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Book Review

Book Title: The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran Civil War

Book Author: Alexander A. Madiebo

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Book Reviewer: Rotimi Olajide OPEYEOLUWA¹

Though this book is ancient, it is apposite to state that the prognosis offered by the author is as relevant today as when it was first published. Nigeria, like many African countries was birth with much hope in the aftermath of independence in 1960. However, the initial hope was dashed when the country was plunged into a series of political turbulence which dovetailed into a civil war in 1967. The war was instigated by a combination of factors such as ethnic suspicion, intolerance and tussle for political power and supremacy. Alexander Madiebo's book is an appreciable account of the run of play leading to the civil war, the civil war itself and its aftermath. The author of the book was a soldier that actively participated in the crisis leading to the civil war (1967-1970) and the war itself. The book is all about the triumph and travails of a young nation and how centrifugal tendencies has continued to undermine national cohesion even in the post-civil war era.

Though he started from the Nigerian Army, he ended up bearing arms against the Nigerian state without much of a choice, according to him and validated by the events leading to the war. From the book, he confirms the futility and brutality of war in retrospect. In discussing, war time life in Biafra, he narrated a tale of woes and destruction, yet sustained by hope. An episode filled with anguish and pains, as well, as some measure of successes of the ill-fated republic but Biafran was a republic that didn't endure. He highlighted his roles and painted a picture of an eye witness account. For him, the start point, was the first military coup of January 15 January 1966 and other episode only came to re-affirm or vitiate that event. That event was the trigger and enabler of other events that led to the civil war. The

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three hundred and seventy-seven-page book is comprised of three parts and fourteen chapters.

First was the maiden coup which occurred on the 15th January 1966, then the return leg coup of 29th July 1966. Both coups exacerbated the Faultline in both the country and by extension in the army. The author pointed on the failings of both Major General Aguiyi Ironsi and Major General Yakubu Gowon's administrations. The lack of sensitivities of Ironsi in the promulgation of Unification decree provoked a bloody reaction in the north which eventually consumed both his administration and his life. In the case of General Gowon, he failed woefully in arresting the drift and killings of innocent people of eastern extraction.

The first part discusses the background to the war, which included an introduction, series of events which included the first military coup, the failure of the coup and emergence of General Aguiyi Ironsi, the second coup and what he termed the gathering storm and the Biafran Armed Forces. In between all of these events, the author impresses on readers that the war was inevitable based on the flow of events, a deluge of ethnic tensions and suspicion. The author insinuated that the challenge which snowballed into a civil war was political and as such could have been resolved politically. Perhaps because of many of the leading actors were young men, they allowed unrestrained emotions to take the better part of them.

The second part of the book deals with the civil war proper. This part captures the military operations, strategies, tactics, battles defeats and triumphs in details. He was brutally frank in his assessment of the war efforts. Major General Alexander Madiebo was instrumental to the resistance in which, he discharged his duties with every sense of responsibility. Detailed and truthful, he admitted where errors of judgements were made and re-affirmed his choices, where events turned out positive, validating choices he made. Though, he lost his commission in the Nigerian Army to the war, he did not lose his sense of dignity. The war was a bitter pill which was preferably swallowed than the indignities before the war. Like many that participated in the war, he was not apologetic about his role and participation in the war. For them, it was a war of resistance foisted on them but many observers have criticized the Biafran military command for failing to embrace political solution, when it became obvious that the war could not be sustained or won militarily. That in itself is a touchy issue which the author brushed off without saying a thing about in the book.

The third part of the book was devoted to why the war was lost by Biafra. He was frank and detailed to a fault. His account validated Mao Tse Tsung's dictum that, "power comes from the barrel of the gun". Many Biafrans went to the war convinced that victory was attainable and endured grim conditions but once the war began, the tide of events could not be sustained by hope alone. Other variables such as the lack of steady flow of arms, economic sanctions, food shortages, lack of adequate international support and superior firearms of the federal forces ensured that the tide of victory became elusive for the Biafrans. Madiebo, however, debunked the insinuation that the Biafran war was fought to satisfy the ego of

Emeka Ojukwu, former Head of State of Biafra. He said, it was an insult to make such assumptions. For him, the war was fought to stave off a wave of attacks to exterminate the people of the south east. He asserted that, though the war was lost, “but we fought well enough and with sufficient determination to bring our grievances successfully to the notice of the entire world”.

Major General Alexander Madiebo enlisted into the Nigerian Army in May, 1954 as an officer cadet and trained at the Regular Officer’s Special Training School (ROSTS) in Teshie, Ghana, Eaton Hall Officer Cadet School in Chester, England and Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in Camberly, England and was commissioned into the Army Artillery with the rank of a Second Lieutenant in December 1956. His career as a soldier in the Nigerian Army lasted for just 14 years and an additional 3 years in the Biafran Army, where he commanded troops and held command appointments such as the following: commander of the 5th Brigade and Biafran Army Chief. He had the ears of the Biafran leader. In the Nigerian Army, he rose to the rank of a lieutenant-colonel and was promoted Major-General in the Biafran Army. Before the Nigerian-Biafran war, he had served in Cameroun and in the Congo under the banner of the United Nations Organization as a peacekeeper.

The book is a compulsory read for all Nigerians. This is instructive against the backdrop and renewed calls for war. War as catalogued in the book is not a tea-party. It is not for the faint-hearted. It is indeed not for the bold because as the Nigerian-Biafran war revealed that if given an option, even the leaders of such insurrection could bolt with their feet after plunging millions to needless deaths. If war is the continuation of politics by other means, like the book validated, politics if not well handled could ignite crisis which could plunge a country into war. The author presents readers with cocktail of events both remote and immediate causes which plunged Nigeria into war. Although the book was published just a decade after the war but the lessons there-in are still relevant and instructive for a nation adrift and in search for stability and cohesion. The author was explicit and candid about the military operations and the incredible odds which the people grappled with in their determination to sustain the war efforts. The Biafran military structure and the role of mercenaries. He narrated how the military efforts were sabotaged with politics and infightings. Indeed, the book is a required read for dispassionate knowledge and insight into the pre-war and war efforts. Perhaps, the post war-time warning of former chief of Army, Lt. General T. Yakubu Danjuma, where he said, “no country in the contemporary international system has survived two civil wars” is instructive for Nigeria.

The book remains instructive as Nigeria continue its search for nationhood and a necessary pathway in the 21st century. The fortune or misfortune of Nigeria depend on sound leadership and good governance. The war has ended but there is a heavy dose of historical revisionism about the event. An enduring lesson of the Nigerian-Biafran war is that errors of judgement, intemperate reactions and ego can ignite wars. Indeed, all wars can be diffused by diplomacy and all political difference can be handled by the spirit of give-and-

take. A little compromise, a shifting of ground and accommodation of all contending interests can enhance peace and stability in any multi-ethnic and multi-religious society such as Nigeria.