



## Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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### Nigerian Civil War (Biafra) 1967–70

#### Executive Summary

Nigeria is a coastal country in West Africa. In 1960, it became independent from the United Kingdom. The country is home to three main ethnicities, the Hausa in the north, the Yoruba in the west, and the Igbo in the southeast. There are also more than 300 ethnic minorities present.<sup>1</sup> It was the southeastern Igbo part of the country that declared independence in 1967 as the Republic of Biafra. Under colonial rule, ethnic tensions were always present, and the relative peace seemed unstable. In 1966, the predominately Igbo officer corps of the Nigerian Army launched a successful coup d'état to prevent political disintegration over a government they viewed as ineffective. This action was followed by a second coup that same year and increasing anger against the Igbo population in the northern part of the country. This tension led to a massacre and a mass migration of Igbo people to the southeastern Igbo-dominated part of Nigeria. The following year, Biafra seceded. The Nigerian Army quickly surrounded Biafra and consistently retook territory. Cut off from the ocean, the besieged Biafrans quickly ran out of food supplies, and the ensuing humanitarian crisis shocked the world.<sup>2</sup>

#### Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

No. Following independence, the country was unofficially split into three different regions, each controlled by a different ethnic group.<sup>3</sup> Within these regions, however, issues with hundreds of ethnic minorities were significant in the years just before 1967.<sup>4</sup> There was also little social interaction among the three main ethnicities, with intermarriage very rare.<sup>5</sup> Following the war, nationalism became a core subject taught in Nigerian schools, with the goal was to prevent another ethnic conflict in the future and to tie civilian loyalty to the Nigerian government, rather than ethnic institutions.<sup>6</sup>

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

No. Prior to the civil war, there was widespread disillusion with the federal government, with many Nigerians complaining of ineptitude and corruption.<sup>7</sup> The government had also failed to reconcile the differing social, economic, and political interests of the three main ethnicities, let alone the hundreds of minorities.<sup>8</sup> The civilian population was not unified against the Nigerian government, instead, they were more loyal to regional and ethnic entities, which allowed the government to retain some degree of control.

**3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country’s overall population?**

**Yes.** The conflict was limited to the Biafra region, which had a population of about six to seven million in 1969.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Nigeria’s population was about 54 million, so the insurgents had access to no more than 11–13 percent of the population at the beginning of the war.<sup>10</sup> As the war progressed and the rebels lost ground, this percentage decreased. Thus, the Nigerian government maintained security control over no less than 87 percent of the country’s population.

**4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?**

**No.** The rebel forces did not leave Biafran territory over the course of the war. When the conflict was lost, General Odmevwu Ojukwu, the military commander, fled to Côte d’Ivoire in 1970.<sup>11</sup> In its early days, the Republic of Biafra shared a border with Cameroon, but the Nigerian Army soon surrounded the region, cutting off access to it.

**5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?**

**Yes.** The Nigerian Army’s roots trace back to 1863, when the British Royal Navy assembled a small indigenous constabulary. This force provided police and military duties and grew under British colonial control.<sup>12</sup> Its members were recruited primarily from the northern Hausa ethnicity, a trend that continued through independence. The officer corps, however, was predominantly Igbo. In 1966, these officers launched the first coup.<sup>13</sup> After Biafra seceded, the Nigerian Army invaded in 1967.<sup>14</sup>

<b>NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR (BIAFRA) 1967–70</b>	
<b>NATIONAL IDENTITY</b>	<b>NO</b>
<b>GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY</b>	<b>NO</b>
<b>POPULATION SECURITY</b>	<b>YES</b>
<b>EXTERNAL SANCTUARY</b>	<b>NO</b>
<b>EXISTING SECURITY FORCES</b>	<b>YES</b>

## Outcome

Government victory. The government won despite a lack of national identity and government legitimacy. A high degree of population security outside the rebel area, the lack of external sanctuary for the rebels, and the preestablished Army sufficed for a government victory. Rapid Nigerian military victories, disappearing military and food supplies, and a lack of international support led Biafra to surrender in early 1970. The military commander quickly fled the country, and the region was reintegrated into Nigeria.<sup>15</sup> In the decades following the Nigerian Civil War, the government did not acknowledge the extent of the conflict, to pacify future ethnic tensions. One such technique was the introduction of nationalism into schools across the country.<sup>16</sup> The war also had a global impact, as pictures of starving Biafran children were printed in newspapers across the United States and Europe. International outcry led to nongovernmental organizations supplying humanitarian aid to the Biafran citizens and shaped the way Western countries respond to humanitarian crises today.<sup>17</sup>

## Endnotes

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