Britain, Biafra and the Balance of Payments:  
The Formation of London’s ‘One Nigeria’ Policy

Gary BLANK  
London School of Economics

Introduction: A forgotten war in British foreign policy studies

The Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) galvanized world attention to an extent that was truly remarkable for an ‘internal’ conflict. When the oil-rich, predominantly Igbo Eastern Region of Nigeria declared an independent republic of Biafra in May 1967, the ruling Federal Military Government (FMG) responded with an economic blockade and ‘total war’.¹ For the first time in post-colonial Africa, accusations of ‘genocide’ were widely made as images of destruction and starvation beamed into millions of television sets worldwide.² Journalists, politicians, scholars and activists hotly contested the merits and morality of the FMG’s policies in a ceaseless stream of polemics. As one scholar observed, ‘many speculated on whether more blood or more ink was being spilt on the battlefields’.³

Nowhere in the Western world was this debate fiercer than in Britain, Nigeria’s former colonial master. Whereas many European countries and the United States refused to sell arms and military equipment to Nigeria for the duration of the war, Britain became its most significant military supplier and diplomatic supporter. This decision served to implicate Britain in the events of the civil war, and constituted an (indirect) form of intervention. Igbo expatriates and religious and humanitarian organizations protested against British policy through demonstrations, petitions and forums. In January 1969, British dockworkers refused to handle shipments of arms bound for Lagos. Perhaps most significant, however, was the dissent that rent Harold Wilson’s own ranks: a significant proportion of the Labour

¹ Although there was dispute over which side ‘started’ armed hostilities, FMG General Olusegun Obasanjo later acknowledged in his memoirs that ‘Federal troops fired the first shot of the civil war on 6 July 1967’, Olusegun OBASANJO, My Command, Ibadan: Heinemann, 1980, p. xi.
² Accusations of ‘genocide’ against the FMG were highly contentious, and after the war few continued to make them without qualification. For example, Suzanne CRONJE, a leading proponent of the Biafran cause in Britain, suggests that the FMG committed ‘conditional genocide.’ The World and Nigeria: The Diplomatic History of the Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970, London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1972, p. 337.
Party membership, the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), and even the Cabinet challenged London’s Nigeria policy. In his memoirs, Harold Wilson recalled that ‘Nigeria had replaced Vietnam as our major overseas preoccupation. It took up far more of my time, and that of ministerial colleagues, and far more moral wear and tear than any other issue’.

The Nigerian Civil War was clearly a foreign policy issue of foremost importance to the Wilson government, Parliament, and Britain at large. Curiously, however, it has received scant attention from historians of British foreign policy generally, and the Wilson administration specifically. This article utilises declassified documents at the British National Archives to address a fundamental question of historical disputation: why did the British government decide to diplomatically and materially support the FMG’s ‘One Nigeria’ policy in 1967? There is sharp disagreement on this question in the existing literature, most of which was written long before the declassification of official documents. In their authoritative histories of the war, John de St. Jorre and John Stremlau largely accept the public justifications issued by the Wilson government, especially the contention that a successful secession in one African country would lead to the ‘balkanization’ of the continent; the fear that the Russians were waiting in the wings to replace British influence; and the notion that Britain had a responsibility to support a ‘legal’ Commonwealth government by continuing a ‘traditional’ supply of arms.

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6 While most of the relevant archival documents were declassified over a decade ago, only three historians have analysed them in much depth. John W.YOUNG (The Labour Governments 1964-70, Volume 2: International Policy, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, chapter eight) and Mark CURTIS (Unpeople: Britain’s Secret Human Rights Abuses, London: Vintage, 2004, chapter ten) both discuss the conflict within broader histories of British foreign policy. A more careful and detailed treatment of British decision-making in the early months of the war is provided by Chibuike UCHE, ‘Oil, British Interests and the Nigerian Civil War’, Journal of African History, vol. 49, n° 1, 2008. Uche’s persuasive account parallels my own in many respects. However, he offers only a cursory analysis of British weapons sales to Nigeria, treating it as peripheral to, and separate from, oil interests. He therefore accepts the oft-repeated argument that London’s decision to supply arms was spurred by the Russian ‘threat’ (p.127-128). In contrast, I argue below that the ‘decision’ unfolded in a number of stages, and was inseparable from evolving debates regarding the oil question. Uche’s assertion that French oil companies funded Biafra is also highly problematic, based as it is on spurious Federal claims from the time (p. 128-129, fn. 62). For an informed discussion of this latter point, see Suzanne CRONJE, op. cit., pp. 201-202.

Authors with a pro-Biafran bent, on the other hand, place greater stress upon the probable economic motives underlying British policy. Suzanne Cronje, a journalist and leader of the Britain-Biafra Association during the war, notes that ‘it is important to differentiate between the official arguments and the real motivation. The Nigerian Federation had been conceived by Britain as a large West African state, friendly to British interests and weighty enough to be used as a brake on black African ambitions.’

Natural resources were ‘safe’ within the Federation, and ‘a single large market’ was much more conducive to British business than several smaller statelets. Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, a Nigerian historian, largely echoes Cronje’s claims. According to Ekwe-Ekwe, it is crucial to consider the ‘spread’ of British capital investments and other economic interests across the entire Federation (totalling over £1.5 billion). Wary of any disruption to the growth of British business interests, the Wilson government ‘clearly reasoned that it was rational to support the party in the Nigerian civil war that was fighting to maintain the political status quo’. Both Cronje and Ekwe-Ekwe assert that Britain vastly augmented its military supplies to the FMG in order to secure British investments.

A close study of British decision-making during the initial months of the crisis, between the spring of 1967 and the winter of 1968, reveals that economic factors were indeed the most significant in shaping the contours of Britain’s Nigeria policy. However, this is only the beginning of an explanation, not its end point. Previous analyses largely offered a functional view of British policy: because Britain had economic interest ‘x’, it invariably supported the Nigerian government and its policies. What is left out is the potential contradiction between divergent economic interests (e.g., the ‘spread’ of investment across a united Nigeria versus concentrated oil investment in Biafra), and the range of strategies these interests afforded policy-makers. The best means of securing Britain’s economic interests, especially in a highly uncertain and volatile situation, were subject to considerable contestation and debate within the government and civil service. Despite the colonial legacy, London’s Nigeria policy was formed in an historical process, and not determined in advance.

Colonial legacies and the fruits of decolonization

The historical background to the civil war has been explored in great detail elsewhere. For the purposes of this article, however, it is helpful to briefly highlight two legacies of British colonial rule. The first is the significance of metropolitan economic concerns, and the second is the haphazard amalgamation of territories and peoples into a single ‘Nigerian’ colony. It has been claimed that British rule laid ‘the seeds of disaster’ for the fruition of ethnic rivalry and violence in the post-colonial
The emphasis here, however, is specifically on how the interaction of these two factors fostered a particular form of ethnicized political-economic conflict in the early years of Nigerian independence. At different times, British diplomacy exacerbated and attenuated these conflicts before they erupted in civil war. Biafran secession, in turn, directly implicated the British government and British firms, precisely because the crisis intersected their own historically established political-economic interests.

After the Anglo-French Convention of 1898 formalised the colonial division of West Africa, Britain’s Colonial Office sought to save expenditure by amalgamating its new protectorates. One such amalgamation created the single colony of ‘Nigeria’ in 1914. Its first governor, Lord Lugard, was intimately familiar with the intricacies of colonial governance and mindful of the economic imperatives of imperial rule. As he would recall in his memoirs, ‘the partition of Africa was due primarily to the economic necessity of increasing the supplies of raw materials and food to meet the needs of industrial Europe’. The establishment of Nigeria prompted measures to secure a very important variety of raw material—minerals, and particularly oil. In January 1914 the colonial administration passed Mineral Oil Ordinance No. 17, a measure which restricted oil prospecting to British companies alone. This measure enabled a consortium of Shell and British Petroleum (BP) to gain an early monopoly on oil prospecting, although commercially-viable quantities of oil were only discovered in the Niger Delta in 1956, a few years before independence. Colonial rule proved to be a boon for other British corporations as well. Prime among them was the United Africa Company (UAC), a subsidiary of Unilever, which in turn was the descendant of the Royal Niger Company. The UAC controlled 41.3 per cent of Nigeria’s import and external trade by the time the civil war broke out. Subsidiaries of the major British banks, such as Barclays and Lloyds, dominated Nigerian finance. Overall, Nigeria was Britain’s most important market in ‘black’ Africa.

With such significant economic and geopolitical stakes to consider, it is hardly surprising that British politicians and colonial administrators were highly cautious when approaching the question of Nigerian independence. Britain carefully and gradually cultivated ‘individual liberal nationalist leaders’ through various

11 John Hatch, for example, argues that many of the roots of Nigeria’s civil war agonies can be traced to the legacy of British colonial rule. See John Hatch, Nigeria: the Seeds of Disaster, Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1970.
17 Cronje, op. cit., p. 164.
constitutional reforms and attempts at development planning, while simultaneously enacting 'anti-leftist measures' for the repression of Marxists. 18 Such caution proved beneficial: during the first few years following independence in 1960, Nigeria became a leader of the ‘moderate’ faction of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and Nigerian leaders expressly disavowed socialist policies and nationalization measures. 19 Indeed, the economic importance of Nigeria only increased with the election of the first Wilson government in 1964. The Labour Party specifically looked to Commonwealth trade as a means of overcoming persistent balance of payments problems. 20

British hopes that Nigeria would be a ‘showcase’ of Western-style liberal democracy in Africa, however, were quickly dispelled. As Lugard himself had acknowledged, the objective of Nigeria’s amalgamation in 1914 was ‘to unify administrations, not peoples’. 21 More than 250 ethnic groups were stitched together with little regard for mutual historic ties. 22 Three ethnic groups predominated, and each claimed one of three regions as the seat of its power: the mainly Christian Igbo in the East, the primarily Muslim Hausa/Fulani in the North, and the mixed Muslim/Christian Yoruba in the West. Educational, economic and political inequalities fuelled conflict between the regions even during the colonial period, and both the North and the West made threats of secession before 1960. 23

The discovery of oil, moreover, led to important institutional changes even before the onset of independence. In 1958, the colonial government established a commission to recommend changes to revenue allocation. Perhaps the commission’s most significant proposal was to discontinue the practice of returning mining rents and royalties to the regions. 24 While seemingly minor, this revenue adjustment marked the beginning of the dilution of the powers of the regions to the benefit of the national government. The struggle for control of national revenue, and therefore the national government, acquired new importance over regional strategies of revenue generation and appropriation.

21 CRONJE, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
After independence, Nigeria lurched from one political crisis to another, usually as a result of jockeying between political parties claiming to represent one of the three major ethnic groups at the national level.\(^{25}\) In response to these crises, Igbo officers engaged in a coup against the Northern-derived leadership in January 1966, resulting in the ascension of Major General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi. Despite undertones of ethnic tension, the British High Commissioner in Nigeria, Francis Cumming-Bruce, reported that ‘[t]he mood up and down the country is one of reformist exaltation, and the universal rejoicing at the disappearance of politicians who have hung like a millstone round the neck of the country for fifteen years’.\(^{26}\)

Even in the North, there was widespread support for a purge of politicians reviled for corruption and attachment to colonial-era institutions. The Sardauna-led Northern government, in particular, was acknowledged by the Commonwealth Relations Office\(^ {27}\) as ‘identified with the preservation of out of date feudal institutions and social backwardness.’\(^ {28}\) However, Cumming-Bruce fretted that the populist leanings of the new regime might sway Nigeria from its ‘moderate’ path in domestic and international politics. It was feared that Nigeria might take up ‘fashionable African positions’, sideline the large number of British officers still serving in the country, and ‘become less co-operative in its foreign policies and less sensible in its attitude towards expatriate economic interests’.\(^{29}\)

In the end, Ironsi’s ambitious domestic agenda fatally undermined his hold on power. In a bold attempt to prevent the dissolution of the country, Ironsi appointed military governors to the four regions\(^ {30}\) (including Lieutenant-Colonel Chukwuemeka Ojukwu in the East) and announced his intention to transform Nigeria into a unitary state. This announcement met with fierce opposition from Northern politicians and soldiers, and in July 1966, a ‘countercoup’ resulted in the execution of Ironsi and the removal of his closest political supporters. Nigeria’s new military leader, Lieutenant-Colonel Yakubu Gowon, faced strong pressure to allow Northern secession, and British and American representatives in Lagos both played an important role in persuading Gowon to maintain the Federation.\(^ {31}\)


\(^{26}\) The National Archives (TNA), DO 221/85, Francis Cumming-Bruce to Sir Saville Garner, 4 February 1966.

\(^{27}\) The Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO) merged with the Colonial Office (CO) on 1 August 1966 to form the Commonwealth Office. Although some scholars refer to the new office as the ‘CRO’ as well, I have opted to refer to it by its full name in this paper to avoid confusion. Although it played an important role in the decision-making process discussed here, the Commonwealth Office proved to be relatively short-lived, and was merged with the Foreign Office (FO) on 17 October 1968 to form the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). For background on Wilson’s administrative reforms in international affairs, see YOUNG, *op. cit.*, chapter one, especially pp. 10-13.


\(^{29}\) TNA, DO 221/85, Cumming-Bruce to Garner, 10 February 1966.

\(^{30}\) A fourth region, the Mid-West, had been created in 1963.

contrast with Ironsi, Gowon was lauded by the British High Commissioner for being ‘pro-British and pro-West’, someone who had ‘no patience for extremist African demands and would like to help us’. Indeed, it has long been speculated that Britain played a direct role in Gowon’s blood-spattered ascension. No archival evidence confirms this claim, but two important reports from the period were destroyed by the Prime Minister’s Office in 1996 before they could be officially declassified.

It is deeply ironic that Gowon was propelled to political power by Northern secessionists in opposition to pro-unity Igbo, but would spend the next three-and-a-half years resolutely defending Nigerian unity against Igbo separatists. Instead of checking the centrifugal tendencies that imperilled the Federation, Gowon’s rule only exacerbated them. On 29 September 1966—‘Black Thursday’—mob violence broke out against Igbo shopkeepers and civil servants in the North, resulting in as many as 50,000 deaths and two million refugees. This massacre, more than any other event, shattered Igbo confidence in the concept of ‘One Nigeria’, and effectively gave Ojukwu a popular mandate to seek secession. Still, other regions were dissatisfied with the Federation as well: at a November 1966 Constitutional Conference, only the newly-minted Mid-West region ‘resolutely opposed’ the introduction of a secession clause. Although a measure of salvation seemed to be achieved with the signing of the Aburi agreement in January 1967, Ojukwu and Gowon soon fell out over its interpretation. By the winter of 1967, many observers—including some in the British civil service—were actively preparing for an Eastern secession.

London’s initial response to Eastern secession, formally declared on 30 May 1967, has been variously described as ‘equivocal and non-committal’, ‘out of gear if not totally immobilized’, and a ‘hedging [of] bets’. Speaking to the Royal Commonwealth Society two days after the formation of Biafra, George Thomas, the Minister of State for Commonwealth Affairs, refused to condemn either party in the

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32 TNA, PREM 13/1040, British High Commissioner to Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, 7 September 1966.
33 The Eastern Region first made this claim even before declaring secession, and pro-Biafran authors have repeated it many times since. For the most recent reiteration, see Herbert EKWE-EKWE, Biafra Revisited, Dakar: African Resistance, 2007.
34 The two reports were ‘The Nigerian Revolution: The first hundred days’ and ‘Nigeria: the military government’s record,’ dated 6 and 7 June 1966 respectively. They were produced shortly after the ‘Unification Decree’ but before the overthrow of General Ironsi; see TNA, PREM 13/1040. See also UCHE, op. cit., p. 120, fn. 36.
38 Herbert EKWE-EKWE, Conflict and Intervention in Africa, op. cit., p. 22.
40 CRONJE, op. cit., p. 25.
The Labour government’s first statement of policy on the issue, made to the House of Commons on 6 June, meekly intoned that ‘at this stage there can be no recognition of the Eastern region by ourselves,’ and therefore held open the possibility of recognition at a future date. Such equivocations would seem to make little sense in light of the public justifications that the British government later made for its policy. After all, if Britain was really so concerned about the ‘balkanization’ of Africa, why did it not condemn the secession from the start? If London felt an obligation to a ‘legal’ Commonwealth government, why did it not immediately affirm its support for the FMG? Analysis of the primary documents reveals that London was never as committed to the FMG during the first months of the crisis as its later pronouncements suggested. The ‘equivocal and non-committal’ nature of London’s initial policy stemmed from a debate within the government and civil service over the best way to serve ‘British interests’—particularly economic interests—amidst a highly tumultuous and uncertain series of events. This debate will be traced here through four successive stages: pre-secession deliberations; secession and the demand for loyalties; the decision to supply arms; and a turn to the ‘quick kill’.

Pre-secession deliberations

Despite strong support for Gowon and a general pro-Northern tilt, British officials did not shy from warning Nigeria’s new leadership very early on against measures that might exacerbate secessionist hostilities. The British government opposed the idea of excising the oil-producing areas of Calabar, Ogoja and Rivers (COR) from the predominantly Igbo areas, a Federal scheme that aimed to weaken Ojukwu. Not only did the British warn that such moves would increase the likelihood of Eastern secession and civil war, they also made clear to the Federal Government that ‘any injury to the British community or any damage to British interests (notably the oil installations in the Eastern Region) resulting from arbitrary methods of handling any proposed constitutional change would severely strain […] [the] relationship with Nigeria.’ Indeed, British officials were quietly willing to countenance a possible break with the Federal Government as early as the autumn of 1966, given the importance of Shell-BP oil installations in the East. In the event that the Eastern Region should secede, ‘investments in oil in Eastern Nigeria […] could prove a decisive factor in the British government thinking’.

Nevertheless, with constitutional negotiations impending, the Commonwealth Office instructed the British High Commissioner in Lagos to take a global view of ‘British Interest’ in Nigeria, which was predicated upon two central considerations.

41 STREMLAU, op. cit., p. 65.
43 TNA, PREM 13/1040, Cumming-Bruce to Commonwealth Office, 6 September 1966.
44 TNA, PREM 13/1040, Briefing notes for the Prime Minister for his meeting with the Nigerian High Commissioner, Brigadier Ogundipe and Mr. V. A. Adegboroye, 27 September 1966.
45 TNA, PREM 13/1040, Briefing notes for the Prime Minister for his meeting with the Nigerian High Commissioner, Brigadier Ogundipe and Mr. V. A. Adegboroye, 28 September 1966.
The first was the familiar role that a united Nigeria played on the side of ‘moderation’ in African and world affairs, a role that could come undone in the event of dissolution. The second was ‘extensive British commercial interests’, especially the increasing importance of the oil installation in the Delta area of the Eastern Region. Here, too, secession was unpalatable, as it threatened to separate Nigeria into states ‘of doubtful economic viability.’ As anticipated, however, it became increasingly clear that Britain’s broad preference for a united Nigeria might clash with its specific commercial and investment interests. If the Federation could not be held together, the British government would have to come down one side or the other.

In mid-February 1967, the High Commission was already warning the Commonwealth Office that Britain’s interests in the East were so important that the government should avoid stipulating, in advance, its attitude to a possible Eastern secession. Should the East succeed in establishing its claim, London would wish to secure friendly relations without any ‘self imposed inhibitions’. Still, the High Commission acknowledged that, as long as ‘the federation remains in being’, it would be necessary to ensure compliance with all lawful decrees of the FMG. British companies operating in the East—and Shell-BP in particular—were therefore advised not to ‘acquiesce’ to any Eastern demands for revenue payments, and to strictly abide by any blockade imposed by the FMG. Such advice would be taken to heart by the Commonwealth Office, and would shape its initial reaction to Eastern secession, i.e. a ‘wait and see’ policy. It is especially noteworthy because it made no mention of Commonwealth obligations and bore not a trace of sentimental attachment to colonial Nigeria. Fears of ‘balkanization’ in Africa were also absent.47

The tone from Lagos changed somewhat, however, when a new British High Commissioner assumed the post in late February. Derided as a pro-Federal ‘super-hawk’ by Biafrans and their supporters,48 David Hunt was well-connected with the Nigerian elite and was married to the niece of a Lagos shipping merchant.49 Hunt had also befriended Harold Wilson at Oxford, which may help to explain the strong influence and confidence that he came to enjoy in London.50 The documentation demonstrates that there is some validity to the claims of Biafran supporters that Hunt had an anti-Igbo and anti-Eastern bias. In the lead-up to secession, Hunt’s reports on the East were characterized by sensational comparisons of Ojukwu and the Eastern Government with Adolph Hitler and the Nazis. Ojukwu, he said, ‘has got the whole of the Eastern Region goose-stepping in violent demonstrations; his press and radio can only be compared to those of Nazi Germany for their deliberate pursuit of the big lie, their poisonous incitement to racial hatred and the violence of their personal

46 TNA, PREM 13/1040, Commonwealth Office to Lagos, 30 September 1966.
47 TNA, PREM 13/1661, Lagos to Commonwealth Office, 18 February 1967.
48 ST. JORRE, op. cit., p. 295.
50 ST. JORRE, op. cit., p. 296. For his part, Hunt acknowledges in his memoirs that Wilson’s influence played ‘the decisive part in my appointment’, but maintains that his personal connection was not strong. See David HUNT, On the Spot: An Ambassador Remembers, London: Peter Davies, 1975, p. 168.
abuse of, in particular, Gowon and Hassan'.

During this period, the British High Commission also compared Ojukwu to Nasser ‘in his early days’ and warned of Ojukwu’s sympathy for socialism and the Eastern Bloc. Although Hunt tended to blame Ojukwu’s personal psychology for the Eastern troubles, he also suggested that paranoia ‘is an Ibo characteristic’.

Hunt’s arrival in Lagos coincided with a secession threat by Ojukwu, issued on 25 February. Ojukwu pledged to protect the East, militarily if necessary, and to secede from the Federation by 31 March if the FMG did not implement the Aburi agreement. With the possibility of secession looming, Hunt recognized the circumstantial wisdom of the ‘wait and see’ approach, and agreed with the Commonwealth Office that Britain should not assure Gowon that it would never recognize a break-away East.

In the end, Ojukwu merely issued an edict seizing federal revenues, prompting the FMG to suspend Nigerian Airways flights and halt postal and money-order transactions. On 1 May, fears were again heightened when the Western Region’s most prominent politician declared that the West would follow the East in the event of secession. In this context, the Commonwealth Office issued a paper anxiously noting that ‘British interests in Nigeria are bound to suffer in the event of a break-up.’ The paper pointed out that Britain enjoyed a gross turnover of trade with Nigeria of over £180 million a year, and had invested over £200 million in the Federation (of which two-thirds was in oil, largely in the Eastern Region). The division of Nigeria would affect business confidence and terminate ‘the economic advantages of a single large market’. Given this tension of interests, the Commonwealth Office concluded that ‘[a]n open split between the Eastern Region and the rest of Nigeria will face us with an immediate dilemma, since we cannot afford to alienate either side.’ The United Kingdom should therefore seek to maintain ‘informal’ contact with the East, but hold off on recognition until ‘other influential governments’ have done so.

A few days later the West and General Africa Department (WGAD) of the Commonwealth Office approved similar arguments when they were offered by authoritative Overseas Policy and Defence Committee (OPD). Although the WGAD speculated that Britain would be ‘strongly criticised in the rest of Africa if [she] took the lead on recognising secession,’ it nevertheless reiterated that Britain’s ‘most important commercial interests are in the East’ and that London should seek

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53 Ibid.
54 STREMLAU, op. cit., p. 51.
56 TNA, PREM 13/1661, ‘Possible Blockade and Secession of Eastern Region’, 5 May 1967.
57 For some background on the OPD and its relation to the Cabinet, see YOUNG, op. cit., pp. 16-17.
to delay a decision. Once again, the fear of ‘balkanization’ was not so strong as to preclude recognition of an oil-rich, secessionist East.

Like the British government, Shell-BP itself was deeply concerned about the prospect of being torn between the FMG and the East, especially over oil revenues. Consequently, the company refused to sign any agreement with the FMG that would preclude it from paying to ‘another Government or authority’. However, before secession an agreement was reached, although it did not resolve the fundamental problem. Shell-BP agreed to ‘consult with the Federal Government and with their agreement […] pay the amount of revenue under dispute into a special frozen account’, a proposal that the OPD greeted favourably. However, the agreement had a gaping hole: no provision was made for a circumstance in which the FMG refused to allow for such a payment. In the event, that is exactly what occurred.

**Secession and the demand for royalties**

In a bid to forestall secession, Gowon made a number of ‘dramatic concessions’ to the East in the third week of May, including the removal of economic sanctions. As a result, however, Ojukwu was emboldened rather than mollified. On 27 May, he secured an endorsement of independence from a joint meeting of the Eastern Region’s Council of Elders and Consultative Assembly, a move which prompted Gowon to announce a complete reformulation of Nigerian federalism, precisely along the lines that the British previously warned against. Rather than four regions, the new federal Nigeria would be composed of twelve states, dividing the Eastern Region into three parts and leaving the Igbos with only 6 per cent of Nigeria’s oil output in a rump East Central State. Such a revision proved predictably unacceptable to Eastern elites, and Ojukwu finally declared the new republic of Biafra on 30 May.

Britain responded exactly as its ‘wait and see’ approach dictated. On 30 May, the Commonwealth Office informed the British High Commission in Lagos that no decision had yet been made on recognition, while James Parker, the District High Commissioner in the Eastern capital of Enugu, was instructed to stay on good terms with the Biafrans. Somewhat uniquely for a Cold War-era crisis, the US State Department informed the Foreign Office that it had ‘no intention of taking the lead’ on recognition, and would cede to Commonwealth initiative.

Only days after Biafra declared independence, the Six Day War broke out in the Middle East. Many conventional accounts of the Nigerian civil war maintain that the Middle East crisis simply distracted Western powers from the brewing conflict in West Africa. Stremlau, for example, claims that Nigeria was relegated to a

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58 TNA, FCO 25/232, WGAD to Secretary of State, 11 May 1967.
61 STREMLAU, op. cit., p. 60.
63 TNA, PREM 13/1661, Commonwealth Office to Lagos, 30 May 1967.
64 TNA, PREM 13/1661, Washington to Foreign Office, 30 May 1967.
‘distant secondary concern’. True as this may have been, it overlooks the fact that war in the Middle East magnified the importance of Nigerian oil, temporarily increasing Nigeria’s relevance on the world stage.

The Six Day War prompted an Arab oil boycott of the United Kingdom and the closing of the Suez Canal. The important lifeline that Nigerian oil provided during this time was highlighted in a brief for the Minister of State. Middle Eastern oil exports now had to be transported around the Cape to Western Europe, inducing a shortage of tankers and therefore a relative shortage of oil. Meanwhile, because of an Arab oil ban on UK destinations, Britain could not rely upon short-haul oil from either Libya or Algeria. What made this relative shortage so deleterious for the British economy was the resulting price increase, drain on foreign exchange, and therefore pressure upon the balance of payments. Nigerian oil helped to relieve this pressure in two ways: Lagos remained part of the Sterling Area, and its shipments required only a fraction of the time to be transported to Britain. Whereas a round trip between Britain and Nigeria took 20 days, one between Britain and the Persian Gulf required 68. In lieu of Nigerian crude, oil companies would have to rely upon Iranian supply, with greater freight charges, or American supply, at greater cost per barrel. The resulting additional foreign exchange cost would be an estimated £1.3 million a day. Overall, the Ministry of Power estimated that the additional cost to Britain’s balance of payments would be £15 million, assuming a six-month Middle East crisis. For a British government struggling with chronic balance of payments difficulties, this was a particularly unwelcome prospect.

Indeed, the oil issue had become so crucial in early June that even the staunchly pro-Federal Hunt recognized the pre-eminent position that oil must occupy in shaping Britain’s Nigeria policy:

In the new circumstances it must clearly be a principle object of British policy to avoid doing anything which could seriously antagonise the State of Biafra in case it is successful in vindicating its independence. Our interests, particularly in oil, are so great that they must override any lingering regret that we may feel for the disintegration of British-made Nigeria.

However, even as he acknowledged the need to stay on the Biafrans’ good side in the short term, Hunt seemed to have little doubt that FMG military initiative against Biafra was the best means of securing British interests in the medium and

65 STREMLAU, op. cit., p. 65.
66 TNA, FCO 38/111, Secret Brief for Minister of State, 11 July 1967.
67 TNA, FCO 38/111, Powell to Norris, 26 June 1967.
69 TNA, FCO 25/232, Lagos to Commonwealth Office [reproduced in Commonwealth Office Print of 7 July 1967].
long term. Upon Hunt’s advice, the Foreign Office deleted sixteen words from a
proposed letter to Gowon from Wilson. The words were: ‘since a resort to force
would only bring misery for persons of all races in Nigeria.’\(^7^0\) Whether this omission
served as a green light for FMG action can only be speculated. Still, the fact that a
letter from the British Prime Minister to the Nigerian Head of State expressly failed
to advise against military action could not have gone unnoticed in Lagos.

The British government’s ’wait and see’ approach had begun to unravel. The
policy was originally conceived as a short-term measure to bide time while the fate
of Biafra hung in the balance. As the days passed, however, the Commonwealth
Office faced countervailing pressures from two directions. On one side was Hunt,
who believed that a Federal military campaign against Biafra was imminent and
would likely be successful. Should Britain wish to secure its stake in the Federation,
it would have to demonstrate support for the FMG’s military moves (necessarily
alienating the Biafrans). On the other side were those who had a stronger belief in
Ojukwu’s capacity to defend the East and gain recognition, as well as those who
wished above all to secure the continued flow of Biafran oil.

The dispute came to a head over the issue of oil royalties. On 21 June, Biafra
released a decree calling upon companies operating in the East to pay royalties to its
government. At that time, Shell-BP had already paid harbour dues to both sides
(effectively a double payment), but it could not afford to pay royalties to both sides
as well.\(^7^1\) Hunt made clear his ‘impression…that [Shell-BP General Manager
Stanley] Gray personally believes that Ojukwu can succeed in establishing Biafra.’
Seeking to avoid an eventual nationalisation of Shell-BP, Gray would feel
compelled to cast his lot with Ojukwu and sign revenues over to the Biafrans. Hunt,
in contrast, asserted that ‘the odds are slightly in favour of the F.M.G.’ and that the
British government should advise Shell-BP that the best option was to remain
faithful to its agreement with the central government.\(^7^2\) He also believed that a
Nigerian blockade would be relatively effective in bringing the East ‘to its knees’
within two or three months.\(^7^3\)

Hunt’s attitude was not borne of indifference for Shell-BP’s plight, or of
disregard for the UK’s balance of payments problems. Rather, it was predicated on
the belief that oil flow would be stopped regardless of whether royalties were paid
to the FMG or Biafra; therefore, the balance of interests favoured payment to the
FMG because it was the stronger party and such payment would carry less attendant
risks for Britain’s international and regional position:

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I \text{ realise we are now faced with a serious situation aggravated by }
\text{Middle East troubles, and that it is likely, whatever decision is taken,}
\text{that flow of crude will be stopped either by Ojukwu or Gowon. It is, I}
\text{submit, slightly more serious to offend Gowon because to collaborate}
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\(^7^0\) TNA, PREM 13/1661, Commonwealth Office to Lagos, 31 May 1967.
\(^7^1\) TNA, FCO 54/47, Enugu to Commonwealth Office, 21 June 1967.
\(^7^2\) TNA, FCO 38/110, Lagos to Commonwealth Office, 22 June 1967.
\(^7^3\) TNA, FCO 38/110, Lagos to Commonwealth Office, 23 June 1967.
[sic] with Ojukwu would prejudice us with other African states with memories of Katanga.  

What is notable about Hunt’s reference to the legacy of Katanga is its status of secondary importance to oil. If either Biafra or the FMG could be relied upon to secure the flow of oil, the calculus would presumably change. Hunt recommended that Shell-BP pay royalties to the FMG. However, should Shell decide to pay to the Biafrans, Hunt urged that they ‘at least put off the evil day by fourth week in July.’ Interestingly, in a subsequent meeting with Shell officials, Gowon did not give any indication that he would blockade Biafra if Shell-BP made a payment to Ojukwu. In fact, he seemed to suggest that the FMG would be willing to work with the oil company regardless. It seems possible that Gowon was deliberately misleading Shell, perhaps hoping that a royalty payment to the East would provide a casus belli for blockading and attacking Biafra.

In London, the Commonwealth Office opted for the middle ground, and pressed senior Shell and BP executives to follow through on the original plan of paying any royalties into a suspense account. In fact, the oil executives initially agreed to do so, but reversed course when Ojukwu warned that ‘firm and positive action would follow in the event of non-compliance’. Whatever Shell-BP’s expectations, its decision to make a token payment of £125,000 to the East on 1 July alienated both Gowon and Ojukwu. In Enugu, Parker reported that Ojukwu was ‘offended’ by the minimal payment, having expected at least £2 million. For its part, the FMG informed the British High Commission on 2 July that it would now extend its blockade to oil tankers leaving and entering Bonny, effectively prohibiting all oil exports. On 6 July, the FMG launched a so-called ‘police action’ against Biafra, inaugurating the civil war.

**The decision to supply arms**

Although it was anticipated, the FMG’s oil blockade deeply distressed the British government. Nigerian oil constituted 10 per cent of British imports at the time of the Arab boycott, and its loss had a highly deleterious effect upon the balance of payments. In his memoirs, Wilson maintained that this loss contributed to the decision to devalue the pound in November, a claim confirmed by scholars. Thus, the British were at first very reluctant to extend military supplies to the Nigerians, especially when certain requested items (for example, Seaward Defence

75 Ibid.
76 TNA, FCO 38/111, Lagos to Commonwealth Office, 26 June 1967.
77 CRONJE, op. cit., p. 28.
78 Ojukwu made this threat in a 29 June meeting with Gray. See TNA, FCO 38/110, fo. 82, Steel to Hetherington, ‘Secret Memorandum on Nigeria’, 3 July 1967.
79 TNA, FCO 54/47, Enugu to Commonwealth Office, 2 July 1967.
80 TNA, FCO 38/111, Lagos to Commonwealth Office, 2 July 1967.
Boats) would be directly used to implement the blockade. Meanwhile, Britain’s Defence Advisor in Nigeria warned strongly against the provision of arms, given the FMG’s willingness to flout international law by firing upon, and even sinking, stubborn ships. According to the advisor, ‘they are an irresponsible government for whom it would be folly for us to entrust any further supplies of arms.’ Despite these fears, however, Britain decided rather early on to provide Lagos with weapons and other military supplies.

In the existing literature, the British decision is explained by recourse to a number of factors. Stremlau repeats Hunt’s claim that Britain merely continued its role as Nigeria’s ‘traditional’ arms supplier. St. Jorre links the decision to knowledge of Soviet supplies reaching Lagos in August. Cronje maintains that ‘the British Government decided that additional supplies would be required if the federal side was to carry through its campaign.’ All authors locate the decision sometime in August 1967. However, the archives reveal that the decision was made a month earlier, in early July, and that it was intimately tied to the oil question. A 7 July note from the Commonwealth Office to Michael Palliser, Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, suggested that provision of jet aircraft and patrol boats had been ruled out, but that anti-aircraft guns should be made available if ‘Gowon is helpful on oil.’ The Commonwealth Office initially intended to use arms supplies as a bargaining chip to ease the oil blockade.

Britain immediately sent Minister of State for Commonwealth Affairs, George Thomas, to meet Gowon in Lagos. At the meeting, held on 8 July 1967, Thomas forcefully maintained that the oil blockade was illegal under international law, and that oil companies could not be blamed if they decided to pay royalties to Biafra, for it was the government in effective control of a disputed territory. He also warned that the blockade would only prove counterproductive for the Federal Government’s own aims. While doing nothing to weaken the Biafran rebels, it could damage the future financial prospects of Nigeria itself. By potentially forcing Britain to ration oil supplies, moreover, the blockade would erode goodwill toward Nigeria in Britain. In the end, Thomas failed to obtain any concessions from Gowon, exposing the weakness of British leverage over its former colony. Once it was realized that London was essentially powerless to force a resumption of oil flow, the ‘wait and see’ approach of sitting on the fence was exhausted. British policy-makers now had to assess the longer term implications of a protracted conflict between the Federal Government and Biafra. Only a week after Thomas’s failed diplomatic mission, the Commonwealth Office informed Palliser that ‘some of Gowon’s advisers’ were pressing him to take reprisals against Shell-BP for its token payment to Ojukwu. Thus, ‘we have extra reason just now to show that our differences with them over oil

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83 TNA, FCO 38/199, Anderson to High Commission, 7 July 1967.
84 STREMLAU, op. cit., p. 76; HUNT, op. cit., pp. 179-182.
85 ST. JORRE, op. cit., p. 302. Primary documents reveal that London did indeed become aware of Soviet arms shipments in August, but this knowledge ‘did not create any panic [...] nor lead to any immediate change in arms policy.’ See YOUNG, op. cit., p. 203.
86 CRONJE, op. cit., p. 41.
87 TNA, PREM 13/1661, Forster to Palliser, 7 July 1967.
do not mean any general hardening in our attitude’. Where goodwill was once being demanded of Nigeria, it was now Britain that was obliged to demonstrate the same. The Commonwealth Office advocated not only the sale of anti-aircraft guns, but also provision of the previously denied Seaward Defence Boats and the sale, through Crown Agents, of ‘reasonable quantities of minor weapons and supplies.’ Wilson communicated Britain’s new position to Gowon by letter on 16 July.

London’s initial decision to supply weapons to the FMG, therefore, was predicated neither upon the Russian threat, nor strictly upon Britain’s ‘traditional’ role as a supplier. Instead, it was motivated by a desire to safeguard Shell-BP’s future position in the Federation. Since the FMG would not be budged from its decision to blockade Eastern oil, the British government shifted its priority from a short-term safeguarding of oil supply to a long-term safeguarding of fixed oil (and other) investments. The government even stepped in to prevent Shell-BP’s ‘token’ payment to Ojukwu. On 14 July, the Commonwealth Office informed Lagos that the Treasury had held up transfer of the necessary foreign exchange for ‘political reasons.’ Britain finally abandoned the ‘wait and see’ approach—but as we will see, this shift did not yet amount to full material backing for the ‘One Nigeria’ policy.

At first, Britain’s decision to provide limited military backing to Nigeria’s war effort yielded the expected dividends. Federal troops initially enjoyed strong military successes against the Biafrans, and on 25 July they seized the Bonny oil terminal—home to one of Shell-BP’s most valuable installations. Commonwealth Secretary George Thomson became so confident in a Federal victory that he wrote to Wilson, excitedly anticipating negotiations between a ‘victorious FMG and a vanquished “Biafra.”’ However, the military situation changed dramatically on 9 August, when Ojukwu ordered a surprise attack into the Mid-West region and made stunning territorial gains. By 18 August, the Biafran forces were a mere 135 miles from Lagos.

This reversal of fortune strongly shook the Commonwealth Office’s confidence in the very policy it so recently adopted. In an 18 August paper to Wilson, Thomas outlined his conception of British interests with a frankness that deserves extended quotation:

_The sole immediate British interest in Nigeria is that the Nigerian economy should be brought back to a condition in which our substantial trade and investment in the country can be further developed, and particularly so that we can gain access to important oil installations. Our only direct interest in the maintenance of the Federation is that Nigeria has been developed as an economic unit, and any disruption of_
this would have adverse effects on trade and development. Provided economic unity can be preserved, we have no direct interest in how this is done. The break-up of Nigeria into several independent States would not necessarily be adverse to our interests provided that full economic cooperation were maintained between them. Indeed, to the extent that a break-up produced a more stable political arrangement, it might in the long term even be to our advantage.\textsuperscript{94}

Thomas suggested that Britain did not have to rely upon a clear-cut FMG victory, or even the political framework of ‘Nigerian unity’, to safeguard its principal—i.e., economic—interest in Nigeria. So long as economic unity between politically autonomous parts could be achieved, there was no reason for the United Kingdom to be prejudicial to any one potential arrangement. According to Thomas, London’s Nigeria policy should promote negotiation between the parties with the aim of quickly ending the fighting and producing a viable framework for economic cooperation. To this end, he proposed that Britain launch ‘an immediate peace offensive’ designed to stop the fighting and to get the two sides talking. As a corollary of this initiative, arms supplies would be stopped ‘completely’.\textsuperscript{95}

Hunt strenuously opposed the proposal, arguing that such an initiative would have very little chance of success and unnecessarily disturb British-Nigerian relations at a very crucial juncture. Hunt’s ‘on the spot’ authority, coupled perhaps with the personal confidence invested in him by the Prime Minister, ensured that his advice won out, and Thomas’s proposal was quickly shelved.\textsuperscript{96} However, it is interesting to speculate about what may have happened had Thomas’s proposal been adopted. The chance of success for any ‘peace initiative’ may have been slim, and such an initiative would certainly have damaged Nigerian-British relations at least in the near term. Moreover, even with an arms embargo it is still possible that the war could have continued without externally supplied military equipment. The Biafrans were certainly masterful at producing their own weapons, and the FMG had a munitions plant of its own in Kaduna.\textsuperscript{97} Still, an embargo would doubtless have made the prosecution of the war more difficult and weakened the resolve of both sides. Cronje suggests that ‘without external supplies the damage inflicted would have been limited, and outright victory on the battlefield difficult to envisage.’\textsuperscript{98} This is no small matter in a war that killed as many as three million.\textsuperscript{99}

\textsuperscript{94} TNA, PREM 13/1662, Thomas to Prime Minister, 18 August 1967.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{96} TNA, PREM 13/1662, Palliser to Macleod, 23 August 1967.
\textsuperscript{97} CRONJE, op. cit., p. 45.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., p. 45.
\textsuperscript{99} See Eghosa OSAGHAE, Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence, London: Hurst & Co., 1998, p. 69; FALOLA & HEATON, op. cit., p. 158. The most frequently cited death toll statistic is one million. Still, there are dissenters. In his memoirs, the former British High Commissioner to Nigeria, David Hunt, claims that ‘total casualties’ numbered only 100,000 (On the Spot, p. 190). Young suggests a similar figure, citing post-facto Red Cross estimates of 50-100,000 deaths (see YOUNG, op. cit., p. 195).
A turn to the ‘quick kill’

Instead, British policy evolved further and further away from the prospect of genuine negotiation and arms limitation. With the closing of the District High Commission in Enugu, Britain lost its last direct diplomatic link with Biafra. As Nigerian forces amassed battlefield successes throughout the fall, their victories found a direct reflection in the Commonwealth Office. In early November, Thomas dramatically shifted his posture from dove to hawk, urging that Wilson support not a ‘peace offensive,’ but a final Federal military offensive. In motivating this change, he maintained that the ‘key to the fighting lies in Port Harcourt.’ Its capture would deny Ojukwu his last significant link with the outside world, and the last airfield capable of taking major supplies. Port Harcourt, of course, was also the site of Shell-BP’s oil installations. Consequently, Thomas suggested that Britain relax its arms supply policy, so as to go from supplying ‘relatively small quantities of small arms’ to ‘reasonable quantities.’

The Cabinet endorsed this strategy in short order, which it christened as the ‘quick kill.’ An OPD minute of 22 November observed:

The situation has now changed. On the one hand, the FMG seem likely to win in the long run. This would be in our interests. The FMG are better disposed to us than the East; their victory should lead to a restoration of oil supplies in due course. On the other hand, Colonel Ojukwu is now implacably hostile to us, is getting large supplies of arms from the Continent, and may be trying to raise a force of mercenaries.

This was a true turning point for British strategy. Ojukwu could never be a dependable partner for the British; and, as Commonwealth Secretary George Thomson would note a few months later, ‘in the unlikely event of Biafra succeeding in obtaining international recognition as an independent state, Shell/B.P. might find their concession revoked altogether by the Biafrans and offered to some non-British company instead.’ Gray’s refusal in the spring of the following year to pay any royalties to Biafra, despite Ojukwu’s threat to take ‘irrevocable steps’, indicates that Shell-BP had also definitively thrown in its lot with the FMG. Indeed, in December 1967, Gowon requested that Shell-BP pay its royalty of £5.5 million in advance, providing much needed sterling for the purchase of British weapons. The company even proposed, on its own initiative, to pay £1.25 million in income tax which was not yet due. All players now converged on a ‘One Nigeria’ policy, with a ‘quick kill’ of the Biafran rebels. This was, of course, Gowon’s explicit aim from the very beginning; but it was fully accepted by both the British government and Shell-BP once it became clear that only the abject defeat of the Biafrans would ensure the maintenance of Shell-BP’s investments, and—crucially for Britain—a resumption of Nigerian oil flow.

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100 TNA, PREM 13/1661, Thomas to Prime Minister, 8 November 1967.
101 TNA, CAB 148, OPD(67)86, 22 November 1967.
102 TNA, POWE 63/406, 4, Thomson to Prime Minister, 6 February 1968.
104 TNA, FCO 38/113, fo. 292, Confidential Memorandum from the High Commission Lagos, 15 December 1967.
The significance of generous arms sales to the FMG, in this context, went far beyond diplomatic courtesy. By directly enhancing the Nigerian military’s coercive capacity, British weapons became a pivot for harmonizing the various political-economic interests that were thrown into conflict at the outset of the war: ‘Anything we do now to assist the F.M.G. should help our oil companies to re-establish and expand their activities in Nigeria after the war, and, more generally, should help our commercial and political relationship with post-war Nigeria.’

What is more, arms sales were identified as an economic interest in their own right. In a 4 December note to Defence Secretary Denis Healey, Thomson urged that a ‘favourable response to [the FMG’s arms] request ought to give us every chance of re-establishing ourselves again as the main supplier of the Nigerian forces after the war. Provided the war ends reasonably soon, the Nigerian economy ought to recover and be able to expand again, and there should be valuable business to be done.’

Thus, while Britain did not sell arms to Nigeria because it was the country’s ‘traditional supplier’, it certainly did so to bolster its status as a reliable current and future supplier. This motivation, of course, was the opposite of what government officials publicly claimed. That London was willing to commit to such an effort, in turn, further highlights the importance of not simply economic interests, but the mutual alignment of these interests at the close of 1967, when ‘One Nigeria’ was at last fully endorsed by all relevant British policy-makers and by Shell-BP.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the British government preferred the status quo of a united and ‘moderate’ Nigeria to the prospect of a multitude of potentially radical nationalist successor states. This was, after all, a status quo that British officials laboriously moulded in concert with Nigerian elites in the period of late colonialism through to Gowon’s coup. When the status quo became untenable, often because of the conflicting ambitions of these same elites, London’s politicians and civil servants were forced identify the most pertinent interests in Nigeria and devise strategies for their defence. It is important to note that officials regarded economic interests as primary, but even more essential to acknowledge that oil interests—Shell-BP’s substantial investments and the flow of crude they produced—were especially important. Thus, despite later rhetoric about hallowed Commonwealth obligations and the sobering precedent of Katanga, the UK government was very much willing to consider recognition of an independent Eastern government, should one prove ‘viable’. The resulting ‘wait and see’ policy acquired renewed relevance as the Six Day War and Arab oil boycott elevated the macroeconomic significance of oil from the Niger Delta.

Gowon’s decision to impose his own blockade on Eastern oil, maintained even in the face of strong British diplomatic pressure, forced an end to the ‘wait and see’ policy. With the flow of oil now a closed issue, the future status of Shell-BP oil installations assumed primary importance. With Hunt’s assurance that the FMG possessed the military capacity to defeat Biafra, the British government agreed to

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105 TNA, PREM 13/1661, Thomson to Healey, 4 December 1967.
106 Ibid.
provide significant arms to Lagos—months before the prospect of Russian rivalry entered as a significant concern. Still, this was not yet an unequivocal endorsement of the ‘One Nigeria’ policy by all. The opinion of Commonwealth minister George Thomas, in particular, vacillated along with the relative fortunes of the Federal forces. His September proposal for a ‘peace offensive’ represented the last significant attempt to achieve some accommodation between Lagos and Enugu that would nevertheless be amenable to the full spectrum of British economic interests. Thereafter, only the unquestioned defeat of the Biafrans—the ‘quick kill’—would guarantee the long-term security of Britain’s investment in Eastern oil. As the quick kill became a slow death for hundreds of thousands of Biafrans in 1968, however, the Wilson government was faced with the rather difficult task of explaining how its sordid role had nothing at all to do with oil interests. By that stage, both the Soviets and the French had entered the picture as shadowy but nevertheless very real factors in the civil war.

**Bibliography**


