Biafra War Narratives', in T. Falola and O. Ezekwem, *Writing the Nigeria-Biafra War*, p. 182.

of Northerners killed in the East.³²² As a result of the massacres, approximately 1.5 million refugees fled to the Eastern region from the North, whose integration would become a major challenge to Biafra. Unable to bring many of their belongings, most were housed in refugee camps that were hit hardest during the famine.

Although Igbos faced violence and harassment in other parts of the federation as well, the North became a main target in Biafran propaganda.³²³ In contrast to their own identity as progressive and modern, Northerners were portrayed, first by Nigeria's Eastern region and later by Biafra, as traditional, hierarchical, feudal, and backward – the direct opposite to the Igbo identity as progressive and industrious. In addition, the fact that the North was predominantly Muslim in contrast to the widely Christianised South-East was stressed. Eastern propaganda 'dehumanised' Northern people in the wake of the massacres 'with a tendency to reject political and sociological explanations of these events in favour of an emphasis on the atavistic and primitive characteristics of the Northerners themselves.'³²⁴ Thereby, colonial dualist categories of modernity and backwardness were taken over and utilised in Biafran propaganda. This tendency was later continued in war time propaganda. In 1966, a booklet by the federal government portrayed the first coup as an Igbo plot, but the subsequent counter-coup was seen as a mutiny rather than an attempt at re-establishing Northern political hegemony in Lagos.³²⁵ A pamphlet published in the same year by the Ministry of Information of the Eastern region, *Nigerian Pogrom 1966*, responded by asserting that the massacres had been systematic and premeditated by Northern political elites.³²⁶ Notably, however, estimates of casualties diverged widely over time and were possibly inflated for propagandistic effect. In October 1966, after the second wave of massacres, Ojukwu spoke of 3,300 deaths,³²⁷ although the figure later frequently used by the Biafran leadership and its supporters abroad was 30,000 – a number now commonly cited in scholarly work.³²⁸

³²² N. Omenka, 'Blaming the Gods', p. 371; M. Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence*, pp. 135-136.

³²³ On Igbo experiences in Lagos following the first coup, cf. C. Achebe, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*, pp. 66-70.

³²⁴ Robin Luckham, *The Nigerian Military: A Sociological Analysis of Authority and Revolt, 1960-1967* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 301.

³²⁵ 'Nigeria: 1966', *Nigerian Ministry of Information* (Nigeria, 1966); cf. also M. Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence*, pp. 139.

³²⁶ 'Statements by Victims of the Nigerian Pogrom 1966', *Eastern Region Ministry of Information* (Enugu, 1966), issued by the Britain-Biafra Association, BLO MSS. Afr. S. 2399/1.

³²⁷ Chukwuemeka O. Ojukwu, *Biafra, vol. 2. Random Thoughts of C. Odumegwu Ojukwu* (London, 1969), p. 20.

³²⁸ J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 38.

The massacres in the North were a plausible historical precedent for the genocide claim, but as an integral part of Biafran propaganda, the genocide narrative only gained credibility abroad with the reports and eye-witness accounts of starvation in June 1968. Patrick Davies of the Propaganda Directorate argued that early themes of ‘pogrom and genocide, religious warfare, and oil and economic war [...] did not motivate any external mobilisation in aid of Biafra’; it was only achieved with images of starvation, the systematic exploitation of which constituted the watershed moment of Biafran propaganda.³²⁹ Later, during the peak of the famine, the Red Cross reportedly estimated that around 3000 people were dying in Biafra every day from starvation,³³⁰ a number later corrected downwards to 1000, reflecting the alarmist nature of initial estimates.³³¹ Since the famine was a direct result of the blockade enforced as part of the Nigerian war strategy – some Nigerian military leaders expressed their belief that it was a legitimate weapon of war – starvation reinforced the genocide claim. ‘Biafra was born in massacre and bred in starvation’, wrote Margery Perham, a journalist and tutor in African history at Oxford University.³³² Perham’s observation was as true for the idea of the Biafran nation as it was for the recognition and support of advocates abroad. Images of suffering provided the visual evidence without which it would have been more difficult to mount campaigns in favour of Biafra’s independence abroad. External audiences were important for Biafra because of the possibility that favourable public opinion abroad might translate into material or diplomatic support from foreign governments. For secession to succeed, Biafra needed other states to recognise its existence; for the war effort to continue, it needed material support; and for domestic morale, it needed aid to stave off the worst outcome of the famine. ‘Two wars were fought in Nigeria’, writes Davies, ‘the first was the military, which eventually the Federal side won. The second was conducted in the media, and there is no doubt that the Biafrans won that one hands down.’³³³ To extend its representation in the media coverage abroad, Markpress and other public relations firms were hired to promote Biafra’s narrative more effectively to mass audiences that could put pressure on governments to act.

³²⁹ P. Davies, *The Use of Propaganda*, pp. 182 and 240.

³³⁰ Cf. John O’Callaghan, ‘Need for shuttle service’, *The Guardian*, 06.07.68.

³³¹ Douglas Anthony, ‘“Ours is a War of Survival: Biafra and Arguments about Genocide”, *Journal of Genocide Research* 16:2-3 (2014), p. 216.

³³² Margery Perham, ‘Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War’, *International Affairs* 46:2 (1970), p. 234.

³³³ P. Davies, *The Use of Propaganda*, p. 186.

Public Relations

Since Nigeria's independence, several public relations firms were hired and advised federal and local governments in economic and political matters. External Development Services (EDS), a London-based company, served the Eastern region of Nigeria before Biafra's secession, and the contract was later taken over by Biafra. EDS had the most in-depth understanding of the political context of the war. An anonymous letter to the Nigerian Federal Military Government (FMG) from September 1968 asserted: 'I cannot understand why you place such emphasis on Markpress in the Nigerian Biafran conflict [...] a much more important group is EDS'. It goes on to detail EDS' work for Biafra, which included advice on commercial, economic, and telecommunication, planning ahead of secession as well as facilitating Biafran goods exports to Europe.³³⁴ EDS advised Biafra on trends and opinions among British politicians and the likely policy Britain was going to follow. The firm undertook some lobbying on behalf of Biafra, but it did not disseminate Biafran propaganda on a scale comparable to Markpress. Months before secession, however, EDS consultants assumed wrongly that the British government would welcome their views and advice on the conflict, but when they held talks with the Commonwealth Office before the war in early June 1967, British civil servants treated them with suspicion.³³⁵ The determination of the British government to support Nigeria early in the crisis and its unwillingness to engage with contrary points of view is a common observation made by Biafra advocates. Most information the Foreign Office received on the war originated with its High Commissioner David Hunt in Lagos; the consulate in the East was closed when the war began. In the first months of the war, the contract of the Biafran government with EDS ran out and was not extended, so that the firm officially ceased to work for Biafra. At this juncture, Biafra changed its strategy. From targeting civil servants, politicians, and opinion leaders, as EDS had done, Biafra began to target a mass audience via press work.³³⁶ George Knapp, who held the position of partner at EDS, continued to advocate Biafra's position privately and wrote pamphlets on the conflict as a member of the Britain-Biafra Association.³³⁷

EDS was active in the United Kingdom, a key target for public relations efforts. The Biafrans also employed a public relations agent in the United States, Robert Goldstein, to

³³⁴ M. Davis, *Interpreters*, p. 47.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

³³⁶ R. Doron, 'Marketing Genocide', p. 241.

³³⁷ On the Britain-Biafra Association, see chapter 4.

improve the public perception of Biafra's case. Initially, Goldstein carried out what is referred to as press agency: arranging press conferences and seeing to it that articles and ads representing Biafran views were published. He claimed to have been attracted by the opportunity to earn money but then to have become a convinced supporter of the Biafran cause, moved by images of starving children. Goldstein believed to take on a primarily humanitarian account and claimed that he became disillusioned with the political aspect of the war; increasingly, he felt pressure from the State Department to stop working for Biafra.³³⁸ Goldstein's defection from the Biafran cause was highly public. He later accepted money from Nigeria to organise a press conference at which he denounced Biafra, arguing that the Biafran leadership used the suffering of their people for political gain, a common argument of opponents of Biafra.³³⁹ Goldstein's defection coincides with similar disillusionments of other prominent Biafra supporters, like Margery Perham, who had written articles on the war in *The Times*, initially feeling sympathetic to Biafra, but who then changed her mind after a visit to areas conquered by Nigeria, observing Igbos living there unharmed after having come to the conclusion that secession could not be successful.³⁴⁰ On the one hand, the political complexities began to emerge that challenged reductive views of Biafrans as mere victims of a genocidal war and highlighted the agency of the Biafran leadership; on the other hand, after mid-1968, there were increasing efforts by Nigeria and her allies to counter Biafra's narrative and promote their own point of view. Part of this were the reports of the international observers, published in October 1968, concluding that there was no genocide in Biafra.³⁴¹

Nigeria employed the public relations firm Galitzine and Partners in 1968 in response to the perceived success of Biafran public relations and its employment of Markpress. It was the beginning of a more active publicity policy on Nigeria's part, which had, thus far, been rather reluctant to promote its views openly, believing a low-key approach to publicity to be in its best interests.³⁴² Yet, even after hiring Galitzine, Nigeria remained more 'secretive' and its warfare continued in a brutal fashion that did nothing to allay fears over Biafran security.³⁴³ Galitzine followed a more covert strategy than Markpress, but both firms studied and emulated

³³⁸ L. Heerten, 'Dystopia', p. 25.

³³⁹ Karen Rothmyer, 'What really happened in Biafra?', *Columbia Journalism Review* 9:3 (1970), p. 44.

³⁴⁰ M. Perham, 'Reflections', p. 237.

³⁴¹ On the observers, see chapter 4.

³⁴² R. Doron, 'Marketing Genocide', p. 241.

³⁴³ P. Davies, *The Use of Propaganda*, p. 190.

the techniques of each other. When Markpress arranged for journalists to visit Biafra in April 1968, Galitzine did the same for Nigeria in May of the same year.³⁴⁴ Part of Galitzine's activities included publishing and distributing the pamphlet *United Nigeria*. Apart from explaining the Nigerian view of the war, this pamphlet included two documents detailing a deal between Biafran authorities and French business interests for the exclusive right to extract mineral and metal resources in Biafra – including oil – for 10 years in return for six million pounds in foreign exchange.³⁴⁵ According to Cronje, these were officially produced propaganda materials that had been presented to the Nigerian public prior to the 'discovery date' as stated in the pamphlet. These documents were dubious because of their content as well as spelling mistakes, for example, in the name of the Biafran town where the deal was supposedly made as well as in the name of the Rothschild family, the other party to the contract.³⁴⁶ The documents were supposed to highlight French support for Biafra. De Gaulle was rather sympathetic to Biafra in his speeches, and it was widely known and reported that the French were channelling arms to the secessionists via their former colonies Gabon and Ivory Coast.³⁴⁷ The documents show that Nigerian propaganda could be as aggressive as Biafra's.

The public relations firm that became most widely known during the war was, of course, Markpress. The Geneva-based firm owned by the American William Bernhardt began to work for Biafra in January 1968. The firm followed a mass audience strategy, which entailed editing and sending out press releases and official Biafran statements to European newspapers, politicians, church leaders, and other influential people. Overall, the firm sent out 740 news bulletins to 3200 addressees. A journalist writing an article on Markpress after the war believed that the firm's activities 'made their impact'³⁴⁸ – indeed, in Switzerland, where the firm was based, support for Biafra was strong. At the height of public sympathy for Biafra, an English sales week was cancelled over calls for a boycott by Biafra activists, and posters for this boycott were circulated internationally.³⁴⁹ Reports of arms sales by the Swiss company Oerlikon to Nigeria caused a major scandal in Switzerland after which the Swiss government launched an

³⁴⁴ M. Davis, *Interpreters*, p. 161.

³⁴⁵ S. Cronje, *The World and Nigeria*, p. 216 - 218.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

³⁴⁷ For more on French policy, see chapter 3.

³⁴⁸ 'The "voice" keeps up the campaign', *The Times*, 14.01.70.

³⁴⁹ Poster, 'Boycott der Englischen Woche', Archive of the Society for Threatened Peoples.

investigation into all arms exports from the country.³⁵⁰ Moreover, Markpress organised visits to Biafra for around 200 journalists. Bernhardt claimed that the firm's telex link from Biafra to Geneva assured the independence of the journalists' reports from Biafran interference. The journalist reporting an interview with Bernhardt disagrees, however, and noted that a colleague, who visited Biafra with the help of Markpress, had reported to be dependent on Biafran authorities and being accompanied by armed guards during his visit.³⁵¹ Another reason to assume that Biafra was rather careful with regard to journalists visiting the country is the detention of the *Guardian* journalist Walter Schwarz on his first attempt to enter Biafra.³⁵² In general, visits of foreign journalists, politicians, and religious leaders were managed by the Directorate of Propaganda,³⁵³ and Bolaji Akinyemi argues in a study scrutinising the British press coverage of the war that visiting journalists could be shown precisely what the Biafran leaders wanted them to see because 'a good public relations department can always arrange a good show for a correspondent.'³⁵⁴

Despite the reputation of Markpress as a highly effective public relations agency, there are several factors that qualify the role of Markpress. Roy Doron believes that it was mainly due to Markpress' efforts that the narrative about the war abroad focused on genocide.³⁵⁵ Yet, it is unclear to what extent Markpress influenced the content of Biafran propaganda material. Bernhardt later argued that some of the material sent to Markpress from Biafra was not suitable for European audiences and needed to be edited to be credible and effective.³⁵⁶ However, the editing of Biafran propaganda materials by Markpress was minimal.³⁵⁷ The firm's practice to send out material, indiscriminately and often twice or thrice, irritated rather than persuaded those who favoured Nigeria. Moreover, those who received Markpress news bulletins did not always uncritically accept its content and the journalists Frederick Forsyth and Angus McDermid considered the exaggerated propaganda materials distributed by Markpress

³⁵⁰ Hella Pick, 'Swiss look into arms exports', *The Guardian*, 06.12.68; cf. also K. Kuhn, 'Liberation Struggle', p. 74.

³⁵¹ 'The "voice" keeps up the campaign', *The Times*, 14.01.70.

³⁵² Walter Schwarz, 'Eleven days submerged in a Biafran prison', *The Guardian*, 20.07.67.

³⁵³ J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 117.

³⁵⁴ A. Bolaji Akinyemi, *The British Press and the Nigerian Civil War: The Godfather Complex* (Ibadan, 1979), p. 30.

³⁵⁵ Roy Doron, 'Marketing genocide', p. 242.

³⁵⁶ 'The "voice" keeps up the campaign', *The Times*, 14.01.70.

³⁵⁷ M. Davis, *Interpreters*, p. 123; J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 116.

to be of no informative value.³⁵⁸ The material Markpress that was distributed provided supporters of Biafra with arguments but was hardly suitable for converting sceptics or opponents.

A major concern for Markpress was the large amounts of information sent out of Biafra by sources the firm could not control. Although William Bernhardt understood his firm 'as a bridging group, bringing to Europeans an understanding of the African mentality',³⁵⁹ many journalists, sympathetic politicians, and activists did not solely rely on Markpress information; they visited Biafra and received information from a variety of channels.³⁶⁰ Reports sent by official sources, like the propaganda ministry and directorate, journalists, doctors, and missionaries made it impossible to streamline the material reaching audiences and thereby maintaining a centrally controlled, coherent, and convincing narrative.³⁶¹ In addition, Ojukwu send roving ambassadors out to meet officials and give talks at universities promoting Biafra's cause, including the novelist Chinua Achebe.³⁶² According to Davies, 'Biafra invested heavily in foreign emissaries to spread the news, convince the people, raise funds, and lobby members of foreign National Assemblies'.³⁶³ Moreover, in an interview, Bernhardt maintained that the contract with Biafra was never lucrative because the task had been underestimated and the fee taken barely covered expenses.³⁶⁴ Because of this lack of funding, the Biafra campaign had to be reduced to essential services for 'a couple of three- or four-week periods' at a time. News releases from Biafra were still printed and telexed to newspapers, but the large-scale mailing of information had to be shut down.³⁶⁵ Given that Markpress was the main public relations firm employed by Biafra, the limitations of its operation give reason enough to doubt, more generally, the effectiveness of public relations firms acting on behalf of Biafra. Although several were employed by both Biafra and the FMG, only Markpress, despite its shortcomings, received notoriety.

³⁵⁸ S. Cronje, *The World and Nigeria*, p. 212; J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 116; P. Davies, *The Use of Propaganda*, p. 189.

³⁵⁹ 'The "voice" keeps up the campaign', *The Times*, 14.01.70.

³⁶⁰ P. Harrison and R. Palmer, *News out of Africa*, p. 25.

³⁶¹ M. Davis, *Interpreters*, p. 126.

³⁶² C. Achebe, *There Was a Country*, pp. 160-167.

³⁶³ P. Davies, *The Use of Propaganda*, p. 223.

³⁶⁴ 'The "voice" keeps up the campaign', *The Times*, 14.01.70.

³⁶⁵ M. Davis, *Interpreters*, p. 129.

Portrayals of Markpress

Despite its shortcomings, contemporary pro-Nigerian observers tended to exaggerate the effectiveness of Markpress and portrayed the international media coverage solely as the result of Biafran propaganda and the activities of Markpress.³⁶⁶ The genocide narrative was countered by opponents of the secessionists with the argument that it was merely the product of a public relations operation. It is important for the impact of public relations efforts that those whom these firms seek to influence do not realise that they are being influenced.³⁶⁷ Uncovering the operations by Markpress on behalf of Biafra helped to cast doubts on the genocide claim, but the revelation of the involvement of public relations firms rendered suspect any news of suffering, starvation, and the bombing of civilians that Biafra and its advocates reported. Publicising Biafran public relations was part of a strategy that aimed at improving Nigeria's image by challenging the credibility of Biafra's narrative, but it tended to overrate the power of public relations firms to persuade audiences.

Coinciding with the British government's decision to take a more active approach in publicising its own views on the war, supporters of government policy in parliament referred more often to propaganda from August 1968. For that year, there are 26 mentions of propaganda related to Biafra in the Hansard, a number which rose to 42 in 1969; most of these were from proponents of government policy. The name Markpress appears eight times in the context of Biafra in the 1960s, while Nigeria's main public relations firm at the time, Galitzine, is not mentioned at all. There were a few neutral MPs, as for instance Winifred Ewing, who stated that he 'put the Markpress [mailings] in the waste paper basket. I tend to do the same [...] with what I get from the other side'.³⁶⁸ Generally, however, the war was polarising and most took the position of one side or the other. In the House of Commons, MPs argued that there was 'a distorted and perverted view of the situation because of the inaccuracies and shameful distortions of Markpress'³⁶⁹ and that the 'pro-Biafran lobby in the House has listened too much to the propaganda from Markpress'.³⁷⁰ Arguments in the House of Lords were similar. On 27th August 1968, in a debate on the war in Nigeria, Lord Milverton argued that

³⁶⁶ J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, pp. 115-116.

³⁶⁷ Michael Kunschik, *Die Manipulierte Meinung* (Bonn, 1990), p. 1.

³⁶⁸ Winifred Ewing, 10.07.69, *Hansard* HC vol. 786 col. 1642.

³⁶⁹ John Cordle, 09.12.69, *Hansard* HC vol. 793 col. 328.

³⁷⁰ John Tilney, 13.03.69, *Hansard* HC vol. 779 col. 1640.

there was a 'misguided public opinion [...] inflamed by the emotional falsification of the issues under the influence of clever and unscrupulously perverse propaganda'.³⁷¹ A fellow Lord agreed, 'the pro-Biafra feeling has been the result of [...] a very aggressive effort in public relations [...] by Markpress'.³⁷² The national media were believed to have fallen victim to Biafran propaganda. Lord Shepherd, the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, presented the government line and asserted that propaganda from Markpress 'clearly emanates in our national papers'. He then declared that he was not referring to the 'well-authenticated reports of starvation':

In the propaganda field the Ibos have often seemed to be winning the war of words while losing the battle of arms. Behind this success is a highly professional operation conducted by an advertising agency in Geneva. [...] The Ibo official line is regularly telexed to Geneva and distributed wholesale and undiluted by the agency to world-wide outlets. Much of the material distributed by or on behalf of the Ibos is utterly untrue.³⁷³

To illustrate his point, Shepherd then listed some propaganda lies the Biafrans had spread via Markpress, such as the allegation that Britain was sending troops to aid Nigeria in the war. Years later, then Prime Minister Harold Wilson wrote at length about the press and PR campaigns in a section on the Nigeria-Biafra War in his memoirs asserting, 'the public relations campaign carried out on behalf of Biafra was one of the outstanding features of the war. If Biafra's military prowess had been one tenth as efficient, the war would have ended in weeks.'³⁷⁴ In this juxtaposition of a successful propaganda and a hopeless military situation, Wilson and Shepherd imply that by political realist standards or in terms of *de facto* control of territory, Biafra had virtually lost its claim to independence. Political realism ultimately triumphed in the case of Biafra and the military victory of Nigeria ended secession. In retrospect, Wilson hoped to justify his government's policy of supporting Nigeria with arms – so controversial at the time – by maintaining that Biafran propaganda efforts determined the press coverage:

³⁷¹ Lord Milverton, 27.08.68, *Hansard* HL vol. 296 col. 740.

³⁷² Earl Ferrers, 09.12.69, *Hansard* HL vol. 299 col. 965.

³⁷³ Lord Shepherd, 27.08.68, *Hansard* HL vol. 296 col. 691.

³⁷⁴ Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government, 1964-1970: A Personal Record* (London, 1971), p. 557.

The purveyors of Biafran propaganda flooded the Western press and Western legislatures with literature, and secured a degree of moral control over Western broadcasting systems, with a success unparalleled in the history of communications in modern democratic society.³⁷⁵

The 'moral control' of propaganda or public relations outlets over the media, assumed by Wilson, was far from perfect, although public relations firms in the service of Biafra attempted to influence journalists, many of whom were sympathetic to Biafra having witnessed suffering or the bombing of civilians, such as Churchill.³⁷⁶ Yet, overall, the British media were rather divided. Sympathetic views were opposed by articles that were sceptical or even hostile to Biafra's secession, even within the same newspaper. Some articles on the activities of Markpress mirror Wilson's view. For instance, John Young wrote in *The Times* in May 1968, 'The image of gallant little Biafra fighting for its life against a cruel and remorseless enemy has been shrewdly promoted by a worldwide public relations campaign and by foreigners who have become emotionally involved in their cause.'³⁷⁷

Nigerian propaganda, if mentioned at all, was often depicted as ineffectual and rudimentary, which was true in the early months of the war. Generally, the federation pursued a low-key publicity policy, preferring to keep information and debates about the war to a minimum and hoping to quickly end Biafra's secession. Nigeria and the British government attempted to frame the war as a brief military operation to crush a secession that lacked popular support. When it became obvious that the war would take longer, and Biafra and its advocates emphasised popular support for secession, Nigeria and its allies were forced to improve the representation of their position. Rather than a leader lacking in popular support, Ojukwu was increasingly portrayed as a ruthless leader gambling with the lives of his people for his own political ambition, as Goldstein argued. The question of the minorities that lived on Biafran territory was raised. An article in *The Times* noted that 'the federal case, thanks to an incompetent publicity machine, has not been adequately stated', and the journalist pointed to 'horrible stories' he had heard about minorities who had suffered under Biafran rule. Proponents of Nigerian unity argued that the minorities of the Niger Delta would not support

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Winston S. Churchill, 'An eye-witness report on starvation in Biafra', *The Times*, 03.03.69.

³⁷⁷ John Young, 'Peace Prospects Dim in Nigeria', *The Times*, 23.05.68.

a Biafran state. This position was held by Ken Saro-Wiwa, an Ogoni writer and activist, who writes in his account of the war that most leaders of minority communities in Biafra indeed opposed secession because they had long been opponents of Igbo domination in their areas.³⁷⁸ Saro-Wiwa believed that 'Biafra offered nothing new. It had no new ideology, no new inspiration. It was Nigeria in a different name.'³⁷⁹ For Saro-Wiwa, Biafra did not offer the answers to Nigeria's problems of resource distribution, corruption, and ethnic rivalries; it merely reproduced them on a smaller scale. Accounts of massacres of minorities by Biafran troops were used to counter the exclusivity of Biafran claims of victimisation and turning them into perpetrators in their own right. Wilson argued in his memoirs that to his knowledge massacres had been perpetrated by both sides.³⁸⁰ In response, Biafra offered to hold a plebiscite to determine the wish of the minorities.³⁸¹ Another common argument put forward by proponents of Nigerian unity was that if Biafra was allowed to secede, several other separatist movements in African countries would be encouraged to do likewise and Africa would be threatened by balkanisation. Interestingly, the minorities that were formerly opposed to Biafra's independence have since developed 'revisionist' interpretations of the war as an expression of their current grievances within the Nigerian federation: 'while resistance to Biafra catalysed Ijaw nationalism in the fighting and aftermath of the Civil War, Biafra has now become a symbol of contemporary Ijaw nationalism.'³⁸² This fear was believed to be the reason for much of the support Nigeria received from other African heads of state. Haile Selassie, emperor of Ethiopia, who headed the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) peace negotiations, also faced separatists in his country.³⁸³ Nigeria was itself threatened by the secession of the Yoruba and the South-West, should Biafra succeed.³⁸⁴ Whereas Biafra and its advocates emphasised the economic and political viability of the new state, a more common argument of the British was concerned with the viability of a Nigerian state after two thirds of

³⁷⁸ Ken Saro-Wiwa, *On a Darkling Plain: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War* (Port Harcourt, 1989), p. 86.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

³⁸⁰ H. Wilson, *The Labour Government*, p. 557.

³⁸¹ Elizabeth Etuk, 'Warum ich für Biafra kämpfe', *Die Zeit*, 30.05.69.

³⁸² Kathryn Nwajiaku-Dahou, 'Heroes and Villains: Ijaw Nationalist Narratives of the Nigerian Civil War', *Africa Development* 34:1 (2009), p. 47. I know from a personal conversation with Tilman Zülch that Saro-Wiwa is said to have changed his mind about Biafra after the war.

³⁸³ Stephen M. Saideman, *The Ties That Divide: Ethnic Politics, Foreign Policy, and International Conflict* (New York, 2001), p. 85.

³⁸⁴ J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 52.

the oil resources would have broken away with Biafra; thus far, the oil revenue had been shared across the federation to the benefit of the economically weaker Northern plains.

Responding to the emphasis of Biafran propaganda, an article in the *Guardian* just after the end of the war questioned Labour MP Woodrow Wyatt's statements in the media and in parliament in which Wyatt argued that the Catholic Church and Markpress had distorted the way the war was perceived in Britain. Lake argued that although many Catholics were among the Biafra supporters, there were many others from various groups in society including different faiths and the entire political spectrum. Indeed, Biafra advocates were a rather heterogeneous group.³⁸⁵ Lake concludes, 'in fact, the press were subject during the civil war, and even now to a heavy barrage of propaganda from Whitehall. [...] The fact is that government public relations failed'.³⁸⁶ Indeed, the contest over the representation of the war was far from one-sided, as proponents of Nigeria suggested. Rather, the narratives of both Nigeria and Biafra coexisted and vied for influence.³⁸⁷

Missionaries, Advocacy, and Aid

The remarkable success of the Biafran narrative lay in its ability to mobilise a variety of voluntary supporters for its cause. The Biafran perspective pervaded journalistic as well as activist writing, and convinced missionaries, humanitarians, and sympathetic politicians of the urgency of the situation in Biafra. Although Biafran propaganda organs and Markpress, specifically, may have exaggerated the extent of the famine and facilitated its publicity, their efforts alone cannot explain the success of the story of the Biafran famine in mobilising sympathy for Biafra abroad.³⁸⁸ Public interest in Biafra must also be seen in the context of a raised humanitarian sensibility after the Holocaust – awareness of which increased during the 60s – as well as the moral outrage over the war in Vietnam. The number and importance of humanitarian organisations and campaigns, although arguably experiencing a watershed moment during Biafra, had experienced steady growth after the Second World War. By the time of the Biafran famine, humanitarian responses began to be part of the established political repertoire, although the response to any particular conflict was, of course, shaped by the

³⁸⁵ K. Kuhn, 'Liberation Struggle', p. 70.

³⁸⁶ Michael Lake, 'Pope but no Plot', *The Guardian*, 28.01.70.

³⁸⁷ On support for Nigeria's position, see chapter 3.

³⁸⁸ Michael Stewart, 'Biafra: Fighting a War without Guns', *BBC*, 30.07.95.

constellation of all institutions and groups involved. Markpress and Biafran propaganda efforts may have prefigured the ways in which sympathetic observers viewed and portrayed the war, but journalists, missionaries, and advocates brought their own interests into their promotion of the Biafran cause.³⁸⁹

Propaganda and advocacy were thus deeply intertwined. The Britain-Biafra Association published *Biafra News*, a news bulletin that Margot Parish, a member of the organisation, collated from materials of the Biafran special representative Ignatius S. Kogbara in London. Kogbara received the same material from Biafran ministries as Markpress did, but because Markpress selected and edited what it received its bulletins took longer to reach audiences.³⁹⁰ In this way, the Britain-Biafra Association undertook the same work as Markpress, voluntarily. Professional public relations work and advocacy were intertwined in a much more direct way. Some public relations practitioners believed to be acting out of a humanitarian concern and continued their work beyond any given professional duties. After the war, a news article in *The Times* from January 1970, suggestively titled 'The "voice" keeps up the campaign', reported that Markpress was continuing its activity for Biafra. Despite being owed money by Biafra, Bernhardt believed it would be dishonourable to not fulfil his part of the contract. Asked about the political nature of his work, Bernstein replied that he considered Markpress' work for Biafra strictly humanitarian.³⁹¹ Bernhardt, like Robert Goldstein, claimed to be acting out of sympathy for the suffering Biafrans.³⁹² George Knapp and Grenville Jones, the two partners of EDS, began to privately advocate the Biafran cause in panel discussions and in letters to newspapers after the firm's contract with Biafra ran out.³⁹³ Knapp was a member of the Britain-Biafra Association, which published several books and pamphlets that Knapp wrote on the war, among them *Aspects of the Biafran Affair*, in which he criticises the British government's support for Nigeria and challenges the arguments put forward to justify it.³⁹⁴ Knapp's involvement in the 'Biafra lobby' – as British Biafra advocates were referred to at the time – was not only humanitarian but political. Biafra activists were in favour of Biafran independence

³⁸⁹ K. Waters, 'Influencing the Message', p. 703.

³⁹⁰ M. Davis, *Interpreters*, p. 127.

³⁹¹ 'The "voice" keeps up the campaign', *The Times*, 14.01.70.

³⁹² L. Heerten, 'The Dystopia', p. 25.

³⁹³ M. Davis, *Interpreters*, p.45.

³⁹⁴ George Knapp, *Aspects of the Biafran Affair: A Study of British Attitudes and Policy towards the Nigerian-Biafran Conflict* (London, 1968).

and supported its political goals. EDS gathered information on the war and put together an archive that Forsyth used for his book *The Biafra Story*. The firm was, moreover, in contact with the *American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive*.³⁹⁵ Public relations work was not only linked to, but at times overlapped with, advocacy. The Biafra lobby was not only moved by humanitarian but political arguments. Biafra activists were in favour of Biafran independence and supported its political project.

Moreover, Biafra and its people rarely failed to make an impression on visitors. An account of military pilot Leonard Cheshire's experience was printed in the *Guardian*. The Foreign Office sent Cheshire to Biafra to gather information and report back. After his visit, Cheshire returned convinced that Ojukwu was supported by his people and sincerely wished to negotiate with Nigeria. After his debriefing at Whitehall, he was escorted out of the building by an official who said: 'Curious how every single person who goes to Biafra seems to fall for it. As infallible as light falling on a photographic plate.' At the time, Cheshire wondered why the official used this metaphor since he believed photographs record reality and 'not the deception.'³⁹⁶ This anecdote is illustrative of the rigid attitude of the Foreign Office, but the metaphor is an apt description of the experience of Biafra's supporters. For many, a visit to Biafra changed their perception. This was true for the journalists Forsyth and Churchill. Before his visit, the former was briefed by his editor at the BBC on the official British assessment of the conflict: that Ojukwu had no popular support and the rebellion would quickly be ended by Nigeria. When Forsyth arrived in Biafra, his own impression differed, and he send back articles that contradicted the view his editor had suggested; Forsyth was recalled from Biafra. He subsequently quit working for the BBC and returned to Biafra as a freelance reporter; he published an account of the war in 1969.³⁹⁷ The latter, Churchill, visited Biafra from Lagos, believing that reports of starvation and bombing of civilian targets were Biafran propaganda. Once in Biafra, however, he witnessed both and published his observation in a series of articles in the *The Times*.³⁹⁸

An important pioneering role in internationalising the war and generating publicity for Biafran suffering was played by the Irish missionaries of the Holy Ghost Order. Over 600 of the

³⁹⁵ M. Davis, *Interpreters*, p. 47.

³⁹⁶ Leonhard Cheshire, 'Why Wilson's mission failed', *The Guardian*, 17.11.69.

³⁹⁷ F. Forsyth, *The Biafra Story*.

³⁹⁸ Winston S. Churchill, 'An eye-witness report on starvation in Biafra', *The Times*, 03.03.69.

1,050 Catholic missionaries in Nigeria worked in the Eastern region; fewer, mainly British, Protestant missionaries in the East worked among the minorities and were not in favour of Biafran secession.³⁹⁹ Around 250 Irish missionaries in Biafra did not evacuate when the war broke out, choosing instead to stay with their parishes. Besides the Irish, the largest group, 250 other expatriates remained in Biafra, including 70 British.⁴⁰⁰ The missionaries formed a network that could gather and share information with visiting journalists and religious organisations in Europe and North America. Missionaries first drew the attention of journalists to the famine in a calculated attempt to publicise suffering and gain support for their relief effort.⁴⁰¹ Moreover, missionaries constituted the ‘catalytic agent with enough international influence and credibility to sound the alarm’ about the situation within Biafra.⁴⁰² They validated reports of rampant starvations and were figures with whom audiences could sympathise and identify. Missionaries and Biafrans alike were convinced that if only the world knew of their suffering, some form of intervention would follow. The relationship between the missionaries and the media, like that of the aid workers and the media, was mutually beneficial and highly effective in publicising the humanitarian crisis in Biafra. Journalists could rely on missionaries’ knowledge and experience; in return, the missionaries found in journalists a vehicle for their stories and provided them with dramatic quotes. *The Daily Sketch* of 22 June 1968 quoted Kevin Doherty stating: ‘I came here to these people and will stay here until I am killed’.⁴⁰³ Such words helped journalists to frame stories of the war and the famine in a formulaic fashion in which missionaries could become heroes, defying Nigeria’s conquest of Biafra and standing by the people they considered their parish. Once journalists were alerted to the famine by the missionaries, newspaper articles and television programmes on starvation proliferated. This helped considerably in raising the funds necessary for the relief operation.

Irish missionaries or the order of the Holy Ghost Fathers organised aid as well as transport planes and were instrumental in setting up Joint Church Aid, a consortium of more than 30 charities. Drawing journalists’ attention to the famine helped the effort to bring aid into Biafra. When the Irish missionaries were asked after the war if they had any regrets, they

³⁹⁹ Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 952.

⁴⁰⁰ Fiona Bateman, ‘Biafra in the Irish Imagination: War and Famine in Banville’s *An End to Flight and Forristal’s Black Man’s Country*’, in T. Falola and O. Ezekwem, *Writing the Nigeria-Biafra War*, p. 286.

⁴⁰¹ K. Waters, ‘Influencing the Message’, p. 697.

⁴⁰² J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 118.

⁴⁰³ P. Harrison and R. Palmer, *News out of Africa*, p. 21.

answered that they only regretted 'having to leave our people.'⁴⁰⁴ Clearly, their efforts were driven by their genuine concern for the people among whom they lived and whose care they considered their responsibility. They witnessed atrocities, such as raids on hospitals or markets as well as the many deaths from starvation,⁴⁰⁵ and hoped their accounts would bring help to alleviate the suffering and perhaps even end the war. Kevin Doheny's brother, the Irish Holy Ghost Father Mike Doheny, reportedly said, 'when we saw [Kwashiorkor] for the first time, it really shocked us to our foundations',⁴⁰⁶ and he continued, 'here are children I have baptised, and here they are starving. They are mine, maybe in a very true sense. Even though it's not a natural child, it's a spiritual child, a reality. And that's what drove us.'⁴⁰⁷

Interested in helping the people of their parish, the missionaries most likely framed the war in this way in order to arouse compassion abroad, and their efforts coincided with the interests of Biafran propaganda. Francis Ibiam, an Igbo statesman, appealed to the churches: 'If the world, especially the churches, do not help us, we shall all die and Christianity in Nigeria shall die with us.'⁴⁰⁸ Christianity was presented as under threat to Biafrans as well as to religious organisations and dignitaries abroad, who had the power to mobilise support for Biafra, which they did in humanitarian and political ways. Caritas Internationalis became one of the most significant aid providers during the war and later cooperated with protestant aid organisations to form Joint Church Aid, which operated the second large-scale air lift of aid into Biafra, the first being organised by the ICRC.⁴⁰⁹ The Vatican sent a delegation of two envoys, Conway and Rochau, to Nigeria in December 1967 and to Biafra in February 1968. In Lagos, they argued their interest was mainly humanitarian, not political or religious, since they wished to organise the provision of aid. Yet, the monsignors asked Gowon if he would consider announcing a cease-fire and declared their aim of arranging talks between the Nigerians and the Biafran leadership. Nigeria considered the Vatican to be pro-Biafran and declined to announce a cease-fire, even after the pope publicly appealed for a Christmas truce.⁴¹⁰ Similarly to their portrayal as modern, an important benefit of casting Biafrans as innocent Christians was that it made

⁴⁰⁴ N. Omenka, 'Blaming the Gods', p. 381.

⁴⁰⁵ For example, cf. articles on the bombing of hospitals, such as Joseph Minogue, 'Over the razor's edge', *The Guardian*, 26.07.69; Matthew Rosa, 'Schools and hospitals bombed, says Biafra', *The Observer*, 03.03.68.

⁴⁰⁶ P. Davies, *The Use of Propaganda*, p. 182.

⁴⁰⁷ P. Harrison and R. Palmer, *News out of Africa*, p. 20.

⁴⁰⁸ N. Omenka, 'Blaming the Gods', p. 369.

⁴⁰⁹ On relief, see chapter 5.

⁴¹⁰ J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 121.

them more relatable to Christian audiences and thereby helped the relief effort;⁴¹¹ in the eyes of a Christian public, Biafrans were turned into martyrs. Presenting their opponents as Muslims waging a jihad may have tapped into stereotypes against Muslims among their audiences. Ojukwu reportedly said that he had only one regret: not having made more use of the religious angle.⁴¹²

Like Biafran propagandists, the missionaries cast the war as a religious war of Northern Muslims against Southern Christians.⁴¹³ This idea originated in the Biafran propaganda directorate and was calculated to mobilise support not only of the Biafran population, for whom Christianity was a key component of their identity, but also from missionaries in Biafra and Christians abroad.⁴¹⁴ This religious dichotomy, reproduced by advocates and journalists, was an old cliché. It had its roots in the colonial administration. Lord Lugard, governor of Nigeria between 1912 and 1919, amalgamated the Southern and Northern Protectorates of Nigeria and established a system of indirect rule in the North, exercising power through local elites and hierarchies.⁴¹⁵ The British refrained from interfering with religious matters and prohibited missionaries from operating in the North, while the Christian presence in the North grew due to the in-migration of educated Southern professionals, who took up posts in business and administration.⁴¹⁶ Missionaries had been freely operating in the South, running churches and schools, providing the Western education that gave Southerners an advantage in the competition for jobs across the federation. After the massacres of 1966, as part of a culmination of fears over Southern domination in the North, the stereotype of the Muslim North and the Christian South was popularised and became part of press and radio rhetoric before being used in the war propaganda.⁴¹⁷ Ojukwu later spoke of an Arab-Muslim expansionist threat in his *Ahiara Declaration: The Principles of the Biafran Revolution*.⁴¹⁸ In reality, however, Nigeria was religiously heterogeneous: there were many Muslims in South-Western Nigeria, and Christian communities mostly existed in the North. The Nigerian leader Gowon was a Northern Christian.

⁴¹¹ D. Anthony, “Resourceful and Progressive Blackmen”, p. 45.

⁴¹² N. Omenka, ‘Blaming the Gods’, p. 389.

⁴¹³ P. Davies, *The Use of Propaganda*, pp. 187-188.

⁴¹⁴ J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 113; N. Omenka, ‘Blaming the Gods’, p. 374.

⁴¹⁵ K. Kwarteng, *Ghosts of Empire*, p. 296.

⁴¹⁶ N. Omenka, ‘Blaming the Gods’, p. 368.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 370.

The religious war theme was controversial among Christian organisations abroad, who were reluctant to adopt this view, fearing to alienate Nigerian Christians.⁴¹⁹ Although the Catholic Church never officially supported the belief that the Nigeria-Biafra War was religiously motivated, there were individuals and organisations outside of the direct control of the church who promoted such views.⁴²⁰ Christian organisations and individuals abroad were among the main supporters of Biafra and its political project. Some of the most vocal supporters of Biafra were religious personalities, like the Archbishop of Canterbury and Cardinal Heenan in Britain, and Bishop Tenhumberg in West Germany, who founded the Working Group for Human Rights (*Arbeitskreis für Menschenrechte*), which was active for Biafra and southern Sudan. The churches had a wide network enabling them to reach out to a mass audience, and they could, therefore, easily spread their views on the conflict. Such influential reach was not confined to Christian organisations and the American Jewish Committee (AJC) of New York got involved as well. For Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, the images of starving children were reminiscent of the Jewish children that were brought to concentration camps in 1940,⁴²¹ and the comparison of Biafran starvation to the Holocaust was the reason for widespread concern among the Israeli public.⁴²² Sermons, religious organisations, magazines and newspapers did their part to spread news of Biafran starvation. Religious dignitaries and organisations were probably as important in the propaganda effort abroad as were the media and Biafra activists. The religious war rhetoric was so successful in mobilising support for Biafra that the Nigerian military government took counter-measures. The *Code of Conduct* issued to Nigerian soldiers to guide them in warfare included the assertion that the war was neither against a foreign enemy nor a religiously motivated war, or jihad.⁴²³ As a result of missionary activities – their role in promoting Biafran views, mobilising sympathy abroad, securing and distributing aid – Nigeria expelled the remaining missionaries from former Biafra after the war.

With the publication of the reports of a team of international observers finding that no genocide was taking place in October 1968, and with the increased efforts of pro-Nigerians to counter Biafran propaganda, the Biafran narrative lost credibility, although the food situation

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., p. 382.

⁴²⁰ Ibid., p. 376.

⁴²¹ Lasse Heerten, 'A wie Auschwitz, B wie Biafra. Der Bürgerkrieg in Nigeria (1967–1970) und die Universalisierung des Holocaust', *Zeithistorische Forschungen* 8:3 (2011), p. 396

⁴²² Z. Levey, 'Israel, Nigeria, and the Biafran Civil War', pp. 270-271.

⁴²³ N. Omenka, 'Blaming the Gods', p. 369.

worsened again in 1969 and continued to rouse sympathy in the press and from the public.⁴²⁴ As a result of this change, Biafran propaganda shifted to Biafra's self-reliance and its determination to resist Nigeria to the end and beyond.⁴²⁵ The argument was that Biafrans would continue the conflict in the form of a guerrilla war should Nigeria overrun the enclave, and this was echoed in the writing of Biafra advocates like that of Tilman Zülch.⁴²⁶ At the same time, concepts of race and racism gained importance in propaganda toward the end of the war. Ojukwu, apparently no longer eager to appease European audiences and governments, tapping, here, into yet another pre-existing discourse, argues in his speech on *The Principles of the Biafran Revolution* – 'couched in language as evocative as Fanon and Malcolm X as Nkrumah or Nyerere'⁴²⁷ – that the failure to support Biafra in its independence by outside states is due to racism: 'we have learnt that the right to self-determination is inalienable, but only to the white man.'⁴²⁸ In an interview and in specific reference to oil workers sentenced to death by Biafra after a trial accusing them of fighting for the Nigerian army, he laments: 'For 18 white men, Europe is aroused. What have they said about our millions?'⁴²⁹ Ojukwu's confrontational stance was very different from the early assurances to foreign governments and investors that Biafra would honour all contracts that were set up before secession; it hints at the growing disillusionment of the Biafran leadership with the mass audience strategy of their propaganda.⁴³⁰ From attempting to secure favourable public opinion, Biafra returned to more politically charged arguments, presenting Nigeria as in danger of becoming another Congo, embroiled in embittered factional struggles for decades to come. Despite the combined success of Biafran propagandists, public relations firms, and advocates in generating publicity and mobilising public sympathy, public opinion never translated into political support. Aid could not sustain the war effort indefinitely, especially since Nigeria received decisive support from its allies, above all Britain. The strategy was fundamentally flawed.

⁴²⁴ On the reports of the observer team, see chapter 3.

⁴²⁵ J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 112.

⁴²⁶ T. Zülch and K. Guercke, 'Plädoyer für die Republik Biafra', p. 18.

⁴²⁷ D. Anthony, "'Resourceful and Progressive Blackmen'", p. 58.

⁴²⁸ C. Ojukwu, cited in *ibid.*, p. 59.

⁴²⁹ C. Ojukwu, 'The Biafran Head of States Analyses the Biafran Revolution', 01.06.69, *Britain-Biafra Association*, p. 4, MSS. Afr. S. 2399/1.

⁴³⁰ 'Biafra: Agony and Survival', *Friends of Biafra Association* (London, ca. 1968/9), p. 5.



The fact that both Nigeria and Biafra used the services of public relations agencies to promote their views and goals during the war demonstrates how widespread and pervasive the strategic and systematic management of perception had become in international affairs. The debate and publicity that public relations efforts engendered was exceptional and part of the counter-propaganda of Nigeria's allies. Such discussions did not consider the moral and political implications of the practice of utilising public relations firms; instead, the intention behind uncovering work of Markpress for Biafra was to discredit narratives of starvation and suffering as propaganda. Public relations campaigns for Biafra abroad were limited by inadequate funding and the lack of a centralised control over the narrative. The partners of EDS misjudged Britain's political position on the conflict, and its talks with civil servants proved fruitless. To be sure, public relations firms played an important role in relaying information, facilitating access to the war zones for journalists and other visitors, and advising their clients on communication strategies and political matters. Markpress, for instance, despite being hailed by supporters of Nigeria as the agency that had marketed the idea of the Biafran genocide so successfully, was probably most successful by facilitating journalist visits to Biafra and by providing those who already supported Biafra with information to use in their own news bulletins and publications.

Overall, Biafra's propaganda efforts abroad were far more successfully aided by voluntary advocates than by professional public relations firms and agents. It was the strength of Biafra's case that mobilised a diverse range of voluntary supporters, who spread awareness of the suffering occurring within Biafra and gave credence to its genocide claim. Together, these groups formed a discourse on Biafra that was shaped by the propagandistic view of the war, but not determined by it. Rather, the Biafran propagandistic narrative, as relayed by missionaries, ambassadors, and public relations agencies provided activists with a vocabulary to frame and argue their case. Each group appropriated the narrative and imbued it with its own perspective and interests. Voluntary advocacy work helped to garner the type of support for Biafra that changed the course of the war. The food and medicine flown in by aid organisations with the help of public and governmental donations were as vital to Biafra as the arms supplied clandestinely by France, Portugal, and other countries. In so far as advocate groups were instrumental in raising awareness and funds for relief, they arguably had as much impact on the course of the war as foreign states supporting either side, although it could not

change its outcome. Yet, the interwoven nature of propaganda and advocacy raises questions about the susceptibility of advocacy to becoming paid agencies and governmental propaganda organs carefully calibrated to elicit sympathy and support.

3. Weathering the Storm: Governmental Responses

*'The idea was simple, coarse and brutal. Instead of political action the Western powers would substitute a massive humanitarian effort to alleviate the worst consequences of a conflict.'*⁴³¹

The intense media coverage and debates of the war as genocide galvanised public opinion and resulted in harsh criticism of British arms sales to Nigeria and the inaction of other governments in Europe and North America. Each side in the war had several external allies, and the dividing line did not run along the East-West split of the Cold War. Both the United States and the Soviet Union supported Nigeria, although the former did so only indirectly, while the Soviets sent arms to Lagos. Rather, it followed a pattern defined by the process of decolonisation and its repercussions for states seeking influence in Africa. For Britain, this was best achieved by preserving Nigeria's unity, whereas France was in favour of the split up of the federation. Governments who supported the federal side but faced a critical public, like Britain and West Germany, were forced to devise measures to counter what they believed to be exaggerated public concerns roused by propagandistic accounts of a Biafran genocide. In response, governments who supported Nigeria attempted to assuage public opinion by providing aid to Biafra and urging Nigeria to exercise restraint in the war, while continuing their political support of Lagos. Nigerian impatience with measures such as humanitarian aid or restrictions on arms deliveries – both of which effectively made it harder for Gowon to win the war – made this a difficult balancing act.

Documents of the British and West German governments as well as memoirs of politicians and officials reveal this dilemma and the measures that governments were taking to assuage public opinion. For the most part, governmental perceptions of the conflict differed from the rather sensationalist representations by the media, activists, and NGOs. Generally, governments and officials did not believe genocide to be underway, despite their knowledge of the harsh consequences of the war for the population in Biafra. In France, the government aligned with the pro-Biafran movement and supported Biafra both diplomatically and militarily.⁴³² The international repercussions of the Nigeria-Biafra War became crucially

⁴³¹ David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (New York, 2002), p. 131.

⁴³² J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, pp. 224-227.

important for the development of the war, and the Biafran leadership hoped that public opinion would translate into political support or at least allow it to resist Nigeria long enough to increase international pressure for a negotiated peace.

Beginning with an overview of international politics as regards the Nigeria-Biafra War, this chapter will show how the British and West German governments each negotiated a compromise between public opinion and political realism. Since the Wilson government exported arms to Nigeria, Britain was the main target of Biafran propaganda and faced criticism not only from its own public but also from other European countries. The United States, preoccupied with Vietnam, considered Nigeria's war a British responsibility.⁴³³ Britain's public was more divided over the matter than that of any other country, and in parliament and the media, supporters of Biafra were frequently opposed by those favouring Nigeria. The many Biafra committees were complemented by unions of Nigerian students. West Germany's position on the war, however, has received less attention. The independence of many African countries in 1960 opened new possibilities and West German relations with Nigeria fit into a general policy framework developed to build economic and political links with decolonised African countries. At the same time, West Germany was caught up in the Cold War and hoped, alongside its allies, to prevent the spread of communism in Africa, while preventing the diplomatic recognition of the German Democratic Republic by other states and further pursuing the goal of reunification. Couched in terms of friendship, freedom, and the promise of future prosperity, the independence of many African countries was presented as inaugurating a new era in European-African relations. Such rhetoric was not only for African heads of state but for a European public that had been transformed in the process of decolonisation and no longer supported crude colonial-style politics. Large parts of the West German public were mobilised in support of Biafra, if only in the form of relief donations. The process of engaging with the history of the Holocaust in West Germany gained momentum in the late 1960s, a debate tightly enmeshed with the conflicts following decolonisation and thus substantially determining how the Biafra conflict came to be understood.⁴³⁴ Yet, public attitudes to post-colonial Africa were ambiguously located between solidarity and paternalism.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁴³⁴ Cf. M. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*; On references to the Holocaust in protests against the war in Vietnam: Wilfried Mausbach, 'America's Vietnam in Germany—Germany in America's Vietnam', p. 46.

International Politics: Superpowers, United Nations, and OAU

The opportunities and challenges posed by the decolonisation of much of Africa by 1960 as well as the Cold War rivalry between East and West defined the constellation of international interests in Nigeria. On independence, Nigerian democracy was presented as a success story of British decolonisation; one of the most promising economies on the African continent, due not least to the discovery of oil in commercial quantities by Shell in 1956.⁴³⁵ Surrounded by smaller francophone states, Nigeria became the dominant state and economy in West Africa. The end of colonial rule opened the markets and societies of former colonies to the influence of foreign countries, and Britain now competed for clout in Nigeria with other states, including the Soviet Union, eager to expand its influence in Africa. The African continent, like much of the Third World, became a theatre of intense East-West rivalries, although there also existed an alternative to the two power blocs in the form of the non-aligned movement.

Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra War, there was no superpower split since both the Soviet Union and the United States supported Nigeria against Biafra. Many wars in the Third World during the Cold War escalated and spread at least in part because competing factions received assistance from the opposing super powers fighting for influence, as was the case in the Congo, Angola, and Vietnam. There was no ideological difference between Nigeria and Biafra. Both leaders were pro-Western in outlook and supported liberal capitalism. In the absence of ideological obligation, the Soviet Union could follow a more pragmatic line. Supporting Nigeria was part of a larger effort to increase political and economic links with Africa but also to discourage moves towards autonomy among the Soviet Union's own satellite states.⁴³⁶ Instructive is the case of Czechoslovakia. Initially, the country followed the Soviet line and supported Nigeria, but over time, the country shifted its policy in favour of Biafra and began to supply arms to the secessionists. In this way, the Czech government resisted Soviet pressure and responded to public sympathy with Biafra. Supporting Biafra put the country at odds with the other socialist states and was symbolic of its will to defy Soviet dictation; a decision that would become one of the triggers for the Warsaw Pact invasion of August 1968.⁴³⁷ Biafra sent a delegation to China in order to gain support for secession. Initially neutral, after the Soviet

⁴³⁵ M. Siollun, *Oil, Politics, and Violence*, p. 168.

⁴³⁶ Angela Stent, 'The Soviet Union and the Nigerian Civil War: A Triumph of Realism', *A Journal of Opinion* 3:2 (1973), pp. 43-48.

⁴³⁷ S. E. Orobator, 'The Nigerian Civil War and the Invasion of Czechoslovakia', *African Affairs* 82:327 (1983), pp. 201 and 214.

Union began its support for Nigeria, China declared its support for Biafra, denouncing the 'alliance between Anglo-American imperialism and Soviet revisionism'. Yet, there is no evidence that China ever supported Biafra with arms or in terms of diplomacy: a symbolic opposition to what Beijing considered Soviet imperialist tendencies. Chinese trade with Nigeria, on the other hand, grew throughout the war.⁴³⁸

The United States under President Johnson declared a neutral stance towards the conflict, and American officials considered the war a British responsibility. According to the American Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Joseph Palmer, 'this was essentially a problem for the Commonwealth and for Nigeria's neighbours.'⁴³⁹ A confidential telegram from the British embassy in Washington communicated that, in the U.S., there was 'uncertainty about what is likely to happen [in Nigeria] and inability to think of any action which the U.S. government might usefully take.'⁴⁴⁰ The Americans seemed not interested in getting involved in another potentially protracted war at a time when Vietnam was still causing the government great concern on the battle field as well as at home. This position did not change when Richard Nixon entered office as president of the United States in January 1969, although he had used the outrage against what he termed the Biafran genocide as an element of his election campaign and initiated a review of U.S. policy on the matter. In a campaign speech, Nixon had said, 'genocide is what is taking place right now – and starvation is the grim reaper.'⁴⁴¹ Public sympathy for Biafran suffering was strong in the United States and Canada, and as was the case in many European countries, missionaries, Biafra committees like the *American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive* (ACKBA), and relief organisations were active and both well-organised and well-funded.⁴⁴²

⁴³⁸ Maxim Matushevich, 'Strange Bedfellows: An Unlikely Alliance Between the Soviet Union and Nigeria During the Biafran War', in D. Moses and L. Heerten, *Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide: The Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967-1970* (New York, 2017), p. 211; David H. Shinn and Joshua Eisenman, *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* (Philadelphia, 2012), p. 301.

⁴³⁹ Telegram from P. Dean at the British embassy in Washington to FO, 15.08.1967, UKNA, FCO 25/232.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁴¹ Richard Nixon, cited in Brian McNeil, "'And starvation is the grim reaper": the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive and the genocide question during the Nigerian civil war, 1968-1970,' *Journal of Genocide Research* 16:2-3 (2014), p. 318.

⁴⁴² Henry Kissinger, 'Memorandum for the president: U.S. Options in Biafra Relief', 28.01.1969, <https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/virtuallibrary/releases/may16/biafra.pdf> (accessed 12.07.2017).

Despite remaining officially neutral and declaring an arms embargo on both sides, the United States leaned more towards federal Nigeria.⁴⁴³ A report prepared for president Nixon in January 1969 sees U.S. options as limited, arguing that ‘our role is important but it alone will not ensure a solution’ and ‘to the degree that we have leverage, we have it only with the Feds’. The U.S. thus followed a policy described in the report in the following terms: ‘support the Feds diplomatically, endorse “One Nigeria” with Ibo protection but refuse to sell arms’. Kissinger argued in his memoirs that intervention would harm U.S. Nigerian relations and possibly rouse suspicion of other African states, and the report noted, ‘unlike most in Africa, this is a real war’, indicating that there were genuine interests involved, and that this was not a conflict of externally propped-up camps.⁴⁴⁴ Moreover, according to journalist and Biafra activist, Auberon Waugh, when taking up his office, the British and American ambassadors to Nigeria had advised Gowon against dissolving the federation by declaring the secession of the North in 1966.⁴⁴⁵ Nigerian officials, so the Americans knew, were rather closely integrated into the Western camp and wary of Soviet intentions, whereas the Soviets, according to U.S. views, did not have a ‘vital interest’ in Nigeria.⁴⁴⁶ More or less continuing Johnson’s policy, Nixon faced a dilemma similar to that of European politicians.⁴⁴⁷ The president needed to respond to public concern and fulfil the promises of his election campaign without intervening diplomatically and compromising American interests in West Africa; and the only option to do this was to engage in emergency relief. Yet, according to Kissinger, ‘British obfuscation and State Department procrastination’ prevented the development of an independent relief programme when the war came to an end. Kissinger noted in his memoirs that Nixon was ‘happy for once to be on the humane side of an issue’ by supporting the suffering Biafrans.⁴⁴⁸

The dividing line thus did not follow the conventional Cold War dichotomy of East and West. Rather, it was defined by decolonisation: the pressure on the remaining or previous colonial powers, the struggles of African states to preserve colonial borders, and competition for influence in newly independent countries. Biafra received most diplomatic support from

⁴⁴³ Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (New York, 2011), p. 417.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁵ Auberon Waugh, cited in ‘The Other Side of the Nigerian Civil War’, *Africa Research Group* (1970); S. Cronje, *The World and Nigeria*, p. 241.

⁴⁴⁶ Kissinger, ‘U.S. options in Biafra Relief’.

⁴⁴⁷ Cf. Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, *Conflict and Intervention in Africa: Nigeria, Angola, Zaire* (New York, 1990), p. 49.

⁴⁴⁸ Kissinger, *The White House Years*, p. 417.

those countries that recognised its statehood, such as Tanzania, Ivory Coast, Gambia, and Haiti, but its most significant ally remained France. De Gaulle declared French sympathy for Biafra, stopping short of actual diplomatic recognition in 1968, in part responding to domestic pressures but also following geopolitical interests.⁴⁴⁹ Although the French government denied it officially, it was common knowledge among foreign governments and the international press that French arms were channelled to Biafra through former French colonies, which were subsequently re-supplied by France.⁴⁵⁰ With different motives, Portugal and South Africa supported Biafra with arms, hoping that spreading chaos among newly independent colonies would help their cause – Portugal wishing to retain its remaining African colonies and South Africa using the brutality and the disintegration of the Nigeria war to make a case for white rule, which could be presented to uphold a form of law and order. Portugal offered diplomatic and practical support to Biafra, including the use of its main airport. Hence, Lisbon became the hub for flights from Europe to Biafra, and journalists, aid workers, and mercenaries flew into the enclave from an airport outside the Portuguese capital. Israel was also among Biafra's supporters because of strong public sympathy for a people facing a threat to its existence.⁴⁵¹

Nigeria's most important allies were Britain and the Soviet Union. Many other European countries supported Nigeria, although pressure from public opinion complicated this position. Except for the three countries already mentioned above, most African states supported Nigeria. This is conventionally and plausibly explained with the fact that most feared that the Biafran example would encourage separatist movements within their own states.⁴⁵² Similarly, Nigeria's supporters in Europe argued that allowing Biafra to secede would lead to a balkanisation of Africa.

The UN regarded the Nigeria-Biafra War as an internal affair of a member state in which it could not interfere. Many of the UN institutions followed this line; for instance, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to whom the Biafrans appealed in November 1967 since the massacres had driven many to flee into the Eastern region. Partly, the UNHCR was

⁴⁴⁹ 'Now that France supports Biafra', *The Guardian*, 03.08.68; J. Stremmler, *The International Politics*, p. 227.

⁴⁵⁰ 'French in Gabon load arms for Biafra', *The Times*, 04.10.1968; Patrick Keatley, 'France starts a big airlift of arms to Biafra', *The Guardian*, 02.10.68; Record of a conversation of Okoi Arikpo and Harold Wilson, 24.04.68, UKNA FCO 25/241.

⁴⁵¹ Israel's position was complicated, official circles were pro-Nigerian and wary of damaging relations with the country, but extensions of aid and possibly arms were made to Biafra due to public pressure, Z. Levey, 'Israel, Nigeria, and the Biafra Civil War', p. 263.

⁴⁵² Alec Douglas-Home, 13.03.69, *Hansard* HC vol. 779 col. 1587.

constrained by the definition of refugees as persons who had crossed an international border, which did not apply to Easterners who had moved within Nigeria but faced many of the same problems that refugees crossing international borders encounter. As long as the secessionist region was not a recognized state, there was no international border between Biafra and the rest of Nigeria. UNICEF was 'the lone exception to this pattern of indifference' of UN agencies. Rather than seeking permission, UNICEF acted by flying relief supplies into Biafra. The organisation regarded its aid to Biafra as strictly non-political and non-discriminatory – as the MSF would later understand their own work – and justified its activity with reference to assurances of Nigerian leaders that they were concerned for the wellbeing of all Nigerian citizens including those in secessionist areas. It was understood that aid would not be blocked, and that UNICEF was acting in Nigerian interest.⁴⁵³

The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was generally presented as the responsible body for mediating between Nigeria and Biafra. The organisation arranged most official peace negotiations between Nigeria and Biafra, but since the OAU was founded on the principles of promoting African unity and stability, based on the former colonial borders, and because most African heads of state supported Nigeria, it was prejudiced towards restoring unity. During the Council of Ministers meeting of the OAU in late 1967, a communiqué was adopted stating that the OAU member states recognised 'the tragic and serious situation [...] as an internal affair' and reaffirmed their 'confidence in the Federal Government of Nigeria.'⁴⁵⁴ At its conference in Algiers in September 1968, the OAU had appealed to all its member states and those of the UN that they should 'abstain from any act that challenges the unity, territorial integrity and peace of Nigeria.'⁴⁵⁵ The peace conferences chaired by the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie failed to bring about peace – the delegations of both sides refused to accept one another's conditions for negotiations to take place. Nigeria set as a condition that Biafra, in effect, renounce secession by respecting the concept of a united Nigeria, whereas Biafra demanded that a cease-fire should precede negotiations; a precondition dropped only in late 1968 prior to formal negotiations.⁴⁵⁶ Neither the UN nor the OAU had a decisive impact on the outcome

⁴⁵³ Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, p. 142; 'Learning from experience: 1946 – 1979', UNICEF, <https://www.unicef.org/about-us/timeline-1946-1979> (accessed 13.09.17).

⁴⁵⁴ Olukunle Ojeleye, *The Politics of Post-war Demobilisation and Reintegration in Nigeria* (Farnham, 2010), p. 83.

⁴⁵⁵ Draft letter for replying to letters expressing concern about Biafra sent to the West German Foreign Office, AA, BAK B122/11624.

⁴⁵⁶ J. Wilson, FCO, Note on negotiating positions of both sides, 21.10.69, UKNA FCO 65/250/1.

of the war. British officials pointed to the mandate of the OAU to promote peace in Nigeria, although Foreign Office documents reveal that they were expected to be unsuccessful since most African heads of state were preoccupied with similar issues of separatism, including Emperor Haile Selassie, who hoped to prevent losing the Ogaden region to Somalia.

United Kingdom: A Traditional Arms Supplier of Nigeria

Throughout the war, the United Kingdom supported Nigeria, although it took time for the policy to become established, and it remained tentative for the duration of the war. Like the Americans, the British were unsure which policy to follow to protect 'our immediate interests': the security of British expatriates in Nigeria and oil supplies.⁴⁵⁷ A cabinet meeting held just before the outbreak of the war concluded: 'as regards recognition of a separate state in the East, we should wait on developments, and particularly on the action taken by African countries'.⁴⁵⁸ The British knew that both sides were buying arms from October 1966 and were rather well-informed on developments.⁴⁵⁹ Given the fragile situation of Nigeria – it was questionable whether Gowon would be supported by the Western region – the British doubted that Lagos could mount a successful invasion or enforce the blockade without external support.⁴⁶⁰ In August 1967, the Commonwealth Relations Office recommended a policy that called for a cease-fire followed by negotiations and a simultaneous end of arms supplies to the Nigerian government – measures later called for by Biafra advocates. The Foreign Office rejected this proposal because officials believed that this policy would antagonize Nigeria, which would be 'bitterly opposed to a negotiated settlement', whereas Britain 'shall have gained nothing in exchange' aside from the moral advantage of not supplying arms.⁴⁶¹ As is characteristic of the polarising nature of this war, the views of the High Commissioner in Lagos, David Hunt, and the Deputy High Commissioner in the Eastern town of Enugu, later part of Biafra, James Parker, contrasted sharply. Each view reflected the environment within which the commissioners worked, but when Parker was sent back to Britain by Biafra, much of British intelligence came from Hunt in Lagos.⁴⁶² Hunt was strongly in favour of support for Nigeria and

⁴⁵⁷ Cabinet memorandum, 30.05.1967, UKNA CAB/128/42.

⁴⁵⁸ Cabinet memorandum, 01.06.1967, UKNA CAB/128/42.

⁴⁵⁹ Brief for High Commissioner, High Commission Lagos, UKNA DO 186/30.

⁴⁶⁰ Cabinet memorandum, 01.06.1967, UKNA CAB/128/42.

⁴⁶¹ C.L. Booth, FO, Note on CO report, 21.08.67, UKNA FCO 25/241.

⁴⁶² Kwarteng, *Ghosts of Empire*, p. 313.

believed an early Nigerian victory was a possibility, but the Joint Intelligence Committee was more cautious in its assessment. Based on these sources, the Foreign Office believed that the most likely outcome was a 'prolonged military stalemate'; the 'policy should be to lie as low as possible and await the outcome', and this, for the time being, meant maintaining the policy of supporting Nigeria and continuing to supply arms of a defensive nature to those that had 'traditionally' been supplied rather than to 'chop and change our policy to fit the vicissitudes of the war.'⁴⁶³

Prime Minister Harold Wilson and his government faced criticism from parliament backbenchers of all parties, including his own. Labour MP Frank Allaun, for instance, was a vocal critic of government policy. In fact, Allaun read the motion for a vote on banning the arms sale to Nigeria, pressed for during a debate in the House of Commons on 27 August 1968, supported by 51 Labour MPs, and ultimately prevented by the government. The speech that the Commonwealth Secretary had given earlier that day, Allaun saw as 'merely an attempt to justify a disastrous policy.' He rebuffed British economic interests as a rationale since one cannot 'do business in a cemetery'.⁴⁶⁴ Biafra supporters argued that a vote on the arms supply – had it taken place – would have certainly forced the government to end its arms sales, although their opponents and the government had agreed to prevent the vote, and, therefore, not all MPs favouring the government's policy on Nigeria were present.⁴⁶⁵ During Biafra week in October 1969, when around 1000 people gathered at Trafalgar Square, MPs of all parties again demanded a ban of the arms supply.⁴⁶⁶ In a vote on the government's policy on Nigeria and Biafra in March 1969, 35 Labour MPs, 20 Conservatives, and 7 Liberals voted against government policy, but Whitehall officials found it difficult to establish patterns since support for Biafra seemed to cut across all political groups.⁴⁶⁷ In December 1969, Stewart once again defended the arms supply to Nigeria in parliament. The arguments he put forward were the same he had explained in the debate of August 1968: a British decision to end the arms sales would have no impact on the course of the war, whose parties would find supply elsewhere.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶³ Henniker, Note on CO report, FO, 22.08.67, UKNA FCO 25/241.

⁴⁶⁴ Frank Allaun, 27.08.68, *Hansard* HC vol. 769 cc. 1472-1472.

⁴⁶⁵ Francis Boyd, 'Critics say no vote stops victory over arms supply', *The Guardian*, 28.08.68.

⁴⁶⁶ 'All-party appeal on Biafra arms', *The Guardian*, 27.10.69.

⁴⁶⁷ 'The Biafra Lobby', FCO, June 1969, UKNA FCO/250/1.

⁴⁶⁸ Norman Shrapnel, 'Refusal to band arms is repeated', *The Guardian*, 10.12.69.

Nigerian leaders responded sensitively to perceived support for Biafra and were concerned that public sentiment might sooner or later provoke a change in government policy in Britain. Harold Wilson reassured the Nigerian Commissioner of Foreign Affairs Arikpo that the British line towards their secession, before and after it occurred, had been consistent, but it was attacked in parliament and by the churches. Wilson advised Arikpo to publicise as much as possible Nigeria's willingness to negotiate without preconditions.⁴⁶⁹ British fears that ending arms supplies and pressing for a cease-fire and negotiations would be seen as a move directed against Lagos and thereby lead to a deterioration of their relations were not entirely unfounded. Early in the war, for instance, Gowon complained to Wilson about the sympathy for Biafra expressed by parts of the British press, which had, in turn, sparked anti-British campaigns in the Nigerian press.⁴⁷⁰ Gowon feared that Britain might support secession because of the oil deposits of the East, whereas Biafra believed Britain would favour the Muslim North, as it had traditionally during colonial times.⁴⁷¹

Generally, the continued existence of a united Nigeria was in British interests. According to Auberon Waugh, in 1966 and thus before he assumed his role as military governor, the British High Commissioner and the American Ambassador in Nigeria had brought pressure to bear on Gowon not to announce the dissolution of Nigeria and the secession of the North.⁴⁷² Instead, Gowon called for a constitutional conference that would discuss the future arrangement of the Nigerian federation, eventually meeting Ojukwu in Aburi in January 1967 to resolve the tensions between Lagos and the East. The geopolitical consequence of a break up of Nigeria would have been the end of Nigerian hegemony among the francophone states of West Africa, and with it the end of British influence in the area to the benefit of the French. For officials, the war in Nigeria and Biafra brought back memories of the 'bad old days' of Franco-British colonial rivalry in Africa and strained the already problematic relations between the two countries after de Gaulle had blocked UK efforts to enter the EEC in 1961 and 1969,

⁴⁶⁹ Minute of a conversation of Harold Wilson and Arikpo, 24.04.68, UKNA FCO 25/241.

⁴⁷⁰ Yakubu Gowon to Harold Wilson, 29.07.67, UKNA FCO 25/241.

⁴⁷¹ A view also presented by the Britain-Biafra Association: Memorandum for FCO, *Britain-Biafra Association*, 06.02.69, UKNA FCO 65/249.

⁴⁷² Waugh attributes this information to Francis Cumming-Bruce, the British High Commissioner in Nigeria at the time of Gowon's ascension to power: Auberon Waugh, *Scanlan's Monthly*, March 70, quoted in: *The Other Side of Nigeria's Civil War*, Africa Research Group, April 1970.

respectively.⁴⁷³ French involvement made it paramount for Britain to ensure Nigeria's victory by way of continuing arms sales.

Oil was an important factor in Britain's war policy: the British government owned Shell-BP during the 60s, received 40% of the oil produced in Nigeria, and faced the need to diversify its sources due to the volatility of Middle Eastern supply.⁴⁷⁴ Nigeria's Eastern region held vast amounts of easily extractable, high-quality oil. Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart noted that 'the French would be glad to pick up our oil concessions if they could', and 'they would be well-placed to do so if the Biafrans could regain control of the oil areas'.⁴⁷⁵ More than two thirds of Shell-BP's oil concessions in Nigeria were located in territory claimed by Biafra, and the behaviour of the oil companies was cautious: they remained undecided for as long as possible and did not face the same pressure to take sides as the government did.⁴⁷⁶ Peace was generally in the oil industry's interest since it would mean that no installations were at risk of being damaged or taken over – Biafra later threatened to sabotage installations – and that smooth operations would be ensured. In the summer of 1969, the prime minister argued that 'everything possible' should be done to help the FMG and Shell-BP to protect oil installations since the investment in Nigeria was crucial to Britain's balance of payments and economic recovery.⁴⁷⁷ To protect these interests, Britain supplied the FMG with arms from the beginning of the war, and by December 1967, the British government was 'firmly committed' to a federal victory.⁴⁷⁸ In August 1969, RAF officers secretly visited Nigeria to advise the Nigerian air force and help them protect Shell-BP installations in Nigeria.⁴⁷⁹

After the decision to support Nigeria was made, the United Kingdom continued a strategy of low-key publicity, attempting to suppress public debate and hoping to discourage discussion in the UN or at the Commonwealth minister's meeting, although Biafra's supporters hoped these institutions would discuss the war.⁴⁸⁰ Editors and journalists were briefed by the Foreign

⁴⁷³ J. Wilson to Tebbit, Secret Note: 'Nigeria and France', 31.10.68, UKNA FCO 65/266.

⁴⁷⁴ 'Fuel Policy: Draft White Paper', Memorandum for Cabinet, Minister of Power Richard Marsh, 23.10.1967, UKNA CAB/129/133.

⁴⁷⁵ 'Nigeria: Memorandum,' Michael Stewart, UKNA CAB 129/139/26.

⁴⁷⁶ Morris Davis, 'Negotiation about oil', *A Journal of Opinion*, 3:2 (1973), p. 24.

⁴⁷⁷ Harold Wilson to Michael Stewart, 29.07.69, UKNA PREM 13/2833.

⁴⁷⁸ Moberly to Norris, FCO, 28.12.1967, UKNA FCO 38/269.

⁴⁷⁹ V. Hartles, FCO, to D.H. Andrews, 17.09.69, UKNA PREM 13/2833.

⁴⁸⁰ Memorandum for FCO, Britain-Biafra Association, 06.02.69, UKNA FCO 65/249; Peter Cadogan, *Save Biafra Committee*, to FCO, 17.02.69, UKNA FCO 65/249.

Office that the conflict was a minor bush war, likely to be over within a short period of time and therefore of little interest to the news media outlets.⁴⁸¹ As a result, at the outset of the war, the BBC told its correspondent in Biafra, Frederick Forsyth, that the war would not be covered.⁴⁸² Despite the emphasis of the British government that the conflict was an internal affair of Nigeria and that the only appropriate body to mediate was the OAU, American and British officials knew the development of the war would depend on foreign intervention and could not be settled through the peace negotiations of the OAU.⁴⁸³

This ambiguous attitude of the British is illustrated by the policy on arms exports. The export of arms to Nigeria during the war was the most controversial policy of the United Kingdom and provoked criticism from Biafra advocates around the world. For Britain, the arms trade had become a way to retain a degree of influence internationally after the dissolution of the empire. It was, moreover, a highly lucrative business.⁴⁸⁴ As the colonial power in Nigeria, Britain had established, trained, and equipped the Nigerian army.⁴⁸⁵ After independence, Nigeria continued to import a large part of its military equipment from the United Kingdom. Initially, the Nigerian government argued that it would embark on a 'police action' to end Biafran secession within about six weeks.⁴⁸⁶ Despite Biafra's boastful demeanour prior to the war's outbreak and its access to arms from other channels, the British government believed that the Federal Forces were 'much stronger' and would ultimately prevail.⁴⁸⁷ Harold Wilson agreed to continue sending arms despite the war as early as 1967 in order to avoid damage to British interests in Africa. Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart argued in a speech before the House of Commons that ending arms supplies at the outset of the secession would have been tantamount to saying: 'We have put you in a position where you are very heavily dependent on us for the instruments of power. Now, when you are faced by a challenge to your authority, we will put you at a very serious disadvantage'. Stewart continued to state that British arms

⁴⁸¹ Memorandum for FCO, *Britain-Biafra Association*, 06.02.69, UKNA FCO 65/249.

⁴⁸² Michael Stewart, 'Biafra: Fighting a War without Guns', *BBC*, 30.07.1995.

⁴⁸³ K. Kwarteng, *Ghosts of Empire*, p. 325.

⁴⁸⁴ Cf. Mark Phythian, *The Politics of British Arms Sales Since 1964: 'to Secure Our Rightful Share'* (Manchester, 2000), p.3.

⁴⁸⁵ Michael Stewart, 'Nigeria', 09.12.68, UKNA CAB 129/139.

⁴⁸⁶ T. Falola and M. Heating, *A History of Nigeria*, p. 175.

⁴⁸⁷ Michael Stewart, 'Oversea Policy: Nigeria', 10.03.69, UKNA CAB 129/140.

constituted 75% of all arms imports into Nigeria before the war, a number Stewart reports as having lowered after the hostilities began.⁴⁸⁸

Two months later, the British Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, George Thomson, stated in parliament that the UK supplied 15% of Nigeria's weapons and that these were carefully controlled quantities that were important more 'in political than in practical terms', while the 'bulk' of arms was supplied by other sources.⁴⁸⁹ Britain slightly relaxed its early restrictions on quantity and type of arms deliveries in late 1967, and it is possible that Thomson's figure is not wholly accurate.⁴⁹⁰ British officials remained deliberately vague about the type and quantity of arms sold, although the UK never supplied advanced offensive equipment, such as fighter jets or weapons of mass destruction, because it was 'politically impossible' in the face of domestic criticism and, of course, to keep options open should Nigeria not win the war. When the Soviet Union began supplying arms to Nigeria in 1967, this was seen in London as a possible threat to its future relations with Lagos, and Britain's support for the country hardened as any loss of influence in Lagos was seen to benefit the USSR, which was already providing the types of arms the British refused to supply.⁴⁹¹ In a sense, however, this development was also indirectly helping the British pursue their policy of restricting arms sales to Nigeria because it lessened the pressure on Britain to supply these arms, while further contributing to a federal victory. Moreover, Nigeria was generally not inclined towards a closer alliance with the Soviet Union beyond the necessary arms purchases, but if the British ended their arms supply, the Russians could conceivably take credit for Nigeria's victory, whereas British-Nigerian relations would deteriorate. Thomson argued in parliament that the British would lose their moderating influence on Lagos if they stopped allowing the arms deliveries,⁴⁹² although critics responded that Britain did not seem to have any restraining influence with Lagos in the first place since reports of a last federal push into Biafra had been published the previous day.⁴⁹³ Thus, British politicians asserted that a unilateral withdrawal from arms exports would do nothing to reduce the overall flow of arms into the war zone from other

⁴⁸⁸ Michael Stewart, 12.06.68, *Hansard* HC vol. 766 col. 290.

⁴⁸⁹ George Thomson, 27.08.68, *Hansard* HC vol. 769 col. 1447.

⁴⁹⁰ McEntee to Moberly, FCO, 21.12.67, UKNA FCO 38/269.

⁴⁹¹ Colin Legum, 'Biafra: is Britain wrong', *The Observer*, 08.12.68.

⁴⁹² George Thomson, 27.08.68, *Hansard* HC vol. 769 col. 1447.

⁴⁹³ Frank Allaun, 27.08.68, *Hansard* HC vol. 769 col. 1447.

sources. The dynamics of the international politics of the war – the French and Russian involvement and the Nigerian responses to British actions – served to entrench British policy.⁴⁹⁴

Throughout 1968, the British government faced harsh public criticism for its arms sales to Nigeria from the press and in parliament, where support for Biafra cut across the major parties.⁴⁹⁵ Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart prepared a memorandum for the Cabinet, explaining Britain's interests in Nigeria. The main aim of Britain was to restore peace in Nigeria but in such 'a way that keeps us on good terms with the Nigerians and their rulers', so that British commercial and political interests would be secured for the future. The memorandum lists the economic stakes: Shell-BP alone held over £250 million in investments, the remaining British investments amounted to around £150-175 million and the export trade with Nigeria was lucrative for Britain.⁴⁹⁶ Moreover, the British government was a majority shareholder in BP until the company was privatised in the 1980s, making the safeguarding of its investment all the more important for the government.⁴⁹⁷ Stewart believed that 'the whole of our investments in Nigeria and particularly our oil interests in the South-East and Mid-West will be at risk if we change our policy of support for the Federal government' – these investments were, therefore, a primary reason behind the British decision to support Nigeria, despite the fact that, publicly, other reasons were emphasised. The prime minister was briefed that 'to refer publicly in the House to our economic stake in Nigeria would be inadvisable as it would be misunderstood and misrepresented [...]'.⁴⁹⁸ The controversial policy of exporting arms to Nigeria, as one Whitehall official observed astutely, would not be acceptable to the public as long as images of starving children prevented an 'understanding for our actions', although he believed it to be 'perfectly defensible'.⁴⁹⁹ The strategy of disclosing as little as possible in order to prevent debate failed in the face of compelling graphic evidence of the suffering that the war entailed, publicised by Biafran propaganda efforts, sensationalist media reports, the appeals of humanitarian agencies, and the campaigns of solidarity groups all around Europe

⁴⁹⁴ J. Henniker, FCO, 22.08.67, UKNA FCO 25/241.

⁴⁹⁵ 'The Biafra Lobby', FCO, June 1969, UKNA FCO/250/1.

⁴⁹⁶ Michael Stewart, 'Nigeria: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs,' 09.12.1968, UKNA CAB 129/139/26.

⁴⁹⁷ Poole, Robert W., 'Privatisation', www.econlib.org (accessed 16.08.2016).

⁴⁹⁸ Cited in: Chibuike Uche, 'Oil, British Interests, and the Nigerian Civil War', *The Journal of African History* 49 (2008), p. 113.

⁴⁹⁹ Lewis to Curson, FCO, October 1968, UKNA FCO 26/299.

and North America. References to national interests did not trump moral outrage over the suffering in Biafra.

West Germany

West Germany was relatively uninvolved in the politics of the war and attempted, like the U.S., to remain neutral, while supporting the FMG, diplomatically. The West German government maintained no diplomatic relations with Biafra and supported Nigeria and the OAU principle of the preservation of the colonial borders.⁵⁰⁰ Like most other Western countries, West Germany faced a public that expressed concern about suffering in Biafra and was highly critical of government policy, demanding humanitarian and political measures to bring about a peaceful end to the war – a remarkably large amount of letters to the government by concerned citizens and organisations illustrates this. Officials believed that public concern was mainly due to the ‘obviously partisan reporting of parts of the West German press’, which were sympathetic to Biafra.⁵⁰¹ Public opinion was one of three factors that determined West German policy towards the war, and Foreign Office officials were careful to take public opinion into account in their policy guidance. The other two factors were, first, the safe-guarding of future economic and political relations with Nigeria as part of the expansion of West German influence in Africa after decolonisation and, second, concerns about the diplomatic inroads made by the German Democratic Republic (GDR) into Nigeria. The Foreign Office was still striving to isolate the GDR and prevent its recognition by other states in line with the Hallstein doctrine, although Willy Brandt would renounce the doctrine as chancellor in late 1969. Balancing these aims with the need to respond to public criticism and avoid any affront to Nigerian leaders forced the West German government into a position in which it officially supported Nigeria but put an emphasis on relief contributions to highlight its concern for Biafran suffering.

Decolonisation opened new opportunities for expanding influence in Africa. Whereas Britain and France hoped to protect their influence, in 1959, at the first conference of West German ambassadors in Africa, West German diplomats agreed that it was necessary for West

⁵⁰⁰ AA to Tel Aviv Embassy, 16.08.1968, PA I B34/744.

⁵⁰¹ Theierl, Memorandum, ‘Civil war in Nigeria’, BMZ, 01.07.68, B 213/3971.

Germany to further extend its political and economic relations with African countries.⁵⁰² West German diplomats considered this not merely a plan to project national interests onto Africa but, in the context of the Cold War, also as an expression of the desire to keep Africa bound to Europe and the West for the future. Apart from creating opportunities for West German interests, decolonisation presented long-term challenges for future European dominance in Africa. Soviet advances in Africa were to be halted and countered with European strategies. Although the conference did not achieve a consensus on how to achieve this, it was believed that centuries of colonial rule had acquainted Africans with European ideas and ideologies, and that African people were, therefore, more inclined towards Europe and the West as opposed to the socialist states of the East. Yet, paternalistic and even racist thinking persisted among the majority of officials and diplomats attending the conference, despite official statements that Western policy towards Africa would need to be based on 'real cooperation'.⁵⁰³ Important tools for the maintenance of close relations with African countries were identified in cultural and development aid as well as public relations efforts. Policy was to be grounded in interests, not idealist sentiment or morality, and one official retorted to the suggestion of European responsibility resulting from the slave trade or colonial greed: 'this responsibility [...] is as hypocritical as the white man's burden'. He then continued with a statement that was indebted to realist political theorist Hans Morgenthau: 'Moral justification is always a consequence of policy, but should never be its motive'.⁵⁰⁴

West German policy in Nigeria during the war conformed to the general policy framework sketched at the conference but placed a greater importance on national interests – especially the future economic cooperation with Nigeria. West German companies had pursued a few projects in Nigeria with the help of funds earmarked for technical development aid. In 1962, West Germany had granted DM 100 million in capital aid to Nigeria and, these funds were used to build a bridge in Lagos and hospitals in the North.⁵⁰⁵ The bridge, built by a West German construction company, opened in the summer of 1968 during the war. The opening ceremony, at the height of public concern over Biafra, was a politically delicate event

⁵⁰² Torben Gülstorff, 'The white man's burden? Die bundesrepublikanische Afrikapolitik um 1969 zwischen "moralischer Verantwortung" und "realen Interessen"', *Zeitgeschichte-online* (2010), p.1, <http://www.zeitgeschichte-online.de/thema/white-mans-burden> (accessed 08.07.2017).

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁵⁰⁵ Memo prepared for Parliamentary debate on 28.06.68, AA, PA B34/734.

that illustrates the diplomatic dilemmas governments faced at the time. A memorandum of the Foreign Office noted that the opening would hold symbolic meaning for the friendly relations between Nigeria and West Germany that had most recently been strained by the pro-Biafran sentiments of press and public, the halting of development aid, and the prohibition of arms exports from West Germany; a strain deepened by an anti-German press campaign in Nigeria. Moreover, the opening, it was argued, would allow West German officials to discuss important political issues with their Nigerian colleagues.⁵⁰⁶

A project that had the potential to become more controversial was an aircraft works in Kaduna, Northern Nigeria, run by the West German company Dornier. This was based on an agreement of 1963 to the effect that West Germany would support the creation of a Nigerian air force. Airplanes and spare parts that Nigeria bought from West Germany were serviced by West German engineers, whose role included training Nigerian engineers and pilots as well as advising on the establishment of an air force. Moreover, West Germany promised to send spare parts beyond the end of the contract. This advisory group of technicians was to be financed by West Germany and Nigeria in equal parts; however, Nigeria's half was loaned by the West German government. This funding was to be fully transferred to Nigeria, but the date for this to happen had been repeatedly postponed, and in March 1966, the contract ran out and needed to be renewed. The Foreign Office believed a discontinuation of the project would undo much of the progress made over the years in West German-Nigerian relations, besides probably spelling the collapse of the Nigerian air force.⁵⁰⁷ During the civil war, the disentanglement of the West German government from such sensitive matters was seen as urgent, and the Foreign Office encouraged Dornier to continue its activities in Nigeria but also stressed the need to sever government ties to the operation.⁵⁰⁸ The West Germans had also helped to build a munitions factory in Northern Nigeria, and in a meeting with West German ambassador Axenfeld in late 1968, Gowon asked for material supplies for the munitions factory and spare parts for the aircraft works; Axenfeld, however, declined the request. The West German parliament, he argued, would monitor compliance with the policy not to send arms and related materials into conflict zones, and neither Nigeria, Biafra, nor Vietnam would be

⁵⁰⁶ Memorandum, AA, 31.12.68, PA AA B34/747; Lagos embassy to AA, Minutes of a conversation between Axenfeld and Gowon, 14.12.68, BAK B122/5360.

⁵⁰⁷ Communication from AA to BMF, 12.12.66, BAK B126/25140.

⁵⁰⁸ Report, 08.01.68, BK B126/31458.

supplied.⁵⁰⁹ Despite officially supporting Nigeria, West German officials were careful not to alienate the public.

Development cooperation was a vessel to further the interests of the West German state and to increase its political power on the resource-rich continent, opening Africa's emerging markets to West German business and industry. As the aforementioned examples show, development cooperation funds that invested in infrastructure projects were often paid to companies from the donor country, who undertook the construction work. In 1968, representatives of different West German ministries met to discuss views on development aid because public sympathy for Biafra made this a delicate issue. They agreed that current, non-strategic projects would be continued, but no major new projects should be begun until the end of the war, although the Foreign Office and the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development were prepared to decide on a project by project basis. An official noted, specifically, that it would be good publicity if the West German engineers at the munitions factory in Kaduna were withdrawn. Yet, it was the view of the West German ambassador in Lagos that the war was 'practically won by the FMG' and since the country was of considerable economic interest to West Germany, the Nigerians should, therefore, not be angered by a 'restrictive' policy; a view shared by the Foreign Office, although the latter noted that it was likely that the war would continue for some time.⁵¹⁰ Ending development aid, a Foreign Office official argued, would be seen by Nigeria as a form of intervention rather than neutrality, and it would not result in greater influence over the FMG with regard to the conduct of the war. A very similar argument as was put forward by the British regarding the arms sales: stopping them would be considered by Nigeria as an 'unfriendly act' and mean the loss of influence in Lagos for Britain, while other states would fill the gap in the supply. In addition, private companies were active in Nigeria despite the war, and the economic development in zones not directly affected by the war was 'astoundingly good.'⁵¹¹ West German companies were running successfully, and the Nigerian government could expect new sources of income from the coming harvest of tropical products and the export of oil from the Mid-West.⁵¹² In late 1968, the West German foreign minister Willy Brandt assured his Nigerian colleague of West German

⁵⁰⁹ West German embassy to AA, 14.12.1968, BAK B122/5360.

⁵¹⁰ Memorandum, AA, 26.07.68, BAK B122/11623; AA to BMZ, 29.10.1968, BAK B122/11623.

⁵¹¹ AA to BMZ, 29.10.1968, BAK B122/11623.

⁵¹² Lagos embassy to AA, 14.02.68, BAK B126/31458.

support for post-war reconstruction, a good opportunity to show West Germany's goodwill, temporarily restore strained relations, and secure economic opportunities for the future.⁵¹³

Another priority was the West German desire to isolate the GDR, politically, and prevent other states from extending diplomatic recognition.⁵¹⁴ In 1968, there were several visits of GDR delegations to Nigeria and plans of establishing a GDR trade mission in Nigeria were discussed. Possible moves towards establishing formal diplomatic relations with East Germany were monitored by West German ambassadors in Nigeria, who frequently broached the subject with their Nigerian colleagues and warned that the establishment of a GDR trade mission – though, not comparable to formal diplomatic relations – would lead to a deterioration of relations and an end of development aid.⁵¹⁵ A West German embassy official noted that the development of Nigerian-GDR relations would depend on the West German position towards Nigeria – especially as regards continued technical and economic cooperation – the development of the war, and the question of whether Soviet influence could be contained.⁵¹⁶

Although West Germany also supported Nigeria, its policy differed from Britain's. A letter by a Biafra advocate accused the West German government of following 'British directives' because of its support of Nigeria. It included a copy of an *Economist* article from August 1969, arguing that the British policy of support for Nigeria would have to be reconsidered since its rationale no longer held true: the premise that Nigeria would win the war, quickly, and that the Biafran rebellion was not supported by the population.⁵¹⁷ West German interests of securing future relations with Nigeria as part of a wider Africa policy in the wake of decolonisation, and the desire to prevent the diplomatic recognition of the GDR by other states were paramount in defining policy. West Germany, since it supplied no arms or military advice, was only offering diplomatic support, whereas the British government hoped to ensure Nigeria's victory with arms sales, advice on military strategy, and public relations.

The West German government was concerned with public opinion on the war, and like British officials, the West German ambassador in Nigeria noted that the Nigerian government

⁵¹³ AA to BMZ, 29.10.1968, BAK B122/11623.

⁵¹⁴ The relationship between West Germany and the GDR was crucial in shaping German politics in Africa. Cf. Ulf Engel and Hans-Georg Schleicher, *Die beiden Deutschen Staaten in Africa: Zwischen Konkurrenz und Koexistenz, 1949-1990* (Hamburg, 1998); Briggitte H. Schulz, *Development Policy in the Cold War Era: The Two Germanies and Sub-Saharan Africa, 1960-1985* (Hamburg, 1995).

⁵¹⁵ AA to Lagos embassy, 25.11.1968, PA AA IB 34/746.

⁵¹⁶ Lagos embassy to AA, 21.11.1968, PA AA IB 34/746.

⁵¹⁷ Letter of Elfriede Reinke to Federal President, 17.09.69, BAK B122/11624.

had 'missed the opportunity for too long to publicise its own view'. By late 1968, however, this had changed due to Nigeria's increased efforts, and the corresponding media coverage reflected this development.⁵¹⁸ Generally, both the British and West German embassies in Lagos were more inclined towards the position of the Nigerian federal government. A British article noted that the West German public had 'virtually adopted Biafra', mainly because of the efforts of the local churches, and had provided such generous help to the relief effort that due to West German contributions alone 'the drug and medicine situation in [Biafra] seems moderate to good.'⁵¹⁹ A note circulated among senior government officials attests to the amount of public pressure on the government:

[The] threat to the existence of large parts of the eastern Nigerian civilian population led to the increased attention to events in Biafra by the global public. The leading West German print media report almost daily on the terrifying extent of cruelty of the civil war. Therefore, the number of letters addressed to the minister increases steadily.⁵²⁰

Senior politicians and office holders in West Germany received folder loads of letters expressing concern for the suffering in Biafra. These letters 'by no means originate only from church circles or those influenced by them'; 'members of all social strata wish to see a more decisive position of the West German government with regards to the question of Biafra'.⁵²¹ These were answered by generic reply letters that opened with the words: '[...] the West German Foreign Office continues to receive a high volume of letters regarding the events in Nigeria, with innumerable questions, recommendations and suggestions. We ask for your understanding that it is not possible to answer every letter separately.'⁵²² In what follows, the department presented its position on the war, revealing in rather bland and non-committal statements an unwillingness to go beyond the humanitarian contributions the West German government was already making. For instance, it was reiterated that the Federal Military Government (FMG) of Nigeria was the only legitimate government according to international law, and that, moreover, West Germany followed the line of the OAU, as did the General Secretary of the United Nations, U Thant. The diplomatic notion of 'following the OAU's

⁵¹⁸ Lagos Embassy to AA, 14.12.69, BAK B122/5360.

⁵¹⁹ John O'Callaghan, 'Need for shuttle service', *The Guardian*, 06.07.68.

⁵²⁰ Memorandum, 'Civil war in Nigeria', BMZ, 01.07.68, BAK B213/3971.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*

⁵²² Sample Letter including Note on the situation in Nigeria, AA, undated (ca. late 1969), BAK B122/11624.

position' was presented as a way of respecting the independence and sovereignty of the newly freed African countries. Yet, one letter did receive a special reply. A teacher from Hamburg had asked each of her pupils to write a brief letter and send them collectively to the federal president. An official responded to the children that with regard to the war, it was not true that 'one of the peoples is good and the other evil', and he noted that the teacher, despite her well-meaning intentions, encouraged the children to think in stereotypes.⁵²³

Most letters were from organisations or individual activists involved in raising awareness of the famine and the war in Biafra with the aim of collecting donations for aid. Advocates demanded political measures besides the commitment to relieving Biafran suffering. Demands included an immediate cease-fire that would allow for a more effective transport of relief into Biafra, a stronger stand of the West German government against the suffering in Biafra as well as against the Nigerian efforts to exert pressure on other states, especially Britain, to reconsider their position, and finally, a more determined engagement to achieve a peaceful settlement by offering mediation. In the generic answer letter, West German officials argued that such demands implied a greater weight than West Germany had in these affairs. In their view, a unilateral West German recognition of Biafra would not bring about change in the international community's position, nor would it change the outcome of the war. Although probably true, this underestimates the political leverage West Germany could have had, and the encouragement France would have received in recognising Biafra. Moreover, the Foreign Office emphasised that the government fully supported an international arms embargo, and prohibited all arms exports to either side. Yet, it was also stated that an international arms embargo would be impossible to enforce since both Biafra and Nigeria received arms through several channels. Although the West German government supported efforts to bring about a cease-fire, find a peaceful solution acceptable to both Nigeria and Biafra, and aid the affected population, it believed that where 'such important institutions' as the Vatican and Commonwealth Office have failed, it was unlikely to succeed.⁵²⁴

Politicians who were generally more susceptible to public opinion expressed sympathy with Biafran suffering. Personally, Brandt admitted that he found the situation in Biafra

⁵²³ Zimmermann, BPA, Letter, 29.01.70, BAK, B122/11623.

⁵²⁴ Draft Letter, AA, undated (ca. late 1969), BAK B122/11624.

depressing, and on television, Brandt called on West German citizens to get involved.⁵²⁵ Members of parliament expressed concern over Biafran suffering, and in a debate in June 1968, parliament asked the West German government what could be done to stop the war.⁵²⁶ As in Britain, support for Biafra cut across political parties. One month later, in August, three members of parliament planned a visit to Biafra to witness the situation but cancelled their plans fearing a 'politicization' of aid.⁵²⁷

To address these concerns, Willy Brandt spoke before parliament in September 1968. The war, he acknowledged, affected large parts of the West German public. While much humanitarian aid had been provided, it was less known that the West German government had also undertaken political efforts to bring about a peaceful solution. Brandt had met with African heads of state, including Senegalese president Leopold Senghor and president of Niger Hamani Diori, as well as with representatives of other countries and international organisations. It was regrettable, he argued, that despite the many efforts to bring an end to the war, nothing had proven effective thus far, also remarking the special responsibility of Britain and France for 'world peace' in this context. Yet, he pleaded that West Germany's policy of non-interference should not be regarded as indifference.⁵²⁸ Another West German diplomatic initiative was to bring the council of ministers of the EEC to agree on a declaration that would make it easier for Nigeria to gain the status of EEC associate. The declaration was to state that Nigeria would need to avoid violating human rights in the current conflict as a necessary precondition for such a step. Other EEC states such as France, the Netherlands, and Luxemburg did not agree to the proposal – a declaration could, therefore, only be handed over by West Germany, unilaterally, which was not binding for Nigeria's ratification of the treaty.⁵²⁹ The war, however, ended before the ratification. At a meeting of the WEU member states, West Germany suggested a concerted relief effort and an appeal to both sides of the war to end hostilities, which was likewise opposed by other members.⁵³⁰

⁵²⁵ L. Heerten, *Spectacles of Suffering*, p. 271.

⁵²⁶ Adeolu Durotoye, *Nigerian-German Relations: The Role of Political Culture* (Hamburg, 2001), p. 142.

⁵²⁷ L. Heerten, *Spectacles of Suffering*, p. 272.

⁵²⁸ Willy Brandt, Speech in Parliament, 26.09.68, in: H. Grebing, G. Schöllgen and H. Winkler, *Willy Brandt: Berliner Ausgabe* 6, pp. 193-195.

⁵²⁹ Brief for West German Secretary of State for Cabinet Meeting, AA, 21.08.68, PA AA IB 34/743.

⁵³⁰ Frank, AA, Memorandum 22.08.68, PA AA IB 34/743.

During his time as foreign minister and later as chancellor, Brandt did not change West German policy on the conflict. At a meeting with African ambassadors, Brandt reaffirmed that Bonn would not interfere in the war in any way and respect the authority and position of the OAU on the matter.⁵³¹ In a conversation of the Nigerian Commissioner for Information, Anthony Enahoro, and Brandt, the former explained that the FMG would now pursue a military victory because OAU negotiations at Addis Ababa had failed. The West German minister noted that West Germany preferred a peaceful solution but did not protest.⁵³² West Germany remained an ally of Nigeria committed to the federation's territorial integrity until the end of the war. Despite the moral issues at stake and the concern of the public for suffering in Biafra, the scope for action of West German politicians was limited by the conventions of international diplomacy as much as by national interests.

Managing Public Concern: Humanitarian Politics

British and West German officials faced a dilemma. Both countries were inclined to support Nigeria but were challenged by an opposition from the public they could not afford to ignore – and neither could they afford to back the losing side, given the economic significance of Eastern Nigeria. These factors created a tension that forced politicians into a balancing act. West Germany, like the United States once Nixon was in office, devised a 'two track policy': aid contributions and measures to improve relief provision for Biafra would be highlighted publicly, while the policy of supporting Nigeria diplomatically remained unchanged.⁵³³ In this way, since a large part of the support for Biafra was grounded in sympathy with the starving population, humanitarian motives and contributions to the relief effort were used to appease a concerned public even if those measures opposed Nigerian interests.

After the Second World War, humanitarian agencies grew rapidly in number, scope, and prominence, inspired by the widespread hunger and destitution. Oxfam, for instance, was founded in this context, as were the United Nations and its subsidiary humanitarian bodies. At the same time, both development aid and emergency relief became more closely entangled with states, who regulated NGOs and became the primary funders of aid efforts because the

⁵³¹ J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 295.

⁵³² Memorandum, Conversation Foreign Minister with Anthony Enahoro, Nigerian Foreign Minister, AA, 12.09.68, PA AA IB 34/744.

⁵³³ D. Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed*, p. 76.

work of humanitarian organisations was seen as essential to political interests and national security matters. During the Cold War, aid was considered a valuable tool for containment.⁵³⁴ By 1976, Henry Kissinger observed that disaster relief was ‘increasingly becoming a major instrument of U.S. foreign policy’.⁵³⁵ The Nigeria-Biafra War demonstrates one of the ways in which humanitarian politics could be employed as part of interest-based policies.

In the summer of 1968, the British government declared that it would provide £250,000 for relief in Nigeria and Biafra, but Ojukwu refused to accept aid from Britain since the country supplied arms to Nigeria.⁵³⁶ To accept food from the country it was accusing of being complicit in the genocide of its people would undermine the credibility of this very claim. Yet, British donations to the Red Cross were used on both sides of the front line. Publicising British efforts was important for allowing the government to continue its support of Nigeria by reducing public pressure based primarily on humanitarian concern. The Lagos embassy sent a report on a hospital set up in Enugu by British doctors, and the Foreign Office replied that this would be an excellent theme for photographs to document British relief measures in Nigeria; there was a need for good quality images for distribution to the press in order to increase public awareness of the government’s contribution.⁵³⁷ The French embassy asked for figures of the exact relief contribution of the British government and private organisation for use in official statements and conversations.⁵³⁸ In 1968, Lord Shepherd, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, visited Lagos twice with the specific aim of gathering information on the relief effort and finding a way to improve aid provision.⁵³⁹ Such initiative enabled the government to demonstrate to the public that it was putting pressure on Nigeria to allow relief in. The supply of arms, it was argued, ensured the British government a degree of influence in Lagos that could be used to put pressure on Gowon to fight the war with restraint and fully cooperate with the relief organisations to allow for the provision of aid in Biafra. At the time of the second visit, Lord Hunt argued in parliament that the suffering had been used to further a political cause and asserted that ‘our political sympathies must now be subordinated to the overriding need to

⁵³⁴ On humanitarian politics, see chapter 5.

⁵³⁵ M. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, p. 104.

⁵³⁶ M. Stewart, 22.10.68, *Hansard* HC vol. 770 col. 1071; John O’Callaghan, ‘Food at a price for Biafrans’, *The Guardian*, 08.07.68.

⁵³⁷ Lagos embassy to FCO, 17.12.68, UKNA FCO 26/299; FCO to Lagos embassy, 19.12.68, UKNA FCO 26/299.

⁵³⁸ Paris embassy to FCO, 29.11.68, ‘Nigeria: Relief Aid’, FCO 26/299.

⁵³⁹ Malcolm Shepherd, 26.06.68, *Hansard* HC vol. 293 col. 1410.

bring to an end the suffering of human beings'. In Hunt's view, the lead taken by the UK government encouraged many countries to contribute to the relief effort now running, efficiently.⁵⁴⁰ On 12 December 1968, the government announced another £700,000. In a discussion of Nigeria's relief needs at the end of January 1969, amid fears of a renewed worsening of the food situation in Biafra, Shepherd emphasised that this brought total relief contribution of the British government to almost a million pounds and that this would meet the immediate need of the Red Cross.⁵⁴¹

The West German government was likewise concerned with the relief situation and large contributions were made to aid organisations. An appeal by the West German parliament expressed concern about the suspension of relief flights and urged Nigeria to support the resumption of flights as well as the opening of a waterway for relief to be brought into Biafra.⁵⁴² In the same appeal, Ojukwu was asked to do everything in his power to support such a relief solution. Under the chancellorship of Georg Kiesinger, the West German government donated increasing sums for aid in Nigeria and Biafra. In July 1968, Foreign Minister Willy Brandt announced that DM 5 million would be given to aid agencies. This figure almost doubled the following month, when total aid contributions rose to DM 8.65 million.⁵⁴³ A sub-commission for humanitarian aid in Africa was founded in July 1968. Public statements on aid were mirrored by the interest of the Foreign Office in the matter as a potential way of responding to the humanitarian crisis, and thereby addressing the key concern of the West German public without endangering West German interests in Nigeria or, indeed, its relations with close allies – like the United States or the United Kingdom – by changing the course of official policy. According to a memorandum of the West German Foreign Office, the humanitarian contributions of the West German government, including funds from the Foreign Office and from the ministry of economic cooperation and development, amounted to over DM 24 million in the fiscal year 1968. In comparison, donations from private sources amounted to almost DM 46 million for the same year of which the vast majority was collected by the churches, nearly DM 39 million.⁵⁴⁴ Governmental contributions were divided between the aid organisations of

⁵⁴⁰ Lord Hunt, 12.12.68, *Hansard* HL vol. 298 col. 681.

⁵⁴¹ Lord Shepherd, 21.01.69, *Hansard* HL vol. 298 col. 893.

⁵⁴² 'Appell des Deutschen Bundestages zur Wiederaufnahme der humanitären Hilfsmaßnahmen in Nigeria/Biafra', AA, BAK B122/11624.

⁵⁴³ Heerten, *Spectacles of Suffering*, p. 270; Durotoye, *Nigerian-German Relations*, p. 140.

⁵⁴⁴ Durotoye, *Nigerian-German Relations*, p. 139.

the Catholic and Protestant churches in West Germany, Caritas and the *Diakonisches Werk*, as well as the West German Red Cross. Additionally, the memorandum listed other West German contributions to the effort, including religious and secular aid organisations as well as citizen committees. Total West German aid to Nigeria and Biafra amounted to DM 70 million in 1968 – the state was thus responsible for just above a third of the means flowing into the aid effort of the relief organisations.⁵⁴⁵

The importance of relief contributions is also emphasised further by the fact that the West German government monitored and compared the contributions of other states in 1968. A list of the donations of other countries shows that only the United States provided more funds to relief than West Germany, that is, the equivalent of DM 84 million of which more than three quarters came from the government. The US were followed by Norway and the Netherlands – both contributed DM 26 million – and Switzerland gave DM 21 million. Least was, perhaps unsurprisingly, donated by France and Britain. France donated DM 13 million of which only a fraction came from government sources. Britain provided roughly DM 7 million and over two thirds originated from private sources. Despite the moral outcry over Biafran suffering and the public controversy in Britain over arms exports to Nigeria, the West German public donated nine times as much to the relief effort as the British public, although the West German population was only about one and a half times larger than Britain's in 1968.⁵⁴⁶ The West German Foreign Office noted, however, that the figures provided were no guarantee, and that in the case of France, they almost certainly did not reflect the extent of the country's involvement in the conflict.⁵⁴⁷ In total, the West German Foreign Office suggests that roughly DM 239 million had been spent on humanitarian aid for Nigeria and Biafra worldwide. Monitoring its position among international aid contributions assured that West Germany had a credible argument for its active involvement in the aid for Biafra. The memorandum ended with a plan for aid contributions in 1969 and suggested that the government allocate around DM 50 million for this very purpose. According to the authors, this sum was justified because 'the catastrophe in Nigeria and "Biafra" claimed most deaths since the Second World War', and according to UNICEF's estimation, 1.5 million people, mainly children, had died of

⁵⁴⁵ Memorandum on West German humanitarian aid for Nigeria, 'Biafra', AA, 29.01.1969, BAK B126/31458.

⁵⁴⁶ Population data taken from the World Bank's online data base, <https://data.worldbank.org> (accessed 13.10.17).

⁵⁴⁷ On French involvement, cf. Christopher Griffin, 'France and the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970', in D. Moses and L. Heerten, *Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide* (Abingdon, 2017), pp. 156-176.

malnutrition and related diseases by 1968. Church aid organisations estimated that at least DM 600 million would be necessary in 1969 to end starvation, so that the West German sum, although considerable, was only a small part of what would be needed. Two thirds of these allocated funds were to be used in Biafran territory – that is, in proportion to the number of people in need – with the remainder to be used in federally held areas.⁵⁴⁸ But, of course, the continuation of governmental aid was not simply a matter of further help in need in the war zones of Nigeria and Biafra; it was the West German government's most effective approach to appeasing a concerned and critical public at home.

Managing Public Opinion: Discrediting Biafran Propaganda

Unlike West Germany, the British government, despite emphasising its humanitarian concern and its moderating influence on Nigeria, could not effectively follow the strategy of substituting political with humanitarian measures since Biafra refused British aid. Yet, the British government faced criticism for its arms sales not only in Britain but from Biafra advocates around the world. The British government believed that public sympathy for Biafra was largely due to propaganda, and Britain was, indeed, one of its main targets, especially because of status as an ally of Nigeria.⁵⁴⁹ A Whitehall official observed in late 1968:

There is no doubt that the Biafrans, through Markpress, are still having success in winning the sympathy of the ordinary people in Europe and, indeed, in other countries subjected to the full weight of the modern communications media.⁵⁵⁰

Initially, the government's silence on the war had been part of the attempt to discourage public debates of the conflict – as was Whitehall's attempt to brief journalists and editors on how to interpret the conflict. This was premised on the hope that the conflict would be over within a matter of weeks, as Gowon initially implied by announcing the military operation that started the war as a 'police action'.⁵⁵¹ The continuation of the war, the media coverage of the famine, and the public criticism of arms sales made this strategy ineffective. By late 1968, British officials came to the conclusion that they had thus far neglected to efficiently and

⁵⁴⁸ Memorandum on West German humanitarian aid for Nigeria, 'Biafra', AA, 29.01.1969, BAK B126/31458.

⁵⁴⁹ J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 116.

⁵⁵⁰ Letter from Lewis to Curson of the Foreign Office, October 1968, UKNA FCO 26/299.

⁵⁵¹ J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 78.

persuasively express the British line on the conflict. In November 1968, during a Foreign Office meeting on the British government's 'public line' with regard to the war in Nigeria, officials decided that a more positive and 'less defensive' approach was necessary to promote a more favourable view of British policy and counterbalance Biafran propaganda.⁵⁵² A Whitehall official argued that articles by journalists, who became critical of Biafra after visiting Nigeria, such as *The Times*' Margery Perham, helped the government's position. Generally, the official believed that there were 'signs that the press [...] are beginning to realise that the Biafrans are prepared to use the plight of their starving women and children as a major weapon in the political propaganda war'.⁵⁵³ This trend in reporting could be further strengthened if Nigeria invited journalists and facilitated their work, as Biafra had done since the beginning of the war. Those visiting Nigeria as believers in the Biafran cause might come back with a more critical view of the secession.⁵⁵⁴

Officials at the Foreign Office were concerned with the ineffectual presentation of the British position and took measures to remedy the situation. It was planned that the Central Office of Information (COI) would prepare information booklets for distribution in Britain and abroad, setting out and explaining the British view.⁵⁵⁵ British embassies were to receive clarifications of the British line. Additionally, a speech by Thomson in the House of Commons was arranged for 27 August 1968. He reiterated the position that Britain could not remain neutral when a Commonwealth country was faced with secession; influence in Lagos would be lost if the arms supply was ended and, in line with the new approach to defending British policy, the secretary stated that the responsibility for the suffering of Biafrans lay with Ojukwu, who 'refuses to recognise the political and military cul-de-sac into which he has led his people'.⁵⁵⁶ Whereas most governments agreed at least 'broadly' with the British perspective, public opinion in many countries was fiercely pro-Biafran, and that often also meant critical of Britain.⁵⁵⁷ One prominent example is France, where the government aligned with public opinion. The son of the French Foreign Minister, Francois Debré, was a Biafra advocate who

⁵⁵² Minutes of a meeting at the FCO, 21.11.68, UKNA FCO 26/299.

⁵⁵³ Letter from Lewis to Curson, FCO, October 1968, UKNA FCO 26/299.

⁵⁵⁴ Memorandum on Meeting, FCO, 21.11.68, UKNA FCO 26/299; cf. also: Margery Perham, 'Reflections on the Nigerian civil war', *International Affairs*, 46:2 (1970), pp. 231-246.

⁵⁵⁵ Memorandum on Meeting, FCO, 21.11.68, UKNA FCO 26/299.

⁵⁵⁶ George Thomson, 27.08.68, *Hansard* HC vol. 769 cc. 1446-1447.

⁵⁵⁷ Collins to J. Wilson, FCO, 24.01.69, UKNA FCO 26/299.

wrote *Biafra: An Illusion*, an impassioned critique of what he believed to be British complicity in the Biafran genocide.⁵⁵⁸

Justifications of British policy, favourable journalistic accounts, and demonstrative aid contributions complicated the picture but did not change the balance of perception in favour of the British government. If the emotive impact of images of starving children were to be countered, their very basis had to be discredited. This, the government attempted on two planes. On the one hand, it aimed to discredit Colonel Ojukwu and the legitimacy of his regime from the very beginning. It was argued that Ojukwu was basically at the helm of an elite project with no popular support and that the rebellion would be over in a matter of weeks. This prediction did not hold true and was not believed by those journalists visiting Biafra, so the line was later changed to portraying Ojukwu as a cynical leader, exploiting his population for his political ambitions. Moreover, media reports of civilian bombing and large-scale starvation were dismissed by British politicians as exaggerations of Biafran propaganda. And this is precisely why, in the context of the Biafran war, politicians and media outlets pointed out that a public relations firm, Markpress, was handling Biafra's image abroad; it was rather unusual for governments to publicly discuss the activity of public relations firms.⁵⁵⁹ Given the many accounts that came from Biafra by visiting journalists, travelling missionaries, humanitarian workers, and Biafran delegations, this approach had a limited effect.

The second step of disproving the genocide claim proved slightly more effective. Karen Smith observes that in parliament, at least, MPs supporting Nigeria used the word 'genocide' far more often than their pro-Biafran counterparts.⁵⁶⁰ The focus of the debate on whether genocide was an appropriate label distracted from the actual horrors of the war but also enabled Nigeria's allies to disprove claims of genocide and, therefore, cut short the debate on the war's human cost. Of course, disproving genocide did not mean that no atrocities were being committed by the Nigerian armies, but it was easier to disprove the former than to prove that, in fact, the Nigerian army fought the war with the greatest restraint and that human suffering was kept to a minimum. In order to make this approach a credible one, the British advised Nigeria to allow a team of international observers into the country to examine the

⁵⁵⁸ François Debré, *Biafra: An Illusion* (Paris, 1968); Paris Embassy to FCO, 10.12.68, UKNA FCO 26/299.

⁵⁵⁹ On public relations, see chapter 2.

⁵⁶⁰ Karen Smith, 'The UK and "genocide" in Biafra', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 16 (2014), p. 252.

front line as well as the areas conquered by Nigeria. It was a manoeuvre that carried much hope for the British: while they had considered the withdrawal of support to Nigeria as a most drastic measure in case the war continued indefinitely, it was most certainly not the desired outcome.⁵⁶¹

The Team of International Observers

On 20 August 1968, Lord Shepherd met with Anthony Enahoro in London and suggested that the FMG invite a team of observers to investigate genocide allegations and observe the conduct of federal troops in the front areas.⁵⁶² The idea of some form of an international peace force had been debated for some time in the press and in parliament, and this measure, so the British hoped, would help improve the image of Nigeria and refute accusations of genocide. Gowon promised to consider the suggestion but was wary of external infringements on Nigerian sovereignty. Two months after the first front page reports on starvation in Biafra in June 1968, when negotiations at Kampala and at Addis Ababa had failed, Gowon announced again that Nigeria was preparing a 'final push' to capture what remained of Biafra. According to Cronje, this caused the British government some embarrassment and instructed the Foreign Office to renew its pressure on Lagos to allow observers.⁵⁶³ In the Nigeria debate on 27 August 1968 in the House of Commons, the MP and Biafra advocate Frank Allaun noted that Gowon's announcement directly contradicted the government's claims that it was using its influence to persuade the FMG to fight with restraint. The next day, the FMG announced its decision to invite the OAU, UN, United Kingdom, Canada, Sweden, and Poland to send a representative into Nigeria 'to satisfy the world opinion, contrary to the malicious propaganda of the rebels, that there is no intentional [...] destruction of civilian lives [...]'.⁵⁶⁴ Each representative was allowed up to two deputies, and over the period of the war, members of each country were succeeded by new appointments. The chairmanship rotated among the representatives and reports were based on unanimity. If a team member disagreed with the remaining observers,

⁵⁶¹ Michael Stewart, 'Oversea Policy: Nigeria', 10.03.68, UKNA CAB 129/140.

⁵⁶² L. Glass, HC Lagos to FCO, 'Nigeria: International team of Observers', 11.03.70, UKNA FCO 65/782.

⁵⁶³ S. Cronje, *The World and Nigeria*, p. 81.

⁵⁶⁴ L. Glass, HC Lagos to FCO, 'Nigeria: International team of Observers', 11.03.70, UKNA FCO 65/782.

a minority report could be filed. British officials noted, however, that this was better avoided, possibly to give the reports more credibility.⁵⁶⁵

At the end of September 1968, the observer team first met with Gowon before beginning to tour the federal frontlines.⁵⁶⁶ Initially, they had been invited for two months since it was expected that the war would be over within that time.⁵⁶⁷ The first visit was undertaken from 25-30 September 1968, and a first report from 2 October 1968 stated that the FMG fully cooperated and that there were no restrictions to the movements of the observer team. Moreover, it concluded that no genocide was taking place. Apart from achieving this key objective, the report provided insights into the general conduct of federal troops and the situation in the war zone. The observers noted that troops were helping civilians and that Igbos began moving back to their former homes in federally held areas; there was also no sign of the destruction of property. Subsequent reports were similar and added little to the findings of the first. During the second visit, reports of massacres were followed up and found to be untrue. According to the observers, the Queen Elisabeth Hospital in Umuahia, which the Western press had reported to have been bombed, showed 'no signs of bomb damage'. Criticism of the FMG only concerned the treatment of prisoners of war and political detainees as well as problems with transport, communication facilities, and the dependence on the FMG for accommodation.⁵⁶⁸ The first reports successfully dispelled much of the fear abroad that a Biafran genocide was underway, and the British High Commissioner Leslie Glass noted that the British government 'can take private credit for having inspired the invitation of the Observer Team' and that it was unfortunate that this could not be used publicly.⁵⁶⁹

The last observer report covering the period around Biafra's collapse – from October 1969 to January 1970 – reiterated that there was no evidence of genocide and that 'continued accusations of intended genocide can only be interpreted as malicious disregard of the

⁵⁶⁵ E.G. Willan, HC Lagos to J. Wilson, FCO, 31.01.70, UKNA FCO 65/782.

⁵⁶⁶ The members of the team signing the first report were: Major-General Henry Alexander, United Kingdom; Major-General Arthur Raab, Sweden; Major General William Milroy, Canada. A representative of Poland joined the team only later and the UN representative Nils Gussing accompanied the observers. 'Observers in Nigeria find genocide claim not justified', *The Guardian*, 04.10.68.

⁵⁶⁷ S. Cronje, *The World and Nigeria*, p. 82.

⁵⁶⁸ 'Report dated 2 October, 1968 on International Observer Team's visit to 1st Nigerian Division', UKNA FCO 65/178; 'Report released on 15 October, 1968 on International Observer Team's visit to 3rd Nigerian Division', UKNA FCO 65/178.

⁵⁶⁹ L. Glass to M. Stewart, Diplomatic Report 'Nigeria: International Team of Observers', 11.03.1970, UKNA FCO 65/782.

authenticated facts'. Yet, the conduct of federal troops was 'as good as that of any army during and after a war'. There was evidence of looting, ill-discipline – especially of the third marine commando, which resulted in a 'break down of law and order' in the area it occupied – and rape as well as forced marriages. Relief administration was difficult due to a lack of transportation and an inadequate distribution system. However, on the last tour of the observers during this period, the discipline of the third marine commando was reported to have improved, as had the relief distribution more generally.⁵⁷⁰

Critics like Suzanne Cronje denounced the team's mission as an 'exercise in public relations' designed to dispel fears over genocide in Biafra. Cronje's main points of critique are the lack of expertise of the team for the task at hand as well as its dependence on the Nigerian military for transport and access to sites. All members of the team except the UN observer Nils Gussing were military figures. The team, therefore, did not include lawyers, experts in the forensics of genocide, anthropologists, or experts on Nigeria, who could 'tell an Igbo from a non-Igbo'. Moreover, the British observers were implicated in allegations of gathering intelligence for the British High Commission as well as the Foreign Office, and of advising the Nigerian High Command on military planning for the war.⁵⁷¹ Tilman Zülch, a Biafra activist and co-founder of the *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe*, closely followed Cronje's criticism in his piece on the observers under the title 'How true is the truth?'. Zülch noted that the observers had only included looting and rape in their last report because journalists had already reported these activities.⁵⁷² For the British member of the observer team, Major Gray, the principal flaws in the team's operation were due to its dependence on the Nigerian government for transport and accommodation. Gray believed this to be the main cause for the accusation that the observers were merely 'whitewashing' the FMG. Gray's report on the team's creation and role begins with a piece of advice 'to those about to form an[other] Observer Team': 'Don't'.⁵⁷³ The criticism of Biafra supporters like Cronje was not unfounded, but the overall conclusion that Nigeria was not intending to commit genocide appeared to be true.⁵⁷⁴

⁵⁷⁰ 'Report and Findings of the Representatives of Canada, Poland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom for the Period of 1 October to 31 January 1970', *Observer Team to Nigeria*, 12.02.1970, UKNA FCO 65/784.

⁵⁷¹ S. Cronje, *The World and Nigeria*, pp. 84-105.

⁵⁷² Tilman Zülch, 'Wie wahr ist die Wahrheit? – Der Fall der internationalen Beobachterkommission in Biafra 1968-1970', in T. Zülch, *Von Denen Keiner Spricht* (Hamburg, 1975), pp. 189-200.

⁵⁷³ P.A. Gray, 'A Future Observer Team', 23.03.1970, UKNA FCO 65/783.

⁵⁷⁴ For more on genocide, see chapter 1.

In Britain, the findings of the first report were duly reported in the press.⁵⁷⁵ 'Despite the lull in headline news' on Nigeria due to the report, the *Guardian* noted in an editorial that the rejection of genocide did not amount to 'the whole truth' because the war was 'still bloody'.⁵⁷⁶ The West German press likewise reported the observers' findings rather uncritically.⁵⁷⁷ In Sweden, on the other hand, the reports were not covered and the press printed stories on a Biafran genocide throughout 1969. Overall, according to FCO officials, 'the message was slow to take effect on public opinion in Europe and North America, but during 1969 the accusations of genocide died down'. In response to this development, Biafran propagandists switched to other themes and focused on issues of racism and neo-colonialism. At the end of the war, because of widespread fears that a kill-off of Biafrans might follow the federal invasion of the region, genocide accusations briefly surfaced again. In January 1970, journalists visited Owerri and reported evidence they believed the observers had ignored in the press. Allegations that the observer reports were 'whitewashing' the FMG reached a peak. Regarding the last comprehensive report to be filed after the return of the observers, an official noted that this would not be an easy task since it could not be too favourable to be credible, yet, if the report was too critical, it would 'infuriate [the] FMG'.⁵⁷⁸ Nonetheless, 'the fears, voiced by many, that catastrophe would follow federal victory never materialised', and when the observers were disbanded by Nigeria after the end of the war, the move was not criticised.⁵⁷⁹

The reports were used by the government in parliament to justify its policy of support to Nigeria and the continuation of British arms exports with a degree of success.⁵⁸⁰ In a final report on the observer team after the end of its operation, British High Commissioner in Lagos, Leslie Glass, wrote: 'The value of the Team's work cannot be over-estimated. They refuted accusations which had led to most unpleasant personal attacks [on senior politicians]. They played a large part – perhaps a key part – in enabling HMG to resist demands that we should

⁵⁷⁵ 'Observers in Nigeria find genocide claim not justified', *The Guardian*, 04.10.68; Michael Wolfers, 'Nigeria observers find no evidence of genocide', *The Times*, 04.10.68.

⁵⁷⁶ 'If not "genocide," still bloody', *The Guardian*, 11.10.68.

⁵⁷⁷ Tilman Zülch, 'Wie wahr ist die Wahrheit? – Der Fall der internationalen Beobachterkommission in Biafra 1968-1970', in T. Zülch, *Von Denen Keiner Spricht* (Hamburg, 1975), p. 198; Klaus Natorp, 'Keinerlei Beweise für Völkermord in Biafra', *FAZ*, 19.11.1968.

⁵⁷⁸ E.G. Willan, HC Lagos to J. Wilson, FCO, 31.01.70, UKNA FCO 65/782.

⁵⁷⁹ L. Glass, HC Lagos to FCO, 'Nigeria: International team of Observers', 11.03.70, UKNA FCO 65/782.

⁵⁸⁰ Maurice Foley, Minister for African Affairs, 13.03.69, *Hansard* HC vol. 779 col. 1576; George Thomson, Undersecretary for Commonwealth Affairs, 30.10.69, *Hansard* HC vol. 790 col. 494.

change our policy of support for the FMG'. Glass regretted that Britain could not publicly take credit for having inspired the invitation of the observers since this may have benefitted the image of senior politicians and the prime minister.⁵⁸¹

The mandate of the observer team was focused on the most pressing issue of the war, the safety of Igbos and other Easterners, thereby often disregarding other or only indirectly relevant issues of much import. The preoccupation with the question of whether genocide was taking place not only overshadowed the very real suffering of the Biafrans and all others affected by the war, but it also glossed over the problems that led to secession in the first place. The observer team proved effective as a measure supposed to counter the concerns of the public about the possible genocide taking place in Biafra, but a large number of private advocacy committees remained active, and humanitarian workers continued their work even after Biafra's collapse. The extermination of Igbos or Biafrans did not take place and politicians, relief organisers, and the media applauded Nigeria for the reconciliatory spirit with which the reintegration of Biafra was approached, emphasising the necessity of Gowon's 'no victor, no vanquished' policy for the future of the Nigerian federation.⁵⁸² Yet, British politicians still sought to 'destroy the personal image of Ojukwu' by launching a press campaign to denounce the former Biafran leader 'with a fully documented, comprehensive broadside, followed by silence'.⁵⁸³ If Ojukwu sought to settle in the UK after the war, he was prevented from doing so.⁵⁸⁴ Even in retrospect, it was important for the government to assert its perspective and justify its policy, which, it believed, had been completely vindicated by the end of the war.⁵⁸⁵



The British and West German governments responded to criticism of their Biafra policies with a twofold strategy: on the one hand, they acknowledged and acted upon the human suffering by increasing their aid contributions and publicising them; on the other hand, especially the British government took measures to discredit the premises on which the support for Biafra

⁵⁸¹ L. Glass, HC Lagos to FCO, 'Nigeria: International team of Observers', 11.03.70, UKNA FCO 65/782.

⁵⁸² John Clare, 'Victors show courtesy to defeated officer', *The Times*, 16.01.70; Colin Legum, 'After the tragedy', *The Observer*, 18.01.70; Georg Huessler, president of West German Caritas, quoted in: 'Nigeria feeding 700,000 Ibos a day', *The Guardian*, 29.01.70; Maurice Foley, British Minister for African Affairs, quoted in: Patrick Keatley, 'Nigeria bans Cheshire', *The Guardian*, 17.01.70; 'Africa ponders Nigeria', *The Times*, 12.03.70.

⁵⁸³ K. Kwarteng, *Ghosts of Empire*, p. 335.

⁵⁸⁴ Cabinet memorandum, 26.03.70, UKNA CAB/128/45.

⁵⁸⁵ Cabinet memorandum, 13.01.70, UKNA CAB/128/45.

rested. In challenging the image of Biafra that emerged from public relations efforts, media reports, and activist accounts, opponents of Biafran independence essentially established a counter discourse that discredited Biafra's claim to victimhood, the legitimacy of its rulers, and the veracity of the genocide claim. These competing interpretations of the war raised the complexity of the issues. While a large part of the public was drawn to sympathise with the Biafrans because of the emotive impact of the 'death imagery of Biafra's struggle', once the foundation of these was called into question, much of this support was shaken.

At a time when conventional political interventions in the form of peace negotiations failed and embargoes as well as diplomatic pressure were slightly inopportune, the increasing focus of protesters on highly media-effective humanitarian issues forced governments to react by contributing to the aid effort. In political rhetoric, humanitarian intervention, despite its political implications, was severed from politics. This was an especially common theme in American and West German statements on the war. Both countries donated large sums to the relief effort in Biafra, while in fact supporting Nigeria. For Britain, the situation was more complicated. Its arms sales to Nigeria, despite the rhetorical justification that it had been the nation's 'traditional arms supplier', revealed its political position, clearly. Nevertheless, the British government was involved in providing relief, and British aid was used in the war zones on the Nigerian side of the frontline as well as throughout the country once the war was over.

Archival documents show how important it was to governments to respond to public concerns. They devised strategies to manage public opinion and to change the public perception of the conflict as opposed to changing their policies. As a concession to public concerns about the famine in Biafra, they contributed to the aid effort. Britain, facing more severe criticism, also made efforts to discredit the Biafran leadership and its claim that Nigerians perpetrated a genocide against Biafrans. West Germany, since it did not send any arms to Nigeria or Biafra, could pose as a neutral observer, committed to bringing about a peaceful solution but unable to affect the conflict's outcome without broader European support. Both countries upheld their political positions despite public criticism.

4. The Other '1968'? Biafra Advocacy

*'We are sending food to starving children in one ship
and bullets to shoot them down in another.'*⁵⁸⁶

When British prime minister Harold Wilson visited the West German government in Bonn in February 1969, bags of what some observers believed to be ox blood – police later said the bags contained paint – were thrown at the limousine in which Wilson was travelling and the 500 West German and foreign students who protested shouted 'Wilson murderer' and 'Wilson's weapon's, Biafra's death'. Referring to the demonstration in a later speech Wilson said: 'I sympathize with the sincerity of their views, but they are wrong.'⁵⁸⁷ Wilson met with a similar welcome by demonstrating students holding banners calling on Wilson to 'stop your bloody war' during a state visit to Stockholm later that year.⁵⁸⁸ The international media coverage of the famine in Biafra resulted in unprecedented responses from the public and inspired the creation of associations and committees supporting Biafra by raising awareness about the war, the secessionist state's project, and the humanitarian situation in Biafra. As a result, the British government faced a world opinion sympathetic to Biafra and critical of British arms deliveries to Nigeria and became a primary target of supporters of Biafra around the world – Biafra unions from West Germany, Israel, Kenya, Sweden, and California sent letters to Harold Wilson protesting British involvement. These groups also pressured their own governments to increase their diplomatic efforts to bring about an end to the war and increase humanitarian commitments.

This chapter will explain, with a focus on West Germany and Britain, who got involved in activism for Biafra, how they understood the war and what strategies and rhetoric they employed to mobilise compassion and further Biafra's cause. It will show that Biafra advocates were a diverse group, and although they were most active around 1968, and therefore part of the political activism of the time, they were rather apart from the politics of the new left,

⁵⁸⁶ Harry Keightley, quoted in: 'Arms cargo refused by dockers', *The Guardian*, 11.01.69.

⁵⁸⁷ Harold Wilson, quoted in 'Students in Bonn throw blood at Wilson's car', *The Times*, 13.02.69.

⁵⁸⁸ Roland Huntford, 'Wilson on Six: go carefully', *The Observer*, 06.07.69; Francis Boyd, 'Stewart to face sharp questions on Biafra aid', *The Guardian*, 07.07.69.

commonly associated with 1968 on the European continent. The relative reserve of the new left on the subject of Biafran suffering moved the co-founder of the *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe*, arguably the most successful West German Biafra committee, to note that the Biafra supporters were part of 'the other 1968'.⁵⁸⁹ Biafra activists combined political advocacy with humanitarian concern and their work is indicative of the rise of humanitarian organisations in the post-war period. The heightened humanitarian sensibility as well as the increasingly visual and emotive media coverage of distant suffering contributed to this development. An important role in mobilising support for their respective war effort was played by Biafrans and Nigerians abroad, as will be highlighted, many of whom founded organisations to support their respective side in the war or inspired and supported those who established advocacy groups. Student delegations from Biafra and other ambassadors travelled overseas to promote the new state and win support for secession. The history of Biafra activism is therefore also that of the exchange between the Third World and the developed West, and demonstrates the increasing transnational links that enabled 'Biafra' to become a global cause celebre, links strengthened yet again by the rise of humanitarian NGOs – links that made it harder for governments to assert their point of view without challenge.

The majority of the 'Biafra lobby', as Biafra activists were called in Britain, were not humanitarian organisations, although their work – raising awareness of Biafran suffering and collecting donations for relief – is part of the transition from 1968 political activism to the institutionalisation and popularisation of the humanitarian movement at the time. This chapter reconstructs the history and activities of organisations involved in Biafra advocacy in West Germany and Britain with the help of documents from archives and newspaper articles. The Britain-Biafra Association has left some documents now held by the Bodleian Libraries in Oxford and its publications are available at the British Library. The documents of the *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* are held by its successor organisation, the Society for Threatened Peoples. These sources help to reconstruct events, such as rallies or meetings with government officials. Examples from other countries will point to the transnational links forged by pro-Biafran organisations. The chapter will show that advocacy was caught between the information politics of both sides. Protesting the brutality with which the war was fought, the criticism of

⁵⁸⁹ Tilman Zülch, 'Die anderen 68er: Von der Protestbewegung zur Menschenrechtsorganisation', *Society for Threatened Peoples*, <https://www.gfbv.de/de/ueber-uns/die-anderen-68-er/>.

using economic warfare and the resulting starvation as weapon, often went hand in hand with an uncritical support for the Biafran leadership.

The *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* and Biafra Advocacy in West Germany

As in many European countries, sympathy for Biafra was strong in West Germany, and in 1968 West Germans donated more money to the relief effort than any other European country.⁵⁹⁰ The West German government came under pressure from the public to become more active to alleviate the suffering of the Biafrans, and simultaneously from the Nigerian leadership because of the widespread sympathy for Biafra in press and public opinion.⁵⁹¹ Several Biafra committees had sprung up all over West Germany involving a variety of people in Biafra advocacy. This was partly inspired by the churches and religious organisations that spread information on the war and the plight of the Biafrans, while other activists first learnt about the war from the media. One of the most active and successful organisations founded to take up the cause of Biafra was the *Aktion-Biafra Hilfe*, established in 1968 by three 'politically independent' students of Hamburg University, Klaus Guercke, Tilman Zülch, and Dirk Steenken. These students began by setting up a permanent information stand in the canteen of Hamburg University, which they updated regularly with new information from Biafra. They arranged teach-ins, organised demonstrations, collected signatures and donations, and presented resolutions to the British, Soviet and Egyptian consulates. They distributed 60,000 flyers, put up 3000 posters around Hamburg, and wrote letters to newspapers, intellectuals and politicians. They sent appeals to the press to be printed along with letters to the editor.⁵⁹² The Hamburg branch of *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* arranged for the founding of further committees in Northern West Germany and coordinated activities between committees and activists throughout West Germany and beyond, thus creating a veritable network. One of its patrons, the director of the Evangelical Academy in Hamburg, Joachim Ziegenrucker, wrote about its beginnings, praising its work as an 'exemplary' attempt to strengthen public awareness of

⁵⁹⁰ Memorandum on West German humanitarian aid for Nigeria, 'Biafra', AA, 29.01.1969, BAK B126/31458; see also chapter 3.

⁵⁹¹ Lagos embassy to AA, Minutes of a conversation between ambassador Axenfeld and Gowon, 14.12.68, BAK B122/5360.

⁵⁹² T. Zülch and K. Guercke, 'Über die Tätigkeit der Aktion Biafra-Hilfe', GfbV Archive.

social and political responsibility. The organisation collected donations for the relief effort, and for the most part donated these to church aid organisations.⁵⁹³

Compared to Britain, the political activism of '1968' was stronger than in Britain and provided a background, rhetoric, and strategies for Biafra activists. In a letter to Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, the editor in chief of the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, Zülch complained that the activities of his organisation were only mentioned in the context of the extra-parliamentary opposition, which was harshly criticised by the paper, undeservedly Zülch believed: 'despite the currently understandable resignation, they [the student organisations] contributed to the Biafra campaign.'⁵⁹⁴ There was clearly an overlap between these groups and their activities, but the differences became increasingly pronounced over time, especially when large parts of both the old and the new left failed to fully embrace the cause of Biafra. Increasingly, the West German extra-parliamentary opposition functioned as a negative example, from which the *Aktion-Biafra Hilfe* sought to differentiate its efforts and activities. In his article on the history of the organisation titled 'the other 1968', Zülch criticised the inaction of the Socialist West German Student Union (SDS).⁵⁹⁵ Moreover, the explicit differentiation from the new left was intended to save the organisation's credibility among the West German press, political parties and businesses that condemned student radicalism. Zülch observed that humanitarian aid was not particularly popular, because it was 'not about political doctrines'.⁵⁹⁶ Beyond students, supporters of the *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* included religious ministers, doctors, employees and workers of all kinds.⁵⁹⁷

The major focus of the *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* was to create publicity for the Biafran plight. In a letter to the West German weekly, *Die Zeit*, the organisation criticised the insufficient coverage of its first rally in Hamburg, which the paper had commented on 'only in the context

⁵⁹³ Excerpt from Joachim Ziegenrucker on the *Aktion-Biafra-Hilfe*, *Konvent Kirchlicher Mitarbeiter* 14 (November 1968), GfbV Archive.

⁵⁹⁴ T. Zülch to M. Dönhoff, 17.07.68, GfbV Archive; One appeal for an end to arms supplies and peaceful negotiations was supported by the student groups: LSD, Republikanischer Club, SHB, and Jungsozialisten, K. Guercke, D. Steenken and T. Zülch, Flyer: 'Über 150 000 Tote', June 1968, GfbV Archive.

⁵⁹⁵ T. Zülch, 'Auf keinem Auge blind: Der Einsatz für die Rechte bedrohter Völker', in G. Nolte and H.-L. Schreiber (eds.), *Der Mensch und seine Rechte: Grundlagen und Brennpunkte der Menschenrechte zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen, 2004), p. 75.

⁵⁹⁶ Flyer, 'Frohe Weihnacht: Mit 700 000 Hungertoten Biafranern im Dezember', *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe*, December 1968, GfbV Archive.

⁵⁹⁷ 'Die anderen 68-er', *Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker*, https://www.gfbv.de/uploads/download/download/die_anderen_68er.pdf (accessed: 15.09.17).

of the “protest students”. The peaceful demonstration of the *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe*, the organisers lamented, did not attract as much attention as more violent and spectacular protest, even though more publicity for its campaign would be vital for ‘encouraging further support’ for its cause.⁵⁹⁸ The *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* repeatedly sent reports to the West German press, distributed leaflets, published a brochure and a book, and reached out to a host of other organisations of the Hamburg area in over 500 letters that appealed to people’s conscience and asked for their support. On one instance, to protest the failure of the German press agency (dpa) to cover the ‘genocide in Biafra’ more comprehensively and print the information provided by the *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* and the Evangelical Student Congregation, members of these organisations held a two-day hunger strike in front of dpa’s offices.⁵⁹⁹

In their efforts to publicise the plight of the Biafrans, the activists often drew on elements of Biafran propaganda narratives. They argued that Biafrans were the victims of genocide perpetrated by Nigeria and made frequent references to the Holocaust, one flyer read ‘Biafra is a single concentration camp – starvation replaces gas’.⁶⁰⁰ In a memorandum written after the war, Zülch discredited the observer team as financed by Nigeria and unreliable and denounced the ‘extremely partisan’ coverage of certain West German journalists, which prevented the outrage the public would have otherwise felt regarding Britain’s policy. According to Zülch, there were unbridgeable differences between ‘the backward, feudalistic North and the dynamic, progressive East,’ and the war was only possible, because of the ‘macabre complicity’ of the Soviet Union and Britain, whereas France’s support for Biafra was merely ‘half-hearted’. What was lost along with Biafra was the possibility of a black-African state that would be able to develop a modern industrial society based on ‘black-African socialism’. Zülch was convinced of the genuine suffering of the Biafran people and the danger a reintegration into Nigeria held for them. He wrote that after the war, ‘the destruction [of the Biafran people] went on’: journalist Richard Hall reported that Nigerian troops shot into streams of refugees, and desperately needed aid was delayed because the church organisations who had provided relief during the war and were well-placed to continue doing

⁵⁹⁸ T. Zülch to M. Dönnhoff, 17.07.68, GfbV Archive.

⁵⁹⁹ Klaus-P. Siegloch, ‘Aufruf des AStA Auslandsreferats’, December 1968, GfbV Archive; ‘Declaration of the action group “Fasting for Biafra” on the hunger strike at the dpa’, 17.12.1968 GfbV Archive.

⁶⁰⁰ Flyer, ‘Biafra ist ein einziges Konzentrationslager – die Aushungerung ersetzt das Gas’, undated, GfbV Archive.

so were expelled by Nigeria.⁶⁰¹ Zülch and Klaus Guercke published an edited volume on the conflict in 1968 with a foreword by Golo Mann and contributions from other Biafra supporters like noted anthropologist Stanley Diamond. It was published by the evangelical Lettner Publishing House in Berlin and a second edition was printed in 1969. The introduction was written by Tilman Zülch under the title 'A Plea for the Republic of Biafra'. It outlines Zülch's view of the conflict and restates Biafra's case for independence. Although increasing European integration and pan-African ideals were good arguments against Biafran secession and the dissolution of the Nigerian state, the danger to the survival of the Biafran people justified an exception, Zülch argued.⁶⁰² He then went on to criticise the arrogance visible in some writing on African development that could also be observed in the coverage of the Nigeria-Biafra war. The war was often described as only a tribal feud, even though according to Zülch distinct nations or peoples were involved in the struggle.⁶⁰³ Yet, by adopting the dichotomy of the progressive East and the backward North, he was applying similarly undifferentiated notions.

Although the *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe*, like many other Biafra activists, used the humanitarian angle to rouse attention, the group was not merely concerned with the humanitarian plight of the starving Biafrans, but supported the political project of Biafra's secession and demanded political steps on top of the humanitarian efforts to remedy the situation. In an appeal to the West German government this is very clear: 'as a last resort to end the ongoing genocide in Biafra [...] only political steps remain.' The appeal demanded of the West German government to diplomatically recognize the Biafran state, to encourage other European states to do likewise, and to put pressure on Britain and the Soviet Union to end their arms supply to Nigeria.⁶⁰⁴ Such action would have increased the probability of other states following suit and would have enhanced the legitimacy of the Biafran regime. Recognition may have opened ways to access international fora, such as the United Nations General Assembly which had thus far declined to discuss the issue. As far as the UN were concerned, the war as an internal crisis of a sovereign member state. An important step to make recognition more probable was achieving a cease-fire. Essentially, a cease-fire would freeze the political realities, and by doing so enhance the Biafran leadership's claim to *de facto* control of the territory delineated as

⁶⁰¹ Tilmann Zülch, 'Memorandum', undated ca. 1970, GfbV Archive.

⁶⁰² Tilman Zülch, 'Plädoyer für die Republik Biafra', in Tilman Zülch and Klaus Guercke (eds), *Biafra: Todesurteil für ein Volk?* (1968)

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁴ T. Zülch and K. Guercke, 'Über die Tätigkeit der Aktion Biafra-Hilfe', GfbV Archive.

Biafra. Moreover, peace negotiations that could have followed a cease-fire would allow Biafra to make its case publicly implying the *de facto* recognition of the Biafran leadership as a legitimate partner for negotiations – this was the main reason why Nigeria rejected direct negotiations with Biafra if secession was not given up beforehand. The *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* was lobbying members of parliament and successfully gained the support of well-known public figures, writers, and academics for its resolution to the West German government that asserted: ‘It should be unbearable for every West German who is serious about transcending the [Nazi] past, that the destruction of a people is now repeated in Biafra with the help of an ally of West Germany’s. Remaining silent on the policy of Britain is tantamount to complicity.’⁶⁰⁵



Plakat: Klaus Behr

Klaus Behr, ‘Wilson’s Arms—Biafra’s Death’, *Pogrom 6*, 1970.

⁶⁰⁵ The demand was that the West German government should explicitly distance itself from British policy, not an end to arms exports or diplomatic recognition of Biafra, as other resolutions of the ABH had done. The signatories included Jürgen Habermas, Ernst Bloch, Heinrich Böll, Erich Kästner, and Marcel Reich-Ranicki; ‘Appell deutscher Intellektueller an die Bundesregierung’, *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe*, 11.01.1970, GfbV Archive.

The condemnation of British policy, regarding both the arms trade with Nigeria and political support more generally, was a common focus of both the *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* in West Germany and the British Biafra organisations. This echoed the emphasis on British involvement in Biafran propaganda. The activists submitted a resolution to the British consulate calling on Wilson to change his policy of exporting arms to Nigeria and instead demanded a cease-fire and a negotiated settlement that would recognize Biafra's right to self-determination.⁶⁰⁶ This resolution had previously been sent to 30 British newspapers and to *Die Zeit* for publication.⁶⁰⁷ A poster announcing the demonstration against Wilson's visit to Bonn, showed the prime minister standing before a backdrop of starving Biafrans, holding arms in his hand looking as if they were a bouquet of flowers. The poster carried the title 'Wilson's arms – Biafra's death' and among those groups supporting the planned action were the *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe*, LSD, SHB, Republikanischer Club, KSG Münster, as well as several unions of foreign students in West Germany, such as the Czechoslovakian Student Union, the Union of Greek Students, and Afghan Students.⁶⁰⁸ Later that year, another group of Biafra activists launched 'Aktion British Week' and distributed flyers calling for a boycott of British goods during a British sales week in Hamburg from 26th September until 3rd October. An illustration by the Swiss artist Celestino Piatti is printed on the flyer depicting an emaciated black figure, whose head looks like a skull. A white hand in a sleeve showing the British flag is around the figure's neck. Beside the hand around the neck of the black figure is the name Biafra, written with an 'f' that resembles a cross, or a tombstone. The meaning is clear: Britain is killing Biafrans. The text criticises British arms exports to Nigeria and the placing of economic interests before Biafran lives: 'Don't become complicit in the death of innocent women and children! Don't buy British products.'⁶⁰⁹

Like Biafra advocacy groups elsewhere, the *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* organised demonstrations and rallies. In October 1968, a rally took place in Hamburg and the former mayor of West Berlin, Heinrich Albertz (SPD), and Günter Grass delivered speeches.⁶¹⁰ Grass' speech, in which he attacked the inactivity of the West German society and government in the face of genocide, was later published in *Die Zeit*. West Germany, he noted, had a special responsibility to prevent

⁶⁰⁶ Resolution an die Britische Regierung, undated ca. 1968, GfbV Archive.

⁶⁰⁷ T. Zülch to M. Dönnhoff, 17.07.68, GfbV Archive.

⁶⁰⁸ Klaus Behr, Poster 'Call to Wilson Demonstration: Wilson's arms – Biafra's death', February 1969, printed in: *Pogrom 6*, 1970, GfbV Archive.

⁶⁰⁹ Peter Pommée, Jan Marth, Elfriede Reinke, Ruth Sartorisio, Flyer, Boycott British Week, Aktion British Week, GfbV Archive.

⁶¹⁰ Flyer, 'Kundgebung, 04.10.68: Biafra – Todesurteil für ein Volk', GfbV Archive.

the recurrence of genocide: ‘the knowledge about Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Belsen compels us to address openly those responsible for the genocide in Biafra, because silence [...] means complicity.’ Without external arms supply, the war could have never assumed genocidal proportions, he argued, a genocide that ‘happened in full publicity’ for a few days, and then, when new headlines replaced the coverage of Biafra, ‘the world [went] back to business as usual.’ There was no intervention or political recognition of Biafra because of the national interest of other states, especially regarding oil.⁶¹¹

There were many points of connection between Biafrans and the *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe*. In May 1968, a delegation of the Biafran Union of Students was invited to tour West German university towns and deliver speeches. Throughout the war, the organisation helped around 60 Biafran students in West Germany to find accommodation and funding.⁶¹² After the beginning of the war, Nigeria made the continued payments of scholarship for students abroad who came from East dependent on signing a declaration of loyalty to the Nigerian state. As a consequence, those students who would not sign lost their funding; others lost private funding due to the blockade of Biafra, because their families or benefactors could not send money abroad. At the time, the controversial *Ausländergesetz* [foreigner law] of 1965 allowed West German authorities to deport politically active immigrants who had taken part in demonstrations, protests or had publicly expressed criticism of West Germany or its allies. Protests and press criticism prevented the deportations of many under the foreigner law, including that of Bahman Nirumand, a vocal critic of the Iranian Shah. Obi Ifeobu, a medical student from Biafra, was less lucky. Ifeobu was deported after taking part in a demonstration against the Vietnam War with the justification that Ifeobu was ‘disrupting public safety and the friendly relations between West Germany and the United States’. After pressure from the public, authorities admitted that Ifeobu’s deportation was ‘unfounded’, but refused to pay for his return.⁶¹³ Along with other Hamburg student organisations, the *Aktion-Biafra Hilfe* helped him re-enter West Germany to complete his studies and collected funds to finance his stay.⁶¹⁴

Tilman Zülch travelled to Biafra to witness the situation there and published articles in regional West German newspapers. One of these articles was entitled ‘In Biafra a nation

⁶¹¹ Günter Grass, ‘Völkermord vor aller Augen: Ein Appell an die Bundesregierung’, *Die Zeit*, 11.10.68.

⁶¹² T. Zülch, ‘10 Jahre Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker – 5 Jahre beschattet’, *Pogrom* 68, 1979, GfbV Archive.

⁶¹³ Q. Slobodian, *Foreign Front*, pp. 44-49.

⁶¹⁴ AStA-Info, *Hamburg University*, 16.04.69, GfbV Archive.

developed out of refugees' and argued that 'Biafran patriotism' had become so strong that one could speak of a Biafran nation that had developed, comparable to European nations. Zülch asserted that he did not encounter the 'dying, apathetic people' misled by its leaders, to the contrary Biafra left a vital and industrious impression – to him even most refugees, who made up around two thirds of the Biafran people, appeared 'happy'.⁶¹⁵ In short, according to Zülch, the increasingly critical news coverage suggesting that Biafra was all but defeated and casting Ojukwu as a cynical leader was wrong. Biafra had established itself as a nation and would not easily give up its struggle.

The Biafra advocacy of the *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* differed from the political activism of other student groups, for instance in the context of Vietnam. Zülch was interested in the plight of the Biafrans and was at the time working on a doctoral project on the South Sudan. Having been affected personally by post-war expulsion of West Germans from the Sudetenland in his youth, Zülch took an interest in the struggles of groups who faced persecution or lacked their own state, such as the Biafrans at the time. The *Society for Threatened Peoples* that grew out of the *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* was then broadening the scope to encompass the grievances of other ethnic groups around the world: 'a new type of conflict' that was overlooked by 'development groups, the Third World movement, and the dogmatic left.'⁶¹⁶ The outlook was humanitarian, but the strategy was political. In a way, the *Aktion-Biafra Hilfe* had much more in common with the more politically active of the humanitarian organisations, such as Oxfam for instance, than with other political groups of the extra-parliamentary opposition. Its critique of the new left's blindness to crimes that did not fit the framework of liberation struggles was shared by MSF co-founder Bernard Kouchner: the universal wish to support and aid all those suffering around the world, regardless of their political conviction or religious belief was characteristic of humanitarianism since its inception and this universality would also become a major feature of the emerging human rights movement.⁶¹⁷

The 'Biafra Lobby': Support for Biafra in Britain

In Britain, there were several committees and associations with partly overlapping membership that took up Biafra's cause with regional branches all over the country. The main

⁶¹⁵ T. Zülch, 'In Biafra entstand eine Nation von Flüchtlingen', *Der Tagesspiegel*, 09.03.69.

⁶¹⁶ T. Zülch, Editorial, *Pogrom* 156, 1990, GfbV Archive.

⁶¹⁷ S. Moyn, *The Last Utopia*, p. 14.

organisations were the Save Biafra Committee, the Britain-Biafra Association, the Friends of Biafra Association, the Biafra Union, and the Committee for Peace in Nigeria initiated by Fenner Brockway. The government used the term 'Biafra lobby' for advocates of the secessionists, because they promoted Biafran independence. Brockway's committee, however, was not seen as part of this lobby, because it was non-partisan and the committee's aim was less Biafran independence than a peaceful solution to the war. The extent of criticism of the government these organisations generated and the difficulties this created for the government to continue following its policy as well as for the goodwill of Nigeria led the Foreign Office to compile a document with an overview of those in parliament, press, and television who were sympathetic to the Biafran cause as well as the most important pro-Biafran groups.⁶¹⁸ The memorandum made the point that support for Biafra cut across the three major political parties, and while the Communist Party was 'on the fence', Trotskyists were strongly in favour of Biafra – it was difficult to arrive at definitive patterns so diverse were supporters. They were moreover recruited from all religious confessions. In both press and television, the Biafrans had a better representation than the federal government. Among those roused by humanitarian concern were many with 'strong religious convictions', among whom a small proportion are 'militant Roman Catholics', but since even a Catholic weekly, *The Tablet*, was rather balanced in its coverage of the war, the document concluded that it was not possible to assume all Catholics to be necessarily pro-Biafran. Support for Biafra cut through religion and politics in other parts of Europe and North America as well – the emerging movement of humanitarianism and human rights was relatively detached from political considerations and seen as above politics. Yet, advocacy combined humanitarian concern with political lobbying and support for Biafran independence.

In Britain, a large part of those active in pro-Biafran societies were Britons who had formerly lived and worked in Nigeria or Biafra and Biafrans living in Britain. This differed from West Germany where the movement was dominated by students. In Britain, the context is not so much the activism of '1968', the role of the churches is also less significant, it is rather Britain's history as Nigeria's colonial ruler. The Britain-Biafra Association is a case in point, it counted journalists and politicians among its members, including Suzanne Cronje who had

⁶¹⁸ 'Biafra Lobby', FCO, June 1969, UKNA FCO 65/250/1.

previously lived in northern Nigeria. However, the case seems different for the Save Biafra Committee, founded by Peter Cadogan, a Trotskyist who was also involved in the Committee of 100 which organised direct action protest against nuclear armaments.⁶¹⁹ These two organisations were among the most active – comparing the two rather distinct organisations and their activities demonstrates the diversity of Biafra supporters.

The Britain Biafra Association was established in December 1967 by British citizens who had worked in various parts of the Nigerian federation before the war as well as friends and relatives of Biafrans in Britain. The organisation had around 300 members, but its base of support broadened in 1968, and a petition for an arms ban carried 2000 signatures.⁶²⁰ The declared aim of the organisation was to end hostilities between Nigeria and Biafra in a peaceful way that ensured Biafra's autonomy, bringing together those sympathetic to Biafra, and circulating material to MPs, trade unions, and others to promote Biafra's case.⁶²¹ The association had close contacts with Biafra and received material from the secessionist government, including reproductions of Ojukwu's speeches and of other Biafran politicians like Louis Mbanefo, and reproductions of declarations of diplomatic recognition by other African states. Like the members of the West German *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe*, three members of the *Britain-Biafra Association* visited Biafra in April 1968. For Biafra, such outside support was important and the Biafran Ministry of Information arranged an itinerary, accommodation, and transport for the delegation. The delegation flew via Lisbon on a plane of the World Council of Churches, a charity flying relief into Biafra, especially medicine. Once in Biafra, the group met Nnamdi Azikiwe, who had been the first President of Nigeria from 1960 to 1963. Azikiwe supported Biafra during most of the war, but switched his allegiance to the Nigerian side in October 1969 after his attempts to bring the issue before the UN had failed.⁶²² During the meeting with Azikiwe, the delegation discussed the recognition of Biafra by Tanzania, and Azikiwe was of the opinion that other African states would follow suit. Margot Parish, the secretary of the Britain Biafra Association, thought the 'highlight' of the visit was the meeting with Ojukwu. The Biafran leader stated: '[...] as long as there is a single Biafran alive the question of reunification with Nigeria is gone, never to come back, we will never allow it.'⁶²³

⁶¹⁹ Ibid.; Michael Randle, 'Peter Cadogan: Obituary', *The Guardian*, 05.12.2007.

⁶²⁰ Dennis Barker, 'Biafra movement gets a filip', *The Guardian*, 04.06.68.

⁶²¹ 'Memorandum', Britain-Biafra Association to FCO, 06.02.69, UKNA FCO 65/249.

⁶²² Patrick Keatley, 'Call for Ibos to desert Biafra', *The Guardian*, 09.10.69.

⁶²³ C. Ojukwu, quoted in Margot Parish, 'Impressions of Biafra', *Labour Monthly*, June 1968, p. 271.

When asked about the possibility of a settlement along the lines of the Aburi Agreement of 1967, Ojukwu declined. This agreement had set out that Nigeria would become a loose federation with greater autonomy for the component states. Now Ojukwu rejected such federal association with Nigeria, although he envisioned close economic ties. The degree of political support for Biafra among the British visitors is demonstrated by the fact that the delegates did not, even privately, question Ojukwu's rigid attitude. Ojukwu remarked that he believed there was now a change in Britain: 'people were beginning to ask questions,' and the people the delegation met in Biafra were hopeful that the visit signified a prospect of future support from Britain.

Biafra did not fail to impress visitors. Margot Parish, who was part of the delegation travelling to Biafra, published an article on the visit in *Labour Monthly* two months later and concluded: 'we came away from Biafra confident that Biafra is here to stay', she added, 'we must double our efforts to win support for this heroic struggle'. This, she argued, would best be done by bringing about an end to the British arms sales to Nigeria. Parish attempted to debunk arguments commonly made in favour of British support for Nigeria. Pro-Biafra advocates intended to counter the narrative presented by the British government. At Aba General Hospital local people worked voluntarily, the morale of both people and soldiers was high and therefore the assumption that the war would quickly be won by Nigeria was problematic. Parish emphasises that they met several people from the minority tribes who fully supported Biafra, contrary to the federal argument that much of the territory Biafra claimed was inhabited by minorities who resented Igbo domination. During their visit, the delegation of the Britain Biafra Association saw evidence of Biafran successes, such as an ambushed Nigerian convoy showing evidence of Biafran-made mortar shells, as well as signs of Nigerian bombing of civilian targets like markets, schools, and hospitals. The latter, for Parish, was proof that the moderating influence the British government claimed to have on Lagos due the arms supply did not exist. For lobbying purposes and to spread the representation of the Biafran case, the BBA published several pamphlets on the war to promote views that questioned the way the government presented the war. This includes Oxford law professor Harold Greville Hanbury's booklet 'Biafra: Challenge to the Conscience of Britain', sent to government officials. Hanbury sketched the pre-history of the war presenting the Biafran view that Gowon's government had no claim to legitimacy, that Gowon had broken the Aburi agreement – According to Hanbury, American diplomats agreed with the view that the minorities of the

Niger Delta were loyal to Ojukwu and that the latter initially even restrained the wish of the people to secede until this became untenable.⁶²⁴ In short, a history that was as one-sided as the federal version that Ojukwu enjoyed no popular support, was driven by oil interests and was bitterly resented by the minorities.⁶²⁵

These themes recur in the writing of Biafra advocates. The Britain Biafra Association mixed political criticism with propagandistic and paternalistic images of Biafra: 'Britain is being party to the destruction of an able, dynamic and industrious people, who were her friends and pupils [...] who find it very difficult to understand why [Britain] is seeking to destroy them'.⁶²⁶ Biafra was romanticised in these accounts by phrases such as: 'When recruits are needed there is a recruiting campaign and it takes the police and military all their time to control the crowds of young men eager to enlist.' This statement was meant to underscore the popular support of secession and the war effort as well as the superior morale of the Biafrans that promised a difficult and long war, if not Biafran success. Another example is Parish's remark about the women in Port Harcourt collecting money for the war effort: 'money is given as willingly as life itself in Biafra today'.⁶²⁷ These descriptions are exaggerations and show how committed some of Biafra's supporters abroad were to the romantic image of the Biafran nation-building project. Unlike aid organisations, activists were motivated by a purely humanitarian concern but also by a political solidarity – this often included an uncritical acceptance of Biafran propaganda. Referring to pilot Leonard Cheshire, who visited Biafra in March 1969 and subsequently became a supporter of Biafra and set up relief initiatives, Oxfam's West Africa field director, Derek Robinson, expressed the opinion that what Cheshire saw was 'in all probability "stage-managed"'.⁶²⁸ The visit of the Britain Biafra Association to Biafra, for instance, was indeed arranged by the Ministry of Information. After his visit, Cheshire worked together with journalist Winston Churchill to set up a relief effort. Commenting on their lack of experience, Robinson remarked that their efforts were an example of the typical 'conflict between ideals and reality' – Robinson believed that their lack of knowledge of Africa as well as relief administration was evident in their relief plans.⁶²⁹

⁶²⁴ H. G. Hanbury, *Biafra: A Challenge to the Conscience of Britain* (London, 1968), UKNA FCO 65/249.

⁶²⁵ The official narratives of both sides are discussed in chapter 2.

⁶²⁶ Memorandum, Britain-Biafra Association to FCO, 06.02.69, UKNA FCO 65/249.

⁶²⁷ Margot Parish, 'Impressions of Biafra', *Labour Monthly*, June 1968, BLO MSS. Afr. S. 2399/1.

⁶²⁸ D. Robinson to K. Bennett, Oxfam, 03.12.69, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/2/3/1/2.

⁶²⁹ *Ibid.*

The Britain-Biafra Association and the Save Biafra Committee, lobbied the British government, parliament and press. Biafra's advocates believed that Britain could bring about a solution of the conflict if only enough pressure was exerted to force a change of policy. In October 1968, the Britain-Biafra Association asked the British Foreign Office for a meeting, in order to present Biafra's case to officials. Several months later, in early February 1969 a meeting was arranged by the FCO. In the meantime, Foreign Office officials debated the advantages and disadvantages arising from inviting delegation, arriving at the conclusion that while it would likely not improve their position with the Biafran leadership — officials believed nothing short of a 'complete reversal' of the British policy would do that — it would help in reducing criticism from parliament and the press; meeting the delegation without satisfying their demands seemed preferable to not meeting them at all, provided David Hunt, High Commissioner in Lagos, and the FMG were notified beforehand.⁶³⁰ At the meeting, the delegation presented its viewpoint and one member recounted what she had witnessed on a recent trip to Biafra. A memorandum summarising their arguments was submitted to the government. The memorandum argued that the premise of the current policy of supporting Nigeria, that the rebellion would quickly be over, was flawed. The information on which it was based was one-sided, originating mostly from David Hunt and the High Commission in Lagos. However, the main argument for continuing to supply arms, namely that it would assure British influence in Lagos to effect restraint in warfare; was proven wrong by the brutality of the war and the fact that another attempt at a 'final push' was underway at the time of the meeting. Despite 'mounting public opinion' in favour of Biafra, the memorandum continued, the government held on to its policy, although Biafra could not be 'invaded, blockaded and bombarded' without outside help and therefore a change in British policy would contribute to a settlement of the war in peaceful terms; by supporting efforts for a cease-fire, a peace-keeping force, and ending, even unilaterally, the arms sales to Nigeria. To achieve this, Britain should work together with the USA, France, and Russia, and work towards bringing the case before the UN, which was thus far declining to discuss the matter. Such action would prevent the conflict from turning into 'a war without end, with European countries making profit by supplying arms to both sides for African to slaughter African'. The lobbying work of the BBA was not without its effect. Michael Stewart, who had promised in June 1968 that the

⁶³⁰ D.C. Tebbit, Confidential Note, FCO, 03.12.68, UKNA FCO 65/249.

government's policy would have to be reviewed if 'it were the intention of [Nigeria] to proceed without mercy either with the slaughter or the starvation of the Ibo people, or [...] to take advantage of a military situation in order to throw aside with contempt any terms of reasonable settlement', received a letter from a cabinet member, in which she reported that she had attended a meeting of the BBA under the motto 'Biafra Lives' and urged Stewart to work towards changing a policy that 'failed to attain its objects', that is a peaceful solution.⁶³¹

Biafra committees and Biafran Student Unions arranged rallies and demonstrations. The prime minister wrote in his memoirs that in 1968 'demonstrations were increasingly hard to bear, as more and more Vietnam gave place to Biafra for their inspiration.' He believed many of those who protested against the war in Vietnam now took up the cause of Biafra plus 'more, most of them politically uncommitted [...]. They demonstrated in the streets, often silently – with dignity and sorrow – many for the first and only time in their lives.'⁶³² There were quite a number of demonstrations, vigils, and hunger strikes taking place in Britain throughout the duration of the war. At the end of September 1968, a major rally was organised by the Save Biafra Committee at Trafalgar Square. Auberon Waugh of the Britain-Biafra Association and the Biafran journalist Eddie Ekesiobi and the Biafran politician R. Ogabir spoke. The latter firmly expressed the position that Biafra wished self-determination and would not be a part of Nigeria again. Peter Cadogan reported that the Trade Union Congress (TUC) had not committed to asking workers to refuse producing or transporting arms for Nigeria. The speeches were followed by Biafran dances 'of grief and mourning', and finally the rally proceeded to Downing Street to hand in a petition, followed by an over-night vigil with around 100 people taking part, despite heavy rain.⁶³³

The reports of the International Team of Observers, the first of which was published in October 1968, did not change the views of Biafra activists. Heerten's observation that Biafra advocacy weakened after mid-1968, after these reports refuted Biafra's genocide claim and returning visitors, like Margery Perham, changed their opinion of Biafra and begun to support Nigeria needs to be qualified.⁶³⁴ It is true that there were influential personalities, who publicly recanted their support of the secessionists, the media coverage changed its tone and became

⁶³¹ J.D.M. Line to Michael Stewart, FCO, 25.11.68, UKNA FCO 65/249.

⁶³² H. Wilson, *The Labour Government*, pp. 557-558.

⁶³³ 'British policy under savage attack at Biafra rally', *The Guardian*, 30.09.68.

⁶³⁴ On Margery Perham, see chapter 2. On the International Team of Observers, see chapter 3.

increasingly critical of Ojukwu, and relief agencies like Oxfam and the Red Cross noticed a marked fall in revenue in late 1968 for their operations in Nigeria and Biafra, which could indicate disillusionment on the part of the public.⁶³⁵ Generally, however, the lack of money experiences by Oxfam and the Red Cross also reflected increased spending. However, there were still a number of demonstrations and activities throughout 1969, including Wilson's visits to Bonn and Stockholm where he was met by protesters. In fact, as late as September, there was a conference of 'nearly 20' organisations sympathetic to Biafra that discussed the possibility of establishing a volunteer force to join the Biafran army, and Hannah Baneth of the Save Biafra Campaign 'hoped to transform the genuine humanitarian concern for the plight of Biafra into an awareness that political action, especially in London, could change the situation.' For a *Guardian* journalist, this signalled a 'new militancy' of the pro-Biafra activists.⁶³⁶ A Biafra week was organised by the Save Biafra Committee from 24-31 October 1969 and advertised by a flyer headlining 'A million Biafrans die because of British arms'.⁶³⁷ Two demonstrations and a "Biafra Ball" were planned, as well as events for raising funds and gathering signatures for a petition to stop British arms sales to Nigeria.

Many pro-Biafran demonstrations did not attract a large number of protesters. During Biafra Week, the police did not expect many to attend the demonstrations, and an official report later claimed that the demonstration of October 24 'was a very mild affair' and only around 50 people took part.⁶³⁸ An open letter was delivered to the Shell International Centre in London and stickers placed on cars in the company's car park. The letter stated 'Nigeria derives tens of millions of pounds annually from its oil royalties and Shell-BP is the single biggest interest involved. This puts you in a very powerful position politically'. Shell-BP and the revenue it brought Nigeria, the letter argued, underpinned not only the war effort but also the legitimacy or viability of the FMG. The Biafrans on the other hand 'have shown in two years of determined fighting that they will never surrender', and had become determined to attack oil installations that would threaten Shell-BP investments in the east of Nigeria. Moreover, public opinion could affect sales and the organisers announced the start a 'nation-wide and

⁶³⁵ A. Collins to J. Wilson, FCO, 24.01.69, UKNA DO 186/1.

⁶³⁶ The Save Biafra Campaign was organised by the Save Biafra Committee. Both names appear interchangeably in the press; 'Volunteer Fighters for Biafra', *The Guardian*, 22.09.69.

⁶³⁷ 'No Arms for Nigeria', No Arms for Nigeria Campaign, Flyer, undated, UKNA FCO 65/250/1.

⁶³⁸ Letter FCO to High Commission Lagos, 27.10.69, UKNA 65/250/1.

international' campaign calling for a boycott of Shell-BP oil – a campaign, the letter promised, that would be called off should Shell-BP change its position.⁶³⁹ Protesters then marched from Shell to Downing Street but dispersed by the early evening. For the second demonstration on Sunday 26 October not many more were expected. An FCO official ventured, 'the whole week may be a flop'. Of 3000 tickets for the Biafra Ball only around 500 had been sold.⁶⁴⁰ Yet, the demonstration on Sunday attracted around 1000 people, and similar numbers were reported in the *Guardian* for three other pro-Biafran rallies.⁶⁴¹

Direct action was organised. In April 1969, Peter Cadogan of the Save Biafra Committee organised a demonstration in the Tilbury docks, urging workers to refuse to load arms onto a ship. The Foreign Office knew about Cadogan's plans but noted 'we have in the past weathered two previous dockside storms', referring to two previous strikes at London and Middlesbrough, but 'although publicity of this kind is obviously embarrassing, there is very little that we can do.'⁶⁴² At Middlesbrough dockers had refused to load arms onto a ship after seeing footage of starving children on TV. The shop steward pointed out the contradictions of their work: 'We are sending food to starving children in one ship and bullets to shoot them down in another.'⁶⁴³ Such activities, however, had limited effects. At Middlesbrough, volunteers were found to complete the loading of the ship and it sailed as planned, the media had been kept away hence there was no publicity, and no more arms were to be shipped from the port after the incident.⁶⁴⁴ The Tilbury action planned by the Save Biafra Committee was equally unsuccessful. The police prevented 70 demonstrators from entering the docks and the attempt was only briefly reported in the *Times*.⁶⁴⁵ As late as Christmas 1969, two weeks before Biafra's collapse, the Save Biafra Campaign organised a 48-hour fast at Piccadilly Circus, attended by 39 people. Banners stated: 'Britain stuffs while Biafra starves' and 'Biafra: Britain's Vietnam'.⁶⁴⁶

Whereas the active participation in pro-Biafra advocacy was arguably not a mass phenomenon, the continuing concern of the government not to alienate the public further is

⁶³⁹ 'Nigeria-Biafra: An open letter to the Managing-Director of Shell', No Arms for Biafra Campaign, 24.10.69, UKNA FCO 65/250/1.

⁶⁴⁰ Letter FCO to High Commission Lagos, 27.10.69, UKNA 65/250/1.

⁶⁴¹ John Ezard, 'Arrests after Biafra march', *The Guardian*, 24.06.68; 'Call to stop arms to Lagos', *The Guardian*, 29.07.68; 'Night of Protests', *The Guardian*, 07.01.69.

⁶⁴² Millington to McEntee, FCO, 24.03.69, UKNA FCO 65/345.

⁶⁴³ Harry Keightley, quoted in: 'Arms cargo refused by dockers', *The Guardian*, 11.01.69.

⁶⁴⁴ McEntee to J. Wilson, FCO, 10.02.69, UKNA FCO 65/345.

⁶⁴⁵ Michael Wolfers, 'Ojukwu speech fails to stir Lagos', *The Times*, 05.05.69.

⁶⁴⁶ John Ezard, 'Fasters defy rain for Biafra's hungry', *The Guardian*, 27.12.69.

evidenced by its decision not to extend its arms support to military aircraft although these might have forced a federal victory, or at least continued efforts to bring about negotiations and support for the relief effort. Public opinion was a major concern for the government, yet opposition to the government's policy in parliament likewise failed to achieve a change. A letter of the BBA urging the government to reconsider its position was sent along with Julius Nyerere's memorandum submitted to the OAU in September 1969, in which he made a strong case for Biafra's independence: 'The break-up of Nigeria is a terrible thing. But it is less terrible than that cruel war.' This was really the bottom line of what most Biafra committees believed. Without British support, military and diplomatic, Nyerere argued, the Nigerians could not win the war and those who believed the OAU could solve the issue were 'conveniently fooling themselves.'⁶⁴⁷

The Role of Biafrans and Nigerians

Biafra committees drew on information from Biafra, expatriate Biafrans, and their visits to the enclave. Quinn Slobodian has examined the role of foreign students on new left protest on Third World issues in West Germany in the 1960s and found that while expatriate students were an important inspiration, because they made West German students aware of the issues in their countries and helped them build a solidarity that crossed borders, the West German students were sometimes caught up in their own romantic imaginations of the Third World, which at times became a projective space for their own grievances or hopes. Moments of connection were interspersed with those of disconnect: 'the oscillating dynamic of presence and absence that marked the West German relationship to the Third World.'⁶⁴⁸ For reasons discussed below, however, the new left in West Germany as elsewhere only partially took up the cause of Biafran secession and often in a broader context of a variety of issues, including Vietnam for instance. Nevertheless, the observations Slobodian made for the West German new left can similarly be applied to those active for Biafra. Their contacts with Biafrans (more so than Nigerians) expanded their own experience, but their genuine concern and engagement

⁶⁴⁷ Nyerere noted that Sudan was facing a similar situation, but since no oil had been discovered yet, there was no military confrontation. Ten years after Nyerere's memorandum oil was discovered in Sudan, and civil war ensued. Julius Nyerere, 'Memorandum: The Nigeria/Biafra Crisis', 04.09.1969, UKNA FCO 65/250/1.

⁶⁴⁸ Q. Slobodian, *Foreign Front*, p. 12.

led to an uncritical acceptance of the Biafran narrative – whether for practical reasons or out of true belief – that turned Biafran activists into purveyors of Biafran propaganda.

Without doubt Biafrans and Nigerians had agency in how their war was represented and in attempts to acquire allies and material help. The Biafrans were very active in promoting their case for independence. Besides propaganda disseminated by state organs and public relations firms, travelling ambassadors, expatriates, and students abroad actively promoted the cause. The writer Chinua Achebe was among the ambassadors of Biafra. He travelled to Senegal, Scandinavia, Canada and the United States, where he made an ‘extensive’ tour of universities, met opinion leaders, and spoke of ‘the humanitarian disaster that was Biafra’. Achebe was also part of the Biafran delegation headed by Louis Mbanefo, the Biafran Chief Justice, to the peace negotiations arranged by the Commonwealth Secretary and the OAU in May 1968.⁶⁴⁹ Moreover, Achebe like other Biafran intellectuals helped draft important Biafran documents, such as the Ahiara Declaration.⁶⁵⁰ Unfortunately, Achebe’s “personal history of Biafra” does not go into detail about his activities or their effects, but it is clear that Biafran envoys complemented the activities of other advocates, such as missionaries who also toured other countries to give talks about suffering Biafra, in important ways by forging a direct link with audiences.

The Biafran delegation invited by the *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* was comprised of students and young professionals acting as voluntary ambassadors for their state. They travelled through West Germany to give talks in university towns and promote their nation-building project in May 1969. The delegation was also received by federal president Gustav Heinemann.⁶⁵¹ *Die Zeit* printed an article of Elisabeth Etuk, a 28-year-old psychologist and member of the delegation. She explained why she fought for Biafran independence.⁶⁵² In the article, Etuk interwove her personal experience with the history of Nigeria. As a student from the South-East at Ibadan University, she hoped to find work in the North of Nigeria and engage in improving women’s rights since ‘the feudal elite of Northern Nigeria opposed the

⁶⁴⁹ C. Achebe, *There Was a Country*, pp. 160-167.

⁶⁵⁰ C. Ojukwu, ‘The Biafran Head of State Analyses the Biafran Revolution’, *Britain-Biafra Association* (1969), BLO MSS. AFr. S. 2399/1. Delivered as a speech in the town of Ahiara, it became known as the Ahiara Declaration in reference to Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere’s Arusha Declaration of 1967. For more on the Ahiara declaration, see chapter 2.

⁶⁵¹ ‘Biafra Newsletter’, December 1969, *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe*, GfbV Archive. More on the Biafran delegation below.

⁶⁵² Elisabeth Etuk, ‘Warum ich für Biafra kämpfe’, *Die Zeit*, 30.05.1969

emancipation of women', but friends warned her of the dangers any attempt of changing the social structure of the North would entail. She noted the attempts of Wole Soyinka and Peter Enahoro, both Nigerian writers, to criticise injustices in Nigeria: Soyinka was imprisoned, Enahoro left Nigeria. The first coup of 1966 Etuk and many other Nigerians saw as an attempt to end incompetence, corruption, and the dependence on foreign countries, as was the declared aim of the five young officers who undertook the coup.⁶⁵³ She believed that both the massacres of Easterners in the North as well as the interpretation of the 1966 coup as an attempt of the Igbo to take central power was influenced by British advisers and Nigerian politicians. In the ensuing massacres she lost relatives, and in the West of Nigeria, where she studied, threats and military controls mounted, so she decided to leave for the East. There she witnessed other refugees arriving from the rest of the federation: many children were mutilated, and one woman was still 'clutching the head of her decapitated child'. Etuk describes her experience in the West before leaving with a bitterness that is also reflected in Chinua Achebe's memoirs: neighbours and friends may have shown some sympathy, but the majority of people were more concerned about their own interests.⁶⁵⁴ The massacres and the failure of Nigerian politicians to condemn them, Etuk argues, made young Easterners demand that Ojukwu declare secession, and subsequently the people were highly involved in the army, relief, and food production to support the war effort. According to Etuk, minorities were hardest hit by the war, since it was mostly fought in their territory. She argues the claim that the minorities opposed Biafra was Nigerian propaganda and suggests a plebiscite would reveal whether they preferred to join Biafra or remain with Nigeria. Etuk envisions an independent Biafra as a new democratic society, progressive and free from dependence on foreign countries, neo-colonialism, and corruption. Biafra's resistance, Etuk, emphasises is the 'resistance of a black-African nation', whereas in Nigeria 'tens of thousands' of non-Africans are economic or military advisers, or mercenaries.

The image of Biafra painted by Etuk is typical of what the British historian and politician Kwasi Kwarteng calls 'the well-rehearsed view that Biafra was a romantic experiment in

⁶⁵³ Cf. J. Stremmler, *The International Politics*, p. 34; Walter Schwarz, 'General Ironsi takes over power', *The Guardian*, 17.01.66.

⁶⁵⁴ C. Achebe, *There Was a Country*, p. 68; for a recent fictional account, cf.: Chimamanda Adichie, *Half a Yellow Sun* (New York, 2006).

civilized statecraft crushed by brute force.’⁶⁵⁵ It is part of the official presentation of the Biafran nation-building project and features in Biafran propaganda and activist writing of the time. It is so pervasive that it is found even in more recent histories of the war, including Achebe’s memoirs.⁶⁵⁶ Etuk’s article clearly shows the rhetorical similarities to the writing of Biafra activists abroad. Experiences of resentment and harassment were shared by many Easterners in other parts of Nigeria before secession. This narrative is, however, not without its problems. For instance, those able to actively partake in Biafran politics were a minority. The fact that there were vast amounts of people without the ability to read and write – a major obstacle for internal propaganda – limited their ability to take part in the creation of the Biafran nation, and it is difficult to judge to what extent these groups supported secession, had they not feared extermination. Figures provided for literacy among the Biafran population are rough estimates, but they nevertheless indicate that the representation of the secessionist project as supported by the entire population and deeply democratic has its limits, even if Etuk was right about the involvement of the educated youth. The involvement of students, university teachers, and intellectuals was prominent – Chinua Achebe’s work for Biafra is a case in point. The fact that Biafra was supported with arms by Salazar’s Portugal, South Africa, Rhodesia, China, and France, and employed several foreign mercenaries, for example French legionnaire Rolf Steiner and Michael Hoare, which was by no means unusual for African wars – both mercenaries previously fought in the Congo – further taints the romantic image of Biafra’s independent strife for nationhood.⁶⁵⁷ Accepting this form of help was a matter of pragmatism, and Ojukwu is reported to have said he would accept help from the devil himself if it were necessary for Biafra’s survival.⁶⁵⁸ The portrayal of Biafran secession as arising from the will of the people is problematic, but the emphasis of this idea may also have been intended to counter the opposing and similarly one-sided view promoted by supporters of the federal side, namely that Biafran secession lacked popular support and was especially resented by the minorities in Biafra.⁶⁵⁹

⁶⁵⁵ K. Kwarteng, *Ghosts of Empire*, p. 329.

⁶⁵⁶ C. Achebe, *There Was a Country*, p. 143.

⁶⁵⁷ Frederick Forsyth, ‘The mercenary notice’, *The Guardian*, 11.04.70.

⁶⁵⁸ Olayiwola Abegunrin, *Nigerian Foreign Policy under Military Rule, 1966-1999* (Westport, 2003), p. 36.

⁶⁵⁹ For instance, this view was put forward by the West West German Nigerian Union of Students in a memorandum to federal president Gustav Heinemann, 20.11.69, BAK B122/11627. In Britain, Lord Shepherd argued along similar lines before parliament, 27.08.68, Hansard HL vol. 296 col. 684; cf. also: *United Nigeria* (London, 1968).

Biafrans and Nigerians living abroad founded organisations to further their respective causes and lobby governments accordingly. On taking office, the West German president Gustav Heinemann declared that he would be willing to openly engage in talks with representatives of the student movement. Nigerian and Biafran student delegations were hoping to take up this offer to present their case to the West German government. Heinemann believed it was right to meet the delegations because Biafra, just like Vietnam, was an important issue for the West German youth.⁶⁶⁰ A delegation of the Nigerian Union of Students in West Germany met Heinemann in November 1969 to present their views and urge the West German government to use its influence among the EEC countries so that these would see the war 'in the right perspective'. Heinemann replied by asking whether he should work towards ending the arms supply of the French to Biafra and of the British to Nigeria. The speaker of the Nigerian Union retorted that this was not what he had in mind.⁶⁶¹ As was usual for these occasions, the union presented Heinemann with a memorandum setting out their perspective, which amounted to an inversion of the Biafran position. The war was not religious in nature and there was no intention to exterminate the Igbos, to the contrary Ojukwu was planning a genocide of the minorities in the East. The memorandum concluded with an allusion to West German aspirations to reintegrate East West Germany, that Nigeria was fighting for the right to remain united as a state.⁶⁶² A meeting of Heinemann with the Munich chapter of the Biafran Union of Students took place a few days later. The Biafran student delegates T. Mensa and B. Ume emphasised that Biafra was a melting pot of various ethnic groups who had been driven out of other parts of Nigeria, but were now united in Biafra where the people decided the direction of politics. Surrender would therefore only lead to further wars and conflicts. They appealed to the West German people, who had also faced wilful starvation – possibly referring to the Berlin blockade which other pro-Biafran groups also made reference to – and reminded the West German officials that this time no one could claim ignorance of what happened in

⁶⁶⁰ Note on requests for a meeting with Heinemann by Nigerian and Biafran Student representatives, BPA, 01.08.69, BAK B122/11625.

⁶⁶¹ Minutes of the meeting of the Nigerian Union of Students with Gustav Heinemann, BPA, 20.11.69, BAK B122/11627.

⁶⁶² O. Akinyosoye and J. Aina, Memorandum of the Nigerian Union of Students for the Federal President, 20.11.69, BAK B122/11627.

Biafra, alluding to the West Germans who claimed that they had had no knowledge of Nazi crimes.⁶⁶³

Biafrans and Nigerians took part in large numbers in rallies and vigils. The *Times* editorial on the demonstration protesting Wilson's policy during the prime minister's visit to the West German government in Bonn in February 1969 argued that foreign students had no right to protest the visit of a statesman to a country in which they were themselves guests – suggesting that a significant number of foreign students were among the protesters.⁶⁶⁴ According to British news reports most of those taking part in pro-Biafran demonstrations in Britain were African.⁶⁶⁵ In June 1968, four arrests were made after around 2000 protesters were reported to have stormed No. 10 Downing Street, chanting 'Wilson, thief and murderer'. Originally, there was no plan to break in, only a petition was to be handed in, but Fine Agi, secretary of the Friends of the Biafra Association said: 'If Wilson doesn't stop sending arms, we'll break into his bedroom.'⁶⁶⁶ A month later, another procession of around 1000 marchers, 'two thirds' African according to the *Guardian* reporter, handed in a letter protesting the arms sale.⁶⁶⁷ An article on another pro-Biafra demonstration in London noted that there were hardly any 'white faces' among the protesters.⁶⁶⁸ While this may have been the case, this comment was meant to discredit any notion that this protest was supported among the white British public. This was far from true. Support for Biafra in both Britain and West Germany was not restricted to Biafran expatriates, as has been demonstrated, but it was inspired by direct contacts between Biafrans and Biafra activists, either in Biafra or abroad.

The Position of the New Left

Although 1960s activism was an important backdrop for the engagement with Biafra, there was little direct support from the new left for Biafra. In an article in the *Spectator*, journalist Richard West argued that Biafra was a 'natural cause' for both the old and new left, yet neither

⁶⁶³ Opening speech of the president of the Biafran Union of Students (Munich), BPA, 29.11.69, BAK B122/11625.

⁶⁶⁴ 'Perils of Ministerial Visits', *The Times*, 13.02.69

⁶⁶⁵ Dennis Barker, 'Save Biafra movement gets a fillip', *The Guardian*, 04.06.68; John Ezard, 'Arrests after Biafra march', *The Guardian*, 24.06.68; 'Call to stop arms to Lagos', *The Guardian*, 29.07.68.

⁶⁶⁶ John Ezard, 'Arrests after Biafra march', *The Guardian*, 24.06.68.

⁶⁶⁷ 'Call to stop arms to Lagos', *The Guardian*, 29.07.68.

⁶⁶⁸ 'The Save Biafra Movement gets a Fillip', *The Guardian*, 04.06.68.

embraced it. It is at first puzzling that the new left was all but absent from protest on behalf of Biafra, considering its involvement in protest against the war in Vietnam and its engagement with the liberation struggles of the Third World.⁶⁶⁹ While parts of new left activism overlapped with that of Biafra advocates, the lack of new left endorsement of the Biafran cause opens new perspectives on the groups lobbying for Biafran independence and emphasises the diversity of 60s activism.

The new left did not see the conflict between Nigeria and Biafra as a genuine liberation struggle. Unlike in Vietnam, Cuba or in the remaining Portuguese colonies, both regimes in Nigeria and Biafra were explicitly liberal capitalist and Western-oriented in outlook. Due to the involvement of oil companies, most notably the partly state-owned British company Shell-BP, the situation in Nigeria was reminiscent of the secession of Katanga from the Congo, with the support of mining interests as well as Belgium and the United States. Biafra, on the other hand, had seceded with nearly 60% of Nigeria's oil fields and it was easy to draw a parallel to Katanga and see secession as primarily serving a regional elite. Control over oil revenues, which had thus far been shared with the other provinces in the federation, was not only an incentive for elites to mobilise their people for secession, it was the guarantor of the economic viability of an independent Biafra. Biafran and Nigerian attempts to secure oil royalty payments from Shell-BP increased the likelihood of war. According to international law any military challenge of Biafra's claim to actual control over the territory would destroy the chances of Biafra to get oil royalty payments. Nigeria had therefore an incentive to begin hostilities.⁶⁷⁰ Once Britain and West Germany had decided to support Nigeria and other countries such as France and Portugal helped Biafra with arms deliveries, the war fronts hardened. An article in the periodical *Roter Morgen* of the Communist Party of West Germany/Marxist-Leninists (KPD/ML) describes the Nigeria-Biafra in terms of a neo-colonial conflict as a 'proxy war in which on both sides black men fight for their white masters' while they hope to either safeguard or gain access to the country's oil and other resources.⁶⁷¹

Biafra was discussed primarily through the lens of its humanitarian dimension. Compassion was mobilised with recourse to an emotionally charged rhetoric of genocide and

⁶⁶⁹ Richard West, 'Biafra and the left', *The Spectator*, 16.05.69.

⁶⁷⁰ Morris Davis, 'Negotiating about Biafran Oil', *A Journal of Opinion*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1973), pp. 23–32.

⁶⁷¹ 'Zwei Wege des westdeutschen Imperialismus', *Roter Morgen* 11, <http://www.mao-projekt.de/INT/AF/Biafra.shtml> (accessed 13.11.14).

the use of dramatic and graphic images of starving children. Slobodian coined the term 'corpse polemics' to denote the use of graphic imagery in order to grab the attention of an audience and rouse them into action. While protesters were critical of the press, they were also dependent on it as a platform to make their protest heard.⁶⁷² Although new left had used similar techniques to protest the war in Vietnam and the suffering of the civilian population. However, the ambivalent effects of images of suffering did not always lead to an identification with the depicted victim, but could also alienate the viewer by evoking disgust instead of compassion. In fact, even compassion with the victims may anaesthetize rather than inspire action, by overwhelming onlookers and instilling feelings of powerlessness. The postulated direct causal line from information to action, on which some activist publicity methods rested, simply did not exist. The spectacles of suffering evoked by Biafra activists were similar to the sensationalist way in which the tabloid press covered conflict and violence, which constituted one of the major targets of new left critique and protest in West Germany in the late 1960s. The tendency of the mainstream press to exaggerate and distort issues was evident in the coverage of demonstrations and protest throughout the 1960s.⁶⁷³

Humanitarian relief was to a large extent organised and administered by Christian organisations and missionaries. The humanitarian efforts of the churches were often seen by leftists as a vanguard for Western economic interests. An article with the tagline 'How commune 99 became the accomplice of the system' reported that the West-Berlin commune 99 founded a 'black guard' as a counterpart to the red guard and held its first press conference in its new role. The 'black guard' was in favour of development aid and the group is reported to have distributed flyers asking for donations on behalf of 'the *dead* of Biafra'. When asked who was receiving the funds the author of the article learned that it would be given to a protestant church which organised relief for Biafra. Moreover, the 'black guard' was making plans to visit Africa to work in a humanitarian capacity. Since the 'black guard' declared its aims to be in line with EEC and Soviet policies in Africa, the author of the article saw them as accomplices in neo-colonialism, aiding the church in paving the way for business to operate in Africa: 'They simply do not understand in what mission they are going to be ferried to [Africa].'

⁶⁷² Q. Slobodian, *Foreign Front*, p. 167.

⁶⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

This would serve a double purpose, as they would thus be 'eliminated' as critics and dissenters within West Germany by being flown to Africa for voluntary work.⁶⁷⁴

Parts of the left argued that help for Biafra came from the 'wrong side': besides the churches Biafra was receiving support from Salazar's Portugal and apartheid South Africa.⁶⁷⁵ Certainly, it was also antagonising members of the new left newspapers and Biafra supporters had often compared Biafra to Vietnam in a way that put Biafra above Vietnam in a hierarchy of suffering. *Der Spiegel* stated, echoing Félix Houphouët-Boigny's claim, that more people were dying daily in Biafra than in two weeks of the Vietnam War.⁶⁷⁶ In Britain, the Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Heenan, who was supportive of the Biafra movement, complained that there was so much compassion and protest for Vietnam, but nothing comparable in response to the crisis in Biafra.⁶⁷⁷ Similar criticism, levelled at the new left, was expressed in West Germany, among others by Golo Mann and Günter Grass.⁶⁷⁸ Biafra advocates thereby set themselves apart from a dominant group of 1960s activism. They were part of the rise of a new form of interventionist humanitarianism that was influenced by the radicalism of the time in its emphasis on speaking out against injustices and subordinating national sovereignty to their quest to relieve suffering, but was set apart by its explicit disregard of political issues in the narrower sense. The left was at times caught up in black-and-white conceptions of allies and enemies that limited their sense of justice to those who shared a common ideology. Kouchner forcefully argued that 'the left – if it really exists – closed its eyes [to Biafra], as it did during the destruction of the Jews, the extermination of the Kurds, the Sudanese, and the Indios in Mato Grosso. The only thing that interests them is whether those who are dying belong to the left.'⁶⁷⁹ While Biafra advocates and new humanitarians did not draw this dividing line, they had a similarly dualistic view of reality in terms of victims and perpetrators that overshadowed the complexity of conflict in very similar ways, even though their approach was universalistic,

⁶⁷⁴ 'APO-Kehraus unter Mitwirkung kirchlicher Institutionen', *NEUE Aktion* 3, 30.12.68, (accessed 13.11.14).

⁶⁷⁵ B. Kouchner, Excerpt from an Interview with Bernard Kouchner in the *Nouvel Observateur*, 19.01.1970, printed in: 'Biafra: Eine Broschüre', *GfbV* (2008), GfbV Archive.

⁶⁷⁶ 'Nur Beten', *Der Spiegel*, 19.08.1968; for a comparison of mortality figures in both conflicts, see chapter 1.

⁶⁷⁷ 'Protests too selective, cardinal says', *The Times*, 03.06.68

⁶⁷⁸ Tilman Zülch und Klaus Guercke, 'Plädoyer für die Republik Biafra', in T. Zülch und K. Guercke, *Soll Biafra überleben? Dokumente, Berichte, Analysen, Kommentare* (Berlin, 1969), p. 12; Golo Mann Quoted *ibid.*, p. 10; Günter Grass, 'Völkermord vor aller Augen: Ein Appell an die Bundesregierung', *Die Zeit*, 11.10.68.

⁶⁷⁹ B. Kouchner, Excerpt from an Interview with Bernard Kouchner in the *Nouvel Observateur*, 19.01.1970, printed in: 'Biafra: Eine Broschüre', *GfbV* (2008), GfbV Archive.

caring for the suffering of all. This universality that ignored the details of the political struggles within which the suffering unfolded was the reason why the plight of Biafra appealed to such a diverse audience. Politicians and senior civil servants later recalled that the Nigeria-Biafra war worried more people and occupied more of their time than the Vietnam War or the invasion of the ČSSR.⁶⁸⁰

End of the War, End of the Biafra Lobby?

Although media and public interest waned and the feared kill-off of Igbos or continued guerrilla warfare did not materialize, few supporters of Biafra changed their beliefs about the war in significant ways. As a last-ditch effort, the *Save Biafra Campaign* organised a march from Trafalgar Square to No. 10 Downing Street to deliver a letter and hold a two-hour vigil after Biafra's collapse in January 1970. The letter demanded that a peace keeping force be set up and that aid should not be channelled via the Nigerian Red Cross – still under the presumption that genocide was an actual threat.⁶⁸¹ At that time, the Britain-Biafra Association distributed American anthropologist Stanley Diamond's essay 'Who killed Biafra?'. The essay is preceded by a quote of Ojukwu, reflecting the Biafran leader's turn to revolutionary rhetoric in 1969: 'Africa needs Biafra. Biafra is the breaking of the chains.' Ojukwu attempted to portray Biafra as a black African nation-building project that was not dependent on cooperation with Western powers, but a challenge to neo-colonialism – although Biafra had initially promised to respect and honour all contracts previously negotiated with the Eastern Region.⁶⁸² This view was broadly taken over by Biafra advocates, and Diamond wrote that 'a generation of young adults, among them the most talented and skilled in black Africa, has been stifled' and that the war 'ruined a national culture at its birth'. Diamond's representation of Biafrans as innocent, but ingenious and industrious victims and of Ojukwu as a responsible and popular leader, as well as his analysis of the historical and political context of the war, presents a similar argument as earlier pro-Biafran pamphlets, such as that of Hanbury or Knapp.⁶⁸³ Diamond redefined genocide to fit the Biafran case in cultural terms as 'the collapse of the symbolic universe' that

⁶⁸⁰ H. Wilson, *The Labour Government*, p. 558; Harald Posadowsky-Wehner (West German diplomat), cited in: 'Rettung durch die Stockfisch-Bomber', *Der Spiegel*, 16.06.69.

⁶⁸¹ Francis Boyd, 'Whitehall tries to play things down', *The Guardian*, 14.01.70.

⁶⁸² 'Biafra: Agony and Survival', *Friends of Biafra Association* (London, undated), p. 5.

⁶⁸³ Harold G. Hanbury, 'Biafra: Challenge to the Conscience of Britain', *Britain-Biafra Association* (London, 1968); George Knapp, 'Aspects of the Biafran Affair', *Britain-Biafra Association* (London, 1968).

the Biafran nation-building project had created, yet he also used allusions to the Holocaust. Writing after the war, Diamond observed what he perceived to be a rewriting of history in the interest of the victors, in which Biafra was portrayed as another Katanga, 'a creature of the oil companies', and allied with white supremacist governments, like that of South Africa. This view was put forward by the British, American, and Russian governments as well as the New York Times, whose director according to Diamond also happened to be on the directorial board of Shell.⁶⁸⁴ This is interesting, because the way the war was discussed abroad can be understood in terms of two opposing discourses, that of Biafra and its supporters and, on the other side, that of Nigeria and its allies. The victory of Nigeria strengthened the federal version of events.

With the end of the war and of Biafra's existence, activist and advocacy efforts for Biafra either ceased, as was the case for most British associations or were transformed into other humanitarian endeavours. An attempt was made at establishing an international organisation in January 1970 that demanded immediate safeguards for the Biafran population, the continued provision of relief by way of a continuation of the church-led airlift as well as other relief routes, and finally, a visit of an international group of journalists to witness the situation in Biafra following the war. This campaign was supported by Biafra committees around the world, including the *Britain-Biafra Association*, the *Save Biafra Campaign*, the *American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive*, and the French *Comité de Lutte Contre le Génocide au Biafra*. In total 12 organisations supported the campaign, but it was not to last.⁶⁸⁵ The *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* had by the end of the war broadened its focus to encompass all minorities under threat and changed its name to *Society for threatened Peoples*. As such, the organisation still wrote about events in Biafra in its journal *pogrom* for years to come and in unchanged terms. A volume of 1998, for instance, marking the thirty-year anniversary of the organisation, features an article on the work of the group and continues to refer to Biafra as a genocide.⁶⁸⁶ Bernard Kouchner whose experiences in Biafra led him to help setting up the *Comité de Lutte Contre le Génocide au Biafra*, later co-founded the *Médecins Sans Frontières* based on principles developed in Biafra.⁶⁸⁷

⁶⁸⁴ Stanley Diamond, 'Who killed Biafra?' (Britain-Biafra Association: London, 1970), p. 1, BLO MSS. Afr. S. 2399/1.

⁶⁸⁵ Memorandum: 'Internationale Aktion', *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe* der Gesellschaft für Leben und Zukunft bedrohter Völker, 15.01.70, GfbV Archive.

⁶⁸⁶ T. Zülch, 'Als Aktion Biafra-Hilfe fingen wir an', *Pogrom* 200, 1998.

⁶⁸⁷ Eleanor Davey, *Idealism Beyond Borders: The French Revolutionary Left and the Rise of Humanitarianism, 1954-1988* (Cambridge, 2015), p. 37.

Regarding the growth of humanitarian movements, on the other hand, the Biafra experience was a moment at which humanitarian concern for Biafran suffering was deeply entangled with partisan political advocacy that supported the independence of the Biafran state. Both before and after, humanitarianism was more distanced from political action. Noting the tension between humanitarian concern and political advocacy, Stanley Diamond ended his essay with a strong critique of the 'grandiose offers of help' to Nigeria from foreign countries. This help could not reach the most affected areas, due to organisational and transport problems as well as, Stanley believed, lack of good-will from Nigeria. Relativizing the suffering, Stanley argues, made the struggle appear shallower, 'this is the link between official humanitarianism and the politics of conquest.'⁶⁸⁸

⁶⁸⁸ S. Diamond, 'Who killed Biafra?', p. 2, BLO MSS. Afr. S. 2399/1.

5. Biafra and the Rise of Humanitarian Interventionism

*'Absolute goodness is hardly any less dangerous than absolute evil.'*⁶⁸⁹

Hannah Arendt's semantic differentiation of pity from compassion in *On Revolution* describes compassion as a shared experience of suffering, which involves imagining taking the space of the one who is suffering, without the need of expressing this emotion. Pity, on the other hand, creates a space between the subject that pities and the object of this sentiment, which becomes abstract. The sentiment denotes a self-serving emotion, in the sense that pity is enacted more for the sake of the subject in a self-reflexive way than for the object that is pitied. Consequently, pity fills the space between the feeling subject and the object of its pity with loquacious elaborations of stories of suffering that implicitly highlight the virtuousness of the subject. Applied to the modern humanitarian industry, this characterisation of pity illuminates the graphic, visceral character of the donation appeals of humanitarian organisations. An examination of the relief effort in favour of Biafra shows that one of the shortcomings of the operation was an incomplete engagement with the political complexities of the situation. Priority was given to providing aid, despite the unintended consequences. In the absence of political measures, aid contributed to prolonging the war. This theme will be explored in the context of the institutional logic of aid organisations as well as their relation to the media and governments.

The modern humanitarian industry emerged at a certain juncture in history, and *New Yorker* journalist Philip Gourevitch asserts that humanitarianism was 'probably the most enduring legacy of the ferment of 1968 in global politics'.⁶⁹⁰ However, much of the support for the suffering Biafrans that was collectively channelled into aid and thereby transformed the landscape of humanitarian agencies came from groups in society that are not usually associated with the new left or with '1968'. Humanitarianism is not so much a legacy of 1960s radicalism as a legacy of its increasing fragmentation after 1969. According to Samuel Moyn, the rise of the modern human rights movement needs to be located in the 1970s. He argues

⁶⁸⁹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Middlesex, 1973), p. 82.

⁶⁹⁰ Philip Gourevitch, 'Alms Dealers: Can you provide humanitarian aid without facilitating conflicts?', *The New Yorker*, 11.10.2010.

that this development needs to be seen against the backdrop of the failed political projects and ideologies of the 1960s⁶⁹¹ – a background that similarly fed into the ascendancy of humanitarian organisations. The growing humanitarian and human rights movement and governmental development agencies absorbed members of the student movement during the 70s who in turn began to reform the concepts and approaches of these institutions.⁶⁹² After the demise of other utopias, humanitarian and development aid offered, in Gourevitch's words, 'a non-ideological ideology of engagement that allowed one [...] not to be a bystander, and, at the same time, not to be identified with power'.⁶⁹³ Yet, the transition from '1968' activism to humanitarianism and human rights is not a linear development.

An important role in the relief effort for Biafra was played by the churches and religious organisations, which informed people about Biafran suffering, collected funds, and mounted a relief effort that made effective use of the network of missionaries on the ground. This is not surprising given that most aid organisations have Christian origins and initially located their work in the tradition of Christian charity, such as the Red Cross and Oxfam. The long tradition of overseas missionary activity had always been combined with more practical 'help' for the indigenous people they sought to convert, and by the 1960s the Catholic church embraced the project of modernisation and 'development' for the Third World, expressed in the encyclical *Populorum Progressio* of 1967. Operating in Biafra, church relief agencies did not have to maintain relations with Nigeria and were less concerned with the political consequences of their aid and were thus able to be more radical in their provision of aid than the more secular organisations.

This chapter is primarily concerned with the tensions between the political and the humanitarian. During the Nigeria Biafra War, the relative restraint of many foreign states increased the power and manoeuvring space of relief agencies to act within the theatre of war. Humanitarian NGOs contributed to the depoliticization of the conflicts in which these agencies administered aid by presenting reluctant governments with a possibility of responding to public concerns without making political commitments. The use of contributions to humanitarian aid by foreign states to replace rather than accompany political measures, such as negotiations, sanctions, or military involvement, turned aid into a political measure in its own right, if only

⁶⁹¹ S. Moyn, *The Last Utopia*, p. 3 and 7.

⁶⁹² A. Eckert, 'Spätkoloniale Herrschaft', p. 9.

⁶⁹³ Gourevitch, 'Alms Dealers', *New Yorker*, 11.10.2010.

for domestic politics. Before a discussion of this issue, the relief operation, the agencies involved, and the money spent will be reviewed and put into perspective. The airlift of food and medicine into Biafra was the most remarkable and adventurous aspect of the relief operation. The experience of the Biafran famine led French doctors working for the Red Cross to challenge the principles and ideas underpinning the practice of the Red Cross, especially political neutrality and discretion, and to found the *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF). This was the birth of the 'borderless movement'. Leading on from this, an archival study of Oxfam's involvement will show that the split that led to the creation of the MSF occurred in a similar way within Oxfam. Although aid providers often claimed that their actions were apolitical, the political implications of relief were often apparent. Questioning the possibility of apolitical aid, this chapter ends in a detailed discussion of the political consequences of humanitarian aid to Biafra and an assessment of its influence on the course of the war.

Humanitarianism was not only a 'last utopia' for those disillusioned with 20th century ideologies, nor a mere continuation of imperial paternalism or missionary zeal. It has to be viewed in the context of its history from its inception in the late 19th century and in the light of the broader developments that shaped its development: the end of the Second World War and the increasing awareness of the Holocaust, the triumph of liberal capitalism in the West and its opposition to the communist East in the Cold War, and, of course, decolonisation. Against this backdrop institutions of liberal global governance emerged, and as a part of these modern humanitarianism became an important mediator in the relations of the West and the developing nations.⁶⁹⁴ Biafra was an important stepping stone in the development of the modern humanitarian system and although it was not the origin of an interventionist brand of humanitarianism, it brought about the breakthrough of its late twentieth-century variant under a new constellation of the international order.⁶⁹⁵ Despite the dilemmas the humanitarian agencies faced in Biafra – dilemmas that continue to plague humanitarian interventions to this day – aid organisations emerged strengthened in number, mandate, and legitimacy from the conflict.

⁶⁹⁴ M. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, p. 31; K. O'Sullivan, 'Humanitarian Encounters', p. 306.

⁶⁹⁵ The common assumption that Biafra marks the beginning of humanitarian interventionism is challenged by Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, 'Humanitarian Aid and the Biafra War: Lessons not Learned,' *Africa Development* 34,1 (2009), 69–82.

The Relief Effort for Nigeria and Biafra

The humanitarian response to Biafra laid the practical and ideological foundation for the modern humanitarian industry. One reason for this development is the success of aid agencies to secure large amounts of funding for their work. The World Council of Churches (WCC) and Caritas issued calls for donations in late 1967, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in February 1968.⁶⁹⁶ A few months later, after the media attention to starvation, donations increased drastically. It is a problem for humanitarian responses to famines to this day that funds of a significant volume can only be raised once media attention and images of intense suffering publicise the cause. At this point, however, it is usually too late for preventative measures.⁶⁹⁷ An estimate by Morris Davis in 1970 put total world-wide donations to Nigerian relief and rehabilitation during the war at \$170 million, almost half of which came from the United States, mainly from governmental sources. In Europe, private and public donations were divided more evenly.⁶⁹⁸ Though these figures originate from contemporary evidence, they are likely to reflect the reality in terms of the composition of aid. A more recent figure provided by Pérouse de Montclos for the overall aid to Biafra is \$250 million.⁶⁹⁹ In addition to monetary donations, food, medicine, trucks, and airplanes were sometimes donated or sold at discount prices to humanitarian organisations; it is therefore difficult to arrive at a definitive figure. Although the relief effort was 'unprecedented in magnitude and integration', Davis notes that the total sum of money donated was relatively small if seen in relation to the huge GDPs of the developed countries.⁷⁰⁰

Biafra constituted the first mass-mobilisation of aid for black Africans.⁷⁰¹ A famine in the Congo in the early 1960s had also attracted donations from the public, but the figures were not comparable to responses to Biafra. In 1961, following a television programme on the Congo famine, Oxfam received £20,000 in response to its appeal in one day.⁷⁰² Oxfam spent £300,000

⁶⁹⁶ M. Davis, 'Audits', p. 506.

⁶⁹⁷ Cf. S. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*, p. 102.

⁶⁹⁸ M. Davis, 'Audits', p. 503.

⁶⁹⁹ M. Pérouse de Montclos, 'Humanitarian Aid', p. 74.

⁷⁰⁰ M. Davis, 'Audits', pp. 505-506.

⁷⁰¹ M. Pérouse de Montclos, 'Humanitarian Aid', p. 71.

⁷⁰² 'History of Oxfam', Oxfam, <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what-we-do/about-us/history-of-oxfam> (accessed 25.10.17).

for relief in the Congo by September 1961;⁷⁰³ in Biafra the organisation spent twice the amount, £600,000.⁷⁰⁴ Two later African famines attracted similar attention as Biafra. Ethiopia during the 80s and Somalia during the 90s saw the intervention of a large number of relief agencies – in the case of Somalia also a disastrous military intervention by the United States. Both were a continuation of the trend set by Biafra of publicising the famines with the help of images of starving children. There was a rise of celebrity endorsement of humanitarian action with the inception of Bob Geldof's Live Aid in response to the famine in Ethiopia. The two Live Aid concerts held to raise funds for Ethiopian famine victims collected \$70 million alone. This celebrity endorsement was not new, and well-known musicians, such as Jimi Hendrix and Joan Baez, played at benefit concerts for Biafra in 1968.⁷⁰⁵ John Lennon returned his MBE partly in protest against Britain's involvement in 'the Nigeria-Biafra thing'.⁷⁰⁶ Notably, the famines in Somalia and Ethiopia also occurred in the context of civil war although the political complexities disappeared behind images of suffering. As economist Amartya Sen reminds us, most famines are man-made. Famines do not arise due to actual shortages of food, but because of issues relating to the distribution of resources.⁷⁰⁷ Both before and after the war, Biafra did not experience famines.

During the Nigeria-Biafra War, several agencies were involved in the relief effort to both sides. The major organisations were the Red Cross, which coordinated relief efforts in Nigeria as well as operating in Biafra, and a consortium of 33 Catholic and Protestant aid organisations by the name of Joint Church Aid (JCA), which mostly provided aid in Biafra.⁷⁰⁸ Missionaries, especially the Holy Ghost Fathers, were deeply involved in the relief effort on the ground in Biafra. They organised the unloading, transport, and distribution of aid. Other organisations involved were Oxfam, the Save the Children Fund, and UNICEF. Irish Missionaries founded the

⁷⁰³ M. Black, *A Cause for Our Times*, p. 66; A similar estimate of total contributions is provided in: '£25,000 for Congo', *The Guardian*, 25.02.61.

⁷⁰⁴ M. Black, *A Cause for Our Times*, p. 130.

⁷⁰⁵ Lindsay Michie and Ayoyinka Oriola, 'Afrobeat: The Music of Fela Kuti', in Eunice Rojas and Lindsay Michie, *Sounds of Resistance: The Role of Music in Multicultural Activism*, Vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, 2013), p. 353. The figure for live aid donations is provided in Geoffrey Gilbert, *World Poverty: A Reference Handbook* (Santa Barbara, 2004), p. 109.

⁷⁰⁶ John Lennon protests – and returns his MBE', *The Guardian*, 26.11.1969.

⁷⁰⁷ Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford, 1981), p. 154.

⁷⁰⁸ Emmanuel Urhobo, *Relief Operations in the Nigerian Civil War* (Ibadan, 1978), p. 34.

NGO Concern and launched the Joint Biafra Famine Appeal in Britain and Ireland.⁷⁰⁹ During the relief effort for Biafra these organisations cooperated and shared information, warehouses, and vehicles.⁷¹⁰ In addition, several smaller ad-hoc organisations and Biafra committees collected funds and channelled them to the major relief organisations. In mid-1968, there were around 500 refugee camps housing 600,000 refugees altogether.⁷¹¹ These provided shelter and food to those who fled the North and other parts of the federation due to the increasing discrimination faced by Easterners. Although they were hard hit by the famine, they were also among the first to receive aid supplies.

Church related aid organisations were especially active in Biafra. The church had a long history in Eastern Nigeria, where proselytization was more successful than elsewhere in Nigeria and the highest number of missionaries operated on the eve of war.⁷¹² The importance of overseas missions increased with the papal encyclical *Populorum Progressio* of March 1967, which marked the renewed concern of the Vatican to improve standards of living around the world, especially for 'those peoples who are trying to escape the ravages of hunger, poverty, endemic disease and ignorance.'⁷¹³ The encyclical made direct reference to the effects of colonisation, both negative and positive and pointed to the danger of social unrest stemming from poor living conditions or generational conflict. This encyclical reflects the effort of the Catholic Church to adapt to decolonisation. Whereas proselytization had usually gone hand in hand with practical help, the end of patronage by colonial powers left the churches with a stronger need to justify their presence. In contrast to the growing secularisation of Europe, the newly independent world also offered the promise of continued support for the Christian faith. The churches, religious organisations, and Christian journals played an important role in spreading awareness of the suffering in Biafra and the Protestant and Catholic aid organisations administered the bulk of aid in the secessionist enclave.

⁷⁰⁹ Ads for the appeal appeared, for instance, in *The Guardian* of 28.03.69 and 02.04.69 and in *The Times* of 19.03.69 and 18.07.69; Cf. also 'Our History', *Concern*, <https://www.concern.net/en/about/history> (accessed 25.10.17); O'Sullivan, 'Humanitarian Encounters', p. 302.

⁷¹⁰ E. Urhobo, *Relief Operations*, p. 12.

⁷¹¹ Red Cross to Oxfam, 07.06.68, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/2/3/1/1.

⁷¹² On missionaries and proselytization in Nigeria, see chapter 2.

⁷¹³ Pope Paul VI, 'Populorum Progressio: Encyclical of Pope Paul VI on the Development of Peoples', Vatican, 26.03.67, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html (09.10.2017); see also B. Mann Wall, *Into Africa: A Transnational History of Catholic Medical Missions and Social Change* (New Brunswick, 2015), p. 101.

Despite the strong Christian presence in the relief effort and the Christian roots of the more secular aid organisations as well as the background of many relief staff in the colonial service, in the course of the operations in Nigeria and Biafra aid organisations professionalised and developed an ethos that suited their international outlook and was removed from either religious dogma or national histories.⁷¹⁴ O’Sullivan observes that relief agencies in Britain and Ireland, despite their different backgrounds and historical outlook – Ireland’s memory of the famine and its anti-colonial attitude and Britain’s adjustment to the end of empire – both translated into a humanitarian landscape that was rather similar in practice and philosophy.⁷¹⁵ This can, more or less, be extended to humanitarian agencies all over the world, their outlook became global and universalistic.

The Airlift: Operation INALWA and ‘Jesus Christ Airlines’

Since federal forces established a blockade around Biafra after the capture of Port Harcourt in May 1968 and there was no agreement by both sides on a suitable relief route until the end of the war, the only way to bring in relief was via plane. The airlift to bring in relief to the surrounded Biafran enclave was a remarkable undertaking, but it also brought agencies deeper into the diplomatic and military contest of both sides. Negotiations with Nigeria and Biafra on the modalities of how aid was to be brought in were intertwined with strategic considerations and a major controversy during the war. The two main airlifts bringing food and medicine into Biafra were operated by Joint Church Aid (JCA), nicknamed ‘Jesus Christ Airlines’, and by the Red Cross known as the International Airlift West Africa (INALWA). Several other organisations either funded part of these operations or chartered their own flights to operate as part of the routes established by the above organisations. The JCA airlift began when Caritas Internationalis set up the first airlift from Sao Tomé in February 1968 and its director in Biafra, Holy Ghost Father Anthony Byrne, arranged a contract with Biafran gun-runner Hank Wharton. Effectively, Caritas bought space on gun-running planes for its relief supplies. Caritas Internationalis was soon joined by other organisations, such as the World Council of Churches, Scandinavian Nordchurchaid, Canadian Canairelief, and UNICEF – the airlift was streamlined at

⁷¹⁴ The continuities between colonial service and humanitarian agencies is highlighted by Bocking-Welch who also argues that aid organisations increasingly distanced themselves from connections to empire, Bocking-Welch, ‘Imperial Legacies and Internationalist Discourses’, pp. 879–896.

⁷¹⁵ K. O’Sullivan, ‘Humanitarian Encounters’, p. 305.

a conference in November 1968 under the umbrella of JCA. Largely, the organisations making up JCA ran parts of the airlift with their own planes, personnel, and supplies, but some aspects were jointly managed. By November 1969, JCA had airlifted more than 43,372 tons of relief in around 4000 nightly flights into Biafra.⁷¹⁶ The same route continued to be used by pilot Hank Wharton to fly arms into Biafra. The Red Cross assured the Nigerian leadership that it would fly on a separate route from the one used by gun-running planes, so as not to inadvertently provide cover for arms imports to Biafra. Since the airlift involved crossing Nigerian airspace, the ICRC was required to obtain permission from Nigerian leaders for its operation. An agreement with Nigeria in December 1967 allowed the ICRC to use the island of Fernando Po, then still a Spanish colony, as a base. The airlift had a bumpy start due to some political interference on the part of ICRC. The organisation had sent a delegate to the peace conference at Kampala to lobby both sides to facilitate relief, and the delegate had publicly called for Nigeria to lift the blockade, which angered federal leaders. As a result, the organisation's airlift was initially sporadic and often interrupted. After long and difficult negotiations, the ICRC operation began properly in September 1968 only to be halted again in January 1969, when Equatorial Guinea, after achieving independence from Spain, disallowed the ICRC to operate from its territory so as to safeguard its relations with Nigeria.⁷¹⁷ In the mounting frustration because of the obstructions put in relief's way by both sides, the ICRC found a new base for its operations in Cotonou, then Dahomey, and continued operation INALWA increasing the amount of relief brought into Biafra. Until the suspension of ICRC flights and before the resumption of flights from Cotonou 7069 tons of relief had been lifted in 744 flights.⁷¹⁸ For the entire period of July 1968 to June 1969, when the ICRC ended its airlift, 20,500 tons of relief supplies were brought into Biafra.⁷¹⁹ A fourth location used by the French Red Cross and Africa Concern for relief flights was Libreville in Gabon. Gabon was one of the four African countries

⁷¹⁶ 'The Relief Situation in Nigeria', *Oxfam Information Office*, 05.11.69 BLO MS. Oxfam DIR/2/3/2/12; Tony Byrne was the coordinator of Caritas in Biafra and states that more than 60,000 tons had been transported on 5500 flights by the end of the programme, Tony Byrne, *Airlift to Biafra: Breaching the Blockade* (Dublin, 1997), p. 150; the estimate given by Morris Davis for the same period is that 37 thousand tons were flown to Uli from Sao Tomé, M. Davis, 'Audits', p. 509.

⁷¹⁷ 'International Review of the Red Cross no. 94', ICRC (Geneva, 1969), p.7, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/RC_Jan-1969.pdf (accessed 26.10.17); Hella Pick, 'Airlift to Biafra halted as Lagos puts on pressure', *The Guardian*, 09.01.69.

⁷¹⁸ Report 'Nigeria-Biafra', *Oxfam*, 30.01.1969, BLO MS. Oxfam DIR/2/3/2/12; Dahomey was renamed Benin in 1975.

⁷¹⁹ M. Davis, 'Audits', p.511.

that recognised Biafra, and Libreville-Uli was also the main route for the arms covertly channelled to Biafra by France, a connection that the ICRC would have avoided for neutrality reasons.⁷²⁰

Compared to other possible methods of transporting relief, over land or by sea, the airlift only brought rather small quantities of aid into Biafra. Especially since Biafra's only operative airport after the fall of Port Harcourt was a makeshift airstrip at Uli where no large transport aircraft would have been able to land had they been available to the organisations. Moreover, once Gowon had agreed to daylight flights, which was as late as September 1969, Ojukwu continued to oppose these plans despite 'open and sincere' discussions of the Biafran leadership and ICRC delegates because the ICRC agreement with Lagos 'did not give sufficient guarantees for the security of Uli airport'.⁷²¹ With good reason, Ojukwu feared the militarily disastrous loss of Biafra's last link to the outside world. Moreover, if relief was flown in by day only it would not give cover to the arms flights coming in by night.⁷²² Therefore, relief agencies could only fly by night. Despite these restrictions, the overall amount flown in steadily rose, from an estimated 800 metric tons from summer to autumn in 1968 to 11000 in the first two thirds of 1969 and 2800 in the last four months of the war.⁷²³

Flying into Biafra by night was a dangerous adventure and all visitors to Biafra had to fly into the enclave on planes carrying arms or relief. Planes were frequently rather old, and there were a number of crashes. A pastor recalls his arrival at Uli airport in Biafra:

The French Red Cross plane which takes us to Biafra circulates around the Nigerian bomber, which hovers over Uli airport almost every night waiting to drop its bombs. Below us lightning flashes and heavy clouds hide the airport. Landing seems impossible. [...] Then the plane suddenly dives into the clouds and lands at Uli in complete darkness.⁷²⁴

Initially, the Nigerians bombed the airstrip by day only in an effort to cut off the last link of Biafra to the outside world and its only possibility of bringing in arms, food, medicine, visitors,

⁷²⁰ J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 246.

⁷²¹ Ibid. p. xix; 'International Review of the Red Cross no. 104', ICRC (Geneva, 1969), p. 645, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/RC_Nov-1969.pdf (accessed 26.10.17).

⁷²² J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 247.

⁷²³ M. Davis, 'Audits', pp. 510-511.

⁷²⁴ Lothar Kühl, 'Impressions from Biafra—Middle of August 1969', BLO MS. Oxfam DIR/2/3/2/12.

and information. Uli was such an important target that British military advisers who visited Nigeria in August 1969 suggested the Nigerian air force should concentrate on a 'single aim': the 'neutralization of the rebel airstrips – especially Uli'.⁷²⁵ One Nigerian bomber, which came to be called 'the Intruder', began bombing Uli at night during October 1968, and in June 1969 a Red Cross aircraft was shot down.⁷²⁶ This ended the INALWA operation, although JCA, the French Red Cross and Africa Concern continued flying from Libreville, Gabon.⁷²⁷ The shooting down of the Red Cross plane was a result of mounting tensions following Carl Gustav von Rosen's attacks on Nigerian airfields. The Swedish aviator and mercenary pilot had initially worked as a relief pilot for the ICRC, but became frustrated with the failure of peace negotiations and eventually set up and commanded Biafra's first air force. The shooting down of the Red Cross plane very likely was a reprisal for von Rosen's actions, who had said in August 1968: 'If the Nigerians make good on their threat to shoot down Red Cross planes [...] the Nordic countries should provide the Red Cross with fighter escorts.'⁷²⁸

Throughout the war, the church agencies had an advantage over the ICRC while operating in Biafra. The churches operated their airlift from Sao Tome, a Portuguese island more supportive of the relief operation, than Fernando Po, the Spanish island from where the ICRC relief planes flew.⁷²⁹ Missionaries had long operated in the area enjoying good connections with local elites and the Biafran leadership. Unlike that of the Red Cross, the relief effort of the churches was largely concentrated in Biafran territory. Church agencies could therefore act with less deference to Nigeria, and were accused of aiding the rebels – a charge also levelled at other agencies, like Oxfam – of mounting a religious war, and of paying money to Biafra which was then used for arms.⁷³⁰ Given the role some missionaries – such as Anthony

⁷²⁵ Secret 'Report on visit to Nigeria by RAF officers, 20th – 23rd August 1969, FCO, 27.08.69, UKNA PREM 13/2833.

⁷²⁶ 'Report of the Biafra Study Mission', Congressional Record 115:33, 25.02.69, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/2/3/1/1; J. Strelau, *The International Politics*, p. 246.

⁷²⁷ 'Biafra agrees to IRC plan', *The Guardian*, 19.08.69; M. Davis, 'Audits', p. 508.

⁷²⁸ Carl Gustav von Rosen, quoted in: Patrick Keatley, 'Red Cross 'not to run blockade'', *The Guardian*, 20.08.68; Emmanuel Urhobo, *Relief Operations in the Nigerian Civil War* (Ibadan, 1978), pp. 15-16; M. Black, *A Cause for Our Times*, p. 128; J. Strelau, *The International Politics*, pp. 324-334. Strelau believes in the shoot down being a case of reprisal, as do others, but he also notes that the ICRC was bound to make this incident public whereas the churches could have just gone on with the airlift without mentioning the shoot down. Nigeria apparently wanted to make a statement.

⁷²⁹ M. Davis, 'Audits', p. 508.

⁷³⁰ Jacinta C. Nwaka, 'When Neutrality Loses its Value: Caritas Airlift to Biafra, 1968-1970', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 22 (2013), p. 79.

Byrne who was also the director of Caritas Internationalis in Biafra – played in publicising the suffering, portraying the war as religious in character, and openly taking Biafra’s side, Nigeria’s suspicion and anger over their actions that effectively disregarded Nigerian sovereignty was not surprising.⁷³¹ The Red Cross coordinated relief in federal areas and was bound by legal obligations under the Geneva conventions and needed to maintain good relations with the Nigerian government by avoiding any action that would infringe on Nigerian sovereignty or anger federal authorities. Yet, although church organisations were at the outset less concerned about being drawn into conflict with Nigeria, these organisations ran into problems too. Initially, Pope Paul VI had argued that ‘the moral obligation of assisting starving people was greater than the political obligation of maintaining a good relationship with the Federal Government’, but later the Pope qualified this stance in a meeting with visiting Nigerian bishops in February 1969 when he described his position as ‘disinterested impartiality’.⁷³²

The Politics of Neutrality: The ICRC and the ‘French Doctors’

For some time, the night-time relief airlift into Biafra was grudgingly tolerated by Nigeria, not least as a concession to foreign public opinion and in order to counter the image of Nigeria’s brutal warfare against Biafra. Relief agencies, especially the Red Cross and Oxfam, as well as politicians were in constant negotiations with both sides to find viable alternatives to the night-time airlift that both sides could accept and that would allow a more efficient transport of relief goods into Biafra. Yet, in a war in which starvation was used as a siege tactic to force Biafra to surrender, Nigeria perceived the provision of humanitarian aid as a direct intervention into the war.⁷³³ The Nigeria Biafra War brought about the iconic split between a group of French doctors working in Biafra and the ICRC, the former being in favour of a more interventionist stance on the provision of relief and a more universal ethics that was in favour of supporting victims of all kinds. The Red Cross had a long-established set of principles that bound it thoroughly into the international political order, including neutrality, impartiality, and the respect for the sovereignty of the states within which it operates.⁷³⁴ For the French doctors, the ICRC’s silence on the suffering of Biafrans and its submission to Nigerian demands, seemed

⁷³¹ For more on missionaries and public relations, see chapter 2.

⁷³² N. Omenka, ‘Blaming the Gods’, p. 388.

⁷³³ J. Nwaka, ‘Caritas Airlift to Biafra’, p. 79.

⁷³⁴ Cf. Jean Picket, *Red Cross Principles* (Geneva, 1956).

partial and an impediment to relief. However, speaking out about Biafran suffering, whereby the French doctors broke their confidentiality agreements with the ICRC, implied taking sides, too, the side of the victims.

Many relief organisations considered their work to be humanitarian and were not concerned with the political issues at stake or the political consequences of their intervention. On the one hand, aid organisations believed that it was possible for humanitarian action to be disjointed from politics, on the other, this belief was pragmatic and intended to protect the ability of relief agencies to operate in theatres of war and political conflict. In July 1968, Nigeria invited the ICRC to coordinate all relief efforts in federal areas and insisted that other organisations channel their relief via the ICRC.⁷³⁵ Although the ICRC seemed to act with rather more constraint than the church agencies, the pressures on the organisation to act to help Biafran victims forced the ICRC to transgress its own rules. The ICRC went beyond what could be strictly considered neutral as a result of the scale of international public concern for Biafra, the competition from church organisations, and the frustration with the obstructions of aid by both Nigeria and Biafra and launched operation INALWA. In the absence of safety guarantees from Nigeria for night flights and an agreement of Biafra to daylight flights, the ICRC decided to step up night-time flights despite the risks of being attacked by Nigerian aircraft. Furthermore, the ICRC took other measures that were seen by Nigeria as a direct interference into the politics of the war. In 1968, the ICRC sent its delegate general for Africa, Georg Hoffman, to the peace negotiations at Kampala to meet with both sides and discuss relief routes. After the negotiations, the delegate publicly called on both sides to agree on a suitable relief route. Later, Auguste Lindt, the ICRC's commissioner general for relief in Nigeria since July 1968, attended the negotiations at Addis Ababa to advise on matters of relief.⁷³⁶ In Gowon's view the activities of the ICRC during the war constituted a 'flagrant attempt against all the conventions and history of the ICRC'.⁷³⁷

The ICRC coordinated 29 relief teams and 299 staff members as of January 1969.⁷³⁸ Among these was the group of French doctors worked for the Red Cross, including Bernard Kouchner and Max Récamier, who were later among the founders of the *Médecins Sans*

⁷³⁵ 'Lagos call for UN help', *The Times*, 30.07.68.

⁷³⁶ J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 210.

⁷³⁷ Gowon, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁷³⁸ Report 'Nigeria-Biafra', *Oxfam*, 30.01.1969, BLO MS. Oxfam DIR/2/3/2/12.

Frontières. This reflected the concern of the French public for Biafra and the French Red Cross likewise began acting independently of the ICRC by launching a separate airlift from Libreville in Gabon, from where the Gabonese sent arms to the Biafrans, arms that were in turn replenished by the French government. Gabon was also one of the countries that recognised Biafra and was therefore not a neutral base for operations. The ICRC had moved its base to Fernando Po, because of concerns that operating from Lagos would interfere with the organisation's wish to remain neutral.⁷³⁹ In the face of the suffering they witnessed, they felt that the ICRC was not doing enough to ensure aid reached those who needed it. Kouchner recalled that to remain neutral and silent was a position the Red Cross had also held during the Holocaust: 'If the International Red Cross had alerted the world, if the Pope, Winston Churchill and those who knew about the extermination had spoken out, it would have changed a lot [...]. Why did the world not do anything?'.⁷⁴⁰ Kouchner and Récamier called for an international intervention and described the suffering in Biafra in a *Le Monde* article in November 1968.⁷⁴¹ Kouchner believed a genocide was underway and 'by keeping silent we doctors were accomplices in the systematic massacre of a population.'⁷⁴² Their engagement for Biafra became the 'myth of origin' for the MSF that set the new organisation apart from the Red Cross.⁷⁴³ Nevertheless, the break between the organisations has often been overrated. By subscribing to the ideal of *témoignage*, the act of bearing witness to injustice and violence perpetrated publicly, the doctors broke with the ICRC code – and their confidentiality agreements – they changed the way humanitarian agencies worked, but also afforded publicity for the crisis that the Red Cross was trying to alleviate and therefore contributed to increasing the funds at the disposal of the ICRC for relief in Biafra.⁷⁴⁴ The principles of not speaking out, of not commenting on the political issues at stake, even less so outright support for one side, was a matter of pragmatism for most agencies that hoped to safeguard their ability to continue providing aid for those in need. In the context of Biafra aid organisations found themselves in a paradoxical situation: to be allowed to operate, organisations needed to remain silent about

⁷³⁹ T. Brierly, 'On the Relief Situation in Nigeria', January 1968, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/1/1/3.

⁷⁴⁰ Kouchner quoted in E. Davey, *Idealism Beyond Borders*, p. 43.

⁷⁴¹ Eleanor Davey, 'Beyond the "French doctors": The evolution and interpretation of humanitarian action in France', Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper (October 2012), p. 17, <http://euhap.eu/upload/2014/06/hgp-odi-the-evolution-of-ha-in-france-oct-2012.pdf> (accessed 31.10.17).

⁷⁴² Kouchner quoted in J. Benthall, *Disasters, Relief and the Media*, p. 125.

⁷⁴³ Renée C. Fox, *Doctors Without Borders: Humanitarian Quests, Impossible Dreams of Médecins Sans Frontières* (Baltimore, 2014), p. 45.

⁷⁴⁴ M. Desgrandchamps, 'Dealing with "Genocide"', p. 291.

the suffering they witnessed so as not to anger Nigeria. Yet, they also needed to raise funds for which drawing attention to the misery of the people in Biafra was helpful – the publication of pictures of starving children in the press boosted NGO funding.

A negative consequence of the need for speaking out and thereby raising awareness and, more importantly, funds, is what David Rieff later called the ‘shameless hyperbole that has been the common coin of humanitarian agencies since the refounding of modern humanitarian action that can be dated to the work of the so-called French doctors in Biafra between 1967 and 1969.’⁷⁴⁵ These French doctors were called the ‘Biafrans’ in France because of their staunch support of Biafra’s independence. Kouchner had helped found a Biafra committee, the *Comité de Lutte Contre le Génocide au Biafra*.⁷⁴⁶ To frame the suffering in Biafra, Kouchner and his colleagues, like other Biafra activists at the time, fell back on Biafran propaganda. For instance, they believed and promoted the view that the war was genocidal and a Northern Muslim plot against the Christian Igbo, a narrative also relayed by the French secret service aiding the government in its policy of supporting a break-up of the large and anglophone Nigerian state.⁷⁴⁷ Kouchner and his colleagues thereby became embroiled in the propaganda struggle between Biafra and Nigeria and their respective supporters. From the beginning the MSF adopted ‘a very media-conscious, aggressive style’.⁷⁴⁸ This was in line with the principle of *témoignage*, but it was also a recipe for organisational success: publicity and notoriety ensured funding.

The split in organisations such as the ICRC or Oxfam reflects the tension between a humanitarianism that conceives of itself as apolitical and the realisation of the limits that such a view places on the provision of relief. As a consequence, humanitarianism during the Nigeria-Biafra radicalised. The radicalisation of aid in the *sans-frontiérisme* movement, although it seemed at first to be a politicization of aid, resulted in a depoliticising simplification. The Manichaeian division of the world into victims and perpetrators flattened out the complexity of the conflict and the interests and strategies pursued by both sides of the conflict. The frustration with slow and ineffective aid brought about support for a more interventionist

⁷⁴⁵ David Rieff, *The Reproach of Hunger: Food, Justice, and Money in the Twenty-First Century* (New York, 2015), p. 3.

⁷⁴⁶ ‘Founding of MSF’, MSF, <https://www.msf.org.uk/founding-msf> (accessed: 07.09.17); see also chapter 4.

⁷⁴⁷ M. Pérouse de Montclos, ‘Humanitarian Aid’, pp. 71-72.

⁷⁴⁸ A. de Waal, *Famine Crimes*, p. 76.

humanitarian practice and resulted in a lack of awareness of, or unwillingness to engage with, the political consequences of relief and the 'gray zone' within which most ethical dilemmas are located.⁷⁴⁹ Arguably, the new approach was politically as problematic as the limitations put on organisations by traditional neutrality. At the heart of the issue lies the old question of the relationship between the political and the moral, so intertwined during the Nigeria Biafra War. The borderless movement effectively opened the path for the erosion of the sovereignty of governments in the aid-receiving Third World.

Pure Humanitarianism: Oxfam

The issue that brought about the split of the French doctors from the ICRC was reflected in the controversy among Oxfam's staff whether the organisation should be more politically active or, to the contrary, avoid politics and aspire to a 'pure', non-political humanitarianism. This debate within Oxfam was on the one hand about whether the organisation should take on a more directly political role in educating the public about the issues of world poverty and lobbying the government to adjust its policy on aid and development. This was the view taken by the more radical voices in the organisation, but it was rejected by director Lesley Kirkley. Yet, a second issue was the controversy resulting from the use of images of starving children to appeal for donations. These campaigns to raise funds for the aid effort in Biafra as well as some public statements of Oxfam officials angered Nigeria and made it difficult for Oxfam staff in Lagos to operate.

Oxfam's activities in Nigeria and Biafra predated the war. In 1966 the organisation was involved in the rehabilitation of refugees in Eastern Nigeria. By the time war broke out, Oxfam's field directors were aware of the problematic humanitarian situation.⁷⁵⁰ In a report on the refugee situation in late 1966, Tim Brierly, a former colonial officer and Oxfam's field director for West Africa, wrote to Oxfam headquarters that the situation in Nigeria was very unpredictable: Gowon was not yet recognised as head of state and Ojukwu, on the other hand, was trying to remedy the refugee crisis by devolving powers to newly created provinces, but overcrowding and food shortages would still become a problem. Brierly concluded, Oxfam

⁷⁴⁹ For the concept of the 'gray zone', cf. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York, 2017 [1986]), pp. 25-56.

⁷⁵⁰ West African Field Director to Oxfam, 10.01.67, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/1/1/3.

would have to consider carefully which projects to support given these difficult and uncertain political circumstances.⁷⁵¹ In early 1967, Oxfam channelled its aid in Biafra through the Irish Holy Ghost Fathers, missionaries who were in a good position to help people on the ground. Oxfam was careful to spend roughly equal amounts in federal areas; £59,300 had been spent in both areas by February 1968.⁷⁵² One month later Oxfam granted £20,000 to Caritas for the airlift, which created problems with Nigeria because Caritas had initially been buying space on planes carrying arms into Biafra.⁷⁵³

Oxfam regularly received information from its field directors in Lagos, teams in the field on both sides, as well as other aid organisations – the representatives of various aid organisations met and exchanged information. Consequently, aid organisations were well informed about the war and the local situation. Based on the reports Oxfam received from its own workers in the field and other sources, director Lesley Kirkley gave frequent reports to the committee meeting in Oxford where decisions were taken on Oxfam's further action. In the early months of the war, Brierly described the mood in Biafra as one of 'calm determination' despite the fear of federal troops. Yet, he reported Reverent E.H. Johnson's rather sober – and ultimately accurate – assessment that the war would result either in a federal victory or a stalemate. Brierly believed that cease-fire and negotiations might mean a loss of face for Gowon and could result in an overthrow by Gowon's 'own field commanders'.⁷⁵⁴ In another report on the relief situation in January 1968, Brierly noted that Gowon was careful to avoid atrocities; although some field commanders 'go their own way'. Oxfam was therefore aware that there was no Nigerian policy of genocide. The growing relief needs were met by the organisations, and Brierly only suggested supporting one IRC surgical team at Achi hospital, since any aid given to Biafran civilians was seen in Lagos as prolonging the war.⁷⁵⁵ Yet, the information available from Lagos was not always sufficient. West Africa director of Oxfam in 1968, Duncan Kirkpatrick, noted the transport difficulties that affected the provision of relief as well as the mobility of relief coordinators to get a 'comprehensive view' of the current

⁷⁵¹ T. Brierly to Humphrey, 'Refugees in Eastern Nigeria', 26.12.66, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/1/1/3.

⁷⁵² M. Black, *A Cause for Our Times*, p. 119.

⁷⁵³ 'Oxfam food ship sails – Magnificent response to £100,000 emergency appeal', Oxfam brochure, 01.07.68, BLO MS. Oxfam COM/3/3/1; Need evidence here for gun report

⁷⁵⁴ T. Brierly to J. W. Jackson, 25.01.68, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/2/3/1/1.

⁷⁵⁵ T. Brierly, 'Notes on the Relief Situation – Nigeria', January 1968, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/1/1/3.

situation. As far as he knew, the situation in refugee camps was bad, but many villages were worse off due to the in-stream of refugees fleeing the towns before the advancing troops.⁷⁵⁶

A major change for the organisation occurred just before the Biafran famine became a media event with the appointment of Nicholas Stacey as the new deputy director of Oxfam in May 1968. Stacey set out to change the organisation's public profile. In the official history of Oxfam, Maggie Black describes Stacey as an 'energetic dazzler' with a talent for publicity. Stacey had been a known television and press journalist and continued to publish articles in the press in his new capacity. After Stacey's appointment, Oxfam launched graphic appeals for aid to Biafra in newspapers in Britain and increased the NGO's public visibility. Oxfam launched fund-raising campaigns and 'became operational' for the second time only by sending their own medical and relief teams to work under the auspices of the ICRC.⁷⁵⁷ One of these was a paediatric unit sent to Biafra to treat severely malnourished children. A report of their work and observations was later published in the prestigious medical journal *The Lancet*.⁷⁵⁸ Some campaigns were spectacular. In 1968, an appeal for £100,000 to finance 1000 tons of milk powder to be bought and transported to Biafra resulted in the highly media-effective chartering of the Dutch freighter *Mitropa*. The milk powder was shipped to Fernando Po and handed over to the ICRC for transport from the island into Biafra.⁷⁵⁹ The whole operation cost £100,000 and was publicised in a leaflet distributed in the United Kingdom.⁷⁶⁰ Such projects were useful for publicity purposes and leaflets and brochures were printed for distribution by regional Oxfam committees to advertise the organisation's work and increase funds raised by showing specifically how Oxfam used donations to provide relief.⁷⁶¹ Unfortunately, a part of the dried milk later perished on Fernando Po when the Red Cross was unable to fly into Biafra and relief stocks were piling up in the tropical climate of the island with no adequate warehousing facilities.⁷⁶²

⁷⁵⁶ D. Kirkpatrick to L. Kirkley, undated ca. 1968, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/3/3/1/20.

⁷⁵⁷ M. Black, *A Cause for Our Times*, p. 126.

⁷⁵⁸ Bruno Gans, 'A Biafran relief Mission', *The Lancet*, 29.03.68, pp. 660-665, BLO MS. Oxfam DIR/2/3/2/12.

⁷⁵⁹ Letter from Oxfam to C. Davies, 03.07.68 BLO MS. Oxfam COM/3/1/8; Note, 'Biafra Emergency: Urgent', 14.06.68, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/2/3/1/1.

⁷⁶⁰ Flyer: 'Oxfam food ship sails', Oxfam, undated ca. 1968, MS. Oxfam COM/3/3/1.

⁷⁶¹ 'Oxfam food ship sails – Magnificent response to £100,000 emergency appeal', Oxfam brochure, 01.07.68, BLO MS. Oxfam COM/3/3/1.

⁷⁶² M. Black, *A Cause for Our Times*, p. 124.

Advocacy and spectacular campaigns had initially brought Oxfam fame and kept it in touch with the younger generation.⁷⁶³ A massive campaign was launched to distribute leaflets on Biafra, win support among influential personalities, and collect donations. By June 1968, 185 schools had been asked to distribute the 'Emergency Express' brochure, letters were sent to newspapers, and the Bishop of Newcastle had promised to write to 260 clergymen about Nigeria and Biafra to win their support in raising awareness of the war. As part of a 'general mobilization' Oxfam branches were instructed to organise fundraising events and report back on their plans and successes.⁷⁶⁴ In late 1969, the support attracted by an event sponsored by Oxfam demonstrated the appeal of the organisation to the younger generation. A group of young people asked Oxfam to sponsor a walk they were organising in order to raise £200,000 for the 'hungry-half' of the world. 50,000 people were expected to attend.⁷⁶⁵ The walk was supposed not only to raise money and engage with the youth, but also to bring 'unequaled publicity' for Oxfam on TV and in the press.⁷⁶⁶ As late as November 1969 when a decision had been taken not to place further advertising, Oxfam's head of communications, Philipp Jackson, urged Kirkley and Stacey to take the lead in public campaigning for Biafra, since the famine was likely to continue to be 'preoccupation of the British public' for the remainder of the year and Oxfam should not be seen to be 'out of touch with a topical situation'.⁷⁶⁷

Oxfam's heightened public profile was fraught with problems. In March 1968, it had been decided on the advice of Brierly that there was to be no publicity for direct aid to Biafra, so as to not endanger Oxfam's ability to partake in post-war reconstruction by angering Nigeria. Nigerian officials were suspicious of humanitarian agencies and journalists for what they saw as taking Biafra's side. With graphic advertisements depicting starving children and public statements, such as 'the price for a united Nigeria is likely going to be millions of deaths', such caution was cast aside and the need to help was seen as paramount.⁷⁶⁸ The use of advertisements depicting starving children and public statements that could be construed as partisan angered Nigeria. The implicit politics of public statements and advertisements that

⁷⁶³ M. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, p. 128.

⁷⁶⁴ D. Johnson, 'Information Sheet', 25.06.68.

⁷⁶⁵ Nicholas Stacey, '50,000 teenagers walking tall', *Evening News Late Extra*, 14.04.69, BLO MS. Oxfam COM/3/1/8.

⁷⁶⁶ Oxfam 'Walk '69' Basic Facts, undated letter, BLO MS. Oxfam COM/3/3/1.

⁷⁶⁷ Philipp Jackson to L. Kirkley and N. Stacey, 26.11.69, BLO MS. Oxfam COM/3/3/1.

⁷⁶⁸ M. Black, *A Cause for Our Times*, p. 127.

went beyond neutrality made it difficult for Brierly to operate in Lagos where the impatience with Oxfam's actions grew. Oxfam was split on politics, not into pro-Igbo and anti-Igbo camps, but on the question of direct political lobbying – which Kirkley and Stacey opposed.⁷⁶⁹ Maggie Black believes that Oxfam and the other aid agencies had fallen for Biafran genocide propaganda 'hook, line and sinker', but institutional logic and pragmatic reasons for the dramatic appeals may have been more important: Oxfam, like the press, had found an angle that would boost its income and notoriety as an organisation.⁷⁷⁰

The question of a route suitable for the transport of sufficient quantities of relief that was acceptable to both sides was still unresolved by August 1968, and peace seemed equally improbable after several failed initiatives, a failed final offensive of the FMG, and news of the French arms supply to Biafra. The ICRC decided to continue its airlift in September 1968. The relief organisations became increasingly frustrated with the obstacles put in the way of relief by the politics of the war, so did parts of the press and Biafra activists. Peter Cadogan of the Save Biafra Committee, for instance, criticised Oxfam for subordinating its activities to the ICRC, an organisation that according to Cadogan had 'turned its back on a starving people' and thereby supported Nigeria's 'quick-kill' policy. Oxfam, Cadogan argued, was 'muted and short of action', although the organisation had realised that only an end to the war could end Biafran suffering and allow for an effective provision of relief.⁷⁷¹ In order not to appear supportive of the more radical political support for Biafra, Oxfam decided that 'it should not be too closely associated with Cadogan's Save Biafra Committee'.⁷⁷² Responding to criticism of the shortcomings of the ICRC relief operation in *The Times*, Stacey wrote in a letter to the editor of the paper in September 1968: 'No relief agency in the world, however efficient, could overcome these kinds of difficulties short of taking over the country.'⁷⁷³

Despite public assurances of Kirkley and Stacey that Oxfam opposed political lobbying, both became quite active in the politics of the conflict. Political decisions were affecting the provision of relief: the refusal of reaching an agreement on a relief route made the agencies'

⁷⁶⁹ John de St. Jorré, 'Has Oxfam man on spot resigned?', *The Observer*, 14.07.68.

⁷⁷⁰ M. Black, *Oxfam*, p. 121.

⁷⁷¹ Peter Cadogan, 'Biafra' Information Leaflet, ca. 1968, BLO MS. Oxfam DIR/2/3/2/12.

⁷⁷² Minutes on Meetings of Divisional Heads on the Subject Nigeria/Biafra, 25.02.69, BLO MS. Oxfam DIR/2/3/2/12.

⁷⁷³ N. Stacy to the Editor of *The Times*, 16.09.68, BLO MS. Oxfam COM/3/3/1; Nicholas Stacey, 'Red Cross in Nigeria', *The Times*, 20.09.68.

work almost impossible, so to operate as humanitarian agents, more had to be done in Kirkley's view. In July 1968 Oxfam appealed to the Prime Minister to intervene personally to convince Nigeria to allow the relief airlift into Biafra.⁷⁷⁴ Later that year, Oxfam appealed again to 'our authorities to give priority now to get the fighting stopped'.⁷⁷⁵ At the outset of the organisation's work in Nigeria, Oxfam had entered an agreement with the ICRC not to act unilaterally, but disregarded the agreement when director Leslie Kirkley went to Biafra in June 1968 to discuss the opening of a relief route with Ojukwu⁷⁷⁶ – during the meeting Ojukwu promised to allow daylight relief flights, but never followed through on his promise. Not seeing Gowon first was considered a diplomatic affront in Lagos, and Oxfam's image in the Nigerian capital deteriorated further. This created a rift between Oxfam and other organisations that were part of the Disaster Emergency Committee, which had been created in 1963 by Oxfam, the British Red Cross, War on Want, and Christian Aid to coordinate relief efforts.⁷⁷⁷ Subsequently, when British High Commissioner David Hunt headed a mission to secure a relief route, Red Cross and Save the Children Fund staff were invited but no representative of Oxfam.⁷⁷⁸

The war in Nigeria and Biafra, especially due to the suspicions of the Nigerian government regarding Oxfam's work in Biafra, forced the organisation to issue a statement 'to counter charges that Oxfam is only concerned with the Biafran side'. 'Oxfam is a completely non-political body', the statement opened and argued that Oxfam was simply concerned with people in need, 'whatever their colour or belief.' Oxfam grants for relief projects were made on the basis of need, most urgent in 'Ibo-land'. The £300,000 thus far spent by Oxfam exceeded the £250,000 offered by the British government and although governmental missions to establish a viable relief route were necessary, time was of the essence and relief needed to be brought in immediately.⁷⁷⁹ Oxfam's officials in Lagos were acutely aware of the sensitive situation Oxfam was caught in. In mid-July 1968, Bennett warned Nicholas Stacey about Oxfam's provocative public statements. that the phrase used in the Oxfam Actuator

⁷⁷⁴ Patrick Keatley, 'Nigeria may destroy relief planes', *The Guardian*, 06.07.68.

⁷⁷⁵ 'Oxfam cannot stop the war', *The Guardian*, 02.12.1968.

⁷⁷⁶ 'Relief for Biafrans blocked', *The Guardian*, 21.06.68.

⁷⁷⁷ 'Timeline: History of Oxfam', *Oxfam*, <https://www.oxfam.org.uk/what-we-do/about-us/history-of-oxfam> (accessed: 19.10.17).

⁷⁷⁸ M. Black, *A Cause for Our Times*, p. 123.

⁷⁷⁹ 'Nigeria/Biafra: A Statement of Oxfam's Position', Oxfam, 09.07.68, BLO MS. Oxfam COM/3/3/1.

‘meanwhile we are beating the blockade while we can’: ‘this statement is not just dynamite; it’s the hydrogen bomb’ in its potentially destructive effect on relations with Nigerian authorities. The FMG believed that Oxfam was sympathising with Biafra and this suspicion made the situation for fieldworkers ‘appallingly difficult’ no matter how often Oxfam publicly professed neutrality.⁷⁸⁰ In the face of Oxfam’s actions, Kirkley’s assurances that Oxfam was taking no side in the conflict were futile. In a meeting with locally operating relief agencies in July 1968, Gowon explained that his government did not resent relief as such but that any form of political interference was unacceptable to his government. Oxfam’s political involvement, Gowon argued, was proven by the publicity the organisation generated for Biafran suffering in Britain, as well as by the use of unauthorized planes that also carried arms – this was in reference to Oxfam’s early support given to Caritas, when the latter still chartered space on gun-running planes. Gowon believed that these actions by Oxfam and Caritas ‘bolstered’ Ojukwu’s determination to resist.⁷⁸¹

The situation in Lagos had become so difficult for Brierly by the end of July 1968, that he resigned. When early rumours of Brierly’s plan to resign were published in the *Observer*,⁷⁸² Kirkley protested the publication of this information.⁷⁸³ As director of Oxfam, Kirkley was hoping not to draw attention to the internal dissensions within Oxfam and thereby possibly reduce public confidence in the organisation. After Brierly left, Kirkley sent Bennett to Lagos to mend relations with the Federal Military Government. Bennett returned ‘partially successful in improving the very bad odour in which Oxfam is currently held’. It was agreed that Oxfam would channel all aid through the ICRC and would no longer support Caritas or the other church agencies that acted without permission of Gowon.⁷⁸⁴

The pressures on Oxfam in Britain were different from those affecting staff in Lagos. Bennett had earlier written to Brierly that according to ‘Lagos quarters’ any help provided for Biafra could be seen by Nigeria as an unfriendly act, but that many thought it ‘so important [...]

⁷⁸⁰ K. Bennett to N. Stacey, 18.07.68, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/2/3/1/1.

⁷⁸¹ T. Brierly to L. Kirkley, 29.07.68, BLO MS. Oxfam DIR/2/3/2/11.

⁷⁸² John de St. Jorré, ‘Has Oxfam man on spot resigned?’, *The Observer*, 14.07.68.

⁷⁸³ This is clear from two letters to L. Kirkley by the *Observer* and J. de St. Jorré respectively, in which they apologised and justified their publication of Brierly’s plans to resign: W. Quentin to L. Kirkley, 18.07.68 and J. de St. Jorré to L. Kirkley, 18.07.68, BLO MS. Oxfam DIR/2/3/2/11.

⁷⁸⁴ Philip Jackson, ‘Biafran Emergency Appeal’, 19.07.68, BLO MS. Oxfam COM/3/3/1; M. Black, *A Cause for Our Times*, p. 124.

to try to help in Biafra that we should be willing to accept any risks inherent in this.⁷⁸⁵ The use of graphic images for donation appeals was intended to ‘replace experience by trying to show visually and graphically what plight half the world is in.’⁷⁸⁶ Donations to Oxfam received in response to press appeals for the Biafran famine were ‘the highest [...] in recent years’ and ‘the continued interest depended on continued media coverage and the opening of a relief route.’⁷⁸⁷ In March 1969, new attention was drawn to Biafran suffering by the reports on aerial bombing of civilian targets, like markets and hospitals. This was the background to a public statement by Oxfam chairman, Charles Coulson: ‘What Britain – both the government of Britain and the people of Britain – must now face is that the price of a united Nigeria is likely to be millions of deaths’.⁷⁸⁸ Attacks on relief workers and hospitals resulted in a further deterioration of the relations between relief agencies and the FMG. Agencies became increasingly impatient with the Nigerian leadership, which in their view obstructed their efforts to aid the suffering population. Still, the Nigerian leadership resented the use of these images and the emphasis of Biafran suffering in Oxfam ads and Bennet believed it ‘highly probable’ that the continued use of such images could lead to an end of Oxfam’s activities in Nigeria. Although it would create a challenge for fundraisers and the public relations department of Oxfam to do without such graphic imagery, Bennett noted that hunger and even kwashiorkor were not unknown in Africa even during times of peace.⁷⁸⁹

Possibly, due to the experience of how effective publicity was in the context of the Biafran famine, Stacey hoped to transform Oxfam into an organisation with a broad basis of support that would be able to effectively pressure the government to change its aid policy. Under this scheme, Stacey argued, half of Oxfam’s annual income should be used for advertising and information campaigns that would captivate and mobilise public opinion. In this way, Oxfam would increase its role of forming public opinion and educating the public: ‘Oxfam and the other agencies have to be as effective politically as they are in fund raising’.⁷⁹⁰ The rationale was, interestingly, that the fight against world poverty was in the self-interest of

⁷⁸⁵ K. Bennett to T. Brierly, 30.01.68, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/2/3/1/1.

⁷⁸⁶ P. Jackson to K. Bennett, 15.08.66, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/2/3/1/1.

⁷⁸⁷ Philip Jackson, ‘Biafran Emergency Appeal’, 17.07.68, BLO MS. Oxfam COM/3/3/1

⁷⁸⁸ M. Black, *A Cause for Our Times*, p. 127.

⁷⁸⁹ K. Bennett, ‘Nigeria’, Brief to Oxfam Africa Committee Meeting, 16.02.70, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/1/3/3.

⁷⁹⁰ John Fairhall, ‘Oxfam’s cash famine’, *The Guardian*, 28.08.69.

the British people, since it might be the British people suffering from poverty one day.⁷⁹¹ This is similar to an argument made by Golo Mann in the preface to a volume published by the German group *Aktion Biafra-Hilfe*, in which he argues that if ‘we don’t help the [Biafrans], no one will help us either’.⁷⁹² Although Kirkley agreed with Stacey to a degree, since he believed in ‘an all-out attack on public apathy and lack of knowledge’ regarding world poverty, he and the Oxfam executive preferred to use most of the income for direct aid and turned down Stacey’s plans in January 1970.⁷⁹³ A few months later, Stacey resigned but not before leaving his mark on the Biafra campaign.⁷⁹⁴

Oxfam’s campaign did not only cause problems with Nigeria. Echoing the politically delicate situation ‘in the field’ of operation, a debate ensued within Oxfam and among the British public to what extent charitable organisations should also undertake political work. Oxfam’s advocacy, calls for political action, and government lobbying conflicted with the definition and regulations of ‘charitable work’ by the British Charities Commission. Oxfam had run into problems a few times because of political campaigning. High-profile advocacy and the controversies it entailed for Oxfam had been part and parcel of the organisation’s identity as young and dynamic. It attracted younger members and brought much publicity and fame to Oxfam. Yet, certain benefits, such as tax cuts rested on following the regulation set down by the charities commission.⁷⁹⁵ Philip Jackson, underlined in the *Telegraph* in 1970 that Oxfam enjoyed support from various groups in society: ‘Christian, Jew, agnostic, conservative, radical, the old and the young, all make Oxfam a vehicle for their compassion’, yet these supporters did not share a common political outlook.⁷⁹⁶

The relations of charities with the media were not always symbiotic, as is evident from the coverage of the issue of charities’ scope for political action. In 1971, when a House of Lords debate on whether charities should be free from the restrictions on political action was arranged, Lord Beaumont of the Liberal Party made the case in favour of lifting the restrictions: ‘for many charities it is axiomatic that their objects are twofold: first of all to relieve the suffering [...] and at the same time to urge the government to take over that relief themselves,

⁷⁹¹ Martin Woollacott, ‘How they stymied Nick Stacey’, *The Guardian*, 24.01.1970.

⁷⁹² Golo Mann, preface to T. Zülch and K. Guercke, *Soll Biafra Überleben?*, p. 10.

⁷⁹³ Martin Woollacott, ‘How they stymied Nick Stacey’, *The Guardian*, 24.01.1970.

⁷⁹⁴ ‘Stacey resigns from Oxfam’, *The Guardian*, 02.05.70.

⁷⁹⁵ M. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, p. 128.

⁷⁹⁶ Philip Jackson, ‘Oxfam and Politics’, *The Telegraph*, 14.05.70.

or [...] by tackling the basic causes rather than the symptoms.⁷⁹⁷ The press took up the subject and the conservative *Times* reasoned that ‘the attainment of a political object is not a valid charitable purpose,’ although a small measure of political action, one that directly and immediately supported the aid effort, was acceptable. The main argument put forward to support this view was that since charities were exempt from paying tax at the (indirect) expense of the entire British public, they were therefore not supposed to advance specific political goals not shared by all members of British society without endangering their privilege of tax exemption.⁷⁹⁸

On 5 January 1970, a meeting was held at the FCO with representatives of British charities and the Lagos High Commission on the future of relief operations in Nigeria and Biafra. It was discussed that food and medicine were needed most. A lot of food was stored in Port Harcourt, but there were transport problems, especially due to the lack of service technicians and spare parts.⁷⁹⁹ A few days later, Biafra surrendered and the war was over. During the war Oxfam spent around £600,000 for relief in Nigeria and Biafra. Additionally, it became clear during the late 60s that above and beyond emergency relief, a long-term approach to development was necessary to achieve Oxfam’s aim of ending world hunger and poverty. Long-term work was less useful in attracting funds and was not suitable for the kind of dramatic aid appeals made in the context of Biafra. This also reflected on the image of Oxfam as an organisation, and Philip Jackson wrote that Oxfam should appear as ‘an agency of integrity, efficiency, imagination and force’ not ‘serious and steady’.⁸⁰⁰ The results would take time to manifest and could not be reported back within a short period of time to assure donors of the efficacy of their contribution. Development aid, even more than emergency relief, was highly complex and inevitably interwoven with questions of a political nature. The very notion of development is linked to various questions of a normative nature. Likewise, the provision of relief during the Nigeria-Biafra War, led organisations like Oxfam back to basic political questions.

⁷⁹⁷ Lord Beaumont, 30.06.71, *Hansard* HL vol. 321 col. 331; ‘Are politics a charitable aim?’, *The Times*, 02.07.71.

⁷⁹⁸ ‘In the name of charity’, *The Times*, 27.06.70.

⁷⁹⁹ C. Warr, Minute ‘Meeting held at FCO re. Nigerian aid’, 05.01.70, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/1/1/3.

⁸⁰⁰ P. Jackson to K. Bennett, 15.08.66, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/2/3/1/1.

Biafra and the Politics of Relief

In his analysis Morris Davis examines the question to what extent humanitarian aid contributions during the Nigeria-Biafra War were a vessel to project political power by the United States, the major donor. Davis concludes that despite American financial contributions, the US government had not much control over the relief agencies and how they utilised the funding.⁸⁰¹ This situation incidentally changed after the war when both the US and Britain increased their involvement in Nigerian post-war reconstruction. A contemporary case of more direct links between foreign policy goals and relief programmes is the involvement of the humanitarian agencies Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and CARE in Vietnam, whose programmes became part and parcel of the strategy and policy goals of the United States in Vietnam. Both agencies were dependent on funding from the US government and believed that they shared the interests of the United States as far as anti-communism was concerned. When the close relationship between CRS and the US government was revealed by a journalist in 1967, the agency had to end its 'more controversial programs'.⁸⁰² During the Nigeria-Biafra war it was precisely the absence of an intervention by foreign states that freed the space for a prominent role by humanitarian NGOs. At the same time, government funding for relief increased. The fact that there seems to be no direct link between humanitarian aid and the projection of state power does not preclude any political function of relief.

In the words of Alex de Waal's adaptation of Sigmund Freud's book title, responses to Biafra constitute humanitarianism's 'totem and taboo'. In the absence of intervention by states or international organisations, NGOs were faced with relative freedom of action and mounted an unprecedented and 'unsurpassed' relief effort. In the wake of Biafra, many of the aid NGO's became well-known by the European public and 'an entire generation of NGO relief workers was moulded by Biafra'; it became their totem. This led to the reorganisation and expansion of many existing NGOs and the creation of new ones. More importantly, it is the birth of the image of relief as a heroic effort to save people in distress, no matter what the obstacles were. However, it also became a taboo because the political implications of aid and the resulting dilemmas facing NGOs became more visible and important during the Biafran famine than ever before. The ethical questions raised remain unresolved and have only recently begun to be

⁸⁰¹ M. Davis, 'Audits', p. 405.

⁸⁰² M. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, pp. 147-148.

debated.⁸⁰³ Remaining apolitical, as Oxfam decided in the aftermath of the Biafran war, was potentially as hazardous – because it was really impossible – as speaking out on behalf of the victims, the approach adopted by the French doctors and later the MSF. Meanwhile, the humanitarian response has become the norm to alleviate the inevitable suffering during civil wars and as such the expectation of aid has changed the way it is conducted. In the Sierra Leone Civil War, troops mutilated civilians in order to create a situation – and more importantly, dramatic images – that attracted foreign media attention as well as aid organisations.⁸⁰⁴ Events in Darfur are likewise explained in terms of a genocide, rather than a war, and as in Biafra, this angle diverts attention from the political issues at stake and the interests of the groups involved to the mere humanitarian spectacle of human suffering. The tendency to view the war in terms of the dichotomy between victims and perpetrators is a necessary to evoke sympathy from audiences and therefore serves both the interests of the media outlets and the needs of aid organisation. Hence the Nigerians and their allies increasingly pointed to the complicity of Ojukwu in the suffering of the Biafrans.

The Nigerian leadership was very critical of the aid organisations. In a pamphlet, the Nigerian government expressed its anger at foreign interference from states and the international relief organisations, and called these pejoratively ‘meddlers’ and ‘do-gooders’. On the one hand, this simply reflects Nigerian frustration, but it also implies that the organisations were either naïve or wilfully oblivious with regard to the political significance of their actions. Nigerians were concerned that wartime and reconstruction aid would be used as a vessel for a continued interference in Nigerian affairs, and thereby a permanent disregard for the state’s sovereignty, by foreign states and agencies. Gowon made clear that all relief after the war was to be under the control of the Nigerian Red Cross and disbanded the Team of International Observers shortly after the war.⁸⁰⁵ The ICRC, Gowon believed was doing in ‘an African country what they have never dared to do in any other more disastrous theatres of current world conflict.’⁸⁰⁶ Apprehensions regarding what was perceived as a neo-colonial intrusion combined with resentment of the paternalistic attitude of aid organisations and the image of Nigeria and Africa they conveyed. Ken Bennett observed that if Oxfam did not stop

⁸⁰³ A. de Waal, *Famine Crimes*, pp. 72-73.

⁸⁰⁴ Philip Gourevitch, ‘Alms Dealers’.

⁸⁰⁵ Lagos embassy to FCO, Secret Telegram, 13.01.1970, UKNA FCO 65/782.

⁸⁰⁶ Gowon, quoted in J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 212.

using images of starving children it would likely be disallowed to continue to operate in Nigeria.⁸⁰⁷ The resentment also had racial undertones and annoyed Nigerian officials asked relief workers: ‘why don’t you find some starving White people to feed?’⁸⁰⁸

Matters of relief were subordinated to military considerations by both sides. The logic of war and the imperative of morality were incompatible. Starvation, so far as it arose from the deliberate blockade of Biafra, was part of military strategy: the famine would force Biafra to surrender eventually, even if the Nigerian military could not invade the enclave. Whereas relief rendered the blockade all but effective, the Nigerians felt it necessary not to pursue the war to brutally or obstruct relief, both because of their own concerns about public opinion abroad and advice of their allies, like the United Kingdom. Michael Stewart recalled: ‘we kept telling [the Nigerians] you must, if only for presentational reasons, be as generous as you can on the relief matter.’ For scholar John Stremlau, the war was sustained by relief, not external aid. This is borne out by the oral testimony he gathered from the leading protagonists of the war. Ojukwu argued that three factors helped Biafra to hold out during the most difficult time in July and August 1968: Biafra’s logistical advantages, Nigeria’s logistical difficulties, and the financial aid from the churches and other relief agencies. According to Ojukwu, the income in foreign exchange from relief ‘wasn’t much, but enough to sustain us.’⁸⁰⁹ The head of military planning corroborated Ojukwu’s account by stating that the war was ‘largely financed by private and humanitarian contributions.’⁸¹⁰ It is very difficult due to the clandestine nature of material aid to Biafra – much of Biafran armaments came from European black-market sources – to arrive at a definite account of foreign military aid received by Biafra.

Money was received either by direct payment or by exchange for local currency to buy foodstuffs within Biafra. For instance, Kirkpatrick bought local produce from food directorate to help with meagre supplies of milk powder and stock fish flown in. Moreover, relief staff on the ground spent their income locally.⁸¹¹ According to Pérouse de Montclos, 15% of all money the relief agencies brought into Biafra was spent on arms, an amount that was equal to federal expenses during the war. Money was a crucial resource in the war and recognising its

⁸⁰⁷ K. Bennett, ‘Nigeria’, Brief to Oxfam Africa Committee Meeting, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/1/1/3.

⁸⁰⁸ E. Davey, *Idealism beyond Borders*, p. 29.

⁸⁰⁹ Ojukwu, quoted in J. Stremlau, *The International Politics*, p. 239.

⁸¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁸¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

strategical value as a potential weapon, the Nigerian government devalued its currency in January 1968 as a last measure of economic warfare and Alex Madiebo, Biafran Army Chief of Staff, later argued that the lack of currency was the main reason for losing the war.⁸¹² The lack of money in circulation was a major obstacle to rehabilitation after the war. West German officials noted that more and more groups collecting donations for the suffering in Nigeria and Biafra began to transfer their funds to the large relief organisations, but expresses concern that some remaining citizen committees who politically support Biafra, are still sending their funds to Biafran student organisations in West Germany or to 'the Ojukwu regime'. It adds that there was no legal basis for intervening against these actions of the more politically involved Biafra committees.⁸¹³

Besides financial aid to the war economy, relief agencies also undertook infrastructure improvements, especially at Uli airport, as food and arms used the same transport routes.⁸¹⁴ Moreover, relief food and medicine directly benefited the army and administration. To be sure, relief agencies tried to prevent the seizure of their supplies, but not always successfully. The sisters of the Medical Missionaries of Mary (MMM) kept 'an air raid emergency cupboard and suitcase full of drugs and instruments hidden in their convent' to protect their supplies from soldiers. The sisters were sometimes forced to operate and give medical care to soldiers, their clinics were generally open to all, although the great demand for medical services and the lack of staff and supplies meant that not all waiting patients could be seen.⁸¹⁵

Moreover, questions of relief were inextricably linked to questions of strategy. The route of relief flights into Biafra was shared by the arms shuttle flights and initially relief was transported on the very same planes as the arms flown in by the American pilot and adventurer Hank Wharton. The arms flights were the reason why Biafra would not allow daylight relief flights, since their night-time flights effectively covered the arms shuttle. Nigeria would be restrained from shooting down planes to avoid targeting relief organisations' planes and causing a scandal. From mid-1968 a makeshift airstrip near Uli was the only remaining link of Biafra to the outside world. Should relief planes fly to Uli during day time, however, Nigeria could locate the exact position of the airstrip, otherwise camouflaged in day time, and would

⁸¹² M. Pérouse de Montclos, 'Humanitarian Aid', p. 74.

⁸¹³ Memorandum on West German humanitarian aid for Nigeria, 'Biafra', AA, 29.01.1969, BAK B126/31458.

⁸¹⁴ M. Pérouse de Montclos, 'Humanitarian Aid', p. 72.

⁸¹⁵ B. Mann Wall, *Into Africa*, pp. 103-104.

have a chance of destroying Biafra's last link to the outside world. Humanitarian concerns were clearly subordinated to military strategic considerations, however, losing Uli airstrip was tantamount to surrender. The church organisations agreed to extend and maintain Uli airstrip in order to use it for relief. This benefitted the shuttle of arms as well as relief flights.⁸¹⁶

There were less tangible benefits of relief as well. Relief food and medicine strengthened Biafran morale, staving off the worst of famine and fuelling hopes for future political support from abroad. By autumn 1968 the relief effort that intensified in summer began to take effect, daily casualties were greatly reduced, hunger was held in check until a further food crisis in 1969. Moreover, the NGO's appeals increased further the publicity of Biafran suffering. It was a common trope among Biafrans and their supporters that the 'world remained silent' in the face of Biafran suffering, and the attention subsequently devoted to the famine changed this and promised not only material, but possibly also political support. The Biafrans derived great comfort from the visits of foreign delegations who expressed concern about their fate, as Margo Parish of the *Britain-Biafra Association* reported on her visit to the enclave.⁸¹⁷

Aid organisations were a key factor in the internationalisation of the war, along with the Biafran public relations campaign, and the media's interest in the famine. The point is often made that the war was all but lost militarily by May 1968 with the fall of Port Harcourt, a major port city, after which Biafra was surrounded by Nigerian troops and lost an airport, sea access, and control over important oil installations. In a very traditional war, this might have been true. Warfare had long changed and propaganda and internationalisation had become as much part of war as the battlefield. That the relief effort made possible the continuation of the war was not generally acknowledged and conveniently forgotten after the war. Instead the Biafran determination to resist and military prowess became legendary to the same extent that Nigerian disorganisation was emphasised.⁸¹⁸ Whereas Jacinta Nwaka argued in the context of Biafra that political neutrality as a humanitarian principle is not 'sacrosanct' and should not be so – especially when as was the case in Biafra the humanitarian situation was an integral part of war strategy – Pérouse de Montclos warns of the 'dark side' of aid. The UN concept of a 'responsibility to protect, or linking the respect for sovereignty to the respective state's ability to protect its population from humanitarian disaster, is often seen as emerging from the brand

⁸¹⁶ M. Davis, 'Audits', p. 508.

⁸¹⁷ Margot Parish, 'Impressions of Biafra', *Labour Monthly*, June 1968, BLO MSS. Afr. S. 2399/1.

⁸¹⁸ M. Pérouse de Montclos, 'Humanitarian Aid', p. 70.

of borderless humanitarianism that was developed in the course of the Nigeria-Biafra war and championed by the MSF. The danger of this radicalised aid lies in the possibility of abusing such an erosion of state sovereignty and argues that humanitarian pretexts have long been used in gunboat diplomacy. After all, 'Africa was colonised under the pretext of civilising the continent and abolishing the slave trade'.⁸¹⁹



Throughout the war, the leadership of the federal side was highly critical of the humanitarian agencies, since it regarded their action as an intervention into what was regarded as an internal affair. Gowon accused Caritas and Oxfam of publishing 'biased appeals' in newspapers and complained that the use of the term 'Biafra' legitimised the secessionist state.⁸²⁰ In a similar vein, Lagos newspaper accused Caritas and Oxfam of 'clandestine support for the rebel cause' and believed the appeal of the organisations for a cease-fire was insincere, since 'humanitarian organisations aided and abetted the secessionist leaders in their futile attempt to sustain their armed rebellion.'⁸²¹ On 5 June 1969, when the Red Cross plane was shot down, the Nigerians were 'increasingly frustrated by their inability to bring the war to an end and they blamed the agents of humanitarianism for inhibiting their efforts to do so.'⁸²² The British had been advising Nigeria to adopt a more restrained approach to warfare for the sake of better publicity. The longer the war lasted, the more insecure Gowon's position as federal leader. Roughly a week later, the ICRC representative in Nigeria, Auguste Lindt, was declared *persona non grata* and according to Derek Robinson, Oxfam's field director for West Africa in 1969, the action taken against the ICRC was a 'normal reaction of a government being constantly defied' and Lindt's actions had been 'asking for trouble' so that even many of the relief agency staff were glad he left.⁸²³ Shortly afterwards Nigeria banned night flights. At the time, the airlift had already been stopped because there was no possibility of transporting goods to the feeding and medical centres once flown into Biafra.⁸²⁴

⁸¹⁹ Ibid., p. 71.

⁸²⁰ A. Omaka, *The Biafran Humanitarian Crisis*, pp. 66-67.

⁸²¹ 'Federal Govt spurns "cease-fire" pleas', *Daily Times Lagos*, 03.12.68, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/1/1/3.

⁸²² M. Black, *A Cause for Our Times*, p. 128.

⁸²³ D. Robinson to K. Bennett, 18.06.69, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/2/3/1/2.

⁸²⁴ Hella Pick, 'Biafra flights banned', *The Guardian*, 17.01.69.

Finally, in October, the Nigerian Red Cross took over the ICRC activities in federal areas and the Nigerian Rehabilitation Commission functioned as the coordinating body.⁸²⁵ Most missionaries and Christian organisations who operated in Biafra during the war were expelled after the war, because of the outspoken support for Biafran secession of many missionaries as well as Christian dignitaries abroad. Robinson wrote to Oxfam headquarters that Nigeria kept a black-list of organisations that would not be allowed to operate in Nigeria.⁸²⁶ The ICRC had already transferred all personnel, vehicles, and supplies to the Nigerian Red Cross in late 1969. Massive amounts of relief were brought into Nigeria after the war, especially by foreign governments, and Gowon was concerned that aid for post-war reconstruction might be linked to increased foreign interference.⁸²⁷ The federal government insisted that all foreign aid be given on a government to government basis and should not originate with individual agencies. Oxfam handed over its supplies, equipment and teams to the British government to be used by the Nigerian Rehabilitation Commission. To be able to continue to contribute to the aid effort for those who continued to be affected by the war's repercussions in Nigeria, Oxfam, like other agencies, had to submit to local political authorities.

Yet, it is also already discernible in responses to the Biafran famine that the humanitarian endeavour took on a self-perpetuating dynamic and a self-referential dimension in so far as relief became an end in itself, regardless of unintended consequences. Pérouse de Montclos argued: 'From a media point of view, Biafra was a success story, [...] but from a humanitarian point of view, it was an operational disaster, a logistical nightmare, and a political failure.'⁸²⁸ Although this is a rather harsh judgement given the difficult conditions under which relief agencies operated as well as the novel nature of the undertaking, the juxtaposition of the media success to the problematic role of the relief effort expresses the stark difference between the public perception for Biafran suffering and the relief effort, on the one hand, and the political consequences of relief as well as the realities of aid provision, on the other. The extent of the political failure of the effort was forgotten in the context of the rising number and power of relief organisations. Biafra came to be known as a watershed moment in the

⁸²⁵ Note, 'Continued Relief in Nigeria', League of Red Cross Societies, Geneva, 14.10.69, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/1/1/3.

⁸²⁶ D. Robinson to M. Harris, 03.12.69, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/2/3/1/2.

⁸²⁷ K. Bennett, 'Nigeria', Brief to Oxfam Africa Committee Meeting, BLO MS. Oxfam PRG/1/1/3.

⁸²⁸ M. Pérouse de Montclos, 'Humanitarian Aid', p. 72.

history of humanitarian action, although the questions raised in the discussions about politics that split organisations remained unanswered. At its most extreme, and 'because the humanitarian market is very competitive, aid is often implemented for the audience rather than for the victims.'⁸²⁹

⁸²⁹ Ibid., p. 76.

Conclusion

The Nigeria-Biafra War marks a critical juncture, when, in the wake of the Second World War and decolonisation, new forms of global governance emerged that eventually transformed the preceding order. During the 1960s, responses to the Biafran famine were indicative of these international or transnational shifts and their intersections with local developments. Decolonisation opened a space of political possibilities, both for the newly independent countries as well as for the global order. It seemed possible that the emergence of the bloc-free movement signified the rise of an additional pole, challenging the Cold War dichotomy of East and West and, to some extent, perhaps inspiring the newly independent states to avoid the often difficult and violent processes that had driven the consolidation of many European nation states. Such hopes proved optimistic with regard to Africa. Many colonies that achieved independence without war were left with governments and borders inherited from the colonial era, and contests about political power and representation resulted in attempts to redraw the African map and create new polities.

The secession of Biafra was part of this process and contributed to a political project that imagined a new community within the boundaries of Nigeria. But it was also the attempt of a regional political elite to prevent the loss of control over the economically important, oil-rich area of the Niger delta. In the twelve-state division of Nigeria, implemented by Gowon, the Niger delta area fell into a separate administrative state, the East Central State, which was also the Igbo heartland. The war was a consequence of ethnically charged rivalries between Nigeria's three regional power centres that had developed under colonial rule since the creation of the Nigerian colony in 1914. Likewise, the transformation of Africa's political landscape did not occur in a power vacuum but in the context of efforts undertaken by the old colonial powers to retain influence in their former colonies; and as a result of inroads made by other states to expand economic and political relations with the newly independent states. In addition, Cold War competition for political influence around the globe exacerbated existing political rifts within African states. Decolonisation was the result of changes in the global constellation of political power after the Second World War; itself, of course, ushering in a new set of substantial transformations. Yet, independent countries entered an already existing world order and the shifts that occurred thus created as many new opportunities as they were grounded in existing continuities and constraints.

The key questions that guided the research for this thesis asked what role the many perceptions of the war played in shaping its course, how these emerged, to what extent and in what ways Nigerians and Biafrans influenced the way in which their struggles were understood abroad, what images of the Third World arose from the engagement with the Biafran famine, and how this related to other concepts of the Third World, such as the one pedalled by the new left. The central assumption underlying these questions argues that the famine in Biafra became a *cause célèbre* abroad because of a particular constellation of institutions with an interest in the publicization of Biafra as a humanitarian crisis, and that this was part of the adaptation of Western societies to the postcolonial world order. Three intersecting developments have crystallised as especially relevant for explaining the impact of the Biafran famine on Western audiences: the rise of humanitarian institutions, changes in the media landscape, and the activism of the long 1960s. The Nigeria-Biafra War was not the only conflict to rouse public concern and engender protest, nor was humanitarian action or the use of graphic imagery of suffering novel, but the Biafran famine occurred at a moment in history when several factors converged. Humanitarianism has a long history and its institutionalisation in non-governmental, independent organisations reaches back to the late 19th century, and so do humanitarian modes of depicting suffering. Important developments took place during the Second World War, but only during the relief effort for Biafra, did humanitarian NGOs carve out a role for themselves in international politics and emerged as important mediators between the West and the Third World.

Changes in the role and function of the media facilitated this development. The rise of television as a medium increased the importance of visual elements. When images of starving children were published by the press, and televised scenes of the famine moved audiences abroad, solidarity and support for Biafra became immediately apparent. While the medium alone cannot explain the impact of the images of starving children, it created the necessary public sphere for an engagement with the iconography of Biafran suffering. The famine in Biafra became a global media event, and the publicity of the conflict generated extensive income for the aid organisations operating in Nigeria and Biafra. Simultaneously, media outlets discovered a news item that would capture public imagination: the 'humanitarian crisis'. As a consequence, aid organisations entered a close relationship with the media, depending not merely on their new partner's willingness and self-interest to report on the sensation of humanitarian disasters but also on their communication channels to launch large-scale

donation appeals. The symbiotic relationship between the media and humanitarian agencies enabled the rise of the modern humanitarian industry.

The media coverage of Biafran suffering met with an audience receptive for the issues of politics and morality that were taken up by activists and placed on the daily agenda during the long 1960s. This was accompanied by a renewed interest of church organisations in the Third World and the emerging solidarity of student movements with liberation struggles in the postcolonial world. Biafra's advocates, including religious dignitaries and committees that sprang up all over Europe and North America, raised public awareness and asked the public to support the relief effort for the suffering Biafrans. Biafra committees were founded by diverse groups of society, which, for the most part and with the exception of France, did not include the new left. Yet, activism for Biafra intersected with the student movement of '1968' in various ways. Parts of the rhetoric and strategies were borrowed from the protest movements of the 60s, as for instance, the comparisons of Biafra to the Holocaust that were also frequent in contemporary debates of Vietnam, or the arrangement of teach-ins, protest gatherings, and marches. Biafra's advocates did not only wish to end Biafran suffering but, at the same time, also supported what they saw as an indigenous African nation that would be able to transform on its own into a progressive and prosperous society. Unlike the protest against the war in Vietnam, the dominant humanitarian angle in which the Nigeria-Biafra War was portrayed and debated in public discourse convinced a mass audience and mobilised a diverse group of supporters to the cause, but it also blunted the debates of the political issues of the war.

Governments aided this development during the war by supporting NGOs, while decidedly not pursuing political measures to bring about peace negotiations. On the one hand, states like Britain and Germany had to safeguard their interests internationally; on the other hand, they needed to respond to the concerns of the electorate with regard to suffering in Biafra. Britain faced these dual forces most starkly. Criticised by the international media and Biafra activists around the globe for arms exports to Nigeria, the British government needed to act. This was done not by changing the controversial policy but by contributing to humanitarian measures and countering what the British government believed was a misguided public perception of the war. The absence of state-led political interventions and the simultaneous generosity of state contribution to NGO funding accelerated the expansion of humanitarian efforts, the increase in organisational competence, and the legitimacy of existing NGOs. Aid organisations filled part of the void left by the former colonial states to the extent

that they took over a role that the new governments in those countries were not always equipped for, namely responding effectively to humanitarian disasters. In the absence of accompanying state-led interventions, globally operating aid organisations emerged as a form of global governance in its own right, projecting Western power through the spread of Western ideas, alleviating humanitarian disasters, and thereby fulfilling an important regulatory role.

The importance of institutions and groups working across countries and on supra- or subnational levels made the Nigeria-Biafra War a genuinely transnational event. Here, the focus has been on transnationally operating agents, such as the media, NGOs, and activists, demonstrating exactly how the manifold intersections of their perceptions, activities, and interests changed the course of the war. These agents transcend the traditional boundaries of state sovereignty, and the degree of their respect for sovereignty seems reflect the degree of political power of a given state. It is unlikely that organisations bound by international law, such as the Red Cross, would have acted as boldly in a Western country as in Nigeria. Borderless humanitarianism eroded the sovereignty of those countries likely to be inadequately equipped to handle humanitarian disasters. As is usual for transnational history approaches, a special emphasis has been placed on exchanges, transfers, and the entanglement of the history of the Nigeria-Biafra War with responses abroad and with the social changes that made such responses possible in post-war Europe. Carefully calibrated information channels shaped the perception of the war abroad, and the propaganda narrative of the Biafran genocide was elaborated in its attempt to use and abuse the imagery of suffering. Responding to the impact of images of starving children, Biafrans adjusted their propaganda line, and Nigerians, with the help of their British ally, devised a counter strategy. The 'conceptual bricolage' of the imagination of the Biafran community was developed in dialogue with foreign audiences;⁸³⁰ sometimes Biafrans played on cultural stereotypes, sometimes activists abroad appropriated the Biafran quest for independence in the context of local historical and political issues.

This entanglement of the history of the war with the responses abroad was the result of globalising processes. Globalisation is a contested and controversial concept, which has been questioned on account of its historical accuracy as well as the blind spots created by an exaggeration of both global interconnectedness and the homogeneity of the process. Societies in the 'global South', such as Nigeria, are much less bound into the global networks of

⁸³⁰ The term 'conceptual bricolage' is used by Heerten to denote the melange of ideas and discourses Biafran propaganda utilised, L. Heerten, 'Dystopia', p. 22.

information and mobility than Europe or North America due to differences in wealth and power. Moreover, countries of the global South do not partake in global economy or international politics on an equal basis. Processes of fragmentation and integration occur at the same time.⁸³¹ Nevertheless, during the late 1960s, an elite of Biafran students and intellectuals was able to travel widely to promote their cause and share their views with advocates abroad. The migration of Nigerians to Europe and North America and the presence of students from the federation abroad were important factors in acquainting European and American activists with the Nigerian political landscape and the issues at stake in the war. Conversely, delegations from activist groups, humanitarian organisations, the Vatican, foreign parliaments and governments visited Biafra and Nigeria. The personal exchanges were an important part of the creation of a shared transnational public sphere that reflected the events in Nigeria and Biafra. Focusing on these transnational exchanges and processes rather than taking a more global approach allowed for an in-depth analysis of some institutions, the media, aid organisations, Biafra committees, governments, and their relation to the national peculiarities of Britain and Germany.

The growing body of scholarship on the international repercussions of the war has begun to reconstruct the roles of various countries during the war, trace changes in the landscape of humanitarian organisations, and explore the discursive forms of engagement with Biafran suffering. However, the existing literature has not highlighted the constellation of institutions that made the broad array of responses to the war possible. This thesis adds to the body of knowledge by studying the transnational dimension of the war and highlighting the intersection of various agents, including the media, governmental institutions, and advocates. Of central importance are perceptions and narratives of the war and Biafran suffering. Perceptions of the war were as important for shaping its course as were developments on the battlefield. Propaganda is as old as warfare itself, and it should, therefore, not surprise that both Nigeria and Biafra employed a number of public relations firms to enhance the representation of their respective views abroad. The modalities of engaging with conflict abroad and the way in which information was relayed and distributed changed during the second half of the twentieth century with the spread of television, the increasing ease with which information could be transmitted across vast distances, and the myriad of organisations

⁸³¹ C. Kalter, *The Discovery of the Third World*, p. 478.

and agents that could function as sources of information, including the growing number of humanitarian workers. The world, reflected in the news media, became a smaller, more interconnected space for privileged audiences. At the same time, this was made possible by a growing number of intermediaries that shaped information according to institutional preference.

The paternalistic view of Biafrans as victims that dominated in public discourse underestimated their agency. Adept strategists, they managed the representation of their case in Western countries and developed several different angles from which to present their struggle. Biafrans abroad established or helped set up committees and organised rallies to support Biafra. Biafran students and expatriates abroad as well as the roving ambassadors captured the imagination of many Westerners and mobilised supporters for the Biafran nation-building project. This was not least a result of the ability of the Biafrans to 'frame' their nation largely in terms of Western categories, such as modernity, industriousness, and the emphasis placed on Christian faith. Such categories were used in propaganda narratives to establish a similarity between Biafrans and the European and North American audiences that would constitute a basis for solidarity. Although the impact of images of starving children was discovered by Western journalists, Biafran propagandists were quick to adapt and link the images of the horrors of war and famine with the genocide narrative that had been developed since before secession. With the increasing frustration of the Biafran leadership as regards the lack of political support from abroad, the Biafran quest for self-determination was reframed as a revolutionary struggle by mid-1969.

The imagination of the Third World that arose from the engagement with the Nigeria-Biafra War was different from the concomitant imagination that had emerged from the new left in the 1960s, although both were marked by a mixture of genuine exchange and projection. Many Biafra advocates had personal connections to Biafrans and visited the enclave. They took an interest in the vision of the Biafran state and forged a solidarity in which they shared not merely the belief in the political project that Biafran elites pursued but also the genuine concern for the wellbeing and safety of the Igbo within Nigeria. The new left notion imagined the Third World as the space of the new revolutionary subject that would transform global power relations. To the extent that Biafra activists shared the political vision of Biafrans for the new state and believed that the Biafran state would become the first African state to control its own future and create a viable and prosperous society, their imagination of the Third World

was related to that of the new left as it envisioned Biafra as the possibility of greater emancipation in Africa. However, Biafra activists were only a fraction of those who expressed concern about Biafra, and the significance of exchange and solidarity receded in the accounts of the media and humanitarians. Given their institutional pressures and practice, in media accounts and humanitarian expositions, Biafra emerged as a site of immense suffering that required the intervention of Western technocrats and experts in aid and development. Humanitarianism was, to a certain degree, an extension of colonial or missionary paternalism, but it also transformed the former colonies into forms of power that were perhaps diffuse but more adapted to the changes marked by decolonisation; changes in the clear restrictions now placed on external interference with the inner affairs of former colonies; and restrictions grounded in Cold War fears of escalation as well as in the increasingly critical public opinion of the former colonizing countries. The discursive transformation of the self-interest of imperialism into an act of benevolence, originating in ideas of the 'civilising mission', survived in the humanitarian ideology that developed in the wake of the Nigeria-Biafra War in the form of interventionist humanitarianism. The Third World, and this is especially true for Africa, was imagined as a space of continual crisis that required the continued patronage of the West. Changes in the relation of the 'West and the rest' occurred in rhetoric rather than practice. While individual humanitarian workers may have seen their engagement with the Third World as a shared struggle, humanitarianism as the expression of a 'politics of pity' reflected a hierarchical relationship.⁸³² The Africa Research Group, the American 'radical research organisation' mentioned at the outset of this thesis, expressed this idea more polemically with regard to the Biafran famine and argued that 'the affluence which permits liberal humanitarianism is based on the very poverty toward which it is directed'.⁸³³

This development occurred at a time, when protest movements in Europe developed a keen awareness of the inequality of wealth around the globe and took part in advancing the process of coming to terms with the history of fascism, the Holocaust, the vast extent of human suffering during the Second World War, and the possibility of a global nuclear catastrophe. Universal morality caved in on itself; to change the world, one had to start by changing oneself.

⁸³² L. Heerten, *Spectacles of Suffering*, p. 334.

⁸³³ 'Africa Research Group', *Africa Research Group* (Cambridge, MA; ca. 1970), http://kora.matrix.msu.edu/files/50/304/32-130-67E-84-african_activist_archive-a0b4q5-a_12419.pdf (accessed 30.10.17); 'The Other Side of Nigeria's Civil War', *Africa Research Group* (1970).

Sartre declared in the preface to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* that the Third World would now rise to turn the previous order of Western domination on its head,⁸³⁴ and contemporary observers of the Biafran famine like German historian Golo Mann warned that if there was no help given to the suffering Biafrans, there would be no help for 'us either'.⁸³⁵ Interventionist humanitarianism was one answer to the search for a new morality that did not depend on an identification with a particular ideology or group. However, as a 'non-ideological ideology', the humanitarian perspective, while initiating new approaches to the world's challenges, constituted a simplification and, in effect, a depoliticization of the political issues in which human suffering was highlighted, whereas the more contested issues of how societies should be arranged, and the arbitrariness of power politics were eclipsed. In part, Biafrans contributed to the dominance of this perspective, but as an angle to mobilise political support, the humanitarian perspective failed and as a solution to political conflict: humanitarian responses remained insufficient. Yet, the strength of humanitarian narratives and hence the foundation for the success of humanitarian organisations lay in their power to capture the imagination and stir the sympathy of a mass audience.

⁸³⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, preface to Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London, 1974 [1961]).

⁸³⁵ Golo Mann, preface to T. Zülch and K. Guercke, *Soll Biafra Überleben?*, p. 10.

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