

## 'The lessons of history' revisited

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On Thursday, April 21, 1988, this column came out with the piece: *Leftists and the lessons of history*. The sequel to this, *Leftists and the national question*, appeared the following Thursday, April 28, 1988. The two-part essay appeared as General Ibrahim Babangida's military regime was setting up a Constituent Assembly to produce a new Constitution. The "electoral" politicians were, naturally, in a state of animation. My essay was a reaction to what I was beginning to see as traces of ethnicity, regionalism and religious bigotry in the periphery of the *Nigerian Left* as we responded to this animation. The problem was that some of our compatriots either did not see what I was seeing, or were deliberately denying it

I would like to preface this review with an explanatory note. Since 1988 when I wrote the essay - a period of 24 years - the world has undergone profound changes, changes whose enormity would have been unimaginable at that time. Readers who were adults at that time will have to do some mental exercise to recapture the historical context - political and social, national and international - in which the essay was conceived and written. Those who were children then, or were not born, will have

to mentally construct the context with what they have heard or read. What appears below is just a summary of my key propositions in the 1988 essay.

I began the piece, *Leftists and the lessons of history* by reminding readers of the *Second International Workingmen's Association*, or the *Second International*. The organization was the federation of revolutionary socialist and communist parties in Europe and America. Before 1914, that is, before the outbreak of World War 1, the mission of that *International* was the overthrow of the bourgeois order worldwide. The group was credible and "European and American rulers, understandably stood in awe of this organization, its national wings and its leaders". Anticipating World War I the *International* passed resolutions "demanding joint revolutionary action by workers of all nations in Europe to prevent what would essentially be an intra-bourgeois war, or in the alternative, to turn the war into a civil war against the bourgeois rulers in each belligerent country".

This did not happen. Rather, what happened was that the national leaderships of the International, except a few (which included Russia), "merely lined up behind the various European bourgeois war-mongers, each side clutching its national flag. Workers who had been taught to shout "Workers of all countries, unite" were now mobilized by their 'leaders' for the battlefield: to slaughter one another across national boundaries which their ideology said should not divide them. The *Second International*, as expected, did not recover from this tragedy". With this reminder I drew an analogy between what happened in Europe during World War I and in Nigeria during the (1966-1970) crisis and civil war. My first thesis was that in the crisis and civil war in Nigeria the "bourgeoisie, their feudal allies and their agents within the armed forces succeeded in splitting the nation essentially into ethnic coalitions and proceeded, in their struggle for hegemony, to bring death and untold suffering on the masses". My second thesis was that in that tragedy Nigerian leftists abandoned their ideology and its imperatives and embraced bourgeois ideology of ethnicity and religious bigotry - "but all the time chanting radical slogans".

I accused Nigerian Leftists of the time of failing to mobilise a *third force*, but rather split up and lined up behind Gowon and Ojukwu "jumping from one place to another, within the country and abroad, mobilizing support for the bourgeois factions". 1

charged that some Nigerian leftists were used to liquidate several of their compatriots who "correctly saw a genuine solution to the crisis necessarily embracing the overthrow of both Gowon and Ojukwu". It was my view that the bourgeois ideology, especially its ethnic and religious dimensions, is still very powerful in Nigeria. It is dominant and all-pervading. It is, in short, hegemonic. We may not be aware of this in peace time, just as the leadership of the Second international was not aware of the reality and level of bourgeois nationalism within its own consciousness until the outbreak of the World War 1 and just as Nigerian Leftists thought they had transcended ethnic consciousness until their illusion was shattered by the outbreak of the (1966-70) crisis".

In the second article, *Leftists and the national question*, I said: "Nigerian leftists, in the main, appear to have abandoned the debate on the national question and problems of religious conflicts to the bourgeoisie. The thinking is that patriotic and socialist politics transcends ethnicity and religious bigotry and hence that patriots and socialists have no business discussing ethnicity and religious intolerance as they affect politics. The first part of this thesis is correct although only as a general, or abstract, principle. But the second part is decidedly false." My view was that "patriots and socialists must intervene in the debate on ethnicity and religious bigotry and encourage the popular masses to do so because ethnicity and religious differences are not only real; they do divide, and are used by the bourgeoisie to divide, the popular masses." I also argued that "a Nigerian patriot or socialist must be able to tell bourgeois chauvinists from his or her community that their call for ethnic solidarity is for their own selfish interest, and not for the interest of the masses in that locality - whose names they are invoking in vain. A Nigerian patriot or socialist who cannot openly do this at this time is a fake. Indeed, a politically active and ambitious Nigerian who cannot do this is in danger of being mobilised to repeat the political horrors of the past".

This two-part essay attracted several responses - some published, others privately circulated. Of these responses, I shall pick out two for their immediate relevance to the current situation in the country. The responses came from two frontline patriots and leftists both of whom are now dead. We may call them Comrade

A and Comrade B respectively. *It is significant that none of the two personages, came from the area called Biafra between May 30, 1967 and January 12, 1970.* Although Comrade A conceded that the leaders of the Second International "lined up" behind the European war-mongers during World War I (1914-1918), he insisted that what happened in Nigeria during the crisis and civil war (1966 - 1970) could be compared with World War II (1939-1945), and not with World War I.

Comrade A described World War I as a "war among European imperialist nations to divide and re-divide the world for their domination and exploitation". European revolutionaries were therefore wrong to support the imperialist rulers in it. On the contrary, according to Comrade A, in World War II, the Soviet Union and revolutionaries elsewhere went into alliance with "national imperialists of the West" to "submerge" fascism. Such alliance, he insisted, was "necessary and correct". Turning to the Nigerian crisis and civil war, he said: "It was clear to the majority of Nigerian Marxists at the time that the secessionists backed up by the imperialist powers and (apartheid) South Africa were the enemies of Nigerian progress. That was why the Nigerian Marxists gave their full support to the federalists to prevent the balkanisation of the country by the imperialists and their secessionist agents .

Comrade B, in his intervention, was very angry with both Comrade A and myself. He thought we were "trivializing" a monumental tragedy. He was however, more angry with Comrade A as an older Leftist. He agreed with me that Nigerian leftists "lined up" behind bourgeois factions, but disagreed that the construction of a "third force" was possible. What "true Marxists or progressives could have done", he said, "was to prevent the crisis from leading into a shooting war. This was possible in 1967. The opportunity abounded. They missed it because ethnic and leftist opportunism blurred their reasoning". He said that the escape of Marxists of Eastern Nigerian origin was "motivated by the natural instinct of survival - because those pursuing them were never guided by any ideological considerations". He mentioned the case of Gogo Chu Nzeribe, a frontline trade unionist and leftist who was committed to the Federal side, and did not escape. He was, nonetheless, killed.

1 preserved the two responses because I benefitted from both of them. / *am recalling this debate and re-presenting it because I strongly believe that a second edition of the (1966-1970) tragedy- which is threatening-must be prevented.*