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Lasse Heerten & A. Dirk Moses

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The Nigeria–Biafra war: postcolonial conflict and the question of genocide

LASSE HEERTEN AND A. DIRK MOSES

The Nigeria–Biafra war that raged between 1967 and 1970 made headlines around the world, above all for the major famine in the secessionist enclave of Biafra, and prompted a major international relief. It was a genuinely global event. Yet by the late 1970s, it was seldom talked about outside Nigeria. Since then, it barely features in scholarly and popular accounts of the period. The conflict is also virtually entirely absent from the field of genocide studies, which began to form in the closing decades of the twentieth century. However, in recent years, scholarly interest in the conflict is increasing. Alongside with a renewed literary interest in the war and its legacy, the international history of the war and the humanitarian operation in particular has attracted the attention of historians and academics of other disciplines. On the basis of a brief account of the conflict and the issues it raised, this contribution argues that the conflict should be considered by students of genocide, since its implications challenge some of the field's founding assumptions and premises. First, the Nigeria–Biafra war evinces the importance of conceptual history for the study of genocides. The article shows how concepts of genocide influence the perceptions and thus, in effect, the politics of conflicts, in particular in cases where representations of genocide are tied to the Holocaust, understood as a state-sponsored, ideology-driven racial hate crime. Second, and following from this point, scholars of genocide studies need to reflect on the impact of this understanding of the Holocaust on their discipline. As we argue, this model determines their (mis-)apprehension of other cases they discuss or—exactly because of this model—fail to discuss.

Introduction

The Nigeria–Biafra war that raged between 1967 and 1970 made headlines around the world, above all for the major famine caused by the Nigerian state's (federal military government, FMG) blockade of the self-proclaimed separatist Republic of Biafra in the country's east. The crisis drove prominent academics and journalists to mobilize public opinion, prompted a major international relief operation to bring supplies to starving civilians and exercised the minds of statesmen and -women from the great powers to the UN.¹ It was a genuinely global event. Whether in its estimated one to three million deaths,² its implications for secessionist movements and political stability in Africa, its role as a crucible of contemporary humanitarianism or subject matter for famous African novelists, the war was widely regarded as a watershed in the postcolonial global order. Throughout the 1970s, scholars published energetically on the multifarious

issues raised by the conflict, often comparing it with the bloody but successful secession of East Pakistan (Bangladesh) from Pakistan in 1971.³ And yet, at least internationally, it was largely forgotten by the end of the decade, overtaken by the grotesque events in Cambodia and elsewhere.⁴

For the field of genocide studies, the war is relevant in four ways. In the first place, famine was intrinsic to the war's operational unfolding, and accusations of genocide were elemental to the Biafran propaganda campaign, prompting an international debate about the application of the term. Second, two of the field's prominent figures—Robert Melson and Leo Kuper—observed the war as scholars of Africa and drew formative conclusions about the nature of genocide that effectively excluded the conflict from the canon of twentieth-century genocides; it is no accident that this journal has never published an article on the subject. Thirdly, just as many defeated Igbo claimed that their genocidal experience was denied during the war, so they have campaigned since then for its recognition and effective canonization in the field and popular consciousness.⁵ Finally, genocide studies have recently taken colonial and international 'turns' that draw attention to the (post)-colonial, imperial and global contexts in which genocidal violence is embedded.⁶

In historiography more broadly, scholars working on postwar humanitarianism have rediscovered the Nigeria–Biafra war, using western-based archives of civil society organizations, states, the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva (ICRC).⁷ Many are now focusing on the 1970s as the 'breakthrough' decade for human rights and humanitarianism, and the global concern about the war features as part of this research agenda.⁸ The visual component of the global moment called 'Biafra' is also an important object of inquiry.⁹ Still others are interested in the norms that guide the foreign policies of states in debates about humanitarian intervention in which Biafra figures as a divisive case study.¹⁰ Recently, the Nigeria–Biafra war is beginning to rate a mention in surveys of postcolonial Africa.¹¹

That the subject of Biafra and genocide is in the air is also indicated by the publication of Chinua Achebe's blend of memoir and history, *There was a country: a personal history of Biafra*, a few months before he died in March 2013, two years after the death of the wartime Biafran leader, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu. The famous novelist had worked for the Biafran cause during the war, and the genocide issue appears throughout the book. Commenting on Achebe's views, another famous Nigerian author, Wole Soyinka, whose imprisonment during the war by the FMG is recorded in *The man died* (1971), concurred that Biafrans had indeed been victims of genocide even though he did not support the Biafran secession.¹² Literary signs of a renewed interest in the conflict were also discernible before the publication of the late Achebe's last book. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a yellow sun*, a novel about the travails of a Biafran family during the war, won a major literary prize in 2007 and is now the subject of a British-Nigerian co-produced motion picture.¹³ The recent excision of the southern Sudan from the Republic Sudan also reawakened interest in the Nigeria–Biafra war by drawing attention to the stability of postcolonial Africa's borders and the possibility of secession.¹⁴ These discussions tied in with a longer debate about postcolonial

self-determination, in which the Eritrean national movement, leading to the state's independence from the Ethiopian federation in 1991, also featured prominently.¹⁵ The rise of the northern Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram also raised questions about Nigerian federalism and the legacy of the Nigeria–Biafra war.¹⁶

This resurgence of memorizations of the conflict in the literary and cultural sphere dovetails with the currently growing interest in issues of trauma and memory raised by the conflict. Nigerian scholars in particular have started working on its multiple legacies, as many of whom are personally affected by the conflict's consequences. If anything, memories of the war have recently gained in relevance in Nigerian politics, as underlined by the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), a south-eastern Nigerian secessionist movement founded in 1999.¹⁷ Despite the growth of public and scholarly interest, however, sound and comprehensive, primary source-based accounts of the history of the civil war are still lacking.¹⁸

For these reasons, and in view of the war's looming fiftieth anniversary, we decided it was timely to gather scholars working in these domains to contribute to this double issue of the *Journal of Genocide Research*. Our call for papers went out in September 2011 and attracted 32 abstracts. We chose about half and gave authors a year to produce an article based on original research. Three other authors joined the group along the way. As always, the peer review and revisions take time, so now, almost three years after the process began, we present eleven articles that we hope will stimulate the scholarly discussion about the war and the genocide question. We also hope that the discussion can maintain sufficient distance from the hornets' nest of sensitivities that the war continues to generate. As already noted, the genocide claim remains as salient today as it was in the later 1960s.¹⁹ All too often, we found, the temptation to restage the war's propaganda campaigns—and express the accompanying emotion of outrage—was difficult to resist, whether by Nigerians for or against Biafra, or by westerners sympathetic to one side or the other, leading to partisan advocacy rather than balanced analyses. We did not include such pieces in this volume.²⁰ To that end, proving whether genocide took place is not the purpose of our undertaking, although we will suggest alternative ways to conceptualize the issue. Our aim, to adapt the expression coined by the Australian historian Raymond Evans, is to write a book, not to catch a crook: we seek to historicize the discourse about genocide and Biafra.²¹ Specifically, we are interested in mapping how contemporaries understood the humanitarian and criminal dimensions of the war, and how and why victims were constructed as objects of identification and empathy in relation to the emerging international archive of human catastrophe like the Holocaust. Moreover, in this article, we highlight the relevance of the Nigeria–Biafra war for genocide studies, and suggest how the assumptions dominating the field could be reconceptualized in view of the issues raised by the conflict.

Intrinsic to the conflicting perceptions of the war was the 'politics of naming'.²² There is a considerable semantic and political difference between labelling the conflict as an insurgency, as the FMG initially did, as a civil war or as genocide.²³

An understanding of the conflict as genocidal was principally promoted by the Biafrans and their supporters; these claims have become elemental to Biafran constructions of national identity. Had the secessionists achieved their revolutionary project of national self-determination, we would probably call the conflict the Biafran war of liberation.²⁴ However, since Nigeria was, and remained, the recognized political entity within which the war was fought, the designation as ‘Nigerian civil war’ gained the most currency, at least in the Anglophone world.²⁵ In this special issue of the journal, we primarily use the term ‘Nigeria–Biafra war’ to reflect that these were the two warring parties. Even if Biafra never became a recognized state in international law and politics, the internationalization of the conflict turned it into a recognized term for contemporaries around the globe. Moreover, for many living in the secessionist state, ‘Biafra’ began to signify the political entity within which they lived—and with which many identified—and still do.²⁶

This special issue does not purport to offer comprehensive coverage of the war. Had we more time and space, we would in particular have wished to include contributions dealing in more detail with the prelude to the civil war and the 1966 massacres against Igbos in northern Nigeria, with the military, social and gender dimensions of the conflict, its traumatic legacies, and further case studies on the war’s international and diplomatic history (the French, Russian and Chinese cases are notable absences here). As it stands, this collection of articles represents current historiography’s focus on the conflict’s international history and legacy.²⁷

The Nigeria–Biafra war: evolution and course of events

As a unified territory, Nigeria had been created in 1914 through the amalgamation of Britain’s colonial possessions in the region. After independence in 1960, Nigeria had been widely considered one of sub-Saharan Africa’s most promising postcolonial states. The potential for development seemed boundless in the democracy of roughly 45 million people, where large amounts of high-quality oil reserves had been discovered shortly before the end of colonial rule.²⁸ Two British legacies, however, combined to impair the evolution of a stable political system and social relations; colonial rule divided the population along ethnic lines, but incorporated the groups thus defined in a centrally governed federal state.²⁹ The territorial and ethnic borders that marked Nigerian colonial society were still in place when the country achieved independence. Established as a federal state, postcolonial Nigeria was split into three main regions, each dominated by one or two ethnic groups: Hausa-Fulani in the north, Yoruba in the west, and Igbos in the east. Hundreds of other ethnic minorities of different size made up the rest of the population. In 1963, the federation was separated into four states when the multi-ethnic Midwestern State was carved out of parts of the Western Region. Partly parallel with these political borders, what many perceived as a religious divide cut through the territory: the south was predominantly Christian, whereas the north was widely Islamic dominated.³⁰

The optimism of decolonization had begun to crumble by the mid 1960s. Paradoxically, the growing participatory options for the population weakened the post-colonial democracy. At the regional level, a system of patronage was created along ethnic lines. At the national level, the three ‘mega-tribes’ competed for state resources that had become increasingly lucrative thanks to the revenues from oil and other commodities.³¹ A deepening rift severed the north and the southern regions. The Eastern Region, geographically in the country’s southeast, was increasingly isolated in particular. In all regions politicians feared the possible domination of their counterparts from other parts of the country. Federal and national elections developed into fiercely fought battles for power; ballot rigging and other forms of manipulation were omnipresent.³²

In January 1966, an Igbo-dominated putsch by a group of army officers initiated a series of coups and counter-coups that led to the installation of military rule.³³ The first coup was forestalled, but only after the rebellious officers killed a number of high-ranking officials, among them Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto, one of the principle figures in the northern leadership. The remaining rump cabinet transferred power over the state into the hands of the highest-ranking officer, Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, general commanding officer of the Nigerian army. The new head of state and most of his advisors were Igbo. Many in the north considered Ironsi’s government as a continuation of the southern-instigated coup and, in the last days of July 1966, he was captured and killed in a counter-coup by a group of northern officers and soldiers. The remaining officers selected Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon as the new head of state. The coup d’état was a success, except in the Igbo-dominated Eastern Region, where military governor general Ojukwu remained in power.³⁴

Repeated outbursts of violence between June and October 1966 peaked in massacres against Igbos living in the *Sabon Gari*, the ‘foreigners’ quarters’ of northern Nigerian towns. According to estimates, these riots claimed the lives of tens of thousands. Whether representatives of the Nigerian state systematically organized the killings remains disputed. At the very least, the Nigerian government failed to halt the riots.³⁵ This violence drove a stream of more than a million refugees to the Eastern Region, the ‘homeland’ of the Igbos’ diasporic community. The massacres were one of the key events in the unfolding of the civil war. Amidst rampant fears among the Igbos in particular, the Eastern Region began to call for more autonomy.³⁶ Ever since the end of colonialism had become imaginable, the leaderships of all regions had at times pondered secession.³⁷ Now, after failed negotiations, this dramatic step was finally taken. On 30 May 1967, the east’s political leadership around Ojukwu declared its independence as the Republic of Biafra, named after the Bight of Biafra, a bay on the country’s Atlantic coast. Hostilities erupted a few weeks later. On 6 July, the Nigeria–Biafra war began with the advance of federal troops into secessionist territory.³⁸

The military power of both sides was limited because of a lack of funds, personnel, discipline and education. The federal army was still better equipped even though the secessionist forces comprised a large part of the former Nigerian officer corps, which had been dominated by Igbo.³⁹ Despite a number of

spectacular offensives from both sides, for the most part the military situation was a stalemate.⁴⁰ The FMG's major strategic advantage was not its military force, but its diplomatic status: internationally recognized statehood. That the FMG could argue that it was a sovereign government facing an 'insurgency' was decisive. Foreign governments, in particular most of those organized in the Organization of African Unity (OAU), considered the conflict an internal matter. The regional organization principally responsible for mediation thus ensured that no step was taken that might be interpreted as recognizing the Biafran government. The latter, in turn, soon rejected any OAU intervention.⁴¹

Nigeria's secured diplomatic status was also crucial for the most significant development in the war's early stages: the FMG's decision to blockade the secessionist state. To cut off Biafra's lines of communication with the outside world, air and sea ports were blockaded, foreign currency transactions banned, incoming mail and telecommunication blocked and international business obstructed. Even with its limited resources, Nigeria was able to organize a successful blockade without gaping holes or long interruptions—mostly because other governments or companies were ready to acquiesce to Lagos' handling of the matter.⁴² Moreover, as a recognized government, the Gowon regime did not meet any substantial difficulties in obtaining weapons on international markets. Due to their 'rebel' status, by contrast, the Biafrans were forced to use black market channels to buy arms. The secessionists' efforts were also hampered by Nigeria's overnight change of currency in early 1968 that rendered worthless millions of Nigerian pound notes in the Biafran treasury.⁴³

The most important third party to the conflict was the UK. As the former colonial power, Whitehall had usually supplied the federal army with weaponry. Even so, Her Majesty's Government (HMG) initially wavered in its decision about which side to support, leading the FMG to turn to the Soviet Union. Moscow, hoping to gain a foothold in a major West African state, began to supply the federal side with arms.⁴⁴ Now afraid of losing its influence, London began to dispatch arms deliveries.⁴⁵ Nigeria's oil—most of which lay within Biafran territory—played a significant role in the evolution of Whitehall's policy line. When war broke out in Nigeria, London was concerned about its oil supply as Arab states had limited their oil shipments to states supporting Israel after the Six Day War between Israel and Egypt. Despite initial leanings towards Biafra, most oil companies preferred to continue dealing with the federal government, and soon HMG followed suit, firmly opting for a federal solution, not least because it expected that this would keep the oil flowing out of Nigeria.⁴⁶ The British position also effectively determined the policy of the Cold War superpower across the Atlantic. To secure their transatlantic 'special relationship', the US government, in particular the state department, followed the British line, although it did not supply arms to the FMG.⁴⁷

Realizing their slim chances on the battlefield, the Biafran leadership moved the conflict into the propaganda domain.⁴⁸ The situation did not look promising for Biafra's propagandists in the international sphere, either. Governments of the global south were particularly hesitant. As many of them faced separatist

movements at home, they were adamantly opposed to what they understood as illegitimate secession rather than the legitimate exercise of the Biafrans' right to self-determination. As Brad Simpson argues in this volume, the Biafran campaign showcased the ambivalence about how the postcolonial international system dealt with self-determination projects, and left an equally ambivalent legacy. Since its inception in 1963 in the wake of the Congo crisis and the attempted secession of Katanga, the OAU's guiding principle was the rejection of separatism. With the defence of postcolonial sovereignty deeply ingrained into its fabric, the Biafran campaign fell on deaf ears in African inter-governmental circles with only a few exceptions.⁴⁹

Accordingly, despite the secessionists' intensive efforts, the conflict did not engender much international interest during the first year of fighting. Even though casualties were substantial from the outset. Throughout the conflict, federal aircraft shelled towns and other targets on Biafran territory, frequently inflicting numerous civilian casualties. Despite such recurrent risks, the population in the warzone was particularly threatened in moments of instability produced by military advances and setbacks. In August 1967, Biafran forces launched a major offensive, crossed the Niger and marched through the midwestern state towards Lagos. Failing to capitalize on the momentum, the Biafrans came to a halt about 100 km east of the capital and then withdrew after federal forces retaliated. Violence against civilians broke out in border towns that experienced double occupation. Ethnic minorities in Asaba, for example, considered themselves relatives of the Igbos and were treated as sympathizers of the 'rebels'; they became victims of massacres and rape by federal soldiers. As S. Elizabeth Bird and Fraser Ottanelli show in this theme issue, the memory of the Asaba massacres is still alive although the Nigerian state has repressed publication of the terrible events and its commemoration. For many in Asaba, the memory of the massacre remains painful and stands in the way of inter-ethnic reconciliation.⁵⁰

Despite Nigeria's efforts to suppress reports about such events, the deepening humanitarian crisis of the Biafran population thrust the conflict into the international spotlight. By the end of the year, the first signs were discernible that Biafra would be threatened by a serious food shortage; the Biafran population was heading for a famine that could cost hundreds of thousands of human lives. In the first half of 1968, ever more religious groups and humanitarian organizations were alerted to the event, due in large measure to the presence of western missionaries. These religious ties were conduits for the transnational networks through which the conflict would be turned into an object of international humanitarian concern. For many Christian clerics and laypeople, the war seemed to be a cosmic drama fought between a vulnerable Christian Biafra and a northern Muslim-dominated federal Nigeria.⁵¹ In early May 1968, Biafra's principal port town and remaining access to the sea, Port Harcourt, fell to federal forces. The secessionist state was turned into a landlocked enclave. With federal forces tightening the noose around the secessionist territory, the shrinking Biafran enclave soon encompassed only the heart of Igboland. At the same time, this territory had to absorb increasing numbers of people fleeing federal offensives. After a

year of fighting, the rump state was overpopulated, its people impoverished, lacking supplies, food and medicine.⁵²

The growing international interest in the conflict generated by the humanitarian crisis became a major factor of change in political and military terms, seemingly representing a political gain for Biafra. In April 1968, Julius Nyerere's Tanzania recognized the secessionist state, citing humanitarian concerns as the grounds for this decision. Gabon, Ivory Coast and Zambia followed in the ensuing months, and a year later 'Papa Doc' Chevalier's Haiti. On morally ambiguous grounds, the *Estado Novo* dictatorship in Portugal, and the South African and Rhodesian apartheid regimes clandestinely supported the Biafran secessionists as well, ostensibly to weaken one of sub-Saharan Africa's biggest states.⁵³ The De Gaulle government also backed Biafra. In Paris, postcolonial power politics conjoined with efforts to ride the wave of domestic humanitarian concern. France delivered arms to Biafra, mostly channelled through Houphouët-Boigny's Ivory Coast. Projecting its postcolonial power through the ties of *Françafrique*, Paris aimed to weaken Nigeria, not only for its close British ties but also because it was the largest and potentially most powerful state in France's principal sphere of influence in west Africa.⁵⁴ To a lesser degree, Beijing a few years into the Sino-Soviet split, also supported Biafra, partly to oppose Russia.⁵⁵ The airlifts of aid of Biafra, partly used for humanitarian purposes and partly for military purposes, prevented Biafra's fall for some months.⁵⁶

These various sources were not enough to tip the scale in favour of the secessionists. The military standoff remained for another eighteen months after the increase of international interest in mid 1968. Breakthrough attempts were orchestrated by both sides. They invariably failed, at least until late 1969. By then, Nigerian strategic adjustments and changes in the military leadership ensured a successful final onslaught on the Biafran enclave.⁵⁷ In early 1970, Ojukwu and some of his followers fled to the Ivory Coast. After two and a half years of fighting, the remaining secessionist regime surrendered on 15 January 1970.⁵⁸

The relief operation, representations of humanitarian crisis and 'third world' suffering

In the summer of 1968, contemporaries around the globe witnessed the emergence of a new 'third world' icon: the 'Biafran babies'. Readers and audiences in the west in particular were confronted with photographs of starving children in the secessionist Republic of Biafra, which made headlines for months.⁵⁹ For various commentators, the Biafran crisis marks the onset of a new age of humanitarian catastrophe broadcast by modern media. According to Michael Ignatieff, the 'age of televised disaster' began with the Biafran war.⁶⁰ As the 'first major disaster that was brought into the living rooms of the world by television . . . [it] challenged indifference to faraway suffering', explained Aengus Finucane, a founder of the Irish NGO Africa Concern.⁶¹ The war was the first postcolonial conflict to engender a transnational wave of humanitarian concern. International and non-governmental organizations, principally the ICRC and a number of religious

organizations under the umbrella of Joint Church Aid, founded to address the crisis, organized airlifts to bring relief supplies into Biafra.⁶² ‘Biafra committees’ emerged across the west, raised funds for the humanitarian operation and lobbied governments and international organizations to intensify their relief efforts.⁶³

Some of these committees evolved into NGOs that now feature in the prominent non-governmental sector of human rights politics. The most well-known example is the French Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). The NGO developed from the Comité de Lutte contre le Génocide au Biafra, formed by a group of young French Red Cross volunteers during the conflict, which, in 1971, joined forces with the medical journal *Tonus* to send medical personnel to famine and civil war-ridden East Pakistan—a re-run of Biafra, as many at the time thought.⁶⁴ Making use of the channels of the mass media age, this new breed of activists believed in what became known as *témoignage*, the outspoken public disclosure of what humanitarians and journalists had witnessed in the field, the standard accounts explain. Accordingly, these ardent believers in the humanitarian cause had to break ranks with the organization that stood for humanitarian idealism since its inception a century before: the ICRC. Biafra, a new era, the age of *sans-frontiérisme*, had begun.⁶⁵

The alleged rift between outspoken French doctors and an overly cautious ICRC has turned into a myth of origins of this new movement.⁶⁶ However, as Marie-Luce Desgrandchamps deftly shows in her contribution to this volume, these conflicts were not only due to diverging principals, but also to different realms of experience. It was an entirely different matter whether these events were analysed from a Genevan office or witnessed in a Biafran hospital. The humanitarian workers in the field directly experienced the situation but lacked the general picture of international policy experts; both perspectives had their shortcomings. The former were often willing to decry what they perceived as genocide. Staff in the ICRC headquarters were, contrary to what MSF mythology would have us believe, not entirely reluctant to speak out against atrocities reported by their staff. Policy considerations of non-partisanship and often simply communications mismanagement impeded their public expression. Even so, ICRC structures allowed for some leeway. The humanitarian international organization was not as clearly bound to the principal of nation-state sovereignty as the UN, for instance. Far from denouncing genocide, the ‘world organization’ even partook in the international observer mission put up by London and Lagos to counter Biafran genocide allegations.⁶⁷

The Biafran crisis was also connected to wider changes in the relief sector. In particular, it resulted in a massive spending increase through state funds and public donations, leading to the growth and proliferation of NGOs. As suggested by Kevin O’Sullivan’s sensitive line of argument in his article here, the conflict accordingly needs to be situated within complex sets of historical change *and* continuity.⁶⁸ O’Sullivan’s contribution also helps to inscribe the visual landscape of the Biafran crisis into longer strands of images of and paternalistic relationships with the ‘third world’—and their connection with transformations in humanitarian politics. As he argues, in the aid operation for Biafra, ‘imperial responsibilities and

care for far-off communities' were repackaged for a postcolonial era: 'The vision of an inclusive "common humanity" the NGOs espoused was in practice rooted in a very western understanding of humanitarian responsibilities and a very western image of the third world'.⁶⁹

O'Sullivan also shows that humanitarian representations of the conflict led to a 'flattening out [of] the complexity of Biafran and Nigerian society in favour of the moral imperative of humanitarian aid'.⁷⁰ However, despite the dominant tendency to de-politicize understandings of the conflict, some of Biafra's international supporters formulated their activism along overtly political lines. As Brian McNeil shows, members of one of the biggest ad hoc organizations that came to life during the Biafran crisis—the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive—spoke out not only against genocide but also for Biafran self-determination. His close reading of the sources shows how intimately intertwined the notions of genocide and self-determination became in the committee's perception of the crisis. For them, any negation of a Biafran state amounted to genocide.⁷¹ The spheres of a self-proclaimed apolitical moral concern and politics were much more blurred than many advocates of humanitarian intervention at the time would have admitted. Accordingly, Biafra needs to be situated within the complex histories of humanitarianism, ideas about sovereignty, genocide, human rights and the right to self-determination, as well as the rise of NGOs in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Biafra, Holocaust analogies and the history of genocide

After the 1966 massacres, allegations of genocide against federal Nigeria—in particular casting Muslims as 'savages'—became the core of secessionist propaganda. Biafra's campaign aimed at its own population and at possible allies abroad. The Biafran leadership was confronted with the task of uniting the heterogeneous peoples of the secessionist state: the nation of 'Biafra' still had to be turned into an imaginable community.⁷² Only roughly half of the 14 million inhabitants were Igbo, the rest belonging to different ethnic minorities. Roy Doron's detailed study of Biafran propaganda reconstructs how this message was formulated and tightly controlled by strict guidelines. In particular, political cartoons—reproduced in Doron's article—played a crucial role in disseminating this message to a largely illiterate population.⁷³ Some foreign commentators observed this fear of genocide to be authentically experienced, as Joseph C. McKenna wrote in *Foreign Affairs* in 1969: 'Unable now to feel secure away from their native soil, the Ibos saw themselves as the target of genocide. The trauma induced by the September [1966] riots, coming on the heels of the violence in May and July, cannot be overestimated. Secession had become almost inevitable'.⁷⁴

Further elevating the genocide reproaches, the eastern (later the Biafran) leadership frequently made comparisons to the Holocaust to draw attention to their cause.⁷⁵ This analogy originated in ethnological genealogies that cast the Ibos as the 'Jews of Africa', even as one of Israel's 'lost tribes'. The Biafran leadership

drew on this representation that many eastern Nigerians had adopted as their self-perception. This analogy, combined with the genocide charge, was used by the leadership to secure the support of the population, and to build loyalty to Biafra by emphasizing the threat from a common enemy. The 'Jews of Africa' envisioned their state like an 'African Israel', a new nation born of genocidal violence.⁷⁶

Soon, the growing cast of Biafra's supporters around the globe adopted this rhetoric, further elaborating it in the process. After the publication of images of starving Biafran children in the western media, analogies and comparisons with the Holocaust abounded internationally. Biafran refugee camps were described as 'the camp of Belsen at its liberation', 'Mauthausens of famine' or as a 'Buchenwald for children'.⁷⁷ Auschwitz, the most well-known site of mass annihilation, was repeatedly referenced, although the camps liberated by western allied troops were more frequently invoked. Photos of them had circulated in western media since 1945. The connections between Biafra and the Holocaust were also a product of representation strategies. Biafran propagandists and many of the secessionists' sympathizers around the globe tried hard to secure what they deemed the 'right' interpretation of the 'facts'.⁷⁸ To a large degree, the connection between the humanitarian crisis in Biafra and the Holocaust was made on a visual level, at least in the eyes of western observers. Contemporaries were reminded of the photos of the liberation of the camps, which they increasingly understood as denoting genocide, by the images of emaciated civil war victims.⁷⁹

A symbiotic relationship of identification developed with Jewish activists and organizations, as it did for Bernard Kouchner, the figure-head of *sans-frontiérisme* whose grandfather was killed in Auschwitz.⁸⁰ These networks were vital for the establishment and coordination of transnational Biafra protest. Biafran linkages to Jews during the Holocaust were extended to contemporary Israelis. As Zach Levey demonstrates here, Biafrans identified closely with Israel as a similarly beleaguered modernizing nation surrounded by backward, Muslim neighbours. Inspiringly, it had won a stunning victory against them in the Six Days War in 1967. Biafran leader Ojukwu announced that, 'Like the Jews . . . we saw in the birth of our young Republic the gateway to freedom and survival'. Many Israelis reciprocated, viewing the Biafrans in similar terms and pressuring their government to aid the secessionist struggle in various ways. They thought genocide was taking place.⁸¹

For many in post-fascist West Germany, the genocidal past was an obligation to act in the present. Günter Grass felt it was a particular responsibility of his fellow countrymen to react:

As Germans, we should know what we say when we use the word 'genocide'. This biggest of all crimes weighs heavily on the past of our people. Not moralizing condescension, but the knowledge of Auschwitz, Treblinka and Belsen obligates us to speak out publicly against the culprits and accessories of the genocide in Biafra . . . [S]ilence—we had to learn that as well—turns into complicity.⁸²

Many West German commentators agreed that 'after Auschwitz, to which Biafra had been rightfully likened', the Federal Republic of Germany bore 'a special responsibility'.⁸³

This responsibility was not West Germany's alone, as many felt. Bishop Heinrich Tenhumberg, head of the Roman Catholic Church's liaison office with the Bonn government, explained that the 'principle of non-intervention is outdated in our time when the protection of fundamental human rights is at stake'. 'Civilized states' cannot remain passive in a world after Auschwitz given that modern communication technology automatically transformed internal conflicts into international crises.⁸⁴ The international community of states would need to react, the weekly magazine *Der Spiegel* argued as well. The UN has 'defined what is happening in Biafra as criminally liable. The Nazi genocide of the Jews prompted the world organisation in 1946 [sic] to declare genocide an international crime'. Yet the organization lacked the instruments to enforce this norm in practice. Without an international court, 'the genocide allegations against Nigeria would have to be judged by a Nigerian court', commentators pointed out. The UN Convention on the Punishment and Prevention of Genocide (UNCG) remained toothless.⁸⁵ In view of Biafra, the lessons to be drawn from the Holocaust was to create international norms to prevent similar crimes in the present and the future.

The associations with the Holocaust became especially virulent in the UK. As Karen Smith notes in her article, because of the entanglements with the former British colony, discussions about the Nigeria–Biafra war had been particularly intensive in Britain. By summer 1968, Harold Wilson's Labour government had come under heavy rhetorical fire.⁸⁶ Wilson's critics in the Biafra lobby, in the press and in the two houses of the parliament accused Whitehall of complicity in genocide. In *Biafra story* (1969), which sold out in weeks, the staunchly pro-Biafran journalist and later author of bestselling crime novels Frederick Forsyth explained that Britain was culpable of supporting Nigeria's genocidal persecution of the Biafrans that resembled the treatment of the Jews in the Second World War.⁸⁷ Auberon Waugh argued that the 'mass starvation to death of innocent civilians' was 'the most hideous crime against humanity in which England has ever been involved'.⁸⁸ Wilson was taken aback by the criticism, and in his memoirs expressed grudging admiration for the Biafran propaganda, writing that it 'secured a degree of moral control over Western broadcasting systems, with a success unparalleled in the history of communications in modern democratic societies'.⁸⁹

So far, genocide studies scholars have not delved very deeply into the significance of the ideas of genocide and the Holocaust for the perception of other conflicts.⁹⁰ Scholars in the field have devoted more energy to identifying genocides in the past than analysing what historical effects their notions of genocide has had in the decades since its inception.⁹¹ The Biafran case, which, according to a relatively widespread consensus, did not constitute genocide, hardly features in this literature, as we detail below. The conflict is also seldom commented upon in the vast historiography on the cultural memory of the Holocaust and its legacies.⁹² Genocide allegations during the Nigeria–Biafra war—if mentioned at all—tend to be disregarded as irrelevant by arguing that they merely underline the weakness of genocide as a political and legal idea.⁹³ The salience of the cultural memory of the

Holocaust in the internationalization of the humanitarian crisis in Biafra underlines that genocide studies should develop new methods to incorporate a diverse set of conflicts—even those that many nowadays would not understand to have constituted genocide, if only because many contemporaries thought they did.

Biafra and the founding assumptions of genocide studies

The field of genocide studies did not exist during the Nigeria–Biafra war. It started to crystallize only in the early 1980s and consolidated and developed in the 2000s, spurred by the wars of Yugoslav secession and the Rwandan genocide in 1994. Its effective founders were academics and graduate students at the time of the Biafra conflict, however, who reflected on it in the later 1970s and 1980s as they debated definitions of genocide for social scientific research rather than for strictly legal purposes. In many ways, they were rowing against the tide, as these were also the decades when the Holocaust came into public and academic prominence as a supposedly singular or unique event. Engaging in comparative genocide studies, as the emerging field called itself, could be seen as heretical. Helen Fein recalls that her presentation about different national responses to Jewish persecution during the Holocaust, which included a comparison with the Armenian genocide, at the First International Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust in 1975 was regarded as 'radical' because 'the dominant position was that the Holocaust was unique, noncomparable and to some, non-explicable as a historical event—viewed as a mystifying or transcendent event'. This was a position that the sober sociologist Fein could not share, despite her personal commitment to Holocaust research.⁹⁴ As late as 1992, Robert Melson felt compelled to preface his *Revolution and genocide* with the statement that the book's pairing of the Holocaust and Armenian genocide 'does not spring from a desire to trivialize the Holocaust by spuriously universalizing human suffering and denying its unique and perhaps unfathomable characteristics'.⁹⁵ How genocide would be defined in relation to the Biafran case had profound implications for the field and study of postcolonial genocides generally. As we will see, the Holocaust-as-prototype-of-genocide came to shape these scholars' moral and political imaginations.

Melson's reasoning is particularly revealing because he was a *bona fide* Nigeria expert, having spent 1964 and 1965 in the country for his doctoral research on its labour movement. News of a Biafran friend's murder brought back traumatic memories of the Holocaust, which he had barely survived as a child in Poland. 'I could not help but make the connection between their experience and my own.' Biafrans were being killed purely for their identity: it was 'as if the twenty-some years after the Second World War had been compressed into a few minutes. The Holocaust monster was on the prowl again, and it was no use trying to escape its implications in Africa or elsewhere'.⁹⁶ He consequently supported their secessionist campaign. This initial moment of empathetic recognition soon passed, though, when he saw that the FMG did not intend to exterminate all Biafrans after its victory in 1970, and indeed apparently sought to integrate them into the state. 'The Nigerians were not Nazis, and the Ibos were not Jews.'⁹⁷ This

conflict could not be genocide because its messy script did not resemble the tidy dramaturgy of the Holocaust of utterly innocent victims and monstrous perpetrators bent on their total extermination.

Genocide, Melson intuited, needed to entail the attempt to destroy a group in its entirety. Accordingly, he criticized the UN genocide definition's criminalization of group destruction 'in whole or in part' for conflating what he called 'total' and 'partial genocides' (or 'genocides in part'). Unlike the Holocaust and the Armenian and Cambodian genocides, which were cases of attempted total destruction by revolutionary regimes driven by redemptive ideologies, the Biafran and other cases were partial, meaning the aim was to 'coerce and alter' a group's identity and social status rather than to eliminate it, even though it exceeded massacres in scale and effect.⁹⁸ Thus, although Melson acknowledged that 'over a million Biafrans starved to death as a result of the deliberate Nigerian policy of blockade and disruption of agricultural life', the policy could not be called genocidal because the FMG policies 'did not include extermination of the Ibos'.⁹⁹ Melson also implied another feature intrinsic to genocide. Igbos were not being killed for ideological reasons and purely for their identity but because they were a party to a secessionist civil war. Not the product of a global ideology of racism, the Nigerian violence was rather a territorially contained conflict of self-determination resulting from the tensions of postcolonial state building and modern nationalist ideology.

As an expert on African politics and later genocide, Melson would have been aware of Leo Kuper, an older scholar who also moved from African studies to genocide studies. He came to stand for the thesis that postcolonial political instability was caused by these states' internal ethnic pluralism, one close to Melson's own approach to ethnic communalism, which he thought was intensified by modernization processes.¹⁰⁰ Kuper distinguished, on the one hand, between genocides caused by ideological fanaticism in which victims were largely passive objects of phobic hatreds, destroyed for who they were, like the Holocaust (non-political genocide), and on the other hand, conflicts that erupted from the quotidian power struggles within shaky polities in which people were destroyed for what they did (political genocide).¹⁰¹ In his landmark *Genocide: its political use in the twentieth century* (1981), Kuper briefly mentioned the Biafran conflict, particularly the 1966 massacres in the north before the civil war and famine, as a case of 'genocidal massacre', a new concept he introduced to the field; it performed the same qualifying function as Melson's distinction between total and partial genocide. He thought Biafran propaganda about genocide to be excessive and also noted that no attempt was made to exterminate the Igbo after their military defeat.¹⁰²

This style of reasoning was hegemonic within the founder generation of genocide studies in the 1980s and 1990s. In an early genocide anthology, Alan Berger summed up the consensus in his chapter entitled 'The Holocaust: the ultimate and archetypal genocide', which observed that the Holocaust had 'come to be viewed as the paradigm of genocide'. The question of agency was central, echoing Kuper's distinction between political and non-political genocides: 'it was not *what* Jews did but rather *that* they were Jews which constituted their

“crime”¹⁰³ The notion of political passivity was built into Irving Louis Horowitz’s influential definition of genocide in his *Genocide, state power and mass murder* (1976), one of the field’s founding texts: ‘Genocide is herein defined as a *structural and systematic destruction of innocent people by a state bureaucratic apparatus*’.¹⁰⁴ On this logic, the palpable political agency of Biafrans rendered dubious their claims to genocidal victimhood: they could not be innocent. What is more, the centrality of the state for genocide’s perpetration also made it difficult to class as genocide the 1966 massacre of Igbo in northern Nigeria. Although many genocide scholars eschewed his arguments about the Holocaust’s ‘phenomenological uniqueness’, Steven T. Katz’s contention that ‘the concept of genocide applies *only* where there is an actualized intention, however successfully carried out, to physically destroy an *entire* group’ accurately reflected the field’s assumptions.¹⁰⁵

This argument persists to the present day. Writing in an anthology on the Nigeria–Biafra war in 2013, Paul Bartrop, acting as gatekeeper to the house of genocide studies, insisted that ‘until it can be demonstrated that their [the FMG’s] goal was the *total destruction* of the Igbo as a people, and not forcing the surrender of Biafra and its reincorporation into the Nigerian Federal Republic, caution must be exercised in concluding the genocide occurred’.¹⁰⁶ In fact, neither for Raphael Lemkin, who coined the genocide concept, nor in international law is it necessary to show intended total destruction to demonstrate genocide. The UNCG speaks of the intention to destroy ‘in whole or in part’.¹⁰⁷ Not for nothing did Samantha Power observe that ‘the link between Hitler’s Final Solution and Lemkin’s hybrid term would cause endless confusion for policymakers and ordinary people who assumed that genocide occurred only where the perpetrator of atrocity could be shown, like Hitler, to possess an intent to exterminate every last member of an ethnic, national, or religious group’.¹⁰⁸

This paradigm ensured the exclusion of the Nigeria–Biafra war from genocide studies. Thus, the first anthology on genocide, published by Jack N. Porter in 1982, contained a section on the Hutu–Tutsi in Burundi, the Ache of Paraguay, the Buddhists of Tibet, East Timor, Cambodia and East Pakistan, but not the Igbos of Nigeria.¹⁰⁹ In a much-cited article in 1988, Ted Gurr and Barbara Harff did not count the 1966 massacre of Igbos in the north as genocide because ‘there was no deliberate, sustained policy of extermination dictated and organized by ruling groups’, but then also excluded the subsequent state-induced famine.¹¹⁰ Helen Fein was prepared to refer very briefly to the ‘Ibos in Nigeria (preceding the Biafran secession in 1966)’ in her well-known analysis, *Genocide: a sociological perspective* (1990), although she too omitted the deliberate famine.¹¹¹ The Biafran case was not covered in Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn’s influential anthology, *The history and sociology of genocide* (1990), but they included a bibliographical reference despite their stated misgivings.¹¹² Neither did Jonassohn’s survey of ‘man-made famines’ mention the million or more Biafran victims.¹¹³ The paucity of research was evident when Israel W. Charny’s pioneering *Encyclopedia of genocide* (1999) contained a perfunctory paragraph-long entry on the Igbos based wholly on Kuper’s own brief summary.¹¹⁴

The situation had not changed appreciably by the 2000s. Harff again excluded the 1966 massacres from her survey of genocide and political mass murder since 1955 because ‘the government was not complicit in killings carried out by private groups’, and again she omitted the subsequent war and famine.¹¹⁵ No mention was made of the Nigeria–Biafra war in the canonical *Century of genocide* anthology in 2004, nor in the fourth edition of 2013, although the third edition (2009) contained a chapter with few paragraphs on the war in relation to undefeated perpetrator regimes.¹¹⁶ Ben Kiernan’s mammoth, prize-winning world history of genocide makes no mention of Biafra despite purporting to cover ‘genocide and extermination from Sparta to Darfur’. Neither does it appear in new books on ‘forgotten’ and ‘hidden’ genocides.¹¹⁷ If at all, it is briefly mentioned in passing, as in Benjamin Valentino’s monograph on mass killing and genocide in the twentieth century and Philip Spencer’s *Genocide since 1945*.¹¹⁸ Usually, genocide scholars do not even list Biafra among the cases excluded from their definition of genocide.¹¹⁹ The exclusion of the Biafran case from genocide studies has been virtually as complete as it has been unnoticed.

Until the Bosnian and Rwandan cases of 1994, the canonical genocides were the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide. The first comparative genocide studies conference, held in Israel in 1982, was limited to these cases. This selection can perhaps be explained by the biographies of the founding generation of genocide scholars, who were in the main Holocaust survivors or their children, Israelis and Armenians. Yet, as Melson’s journey indicates, the Holocaust was not the initial focus. It was too traumatic to write about the Holocaust early in his life, he wrote later. The interest in postcolonial Africa functioned as a displacement. ‘As did so many of my generation growing up in the late 1950s and 1960s, I had hoped that Africa, the Third World, would avoid the recent horrors of Europe.’ The Biafran case spurred him less to explore contemporary Africa and similar contemporary cases, however, than to go back in time: ‘I knew I had to return to the Holocaust to try to make sense of it both at the level of personal emotion and in some broader comparative intellectual perspective’.¹²⁰ Europe’s traumatic past, then, led to a commitment to postcolonial reconstruction, and then back to the Holocaust when these hopes for the new postcolonial nation-states were dashed.¹²¹ After spending 1977 in Jerusalem, overlooking the occupied Judean desert and Dead Sea from the Hebrew University’s elevated campus, he decided to work on the Holocaust and became a charter member of the Jewish studies programme at his home institution, Purdue University in Indiana, USA. Seeking a case to compare to the Holocaust, Melson settled on Armenia rather than Biafra—or Cambodia—because it ‘most resembled [the Holocaust]’.¹²² Fein, too, had initially written about colonial violence after a period of anti-Vietnam war activism before rediscovering her Jewish identity while living in India in the early 1970s and resolving to work on the Holocaust, antisemitism, genocide and refugees.¹²³

In a very concrete sense, the canonization of the Holocaust and Armenian genocide came at the conceptual expense of Biafra and other so-called partial colonial and postcolonial genocides. Rather than incorporating the colonial and

postcolonial into genocide studies, the Holocaust focus superseded them so that only conflagrations that somehow resembled this ‘maximal standard’ (Martin Shaw) could be imaginable as genocide, that is, as the terrible outcome of redemptive ideologies whose victims were passive objects of revolutionary state violence.¹²⁴ If this exclusion was the result of unreflective models of genocide, however, so were the Biafran claims to genocide during and since the civil war.

Biafran claims of genocide

Proponents of the Biafran cause made a case for genocide from the beginning of the violence in 1966. As noted above, in doing so they also bought into the Holocaust prototype by casting themselves as African Jews in the developing dramaturgy of genocide. Their case consisted of several elements: positing the Nigerian construction of an enduring ‘Igbo problem’, ontologizing collectives (the Igbo, the Hausa, and so on), highlighting fierce northern Nigerian (read: Hausa) ethnic resentment at Igbo talent and social success, stressing that the Igbo were innocent victims of premeditated and highly organized exterminatory violence, and narrating the war–genocide as the culmination of fifty years of ‘Igbophobia’. It had two phases: the 1966 killings followed by the war–famine, though some scholars traced a line of violence to earlier massacres. Lastly, the British are held virtually co-responsible. Douglas Anthony’s article in this volume shows that Biafran elites also termed the 1966 massacres ‘pogroms’ and explicitly invoked Jewish and Armenian precedents, linking them to long-standing ethnic antipathies against Igbos living in northern Nigeria in particular, while they also took pains to stress that Biafrans included other groups living in eastern Nigeria. An example of this tendency was a Biafran pamphlet that argued that diplomacy had failed because ‘the final solution of the “Biafran problem” involved genocide’.¹²⁵

This genocide claim provoked an international debate about the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Nigeria. It also placed immense pressure on the British government, whose support for the FMG attracted accusations of neo-colonialism by Biafran proponents.¹²⁶ Public opinion there was firmly on the Biafran side; government rhetoric about Nigerian unity and its long-standing military relationship was no match for images of starving babies, the widespread circulation of which was part of the Biafran public relations campaign. Senegal and Tanzania referred to Biafran genocide. The British ultimately won the propaganda war by sponsoring an international observer team to visit Nigeria and report on the genocide issue. The FMG played along, although it forbade the team entry to Biafran territory where the famine and aerial bombing of eastern Nigerians were actually occurring. The team determined that genocide was not taking place, and international public opinion largely concurred. Like Melson, the latter concluded that the Nigerians were not Nazis and the Igbos not Jews.¹²⁷ It was deemed a civil war rather than a genocide.

Academic proponents of the Biafran cause today advance arguments strikingly similar to the Biafran propaganda campaign of the late 1960s. Biographical

trajectories account in part for this continuity: these scholars were either participants in the conflict or are children of participants, often working in universities abroad. G. N. Uzoigwe, for instance, author of ‘Reflections on the Biafran revolution’ from 1969—a passionate yet poised and beautifully rendered plea for the Biafran cause—has since also penned many books on the subject, as well as, most recently, a conference paper entitled, ‘The Igbo genocide, 1966: where is the outrage?’, which seeks to raise the profile of the Biafran case by making less poised comparisons:

It dwarfed the Congolese killings of the early 1960s, the Tutsi genocide, and the Darfur genocide, in its hatred, planning, intensity, ferocity, barbarity, and the number of people killed or affected. And yet genocide scholars have totally ignored it despite the impressive documentation of what happened.¹²⁸

These are not claims likely to advance his cause. Who can say with certainty whether the Rwandan genocide was less intense, ferocious or barbaric? Unfortunately, this academic advocacy is characterized by such rhetorical excess, argument by assertion and recurrence to the same, thin layer of evidence for FMG genocidal intention.¹²⁹ For example, Chima Korieh, a prolific writer on the subject, recently edited two anthologies on the Nigeria–Biafra war, one dedicated to his Biafran parents and daughter, ‘haunted by the images of the starving children in Biafra’, which were based on a conference co-funded by an Igbo organization. He proclaims ‘the capacity of an oppressed people to resist an attempted genocide’.¹³⁰ Little has been written about the conflict’s ‘genocidal character from the Biafran perspective’, he continued, which has been mischaracterized as a war: it was thus an ‘invisible genocide’. He pointed to evidence for ‘the meticulously planned and implemented political project of exterminating the Igbo ethnic group in northern Nigeria before the conflict in other parts of Nigeria and during it’, although adducing none beyond the conclusions of an International Committee on the Investigation of Crimes of Genocide in 1969 (an ad hoc group originating in Paris ‘under official Jewish and Christian auspices’ and comprising jurists from various countries¹³¹) and the experiences of Biafran refugees. The same misplaced certainty and argument by assertion is on display again when he writes, regarding the famine, that the ‘[c]onditions in Biafra during the war leave *no doubt* that there was a well-organized and systematic attempt to starve the Igbo population to extinction’. As usual, there is also the invocation of the Nazi analogy: ‘The war was indeed a Nigerian variant of what the Nazis called the final solution to the Jewish problem’.¹³²

To maintain consistency with the Holocaust dramaturgy as a non-political genocide, Korieh and others emphasize Igbo innocence and lack of agency. They thus play down Igbo officers’ participation in the fateful military coup of 1966, and do not mention the Biafran rejection of a supply corridor (for fear that the FMG would poison food) in 1968 and 1969, still less recall the obdurate continuation of the war against all odds despite the catastrophic famine.¹³³ Responses to the international observer team are also weak. Korieh writes defensively: ‘Perhaps

that intent [to commit genocide] was not officially proclaimed. But the state had many willing executioners with clear intent on exterminating the Igbo. The state did not do much to stop it nor prosecute those who did the job'.¹³⁴ The Biafran case tends to resort to quoting contemporaries, whether other Biafrans or sympathetic westerners, who asserted that genocide was taking place, without independently assessing the evidence. Where incriminating quotations of Nigerian officials can be adduced, they are scripted into an argument about 'unparalleled hatred' against the Igbo and Nigerians' long-term genocidal intentionalism with Goldhagenesque overtones.¹³⁵

The prolific independent scholar Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe is perhaps the most outspoken articulator of this paradigm, which also depicts the Nigerian state as a prison house of nations, especially for the Igbo. Like Uzoigwe in his 1969 article, and many of the project's supporters at the time, Ekwe-Ekwe believes that the Biafran ideal represented authentic self-determination because it challenged the borders and artificial states imposed on Africans by European colonial rulers.¹³⁶ These notions are worthy of serious discussion, but come with considerable partisan baggage. Thus, he claims Biafra as 'Africa's most devastating genocide of the 20th century' while '[m]ost of Africa and the world stood by and watched'. His indignation continues: 'The records of those who carried out the Igbo genocide make no pretences, offer no excuses, whatsoever, about the goal of their dreadful mission—such was the maniacal insouciance and rabid Igbophobia that propelled the project. The principal language used in the prosecution of the genocide was Hausa. The words of the ghoulis anthem of the genocide'.¹³⁷ Ekwe-Ekwe, Uzoigwe, Korieh and others are well aware that other Nigerians accuse the Igbo of being a 'bumptious' and ethnocentric people who seek to dominate the country. What non-Igbo Nigerians deplore as overweening ambition, Ekwe-Ekwe understands as talent, enterprise and leadership:

The Igbo were one of the very few constituent nations in what was Nigeria, again prior to 29 May 1966, who understood, fully, the immense liberatory possibilities . . . and the interlocking challenges of the vast reconstructionary work required for state and societal transformation in the aftermath of foreign occupation. The Igbo had the most robust economy in the country in their east regional homeland. Not only did they supply the country with its leading writers, artists and scholars, they also supplied the country's top universities with vice-chancellors and leading professors and scientists. They supplied the country with its first indigenous university (the prestigious university at Nsukka), with its leading and most spirited pan-Africanists and its top diplomats. They supplied the country's leading high schools with head teachers and administrators, supplied the country with its top bureaucrats, supplied the country with its leading businesspeople and supplied the country with an educated, top-rated professional officers-corps for its military and police forces. In addition they supplied the country with its leading sportspersons, essentially and effectively worked the country's rail, postal, telegraphic, power, shipping and aviation services to quality standards not seen since in Nigeria . . . And they were surely aware of the vicissitudes engendered by this historic age, precisely because the Igbo nation played the vanguard role in the freeing of Nigeria from Britain, beginning from the mid-1930s.¹³⁸

In his contribution to one of Korieh's anthologies, Uzoigwe complained that Ekwe-Ekwe has been ignored. Given the tone of his writings, that would not be surprising, but in fact his online contributions have attracted attention.¹³⁹ A Canadian academic, Gerry Caplan, disputed Ekwe-Ekwe's casualty figures, pointed out that 'Ojukwu was hardly the knight in shining armour portrayed by Ekwe in his various writings', that Biafra contained its own minorities that were less than enthusiastic about the independence cause and, most importantly, that it was not a non-political genocide: 'the responsibility for it was hardly as one-sided as he [Ekwe-Ekwe] claims'.¹⁴⁰ Oxford don Gavin Williams objected to the 'blanket condemnations of the "Hausa-Fulani"', and Ian Smillie, founder of the Canadian NGO Inter Pares and noted writer on humanitarianism, argued that the conflict was a war rather than a genocide.¹⁴¹

These arguments are equally unsatisfactory. Ekwe-Ekwe's critics admit that the perpetrators of the 1966 massacres were never brought to justice, and that the 'federal forces did indeed try to starve the Igbos into submission, a cruel weapon' (Caplan), yet they do not draw any consequences from these facts. Igbo scholars' frustration with the failure of genocide studies to join the dots and think seriously about the million deaths in relation to their models of genocide is understandable. The too-easy dismissal of this violence was echoed in the British prime minister's recounting of the 1966 massacres: 'The Ibos who had seized power [in the 1966 coup] were themselves dispossessed by another military coup, and had retired to Iboland to brood'.¹⁴² By contrast, this is how Charles Keil, an American ethnomusicologist who witnessed the 1966 massacres and then led the chapter of the Committee to Keep Biafra Alive at the State University of New York at Buffalo, described the events to which Wilson referred:

The pogroms I witnessed in Makurdi, Nigeria (late Sept. 1966) were foreshadowed by months of intensive anti-Ibo and anti-Eastern conversations among Tiv, Idoma, Hausa and other Northerners resident in Makurdi, and, fitting a pattern replicated in city after city, the massacres were led by the Nigerian army. Before, during and after the slaughter, Col. Gowan could be heard over the radio issuing 'guarantees of safety' to all Easterners, all citizens of Nigeria, but the intent of the soldiers, the only power that counts in Nigeria now or then, was painfully clear. After counting the disembowelled bodies along the Makurdi road I was escorted back to the city by soldiers who apologized for the stench and explained politely that they were doing me and the world a great favor by eliminating Ibos. 'They eat dogs, they must die like dogs'. 'We find 'em, we kill 'em, and they do us the same, na be so?'. 'They are born with greed in their hearts'. 'They are the only people spoiling Nigeria ever since—One Nigeria without Ibo!'. 'We make sure they will never worry us again'. I am paraphrasing the kernels of conversations with dozens of soldiers conducted at nightclubs, roadblocks and in their barracks during the ten months between the pogroms and July, 1967, when I left Nigeria. I met a few soldiers, mostly officers, who were not convinced that the Ibos were innately evil, expendable, exterminatable, but they were exceptions.¹⁴³

Despite their differing assessments of the conflict as a genocide *or* a civil war, all parties have been transfixed by the Holocaust dramaturgy, thereby missing the point that war and genocide are not utterly distinct categories, indeed that

genocides usually take place during military conflict: war can be waged in a genocidal manner. To require the ‘innocence’ or agentlessness of the victim party ontologizes the victim collective, conflates combatants with civilians and thereby imports a genocidal logic into academic analysis. Just because the Nigerians may not have been Nazis, and Igbo not African Jews, does not mean they cannot still be victims of genocide. We elaborate on this proposition briefly in the next section.

Genocide, famine and warfare

Just as the Holocaust dramaturgy has framed genocide studies, so has the distinction between war and genocide. They can be distinguished in various ways: for example, belligerents can surrender in the former but not the latter, because it is essentially a campaign to exterminate rather than to dominate groups.¹⁴⁴ While seemingly clarifying, there are grounds for regarding these options as too stark for some factual circumstances. How much sense does it make to categorize the eventually predictable starvation of over half a million people, like in Biafra, as merely a campaign to dominate and then govern a fractious people, the military violence performing ‘a communicative function with a clear deterrent dimension’?¹⁴⁵

On the face of it, intending to destroy part of a group—or cripple it, as Lemkin sometimes put it—would satisfy the requirements of genocide. For all that, the literature focuses exclusively on the casualties, forgetting that the purpose of the genocide concept is to protect people’s ‘groupness’: the FMG campaign was not just attacking individuals but the notion of ‘Biafra’. Finally, consistent with the Holocaust dramaturgy, it presumes that genocide must entail the complete extermination of the enemy. That is why surviving a surrender, as occurred in Nigeria in 1970, cannot be imagined as genocide. Observing, as many do, that eastern Nigerians were not exterminated upon losing the war misses the point that doing so would have delegitimized the FMG and its patrons, and was functionally unnecessary. Committing genocide during the war could be sufficient to exert control of the contested territory.¹⁴⁶ ‘Integrating’ eastern Nigerians into the state with the policy of ‘no victor, no vanquished’ meant smashing Biafra through ‘lawfare’, that is, legal measures that achieve the same end as military operations, in this case dismembering the Eastern Region with the new federal state borders instituted in 1967.¹⁴⁷

Ultimately, the slippage between Igbo and Biafra categories explains the fraught nature of the genocide concept in this case. The former have not been destroyed, nor can it have been the FMG intention to destroy such a large group. However, without doubt, Igbo have been subordinated in Nigeria since 1970 by removing their regional governance of the oil-producing areas, subjecting them to punitive abandoned property and postwar currency conversion regimes, and hindering economic development of their states by policies of studied neglect.¹⁴⁸ When MASSOB and other Igbo leaders talk of the continuing ‘war’ on the Igbo, this is what they mean.¹⁴⁹ But is this genocide? By contrast,

‘Biafra’ as an Igbo project of collective assertion and liberation was destroyed in 1970 and has been a taboo subject ever since—at least until MASSOB placed it back on the agenda. For its members and other Igbo, the destruction of this agency and dashing of collective hopes for freedom can be experienced as genocidal loss of group self.¹⁵⁰ A critical discussion of these propositions is overdue.

One dimension of this discussion is revisiting the war–genocide relationship. Martin Shaw has posited a distinction between what he calls degenerate warfare and genocide; both target civilians but in different ways. The former attacks the enemy’s civilian population as part of a broader military campaign, as in aerial bombing of cities, though destroying it is not the ultimate goal: the enemy’s state, rather than its population, is the belligerent. In genocide, a social group as a whole is the enemy and its power and members are targeted for destruction.¹⁵¹ In reality, genocides usually occur during military conflict, so it is appropriate to think of them as ‘a component of such conflicts’ and/or as interwoven in a single campaign.¹⁵² Indeed, Shaw concludes that ‘hybrid forms of war *and* genocide are the general rule’.¹⁵³

Arguing along similar lines, Mark Levene reminds us that Lemkin conceptualized genocide as warfare against civilian groups rather than states, a notion captured by Lucy Dawidowicz’s book, *The war against the Jews, 1933–1945*.¹⁵⁴ He posits three types of warfare—between states, by a state against one deemed illegitimate, and warfare within states. Each can evince genocidal features in certain circumstances, especially where partisan resistance breaks out, and in practice genocide emanates ‘in many case of these very same “total war” scenarios’.¹⁵⁵ Unlike Shaw, however, he follows the conventional distinction between war and genocide, and thus classes Biafra in the former category because the eastern Nigerians were not exterminated upon surrender.¹⁵⁶ Yet on his own definition of genocide, which highlights a regime’s attempt to destroy a group ‘if not in total-ity, then in such numbers—at least as perceived by the regime—that it no longer represents a threat’, the Biafran case could be made to fit. After all, eastern Nigerians were attacked as a whole until they were no longer threatening.¹⁵⁷ Each case will need to be examined for dimensions of overlap or confluence that may be difficult to disentangle. On these terms, the Biafra case, with the blockade representing an attack on the entire population, seems to occupy a grey zone between degenerate warfare and genocide.

So much for social science; what about law? Induced famine can be classified as an *actus reus* of article II(c) of the UNGC: ‘Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part’.¹⁵⁸ Proving the necessary ‘intent to destroy in whole or part’ is less straightforward. The jurisprudence of the international criminal tribunals has insisted on ‘special intent’ (*dolus specialis*), meaning that foreseen outcomes of a policy do not count as genocidal. ‘Even if a government knows that its policies will create famine among Tigrayans, for example, unless it specifically intends to exterminate the Tigrayans in whole or in part, its actions will not meet the standard for genocide.’¹⁵⁹ At the same time, the tribunals have acknowledged that perpetrators can possess various intentions (sometimes called motives) that do not

vitiate a genocidal one.¹⁶⁰ In other words, the intention to defeat a state militarily can co-exist with an intention to destroy a group's social power and ability to resist, indeed destroy it as a group—consistent with Shaw's point about the hybridity of war and genocide.

Whether these considerations bear on the Biafran case remains to be determined empirically and conceptually. The various dimensions of the military campaign need to be reconstructed, and the organizers and perpetrators of the 1966 violence identified. What is more, careful consideration needs to be given to contextualizing the Biafra case in the history of civilian victims of blockades, sanctions regimes and sieges—and especially consequent famines—which are far more common features of warfare (both civil, inter-state and *de facto*) than supposed, ranging from the Napoleonic wars to the American civil war, the First World War, the Ukrainian hunger famine of 1932–33 and the German siege of Stalingrad. Serious questions confront the case for genocide.

- Can a genocide accusation be sustained on behalf of such an immediately invented group like Biafra, one that purported to transcend the Igbo to encompass smaller groups in eastern Nigeria that chafed under Igbo domination?
- If the genocide was aimed at the Igbo as such, how does one account for the fate of Igbo people who safely resided outside Biafra—in FMG-controlled territory—during the civil war and re-migrated there after it was over? This is a case in which the killing was ended by the aggressor, not by a third party.
- Can one identify an FMG intention to destroy Biafra or Igbo people by starvation through its blockade when the Biafran authorities rejected offers to enable the delivery of supplies because it did not suit their military objectives?
- What about the claim by Ogoni writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa that his people suffered genocidal violence at the hands of Igbo soldiers during the war for allegedly supporting the FMG?¹⁶¹
- What of the possible bitter irony that the prolongation of the war due to western support of Biafran resistance, which was elicited by the fear that genocide was taking place or would occur if Biafra lost, dramatically increased the Biafran civilian losses that the secession and western aid was designed to prevent? For this reason, Ian Smillie called the relief effort 'an act of unfortunate and profound folly', also noting that the hard currency that humanitarian organizations brought to Biafra was spent on weapons, just as weapons were smuggled with humanitarian aid, as suspected by the FMG.¹⁶²
- Igbo scholars are wont to quote some incriminating statements by northern generals but were they implementing government policy? Did Gowon make such statements in public or private?
- Finally, most genocides are expulsions of one kind or another; in this case, the aim was to preserve a federation by including the Igbo against their will. How does this fact cohere with a genocidal intention?

More thinking remains to be done to relate genocide and the FMG campaign.

Conclusion: memory and aftermath of the conflict

When Saro-Wiwa wrote his book, *Genocide in Nigeria: the Ogoni tragedy*, its main point was not to accuse the Igbo–Biafrans of dominating and killing the river peoples of the Niger delta during the war.¹⁶³ His target was the Nigerian state and foreign oil companies, especially Shell British Petroleum, for plundering the delta peoples' resources, despoiling their environment and attacking them when they protested. Saro-Wiwa himself and others were executed by the state on trumped-up murder charges in 1995. Despite government oppression, various delta protest and liberation movements continue to resist this form of internal colonialism, and now make common cause with their erstwhile enemy, the Biafrans, in the form of MASSOB.¹⁶⁴ Both use the genocide rhetoric.

Ever after Biafra's fall in early 1970, the memory of the war remained wrenching in Nigeria and Nigerian diaspora circles. The question of whether genocide was committed constitutes a recurrent bone of contention within Nigerian society, going back, as we have seen, to the widespread genocide allegations and invocations of Holocaust memory during the conflict. As Mpalive-Handson Msiska argues in this volume, Achebe's *There was a country* does not exemplify the ethnic chauvinism for which some commentators reproached it, but rather an attempt to reach closure through a confrontation with the past. '[H]ankering for a home', as Msiska argues, Achebe aimed to 'work through' the conflict as his personal and postcolonial Nigerian society's traumatic experience.¹⁶⁵ A similar plea for a confrontation with a troubling past can be identified in the contribution by Bird and Ottanelli. The memory of the Asaba massacres haunts the town community to this day; this spectre can only be relegated to the past, it seems, once a national process of national reconciliation through commemoration has been initiated.¹⁶⁶ MASSOB broke the taboo to refer to Biafra in Nigerian political discourse; however, the centrifugal forces of the Nigerian federal state have countered this resurgence. In recent years, the movement for a new Biafra collaborated with other quests for ethnic self-determination, while allowing the grievances to be increasingly termed 'Igbo' concerns, rather than 'Biafran'.¹⁶⁷

Whether the massacres, bombings and famine are named as genocide or not, dealing with the history of the war is important for an understanding of the fabric of postcolonial Nigeria and of the international order in which the conflict emerged and unfolded. The Nigeria–Biafra war poses intricate challenges for genocide studies scholars. Two related issues in particular are worth pondering further. First, the Nigeria–Biafra war underlines the importance of the conceptual history of genocide and of what Michael Rothberg has dubbed 'multidirectional memories' for the study of genocides.¹⁶⁸ More thinking needs to be put into how genocide as a concept, crucially often a concept directly tied to dominant understandings of the Holocaust as a state-sponsored, ideology-driven racial hate crime, influences the perceptions—and thus, in effect, the politics—of other conflicts. Second, and related to this point, scholars of genocide studies need to reflect on the impact of this understanding of the Holocaust on their discipline and how this model determines their (mis-)apprehension of other cases they discuss or—exactly because of this model—fail to discuss.

This article was written as western publics were again stirred by a humanitarian crisis in Nigeria, this time by the kidnapping of some 276 female students from a secondary school dormitory in the town of Chibok in north-eastern Nigeria in mid April 2014. Although the culprits, an Islamist militia known as Boko Haram, have been registered by western security agencies and international observers like the International Crisis Group (ICG) since 2011, their brazen act now invoked what Didier Fassin calls ‘humanitarian reason’: the expression of moral sentiments to motivate humanitarian action for far-off victims that conceals its redemptive emotional investment and the asymmetrical power relations between the west and the global south.¹⁶⁹ For Nigeria, the recent rise of Islamic terrorism is part of a longer history of political crisis in its postcolonial kleptocracy, a political system unable to offer basic services, still less provide hope for its citizens. Widespread corruption, mounting economic inequality and social marginalization are the breeding ground of unrest and violent conflict.¹⁷⁰ The country’s complex and multiple insurgencies, which have predominated in the non-Muslim southern oil region, are now perceived internationally through the depoliticizing prisms of ‘Islamic terror’ and ‘humanitarianism’. In many ways, the Nigeria–Biafra war remains a crucial episode to help us write a ‘history of the present’, to make sense of these current events.¹⁷¹

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Endnotes

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Notes on contributors

Lasse Heerten is a postdoctoral researcher at the Free University, Berlin, and will be a postdoctoral fellow in the Human Rights Program at the University of California, Berkeley, in 2014–2015. He defended his Dr. Phil. at the Free University

with the highest distinction ('summa cum laude') for his thesis, 'Spectacles of suffering: the Nigerian civil war, the media event "Biafra", and human rights in a postcolonial world, 1967–1970', in 2014. His work has appeared in peer-reviewed journals and anthologies, most recently, "A" as in Auschwitz, "B" as in Biafra: the Nigerian civil war, visual narratives of genocide, and the fragmented universalization of the Holocaust', in Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogne (eds.), *Humanitarian photography: a history* (forthcoming).

A. Dirk Moses is professor of global and colonial history at the European University Institute, Florence, and associate professor of history at the University of Sydney, Australia. He is the author and editor of many publications on genocide and colonialism, including most recently, with Bart Luttikhuis, *Colonial counter-insurgency and mass violence: the Dutch empire in Indonesia* (2014).