

## GREAT POWERS' ENCOUNTER IN AFRICAN CONFLICTS: BRITISH INTELLIGENCE ON THE SOVIET UNION INVOLVEMENT DURING THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR (1967-1970)

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the British intelligence on the Soviet Union's involvement in the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970). The study adopts a historical narrative approach for data analysis while drawing from the official archival documents on the conflict obtained from the British National Archives, located in Kew, London and secondary sources such as books, journals, newspapers and internet sources for data collection. The study indicates that the delayed acquisition of defensive military equipment by the federal government from Britain paved the way for the Soviet Union penetration in the conflict. Consequently, Nigerian-Soviet relations were conditioned by the exigencies of the civil war. While the Soviet Union and Britain had the common objective of supporting the Federal Military Government (FMG), Britain saw the Soviets as a threat to their influence with the FMG. The ideological differences between the two countries prompted Britain to thwart the Soviet efforts in the conflict which involved the use of intelligence gathering systems often in alliance with other western powers. Britain found it expedient to lead intelligence gathering efforts on the Soviets as they offloaded their military consignment and provided diplomatic support to Nigeria. The Nigerian authorities felt that they had no alternative but to accommodate the Soviets because the struggle to maintain the unity of Nigeria overrode other considerations in the war. For Britain, the Soviet Union involvement in the civil war was considered to be very risky, unlike the FMG which did not focus on the likely negative implications because they needed external assistance to achieve military victory in the conflict.

**Keywords:** Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), Nigerian Federal Military Government, British Intelligence, Soviet Union, Cold War rivalry

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**Rezumat:** Acest articol analizează informațiile serviciilor secrete britanice privind implicarea Uniunii Sovietice în războiul civil din Nigeria (1967-1970). Studiul adoptă o

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abordare narativă istorică pentru analiza datelor, bazându-se pe documente oficiale de arhivă despre conflict obținute de la Arhivele Naționale Britanice, având sediul în Kew, Londra precum și surse secundare, cum ar fi cărți, reviste, ziare și surse de internet pentru colectarea datelor. Studiul indică faptul că achiziționarea întârziată de echipament militar defensiv de către guvernul federal nigerian de la Marea Britanie a deschis calea pentru pătrunderea Uniunii Sovietice în conflict. În aceste condiții, relațiile nigeriano-sovietice au fost condiționate de exigențele războiului civil. În timp ce Uniunea Sovietică și Marea Britanie aveau ca obiectiv comun sprijinirea Guvernului Militar Federal (GMF), Marea Britanie i-a văzut pe sovietici ca pe o amenințare la adresa influenței lor asupra guvernului nigerian. Diferențele ideologice dintre cele două țări au determinat Marea Britanie să contracareze eforturile sovietice în conflict, care au implicat utilizarea sistemelor de colectare a informațiilor, adesea în alianță cu alte puteri occidentale. Marea Britanie a considerat oportun să-și îndrepte atenția asupra sovieticilor, pe măsură ce aceștia descărcau transporturile militare și acordau sprijin diplomatic Nigeriei. Autoritățile nigeriene au considerat că nu aveau altă alternativă decât să-i acomodeze pe sovietici, deoarece lupta pentru menținerea unității Nigeriei era mai importantă decât alte considerente legate de război. Pentru Marea Britanie, implicarea Uniunii Sovietice în războiul civil a fost considerată foarte riscantă, spre deosebire de guvernul nigerian, care nu s-a preocupat de posibilele implicații negative ale asocierii cu Uniunea Sovietică, considerând că pentru obținerea victoriei militare în conflict era nevoie de asistență externă.

**Cuvinte cheie:** războiul civil din Nigeria (1967-1970), guvernul militar federal nigerian, serviciile de informații britanice, Uniunea Sovietică, rivalitatea din Războiul Rece

## I. Introduction

In warfare, military confrontation is not enough to achieve victory. Intelligence operations are required to ascertain the extent of preparedness by various factions involved in conflict. Intelligence gathering is a necessary exercise embarked upon by different groups participating in a war in pursuit of obtaining information about the enemy's military strength and capabilities, the type of military equipment and strategies deployed in conflict<sup>1</sup>. Quintessentially, intelligence gathering is about reducing uncertainty, providing early warning and informing policy decisions. The forms of intelligence gathering activities have evolved over recent decades and reflect not only the type of threat being faced, but also political and public perception. In this sense, the Cold War effectively became a spy war between US and Soviet intelligence agencies and those of their allies, leading to the use of extreme measures and covert action in the pursuit of their goals<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Dragan Manojlović, Saša Mijalković and Božidar Banović, "Intelligence Operations: Conception and Structure", *Vojno delo*, 63, no. 4 (2011): 184-195 [https://hdl.handle.net/21.1.5107/rcub\\_jakov\\_384](https://hdl.handle.net/21.1.5107/rcub_jakov_384).

<sup>2</sup> Siobhan Martin, "Spying in a Transparent World: Ethics and Intelligence in the 21st Century", *Geneva Papers*, Research Series 19/16, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 11,

Armed conflict has been a recurring reality in African countries<sup>3</sup>. These conflicts threaten the peace and stability of the African continent since the 1960s<sup>4</sup>. The Nigerian Civil War was a notable example of such fighting which also involved a high degree of foreign involvement<sup>5</sup>, therefore internationalizing the conflict since a civil war could no longer be an internal affair when third parties intervened in the dispute. Indeed, this was the case of Great Britain's and the Soviet Union's involvement in the civil war<sup>6</sup>. The origin of the civil war can be traced to wide ranging factors spanning from colonialism to the military *coup d'état* of January 15, 1966 and the counter *coup* of July 29, 1966<sup>7</sup>.

Amid the Cold War polarization<sup>8</sup>, there was no conflict that occurred where the great powers did not find themselves taking sides be it in Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Africa. In the last region, the views of some African leaders were divided between those that considered that African nations should not be involved in the quarrels between the superpowers, while others advocated for maximum cooperation with the foreign powers<sup>9</sup>. After all, the interests of African countries were tied to the interests of their foreign allies. Those African countries aligned with the West saw their intelligence services trained and supported by western countries and their intelligence collection priorities reflecting the Western interests. Meanwhile, African countries aligned with the Soviet bloc found their intelligence tied to the fortune of the Soviet Union<sup>10</sup>. As a result, African nations were supported by either of these countries in ensuring efficient intelligence gathering in times of conflicts like the Nigerian

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[https://www.gcsp.ch/sites/default/files/2024-12/GP%2019%20-%20S.%20MARTIN%20-%20Intelligence\\_web.pdf](https://www.gcsp.ch/sites/default/files/2024-12/GP%2019%20-%20S.%20MARTIN%20-%20Intelligence_web.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Rafael Grasa and Oscar Mateos, *Peace, Conflict and Security in Africa. New Challenges and New Perspectives* (Barcelona: International Catalan Institute, 2010), 2-3.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Gilpin, "Understanding the Nature and Origins of Violent Conflict in Africa", in *Minding the Gap: African Conflict Management in a Time of Change*, ed. Pamela Aall and Chester A. Crocker (Waterloo, Canada: CIGI Publications, 2016), 21-32.

<sup>5</sup> John J. Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), xi.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Olukayode Akinbi, "Supra-National Organizations and Conflict Resolution during the Nigeria Civil War: A Historical Review", *AFRREV IJAH: An International Journal of Arts and Humanities* 1 no 4 (2014): 291-306.

<sup>7</sup> Adewunmi James Falode, "The Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970: A Revolution?", *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 5, no. 3 (2011): 120-124, <https://www.international-scholarsjournals.com/articles/the-nigerian-civil-war-19671970-a-revolution.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Cassels, *Ideology and International Relations in the Modern World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 232.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Meredith, *The State of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence* (New York: The Free Press, 2005), 204.

<sup>10</sup> Sandy Africa and Johnny Kwadjo, "Introduction", in *Changing Intelligence Dynamics in Africa*, ed. Sandy Africa and Johnny Kwadjo (Birmingham: GFN-SSR Publications, 2009), 1-14, <https://gsdrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Changing-Intelligence-Dynamics-in-Africa.pdf>.

Civil War which brought the superpowers together, providing assistance in the area of military and intelligence gathering to Nigeria and Biafra.

During the Nigerian civil war, the Soviet Union and Great Britain had competed with each other while, siding and supplying the Federal Military Government of Nigeria with weapons, military aircrafts, naval vessels, and military expertise. At the same time, several Western states, namely Portugal and France, along with South Africa provided clandestine military assistance to the separatist Republic of Biafra<sup>11</sup>. Richard W. Bean et al. have studied the encrypted messages sent from Lisbon to Biafra via telex showing the Portuguese deep involvement in the conflict<sup>12</sup>. The war between Nigeria and Biafra became so widely internationalized that its solution depended to a large degree on London, Moscow and Paris. This was notable since, at the outset of the war in July 1967, external diplomatic and military intervention in the fighting was largely absent<sup>13</sup>.

This study investigates the British intelligence gathering efforts during the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970). It specifically focuses on the United Kingdom's intelligence gathering in relation to the Soviet Union's military activities in the civil war. Additionally, personal accounts of military operations and other facets of the war exist from those that participated in the conflict exist<sup>14</sup>. Since the intelligence historiography of the armed conflict has received scant scholarly attention, this study, drawing from the pool of recently released official documents on the military reports of the conflict, seeks to contribute to the historiography of the war by looking at the British role in the intelligence operations covering the fighting and the Soviet Union actions. The study adopts historical and statistical research methodology, employing both primary and secondary sources for data collection. Primary sources comprise of archival documents obtained from the British National Archives, located in Kew, London, the National Archives United States of America, the International Committee of Red Cross archives in Geneva, United Nations digital archives, and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) digital historical collections.

This paper argues that the diametrically opposed attitudes of these foreign powers served as a breeding ground for the rigid British intelligence assessment of the Soviet Union's activities in the war. Britain's purpose was to

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<sup>11</sup> Al J Venter, *Biafra's War 1967-1970: A Tribal Conflict in Nigeria That Left a Million Dead* (West Midlands: Helion and Company Limited, 2018), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Richard W. Bean, George Lasry, and Frode Weierud, "Eavesdropping on the Biafra-Lisbon Link: Breaking Historical Ciphers from the Biafran War", *Cryptologia* 46, no 1 (2020): 1-66 <https://doi.org/10.1080/01611194.2020.1762261>.

<sup>13</sup> Okwudiba Nnoli, "The Nigeria-Biafra Conflict: A Political Analysis", in *Nigeria: Dilemma of Nationhood: An African Analysis of the Biafran Conflict*, ed. Joseph Okpaku (New York: The Third Press Joseph Okpaku Publishing Co., Inc., 1972), 129-130.

<sup>14</sup> Godwin Alabi-Isama, *The Tragedy of Victory: On-the-Spot Account of the Nigeria-Biafra War in the Atlantic Theatre* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited Nigeria, 2013), 1-10.

look for tangible evidence needed to protest against Soviets involvement in the war while at the same time justifying British actions and policies in the conflict which sought to ensure the indivisibility of the Nigerian state in a manner that British interests would be retained and enhanced in the post-war period. Britain was uncomfortable with the involvement of the Soviet Union in the war fearing that it increased the risks of losing their influence with the Federal Military Government of Nigeria. Because of these concerns, it became paramount to engage in intelligence operations that uncovered the Soviet Union's true intentions and motives which, Britain argued, did not serve the interests of Nigeria.

The first section of the study looks at the background of British intelligence in the Nigerian Civil War while the second section interrogates the aims and purpose of the British intelligence in relation to the conflict. The third section discusses the British intelligence on Soviet Union activities in the war while fourth section analyses the Soviet military activities in the conflict.

## **II. British Intelligence in the Nigerian Civil War: A Background Analysis**

Intelligence gathering remains a significant factor in the execution of war. National governments invest in intelligence with the aim of meeting their wartime information needs. Thus, the quality and consistency of intelligence operations reflect a military's strength<sup>15</sup>. The British intelligence operation on postcolonial Nigeria began during the internal political crises of the 1960s<sup>16</sup> that riddled the nation up to the period of the military coup and counter coup of 1966<sup>17</sup>. Both coups attracted the attention of the British officialdom when it was discovered that foreign powers could take advantage of the Nigeria's problems and meddle in the country's domestic affairs<sup>18</sup>.

While the Nigerian government had no knowledge of actual foreign intervention in Nigeria's internal situation, the British government was certain that foreign powers would take the opportunity created by the Nigerian internal

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<sup>15</sup> Emmanuel Kwabla Kpeglah, "The Role of Human Intelligence (HUMINT) in Counter-Terrorism: A Case of Boko Haram", Master's thesis, International Development Studies and International Relations, Noragric Norway, 2018, 10, <https://nmbu.brage.unit.no/nmbu-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2566123/grand%20final%20bh%202081.pdf?sequence=1&#38;isAllowed=y>.

<sup>16</sup> A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: A Documentary Sourcebook 1966-1970 Volume II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 1-10.

<sup>17</sup> The Government of Eastern Nigeria, "Nigerian Crisis 1966", Ministry of Information, Eastern Nigeria, 1966, 1-9.

<sup>18</sup> Kunle Amuwo, "The Historical Roots of the Nigerian Civil War", in *Perspectives on the Nigerian Civil War*, ed. Siyan Oyeweso (Lagos: OAP Publications, 1992), 1-17.

quagmire to exploit the country's differences and aggravate tensions<sup>19</sup>. Since the signing of the Anglo-Nigerian Defense Pact in 1960, Britain had never lost the desire to assist Nigeria in actualizing its security and military obligations, by providing assistance in establishing an air force and other defense agencies. In short, Britain did not abandon its defense and security ties with Nigeria<sup>20</sup>. Consequently, given the complexity of Nigeria's postcolonial political crisis, the question of how to strengthen British intelligence architecture in the country became a security imperative among British officials<sup>21</sup>.

On May 30, 1967, Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu made the declaration of the Republic of Biafra<sup>22</sup>. According to Arthur A. Nwankwo, “the Biafra secession was welcomed by most Eastern Nigerians. They believed that their security lay only in the sovereign state of Biafra...”<sup>23</sup>. However, the Nigerian government and its allies like the United Kingdom opposed with such postulation, in favor of supporting the thesis of the indivisibility of one Nigeria. Ade Adefuye reveals that, President Gowon interpreted Biafra as a challenge to Nigeria's national integrity and sovereignty which he sworn to defend by force. A police action which later developed into a full-scale war was launched on July 6, 1967<sup>24</sup>. As a result, Britain had to act urgently to strategically position its intelligence radar on Nigeria, for not doing so would risk losing vital interests in the country and open the frontiers to the influx of external forces and meddling in Nigeria's internal affairs<sup>25</sup>.

Although Britain could not stop the penetration of other powers into Nigeria, it could opt to obfuscate them to avoid losing its presence in country entirely. At this time, Nigeria was already a target of great power competition between United States of America and the Soviet Union. This period of global tension presented unique challenges for newly independent nations, such as

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<sup>19</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), “Confidential: Minute on the Conversation between the British High Commissioner Francis Cumming-Bruce and Major-General Yakubu Gowon Held on October, 1<sup>st</sup>, 1966 from Lagos to Commonwealth Office Telegram No. 1471, October, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1966”, Prime Minister's Official Papers 13/1041, TNA.

<sup>20</sup> Akali Omeni, “The Cold War and Air Force Politics in Independent Nigeria (1960–1962)”, *Journal of African Military History* 1, no. 41 (2023): 1-10, <https://doi.org/10.1163/24680966-bja10015>.

<sup>21</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), “Secret: The British Prime Minister's Personal Minute on the Nigerian Situation sent to Commonwealth Secretary”, Despatch No. M, 5A/66, October 1966, PREM 13/1041, TNA.

<sup>22</sup> Oluchukwu Ignatus Onianwa, *Britain's Injurious Peace Games in the Nigerian Civil War* (London: Academica Press, 2018), 38-39.

<sup>23</sup> Arthur Nwankwo, *Nigeria: The Challenge of Biafra (Third Edition)* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1980), 42.

<sup>24</sup> Ade Adefuye, *Culture and Foreign Policy: The Nigerian Experience* (Lagos: Nigerian Institute of International Affairs Publications, 1992), 55.

<sup>25</sup> Stremlau, “The International Politics”, 62-64.

Nigeria, as they sought to navigate the complexities of the bipolar world<sup>26</sup>. As the Cold War turned global and the parameters of the conflict shifted away from an East-West struggle to a North-South dynamic, American and British officials found themselves meddling in the affairs of this African country with the motive of sustaining Western-type democracy and development and nipping the communist ideas that were fast growing in Nigeria<sup>27</sup>.

British intelligence operations began to develop during the civil war when the Federal and Biafran troops commenced military confrontations on July 6, 1967. The first salvo of the war was shot at Garkem by the Federal forces in the Northern sector of the Nigerian Civil War. The entire operation was under the control of 1 Division under the command of Lt. Colonel Mohammed Shuwa. 1 Division launched Operation Unicord which was designed to crush Biafran forces defending Ogoja and Nsukka to ease the capture of Enugu which was the capital of Biafra<sup>28</sup>. While the Federal military had envisaged and planned for a short conflict, indeed its strategy was that the conflict could be reduced to a police action, they had underestimated the strength and determination to succeed of the opposition. Federal Nigeria had no long-term strategy for subduing the recalcitrant state, whereas Biafra's objective was to achieve permanent sovereignty<sup>29</sup>. According to A.O. Oyekanmi, throughout the Nigerian Civil War, a comprehensive set of strategies of war on land, sea and air would be adopted<sup>30</sup>.

Following the commencement of military operations between Nigeria and Biafra, the Security, Defense and Military Operation Desk Section at the British High Commission in Lagos headed by Colonel Robert E. Bob Scott established an intelligence gathering program known as the Acquisition of Daily Situation Reports (ADSR). This was evidenced in a telex the British High Commissioner in Lagos, Sir David Hunt, sent to London on July 22, 1967: "...

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Godwin Okoliko, "Assessing Nigeria's Position in Global Affairs: A Study of its Non-Aligned Foreign Policy Posture During the Cold War", *International Journal of Innovative Inventions in Social Science and Humanities* 2, no. 05 (2025): 28-37.

<sup>27</sup> Brian McNeil, "Frontiers of Need: Humanitarianism and the American Involvement in the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970", Ph.D. Diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2014, 18, <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/b7277f6b-4246-48f6-a224-f83cbdda95ce/content>.

<sup>28</sup> Nathaniel John Odoh et al., "The Nigerian Civil War: Historicising the Battle for Onitsha 1967-1970", *Icheke Journal of the Faculty of Humanities* 19, no.1 (2021): 1-13, <https://ichekejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/15.-The-Nigerian-Civil-War-Historicising-the-Battle-for-Onitsha-1967-1970.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> Norbert Götz, "Towards Expressive Humanitarianism: The Formative Experience of Biafra", in *An Era of Value Change: The Long 1970s in Europe*, ed. Fiammetta Balestracci, Christina von Hohenberg, and Isabel Richter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 207-232.

<sup>30</sup> A.O. Oyekanmi, "The Relevance of Nigerian Civil War 1967 to 1970 on Strategic Theory", International Academic Multidiscipline Research Conference, Switzerland, March 2021, 196-207, [http://www.ijbts-journal.com/images/main\\_1366796758/2021%200101%20Oyekanmi%20A\\_O.pdf](http://www.ijbts-journal.com/images/main_1366796758/2021%200101%20Oyekanmi%20A_O.pdf).

We are not confusing you by sending to you too frequent or too detailed reports on the military situation here. We are trying to keep our Daily Situation Reports (DSR) as brief as possible. The information they contain is for the most part straight from the horse's mouth"<sup>31</sup>. Scott, the British Defence Adviser for Military Operations Nigeria, was in charge of the ADSR because of his close contacts with the upper military hierarchy of both sides of the conflict and a well-established line of communication with the British Military Adviser at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Major-General J.M. McNeill<sup>32</sup>.

It was not that Nigeria was unable to conduct intelligence exercises during the civil war, in fact, the Field Security Section (FSS) of the Royal Nigerian Army which was established on November 1, 1962 was expected to meet the intelligence and security needs of the Nigerian military. However, the problems encountered during the civil war made it apparent that the FSS was inadequate to meet the intelligence requirements of the Nigerian Armed Forces<sup>33</sup>. Hence, the desire of the Nigerian military government to have a professional and independent intelligence assessment of the Biafran army led Britain to institute an intelligence gathering program during the civil war.

At a meeting with a British official at the High Commission in Lagos, M. J. Newington, the Nigerian Commissioner for Information and Labor, Anthony Enahoro, revealed that the Permanent Secretary Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs and later Nigeria's Permanent Representative at the United Nations, Simon Ogbu, had asked him whether he knew any methods of obtaining an independent assessment of the military capabilities of the Biafran forces. Ogbu had thought of asking the British High Commissioner, Sir David Hunt, but decided that perhaps it would be better to make an informal inquiry first<sup>34</sup>.

Newington thought that the High Commissioner would not take kindly such an approach and that there was nothing in writing about any request to them for intelligence on Biafran armed forces. Enahoro assured him that only he and Ogbu knew of this approach, though he assumed that Ogbu had acted under President Gowon's instructions. When Newington declared that it was extraordinary that the federal government lacked accurate intelligence on Biafra's armed forces, Enahoro said that the staff at the Army Headquarters was

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<sup>31</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), "Confidential: Minute on Daily Situation Reports of the Nigerian Civil War from G.D. Anderson in the British High Commission to P.H. Moberly in the West and General African Department of Commonwealth Office", July 22, 1967, FCO 38/284, TNA.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Nigerian Army Education Corps and School, *History of the Nigerian Army, 1863-1992* (Lagos: Nigerian Army Headquarters, 1992), 179.

<sup>34</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), "Confidential: Note of Record of Conversation between the Nigerian Commissioner for Labour and Information and M.J. Newington, May 30, 1967, File No. TX 10/14/6C1066/West and General African Dept., Title: Nigeria, Defence War and Belligerency, Eastern Region, Armed Forces and Arms Supplies June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1967-December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1969", FCO 38/289, TNA.

incompetent to the extent that their assessment could not be trusted<sup>35</sup>. On whether British officials had good intelligence on the Biafran army, Newington told Enahoro that he personally believed that Biafran soldiers were strong enough to confront anyone that would mount an invasion against their territory<sup>36</sup>. Although, the intelligence available to British officials on Nigeria was the best available to anyone in Africa, they faced great difficulties gathering the information given the complexities of the conflict and the widening political landscape of the country<sup>37</sup>.

On July 7, 1967 a telex link was established between Lagos and London for effective and smooth running of the British intelligence program. As the British High Commissioner Sir David Hunt argued, “the rapport between London and Lagos had been splendid hitherto and would no doubt continue to be so; you can’t imagine how encouraged we have been by such imaginative and understanding support”<sup>38</sup>. During the civil war, the British intelligence operation was very effective given the collaboration received from the British High Commission Office Annexes in Enugu, Benin, Ibadan, and Kaduna. Consequently, a Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) was set up to contribute to the assessment of the war development. The JIC intelligence gathering system complimented the efforts of the Federal War Cabinet (FWC) established by the Nigerian Head of State Major-General Yakubu Gowon and the military officers at the battle front<sup>39</sup>.

The Federal Government had envisaged that the Biafra declaration would be regarded as a treason act by their western allies and that they would form an alliance to downgrade it. However, Britain did not know the actual party to support in the beginning of the civil war<sup>40</sup>. It took strong intelligence assessments to be able to recognize the need to support the federal government which it believed had the strongest arguments and were capable of winning the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), “Confidential: Note for the Record of a Meeting between the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson and Commonwealth Secretary and the Defence Secretary Dennis Healey, Paymaster General Burke Trend and other British Officials Held on October 12, 1966 at 10:00 a.m at No. 10 Downing Street London”, PREM 13/1041, TNA.

<sup>38</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), “From the British High Commissioner in Lagos David Hunt to Foreign Office”, FCO 38/283, TNA.

<sup>39</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), “Confidential: Joint Intelligence Committee (A) Assessment of the Nigerian Military Situation and Changing War Conditions Reference JIC (A)(69) (N)(38)J 207/2/by B.T.W. Stewart Secretary Joint Intelligence Committees 26 March 1969”, PREM 13/2818, TNA.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Ediagbonya, “A Critical Assessment of Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics and Nigeria Relations during the Period of Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970”, *Polit Journal: Scientific Journal of Politics* 2, no. 4 (2022): 245-255, <https://doi.org/10.33258/polit.v2i4.792>.

conflict. Thus, intelligence analysis of the conflict was very important in the formulation of the British foreign policy during the civil war.

The British Prime Minister Harold Wilson and the British Ministers needed firsthand information on the military situation in Biafra and the Nigerian side of the war to use it as a guide when answering questions about the civil war in the House of Parliament. According to the British Parliamentary Under-Secretary in the Foreign Office, Maurice Foley, “it was useful for the Prime Minister and British Ministers, and Foreign Office to be as up-to-date as possible on the military situation when he had to answer questions about Nigeria”<sup>41</sup>. Throughout the civil war, the British government was subjected to intense attacks both inside and outside Parliament, for its arms supply policy and general support for federal Nigeria. The most vigorous opposition came from sections of the British mass media as well as pressure groups organized in support of Biafra<sup>42</sup>.

Chinua Achebe argues that Harold Wilson’s government found itself in a public relations nightmare at home and abroad. The civil war news had consistently appeared in the major newspapers in Great Britain and stirred outrage from the British people. Things were so tense that there were series of protests among various British associations like the dockworkers that refused to load ships with British arms heading to Nigeria, protesting that they were being used to kill Biafran women and children<sup>43</sup>. Amid all these domestic activities that negatively impacted the British government, it was critically necessary for the United Kingdom authorities to arm themselves with reliable information gathered through intelligence to counter the accusations leveled against it during the conflict.

The objectives of British intelligence program were to ascertain which side would win the war and discern how to deal with the influx of foreign forces such as the Soviet Union, France, Portugal, or Czechoslovakia that posed potential threats to the implementation of British policy in the fighting. The most important aim was to acquire information required to formulate military recommendations for the Federal Military Government of Nigeria on ways to hasten the end of the conflict. According to E.G. Willan, “nevertheless, the fact remains that we are of course already in a reasonably good position to feed in military advice, both operational and technical, in a discreet way through Bob

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<sup>41</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), “Confidential: Record of Meeting between the Nigerian Commissioner for External Affairs Okoi Arikpo and the British Parliamentary Under-Secretary in the Foreign Office Maurice Foley at Marlborough House on Tuesday May 6, 1968”, FCO 65/333, TNA.

<sup>42</sup> Oladapo Olusola Fafowora, *Pressure Groups and Foreign Policy: A Comparative Study of British Attitudes and Policy towards Secessionist Moves in the Congo (1960-1963) and in Nigeria (1966-1969)* (Lagos: Heinemann Educational Books Nigeria Ltd, 1990), 108.

<sup>43</sup> Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 100-101.

Scott's contacts and have indeed done so on many occasions. This had been on a completely informal basis, but need be no less effective of that"<sup>44</sup>.

British intelligence operations in the war detected that Biafra had no possibility of winning the war despite being supported by foreign countries like France and could at best hope for a negotiated settlement. This was made possible following the support received by the federal military from external powers like the Soviet Union that aligned with the one Nigeria policy advanced by the Federal Military Government in Lagos. Through its intelligence operations, Britain was already alarmed by the activities of the Soviet Union which was providing political and diplomatic support to Nigeria. The Soviets appeared ready to mirror British efforts of assisting the federal authorities in the civil war. This is why it became necessary for Britain to rollback the Soviet excesses on both military and diplomatic frontlines of the conflict.

### **III. Soviet Union on the British Intelligence Radar**

Britain began to monitor the Soviet Union's participation in the Nigerian Civil War when the British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, learnt, on July 1, 1967, in a letter from Major-General Yakubu Gowon, of the federal government's intention to purchase military equipment from other sources should Britain refuse to do so<sup>45</sup>. Gowon had made the statement in the wake of the Cold War politics between the great powers of the Eastern and Western divides even though Nigeria had adopted the principle of nonalignment<sup>46</sup>.

As mentioned earlier, during the Cold War, Africa including Nigeria was a particularly active spot for the competition between the Soviet Union, the United States, and Britain among other foreign powers. The period of decolonization and the emergence of competing independence movements and of political competition provided opportunities for external powers to apply various means of influence including supporting local actors in conflicts. The

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<sup>44</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), "Confidential: Minute on Sending British Military Mission to Nigeria from E.G. Willan in the British High Commission Lagos to John Wilson Head of West African Department Foreign and Commonwealth Office, July 26, 1969", FCO 65/334, TNA.

<sup>45</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), "Confidential: Text of Gowon's Personal Message to the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson on Nigerian Request for Military Equipment from the British High Commissioner in Lagos to Commonwealth Office Telegram No. 1340, July 1, 1967 File No. TX 10/11/Part A/6C1066/ West and General Africa Dept./Title: Nigeria, Arms and Legal Importation General Policy January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1967 - December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1968", FCO 38/265, TNA.

<sup>46</sup> Joseph Olukayode, "Historicizing British and Russian Intervention during the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970", *International Affairs and Global Strategy* 34 (2015): 1-6, <https://www.iiste.org/Journals/index.php/IAGS/article/download/23888/24459>.

ideological underpinning of the Cold War provided the motivation for the two rival powers to seize those ample opportunities.

Despite being Nigeria's traditional arms supplier<sup>47</sup> between 1966 and early 1967 the United Kingdom was reluctant to supply the Nigerian Government with arms to quell the internal crisis that affected the nation. Consequently, Gowon sought for military assistance elsewhere. On June 14, 1967, the British High Commissioner in Lagos, Sir David Hunt, wrote to London that “continued refusal to provide arms for Nigeria had been regarded within the power circle in Lagos as an unfriendly act and signs of deterioration in British relations with Nigerian army, navy and the air force”<sup>48</sup>. This attitude appeared to have cleared the way for the acquisition of arms from the Communist blocs mainly Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. Nigeria needed Russia's diplomatic and military support in its war efforts to defeat the secessionists since “the indecisiveness of the West made Soviet Union to give both diplomatic and military support to the Federal Government”<sup>49</sup>.

Gowon had sidelined the idea of pursuing a collaboration with Russia to execute the war during a discussion with the British Defense Adviser, R.E. Scott<sup>50</sup>. Through the British intelligence sources it was discovered that a secret discussion on arms supplies between the Nigerian government and Soviet officials was held in Moscow in June 1967<sup>51</sup>. The four-man delegation included Chief Anthony Enahoro, the Commissioner for the Ministries of Information and Labor and Finance Minister, Obafemi Awolowo<sup>52</sup>. During the colonial period, Britain had been in control of Nigeria, but the Soviet Union, that was, at this point, considering giving their support to Nigeria, also saw it as an

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<sup>47</sup> Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964-1970: A Personal Record* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson and Michael Joseph Ltd, 1971), 555.

<sup>48</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), “Confidential: Minute on Arms for Nigeria from the British High Commissioner in Lagos to Commonwealth Office Telegram No. 1164, June 14, 1967”, FCO 38/265, TNA.

<sup>49</sup> Olusegun Emmanuel Ofundej, “Causes and Impact of the Nigerian Civil War: Revisited”, *Jalingo Historical Review* 8, no. 1 and 2 (2025): 104-108, <https://jhrhds.org.ng/causes-and-impact-of-the-nigerian-civil-war-revisited/>.

<sup>50</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), “Confidential: Minutes on the British High Commissioner's Comment on Nigerian Request for Military Equipment from Lagos to Commonwealth Office Telegram No. 1341”, FCO 38/265, TNA.

<sup>51</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), “Confidential: Minute on Possible Arms Deal with Czechoslovakia Annex A from Commonwealth Office to Lagos, July 11, 1967”, FCO 38/265, TNA.

<sup>52</sup> Maxim Matusevich, “Strange Bedfellows: An Unlikely Alliance Between the Soviet Union and Nigeria During the Biafran War”, in *Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide: The Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967-1970*, ed. A. Dirk Moses and Lasse Heerten (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2017), 202-203.

opportunity and avenue to penetrate the country for the purpose of establishing their economic interests<sup>53</sup>.

As a result, a Soviet Union policy in Nigeria would provide active support to the federal government in its war against Biafra with the belief that the war would deepen the Soviet penetration of Nigeria<sup>54</sup>. The Nigerian authorities felt that they had no alternative but to accommodate the Soviets because the struggle to maintain Nigerian unity overrode all other considerations in their view<sup>55</sup>. The Soviet Union intervention was largely motivated by the long-term promotion of Marxist ideology and the Russian revolutionary ideals which were viewed as a means of establishing the Soviet presence in Africa and globally by offering an alternative to the US and the Western influence. After all, Africa was a region where Moscow sought to undermine the Western international world order and the influence of the United States and its Western allies while portraying itself as a pragmatic, fair, and responsible strategic partner and power broker<sup>56</sup>.

Meanwhile, the civil war opened new lines of bilateral relations between Nigeria and the Soviet Union<sup>57</sup>. Chinua Achebe found that the Soviets had the intention of expanding their bilateral trade relations with Nigeria to include military and economic assistance. They signed a contract with the Nigerian government to build one of the largest steel mills in Africa, at a cost of \$120 million – an astonishing sum at that time. That steel investment would later become the Ajaokuta Steel Mill<sup>58</sup>.

On Thursday, November 21, 1968 the Soviet government delegation and the representatives of the Nigerian Federal Military Government signed the agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation between the Soviet Union

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<sup>53</sup> Ebele Udeoji and Ugo P. Onumonu, “Rethinking Political Leadership and Neo-colonialism in Africa: Interrogating Nigerian Civil War and Global Politics”, *FUWukari Journal of Politics & Development* 4, no. 1 (2020): 187.

<sup>54</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), “Confidential: Intelligence Assessment of Russian Attitude in the Nigerian Civil War: A Paper for NATO Expert Working Group on the Soviet Socialist Republic and Eastern Europe Agenda Section IV (6) Nigeria 1969”, File No. JWN 3/303/1/Part C/West African Dept./Nigeria: Political Affairs, External, Bilateral Relations, Russian Attitude towards the Nigerian Civil War, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1968-December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1969, FCO 65/255/1, TNA.

<sup>55</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), “Confidential: Minute on Russian Influence in Nigeria John Wilson to E.G. Willan in the British High Commission in Lagos, November 18, 1968”, File No. JWN 3/303/1/5A368/Part A/Nigeria, Political Affairs, External, Russian Attitude towards the Nigerian Civil War January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1968-December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1969, FCO 65/253/1, TNA.

<sup>56</sup> Marta Kepe et al., *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in Africa* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2023), 6-7.

<sup>57</sup> Said Adejumobi, “The Impact of the Civil War on the Nigerian State”, in *Perspective on the Nigerian Civil War*, ed. Siyan Oyeweso (Lagos: OAP Publications, 1992), 233.

<sup>58</sup> Achebe, *There Was a Country*, 104.

and the Federal Republic of Nigeria<sup>59</sup>. The agreement was signed on behalf of the Federal Military Government by the Federal Commissioner for Economic Development Yahaya Gusau and on behalf of the Soviet government by A.I. Alikhanov Deputy Chairman of the State Committee of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union's External Economic Relations. Signing of the agreement reaffirmed the unequivocal stand of the Government of the Soviet Union in the Nigeria's struggle to preserve its unity and territorial integrity<sup>60</sup>. The Air Communication Agreement was also signed between Nigeria and Soviet Union during the civil war to boost the airpower capacity of the country<sup>61</sup>.

Because the economic worldview of Nigeria was restricted to the West<sup>62</sup>, Western diplomats in Nigeria were disquieted about the signing of the pact between Nigeria and the Soviet Union. Effort made to delay signing the pact proved futile<sup>63</sup>. A CIA's reaction to the event revealed that: "the Soviets have increased their diplomatic presence in Nigeria since the civil war and signed a Nigerian-Soviet Union economic assistance agreement. As the military stalemate forces Gowon even further towards non-alignment, the Soviet position would be enhanced while the United States and United Kingdom lose ground"<sup>64</sup>. A British official, E.G. Willan, asserted that there was little doubt that the Soviet policy of giving unqualified support to the Federal government had enabled them to improve their positions in Nigeria to some extent at the expense of Britain. This did not mean that Nigeria was in danger of becoming communist or even that there was a substantial or influential body of opinion which sympathized with Soviet policies or that wanted closer Nigeria-Soviet relations. The Nigerian government saw their relationship with the Soviets as purely opportunistic and that by letting the Soviets get a foot in the country, they did so with their eyes open<sup>65</sup>. M.R.H. Jenkins noted that "we accept that the

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<sup>59</sup> Federal Government of Nigeria, "Signing of Nigerian-Soviet Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation", Press Release from Novosty Press Agency Nigeria Branch, 1968, 1-4. See also: Federal Ministry of Information, "Soviet Economic Delegation Arrived Tomorrow", No. F. 2017, November 3, 1968.

<sup>60</sup> Oluchukwu Ignatus Onianwa, *Speeches on the Nigerian Civil War: A Historical Documentation Biafran and Federal Perspectives Volume I* (London: Academica Press, 2019), 417.

<sup>61</sup> Kasoro Kelvin Ovefla and Abraham E. Orhero, "Nigeria-Russian Economic Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: Current Dynamics and Future Prospects", *Journal of Public Administration, Finance and Law* no. 28 (2023): 382-392, <https://doi.org/10.47743/jopaf-2023-28-29>

<sup>62</sup> L.E. Okogwu and Aja Akpuru-Aja, *Nigerian Diplomacy and the Conflicts of Laws: An Insight into the Practice of Nigeria's Foreign Policy* (Abakaliki: Willy Rose and Appleseed Publishing Company, 2004), 97.

<sup>63</sup> Fredrick Forsyth, *The Making of an African Legend: The Biafran Story* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1969), 187.

<sup>64</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "Notes for the President's Daily Brief Document No. CIA-RDP79T007000250001-2", Central Intelligence Agency Historical Archives and Digital Collections, April 29, 1969.

<sup>65</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), "Confidential: Minute on Soviet Assistance to Nigeria November 23, 1968", FCO 65/253, TNA.

Soviet Union wanted to spread its influence in Nigeria and if possible at our expense. Nonetheless, we think that it is in the Soviet interest to bring the war to an end. The Soviets do not want to have to go on supplying large quantities of arms to the Federal government forever. Nor if by any chance the Western countries did impose an embargo would the Soviets want to find themselves in the position of being the only supplier of arms”<sup>66</sup>. This showed that western officials never underestimated the Soviet support for Nigeria, as it was something that they took very seriously and widely thought of within the context of the war.

An intelligence report intercepted by the British Embassy in Moscow on May 29, 1968 revealed that there was no indication in Moscow over the weakening Soviet support for the federal government. In other words, as Chinua Achebe observes, “the United Kingdom intelligence service warned that the Soviet Union penetration to Nigeria was growing massively for the Soviets saw it as a chance to increase their influence in the whole of West Africa”<sup>67</sup>. The Soviet interests were, therefore, best served by providing continued support of the federal government and they were not ready to risk their relations with them by exerting pressure for a ceasefire<sup>68</sup>. Again, the Soviets were ready to give direct military assistance to struggling African states in order to create opportunities for the perpetuation of economic and military imperialism in Africa, and especially in Nigeria<sup>69</sup>. The rationale for conducting intelligence covert actions was that the Soviet Union was seen as an expansionist power with designs on global domination, and Washington assumed the right to intervene with whatever measures were necessary to contain the threat and protect American strategic, political, or economic interests whenever and wherever they were deemed to be in jeopardy. The Cold War was, moreover, as much about perceptions as reality. In this context, it was imperative for the British government and the United States to not only secure and retain the upper hand against the Soviet Union, but also to be seen to actively do so and in many instances covert action provided the most appropriate means for the achievement of this goal<sup>70</sup>.

The Nigerian government was pleased with the immense contributions of the Soviet Union towards the effective execution of the civil war even though

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<sup>66</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), “Confidential: Minute on Nigeria-Soviet Union Relations from M.R. H. Jenkins to P.D. McEntee in the West African Department, January 16, 1969”, FCO 65/253, TNA.

<sup>67</sup> Achebe, *There Was a Country*, 100.

<sup>68</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), “From British Embassy in Moscow to Foreign Office Telegram No. 865, May 29, 1968”, FCO 38/213, TNA.

<sup>69</sup> \*\*\*, “Letter from Biafra: Russia Digs In”, *Biafra Newsletter*, January 17, 1969.

<sup>70</sup> James Callanan, *Covert Action in The Cold War US Policy, Intelligence and CIA Operations* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2010), 2.

some officials of the government tended to be skeptical about the Soviet intentions in the conflict.

#### **IV. Intelligence on Soviet Military Activities during the Civil War**

Military aid was an important instrument of the Soviet Union foreign policy. From the 1950s, the Soviet Union began to use economic and military programs as a means of expanding its influence in the underdeveloped countries of the free world particularly in Asia and Africa<sup>71</sup>. Moscow viewed its military aid program as the best means of gaining influence in Africa. The Soviet leaders perceived the large demand in Africa for weapons and military training services as being due to the inability of Western countries to fulfil their political and military obligations in these countries<sup>72</sup>. The Soviet Union's ability and willingness to deliver large quantities of arms rapidly to African or Asian countries on favorable terms had established its place in the arms market around the globe. As Deputy Under-Secretary for Economic Affairs Douglas C. Dillon remarked while reporting to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations: "the USSR is now the second greatest industrial power in the world"<sup>73</sup>.

The arrival of the Soviet Military Attaché, M.V. Medvedev, to Nigeria on November 15, 1968 was an extension of the Soviet Union military and defense aid program in Africa and elsewhere. When the Soviet Attaché arrived in Lagos, it was assumed that he would pay a visit to the intelligence and security services of other foreign countries such as the British Senior Service Attaché and Defense Adviser in Lagos R. E. Scott and the Security Desk at the US Embassy in Lagos. But such a visit never took place. With Medvedev's arrival there were now three foreign powers' Secret Service Attachés in Lagos that of United Kingdom, USA and Soviet Union<sup>74</sup>. While British officials in Lagos had anticipated positive outcomes with the arrival of Soviet Military Attaché in the context of strengthening the Anglo-Soviet support for the advancement of the

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<sup>71</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "Special Report: Soviet Military Aid. Document No. CIA-RDP7900927A004300040003-0", Central Intelligence Agency Office of Research and Reports, 1963.

<sup>72</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "USSR: Commercial Relations with the Third World and Some Consequences for Western Business. A Submission to the President's Task Force on International Private Enterprise Subcommittee on Trade and Foreign Economic Assistance", Document No. CIA-RDP08S01350R000200480001-3, December 1, 1983.

<sup>73</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "The Sino-Soviet Bloc Economic Offensive: Hazards for the Underdeveloped Countries", Document No. CIA-RDP7801634R000100060017-7, 1958.

<sup>74</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), "Priority Secret: Arrival of Russian Military Attaché to Nigeria from Lagos to Foreign Office Telegram No. 2000 November 13, 1968", FCO 65/253, TNA.

federal government's war cause, London expressed misgivings over the coming of Medvedev to Nigeria, thus, showcasing the diametrical positions of the two great powers in the conflict. On November 15, 1968, the British Foreign Secretary, Michael Stewart, maintained that: "Although we obviously cannot object to the exchange of normal diplomatic courtesy calls with the Soviet Military Attaché, we would have serious misgivings about the establishment of closer relations not so much from the general point of view of Anglo-Soviet relations as from the particular circumstances of Nigeria"<sup>75</sup>.

The identification of the Soviet Union's military activities through the supply of arms and military aircraft to Nigeria was a key aspect of the British intelligence operations. The Soviet Union military contribution to Nigeria's war efforts consisted largely of very expensive arm transfers<sup>76</sup>. A British intelligence report on the external influence in the civil war, released on August 8, 1967 revealed the Federal Military Government of Nigeria's determination to obtain arms particularly jet aircrafts and armored cars from the Soviet Union. On August 3, 1967, there was delivery of six Czech jet trainers to Nigeria.<sup>77</sup> The Nigerian government imported from the Soviet Union a squadron of twelve reconditioned MIG-17 fighters and another twenty-nine trainers<sup>78</sup> as well as Ilyushin bombers for the Federal Air Force<sup>79</sup>. In March 1968, a consignment of 28 Ilyushin bomber fighters was delivered to the federal force aircraft park<sup>80</sup>. All these transfers show us that Nigeria had turned to the Soviet Union for the supply of military aircraft to maintain dominance in the air war<sup>81</sup>. Additionally, the Soviet Union supplied Nigeria with T-34 battle tanks, antiaircraft guns, AK-47 rifles, machine guns, grenades, mines and bombs<sup>82</sup>. The decision to purchase Soviet equipment was not taken lightly. Federal leaders also

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<sup>75</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), "Confidential: Russian Military Attaché from the British Foreign Secretary to Lagos Telegram No. 1822 November 15, 1968", FCO 65/253, TNA.

<sup>76</sup> Current News from and About Biafra, "UK Increases Arms to Nigeria", no. 59, November 26, 1969.

<sup>77</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), "Secret: Report on Nigerian Military Situation and the Assessment Before the War by British Defence Intelligence Staff August 8, 1967 File No. S/R/1993/ Title: Intelligence General Commonwealth Countries Nigeria March 20, 1967-December 31, 1969", Ministry of Defence Papers 31/27, TNA.

<sup>78</sup> Stremiau, "The International Politics", 79.

<sup>79</sup> Raph Uwechue, *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War: Facing the Future* (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1971), 9.

<sup>80</sup> Markpress News Feature Services, "Soviet Steps Up Supply of Military Aircraft to Nigeria", Biafra Overseas Press Division, Gen no. 28, March 22, 1968.

<sup>81</sup> Al J. Venter, "Book Reviews Cold War 1945: 1991 Biafra Genocide, Nigeria: Bloodletting and Mass Starvation, 1967 – 1970", *Scientia Militaria – South African Journal of Military Studies* 47, no. 1 (2019): 137, <https://doi.org/10.5787/47-1-1272>.

<sup>82</sup> Achebe, *There Was a Country*, 154.

did not want to unduly alarm Western interests, despite their irritation with the United States and Britain<sup>83</sup>.

A report published in *Daily Telegraph* by Bruce Loudon from Lisbon, on August 6, 1968 revealed that the Soviets had a Radar Tracking System (RTS) which according to Colonel Wichmann, the controller of the Joint Church Aid, made it easier for them to track relief planes and possibly shoot them down. The radar was based on a Russian warship stationed between the Island of Sao Tome and the coast closed to Biafra. The warship relayed information to Nigeria's air force command as more Russian arms made their way to Lagos for delivery to the Nigerian troops on the war front<sup>84</sup>.

At the end of October 1968, a Soviet cargo ship unloaded a large number of Russian vehicles at the Apapa docks in Lagos. Brigadier Hassan Kastina, the Chief of Staff of the Federal Army, said that they were destined for the Northern and Southern sectors of the war front. Meanwhile, the Soviets had by the end of October 1968 began to deliver, for the first time, infantry arms and ammunition in Antonov transport planes flying between Anaba in Algeria and Kano in Northern Nigeria. This increase was regarded as Moscow's response to a Nigerian request for more arms following the report of French arms supply to Biafra<sup>85</sup>. In this sense, it is notable that the Soviet military personnel had worked very closely with the Nigerian army units. The First-Lieutenant commanding A Company 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 14 Brigade of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Nigerian Federal Marine Commando Division, Buraimoh Araenia, revealed that “the Russian officers had considerable military authority to order the Nigerian company commanders and other officers what to do and when to do it. The Russians did not wish to delegate their work nor rely on Nigerians. The military operations were observed not only by Soviet military experts but by engineers and technicians”<sup>86</sup>.

While the Soviet military assistance was limited to sales of equipment and provision of technical assistance, it enabled the enlargement of the Soviet diplomatic and commercial missions in Lagos<sup>87</sup>. This is relevant since some of the Soviet military equipment supplied to the Nigerian armed forces was destroyed by the Biafran army on several occasions on the battlefield. As John De St. Jorre notes, “In late May 1969 lightning raids on Benin and Enugu

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<sup>83</sup> Suzanne Cronje, *The World and Nigeria: The Diplomatic History of the Biafran War, 1967-1970* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972), 268.

<sup>84</sup> Current News from and About Biafra, “Soviet Radar and the Nigerians”, no. 19, June 20, 1969.

<sup>85</sup> Cronje, *The World and Nigeria*, 268.

<sup>86</sup> Markpress News Feature Services, “Russians Turn Nigerian-Biafra Conflict into a War Game”, Biafra Overseas Press Division, Gen No. 279, August 23, 1968. See also: Biafra Newsletter, “Soviet Made Nigerian Plane Raids US Companies”, October 27, 1967.

<sup>87</sup> Directorate of Central Intelligence and United States Intelligence Board, “Prospects for Postwar Nigeria”, National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) No. 64.2-70, November 2, 1970.

airfields spearheaded by Count von Rosen, destroyed on ground several Russian built aircraft of the Nigerian air force”<sup>88</sup>. The Soviet Union posed as the most important friend of Nigeria, having furnished the country with considerable military material which put them in good standing with the federal government. The Nigerian leaders had found the British government to be too slow in fulfilling their military commitments while, at the same time, the United States refused to grant the country the expected military demands<sup>89</sup>.

Britain was concerned that the involvement of the Soviet Union in the war increased the risks of losing its influence with the Federal Military Government. In the British Parliamentary debates on the Nigerian situation in the House of Commons London held on Tuesday August 27, 1968, the British Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, George Thomson, while justifying the British policy in the conflict, said that it was an argument that Britain should not be in the company of the Soviet Union in supplying arms when that country had adopted an oppressive attitude towards smaller nations, as illustrated by the Soviet Union’s actions in Czechoslovakia. As noted, the Russians had already secured a political foothold in Nigeria by supplying it with military aircraft and bombs. If British arms were cutoff, Russia would be only too willing to fill the gap and replace the influence which Britain would lose in Nigeria<sup>90</sup>.

Within the foregoing period, federal officials in Lagos had issued a series of warnings that if London did not grant the Nigerian Armed Forces’ request for military assistance they would not hesitate to reach out to the Soviet Union or to a third party. On June 17, 1968, the Commander of the Nigerian Navy, Admiral Wey and the Commander of the Nigerian Air Force, Shittu Alao, had separately told the British Defense Adviser R.E. Scott that the Soviet Union Embassy in Lagos had consistently and actively approached them and other senior members of Gowon’s government. Alao admitted that the Soviets had frequently approached him and were prepared to meet all his requests. Alao also confirmed that the Soviet Freighter Nikolai Nekrasov delivered a large consignment of bombs for the Nigerian Air Force on June 14, 1968. According to Admiral Wey, “Soviet Ambassador had recently pressed for him to be formally appointed Military Attaché, but Gowon again refused. As a result, if

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<sup>88</sup> John De St. Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1972), 334.

<sup>89</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “The Presidential Daily Brief on Nigeria”, Document No. CIA-RDP79T00936700190001-3, January 24, 1969.

<sup>90</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), “Extracts from British Parliamentary Debates on the Nigerian Situation in the House of Commons London Tuesday August 27, 1968”, FCO 38/288, TNA.

UK stopped arms supplies to Nigeria, the Soviet Union would immediately step in”<sup>91</sup>.

CIA’s National Intelligence Estimate report on Nigeria dated November 2, 1970, confirmed the Soviets’ deep meddling into Nigeria’s military establishment and of the entire Gowon government during the war. According to the report, “the Soviets wanted to become sole suppliers of military aid to Nigeria having persuaded some officials in the Nigerian Ministry of Defense and some army officers of the wisdom of such a scheme. Gowon and the top leadership in the armed forces were comfortable to the idea because they saw the Soviets as an alternative in meeting their military needs that could not be met through traditional Western sources”<sup>92</sup>.

E.G. Willan, a lead British expert and intelligence officer warned that Nigerian officials had resisted Soviet overtures to train personnel of the Nigerian Navy and Air Force in Russia. Should any of the Nigerian services allow personnel to be sent to Russia for training it would have indicated greater Soviet influence in the services. The arrival of the Soviet Military Attaché had been followed by a request for a deputy which would give the Russians greater opportunities to tour military establishments in Nigeria<sup>93</sup>. C.L. Booth maintained that it was not desirable to leave the federal government entirely in the hands of the Russians. As long as the Nigerian government retained confidence in the British Government, the Russians might have an uphill battle to establish a position of real influence among the British trained officers who supported the federal government; but if the British position of trust in Lagos was undermined by a total cut-off of British arms deliveries, this would make things easy for the Russians to gain a foothold in Nigeria<sup>94</sup>.

Meanwhile, during this time, the Soviet presence increased in Nigeria by a large percentage. A relevant example was the visit of four Soviet Naval vessels to Lagos on March 5-9, 1969. A Soviet Naval Squadron comprising two Missile Destroyers, one ‘F’ Class Submarine and one fleet oiler arrived in Lagos. A Squadron led by flagship Commodore Vlazwkir Platonov, Boiky Hull No. 976 which was a Krupny class guided missile destroyer, had also arrived. This was followed by the Neuloviny Kotlin Sam class guided missile destroyer Hull No.

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<sup>91</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), “Confidential: Minute on Soviet Arms Supplies from the British High Commissioner in Lagos Sir David Hunt to Commonwealth Office Telegram No. 845, June 17, 1968”, PREM 13/2257, TNA.

<sup>92</sup> Directorate of Central Intelligence and United States Intelligence Board. “Prospects for Postwar Nigeria”, National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) No. 64.2-70, November 2, 1970.

<sup>93</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), “Secret: Soviet Aims and Activities in Nigeria: Comments on JIC Paper (68) 70 (Final)”, FCO 65/254, TNA.

<sup>94</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), “Confidential: Minute on Arms Supply for Nigeria from C.L. Booth Foreign Office London to J. E. Killick British Embassy Washington DC August 31, 1967”, FCO 38/267, TNA.

952<sup>95</sup>. The Soviet Naval visit was accompanied by celebrations, complete with concerts and a football match which the Nigerians won or were possibly allowed to win. The Squadron Commander Captain A.A. Platonov, the Soviet Ambassador to Nigeria, A.I. Romanov, and Soviet Naval officers were present with this occasion<sup>96</sup>. Gowon proposed a toast to the friends of the Nigerian people and friendly relations between Nigeria and the Soviet Union<sup>97</sup>.

Despite the events noted above, the Soviet Union's relationship with the Nigerian government was not always cordial as Lagos had on several occasions become suspicious and distrusted the Soviet actions during the conflict. This act of distrust manifested itself in several ways. For instance, Gowon was reportedly incensed at the behavior of Soviet Ambassador Romanov during the Soviet naval visit to Lagos on March 5-9, 1969. In an attempt to regain custody of a Soviet seaman who had jumped ship in Lagos harbor, Romanov apparently told the Nigerian police that Gowon himself had ordered the immediate release of the would-be defector. At a staff meeting held on March 10, 1969, Gowon denounced Romanov's actions. The naval visit also occasioned a personal dispute between Romanov and Admiral Joseph Way, the Nigerian Navy Commander, who had succeeded in postponing the visit several times and then in limiting it to fewer days than the Soviets wanted. Way also publicly called Romanov a dishonest man and accused him of saying malicious things about him. Despite the great importance of the Soviet military aid given to the federal government, Nigerians tried to protect themselves from Soviet meddling. Lagos had consistently attempted to limit the size of the Soviet Embassy and to control Soviet front organizations<sup>98</sup>.

In all the British intelligence operations and diplomatic contacts with the Soviets over Nigeria they professed continued support to the federal government until they won the war and would further continue to do so even if others were to withdraw their support. E.G. Donohoe argued that the Soviet Union did not seem to be interested in a quick end to the war, though equally they could probably not afford to see the Federal Military Government lose. Deliveries of war equipment appeared designed to force the Nigerians to keep coming back for further requests. Despite this, senior members of the federal government remained reluctant to be too closely committed to the Soviet

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<sup>95</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), "Confidential: Minute on Soviet Naval Visit to Lagos from the British High Commissioner in Lagos David Hunt to Foreign and Commonwealth Office Telegram No. 466, March 5, 1969", FCO 65/254, TNA.

<sup>96</sup> BBC, "Lagos: Gowon Reception for Soviet Naval Squadron", B45/(MF), Monday 1540/6.3.CMH/BMON/Testing 1530.

<sup>97</sup> Reuters/BBC, "Reception 2 Toast to Friendly Relations", Monday 1541/6.3 CMH.

<sup>98</sup> United States Department of State Director of Intelligence and Research, "Research Memorandum: USSR-Nigeria: Bilateral Tensions Increase as War Drags On. From Thomas L. Hughes to the Secretary of State Document No. RSE-24/PA/HO Department of State/E.O. 12958 as amended", April 2, 1969, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/documents/organization/54599.pdf>

Union<sup>99</sup>. The federal government tended to take a pragmatic view of their relations with the Soviet Union and were aware of the dangers this relation could pose but believed they had the ability to handle them. Britain doubted the confidence of the Nigerian government in tackling the Soviets and the more they inform them of the risks the better.

In all these, the intelligence outlook on the Soviet Union during the civil war produced by the United States and Britain, was that Moscow's position in Nigeria might become increasingly controversial given international considerations, such as its relationship with Paris, its image in the face of rising humanitarian sympathy for Biafra's plight, and a growing African sentiment for a compromised peace settlement. To ease their position, Soviet policymakers could look with more sympathy than they had before on a compromise settlement which would allow Moscow to retain most of its gains in Federal Nigeria, while recouping its prestige in eastern Nigeria. Indeed, Biafra was an area to which the Soviets devoted most of their attention before the war started, and there was evidence that they had been in intermittent contact with Biafran representatives since the outbreak of hostilities. Soviet press and propaganda organs had consistently referred to Biafrans and their leaders, such as Colonel Ojukwu as misguided but not malevolent. There was other fragmentary evidence that Moscow did not lock itself too tightly into support of the federal side. A March 17, 1969 article in the *London Financial Times* quoted reliable sources to the effect that high-ranking Biafran officials had been approached by Soviet representatives who suggested that Moscow could use its influence in Lagos to win a political settlement acceptable to Biafra's leadership. It was possible that the *Financial Times* story was no more than a Biafran attempt to drive a wedge between Moscow and Lagos but it might have contained a germ of truth. From the foregoing revelations, it was believed that Moscow's view of its interests in Nigeria in general and its relationship with Lagos in particular, were important factors in assessing the possibility that the Soviets might be interested in a compromise solution to the Nigerian Civil War<sup>100</sup>.

Meanwhile, on the other side, containment was the motive behind the British intelligence program monitoring the Soviet Union during the civil war. Britain in collaboration with its allies was bent on containing the excesses of the Soviet Union in terms of military buildup and of wielding too much economic influence across Africa mainly in Nigeria and other parts of the globe. According to the United States diplomat, Henry Kissinger, "the greatest problems was how to manage the Soviets as they emerged as global instead of

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<sup>99</sup> The National Archives (Kew Garden, London), "Confidential: Minute on Soviet Influence in Nigeria from E.G. Donohoe in the British High Commission Lagos to P.D. McEntee in the West African Department Foreign and Commonwealth Office London, August 9, 1969", FCO 65/255/1, TNA.

<sup>100</sup> United States Department of State Director of Intelligence and Research, "Research Memorandum: USSR-Nigeria: Bilateral Tensions Increase as War Drags".

regional superpower”<sup>101</sup>. Thus, evidence gathered from the British intelligence operations during the conflict was used to create negative perceptions of the Soviet Union in Nigeria, reminding the federal government of the danger Russia posed to the national security architecture of Nigeria.

## V. Conclusion

The Nigerian conflict showed that Africa had remained the theatre for great power competition given that influence and strategic engagement would yield political, economic and commercial benefits. Since Africa has numerous untapped natural resources, conflicts like the Nigerian Civil War offered a great opportunity for the great powers to flex their diplomatic muscle in a manner that would protect their respective spheres of influence in order safeguard vital interests. In fact, Russia’s military presence on the continent dominated by far diplomatic activities, informational presence, and even economic influence. Russia’s military-technical cooperation was aimed at maintaining and expanding Russia’s arms export market, ensuring the presence of Russian military experts and trainers, gaining experience in counterterrorism operations, improving the access of Russian forces to locations that could have strategic and operational meaning, establishing support bases for Russian forces, improving the system of deployment for the armed forces, and thus supporting Russia’s image as a great power.

Ideological reasons had given way to economic and geopolitical interests particularly since maintaining good relations with African leaders would maintain Russia’s role as an influential power and support their economic interests<sup>102</sup>. Thus, British intelligence directed against the Soviet Union purposely looked for tangible evidence needed to protest the Soviet Union involvement in the war while at the same time justifying Britain’s actions, portrayed as having undertaken the right policy approach in the conflict. Britain was uncomfortable with the prospect that the involvement of the Soviet Union in the war increased the risks of losing its influence with the federal government. The number one sign pointing to this situation was the attitude of the Nigerian government repeatedly warning British officials that if London did not grant Lagos the request for military assistance they would not hesitate to reach out to the Soviet Union. British intelligence in this context was meant to prove that the Soviet ambition was to expand their influence in Africa and not to protect the territorial integrity of Nigeria which had been the main policy of the Federal Military Government in the war.

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<sup>101</sup> Walter Lafeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-1984* (New York: Alfred A. Knof, 1985), 239.

<sup>102</sup> Kepe et al., *Great-Power Competition*, 20.

Having gathered enough evidence to prove their suspicions about Soviet grand designs despite their consistent denials, Britain next questioned how to deal with the growing Soviet incursions in the war. The proposition arrived at was that any intelligence action should revolve around how to protect British interests in the country and that this fundamental interest would be best served by the preservation of Nigerian unity. It was concluded that Nigeria must remain as one indivisible nation so that the country would serve as a source of influence and protector of Western values in West Africa against communist ideals championed by Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union had strategic ambitions in the whole of Africa, but they found the Nigerian conflict to be an opportunity to execute their long-term plans of expanding military and economic cooperation in that region. These bilateral relations were envisaged to give the Soviets an unhindered foothold in Nigeria. Any legitimate political ambition and growth of Russian influence was bound to be inimical to the British interests in the country. Notably, after the conflict, the Russians tried to consolidate and extend their influence in Nigeria, but Britain had more experience with Nigeria's political landscape than the Russians and its influence was deeply rooted. As such, it became British policy to consistently review the Soviet threats as they materialized and be prepares to counter them when required from that point onwards.

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