

## NIGERIA/BIAFRA CIVIL WAR: MY EXPERIENCE

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*Achike Udenwa*

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This book has seven chapters covering aspects of Nigeria's history, the author's experience during the Civil War, 1967–1970 and his reflection on Nigeria as a nation. The purpose of the book as the author makes clear is “to fill the gap and further highlight the role played by the lower command – the platoons, companies, battalions and brigades etc.”. Finally, and among others, it is the story of how young officers without professional training, but consumed with patriotic fervour, fought in a war.

However, the book begins with a foreword written by I.N.C. Aniebo, who was Military Secretary at the Nigerian Army headquarters in Lagos between 1963 and 1965. Aniebo recounts that the “rot” in the Nigerian system did not begin with the military but with the politicians. In Aniebo's *mea culpa*, the politicians politicised the military and the country and refused to take the blame. The quota system, as Aniebo observed, was introduced in the recruitment of other ranks, with fifty per cent going to the northern region and twenty five percent each going to the eastern and western regions. In time, the quota system, he continues, was introduced in the recruitment of officer cadets. As the Military Secretary, he had to set varying cut-off points often below fifty per cent for the northern region while increasing that of the western and eastern regions to eighty per cent. In a caveat, he notes that the low cut-off mark was not due to low scores but to the numerous spaces available. In conclusion, by the time the *coup de etats* started in 1966, the Nigerian Army was a northern Nigeria institution.

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Be that as it may, in the introduction of the book, Udenwa establishes the reason for his writing the book. In doing so, the author clarifies to the reader that his book is neither pure history nor pure journalism. If

anything, he makes it clear that it is a hybrid of the two but that it would go a long way in contributing to the source material and literature on the Nigeria–Biafra civil war. The author further discusses the concept of wars, civil wars and various other disturbances. With respect to Nigeria, he highlights the economics of marginalisation, leadership and the way all these have affected his ethnic group, the Igbo. Indeed, it was the Igbo with some other ethnic minorities of the eastern region who tried to secede under the name “Biafra”.

Chapter two of the book has a natural flow from the introduction with the author discussing Nigeria’s political development from 1914 to the eve of the new democratic dispensation in 1999. In what reads like a history of how the Nigerian nation was gobbled up by Britain, the author rehashes the litany of constitutions, the various agitations and discrepancies in the constitutions up until political independence in 1960. In this chapter, special mention is made of the political developments between 1964 and 1965, the eve of the *coup de etats* that heralded the military intervention in governance. In chapter three, the author tries to account for the plan, execution and the consequence of the first *coup de etat* of 15 January 1966. In doing so, he discusses the various interpretations, especially the ethnic interpretation given to the January *coup de etat*. An entry is also made on the counter-*coup de etat* of 29 July 1966. The author’s personal experience only comes to bear in Chapter four, which covers the civil war years, 1967–1970. Here the author recounts how he joined and was trained in the Biafran Army. He also describes his personal experience at the onset of the war and the battles in which he participated during this period. Chapter five of the book accounts for the cessation of hostilities and the end of the war. The author describes how in the end, hunger, starvation and the deplorable and disheartening situation brought despair to him and his colleagues in their area of operation. The author makes sure to point out that he heard about the capitulation of Biafra on the radio. In this chapter, the author publishes the verbatim text of the broadcast from the head of state, General Yakubu Gowon.

In Chapter six, the social effects of the Nigeria/Biafra civil war are aptly described. Udenwa highlights such iniquities as rape, prostitution, murder and more as some of the effects of the war. Furthermore, the author presents the results of the questionnaire he administered on the communities where he served as a Biafran soldier during the war. In the response elicited on the impact of war in their communities, it confirmed the author’s earlier assertion that the war had a deleterious effect on the community and the society at large.

Finally, in Chapter seven, the author concludes with his opinion on what has gone wrong with the country and offers some panacea. Part of the ills of the country, for him, include the lack of visionary leadership, a lack of patriotism, a lack of discipline, corruption, the problem of low productivity arising from faulty educational planning, poor attitudes to work, an underdeveloped private sector and a lack of adequate power supply. Udenwa also raises the issue of the Niger Delta, which is the oil-producing area of Nigeria. The author opines that if the callous neglect and underdevelopment of the area is not well managed, it will continue to be a source of conflict for the entire Nigerian polity.

In part, this book is a quasi-history of Nigeria, and in another, an aspect of the military history of the Nigerian/Biafran civil war as seen from the area where the author participated. As a history of Nigeria, it is by no means incisive or elaborate. For the military historian, rather than filling the gaps on what has been written, the author's personal experience would serve as a veritable source when the full historical reconstruction of the military operations of the war is undertaken. Indeed, this book ranks among the pioneers for the military history of the civil war as seen from the lower commands on both sides of the conflict. In fact, more of this – perhaps even from non-commissioned officers and other ranks – is desperately needed to enrich the source material with which the professional military historian could rely on in reconstructing the military history of the civil war. In this regard, this book is an interesting read and highly recommended.

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