

Petroleum and The Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970

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Early in the summer of 1967, a bloody civil war erupted in the West African nation of Nigeria that rapidly became a focus of worldwide attention and concern. That the withdrawal of the Eastern region from the Nigerian federation and subsequent establishment of the independent Republic of Biafra coincided with the dramatic expansion of the country's petroleum industry was more than mere chance. Though deep-seated rivalries and recurrent political tensions provided the essential motivation, oil played a pivotal role in precipitating the secession. With the outbreak of hostilities, the country's petroleum industry quickly became a vital strategic component of the conflict, and this carried further international consequences. This work seeks to examine the degree to which Nigeria's considerable oil reserves affected the Biafran War. The discussion will proceed from the domestic roots of the conflict to the war itself and the involvement of other nations which eventually proved decisive in assuring a Nigerian victory.

THE BACKGROUND: NIGERIAN PETROLEUM

After more than fifteen years of geological reconnaissance, survey work, and dry test holes, a Shell-British Petroleum (BP) fifty-fifty joint venture company made the initial commercial petroleum discovery in Nigeria in 1956. Though Shell-BP's pioneering success touched off extensive exploration, limited knowledge of the extent of the nation's reserves kept oil in the background of Nigerian politics for a number of years. The picture changed dramatically, however, as the sixties progressed. Led by Shell-BP, which by June 1967 had spent £ 150,000,000 in establishing production,¹ virtually all of the major international oil companies became involved in Nigeria.² The West African nation provided a particularly appealing source of supply. The oil was sweet crude, with a relatively low sulphur content, a high fuel yield and excellent blending properties, and Nigeria's geographical location also ensured secure — and reasonably inexpensive — access to both European and American markets.

With the necessary infrastructure established by the mid-1960s, Nigerian oil production expanded rapidly. The industry's growth rate was phenomenal:

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1. O. Nnoli, "The Nigeria-Biafra Conflict — A Political Analysis," in *Nigeria: Dilemma of Nationhood*, ed.: J. Okpaku (New York: The Third Press, 1972), p. 134.

2. By the late 1960s Standard Oil of New Jersey was the only international major not involved in Nigeria. International "minors" active in the country included Italian and French government-owned concerns and various private American corporations.

worth only £ 1 million in 1958, oil exports reached £ 92 million by 1966 with a £ 43.4 million net contribution to the nation's balance of payments (including an allowance for service payments and net capital inflow for continued development).³ With the value of Nigeria's oil exports increasing at an annual rate of 28 percent between 1958 and 1966,⁴ petroleum development was clearly the major structural change in the country's economy in the decade before the war. While oil had previously generated little political attention, impressive projections soon established it as a factor from both the economic and the political perspective:

Any relative disinterest in petroleum that remained in 1965 came to an abrupt halt when the Federal Prime Minister in a statement to the Chamber of Commerce and the Federal Minister of Finance in his annual budget address spoke optimistically about the balance of payments impact that oil production would have in Nigeria. Political feelings about petroleum changed from apathy to euphoria.⁵

THE POLITICAL ORIGINS OF THE WAR

The emerging recognition of the political benefits of petroleum-based development coincided with an intensification of Nigeria's chronic internal tensions. Though the federal structure adopted by Nigeria at independence constituted an attempt to place the nation on a solid economic and political foundation, it had been continually jeopardized by the natural rivalry that developed among the three major ethnic groups.⁶ The idea of a single, unified Nigerian state was never fully accepted by a substantial portion of the population. Instead, overriding ethnic loyalties evolved which contributed to a sharp sense of separation between regions.⁷ As inter-regional rivalries deepened, each group became increasingly concerned with its own welfare and autonomy. An army revolt in January 1966 placed a predominantly Ibo government in power in Lagos and effectively shattered the delicate political balance that had existed between North and East since independence. Hausa fears of political and

3. Proven Nigerian reserves in 1966 were placed at 400 million tons, probable at 600 million, and possible at 1200 million. V. P. Diejomaoh, "The Economics of the Nigerian Conflict," in *Nigeria: Dilemma of Nationhood*, ed.: J Okpaki (New York: The Third Press, 1972), p. 333.

4. E. W. Nafziger, "The Economic Impact of the Nigerian Civil War," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 10, 2 (1972), p. 233.

5. S. R. Pearson, *Petroleum and the Nigerian Economy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970), p. 137.

6. The Hausa/Fulani people of the North numbered 15 million; the Yoruba of the West, 12 million; and the Ibo in the Eastern region, 10 million.

7. O. Nnoli, "The Nigeria-Biafra Conflict," p. 128. Also, A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, *The Genesis of the Nigerian Civil War and the Theory of Fear*, Research Report #27 (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1975), p. 11.

economic domination by the better-educated Ibo appeared justified when it was announced that regional subdivision would be abolished in an attempt to unify the country: many Northern civil servants would be replaced.

The reaction in the Hausa areas was immediate and emotional. Violent riots erupted that took the lives of many Easterners living in the North⁸ — eventually providing the momentum for a successful Northern counter-coup in July 1966. Major-General Y. Gowon, a career officer from a small Northern tribe who played a minor role in the actual coup, emerged as the compromise choice for head of state. Gowon's leadership was ineffective, however, in the Eastern region where Lt. Col. C. O. Ojukwu, the former military governor, rejected all claims of federal authority, alleging that the coup was little more than an attempt to subject the Ibo to Northern domination. But despite Ojukwu's call for a temporary "drawing apart" of the regions of Nigeria — to allow the wounds of the two coups to heal — Eastern secession was not seriously considered until a new wave of massacres broke out in the North in September 1966 which claimed the lives of some 30,000 Eastern people.⁹ As the refugees streamed down from the North, relations between Ojukwu and Lagos deteriorated rapidly.

PETROLEUM AND SECESSION

Nigeria's new oil wealth deepened the political cleavages that were pushing the Eastern region toward secession. Only two of the country's four regions contained producing oil fields or evidence of petroleum reserves. In 1966, 62.9 percent of Nigerian output came from the Eastern region and the remaining 37.1 percent from the neighboring Mid-West region.¹⁰ Federal policies requiring the redistribution of oil revenues therefore proved distasteful to the Ibos, who constituted a clear majority of the population in the Eastern region. While 100 percent of agricultural income was returned to the region of origin only a fraction of crude oil revenues accrued to it:

As revenues from petroleum grew, absolutely and proportionally to total government revenues, pressures were created that increased already existent ethnic rivalries. Those groups inhabiting areas where oil was being produced tended to oppose the procedures in force that redistributed oil revenues, whereas groups living in areas without petroleum generally pressed for greater redistribution.¹¹

8. Ibo merchants were present throughout the country.

9. S. Cronje, *The World and Nigeria: The Diplomatic History of the Biafran War, 1967-1970* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972), pp. 17-18.

10. Diejomaoh, p. 333.

11. Pearson, *Petroleum and the Nigerian Economy*, p. 142.

The Ibo commitment to secession was given significant impetus in mid-May 1967 when Gowon announced plans for the realignment of Nigeria's four administrative regions into twelve separate states. The former Eastern region was divided into three states (East Central, Rivers, and South-Eastern) and only the landlocked and overcrowded East Central remained chiefly Ibo. (See map, page 81). The new partition effectively denied the Ibo people control of Port Harcourt and the major petroleum fields of the area which were concentrated within the borders of the new Rivers state.¹² The boundaries were not reflective of ethnic groupings: the East Central state was cut off from a substantial number of people — and oil wells — in areas that had previously been classified as Ibo by the federal government¹³ (Port Harcourt's population was almost 80 percent Ibo).

With actual production of April 1967 as a base, more than ¼ of total Nigerian oil production occurred in Ibo-inhabited areas. By far the largest portion of this was in the (newly-formed) predominantly non-Ibo Rivers state, where Ibo oil areas accounted for nearly half of total production.¹⁴

The new arrangement could be expected to seriously diminish Ibo oil revenues. They would be redistributed on the basis of a formula giving 50 percent to the state of origin, retaining 15 percent for the use of the federal government, and dispensing the remaining 35 percent among the states on the basis of population.

For the East to accept such an arrangement would deprive Ojukwu's government of 60% of its agricultural revenues and 95% of its income from petroleum. Cut off from Calabar, Ogoja and Port Harcourt, the over-populated Ibo heartland would thus become landlocked, underfed and relatively impoverished.¹⁵

Equally important, the imposition of the new state structure destroyed any lingering Ibo hopes that the Gowon government would be sensitive to their interests. Though secession probably would have occurred eventually without the realignment, the process was accelerated dramatically. By the end of May, Ojukwu had announced the formal withdrawal of the Eastern region from the Nigerian federation.

The risks involved in the commitment to secession were considerable, but the

12. "The division was designed to court the non-Ibo minorities by grouping them into separate Rivers and South-eastern states. . . . Lagos expected the move to incite a revolt of non-Ibos against Ojukwu, but the minorities remained loyal without apparent coercion." Cronje, *The World and Nigeria*, p. 22.

13. *The Economist*, October 7, 1967, p. 19.

14. Pearson, p. 141.

15. J. J. Stremmlau, "The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War," (Ph.D. dissertation, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, 1974), p. 108.

inclusion of the entire Eastern region in the Biafran state (and hence the Rivers state's 57.1 percent of Nigeria's 1966 output) gave the fledgling nation the potential for economic viability, if not prosperity. Control of the neighboring Mid-West state — which also had a substantial Ibo population — would have permitted the Biafrans to exploit all of Nigeria's producing oil fields. One analyst projected that an independent Biafra encompassing only the East:

. . . would have had a petroleum-dominated economy, with oil being responsible for as much as $\frac{2}{3}$ of government revenues, $\frac{3}{4}$ of foreign exchange earnings, and $\frac{1}{4}$ of GNP. The potential for growth that petroleum might have imparted to some 12 million Biafrans is enormous.¹⁶

Nigeria's oil wealth was not directly responsible for the schism that produced civil war in July 1967; other influential factors included the long-standing distrust and political rivalry between the three principal ethnic groups, the predominance of Ibo traders in the Hausa regions, and the Northern massacres. It is nonetheless evident that when conditions developed in 1966-1967 which the Ibo leaders found unpalatable, they were aware that a successful withdrawal of the Eastern region from the federation would present enviable economic prospects for a new Ibo nation. Petroleum was, therefore, a crucial "threshold ingredient" precipitating secession: without the prospects of oil revenue, the economic rationale for a Biafran nation would have been unconvincing. In March 1969, the Nigerian Commissioner for Economic Development declared:

The root cause of the present civil war is really an economic one. . . . I am convinced that if there were no petroleum discovered in large quantities in parts of the former Eastern region, the secessionists would not have tried to break up Nigeria.¹⁷

BIAFRA AND THE CIVIL WAR

Firmly committed to secession on May 30, 1967, Biafran leaders immediately set out to establish their new nation's economic viability. The key was judged to be the control of Port Harcourt and its oil-rich environs: the surrounding marshy creeks were the principal source of Nigerian high-grade crude, and the nearby channel island of Bonny was Nigeria's only export terminal for petroleum. While Ojukwu maintains that he did not anticipate immediate international diplomatic recognition given the little that Biafra had to offer any prospective ally, he clearly expected it to follow automatically once Biafra had

16. Pearson, p. 151.

17. Nafziger, p. 234.

proved itself to be a viable state — “a situation which would necessarily include the retention of control over the oil fields in the River areas.”¹⁸

The Biafrans had little difficulty assuming control of the industrial area and petroleum export facilities. Though the local majority tribes, fearful of potential Ibo domination, were lukewarm in their support for the new nation, they responded to Ibo overtures. They were well aware that all Easterners had been targets of the Northern massacres and that a number of non-Ibo Eastern leaders had been imprisoned for voicing opposition to the Lagos regime.¹⁹

The federal government reacted promptly to Biafran secession by imposing strict economic sanctions, including a blockade of all exports except crude petroleum. All earnings from oil sales would accrue to Lagos until the semi-annual royalties were due on July 10.²⁰ Confronted by the possibility that the revenues from Biafran oil exports would benefit Gowon, and pressured by the demands of military preparedness and the requirements of a sizable refugee population,²¹ Ojukwu demanded £ 7 million due from Shell-BP in taxes and royalties on production of the Eastern region. Though Biafran lawyers provided the company with a legal framework within which to act, the payment was never made. A combination of the extension of the federal blockade to include oil and the successful landing of federal troops on Bonny in the last week of July decisively undermined Ojukwu's bargaining position. Exports were completely cut off and the Biafrans could no longer claim total control over the region's oil installations and output. In August, the last Shell-BP employees left Biafra.

Biafran fortunes took a pronounced downward turn when a daring thrust into the Mid-West state in late August 1967 stalled and then was turned back as supply lines became overextended and the anticipated local support for the Ibo state failed to materialize. Gowon responded by committing the federal government to full-scale military operations “to crush the Ojukwu rebellion.” The impact of the Nigerian army's plentiful manpower and abundant supplies soon became evident. By January 1968, the federal forces controlled the three key towns of the former Eastern region (Enugu, Nsukka, and Calabar), and by September they had reduced the Biafran state to a 60 mile by 30 mile enclave. It became quite clear that Biafra could not survive economically without oil after the federal forces captured Bonny, for this meant that Biafra could not get any foreign exchange or tax revenues from oil. The Biafran resistance began to

18. Stremmlau, p. 120.

19. Ojukwu, recognizing the need to encourage minority support, toured much of the non-Ibo Eastern region in the months prior to secession, focusing on the similarities between the Ibo and their neighbors. *West Africa*, May 6, 1967, p. 579.

20. Stremmlau, p. 130.

21. The blockade forced the Biafrans to sell exports — primarily palm products — at low prices and to buy imports high.

collapse rapidly after the initial foreign resources (approximately \$20 million remained at secession from the regional government) and foreign currency obtained by selling Nigerian currency abroad had been exhausted, around April of 1968.²² Only relief supplies of military equipment — primarily obtained indirectly from French sources — and a desperate counterattack that secured two critical oil wells enabled the secessionist forces to hold out until 1969.²³

Faced with the deteriorating military situation and reversals on the international diplomatic front, Ojukwu aimed to take the offensive in 1969. Biafran guerrillas infiltrated many of the important strategic areas of the Mid-West and Rivers states. Tiny, propeller-driven “Minicons” — Swedish-built trainer planes fitted with rockets and extra fuel tanks — were used to threaten key positions from the air.

The principal non-military targets were to be the Gulf and Shell-BP oil installations. Gulf had maintained its output throughout the conflict and Shell-BP had resumed production in October 1968. Early in June 1969, Ojukwu declared, “oil . . . is the mainstay of the Nigerian economy and it is from oil that they [government forces] obtain all the necessary credits for the prosecution of this futile war.”²⁴ The Ojukwu government assumed that effective harassment could persuade foreign governments with oil interests in Nigeria to press Lagos for an unconditional cease-fire and a negotiated settlement. Lagos had firmly rejected the idea of an armistice prior to negotiation since it would enable the Biafrans to retain some degree of bargaining power.

The Biafran counterattack had a considerable impact on Nigerian oil production. Ground forces made significant progress both in the Rivers state where output became irregular and in the Mid-West where the completion of Shell-BP’s pipeline to Forcados was delayed. In May a guerrilla force raided an AGIP²⁵ drilling site in Okpai, killing 11 Europeans and capturing 18 more. Though the action diminished foreign sympathy for the Biafran cause, there were reports that a sizable ransom (\$10 to \$20 million range) was paid by the Italian government.²⁶ The incident also gave Ojukwu the opportunity to address the major petroleum producers operating in Nigeria. He pointed out that the oil companies were basically uninterested in West African politics but nevertheless needed tranquil conditions to run a feasible commercial operation. “He then argued that since a guerrilla war would inevitably follow any Nigerian conventional military victory, it was the Biafrans, not the federal

22. Diejomaoh, p. 335.

23. Z. Cervenka, *The Nigerian War, 1967-70* (Frankfurt Am Main: Bernard und Graefe Verlag fuer Wehrwesen, 1971), p. 64.

24. Stremiau, p. 515.

25. Nigeria AGIP Oil Co., Ltd. — jointly owned by Ente Nazionale Idrocarbum (ENI), Italian government (50 percent) and Phillips Petroleum Co. (US private — 50 percent).

26. Stremiau, p. 585.

government, who held the key to tranquility in the area."²⁷ Aware that the federal government could not protect all installations and personnel in exposed areas, Shell-BP withdrew a number of workers and closed down several wells.

The Minicons were even more destructive: with an effective range of more than 200 miles and the ability to fly at altitudes low enough to avoid anti-aircraft and radar detection, the tiny planes could strike Shell-BP's rapidly expanding Mid-West operations and Gulf's offshore installations. In May 1969, they inflicted significant damage upon the Port Harcourt refinery, and by August the planes had succeeded in bombing several of Gulf's storage tanks off the Escravos Estuary. Colonel Robert Scott, Defense Advisor in the British High Commission in Lagos, expressed concern: "The Minicons are 'simple in the extreme,' but their effect on the Nigerian economy, particularly oil production, could be critical to the outcome of the war."²⁸ Nigerian petroleum output dropped 18 percent from already reduced wartime levels to only 470,000 barrels per day in July and August as production was limited or suspended at a number of fields,²⁹ and in October Gowon ordered Shell-BP to close the newly-opened Forcados terminal for fear of air attack.

Though damaging, the impact of the raids was not as dramatic as the Biafrans had expected: the Nigerian economy was never seriously damaged. Ojukwu overestimated the importance of petroleum in Nigeria's foreign exchange picture and underestimated the overall strength of the Nigerian economy. The federal government was forced to impose severe import restrictions and endure considerable deficit financing internally, but earnings from agriculture sustained a favorable foreign exchange position.³⁰ When Ojukwu's tactics also failed to produce international intervention, the morale of the out-manned and undersupplied Biafran army faded rapidly. By January 1970 surrender was the only reasonable alternative.

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AND THE BIAFRAN SECESSION

The Gowon-led government that took power in July 1966 was firmly opposed to the secession of the Eastern region. The withdrawal of an integral part of the federation would not only set a dangerous precedent for further balkanization, but it would also threaten Nigeria's position as a leading power in Black Africa. Though outwardly expressing concern for the status of the region's minority tribes under Ibo hegemony, Lagos was well aware that the successful establishment of a sovereign Biafran state would deprive Nigeria of almost two-thirds of its producing oil wells and virtually all of the processing in-

27. *The Economist*, June 28, 1969, pp. 34, 37.

28. Cronje, p. 150.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

30. Stremlau, p. 580.

stallations. The federal government recognized that the loss of the entire region and its abundant petroleum reserves would seriously affect the economic well-being of the nation:

The prospect of having the loss of Biafra, and especially Biafran oil, cut total revenues by 45%, reduced foreign exchange availability by nearly 40%, and decrease GNP by 30% surely provided a strong economic incentive for the leaders of federal Nigeria to wish to maintain a united Nigeria.³¹

Once the Biafran advance into the Mid-West state had convinced Gowon that full-scale military operations would be necessary against the secessionists, Lagos focused on the capture of the industrial and oil-producing centers of the Eastern region as the critical initial objectives. Ojukwu's claims of Biafran economic viability would be undermined³² and the federal government would be assured a strong position — and control of the nation's oil — in any enforced negotiations (Gowon was fearful that non-African powers might forcibly promote an OAU peace initiative contrary to Nigerian interests).³³ Though the seizure of Bonny and the effective blockade on oil tankers denied the Biafrans any returns on the export of crude, Biafran control of the Port Harcourt-Bonny pipeline through 1968 restricted Nigerian production for the first year and a half of the war to Gulf's offshore wells in the Mid-West. As a result, Nigerian output decreased 86.7 percent from the first half of 1967 to the second,³⁴ resulting in a steady decline in Lagos' foreign exchange reserves.³⁵ The federal government therefore resorted to the exploitation of East-West rivalries to ensure a steady supply of military hardware³⁶ and vigorously encouraged the oil

31. Pearson bases the figures on projections of Nigeria's economy with and without Biafra: "In united Nigeria, oil production in 1973 might be between 1.8 and 2.4 million barrels per day, whereas comparable figures for Nigeria (less Biafra) are 0.9 to 1.1 million. In contrast to the £ 175-240 million figure for payments to government in united Nigeria, oil revenues would amount to £ 85-110 million in Nigeria (less Biafra). In united Nigeria the oil sector foreign exchange contribution would be £ 211-288 million, but in Nigeria (less Biafra) it would be £ 100-128 million. Finally the oil sector contribution to GNP would be £ 94-124 million in Nigeria (less Biafra)." Pearson, pp. 151-52.

32. Stremmlau, p. 254.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 155-56.

34. Nafziger, p. 236.

35. *The Economist*, April 20, 1968, p. 37.

36. The federal government proved reasonably adept at exploiting rivalries between Eastern and Western powers. When both the United States and Great Britain proved hesitant to supply the Nigerians with sophisticated aircraft, the Gowon government bought 20 MIG-15s. Despite Gowon's staunch anti-Communism, the Soviets proved ready to take up any slack in arms supplies from the West. "Nigeria's non-aligned status instantly acquired new credibility and for the duration of the conflict Gowon could use the threat of greater reliance on Moscow to ensure the flow of British small arms and to restrain the Western powers from pressing too vigorously for a compromise settlement on terms Gowon considered contrary to national interest." Stremmlau, p. 144.

companies to accelerate the pace of local development as an important potential source of exchange earnings. Shell-BP, encouraged by the fall of Bonny and the federal advance on Port Harcourt, embarked on a £ 42 million development program in March 1968 that focused on the construction of a 28-inch pipeline to carry Mid-Western petroleum to a deep water offshore loading terminal at Forcados. As new wells were established in the Mid-West and the Bonny terminal became operational again, the substantial investments paid off: in late 1968 Shell-BP oil flowed from Nigeria. By the end of 1969 new production peaks were recorded, with a favorable impact on the federal government's exchange position. The renewed stream of oil revenues that accrued to Lagos therefore helped tip the balance increasingly — and decisively — to the federal side as the war progressed.

GREAT BRITAIN AND THE BIAFRAN WAR

Preliminary government reactions to the Biafran secession were muted and noncommittal in Great Britain. While the Secretary for Commonwealth Affairs declared, "at this stage there can be no recognition of the Eastern region . . .,"³⁷ government officials were actively conferring with secessionist authorities in the Biafran capital of Enugu. This apparent vacillation was principally a response to the simultaneous eruption of the Six-Day War in the Middle East: one week after Ojukwu proclaimed an independent Biafran state Egypt announced the closing of the Suez Canal. Britain's oil supplies were greatly disrupted, and Wilson's Labour government, seriously concerned with balancing overseas payments and trade, also faced the possibility that a devaluation of the pound would be necessary — a step which would further erode its already tenuous domestic support. The strategic importance of Nigeria's low-sulphur crude became increasingly apparent; with the Suez unavailable, Nigeria was almost 7000 miles closer to England than the Persian Gulf producers. Nigerian oil supplies would not drain British foreign exchange reserves as they originated in a Commonwealth country. Despite a basic preference for a united Nigeria, Britain therefore refrained from making any firm commitments. As long as the Biafrans controlled the major oil fields and processing installations, it would not be in Britain's best interests to take sides.

A number of considerations dictated a British policy of support for Lagos. Nigeria's federal system, regarded as Britain's showplace for African independence, was founded upon the conviction that real progress could only be achieved within the framework of large, powerful political units. Many were afraid that the survival of the Biafran state would invite further fragmentation if not the total disintegration of the federal structure. Nigeria was also Britain's

37. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

largest market in Black Africa: in 1965, British investments there were worth \$568 million, and comprised 53 percent of all foreign investment in Nigeria.³⁸ It was not until the federal forces had successfully blockaded Biafran exports and controlled the Bonny terminal that the British made a decisive commitment to Lagos: Biafra had lost effective control of the oil. The abruptness of London's decision was reflected in a follow-up report by the Nigerian High Commission in England:

Britain's shift to unequivocal support of one Nigeria came suddenly when Nsukka fell (on July 16) and then Bonny. During that time Nigeria received full and official assurances from representatives of the Foreign Office. . . .³⁹

When the British government blocked Shell-BP's promised payment to Ojukwu in August 1967, the oil company was forced to the federal side. By the end of 1967 it paid all outstanding taxes and royalties directly to Lagos:⁴⁰

Once the decision to pay Lagos was taken, there was no turning back. From then on the survival of Biafra was a threat to Shell-BP, whatever reassurances Biafra's official statements offered the world: Ojukwu was nursing grievances which, as the company was well aware, were not entirely unjustified.⁴¹

The most obvious manifestation of Britain's support for Lagos was the substantial flow of military materials. Though British supplies accounted for less than two-fifths of Nigeria's arms imports in 1966, by 1968 (the first full year of the war) almost four-fifths of Nigeria's weapons came from Great Britain.⁴² London justified the sales on several grounds: they were declared to be "traditional" supplies;⁴³ it was maintained that by promoting a speedy end to the war they would protect British investments; and they were regarded as a necessary response to Soviet meddling in a Commonwealth country. As the war turned increasingly against the Biafran forces in late 1967, Britain pressed for a cease-fire with formal peace negotiations. London recognized the growing threat to residual financial interests and the potential for considerable loss in a

38. Cervenka, p. 104.

39. Stemplau, p. 136.

40. Despite the eventual commitment to Lagos, it is clear that Shell-BP was initially quite willing to negotiate with the Biafrans. "Unlike Nigeria's traditional trading partners, it had no need for a big market in West Africa — what the company wanted was a cheap and reliable source of crude oil; from this point of view it was immaterial whether the revenues were paid to Lagos or Enugu." Cronje, p. 170.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

42. Cervenka, p. 106.

43. As recently as 1963, Great Britain had supplied 75 percent of Nigeria's arms imports.

protracted war: the flow of oil had been severely diminished and Port Harcourt loomed as the next major federal objective — with \$250 million of British investment tied up in oil installations.⁴⁴

As the war ground on throughout 1968 and 1969 and peace initiatives failed to gain momentum, internal pressures mounted in England — both official and popular — for the suspension of arms sales to Lagos. But Britain's substantial oil and commercial investments and the fear that Lagos might turn increasingly to the Soviet Union for military supplies prompted continued support for the federal government.

A further cause for not endangering relations with Lagos was the announcement on December 4, 1968 that Shell-BP had resumed oil production and that Nigerian production was expected to quickly surpass pre-war levels. The government was resigned to continue its policy of selling military equipment to Nigeria and, as before, tried to persuade its critics that in doing so London retained sufficient leverage to press Lagos on matters related to humanitarian intervention and on the need for a negotiated settlement.⁴⁵

As prospects for a peaceful solution grew increasingly remote, Britain sought a speedy end to the war. The Minicon raids and other infiltration tactics convinced London that Nigerian oil interests could never be secure as long as Biafra survived and that the anticipated Nigerian oil boom would never be realized until the hostilities had been decisively terminated. By the following January British arms exports to Nigeria had contributed significantly to the Biafran surrender.

FRANCE AND THE BIAFRAN WAR

France was the most powerful supporter of the Biafran cause. At the outset of the war deGaulle was willing to offer the Biafrans little more than humanitarian relief and refused to grant formal diplomatic recognition: "Informally French officials conveyed to [Ojukwu] that, 'we would like to help you but your situation looks hopeless.'"⁴⁶ By the summer of 1968, however, the determined resistance of the Biafran forces and the overwhelmingly pro-Biafran sentiments of the French public encouraged the government to endorse — but not officially recognize — the Biafran state. DeGaulle's Information Secretary therefore announced in July "that the Biafrans had 'demonstrated their will to assert themselves as a people' and that the conflict 'must be resolved on the

44. Stremblau, pp. 209-10.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 511.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 410.

basis of the right of peoples to self-determination.'"⁴⁷ The formal endorsement was accompanied by a substantial increase in indirect French military assistance to the rebels, which proved decisive in sustaining Biafran resistance through the summer and fall of 1968.⁴⁸ The underlying motives for France's support of the Biafran cause were complex although humanitarianism remained the sole official explanation. The disintegration of the Nigerian federation appeared consistent with deGaulle's philosophy of nationalism and national self-assertion that had prompted the breakup of the old French West African Federation in 1958. The strong position of a united Nigeria amidst the smaller and weaker Francophone states of West Africa also concerned deGaulle.⁴⁹ It appears, as well, that Britain's commitment to Lagos was perceived as a critical error in a war that would be difficult — if not impossible — to win. Support for Biafra not only gave deGaulle an opportunity to embarrass a traditional rival but it also promised a significant potential economic reward should the secession prove successful.

France was far less dependent upon Nigerian oil than Great Britain,⁵⁰ but the petroleum factor nevertheless clearly figured in French policy calculations — though to what extent is difficult to determine. Allegations of Biafran economic concessions to deGaulle were widely circulated. In July 1967 the London *Times* reported that the French government had authorized the state-owned *Régie Autonome des Petroles* to participate in a deal with Ojukwu whereby SAFRAP would obtain the oil rights to an area capable of producing two million tons of petroleum a year for \$15 million. And in August 1967 the *Morning Post* reported an agreement alleged to have been concluded between Biafra and the French branch of the House of Rothschild: in return for £ 6 million, the Rothschild Bank was to be granted "the exclusive rights of exploitation and extraction of all the deposits of the columbite ore, uranium, coal, tin concentrates, natural oil, and gold for the duration of 10 years."⁵¹ But no detailed evidence of any Franco-Biafran deals has come to light.⁵² Further-

47. *Ibid.*

48. France never officially furnished the Biafrans military supplies. Rather, the arms and equipment were acquired by the rebels through the Ivory Coast and Gabon, two West African nations that maintained close ties with France and had recognized the sovereignty of Biafra. This enabled the French to periodically assure the Nigerians 'in good faith' that they were supplying no military aid to the secessionists.

49. Schwartz, W., "Foreign Powers and the Nigerian War," *Africa Report*, 15, 2, (February, 1970): pp. 12-14.

50. In 1966, France imported only 3 percent of its total oil purchases from Nigeria — as opposed to 10 percent for Great Britain — and the SAFRAP (a subsidiary of ERAP — *Enterprise des Recherches et d'Activités Pétrolières* — and the only French company with oil concessions in Nigeria) oil fields were producing only 37,000 barrels per day in June 1967 (compared to 486,000 for Shell-BP). Stremlau, p. 408; Cervenka, p. 115.

51. Cervenka, p. 114.

52. Cronje concludes that the Rothschild document was clearly a hastily concocted forgery, most

more, in August 1967 Ojukwu was not yet particularly hard-pressed for foreign currency:

To assume that Ojukwu would have signed away Biafra's entire mineral wealth, including the vast oil reserves, for ten years was naive in the extreme, since he still had reason to hope that Shell-BP would pay him at least part of the revenues Biafra had claimed.⁵³

Paradoxically, it was only after Biafra had lost control of the major Eastern oil fields that the French made their formal statement of support. The belated commitment was probably a means of hedging French bets: if Biafra managed to survive and gain international recognition, it would most likely encompass the entire Eastern region — and thus the rich oil reserves.⁵⁴ But despite its links with Biafra, the French government did not want to jeopardize its relations with Lagos. DeGaulle was well aware that French investors had some \$100 million tied up in federal Nigeria⁵⁵ and that the oil-rich countries of North Africa were among the strongest supporters of Gowon's government.⁵⁶ France, therefore, never extended full recognition to Biafra and continued to engage in a lively trade with federal Nigeria. From 1967-1969, Nigeria recorded a \$115 million trade surplus with France, much of which went to the purchase of military equipment from England and the Soviet Union.⁵⁷ Ultimately, French support for Biafra never had the political, military or economic impact necessary to ensure the survival of the state.

OTHER NATIONS AND THE BIAFRAN WAR

Non-African nations other than France and England were less intimately involved with the conflict and based their actions principally on humanitarian or political factors rather than on petroleum-related issues. The United States, remembering the embarrassment of the Congo, was wary of entanglement in another African civil war and declared from the outset its firm intention to remain aloof from the affair. Four days after secession, Washington announced that it would neither sell nor otherwise supply arms to either side, "in order not to deepen the conflict."⁵⁸ As Nigeria was a Commonwealth country the

likely produced in response to fears that Shell-BP was about to recognize Biafra's *de facto* control over the Eastern region's oil, p. 217.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 217.

54. Schwartz, p. 14; and Diejomaoh is more direct in his conclusion: "It is clear that French support for Biafra must have been in exchange for something substantial. All that Biafra had to offer was the promise of oil." p. 336.

55. Stremmlau, p. 408.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 413.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 421.

58. Obunbadejo, O., "Nigeria and the Great Powers: The Impact of the Civil War on Nigerian Foreign Policy," *African Affairs*, 75 (January, 1976): pp. 14-32.

hostilities fell within the British "sphere of influence" and were therefore essentially a British problem; Washington had judged Soviet involvement as an apparent rather than real threat.⁵⁹ Though the prolongation of the war and persuasive secessionist propaganda encouraged a strong pro-Biafran lobby in America, political support remained with the federal government and the weight of American investment was firmly on Lagos' side. "American investments (in Nigeria) more than doubled in the first two years of the conflict."⁶⁰ Petroleum provided an important focus: Gulf, the second largest producer in Nigeria, expanded output rapidly during the war (by April 1969 it had increased its prewar production of 57,000 barrels per day to 200,000 and total investments reached \$168 million),⁶¹ and a number of other American-based oil companies stepped up their activities. As the war stretched on, the American position became more and more pro-federal. The Americans were patient with Ojukwu's apparent insensitivity to the suffering of his people, and "whatever sympathy for Biafra there was in the State Department probably vanished when Biafra's Minicon air force attacked the new Gulf oil terminal in a surprise raid."⁶²

Oil did not operate as an important factor in the involvement of other nations in the civil war. The Soviet Union was drawn in by early British equivocation and American refusals to supply arms: support for Lagos was a no-risk proposition that presented the potential for closer ties with a Black African power. Portugal provided non-military aid — at a price — to Biafra, but the rest of the middle-sized European nations followed the Anglo-American line: "while national self-interest might provide the required motivation, Biafra was too remote to propel even those governments reputed to possess an 'international conscience' into a collision course with Washington or London."⁶³ And while China and a number of African and Caribbean states supported the rebels in principle, the large-scale economic or military commitment needed to assure Biafran survival never appeared.

CONCLUSION

Though Nigeria's vast potential petroleum wealth could not be officially recognized as the influential factor prompting Biafran secession and shaping the eventual outcome of the civil war, its pervasive role as a dominant compo-

59. "Even when the Soviet Union stepped into the conflict by effectively arming the federalists, the U.S. did not find it necessary to reverse its declared policy partly because it felt that Britain's commitment to the federal cause would check, if not neutralize, Moscow's efforts, and partly because it had worked out the Nigerian equation and come to the conclusion that as General Gowon was hardly a Bolshevik, there were obvious limitations to the extent to which he would flirt with the Russians." Ogunbadejo, p. 18.

60. Cronje, p. 250.

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.*

63. *Ibid.*, p. 323.

nent in important political, economic, and strategic calculations cannot be underestimated. It appears unlikely that the Ibo leaders would have seriously considered secession a reasonable alternative without the Eastern region's substantial mineral resources on which to base the economic viability of the new nation. There are persuasive indications that international recognition and increased support would have been forthcoming if Biafra had succeeded in retaining control of the key oil installations and in maintaining the flow of petroleum exports.⁶⁴ Under such circumstances Ojukwu might well have been able to pressure Lagos into a negotiated settlement in which Biafra would remain a sovereign state. Biafra was broken without the region's oil and the revenues it could produce. There was no foreign exchange with which to purchase the arms and equipment necessary to sustain resistance and the Ibo leadership was left with precious little to offer any potential allies. The resilience of Nigeria's economy when deprived of oil revenues early in the war enabled Lagos to retain critical international support and eventually to bring the full weight of superior resources decisively to bear on the outmanned Biafrans.

64. Stremmlau, p. 254.



NIGERIA

Source: S. R. Pearson, *Petroleum and the Nigerian Economy*.