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Michael Gould, *The Biafran War: The Struggle for Modern Nigeria*. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012. Pp. xviii, 258. ISBN 978-1-78076-463-4.

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The Nigerian Civil War (1967-70)—also called “The Nigeria-Biafra War” or “The Biafran War”—was the most traumatic event on the African continent in the late 1960s. The “Wind of Change” that began gently in Africa after World War II had become a tornado by 1960, bringing in its wake Nigeria’s independence from Britain. Much was expected of the new Nigeria, proudly called the continent’s “great giant.” That appellation was well deserved, because Nigeria is both Africa’s most populous country (one in five Africans is Nigerian) and the richest in natural resources. But, within six years of independence, the country imploded, triggering a series of events that cascaded into a brutal civil war, from which it has not yet recovered. Whether or not this war was avoidable may be debated; and the Nigerian government’s role in the genocide of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, both before their secession and during the ensuing civil war, remains a fiercely controversial and divisive issue. In *The Biafran War*, Michael Gould (PhD School of Oriental and African Studies, London Univ.) offers judicious analyses of these and other vexatious issues, a laudable feat given the entrenched and opposing convictions of the combatants. His prose is clear and readable, but inelegant.

Gould is a family friend of Gen. Yakubu Gowon, Nigeria’s military leader between 1966 and 1975, a fact he makes clear in the interest of full disclosure; he is also well informed about the life and character of Gen. Chukwuemeka Ojukwu, the Biafran leader from 1967 to 1970. A particular strength of the book is the author’s use of archival sources in Britain and Nigeria, as well as the extensive interviews he conducted with some of the most important dramatis personae of the conflict. No one has previously done as much research on the subject.

The book comprises seven chapters plus an epilogue, postscript, and three appendices. The pedestrian and perfunctory introductory sections (chapters 1-3) add nothing to our knowledge of Nigeria’s complex history, peoples, and culture. Gould does not adequately discuss the cataclysmic events that forced the East to secede from Nigeria. He agrees with the British and Nigerian governments that the targeted slaughter of the Igbo people (May-October 1966), who had lived in northern Nigeria for many generations, did not amount to genocide. Instead, he uses the word “pogrom” (33), a semantic distinction with very little difference. The international gold standard for defining genocide in war or peace is UN Resolution 260 (III) of 9 December 1948, which Gould does not cite. According to this document, the decisive issue is not *how many* people are killed (unascertainable in most cases), but *why* they were killed—typically for ethnic, racial, or religious reasons. The British and Nigerian governments blamed Biafra’s propaganda for exaggerating the numbers of Igbo who were killed, wounded, maimed, or driven to flee to the East for safety. The Biafran government and its supporters in Europe countered that evidence of genocide before the war abounded, but that British and Nigerian authorities ignored it and minimized the numbers to conceal cover their own monumental atrocities.

The author surprisingly discounts the heart-rending reports of journalists (British, American, and German, among others) who, unlike Gould, actually witnessed what happened before the secession. Nor does he take account of the publications of the secessionist regime and the published reports of those who survived the massacres. He attributes General Gowon’s inability to stop the carnage or punish the perpetrators—who paraded about in broad daylight—to his fragile hold on power. British official documents are, incredibly, silent about Prime Minister Harold Wilson’s government’s reaction to the pogroms. Given the close relations between Nigeria and Britain, if Gowon was in fact too weak to stop the killings that went on

for so long, it is inexcusable that he did not seek British help and that Britain offered him none and showed no sympathy whatever for the Igbos' plight.

The truth, as the official papers at Kew Gardens (London) and Rhodes House (Oxford) show, is that genocide or not, Britain had purely economic reasons for not allowing the break-up of Nigeria. These are issues the author fails to address in any detail. He does believe, however, as do I, that the East would not have seceded had Nigeria and Britain not reneged on the Aburi Accord, by which all parties agreed that, given the bloodletting that had taken place, a con-federal constitution on the Canadian model would be best for Nigeria. Finally, Gould concludes, as did contemporary writers, that, though all but one of the military officers who executed the coup of 15 January 1966 were Igbo, what happened was not a coup, but a putsch by radical and nationalistic officers against a very corrupt, dictatorial government with prebendal pretensions. Unfortunately, the coup only partially succeeded and was eventually quashed through the efforts of Maj. Gen. Johnston Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo officer commanding the Nigerian armed forces. But the unexplained fact that only one of the sixteen people who died during the January coup was Igbo became a disturbing issue. Ironsi's failure to try the officers after their arrest made matters worse, even though they had surrendered on condition that they would not be tried for treason. The result was the revenge killings of thousands of Igbo soldiers (including Ironsi) and civilians living in northern Nigeria; many believe the butchery reached genocidal proportions and was motivated by both a desire for vengeance and a determination to restore, at all costs, the North's pre-coup dominance in the politics of the Nigerian federation.

The last part of chapter 3 (52–72) and chapters 4 and 5 deal with the actual fighting. The British High Commissioner in Lagos (Nigeria's capital at the time), David Hunt, and his predecessor, Sir Francis Cummings Bruce, both despised the Igbo and believed military action was the only way to force the East back to obedience. Sir Francis admitted frankly that the Igbo "were too clever by half" and Hunt "was very dismissive of the military prowess of the Igbo people." The Nigerian military, too, dismissed the Biafrans as "an army of pen-pushers"; all agreed that the Igbo could be subdued "within two weeks" (52). In the event, the war lasted nearly three years.

Gould's assessment of the respective military organizations and their troops is expert and accurate. His analysis of Biafra's brilliant strike at Nigeria through the Mid-West Region and its ultimate failure is the best I have read. The commander of the expedition, Lt. Col. Victor Banjo, unbeknown to the Biafran leader, was planning to overthrow his boss. Unlike Ojukwu, he did not favor secession, preferring to set up a socialist government in Nigeria under his leadership. The retreat from the Mid-West because of Banjo's perfidy, Gould correctly believes, changed the course of the war and contributed to Biafra's final defeat. Intentionally or not, Banjo played a part in ruining Biafra and the Igbo. In the end, he and his fellow conspirators were convicted of treason in Biafra and executed.

Apart from the ambush by Biafra's soldiers using their locally manufactured *Ogbunigwe* (a large bomb, literally an "instrument that kills in multitudes"), which decimated Nigerian soldiers at Abagana on the Enugu-Onitsha road, there were no memorable battles during the conflict, as Gould notes. He credits Biafra's ingenious use of propaganda with enabling the secessionist state to last as long as it did. This is debatable: more critical factors were the Igbos' determination to survive against all odds, the provision of food supplies by various international agencies despite the obstructive politics of aid relief in the latter stages of the war, and the incompetence of the Nigerian military.

Again and again, Gould writes as if Biafrans invented propaganda as an instrument of warfare. Biafra desperately needed to alert an unconcerned international community to its perilous plight and made brilliant use of propaganda to accomplish that. This makes it difficult to understand why Gould labels the propaganda "unashamed" (73, 79). He also believes that Nigerian soldiers committed no genocide during the war, citing the report of the international observers Gowon had invited to tour the areas in Biafra under Nigerian control. But Ojukwu, too, brought in his own observers, who found evidence of genocide. In short, reports on both sides were based on carefully managed guided tours (79). Under the heading of merely unfortunate "unlawful killings" (79–80, 85–86), Gould includes the machine-gunning by Nigerian soldiers of seven hundred innocent Igbo people in Asaba's market center and the massacres of three hundred Igbos

praying in Onitsha cathedral and at Fege, a suburb of Onitsha, where “the older and taller boys were singled out and shot.” He makes no mention that Gowon did not punish the culprits.

In chapter 6, Gould evaluates the backgrounds, characters, and leadership styles of Gowon and Ojukwu. While Gowon grew up in a modest Christian (Anglican) family unable to provide him a university education, Ojukwu belonged to one of Nigeria’s richest families and went to Oxford university, where he read modern history at St. John’s College. The two men’s characters reflected these different backgrounds. The humble, affable Gowon professed his religion openly. The ostentatious, imperious, and worldly Ojukwu was difficult to admire, and, though raised Roman Catholic, was quiet about his religion. As a leader, Gowon was flexible and delegated much authority to his field commanders, while Ojukwu was the exact opposite. As someone who knew and interviewed both men, Gould portrays their personalities very accurately. The rest of the chapter rehashes the causes of the war already discussed in chapter 3.

In the final chapter, Gould summarizes his book, adding nothing new. In the epilogue, he justifiably laments Nigeria’s decision to act as if its civil war never occurred: no monuments are preserved, the war is not taught in the country’s schools, colleges, or universities as it is elsewhere in the world, and so forth. The short postscript is a fair assessment of the pathetic situation of the Igbo people after their defeat—their slow reintegration into Nigeria (including Ojukwu’s return from self exile), their minority status in the Eastern Region, where had been the majority before the war, and the continued marginalization of their underdeveloped territory. This makes a mockery of Gowon’s (internationally applauded) claim that the war had “No victor, no vanquished.”

The author concludes: “The Igbo peoples are irrepressibly optimistic and talented, they will always find ways round their disadvantaged position, and although they have had to suffer restrictions and control by the North since the end of the war, they have continued to excel in many walks of life. The only tragedy has been that most of Ojukwu’s people have been unable to enjoy even some of the riches and benefits accruing from Nigeria’s only real source of income, oil” (208–9)—most of these “riches and benefits” derive from the region that seceded.

Those who care about the conflict will appreciate the book’s appendices: the first lists the arms that Britain shipped to Nigeria (1967–69); the second reprints a “Document confirming the potential doubling of Nigerian oil revenue by 1970” that the oil companies hid from Nigerian authorities and from Ojukwu before secession and then throughout the war; and the third reprints a “Document confirming the proposed sale of Biafran natural resources to Rothschild Bank, Paris”—a sale fabricated by British officials that never took place.

Historians will be disappointed by the book’s lack of tidiness. A subject of this magnitude merits a more methodical and detailed treatment than Gould provides here. His praiseworthy effort to be evenhanded will not, unfortunately, satisfy diehard Biafrans or Nigerians. Some may consider this the strength of the book. The available evidence undermines the claims by Britain and Nigeria that “Ojukwu seceded out of political ambition and greed for oil” (140). Whether they were victims of genocide or not, the Igbo certainly feared for their safety and received no written guarantees from outside powers that they would be secure in Nigeria before and during the war. They thought it foolhardy to trust Gowon’s specious assurances of their safety that so endeared him to the outside world. The Organization of African Unity’s refusal to support Biafra’s secession, Britain’s unprecedented mobilization of other nations against Biafra, and the failure of Nigeria’s Western Region and Eastern minorities to endorse secession sealed Biafra’s fate. Hunger only delivered the coup de grâce.

Despite its defects, *The Biafran War* is nevertheless well worth reading, especially at a time when Nigeria again appears poised on the brink, its people having learned nothing and forgotten nothing about the Biafran secession.