

19

Nigeria: July 6, 1967

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In the morning of July 6, 2004, I conducted a brief survey of the knowledge and consciousness of what happened in Nigeria exactly 37 years earlier. To cut a long story short, the result was uniformly poor and very depressing. One particular interview is worth recalling. The respondent cannot be described as a young man. He is more than averagely educated academically, professionally and in the streets. When I mentioned July 6, 1967, he asked whether that was the day I was born. I said no, that I was born 21 years earlier. I accelerated the interview by hinting that the date has something to do with war. "Oh, yes," he shouted with self-satisfaction, "my father used to tell me that he fought in India and Burma". I told him that his father must have fought with the British army in World War II, which ended 22 years before 1967. When I saw that he had given up, I supplied him the information: Thursday, July 6, 1967 was the day the Nigerian Civil War began on two fronts: Ogoja and Obudu in the present Cross River State.

I was somehow embarrassed by the result of my survey because I had recently written an article on aspects of World War II and expected it to be understood and well received by my readers, especially the younger generation. I had long noted some similarities between the battles for Warsaw (Poland) and Stalingrad (Soviet Union), during World War II and the battles for Nsukka and Onitsha during the Nigerian Civil War. I had, in particular, compared the sufferings and heroism of the

inhabitants and defenders of Asaba/Onitsha with the experiences of the inhabitants and defenders of Warsaw. I had argued that the Nigerian Civil War has both general and particular lessons not only for contemporary Nigeria and Nigerians, but also for the world. Beyond all this, the war was, by world standards, one of the great wars of our time, and deserves to be known, studied, and remembered - especially by Nigerians - even for its own sake.

Many accounts of the Civil War have been published by several categories of people: partisans and combatants, ideological intellectuals, academics, scholars, professionals, etc. I have read many of them. I am again consulting several of them, as well as personal notes. There is a particular account written by a professional journalist and former soldier and diplomat. The writer covered the war and took time to study its background, context and aftermath before producing an exhaustive and serious story. The book came out within two years of the conclusion of the war. "The Nigerian civil war," wrote the author, "was not just another African skirmish". That was the central thesis. He then went on to elaborate, providing his second thesis: "It bears closer comparison with the American and Spanish Civil Wars. Like the American conflict, it was a war about nationhood and the struggle between the great powers; and like both wars, it was a desperate affair, fought to a bitter end by determined people". I would recommend this statement, as hypothesis, to young, but serious, researchers.

My chosen author continued: "Above all, the Nigerian Civil War was a modern phenomenon, it was one of the world's first "television wars" and as such aroused the conscience - and passions -- of the world in an extraordinary and unprecedented way. It was also the first war in which African armies led by African officers fought each other with modern weapons. The war moved rapidly into the unenviable world league of the Vietnamese and Arab-Israeli conflicts sharing the same intractability and bitterness". I would, again, commend this statement to young researchers.

Several writers perceived the Nigerian army majors' coup of January 15, 1966, as the first shot in the Nigerian Civil War. This perspective is as useful as it is dangerous: useful to the extent that it allows the researcher to see the causal links in the sequence of events beginning from the majors' coup and ending in the event

of Thursday, July 6, 1967; and dangerous because one may succumb to the temptation to force unrelated events, or events which can be explained differently, into a false theoretical fit. A good approach is to adopt the perspective while being conscious of the danger. With this settled, hear what Major Chukwurna Nzeogwu, one of the leaders of the coup said over the radio at noon on Saturday, January 15, 1966: "Our enemies are the political profiteers, swindlers, the men in the high and low places who seek bribes and demand ten percent, those that seek to keep the country divided permanently so that they can remain in office as ministers and V. 1. P's of waste, the tribalists, the nepotists. We promise that you will no more be ashamed to say you are Nigerians".

The majors' coup was put down by loyalist forces under the General Officer Commanding the Nigerian Army, Major-General T. U Aguiyi - Ironsi. The latter either collected power from a badly shaken and decimated federal government, or coerced government ministers into handing over power to him. A researcher may go into this. In any case General Ironsi instituted military rule, assuming the title: Head of the Federal Military Government and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. You may observe that the second title is a war title.

For the three months preceding the January 15, 1966 coup the Western Region was in a state of war - a war between the Western regional government on the one hand and its supporters and the forces of opposition inspired by the Action Group (AG) and its ally, the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) on the other. In this conflict, the Western government forces were supported by the Federal Government and the security forces. January 15 put an end to this bloody war whose other dimension was the appearance of ethnicity as the dominant feature of politics in a large segment of the population. When the crises and massacres came, the Igbo fraction of the ruling class, and the Igbo ethnic group as a whole, were the main victims. Igbo elites dominated the groups that took the critical decisions and actions – at various levels and at various times - in response to the massacres. And when it came to self-determination and secession, they essentially look the decision.

Here then is as the main internal contradiction in the secessionist option (Biafra): the Igbo fraction of the ruling elite, supported by large sections of the

masses from the same ethnic nationality, substituted for the people of the minority nationalities on the crucial question of self-determination. It was a contradiction because since the enactment of the regionalist constitution whereby decisive powers were vested in the regions, these same Eastern minorities had been fighting for self-determination. To ask them to support the secessionist option (Biafra) almost unconditionally was to ask them to transfer their minority status from one known entity to an unknown one. In spite of minorities' share of the tribulations of the preceding 18 months (January 1966 – July 1967), this transfer did not happen and I doubt if it could have happened.