

Wartime Anglo-Nigerian Relations: A Historical Analysis of Yakubu Gowon and Harold Wilson Diplomatic Correspondence during the Nigerian Civil War, 1967–1970.



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Abstract

This paper examines the diplomatic correspondence between British Prime Minister Harold Wilson and Nigerian Head of State Major-General Yakubu Gowon during the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). Using a historical narrative approach, it analyses primary sources from the British National Archives and secondary sources from Nigerian university libraries. The study highlights how diplomatic communication served as a key tool in efforts toward peace settlements, military support, and humanitarian aid. The correspondence centered on preserving Nigeria's unity in the face of civil strife, reflecting a shared interest in maintaining the status quo and avoiding missed opportunities for peace. It argues that while Wilson responded cautiously to Gowon's messages, mindful of domestic and international criticism, the underlying motivation was Britain's desire to safeguard its political and economic interests in a united Nigeria and to maintain influence over the Federal Military Government amid the war's geopolitical complexities.

Keywords: *Wartime, Anglo-Nigerian, Relations, Yakubu Gowon, Harold Wilson Diplomatic, Correspondence, Nigerian Civil War*

Introduction

For centuries, diplomatic correspondences have been potential sources of historical writings and conduct of diplomatic relations between sovereign nations. As a veritable means of communication it could be used to issue a warning or express shared views between nations in areas of mutual interests and understanding such as, military, politics and economy. During the 1960s, the Nigerian government's engagement with Britain in the field of diplomacy was characterised by the exchange of correspondences in matters that concern the two countries and to draw the attention to issues or events that required shared solutions. Anglo-Nigerian diplomacy represented a unique way of interacting with one another for better protection of their respective interests in global affairs.

On 6 July, 1967 the Nigerian State was engulfed in a civil war¹ between the Federal Military Government of Nigeria led by Major-General Yakubu Gowon and the defunct Republic of Biafra under the leadership of Lieutenant-Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu.² The Civil War was a vital component of international politics of the 20th century, especially, with the involvement of Great Powers such as Britain.³

The conflict threatened the Anglo-Nigerian relations established over centuries ago. As a disturbing event in the relationship between the two countries, consistent diplomatic communications were established between the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson and Nigeria's Head of State Major-General Yakubu Gowon. Gowon-Harold Wilson diplomatic communications encompassed arms supply deals, peace negotiations, and humanitarian activities.

The essence of this paper is to discuss the diplomatic correspondence between the Federal Military Government of Nigeria and British Government on the Nigerian Civil War. However, it implements a specific focus on the major exchanges between the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson and the Nigerian Head of State Major-General Yakubu Gowon on a peace settlement, arms supply and diplomacy. The study relied on the use of primary sources such as archival materials obtained from the British National Archives Kew London and secondary sources such as books and journal articles obtained from the University of Nigeria Nsukka and Kenneth Dike University of Ibadan libraries for data analysis.

This paper argued that the British involvement in the Civil War was a demonstration of her long-term relationship with the Nigerian State. Based on new evidences of the British role in

¹ Confidential: Minute on the Beginning of Military Operations of the Nigerian Civil War from the British Defence Adviser Military Operations Nigeria in the British High Commission Lagos to Commonwealth Office in London Telegram No. 1435, 10 July 1967 File. TX 10/16/Part A/West and General African Department/Title: Nigeria, Defence and Military Operations against Biafra 6 July 1967-31 December 1970 Foreign and Commonwealth Office Papers 38/284, The National Archives Kew London (thereinafter, TNA).

² Nwankwo, A.A. and Ifejika .S..U. *The Making of a Nation: Biafra*. (London: C. Hurst and Company, 1969), 3.

³ Warren, G.B. Petroleum and the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970. *The Fletcher Forum*. 3(.2) 2000, 66.

the war, there was a closed diplomatic correspondence between the higher echelon of leadership within the Federal Military Government of Nigeria and the British officialdom. It was the British desire to maintain a strong influence with the Nigerian government based on her one Nigerian policy in the Civil War that was why it sustained diplomatic communication with the Federal Military Government through the provision of needed advice and assistance to execute the war. The diplomatic exchanges served as a foreign policy direction for Britain in the execution of the war anchored on peace settlement, arms supply and humanitarian activities. The core issue in Yakubu Gowon and Harold Wilson's diplomatic correspondences was the need for maintenance of Nigeria's unity threatened by the declaration of Republic of Biafra. Meaning, apart from Biafra, nothing significant has changed since post-independence period in the Anglo-Nigerian relations. Therefore, exchange of views with Nigeria was a very significant way of achieving the goal of protecting British economic and political interests in Nigeria. The diplomatic correspondence between Britain and Nigeria from the lens of Gowon-Harold Wilson enabled the two countries to state their respective policies and positions on the Civil War and the need for them to work together in ensuring military and diplomatic triumph on the basis of one Nigeria.

The first section of the paper discusses the diplomatic correspondence between Major-General Yakubu Gowon and Harold Wilson during the Civil War. The second section interrogates diplomatic communication on military operations while the third section examines diplomatic exchange between the two leaders on peace negotiations. Seeing the war as a major challenge in one of her spheres of influence in West Africa Britain made it her cardinal objective to ensure the indivisibility of Nigeria and to prevent the breakup of the Federation. It was this standpoint that defined British policy in the war and was a motivating factor in Yakubu Gowon –Harold Wilson diplomatic correspondence.

Yakubu Gowon-Harold Wilson Diplomatic Correspondence during the Civil War

The official announcement of the creation of the Republic of Biafra by the Military Governor of the Eastern Region, Lieutenant-Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, on 30 May 1967 set in motion diplomatic correspondence between the Nigerian Head of State Major-General Yakubu Gowon and the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson. A few hours after Biafra was declared, Gowon addressed his first letter to the British Prime Minister in London informing him about his commitment to achieving a peaceful solution to the crisis that bedeviled the post-independence Nigeria. Unfortunately, these efforts never resulted in the success that was anticipated. Gowon appealed to the British Prime Minister to refrain from doing anything that would impair the corporate existence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.⁴

⁴ Text of Letter from the Head of Federal Military Government and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson 30 May, 1967, Prime Minister's Office Papers 13/1661, TNA.

Another message was sent to the Prime Minister by Gowon on 2 June, 1967 which reflected on the series of political upheavals that took place in the country the most important being the 1966 *coup d'états* and the meeting of the Nigerian military leaders held at Aburi in Ghana on the 5 January, 1967.⁵ The Aburi meeting was an initiative of the British diplomat Malcolm MacDonald who recognised the need for the Nigerian military to gather outside Nigeria to discuss and settle their differences.⁶ The Aburi meeting was facilitated by Head of Ghana Military Government, General Ankrah. The gathering was very significant because it was the first time that the Head of the Federal Military Government of Nigeria, Major-General Yakubu Gowon, met the Military Governor of the Eastern Region, Lieutenant Colonel Chukuwemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu face-t-face after the July 29 1966 military coup d'état. Secondly, it was the first time the Cabinet of Federal Republic of Nigeria had held a meeting outside the country in peacetime.⁷

The conference was declared open by General Ankrah the Head of host government who welcomed the visitors to Ghana for such a crucial meeting.⁸ The Council discussed a long range of issues at the end of which substantial agreements were made on a number of issues such as renunciation of the use of force as a means of settling Nigerian crisis; army to be governed by the Supreme Military Council under a chairman to be known as the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and Head of the Federal Military Government among other sundry of issues⁹ aimed at reducing tension and resulting in a far-reaching devolution of power from the center.¹⁰ Both Federal and Eastern Regional Government released early a document giving the official minutes of the meeting. The divided interpretation and the implementation of the understanding beyond the minutes that the agreement reached at Aburi was left undone.¹¹ A.H.M. Kirk-Greene (1971) argued that, Aburi resulted in a potential resolution agreed personally by the five military leaders of the major issues of discord and distrust that had brought Nigeria to the threshold of disintegration.¹²

⁵ Text of Letter from the Head of the Federal Military Government and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson Sent from Supreme Military Headquarters State House Lagos Nigeria to No. 10 Downing Street Whitehall London S.W.1. Serial No. T149B/67/Reference No. 1882, 2 June, 1967, File No. JM 1/19/6C1049/West African Dept./Title: Commonwealth Africa, Nigeria Political Affairs, Secession of Eastern Region, 10 March 1967/20 November, 1968, FCO 25/232, TNA.

⁶ Suzanne Cronje. *The World and Nigeria: The Diplomatic History of the Biafran War, 1967-1970* (London: Sidwick and Jackson, 1972), 18.

⁷ Gowon and Ojukwu Shake Hands in Accra. *Spear*, February 1967, 1.

⁸ A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: A Documentary Sourcebook 1966-1969* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 70-71.

⁹ Bernard, C. Odogwu. *No Place to Hide: Crisis and Conflict Inside Biafra* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Company Limited, 1985), 255-256.

¹⁰Text of Letter from the Head of the Federal Military Government and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson Sent from Supreme Military Headquarters State House Lagos Nigeria to No. 10 Downing Street Whitehall London S.W.1. Serial No. T149B/67/Reference No. 1882, 2 June, 1967, FCO, TNA.

¹¹ Kirk-Greene, "Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria", 71.

¹² Kirk-Greene, "Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria", 71.

Gowon's administration needed Britain more than ever before to tackle the fundamental problems in Nigeria. His letter to the British Prime Minister after the announcement of Biafra laid the foundation for the numerous Anglo-Nigerian diplomatic interactions that took place during the Civil War. The British interests being the desire that the fighting should stop before the Nigerian economy got further damaged and that a political settlement was achieved appeared to have guided the diplomatic exchanges between Gowon and Harold Wilson. Therefore, the British cardinal policy in the conflict was the pursuit of peace settlement and supply of reasonable quantities of arms and ammunition of an unsophisticated nature to the Federal military reasonable enough to put down the insurrection fairly speedily and without great bloodshed and securing of a controlled victory in conditions in which the early resumption of normal life and activity was possible.¹³

Diplomatic Communication on Military Operations

Gowon's official letter of 1 July 1967 to the British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, delivered through the British High Commissioner to Nigeria, Sir David Hunt, marked the beginning of the Anglo-Nigerian communication on military operations during the Civil War. While he appreciated the great concerns expressed by the British government officials and British Parliament about the political crisis in Nigeria, Gowon recognised that Britain as Nigeria's oldest and closest ally had the task of ensuring its stability. In addition to that it was incumbent on the British government to denounce the secession move and reaffirm its desire that the territorial integrity of the Federation of Nigeria should be respected.¹⁴

Against the backdrop of a military build-up by the Biafra regime through the acquisition of offensive military aircraft overseas Gowon appealed to the British Prime Minister to permit the sale from the British sources of the following military equipment to the Nigerian Armed Forces, namely, 12 jet fighter bomber aircraft; 6 fast seaward Defence boats, capable of at least 30 knots per hour and fully equipped; and 24 anti-aircraft guns.¹⁵

Gowon had hoped that Her Majesty's Government would accede to these requests and in view of the extreme urgency of the matter, the aircraft and anti-aircraft guns should be made available in Nigeria.¹⁶ The Federal Government desired that the supply of the equipment should be strictly on commercial terms and if they did not grant the request to Nigeria, they might go elsewhere to obtain the weapons. Hence, such action should be

¹³ Confidential: Memorandum on British Policy towards Nigeria from Foreign Office to Lagos August 1967 File No. TX 10/11/Part C/West and General African Department/Title: Nigeria, Arms, Legal Importation and General Policy June 1967-31 December 1970. FCO 38/266, TNA.

¹⁴ Text of Gowon's Message to Prime Minister Harold Wilson on Nigerian Request for Military Equipment from the British High Commission in Lagos to Commonwealth Office Telegram No. 1340, File No. TX 10/1/6C1066/Part A/West and General African Dept./Title: Nigeria, Arms, Legal Importation, General Arms Policy 1st January, 1967-31st December, 1969, FCO 38/265, TNA.

¹⁵ From Gowon to Harold, 1 July, 1967, FCO 38/265, TNA.

¹⁶ From Gowon to Harold, 1 July, 1967, FCO 38/265, TNA.

misconstrued as affecting in anyway the traditional Nigerian policy of non-alignment in the issues that divided the military and ideological camps in the world.¹⁷ With the acquisition of military facilities the East was ready to pursuit their secessionist aims with the force of arms. Therefore, the Federal government could not stand and watch them achieve the break-up of Nigeria through that military means.¹⁸

While Gowon was confidence that Britain would allow his government to purchase military equipment on the basis of the Anglo-Nigerian relations and cooperation he was also skeptical about how Britain would accede to his request in this moment of national emergency in Nigeria.¹⁹ At a meeting with the Minister of State for Commonwealth Affairs, George Thomas, on 8 July 1967 Gowon revealed that his request was made only on a commercial basis and if he could not obtain the necessary assistance from Britain then he would be forced to look elsewhere.²⁰ According to the British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, in his book *the Labour Government, 1964-1970*:

By the autumn of 1967 the Federal Military Government's appeal to Britain for arms supplies presented us with a problem which was to be with us for over two years. Britain was and had been in colonial days as well as in the independence era, Nigeria's supplier of arms. We are equally the nation responsible for the military training of Nigeria's armed forces...The demand for arms supplies meant our Government was bound to lay itself open to attacks from one side or the other and from their respective supporters in Britain.²¹

Gowon's thought in the letter to the British Prime Minister appeared to have been influenced by geopolitics driven by the ongoing Cold War between the East and West where African countries opted for neutrality. Despite the fact that Nigeria was among the African nations that made the principle of non-alignment as the cornerstone of their foreign policy the Nigerian Head of State had reached out to the great powers for the purchase of military technologies. Virtually all the great powers had a stake in Nigeria. Therefore, Gowon had reasoned that if Britain refused to grant his request alternatively other countries such as the Soviet Union would no doubt accede to his demands.

¹⁷ TNA, FCO, 38/265, Text of a Letter by the Nigeria's Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, by D. Hunt to the British Prime Minister, 1st July, 1967.

¹⁸ From Lagos to Commonwealth Office Telegram No. 1st July 1967, FCO 38/265, TNA.

¹⁹ From Lagos to Commonwealth Office Telegram No. 1st July 1967, FCO 38/265, TNA.

²⁰ Confidential: Record of a Conversation between the Commander-in-Chief and Head of the Federal Military Government Major-General Yakubu Gowon and the Minister of State for Commonwealth Affairs Mr. George Thomas M.P. on Saturday 8th July 1967 at Dodan Barracks from Lagos to Bentliff in Commonwealth Trade Department, Prime Minister's Office Papers, 13/1662, TNA.

²¹ Harold, Wilson. *The Labour Government, 1964-1970: A Personal Record*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson and Michael Joseph 1970), 555-556.

After due consultations with the British Ministers about the Federal request for arms supply, the British Prime Minister's replied letter to Gowon was delivered to the Nigerian Head of State in Dodan Barracks, Ikeja Lagos, by the British High Commissioner, David Hunt, on the morning of 17 July 1967. The Prime Minister said that Britain had consistently hoped to see even from the grave and difficult problems, the reemergence of a peaceful and united Nigerian. Britain had demonstrated in many ways her support for the Federal government as the legal government of Nigeria as exemplified by her refusal to recognize Biafra's secession.²² The Prime Minister said to Gowon that, he had looked most carefully into the request of military supplies. There was nothing he could do to help over the Jet aircraft. These could not be made available at this time for it would affect the critical situation in Nigeria. Furthermore, the Prime Minister said to General Yakubu Gowon:

We can however if you wish agree to your purchasing twenty-four Bofors guns with the necessary spares and so on, and we can also arrange to train a sufficient number of Nigerian soldiers in their use by arranging courses in this country. We have also considered the general question of arms supplies, and I wish you to know that subject to our usual reservation of the right to study carefully all arms orders we do not intend to put any obstacle in the way of orders placed in this country for reasonable quantities of military material of types similar to those you have obtained here in the past...²³

The Prime Minister reminded Gowon about the political difficulties his administration was facing regarding the supply of arms to the Federal Military Government of Nigeria. However, he reassured Gowon that he and his colleagues would remain steadfast to those promises made to the military government despite these difficulties.²⁴

Consequently, on 17 July 1967, the Nigerian Commissioner for Information and Labour and diplomatic emissary of the Federal Military Government during the civil war, Anthony Enahoro visited London and presented to the British Prime Minister, a letter of introduction from General Gowon which explained that his principal concern was not only that the Federal Military Government should win in their struggle against Biafra but that it should be manifest to world opinion that the right side had won the battle.²⁵

²² Confidential: Text of British Prime Minister's Letter to General Yakubu Gowon, July 17, 1967, FCO, 38/265, TNA.

²³ Confidential: Text of British Prime Minister's Letter to General Yakubu Gowon, July 17, 1967, FCO, 38/265, TNA.

²⁴ Confidential: Text of British Prime Minister's Letter to General Yakubu Gowon, July 17, 1967, FCO, 38/265, TNA.

²⁵ Confidential: Record of a Meeting between the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson and Nigerian Commissioner for Information and Labour Chief Anthony Enahoro at No. 10 Downing Street Held at 3.30 pm on Monday 17 July 1967 from Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Office to British High Commission in Lagos 17 July 1967, PREM 13/1661, TNA.

He assured the Prime Minister that whatever the reactions in the Nigerian press concerning the British attitude towards the civil war, the Federal Government remained committed to the very special bonds which Britain and Nigeria shared.²⁶ The longstanding friendship between Britain and Nigeria was strong enough to ensure that the British government responded to Federal requests for necessary supplies.²⁷

The increased French support for Biafra and the need for a fighter aircraft to be supplied to Nigeria to enable the Nigerian Air Force to intercept planes involved in the Uli airlift in Biafra and sometimes airdrop of arms supplies to Biafra prompted Gowon to send a communication to the Prime Minister in London on 5 November 1968. While handing over the letter to the British Government Anthony Enahoro told British officials that the French problem was very important for arms supply to Biafra army had been stepped up. It was not in the best interests of anybody to see the continuation of the Civil War as a result of the increased acquisition of French arms by Biafra.²⁸

While the British Prime Minister expressed great disappointments over the increased external support for Biafra as revealed in Gowon's message sent to him on 28 November, 1968, he assured the Nigerian government of continuous British support as it had been in the past, despite the criticisms which they had encountered so far in Britain. The Prime Minister said to Gowon:

We hoped that there could be a very early end of the war so that the sufferings of the Nigerian people can be brought to an end... For our part, in order to maintain our continued support for you, we shall need to demonstrate that we are doing our utmost best to help bring about a settlement, and for this purpose, we need to retain a measure of political flexibility with regards to peacemaking activities...²⁹

Gowon said that it was essential that the Nigerian Air Force be enabled to put a stop to the almost non-stop arms traffic to Biafra.³⁰ Unfortunately, the British response was negative with

²⁶ Letter from Major-General Yakubu Gowon Head of the Federal Military Government and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Supreme Headquarters, State House, Dodan Barracks, Lagos, Nigeria to the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson Serial No. T222A/67, 29 July 1967,

²⁷ Nigerian-British Ties Stronger than Ever. *New Nigerian*. 25 November, 1968, 1.

²⁸ Confidential: Record of Meeting between the British Secretary of State Michael Stewart and Nigerian Commissioner for Information and Labour Anthony Enahoro held on Thursday 7 November 1968 from Foreign and Commonwealth Office to the British High Commission in Lagos 7 November 1968, DEFE 13/27 TNA.

²⁹ Letter from the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson to Major-General Yakubu Gowon Head of the Federal Military Government and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Supreme Headquarters, State House, Dodan Barracks, Lagos, Nigeria, 28 November, 1968, Serial No. T297/68, PREM 13/2258, TNA.

³⁰ Letter from Major-General Yakubu Gowon Head of the Federal Military Government and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Supreme Headquarters, State House, Dodan Barracks, Lagos, Nigeria to the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson 5 November, 1968, Serial No. T241A/68, Reference No. 1882/S, PREM 13/2258, TNA.

the explanation that fighter aircraft were in very short supply in Britain.³¹ While the British Government supported the Nigerian Government cause it was very cautious of granting much of her military needs to execute the conflict. As Oladipo Olusola Fafowora argued "fearing domestic criticisms of its arms policy particularly from the left-wing sections of the Labour Party, the British Government sought to play down its role as Nigeria's main source of arms..."³² These criticisms spans from the members of the British parliament, public opinion and pressure groups. Regardless of public and parliamentary sentiments in Britain the Labour Government strongly indicated unwavering commitment to Lagos by allowing British arms to advance so as to assist the Nigerian Government with military equipment and planning.³³

Diplomatic Exchange on Peace Negotiations

When the civil war broke out on 6 July 1967 the need for peaceful settlement was high on the agenda. Campaign for peace negotiations surged from 1967 to 1969 as the Nigerian soldiers and Biafran army intensified their military onslaught against each other. In a letter dated 5 April 1968 Prime Minister Harold Wilson informed Gowon about the considerable interests in Britain by a statement made by Nnamdi Azikiwe in Paris that Biafran authorities were ready to discuss a peace settlement without preconditions and a letter which the British peace activist Lord Brockway had had from Ojukwu revealed the determination of Biafrans to accept immediately a cease-fire followed by unconditional discussions.³⁴ Britain had hoped for an early resumption of peace negotiations in the conflict as very cardinal in creating radical change and confidence in the Federation. An Anglo-Nigerian relation on the conflict was envisaged to help proffer solutions needed to calm the situation down and help to get a calmer approach to the war.

Gowon was meant to understand that Britain and other friends of Nigeria felt that an effort should be made to test the sincerity of Biafran to peace negotiation. He was encouraged to send the letter of 5 April 1968 because Gowon felt that it would be tragic if any opportunity were lost to end the fighting in Nigeria on acceptable terms. The Prime Minister recognized how keenly Gowon wished to avoid a situation in which organized persistence on Biafran side collapsed.³⁵

³¹ Letter from Major-General Yakubu Gowon Head of the Federal Military Government and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Supreme Headquarters, State House, Dodan Barrakcs, Lagos, Nigeria to the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson 5 November, 1968, Serial No. T241A/68, Reference No. 1882/S, PREM 13/2258, TNA.

³² Oladipo, O. Fafowora. *Pressure Groups and Foreign Policy: A Comparative Study of British Attitudes and Policy towards Secessionist Moves in the Congo 1960-1963 and Nigeria 1960-1969* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Nigeria Limited, 1990), 100-101.

³³ John J. Stremmlau. *the International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), 267.

³⁴ Text of Letter from the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson to Major-General Yakubu Gowon Serial No. T96A/68 from the Commonwealth Office to Lagos Telegram No. 489, 5 April 1968, PREM 13/2257, TNA

³⁵ From Gowon to Harold Wilson, PREM 13/2257, TNA.

While the Prime Minister never attempted to suggest to the Federal government the nature of any settlement they might be prepared to accept, he knew that the Federals had frequently declared the willingness to guarantee Igbo security and their future in Nigeria.³⁶ The Prime Minister suggested to Gowon that this was an opportunity to strengthen their commitment to peace settlement. Biafrans might well not be able to bring themselves publicly to accept the end of secession and the setting up of the twelve states structure before negotiations, but that surely did not mean that they could not be brought to do so in the course of discussions. If Gowon were to respond to Azikiwe proposal in the way the Prime Minister suggested, and the Biafrans then attempted to change their tack. Then, Gowon would have demonstrated the willingness to explore ways to bring the fighting to an end. This was highly necessary part of the war if it were to give them maximum political warfare advantage.³⁷

On 16 April 1968 General Gowon responded to Prime Minister's message with strong acknowledgement of his interests in the search for a peaceful settlement for a united Nigeria, hence, it would be tragic if any opportunity were lost to end the fighting on acceptable terms.³⁸ Gowon reminded the Prime Minister of the various peace moves undertaken with Biafran leaders so far in the conflict.³⁹ The Kinshasa Summit of Heads of State and Government of the OAU discussed the Nigerian situation and set up a peace mission of six Head of State to explore with Nigeria the possibility of restoring peace in Nigeria.⁴⁰

Ahead of preliminary peace talks between the Federal and Biafran representatives in London convened by the Commonwealth Secretary-General Arnold Smith a letter from Gowon was sent to Prime Minister Harold Wilson on 2 May, 1968. The Nigerian Deputy High Commissioner in London, B. A. T. Balewa, handed the letter to E.G. Norris in the Commonwealth Office. This particular message from Gowon to the Prime Minister was less of a personal one than the exchange that the Prime Minister and he had previously when the Prime Minister encouraged him to take up the Biafran offer of peace talks without preconditions. The Nigerian Head of State had sent the same message to all Heads of Government in the Commonwealth and Africa.⁴¹ The purpose of Gowon's letter was to keep the Prime Minister informed of the situation in the Nigerian conflict particularly the prospect of peace talks.

In October 1967 when the approach was firstly made Arnold Smith contacted him and he sent high official delegation to London. But Biafran officials later changed their minds and did not send their own representatives to London as agreed. This happened again in November,

³⁶ From Gowon to Harold Wilson, PREM 13/2257, TNA.

³⁷ From Gowon to Harold Wilson, PREM 13/2257, TNA.

³⁸ Text of Letter from Major-General Yakubu Gowon to the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson Serial No. T103/68 from Lagos to Commonwealth Office Telegram No. 492, 16 April, 1968, PREM 13/2257, TNA.

³⁹ From Gowon to Harold Wilson, PREM 13/2257, TNA.

⁴⁰ From Gowon to Harold Wilson, PREM 13/2257, TNA.

⁴¹ Confidential: Minute on Gowon Message to the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson from the Private Secretary in the Commonwealth Office J.R. Williams to A.M. Palliser, 16 May, 1968, PREM 13/2258, TNA.

1967. Arnold Smith later contacted the Biafran officials and he was assured that they were ready to begin talks in London under the auspice of the Commonwealth Secretariat.⁴²

Sending a message from London to Lagos was later initiated on 16 May 1968 following the announcement by the Commonwealth Secretariat that agreement had been reached between Federal and Biafran representatives in London on the opening of peace talks in Kampala on 23 May 1968. ⁴³ British officials were conscious of the fact that General Gowon's message was addressed not only to the Prime Minister but also to all African and Commonwealth Heads of Government. They had desired to keep the diplomatic channel of communication between Gowon and the Prime Minister open.⁴⁴

On 21 May 1968 the Prime Minister's message was eventually delivered to Gowon in Lagos. Gowon was admonished to exercise patience and understanding in the Kampala peace talks as was done in London talks. The Commonwealth Secretary-General, Arnold Smith, arranged a preliminary peace talks in London between the Nigerian ably represented by the Commissioner for Labour and Information, Anthony Enahoro and Biafran sides of the war led by Sir Louis Mbanefo on 6 May 1968 to discuss the possible peace settlement of the civil war.⁴⁵ Britain supported Arnold Smith's peace initiative which served as the prelude to the ultimate peace settlement negotiations of the conflict.⁴⁶

Following the breakdown of the Kampala Peace talks in May 1968 Gowon had on 1 June, 1968 sent a message to Prime Minister Harold Wilson regretting the downfall of the peace settlement. The Kampala peace talks broke down because the Federal Government through its chief delegate, Anthony Enahoro, insisted that Biafra must jettison its independent status as the condition for peace talks while Biafra through its delegate, Louis Mbanefo, demanded for an immediate unconditional ceasefire as a precondition for discussion at the peace summit. Therefore, the inability of the two sides to agree on a peace formula led to the breakdown of the Kampala peace talks.⁴⁷

⁴² Text of Letter from Major-General Yakubu Gowon to the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson Serial No. T112/68 delivered by the Nigerian Deputy High Commissioner in London B.A.T. Balewa to E.G. Norris in the Commonwealth Office Reference No. L/SEC.0563, 2 May, 1968, Telegram No. 549/3/5/0920, File No. TX 1/85/6C1066/Part A/West and General African Dept./Title: Nigeria, Political Affairs, Internal, Federal Nigeria and Biafra Peace Talks 1st January 1968-31st December, 1969, FCO 38/213, TNA.

⁴³ From the British Private Secretary J.R. Williams to A.M. Palliser, 16 May, 1968, PREM 13/2258, TNA.

⁴⁴ Confidential: Minute on Nigerian Peace Talks from Commonwealth Office to Lagos and Kampala Telegram No. 727, PREM 13/2258, TNA.

⁴⁵ Oluchukwu I. Onianwa. *Britain's Injurious Peace Games in the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (Washington DC and London: Academica Press, 2018), 58.

⁴⁶ Text of Letter from the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson to Major-General Yakubu Gowon delivered by an official of the British High Commission in Lagos Williams on 21st May, 1968 from Lagos to Commonwealth Office 22 May, 1968, PREM 13/2258, TNA.

⁴⁷ Oluchukwu, *Britain's Injurious Peace Games*, 79.

Gowon appreciated the Prime Minister's letter sent to him on 21 May 1968 because the Prime Minister was informed of the development at the Kampala peace talks. He was happy that Biafra delegates came at least to the conference table but unfortunately, the hope placed by everyone on these talks was dashed due to Biafra's unchanged position.⁴⁸

Gowon reminded the Prime Minister about a series of developments in Britain regarding the civil war which had caused a lot of suspicions to the Nigerian public and some anxiety to the Federal government of Nigeria. As argued by Gowon "I do not think that the people who were responding to Biafra propaganda were at all aware of the depth of feeling in Nigeria on the fundamental issue of preserving the unity of the Federation".⁴⁹ As he had continuously stressed in their previous exchanges of correspondence, Gowon admitted that he owed a duty to Nigeria to perform conscientiously. Should the British government succumbed to pressure from ill-informed opinion to stop military support to Nigeria, he should have no alternative but to obtain whatever weapons he needed from any available sources.⁵⁰ Gowon declared that "it would be disastrous for Anglo-Nigeria excellent relations if such a decision were to be made at the tail end of the crisis and I trust that the realism and sound judgment displayed by your government would be maintained."⁵¹

When the Prime Minister replied to Gowon's message on 19 June, 1968 he agreed with the Nigerian Head of State that there was value in maintaining strong Anglo-Nigerian relations regarding the civil war amid the renewed campaign for a change of British policy in the civil war. Gowon was reminded of the considerable pressure in the House of Commons on the need for a policy change in the conflict. The debate of the Parliament on the matter reflected the anxieties which were felt by all parties of the Houses about events in Nigeria.⁵² Given these circumstances, the Prime Minister told Gowon that it had emerged very clearly that the Nigerian case was not well understood, particularly in the Parliament and the media.⁵³ According to the Prime Minister:

It was clear that many influential British Members of Parliament found it increasingly difficult to understand why the Federal government was unable to make an offer of a ceasefire. The demand for a ceasefire was made with the more urgency because there was great anxiety in British lest, through a search for a final military solution, there should be widespread killing of Igbos. I

⁴⁸ From Lagos to Commonwealth Office 22 May, 1968, PREM 13/2258, TNA.

⁴⁹ From Gowon to Harold Wilson, PREM 13/2258, TNA.

⁵⁰ From Gowon to Harold Wilson, PREM 13/2258, TNA.

⁵¹ From Gowon to Harold Wilson, PREM 13/2258, TNA.

⁵² Confidential: Personal Message from the British Prime Minister Harold to Major-General Yakubu Gowon Serial No. T136/68, PREM 13/2258, TNA.

⁵³ Confidential: Personal Message from the British Prime Minister Harold to Major-General Yakubu Gowon Serial No. T136/68, PREM 13/2258, TNA.

am bound to tell you that if this happened it would have most serious effects, both for us and for you.⁵⁴

It was considered a good decision by the British Prime Minister for such a statement to include Gowon's willingness to facilitate medical and food supplies to the beleaguered areas, and a reaffirmation of the Federal government's determination to maintain firm military discipline and to avoid all excesses by their armed forces.

The Prime Minister was concerned in his letter to Gowon about the widespread reports in Britain about the alleged famine and starvation which increased greatly the emotional involvement of many people in Britain. Therefore, the Prime Minister suggested to Gowon that a report from an authoritative observer sent by the British government would help to establish the truth about such stories and put them in proper perspective. It would also show well-built Anglo-Nigerian concern to avoid any unnecessary human sufferings in the civil war.⁵⁵ The Prime Minister later declared:

May I repeat our position, we have explained to Parliament in detail the basis of our policy of support for the Federal Military Government. We intended to continue that policy. But there is no doubt that in so far as the support includes the supply of arms we shall be under mounting criticisms unless we could demonstrate that the government we are supporting was prepared to use the overwhelming advantage of its present position to seek in magnanimity and compassion a very early end to the fighting...⁵⁶

Similarly, on 22 September, 1968 the British Minister for Commonwealth Affairs, George Thompson suggested to the British Prime Minister the need for a British Minister Lord Shepherd to send a letter to Gowon to let him know about the advantages of accepting Biafra's decision for peace negotiations for the public opinion had expected Britain to do everything humanly possible to secure humane treatment of the civilian population on the conclusion of formal hostilities. According to the Minister, "only by means of a Ministerial visit to Lagos accompanied with a letter from the Prime Minister to Gowon can we exert the influence we have acquired to the full and only in that way shall we be able to demonstrate to the British public that we have really bestirred ourselves."⁵⁷ Sending a letter to Gowon at this time was something that even the British High Commissioner in Lagos Sir David Hunt endorsed when he said "I naturally welcome this proposal; as on previous occasions, it is important to make it clear that its purpose is to help the Federals more than to help ourselves."⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Confidential: Personal Message from the British Prime Minister Harold to Major-General Yakubu Gowon Serial No. T136/68, PREM 13/2258, TNA.

⁵⁵ Confidential: Personal Message from the British Prime Minister Harold to Major-General Yakubu Gowon Serial No. T136/68, PREM 13/2258, TNA.

⁵⁶ Confidential: Personal Message from the British Prime Minister Harold to Major-General Yakubu Gowon Serial No. T136/68, PREM 13/2258, TNA.

⁵⁷ Confidential: Personal Message from the British Minister for Commonwealth Affairs George Thomson to the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson Serial No. 58/68, 22 September, 1968, PREM 13/2260, TNA.

⁵⁸ Confidential: Minute on Possible Biafran Capitulation from the British High Commissioner in Lagos Sir David Hunt to Commonwealth Office, Telegram No. 1598, 22 September, 1968, PREM 13/2260, TNA.

Later, Lord Shepherd handed over the Prime Minister's letter to the Nigerian Head of State during his visit to Nigeria and first meeting with Gowon in Dodan Barracks Lagos, on 26 September, 1968. In the letter to Gowon the Prime Minister emphasised the overwhelming support expressed by Africa's leaders at the Algiers conference for solutions based on national unity and territorial integrity.⁵⁹ He reminded Gowon about the plight of starving civilians in the war-stricken areas and the need to promote relief measures in the war. The Prime Minister appreciated Gowon's diplomatic efforts towards reassuring Nigerian and world opinion that unnecessary suffering was being avoided in the pursuit of legitimate aims in the war. Britain valued the direct exchange of views with Nigeria in surmounting the difficulties created by the conflict.⁶⁰

In a letter dated December 1968 the Prime Minister informed Gowon about his intended visit to Nigeria which was based on the concern regarding the increasing unpopularity of the British Government policy of support for the Federal Military Government in Britain. The opposition was confined to small pressure groups and to those with a particular political or religious outlook.⁶¹ The Prime Minister was worried about the opposition in the parliament on the British policy in the civil war when he said to Gowon:

You should know that the Conservative Opposition... have now in fact made common cause with all those in all Parties in the House who support Biafra in calling for a multilateral embargo on the supply of arms to both sides... it was precisely this kind of issue on which I had hoped, in a personal visit to be able to obtain your personal views. A strict preservation of the confidential character of the diplomatic exchanges would ensure the solidification of the Anglo-Nigerian diplomacy in the conflict so as to guide against the politics of maneuverings by other great powers mainly the Soviet Union.⁶²

After the visit of the British Prime Minister to Nigeria on 27-30 March, 1969 Gowon sent a message to the British Prime Minister on 19 April, 1969 in appreciation of the diplomatic conversation with the British leader being the first of its kind after a long period of exchange of correspondence with him. The Prime Minister's visit to Lagos attested to the fact that, of all the Western countries, only Britain openly maintained its policy support for Nigeria.⁶³ In his correspondence to the Prime Minister, Gowon said, "when I consider the special relationship between our two countries and people, I sometimes really wonder whether it was necessary

⁵⁹ Text of Letter from the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson to Major-General Yakubu Gowon Serial No. T195/68, 24th September, 1968, PREM 13/2260, TNA.

⁶⁰ Text of Letter from the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson to Major-General Yakubu Gowon Serial No. T195/68, 24th September, 1968, PREM 13/2260, TNA.

⁶¹ Draft Message from the British Prime Minister to Gowon, December 1968, PREM 13/2260, TNA

⁶² Harold Wilson to Gowon, December 1968, PREM 13/2260, TNA.

⁶³ Draft Message from Gowon to Harold Wilson, 19 April 1969, PREM 13/2260, TNA.

for me to bother you with such matters instead of their being handled satisfactorily at a lower level, once the basic principles had been agreed upon."⁶⁴ Gowon was grateful for the enormous British support essential to the survival of Nigerian as one country.

In a letter sent to Gowon in September 1969, the Prime Minister appreciated the agreement reached between the Federal government and the ICRC on planned daylight relief flights to Biafra. He knew very well the political difficulties and anxieties involved for the Federal Military Government to have made concessions in order to secure the agreement. While the arrangement agreed appeared to be unacceptable to Biafra Gowon presented himself to the world opinion as being prepared to go to considerable lengths to bring relief to those in need.⁶⁵

The possible utilization of the British Royal Air Force to airlift relief supplies to Biafra and to demonstrate the willingness of the Nigerian government to do everything possible to promote humanitarian operations in the conflict, motivated the Prime Minister to send a message to Gowon which was delivered by the British Parliamentary Under-Secretary for African Affairs Maurice Foley during his visit to Nigeria on 26 November, 1969. The Prime Minister reminded Gowon that during his visit to Lagos in March 1969 he made it clear that the British government remained true to its policy of support for the Federal government in a cause which Britain believed to be just.⁶⁶

One important issue raised in the letter was the fact that no British Minister visited Biafra which increased the perception and criticisms that the British officialdom did not care sufficiently about the vulnerable and suffering people in the war zone. The Prime Minister suggested to Gowon the need for an official visit of a British Minister to Biafra by a team consisting of Maurice Foley, Lord Hunt and an official of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The real purpose of the visit was to enable Britain to fortify the Defence of a policy that they believed was in the Anglo-Nigerian interests. The Prime Minister requested the help and cooperation of Gowon in arranging a legitimate method of relief supplies from Cotonou to Biafra.⁶⁷ The Anglo-Nigerian diplomatic relations as evidenced in the Yakubu-Gowon-Harold Wilson diplomatic correspondence guaranteed the Federal victory during the civil war on the basis of national unity that was restored after the Eastern region was declared Republic of Biafra.

⁶⁴ Draft Message from Gowon to Harold Wilson, 19 April 1969, PREM 13/2260, TNA.

⁶⁵ Text of Letter from the British Prime Minister to Major-General Gowon September, 1969, PREM 2860, TNA.

⁶⁶ Text of Prime Minister's Message to Major-General Yakubu Gowon Serial No. T184/69, 26 November, 1969 File No. JWN 22/12/5A369/Part B/West African Dept./Title: Nigeria, Visit of the British Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office Maurice Foley, 1st January, 1968-31st December, 1969, FCO 65/472, TNA.

⁶⁷ Text of Prime Minister's Message to Major-General Yakubu Gowon Serial No. T184/69, 26 November, 1969 File No. JWN 22/12/5A369/Part B/West African Dept./Title: Nigeria, Visit of the British Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office Maurice Foley, 1st January, 1968-31st December, 1969, FCO 65/472, TNA.

Conclusion

The Gowon-Harold Wilson diplomatic communication was anchored on the maintenance of Nigerian unity threatened by the Civil War. From political and physical perspectives, Britain sustained genuine support for the Federal Government because of what it perceived as having the better cause in the interests of the Nigerian Federation. Key aspects of their closed diplomatic exchange of views were peace, military operations, diplomacy and humanitarian operations. An analysis of these views tended to inject new insights into the Anglo-Nigeria's relations experiences during the war. While Nigeria saw it as highly necessary to approach British officialdom for war assistance, Britain acknowledged that granting such a request had the potential to accord her strong influence with the Nigerian government. The threat that external forces in the war such as France and the Soviet Union posed in the Civil War became a factor in thickening the diplomatic correspondence between Gowon and Harold Wilson. Added to this situation was the strong world opinion on the side of Biafra where more and more national governments were on the line to recognize, render foreign military assistance and diplomatic support to the breakaway State which tended to dry up any amount of support for the Federal Government. Diplomatic correspondence between the two Heads of State solidified the Anglo-Nigerian diplomatic relations guided against the politics of maneuverings by other great powers. The need to prevent military supplies into Biafra territory was highly important in the diplomatic exchanges between Nigeria and the British officialdom. Both countries consistently reminded themselves of the need to be tolerant and calculative in the implementation of their war policies. Highly revealing from the Gowon-Harold Wilson's conversations was that it was never the British policy to stick to a military solution only in the Civil War rather there was constant support for a peaceful and humanitarian resolution of the conflict.

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