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Biafra And the Discourse on The Igbo Genocide

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Abstract

There has been a reluctance or indifference to a systematic study and documentation of the Igbo Genocide in Nigeria. In the main, the reason has been due to official and non-official attempts to subvert a focus on an event in which more than one million Igbo were slaughtered through a process that was fomented, orchestrated, executed, and supervised by the Nigerian state.

Keywords

Biafra, Igbo Genocide, Chinua Achebe, Nigeria-Biafra War

We provided medicine to hundreds of women and their children daily, knowing that many would not be returning to that village's clinic a week later because they would be even more severely ill or dead or because the front lines had changed and nearby fighting prevented them from safe passage to our site. The men were either in the military, in hiding, or dead. The women, left alone with their children and

elderly men, had to be constantly on the run, unable to grow crops and incapable of providing stability for their families.—*John Sherman, War Stories*

Biafra should stand in the world's conscience as a monument to the possibility of successfully resisting "final solutions."—*M.J.C. Echeruo*

Introduction

The Rwandan and Darfur genocides in Africa, as was the case of the Armenian, Kosovan genocides, all "reflect the historical conflagration of human bestiality and resonate the Nazi trivialization of Jewish personhood – in shape, though not in magnitude" (Ezeonu, Personal communication, 2011). However, unlike the Jews and the Armenians, Rwandan and Darfur Genocides, the Igbo Genocide has been neglected by scholars, activists, and community leaders. The reluctance or indifference to a systematic study and documentation of the Igbo experience in Nigeria stems from the attempt to subvert a focus on the Igbo Genocide, in which more than one million Igbo were slaughtered in a genocide fomented, orchestrated, executed, and supervised by the Nigerian state.

Yet, some of the literature on the Biafra war has been very cautious to apply the term genocide, in spite of the mass killing of Igbo civilian population. Mainly based on a legalistic application of the term "genocide", Paul Bartrop (2012) has addressed the appropriateness of employing the terms "genocide" to describe what happened in Biafra. While accepting the calamitous conditions faced by the Igbo during the pogrom and the war, he suggests a measured application of genocide to describe what happened to Biafrans. Surely, a determination of whether or not the fate of Biafra was or was not genocide depends on the question of *intent* on the part of Nigeria to destroy the Igbo as a nationality. However, as Bartrop (2012: 13) explains, "those who have argued that there was no such intent rely on the premise that there was no wholesale slaughter of Igbo in the aftermath of the war." However, he questions how one should characterize the massive death toll among the civilian population if there was no genocidal intent on the part of federal Nigeria. Chima Korieh (2012: 13) has argued:

While it is plausible to argue that there was no complete annihilation of the Igbo when they lost the war, the actions and behavior of the federal Nigeria during the war did not exclude such genocidal intent. Speeches by Northern leaders called for ethnic cleansing of the north of Igbo people. Pogroms and mass killings of the Igbo population from a decade earlier leave no doubt that the war offered opportunity to implement a "final solution" of what was perceived as an Igbo problem.

Indeed, according to the Investigator Report, "hostilities between federal Nigeria and the Republic of Biafra that began in July 1967 served as a continuation of an intention to exterminate the Igbo people. The War was indeed a Nigerian variant of what the Nazi called the "final solution" of the Jewish problem" (The International Committee on the Investigation of Crimes of Genocide, 1968) (hereafter, Investigators Report).

Since the late 1950s, thousands of Igbo people have been massacred in different parts of Nigeria, especially in the Northern Region. The genocide against the Igbo, conceived, planned, and executed with the support of public officials in many cases, reached its climax in 1966. Even since the end of the Biafra-Nigeria war, the Igbo people remain objects of targeted slaughter in different parts of the country. Even the Igbo Genocide has not received any attention by genocide scholars. A great deal of literature exists on genocide studies. In *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (2007), Ben Kiernan reviews the history of genocides and the attempts to exterminate groups of people based on their ethnicity or other characteristic. A massive volume of 723 pages, but there was no mention of the Igbo Genocide, the first attempt to systematically murder and exterminate a people because in post-colonial Africa because of who they are, i.e. their identity as a distinct people.

Chinua Achebe's (2012) recent memoir, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* brought to public discourse what Uzoigwe (2012: 22) has described as a forgotten genocide. So the reaction to Achebe's *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* reveals the deep "ethnic" divide that still pervades public discourse about the Nigeria-Biafra war in Nigeria and the attempt by individuals from the other distinct nationalities that constitute Nigeria to politicize the history and memory of the Igbo Genocide. Achebe (2012: 82-83) describes in his memoir:

...a detailed plan for mass killing was implemented by the government—the army, the police—the very people who were there to protect life and property. Not a single person has been punished for these crimes. It was not just human nature, a case of somebody hating his neighbor and chopping off his head. It was something far more devastating, because it was a premeditated plan that involved careful coordination, awaiting only the right spark.

As Adam Nossiter (2012: BR.1) of the *New York Times* notes in his review of Achebe's book, *There was a Country* gives us "glimpses of this immense human tragedy in Achebe's characteristically plain-spoken narrative: the millions of citizens escaping the war zone, targets of the federal Nigerian planes even as they fled; the men and women driven mad by the grinding, endless war." The Igbo, Achebe disclosed in the book, were chased as rats, macheted, mutilated and killed in a calculated attempt to vanquish them. In *The Nigeria-Biafra War: Genocide and the Politics of Memory*, Chima J. Korieh, a historian, addressed the issue of Igbo Genocide before and during the war more directly (Korieh, 2012). The book reveals evidence of a meticulously planned and implemented political project to exterminate the Igbo ethnic group in northern Nigeria before the war and in other parts of Nigeria during the war. The Igbo Genocide, this paper argues, was masked by the attempts by both federal Nigeria and major Western nations to downplay the evidence of the genocide perpetrated against the Igbo and other Easterners, as well as its deeper roots in the pre-Biafra war period. Yet, the Igbo experience reveals the indomitable power of the human spirit to endure in the face of unparalleled hatred and genocidal attacks.

The beginning

As Karl Maier (2000: 7) succinctly puts it, Nigeria, like most contemporary African states, is "the bastard child of imperialism, [with] its rich mosaic of peoples locked into a nation-state they had had no part in designing." The amalgamation of northern and southern parts of the territory in 1914 and regionalism created what Akinyele (2010: 293) describes as a greater "awareness of the principle of self-determination," especially among the three largest but divergent nationalities (Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa-Fulani).

The political division of Nigeria during the colonial period into three regions—North, West and East—exacerbated the already well-developed economic, political, and social competition among Nigeria's different ethnic groups (American Jewish Congress, 1968).

The British colonial system of administration known as the Indirect Rule System was applied by its originator, Frederick Lugard, to ensure that the British ruled Africans through their traditional rulers and political institutions (Lugard, 1923). Nigeria's three major distinct peoples were suspicious of each other from the formation of the union. Indeed, the British had designed Nigeria to favor the predominantly Muslim north and to a lesser extent the Yoruba in the west, and to a much lesser extent the Igbo and the other Easterners in that order. For the country was "divided in such a way that the north had slightly more population than the other two regions combined. On this basis the Northern Region was allocated a majority of the seats in the Federal Legislature established by the colonial authorities" (American Jewish Congress, 1968). These suspicions translated into political problems soon after independence in October 1960. As Korieh (2012: 4) notes:

The pluralistic structure of post-colonial Nigeria and the inherent suspicion existing among the ethnic groups (sic) led to perpetual disagreement and enhanced ethnic tensions. The new political elite relied on ethno-centric systems of loyalty which made integration regional and as a result quite difficult at the centre. It also posed challenges at regional levels as shown during the Western Region's political crisis when contending political interests sought to establish or expand their support base. These competing interests clearly affected the stability of the nation and their constituent parts.

The success of British imperial design in Nigeria lasted so long as Britain "welded different groups together with an iron hand but soon began to collapse after Britain disengaged from Nigeria in 1960" (Korieh, 2012: 4). The failure of British imperial policy was the genesis of Nigeria's post-colonial problems.

The perennial problems of the Nigerian state are well documented in Chinua Achebe's *The Trouble with Nigeria* (Achebe, 1983); Karl Maier's, *This House Has Fallen* (Maier, 2000); and Wole Soyinka's, *The Open Sore of a Continent* (Soyinka, 1996), among other accounts. Yet, the Nigerian republic represented the hopes and aspirations of members of the Igbo, who perhaps invested more than any other group in the attempt to build the new nation. However, no other episode in Nigeria's post-colonial history had a more disintegrating and destabilizing effect on the 'nation' than the Nigeria-Biafra War. The war, I would argue, provided the opportunity for the nationalities that hate and resent the Igbo to carry out a systematic slaughter of the Igbo on a scale which was far more lethal than previous episodes and pogroms against the Igbo.

The Igbo people had been the victims of targeted killings in the north of Nigeria before the war. Were these attacks genocidal in intent and in their scale? First, let us review the accepted definition of genocide. According to the United Nations Organization's *Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, genocide means any act committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group. Such acts will include: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and (e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (United Nations Organization's (UN), *Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* 1948: 7). The treatments of the Igbo in the north, some of which began under the watch of British colonial officials, meet these criteria.

Several outbreaks of Nigerian hostility toward Biafrans occurred from time to time even during the British colonial era. In 1945, northern Nigerians massacred Igbo resident in Jos. The British Administration did not "take the matter seriously and did not even conduct an inquiry into the gruesome episode" (Nigeria-Biafra Conflict, 2011). A similar episode when northerners gruesomely massacred the Igbo took place in the city of Kano in 1953. This was also under the watch of the British and seven years before Nigeria became independent of British rule.

Was it the intent of the government of Nigeria to commit genocide against the Igbo? An international military observer group, on the other hand, has reported that there was no evidence of an intent on the part of Nigerian troops to wipe out the Ibo (sic) people, (New York Post, Sep. 28). Perhaps that intent was not officially proclaimed. But the state had many willing executioners with clear intent on exterminating the Igbo. The state did not do much to stop it nor prosecute those who did the job. As the American Jewish Congress noted:

Proponents of Biafra for the most part acknowledge that it is not the official policy of the Nigerian government to commit genocide. They do assert, however, that some local Nigerian commanders intend and, indeed, have tried to wipe out as many Ibos as possible, and that some Northern Muslim commanders regard the war as a holy Jihad (sic) against the Ibo people (1968: 22).

Andrew Brevin and David MacDonald, two members of the Canadian Parliament, on their return from Biafra, “reported that genocide is in fact taking place.” One of them stated that “anybody who says there is no evidence of genocide is either in the pay of Britain or being a deliberate fool” (American Committee on Africa, Relief Memo #4, Nov. 1, 1968). And Lloyd Garrison wrote that: “the record shows that in Federal advances... thousands of Ibo male civilians were sought out and slaughtered...” (*NY Times Magazine*, 31 Oct 1968, p. 92).

A careful analysis of the experiences of those who witnessed the war, speeches by northern and federal officials, and other sources, reveals that the intent of these actors against the Igbo was genocidal. The International Committee on the Investigation of Crimes of Genocide notes that there was “evidence that leading functionaries of the Northern Nigerian Native Administration (NA)—an agency which the British themselves described as ‘an integral part of the machinery of government’ —were deeply involved in the planning of the massacres of 1953” (Investigators Report, 8–9). Two days before the massacres began on Thursday 14th May 1953, Mallam Inua Wade, then secretary of the Northern Peoples’ Congress and later Federal Minister of Works, convened a meeting of the NA sectional heads at the Works Depot in Kano during which he made “a very ill-advised and provocative speech” (Investigators Report, 9). Inua Wada was reported to have said that the north had:

...organized about 1,000 men ready in the city to meet force with force... the Northern Peoples’ Congress has declared a strike in all Native Administration Offices for Saturday, 16.5.53 ... we shall post sufficient number of men at the entrance of every office and business place ... we are prepared to face anything that comes out of this business (Investigators Report, 9).

An Eastern Region’s document detailing the systematic massacre of the Igbo in the north entitled: *Nigerian Pogrom: the Organized Massacre of Eastern Nigerians* provided a “chilling account of the organized massacre of the Igbo people in Northern Nigeria dating to the 1950s.” (Eastern Nigeria, 1966). There was increasing intensity of Igbo killings after 1966. The International Committee on the Investigation of Crimes of Genocide found evidence of genocide and intent to commit genocide by northern Nigerians against the Igbo, and accused federal Nigeria of genocide in its report (Korieh, 2012). The wanton attacks and massacre of the Igbo reached an unprecedented scale in 1966 when a large number of Igbo men, women and children were brutally massacred in Northern cities. Following this incident, the Government of the then Eastern Nigeria appointed a judicial Tribunal of Inquiry to investigate the massacres. The Tribunal, (also known as Atrocities Tribunal), headed by Mr GCN Onyiuke “found as a fact that the northern Nigeria authorities with their collaborators had devised a seven point program aimed at a complete extermination of the then Eastern Nigerians (now Biafrans) in Northern Nigeria and other parts of the Federation” (ibid, 5-6). The program as outlined included the following:

1. To kill off the Major-General and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, T. J. T. Aguiyi-Ironsi;
 - To kill off all the Yamiri Army Officers;
 - And subsequently purge the Army of Yamiri by killing the rest in the ranks.
2. With the aid of Westerners in the Army, to take complete control of the Armed Forces, the Police and the Navy and to purge off the Yamiri in these Forces too.
3. To kill off and dispossess all the Yamiri domiciled in the Northern Region.
4. To use control of the Armed Forces to take control of the country’s Government.
5. To revenge Sardauna’s and Abubakar’s death by killing Dr. Zik, Dr. Okpara, Ojukwu and Major Nzeogwu.
6. To destroy Port Harcourt, Enugu and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
7. To kill all
 - Yamiri in top civil service posts;
 - All wealthy Yamiri – male and female;
 - All Yamiri educated giants;
 - All grown up males and females of Yamiri;
 - To leave out only sucklings in Yamiri land.¹

Most if the objectives outlined above except (5 and 7) had been achieved by the time the war broke out in 1967. The war provided the opportunity to continue the deliberate execution of the outlined agenda.

The animosity harbored by other Nigerian groups against the Igbo intensified after independence in 1960. Getting rid of the Igbo in the North became a priority. The first opportunity for ethnic cleansing was the disputed National Census Crisis of 1962–1963. Debates in the Northern House of Assembly reveal the “depth of the hatred and bitterness which Northern Nigerians nursed against Biafrans.” The following excerpts reveal the passion with which the north and the west would pursue the de-Igbonization agenda. Speaking in the Northern Region House of Assembly, Mallam Bashari Umaru suggested: “I would like (you), as the Minister of Land and Survey, to revoke forthwith all certificates of occupancy from the hands of the Ibos resident in the region (Applause)” (Investigators Report, 10-11). Mr. Megida Lawant concurred: “In fact it is quite a long time that we in our part of this region have known the Ibos and I do not think that at the moment there is any Ibo man owning a roof in Igbirra Division... I am appealing to the minister to make life more difficult for them” (Ibid). Alhaji Yusufu Bayero spoke in these words:

Mr. Chairman, I would like to appeal to the Minister of Establishments and Training if he will appeal to the Minister of Local Government about some employees who are Ibos and are working under some Native Authorities here... I cannot see why they should be in our Region. We are all sure that they are the poorest people in the country (Investigators Report, 10-11).

Alhaji Usman Liman (Sarkin Musawa) was applauded when he rhetorically questioned the House.

What brought the Ibos into this Region? They were here since the Colonial Days. Had it not been for the Colonial Rule there would hardly have been any Ibo in this Region. Now that there is no Colonial Rule the Ibo should go back to their Region. There should be no hesitation about this matter. Mr. Chairman, North is for Northerners, East for Easterners, West for Westerners and the Federation is for all (Investigators Report, 10–11).

The demand for drastic action against the Igbo was accepted by the responsible Northern Nigerian Ministers and the Premier. Ahmadu Bello, Sardauna of Sokoto and Premier of the Northern Region responded in these words: “It is my most earnest desire that every post in the region, however small it is, to be filled by a Northerner (Applause).” The Minister of Establishment and Training, Mustafa Ismaila Dujuna affirmed:

Mr. Chairman, Sir, since 1955 this government had laid down a policy. First NORTHERNERS, second EXPATRIATES and third, NON-NORTHERNERS. Mr. Chairman, Sir, I have noted very carefully all the speeches made by all the members in the honorable House and I am ready to put up to my Government their views and I hope my Government will give them consideration... I think these two things are the major things I have to answer now. One is on scholarship and the other is on how to do away with the Ibos (Investigators Report, 10–11).

The applause continued when Ibrahim Musa Gashash, the Minister of Land and Survey assured members that “having heard their demands about Ibos holding land in Northern Nigeria my Ministry will do all it can to see that the demands of Members are met. How to do this, when to do it, all this should not be disclosed. In the course, you will all see what will happen (Investigators Report, 10-11).

Publications and other media were used to launch a vicious and devastating attack on the Igbo. The Northern People’s Congress, the party in power in northern Nigeria, published what The International Committee called a highly scurrilous booklet entitled “SALAMA: Facts must be faced,” which was contrived to “inflame the feelings of the Northern Nigerian masses to such an extent that, on the flimsiest pretext and as soon as the signal was

given, the masses would pounce upon Biafrans and massacre them. It did happen.” Similar plans of attacks on the Igbo were simultaneously executed in Western Nigeria.

A booklet entitled *UPCAISM* was published by the Government of Western Nigeria, which displayed photographs of stores and shops run by Igbo traders in Lagos. The International Committee noted that Western Nigerians were “invited to accept the inflammatory lie that these Biafran ‘strangers’ had expropriated Western Nigerian land and the fruits thereof.” Accordingly, the Government of Western Nigeria, like their counterpart in northern Nigeria:

...organized and conducted a campaign of hate against Biafrans. The character of Biafrans was remorselessly assassinated. As in Northern Nigeria, Biafrans were callously dislodged from their merited positions in western Nigeria and in federal agencies and institutions. Even business firms were urged to remove Biafrans from, or to refuse to appoint them to, positions in their various establishments (Investigators Report, 10–11).

The seed of hatred against the Igbo was sewn in earlier years. In a formal complaint lodged by the Republic of Biafra to The International Committee on the Investigation of Crimes of Genocide, the Biafra government noted:

Under Colonial rule the British Imperial Government had excelled and glorified itself in the so-called system of “indirect rule” for purposes of imperial policy. The various ethnic groups above referred to were played off one against the other – the sum result of this policy is that for 40 years under British rule the agglomeration known as the Federation of Nigeria was essentially made up of three divergent countries corresponding to the three large ethnic groups, each suspicious of the other and perpetually disagreeing. It was this hotchpotch of a territory that was on the first of October 1960 conferred the unmerited dignity of nationhood and styled as “Federation of Nigeria” (Investigators Report 1969: 4).

Indeed, the British colonial administration in Nigeria had cast the Igbo in a very bad light. Such anti-Igbo sentiments became deeply embedded in both public and private discourses. Indeed, the British had a hard time implementing indirect rule among the Igbo from the inception of their administration in Nigeria. As Korieh (2010: 69) noted, some colonial officials admitted the difficulty of implementing the system:

Yet they were more concerned with applying the idealistic philosophy of the native administration project than dealing with the contradictions inherent in the Igbo political system. Indeed the confrontations that would occur between the British and the Igbo when the system of warrant chiefs was imposed from the first decade of the twentieth century onward did not arise from a cultural misunderstanding on the part of officials, but an avowed prosecution of an imperial policy that had been elevated to the status of ideology.

The motives behind the coup of July 1966, only provided in the words of Lord Stonham, were nothing but “vicious pretexts” merely put forward to justify “evil motives” (Ibid). The civil war was the culmination of nearly half a century of ethnic rivalry and vilification of the Igbo by other ethnic groups in the country.

The Biafra War: continuity of genocide

On the 30th May 1967, abiding by the resolutions of the joint session of the Advisory Committee of the Chiefs and elders and the Consultative Assembly of the Representatives of the People, the Military Governor of the then Eastern Nigeria, Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu, proclaimed the territorial area comprising the former Eastern Region of the Federation of Nigeria, as the Republic of Biafra. The massive killing of the Igbo was the impetus for this declaration. Between May 1967 and January 1970, the eastern part of Nigeria existed as the Republic of Biafra. Refusing to acknowledge the secession, the Federal Military Government, led by Major-General Yakubu Gowon, invaded Biafran territory in July, commencing a brutal war

that would last nearly three years. They would suffer more persecution and massacre in various parts of the country and within the Igbo territories as the war lasted. Between May 1967 and January 1970, the Republic of Biafra witnessed massive atrocities that claimed the lives of between 500,000 and two million Igbo and other Easterners (US State Department, 1967–1969).

Scholars and other commentators have extensively documented the Nigeria-Biafra War and the large-scale killing of the Igbo by starvation and by federal soldiers during the war. As has been well documented: “most of the victims died of starvation and disease brought on by the encirclement of the Biafran enclave, a situation exacerbated by political disputes that hindered efforts to bring food and medical supplies to the besieged population” (US State Department). The International Committee on the Investigation of Crimes of Genocide, a quasi-official organ, headed by Dr. Mensah, a Ghanaian, found evidence of genocide and intent to commit genocide by northerners against the Igbo. The Committee investigated these claims following a complaint by the Biafran government accusing federal Nigeria of genocide. After traveling in Biafran and Nigerian territories in December, 1968, the committee submitted:

The underlying intention of Nigeria Authorities in its relations with the people of the former Eastern Nigeria (now Biafra) has always been to solve their political or other differences by calculated massacres of Biafran citizens. Documentary evidence abounds in the speeches of Northern Nigeria leaders in the regional Parliament, by publications in Northern Nigeria official newspapers, brochures and magazines of intention to liquidate Biafrans physically as a method of solving a disagreement. Besides physical acts of extermination, the Biafrans have been subjected to psychological pressures by malicious, vicious and destructive falsehood that not only was a Biafran an unwanted “*stranger*” in his own country, but the general object of hate and discrimination throughout the length and breadth of Nigeria (Investigators Report, 1969: 4–5).

But as the American Jewish Congress noted in response to the tragedy faced by the Igbo, the Biafra war:

...exemplifies in microcosm areas of stress that continue to agitate relations between states in many parts of the world. They include—the demands of competing nationalisms; the ambiguities of the principle of self-determination and the lack of clarity as to its limits; the continuing influence of religious considerations in contemporary politics; the tentative character of ideological groupings; the uncertainty by governments as to their own national self-interest and the emergence of incongruous and improbable alliances (The American Jewish Congress, 1968).

The massacre of the Igbo people before and during the war constituted genocide. When Raphael Lemkin coined the term in 1944, he termed genocide a “coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves” (Lemkin, 1944: 79-95). This implies an attempt to destroy a nation or ethnic group through the above action. As the United Nations Organization’s *Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* further conveys, genocide involves any act committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group. Such acts as provided in the convention were implemented against the Igbo before and during the war.

The accounts of the Biafrans leave no doubt about the ordeal and the intent of federal Nigeria and a cross-section of other Nigerians. As Achebe (2012: 82) recalls in his autobiography:

...I watched horrified as Northern officers carried out a revenge coup in which they killed Igbo officers and men in large numbers. If it had ended there, the matter might have been seen as a very tragic interlude in nation building, a horrendous tit for tat. But the Northerners turned on Igbo civilians living in the North and unleashed waves of brutal massacres that Colin Legum of *The Observer* (UK) was the

first to describe as a pogrom. Thirty thousand civilian, women, and children were slaughtered, hundreds of thousands were wounded, maimed, and violated, their homes and property looted and burned—and no one asked any question. A Sierra Leonean living in Northern Nigeria at the time wrote home in horror: “The killing of the Igbos has become a state industry in Nigeria.

Uzoigwe has outlined four successive genocides of the Igbo on May 29, July 29, September 29, and October 29 1966 which had occurred before the war in 1967. These pogroms resulted in the death of over 30,000 Igbo men, women and children and the maiming of thousands more as they fled the north (Uzoigwe, 2012).

The series of pogroms and the war against Biafra provided opportunity to deal with what was perceived as “the Igbo problem.” The first military coup d’état of 15 January 1966 resulted in the death of Ahmadu Bello, leader of the Northern People’s Congress, the Prime Minister of the Nigerian Federation (a Northerner) and six senior northern military officers. In the Western part of Nigeria, the Premier of the Region, Samuel Ládòkè Akíntǫlá, and the Federal Minister of Finance, Festus Okotie-Eboh, and (a Mid-Westerner) were also killed. Major Igbo political leaders including Nnamdi Azikiwe and the Premier of the Eastern Region, Dr. MI Okpara survived the coup. The fact that major Igbo political leaders of the time were not killed gave it the image of an Igbo coup. Uzoigwe has outlined two factors that apparently convinced the Northerners of the existence of a “grand Igbo design to rule Nigeria,” driven by the Igbos’ “uncouth bumptiousness and an arrogant belief in their own exceptionalism” (Uzoigwe, 2012). The first is the emergence of General Aguiyi Ironsi, an Igbo, as head of the military government. The second is the abolition of the federal structure of governance in favor of a unitary structure.

The outbreak of the war provided the opportunity to carry out the goal of eliminating the Igbo (Korieh, 2012). From July 1967, Nigeria Radio broadcasts explicitly and implicitly relayed this goal. Nigeria Radio, based in Lagos, continuously broadcast a war song in Hausa which translates as: “Let us go and crush them. We will pillage their property, ravish their womenfolk, murder their menfolk and complete the pogrom of 1966” (Investigators Report, 7). Evidence on the Nigeria-Biafra War reveals that these acts were carried out by the Nigerian soldiers when they reached Igbo villages and towns. A scrapbook recovered from Nigerian soldier Ganiyu Sodeinde at Bori is an instructive detail of what his Battalion Commander Lt. Col. Onifade often repeated to the soldiers in his unit, and the prevailing official attitude toward Biafrans:

He [referring to Lt. Col. Onifade] expresses doubts at the possibility of Nigeria subjugating Biafra in the present war. Even if this were possible, he said, there was the danger that another generation of Biafrans could spring up. He said that Germany had once faced the same period of trial in her history which Biafra is facing at the moment; but today, the Germans are leading the world in technological skill. Similarly, he predicted a glorious future for Biafra if allowed to exist... what all sons and daughters of Nigeria should do to prevent such a situation from developing was not only to subjugate Biafra but at the same time to ensure that a new generation of Biafrans does not rise up to perpetuate their race. He commanded us to kill every Biafran we meet (Investigators Report, 7).

Indeed, the International Red Cross in Geneva had lodged protests with the Federal Military Authority, in January 1968 and March 1968, for what were regarded as “inhuman excesses of the army of the Federal Military Government,” including the inhuman excesses of the soldiers in the treatment of Biafran prisoners of war and Biafran civilian populations in areas occupied by forces of the Federal Military Government (International Committee, 7).

The testimonies of Biafran returnees from northern Nigeria towns and cities paint a picture of a systematic and calculated program of genocide planned by northern emirs, district heads, former politicians, top civil servants, university students, British nationals, and law enforcement officers. Enoch Ejikeme, an Igbo businessman who

had lived in Katsina since 1951, recalled what happened during the pogrom of May–June 1966. He told the Atrocities Tribunal:

It was about 2 a.m. -4 a.m. in the early morning of 29/5/66 when a large number of Hausas started collecting in the Emir's palace. Round about 6 a.m. that all burst out from the palace carrying sticks, matchets, daggers, axes, etc. and all other dangerous weapons, spread themselves all over the town, looting and burning houses and shops. Some of the N. A. Police took active parts, while others made no attempts to bring the situation under control. This attack was directed against people of Southern Nigeria origin with the exclusion of Yorubas. ...While the attack continued the Emir of Katsina, Usman Nagogo; the former Northern Minister (of Education) Isa Kaita; Musa Tafida Yar 'Adua, former federal Minister of Lagos Affairs; and Magajin Gari, Emir's son, were parading the town up and down cheering them up (in Korieh, 2012: 14).

Julius Abisi, a Prison Warden who lived in Kaduna from 1958 to 1966, testified about the massive attack on Easterners in the city of Kaduna following a meeting of top Hausa civil servants at the Ahmadu Bello Stadium on Saturday May 29 1966. He recalls "from the meeting they spread to the town attacking every Easterner they met; looting, arson and killing law-abiding Easterners featured prominently." Reminiscent of what happened in Nazi Germany, Abisi told the Tribunal "After the general attack they started going from house to house hunting Easterners to kill...They boasted that after their operation NOTHING LIKE EAST WILL REMAIN ON THE MAP OF NIGERIA..." (Korieh, 2012: 15). Testimonies collected by the Atrocities Tribunal reveal that the pogrom in Gombe, Gusau in Sokoto Emirate, and many other northern cities, were carried out with a significant level of official sanction from traditional political institutions in the north.

The mutual relationship that existed between the British and the northern elite continued in the post-colonial period, and the deep distrust for the Igbo people from both did not abate. British nationals in northern Nigeria in the 1960s placed their footprint on the crisis and were not shy to reveal which side they supported. During the pogroms of 1966, British expatriates played an active part at Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) in articulating the proposed elimination of the Igbo from the north. The Report of the International Committee that investigated the acts of genocide on the Igbo noted that the activities of the "Northern Nigeria students and their foreign (particularly British) instigators and collaborators at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria... were deeply-laid plans for the execution genocide." (Korieh, 2012: 16). Some of the prominent British citizens involved were Mr. SS Richardson, Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Director of the Institute of Administration at ABU; Mr. JM Lawrence, Hall Master, Institute of Administration; Professor FW Sansome, Head of the Department of Botany; and Dr Eva Sansome, wife of Professor Sansome and Reader in the Department of Botany. Others include Major ADF Boyle, Eastern manager in charge of University transport, security guards and labor force, and Mr. RB Walker, Superintendent of the Zoology Laboratory. Reports indicate that Mr. Richardson and Mr. Lawrence began to hold clandestine and exclusive meetings at night with Northern Nigerian students including Paul Anyebe, Murtala Aminu, Mohammed Arziki, Yameni Othman, AB Homkwap, and Mallam Maishanu, after 15 January 1966. These British nationals conducted a campaign of hate against Biafrans. It is reported that Major Boyle arranged for University van No. Z 5144 to be used by the Estate Foreman Mallam Dosso to transport thugs on multiple occasions from distant places to Samaru and elsewhere, "where they murdered Biafrans and looted their property" (Korieh, 2012: 17). Coincidentally, these incidents and British complicity happened after the visit of the British High Commissioner, Sir Francis Cumming-Bruce, to the university in May 1966.

Conditions in Biafra during the war create no illusion that there was a well-organized and systematic attempt to starve the Igbo to extinction. In September 1968, the International Committee of the Red Cross reported that 8000–10,000 people were starving to death each day as the result of the Biafran war of independence (New York Post, September 28, 1968). The *New York Times* also reported that a relief worker for the World Council of Churches stated that 25 people would die each day if the war continued for another month (New York Times,

October 31, 1968). The above reports were not an exaggeration of what befell the Igbo and others in the Biafra enclave as the situation continued to deteriorate. Other reports painted a picture of unimaginable human suffering on a scale not previously experienced in Africa. Uzoigwe has painted a picture of appalling human suffering and degradation based on eye-witness accounts and official reports (Uzoigwe, 2012). His claim of genocidal intent against the Igbo by northerners is supported by the accounts presented by Western journalists and the Eastern Nigerian Government. They were convinced that the Igbo faced genocide in the north between May and October of 1966.

The mass slaughter of the Igbo in the Mid-Western region towns remain the most visible evidence of what Emma Okocha called the “first black on black genocide” in all of Africa (Okocha, 2004). Mass extermination of the Igbo took place in the towns of Benin and Asaba. In Asaba, federal troops ordered the killing of every male, including young boys. Witnesses noted that all the males of Biafran origin were told to gather in the marketplace to welcome the advancing Federal troops. What resulted was that “all these people were razed to the ground by machine-gun fire” (The International Committee). It is estimated that 700 people were killed on this day of “ceremonial welcome” (Okocha, 2004). One Mr. Okwudiafor of Asaba who survived the massacre recalls:

Our way home was littered with corpses of people who had been shot and we saw women and children carrying the corpses of their husbands and relations from the dancing ground to their homes for burial. Some corpses that had nobody to identify them were buried in mass graves at Ogbe Osowe where the ghastly incident took place. I lost 11 people in my family during that incident. Rev. Fr. P. Ugnoko lost not less than sixty of his closest relations. There was hardly any family in Asaba that was not touched (Okocha, 2004: 54).

In Benin, the federal capital of the Mid-Western region, evidence was given about Biafran residents in the town who were called out into the open, where they were exterminated. Conor Cruise O’Brian reported the barbarity of this incident (Okocha, 2004: 54). From the Mid-Western region, where it appears the “final solution”-type of mass slaughter of Biafrans started, the process became widespread in the other regions. At Sapele, Biafran residents of the town were assembled in a school three miles from the town, where they were razed to the ground by machine-gun fire from federal soldiers. Witnesses gave 2000 as the number of Biafrans exterminated in this incident. Similar methods were used in Warri and Koko, with the extermination of over 2500 Biafrans (Ibid). It was reported that in Ogwasi-Ukwu about 200 Biafrans, mostly teachers and civil servants, were shot in the month of May 1968. The explanation that the Federal Military Authority gave was that the victims were guilty of having consorted with the enemy (Okocha, 2004: 54). The massive killing of civilians as the federal troops moved through southern Nigeria resembles similar acts of mass slaughter of other peoples and genocides that have taken place in other places at different times in history.

The *Time* report of 23 August, 1968 described the magnitude of the suffering in Biafra:

[...] in scope of suffering, in depth of bitterness, in the seeming hopelessness of any solution short of wholesale slaughter, there is no parallel to the tragedy that has been gathering force the past 14 months in Nigeria... One of the opposing forces, wielding a full array of modern weapons from Britain, Russia and much of Europe, is the federal government of Nigeria. It is determined to crush a rebellion that it feels will destroy its republic. On the other side, armed chiefly with determination, stands the secessionist state of Biafra, the home of Nigeria’s Ibo tribe. The Ibos [*sic*] are convinced that they are fighting not only for independence but for their survival as a people (Time, 1968).

The horrific killing of Biafrans prompted The American Jewish Congress to declare on 15 December 1968, in a memo titled “The Tragedy of Biafra,” that “For more than a year, a little noticed but nonetheless savage and tragic war has been going on between the Federal Government of Nigeria and the former Eastern Region of that

country which, in May 1967, proclaimed its independence as the Republic of Biafra” (American Jewish Congress, 1968: 1). The memorandum concluded:

Obviously concurrent with political efforts both by our own government and by international agencies to stop the war, more immediate efforts to provide emergency relief both private and governmental must continue. Every means must be used to avoid the imminent starvation. History suggests that every age has its own time of moral trial. It is perhaps not too much to believe that Biafra fulfills that role for this generation (American Jewish Congress, 1968: 45).

As the Investigators Report concluded that with:

...these speeches, which are all recorded in the Parliamentary pamphlets of the Northern Government, and also the formation of the Sarduana Brigade in the region of incitement, that is the Northern part of the Federation, I find it difficult to believe that the acts of atrocities directed against peoples of Biafra origin were not premeditated, centrally directed, and did not contain motives such as the extermination of these people, or the denial of their right of existence, or the intention to physically destroy them (Investigators Report, 96).

In the report of the *International Observer Team* can be found allegations of:

- a) The shooting of members or field officers of the International Red Cross, which incidents are alleged to have occurred after the issue of the Code of Conduct.
- b) The treatment of Biafran prisoners of war in a manner inconsistent with the Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war. The report contains some evidence of the non-observation of this Convention, and here again it is alleged that this has occurred after the issue of the Code of Conduct.
- c) Intensification of the bombing of centers of civilian population, resulting in the killing of masses of Biafrans has occurred from around December 1968, as far as I am aware, it is still continuing (The International Committee).

Conclusion

This paper has revealed the systematic attempts made to commit genocide against the Igbo before and during the Nigeria-Biafra war. From the massacre of the Igbo at Kano in 1953 after an uprising of indigenes against Easterners to the pogroms in 1966, a systematic attempt was made to exterminate Easterners, including women and children. It is estimated that between 36,000 and 42,000 Easterners were killed in the pogroms. Over a million Igbo died as a result of these pogroms and the war itself. Indeed, “if it is difficult to establish motives and intent to commit genocide against the Igbo in earlier massacres, it is less so with the hostilities of 1966 and the official war broke out 1967” (Korieh, 2012). The deliberate policy of starving the civilian population of Biafra, the bombing of civilian targets and the gruesome and barbaric methods of killing Biafran civilians were clearly planned and executed with the intent of annihilating them. Evidence of substantial motivation and incitement to commit the crime of genocide laced the speeches by northern intellectuals, bureaucrats, and politicians. There was genocide against the Igbo people.

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Notes

1. Yamiri is a derogatory name for the Igbo. Yamiri literally means “give me water” depicting Igbo immigrants begging for a drink of water on their arrival to the north.

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