

Book Reviews

COLD WAR 1945 – 1991

BIAFRA GENOCIDE, NIGERIA: BLOODLETTING AND MASS STARVATION, 1967 – 1970

Al J Venter

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Maps, photographs

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The book begins with an introduction in which the author recounts the colonial history. He maintains that the average Nigerian does not like to be reminded of the fact that, until 1960, Nigeria was ruled from London. The author acknowledges the progress made by Nigeria in infrastructure –schools, clinics, hospitals, administrative centres, rail links - which made him compare Nigeria (as the “African pearl”) with India, which he describes as the “jewel in the British Crown”. The author identifies the bloody counter-coup of July 1966 as a major event which led to the Biafran War following hostilities that led to the death of people of Southern Nigerian origin, the majority of whom were from the Igbo tribe. In the process, the Nigerian Civil War started and marked “one of the first times Western countries were awakened and deeply affronted by the level of the suffering and the scale of the atrocities played out in this corner of the African continent” (p. 11). Perhaps, this justifies Venter’s choice of the title of the book. In his opinion, the efforts made by “friends of Biafra” to send relief materials to the “beleaguered state” did not meet the aims as most of the relief aircraft were used for ‘arms smuggling’. Hence, “most of the people who died in the war either starved to death or were debilitated that their frail bodies were unable to counter infection or disease” (p. 15). This lends credence to the position of RN Ogbudinkpa, in *The economics of the Nigerian Civil War and its prospects for national development* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Press, 1985), where he insists that many people died in the war as a result of starvation and not military activities. However, despite the difficulties associated with wartime environments, Venter, like most journalists who covered the war, was in Biafra until the end of the war.

In Chapter 1, Venter attempts a discussion of the Biafran War which he sees as a spill-over effect of the amalgamation policies of the British colonial government, which transformed into a civil war within seven years after independence. He maintains that at the onset of the war, the Nigerian army had a small professional force which was characterised by poor leadership, poor coordination and poor administration. However, one of the strategies adopted by Yakubu Gowon (the Nigerian Head of State during the War) was the economic blockade in which all Biafran ports were blockaded and “within months, the conflict degenerated into one of the most brutal tit-for-tat wars of attrition Africa has seen since the end of World War II (p. 23). Venter recognises that although the Biafran armed forces were in no way comparable in strength, firepower or manpower to what the central authority in Lagos was able to put into the field (p. 24), the Biafrans were able to put up counter-offensives mostly in the rainy seasons against federal offensives in dry seasons.

Chapter 2 opens with a description of the events of 19 July 1966, when the first fight broke out in Lagos, after the second coup or what is widely referred to as the ‘counter-coup’. As is known with coups, the moment the military took over power, they occupied all the government machinery, including editorial offices of all the country’s newspapers, making it difficult for the events to be reported. The chapter ends with a statement that, because of intimidation from the military, people became cautious even as secret recruitment and training of young Ibo males were going on in the Easter region.

Chapter 3 gives an account of the early stages of the actual war, taking into consideration the tactical mistakes, which led to a series of disasters in the attempt by the federal army to overrun some Biafran towns, which changed hands either for Nigeria or for Biafra at different times in the course of the war. The author maintains that, although the federal government had hoped to starve Biafra into submission, “it was force of numbers that ultimately made them victorious” (p. 40). Venter identifies the presence of mercenaries on both sides of the war although he claims that, due to administrative misunderstandings between the Biafrans and the mercenaries, the latter had little influence on the outcome of the war. However, despite the numerical advantage of the federal army over Biafra, Ojukwu was able to cash in on Gowon’s miscalculation and launched an offensive aimed at taking Lagos, which was absolutely empty (troop-wise) as the federal army was concentrated on the other side of the Benin River. The Biafrans were however unable to grab the victory, which was almost in sight as a result of the activities of Brigadier Banjo who was seen as a ‘traitor’. It was the Midwest Invasion and the attempt by the Biafrans to overrun Lagos, which transformed the war into a total war and the aggressive recruitment by Gowon, thereby increasing the Nigerian army.

In Chapter 4, the author discusses the inordinate will to survive among Biafrans despite been surrounded by the enemy. As the war raged, the cost of essential commodities became high and even the nightly flights into Biafra could not meet the supply needs of several million people cut off from the outside world by the blockade. However, there were dozens of home industries, which supplemented the relief materials brought in by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Joint

Church Aid and others. Venter remarks that, “it was agreed afterwards that Biafra’s ability to survive was due largely to the remarkable competence of the ordinary Biafran” (p. 54).

Chapter 5 discusses the personal attributes of the leaders of the dyads –Gowon and Ojukwu. Gowon was a good man who earned the support of the British against Ojukwu who was not in the good books of the British. In fact, Ojukwu was detested by the British who saw him as “stubborn and opinionated” (p. 71).

In Chapter 6, the author acknowledges the direct or indirect involvement of foreign powers – in favour of Nigeria in the Nigerian-Biafran War. The Biafrans did not waste time in organising a rag-tag air force, which brought in military supplies from South Africa and Portugal even before the war had been declared formally. Biafran aircraft were mainly obtained through hijacking of Nigerian aircraft, which gave the former air superiority over the latter at the beginning of the war. The Biafran Air Force launched several attacks against the Nigerian Navy, which was charged with the responsibility of enforcing the blockade of Biafra. In a bid to weaken the Biafran dominance in the air, Nigeria turned to the Soviet Union, Great Britain, Sudan and other sympathising countries for aircraft. However, when Nigeria gained air superiority, and with the wartime policies of Gowon, Biafra resorted to night flights, which ensured the supply of military hardware and relief materials by the Joint Church Aid, the ICRC and other ‘friends of Biafra’. The flights were undertaken by mercenaries from other countries who were arranged into the 4th Commando Brigade, which was notorious for its offensives in the Onitsha and Owerri sectors of the war. However, the inability to reach an acceptable compromise on the mode of supply of relief materials to ‘dying Biafrans’ by the federal government and Biafra led to the continuous flow of weapons into Biafra by way of night flights until the end of the war. Venter acknowledges “there were approximately sixteen mercenary pilots hired by the Nigerian Air Force comprising the British, South African, French, Australian, Polish and possibly one or two nationalities” (p. 82) who flew the Russian MIG fighters and other aircraft. On the Biafran side, Count von Rosen created what was called an “instant air force” for the near-planeless Biafra (p. 88) comprising mercenaries from different countries that supported Biafra. These mercenaries flew the Biafran Minicons which were among the smallest modern aircraft built at the time, and other aircraft acquired by Biafra in the course of the war.

Chapter 7 discusses the mercenary component of the war in which the author maintains “quite a number of mercenaries headed to Biafra once the war started and included soldiers of fortune from many European countries, South Africa, Rhodesia, Australia, Canada and Britain as well as one or two Chinese Nung fighters” (p. 97). In another statement, the author argues that there were actually more mercenaries active with the Biafran forces than are given credit for because Ojukwu did not want the mercenaries to take the glory of Biafran exploits. Despite the unfriendly weather conditions, unspecified tropical diseases and ‘friendly fire’ accidents, to which the mercenaries were prone, a good number of them “continued to arrive in the embattled enclave even after Biafra suffered its first defeats” (p. 98). However, Ojukwu managed to cultivate ties with several groups of freelance aircraft operators from Europe, the

United States, South Africa, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and with arms merchants from France, Holland, Germany, China and several European governments including France, Portugal and Spain in a bid to provide his miniscule army with just about all it needed, always at a price (p. 103).

Chapter 8 of the book gives an account of what the author terms - 'the Air Bridge'. Venter describes the activities of mercenaries from different parts of the world who were involved in the war on the side of either Biafra or Nigeria. The author points out that, despite the attendant risks to which the mercenary airmen were subjected, such as incessant bombings, explosions, losses in crews and machines, lack of routines, such as routine 'duty' or 'flight times', the mercenaries kept on fighting possibly because they were assured of their payment. In fact, one of the mercenaries – Jim Townsend – once noted that crews were paid in American dollars – cash-in-hand and nothing as mundane as cheques. This worked for many operators, the majority of whom did not have bank accounts. In this chapter, the author relates a 1995 interview by the BBC with one of the aviators, Fred Cuny, an American World War II disaster relief veteran, who disclosed how he got involved in the Nigerian Civil War and how they referred to Biafra as "the world's largest flying zoo" (p. 112), where "a mixed bag of people" (p. 112) operated in favour of either Biafra or the Nigerian government.

In Chapter 9, the role of the British in the Nigerian Civil War is aptly described. The author highlights the politics that characterised Britain's 'clandestine' involvement in the war. In British political circles, the Biafrans were classed as "pariahs", "a group of unprincipled rebels [who] were potentially damaging to British interests in Africa, Nigeria especially" (p. 114). As a result, it was necessary to prevent Ojukwu from achieving his dream of an independent Biafra, which was thought in British circles would have a spiral effect in different African countries that were experiencing or had experienced factional differences. Furthermore, Venter maintains "Whitehall's link with Moscow in a bid to destroy Biafra did not help matters" (p. 114). He continues, "it was obviously Nigeria's immense oil resources that gave the Nigerians, the British and Lagos's newfound ally, Moscow. However, even when the British rejected requests by Nigeria to be militarily involved in the war, the former urged Gowon to seek what was termed a 'peaceful' solution. In the end, however, it was obvious that the supply of military hardware to Lagos by London greatly aided Gowon in the war. Venter avers "a word about the one weapon which arguably caused the most damage to Biafran forces in their defence of Eastern Nigeria was the FV601 Saladin, a six-wheeled armoured car [which] cut through Biafran defences like butter" (p. 120).

AJ Venter's work can be appreciated better if read together with works such as Ogbudinkpa *op. cit.* and JC Korie (ed). *The Nigeria-Biafra War: Genocide and the politics of memory*, (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2012). Venter provides an important contribution to the burgeoning historiography on the Nigeria-Biafra War. It is yet another eyewitness account by a freelance reporter during the war. Venter's book is an interesting read for military and war studies students and scholars.

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