

Business as usual: Britain, oil and the Nigerian civil war, 1967-1970

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Synopsis

The crisis of the Nigerian civil war of 1967 to 1970 became a major foreign policy preoccupation of the British government of Prime Minister Harold Wilson. Against the sentiments of a sizeable portion of public opinion in Britain, Europe, the United States and other places around the world, the Labour government evolved a policy of support for the federal authorities in the Nigerian war. The controversial support for the government based in Lagos led to stringent criticism of the foreign policy response of the British government to the Nigerian crisis including the rankling charge that the government's policy was based largely on Britain's economic interests. The government denied the charge, insisting that its policy was guided more by the position taken by the overwhelming majority of independent African countries and the need to assist a fellow independent Commonwealth country maintain its territorial integrity.

Four decades after the onset of the war, mounting evidence firmly support the position that the British foreign policy response was, indeed, guided largely by British economic interests in general and the oil interest trapped in the Nigerian crisis in particular. Set against the domestic, social and political challenges facing the British government and its exacerbation by such developments in the international system as the new round of crisis in the Middle East which resulted in another Arab-Israeli war and an oil boycott of Britain in June 1967, the prospect of civil war in Nigeria threatened to severely curtail the options open to the British government to achieve positive results in its social and economic goals and enhance the chances of its

continuation in office. For the British government therefore, the overriding aim of its initial intervention in the Nigerian crisis was the prevention of the outbreak of hostilities. When this failed, the British government sought the continuation of oil mining and exportation from Nigeria despite the war. When this failed, she worked for the earliest cessation of hostilities. The British government was again frustrated in this regard as the war dragged on for 30 tedious months during which the Nigerian federal authorities repeatedly promised but failed to bring the military campaign to a successful completion.

This paper, an offshoot of my doctoral study, resolve important issues surrounding factors which predisposed the British government to the set of foreign policy responses it made to the crisis of post independent Nigeria in the 1960s, especially in the traumatic years of the civil war. The overriding factors were largely economic. For the British, as David Hunt – the British High Commissioner to Nigeria at some points in the crisis acknowledges in his memoirs, it was business as usual.

Introduction

At the time of Biafra's self-declared independence, there were three options open to Britain. One was to recognize the new state; this in fact would have meant formalizing the existing *de facto* partition that had existed since 1 August 1966...The second option was to announce and stick by an attitude of neutrality in thought, word and deed...The third option was to announce and adopt total moral, political and military support for Gowon...What the Wilson Government did was to adopt the last option and announce the second. In doing so and maintaining the fable for a year, it made a fool of the British Parliament and people, and several other governments, notably those of Canada, the United States and the Scandinavian countries, who later became sufficiently concerned to wish to see peace brought about through the offices of a mutually acceptable and impartial mediator.

Frederick Forsyth¹

¹ Frederick Forsyth, *The Biafra Story*, (Middlesex, 1969), pp. 157-158. Mr Forsyth - a source whose importance may not be readily apparent - had unrestricted access to crucial information about the Nigerian civil war from the Biafran perspective. He was (and remains) a close confidant and the official biographer of the Biafran leader, Colonel C. O. Ojukwu. He was in Biafra almost throughout

HMG (Her Majesty's Government) would recognise Biafra if it seemed likely to endure as a country. But H.M.G. did not want to be among the first to recognise and would hope to have avoided recognition should the F.M.G. be ultimately victorious. In fact our policy would be determined not be [sic] principle but by the practical ends of defending our oil and other interests in Nigeria (of these we agreed oil was much the most important). We had refused to lend troops to F.M.G.

'Note for the Records: Nigeria'²

The key question which led to the investigation at the heart of this paper: 'What factors predisposed the British government towards the set of policies it adopted towards the crisis of the Nigerian civil war?' has been unequivocally answered. The factors were many but dominated in the main by economic considerations in general and oil related issues in particular. In answering the key question, however, numerous other questions have emerged which deserve investigation. These include such wider questions as: 'Why did the British government find it difficult to openly acknowledge economic and oil concerns as the real driving force for its policies towards the Nigerian crisis? Is there a recurring tendency on the part of Britain and many other developed economy governments to seek to disguise or completely deny the economic angle to their foreign policy pursuits, especially where it appears to profit at the expense of human sufferings and tragedies implicit in crisis situations? Specific to the narrower confines of the topic under investigation: 'Why was there so much controversy and debate around what issues conditioned Anglo-Nigerian relations between 1967 and 1970?' This paper will better resolve the latter than the former sets

the war, starting as BBC's correspondent. He has published extensively on the Nigerian crisis and represented such a profound voice of opposition to the policies of the British government in the Nigerian crisis that top ranking officials of Her Majesty's Government engaged directly with his criticisms.

² The National Archives (NA), POWE 63/238, 'Note for the Records: Nigeria', 5 June 1967. Report on an interdepartmental meeting involving officials from the Ministry of Power, Commonwealth Office, Treasury, Department of Economic Affairs, Board of Trade, O.D.M., Export Credits Guarantee Department (ECGD) and Bank of England that took place at 3 pm on 2 June 1967.

of questions. Indeed, the earlier sets of questions belong in the genre of open debates worthy of eternal reviews.

Brief background to 1967-1970 Anglo-Nigerian relations

Nigeria had been independent of Britain for less than seven years when its civil war broke out. Moreover, some have argued that the seeds of the hostilities which erupted in 1967 were planted in part, by the controversial British amalgamation of disparate territories and peoples to form modern Nigeria in 1914. For the approximately 70 years which formal British colonization lasted in Nigeria³ colonial officials and policies did very little to foster any meaningful sense of national identity among the over 350 ethnic groups in Nigeria. Rather, various key officials including the iconic Fredrick Lugard pursued a deliberate policy of keeping sections of the country apart. In the build up to Nigerian independence, therefore, the primary focus, loyalty, appeal and support base for the politicians who emerged on the Nigerian national scene were parochial and, in a number of cases, divisive. Nonetheless, throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, Nigeria was perceived and toasted in the international community – especially the West - as a promising example of thriving democracy in black Africa. Reality caught up shortly after when relentless crisis brewed in the newly independent state.

The pace of political and social degeneration in the country quickened significantly after the British handover of power to indigenous rulers on 1 October 1960. The 1959 elections which produced the parliament and government at independence had been

³ British encroachment on what later became Nigeria began with the proclamation of a protectorate over Lagos in 1851, proceeded with formal colonization of the entire country in 1898 save for the aberration of the Egba United Government which maintained a form of quasi-sovereignty at the pleasure of the British until the mid-1930s.

fiercely contested and allegations of rigging dogged the exercise.⁴ By 1962, sections of the country had erupted in riots and attempted breakaway. Between 1963 and 1965, the coalition in power at the federal level – the NPC/NCNC alliance - had aided the disintegration of law and order in the West - the regional base of the opposition party and encouraged the break up of the Action Group, the dominant party in the West. In the predictable chaos which ensued, the coalition in power at the centre declared a state of emergency in the region and appointed an administrator over the area. The federal government continued its quasi-legal pursuit of the opposition party by arresting and charging several of its key leaders including Chief Obafemi Awolowo with treasonable felony. Awolowo was sent to goal and constructive opposition ceased in the federal legislature. The NPC/NCNC alliance gerrymandered the Western region with the creation of a fourth region – the Mid-West - from within its borders without a corresponding re-delineation of the other two pre-existing regions. At the December 1965 elections, the federal authorities declared NNDP, the splinter party it had help create, the winner of the regional elections. The region erupted in popular spontaneous riots.

In the midst of all these crises, Nigeria continued to play a prominent, pro-Western role in international politics: it sent troops to the Congo under the mandate of the UN, convened the first Commonwealth Head of Government's summit outside London to help Britain address the crisis in Rhodesia and helped prevent the more radical ideas of leftist elements like Kwame Nkrumah from deciding the form and direction of the Organisation of African Unity. While the intelligence estimates of the US and British governments hinted at the possible break up of Nigeria from as far back as 1963/65,

⁴ The problem of electoral violence and rigging continues with Nigeria to date as the elections conducted in the last two weeks illustrate.

their governments continued to hold up Nigeria as an example of what they hoped independent African countries would look like. Within hours of the end of the Commonwealth meeting in Lagos in January 1966, the Nigerian Army effected a violent removal of the Nigerian government via a coup. A second military on military coup took place six months later in July 1966 and the country headed closer to disintegration. Debates about the ethnic motives behind the coups led to sectional mayhem with people from the East of Nigeria becoming targets for mass attacks and killings in the North of Nigeria. This triggered a mass return of people of Eastern extraction – located widely all over Nigeria – back to the Eastern Region.

By July 1967, the Nigerian crisis had transformed into a civil war, the outcome of which depended partly on the reaction of the international community. In the evaluation of the opposing authorities in the Nigerian war, a key factor in attracting the support of the most important sections of the international community laid in achieving British diplomatic backing. While both sides in the Nigerian war concentrated on influencing British foreign policy response to the war, however, they failed to realize the key factors which dominated the closed debates of British policy makers at the time.

British Dilemma, Nigerian/Biafran Misconception

In its first ten days of office, the new Labour Government had been through a baptism of fire. The economic situation; an explosive foreign situation; Rhodesia at dagger-point: on each of these, far-reaching decisions had to be taken before the Government was a week old... The economic consequences of this June (1967) week were extremely serious for Britain. The closure of the Canal alone, it was authoritatively estimated, was costing Britain £20 millions a month on our balance of payments. No less serious was the loss of Middle-East oil. We had to seek to replace this from other areas at a higher price and, in the main, at much higher freights. Supplies from Libya, the one source west of the Canal, were cut for a time. Nor could we make up any substantial part

of the loss from Nigeria, our other short-haul source. Within weeks, the civil war there cut off all our Nigerian supplies...The crisis was a serious blow...the biggest contributing factor to the devaluation which came five months later.

Harold Wilson.⁵

There is good reason to agree with the position that the Nigerian civil war was a local conflict that drew in foreign powers. The international involvement with the Nigerian crisis had an impact on the relationship between the United Kingdom and the authorities in conflict in Nigeria. There were three important angles: the perspective of the importance of recognition or its denial to the new state of Biafra by other sovereign states in the international system, the question of achieving crucial British national objectives in the foreign arena in the face of numerous constraints and the interplay of superpower rivalry in the Nigerian crisis.

The leadership of the FMG of Nigeria and officials of the state of Biafra were preoccupied by the twin issues of recognition and support in their engagement with Britain and the entire world in the months which preceded the Biafran declaration of independence.⁶ Her Majesty's Government was preoccupied with a local economic challenge which was increasingly exacerbated by a worsening foreign environment. As Prime Minister Harold Wilson noted in the opening quotation, the new Labour government faced a series of daunting international crises from its first few days in government. The crises grew in number and complexity with damaging effects on British economic interests at home and abroad. The third major angle from which international involvement in the crisis of the Nigerian civil war significantly affected the relations between the United Kingdom and the authorities of the Federal Military

⁵ Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government, 1964-1970: A Personal Record*, (London, 1971), p. 26 and 400.

⁶ This view is shared by John de St. Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War*, (London, 1972), p. 179.

and Biafran governments was in the way it intensified the East/West rivalry of the Cold War era on the one hand, and the competition between Britain and some of its traditional rivals like France and Portugal on the other.

In a much wider context than that of bilateral engagement with Britain, however, Nigeria's external relations in the period of its civil war underwent a significant transformation. It was marked by a gradual but radical departure from the pattern set in the first five and a half years of post independence engagement with the global community. Consequently, Anglo-Nigerian relations between the 1967 and 1970 was equally conducted under a climate and with perceptions and outcomes which were markedly different from what obtained from 1956 - four years before the attainment of formal independence when the three regional governments in Nigeria were allowed enough autonomy under the decolonisation programme of the British colonial authorities to conduct a level of parallel foreign interaction - and 1st October 1960 when the emergence of an indigenous central government took over the coordination of Nigeria's foreign relations.

While the policy of Her Majesty's Government towards the Nigerian crisis had often been criticised as self-serving, it is interesting to observe that the duplicity of the French government in the Nigerian crisis has not received as much attention and criticism. While France gave discrete support for Biafra from the start of the civil war, it nevertheless, supplied arms to the federal side for over eleven months. Six weeks after the imposition of arms embargo on the Nigerian federal authorities, the French Cabinet issued a statement in support of Biafran claim to self-determination on 31 July 1968. It is important, however, to highlight the fact that French policy towards

the Nigerian crisis is rooted in a larger and longer framework of rivalry between the French and the British over Nigeria, and between the French and Nigeria within the West African sub region. Direct Anglo-French rivalry over territory in the West African sub region and in the area that became Nigeria in particular began in the nineteenth century. In the scramble for territory, the race for land in the area had led to a confrontation between British traders led by Sir George Goldie and the French. The British government was reluctant to commit itself to more territory in the area but stepped in to counter French encroachment.

Other factors notwithstanding, the driving factor in British policy towards the Nigerian crisis was the oil factor. The British establishment had decided in a meeting which preceded the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli Six Day war by three days and fighting in the Nigerian civil war by over a month had already decided that oil was the most important British interest to guide in the Nigerian war implied that protection of oil as a valuable economic investment predated even the concern for the effect of the Nigerian war on British oil supplies. This concern engaged the attention of the civil servants as well as the politicians. Additional proof that the Wilson government and its bureaucracy had long viewed Nigerian oil as important to the British economy with respect to its foreign exchange position was revealed by a correspondence between the British mission in Nigeria and the Commonwealth Relations Office in London two months after the Labour government came into office in 1964. The British High Commissioner had requested, received and forwarded to London an estimate of the long-term prospects of oil production on government revenues and foreign exchange in Nigeria for the years 1964 to 1970. The estimates put the market value of the proven potential production at £30 million in 1964, rising to £125 million

in 1970. These estimates were passed to the Ministry of Power which confirmed the estimates as realistic.⁷ While the British were relatively clear about what their interest was in the Nigerian crisis, the real marvel was the fact that high ranking officials in Nigeria and Biafra had the most misinformed views about what constituted British interests.

Conclusion

This paper has only made a stab at a controversial historical topic in the light of newer and more complete primary materials from government and private sources. Key historical facts which the investigation behind the paper has established include the fact the British government of Prime Minister Harold Wilson between 1964 and 1970 denied the real reasons for its foreign policy decisions on the Nigerian crisis and civil war. Also, British foreign policy position towards the crisis/war did not emerge early and with the certainty that many previous influential writers had suggested. Further, the Nigerian and Biafran authorities erred gravely in many of their key assumptions about the perception, evaluation, interests and motivation of the British government in engaging with the Nigerian crisis.

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⁷ CAB 163/54; Confidential letter from Sir Francis Cumming-Bruce, British High Commissioner to Nigeria to Sir Algernon Rumbold, Commonwealth Relations Office, London, 18 December 1964. Commented upon by A. B. Powell, Ministry of Power on 17 February 1965.