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The Peacekeeping Role of the Organization of African Unity During the Nigerian Civil War, 1967—1970

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Abstract. This study examines the peacekeeping activities of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in resolving the Nigerian crisis. On May 30, 1967 the eastern part of Nigeria, the self-proclaimed Republic of Biafra, tried to secede from Nigeria. This led to a civil war that lasted from July 6, 1967 to January 15, 1970. Biafra's army was defeated and capitulated. The reference to the history of the OAU peacekeeping experience is relevant, because it can be applied to the settlement of contemporary crises and conflicts in Africa. The author was guided by the principles of historicism, scientific objectivity and reliance on sources. The aim of the article is to clarify the nature and methods of the OAU's peacekeeping activities, to identify internal and external factors that hindered the achievement of peace, and to assess the effectiveness of the organization's peacekeeping efforts. The article uses for the first time information and analytical memos of Soviet diplomats found in the Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation (AVP RF) on the OAU's activities to stop the civil war in Nigeria. The author concludes that the Nigerian crisis was a unique international conflict for the Cold War period. The motives of the external actors were primarily determined by geopolitical aspirations and national interests, rather than bloc solidarity. The author identifies factors that negatively affected the OAU's potential as a peacemaker: a split among African countries (four of which recognized Biafra's independence) and competition from Great Britain, which vigorously promoted its own peacekeeping agenda. The OAU's decisions were not binding on member states; it had no effective mechanism for implementing them, and it had no armed forces of its own that could be used to disengage the warring parties. The OAU succeeded in diplomatically securing overwhelming African support for Nigeria's territorial integrity, though its mediation efforts failed to achieve peace. The Biafra leadership was not going to capitulate while there was still room for resistance and the federal government was not inclined to question the country's territorial integrity. The results of the OAU's peacekeeping can be assessed as positive: it prevented the legitimization of separatist Biafra, which could have had a domino effect with disastrous consequences for the entire African continent.

Key words: international relations, peacekeeping, Nigerian Civil War 1967—1970, Organization of African Unity

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Миротворческая роль Организации африканского единства во время гражданской войны в Нигерии в 1967—1970 гг.

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Аннотация. Изучается миротворческая деятельность Организации африканского единства (ОАЕ) по урегулированию нигерийского кризиса. 30 мая 1967 г. от Нигерии попыталась отделиться ее восточная часть, самопровозглашенная Республика Биафра. Это привело к гражданской войне, которая длилась с 6 июля 1967 г. по 15 января 1970 г. Армия Биафры была разгромлена и капитулировала. Обращение к истории миротворческого опыта ОАЕ актуально, поскольку он может быть использован для урегулирования современных кризисов и конфликтов в Африке. Автор руководствовался принципами историзма, научной объективности и опоры на источники. Цель исследования — выяснить характер и методы миротворчества ОАЕ, определить внутренние и внешние факторы, препятствовавшие достижению мира, оценить результативность миротворческих усилий организации. Впервые использованы найденные в Архиве внешней политики Российской Федерации (АВП РФ) информационные и аналитические записки советских дипломатов о деятельности ОАЕ по прекращению гражданской войны в Нигерии. Установлено, что нигерийский кризис был неординарным для периода холодной войны международным конфликтом. Мотивы внешних игроков определялись в первую очередь геополитическими устремлениями и национальными интересами, а не блоковой солидарностью. Выявлены факторы, которые негативно влияли на возможности ОАЕ как миротворца: раскол среди африканских стран (четыре из них признали независимость Биафры), а также конкуренция со стороны Великобритании, которая энергично продвигала собственную миротворческую повестку. Решения ОАЕ не были обязательными для стран-участниц, она не располагала ни эффективным механизмом для их имплементации, ни собственными вооруженными силами, которые можно было бы использовать для разъединения враждующих сторон. ОАЕ удалось дипломатическими методами обеспечить поддержку подавляющим большинством африканских государств линии на сохранение территориальной целостности Нигерии, хотя посреднические усилия Организации не привели к достижению мира. Руководство Биафры не собиралось капитулировать, пока были возможности сопротивляться, а федеральное правительство — ставить под сомнение территориальную целостность страны. Итоги миротворчества ОАЕ можно оценить как позитивные: она не допустила легитимации сепаратистской Биафры, иначе мог произойти эффект домино с тяжелыми последствиями для всего Африканского континента.

Ключевые слова: международные отношения, миротворчество, гражданская война в Нигерии 1967—1970 гг., Организация африканского единства

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Introduction

The peacekeeping activities of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) during the Nigerian crisis of 1967—1970 have been extensively studied in foreign historiography

(Červenka, 1971; Akuchu, 1977; Cronje, 1977; Stremlau, 1977; Posibi & Canale, 2020). Russian works on the Nigerian civil war have touched on the subject slightly (Ettinger, 1976). The OAU documents and information and

analytical memos by Soviet diplomats on the organization's efforts to resolve the Nigerian crisis, found in the Russian Federation Foreign Policy Archive (RFFA), were the source material for this article.

The Nigerian civil war was the result of fundamental, historically rooted contradictions between Nigeria's three major peoples — the Hausa-Fulani, the Yoruba, and the Igbo. The Hausa-Fulani, whose religion is Sunni Islam, made up the majority of Nigeria's northern population. The largest ethnic group in the west and south-west, the Yoruba, were predominantly Christian. The Igbo, Christians and animists, predominated in the south-east. British colonial policies (indirect rule with an emphasis on regionalism) encouraged the territorial division into the north, east and west and enhanced growing tensions between ethnic groups and political forces. Before independence, Nigeria was a loose federation consisting of three regions (Northern, Eastern and Western), and the federal territory of Lagos (the capital). The Eastern Region occupied only 8% of Nigeria's territory (76,000 km²), but was the most socially and economically developed, possessing 4/5 of the country's oil reserves, a modern transport infrastructure and 90% of its skilled labour force (Davidson & Mazov, 2021, p. 508).

Nigerian political parties were established and functioned as ethno-regional organizations. The parliamentary elections of December 1959, held on the eve of independence (October 1, 1960), brought victory to the Northern People's Congress (NPC), a party of chiefs and emirs of northern Nigeria, which defended Islamic values and the interests of northerners. Abubakar Balewa, a Hausa, became prime minister. His government proved unable to deal with the many problems and to consolidate the country.

On 15 January 1966, a group of junior Igbo Army officers attempted a military coup. They executed all key figures of the ruling regime, including Balewa, and many senior officers of

northern extraction. The surviving commander of the armed forces, Major General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo, thwarted the conspirators' efforts to take power and was declared head of the military government. He suspended the constitution, dissolved parliament and abolished the federal structure of Nigeria in order to create a unitary state that could strip the privileges of the emirs and chiefs of northern Nigeria. From May through October 1966, pogroms in the north killed thousands of Igbo and caused hundreds of thousands to flee to the eastern region. On 29 July 1966, a new military coup took place, Aguiyi-Ironsi was killed and Lieutenant-Colonel Yakubu Gowon installed as Supreme Commander of the Nigerian Armed Forces. He was chosen as a compromise candidate, a northerner who was a Christian from Angas (one of Northern Nigeria's ethnic minorities).

Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the governor of Eastern Nigeria, refused to recognize Gowon as head of the federal military government (FMG) of Nigeria. An autonomous regional military government was set up, a regional army was formed, and taxes and duties were not paid to the federal authorities. On 27 May 1967, Gowon signed a decree creating 12 states instead of 4 provinces. In the north and west, the new boundaries coincided with those of the major ethnic groups. The eastern region was carved into three states, so that the major oil fields were located in states where the Igbo would not be in the majority. On 30 May, Ojukwu solemnly proclaimed that "The territory and region known as Eastern Nigeria, together with its continental shelf and territorial waters shall henceforth be an independent sovereign independent state of the name and title of 'The Republic of Biafra'" (Kirk-Greene, 1971a, p. 452). On July 6, 1967, the federal army entered Biafran territory. The civil war lasted two and a half years. On January 15, 1970, the Act of Unconditional Surrender of Biafra was signed.

Guided by geopolitical considerations and national interests, the USSR did not recognize the secession of Biafra and supported the actions of the FMG to preserve its territorial integrity, including by supplying weapons (Mazov, 2023). The international response to the Nigerian crisis revealed an array of positions which were non-bloc, unique, and atypical of the Cold War era. The Soviet Union found itself in a motley crew of Gowon government's supporters — Great Britain, East European socialist countries, Arab countries and most of Black Africa's nations, all fighting their own separatists. The United States declared itself neutral. France, Portugal, the Republic of South Africa, the People's Republic of China, and Israel were on Biafra's side, either explicitly or implicitly. Four African countries (Gabon, Zambia, Ivory Coast (now Côte d'Ivoire), and Tanzania) officially recognized Biafra's independence. Of the non-African states, Haiti followed suit.

African Countries' Reactions to Biafra Secession

Immediately after secession, the federal government undertook a number of measures in the international arena to prevent Biafra from being recognized by foreign countries. On June 1, Y. Gowon sent appeals to international organizations and heads of state and government, warning that "recognition of the anti-constitutional regime of Ch. Ojukwu will be regarded as an act of hostility against the Federation of Nigeria." The telegram to the OAU Secretary General Telly Diallo stated that "Recognition of Ojukwu's rebellious regime is unacceptable."¹

Most African countries had no reason to encourage Igbo separatist aspirations. Africa

¹ Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation (AVP RF). Fund 0579. Reg. 10. P. 12. Case 7. L. 15—16. Student-practitioner of the USSR Embassy in Nigeria V. Kushpel "On the reaction to the proclamation of the Republic of Biafra. (Information from press materials)". June 23, 1967. (In Russian).

inherited its boundaries from the colonial division of the continent, with 44% of state boundaries along meridians or parallels, 30% along straight and arched lines, and only 20% along natural geographical borders, usually coinciding with ethnic group settlement (Tuzmukhamedov, 1973, p. 18). In almost every African country, the problem of separatism was a pressing issue and there had been a potential "Biafra," if not one. The secession of Eastern Nigeria set a dangerous precedent, fertile ground for the development of separatist movements.

The OAU Charter, adopted at a conference in Addis Ababa in May 1963, stated as one of the aims of the organization to safeguard the "sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence" of African states.²

Although no African country recognized Biafra in 1967, their position on the Nigerian crisis was not uniform. Within a week of the declaration of the Republic of Biafra, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Dahomey (now Benin), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Niger, Somalia, and Togo declared their non-recognition. Most countries either did not speak out or "made general, non-binding statements."³ Several East African countries (Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Zambia) took a special stance. The presidents of these countries met during the first half of July 1967 for a "Peace for Nigeria" meeting. In the resulting appeal, they called for an immediate cessation of hostilities and for negotiations to begin between the FMG and Biafra, which would effectively mean its *de facto* recognition.⁴

The OAU was in no hurry to offer its mediation to resolve the crisis. The OAU Secretariat confined itself to distributing the text

² Charter of the Organization of African Unity // Russian Law portal. (In Russian). URL: <https://constitutions.ru/?p=784> (accessed: 22.02.2023).

³ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 10. P. 12. Case 7. L. 31. Attaché of the Soviet Embassy in Nigeria V. Bobunov "African countries' attitude to the Nigerian crisis. (Information)". September 13, 1967. (In Russian).

⁴ Ibid. L. 40—41.

of a message from Y. Gowon on June 1. The OAU could not ignore the position of the FMG, which considered any international mediation unacceptable and viewed it as foreign interference in Nigerian internal affairs. Speaking in the Ghanaian capital, Accra, in July 1967, Okoi Arikpo, the future (from September 3, 1967) Minister of Foreign Affairs of Nigeria, stated that “The Federal Government, headed by Major General Yakubu Gowon, will not accept any mediation from any friendly country or from the Organization of African Unity in resolving the crisis in Nigeria. Any attempt at mediation will be regarded as an act of interference.”⁵

On July 6, 1967, the federal army entered Biafra territory from the north in two columns. Y. Gowon called this a “police operation” (Kirk-Greene, 1971a, p. 459). According to the plan of the Nigerian Army General Staff, it was to be finished within a month with the capture of Enugu, the capital of Biafra. The campaign was initially successful for the federals. On July 12, the towns of Okoja and Gakem were captured, and on July 14, Nsukka with its university, the spiritual and intellectual center of Biafra, where the ideological justification for its separation was formulated. On July 26, Nigerian marines seized Bonny Island, the site of the Shell-BP oil pipeline terminal from Port Harcourt, in a surprise attack from the sea.

To turn the tide of the war, Ch. Ojukwu used an unexpected move that overturned all predictions and scenarios. At dawn on August 9, the covertly concentrated 8th Mobile Brigade of the Army of Biafra under the command of Brigadier General Victor Banjo (Yoruba) crossed the Niger and began to advance deep into mid-western state. Ten hours later it took Benin City, the state capital, without firing a single shot.

In a radio address to “Nigerians and Biafrans,” V. Banjo announced the termination

of the federal constitution and laws in the Midwest and the establishment of an interim military administration (Kirk-Greene, 1971b, pp. 157—158). The secession of the Midwest following Biafra posed a mortal danger to the federation. The emerging configuration of Biafra (Igbo) and Midwest (Yoruba) against Northern Nigeria (Hausa), i.e. South against North, would fundamentally alter the balance of power, with no obvious victory for either side.

Lagos reacted to the “liberation” of the Midwest with a tough statement by Y. Gowon on 11 August: “Henceforth the forces of the Federal Military Government will respond with crushing blows to the rebels and pursue them relentlessly until the rebellion is crushed” (Kirk-Greene, 1971b, p. 8). “Police operation” has turned into a full-scale civil war.

Meanwhile, Banjo’s “Liberation Army” continued its march westwards. On August 20, it reached the town of Ore in Niger, 200 km from Lagos. Hastily assembled from all available forces (from Gowon’s personal guards to army cooks), it was unlikely that the federal units would have stopped the advance of the enemy. V. Banjo played his own game. He halted the offensive and began preparations for a coup to oust Y. Gowon and Ch. Ojukwu and bring the influential Yoruba politician Obafemi Awolowo to power in Nigeria. The plot was uncovered and V. Banjo and three of his accomplices were shot by a Biafra military tribunal (Daly, 2017).

Federal troops went on the offensive in late September, cleared the Midwest of Ojukwu’s forces and reached the Niger, but failed to cross it. A positional war of attrition ensued.

Failures on the front did not affect the FMG’s stance on the peace settlement, which it regarded as a purely internal Nigerian affair. On August 12, Victor Adegoroye, Deputy Permanent Secretary of the Nigerian Foreign Ministry, stated that “The OAU, like other organizations, is not a supra-governmental body, and Nigeria has

⁵ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 10. P. 12. Case 7. L. 31—35.

never allowed its domestic politics to be internationalized.”⁶

Biafra, on the other hand, was all for the internationalization of the settlement. Ojukwu said at a press conference on August 28 that he “preferred mediation of the Nigerian crisis by African states through the OAU, and in the event that the OAU failed to achieve anything, he would not object to mediation by the [British] Commonwealth countries.”⁷

The Nigerian Issue at the OAU Summit in Kinshasa. Establishment and Launching of the OAU Consultative Committee on Nigeria

As it became obvious that a swift defeat of Ojukwu’s army failed, the peacemaking line of achieving compromise between the federals and Biafra began to gain popularity among African countries. A backroom game developed around the inclusion of the Nigerian issue on the agenda of the OAU summit held in the DRC capital Kinshasa from 11 to 14 September 1967. Ghana, Dahomey, Ethiopia, Kenya, Ivory Coast, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia lobbied for its discussion. Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere considered it a matter of time “when Biafra will start receiving external assistance from African and European countries. It is the duty of the OAU heads of government to compel Nigeria to end its useless war, which, in addition to ruining the country’s economy, is making normal relations with Biafra impossible.”⁸

The Minister of Finance, O. Awolowo, who headed Nigeria’s delegation to the summit, succeeded in preventing the issue of the Nigerian crisis from being placed on the official agenda. However, at the insistence of Liberian President William Tubman, the heads of seven

countries (Cameroon, the DRC, Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Niger and Zambia) discussed it during a closed-door meeting on September 12. The representatives of Nigeria, O. Awolowo and O. Arikpo, attended only at the invitation of the heads of state (Stremlau, 1977, pp. 88—93). The resolution adopted after heated discussions “condemned the secession of part of any OAU member state,” recognized the Nigerian conflict as “an internal matter to be resolved first and foremost by the Nigerians themselves.” The OAU established its mission to Nigeria (later renamed the OAU Consultative Committee on Nigeria) composed of six heads of state: Ghana’s National Liberation Council Chairman Joseph Ankrah, the DRC’s President Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, Cameroonian President Ahmadou Ahidjo, Liberian President William Tubman, President of Niger Hamani Diori, Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I. The Mission was mandated to visit “the head of the Federal Government of Nigeria to reassure him of the Summit’s desire to preserve the territorial integrity, unity and peace in Nigeria.”⁹

For the first time, Nigeria recognized that its civil war was not just a purely internal affair, but an African-wide affair as well. Biafra took the summit’s decisions on the Nigerian issue as its victory. Its foreign ministry published a memorandum stating that “The acceptance of the OAU resolution on the Nigerian/Biafra crisis is a triumph for Biafra because it was a vindication of the fact that the dispute was no longer internal” (Stremlau, 1977, p. 95).

Ch. Ojukwu’s triumphalism proved to be clearly premature. The mission was originally supposed to arrive in Lagos on September 27, 1967, but it did not happen until November 22. The visit has been postponed five times as

⁹ Resolutions and declarations adopted by the Fourth Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government held in Kinshasa, Congo, from 11 to 14 September 1967. AHG/Res. 51 (IV). Resolution // Organization of African Unity. URL: https://au.int/sites/default/files/decisions/9516-assembly_en_11_14_september_1967_assembly_heads_state_government_fourth_ordinary_session.pdf (accessed: 15.06.2021).

⁶ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 16. Case 7. L. 78. G. Grebtsov, A. Stepanyuk “On the OAU ‘Advisory Mission’ to Nigeria. (Reference)”. January 4, 1968. (In Russian).

⁷ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 16. Case 7. L. 78.

⁸ Ibid. L. 33.

fighting continued despite Y. Gowon's verbal promises. He only agreed to accept the mission after his army had made substantial progress — taking the Biafra capital Enugu (Ch. Ojukwu had moved the capital to Umuahia); liberating the Midwest and seizing the strategically important port of Calabar.

It was clear from conversations between Nigerian officials and Soviet diplomats that in Lagos “they had little hope of the OAU Mission making decisions which would have a significant impact on stopping the civil war.” Y. Gowon told Ambassador A.I. Romanov: “I will listen to what Selassie, Ankrah, Ahidjo and Diiori have to say. Our position on the rebellious Ojukwu regime was determined long ago.”¹⁰ The leaders of not six but four states — J. Ankrah, A. Ahidjo, H. Diiori and Haile Selassie I — came to Lagos. J.-D. Mobutu and W. Tubman could not attend due to “being busy with internal affairs.”¹¹

On November 23, an official opening ceremony for the OAU Advisory Committee meetings was held, where “all members of the federal military government and heads of diplomatic missions in Nigeria” were invited. The prevailing view in the diplomatic corps in Lagos was that there was disagreement among the committee members “on the ways to resolve the Nigerian crisis.”¹² It was expected that Y. Gowon would be pressured to compromise with Ch. Ojukwu.¹³

The committee met behind closed doors until late in the evening of November 23. Y. Gowon had named three conditions for a ceasefire and the start of peace talks with representatives of Eastern Nigeria: renunciation of secession, recognition of Nigeria's 12-state administrative structure, the transfer of power

from Ch. Ojukwu to “new Igbo leaders” (Stremlau, 1977, pp. 100—104). A communiqué issued the next day affirmed that “Any solution of the Nigerian crisis must be in the context of preserving the unity and territorial integrity of Nigeria.” The committee agreed that “As a basis for return to peace and normal conditions in Nigeria, the secessionists should renounce secession accept the present administrative structure of the Federation of Nigeria.” General J. Ankrah was mandated “to convey the text of the OAU Kinshasa summit as well as discussions and conclusions of the first meeting of the Mission in Lagos to the secessionists” (Stremlau, 1977, pp. 103—104).

Y. Gowon scored a diplomatic victory: the communiqué included all the basic principles that the federal government had put forward as conditions for resolving the crisis. He concluded a reasonable compromise and “made some concessions to Eastern Nigeria, agreeing to allow members of the Mission to make contact with Ch. Ojukwu, although earlier even the rising of such an issue had caused him to react sharply negatively.”¹⁴ On November 24, O. Awolowo told A.I. Romanov: “Overall, we are satisfied with the results of the Mission's work. All decisions are mostly in accord with our wishes. The line of the federal government towards the rebellious regime will remain the same — the unity and integrity of the country must be preserved.”¹⁵

The other was the reaction of the separatists. Radio Biafra described the 25 November communiqué as “an attempt by a few African states to use their position in the Committee to blackmail and discredit the Organization of African Unity. By so doing

¹⁰ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 11. P. 14. Case 7. L. 120. Counsellor of the USSR Embassy in Nigeria R. Melnikov “On some results of the work of the advisory Mission of the Organization of African Unity. (Reference)”. December 13, 1967. (In Russian).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. L. 122, 123.

¹³ Ibid. L. 124.

¹⁴ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 16. Case 7. L. 81. G. Grebtsov, A. Stepanyuk “On the OAU ‘Advisory Mission’ to Nigeria. (Reference)”. January 4, 1968. (In Russian).

¹⁵ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 11. P. 14. Case 7. L. 125—126. Counsellor of the USSR Embassy in Nigeria R. Melnikov “On some results of the work of the advisory Mission of the Organization of African Unity. (Reference)”. December 13, 1967. (In Russian).

these African states have fallen prey to the British-American imperialist conspiracy to use the Committee's recommendation as a pretext for a massive arms support for their puppet and tottering neo-colonialist regime in Lagos" (Stremlau, 1977, p. 105). Ankrah tried to contact Ch. Ojukwu through a pre-established radio channel, but he did not answer the call.

The situation on the fronts in the spring of 1968 did not indicate that the Federal Army would break the resistance of the Biafra forces and compel them to surrender. In his New Year's address to the nation on December 31, 1967, Y. Gowon assured Nigerians that final victory over the rebels would be achieved by March 31, 1968.¹⁶ In late March, after heavy fighting, the Federal Army occupied Onitsha, a major trading city in Western Biafra. But it failed to develop the success — seizing of Nnewi, the native village of Ojukwu, and the Uli airstrip. The Biafrans ambushed and completely destroyed a large supply convoy of federal troops on the Enugu — Onitsha road, depriving them of large quantities of ammunition and fuel. Onitsha was besieged by Biafra troops.

Biafra Breaks Diplomatic Blockade

The failure of the Nigerian offensive inspired supporters of Biafra, including Africans. On April 13, 1968, Tanzania officially recognized Biafra as an independent state. It was not a spontaneous or sudden decision. Following the proclamation of Biafra, the Tanzanian press "strongly attacked the federal military government, accusing it of intending to physically exterminate the Ibo people," claiming that "the reactionary federal north of Nigeria is trying to strangle the progressive Eastern Province." With the approval of President J. Nyerere, the Biafra Information Bureau operated in Dar es Salaam. Its head, Austin Okwu, "maintained close contacts with

the Tanzanian government and used the Tanzanian press for the benefit of the Eastern Nigerian separatists." J. Nyerere publicly advocated a cease-fire and the beginning of peace talks between Nigeria and Biafra as equal partners. The Soviet Embassy in Dar es Salaam believed that "Tanzania's recognition of Biafra should be seen as a way of pressuring the military federal government of Nigeria into a peaceful resolution of the conflict with Biafra on the basis of recognition of Ibo's right to a degree of self-determination."¹⁷

Why was Tanzania the first to break the "diplomatic quarantine" imposed around Biafra? Tanzania was one of the few African countries without separatist movements that could have been inspired by the example of Biafra. The issue of territorial integrity was already becoming a point of contention between Tanzania and Nigeria. J. Nyerere supported the rebellion of Patrice Lumumba's followers in Eastern Congo in 1964—1965, the supply of Simba rebels, including weapons, went through the territory of Tanzania, their camps and bases were located in the border areas with Congo (Mazov, 2019a; 2019b). The rebels proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of Congo with its capital in Stanleyville (now Kisangani). The territory of the self-proclaimed state covered 7 of the 21 Congolese provinces (Mazov, 2015, p. 260). Nigeria, on the other hand, was in favor of preserving the territorial integrity of the DRC.

Tanzania's decision to recognize Biafra was influenced by the position of the People's Republic of China, with which it developed close ties. China was the only Asian state that supported the Biafran separatists. Beijing sought to strengthen its position in West Africa, which had been shaken since the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah's regime in Ghana in 1966, and to use the Nigerian crisis as another

¹⁶ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 11. P. 13. Case 6. L. 2. (In Russian).

¹⁷ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 16. Case 10. L. 126—127. G. Grebtsov "The Position of African Countries on the Nigerian Crisis. (Reference)". July 25, 1968. (In Russian).

escalation of its propaganda campaign against “Soviet revisionism.” The war in Nigeria, the British researcher notes, “was an ideological gift for the Chinese: there, for the first time in history, were the ‘running dogs of imperialism’ (America and Britain) demonstrably shoulder-to-shoulder with Soviet ‘revisionists’ for the whole world to see” (De St. Jorre, 1972, p. 185).

The Nigerian press reported that “Chinese instructors organized training of Ibo youth in guerrilla warfare in camps located in Zambia and Tanzania, from where military units were then deployed to Biafra.”¹⁸ In a conversation with A.I. Romanov, O. Arikpo noted that in Nigeria “we are very unhappy with the provocative activities of the Chinese, who through Tanzania and Zambia provide military assistance to the Ojukwu rebels.”¹⁹ The separatist leader, in a September 1968 message to Mao Zedong, expressed “profound gratitude for the understanding and sympathy you have manifested for our struggle against Anglo-American imperialism sustained by Soviet revisionism” (De St. Jorre, 1972, p. 185).

On May 8, Gabon recognized Biafra. France retained control of Gabon’s mineral resources (uranium, iron and manganese ore, oil, gas), and President Albert-Bernard Bongo followed the former metropolis’ foreign policy, including the Nigerian crisis.

The secession of Biafra was in France’s geopolitical interest. President Charles de Gaulle viewed the Nigerian civil war as a good chance to undermine British influence in Africa. A strong and united Nigeria could become the hegemon of West Africa, sidelining the French-speaking states of the region with which France

had close ties (Filippov, 2016, pp. 291—292). France had substantial economic interests in Nigeria. In 1964, the French state-owned oil company SAFRAP obtained rights to explore for oil in Eastern Nigeria. In the summer of 1967, Ch. Ojukwu promised the company a concession of oil-rich areas near Port Harcourt (Griffin, 2017, p. 162).

In June 1967, Jacques Foccart, Secretary General to the President of the French Republic for Africa and Madagascar, architect and performer of the *Françafrique* project, quoted in his journal de Gaulle’s words on the French strategy in Nigerian civil war: “We must not intervene or give the impression of choosing a side, but... it is preferable to have a Nigeria that is broken up into small parts than a unified Nigeria... If Biafra succeeds, it will not be such a bad thing for us” (Griffin, 2017, p. 160).

Officially, France remained neutral, preferring to act through its allies in West Africa. On May 14, Ivory Coast declared its recognition of Biafra. During a conversation between the Soviet ambassador to Ghana, V.S. Safronchuk, and the Ivorian ambassador in Accra, Leon Amon, in June 1968, V.S. Safronchuk asked his colleague “to explain what motives guided the Ivorian government in recognizing the Eastern Province of Nigeria as an independent state of Biafra.” L. Amon replied that the Federation of Nigeria was “an artificial and unviable entity” because it “was a legacy of the colonial policy of England, which tried to unite into one state completely different ethnically, socially and economically population groups.” V.S. Safronchuk stressed that separatism, the fragmentation of African countries “prevented the creation of strong independent African states capable of successfully resisting the onslaught of the colonizers.” L. Amon countered that “The formation of two or three independent states in the place of Nigeria will not necessarily mean their weakening.” Biafra “would be much stronger than the Ivory Coast in terms of

¹⁸ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 14. Case 7. L. 174. Attaché of the USSR Embassy in Nigeria V. Kushpel “On the position of Asian Countries in the Nigerian Crisis. (Reference)”. July 17, 1969. (In Russian).

¹⁹ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 13. P. 17. Case 3. L. 9. From the diary of Romanov A. I. “Record of conversation with Commissioner for Foreign Affairs O. Arikpo”. April 9, 1969. (In Russian).

population and economic potential, and would generally be one of the largest states in Africa.” At the moment, “as a result of the war and the systematic extermination of the Ibo by federal troops, tribal enmity and mutual hatred have reached such a level that reconciliation is impossible, and the only option left is the creation of several independent states on Nigeria’s site.”²⁰

This position was fully in line with the French one. Félix Houphouët-Boigny, President of Ivory Coast, was a principled opponent of large “artificial” federations in Africa, a staunch anti-communist, his foreign policy was French oriented. He considered the OAU to be a failed organization and officially supported the decision of Tanzania to recognize Biafra. The day after Gabon’s recognition of Biafra, F. Houphouët-Boigny convened a large press conference in Paris, where he openly expressed his disagreement with the OAU stance: “An internal problem, respect for the territorial integrity of every member of the OAU, the sacrosanct respect of unity... Nothing of the sort excuses our apathy in the face of the kind of crimes perpetrated by black brothers against other black brothers” (Stremlau, 1977, p. 138).

France used the Ivory Coast and Gabonese territory to supply Biafra with arms and ammunition by air and sea. French military aid to Biafra was decided at the state level on September 27, 1967, following a meeting between Presidents Ch. de Gaulle and F. Houphouët-Boigny. Deliveries by sea began in October 1967: German and Italian weapons captured from World War II with serial numbers scratched off were sent to Abidjan and Libreville, from where they were shipped to Biafra (Griffin, 2017, pp. 163—164).

On May 20, 1968, Zambia recognized Biafra. The reasons were the same as

²⁰ AVP RF. Fund 0573. Reg. 12. P. 18. Case 1. L. 98—99. From the diary of Safronchuk V. S. “Record of a conversation with the Ivory Coast Ambassador to Ghana Leon Amon”. June 24, 1968. (In Russian).

Tanzania’s: no separatist movements posing a threat to territorial integrity, growing Chinese influence. The Zambian government press believed that “The OAU must now make it clear to the federal government of Nigeria that the problem of Biafra’s existence cannot be solved by military means and that political negotiations must begin.”²¹

What were the consequences of breaking Biafra’s diplomatic isolation?

Lagos broke off diplomatic relations with all the countries that recognized the separatist regime of Ch. Ojukwu — Ivory Coast, Gabon, Zambia and Tanzania. The leaders of these states, in particular the President of Tanzania, became the object of harsh unpleasant criticism in the Nigerian media. He was called a “traitor,” an “accomplice of all the enemies of Africa.” There were demands to expel Tanzania from the OAU, “to review the role of the Tanzanian ruling circles in Africa’s struggle for general liberation and progress.”²²

The OAU was seriously challenged, the effectiveness of its peacekeeping efforts was questioned, and the threat of a split within the organization emerged. R. Melnikov, Counselor of the Soviet Embassy in Lagos, reported to the Foreign Ministry: “The Nigerian crisis, especially in its final stage, was a real test for the OAU. If in the initial stage the conflict aroused between the military government of Nigeria, on the one hand, and the Ojukwu dissenters, on the other, in its final stage the four African member countries of the OAU were on the side of the rebels, in violation of the relevant articles of the Charter. In doing so, they have put the OAU in a difficult position. The

²¹ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 16. Case 10. L. 128. G. Grebtsov “The Position of African Countries on the Nigerian Crisis. (Reference)”. July 25, 1968. (In Russian).

²² AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 16. Case 10. L. 139, 140. First Secretary of the USSR Embassy in Nigeria Yu. Dedov “On the position of the Western Powers and some African countries at the present stage of the Nigerian crisis. Reference”. May 21, 1968. (In Russian).

organization is thus faced the fact which could be the beginning of a split of the OAU, if no action is taken.”²³

First Direct Negotiations between Representatives of the Federal Government and Biafra

The failure of the OAU’s mediation efforts and its emerging divisions over the Nigerian question prompted the warring parties to turn to Britain, another contender for peacemaking.

The former metropolis enjoyed enormous economic, military, and political influence in Nigeria. British investment (568 million USD in 1965) in the Nigerian economy accounted for 53% of all foreign investment (Červenka, 1971, p. 104). The Nigerian army was armed with British weapons and all officers were graduates of British military schools. In February 1967, there were more than a thousand British subjects working in the Nigerian state apparatus. They held many “key jobs for which qualified Nigerians were not available.” Another 500 Britons worked in Nigerian universities and schools. Essential utilities such as electricity, railroads and telephones were heavily dependent on senior British staff (Uche, 2008, p. 119).

British authorities believed that the secession of eastern Nigeria would not be in the national interest of their country and would create new economic and geopolitical challenges. Nigeria, according to a secret British government document, was a friendly, pro-Western, “potentially one of the most powerful African states, both economically and politically.” The small, weak states that might emerge in its place could become the object of “undesirable outside influence” (Uche, 2008, p. 121). Britain was the largest supplier of arms

²³ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 16. Case 7. L. 73. Counselor of the Soviet Embassy in Nigeria R. Melnikov “Activities of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in solving African problems. (Reference)”. June 26, 1968. (In Russian).

to the federal army and remained so throughout the war.

And in the peace settlement, the British tried to play first fiddle. They acted not only through government channels, but mainly through the British Commonwealth Secretariat. On April 27, 1968, Nigerian Foreign Minister O. Arikpo, returning from London, “assembled the African ambassadors and, informing them of his negotiations with [British Prime Minister Harold] Wilson, declared the readiness to begin negotiations [with Biafra] without any preconditions. He stressed, however, that without the rebels’ renunciation of separatism and their recognition of the division into 12 states, a cease-fire would be impossible.”²⁴

General Hassan Usman Katsina, a member of the Supreme Military Council of Nigeria and Chief of Army Staff, said A.I. Romanov that “The Federal Government was forced to make concessions to the representatives of Ojukwu under pressure from the Americans and the British, as well as some African heads of state, who were in some way trying to save the Ojukwu regime.”²⁵ Obviously he was referring to the leaders of Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon, Zambia and Tanzania who recognized Biafra.

O. Arikpo was the most prominent figure of the “peace party.” In addition to declaring his readiness to negotiate without preconditions, he was notable for public apology for the bombing of civilians with Soviet-supplied aircraft.²⁶ H.U. Katsina was one of the leaders of the “war party.” After the military coup in January

²⁴ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 16. Case 10. L. 141. First Secretary of the USSR Embassy in Nigeria Yu. Dedov “On the position of the Western Powers and some African countries at the present stage of the Nigerian crisis. Reference”. May 21, 1968. (In Russian).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 11. P. 13. Case 4. L. 70—71. From the diary of Romanov A. I. “Record of conversation with the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nigeria E. Ogbu”. November 29, 1967. (In Russian).

1966, he became governor of Northern Nigeria, and in May 1968 was appointed Chief of Army Staff, a position he held until the surrender of Biafra. Representatives of the “war party,” the “national-patriotic forces,” as they called themselves, considered any compromise with the separatists as a betrayal; the upcoming negotiations with Ch. Ojukwu were seen as the result of a backroom deal that could deprive the federal army of victory.

At negotiations in London on May 6—15, 1968, representatives of the FMG and Biafra, through the mediation of the Commonwealth Secretary General, A. Smith, a Canadian, reached an agreement to hold peace talks in the Ugandan capital, Kampala, on May 23, 1968.²⁷ The British succeeded where the OAU had failed — in bringing the warring parties in the Nigerian conflict to the negotiating table.

The proponents of a war to victory were ahead of the game by issuing an ultimatum to Y. Gowon. H.U. Katsina revealed to Romanov the details: “The officers and soldiers at the front are very embittered against the rebels and ‘may turn their guns against the federal government in Lagos’. We... told this frankly to General Gowon at the Supreme [Military] Council meeting yesterday and demanded decisive action on the front.”²⁸

This was followed by an attack on Port Harcourt, which was taken by federal troops on May 19. The operation “proved much quicker and easier than originally anticipated, for it turned out that although it was well fortified, it was defended by only one hungry and poorly armed battalion.”²⁹ Apparently, Ch. Ojukwu

was in a bad way if he could not throw in a larger force to defend the strategic city with its port, oil refinery and airport. The war party sent a clear message to the world, which was well expressed by the Nigerian ambassador to the USSR, George Kurubo in a conversation with A.I. Romanov on May 15, 1968. Predicting the fall of Port Harcourt “within a week,” the ambassador reported “in confidence” that “In his opinion, a solution to the Nigerian conflict is apparently ‘only possible by military means,’ and talk of a peace formula is supposedly ‘only an episode.’”³⁰

Negotiations with Biafra could now be conducted from a position of strength. On May 20, the day after the capture of Port Harcourt, G. Kurubo conveyed through the Foreign Ministry a message from the Nigerian leader to the Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers A.N. Kosygin. On the eve of the negotiations in Kampala, Y. Gowon assured A.N. Kosygin of the “firm determination of the Federal Government to preserve the territorial integrity of Nigeria at any cost” and expressed “hope for the support of the Soviet government.”³¹

On May 23, 1968, negotiations began in the Ugandan capital between the delegations of Nigeria, headed by Anthony Enahoro, Minister of Information and Labor, and Biafra, headed by Louis Mbanefo, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. The agreed agenda included two items: “Conditions for Cessation of Hostilities” and “Conditions for Final Settlement.” The initial positions of the two sides were opposite. The federal troops were prepared to cease fire on the

²⁷ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 16. Case 10. L. 143. First Secretary of the USSR Embassy in Nigeria Yu. Dedov “On the position of the Western Powers and some African countries at the present stage of the Nigerian crisis. Reference”. May 21, 1968. (In Russian).

²⁸ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 15. Case 4. L. 14—15. From the diary of Romanov A. I. “Record of a conversation with Brigadier General Usman Katsina, member of the Supreme Council of Nigeria”. May 8, 1968. (In Russian).

²⁹ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 16. Case 10. L. 144. First Secretary of the USSR Embassy in Nigeria

Yu. Dedov “On the position of the Western Powers and some African countries at the present stage of the Nigerian crisis. Reference”. May 21, 1968. (In Russian).

³⁰ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 15. Case 4. L. 17. From the diary of Romanov A. I. “Record of a conversation with the Nigerian Ambassador in Moscow G. Kurubo”. May 15, 1968. (In Russian).

³¹ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 16. Case 7. L. 1. [Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR] A.A. Gromyko to the CPSU Central Committee. June 10, 1968. (In Russian).

condition that “The rebels renounce secession, order their troops to lay down their arms from the moment of the cease-fire, publicly and simultaneously declare their renunciation of secession and that order.” Representatives of Biafra proposed “an immediate cessation of hostilities” and an economic blockade of Biafra, withdrawal of troops “to the borders that existed before the outbreak of hostilities.” The federal government believed that a “mixed force” consisting of “parts of the federal armed forces and police” and “Ibo manned police units” should be set up “to monitor and disarm the rebel troops.” According to Biafra, “an international force and a monitoring body” were to maintain order along the ceasefire line.³²

Negotiations were constructive until Ch. Ojukwu, in a radio address on the first anniversary of Biafra, stated: “Our delegates have gone there [to Kampala] with a clear and unequivocal mandate to seek a ceasefire in the present conflict, and thereafter to discuss with the Nigerians the basis of our future cooperation with them. Without a cease-fire, there can be no talks aimed at reaching a permanent settlement” (Ojukwu, 1969, p. 269).

The Biafra delegation then offered to stop the fighting without conditions, threatening otherwise to withdraw from the negotiations. On May 31, L. Mbanefo stated that his delegation saw no point in continuing negotiations — until the Biafra army was defeated, they would not surrender. The same day, the Biafran delegation left Kampala. The Nigerian negotiators had no choice but to return to Lagos (Stremlau, 1977, pp. 173—174).

The OAU Regains the Initiative. Negotiations in Addis Ababa

The failure of the Commonwealth Secretariat’s peacemaking efforts, which acted

³² AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 15. Case 7. L. 3, 4. Message from the Head of the Federal Military Government of Nigeria Y. Gowon to the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR N.V. Podgorny. June 5, 1968. (In Russian).

according to the British scenario, allowed the African countries to regain the initiative in mediating the Nigerian crisis, to prove that they had the capacity and the will to achieve peace.

A session of the OAU Consultative Committee on Nigeria, chaired by Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia, was held in the Niger’s capital Niamey on July 17, 1968, and adopted a resolution demanding that both parties urgently resume peace negotiations to resolve the Nigerian crisis in order to “preserve Nigeria’s territorial integrity and guarantee the security of all its inhabitants” (Stremlau, 1977, p. 188).

On July 18, a Biafra delegation led by Ch. Ojukwu arrived in Niamey and stayed for two days. Bilateral contacts (July 20—26) resulted in an agreement to begin peace talks in Addis Ababa on August 5, 1968, and an agreed agenda: “1. Arrangements for a permanent settlement; 2. terms for cessation of hostilities; and 3. concrete proposals for the transportation of relief supplies to the civilian victims of war” (Stremlau, 1977, pp. 193—194).

The Consultative Committee entrusted Haile Selassie I to be the mediator in the Addis Ababa negotiations. S.M. Kirsanov, counselor of the Soviet Embassy in Ethiopia, commented on this decision: “The emperor hoped that by moving the negotiations to his capital, he could play the role of ‘peacemaker’ in the largest and longest-running conflict in Africa if the outcome was positive. The emperor’s desire to solve the Nigerian crisis ‘personally’ and thereby enhance his prestige in Africa and in the world is not only due to his ambition, but also to his need to report to the forthcoming Assembly of African Heads of State in Algiers on the activities of the OAU Consultative Committee on Nigeria, which he chairs.”³³

³³ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 16. Case 10. L. 96. Counselor of the Soviet Embassy in Ethiopia S. Kirsanov “On the progress of the peace talks in Addis Ababa on Nigeria”. August 27, 1968. (In Russian).

Before the meeting in the Ethiopian capital, Ojukwu was concerned about strengthening his position. His representative in Paris, Raph Uwechue, managed to persuade the French leadership to actually recognize Biafra's right to secession. On July 31, Minister of Information Joël Le Theule stated that the Nigerian conflict "should be settled on the basis of the right of peoples to self-determination, and should entail putting into action the appropriate international procedures" (Stremlau, 1977, p. 197). French support went beyond words. Increased arms shipments to Biafra through Ivory Coast and Gabon followed (Griffin, 2017, p. 168).

The Biafra delegation at the negotiations in Addis Ababa consisted of 35 people, headed by Ch. Ojukwu himself. Among the delegates there were no figures with international fame, and the President of Gabon A.-B. Bongo strengthened it with two Gabonese — the Minister of Information and an Air Force captain in full dress uniform. Each delegate received a special "Code of Conduct" prepared by the Ojukwu administration stating, in part, "There must therefore be absolutely no fraternization with any member of the Nigerian delegation. You should discourage, scorn or repulse any attempts at friendliness by any Nigerian" (Stremlau, 1977, pp. 198—199). The federal government delegation was led, as in Kampala, by A. Enahoro; Y. Gowon did not come to Addis Ababa.

As announced, the talks began on August 5 at the House of Africa, the headquarters of the OAU. Haile Selassie I and A. Enahoro made brief speeches. The emperor "stressed the responsibility of both sides to ensure peace not only in Nigeria, but throughout the African continent," urging them to "refrain from polemics and propaganda, to show a spirit of cooperation and brotherhood."³⁴ The head of the Nigerian delegation identified the main goal of the negotiations as "whether or not the reintegration of the parts of the East Central State of Nigeria, still under the control of the

other side, can be reintegrated into Nigeria" (Stremlau, 1977, p. 200).

Ch. Ojukwu gave a long two-hour speech with no hint of compromise. Ojukwu demanded recognition of the secession of Eastern Nigeria, argued that the Igbo could not survive as a nation and make progress except in their own state. The separatist leader accused Y. Gowon of "genocide for seeking to exterminate 14 million Biafrans in the most gruesome manner" and "of aspiring to be the Hitler of Africa" (Ojukwu, 1969, pp. 336, 339). Ch. Ojukwu also allowed himself an ultimatum: if within 24 hours Y. Gowon did not respond positively to the emperor's invitation to come to Addis Ababa, he, Ch. Ojukwu, would fly to Biafra. On August 6, Ch. Ojukwu left Addis Ababa, appointing Professor Eni Njoku as head of the Biafra delegation.

The activity of the Biafran delegation's press center, which opened in the largest hotel in Addis Ababa with the permission of the Ethiopian authorities, did not encourage a constructive atmosphere around the talks. According to Kirsanov, it worked quite effectively: "The Biafran delegation distributes brochures, posters and other materials that defend the Biafran cause and attack countries supporting the federal government. In particular, the posters distributed there, show in cartoon form England, the United States, and the Soviet Union are working together to help Nigeria in the fight against Biafra. This press center also displays photographs showing the 'massacre' of federal troops against the Ibo tribe. The press center staff talks to Ethiopian and foreign correspondents and other visitors and distributes their literature and materials. Documentary films on the horrors of war and the 'atrocities' of the federal troops are shown there daily."³⁵

The two sides put forward diametrically opposed plans for resolving the conflict. The federal government believed that a cease-fire should have been preceded by a "declaration of

³⁴ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 16. Case 10. L. 97.

³⁵ Ibid. L. 105—106.

renunciation of secession” and “disarmament of the rebel troops.” E. Njoku’s response proposals included preserving Biafra “as a sovereign and independent state,” “an immediate cessation of hostilities,” “an immediate lifting of the economic blockade imposed by the federal government” on Biafra, “withdrawal of troops beyond the pre-war borders and ensuring that refugees are free to return home.”³⁶

The mediation efforts of Haile Selassie I and the OAU Secretary General T. Diallo were in vain. The parties were unwilling to change their positions and the negotiations reached an impasse. The only issue on which there was a chance to agree was the delivery of humanitarian aid to the civilian population of Eastern Nigeria.

On August 13, A. Enahoro announced that he had not come to Addis Ababa “to liquidate Nigeria” and left for his home country to consult with his government (Stremlau, 1977, p. 204). The Nigerian delegation was headed by Femi Okunnu, Minister of Public Works and Housing. According to information received by the Soviet embassy “in OAU circles,” “Enahoro went to Lagos on the completion of his mission, which was to make known to all Africa the position of the federal government and to prove the failure of the Biafra proposals and the irreconcilable nature of the position of its leaders.”³⁷ He fulfilled this task.

Haile Selassie I did not give up hope of reaching agreement on at least one issue — the delivery of humanitarian aid. The negotiations were moved from the House of Africa to the Emperor’s Jubilee Palace and took place behind closed doors under strict secrecy.

In June 1968, Biafra had only one point of contact with the outside world: the airstrip at Uli. Transport planes chartered by the International Red Cross (IRC) landed there to deliver aid supplies to the people of Biafra. The IRC’s budget consisted of cash contributions

and donations of food and medicine from governments, international charities and church organizations. The UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the International Confederation of National Catholic Charities (CARITAS), the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the National Committees of the Red Cross in Ireland, USA, Germany and Sweden all invested heavily in aid to Biafra. The Nigerian government did not have the means to adequately fund the Nigerian Red Cross (NRC), failed to provide food and medicine to the war-stricken population. Y. Gowon was forced to accept the work of the IRC in Nigeria.

Flights to Biafra began in late 1967. They operated at night from Abidjan (Ivory Coast), Cotonou (Dahomey), Libreville (Gabon), Sao Tome (on the Portuguese island of the same name) and Santa Isabel (Fernando Po Island, Equatorial Guinea). A total of 7,350 flights took place, carrying about a million tons of cargo (Venter & Dinsdale, 2018, p. 106). It was the largest air bridge since the World War II.

Much of the cargo was contraband — weapons and equipment for the Ojukwu army. According to the International Committee of the IRC, the planes it chartered made 9—10 flights to Biafra per day, but in fact 17—20 planes landed at Uli every night. The Committee, according to a staff member of the Soviet Embassy in Lagos, “under the guise of humanitarianism... in fact supplies Ojukwu’s army with food, ammunition and medicines, and also disguises military supplies to Biafra from other countries.”³⁸

The logistics of delivering supplies to the war-ravaged population of Eastern Nigeria was therefore a military and political issue. The parties to the negotiations in Addis Ababa took diametrically opposed positions on this issue. The Biafra delegation demanded the lifting of

³⁶ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 16. Case 10. L. 98.

³⁷ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 16. Case 10. L. 102.

³⁸ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 14. Case 7. L. 42. Referent of the USSR Embassy in Nigeria A. Buevich “Activities of the International Committee of the Red Cross and other ‘charitable’ organizations in Nigeria (Reference)”. February 12, 1969. (In Russian).

the blockade and free access to Ojukwu-controlled territories for all modes of transport carrying supplies to the civilian population. The federal government delegation believed that IRC aircraft could deliver cargoes to Nigerian airports, from where they would be sent to their destinations by truck through specially created “mercy corridors” after being inspected by federal authorities.

Despite five meetings between the two delegations, chaired by the Emperor, and more than a dozen meetings with each of them, no progress was made. Haile Selassie I decided to convene a session of the Consultative Committee on Nigeria and invited the heads of member states — Ghana, the DRC, Cameroon, Liberia, Niger — to Addis Ababa on August 16. The session, scheduled for August 19, did not take place, because none of the invitees came to the Ethiopian capital. They, as S.M. Kirsanov rightly noted: “Understanding the obvious failure of the negotiations in Addis Ababa, considered it most expedient for themselves to avoid direct participation in these negotiations. Here it is believed that the leaders of the other participants in the Consultative Committee do not want to take responsibility for the actual failure of the peace talks in Addis Ababa.”³⁹

On September 9, the allotted time for negotiations expired, and the Emperor declared them over, ending “his fruitless mission as mediator”⁴⁰ to resolve the Nigerian crisis.

Even before the formal conclusion of the negotiations, when it became clear that they had failed, Y. Gowon once again decided that it was time to solve everything on the battlefield. On

August 24, 1968, in an interview with the BBC, he announced a “final push” on all fronts which “started today” and would end the separatists presumably within “the next four weeks” (Kirk-Greene, 1971b, pp. 316—317). Military success was needed by the federals in advance of the OAU Assembly of Heads of State and Government in Algiers, where the Nigerian question was to be discussed.

The Marine Division moved north from Port Harcourt and by September 15 had taken Aba and Owerri, two of the three towns still controlled by Biafra. On September 10—11, one of the division’s brigades, advancing northwest, took the village of Oguta, just 10 miles from Biafra’s only Uli airstrip. The federals had three miles to advance, and it would be within reach of their artillery. The surrender of Ch. Ojukwu then became a matter of short order.

Diplomatic Victory for the Federals at the OAU Summit in Algiers

In such a favorable environment for the federal government on the fronts, the OAU Assembly of Heads of State and Government opened in Algiers on September 13. The day before, in one of the rooms of the Club des Pins, where the conference was held, Colonel Olufemi Olutoye, Military Undersecretary at the Nigerian Ministry of External Affairs, set up a situation room where he used maps and charts to show the advance of the marines led by Colonel Benjamin Adekunle. The Nigerian delegates on the sidelines assured their colleagues from other African countries that the war is almost over (Stremlau, 1977, p. 269).

The Nigerian delegation was headed by O. Awolowo. He arrived in Algeria on September 12 and met with all the heads of state attending the forum before discussing the Nigerian question. There were no Biafra representatives in Algeria, but the delegates of Ivory Coast, Gabon, Zambia and Tanzania, countries which recognized the Ojukwu regime, distributed his personal message to all heads of delegation. He reiterated his

³⁹ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 16. Case 10. L. 105. Counselor of the Soviet Embassy in Ethiopia S. Kirsanov “On the progress of the peace talks in Addis Ababa on Nigeria”. August 27, 1968. (In Russian).

⁴⁰ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 16. Case 10. L. 110. Counselor of the Soviet Embassy in Ethiopia Yu. Komarov, attaché of the Soviet Embassy in Ethiopia V. Tokin “On the progress of the peace talks in Addis Ababa on Nigeria. (Information in addition to our No. 394/s of August 27, 1968)”. October 8, 1968. (In Russian).

earlier position: the coexistence of Biafra and Nigeria is possible only in the form of “an economic union of two independent and sovereign states of Biafra and Nigeria” (Stremlau, 1977, p. 271).

The discussion of the Nigerian issue began at 4 PM on September 15 and lasted 14 hours. Haile Selassie I first presented the report of the OAU Consultative Committee and the committee’s draft resolution on Nigeria. The Emperor proposed a vote on the draft without discussing the situation in Nigeria. He was supported by the President of the DRC, J.-D. Mobutu, who stated that “If its secession succeeded, Biafra would present a dangerous example of a divided state, a potential threat to many African states.”⁴¹ Representatives of the countries which recognized Biafra insisted on the discussion. It lasted five and a half hours, and a resolution was adopted calling upon “all member states of the United Nations and OAU to refrain from any action detrimental to the peace, unity and territorial integrity of Nigeria” and appealing to “the secessionist leaders to cooperate with the Federal authorities in order to restore peace and unity in Nigeria.” At the suggestion of the Ivory Coast delegation, a clause for a general amnesty after the end of hostilities was included (Kirk-Greene, 1971b, pp. 328—329). 36 countries voted for the resolution, 4 countries, which recognized Biafra, voted against it, and 2 delegations (Botswana and Rwanda) abstained.⁴²

In assessing the outcome of the Algerian forum, the Nigerian media noted that “The OAU resolution on Nigeria was a major diplomatic victory for the federal military government, and for the rebels the resolution should serve as a signal to denounce

secession.”⁴³ It was indeed a success for Nigerian diplomacy, but only a military defeat could have forced Ch. Ojukwu to stop secession, which did not happen.

In early September 1968, Biafra was a small enclave, 60 miles long and 30 miles wide, landlocked and surrounded on all sides by the enemy. Nothing seemed to save it from surrender. On September 12, federal troops crossing the Orasha River, which gave way to the Uli airstrip, came under intense fire from artillery that had taken up secret positions the day before. After suffering heavy losses, they retreated 20 miles. On other fronts, Biafra troops also managed to hold their positions.

New supplies of French arms helped. On August 24, Ch. de Gaulle retaliated to Y. Gowon’s “final push” with sending another large shipment of weapons by sea to Ivory Coast (Griffin, 2017, p. 168). At a press conference in Paris on September 9, the day the Addis Ababa conference ended, the French president stated: “Indeed, why should the Ibos, who are generally Christians, who live in the south in a certain way, who have their own language, why should they depend on another ethnic fraction of the Federation [of Nigeria]?” (Kirk-Greene, 1971b, p. 329).

The front stabilized again, another Y. Gowon’s promise to finish off the separatists remained unfulfilled.

The Final Peacekeeping Initiatives of the OAU

In the absence of military successes of the federal army, the chances of renewed peacekeeping under the OAU auspices looked unrealistic. Speaking to the Biafra media on December 31, 1968, Ch. Ojukwu criticized the OAU disparagingly: “The Organization of African Unity is merely a title — a marionette show — plenty of pomp, but no circumstance... it might be an Organization of African eunuchs. The OAU has African skin, but this is only...

⁴¹ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 11. P. 13. Case 4. L. 39. Third Secretary of the USSR Embassy in Nigeria I. Shiryayev “The Nigerian crisis and the meeting of Foreign Ministers and the OAU Heads of State Conference in Algiers in September of this year. (Reference)”. October 16, 1968. (In Russian).

⁴² Ibid. L. 40.

⁴³ Ibid.

a mask for established imperialism — Arab-British-Russian” (quoted from: (Stremlau, 1977, p. 308)).

Despite Ojukwu’s offensive-aggressive rhetoric, it was clear that the military defeat of his regime was just a matter of time. Pro-Western African countries were anxious to find a peace formula that could “save face” for Ojukwu. On January 24, 1969, Liberian President Tubman urged the OAU Consultative Committee to invite representatives of the federal government and the secessionist leaders to meet and negotiate “without any agreed agenda” (Stremlau, 1977, p. 310). While Ch. Ojukwu was negative to this initiative, the federal government agreed to negotiate. Neither the exhortations of the Zambian delegation which visited Biafra in March 1969, nor the calls for talks by Ivory Coast, Gabon and Tanzania, helped to change Ojukwu’s position.

More effective was the pressure on Ojukwu’s sensitive point: arms supplies. In late March, Ivorian President F. Houphouët-Boigny, Niger’s President H. Diiori and the DRC President J.-D. Mobutu visited Paris. According to press reports, they succeeded in inducing Ch. de Gaulle to reduce the supply of arms to the Biafra army in order to make Ch. Ojukwu more amenable to negotiations. By mid-April, the French deliveries of arms had fallen from 25 tons to 1 tons per day (Stremlau, 1977, p. 312). The result was not slow to affect the fighting: on April 22, the federal troops seized Umuahia, the capital of Biafra. On April 13, Biafra announced that it had accepted Haile Selassie’s invitation to negotiate with Nigerian representatives in Monrovia through the mediation of the OAU Consultative Committee.

The Consultative Committee met in the Liberian capital on April 18—20, 1969. Haile Selassie I chaired the session, with the heads of Liberia (Tubman), Niger (Diiori), the DRC (Mobutu), Cameroon (Ahidjo), and Ghana (was represented by John Harley, Vice-Chairman of the National Liberation Council). The OAU

Secretary General, T. Diallo, also participated. The delegation of Nigeria was headed by Minister of Public Works and Housing, F. Okunnu, and of Biafra — by Chief Justice L. Mbanefo. They were invited to the Committee meetings to present their positions and then the work was conducted in a closed mode. W. Tubman and H. Diiori, as a result of negotiations with L. Mbanefo, found a formula acceptable to Ch. Ojukwu — “return to a normal situation in the country” as a basis for negotiations. As was to be expected, this did not please the federals, F. Okunnu proposed another basis — “a federal united Nigeria.” This was not accepted by the Biafran side, and the session ended inconclusively (Stremlau, 1977, pp. 313—319).

The summer campaign of 1969 was quite successful for the Biafra army. It launched several counterstrikes and retook Owerri on April 25, where Ch. Ojukwu immediately relocated his capital.

The air supremacy of the Nigerian air force was seriously challenged. A 60-year-old Swedish Count Carl Gustaf von Rosen, a famous air ace and adventurer, proposed to Ch. Ojukwu to establish a “regular air force.” Having received Ch. Ojukwu’s consent and with the support of French intelligence, C.G. von Rosen purchased five Swedish light single-engine trainer aircraft “Malmö,” nicknamed “Minicons” in Africa, and converted them into attack fighting machines. The squadron under the command of C.G. von Rosen consisted of four Swedish mercenaries and three Igbo. Because of the diminutive size of its aircraft, it was called the “Biafran Babies.” On the night of May 20 1969, the squadron covertly flew from Gabon to a secret airfield Orlu, located in Biafra near the front lines. On May 22, the “Minicons” attacked the airfield of Port Harcourt, on May 24 — Benin, on May 26 — Enugu, on May 28 — knocked out the power plant in Ugeli, which supplied electricity to all of South-Eastern Nigeria. Von Rosen’s squadron inflicted damage on the Federal Air Force without sustaining casualties. The

“Minicons” approached their targets at a very low altitude (2—5 meters), which made it very difficult for the anti-aircraft guns to operate, and during the flights they maintained radio silence. Soon, at the insistence of the Swedish government, C.G. von Rosen and the foreign pilots from his team left Nigeria.

The successful actions of Ch. Ojukwu’s air force provoked an escalation of the air war. On the night of June 5, 1969, a Nigerian Air Force MiG-17 shot down a Swedish Red Cross DC-6 with identifying markings (De St. Jorre, 1972, p. 332). Notes of protest from the US and Swedish governments followed. Nigeria responded by declaring A. Lindt, head of IRC operations in West Africa, *persona non grata* for unauthorized flights over its territory. The federal government issued a decree requiring all aircraft to land in Lagos for inspection on their way to and from Biafra.⁴⁴ It was ignored and illegal night flights continued.

The OAU made one last attempt to resolve the Nigerian crisis at its sixth summit in Addis Ababa, September 6—10, 1969, attended by representatives of 41 African countries, including Y. Gowon, who met with the heads of 14 states during the summit. Biafra was not represented. Its interests were defended by the four countries that recognized the Ojukwu regime. Ivory Coast, Gabon, Zambia and Tanzania called on the OAU to initiate an immediate ceasefire without preconditions. Y. Gowon insisted that any negotiations were possible only in the context of recognition by both sides of “a unified Nigeria” (Stremlau, 1977, p. 350). Throughout the summit there were negotiations between representatives of the four countries and the Consultative Committee to work out a compromise resolution. No concessions were made to Biafra. The resolution adopted appealed “solemnly and

urgently to the two parties involved in the civil war to agree to preserve in the overriding interest of Africa, the unity of Nigeria and accept immediately suspension of hostilities and the opening without delay, of negotiations intended to preserve unity of Nigeria and restore reconciliation and peace that will ensure for the population every form of security and every guarantee of equal rights, prerogatives and obligations.”⁴⁵

Y. Gowon was also victorious in another issue — international aid to war-affected civilians. The problem gained a lot of international attention after the incident with the Swedish Red Cross plane. The summit asked governments, international, religious and charitable organizations of the world “to facilitate the implementation of the present resolution and to desist from any action, gesture and attitude likely to jeopardize the efforts of the OAU in finding an African solution to the Nigerian crisis.”⁴⁶ Aid to civilians was recognized as an internal affair of Nigeria. 36 countries voted in favour of the resolution, 5 abstained (Ivory Coast, Gabon, Zambia, Sierra Leone and Tanzania) (Stremlau, 1977, p. 354).

The decisions taken in Addis Ababa forced Ch. Ojukwu to refuse to accept the peacekeeping services of the OAU. His attempts to engage Switzerland, Austria, Sweden and Yugoslavia to mediate the conflict proved to be unsuccessful. In December 1969, Haile Selassie I invited representatives of the federal government and Biafra to Addis Ababa for peace talks. The crucial question was whether the Emperor did so privately or as chairman of the OAU Consultative Committee

⁴⁴ AVP RF. Fund 0579. Reg. 12. P. 14. Case 7. L. 45. The Third Secretary of the USSR Embassy in Nigeria N. Petrov “The Federal Government’s decision to restrict the IRC activities in Nigeria and the reaction of the Imperialist Powers. (Reference)”. August 15, 1969. (In Russian).

⁴⁵ Resolutions adopted by the Sixth Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government Held in Addis Ababa from 6 to 10 September 1969. AHG/Res.58/Rev.1 (VI). Resolution on Nigeria // Organization of African Unity. URL: https://au.int/sites/default/files/decisions/9518-assembly_en_6_10_september_1969_assembly_heads_state_government_sixth_ordinary_session.pdf (accessed: 04.03.2023).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

on Nigeria. Biafra believed it was a private initiative as it refused to deal with the OAU. Nigeria's ambassador to Addis Ababa, Olu Sanu, made a statement on December 17 that he had received assurances from Ethiopian Foreign Minister Ketema Yifru that the talks were organized within the OAU. As a result, they did not take place, and the Biafran delegation that had previously arrived in Addis Ababa, returned on 18 December (Červenka, 1977, pp. 106—107).

By then the civil war was almost over. The federal army had gone on the offensive, which this time proved to be really decisive and victorious. Hungry Biafran soldiers abandoned their weapons, hid in the forests or mingled with the crowds of refugees. On January 9, 1970, Owerri fell. On the morning of January 11,

Ch. Ojukwu flew to Ivory Coast. A few hours later the Uli airstrip came under the control of Gowon's troops. On January 15, Biafra surrendered.

Conclusion

The OAU failed to resolve the Nigerian crisis. The other peacekeepers, notably Britain, also failed. The parties to the conflict did not seek reconciliation but military victory; everything was decided on the battlefield. The OAU succeeded in preventing the legitimization of secessionist Biafra, which was sought by France and China through their African allies who recognized the Ojukwu regime. Otherwise, there could have been a domino effect with disastrous consequences for the whole continent.

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