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GABON AND FRANCO-BRITISH DIPLOMACY DURING THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR, 1967–1970

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Abstract

This paper examines Gabonese and Franco-British diplomacy during the Nigerian Civil War. The study adopts a historical narrative approach and uses primary sources, including archival materials and newspapers from The National Archives, Kew, London, and secondary sources, including books and journal articles for data analysis. The recognition of the Republic of Biafra marked Gabon's entry into the diplomatic arena of the civil war. Gabon actively participated in the Anglo-French-inspired diplomatic initiative to resolve the civil war, even though it was designated as the international *entrepôt* for arms exports to Biafra. The paper argues that, while Gabon was guided by its national interests during the civil war, particularly its desire to be heard globally, it considered the Biafran drama a global issue on which African countries ought to have taken an uncompromising stand. Gabon served as a channel through which the great powers maintained diplomatic contact with the Biafran authorities. The Gabonese episode in the Nigerian Civil War brought Africa more closely into the geopolitics of the 1960s. Biafra was regarded as a security issue that required a peaceful diplomatic settlement, which never materialized because of the overbearing influence of the great powers during the civil war.

Keywords: *Nigerian Civil War, Gabon, France, Britain, diplomacy, Nigeria.*

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Introduction

In the 1960s, African states became sites of civil conflict, including the Nigerian Civil War.[1] The early internationalization of the civil war was shaped by the recognition of Biafra[2] and the diplomatic support it received from some African states, namely, Gabon,[3] Tanzania, Ivory Coast, and Zambia.[4] Gilbert Onuaguluchi argues that the diplomatic recognition Biafra received from these states was the turning point in the international politics of the civil war. These countries used their international influence as extensively as possible in support of the Biafran cause. Military assistance to Biafra became easier after these African states accorded it diplomatic recognition. Biafra was able to resist more effectively the siege by the federal armed forces.[5]

One of the features of the Nigerian Civil War was the approach taken by great powers such as Britain toward African countries that had recognized Biafra, especially Gabon. Britain requested that these countries use their good offices or diplomatic influence with the Biafran government to persuade it to renounce secession and return to membership in the Nigerian federation on equal terms with the other states created by Head of State Major-General Yakubu Gowon before the outbreak of the war.

This paper examines Gabonese diplomacy during the Nigerian Civil War. More specifically, it focuses on the influence of Franco-British diplomacy on Gabonese actions during the conflict. Methodologically, the article relies primarily on archival evidence from the National Archives, Kew, London, supplemented by relevant books and journal articles. Indeed, an account of post-independence African history is incomplete without examining how the Biafran episode shaped African and great-power politics in the twentieth century.

This paper argues that Gabon exercised a form of constrained diplomatic agency within the asymmetric postcolonial order of 1960s Africa. By recognizing Biafra, maintaining close relations with the Biafran leadership, and subsequently offering its "good offices" for contacts between the warring parties, Gabon sought to transform its position from that of a small postcolonial state into a consequential diplomatic intermediary. Gabon was deeply concerned about the conditions of the war, particularly its horrific effects on the civilians in Biafra, and therefore opted to

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[1] Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945–1984*, 5th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 1–3.

[2] Confidential: Minute on the Nigerian Civil War and Recognition of Biafra, from the Commonwealth Office to Ottawa, Telegram No. 169, June 2, 1967, File No. TX 3/28/Part A/West and General African Dept., "Nigeria, Political Affairs, External, Bilateral, Eastern Secession, Recognition Countries, and Others than United Kingdom, 30 May 1967 to 31 December 1970," FCO 38/249, The National Archives, Kew, London (hereafter TNA).

[3] John J. Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967–1970* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 109–10.

[4] Ade Adefuye, *Culture and Foreign Policy: The Nigerian Experience* (Lagos: Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, 1992), 57.

[5] Gilbert Onuaguluchi, *The Giant in Turbulent Storms: The Story of Nigeria, 1944–1987* (New York and Los Angeles: Vantage Press, 1990), 122.

recognize Biafra along with Tanzania, Ivory Coast, and Zambia. Gabon was highly active in the regional politics and international diplomacy of the war and maintained close diplomatic contacts with the Biafran leadership. In the process, it served as a channel of communication between Biafra and state actors, especially Britain. Accordingly, Gabon used its influence with the Biafran authorities to facilitate contacts with the great powers and support diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict. More importantly, during the civil war, Gabon was guided by its national interests, including its desire to make its voice heard on the global stage and become the economic powerhouse of West Africa. Gabon did not consider the Biafran issue an internal Nigerian problem, but rather a global issue on which African countries ought to have taken an uncompromising stand. Gabon supported the French-inspired diplomatic initiative aimed at resolving the civil war, which in turn influenced its decisions during the conflict.

The first section of the study examines Gabon's activities during and after its recognition of Biafra, while the second section examines Franco-British diplomatic efforts to influence Gabon to engage with the Biafran leadership in pursuit of a peaceful settlement of the civil war. The Gabonese episode in the Nigerian Civil War was one of the major developments that brought Africa more closely to the forefront of global politics in the 1960s. The great powers exploited the security issues generated by the conflict in their rivalry with one another, thereby contributing to peace and security challenges in Africa.

The Nigerian Civil War: Background and Origins

The Nigerian Civil War, a tragic African conflict that occurred during decolonization, was precipitated by the fragile political conditions and constitutional problems that beset the Nigerian state.[6] The 30-month-long war, fought between the Federal Military Government (FMG) of Nigeria, led by Major-General Yakubu Gowon, and Eastern Nigeria, under Lieutenant-Colonel Ojukwu, from July 6, 1967, to January 15, 1970, was one of the most turbulent conflicts of the twentieth century.[7] Numerous factors contributed to the outbreak of the civil war. The first was the failure of the British colonial administration to take into consideration Nigeria's ethnic and cultural diversity when formulating colonial policies. Nigeria is home to numerous ethnic groups, including the Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, and Fulani.[8] By the early twentieth century, these ethnic groups had come under British colonial rule. The creation of the Southern and Northern Protectorates of Nigeria and their subsequent amalgamation on January 1, 1914, under Governor-General Sir Frederick

[6] Richard Akresh, Sonia R. Bhalotra, Marinella Leone, and Una O. Osili, "War and Stature: Growing Up during the Nigerian Civil War," IZA Discussion Paper No. 6194 (Bonn: Institute for the Study of Labor, 2011), 1–11.

[7] Rantimi Jays Julius-Adeoye, "The Nigerian-Biafran War," African Studies Centre Leiden, 2017, accessed March 11, 2024, https://www.ascleiden.nl/content/webdossiers/nigerian-biafran-war.

[8] Central Intelligence Agency, *National Intelligence Survey: Nigeria—The Society*, 50B/GS/S (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1973), CIA-RDP01-00707R000200100006-9.

Lugard, changed the political landscape of Nigeria.[9] An indirect-rule system of governance that relied on Native Authorities and traditional rulers, such as emirs, obas, chiefs, and warrant chiefs, was introduced and implemented.[10] The emergence of colonial administration in Nigeria was accompanied by the drafting of constitutions that provided guiding principles for the effective governance and administration of colonial Nigeria.[11] The following constitutions were introduced during colonial rule in Nigeria: the 1922 Clifford Constitution;[12] the 1944 Sir Arthur Richards Constitution;[13] and the 1954 Lyttleton Constitution. The colonial constitutions contained significant flaws, as they created conditions for political domination, tribalism, and favoritism in Nigeria.[14]

The British colonization of Nigeria primarily sought to protect the investments and interests of British traders and merchants rather than foster political cohesion. This contributed to North and South divisions, tribalism and ethnic jingoism, party politics, and the struggle to gain control of the central government.[15]

At independence in 1960, Nigeria inherited a weak political structure and an unbalanced federation. Nationalist leaders from various regions emerged to lead the country during the First Republic (1960–1966). They included Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, who served as prime minister, and Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, who served as governor-general and later became ceremonial president in 1963, when Nigeria became a republic. Political parties were largely organized along regional lines. Among them was the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), founded by Azikiwe in 1944 and later renamed the National Council of Nigerian Citizens. The Northern People's Congress (NPC) was formed by Sir Ahmadu Bello. The Action Group (AG) was founded by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, who served as general secretary of Egbe Omo Oduduwa and leader of the Nigerian Produce and Traders' Association (NPTA). These regionally based parties shaped the character of the post-independence political crisis, as each region increasingly feared that rival parties would use political power to advance their own interests.[16]

One major post-independence crisis that contributed to the outbreak of the civil war was the rift within the Action Group between Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the leader of the opposition party, and Chief Samuel Ladoke Akintola, premier of

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[9] Raph Uwechue, *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War: Facing the Future* (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1971), 4–5.

[10] O. A. Lawal, *"*Britain and Decolonization in Nigeria, 1945–1960*"* (PhD diss., University of Ibadan, 1991), 250; E. C. Amucheazi, ed., *Readings in Social Sciences: Issues in National Development* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1980), 14.

[11] Kunle Amuwo, "The Historical Roots of the Nigerian Civil War," in *Perspectives on the Nigerian Civil War*, ed. Siyan Oyeweso (Lagos: OAP Publications, 1992), 10–11.

[12] Gabriel Olakunle Olusanya, "Constitutional Development 1861–1960," in *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, ed. Obaro Ikime (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1980), 17.

[13] Efiong Isaac Utuk, "Britain's Colonial Administrations and Developments, 1861–1960: An Analysis of Britain's Colonial Administrations and Developments in Nigeria" (master's thesis, Portland State University, 1975), https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.2521.

[14] Amuwo, "The Historical Roots of the Nigerian Civil War," 10–11.

[15] Amuwo, "The Historical Roots of the Nigerian Civil War," 1.

[16] Amuwo, "The Historical Roots of the Nigerian Civil War," 1.

Western Nigeria. The two politicians struggled for control of the Western Region.[17] While the nation was still recovering from the internal crisis within the AG, another controversy arose over the 1962 census, fueling anger and hostility within the Nigerian polity.[18] The 1964 federal elections and the 1965 Western Regional electoral crisis were significant events that contributed to the atmosphere of political instability in Nigeria.[19] The crisis intensified the political instability in Nigeria.[20] These events had a damaging effect on Nigeria's political system. Together, these developments intensified political instability in the country and set forces of disintegration in motion.

By January 1966, many Nigerians had become highly dissatisfied with the state of affairs in the country.[21] A military *coup d'état* led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu further deepened the national crisis.[22] The inner caucus that planned the coup consisted of Ifeajuna, Nzeogwu, and Ademoyega.[23] The coup succeeded in the North, where Sir Ahmadu Bello, premier of Northern Nigeria and Sardauna of Sokoto, was assassinated. It succeeded in the West with the killing of Chief S. A. Akintola and the arrest of his deputy, Chief Fani Kayode. The coup failed in the East, a development that contributed to its subsequent characterization as an Igbo coup.[24] After the coup, Major-General Aguiyi Ironsi became head of state. A few months after assuming office, he abolished the federal system of government and introduced a unitary system through the promulgation of the Unification Decree No. 34 of May 24, 1966, which unified all the government institutions in the country[25] and contributed to intense riots in several parts of Northern Nigeria. A major feature of the riots was the massacre of Eastern Nigerians and the destruction of their property in northern towns such as Katsina, Gusau, Bauchi, Zaria, Maiduguri, Gombe, and Kaura Namoda. On July 28, 1966, while Ironsi was visiting the North and other parts of the country to campaign for peace and calm, he attended a meeting of traditional rulers in Ibadan, the capital of the Western Region. On July 29, 1966, a group of Northern soldiers seized Ironsi and his host, Lieutenant-Colonel Adekunle Fajuyi, the military governor of the Western Region, and murdered them.[26] The July coup was described as northern retaliation for the coup of January 15, 1966.[27]

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[17] Arthur Agwuncha Nwankwo and Samuel Udochukwu Ifejika, *The Making of a Nation: Biafra* (London: C. Hurst, 1969), 42.
[18] Nwankwo and Ifejika, *The Making of a Nation*, 46.
[19] Nwankwo and Ifejika, *The Making of a Nation*, 92.
[20] Anthony Hamilton Millard Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: A Documentary Sourcebook, 1966–1969*, vol. 1, *January 1966–July 1967* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 24.
[21] Eastern Nigeria, Ministry of Information, *January 15: Before and After*, Nigerian Crisis 1966, vol. 7 (Enugu: Government Printer, 1966), 4.
[22] Nwankwo and Ifejika, *The Making of a Nation*, 29.
[23] Siyan Oyeweso, "Kaduna Nzeogwu, the Coup and Prelude to the Nigerian Civil War," in *Perspectives on the Nigerian Civil War*, ed. Siyan Oyeweso (Lagos: OAP Publications, 1992), 30.
[24] Nwankwo and Ifejika, *The Making of a Nation*, 130.
[25] Amuwo, "The Historical Roots of the Nigerian Civil War," 12.
[26] Eastern Nigeria, Ministry of Information, *January 15: Before and After*, 31–38.
[27] Amuwo, "The Historical Roots of the Nigerian Civil War," 12–13.

In August 1966, Lieutenant-Colonel Yakubu Gowon became head of state rather than Brigadier Ogundipe, who was the more senior officer in the army hierarchy. Although other military officers supported the decision, the military governor of Eastern Nigeria, Lieutenant-Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, refused to accept the arrangement.[28] The killings that had begun in May 1966 continued even after the coup. On September 12, 1966, peace delegates assembled in Lagos for talks concerning the country's future constitutional arrangements. The conference was still in session on September 29, 1966, when people of Northern Nigerian origin launched another violent attack on Eastern Nigerians residing in the North.[29] At this point, Nigeria's political situation deteriorated further. As a result, a series of peace meetings was convened in an effort to resolve the crisis.[30]

On January 5, 1967, the Supreme Military Council of Nigeria continued its meeting in Ghana. The council reached agreement on a number of issues. On the power and functions of the FMG, the Council reaffirmed its belief in the workability of the existing institutions, subject to necessary safeguards. According to Suzanne Cronjé, "the Aburi conference achieved a remarkable amount of agreement. But the agreement was not executed."[31]

At this point, the crisis between the Federal Military Government and Eastern Nigeria intensified, with the two parties taking divergent actions that threatened the peace and stability of the country. For instance, on February 21, 1967, Law and Order (Maintenance) Edict No. 2 of 1967 was promulgated by Ojukwu, which signaled the declaration of any part of Eastern Nigeria as a disturbed area. In March 1967, Ojukwu announced that, from April 1, 1967, he would take over all federal departments and assume control of federal taxes and other revenues.[32] However, the Federal Government declared the Revenue Collection Edicts illegal and unconstitutional.[33] Nevertheless, Ojukwu proceeded to promulgate further edicts, including the Contingency Fund Amendment Edict No. 25 of May 11, 1967, which formally established the Eastern Rehabilitation Commission and a Rehabilitation Fund to address the needs of the large number of refugees who returned to Eastern Nigeria following the disturbances that began on May 29, 1966.[34] The Eastern Region's Consultative Assembly met jointly with the Advisory Committee of Chiefs

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[28] *Report of the Tribunal of Inquiry into the Atrocities and Other Inhuman Acts Committed against Persons of Eastern Nigeria Origin in 1966* (Enugu: Eastern Nigeria Ministry of Information, 1967), 3–146.

[29] Eastern Nigerian Government, *Nigerian Crisis 1966* (Enugu: Ministry of Information, Eastern Nigeria Government Printer, 1966), 8.

[30] Confidential: Minute on the Nigerian Internal Situation, 1966–1967, from F. Cumming-Bruce to M. James, October 1, 1966, PREM 13/1041, File No. 7175895/4S/1848/27G, The National Archives (TNA).

[31] Suzanne Cronjé, *The World and Nigeria: The Diplomatic History of the Biafran War, 1967–1970* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972), 18.

[32] Nigerian Army Education Corps and School, *History of the Nigerian Army, 1863–1992* (Abuja: Nigerian Army Headquarters, 1992), 1–10.

[33] Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Origins of the Nigerian Civil War* (Apapa: Nigerian National Press, 1969), 13.

[34] G. D. Anderson, *Report on Decrees, Gazette Notifications of Appointments from the Eastern Nigerian Government* (United Kingdom: British Government Printer, 1967), 1–2.

and Elders on May 26, 1967, to discuss the future of the region within the Nigerian Federation. In retaliation for Eastern Nigeria's actions, on May 27, 1967, Gowon declared a state of emergency throughout the Federation[35] and imposed a blockade on the Eastern Nigerian coast as well as economic sanctions against the region.[36]

General Gowon subsequently divided the country into twelve states on May 27, 1967, replacing the former four regions, and appointed governors for each of them. Angered by General Yakubu Gowon's decision, the joint meeting of the Eastern Consultative Assembly in Enugu mandated Ojukwu to declare the region independent. Therefore, on May 30, 1967, after summoning the United Kingdom and United States *chargés d'affaires* at 3 a.m. to inform them of his plans, Ojukwu broadcast over Eastern Nigerian radio, declaring Eastern Nigeria a sovereign independent state known as the Republic of Biafra. After the declaration of the Republic of Biafra, Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu sent a letter to British Prime Minister Harold Wilson on May 30, 1967. He told the prime minister that all efforts to resolve the Nigerian crisis had failed, and that the two sides had reached a parting of the ways. Similarly, Gowon sent the text of the message to heads of state and government both within the Commonwealth and elsewhere in the world. He appealed to them to refrain from doing anything that would impair the cooperative existence, sovereignty, and integrity of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Any attempt to recognize and assist the Republic of Biafra would amount to interference in the internal affairs of Nigeria.[37] As the civil war unfolded, Gowon's appeal proved ineffective in preventing further international recognition of Biafra or engagement with the breakaway region by several Western and African countries during the conflict.

Gabon and the Nigerian Civil War

Gabon entered the diplomatic arena of the Nigerian Civil War following its official recognition of the Republic of Biafra. At a cabinet meeting held in Libreville on May 10, 1968, the Gabonese government, led by President Albert-Bernard Bongo, announced its recognition of the Republic of Biafra. In a *communiqué* published by Markpress News Feature Services in Switzerland on May 10, 1968, the government of Gabon expressed its deep sympathy for Biafra and decided to recognize it as an independent state entitled to exercise international sovereignty.[38] The government of Gabon reaffirmed its commitment to African unity, while expressing concern that the war being waged against Biafra risked undermining that unity.[39]

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[35] Bola Ige, "Civil War in Nigeria," *The Multi-Media Album* 4, no. 3 (1969): 6.

[36] Central Intelligence Agency, Office of National Estimates, *The Outlook for Nigeria*, Special Memorandum No. 2-68, January 26, 1968, CIA-RDP79R00967A000800010018-4.

[37] Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Text of a Message Sent to All Heads of States and Government* (Lagos: Ministry of Information, 1967), 1–2.

[38] Confidential: Statement Made by President Albert Bongo of Gabon in the Course of a Press Conference in Paris on May 3, 1968, from Paris to the Foreign Office, Telegram No. 387, FCO 25/234, TNA.

[39] From Paris to the Foreign Office, May 3, 1968, FCO 25/234, TNA.

The Gabonese Council of Ministers supported the government's official recognition of Biafra, declaring that the federal arrangements inherited from colonial rule, as they existed in Nigeria, had not proved viable in practice.[40] This suggests that Gabon was more inclined to recognize Biafra because of its skepticism toward the cohesion of federations established under British colonial rule in Nigeria.[41]

Gabon was inspired by the diplomatic positions on Biafra adopted by Ivory Coast under Houphouët-Boigny and Tanzania under President Julius Nyerere, whose policies toward Biafra were themselves influenced by France. Both countries were highly sympathetic to the Biafran cause.[42] Bongo stated that he had held several discussions in Paris with Houphouët-Boigny concerning Biafra and that the two countries' positions on the matter were close.[43] Houphouët-Boigny had hoped that if the peace negotiations between Biafra and Nigeria failed and more African countries recognized Biafra, other regions of Nigeria would attempt to revolt against the central government of the Federation.[44] Within diplomatic circles in Abidjan, it was believed that French President de Gaulle might have influenced Gabon's recognition of Biafra and was exerting pressure on Houphouët-Boigny for the same purpose.[45]

French officials believed that the Nigerian Federation might prove unworkable and viewed the recognition of Biafra by these countries sympathetically.[46] France had strategic ambitions across West Africa. It regarded the Nigerian conflict as an opportunity to pursue its long-term plans to expand military and economic cooperation with West African states.[47] Ediagbonya et al. argued that President Charles de Gaulle was not eager to see the British-inspired federal system in Nigeria become a reality. According to this interpretation, he influenced Gabon's recognition of Biafra and even pressured Portugal and South Africa to assist Biafra to the detriment of the Federal Military Government of Nigeria.[48]

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[40] Markpress News Feature Services, *Statement on the Recognition of the Republic of Biafra by Gabon Following a Cabinet Meeting under the Presidency of the Head of State Albert Bongo* (Geneva: Biafran Overseas Press Division, 1968), 1.

[41] Uwechue, *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War*, 97.

[42] Chediel Yohane Mgonja, *Press Statement: Statement by the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs at State House on Tanzania's Recognition of Biafra, Saturday, 13 April 1968* (Dar es Salaam: Information Service Division, Ministry of Information and Tourism, 1968), 64/68/IT/I.301.

[43] From Sir Patrick Reilly at the British Embassy in Paris, France, to the Foreign Office, May 3, 1968, FCO 25/234, TNA.

[44] Minute on the Recognition of Biafra, from Peter Mennell at the British Embassy in Kinshasa to C. L. Booth in the West and General African Department, Foreign Office, London, June 5, 1968, Despatch No. 1/6/16, FCO 38/350, TNA.

[45] Minute on the Recognition of Biafra, from I. J. Cheke at the British Embassy in Abidjan to C. M. Le Quesne in the West and General African Department, Foreign Office, Despatch No. 2/8, April 20, 1968, FCO 38/249, TNA.

[46] Minute on Nigeria and France, from Patrick Reilly to the Foreign Office, Telegram No. 368, April 25, 1968, FCO 38/245, TNA.

[47] Uwechue, *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War*, 95.

[48] Michael Ediagbonya, John Uzoma Nwachukwu, William Abiodun Duyile, and Buhari Lateef Oluwafemi, "The Organisation of African Unity: The Dilemma of Nigerian Civil War, 1967–1970," *International Journal of Innovative Research and Knowledge* 5, no. 4 (2020): 38–49.

Gabon's recognition of Biafra was guided by its strategic national interests, including economic and political considerations. As a country endowed with substantial natural and mineral resources, including columbite, uranium, coal, tin, petroleum, and gold,[49] Gabon believed that relations with an independent Biafra could benefit its economy, financial sector, technological development, tourism, education, and manufacturing, while deepening its diplomatic engagement at the regional and continental levels.

Growing concern over allegations of genocide during the civil war was another factor behind Gabon's recognition of Biafra. During the civil war,[50] Biafran authorities accused the Nigerian government and armed forces of deliberately killing civilians since the military coup of 1966 and throughout the civil war.[51] Biafran authorities alleged that the Federal Military Government of Nigeria was pursuing a military solution and intended to commit genocide against them.[52] In response to Biafran allegations of genocide, President Albert Bongo of Gabon declared at a press conference in Paris on May 3, 1968, that Gabon would not remain a passive onlooker in the face of what he described as genocide in Biafra and the threatened massacre of ten million people.[53] This indicated that Gabon was unwilling to remain among those African countries that were silent in the face of the ongoing civil war. Hence, the Gabonese government viewed recognition of Biafra as a means of helping the secessionist state secure international support and strengthen its position on the world stage.

Gabon's intention was to work toward a peaceful resolution of the civil war. Gabon was concerned that the parties were more committed to military action than to peaceful mediation in the civil war. As Chinua Achebe wrote:

> Some of Ojukwu's and Gowon's civilian advisers aggravated the crisis by transforming themselves into sycophants. Rather than encourage their respective leader on each side of the conflict to consider a cease-fire, they massaged their egos and spurred them on to ever-escalating hostility. The longer the war dragged on, the more difficult it was for both sides to give in to anything that might lead to a peaceful resolution.[54]

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[49] Government of the Republic of Biafra, *From the Military Governor: Grant of Exploitation* (Enugu: Ministry of Information, Government of the Republic of Biafra, 1967).

[50] Emefiena Ezeani, *In Biafra Africa Died: The Diplomatic Plot*, 3rd ed. (London: Veritas Lumen Publishers, 2013), 61.

[51] Frederick Forsyth, *The Biafra Story* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), 257–59.

[52] Roy Samuel Doron, "Forging a Nation While Losing a Country: Igbo Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Propaganda in the Nigerian Civil War 1968–1970" (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2011), 84–112.

[53] Statement by Albert Bongo, President of Gabon, at a Press Conference in Paris on May 3, 1968, from Sir Patrick Reilly at the British Embassy in Paris, France, to the Foreign Office, Telegram No. 367, File No. JM 2/2/West and General African Dept., "Nigeria, Political Affairs, Multilateral, Eastern Region and Recognition of Biafra, 21 April 1967–20 November 1968," FCO 25/234, TNA.

[54] Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 124.

There was concern that, if efforts toward a peace settlement were not taken seriously, the already entrenched military action could result in further loss of innocent lives in the civil war. At this juncture, Gabon recognized Biafra partly out of sympathy for the victims of the war who were experiencing severe human suffering.[55] The recognition was intended to discourage military action by both sides and shift their focus toward a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

The need to assume humanitarian responsibilities was another important consideration for Gabon in the civil war. An investigation conducted in 1968 by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and led by Dr. Edwin Spirgi indicated that at least 300,000 children were suffering from kwashiorkor and related ailments. By the summer of 1968, the report revealed that three million children were near death in Biafra.[56] According to Thomas J. Hamilton, about 5,000 children were evacuated from Biafra to refugee centers in Gabon and Ivory Coast at the height of the civil war, with approximately 4,000 of them taken to Gabon on return flights operated by a French Red Cross aircraft conducting daily relief flights to Biafra.[57] Because many children in Biafra lacked basic necessities, the Gabonese government adopted a humanitarian policy that allowed international relief organizations to transport Biafran children to Gabon for medical treatment and care.

In supporting Biafra, Gabon adopted measures that were criticized as contrary to African solidarity,[58] including the decision to expel Nigerian citizens living in Gabon, an action described as a security measure.[59] In a telegram dated November 12, 1968, a US Embassy official in Libreville, N. Steam, reported that over 100 Federal Nigerians were expelled from Gabon and given tickets for a passenger boat from Libreville to Lagos.[60] In November 1968, President Bongo expelled about 200 Nigerians to Lagos for refusing to sign a statement of support for the Republic of Biafra.[61] Another important episode in Gabon's involvement in the conflict was the allegation that the Gabonese government supported the idea of establishing a Biafran government-in-exile in Libreville. However, the Gabonese government denied the claim, stating that Gabon had no wish to interfere in another state's affairs.[62] In the meantime, John Taylor, a special correspondent for the *Sunday Telegraph,* argued that the information about the eventual creation of a Biafran gov-

[55] Forsyth, *The Biafra Story*, 242.
[56] Nathaniel H. Goetz, "Humanitarian Issues in the Biafra Conflict," *New Issues in Refugee Research*, Working Paper No. 36 (Geneva: UNHCR, April 2001), 4.
[57] Thomas J. Hamilton, "5,000 Children Evacuated from Biafra in Civil War Will Be Repatriated from Gabon and Ivory Coast," *The New York Times*, October 11, 1970, https://www.nytimes.com/1970/10/11/archives/5000-children-evacuated-from-biafra-in-civil-war-will-be.html.
[58] Achebe, *There Was a Country*, 98.
[59] United States Telegram on Biafra and Ojukwu's Stop in Gabon, July 24, 1968, FCO 38/233, TNA.
[60] Confidential: Minute on the Gabonese Expulsion of Nigerian Citizens, from Leslie Fielding at the British Embassy in Paris to P. H. Moberly in the West African Department, November 18, 1968, FCO 65/306, TNA.
[61] "Gabonese President Sees Couve de Murville: Not Afraid of Nigerian Threats," BBC, November 14, 1968, 1355/CDF/UPI.
[62] "Gabon Denial on Biafra-Exile Government," *Daily Telegraph*, September 17, 1968, 1.

ernment-in-exile came from the most reliable sources. The moral and material assistance given to Biafra by Gabon and its other partners could not be ignored as it had received worldwide publicity.[63]

Gabon served as a diplomatic channel of communication between the great powers and the main combatants in the civil war, particularly Biafra. Gabon's considerable influence during the civil war, particularly through its role as a key diplomatic intermediary with the Biafran government, prompted Britain to approach President Albert Bongo in an effort to facilitate a peaceful settlement. As Pierre Carraud, the French Deputy Director responsible for non-Francophone African countries, argued, the importance of intermediaries, particularly African states, in preparing the ground for peace negotiations and facilitating a settlement of the war could hardly be overstated.[64]

Peace for Britain meant restoring a united Nigeria, whether through a change in position among the Biafran leadership or their defeat. In this sense, British influence was invariably exerted to secure peace.[65] Britain chose to operate through countries such as Gabon[66] in pursuit of a peaceful settlement of the conflict. On December 27, 1968, the British Ambassador to Cameroun, A. J. Edden, considered ways of persuading Gabon to abandon its pro-Biafran policy during a conversation with President Bongo.[67,68] Furthermore, during another round of conversations with Ambassador Edden on January 8, 1969, President Bongo asked whether the British government would like him to use his good offices to broker peace between Gowon and Ojukwu.[69] Bongo had mentioned Libreville as one of the possible venues for talks between the two parties.[70]

The subsequent Anglo-Gabonese discussions between President Bongo and the British Ambassador to Cameroun were very productive. Consequently, the ambassador was instructed to send a letter to Bongo asking him to use his good offices

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[63] "Aid to Rebels: Flagrant Contradiction," *Daily Telegraph*, September 1968.

[64] Confidential: Minute on France and Nigeria, from Michael Simpson-Orlebar at the British Embassy in Paris to the Honourable R. J. McM. Wilson in the West African Department, Foreign Office, Despatch No. N1/2, October 15, 1969, FCO 65/272, TNA.

[65] Auberon Waugh and Suzanne Cronjé, *Biafra: Britain's Shame* (London: Michael Joseph, 1969), 60.

[66] Oladapo Olusola Fafowora, *Pressure Groups and Foreign Policy: A Comparative Study of British Attitudes and Policy towards Secessionist Moves in the Congo (1960–1963) and in Nigeria (1966–1969)* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Ltd., 1990), 100–10.

[67] Meeting between US Embassy officials in Paris and Jean Gueury, Quai Deputy Director for Non-French Africa, February 26, 1969, File No. JWN 3/312/1/Part D/5A368/West African Dept., "Nigeria: Political Affairs, External, Bilateral, French Attitude towards the Nigerian Civil War, 1 January 1968–31 December 1969," FCO 65/269, TNA.

[68] Discussions on the Nigerian Civil War and the OCAM initiative between a US Embassy official in Paris and Jean Gueury, June 7, 1969, FCO 65/269, TNA.

[69] Confidential: British Foreign Secretary's Reaction to the Meeting between Bongo and Edden on Peace Settlement and Diplomacy, from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to Yaoundé, Telegram No. 1, January 7, 1969, FCO 65/306, TNA.

[70] Confidential: Minute on Reactions to the Meeting between Edden and Bongo, from British High Commissioner in Lagos Sir David Hunt to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Telegram No. 80, January 10, 1969, FCO 65/306, TNA.

in support of a settlement.[71] According to British Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart, "it now appeared that Bongo might have been given some role to play in connection with current French initiatives and the OCAM's conference…"[72] The British Embassy in Paris suggested that an oral rather than a written message should be delivered to President Bongo. Such an approach was considered more informal than sending a letter on instructions from London. Later, an *aide-mémoire* was sent to Bongo, detailing the British response to his offer to help facilitate a peace settlement between Ojukwu and Gowon. The ambassador reminded Bongo of the British government's view that a solution to the Nigerian problem should be sought in an African context. He also stated that Ojukwu should make his position clear at any meeting arranged under the auspices of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) or Organisation Commune Africaine et Malgache (OCAM).[73]

British efforts to pursue a peace settlement through Gabon under OCAM were unlikely to succeed because Britain consistently supported the Nigerian government's position that the war was an internal affair that required no international intervention and that only the OAU had jurisdiction to resolve the conflict. Britain's support for OCAM peace initiatives was also difficult to reconcile with several of its actions during the civil war. First, it resisted efforts to place the civil war on the agenda of the United Nations Security Council or General Assembly. Second, it was at loggerheads with France, the principal sponsor of an OCAM-backed peace settlement based on Biafra's right to self-determination, while also maintaining a cautious stance toward Ivory Coast, Tanzania, and Zambia. The paper argues that Britain's ultimate objective in engaging with OCAM was to gain a better understanding of the organization's diplomatic activities regarding the civil war and to develop a strong counter-diplomatic strategy capable of offsetting the collective actions of OCAM member states working in favor of Biafra.

Gabon and Anglo-French Rivalry During the Civil War

The Anglo-French rivalry was one of the most complex dimensions of the international politics surrounding the Nigerian Civil War. Britain and France adopted sharply divergent positions on the conflict. The British position centered on preserving Nigeria's unity, whereas the French position increasingly emphasized Biafra's claim to self-determination. These divergent positions produced a diplomatic rift between the two countries during the conflict. Before the war began, France had maintained a policy of strict neutrality, regarding the political upheavals in Nigeria as an internal affair.[74] Evidence of a shift in French policy began to emerge in

[71] From Yaoundé to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, January 9, 1969, FCO 65/306, TNA.
[72] Confidential: Minute on Bongo and Nigeria, from Lagos to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Telegram No. 93, January 13, 1969, FCO 65/306, TNA.
[73] Confidential: An Aide-Mémoire Sent to President Albert Bongo on the Nigerian Civil War, from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to British Ambassador Alan John Edden, March 17, 1969, FCO 65/306, TNA.
[74] Confidential: Minute on France and Nigeria, from the British Embassy in Paris to the Foreign Office, May 12, 1967, File No. TX 8/27/Part A/6C/1068/West and General African Dept., "Nigeria: Political Affairs, External, Bilateral, French Policy towards Nigeria, 1 January 1967–31 December 1969," FCO 38/244, TNA.

1968, when the conflict was at its peak, through a series of statements by French officials. For instance, following a meeting of the French Cabinet on July 31, 1968, Secretary of State for Information M. Joël Le Theule declared that the human drama unfolding in the Republic of Biafra deeply concerned the French government. It maintained that the conflict should be resolved based on the people's right to self-determination and through appropriate international procedures.[75]

The French statement on Biafra publicly exposed the divergence between Britain and France and disrupted expectations of a common Western European position on the conflict. France's support for Biafra also appeared to have been shaped by earlier diplomatic tensions with Nigeria following French nuclear tests in the Sahara, which Nigeria had protested. However, in August 1965, negotiations were held to restore Franco-Nigerian diplomatic relations.[76] British officials nevertheless believed that France remained dissatisfied with Nigeria even after diplomatic relations had been restored. Against the background of the Sahara dispute and France's close ties with Gabon, British officials believed that Nigeria might have more to lose than France if relations deteriorated again or if it took action against French firms or individuals over their support for Biafra. France's open support for Biafra brought it into direct conflict with Britain, which increasingly viewed French involvement as a security concern in West Africa and, more broadly, across the continent. British officials therefore considered whether to protest formally against French actions in the conflict.[77]

British officials considered public and collective African pressure the most promising way to constrain French support for Biafra. They proposed that the Nigerian government issue a factual account of French involvement and invoke the Algiers OAU resolution condemning Biafran secession, in the hope of influencing both French public opinion and the government.[78] They also believed that a collective OAU intervention, perhaps a letter from Emperor Haile Selassie to President de Gaulle on behalf of the organization or its Consultative Committee on Nigeria, would carry greater weight in Paris.[79] This approach complemented Britain's

[75] Confidential: Official Statement Issued on the Nigerian Civil War by the French Government, July 31, 1968, FCO 38/245, TNA.

[76] Segun Johnson, "Franco-Nigerian Relations during the War Years, 1967–1970," in *Perspectives on the Nigerian Civil War*, ed. Siyan Oyeweso (Lagos: OAP Publications, 1992), 132–33.

[77] Confidential: Note on the Meeting of Foreign Office Under-Secretaries concerning the French Attitude toward the Nigerian Civil War, from C. L. Booth to Donald Claude Tebbit, August 5, 1968, FCO 38/245, TNA.

[78] Confidential: Minute on French Arms Supply to Nigeria, from the Foreign Office to Lagos, Telegram No. 1504, September 17, 1968, File No. TX 3/27/Part D/6C/1066/West and General African Dept., "Nigeria: Political Affairs, External, Bilateral, French Attitude in the Nigerian Civil War, 1 January 1968–31 December 1969," FCO 38/247, TNA.

[79] Confidential: Note of Conversation between the United States Assistant Secretary for African Affairs and British Officials at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London, from Donald Claude Tebbit to British High Commissioner in Lagos Sir David Hunt, November 5, 1968, File No. JWN 10/1/8/5A/368/West African Dept., "Nigeria: Defence, French Arms Supply, 1 January 1968–31 December 1969," FCO 65/347, TNA.

broader diplomatic effort to frame the conflict as an African matter to be resolved by Africans, thereby limiting the scope for French initiatives on Biafra's behalf.

Gabon used the diplomatic space created by Franco-British rivalry to pursue its own interests and increase its diplomatic relevance, while its agency remained constrained by its asymmetric relationship with France and the wider international structure of the Nigerian Civil War. Gabon's recognition of Biafra was converted into diplomatic leverage, while simultaneously making it an object of competing British and French diplomatic efforts.

Conclusion

The Nigerian Civil War was a significant postcolonial conflict that brought Africa more closely into the arena of international politics. The conflict generated new patterns of diplomatic engagement between African states and external powers. African diplomacy became increasingly prominent in global affairs. It also expanded Africa's participation in international efforts to address peace and security and the export and import of arms.

Meanwhile, Gabon took a pro-Biafran stance in the civil war. Gabon's open diplomatic support gave renewed hope to the Biafran cause at a time of serious military reverses. More importantly, the recognition strengthened Biafra's claim to independent existence and its demand to be treated on an equal basis with the federal government at the peace talks.[80] Thus, Biafran authorities vigorously pursued their cause in the global diplomatic arena with the expectation that more countries would follow Gabon's example. Gabon acted on its own initiative, without dictation from any external power. Even under intense pressure to abandon its pro-Biafran policy, Gabon never rescinded its position, which it believed to be justified. Although Gabon was not free from external pressure, given its constant diplomatic contact with the French government during the conflict, it maintained its position in defense of interests that it believed were threatened by opposition to the use of its territory as a route for arms deliveries to Biafra. Gabon was guided by its national interests during the civil war, including the desire to make its voice heard on the global stage and to become the economic powerhouse of West and Central Africa. Gabon considered the Biafran drama not as an internal Nigerian problem but as a global issue on which African countries ought to have taken an uncompromising stand. Gabon served as a diplomatic channel through which the great powers maintained close contact with Biafran authorities.

The Gabonese episode in the Nigerian Civil War was one of the major affairs that brought Africa more closely to the front line of the global politics of the 1960s. The conflict also became an arena for great-power rivalry, further complicating peace and security in Africa. Britain never severed its diplomatic ties with Gabon, despite the latter's strong support for Biafra, which British officials regarded as a

[80] Alore Preye Posibi and Anna Canale, "Historical Analysis of the Position of African Countries in the Nigerian Civil War, 1967–1970," *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. Asian and African Studies* 12, no. 2 (2020): 302–11, https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu13.2020.210.

threat to the Anglo-American interests in Nigeria. Instead, Britain sought to influence President Albert Bongo and make clear its objections to Gabon's policy in the civil war.

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