

Historicising British and Russian Intervention during the Nigerian Civil War, 1967 – 1970

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Abstract

The desire of both the Biafran regime and the federal military government of Nigeria during the Nigerian civil war to secure diplomatic support as well as military assistance from the outside world could not but lead to the internationalization of the conflict. This desire coupled with other reasons attracted many countries to declare support and assistance to either the federal military government of Nigeria or the Biafran regime.

The focus of this paper is to give a historical analysis of the intervention of Britain and Russia during the Nigerian civil war. The motivational bases of their involvement in the war, the dynamics and levels of their involvement as well as the effects of such involvement shall be examined in this paper. The paper also argues in the conclusion that the refusal of Britain and Russia to comply with the call for international arms embargo in 1968 did not help in facilitating a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The paper also recommends as championed by scholars of conflict resolution in a civil war situation that there should be readiness by the intervening powers to stop arms sale when it might be effective to aid peaceful resolution of conflict.

Keywords: Historicizing, intervention, civil war, diplomatic support, military assistance.

1. Introduction

It is not unreasonable to briefly illuminate Nigeria's external relations with these powers (Britain and Russia) before the outbreak of the war so as to provide some understanding of subsequent developments. At independence, Nigeria in line with most developing countries of the world embarked upon a policy of non – alignment. The policy of non-alignment as practised by Nigeria and other non- aligned members can be understood from two perspectives. The first was to avoid political entanglement in the “Cold war”. For instance, during issues involving the superpowers, the stand of Nigeria should be judged not by any obligation to either of the parties, but in the light of the merits or its implications on the international community. This stand was taken in order to resist external neo – colonial intervention in the internal affairs of Nigeria, as well as to give Nigeria the confidence to express its views on certain international issues. Furthermore, non – alignment made possible the diversification of sources of financial assistance. (Anglin, 1964).

In practice, the Nigerian policy of non – alignment was in line with the policies and aspirations of the western industrialised countries. Because of Nigeria's historical evolution, post independence era was highly committed towards establishing firm relations with Britain and its western allies. Before the civil war, in terms of aid received from foreign countries, it has been asserted that virtually all aids received were directly from western sources, especially Britain and the U.S.A or indirectly through the World Bank and the United Nations (Ate, 1980). During the same period, the Nigerian government “rejected from the Soviet Union a soft loan of £20 million (about ₦40 million) at two percent (2%) interest as against 2.8% from the western countries (Adegbonmire, 1970).

In terms of investment, Anglin (1964) explains that while “eighty percent (80%) of the £200 million in overseas investments in Nigeria was British the balance, apart from some Lebanese and Indian Capital, is also western”. The figure for the Soviet bloc was nil.

This strong sentiment in favour of the western countries was reinforced by the military factor. Indigenous officers of the army, air force and the police force were products of institutions like the Mons officer Cadet School, Aldershot, Sandhurst, Warminster, Scotland yard and others all in Britain. Britain and the United States also supplied the equipment for the navy and the army. This situation reached a climax with the signing of the Anglo-Nigerian Defence pact. Under this agreement, the Nigerian government was to make staging and tropicalization facilities available for the British government. In view of the fact that Britain is a member of NATO, the threat posed to Nigeria's international image engendered stout opposition from various members of the country especially students of the university College, Ibadan, and the members of opposition in government, which forced the Federal Government to abrogate the agreement in January, 1962. According to Ajibola (1978), despite the abrogation of the treaty, the spirit of the pact still lingered on as Britain continued to train most of Nigeria's military personnel, and until 1964, the commanders of the Navy and Army were British nationals. In the cultural and education sphere, Britain remains the most important external factor in Nigeria. English is the official language of the country and the educational institutions still exhibit traits of British influence. Britain remained the major overseas centre of learning for Nigerians. In contrast to this situation, Russian literature was banned in Nigeria by the Balewa regime. (Ajibola,1978).

Thus, it is clearly evident from the above survey that in the field of international politics in general,

Nigerian relations with the West particularly Britain were very cordial. While Russia virtually had no foothold in Nigeria. It is against such a background that the roles of the Great Powers particularly Britain and Russia, during the Nigerian civil war shall be examined.

2. The concept of Intervention in International Relations

There are problems involved in conflict resolution in a civil war situation. Scholars, prominent among whom are James Rosenau (1968, 1974) and Evan Luard (1972), who studied intervention as an aspect of international relations have identified three types of intervention and the problems entailed in each. The first is one in which a power directly occupies the territory of another state to safeguard the regime from collapse. (For example, the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Russia in 1968). The second type of intervention is one in which one government finances rebel forces to overthrow another legitimate government because of the intervening powers opposition to the ideological orientation of the country being intervened in. American interventionist aid to Jonas Savimbi's group against the popular movement for the liberation of Angola (MPLA) has been cited as an example of this.

The last type of intervention is where a power sells arms to the force of either side in a civil strife. The powers that supplied military assistance to either the federal military government of Nigeria or Biafra falls under this category. In the resolution of conflict in this kind of intervention, a number of conditions are necessary. Firstly, the country being intervened in by other countries must be in a relatively weak military state. This condition was present in Nigeria where Nigeria's military strength in 1966 was only a constabulary force of about 20,000 men (Akinbi, 1991). Thus by implication, as at 1967, Nigeria not to talk of Biafra was not in a position to fight a major protracted war. (obviously, with the lack of external sources of arms, both parties would see the futility of an armed encounter).

Secondly, there must be in existence extra-state organisations capable of mediation in the civil strife. As regards the Nigerian war, there were three such organisations – the O.A.U, U.N.O and the Commonwealth of Nations. However, it is worthy of note that there is a clause about respect for the political independence and non – interference in the internal affairs of member states in their charter which prevented them from taking concrete action to resolve the Nigerian war (Ajibola, 1978).

The last condition which is the most important to the Nigerian war was the readiness by the intervening powers to stop arms sale when it might be effective. This condition would have been possible in Nigeria by July 1968 when all the countries that were supplying arms, either stopped arms supply or indicated their willingness to ban arms sales to both parties in the Nigerian war. Russia and Britain were the only two countries that neither banned nor showed any willingness to stop arms supply to Nigeria (Jorre, 1972).

The reasons for this action on the part of Britain and Russia as well as its implications shall later be examined in the cause of this study under the concluding remarks. We shall now proceed to examining the intervention of Britain and Russia during the Nigerian civil war.

3. Great Britain and the Nigerian Civil War

At the outbreak of the Nigerian war Britain found itself in a quandary, this is because Biafra's secession constituted a number of problems for Britain. On the one hand, it was a truism that Britain was Nigeria's former imperial master, and since independence Nigeria had been an active member of the commonwealth. If she (Britain) supported secession, she might be accused of trying to dismember Nigeria. On the other hand, if she supported the federal government there might be a moral dilemma as to whether territorial integrity should be upheld by arms supplies especially since all the people of Nigeria (Biafra included) were supposed to be in the same relation to Britain.(Ajibola, 1978). This moral dilemma was further exacerbated by the events in Nigeria leading to secession. Moreover, Britain citizens and investments were on both sides of the conflict. Finally, there was the question of oil royalty. Britain needed to decide which side to pay the oil royalty to.

The question became imperative as Britain regarded safeguarding her source of oil as important. This fear of loss of oil was also aggravated by the situation in the Middle East. Egypt closed the Suez canal on June 6, 1967 and thereby reduced the source of British oil supply. Thus initially, as Britain dithered and was watching intently to see which way the winds would blow, she declared that she was 'neutral'. (Jorre, 1972) Britain later declared open support for the federal government because of some reasons.

The first motive for British intervention in Nigeria was dictated by the urge to protect her economic interests in Nigeria. The magnitude of British economic interests in Nigeria can be seen from the estimate by the Central Bank of Nigeria in 1965, putting the total investment of British Companies at \$568 million which was 53 percent of all foreign investment in Nigeria. (Cervenka, 1971). There was the argument by Uwechue (1971) that Britain's economic interest could flourish as well in a divided Nigeria as they did in a united country. For instance Ralph Uwechue cited the examples that 'Britain split colonial India' before quitting her but continued to maintain practically unabated economic ties with both India and Pakistan after the event. So also was her relations with Malaya and Singapore after the dissolution of the Malayan Federation. (Uwechue, 1971).

According to (Akinbi 1991), though this might be true, there is no gainsaying the fact that a single unit is usually economically preferable to multiple units. Besides, the above contention can only hold water if only the country broke up in a peaceful and amicable atmosphere. But the Nigerian civil war provided a sharp contrast to peaceful division. In fact any ill – conceived step by Britain could have far – reaching implications for her relations in a divided Nigeria. It was no wonder then that Britain fell behind the side with the ‘big’ battalions. It is also noteworthy that for Britain, national interest had to take into account the attitudes of major African countries. Since Britain still had black Africa on its back as a result of Rhodesia’s illegal breakaway, supporting Lagos provided her the opportunity to redress the balance by conveniently keeping in step with the O.A.U and the majority of African nations.

Another reason that changed Britain’s ambivalence to open support for the federal government was the belief of Britain that Biafra would collapse rapidly. In other words, Britain undermined the will of the Ibos and their potential strength to resist Lagos, believing that the rebellion would be easily crushed. The British’s conclusion was reinforced not only by the fact of federal victory over Biafra when the battle of Ore was fought in September 1968 but also by the fact that initially, Gowon himself called it a ‘police’ action and predicted Biafra’s collapse in a matter of weeks – which never materialised.

Finally, Britain’s hands were forced by Russia’s willingness to supply arms to the federal government coupled with the diplomatic manoeuvres of Anthony Enahoro. When Britain refused to sell arms to Nigeria, the Nigerians therefore turned to Russia. A cultural agreement and technical assistance treaties that encompassed the supply of arms were signed on July 1967. After this Chief Enahoro visited London and reminded the British Prime Minister – Harold Wilson, that British trade investments in Nigeria were important, and that refusal to supply arms would amount to a betrayal at a crucial moment of need. All these factors combined to influence Britain to back Lagos not only diplomatically but also materially.

During the course of the war, especially in 1968, the issue of whether arms supply would not continue to aggravate loss of lives aroused the international community. In other words from mid – 1968, a great majority of people started to feel that the war might not be won so easily as predicted by the federal government and an arms embargo would be decisively significant in ensuring the peaceful resolution of the conflict. Thus between May and July 1968, according to (Jorre (1972), Czechoslovakia, the Netherlands, France, Belgium and Italy banned the supply of arms to either side in the war. Only Britain and Russia refused to stop arms supply. Accounting for this British stand, Cronje (1972) quoted Sir Alec Douglas as having said in 1968 that “Britain is always asked to make a gesture and no one else follows suit, and that does not make much contribution to peace”. Despite this argument, countless efforts were expended to call for an arms embargo. (Akinyemi, 1978). Notwithstanding this, Britain was still intransigent as she did not stop the supply of arms. Some reasons have been advanced apart from Douglas’s argument about the sincerity of other countries to ensure the success of the international arms embargo, why arms supply continued against popular demand. According to Cronje (1972) the Secretary for Commonwealth Affairs, Mr. George Thompson, argued that arms supply brought Britain enough influence so that Britain was able to moderate federal war efforts, though he did not elucidate the practical manifestation of this. Finally, Mr. Stewart, the foreign Secretary enunciated that Britain did not stop the supply of arms because there was no guarantee of a cease fire. He believed that an international arms embargo was inadequate to ensure peaceful resolution of the conflict and that it would aid the Biafrans at the end of the exercise.(Cronje, 1972).

Rather than stop the supply of arms Britain believed that diplomatic means could be used to persuade the two sides to renounce war on their own. To this end, Britain exerted some efforts to persuade Biafra to surrender during the visits of Lord Shepherd to Nigeria in both September and December, 1968 (Jorre, 1972). Mr Foley was also delegated to meet Emperor Haile Selasaie, the chairman of O.A.U’s Consultative Committee on Nigeria and Diallo Telli, the O.A.U. Secretary General at approximately the same time with that of Lord Shepherd.

But not surprisingly, all these diplomatic manoeuvres failed since the diplomatic efforts to be successful required an arms embargo which Britain found difficult to compromise. Because of Britain’s inability to stop the war through diplomacy of persuasion, arms supply increased. Between 1967 and 1969, arms imported to Nigeria were:

Year	Amount	% total Arms
1967	£171,391	47.84
1968	£8,817,560	79.59
1969	£10,255,089	97.36

Source: Nigeria Trade Summary, 1969.

Thus by the beginning of 1969, when all diplomatic means to stop the war foundered, Britain lost a good opportunity to use her influence to stop arms supply.

There has been heated debate among writers about the rightness or otherwise of British arms policy which should be looked into. Cronje (1972) has argued that though Britain claimed that she supplied arms

because she wanted to see that the war efforts of the federal government were moderated, that reason was a façade. She advanced some reasons for this. Firstly, after August 1968, all that interested Britain was Nigeria's victory and that Britain merely used words that suggested altruism so that she would be able to cover up the fact that by September 1968, she already has a vested interest in the outcome of the war, and Britain's vest economic investment would be better protected under a single central authority. Cronje demonstrated this by the role played by Britain during the arrival of the international observer team in Nigeria between September and November, 1968. The duty was to investigate the argument propounded by the Ojukwu regime that genocide was taking place in Biafra. The composition of the Observer team was tactfully influenced by Britain to the extent that majority of the members were military men whom Cronje believes would have sympathy for soldiers rather than civilians. Also, the members of the team went round at the expense of the federal government. The aftermath of this was that the federal government was able to influence the report of the team. Thus, it was hardly a surprise that the team reported in London in 1969 that Biafra's allegation of genocide was groundless (Wangh and Cronje, 1972).

However, Dudley (1972) disagrees with Cronje. He stated that: "while, however, the Soviet Union sought to uses its status as an arms supplier to secure economic advantages from the federal government, Britain used her influence to influence the war policy of the federal government. Among the evidence he cited were that Britain persuaded the federal government to accept an international observer team and to permit the efforts of relief agencies operating in rebel-held areas. Furthermore, Britain demanded an assurance that federal troops would not be allowed to move into Ibo heartland. All these steps went a long way to reduce the loss of lives involved in the war and on this ground he concluded that Britain policy rather than being opportunistic was realistic and humanitarian in character.

According to Akinbi (1991) from whatever angle one looks at the above two arguments, the fact is transparent that Britain could not be disinterested in the Nigerian Civil war. Nonetheless, she had genuine interests in ensuring peaceful resolution of the conflict. The fact that Britain displayed a modicum of efforts by sending some representatives to Nigeria and Ethiopia about negotiation at least could be seen as a minimum interest of Britain to stop the war without bloodshed. On the other hand, Dudley's argument appears apologetic as it does not meticulously elicit the motivational basis of British intervention. The general feeling in the western world was that Nigeria fell under Britain's sphere of influence, therefore Nigeria is a British problem (Akinbi, 1991). In support of this, Melbourne (1970) has argued that rather than lack of interest, America's unwillingness to get involved was due to the feeling that British should be in a better position to answer on anything that occurs in Nigeria. And as shown above, Britain herself enjoyed the privilege that her relations with Nigeria ran through Nigeria's colonial and post – colonial history. In view of that, she had interest in the resolution of the conflict. The main motive that propelled British intervention however was the protection of her economic interest in Nigeria, since she believed that putting a stop to arms supply would only give the Russians influence to her own detriment.

4. Russia and the Nigerian civil war

As indicated earlier, Nigeria external relations with Russia up to 1966 were not very cordial. But the relations began to improve from 1967 and reached its apogee at the end of the war. To support this fact, the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Finance, Abdul Aziz Atta announced on 6th January 1967 that Nigeria was prepared to sign a loan agreement with Russia, the first of its kind since 1960. An agreement to promote cultural cooperation was also signed by the two countries on March 28, 1967. Through this agreement, Nigerians were permitted to visit Russia and students were emboldened to take Soviet scholarships. Again, at the end of 1967. Russia that had earlier been allowed to open an embassy was now allowed to increase the numbers of staff in that embassy and to open other information agencies in the state capitals.

It is worthy of note also that by the time relations between Nigeria and Russia were improving, Russia's relations with other West African states were shrinking to a very low ebb as she lost a friend with the overthrow of Nkrumah in Ghana, Guinea also became unreliable. Her influence was also sagging in East Africa as a result of Sino – Soviet rivalry (Scalapino, 1970). Thus support for Lagos provided her a golden opportunity to consolidate her rising influence.

Due to the refusal of Britain at the outbreak of the war to sell arms, the federal government found refuge in Moscow, where a Nigeria delegation arranged with the Russians the sale of arms (to Nigeria) in August 1967. But Moscow required Lagos to sell her cocoa in exchange for arms. This was to compensate for the lost of cocoa the Russians incurred after the fall of Nkrumah. The Russians demanded for seven thousand tons of cocoa which the Nigerian Cocoa Marketing Company could not procure. When they kept pestering the Nigerians about this, cocoa export to Moscow started jumping up. From 1967 to 1970, cocoa export to Moscow was worth £2.2m in 1965, £3.7m in 1967, £5.4m in 1968 and £6.6m in 1969 (West Africa, 22/12/1970).

Soviet support for Lagos became official in October, 1967 when Premier Kosygin sent a letter to Gowon expressing Soviet's support for Gowon's endeavours to maintain the unity of Nigeria. He reiterated what

he called “Soviet desire to ensure the necessary safeguards of developing countries from imperialist forces” (Cervenka, 1972). Not surprisingly henceforth, Russia increased arms supply to Lagos and intensified her activities among labour leaders. For instance, Russia subsidized the Nigerian Trade Union Congress (NTUC) at the rate of about £30,000 yearly (Cervenka, 1972).

The decision to support the Federal Military Government of Nigeria was based on a realistic assessment of the situation, that is, on the assumption that the O.A.U would uphold Nigeria against Biafra and that Africa would resolutely oppose intervention by the United Nations. (Cervenka, 1972). From the political point of view, Moscow’s Support for Nigeria involved no risk at all, since even if the Biafran secession were successful, the government (Nigeria) would still continue to exist in Lagos.

But what was enigmatic about Soviet policy was that from 1967 to 1969, the Russians did not bother about the ideological orientation of the Gowon regime, which was by no means socialist inclined. The Nigerian rapprochement with Moscow was instigated by the need to procure arms. This view could be backed by some actions taken by the Gowon regime. Firstly, in May 1968, Gowon issued Decree 21 which ordered all disputes to be submitted to arbitration. Strikes were also outlawed by this decree until such arbitration failed. Also, Wahab Goodluck (General – Secretary of the Union Trading Company, African workers union) was arrested when he wanted to go to Khartoum to attend a conference of world Liberation Movements. Again, Dr. Tunji Otegbeye was arrested on his return from Moscow where he attended an International Workers Meeting on January 1969. Throughout the war, General Gowon even stated quite explicitly that “Nigerian development could be attained only by remaining in the system of World Capitalism.” (Solodovnikov, 1969)

Kudryavtsev’s (1968) has argued that Russia intervened in the war because of her intention to protest Nigeria from imperialist machination (or to aid the anti – imperialist struggles against the western powers).

However, this justification of Soviet policy suggests a groundless altruism. The anti – imperialist stance was neutralised by the fact that Soviet support for Lagos was based on increasing soviet trade and cultural agreements with Nigeria rather than the ideological orientation of the Gowon’s government (Akinbi, 1991). With more cocoa exports to Moscow the sum-total of which stood at £6.8m in 1969, more Soviet arms was guaranteed for use in Nigeria. At the same time Soviet military assistance to Nigeria rose to £19 million worth of material that included ammunition, naval equipment, boats, howitzers, ilyushin and MIGs (West Africa, 22/2/1970).

The Soviet policy on the Nigerian conflict was also outlined in an article called “Test of Africa’s maturity” published in *Izvestia* on 11 October, 1968 which states that:

The principle of the right to self determination for Nationalities to the point of secession is not an absolute one, and it is wrong to believe that it should be applied in all conditions. No, it is subordinated to the tasks of class struggle and social liberation.

Thus by implication, the Soviet Union did not see Biafra’s quest for secession in terms of the right for self – determination. What was primary to Russia was how the issue of secession would jeopardise her growing influence. But the fact that was suppressed by the above statements was that Russia’s support for Lagos was a necessary foreign policy option far from being a selfless exercise. (Akinbi, 1991).

The above view can be buttressed by the fact that Russia had long changed from the path of exclusive commitment to World Revolution. What was more primary to Russia was the advancement of the Soviet State’s interest before the question of anti – imperialism. No wonder then that the idea of world revolution has greatly waned after the death of Lenin and the survival of the soviet state had dominated soviet foreign policy from Stalin to Kruschev even up to the contemporary times. It is in support of this argument that Northedge (1968) has declared that soviet policy was governed by the pursuit of national interest. While Russia therefore realised that Nigeria was undoubtedly in the capitalist camp, it conveniently ignored this and armed the federalists. Thus Russian policy in the civil war provides a good case material for understanding the contemporary dominance of pragmatism over ideology when foreign policy interests came first and ideological enthusiasms second rather than being in the reverse. (Akinbi 1991). As pointed out earlier, almost all other intervening countries either stopped or banned arms sale by June 1968, only Russia and Britain persisted. In this way, Russia contributed to the prolongation of the Nigerian war. (Akinbi 1991).

She refused to stop arms supply because by that time her involvement has assumed the status of a “dignified competition” for influence with Britain in Nigeria. Besides, not only did she derive enormous monetary gains from the sale of arms, but more importantly her refusal to stop arms ensured for her influence which was of a key political significance (Akinbi,1991)

5. Conclusion

This paper has given a historical analysis of British and Russian intervention during the Nigerian civil war. Specifically, it has examined the motivational bases of British and Russian involvement in the war, the dynamics and levels of such involvement. Also, the refusal of Britain and Russia to comply with the call for international

arms embargo in 1968 (when all the countries that were supplying arms, either stopped arms supply or indicated their willingness to ban arms sales to both parties in the war) indirectly contributed to the prolongation of the Nigerian civil war. The compliance with the call for an arms embargo on the part of Britain and Russia would have been significant in facilitating a peaceful resolution of the conflict. This is because having lost both men and materials, both sides (in the Nigerian war) by 1968 would see the futility of the entire war Business.

It is also very important to state that Biafra suffered great military reverses in 1968 and 1969 (Akinbi, 1991). Had there been the imposition of an arms embargo, the stock of arms possessed by both parties would have been depleted, and since by then Lagos had already shown her superiority, Biafra would have had no option other than to surrender and state some few conditions for re – integration, at the instance of any of such organisation as the O.A.U or the Commonwealth of Nations. Britain and Russia were not willing to stop arms supply because of their selfish interests. The paper recommends that there should be readiness by the intervening powers in a civil war situation to stop arms supply when it might be effective to aid peaceful resolution of conflict.

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