



PROXY DIPLOMACY: THE STRATEGIC INTERPLAY OF WESTERN INTERESTS AND HUMANITARIAN AID IN THE NIGERIA-BIAFRA CONFLICT, 1967-1970

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Abstract

This study, "Proxy Diplomacy: The Strategic Interplay of Western Interests and Humanitarian Aid in the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict," investigates the complex motivations behind Western interventions during the war. Using historical methodology, it argues that humanitarian aid was not merely a philanthropic response to the world's first televised famine, but a strategic instrument used by Western powers to navigate the constraints of Cold War geopolitics and post-colonial interests. Through a multi-archival analysis of the policies of the United Kingdom, France, and the United States, the study demonstrates how aid served as a "diplomatic proxy." While the British government maintained a policy of "One Nigeria" to protect oil investments and Commonwealth stability, it was forced to facilitate relief to appease a domestic public horrified by images of the Biafran famine. Conversely, France utilized humanitarian rhetoric to clandestinely support the secessionist state, viewing a fragmented Nigeria as a means to diminish Anglophone influence in West Africa. The United States, caught between its "Special Relationship" with Britain and rising domestic pressure, adopted a "neutrality" that prioritized relief over political recognition. The research highlights the birth of the "Biafran Airlift" and the subsequent rise of independent NGOs, such as Médecins Sans Frontières, which challenged the traditional primacy of state sovereignty. Ultimately, the paper concludes that the Nigeria-Biafra conflict transformed the nature of modern diplomacy by blurring the lines between military support and humanitarian assistance. It reveals that the "politics of pity" often masked a deeper "politics of power," where the survival of the Biafran people became inextricably linked to the strategic calculations of distant Western capitals.

Keywords:

1.0 Introduction

The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) remains one of the most complex and devastating conflicts of the post-colonial era. Often simplified as a domestic struggle for secession, the war was, in reality, a globalized event where the boundaries between moral obligation and national interest became dangerously blurred. As the breakaway Republic of Biafra faced a total blockade, the resulting famine broadcast into Western living rooms via the emerging

medium of television, triggered an unprecedented international outcry. However, beneath the surface of the "politics of pity" lay a rigid framework of "proxy diplomacy," where Western powers used humanitarian aid as a strategic tool to influence the war's outcome without engaging in direct military confrontation.

The war began in July 1967 following years of ethnic tensions, political instability, and the eventual declaration of independence by Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu's



Eastern Region of Nigeria. While the Federal Military Government (FMG) of Nigeria sought to maintain "One Nigeria" through a policy of "starvation as a legitimate weapon of war," the secessionist leadership in Biafra leveraged the humanitarian crisis to gain international sympathy. This placed Western nations in a diplomatic quagmire: how to respond to the suffering of millions while protecting their economic and geopolitical stakes in Africa's most populous nation.

The Nigerian Civil War represents a watershed moment in the history of international relations, marking the emergence of "humanitarian diplomacy" as a potent yet paradoxical tool of foreign policy. The Nigerian Civil War unfolded during the height of the Cold War, a period marked by ideological rivalry and geopolitical competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, with Britain and France also asserting distinct strategic interests. Although Nigeria was not a conventional Cold War battleground like Vietnam or Korea, the secession of Biafra and the ensuing humanitarian catastrophe attracted the attention of Western global powers, each navigating the crisis through a mix of diplomacy, covert support, and public posturing.

Western Interests, Humanitarian Aid and Proxy Diplomacy

Western powers, notably; Britain, France, and the United States of America played politics of enlightened national interests during the Nigerian civil war (Gauthier, 2009). As Nigeria's former colonial master, Britain maintained the closest diplomatic and military ties with Nigeria. The British government, under Prime Minister Harold Wilson, consistently supported the Federal Military Government (FMG) led by General Yakubu Gowon, driven primarily by

concerns for political stability, economic interests in Nigerian oil, and the preservation of Nigeria's territorial integrity. Britain viewed a unified Nigeria as essential to maintaining its influence in postcolonial West Africa (Stremlau, 1977). Britain's support went beyond diplomatic rhetoric. The Wilson administration approved continued arms sales to the Nigerian government throughout the war, despite mounting domestic opposition and the growing visibility of Biafra's humanitarian plight. British-made jets and armoured vehicles were used in federal military campaigns, raising moral questions among both the British public and parliamentarians (Uche, 2008). British officials publicly denied selling offensive weapons, but investigative reports and testimonies, including those by former British diplomats, indicated otherwise. Critics such as Frederick Forsyth and Labour Party dissenters accused Britain of complicity in the Biafran genocide (Forsyth, 1969). Despite international appeals for neutrality or mediation, Britain remained firmly in Nigeria's corner. This choice was partly motivated by fears that encouraging secession in Nigeria would set a dangerous precedent across Africa, leading to a cascade of ethnic breakaways in other former colonies.

In contrast to Britain's overt support for the Nigerian government, France pursued a covert and ideologically motivated policy favouring Biafra. Charles de Gaulle's administration saw Biafra as an opportunity to expand French influence in West Africa and undermine the British Commonwealth, particularly in the oil-rich Gulf of Guinea (Heerten & Moses, 2014). French support was strategic and calculated, delivered in a manner that allowed for official deniability. Though France never formally recognized



Biafra, it provided arms, logistics, and diplomatic backing through third-party nations and private networks. Countries such as Côte d'Ivoire and Gabon, both under pro-French leadership, became intermediaries in smuggling weapons, ferrying supplies, and lobbying on behalf of Biafra in international forums (Uche, 2008). French humanitarian organisations such as the Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) emerged in response to the war. They later pioneered the doctrine of "humanitarian intervention." France's support for Biafra had symbolic and ideological value. De Gaulle saw the Biafran crisis as a test of African self-determination and a counterweight to Anglo-American dominance (Klinhoffer, 1977). The French press, echoing de Gaulle's sentiments, framed the conflict as a struggle between a Christian, modernising Biafra and a repressive, Islamic-leaning, northern-dominated Nigerian state. This framing enhanced popular support for the Biafran cause in France, reinforcing the state's indirect intervention.

The United States adopted an official stance of neutrality throughout the conflict, guided by a desire not to antagonize either side and to maintain relations with a potentially strategic African partner. Under President Lyndon Johnson and later Richard Nixon, the U.S. State Department repeatedly affirmed Nigeria's territorial integrity while expressing concern over the humanitarian toll (Korieh, 2012). Nigeria's non-alignment in the Cold War made overt intervention diplomatically risky. Nonetheless, internal divisions existed within the U.S. government and civil society. While official policy leaned toward the Nigerian federal government, members of Congress, civil rights leaders, academics, and religious groups advocated strongly for Biafra. High-

profile American organizations such as the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive and the Joint Church Aid coalition lobbied Washington to intervene, whether diplomatically or through humanitarian airlifts. Media coverage, particularly by Life Magazine and CBS, played a pivotal role in capturing American attention to the war. Reports of starvation and genocide elicited comparisons with Nazi atrocities and the Holocaust, compelling the American public to demand humanitarian responses (Nwakobi, 1990). However, these moral appeals often clashed with strategic interests, especially those related to oil, regional stability, and Cold War alliances. The Johnson administration focused its efforts on humanitarian relief, working alongside the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and various religious organizations to deliver aid. The U.S. Air Force provided logistical support for food drops; however, Washington was careful not to give the impression that it was backing Biafra's political agenda. This balancing act reflects what Lischer (2005) calls "calibrated engagement" where states offer aid to alleviate suffering without altering the political outcome of a conflict.

The Soviet Union's role in the Nigerian Civil War was less visible but significant. In the late 1960s, the USSR sought to expand its influence in Africa, countering American and Chinese efforts and strengthening ties with nationalist governments. Despite Nigeria's non-aligned posture, the USSR provided the FMG with arms and military advisers, aligning itself surprisingly with Britain in its support of the Nigerian state (Matusevich, 2003). This pragmatic alliance was rooted in *realpolitik*. The USSR preferred a strong, centralized Nigerian government to a fragmented West Africa where U.S.-backed proxies could flourish.



The USSR also feared that supporting Biafra might encourage ethnic nationalism, which could resonate uncomfortably in its multi-ethnic republics. As opined by Ediagbonya (2022) Moscow's engagement was based more on strategic opportunity than ideological solidarity. Eastern Bloc states, such as Czechoslovakia and Poland, followed the Soviet lead, providing limited military support and diplomatic endorsements for Nigera. However, the Soviet Union refrained from any direct involvement in the humanitarian dimension of the crisis. Unlike Western countries, where civil society played a role, the USSR treated the conflict as a state-to-state affair, emphasizing sovereignty over human rights (Matusevich, 2003).

The role of international organisations, such as the United Nations and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), was constrained by the political realities imposed by the superpowers (Isana, 2023). The UN maintained a largely peripheral role, limited to symbolic resolutions and mild condemnations. The OAU, meanwhile, upheld the sanctity of colonial borders and refused to recognize Biafra's independence, reinforcing the federal government's legitimacy. Humanitarian diplomacy was left mainly to non-state actors, including NGOs, religious institutions, and advocacy networks. The Biafran war thus marked a transitional moment in which humanitarianism became a transnational force, sometimes independent of state control. Médecins Sans Frontières emerged from frustrations with the ICRC's neutrality and lack of outspokenness, advocating for a more politicized, confrontational form of humanitarian engagement (Davey, 2012)

In this context, the influence of superpowers on humanitarian diplomacy was paradoxical: while official state actors were hesitant to

intervene militarily or recognize Biafra, they enabled or obstructed aid through logistical, political, and diplomatic channels. The Cold War logic of containment and influence made direct intervention undesirable. Still, it did not preclude covert support, rhetorical gestures, or the deployment of humanitarian resources as tools of soft power (Suberu, 2001).

Diplomatic Challenges and Failure of Western Mediation

The diplomatic response of Western powers to the Nigerian Civil War was characterised by complex geopolitical interests, selective engagement, and ultimately limited effectiveness. While several Western countries, notably Britain, the United States, and France, attempted various forms of mediation or intervention, these efforts were constrained by competing national priorities, Cold War alignments, and an underestimation of the conflict's intensity and longevity.

As Nigeria's former colonial ruler, Britain occupied a central but highly conflicted diplomatic position. Although it publicly advocated for a united Nigeria and a peaceful resolution to the conflict, Britain's approach was primarily driven by pragmatic economic and strategic interests, particularly in maintaining access to oil in the Niger Delta through its partnerships with Shell and BP (Stremlau, 1977). British mediation efforts, including attempts to support Commonwealth-led peace talks, were largely symbolic and did not translate into pressure on the Federal Government to cease hostilities. The British government also downplayed the humanitarian catastrophe in Biafra, fearing that stronger involvement might jeopardize its relationship with Lagos or compromise post-colonial stability in West Africa (Oshuntokun, 1979). Moreover, the Aburi Accord, a key moment of



attempted reconciliation in 1967, was diplomatically supported by the Commonwealth and indirectly influenced by Britain. Yet, when the accord collapsed, Britain refrained from a robust follow-up, signaling a preference for non-interventionist diplomacy over sustained conflict resolution.

The United States, although globally assertive during the Cold War, maintained a low-profile stance on the Nigerian conflict. The U.S. State Department viewed Nigeria as a strategic ally in West Africa and was reluctant to intervene decisively, partly due to internal disagreements about the nature of the conflict. While some American diplomats and civil society actors pushed for humanitarian action in Biafra, the Nixon administration emphasized non-interference. It deferred to Britain as the lead Western power on Nigerian affairs (Heerten & Moses, 2012). Efforts at U.S. mediation, including quiet diplomatic messages urging ceasefires and humanitarian corridors, lacked coherence and were overshadowed by Cold War priorities in Southeast Asia and Latin America. The U.S. was also wary of appearing to support secessionist movements, given its global stance on territorial integrity and concerns about setting a precedent (Onuegbu & Hansen, 2016).

France's role was arguably the most controversial among Western powers. Officially, France supported Nigeria's territorial integrity. Yet, it covertly supplied arms and diplomatic support to Biafra, partly as a strategy to counterbalance British influence in West Africa and promote French-speaking African alliances. This duality severely undermined any possibility of neutral Western mediation. French NGOs and missionaries were also active in raising international awareness of the Biafran

humanitarian crisis, which added a moral dimension to French policy but lacked cohesive diplomatic follow-through (Omeid, 2010). French involvement ultimately complicated the international consensus on the conflict, weakening broader Western coordination and providing Nigeria with grounds to resist multilateral peace frameworks perceived as foreign interference.

The involvement of Western humanitarian agencies, particularly the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and NGOs such as Caritas and Médecins Sans Frontières, introduced new dimensions of humanitarian diplomacy. These organizations attempted to broker relief corridors and ceasefires to facilitate the delivery of food and medical supplies into Biafra. However, the Nigerian government regarded such moves with suspicion, viewing them as veiled political support for secession. The lack of coordinated Western diplomatic pressure to ensure safe humanitarian access exposed the limits of Western moral diplomacy. The failure to establish neutral aid corridors or enforce humanitarian ceasefires reflected both the sovereignty concerns of the Nigerian state and the diplomatic fragmentation among Western actors (Draper, 1976).

Efforts by the western powers to mediate in the crisis proved largely unsuccessful. The overall failure of Western mediation stemmed from several structural challenges: Geopolitical divergence among Britain, France, and the United States, each pursuing different strategic objectives in Africa. A Cold War context that prioritized ideological containment over local conflict resolution. The lack of a unified Western diplomatic platform leaves peace efforts disjointed and inconsistent. The Nigerian government's successful framing of the war as a domestic



matter, using sovereignty discourse to resist foreign pressure. As a result, Western powers were unable to function as credible and unified mediators, and their interventions were mainly peripheral, humanitarian, or reactive.

One of the defining features of the Nigerian Civil War was the intense deployment of propaganda and media narratives by both the Federal Government of Nigeria and the Biafran secessionists. These efforts extended beyond the battlefield into the realm of international diplomacy, shaping the perceptions of Western powers, humanitarian actors, and global public opinion. The war thus became not only a military and political contest but also a media war, where competing narratives were instrumental in galvanizing or deterring Western interest and intervention. The Biafran leadership, under Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, developed a sophisticated and emotionally driven propaganda apparatus, leveraging the imagery of starving children and blockaded civilians to portray Biafra as a victim of genocide. Through strategic use of Western journalists, Catholic missions, and humanitarian NGOs, Biafra was able to capture global media attention, particularly in Europe and North America. International newspapers and magazines, including *Life*, *The Observer*, and *Le Monde*, carried graphic images and emotive stories of the Biafran humanitarian crisis, stirring widespread outrage and sympathy (Heerton & Moses, 2014).

This media strategy proved remarkably effective in mobilizing civil society support in the West, especially among faith-based organizations and human rights groups. In France, the images of Biafra's suffering played into the national narrative of humanitarianism and anti-colonial

resistance, further fueling covert French support for the secessionist cause. In Britain, however, the government remained unmoved despite public pressure, underscoring the disconnect between media influence and official policy (Nwakobi, 1990).

The Nigerian Government, by contrast, was slower to engage with international media but eventually launched its counter-propaganda efforts. The regime emphasized the unity of Nigeria, painted the conflict as an internal matter, and depicted Biafra as a rebellious minority group threatening national stability. Nigerian diplomats and officials worked diligently to control the narrative in international forums such as the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations, framing their military campaign as a legitimate internal policing operation rather than a war of aggression. The government also accused Biafra of manipulating Western media and faking humanitarian crises to gain foreign intervention. Nigerian information officers and foreign ministry officials challenged Western media outlets that they saw as sympathetic to Biafra, calling into question the neutrality of their reports (Gould, 2012). However, Nigeria's censorship of journalists and limited access to the war zones further undermined its credibility abroad.

The Western media played an essential role in framing the conflict and influencing public sentiment in Europe and North America. Coverage of the Biafran crisis often adopted moralistic tones, portraying the conflict in binary terms of good versus evil, with the Nigerian government frequently cast as the aggressor. The emotive power of famine imagery, especially the emaciated bodies of children, became a symbolic rallying point for Western audiences and helped spark the first



large-scale modern humanitarian responses, including airlifts and international relief efforts (Draper, 1976).

This media coverage was not without bias or geopolitical undertones. French media outlets were far more sympathetic to Biafra, partly due to the government's covert support. British media, while covering the humanitarian crisis, faced greater governmental pushback and often received limited access to conflict zones. American media, particularly television networks, reported the war with greater emotional engagement than the U.S. government itself, contributing to the disconnect between U.S. foreign policy and popular sentiment (Heerton, 2017).

Despite the media frenzy and widespread public concern, Western governments were largely unmoved to act decisively, highlighting a crucial gap between public outrage and official foreign policy. The Western powers, especially Britain and the United States, remained cautious about being seen to support secessionism and were hesitant to intervene in what was framed as an internal African issue. Thus, although propaganda and media attention brought the war to the centre of international consciousness, it did not translate into meaningful diplomatic or military intervention from the West.

In this regard, the Nigerian Civil War marked the beginning of the instrumentalisation of humanitarian crises for geopolitical ends.

Humanitarian Response and Post-War Relations

The humanitarian response to the Nigerian Civil War marked one of the earliest large-scale international relief efforts in the postcolonial era. Western involvement, though framed in altruistic and humanitarian terms, was deeply entwined with political

interests, ethical dilemmas, and diplomatic constraints. The Biafran crisis served as a testing ground for Western governments, NGOs, and faith-based organizations, whose relief efforts would inadvertently become politicised instruments in the broader dynamics of war, sovereignty, and global diplomacy. The horrific images of malnourished and dying Biafran children broadcast through international media spurred widespread humanitarian concern across Western societies. The resulting outcry gave rise to a constellation of NGOs, missionary-led initiatives, and intergovernmental agencies focused on alleviating the famine in the Eastern Region. Catholic and Protestant missions already established in Biafra played a foundational role, often acting as the logistical backbone for aid distribution (Omeid, 20. Notably, this period witnessed the rise of Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières), whose founding members had worked in Biafra and became disillusioned with the traditional model of humanitarian neutrality. Their experience in Nigeria led them to advocate for "témoignage", bearing witness and speaking out, thus transforming the nature of humanitarian aid into a more politically conscious enterprise (Heerton, 2017).

While humanitarian in intent, many relief efforts became indirect tools of political signaling. Western countries, especially France and some Scandinavian nations, supported airlifts of relief supplies into Biafra through neutral corridors established via São Tomé and Gabon. These operations, coordinated by organizations such as Joint Church Aid (JCA), operated night flights into Biafran territory, a controversial method that risked violating Nigerian sovereignty.

The Nigerian Federal Government saw these airlifts not merely as humanitarian missions but as covert support for Biafran secession,



accusing Western charities and religious missions of aiding the enemy. This tension heightened Nigeria's diplomatic friction with several Western states and complicated its relationship with the Vatican and international Christian missions. The federal government insisted that all aid pass through Lagos and be distributed under its supervision a demand that most NGOs and Biafran authorities rejected, fearing politicization and denial of access to those in need (Draper, 1976).

In both Britain and the United States, relief efforts were tightly controlled and depoliticized. The British government, committed to the territorial unity of Nigeria, emphasized that all aid must respect Nigerian sovereignty and be funneled through federal channels. This position reflected both geopolitical alignment and economic interest, particularly in safeguarding oil access in the Niger Delta and maintaining strong diplomatic ties with Lagos (Kwarteng, 2021). The American response, although initially hesitant, gradually increased as domestic pressure mounted from church groups, African American activists, and humanitarian organizations. However, the State Department was cautious, preferring multilateral engagement through the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The U.S. remained wary of appearing to endorse Biafran separatism and thus refrained from unilateral relief action, even while providing significant funding for relief through neutral channels.

The civil war brought into sharp relief the tension between humanitarian imperatives and state sovereignty. For the Nigerian government, any external relief effort not under its control was seen as a breach of national sovereignty and potentially supportive of rebellion. For humanitarian

actors, however, delivering aid directly to Biafran civilians, especially children, was a moral obligation that could not be subordinated to political boundaries.

This clash led to one of the most enduring legacies of the war: the recognition that neutral humanitarianism is not always possible in civil conflicts, especially when states deny access to affected populations. The Nigeria-Biafra case thus helped reshape the international community's understanding of the relationship between aid, access, and authority.

The complex relief efforts in the West during the Nigerian Civil War significantly shaped and enhanced the international humanitarian system in profound ways. It exposed the limitations of neutrality, highlighted the ethical quandaries of humanitarian access, and underscored how Western states use aid diplomacy to navigate complex conflicts. It also spurred institutional innovation. The inadequacies of the ICRC's neutrality and operational delays during the Biafran crisis became a rallying point for reform within international humanitarian law. Meanwhile, the crisis demonstrated the power of civil society in shaping foreign policy and compelling state responses, even when official policy remained restrained.

The end of the Nigerian Civil War in January 1970 did not mark the end of Western interest or involvement in Nigeria. Instead, it signaled a transition from wartime diplomacy and relief to post-war reconstruction, geopolitical recalibration, and contested memory-making. Western powers, including Britain, the United States, and France, adjusted their strategies to maintain influence, protect strategic interests, and reshape narratives surrounding the war in both domestic and international discourse. Following Biafra's surrender,



Western powers, particularly Britain and the U.S., quickly repositioned themselves as partners in Nigeria's post-war reconstruction. The Nigerian government, under General Yakubu Gowon, launched a "3Rs" policy: Reconciliation, Rehabilitation, and Reconstruction. Western governments, eager to stabilize their economic relationships and avoid further instability, pledged support in the form of financial assistance, technical aid, and development cooperation. However, this support was often driven by geopolitical considerations. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the British Overseas Development Administration (ODA) resumed programmes designed to ensure Nigeria remained aligned with Western strategic and economic interests in Africa. These programmes served to rebuild infrastructure, restore oil production in the Niger Delta, and reestablish Nigerian trade routes, especially with Europe (Donnelly, 2005). France's post-war engagement with Nigeria was marked by diplomatic ambiguity. Having supported Biafra covertly during the war, France now sought to reestablish ties with the victorious federal government. French posturing was cautious, emphasizing commercial and cultural diplomacy over overt political engagement. French companies and oil interests, such as Elf Aquitaine, resumed operations in Nigeria, and cultural missions were expanded; however, mutual distrust persisted between Paris and Lagos (Levey, 2014).

Conclusion

The Nigeria-Biafra conflict served as a crucible for modern humanitarian diplomacy, where Western intervention, driven by the United Kingdom, France, and the United States, operated as "Proxy Diplomacy" that utilized humanitarian aid as

a strategic tool to serve geopolitical interests. This study critically examined the multifaceted roles and interests of Western powers, particularly Britain, France, and the United States, during the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). It revealed how geopolitical interests, economic considerations, ideological alignments, and humanitarian imperatives shaped their policies and interventions.

This study finds that while the "Biafran Airlift" saved lives, it also functioned as a tool of sovereignty for secessionists, highlighting that the conflict marked a shift towards a "humanitarianism of interference" where aid and statecraft became intertwined. This study concludes that Western humanitarian diplomacy in the Nigeria-Biafra conflict was not a departure from traditional power politics, but a refinement of it. Humanitarian aid served as a strategic proxy that allowed Western powers to navigate the tension between domestic moral pressure and the cold realities of geopolitical and economic interests, ultimately prolonging the conflict while simultaneously attempting to mitigate its symptoms. The transformation of aid from a neutral act of mercy into a sophisticated diplomatic lever marked a significant milestone in the conflict. By examining the interplay between the UK, France, and the USA, this study offers a critical reassessment of the origins of modern humanitarian intervention. It concludes that the Biafran crisis was the laboratory for contemporary "humanitarian-military" complexes, where the survival of a population often depends on its strategic value to global powers.

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