

Causes and Impact of the Nigerian Civil War, Revisited

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Abstract

This paper discusses the causes and impact of the Nigerian civil war of 1967 to 1970. The causes are further broken down into two models: the remote and immediate. The impact of the war is discussed through the prism of state, regional and global levels. To achieve its aim, the paper explores the levels of analysis theory to conceptualize and explain its findings. Furthermore, it defines some terms and also explains the types of war for better comprehension of the discourse. The paper employs secondary source materials.

Introduction

In 1967, She was the fourth African nation to go through a civil war. Preceding her were Sudan, the Congo and Chad. After her came the civil wars in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Angola, Mozambique, Uganda, Liberia, Rwanda, Djibouti, Sierra Leone, Algeria, Somalia, Burundi, Congo, Guinea Bissau, Ivory Coast, Central African Republic, Chad, Mali, Libya and South Sudan. The 30 months civil war was preceded by a configuration of pre-independence and post-independence challenges.

The origins of the civil war could be located in a complexity of factors ranging from the remote, which include the structural imbalance of the Nigerian federation; the asymmetrical distribution of power among the various ethnic and geopolitical groups; census controversy of 1962-1964; the Federal Elections of 1964; the regional election crisis in Western Nigeria in 1965, etc. The immediate causes however include the military coup d'état of January 15, and July 29, 1966; the pogrom of the Igbo living in Northern Nigeria from May to September 1966; and the declaration of Biafra state.

Types of War

Limited and Unlimited War

War can be limited according to the aims to be achieved, the amount of force applied and the geographical area in which it is fought. Since 1945, nuclear war has been referred to as unconventional or unlimited war and non-nuclear war as conventional or limited war. Although, war fought with conventional weapons may be unlimited in aims, in the amount of conventional force applied, the extent of territory involved and the degree of destruction of lives and property. Nuclear war may also be limited by restrictions on the number of warheads, the extent of radiation and fallout of weapons, or the territory or targets on which they will be used.

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Internal War

Internal war takes the form of civil wars fought between contenders for control in one particular state or a part of it. In civil wars, the legal government does not grant to the insurgents the rights of armies fighting on behalf of legal government. The war had almost all the characteristics of a war between two countries only that insurgent in civil war are treated as criminals, especially the forces of the insurgent party.

Nonmilitary forms of Conflicts

This implies using other means and methods of coercion such as economic and diplomatic sanctions to compel one's opponent. For example, a state can, to a greater or lesser extent, use economic or diplomatic means to coerce another and to compel it to submit to the first state's will or suffer the consequences.

The Levels of Analysis Theory on Origins of Wars

One of the key questions in international relations and foreign policy is the question of how to examine state behavior. To achieve this, a proper understanding of the levels of analysis is apt for this study. The levels of analysis are system, state, organizational and individual respectively.

i. System Level of Analysis

The system level of analysis examines state behavior by looking at the international system. In this level of analysis, the international system is the cause and state behavior is the effect. Characteristics of the international system cause states to behave the way they do. Change in the international system will cause change in state behavior. The key variable in the international system is the power of a state within the system. Some states are powerful; others are weak. So, for example, the cold war had two powerful states. Therefore, the central cause of all state behavior in the cold war was the fact that the US and USSR were the two powerful states in a bipolar system.

ii. State Level of Analysis

Realists continue to view the international system as a state system. States make up the building blocks of international politics. This perspective describes the traditional approach to international relations. States exercise power. Each state must establish, defend, and protect its independence, survival, prosperity, and sovereignty.

In a world of states, a balance of power exists between them. Great powers have more influence than middling or small powers. Great powers may try to gain hegemonic dominance over the system. This state system manages conflicts in many ways, most of which are peaceful diplomacy, negotiation, bargaining, and compromise, but conflicts may lead to violence that can turn into war. The state system is anarchic and war remains an ultimate recourse to policy makers. Linking this theory to the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war and coupled with the fact that states are saddled with the responsibility of defending and protecting their territorial sovereignty and integrity, the Gowon administration was not ready to cede any part of its territories to Biafra.

iii. Organizational Level of Analysis

Organizational level of analysis examines the way in which organizations within a state function to influence the decision of that state. States do not make decisions for organisations. Organizations bargain with each other to create a foreign policy that is a compromise between competing organizations. This level of analysis, for example, might look at the Iraq war and try to explain it by examining the interests of the US military, the Department of defense, the State Department, and central intelligence agency. How did these organizations create US foreign policy would be the key question at this level of analysis?

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Juxtaposing the foregoing level of analysis with the Nigerian civil war x-rays the roles of some institutions in the war. These institutions include the military, Ministries of Finance and External Affairs. While the military were actually at the fore front of quelling the insurrection led by the Biafran soldiers, the Ministry of Finance, on one hand, advised the Gowon regime to change the country's currency and impose food blockade which ultimately changed the narrative of the war in favour of the Nigerian State. Its counterpart, the Ministry of External Affairs, on the other hand, was busy lobbying and wooing the West and East for (military and diplomatic) support. The above discourse shows the strategic synergy between the government institutions which eventually led to the triumph of the Nigerian State and the capitulation of Biafra.

iv. Individual Level of Analysis

Individual level of analysis focuses on people. It also looks at the roles of different leaders. This level of analysis might explain World War II by examining the role of Hitler. It might look at the end of the cold war by studying Gorbachev. It might suggest that the economic reforms in China are a result of the transition from Mao Zedong's leadership to Deng Xiaoping's rule.

This theory is relevant in understanding the roles of Ojukwu and Gowon in the buildup to the Nigerian civil war. Lt. Col. Ojukwu had many grievances against Gen. Gowon and the Nigerian state which include; one, Gowon was junior to him hierarchically in the military, so he (Gowon) cannot be the Head of State; two, Gowon did nothing to the pogrom against the Easterners residing in Northern Nigeria; three, Gowon reneged on the principles of Aburi negotiations. On Gowon's part, one, he was not ready to cede any part of Nigeria to Ojukwu's Biafra; two, he frowned at Ojukwu's rigid stance on the Biafran project despite international mediations and efforts. By implication, by the roles played by the two leaders, it could be deduced that the Nigerian civil war of 1967 was inevitable.

The Remote causes of the Civil War

One of the causes has to do with the British colonial policy which encouraged people from what later became northern Nigeria to perceive their counterparts from the south as a separate people. One would have thought that the reverse would be the case given the amalgamation of 1914. Even after they had been brought together, the degree of interactions was such that made the northerners to continue to view their southern counterparts with suspicion. This could be seen in their utterances and actions. For instance, they rejected Anthony Enahoro's motion for self-government in 1956 because they were not too keen on getting on with the south without some conditions being met. It also explains why their leaders were not tired of expressing regrets over the 1914 amalgamation and threatening to pull out of the country.

Closely related to the above was the opposing policy on education which the colonialists operated for the northern and southern sections of the country. In the south, liberal education was encouraged while the reverse was the case in the north. The Christian missions who played a major role in the spread of western education in the south were restrained by the colonial authorities in respect of the north. The fallout of this was that the north lagged behind the south in respect of western education.

The census of 1962-1964 equally had a hand in bringing about the war. The Eastern and the Mid-Western Regions were highly critical of the final figures of the repeated census of 1963-64 but the Western Region under Chief S.L. Akintola accepted it. According to Oyediran, the situation made the north to see the east as its headache. This must have been influenced by the fact that the Premiers of the two regions (East and Mid-West) were Igbos.

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The Immediate Causes of the War

The Federal and Western Regional elections of 1964-1965 equally serve as remote causes of the war. The elections in question generated a lot of tension since they came on the heels of the controversial census. The elections were the immediate cause of the January 15, 1966 coup.

While the above could be likened to the gunpowder that awaited being ignited, the Nzeogwu led coup could be seen as the spark that ignited it. The coup was seen by the North as an Igbo domination agenda. The North's response, which was an outright rejection of the situation, was made manifest in the coup of July 29, 1966, and the massacre of the Igbo people in the north. The situation was not made any better by the personality clash between Ojukwu and Gowon. In addition, Ojukwu feared for his safety and that of the other Igbo people. The vengeful nature of the July 29, 1966, coup and the pogrom made the fear real. With the two parties unable to reach a compromise and bury the hatchet in spite of the efforts made in that direction between August 1966 and May, 1967, it was evident that the war was inevitable. By May 30, 1967, the former Eastern Region was declared a sovereign state of Biafra after Gowon had tried to pull the rug from under their feet by creating twelve states in place of the former four regions three days (May 27th) earlier.

The Impact of the Civil War

On the Biafran side, the economy was hard hit as they were cut off from food supplies coming down from Nigeria. There was no active work force in Biafra and as such unemployment rate was on the increase. The majority of industrial plants stopped functioning and thus active production grounded to a halt, every resource was channeled towards curbing the exigencies of the war. The demand for food and essential commodities were on the high while the supply was critically low, people suffered severely from starvation as prices immensely increased. An estimate of one to three million people lost their lives, mostly to starvation, and this sparked a massive humanitarian crisis.

Also, the economic activity of Nigeria was equally slowed down due to the separation of Biafra from the Federal economy. The economic and organizational framework was disrupted, massive population shifts occurred and considerable physical damage sustained.

One of the more costly aspects of the civil war was the gradual cessation of oil production after the hostilities began. When the war ended, government began recovery interventions in the war affected zones; this was enabled and facilitated by an oil boom that occurred in the 1970s, which provided an expansion in government resources. The Nigerian government and international agencies began efforts to reintegrate the war affected populations, repair the destructions done to physical infrastructure, including health and to educational facilities, and restore social services and public utilities to the affected communities.

Diplomatically, on the regional level, the war was seen as an African affair. Most of the African states under the auspices of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) supported the course of the Federal Government and consequently denied Biafra the recognition it needed. The stance of the OAU on the 'unity' of the Nigerian state informed the decision of most foreign states to support Nigeria. However, the states of Tanzania, Ivory Coast, Zambia, and Gabon gave recognition to Biafra. In turn, the Gowon regime vigorously pursued the decolonization of some African states, especially in the Southern part and reaffirmed his commitments towards the regional body's objectives.

Furthermore, on the foreign scene, most, and if not all the western powers, exercised restraint on who to support initially. The indecisiveness of the West made Russia (USSR) to give both diplomatic and military support to the Federal Government. Then, Britain that had been dragging her feet immediately pushed her weight on the Federal side, France partially supported Biafra, China

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supported Biafra and the United States remained neutral but she later intervened based on humanitarian grounds.

The fallout of the foreign interventions tested the 'non alignment' foreign policy stance of the Nigerian state. The Nigerian civil war made Nigeria courted Russia (East) and the union with Russia is still being felt in recent times with her military support towards Nigeria's fight against insurgency. Though China supported Biafra during the war, the narrative has changed lately with China becoming the biggest trading partner of Nigeria after the United States. Furthermore, Nigeria has maintained a strong relationship with her traditional allies – West.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Nigerian civil war broke out because of the perceived structural imbalance of the Nigerian federation and the asymmetrical distribution of power among the various ethnic and geopolitical groups.

Also, the roles played by Lt. Col. Ojukwu and Gen. Gowon further heightened the tension in the polity which eventually led to the outbreak of the civil war.

The civil war had negative effects on both Biafra and the Nigerian state, most of which are still hunting the country six decades after. Such evidences include; the continuous agitation of secession by some groups in South-east Nigeria for the state of Biafra; secession agitation in South-west Nigeria for Odua Republic; terrorism and banditry in North-east and North-west of Nigeria; kidnappings, herders/farmers clash and general insecurity in the country.

Unless there is a conscious effort and political will by the Nigerian government to address the root causes of ethnic suspicions and tensions with the aim of nipping them to the board, future agitations of secession are inevitable.