11-20-2019

Finding Foreign Friends: National Self-Determination and Related Norms as Strategic Resources during the Biafran War for Independence, 1967–1970

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The study analyzes how the government of the Republic of Biafra used international norms to win foreign support during its 1967–1970 campaign to secede from Nigeria. Secession conflicts occur at the intersection of international and domestic politics. For independence movements, support from outside is crucial. But, as Bridget Coggins has asked, how can secession movements find "friends in high places"? International support for unilateral secession attempts is strictly prohibited. Domestic and international asymmetry are limiting secessionist foreign policy instruments to intangible means. Legitimacy is a central concept to illuminate the phenomenon. In international politics, legitimacy depends on the external perception of compliance with a canonical set of normative criteria. The international order prioritizes (1) territorial integrity, (2) nonintervention, and (3) uti possidetis over (4) national self-determination, (5) human rights, and (6) good governance. All six principles are contested. Secession movements can make use of this normative ambivalence to justify their claim in relation to the international community. They can use international norms strategically to influence the perceptions of foreign actors about the legitimacy of the secession claim to win external support. This concept is used to analyze the Biafran campaign for independence from Nigeria from 1967 to 1970. The inquiry rests on a combination of inductive and deductive research techniques and analyzes original documents such as official publications from the government of Biafra and press releases issued by its public relations agency, Markpress.

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The United Nations headquarters in New York is one of the most prominent architectural symbols of international politics after World War II. In front of the Secretariat Building, the flag of every UN member state waves over the UN Plaza. Every time the United Nations accepts a new member, it adds a new national flag to the row of flagpoles in a special flag-raising ceremony.[1] At the official opening of the headquarters building in 1951, only sixty flags flew at the site. By then, the architects already expected membership growth and installed thirty more flagpoles for future admissions.[2] Only nine years later, the number of member states had grown to ninety-nine.[3] In December 1960, the UN General Assembly declared in its Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples: "All peoples have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development."[4]

For many peoples, fulfilling this right means one thing: establishing an independent, sovereign state.[5] UN admission is by far the clearest sign of independence and sovereignty in the modern international system. As the symbolism at the UN Plaza demonstrates, the emergence of new states is a dynamic process. The number of UN member states has now grown to 193.[6] This "trend," as Tanisha Fazal and Ryan Griffiths have called it, continues.[7]

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South Sudan, the United Nation's newest member, became independent from Sudan in 2011.[8] As in South Sudan, most sovereign states belonged to larger countries before their independence. Often, the flag-hoisting ceremony in New York was the pinnacle of a long political struggle. More often, however, struggles for independence ended tragically.[9]

The area surrounding the UN building is a magnifying glass for the ups and downs of state emergence. It is not only a place for celebration but also one for protest and grief. Supported by friends from the United States, representatives of the unrecognized Republic of Biafra, for example, in 1968 and 1969 repeatedly held protest rallies at the Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza, a park near the UN Headquarters. With their national flag waving above their heads, the Biafrans appealed to the United Nations to work toward peace in their bloody conflict with the Nigerian central state and help them in their struggle for independence. To their disappointment, neither the General Assembly nor General Secretary U Thant responded.[10]

While the United Nations and its members support national self-determination in principle, they are cautious of encouraging people within existing countries to aim for independent statehood. Instead, they desire the sovereignty of existing states and the preservation of the territorial status quo in international politics.[11] The rapid increase in the number of states during the 1960s was possible only because the former colonial states realized the illegitimacy of colonialism in international politics and voluntarily granted their former colonies independence. For a brief period, the international community took the principle of national self-determination as an explicit right to independent statehood. Its scope, however, was restricted to former colonies. For peoples whose boundaries were not congruent with colonial demarcations, the international community did not regard the claim to self-determination as sufficient cause to justify independent statehood.[12] An all too welcoming attitude, statesmen feared, would initiate a contagious spread of minority demands that would eventually lead to a "balkanization" of states and the disruption of the international order.[13]

Still, groups within existing states claim independence, though they are not entitled to the restrictive reading of self-determination.[14] When such a claim to independence is accepted neither by the state of which the people in question is a part, the metropolitan state, nor by the international community, we speak of *unilateral secession.*[15] The driving force behind a secession attempt is called *secessionism*. It is a political course of action that is mostly, but not always, carried out in the name of a distinct ethnic community.[16] Secessionist movements, the agents of secessionism,[17] claim a certain territory, often perceived as a homeland, and aim to withdraw it from the "authority of a larger state of which it is a part."[18] The restriction of metropolitan control over the territory in question is the foundation for the establishment of an independent state.[19] To safeguard the independence of their state, secessionists seek international diplomatic recognition.[20]

Experiences of discrimination, trigger events that threaten their survival, and in-group dynamics but also situations of metropolitan weakness are important forces that bring ethnic groups to desire secession, even if their chances are bleak.[21] Metropoles normally reject secession claims straightaway.[22] Because both actors claim exclusive control over the same territory, secession conflicts swiftly reach a deadlock and are often fought with much zeal.[23] Secession is exceptionally difficult to achieve but not impossible.[24] According to John Wood, we should understand secession as a dynamic process. Secessionist movements need to apply a bundle of different strategies and interact with a variety of actors at several levels to reach their goal.[25]

For secessionist movements, support from outside is crucial. Foreign support is necessary to reverse domestic asymmetry because the metropole is often a superior opponent. Secession movements also need diplomatic recognition to establish an independent state.[26] Thus, secession conflicts are internationalized conflicts.[27] But support from "friends in high places,"

as Bridget Coggins has called them,[28] does not come from nothing. At the international level, the domestic asymmetry continues. Because of the potentially disrupting consequences for the metropolitan state in question as well as for the international order itself, the handling of secessionist demands is a delicate matter for third states.[29] Intervening on behalf of secessionists is a strict "taboo."[30] This prohibition also applies to premature recognition without metropolitan consent.[31] As Eiki Berg states, "international law does not have a logically consistent legal doctrine that would treat sovereignty claims in a universal manner."[32] Consequently, whether to support or recognize a secessionist movement is an individual political decision made by sovereign states based on their interests and not an automatism.[33] Sovereign states, however, are initially reluctant to support secession movements and instead treat them as nonstate actors. Because of this twofold asymmetry, secessionist instruments to find foreign support are often limited to intangible means. Thus, secessionist movements need to persuade foreign actors to support them.[34]

At the same time, the international community's handling of secessionist demands is constantly changing.[35] The rapid increase in the number of states is a clear sign that the international territorial order is dynamic and in flux.[36] Shifting notions of justice and appropriateness in international politics influence the willingness of states to accept or promote territorial changes.[37] The secession practice is not regulated exclusively by restrictive principles such as the preservation of territorial integrity, the ban on foreign intervention, and uti possidetis, a regulation that restricts the right to state emergence to former colonies and first-order substates. Although hedged since the 1960s, national self-determination is still a central principle in international politics. Moreover, notions that condition sovereignty on certain behavior such as the protection of individual human rights, genocide prevention, democracy, and good governance increasingly influence the discourse on secession.[38]

We know that secessionist movements justify their cause in relation to the international community.[39] What we barely know is how secessionists do so strategically. International norms that tend to revise the territorial status quo might have a strategic value for secessionist movements when it comes to finding foreign friends. To zoom into this neglected type of secessionist action and shed light on the nexus of secessionist strategy, international norm dynamics, and foreign interference, this article explores the following research question: How do secessionist movements use international norms to win external support? I analyze a historical case that has rarely been considered in recent secession research: the Biafran campaign for independence from Nigeria, 1967 to 1970.

According to Alexis Heraclides, secession movements seek to "meet international normative standards of legitimacy" as part of their international activities.[40] Janice Mueller has investigated how the Tamil Liberation Army and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) "echoed" human rights to improve their strategic positions in the intrastate conflict.[41] Lee Seymour has shown how the Kosovo government strategically invoked human rights to secure premature recognition after the declaration of independence in 2008.[42] Alan Kuperman has investigated how the KLA has manipulated the international perception of the Kosovo conflict to prompt the international community to intervene.[43] Coggins has introduced the concept of rebel diplomacy that pinpoints the "strategic use of talk" violent nonstate actors exert to acquire political goals.[44] Fazal has illuminated how violent rebels make sure to adhere to the international law of war to display their behavior as legitimate.[45] Matt Qvortrup has investigated the strategic calculus underlying independence referenda and how certain technical conditions influence international perceptions of their legitimacy.[46] According to Fiona McConnell, Terri Moreau, and Jason Dittmer, secession movements (as well as other nonstate actors) "imitate" official state diplomacy when they interact with the international community to enhance their legitimacy and become recognized as equivalent actors.[47]

Legitimacy is a sensible starting point for the analysis. What we are looking for also seems to have something to do with communicative actions as well as perceptual factors. As

we have seen, international law does not entail any automatism for sovereign states to support secessionist movements. But normative ambiguities inherent in the international territorial order might offer "incentives"[48] for secessionist movements to use international norms as strategic means to circumvent the metropolitan obstruction and bring sovereign states to intervene. To seize the phenomenon, I introduce the notion of *secessionist norm politics*, a concept inspired both by Bernd Bucher's work in the subfield of critical constructivism within the discipline of international relations[49] and the theory of legitimacy management in the sociology of organizations.[50]

The Biafran case seems fruitful to illuminate the research problem because it has been one of the earliest instances of highly internationalized and mediatized intrastate conflict.[51] At the time, the conflict was referred to as a "war of words."[52] Although well documented, the conflict is quite unknown in recent secession research. More recently, historians have carefully examined the conflict and highlighted the extensive international debate on questions of human rights and genocide it sparked.[53] The period under investigation begins with the declaration of independence in May 1967 and ends with the capitulation of Biafra in January 1970. The study analyzes original documents such as official publications from the government of Biafra and press releases issued by its own public relations agency, Markpress.

The analysis begins by introducing a strategic perspective to the notion of international legitimacy and develops a tentative concept of secessionist norm politics that makes it possible to discover secessionist norm use. The analysis then works out international and domestic context factors of the Biafran independence conflict. Finally, it investigates the Biafran strategy to win international support and how it unfolded. This investigation considers the conflict in three phases and ends by drawing conclusions that refine the theoretical concept.

Norms and Legitimacy: A Strategic Perspective

Circumventing domestic obstruction and persuading states to breach the secession taboo is a strategic imperative for secessionist movements. Because of domestic and international asymmetry, foreign policy instruments of secession movements are limited to intangible, ideational, or cognitive means.[54]

The straightforward concept of legitimacy management in the sociology of organizations can help us uncover strategies that rest on the use of normative means. Mark Suchman offers a basic definition of legitimacy: the "perception that the actions of an entity are appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms."[55] An audience attributes legitimacy. Audience members base their decision to legitimize an actor on the evaluation of its compliance with specific legitimacy criteria. These criteria are identical with norms that have a high social resonance within the audience. Legitimation has profound consequences because it enables actors to act unhindered and often secures them active support by legitimizing actors.[56]

For this reason, organizations seek to manage their legitimacy by influencing the perceptions of external actors. To gain, maintain, or repair legitimacy, organizations can openly adjust their behavior to the norms that are relevant to the audience they want to convince.[57] Or they can manipulate the perceptions of their target audience by building "legitimacy facades."[58] Both varieties rest on the use of norms. Since legitimacy is a matter of perception, legitimacy management occurs mainly in such areas as mass media or public relations.[59] Legitimacy management then is an intangible and indirect strategy to win external support by using the norms that resonate within a community of potential supporters. The norms that legitimacy managers use are essentially strategic means.

To capture agency in norm dynamics, Bucher has introduced the promising concept of international norm politics, illuminating "processes of norm articulation, propagation,

contestation, adaption, adoption, and rejection."[60] The proposed research agenda focuses on "agents embedded within social arrangements and how their purposeful actions lead to the unintended social construction of reality."[61] Actors that pursue norm politics exercise power by deploying, evoking, or using symbolic "normative, or judicial resources to directly alter what other international actors do."[62] The approach incorporates the classic definition of international norms as "standards of appropriate behavior."[63]

In international law, secession is somewhat unregulated and commonly deemed a matter of domestic politics outside the scope of international jurisdiction. For fears of encouraging minorities and setting disrupting precedents, states refrain from formulating clear-cut rules for legitimate secession. Despite the clear preference for territorial integrity, nonintervention, and uti possidetis, the competing notion of national self-determination is still a highly important principle in international law. Moreover, notions that tend to "relativize sovereignty,"[64] such as individual human rights, genocide prevention, and good governance, increasingly penetrate the secession discourse. This "pouring in" of norms, which were not originally part of the normative framework regarding state emergence, is the result of a trend in international politics toward greater respect for humanitarian concerns.[65] We can now observe a "simultaneity" of contradicting and contested principles.[66]

Secession conflicts occur in an international environment that is regulated by a mesh of six norms: (1) territorial integrity, (2) nonintervention, and (3) uti possidetis, (4) national self-determination, (5) human rights/genocide, and (6) good governance. They tend to prompt either the preservation of the current territorial status quo (1–3) or its revision (4–6).[67] While the status-quo oriented norms are based on the conservative paradigm of state sovereignty, the revisionist norms can be associated with a broader dynamic toward liberal internationalism. Although the status quo principles are prioritized in theory and practice, all six norms share some ambivalences and controversies, especially if one tries to balance them. Thus, some norms concerning secession and statehood clash in certain situations.[68]

I suppose that the normative ambiguities and dynamics inherent in the territorial order might offer possible access points for secessionist norm use at the international level. For secession movements, as depicted by Rafael Biermann, international norms not only are neutral rules of the game but appear as "legitimation device[s]" that they interpret selectively and put forward to pursue their interests.[69] International norms are strategic means for secessionist movements to win international support. Secessionist movements use the societal resonance of international norms and connect the internal conflict to international norm dynamics to bring states to "do something [they] would not otherwise do"[70]: break the secession taboo and interfere in the secession conflict on behalf of the secessionist movement. Summing up the theoretical considerations, I propose the following theoretical concept: Secessionist norm politics encompass the strategic use of international norms to influence the perceptions of foreign actors about the legitimacy of the secession claim to win external support.

Following Heraclides, I incorporate a rather broad understanding of international support as an action: "(1) . . . that was deliberately aimed at supporting the position of the secessionists; (2) . . . enhanced the secessionist position, irrespective of the state's intention; and (3) defined by the secessionists themselves . . . as helpful."[71] Foreign support includes intangible measures such as verbal acknowledgment and diplomatic advocacy but also tangible forms such as military aid and military intervention.[72] Formal diplomatic recognition is another highly valuable form of outside support since it can open the door for a dynamic spread of foreign assistance, as Coggins has stated.[73]

With those tentative ideas about secession movements and their use of international norms in mind, we can proceed to the analysis.

The Case of Biafra

The International and Regional Context: Norms and Politics in the Global Sixties

The Biafran secession conflict erupted right after the heyday of national self-determination during decolonization.[74] Once most of the former colonies successfully achieved independence during the 1960s, the international community quickly began to "domesticate"[75] the principle. To prevent a chaotic break-up of old and new states, and to safeguard international stability during the cold war, all major and regional powers went back to privileging the competing norms of territorial integrity and nonintervention.[76] To regulate decolonization, the international community imposed a "colonial grid" on the new states, as Christopher Clapham has put it.[77] This practice involved a takeover of colonial administrative boundaries as state borders and referred to the ancient principle of interstate conduct uti possidetis.[78] In consequence, the application of national self-determination as a right to emerge "as a sovereign independent state" was restricted to "territories . . . of the colonial type,"[79] as General Assembly Resolution 1541 of December 1960 affirmed. For distinct groups within the newly established states, the self-determination should mean substate autonomy.[80] This development led to a highly ambivalent situation as the principle of national self-determination was theoretically affirmed and practically contained at the same time.[81]

The period was also a decade of political turmoil in many parts of the world, often subsumed under the term the *global sixties*.[82] Nonstate actors increasingly influenced international politics. The desire for a revolutionary change in the Western World connected with a growing awareness of colonial and postcolonial matters. The Vietnam War and its immersive international media coverage catalyzed this dynamic.[83] Influenced by the cold war dualism between liberal democracy and state socialism, the question of development loomed over large parts of the postcolonial world and increasingly aroused Western societies.[84] The rise of mass media and the beginnings of a culture of Holocaust remembrance in Western Europe further contributed to this profound transformation.[85] While the notion of national self-determination temporarily lost its momentum, human rights and genocide, ideas that originated in the postwar years but gained prominence in the course of decolonization, became central normative reference points for an emerging international civil society.[86] To celebrate the breakthrough of international humanitarianism, UNESCO declared 1968 the International Year of Human Rights.[87]

Domestic Determinants of the Biafran Secession

The Biafran independence conflict was rooted in a complex combination of colonial heritage, state weakness, identity politics, and communal violence. Nigeria became independent from Britain in 1960. Like most postcolonial states, it inherited the boundaries of the former colonial administration. Typically for British colonial politics, the inner and outer boundaries were determined arbitrarily, with complete disregard for the enormous social diversity of the vast territory.[88] After independence, the country was demarcated by three federal units, roughly modeled on the settlement patterns of the dominant ethnic groups: the Muslim Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Christian Igbo in the east, and the Yoruba in the southwest. Since the political system deliberately restricted the power of the federal state, the substates had many opportunities for separate development. By the mid-1960s, they already diverged significantly.[89]

Latent interethnic tensions came to the fore when two failed coups d'état triggered a federal crisis in 1966. The federal government presented the events as acts of the Igbo and accused the group of plotting for a takeover. Spurred on by these reproaches, local unrest in the Northern Region escalated into mob violence against Igbo residents that killed about thirty thousand people. Shocked by the events, the Eastern administration, which had to deal with a

wave of Igbo refugees that had fled the North, demanded increased autonomy and further political devolution of the federation. A series of failed negotiation attempts and a federal decree that suspended the political autonomy of all substates triggered the Eastern administration to declare secession in May 1967. To reintegrate the Eastern Region and prevent other regions from seceding, the federal army began a military campaign in July.[90] The conflict went through three stages: (1) a military stalemate that lasted from June 1967 to spring 1968; (2) guerilla warfare caused by a federal blockade till spring 1969; and (3) a federal offensive that ceased with the Biafran capitulation in January 1970.[91]

Introducing Biafra: Spring 1967–Spring 1968

On the morning of Tuesday, May 30, 1967, military governor Odumegwu Ojukwu officially declared the independence of the Republic of Biafra. Several national and international media correspondents attended the event. During the ceremony, Ojuwku presented the new national flag, which consisted of three horizontal squares in red, black, and green with a yellow pictogram of a rising sun in its center, a design inspired by the Pan-African flag.[92] Like many other documents of this kind,[93] the Biafran Proclamation of Independence was heavily inspired by the American Declaration of Independence of 1776. According to the Biafran version, the Biafrans had "certain inalienable rights" that could "no longer be protected . . . by any Government based outside Eastern Nigeria."[94]

During the following months, the Biafran attention was drawn to tasks such as internal mobilization and warfare.[95] "Introducing the Republic of Biafra," as one leaflet, published in Europe during the period, stated in its title, was the primary aim of the Biafran campaign at the international level. The publication portrays the Biafran secession as a consequence of decolonization and the breakup of the "artificial geographical unit" Nigeria.[96] Biafra, the document declares, "opted for self-determination after a long period of heart-searching and after making desperate efforts to save the Federation of Nigeria from disintegration."[97] According to the publication, the Biafrans had a historical and cultural "uniqueness" that made them distinct from other Nigerian ethnicities.[98] From the beginning of the conflict, the Biafran government acted as if Biafra were already a fully independent state. In *White Paper on Future Association*, published internationally in August 1967, the government affirmed the sovereignty of the new republic, portrayed the Biafran secession as a result of the break-up of Nigeria, and even offered the federal state cooperative relations.[99]

The international community, however, largely ignored the conflict.[100] In July 1967, the US magazine *Jet* described it as "the war between blacks nobody cares about."[101] Unlike the United States, which firmly ruled out any premature recognition already in June,[102] most states did not even concern themselves with the issue. In September, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) deemed the conflict an "internal affair, the solution of which is primarily the responsibility of the Nigerians itself."[103] Asked by a journalist for the Canadian position on the Biafran war, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau answered in early 1968: "Where's Biafra?"[104]

Two significant developments throughout winter 1967/68 forced the Biafran government to review and intensify its international activities: First, thanks to its material might and British reinforcements, the federal army was able to gain the upper hand on the battlefield and conquer large areas of the Biafran territory. The federal military also succeeded in establishing a blockade around the area that effectively isolated Biafra and its population of fourteen million people from the outside world. As a consequence, Biafra ran short of medicines, seeds, and food.[105] Second, shocked by the increasingly problematic humanitarian situation in the area, relief workers and church representatives who had visited Biafra began to express their concerns in the international media.[106] In October, Pope Paul VI published his pamphlet *On Africa*, in which he calls on Christians on the continent to step in "when violence, as has unfortunately happened, assumes almost the proportions of genocide, when

within the boundaries of the same country different racial groups are pitted against one another."[107] Ojukwu realized the strategic value of this new international attention as he declared in his Christmas broadcast "The Vision of Biafra" in December 1967: "The world is beginning to see the justness of our cause."[108]

Fight for Survival: Spring 1968–Spring 1969

As the prospects of a military victory vanished, the Biafran government and its Ministry of Information radically intensified their attempts to internationalize the conflict. Essential for the new strategy was the foundation of the international public relations agency Markpress News Feature Service – Biafran Overseas Press Division in January 1968. Run by the British media expert William Bernhardt, the professional enterprise took offices in Geneva, Switzerland. According to Morris Davis, the Markpress mailing list contained more than four thousand addressees, including all members of the British Parliament, most major newspapers, news agencies, and several civil society organizations.[109] Key publications included the periodical *Biafra Newsletter* and a significant number of professional press releases, of which Markpress issued several hundred within just two years.[110]

The Biafran publications contained current news from the front, commentaries of recent international events, reports of federal atrocities, speeches by Biafran officials, minutes of press conferences, and press reviews with comments favorable toward Biafra. Markpress also published comprehensive volumes of programmatic statements and documents by the Biafran government.[111] The public relations agency worked closely with the Biafran government and received information by Telex almost daily. Usually, the media experts transformed the Biafran telegrams into proper press releases without editing them much, as Bernhardt told the BBC in 1968.[112] Also, the service managed to fly foreign journalists into the enclave. According to Davis, the typical press tour consisted of a round of press conferences and talks with the Biafran government. After that, the foreign journalists had a chance to visit the countryside, refugee camps, and the conflict-zone.[113] Markpress, in turn, issued minutes and reports of the events.[114] Thus, Markpress became Biafra's central "means of communication [to the] outside world," as Bernhard states in a letter addressed to "Editors Receiving Markpress Releases."[115] In another letter, addressed to the "Editors of the German Press List," Bernhardt reveals the calculus of his endeavors: "Maximum coverage."[116]

During a press conference in spring 1968, Ojukwu reflected on the new strategy: "The war aims of Biafra are very simple: to delay the enemy for as long as possible until world conscience is aroused and then to seek world support in what is essentially a human problem."[117] The strategy, he said, aimed at influencing "world opinion."[118] In another press release, Ojukwu declared that he hoped the new strategy would inspire Western governments to "seriously re-examine their position in the war against Biafra."[119] "Public opinion," Ntieyong Akpan, chief of staff under Ojukwu, recalled of the Biafran approach in his memoirs, "would force . . . governments to take positive action in favor of Biafra."[120] He further stated: "The longer the war lasted, the more sympathy Biafra would have from the world. Such sympathy might bring more recognition, thus making it possible for Biafra to survive as an independent entity from the rest of Nigeria."[121] Winning international support now was a top priority for the Biafrans.

Markpress, with the Ministry of Information, also ensured that the Biafran publications contained a comprehensive wording. Rather than speaking of a struggle of an African people for self-determination, the Biafrans began to display the conflict as a "War of Survival."[122] Genocide and human rights became the central normative reference points for the new strategy, allowing the Biafrans to pick up on an interpretation of the conflict that eyewitnesses had put forward during fall 1967.[123] According to Roy Doron, who has investigated the Biafran government's strategy to mobilize internal support beginning in early 1968, the

people of Biafra were sure that a genocide impended.[124] In a rather eclectic fashion, the Biafrans referred to sources of international law such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Geneva Convention, the UN Year of Human Rights, and the Genocide Convention.[125] The following passage from a pamphlet titled *Genocide Breaks up Nations*, issued by the Ministry of Information, shows this concern clearly: "In this era of human rights and competing social systems, it must be regarded as a fundamental law of politics that genocide will always result in the creation of a new state for the protection of the victims of this most abominable of all crimes."[126] Reflecting on the reluctant role of the OAU, the pamphlet further states: "Those African leaders who are opposed to self-determination for Biafrans are actually aiding and abetting genocide."[127]

To verify these accusations, the Biafrans and Markpress presented plenty of evidence. Throughout the conflict, the Biafrans repeatedly recalled the pogroms of 1966 as examples of the federal desire to exterminate the Biafran people.[128] As the fighting intensified in early summer 1968, the federal war campaign delivered even more proof. Usually, Markpress issued detailed descriptions of atrocities, often backed up by eyewitness reports. Among the reported incidents were air raids on nonmilitary facilities, such as hospitals and markets, forced displacement of civilians, and the poisoning of humanitarian relief supplies.[129] Markpress also extensively covered the blockade and its effects on civilians.[130] To validate the allegations, Markpress invited photojournalists to its press tours. During those trips, journalists experienced the human catastrophe firsthand and covered it extensively.[131] Naked, miserable, and malnourished children became central motives.[132]

Humanitarian relief was high on the Biafran wish list from the very beginning.[133] In response to the tense humanitarian situation and the worsening of the food crisis, Christopher Mojekwu, Biafran minister for home affairs, issued a statement demanding "action and not words while such large numbers of people are suffering starvation and imminent death."[134] During an international press conference, Ojukwu stated: "Every nation has a moral duty to help Biafrans defend themselves."[135] In a message sent to the president of the UN General Assembly, the Biafran government asked the assembly to "avail itself immediately of article 8 of the Genocide Convention to take such action under the charter as they consider appropriate for the prevention, and suppression of acts of genocide."[136] To reverse the military asymmetry, the Biafrans repeatedly demanded a weapons embargo on Nigeria.[137]

Calls for support also included pleas for more direct forms of "intervention."[138] These actions should lever the federal government to accept a cease-fire and encompass "efforts to bringing pressure to bear on [Lieutenant-Colonel Yakubu] Gowon and to make him get down to a conference table."[139] Those appeals also included calls for the OAU to intensify its mediation efforts and toward the UN to put the conflict on the agenda of the General Assembly to work toward a cease-fire.[140] According to the Biafran government, secession was the last resort to prevent a "final solution."[141] "Sovereignty," Ojukwu declared, "is the only possible way of ensuring the Biafrans have exclusive control of the protection of their own lives, liberty, and prosperity."[142] A high-ranking Biafran official demanded in a speech: "Give Biafra diplomatic recognition and save 14 million Africans from extinction."[143] For the Biafran government, diplomatic recognition mattered not only because it reflected "political realities," as Ojukwu contemplated. Widespread recognition would be "one way of getting the other side around the conference table."[144] The idea was that a ceasefire and negotiations would pave the way for an independence referendum and the deployment of an international peacekeeping force.[145]

In April, the Biafran campaign obtained its first breakthrough with the diplomatic recognition by Tanzania. In the official statement, the Tanzanian government under President Julius Nyerere, justified the step with humanitarian concerns and a comparison that fitted the Biafran genocide narrative: "The Biafrans have now suffered the same kind of rejection within their state that the Jews of Germany experienced. Fortunately, they already had a

homeland. They have retreated to it for their own protection, and for the same reason—after all other efforts had failed—they have declared it to be an independent state. In light of these circumstances, Tanzania feels obliged to recognize the setback of African Unity which has occurred."[146] Biafra reacted with great enthusiasm. The *Biafra Sun*, Biafra's leading newspaper, enthusiastically praised Nyerere's "historic statement."[147] Ojukwu declared afterward: "I think that Tanzania having, as it were, broken the ice, the true feeling of Africa will now be demonstrated."[148] The conflict, Ojukwu further declared, "has ceased to be an internal problem of Nigeria."[149] In May, the Ivory Coast, Gabon, and Zambia recognized Biafra as a sovereign state.[150] All four states regarded the act as an exceptional decision and justified it with humanitarian concerns.[151] Félix Houphouët-Boigny, president of the Ivory Coast, declared at a press conference in Paris: "Unity is for the living, not the dead."[152] This wave of premature recognition boosted the Biafran morale greatly, as Akpan recalled.[153] "We have no doubt," Ojukwu stated in July, "that Continental Europe will soon follow the lead of our friends in Tanzania, Gabon, Ivory Coast and Zambia in according Biafra the right to existence."[154]

As the Biafran government predicted, diplomatic recognition helped to persuade the OAU to mediate between the conflict parties. The talks in Kampala, Uganda, however, failed after only five days because neither side was willing to compromise.[155] But the Biafran delegation took the chance to present its allegations at a high-level regional forum. In his speech, the Biafran delegate Louis Mbanefo compared the conflict to the Holocaust and praised the "support . . . by a number of African states which have recognized the sovereignty of Biafra."[156] Afterward, the Biafran government called out the federal government for its dishonest attitude during the conference.[157] As Akpan later admitted, "the strategy . . . was to do more to obtain additional diplomatic recognition than for successful peace negotiations."[158]

Soon after the first press visits, international mass media began to publish reports from the area. Major tabloids such as the German *Stern* and *Life* magazine illustrated their stories with drastic pictures of malnourished children.[159] Most articles adopted Biafran wordings. Time correspondents James Wilde and Friedel Ungeheuer, for example, wrote in their lengthy report: "The Ibos are convinced that they are fighting not only for independence but for their survival as a people."[160] The German *Spiegel* issue of August 19, 1968, features a picture of naked Biafrans on its front page, accompanied by the headline: "Biafra. Death Sentence for a People."[161] According to Lasse Heerten, the conflict had become an "international media event."[162] Markpress and the Biafran government were well aware of their media impact and tried to harness the international arousal, as press releases with news clippings prove.[163]

In June, the representative of the Republic of Biafra in New York issued a press release in which he insisted that "Individuals and Voluntary Organisations in America and Britain should now organize pressure groups to force their home governments to bring the Nigeria/Biafra war which they are sponsoring in favour of Nigeria to an end."[164] This "Biafra lobby," as one British journalist has called it,[165] consisted of civil society organizations such as the Aktion Biafra-Hilfe in Germany, the Britain-Biafra Association, and the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive.[166] Geoffrey Birch and Dominic St. George from the Britain-Biafra Association, for example, wrote in their pamphlet *Biafra—The Case for Independence*: "World opinion must demand that the Lagos Government withdraw their troops from Biafra, accept this new nation's existence and be prepared to negotiate the closest form of economic union possible after the bloodshed. Public opinion should not hesitate to make it known that where human lives are being lost in their thousands, humanity must take precedence over diplomatic niceties and superficial self-interest."[167] The Aktion Biafra-Hilfe urgently demanded an "effective German contribution to the prevention of this biggest genocide since the annihilation of the Jews."[168]

As Ruth Bowert from the Zentrale der Aktions-Kommittees Biafra/Sudan stated in an interview with the German *Spiegel*, the unions were in close contact with the Biafran

government and aimed at "combining humanitarian relief with political action."[169] They organized rallies, published periodicals with material about the conflict, and collected donations.[170] Markpress, in turn, circulated Biafra Union materials and covered their events.[171] Activists included people from the Biafran diaspora, but also journalists, relief workers, Christians, and radical students concerned with Third World issues. This way, a dense and very active transnational network emerged that helped to spread the Biafran message and pressurized Western governments to support the secessionist republic.[172]

In July, the French Council of Ministers insisted, "The present conflict should be solved on the basis of the right of peoples to self-determination."[173] A few weeks later, President Charles de Gaulle confirmed this position and brought forward humanitarian considerations. He conditioned diplomatic recognition on the behavior of African states and declared: "The decision which has not been taken is not ruled out in the future."[174] Although this statement never led to an official act of diplomatic recognition, it was regarded as highly significant by the Biafrans.[175] France also secretly equipped the Biafran army with armaments and ammunition.[176]

Other governments maintained their refusal to support Biafra, though many of them certainly felt the pressure of the lobby groups. Records of parliamentary debates reveal that the Biafran case has been on the agenda of the House of Commons, where the discussion was particularly heated,[177] the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee,[178] and the German Bundestag during summer 1968.[179] The UN was reluctant to interfere. At the UN Human Rights Summit in Teheran in spring 1968, which was held to celebrate the International Human Rights Year, the Biafran issue was absent.[180] In his memoirs, U Thant later clarified the UN position toward Biafra at the time: "Although I was deeply concerned by the incredible human suffering and starvation in Biafra, there was never any doubt in my mind that the conflict was strictly an internal matter and, therefore, outside the jurisdiction of the United Nations."[181] Throughout the conflict, the OAU refrained from interfering without Nigerian consent, kept its insistence on Nigeria's territorial integrity and allowed talks only on humanitarian relief.[182] At its annual meeting in Algiers in September 1968, the organization called "upon all member states of the United Nations and OAU to refrain from any action detrimental to the peace, unity and territorial integrity of Nigeria."[183]

The Biafran conflict also had a huge impact on international relief organizations. Since summer, the combined operations of Oxfam, Caritas Internationalis, the World Council of Churches, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and other humanitarian organizations culminated in the biggest relief operation since World War II. In many relief flights, the operations of the Biafran airlift managed to deliver large quantities of food and medicines into the enclave. Funded in large part by donations raised by the Christian churches and the Biafra lobby, the operation would eventually save hundreds of thousands of lives.[184] The relief organizations advocated for Biafra but carefully avoided the call for recognition. Instead, they displayed the matter as a purely humanitarian problem.[185]

According to Akpan, without international support, "the war would have ended in September 1968."[186] In his Christmas Broadcast, Ojukwu praised the change in the international treatment of the conflict: "Whereas at this time last year we were completely isolated and were struggling alone in a world which seemed dead in conscience and devoid of any respect for human life and dignity, today not only have we friends with courage to declare sympathy and support for us, but also a world which has ceased to exhibit callous indifference to the suffering of humanity and wanton destruction of human life."[187] As a consequence of the airlift, however, the international debate increasingly focused on purely humanitarian issues. Although this move guaranteed international attention and humanitarian relief, it posed a severe dilemma for the secessionists. Ojukwu reflected on this dilemma in a commentary: "Relief, no matter how massive, is at best a palliative."[188] Thanks to the airlift, however, mass starvation was averted.[189]

During the final months of 1968, the Biafran campaign slowly lost its momentum. In August 1968, the Soviet Union invaded the Czechoslovak Republic to end the Prague Spring. The attention of the international press quickly shifted to the events in Prague.[190] Commentators increasingly denigrated the Biafran media campaign as "propaganda."[191] To counter Biafran accusations, the federal government invited an international observer team to "investigate . . . allegations of genocide and war crimes, as they were brought to the attention of the observers."[192] In its first report from November 1968, the team concluded: "There is no evidence of any intent by the federal troops to destroy the Ibo people or their property, and the use of the term Genocide is unwarranted."[193] Additionally, the federal government invited prominent Biafra supporters such as the renowned Africanist Margery Perham to visit military offices in Lagos and investigate the war campaign. Her observations prompted her to withdraw her previous genocide allegations publicly.[194] In a radio broadcast, she appealed to Ojukwu directly and condemned him for sacrificing civilians in order to "prolong a hopeless struggle at their expense."[195] As a reaction to this sudden loss of credibility, the Biafran campaign gradually changed its strategy until spring 1969.[196]

To Safeguard the Biafran Revolution: Spring 1969–January 1970

From early 1969 on, the Biafran strategy incorporated a more revolutionary and transformative claim that referred to notions of statehood and governance. According to Akpan, the new approach was initially meant to appeal to the Biafran population to keep up the fight but quickly found its way into the international campaign.[197] As Douglas Anthony has put it, this new approach was in part influenced by radical ideas of postcolonial self-empowerment. The sources of inspiration included progressive thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, who was very popular among the student movements of 1968, and the Biafra supporter Nyerere, a theorist of African development.[198]

In his end-of-the-year message of 1968, Ojukwu praised the "Biafran revolution" for the first time.[199] Although the campaign still rested on a claim to self-determination and accused Nigeria of genocide and abuses of human rights, the focus of the new approach was increasingly on the achievements of the Biafran governance-building. It also included an original approach to postcolonial statehood by portraying the Biafran secession as an "African struggle against neo-colonialism"[200] Ojukwu explained in an interview with Newsweek: "But if by Balkanization you mean division, secession inclusive, then I say to you: 'Look at Europe.' For a time, there were endless wars in Europe, incessant conflicts until the old Europe and empires were dismantled until the Balkans were Balkanized—then came peace. Why would one think that Balkanization for Europe and Biafranization for Africa would produce different results? I do not think it would. . . Biafra has a message for Africa."[201] The Biafran struggle for independence now was portrayed as a "beacon" for Africa and its struggle to get rid of postcolonial influence and artificial boundaries. In a pamphlet, the Biafran government stated: "Support Biafra and you support African nationalism!"[202]

This attempt to connect the Biafran secession to pan-African nationalism and radical political activism found its most sophisticated expression in Ojukwu's Ahiara Declaration—Principles of the Biafran Revolution. Rather than focusing on allegations of genocide, Ojukwu concentrated on the problem of neocolonialism. According to him, neocolonial rule was a problem not only for Nigeria but for all multi-ethnic states in Africa. The dominance of one people over another within a multiethnic state was an instrument for white domination.[203] Biafra, in contrast, was portrayed as a "movement of true and patriotic Africans."[204] The pamphlet dealt at length with the achievements of Biafran state-building and its progressiveness that amalgamated indigenous principles with modern revolutionary ideas.[205] Secession, therefore, was portrayed as a crucial act to "safeguard the Biafran revolution."[206] In a guest contribution for the German *Zeit*, Biafran emissary Elizabeth Etuk stated: "The Biafran youth has now a new life goal: the buildup of a new society. For them, it's not only

sheer national self-determination. We are fighting for the ultimate liberation from colonial domination, against alien paternalism for the sake of economic interests. We aim to build a new political system that secures human lives, human rights and freedom, a system governed by the people's true representatives and not ones who are bribing and manipulating in the name of the people."[207] Appealing to the student movement in Europe and the United States, the Biafran government in a press release called on "progressive youths throughout the world" to "rise up to the occasion and fight side by side with Biafran Freedom Fighters."[208]

Despite the insistence on revolutionary statehood, the overall political impact during the last year of the conflict was modest. In summer 1969, Biafran soldiers raided a Shell/BP-operated oil field near the Nigerian town of Kwale and took eighteen European oil workers hostage. The Kwale incident briefly brought the conflict back on the international agenda but contributed to the alienation of many international supporters.[209] By August 1969, significant Biafran attempts to exert influence at the international level largely ceased.[210] Markpress continued its work throughout the year. [211] From January to December 1969, the agency published more than two hundred press releases and several books that included all essential speeches by Ojukwu and the Biafran government.[212] Many Biafra unions carried on with publishing and raising funds.[213] The American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, for example, was at its busiest during 1969, when it opened Biafra House in New York and began issuing *Current News from and about Biafra*.[214] On December 10, the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the organization held a rally in front of the UN building to execute the "De-Celebration of Human Rights Day."[215]

Despite all, the Biafran military collapsed in January 1970. In the early hours of January 11, Ojukwu fled the country.[216] His successor, Philip Effiong, immediately surrendered to the federal army and declared the end of the Republic of Biafra.[217]

Conclusion

Shortly after the end of the war, U Thant declared at a press conference: "As far as the question of secession of a particular section of a Member State is concerned, the United Nations' attitude is unequivocal. As an international organization, the United Nations has never accepted and does not accept, and I do not believe it will ever accept the principle of secession of a part of its Member State."[218]

Throughout the conflict, almost all states and international bodies such as the United Nations and the OAU kept their preference for the preservation of Nigeria's territorial integrity and respected its claim to nonintervention. Nonetheless, Biafra managed to find many foreign friends. The country's rather eclectic use of national self-determination, human rights/genocide, and good governance was successful in persuading people, organizations, and even some states to support the secessionist republic.

The Biafran strategy underwent three phases: the introduction of Biafra to an international audience (May 1967–spring 1968) and the portrayal of the Biafran cause as a fight for survival (spring 1968–spring 1969) and an act to safeguard the Biafran revolution (spring 1969–January 1970). The Biafran campaign made use of three international norms that tend to revise the territorial status quo in international politics: national self-determination, human rights/genocide, and good governance. While the first usage rested on the classic reading of national self-determination as a right of a people, the notion of human rights and genocide prevention suggested secession as a remedy against extermination. Arguments that referred to governance norms highlighted the prospects of the Biafran secession.

Surprisingly, for the Biafrans, national self-determination was not the most relevant international norm. It was used during the first phase right after the Biafrans declared their independence and sought to find recognition by introducing Biafra to the international

community. As soon as the Biafran government realized that international support is badly needed but does not come by itself, it professionalized its efforts. The notion of national self-determination was not compelling enough to arouse the conscience of the world, as Ojukwu stated in spring 1968. Accusations of human rights abuses and genocide seemed more dramatic because they adapted to contemporary international debates. Displaying the conflict as a fight for survival also had an inevitable emotional pull. Accusations of human rights abuses and genocide could easily be proven. The main function of national self-determination here was to harness notions of individual human rights and genocide prevention to justify the secession of Biafra. The strategy connected the domestic conflict and its consequences to international norm dynamics to appeal to foreign actors to live up to their commitments and intervene on behalf of the Biafrans.

The attention, friendship, and sympathy the Biafrans won during summer 1968, however, quickly diminished as soon as doubts arose concerning the genocide accusations. The credibility problems prompted another strategic shift, this time toward the use of norms that highlighted the achievements of Biafran state-building and the international prospects of an independent Biafra. Here, the Biafran government sought to win international support by highlighting benchmarks of governance it had achieved. And rather than presenting Biafra as a unique case in need of urgent help, the new effort had a universal character because it displayed the secession as a favorable precedent for other African societies.

Biafra used these norms (1) to put the conflict on the international agenda, (2) to frame the international debate in a way that it appeared necessary to intervene, and (3) to pressure states to do so.[219] The Biafran government observed the international debate closely and adjusted its strategy to the international impact. Gaining international attention was a requirement to win external support. International norms here functioned as transmitters because their universal prominence made it possible to connect the conflict to world politics.[220] Highlighting the fact that Nigeria withheld from the Biafrans the right to national self-determination, violated their human rights, attempted to commit genocide on them, and tried to halt their promising take on governance should raise international awareness. The effort by Markpress to secure maximum coverage shows the importance of the international media for the Biafran secession campaign and how beneficial agenda setting is for secessionists. A comprehensive framing of the Biafran cause as a fight for self-determination, survival, or revolution steered the international debate and suggested support or diplomatic recognition as the only meaningful reaction. During summer 1968, the conflict received much international attention, and most observers adopted the Biafran narrative.

Political pressure, in turn, could be realized only indirectly, through a support network of friends of Biafra that came into existence in summer 1968. Civil society organizations that were concerned with the Biafran cause used the Biafran wordings as rhetorical ammunition and connected the Biafran struggle to contemporary domestic discourses. By reminding governments of their international commitments, civil society organizations sought to pressure politicians to support Biafra. National self-determination, human rights/genocide, and good governance here served as transmitters between the secession conflict and internal debates in the target societies.

As we have seen, the Biafran government was busy expressing its gratitude toward the foreign "friends of Biafra" and echoed statements that were either favorable toward secession or in line with the Biafran narrative. The Biafrans ached for every subtle sign of international acknowledgment and much appreciated it. In a sense, such accomplishments meant some "upgrading," because it confirmed that Biafra was an international actor and capable of entering into foreign relations. From the beginning, Biafra acted as if it were a sovereign state. International and domestic strategies interlocked. At times, as Ojuwku stated, the priority of the Biafran grand strategy was winning international support. The war efforts had the objective to stop the Nigerian advance long enough to allow the Biafrans to win substantial

international assistance. Throughout the conflict, the Biafrans called for almost all possible variants of international support, such as humanitarian relief, diplomatic leverage, political advocacy, material aid, military intervention, and premature recognition. International support had immediate and tangible effects. International friendship mattered a lot to the Biafrans, because it secured comprehensive aid that saved millions of lives, diplomatic backing, and secret arms deliveries that enabled the Biafran military to hold the line for a substantial period. Additionally, foreign assistance helped to amplify the secessionist media campaign. This observation is consistent with Coggins's concept of an incremental and dynamic spread of international support.[221] For some time, Biafra could control this momentum and use international support in its attempt to find more external assistance. International support, therefore, legitimized the Biafran cause.

This observation is proof of the agency secession movements can erect by pursuing normative politics. The Biafrans not only attempted to manage the international legitimacy of their cause. They also tried to delegitimize the federal government by accusing it of the abuse of human rights and the intention to commit genocide. On one hand, the oughtness and sense of moral duty that is characteristic of both norms played an exceptional role. On the other hand, as we have seen, acquiring international legitimacy is not a simple matter. The Biafrans had to deal with ignorance, reservations, criticism, and setbacks. Winning the sympathy of domestic societies did not mean that the respective governments would support Biafra. It became apparent also that secession movements compete with the metropole in their quest to become legitimized by foreign actors.

By using international norms, secession movements can win substantial international support and, as a consequence, achieve great success despite their domestic inferiority. The media, civil society, and the public are important arenas for secessionist norm politics. Although claiming them is difficult, international norms are more than mere political rhetoric. Essentially, they are sources of power that practitioners and researchers should take seriously.

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