

## A comparative study of the Algerian war of independence and the Nigerian civil war

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### Abstract

If there is anything constant in the world, it should be wars., this study presents a comparative analysis of the Algerian war of independence and the Nigerian Civil war. The theory of social history and the methodology of interpretive design were used to provide a thorough discussion of the motivations, features, and consequences of each conflict. The study focuses on the effects of each war on their respective society as well as overriding geopolitical implications of each. Additionally, this study delves into the causes of the Algerian war of independence and those of the Nigerian civil war, exploring the social, economic, and political factors that contributed to the beginning of both wars. Furthermore, it provides an in-dept examination of the major players and stakeholders of each war. The paper concludes with a comparison of the both wars and the broader implications they had on the respective countries, as well as a discussion of their lasting impacts.

**Key-words:** Algerian war, Biafra war, Igbo, Hausa, Africa, secession.

### Introduction

The place of scholarly discourses on wars in Africa cannot be over emphasized. Many African countries such as Algeria, Burkina-Faso, Cameroun, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan have witnessed wars. These countries have either fought against their own government forces or against their colonisers. This research will be based on Wars fought by two different African countries, Algeria and Nigeria, namely; the Algerian war of independence and the Nigerian civil war (also known as the Biafra war).

This study will therefore document the motivations and causes of the Algerian war of independence and Nigerian civil war respectively. It will also look at the organisational changes made by each conflict. Furthermore, the paper will attempt to re-enact the experiences of the people while the wars raged on before it establishes the nexus between the changes, impacts and the experiences by doing a comparative study of both wars. The theory of social history will be used in the course of the study.

### Theoretical framework

The theory of social history will be applied in the course of this research. Social history often called the new social history, is a field of history that looks at the lived experience of the past. Social history is associated in the United Kingdom with the work of E. P. Thompson in particular, and his studies *The Making of the English working Class* and *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act*. Charles Tilly (1984) identifies the task of social history as documenting large structural changes, reconstructing the experiences of ordinary people in the course of those changes and connecting the two. The new social history came to prominence in the 1960s and according to Thompson (1963), this is history from below which had come from earlier developments. Social history has used a much wider range of sources and methods than traditional history and source criticism, in order to gain a broader view of the past.

### Algeria

Algeria is a country situated at the northern zone of Africa. According to Schöpfel, Mariannick (2000), Algeria was colonised by France from 1830 to 1962. France invaded Algeria in 1830 but declared it an integral part of France in 1848. Many French citizens had to move to Algeria during this time to form a group known as Pied-Noirs and were also referred to as French-Algerians. These Pied-Noirs largely lived in conditions superior to those of the majority Muslim native Algerian population. Algeria is one of the countries which has the longest standing colonial history in Africa. It had also had to fight a deadly war from 1954 to 1962 in order to gain independence from France.

### The Algerian war of independence: motivations, causes and major players

According to Benjamin Stora (1993), the historical leaders of the Algerian war of independence are Hocine Aït-Ahmed, Larbi Ben M'Hidi, Moustapha Ben Boulaid, Mohamed Boudiaf, Mourad Didouche, Belkacem Karim, Mohamed Khider, Rabah Bitat and Ahmed Ben Bella. These and others have had to organise and lead several hundred men in the first armed confrontations.

The War took place primarily on the Algerian territory, with impacts in the metropolitan France. Stora (1993) opines that the drive for sovereignty began in the course of the First World War (1914-1918) and expanded

afterwards when the French promise of greater self-rule in Algeria was not fulfilled after the Second World War (1939-1945). The National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale: FLN) initiated what was at first a peaceful movement for independence. They advocated social democracy within an Islamic framework and equal citizenship for any resident in Algeria.

However, France refused to accept the FLN's petition for freedom. This rejection led to a series of attacks organised by the FLN in 1954 on military and civil targets, asking for an armed national liberation struggle for Algerian independence. In the night of October 31, 1954, the FLN started a guerrilla war against France and sought diplomatic recognition at the United Nations to establish a sovereign Algerian State.

Although the Algerian fighters operated in the rural area, predominantly along the country's borders, the most serious fighting took place in and around Algiers. This was where the FLN fighters launched a series of violent urban attacks which was later known as the Battle of Algiers (1956-1957). Although the over 500 000 French troops had it tough on the battle grounds, the forces managed to regain control by the use of brutal measures. In 1959, General Charles de Gaulle, the then President of France, declared that the Algerians had the right to determine their own future. Thus, in spite of the terrorist acts perpetrated by the French-Algerians opposed to independence and the attempted coup in France by elements of the French army, an agreement ushering in the independence of Algeria was signed in 1962.

After the war, the majority of Algerian citizens who had worked for the French, also popularly known as the Harkis, were disarmed and left behind in Algeria. There was also an agreement between French and Algerian authorities which declared that no action could be taken against them. Nevertheless, the Harkis in particular, having served as auxiliaries in the French army, were regarded as traitors and many were abducted, tortured and murdered. Others escaped to France and with their descendants today, form a significant part of the Algerian-French population.

Similarly in 1962, 900 000 European-Algerians (Pied-Noirs) fled to France within a few months in fear of the FLN's revenge. The French government was not prepared to receive such a huge number of refugees and this caused an uproar in France.

According to Alexander M. S et al (2002) in the *Algerian War and the French Army 1954-1962: Experiences, Images, Testimonies*, the human cost of the War remains unknown, particularly on the Algerian side. In line with them, some estimate show that the French lost about 27,000 troops and 5,000 civilians. Meanwhile, Draper Katherine in her article found in *Texas International Law Journal* (2013) states that French sources suggest the casualties among Algerians to total between 300,000 to 500,000, while Algerian sources claim as many as 1,500 000.

## **Nigeria**

Nigeria is a country located in West Africa and was colonised by the United Kingdom. In the year, 1960, Nigeria gained independence from their coloniser, the United Kingdom and they became a Republic in 1963. However, from 1967 to 1970, the country, which was supposed to be one, witnessed a deadly war which took place because the Biafrans, from the eastern part of the country felt marginalised and decided to have their own country.

### **The Nigerian civil war: motivations, causes and major players.**

In line with Momoh, H. B. (2000) and Anwunah, P. A. (2007), the Nigerian civil war also known as the Biafra war took place from the 6th July, 1967 to the 15<sup>th</sup> of January, 1970. According to them, the war was fought between the Federal government of Nigeria and Biafra, a secessionist State which had declared its independence from Nigeria in 1967.

Akpan, Ntieyong Udo in his work, *The Struggle for secession, 1966-1970: A personal account of the Nigerian Civil War* opines that the War is the result of economic, ethnic, cultural and religious agitations among various peoples of Nigeria. He states that just like many other African nations, Nigeria is an artificial structure initiated by the British which had neglected to consider religious, linguistic and ethnic differences. When Nigeria gained her independence from Britain in 1960, the population of 60 million people consisted of nearly 300 different ethnic and cultural groups.

Furthermore, Madiebo, A. A. (1980) asserts that in the mid-1960s, economic and political instability and ethnic friction characterised Nigerian public life. In the mostly Hausa north, resentment against the more prosperous and educated Igbo minority erupted into violence. Tribal tensions increased after a military coup in 1966, which resulted in General Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo man, taking power as Military Head of State. This was followed by a

northern counter coup led by Lt. Col. Murtala Mohammed a few months later This coup placed Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon who later became a General as the Military Head of State. Afterwards, General Aguiyi-Ironsi was killed and widespread reprisals were unleashed against the Igbos. In September 1966, some 10,000 to 30,000 Igbo people were massacred in the Northern Region and perhaps 1,000 000 fled as refugees to the Igbo dominated east. Non-Igbos were then barred from the Eastern Region.

Madiebo, A. A. continues to testify that attempts by representatives of all regions to come to an agreement were unsuccessful. With the Fear of being marginalised within the country, on May 30, 1967, the head of the Eastern Region, Lieutenant Colonel (later General) Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, with the authorisation of a consultative assembly, declared the region a sovereign and independent republic under the name Biafra. Lieutenant Colonel Ojukwu did this citing the northern massacres and electoral fraud as reasons. General Yakubu Gowon, the Head of State of the Federal Republic of Nigeria refused to recognise Biafra's secession and that was the beginning of the war.

In line with Uzoukwu, A. O. (2003), the Nigerian federal forces, which obviously were more in number and had more ammunitions launched a "police action" to retake the secessionist territory. They began to press Biafra's boundaries inward from the south, west and north. Biafra shrank to one tenth of its original area in the course of the war. Starvation and disease followed, estimates of mortality range from 500,000 to 3,000 000. At this point, most countries continued to recognise Gowon's regime as the government of all Nigeria. The United Kingdom and the Soviet Union supplied Nigeria with arms. On the other hand, sympathy for the plight of starving Biafran children brought airlifts of food and medicine from many countries. Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Tanzania and Zambia recognised Biafra as an independent State while France sent weapons to Biafra. In January 1970, General Ojukwu fled to Côte d'Ivoire and the remaining Biafran officers surrendered to the federal government of Nigeria on January 15, 1970. Biafra on the point of total collapse, thereupon ceased to exist.

#### **A comparative study of both wars**

The Algerian and the Biafran Wars were fought mainly for the same purpose of gaining freedom from a people thought to be marginalising the others. In the case of Algerians, those marginalising them were the French while for that of Biafrans, it was the federal government of Nigeria. In order to connect the changes and experiences of the people during the war, this study looks at the similarities and differences of both Wars.

#### **Similarities**

Both Wars were fought for the purpose of independence. Algeria had been under the French colonisation for 124 years before they decided to fight for independence in 1954, which they finally got in 1962. During this period, the French downgraded and treated them as slaves in their own country. On the other hand, while Biafra may not have been under the Nigeria colonisation, but actually was a part and parcel of Nigeria, they, as a tribe and race felt marginalised by the Federal government.

Another similarity recorded from both Wars is the fact that many people were killed during the Wars. According to Alexander, M.S. et al, "The Algerian Ministry of War veterans gives the figure of 152,863 FLN killed" (6). Draper Katherine goes further and writes that: "The Algerian Ministry of War veterans calculates 152,863 FLN deaths, and although the death toll among Algerian civilians may never be accurately known, estimate of 1,500,000 to 2,000,000 were killed" (576). The Nigerian situation does not appear to be totally different as many people lost their lives during the Nigerian civil war. This is corroborated by J. A Stevenson according to whom: "The mass killing during the Nigeria-Biafra war was the result of a deliberately imposed economic blockade on the inhabitants of Nigeria's south eastern region by the country's federal government that led to an induced famine in which over two million people died of starvation and related diseases." (314). Again, Zach Levey adds that: "Between May and September 1966, Northerners murdered between 80,000 and 100,000 Igbos and other Easterners resident in the northern region." (266). The later claims that the Biafrans were killed even before the War started.

Furthermore, the two Wars gained the support of the international community. Chibuikwe Uche asserts that: "In reality, however, the British government supplied many more arms than it was publicly prepared to admit. Apart from direct arms supplies, it provided military intelligence to the Nigerian government and may have helped it to access sophisticated arms and mercenaries through third parties." (130). This is sufficient evidence to show that the Nigerian government got a lot of support from the British government during the Civil war. Christopher Griffin on his part narrates how the French government supported Biafra during the war: "... at the same time it was well known that France was supporting Biafran leader General Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu with covert military aid throughout the war, including mercenaries and weapons." (119).

Similarly for the Algerian war, according to Abderrahmane Bouchène (2014), the FLN sought material support from the Communists.

In addition, both Wars were fought in Africa. The Algerian war was mainly fought in Algiers, the capital of Algeria while the Biafra war mainly took place in the eastern part of Nigeria.

### Dissimilarities

The dissimilarities of the Algerian war of independence and the Biafran war can be seen in many ways. The Algerian war was fought for eight years while that of Biafra was fought for barely three years. Furthermore, Algeria, an African country which was colonised by France, a European country fought to gain its independence and become a sovereign nation while Biafra, a part and parcel of Nigeria, decided to break away and form its own country and this led to a war between them and their mother-country, Nigeria. This shows that the Algerian war of independence was an international war, fought by two countries from different continents while the Biafran war could be seen as a local war fought by two sections of one country.

Additionally, during both wars, foreign nations recognised the fact that Algeria needed to gain their independence, thus they were highly supported which led to them winning at last. However, many nations did not recognise Biafra as a country, those who came to their aid did so for humanitarian reasons and this led to the fact that Biafra lost the war. Lastly, one can say that the major difference between the Algerian war and the Biafran war is that Algeria succeeded in gaining independence from France while Biafra succumbed to the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

### Conclusion

As Wars are part of the world's history, they are also part of scholarly discourse. The present study discusses a comparative analysis of two important Wars by two African countries: Algeria, a country situated in the northern part of Africa and Biafra, a former secessionist State of Nigeria, a country in the western part of Africa. While the Algerians fought against their colonisers, France, for their independence, Biafra on the other hand, had to fight against their own government because they felt marginalised and they needed to have their own country. Both the Algerians and the Biafrans suffered great losses while the Wars were ongoing. Many people lost their lives whereas others suffered famine and diseases immensely. Both Wars were intense and they also gained international recognition. Algeria succeeded in gaining its independence from France however, Biafra lost to the Federal government of Nigeria.

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