I. Origins of the War

Nigeria, a nation roughly the size of Texas on Africa’s west coast, has a larger population than any other African nation, and is home to over two-hundred and fifty different ethnic groups. Nigeria has experienced vast changes, evolving from a collection of ancient kingdoms to a British colony and protectorate to a struggling independent nation. Nigeria’s political, social, and economic development has been largely influenced by the Civil War, or Biafran War, that occurred between 1967 and 1970. Twentieth-Century Historian Brun provides a pithy overview of the events that took place in Nigeria:

“Since gaining independence from Britain in 1960, Nigeria’s armed forces have run the country for all but nine years. In 1967, the eastern region seceded, calling itself the Republic of Biafra. This plunged the country into a civil war. An estimated one million casualties resulted until the secessionists surrendered in January, 1970.” (Brun, 62).

A. Long term political causes

1. **Britain’s division of Nigeria** (1946): Britain’s imperialistic motivations caused her to piece together the colony of Nigeria out of the many diverse ethnic groups populating the region. Later in 1946, Britain again drew boundaries, this time dividing Nigeria into three separate regions: North, West, and East. Great Britain hoped that dividing the colony into regions would strengthen and streamline her control while appeasing the Nigerian demand for representation. Each region had an assembly made up of both Nigerian and British members, which acted as advisory boards to the central government in Lagos. However, this territorial division increased already existing tensions within the colony. Each region was largely comprised of one of three major ethnic groups, and all desired representation and political power in the central government. A power struggle ensued between the three regions that continued after Nigeria was granted independence. Regional desires for political power were one of the major underlying causes of the Biafran War.

2. **Political Parties**: The governmental reorganization resulted in the formation of three major political parties which each vied for control:
   a) The National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC)- dominated the Eastern Region, led by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe. Comprised of the ethnic group Ibo*.
   b) The Action Group (AG)-dominated the Western Region, led by Yoruba Chief Obafemi Awolowo. Comprised of the ethnic group Yoruba*.
   c) The Nigerian Peoples Congress (NPC)-party of the Muslim area in the Northern Region; deputy leader is Sir Abubakar Tawafa. Comprised of the ethnic group Hausa-Fulani*. 
* Ethnic groups, regions, and political parties are inextricably linked, and should not be considered separately but as a whole. Ethnic groups will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

B. Short Term Political Causes

1. Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa: in 1957, Balewa becomes the federation’s first prime minister. Balewa, leader of the NPC, remains prime minister after Nigeria gains independence in 1960. Of the three political parties, the NPC has the strongest backing. Aziwike, leader of the NCNC, aligns his party with the NPC, and assumes the larger role of governor general. The Action Group emerges as the opposition party.

2. Early Struggles: During the early years of independence, the people of South Nigeria, particularly the Ibo, resent the power of the Hausa-Fulani in the North. The largely Muslim Hausa-Fulani northerners who made up the NPC were a much larger group than the members of the other two major regions/ethnic groups/political parties. In 1963, Balewa’s establishment of a Mid-Western region out of the Western region angered members of all groups. Disagreements between Awolowo of the AG and the regional Premier Samuel Akintola caused a political immobilization in the Western region that resulted in central authorities’ ten-month assumption of control. In addition, groups in the North and East regions demanded their own separate political units similar to the Mid-Western region.

3. Political Antagonisms and Corruption: Two events that added to growing political tensions were:
   a) Electoral boycotts during the first general elections in 1964
   b) Violent rioting after the NPC was charged with rigging political party elections in the Western region

Censuses conducted in 1962-1963 had shown that the Northern Hausa-Fulani had an even larger percentage of the nation’s population than had previously been thought. The Ibos in the East and Yorubas in the West resent the elevated status of their neighbors to the north. The NCNC and the AG parties both accused the NPC of fixing the 1964 federal election and the 1965 regional election, inciting bloody riots which added to the political turmoil.

C. The Role of Ethnic Groups in the Outbreak of War

1. Nationalism: This is one of the greatest underlying causes of the Nigerian Civil War. “The ethnicity of Nigeria is so varied that there is no definition of a Nigerian beyond that of someone who lives within the borders of the country” (Rakov, 1). Nigeria consists of between 250 to 300 ethnic groups forced to co-exist within the artificial boundaries constructed by Great Britain. However, “only three ethnic groups have attained ethnic majority status in their respective regions: the Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Ibo in the southeast, and the Yoruba in the southwest” (Rakov, 1). These groups make up about three-fifths of the total population of Nigeria. The Hausa-Fulani are mostly Muslim, while many of the Ibo and Yoruba are Christian. Regional and ethnic distinctions within Nigeria have literally torn the country apart. Their different religions and political ideologies created increasing tension among the three ethnic groups. A growing demand for self-determination contributed greatly to the secessionist Republic of Biafra.
D. Economic Causes

1. Oil was first discovered in the Niger delta in 1958, and quickly formed the basis of Nigeria’s economy. Beers speculates that one of the major reasons the Hausa-Fulani objected to the Biafran secession was the vast supply of oil reserves in the southern Niger delta. According to his theory, the northerners violently opposed the Biafran secession not only to protect Nigerian unity, but also to maintain access to the eastern oil supply. This is a very valid interpretation of the war’s origins.

E. The Events Leading up to the War

1. Assassination and Secession:

   The war began with ethnic rivalry within the military.

   a) January, 1966- a military coup led by a group of army officers, mostly made up of Ibos, seizes control of the central and regional governments, killing Prime Minister Balewa as well as the Premier Akintola. **General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi**, commander of the military officers and himself an Ibo, took control of the government. Aguiyi-Ironsi suspended Nigeria’s constitution and established military governors in each of the four regions.

   b) The northerners feared that these actions would give the Ibos control over all of Nigeria. Riots raged throughout the north, and over 30,000 thousand Ibos were killed. According the ICE case studies, a massive Ibo exodus of over one million occurred, as the persecuted Ibos fled from the north to their ancestral home in the east. In July of 1966, a group of northern army officers staged a counter-coup, assassinating General Aguiyi-Ironsi. **Lieutenant Yakubu Gowon**, a northerner and the army chief of staff, became head of the new Federal Military Government (FMG).

   c) **Colonel Odumegwu-Ojukwu**, military governor of the eastern region, refuses to accept Gowon as the head of state. According to one scholar, Ojukwu “charged Gowon with insensitivity toward the Ibo crisis and restricted all non-easterners from his region” (Sachs, 2). Ojukwu’s opposition to Gowon’s military regime intensified in 1967, when Gowon further divided the country’s four political regions into twelve states. Although Gowon had good intentions-to give some of the smaller ethnic groups greater political power-Ojukwu took personal offense, refusing to accept the division of his Eastern Region into three states. On May 30, 1967, Ojukwu declared the Eastern region an independent republic called **Biafra**. According to historian Burton F. Beers, Ojukwu and the Ibos felt secession was justified, “charging persecution and seeking to protect their oil wealth” (Beers, 746). This drastic step ignited a violent civil war within weeks.

II. The Nature of War

1. War as an instrument of policy

   “The classic statement on the proper goal of war was made by German strategist Carl von Clausewitz in *On War* (1833). He argued that ‘war is not merely a political act, but also a political instrument, a continuation of political relations, a carrying out of the same by other means’”(Rourke, 410). This quote is a point well made in relation to the Nigerian Civil War. The Federal Military Government viewed the civil war as another type of political tool, albeit a bloody one. They fought the war with a clear goal in mind: to reunify Nigeria and
thus ensure access to valuable oil supplies in the newly formed Republic of Biafra. Gowon decided war was the most effective instrument of policy, and employed it to accomplish a calculated agenda.

2. Civil warfare: Strategy and Tactics

a) After Biafra’s creation, army combat units, mostly comprised of Hausa-Fulani, were quickly dispatched by the FMG to crush the Ibo secessionists. However, Biafrans retaliated by taking control of strategic points in the Midwestern region. The FMG responded by sending large numbers of the military forces to fight. This step escalated the conflict to a full-blown civil war. The FMG regained control of the mid-west and delta region. By the end of 1967, they had blocked Biafra’s access to the sea. Despite this, the FMG troops were not able to advance to the heart of Biafra, resulting in a stalemate.

b) What the rebel troops lacked in size and weapons, they made up for in leadership and morale. Lieutenant Colonel Ojukwu did an outstanding job at rallying the Ibo troops and keeping the FMG army at bay. Yet the Ibos were not able to withstand the superior FMG strength, and by 1968 the FMG had invaded Owerri, and oil rich area of the Niger delta. There they increased their numbers to 250,000 men. Even with this new influx of FMG soldiers, the Biafran rebels were able to liberate Owerri.

c) The Biafran rebels did not control Owerri for long because a new offensive in the south forced them into submission. Despite this victory, mounting death and destruction caused Gowon to proclaim a state of emergency. He announce plans to abolish the four regions and redivide the country into twelve states. Most historians view this as a concession to the eastern region, since it would lessen northern domination. Gowon’s strategic move paid off: he won over eastern minorities and deprived the rebel Ibo secessionists of their control over the oil fields and access to the sea.

d) The division of Nigeria into twelve states took effect in April 1968. The final strategy of the FMG was to block supplies from Biafra. Hostilities continued until 1970, at which point the federal forces had starved the Biafran forces into submission. A cease-fire was called January 12, 1970, ending the Nigerian Civil War.

III. Non Combatants and the War

1. War economy

During the Nigerian Civil War, the economy ground to a standstill. “Like other developing nations in Africa, Nigeria tried to modernize its economy. The civil war disrupted that effort” (Beers, 746). Since most of Nigeria’s oil supply was located in the warring Republic of Biafra, the Nigerian economy suffered greatly. Oil was and is fundamental to Nigeria’s economic prosperity, and when the civil war prevented access to major oil supplies it was economically devastating.

2. The home front

Civilian fatalities: Between 500,000 and two million Biafran civilians died from starvation during the war (ICE Case Study, 2). To the north, the Hausa-Fulani civilians helped the war effort, mostly through food production. The majority of civilians in Nigeria were farmers, so it makes sense that their major contribution was food for the soldiers.
3. Women and the war
   The role of women in the Nigerian Civil War is not well-documented. The only acknowledgment of their influence is a brief allusion to their efforts to keep the armed forces fed and to care for the injured. However, it is a safe bet that the Nigerian women were active behind the scenes, organizing to provide medical assistance, weapons, clothing, etc. for the military.

4. Propaganda
   Propaganda played a major role in obtaining foreign support. U.S. and European relief organizations, private groups, and religious groups came to the assistance of the Biafra republic in response to Biafran propaganda that stressed the genocide of the Ibo through graphic images. However, while only a few African nations formally recognized Biafra as a republic, Nigeria’s effective propaganda helped enlist the support of Britain and the Soviet Union. The U.S., on the other hand, was not significantly swayed by the propaganda of either, and placed sanctions on exports of military goods to both the Biafrans and the FMG.

IV. Political, Social, and Economic Effects of the War
1. Post War: Changes & Problems
   a) After the secessionist forces surrendered, Biafra was reincorporated into Nigeria as the East Central State. The Civil War left a legacy of death and destruction, particularly in the war-torn eastern region. Over three million Ibo refugees fled to a small eastern area. Scholars disagree as to the number of civilian and military casualties, with figures ranging from one to two million. However, most historians agree that post-war Nigeria was a country in crisis.
   b) Despite the lack of a formal alliance or treaty, Gowon supervised FMG efforts to ensure that the Ibo people would be treated as countrymen, rather than as defeated enemies. In 1970, immediately after the war, the government initiated reconstruction and relief programs. Dealing with starvation was a significant problem, as was diffusing remaining ethnic tensions. However, Gowon’s skillful handling of the post-war challenge preserved peace, and in 1979 Nigeria returned to a civilian government. In addition, once Nigeria was once again able to utilize her oil supplies, the economy quickly recovered. Many of Nigeria’s post-war problems still plague the nation today. Ethnic tensions and military dictatorships continue to pose a threat to Nigerian unity.
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