

JOHN J. STREMLAU

# The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970



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THE INTERNATIONAL POLITICS  
OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR  
1967-1970



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JOHN J. STREMLAU

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*For Carolyn*



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## PREFACE

Civil wars, with varying degrees of external involvement, have become the principal form of violence in the international system. Most of these conflicts erupt in Third World countries. Thus far, very little has been published about how the local parties in a modern civil war seek to attract or discourage foreign intervention.

My interest in focusing on the policies of those embroiled in armed civil strife was aroused by stark realities; since World War II millions of lives have been lost in the pursuit of essentially domestic political objectives during conflicts that have frequently also imperiled international peace. In Africa alone, there have been no fewer than twelve civil wars between 1960 and 1976. Among the most severe and internationally significant of these was the 1967–1970 war between the federal government of Nigeria and the secessionist eastern region of Biafra.

The possible disintegration of Africa's most populous country, a state that had previously been widely regarded as the continent's outstanding parliamentary democracy and that had enjoyed the bright economic prospect of becoming one of the world's major oil producers, affected a wide range of foreign interests. Many African leaders faced the issue of whether the Biafran example might inspire secessionist forces within their own newly independent and still fragile states. Questions were raised about how events in Nigeria would affect the latent competition between France and Great Britain for influence over their former West African territories. And it was conceivable that the struggle might somehow become another test of strength between the United States and the Soviet Union or precipitate United Nations action similar to the controversial involvement in the Congo. The internationalization of the Nigerian civil war, however, bore little resemblance to situations elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> In this case, foreign intervention resulted primarily from humanitarian rather than from political or ideological concerns.

Barely a year after Biafra's secession, and despite a lack of substantial diplomatic recognition or even covert help from foreign powers,

<sup>1</sup> For general background reading see: James N. Rosenau, ed., *The International Aspects of Civil Strife* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964); Richard A. Falk, ed., *The International Law of Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970); Louis G. M. Jaquet, ed., *Intervention in International Politics* (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Affairs, 1971); and John Norton Moore, ed., *Law and Civil War in the Modern World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

## PREFACE

the war ranked as the most important foreign issue in public opinion surveys throughout Western Europe, and it was regarded as second only to Vietnam among the majority of Americans. In contrast to the lack of popular attention accorded other civil wars of comparable or greater violence, the specter of mass starvation in Biafra brought forth unprecedented amounts of private foreign assistance that substantially altered the nature and duration of the struggle.

Given the intense passions aroused by Biafra, perhaps I should not have been surprised when my decision in 1969 to become a research associate at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs in Lagos was criticized and strongly discouraged by several academic colleagues. Not only were there warnings about the risks of becoming too partisan and jeopardizing all claim to scholarly credentials; some went so far as to insist that by merely affiliating with a Nigerian institution, one would somehow dignify a regime that many believed to be guilty of genocide. Such sentiments, and the demands for intervention to save Biafra, contrasted sharply with the views that I had encountered in 1968 during a series of visits to African universities in eleven countries.

Concern about the suffering and welfare of the civilians inside Biafra was evident throughout Africa, but so were the apprehensions about the Balkanization of Nigeria, especially if this were to be achieved through foreign intervention. The fundamental difference between the prevailing attitude in Africa and public opinion in Western Europe and the United States centered on the issue of whether the survival of the Biafran state was a necessary condition for the survival of the Ibo people. A desire to understand how Nigerian and Biafran authorities tried to deal with the political implications of differing positions on this issue sparked the research for this book.

During a two-year residency in Lagos my wife completed a doctoral study of the sensitive and complex economic issues associated with indigenization of management in foreign-owned corporations, while I assembled most of the material for this book. Neither of us was ever harassed, censored, or in any other way constrained from conducting hundreds of interviews and gathering our data. Following the cessation of hostilities in January 1970, we traveled freely throughout the former Biafran territory. The degree of candor and willingness to recall wartime experiences differed among individuals although, in general, those who had been responsible for Nigeria's and Biafra's foreign relations were equally forthcoming. Several leading Biafrans who contributed to this study were interviewed while in exile; they were as cooperative as those who chose to remain or return to Nigeria soon after the war.

## PREFACE

I have chosen not to dwell on the righteousness of either side, and I remain ambivalent about many aspects of the Nigerian civil war and the various ways that the international community reacted to the conflict. Nevertheless, implicit but important value judgments will be evident in every chapter that follows, and no doubt it will be these, as much as the factual presentation and organization, that will concern many readers.

A list of those interviewed appears after the Note on Sources, but special thanks are due to the following: Yakubu Gowon, C. Odumegwu Ojukwu, Allison Ayida, Godwin Onyegbula, Okoi Arikpo, Uche Chukwumeriji, and Dike Nworah. After imposing on so many for so much assistance—particularly Emeka Ojukwu, who agreed to several all-day conversations—I only hope that all concerned will judge this book to be fair and accurate.

Lawrence Fabunmi, as Director General of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, provided innumerable courtesies. I also owe much to his successor, the late Olusupo Ojedokun, who became a close friend and mentor. The help of the Institute's library staff under the direction of the late Irene Kluzek certainly eased the task of secondary research. Among my friends in Lagos none was more valued for thoughtful advice and encouragement than my two colleagues at the Institute, Oluwale Idris and Mohammed Brimah.

Robert L. West of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy deserves credit for helping to inspire this study and for closely following its development. As early drafts began to take shape, W. Scott Thompson offered extensive suggestions and selflessly devoted countless hours to strengthening its presentation.

I was fortunate to have the benefit of comments from three other readers who have written extensively about Nigeria. My thanks to David Williams extends well beyond the many improvements that he has made in this manuscript. The insights and incomparable coverage of the Nigerian civil war that he provided as editor of *West Africa* were essential to the development of a framework for this book. John de St. Jorre's revisions of the final draft were only the most recent contributions that this outstanding journalist and author of *The Nigerian Civil War* has made to this project. Finally, I want to express appreciation to Pauline Baker for her frequent and wise counsel throughout my period of research in Nigeria and for prompting several valuable changes in the final draft of the book. I owe her and her husband, Raymond, a great debt of gratitude.

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## PREFACE

of Law and Diplomacy. I am also pleased to acknowledge Penny Gosdigian's generous help in preparing the manuscript for publication.

Above all, I am indebted to my wife, Carolyn, who has shared this entire adventure with me. Her belief in the study, regardless of my own periods of doubt and frustration, was a constant source of strength. Throughout, she has been my most constructive critic, and I have gratefully accepted her many suggestions to improve the style and content of every draft. Without her love and support this book would not have been completed.

## CHRONOLOGY OF IMPORTANT EVENTS IN THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

1966

- January 15* First Republic overthrown by military. J.T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi forms military government; C. Odumegwu Ojukwu appointed governor of the Eastern Region and Yakubu Gowon becomes army chief of staff.
- May 24* Ironsi issues decree establishing unitary state; followed by riots in the North.
- July 29* Second military coup. Yakubu Gowon emerges to succeed Ironsi, who is assassinated.
- Late Sept./  
early Oct.* Rioting and Ibo massacres in North; many Ibos flee to Eastern Region.

1967

- January 4-5* Gowon and Ojukwu meet at Aburi, Ghana.
- May 27* Gowon issues decree dividing Nigeria's four regions into twelve states. State of emergency declared.
- May 30* Ojukwu declares secession and establishment of "Republic of Biafra."
- June 12* Eleven civilians appointed commissioners in Federal Executive Council.
- June* Federal government sends delegation to Soviet Union following rejection by British and U.S. governments of requests for aircraft and arms.
- July 6* Fighting breaks out between Biafran and federal troops.
- July 10* Ogoja captured by federal First Division, commanded by Col. Mohammed Shuwa. Biafran aircraft bombs Lagos with little damage.
- July 15* Nsukka captured by First Division.
- July 25* Federal Third Marine Commando Division, commanded by Col. Benjamin Adekunle, captures Bonny ocean terminal, thus controlling access to the sea from Port Harcourt.
- July 27* Shell-BP manager arrested in Biafra; released following month.
- August 9* Biafran forces invade Midwest, capture Benin, and advance to Ore in the West, thus threatening both Ibadan and Lagos. Two incendiary bombs dropped by Biafran aircraft on petrol storage tanks in Apapa with little damage.
- August 10* Gowon announces that what had previously been "police action" against secession is now "total war." Kaduna bombed by Biafran aircraft.
- August 11* Biafran aircraft bombs Lagos, causing some civilian casualties.
- August* Crated MIG-17s brought into Kano airport by Soviet Antonov-12 transports. L-29 Delfin jet trainers arrive at Apapa by sea.



## CHRONOLOGY

- August 10-21* Federal response to loss of Midwest includes formation of the Second Division under Col. Murtala Mohammed. Elements of this division start to move into northern part of Midwest in mid-August.
- August 29* In major turning point of war, federal Second Division troops recapture Ore, thereby halting Biafran advance on Lagos.
- September 14* OAU summit in Kinshasa agrees to send mission to Lagos for discussions with federal government. Capture of Ikom by federal First Division.
- September 20* Benin, Midwest State capital, falls to advance elements of federal Second Division.
- October 4* Enugu, Biafran capital, captured by First Division.
- October 9* Asaba, on west bank of the Niger River, captured by Second Division. Two spans of Niger River bridge blown up by retreating Biafrans.
- October 18* Naval amphibious task force commanded by Adekunle captures Calabar and Parrot Island. Federal forces start to move north to link up with First Division at Ikom to seal Cameroon border.
- October/December* Second Division makes two abortive attempts to cross the Niger River.
- November 22-23* OAU Consultative Mission under Emperor Haile Selassie opens talks with Gowon in Lagos.
- December 20* Pope Paul's special mission arrives in Lagos.

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1968

- Early January* Federal Second Division crosses Niger River at Idah and starts advance toward Awka and Onitsha. Federal government replaces existing currency notes.
- January 29* Biafran authorities begin issue of their own currency and postage stamps.
- February 9-10* Visit to Lagos by Arnold Smith, secretary general, Commonwealth Secretariat.
- March 21* Onitsha captured by Second Division.
- April 5* Abakaliki captured by First Division.
- April 13* Tanzania recognizes Biafra.
- April 21* Afikpo captured by First Division.
- Late April* Entire Southeastern State captured by Federal forces, with occupation of Ikom, Uyo, Eket, Abak, Ikot Ekpene, and finally, Opobo.
- May 6* Bomu oilfields captured by Third Marine Commando Division.
- May 6-15* Enaharo and Mbanefo meet in London under Commonwealth auspices.
- May 8* Gabon recognizes Biafra.
- May 15* Ivory Coast recognizes Biafra.
- May 19* Third Marine Commando Division captures Port Harcourt, having already taken the oil refinery at Okrika; Biafrans cut off from the sea.

## CHRONOLOGY

- May 20* Zambia recognizes Biafra.
- May 23-31* Kampala peace talks.
- May 26* Murtala Mohammed replaced as commander, federal Second Division, by Ibrahim Haruna.
- May 27* Czechoslovakia announces embargo on supply of arms to federal government.
- June 5* Gowon states federal troops will not advance into the Ibo heartland unless all appeals for a settlement fail. Holland announces embargo on supply of arms to federal government.
- June 12* Debate on arms supplies in British House of Commons. France announces embargo on supply of arms to federal government.
- June 20-24* British minister of state, Lord Shepherd, visits Lagos; also travels to Enugu and Calabar.
- July 5* Belgium announces embargo on arms supply to federal government.
- July 15-26* OAU Consultative Committee meeting at Niamey, attended by federal government and Biafran delegations. Adjourned to Addis Ababa.
- July 29* Ahoada, last major town in Rivers State, taken by federal Third Marine Commando Division.
- July 31* French cabinet statement supports Biafran claim to self-determination.
- August 5-9* Peace talks in Addis Ababa.
- August 15* Gowon announces "final offensive" into Ibo heartland to begin August 24.
- August 28* Federal government requests Britain, Canada, Sweden, Poland, and OAU and UN each to nominate an observer to report on the behavior and conduct of federal troops in Ibo areas.
- September 4* Aba captured by federal Third Marine Commando Division.
- September 10-11* Federal Fifteenth Commando Brigade captures Oguta.
- September 13* Commando brigade elements moving toward Uli airstrip cut off Biafran troops.
- September 13-16* Fifth summit of OAU held in Algiers.
- September 15* Biafrans retake Oguta.
- September 16* Owerri taken by federal Sixteenth Commando Brigade.
- September 25-30* Lord Shepherd's second visit to Lagos; he also flies to Port Harcourt and Uyo.
- September 30* Okigwi taken by First Division.
- November/December* Nigerian air force starts air strikes on Biafran airstrips with little success.
- December 11-17* Lord Shepherd makes third visit to Lagos.
- December 15* Tax riots in Western State.
- December 21-24* A Biafran offensive to recapture Owerri and Aba fails.

## CHRONOLOGY

1969

- February 22* President Nixon announces appointment of C. Clyde Ferguson as special coordinator for Biafran relief.
- March 6* Russian warships pay first courtesy visit to Lagos.
- March 12-13* British House of Commons debates Nigeria.
- March 26* Federal First Division advances on two axes: the first from Afikpo, aimed at Bende, and the second from Okigwi, south to Umuahia.
- March 27-31* Visit of British Prime Minister Harold Wilson and HMS Fearless to Lagos. Wilson also visits Enugu, Port Harcourt, and Calabar, and on March 31 flies to Addis Ababa to discuss civil war with Emperor Haile Selassie.
- April 18-20* OAU Consultative Committee on Nigeria meets in Monrovia.
- April 22* Umuahia, the Biafran seat of government, captured by federal First Division.
- April 25* Biafran troops reoccupy Owerri.
- May* Noticeable increase in Biafran activity between the Niger and Ase Rivers in the Okpai and Aboh areas.
- May 4* Lieutenant Colonel Ojukwu assumes rank of general.
- May 9* Biafrans attack AGIP oil drilling sites in Okpai area, Midwest State; Italian oilmen held as hostages.
- May 12* Federal Supreme Military Council announces redeployment of senior field commanders: Obasanjo assumes Adekunle's command over the Third Division, Jalo replaces Haruna in the Second Division, and Bisalla succeeds Shuwa in the First Division.
- May 22* Air attacks by Swedish MFI-9B minitrainer aircraft, led by Count Carl Gustav von Rosen, begin against Port Harcourt, Benin, and oil fields in the Rivers and Midwest states.
- May 30* One-day visit by Gowon to Togo.
- June 1* First indication that Uga airstrip (north of Orlu) used by Biafrans for relief and arms flights.
- June 1* Ojukwu issues Ahiara Declaration.
- June 5* Swedish Red Cross plane shot down by Nigerian air force near Eket, in Southeastern State. ICRC flights from Cotonou suspended until federal policy clarified.
- June 19* Federal government announces approval of a large-scale land relief route into rebel territory.
- June 30* Lagos announces that the federal Rehabilitation Committee will coordinate relief in the future.
- August 1* Pope Paul meets both federal and Biafran representatives in Kampala.
- August 7* Gowon visits Ghana.
- August 12* Gowon meets President Zinsou in Dahomey (Benin).
- August 13* Tax riots in Western State.
- August 17* Former President of Nigeria, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, pays surprise visit to Lagos and has talks with Gowon. They travel to Liberia for 48 hours of further discussion.

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- August 28* Azikiwe declares support for a united Nigeria at a London press conference.
- September 4* Federal government agrees in principle to ICRC plan for daylight flights of relief.
- September 5* Azikiwe's formal homecoming to Lagos; later in September he visits all twelve states.
- September 6-10* Sixth OAU summit conference held in Addis Ababa.
- September 13* Agreement signed by ICRC and federal government for daylight relief flights into Uli airstrip.
- September 14* Ojukwu rejects ICRC-Lagos daylight relief flights agreement.
- October 15* Western State government announces tax and associated concessions to rioters.
- October 25* Gowon visits Congo (Zaire).
- Mid-November* Marked signs of federal buildup for new offensive.
- December 5-10* Maurice Foley, British parliamentary undersecretary, in Lagos for talks with federal government.
- December 14* Federal army prepared for offensive and reported waiting authorization from Lagos.
- December 15-18* Effort to launch peace talks in Addis Ababa.
- December 17* Ojukwu again rejects daylight relief flights.
- December 27* Federal Third Division elements from Aba link up with First Division at Umuahia, cutting off more than 500 square miles of Biafran enclave.
- 
- 1970
- January 7* Owerri falls to federal Third Division.
- January 11* Ojukwu leaves Biafra for Ivory Coast.
- January 12* Uli airstrip captured. Federal First and Third Divisions meet at Orlu. Major General Philip Effiong, officer administering the Biafran government since Ojukwu's departure, broadcasts surrender over Radio Biafra.
- January 13* Gowon accepts Biafran surrender.
- January 14* Biafran armistice mission arrives in Lagos.



**PART I**

**AN AFRICAN AFFAIR**



# • 1 •

## NIGERIA'S PREWAR FOREIGN POLICY

In June 1966, less than twelve months before Biafran secession, Nigeria's head of state, Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi, summoned his ambassadors from their diplomatic posts in Africa for six days of consultations in Lagos. The meeting was to have been the start of a series of ambassadorial gatherings leading to a comprehensive review of foreign policy, the first since Nigeria achieved independence from Britain in 1960. The decision to begin with an assessment of the federal government's interests in Africa was explained by General Ironsi:

In the whole sphere of Nigeria's external relations, the Government attaches the greatest importance to our African policy. We are aware that because of our population and potentials, the majority of opinion in the civilized world looks up to us to provide responsible leadership in Africa; and we realize that we shall be judged, to a very great extent, by the degree of success or failure with which we face up to the challenge which this expectation throws on us. We are convinced that whether in the political, economic or cultural sphere, our destiny lies in our role in the continent of Africa.<sup>1</sup>

Seven weeks later, Ironsi was dead, a victim of Nigeria's second military coup in less than seven months, and the country slipped to the brink of anarchy. Aspirations for leadership in Africa had to be abandoned, as the formulation and execution of a coherent foreign policy became impossible under conditions of domestic chaos. Not until late 1967, well into the civil war, did the federal military government under General Yakubu Gowon succeed in establishing a policy framework for the conduct of international relations, and Africa emerged as the central focus of Nigeria's civil war diplomacy. The basic strategy, which prevailed until the end of the conflict in January 1970, was defensive, aimed at limiting Biafra's penetration of the international system. Nigeria—the would-be giant of Africa—ironically found itself tied to a foreign policy that depended in large measure on the willingness of other African governments to maintain a solid front of

<sup>1</sup> Remarks by the Head of State to the Regional Conference of Heads of Missions in Africa (cited hereafter as RCHM-A), Lagos, June 9, 1966, Cn 1/21/I, 114.



## AN AFRICAN AFFAIR

diplomatic support as a means of discouraging intervention that would foster Biafran independence.

Unlike the Congo crisis a few years earlier, the Nigerian civil war did not polarize Africa or seriously intensify tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union; nor did it bring an influx of United Nations peace-keeping forces. To understand official foreign reaction to the conflict in Nigeria, black Africa's richest and most populous country, one should be aware of the federal government's role in international affairs prior to Biafran secession on May 30, 1967. Diplomacy, after all, is a cumulative process, and Nigeria's previous behavior influenced foreign reaction to the civil war. The federal government's experience during this earlier period also helped shape its effort to control the degree of external involvement in its domestic conflict. This chapter will present a brief outline of Nigeria's prewar foreign policy, with special emphasis on intra-African relations, and it will conclude with a description of how the federal government conducted its diplomacy.

### NATIONAL INTERESTS AND FOREIGN RELATIONS

In the years following Independence, Nigeria's civilian leaders became increasingly embroiled in conflicts resulting from their attempts to consolidate national authority over some 250 linguistically distinct groups, which are scattered across the country's 356,699 square miles—an area comparable to Italy, France, Belgium, and Holland combined. Nigeria was the epitome of what William Zartman referred to as the new "state-nations" in Africa: a former colonial territory that had acquired the formal institutions and sovereign rights of a modern state, but was so badly fragmented that national allegiance remained in doubt.<sup>2</sup> Under these circumstances, Nigeria's political elite was too preoccupied with domestic affairs to pay much attention to international issues. Once the British had withdrawn, the various political groups within Nigeria sought to consolidate their positions and to seize control at the center by engineering a series of lavishly financed and ethnically rooted coalitions that were progressively disruptive and untenable. Shortly after the first military coup in January 1966, the Ministry of External Affairs undertook an analysis of Nigeria's global interests. The result of this exercise was not a report but a set of tables (see Appendix I). Nigeria's interests were divided into eighteen categories, and each state in the international system was graded, according to its relative interest to Nigeria, on a scale from one to ten in each of the eighteen categories. A foreign power's composite score

<sup>2</sup> Zartman, "Characteristics of Developing Foreign Policies."

## PREWAR FOREIGN POLICY

thus could range from 18 to 180. Not surprisingly, Britain led the list (163), followed by the United States (145), West Germany (106), Canada (104), and France (101).

The table provides an interesting insight into official perceptions of the scope and intensity of Nigeria's external relations barely a year before the outbreak of civil war. The perspective is much broader and more diverse than the British had projected when the Nigerian foreign office was created on the eve of Independence, and the subsequent institutional changes reflect the growing role Nigeria played in African affairs. In 1960, only two of Nigeria's seven diplomatic posts were in Africa, but by 1966 twenty-four out of a total of forty-two resident missions were located on the continent. If one refers back to the 1966 table of interests, and aggregates Nigeria's foreign concerns by region, Africa scores higher than the total for Europe and North America combined, primarily because of the importance ascribed to racial affinity.

At the global level, Lagos sought unabashedly to maintain close relations with Britain and other Western governments, for this was seen as the way to maximize economic development, a key element in promoting greater domestic integration. "Moderate" and "pragmatic" are the terms that Western scholars most frequently invoke to describe the international conduct of Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa's government (1960–1966).<sup>3</sup> From 1960 to 1968, Nigeria received \$273 million in technical and capital assistance from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries—Western Europe, the United States, Canada, and Japan.<sup>4</sup> Nigeria was the biggest recipient of OECD funds in Africa. While this figure pales when compared with the enormous oil revenues that accrued to the federal government in the 1970s, Western foreign aid and investment contributed significantly to the 5.7 percent annual rate of economic growth in real terms attained during the early 1960s. This economic input was considered vital by those political leaders who influenced the distribution of aid projects and federal revenue so as to reward important constituencies.

In addition to foreign aid, 85 percent of Nigeria's exports were sold to OECD countries, and close to 75 percent of Nigeria's imports came from that group. Nigeria offered the largest market in Africa,

<sup>3</sup> See Phillips, *The Development of Nigerian Foreign Policy*; Coleman, "The Foreign Policy of Nigeria"; and Cowan, "Nigerian Foreign Policy." Unpublished works that stress the same underlying attitudes in Nigeria's post-Independence foreign policy include: Gray, "The Foreign Policy Process in the Emerging African Nation: Nigeria"; Azikiwe, "Nigerian Foreign Policy 1960–1965"; and Idowu, "Foreign Policy of Nigeria 1960–1965."

<sup>4</sup> Nelson *et al.*, *Area Handbook for Nigeria*, pp. 376–379.

and its capitalist economy was among the most hospitable to Western investments.<sup>5</sup> A further indication of Nigeria's steadily improving economic standing was the July 1966 agreement that provided for associate status with the European Economic Community, the first non-francophone African country to receive such consideration.<sup>6</sup> Nigeria had for many years been the world's second leading exporter of cocoa and groundnuts, the foremost exporter of palm products, and the fifth largest seller of natural rubber. Earnings from these and other primary products financed most of the country's early development, and later helped pay for the civil war. Table 1-1 highlights the aggregate trade flow between Nigeria and her major partners during the war years, a pattern that had been established during the early 1960s.

Petroleum was a relatively insignificant source of foreign exchange until 1969, when it accounted for most of the sharp rise in export earnings that appears in the table.<sup>7</sup> Approximately 400,000 barrels a day were produced in 1966, compared with 2,000,000 barrels a day seven years later. Yet the prospect of great oil wealth—even without any premonition of the sharply rising prices of the 1970s—naturally affected the rosy economic outlook in 1966, and was another reason for strengthening ties with Europe and America. The federal government sought to be recognized as a nonaligned power because, as the prime minister explained in his first foreign policy address, such a status “will ensure that full attention is paid to the opinions expressed by our representatives.”<sup>8</sup> Nigeria's overwhelming foreign economic interests were, however, with the major Western powers.

Economic dealings with the Communist bloc, by comparison, remained negligible throughout the 1960s. Little development assistance was sought or forthcoming, and only some 6 percent of Nigeria's imports came from the Soviet Union, China, and Eastern Europe combined. Barely 3 percent of the country's exports were sold to the Eastern bloc. On a more basic level, there was in Nigeria a deep national commitment to a free enterprise system, a widespread admiration for

<sup>5</sup> See Kilby, *Industrialization in an Open Economy, Nigeria 1945-1966*, chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>6</sup> The agreement lapsed in 1969 because the French declined to sign. This was assumed to reflect the pro-Biafran policies of Charles de Gaulle. In fact, there was probably more at stake than a “show of humanitarian concern.” Nigerian Ministry of External Affairs records show that Lagos believed the reason it took so long to draft the initial agreement was because of French obstructionism within the European Economic Community, which grew out of de Gaulle's desire to perpetuate the special relationship with the former French colonies already enjoying associate status.

<sup>7</sup> See Pearson, *Petroleum and the Nigerian Economy*, for a discussion of this period.

<sup>8</sup> Statement by the Prime Minister, *House of Representatives Debates*, August 20, 1960 (Lagos: Federal Government Printer, 1960).

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TABLE 1-1  
Principal Trading Partners of Nigeria 1967-1969  
(value in millions of Nigerian pounds)\*

Country of Origin or Destination	Imports			Exports		
	1967	1968	1969	1967	1968	1969
United Kingdom	64.6	59.9	86.3	70.3	61.9	87.7
Netherlands	9.3	7.8	11.6	30.8	27.0	42.8
United States	27.8	22.3	29.3	18.5	16.0	40.0
West Germany	25.2	21.2	26.4	25.1	17.9	19.3
Italy	10.7	13.8	13.5	14.1	13.1	14.5
France	9.4	7.2	8.0	22.4	11.5	31.9
Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and the People's Republic of China	13.8	12.1	14.3	7.5	12.2	12.3
African countries	2.6	4.3	5.5	2.8	2.0	3.0
Other countries	60.1	44.0	53.8	46.6	44.9	66.6
Total	223.5	192.6	248.7	238.1	206.5	318.1

Source: adapted from Nigeria, Federal Office of Statistics, *Nigerian Trade Summary, December 1967, 1968, 1969* (Lagos, 1968, 1969, 1970). Table appears in Nelson, *et al.*, *Area Handbook for Nigeria*, p. 370.

\*One Nigerian pound equals U.S. \$2.80.

Western democracies, where many of the modern elite had been educated, and a suspicion of Soviet intentions in Africa. The latter feeling was particularly strong in the Northern Region, where Communism was considered by a Moslem elite to be synonymous with atheism. This wariness was reflected in the federal government's decision to delay opening an embassy in Moscow until 1963.<sup>9</sup>

When a group of social scientists conducted an extensive survey of the attitudes of Nigerian legislators in late 1962 and early 1963, they uncovered an international outlook that held few surprises.<sup>10</sup> Regarding the cold war, the legislators were asked whether Nigeria

<sup>9</sup> When the Soviet embassy was established in Lagos in 1961, the number of its diplomatic staff was limited to ten, whereas no such restriction was placed on the diplomatic missions of Britain and the United States. While only five diplomatic car plates were allocated to the Soviet embassy, one hundred each were given to the British and Americans. Aluko, "The Civil War and Nigerian Foreign Policy."

<sup>10</sup> Free, *The Attitudes, Hopes and Fears of Nigerians*. One hundred members of the Nigerian federal House of Representatives were selected by random sampling from a list of all such legislators.

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should: (1) side with the United States, Britain, and their allies; (2) side with Russia and its allies; or (3) side with neither. The responses were as follows:<sup>11</sup>

	<i>Legislators</i>
side with United States, Britain, etc.	41%
side with Russia, etc.	2
side with neither	50
qualified answers	6
no opinion	1
	<hr/> 100%

Asked to indicate their opinions of various countries on a ten-to-one, high-to-low scale, the composite results were:<sup>12</sup>

	<i>Composite Score</i>
United States	8.3
Great Britain	6.9
Russia	4.6

The attitudes behind these figures revealed that "usefulness" was a principal criterion. The British had helped Nigeria before Independence, but they were less helpful currently. Six out of ten of the respondents gave as the reason for the high rating accorded the United States that "Americans have helped Nigeria" and "are prepared to continue to help us." The Soviet Union was admired for its science and space achievements, but criticized, first because it was Communist and totalitarian, and second because Russia had done nothing to help Nigeria.<sup>13</sup>

By mid-1966, relations with Moscow seemed to be improving, although few would have predicted that when the civil war erupted, only the Soviet Union would agree to supply the federal government with the aircraft it considered necessary for preserving the integrity of the country.<sup>14</sup> When the Conference of Nigerian Ambassadors met in June 1966, the Nigerian embassy in Moscow prepared a lengthy analysis of Soviet intentions in Africa, especially toward Nigeria.<sup>15</sup> While noting that "Soviet leaders have never at any time repudiated the messianic communist doctrine," the report confidently observed that "Soviet cam-

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-18.

<sup>14</sup> This will be discussed in Chapter 3 below. The Soviet Union seemed pleased by the change of government in Nigeria, which brought a southern Ibo to power in January 1966. See Legvold, *Soviet Policy in West Africa*, pp. 269-274.

<sup>15</sup> "Soviet Political Intentions in Africa," report prepared by the Nigerian embassy in Moscow preparatory to the June 1966 Conference of Nigerian Ambassadors in Africa and forwarded to the Ministry of External Affairs by Ambassador Ifeagwu, May 16, 1966, pp. 2-3.

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paigns in Africa so far have not met with any real or apparent success; [and] in the face of this unbroken record of failures, the architects of Soviet policy have been compelled to adjust the special ideological spectacles through which they had looked at Africa in the past . . . current Soviet policy lays increasing emphasis on encouraging the image of the USSR as a benevolent industrial power whose only desire is to live and trade in peace . . . while maintaining the same long-run strategy and goals . . . the eventual victory of communism.”<sup>16</sup>

It was recommended that Nigeria take steps to exploit this change in Soviet tactics toward Africa in order to further two specific interests. The first suggestion was that the federal government sign an economic and technical cooperation agreement with Russia. In the absence of such an agreement, Lagos had learned that it could only take advantage of Soviet technical assistance on a commercial basis and that the Soviet contracts had proven exorbitant.<sup>17</sup> Second, it was urged that Lagos sign a cultural agreement with the Soviets. At the time, more than five hundred Nigerian students were studying in Russian universities, most of them sponsored by Nigerian trade unions rather than by the Nigerian government. To get to Russia, the students usually secured travel permits to visit nearby West African countries, whence they could then depart for Moscow. The federal government considered this illegal, and the report concluded that a cultural agreement was essential “to force an undertaking that all offers of scholarships and recruitment of students should be done only through Nigerian government and approved channels.”<sup>18</sup> The cultural agreement was initialed in Lagos in March 1967 and signed in August of the same year; the agreement on economic and technical cooperation was not concluded until November 1968.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* Examples of these setbacks were given as follows: “The Soviet attempt to subvert the Government of Guinea was detected in good time and this led to the expulsion of the Soviet Ambassador from Guinea in 1961. They have suffered other setbacks. The Communist Party has been banned in the Sudan. In the U.A.R. several communists have been arrested and charged with plotting to overthrow the Government of President Nasser. In Algeria the underground communist movement is being repressively suppressed by the authorities. It will be remembered that also in Kenya the Government turned back Soviet arms apparently supplied at the request of somebody in Kenya. Similarly, the overthrow of President Nkrumah during the recent military coup in Ghana marks another setback for the Soviet diplomacy in Africa.”

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, Part II, “Nigerian-Soviet Trade and Economic Relations,” p. 7. The embassy staff was especially irked at a contract signed August 25, 1965, between the former government of Eastern Nigeria and the Soviet trading organization, “Techno-export,” for a feasibility study with a view to establishing a specialist hospital in Enugu for Soviet technicians. The undertaking proved to be an “expensive commercial proposition” and, apparently to its surprise, the Eastern Region government found it had to pay for nearly all the work in foreign exchange.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Part III, “African Education in the USSR,” p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Nigeria, Ministry of Justice, *Nigeria's Treaties in Force*, Vol. I.

Aside from these interests and the concern about possible Soviet influence among radical African states, Nigeria's relations with Moscow during the prewar years were correct but limited.

As for the close ties to Western powers, the Balewa government came under severe domestic criticism on only one occasion. This concerned a defense agreement with Great Britain that was arranged prior to Independence and was passed by the Nigerian legislature in November 1960. The agreement contained a secret understanding granting Nigeria military assistance as a *quid pro quo* for British air staging facilities, which would have remained under British control. Leaked information about the secret clause caused such a furor in Lagos that the treaty was abrogated by mutual consent in early 1962.<sup>20</sup> Otherwise, there were few strains between Lagos and London during these early years.

When Ian Smith unilaterally declared the independence of Southern Rhodesia on November 11, 1965, Nigeria discouraged other African governments from breaking diplomatic relations or taking other reprisals against Britain.<sup>21</sup> In return, Prime Minister Wilson agreed to devote the major portion of the January 1966 Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference to the Rhodesian question, and the meeting was held in Lagos, the first time that the heads of government had convened outside London.<sup>22</sup> The session helped to quell international criticism of the Wilson government; but if it enhanced the prestige of the Nigerian government, this was obscured by the military coup two days after the conference adjourned.

The most overt conflict between Nigeria and a Western power prior to the civil war occurred shortly after Independence, when France persisted in testing atomic weapons in the Algerian Sahara. After several warnings, the federal government suddenly broke diplomatic relations with Paris on January 5, 1961, imposed a complete embargo on all French goods, and gave the French ambassador forty-eight hours to leave the country.<sup>23</sup> The action was uncharacteristically abrupt, and was taken soon after the embarrassing revelations about the British defense agreement, at a time when the opposition in Parliament was sounding increasingly radical and appeared to be gaining strength. The break with France was popular domestically, and may have helped the Balewa government. As a diplomatic move, however, the gesture appears to have

<sup>20</sup> Ojedokun, "Nigeria's Relations with the Commonwealth, with Special Reference to Her Relations with the United Kingdom, 1960-1966."

<sup>21</sup> This was recalled approvingly by the Conference of Heads of Mission in Africa, which met in Lagos, June 9-14, 1966.

<sup>22</sup> Commonwealth of Nations, Meeting of Commonwealth Prime Ministers, Minutes of Meetings and Memoranda, Lagos, January 11-12, 1966.

<sup>23</sup> For an account of this incident, see Phillips, *The Development of Nigerian Foreign Policy*, pp. 124-126.

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been a serious mistake. In the short run, it caused enormous economic hardship for Nigeria's impoverished, land-locked francophone neighbors to the north and for tiny Dahomey (Benin) on the west coast. Moreover, Nigeria's rebuke failed to stop the atomic tests and did not encourage other African governments to sever relations with Paris.

The expulsion of the French ambassador also contradicted Nigeria's more basic policy of striving quietly to supplant France as the dominant power in West Africa.<sup>24</sup> As will be noted in later references to Nigeria's relations with its francophone neighbors, Lagos has never entertained any delusions about the extent of French influence over the former colonies or about the federal government's limited financial capability—at least before the era of oil wealth—to offer these countries sufficient incentives to lessen their dependence on France.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, a fundamental assumption of Nigeria's foreign policy has been that over the long term, France's interests in West Africa would gradually recede and the former colonial areas would look to Nigeria for leadership in the areas of international security and economic development. In the meantime, Lagos sought to avoid exciting any fears among her weaker neighbors that might have encouraged them to seek closer ties with the former colonial protector.<sup>26</sup>

The moderate to conservative diplomacy which, with the exception of the expulsion of the French in 1961, typified the foreign policy of the Balewa government also reflected the need to maintain a viable coalition in Lagos. Given the severe internal strains and constant readjustments that had to be made to sustain such a coalition, the prime minister usually sought to avoid becoming embroiled in world issues that might have afforded his domestic opposition an opportunity to stir up debate. Unless East-West tensions intruded on Africans affairs, they were generally ignored by the prime minister and his foreign office.

Nigeria's self-avowed political interests related almost exclusively to the changing conditions in Africa. In the broadest sense, Nigerian leaders viewed their country's international prestige as a function of the extent to which Nigeria was considered a leader of black Africa. As one

<sup>24</sup> Whether the affront had any bearing on President de Gaulle's inclination to support Biafran secession can only be surmised. M. Raymond Offroy, the French ambassador who was so unceremoniously deported, seven years later became one of the most prominent figures in the pro-Biafran lobby in France.

<sup>25</sup> This entire matter was reviewed in great detail in preparation for the June 1966 Conference of Nigerian Ambassadors. RCHM-A, "The Economic Dependence of the Afro-Malagasy States on France, A Working Paper," Lagos, June 3, 1966.

<sup>26</sup> A strong endorsement to continue this policy of restraint is set forth in RCHM-A, Working Paper No. 1, "Nigeria's Relations with Other African Countries," Section C, "Nigeria's Bilateral Relationship with Individual African States: French Speaking Africa," Lagos, June 1966.



of the working papers for the 1966 policy review conference for Nigerian ambassadors flatly asserted, "Africa is Nigeria's natural sphere of influence. To shirk this manifest destiny is not to heed the logic of history."<sup>27</sup> Yet beneath these assertions there have been more immediate concerns. To quote from another of the documents prepared for the ambassadors' conference: "Our interest in African affairs has naturally been far from altruistic. Indeed, our African posture and attitude has been respectively shaped and guided by the traditional concept of protecting and promoting our vital national interests, the most important of which is to create conditions at home and around us conducive to political stability."<sup>28</sup>

It was often said during the Nigerian civil war that African leaders felt compelled to support the federal government out of a fear that if Biafra were successful, this might inspire secessionist movements elsewhere in the region; a similar attitude certainly lay at the heart of Nigerian foreign policy before the war. Given the fragility of the country's federal structure, Nigeria's leaders were anxious that the surrounding international environment in West Africa should be conducive to domestic tranquility. Regarding the right of a people to self-determination, a Ministry of External Affairs briefing paper had this to say: "This principle [self-determination] underlies our efforts to secure the decolonization of those parts of Africa still under the colonial yoke. . . . But a word of caution here is necessary: the principle of self-determination in its purely theoretical context may be at variance with the other important principle of territorial integrity. This means that some sections of existing states may claim self-rule on the principle of self-determination. This, however, is not what is meant by the principle in the context of our African policy."<sup>29</sup>

Nigeria's true national interest, in the opinion of the country's ambassadors, were the same in 1966 as they had been in 1960, and these were reiterated in the conference report as follows:

- I. to ensure political stability and internal security, the *sine qua non* for orderly and progressive development of Nigeria's resources for the benefit of Nigerians;

<sup>27</sup> RCHM-A, Working Paper No. 2, "Nigeria's Role in the OAU," Lagos, June 1966.

<sup>28</sup> RCHM-A, Working Paper No. 1, Section A, "The Place of Africa in Nigeria's Foreign Policy," Lagos, June 1966.

<sup>29</sup> The context for this commentary was a paper prepared by the embassy staff in Khartoum, Sudan, which refers specifically to the attempted secession by the Negroid southern Sudanese from a state dominated by Arab northerners. Throughout the 1960s the federal government invariably refused to aid or even talk to representatives from the southern part of Sudan. See "Nigeria's African Foreign Policy, Purposes, Principles and Practices," prepared by the embassy of Nigeria, Khartoum, for the Conference of Nigerian Ambassadors, undated.

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- II. to insulate Nigeria from external subversion;
- III. to ensure respect for Nigerian sovereignty and territorial integrity;
- IV. to create suitable conditions for cooperation with African countries in economic, technical, cultural and other fields;
- V. to protect the interests and dignity of those [tens of thousands of] Nigerians residing in [West] Africa.<sup>30</sup>

The ambassadors further concluded that Nigeria should pursue these interests according to five basic principles. The first of these was "pragmatism . . . to work on the basis of what is clear, practicable and realistic."<sup>31</sup> That the conference should elevate "pragmatism" to the level of high principle reflects an implicit rejection of ideological debate and a belief that if Nigeria were to play an effective role in international affairs, it had to remain sufficiently flexible to adapt to changing conditions.

The second principle committed the federal government to "respect existing boundaries in Africa [which] . . . must, in the interest of peace in Africa, remain the recognized boundaries until such a time as the peoples concerned decide of their own free will to merge into one unit."<sup>32</sup> Nigeria would not support international integration by force or coercion. Complementing this pledge was the principle of "non-interference in the internal affairs of other states," and a fourth principle that demanded "respect of the sovereign equality of all states no matter their size, population, military or economic might."<sup>33</sup>

The fifth and final principle may sound rather hollow in light of subsequent developments within Nigeria: the ambassadors reaffirmed the federal government's firm support for the peaceful settlement of disputes by negotiation, conciliation, and arbitration, adding that "we refuse to take or encourage dogmatic stands from which no compromise is possible."<sup>34</sup> In fact, the government's approach to settling the civil war was not completely inconsistent with this principle of foreign policy, as the chapters on civil-war negotiations will indicate.

The June 1966 ambassadors' conference also recommended that Nigeria pursue four objectives in Africa:

- I. maintenance of good neighborly relations with all states in general and with our immediate neighbors in particular;
- II. cooperation with other African states to prevent Africa from becoming an area of crisis and world tension;

<sup>30</sup> RCHM-A, Summary of Recommendations and Conclusions, CN 1/21/II, Lagos, June 14, 1966.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

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- III. dedication to fostering the systematic evolution towards unity in the Continent; and
- IV. emancipation of all African territories under foreign domination, and the eradication of racial discrimination.<sup>35</sup>

The above objectives were stamped "Top Secret," along with all the other documents from the 1966 ambassadors' conference. Actually, these objectives and the principles behind them were neither new nor unknown. Nigeria's leaders had been espousing them publicly for five and a half years and, as will be discussed in the succeeding pages, the conduct of Nigeria's intra-African relations—the most dynamic and politically important element in the country's foreign policy—was rarely, if ever, at variance with these objectives.

### PROMOTING STABILITY IN AFRICA

Nigeria was born in an age when the internal upheavals in the former Belgian Congo had become the cutting edge of the cold war. In his 1960 foreign policy address, Prime Minister Balewa declared: "It is true that Africa is changing every day . . . but with the good developments are bound to be some bad ones and we are troubled by the signs which we see of the ideological war between the Great Powers of the world creeping into Africa. We shall therefore take steps to persuade the African leaders to take serious note of this distressing trend and we shall make every effort to bring them together, so that we may all find a way to unite our efforts in preventing Africa from becoming an area of crisis and world tension."<sup>36</sup> The statement was indicative of the federal government's pragmatic approach to African unity as a means of achieving greater political independence and security for all nonwhite countries of the region. In pursuit of this objective, the federal government would take the lead in promoting the formation of a pan-African alliance that, in May 1963, became the Organization of African Unity (OAU).

The greatest challenge to Nigeria's views of what would constitute a desirable and feasible level of regional political cooperation was raised by President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, who preached the establishment of an African military high command and continental "union government."<sup>37</sup> Nkrumah's charisma and the aggressiveness of his foreign policy produced a mixture of contempt, envy, and occasional apprehension in Lagos. Although Nigeria's leaders never doubted

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Statement by the prime minister, *House of Representatives Debates*, August 20, 1960.

<sup>37</sup> For a definitive study of Nkrumah's foreign policy, see Thompson, *Ghana's Foreign Policy 1957-1966*.

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Nkrumah's lack of realism, they considered his actions to be a threat to international peace and stability in Africa as well as to Nigeria's own internal security and prestige.<sup>38</sup> The main concern of Nigeria's diplomacy in Africa during the early 1960s was thus to isolate Nkrumah and make certain that his initiatives did not shatter the emerging regional consensus or directly subvert the fragile federal coalition in Lagos. Well-documented revelations in 1962 about Nkrumah's links with Nigeria's leading opposition party, and the widespread suspicion that he was somehow responsible for the assassination of Togolese President Sylvanus Olympio, nearly caused a break in diplomatic relations with Accra, and spurred Nigerian efforts to win the allegiance of governments throughout Africa.<sup>39</sup>

Because Nigeria's vulnerability to subversion was shared by many other newly independent states in the African region, the federal government's role in organizing diplomatic opposition to Nkrumah earned the respect and confidence of many prospective members of the Organization of African Unity. Eighteen months before the OAU was formed, the federal government invited all independent African states to send their foreign ministers to a meeting in Lagos which, in Ghana's absence, reached a tentative agreement on the formula for the OAU Charter.<sup>40</sup>

When the federal delegation left for the first pan-African summit in May 1963, it carried a brief prepared by the Ministry of External Affairs that outlined the basic objectives as follows:

<sup>38</sup> Looking back on this era shortly after Nkrumah was deposed, an analysis prepared by the Nigerian Ministry of External Affairs notes: "On attainment of independence, Ghana was quick to sever all the common links which existed between British West Africa and so the very foundation on which West African Unity could have been built was shattered. . . . They not only discriminated against Nigerians [living in Ghana] in the matter of employment but even engaged in subversive activities against Nigeria and heaped unbearable insults on our leaders. Jealous of Nigeria's resources and her size which marked her out for leadership in Africa, they did everything possible to discredit us the world over." RCHM-A, Working Paper No. 1, Section C, "Nigeria's Bilateral Relationship with Individual African States: Ghana," Lagos, June 1966.

<sup>39</sup> For an account of Nkrumah's role in Nigeria's internal affairs, see Thompson, *Ghana's Foreign Policy*, pp. 237-244. While evidence exists concerning Nkrumah's earlier attempts to overthrow Olympio, his complicity in the actual event remains unclear. *Ibid.*, pp. 308-313.

<sup>40</sup> Lagos Conference of the Heads of African and Malagasy States Organization, Verbatim Report of the Plenary Sessions, Lagos, January 25-30, 1962. Those attending the December 1962 meeting included: Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Congo (Brazzaville), Congo (Zaire), Dahomey (Benin), Ethiopia, Gabon, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Madagascar, Mauritania, Nigeria, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Tanganyika (Tanzania), Togo, and Upper Volta. A useful background study in this field is Legum, *Pan Africanism: A Short Political Guide*; also, Wallerstein, *Africa, the Politics of Unity*.

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Prior to any discussion of a Common Charter, all the participants at the conference should be asked to affirm the following principles:

- (a) sovereign equality of African and Malagasy States, whatever may be the size of their territories and the density of their populations, or the value of their possessions;
- (b) non-interference in the internal affairs of Member States;
- (c) respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each State and for its inalienable right to independent existence;
- (d) peaceful and harmonious settlement of all disputes arising among the African and Malagasy States;
- (e) unqualified condemnation of any subversive activity on the part of neighboring or other States;
- (f) the constant promotion and fostering of all available means of cooperation in the fields of economics, health, nutrition, education, and culture; and
- (g) dedication to the total emancipation of the remaining dependent territories of Africa.<sup>41</sup>

With the exception of principle (f), which was replaced by a plank affirming "a policy of non-alignment with regard to all blocs," the seven points in the Nigerian brief reappear almost verbatim in Article III of the OAU Charter.<sup>42</sup>

Elaborating on Nigeria's position during the summit proceedings, Prime Minister Balewa reminded his fellow heads of state that

Nigeria's stand is that if we want unity in Africa, we must first agree to certain essential things; the first is that African States must respect one another. There must be acceptance of equality by all the States. No matter whether they are big or small, they are all sovereign and sovereignty is sovereignty. The size of a State, its population or its wealth should not be the criteria. It has been pointed out many times that the smaller States in Africa have no right to exist because they are too small. We in Nigeria do not agree. It was unfortunate that the African States have been broken up into different groups by the Colonial powers. In some cases, a single tribe has been broken up into four different States. You might find a section in Guinea, a section in Mali, a second in Sierra Leone and perhaps a section in Liberia. That was not our fault because, for over sixty years, these different units have been existing and any attempt on the part of any

<sup>41</sup> Ministry of External Affairs (cited hereafter as MEA), Brief on the Addis Ababa Conference of Africa and Malagasy Heads of State and Government, Lagos, May 15, 1963.

<sup>42</sup> For a detailed analysis of the OAU Charter, see Cervenka, *The Organization of African Unity and Its Charter*.

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country to disregard this fact might bring trouble to this Continent. This is the thing we want to avoid.<sup>43</sup>

Not only did acceptance of Balewa's view of African unity help to contain Nkrumah—thereby serving Nigeria's immediate interests in 1963—but the subsequent formation of a regional alliance based on the principles set forth in Article III of the OAU Charter was to offer the federal government a line of defense that proved very useful in its civil war diplomacy.

During the three years following the creation of the OAU, the Balewa government lobbied vigorously to ensure its viability. In 1965, when the organization was very nearly destroyed by another intra-West African dispute over allegations of Ghanaian subversion, Nigeria arranged for an extraordinary session of the OAU Council of Ministers in Lagos,<sup>44</sup> which set in motion a series of diplomatic compromises that tended to limit Nkrumah's ability to interfere with the domestic politics of other OAU members, thus strengthening the norms of mutual respect for sovereign equality and territorial integrity. In light of the deep ideological cleavages that had polarized Africa during the previous five years, the establishment of a credible regional organization was a major diplomatic achievement for which Nigerians claim considerable credit.<sup>45</sup>

The Federal Ministry of External Affairs' perceptions of the OAU's importance were reiterated during the 1966 Conference of Nigerian Ambassadors in Lagos. A policy paper prepared for that meeting flatly rejected any suggestion that Nigeria was self-sufficient enough to withdraw from the OAU, or that the regional body was no more than a debating forum. Noting that the dissolution of the OAU was "unthinkable," the policy paper concluded with several *a priori* assumptions that held that if the organization were ever to disappear, "many more states would fall upon each other's throats and that Africa would become a battleground without an umpire for the big world powers. Reduced to a lone wolf, Nigeria cannot hope to effectively shield herself from international intrigues either by her size or natural resources.

<sup>43</sup> Proceedings of the Summit Conference of Independent African States, Vol. I, Section 2, Addis Ababa, May 1963. Statement by the Rt. Hon. Prime Minister of Nigeria, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa.

<sup>44</sup> Verbatim and Summary Record of the Fifth Extraordinary Session of the Council of Ministers of the Organization of African Unity, Lagos, June 10–13, 1965.

<sup>45</sup> Reviewing the formative years of the OAU, a 1966 working paper prepared by the Nigerian Ministry of External Affairs concluded that: "Nigeria's contribution has been to keep the OAU from drifting from the principles which inspired its creation. We have by our words and deeds emphasized over and over again the vital importance of the need to eschew interference in the internal affairs of other states," RCHM-A, Working Paper No. 2, Lagos, June 1966.

. . . With all its manifest faults, the OAU provides a forum for the collective expression of African opinion on matters affecting the destiny of the continent as well as the international community. Should it disintegrate, Africa's voice will count for little in a world impregnated with enlightened self-interest."<sup>46</sup>

The prospects for international peace and security in Africa seemed especially promising in the spring of 1966. The conflict in the Congo (Zaire) had subsided, and with it much of the divisive bitterness that had undermined regional cooperation during the early 1960s. More importantly for Nigeria, Kwame Nkrumah had been deposed. The Ministry of External Affairs noted hopefully that "with Nkrumah and his inordinate ambitions out of the scene, the way may now be open for a new happy chapter in the history of Nigeria/Ghana relations, and indeed, West African cooperation."<sup>47</sup> A delegation representing the new Ghanaian head of state, General Joseph Ankrah, came to Lagos shortly after the coup and, according to Nigerian records, "expressed Ankrah's strong desire to resume the positive cooperation of the colonial years."<sup>48</sup>

Nigeria's relations with her immediate neighbors also appeared in 1966 to be better than ever before.<sup>49</sup> The irredentist rhetoric that occasionally surfaced in the federal legislature, notably with regard to the possibility of Nigeria annexing the Spanish island of Fernando Po, where thousands of Ibo laborers worked on plantations, disappeared with the advent of military rule in Lagos.<sup>50</sup> The thousands of Yorubas living in Dahomey (Benin) and the mix of Hausa/Fulani along the long frontier with Niger facilitated smuggling, and the escape of fugitives and even of some dissident local politicians, but the international political tensions were minor. Of slightly greater concern to Lagos was the notion that the Cameroon Republic harbored ill will toward Nigeria as a result of the United Nations-administered referendum (1961) in Sardauna Province (formerly Northern Cameroon). By 1966 the ceding of this territory was still being commemorated by a day of national mourning throughout the Cameroon Republic. In addition to this issue, the international frontier between Cameroon and Eastern Nigeria remained undefined, and the arbitration of the boundary had become complicated by the prospects of oil reserves in the Calabar riverine border areas. Aside from these issues, however, relations with Yaoundé had been steadily im-

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> RCHM-A, Working Paper No. 1, Section C, "Nigeria's Bilateral Relationship with Individual African States: Ghana."

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> RCHM-A, Working Paper No. 1, Section C, "Nigeria's Bilateral Relationship with Individual African States: Nigeria's Immediate Neighbors," Lagos, June 1966.

<sup>50</sup> See Akinyemi, "Nigeria and Fernando Po, 1958-1966, The Politics of Irredentism."

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proving, a fact of enormous political significance at the time of Biafran secession.

Elsewhere in West Africa firm political links had been established with a generally conservative francophone community, forged in part by the common opposition to Nkrumah. Lagos very much wanted to strengthen these ties so as to encourage these countries "to come voluntarily to the realization that their economic and political destiny lies with Nigeria."<sup>51</sup> There was very little that could be done in the short run to reduce the continued influence of the French in their former colonies, although Radio Nigeria did acquire external broadcasting facilities and commenced extensive French language programming in the mid-1960s.

The basic position of the Ministry of External Affairs acknowledged that it would be many years before Nigeria possessed the economic strength to provide an alternative to dependence on France and that, in the meantime, if Nigeria appeared too ambitious this would prove counterproductive. To quote from a 1966 ministry working paper on relations with francophone West Africa: "Opportunities will present themselves for closer cooperation. Nigeria should take time by the forelock; but in doing this she should be seen to be guided not by the "Big Brother" ambition to dominate but by the desire to promote stability in Africa and interstate friendship. Thus she would be creating a favorable atmosphere which would enable her to develop closer relations with the states when the French influence has declined . . . sooner or later, the Afro-Malagasy states will be laid open to the influence of a wider world . . . if the economic situation of the states so improves as to reduce economic dependence on France."<sup>52</sup> Nigeria's decision to strike a benign but cordial position vis-à-vis the constellation of former French colonies paid off handsomely during the civil war, when the strong support for the federal government that was shown by these states helped to offset General de Gaulle's inclination to assist Biafra.

Beyond West Africa, the federal government had traditionally enjoyed good but rather limited relations with the OAU member governments of north, east, and central Africa. Dealings with Arab states had been complicated by the federal government's opposition to any attempt to draw the OAU into the Arab-Israeli dispute and by Nigeria's willingness to allow the establishment of an Israeli embassy in Lagos. There were rumors following the January 1966 coup that President Nasser of Egypt and other Arab leaders were preparing to break relations with Nigeria because of their anger over the deaths of a Moslem prime minister and

<sup>51</sup> RCHM-A, "The Economic Dependence of the Afro-Malagasy States on France." Lagos, June 1966.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*



the northern premier, the Sardauna of Sokoto who, unlike the prime minister, had openly denounced the state of Israel. Shortly after Ironsi came to power, however, he sent a large delegation of prominent Northerners on a hastily arranged tour of Middle East capitals and, according to Ministry of External Affairs records, President Nasser subsequently informed Nigeria's ambassador in Cairo that he would like to develop closer ties with Lagos, because in the past Prime Minister Balewa had resisted his overtures.

Regarding the situation in southern Africa, Nigerians have always felt deep and bitter resentment about any continuation of the status quo, but during the 1960s they felt powerless to affect the situation. In the table of national interests presented in Appendix I, the Republic of South Africa does not even appear and, for the most part, the federal government preferred to be identified as a "moderate" on the issue of continued white minority rule rather than to engage in what it knew would be regarded internationally as merely symbolic gestures of protest. This same attitude influenced Nigeria's dealings with the OAU's Committee for the Liberation of Africa office in Dar es Salaam.<sup>53</sup> When the committee was established in 1963, Nigeria contributed \$280,000, but by 1965/1966 the committee's total annual receipts from all member governments amounted to only \$358,000 out of a total annual budget appropriation of \$2.4 million,<sup>54</sup> and the Ministry of External Affairs recommended that further Nigerian contributions be withheld on the grounds that much of the earlier money had been seriously mismanaged, a fact that was confirmed by a specially appointed OAU board of auditors that visited Tanzania in November 1966.<sup>55</sup>

Compared with the international entanglements that confronted Nigerian foreign policy makers during the civil war, the difficulties in managing the country's external relations during the five years following Independence appear to be insignificant. While there had been some notable challenges to Nigeria's interests, especially in Africa, these had been resolved to the federal government's satisfaction.

The federal government was proud, too, of its contribution of troops as part of the United Nations peace-keeping operations in the Congo (Zaire) and later to the Republic of Tanzania, where President Nyerere was confronted by a domestic insurrection.<sup>56</sup> On a less dramatic scale,

<sup>53</sup> RCHM-A, Working Paper No. 3, "Aid to African Countries, Nigeria's Relations with Unliberated African Countries," Lagos, June 1966.

<sup>54</sup> OAU, "Estimates for the Budget of the Special Fund of the Coordinating Committee for the Liberation of Africa for the Fiscal Year 1967/68," Appendix I.

<sup>55</sup> OAU, Report of the Board of Auditors, Coordinating Committee for the Liberation of Africa, Annex I, "Report of the OAU Coordinating Committee for the Liberation of Africa to the Council of Ministers at its 8th Session," Addis Ababa, February 1967.

<sup>56</sup> The Congo operation began in December 1960 under the auspices of the

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Lagos also had quietly initiated its own bilateral foreign economic assistance program in Africa<sup>57</sup> (see Appendix II). The sums were not large—Nigeria's per capita income was less than \$100 at the time—but the gifts were another demonstration of the federal government's determination to foster friendly and peaceful relations on the continent.<sup>58</sup>

Against this background of expanding linkages, both in Africa and the wider international system, it is useful to know a little of the brief history of Nigeria's overextended and generally inexperienced foreign policy establishment as it developed prior to the civil war. One tends to think of diplomacy as a carefully calculated set of moves and counter-moves analogous to chess. But Nigeria's capacity to analyze alternative foreign policy options was hampered by a lack of extensive and reliable information from around the world and an inadequately trained and understaffed diplomatic corps.

### THE MANAGEMENT OF NIGERIA'S EXTERNAL RELATIONS

The development of the federal government's foreign policy institutions paralleled the country's growing international interests. By necessity, the process was rapid. The first indication of any planning for the conduct of foreign relations under an independent Nigerian government did not appear until 1956, when a sessional paper anticipating a future foreign ministry was prepared under British advice.<sup>59</sup> Nigeria would have only six permanent missions with embassy status: London, Washington, New York, Accra, Khartoum, and one Western European capital. In addition, there would be a consulate to service Moslem pilgrims in Jedda, Saudi

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United Nations. Nigeria provided two infantry battalions, and these became the backbone of the UN contingent. They continued to serve with great distinction until June 1964, when they were the last troops to leave. The federal government also supplied four hundred policemen to assist with civilian security and to train Congolese police. In April 1964 Lagos dispatched a battalion of soldiers to help President Julius Nyerere restrain mutinous Tanzanian troops. Although the operation took less than six months, the Nigerians played a vital role in training Tanzanian forces loyal to Nyerere, and thereby helped to keep him in power. Needless to say, the Nigerians were particularly incensed by Nyerere's 1968 recognition of Biafra, which they considered an outright betrayal. For an evaluation of the Nigerian army's performance of peace-keeping operations, see Miners, *The Nigerian Army 1956-1966*, Chapter 5.

<sup>57</sup> RCHM-A, Working Paper No. 3, "Aid to African Countries," Lagos, June 1966.

<sup>58</sup> In 1966, Nigeria's ambassadors recommended that the allocation for foreign aid be increased substantially, to 1 percent of the country's annual budget, which in that year would have amounted to a commitment of approximately \$3.5 to help other African governments. The decision had to be deferred for the duration of the civil war because of the shortage of foreign exchange. *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Nigeria, *The Training of Nigerians for the Representation of Their Country Overseas: A Statement of Policy* (Lagos: Government Printer, 1956).

Arabia, and one on the Spanish island of Fernando Po for the thousands of plantation workers from Eastern Nigeria. The foreign missions and the tiny home ministry of three divisions—Protocol and Training, Economic, and Consular—would be staffed by forty bureaucrats. Anything larger than this was dismissed by the British as “prohibitively expensive in men and money” and, as the sessional paper paternalistically suggests, “There are many countries in the world where the older Commonwealth countries . . . are content to leave the diplomatic representation of their interests to Her Majesty’s government in the United Kingdom.”<sup>60</sup>

Between 1960 and 1965 the number of resident Nigerian missions in foreign cities grew from two to forty-two, while the corps of foreign service officers increased from forty to two hundred.<sup>61</sup> The size of these permanent missions and the ranking of ambassadorial posts within the ministry hierarchy reflects, to a degree, the table of interests indicated in Appendix I.<sup>62</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that Lagos chose not to open missions in several European capitals where foreign investment and

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>61</sup> Nigeria, *Federal Staff Lists*, No. 8 to 1st April 1960; No. 9 revised to 1st January 1961; No. 11 revised to 1st January 1963; No. 13 as at 1st January 1965; No. 15 as at 1st August 1966; No. 16 as at 1st August 1970. No *Federal Staff Lists* were published during the war years, 1967–1969, and there appears to have been no substantial change in the size of the ministry during this period. The figures refer only to external affairs officers grades 1–9, and not to executive officers, secretaries, and typists.

<sup>62</sup> Nigeria’s foreign missions are ranked in clusters of declining order of importance from Class A–1 to A–2, B–1 and B–2. Of the forty-two missions established by 1966, only three were in the A–1 category—New York, London, and Washington—and each was staffed by approximately eighteen people. The positions of high commissioner in London, ambassador to Washington, permanent representative to the United Nations, and permanent secretary of the Ministry of External Affairs were the highest in the service. They were interchangeable, and often were retirement posts. The most prestigious post was that of permanent representative to the United Nations and, within the ministry, New York was considered the country’s most important foreign mission, a global listening post and forum to project Nigeria’s concerns onto the world stage.

At the time of the civil war, the federal government maintained twelve class A–2 missions, six of which were located in Africa. The list included: Addis Ababa, Cairo, Abidjan, Leopoldville (Kinshasa), Nairobi, Accra, Rome, Moscow, Tokyo, Ottawa, Paris, and Bonn. When embassies were later opened in Peking and Rio de Janeiro, they were placed in this second tier. The largest number of embassies were rated B–1, with staffs of between five and ten. There were twenty-one such posts on the eve of secession, namely: Dublin, Geneva, New Delhi, Karachi, Jeddah, Khartoum, Bamako, Bathurst, New York (consulate), Conakry, Freetown, Monrovia, Dakar, Lomé, Cotonou, Niamey, Fort Lamy, Lusaka, Yaoundé, Kampala, and Dar es Salaam. The lowest category, B–2, was reserved for the consulates in Hamburg, Liverpool, Port Sudan, Buea (West Cameroon), Edinburgh, and Fernando Po. Based on a “Working Paper on the Administration Organization of the Ministry,” prepared in March 1966 by the head of administration, Ministry of External Affairs.

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other economic interests were actively being pursued, but the federal government did open twenty-four missions in Africa, and six of them—Abidjan, Accra, Addis Ababa, Cairo, Kinshasa, and Nairobi—were given the same status by the ministry as the embassies in Paris, Bonn, and Moscow.

Within the headquarters in Lagos there was a proliferation of substantive and administrative divisions reflecting Nigeria's widening international interests.<sup>63</sup> Nearly three-fourths of the foreign service officers were posted to foreign missions, which meant that the staff complement in Lagos amounted to only forty or fifty professional officers. The policy-oriented divisions—Africa, Asia, Euro-Western (including the Americas), and International (United Nations and other non-African international organizations)—each could claim only a handful of staff.<sup>64</sup> The ministry's budget for home and field operations grew from \$2.7 million in 1960/1961 to \$9.9 million in 1965/1966.<sup>65</sup> It then leveled off during the war years because of the foreign exchange constraints.<sup>66</sup>

The number of foreign service officers remained at approximately two hundred throughout the civil war, despite the flight of Ibo staff during the spring of 1967. As the domestic crisis worsened, the demands on the Ministry of External Affairs increased. The situation was especially frantic in Lagos, where overburdened staff not only had to cope with the cable traffic to Nigeria's foreign missions but also serviced the fifty embassies, nine high commissions, thirteen consulates, and nine international agencies, which were all based in the federal capital. The number of foreign service officers in the federal Ministry of External Affairs was about equal to the professional staff of the American embassy, excluding the two hundred or so USAID and information officials scattered around the country. It is not surprising, therefore, that Western diplomats in Lagos became exasperated when, during the height of international pub-

<sup>63</sup> After 1966 the Ministry of External Affairs was organized into the following divisions: Protocol, Administrative and Establishment, Accounts, Research, Africa, Asia, Euro-Western, Consular and Treaties, Economic, International, Information, and Military.

<sup>64</sup> Among the policy-oriented divisions, Africa had an establishment of eight officers, while Asia had three officers, Euro-Western (including the Americas), four; and International (United Nations and other non-African international organizations), seven. These basic arrangements prevailed with minor changes through the civil war years. One notable development was the diversification and expansion by 1969 of the Africa Division, which grew to ten officers, each of whom had a subregional area of specialty. The Euro-America Division, as it was renamed, shrank from four to three officers, and Asia dropped from three to two over the same period.

<sup>65</sup> Nigeria, *Estimates of the Federation of Nigeria 1960/61 and 1965/66*.

<sup>66</sup> Nigeria, *Estimates of the Federation of Nigeria 1970/71*. By comparison, the budget of the United States Department of State was approximately \$450 million in 1970.

lic concern over the civil war, the ministry was slow to respond to the flood of demands for clarification of policy. In addition to the shortage of staff at the ministry headquarters and in Nigeria's missions in foreign capitals, there were also problems related to a history of poor morale within the foreign service and the disruptions caused by the sudden changes in government and the advent of civil war.

During the 1960s the most experienced and talented group of foreign service officers came from the initial class of thirty-seven that had been carefully recruited immediately prior to Independence.<sup>67</sup> When they entered the service in 1960 their average age was thirty-three, and all but five had the equivalent of at least a B.A. degree. Because the appointments were based on merit as reflected in the level of academic training, the vast majority were southerners, where advanced formal education was more readily available than in the north. As the ministry expanded following the departure of the British, there were strong pressures from Northern Region political leaders to achieve a greater ethnic balance in the foreign service. Despite recommendations to the contrary, the Balewa government declined to require written examinations for the new recruits, and whereas the first class of officers had been closely examined and seconded to British embassies for practical training, subsequent entrants had only to pass an interview and survive a series of lectures and a brief familiarization tour of Nigeria's four regions.

The sudden increase in the size of the ministry meant that experienced personnel had to be rotated quickly to assist with the opening of new missions and to supervise new staff. Diplomats and their families who had expected to serve in a post for the normal two years suddenly were sent—often without warning—to a new location within a year or six months. A further detriment to professional esprit during the early 1960s was the practice of appointing politicians to ambassadorial posts. In 1965 approximately 75 percent of Nigeria's foreign representatives were noncareer appointees, compared with only 27 percent by the end of the civil war in 1970. Not surprisingly, a survey of the federal civil service in 1967 found that 71 percent of the senior respondents in the Ministry of External Affairs cited political considerations in appointment and promotion as the greatest contributor to inefficiency in the foreign service. This figure was the highest reported by any federal ministry.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Nigeria, *Federal Staff List*, No. 8, pp. 32—33. Among the outstanding examples from this group were: Permanent Secretaries P. C. Asiodu and I. J. Ebong; and Ambassadors V. A. Adegoroye, L. Harriman, O. Jalaoso, E. O. Ogunsulire, and C. O. Hollist. Interestingly, while many Biafran emissaries formerly served in the Ministry of External Affairs, few came from this core group. A notable exception was Godwin Onyegbula, Biafra's permanent secretary of foreign affairs and Ojukwu's chief foreign policy adviser.

<sup>68</sup> Nigeria, *Training Needs of the Federal Civil Service*, p. 41.