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Response Memo: What Now for the Western Way of War?

Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country* (Parts II-III)

Word Count: 1,115

In *There Was A Country*, Chinua Achebe recounts the events of the Nigerian-Biafran War from both a historical and deeply personal perspective. In this bloody and fractious conflict, the self-declared Republic of Biafra—comprised mostly of the Igbo people in the southeastern region of Nigeria—attempted to declare independence from the rest of the country. Achebe’s account describes the grinding nature of the conflict between the Nigerian and Biafran armies, the terrible suffering of the Igbo people at the hands of Nigerian troops, his own attempts as an ambassador to secure international recognition for Biafra, and the political repercussions of the failed rebellion for Nigeria as a nation.

Though Achebe doesn’t go into much detail on the subject, I thought it was important to recognize that the construct of Nigeria itself was an artificial one; in an attempt to consolidate economic power over the region, the British had carved out a chunk of territory and slapped it with the label “Nigeria” without regard to religious or ethnic differences.[[1]](#footnote-1) By the time the Biafrans rebelled, Nigeria was independent of the United Kingdom, but the conflict was rooted in the fractured ethnic identities of the Nigerian population. This again relates to the idea of an “us” vs. “them” mentality, in which racial differences elicit a tribal sense of kinship against other groups of people.

In lecture, we discussed the idea that war can help to build a nation, as was the case with World War II in the United States. With Nigeria, we saw the flip side of that, in which war yielded neither increased industrial production nor improved living conditions but instead devastated the lives of millions. Of course, none of the fighting during WWII took place on American soil, so the comparison isn’t exactly fair, but could there be other reasons the two conflicts had such vastly different outcomes? One idea we talked about last time in precept was that an emerging nation like Biafra, lacking the U.S.’s infrastructure, would not be able to withstand the social and political upheaval of war, but I also think it might have something to do with the fact that Biafra was not fighting the classic Western way of war in the first place.

Biafran resistance presented itself in the forms of “sniper fire and guerrilla warfare” (139), with a strategy that involved “break[ing] conflict zones into classic smaller wars,” where the few arms they had would prove more effective (209). With the typical Western way of war, the sheer mass of the military and the organization required to manage it often bring forth a stronger, more centralized state. With guerrilla warfare, though, which requires “no front lines” and “a reliance on small units” (209), that benefit disappears. The reason guerrilla warfare is so effective against the Western way of war is that it *doesn’t* consolidate forces—but the downside is that the state doesn’t reap the same rewards; regimes that use guerrilla warfare, like the one in Biafra, often have great military authority but very little political legitimacy. Professor Centeno touched on this idea in lecture when he remarked how the typical connection between political power and military power was splintering. Is there any way, then, that guerrilla warfare can have the same “state-building” benefits as the Western way of war? Or as nations increasingly use guerrilla warfare as a tool of aggression, will we see a similar trend in the devolution of the nation-state into less centralized, less authoritative forms of government?

In lecture, we also talked about the idea that this type of guerrilla warfare can dissipate the other side’s sense of political legitimacy, since it refuses to fight on their terms. In Achebe’s account, I noticed that the Nigerians often responded to Biafran hostilities in a way that indicated that they felt their sense of political validity was indeed threatened. For example, Achebe writes in Part II that the Nigerian troops “felt humiliated by the Biafran Mid-Western offensive,” in which Biafran troops made an unexpectedly successful attack on Nigerian soil, and sought vengeance by rounding up as many defenseless Igbo men as they could find and systematically killing them in what came to be known as the Asaba Massacre. A comparison might be drawn between the way the Nigerians underestimated the Biafrans and the way the United States underestimated Afghanistan, both of which were expected to be brief, decisive conflicts resolved within months. I found it interesting that Nigeria’s response to the Biafrans’ use of guerrilla warfare tactics was to commit heinous atrocities, as if to assert their authority with absolute certainty, and I wonder if similar U.S. atrocities committed in the Middle East (e.g., urinating on the bodies of dead Taliban fighters) can be attributed to the same sense of indignation, almost, that the other side is “refusing to fight fair.” I imagine that undermining the enemy’s sense of dignity might compel them to retaliate in kind.

The last idea I wanted to discuss was how the Western way of war lends itself to genocide. Throughout the book, Achebe describes the tactics used by the Nigerian government, including the “starve them into submission” policy, as cruel and inhumane. Many international leaders seemed to agree that the Nigerians had committed “an actual series of atrocities, real crimes against humanity”; Achebe cites one of Richard Nixon’s campaign speeches, in which Nixon declared “[G]enocide is what is taking place right now—and starvation is the grim reaper,” as well as an editorial in the *Washington Post* which stated that “genocide” was “the only word which fits Nigeria’s decision to stop the International Committee of the Red Cross, and other relief agencies, from flying food to Biafra” (230).

Maybe reading about other atrocities committed during the madness of war has made me cynical, but I didn’t think that Nigeria’s policies were particularly brutal or barbaric. After all, the Western way of war dictates total war—not war to “achieve limited aims,” but to render the enemy “politically helpless or militarily impotent.” If one side has the opportunity to devastate the other side via starvation, is that not a legitimate weapon of Western war? And if so, where do we draw the line between genocide and total war? Or is genocide only genocide when it’s racially motivated?

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. *There Was A Country: A Personal History of Biafra*. New York: Penguin Press, 2012. Print.

This paper represents my own work in accordance with university regulations.

/s/ Hannah Hirsh

1. Atofarati, Abubakar A. "The Biafran War." *African MasterWeb*. Web. 30 Apr. 2013.

   <http://www.africamasterweb.com/BiafranWarCauses.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)