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The Nigeria-Biafra War: Looking to Art to Interpret Realities

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Abstract

Popular and academic representations of Africa often assume violence as an integral characteristic of the continent. While the narratives surrounding Africa and Africans are still evolving, it is important that scholars who are central to the shaping of Western perceptions of Africa are aware of their contributions to the false narratives. Within the context of the Biafran War, a conflict that often goes undiscussed by political scientists despite its devastation, there has been an oversimplification of the war to the point that the actual causes of the conflict have been obfuscated. I examine the political science literature that discusses the Biafran War, noting the ways in which it falls short in explaining the roots of the conflict, the extent to which British indirect rule on the colonial and postcolonial Nigerian state impacted the war, and who the Biafran people were. I then argue that political scientists would benefit from drawing on Nigerian art and artists to understand the actual lived experiences of people during the Biafran War, and I do so by examining five pieces from four Nigerian and Biafran artists. By using art created by those who lived through the war or experienced the effects of the war's legacy on the Nigerian state, political scientists would be able to understand the conflict in a non-Western perspective while honoring the experiences of those who lived through the conflict and its legacies, and be able to understand the ways in which scholarly discussions of causes of the war and intervention within the war help perpetuate Western bias in the field.

I. Intro

Popular and academic representations of Africa often assume violence as an integral characteristic of the continent as a whole. Western conceptualizations of Africa help perpetuate this notion by often only regarding Africa through the context of Western involvement, labeling Africa as impoverished, backward, full of starving people, and in need of saving (Pierre 2018). When discussing war in Africa, international relations scholars often assume that violence is a natural phenomenon that is essentially the default for the continent, rather than it being a consequence of the intangible and undiscussed atrocities committed by the West during years of colonialism and Western involvement. While the narratives surrounding Africa and Africans are still evolving and in need of reshaping, it is important that scholars who are central to the shaping of Western perceptions of Africa are aware of their contributions to the false narratives. Within the context of the Biafran War, a conflict that often goes undiscussed by political scientists

though it was one of the most devastating wars on the continent in the 20th century, there has been an oversimplification of the war to the extent that the actual causes of the conflict have been obfuscated by Western scholars to perpetuate the narratives surrounding Africans and the association of Africa with violence, which we will discuss further (Clarke 2018).

As Ngugi wa Thiong'o discusses in *Decolonising the Mind*, part of the imperial project is the "cultural bomb," which is meant to reframe African realities, experiences, and history to the point that Africans feel a sense of shame when associating with their heritages, languages, cultures, and even themselves (wa Thiong'o 1986, 2). Similarly, the Western portrayal of the Biafran War in scholarship is meant to leave Nigerians with a sense of shame, with a feeling of doubt regarding the validity of the struggle, and with the desire to disassociate themselves from the conflict and perhaps even their Nigerian or Biafran identity. By framing the Biafran War as an ethnic or religious struggle without discussing the ways British colonial rule essentially birthed the conflict, scholars are enforcing the popular and scholarly Western notion that all ideological or political differences that may lead to conflict in Africa must be due to the ethnic origins of the parties involved (wa Thiong'o 1986, 1). The notion that all African conflicts are centered around ethnicity enforces the idea by Western scholars like Robert Kaplan who argue that Africa's civil wars are anarchic and backwards, "caused by fixed ethnic and cultural realities, making them beyond the reach of Western understanding and help" (Haynes 2007, 308). This idea simplifies actual causes of war in Africa and renders African people as primitive, though it should be understood in Western scholarship that conflicts cannot be explained solely through the simplified terms of "that which is fixed" i.e., ethnic identities (wa Thiong'o 1986, 1).

In an attempt to remedy the cultural bomb, I examine the political science literature that discusses the Biafran War, noting the ways in which it falls short in explaining the roots of the

conflict, the extent to which British indirect rule on the colonial and postcolonial Nigerian state impacted the war, and who the Biafran people were. I then argue that political scientists would benefit from drawing on Nigerian art and artists to understand the actual lived experiences of people during the Biafran War. The literature up to this point focuses on the macro-politics of the war, discussing the overarching issues and their implications, but I argue that by examining art, political scientists would obtain an understanding of the micropolitics of the war at the individual level. A focus on the micropolitics will ultimately illuminate a different dimension of the issues that they are trying to understand, as art tells us about the intimacies of war that may not be examined in political science. While art cannot explicitly answer all of the questions we ask when examining conflicts, an examination of art within scholarship would provide an opportunity for richer discourse. I conclude by examining literature and art by Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Ben Enwonwu, and J. P. Clark, noting the ways these pieces can help contribute to the scholarship on the war and can allow political scientists to use the voices of the people these artists represent to understand their realities. By using art created by those who lived through the war or experienced the effects of the war's legacy on the Nigerian state, political scientists would be able to understand the conflict in a non-Western perspective while honoring the voices and experiences of those who lived through the conflict and its legacies, and would also understand the ways in which scholarly discussions of the causes of the war and intervention within the war help perpetuate Western bias in the field.

II. Literature Review

The Biafran War was perhaps one of the most devastating wars to have occurred on the African continent, as it took place over 30 months and led to anywhere from hundreds of

thousands to two million civilian deaths (Gould 2011). As the Biafran people tried to gain independence from a post-colonial state that hindered their active participation in social, political, and economic institutions, the world watched as a war that could have ended far earlier raged on, causing severe suffering for innocent Igbos, Yorubas, Hausas, and others. While this war had devastating effects on the Nigerian state today and left a scar on the continent, we see that scholars often brush this event under the rug and do not discuss the lasting trauma this war had on Nigerians. Furthermore, when scholars do discuss the war, they fail to recognize how colonialism created the conditions for the war to arise initially. I will examine literature that views the war as a genocide as well as literature that discusses the causes of the war and the war itself, and I will identify gaps in the literature and propose an alternative form of research political scientists overlook and underestimate. By examining the war and the shortcomings of the existing literature, I will be able to identify a space for further improvement for political scientists as they continue to examine wars and other related phenomena in the future.

Before we discuss the different elements of the war and how they are discussed in political science scholarship, we must first look at what happened in the Biafran War. The conflict is traced back to the initial coup in January 1966, in which Nigerian soldiers, led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, killed several political leaders including the prime minister (NewAfrica 2020). The event became known as the “Igbo coup,” and people wrongly blamed the Igbos for the death of the political leaders and military officers while spreading rumors that they were plotting to take control of the state; this catalyzed increased violence against innocent Igbo civilians (ibid.). July 29, 1966 marked the beginning of the countercoup led by northern officers against the administration at the time, which led to the assassination of the Igbo head of state and the assumption of Yakuba Gowon as the new head of state. Though a northern official assumed

power in the federal government, violence against the Igbo people persisted; after they were subjected to the wrath of angry mobs and spiteful neighbors for months, on May 30, 1967, Lieutenant Colonel Emeka Ojukwu announced the secession of the southeastern region of Nigeria, known as the Republic of Biafra (Korieh 2021).

The Nigerian government initially responded to the secessionist movement with a police action, but this was shortly followed by a declaration of war against Biafra. Though Biafrans were severely outnumbered by Nigerians and were struggling with shortages of weapons and military resources, this did not quell their passion for their new state or Ojukwu's optimism for a Biafran victory (NewAfrica 2020). The war, which lasted from 1967 to 1970, escalated rapidly and resulted in hundreds of thousands to millions of Biafran civilian deaths, not to mention military casualties and deaths on the other side of the conflict (Korieh 2021). The Nigerian government employed an economic blockade around the Biafran territory to help end the war, knowing that Biafrans had limited resources and hoping to dry them out, which led to increased Biafran deaths caused by starvation, malnutrition, and other diseases. The war was brought to international attention as Biafrans believed they were the targets of genocide, and though "appeals were made to the United Nations to recognize Biafra and intervene to save the population," the UN refused to interfere because the war was technically a domestic conflict, and thus outside of its reach (ibid., 5). Ultimately, on January 15, 1970, after almost three years of fighting, Biafra surrendered to Nigeria and the war came to an end, leaving behind the ghost of the conflict and the question of reconciliation (Heerten and Moses 2014).

II.1 Historical Context

Before examining the existing scholarly literature, it is helpful to understand Nigeria's pre-colonial and colonial history in order to understand what conditions allowed for the war to

arise. Before Nigeria was formally colonized by the British, the pre-colonial territory was characterized by a variety of societies that fell into two political systems: the centralized state system and the stateless system (Iweriebor 1982). In the centralized state system, there was a single ruler who acted as the central authority with subordinate officials who helped enforce state power. There was also the stateless society, in which there were no formal or highly visible state structures. In these societies, important political and social decisions were the concern of the entire community, and no single ruler or family had control over the broader community (ibid.). While these societies are considered stateless, they were still carrying out the functions of the state, though not in a formalized manner. There were still conflicts and fights for power in the pre-colonial state, but these conflicts were often concerned with expanding the territories of kingdoms and empires or resolving community issues (Ezenwoko and Osagie 2014).

Within the colonial state apparatus, there were two tiers of governments: the central colonial authority and the regional level of authority. While Nigeria had multiple ethnic groups that were governed under these colonial structures, there were three main ethnic groups that made up the state: Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa-Fulani. The Igbo typically resided in the southeastern region of Nigeria; the Yorubas made up approximately 75% of the southwestern population, and the Hausas were the majority in the northern region (NewAfrica 2020). While these three ethnic groups made up the majority of Nigerians, the British were intentional in the ways in which they divided the people, subjugated certain populations, and revered other populations. Ethnic Hausas were placed in positions of power within the colonial structure, while Igbos and Yorubas had little to no representation within the state (Iweriebor 1982). By placing mainly Hausas in positions of power, the British only had to focus on having control of the

Hausa people, while the Hausas had control over the rest of the populations within Nigeria (ibid.).

II.2 War as Genocide; Humanitarian Discussions

Though the Biafran army was gravely outnumbered by the federal military, had less resources and territory, and was dealing with the repercussions of the major famine caused by the blockade, they still had their cause and their passion. However, as the war raged on, the Biafran leaders and proponents of the cause had to use tactics to keep morale high during a war that seemed impossible to win. One of the ways to boost morale while raising international awareness of the devastation taking place in Biafran territory was invoking the language of genocide. By referring to this conflict as not just a war between two parties, but as an attempt by the Nigerian state and Gowon specifically to exterminate an entire group through starvation, Biafra was able to signal more attention to their struggle and fight for their movement longer than the world would have expected. However, the question remains: was the war an attempted genocide against the people of Biafra?

Heerten and Moses address and discuss this pertinent question in “The Nigeria–Biafra war: postcolonial conflict and the question of genocide,” in which they analyze the war from its origins and discuss the question of genocide, as well as the arguments against it. The authors begin by providing a history of the unified Nigerian territory and note how there were two colonial legacies that would impair the postcolonial state’s “evolution [to] a stable political system” (ibid., 172). These legacies were the division of the population along ethnic lines and the incorporation of groups defined along those lines within the federal government. Regarding the discussion of genocide, Heerten and Moses discuss how propaganda within the secessionist

movement cast northern Muslims as “savages” in their treatment of Biafrans, and how Biafran leaders “made comparisons to the Holocaust to draw attention to their cause” (Heerten and Moses 2014, 178). The Holocaust parallels were used to not only solidify the population’s support for the movement, but to spark international discourse about the war (Anthony 2014). The authors find that while framing the war as genocide was necessary for the secessionist leaders to increase support and fight longer against the Nigerian government, they claim it is widely agreed that the war was not a genocide because, according to Robert Melson’s reasoning, genocide must “entail an attempt to destroy a group in its entirety” (Heerten and Moses 2014, 182). Therefore, although scholars acknowledge that “over a million Biafrans starved to death” due to the blockade, because the policy “did not include the extermination of the Ibos,” it should not be considered genocidal (ibid.). Furthermore, the authors note that the option of surrender is not present in genocide, but it was present and was employed by Biafrans in 1970. However, Heerten and Moses do not fully explicate why this conflict should not be considered a partial genocide, nor do they discuss what took place at the individual level that allowed civilians to regard their own experiences as genocide. Rather, the authors seem to regard the use of the term solely as a tactic for gaining support and as one of the starting points for genocide research rather than as an empirical question that deserves further analysis through the examination of the experiences that would warrant the term.

Moreover, in “Biafra, Humanitarian Intervention and History,” Desgrandchamps et. al also discuss the notion of the war being a possible genocide attempt and the dimension of humanitarianism within the discourse. Though the war was initially of marginal interest to the international community, it quickly became a global issue as a catalyst for increased interest in humanitarian interventions (Desgrandchamps et al. 2020). The authors discuss communication

strategies and the framing of the conflict as a genocide, arguing that Biafrans knew how to get the attention of the international community through marketing. When Biafrans were able to show the devastating effects of the blockade imposed by the Nigerian government, they were able to garner greater international interest on the domestic issue, though interest did not necessarily translate into action. Biafran propaganda helped sustain the support of their people, the people who were still dying from the famine, until the very end of the war (Desgrandchamps et al. 2020). Furthermore, the televised image of the "starving African child" helped develop humanitarianism into what it is today and gave rise to increased Western concern for African conflicts (Desgrandchamps et al. 2020, 73). While the authors do touch on the notion of genocide, they do not provide empirical evidence for why the conflict should not be considered a genocide or partial genocide despite the severe asymmetries of civilian deaths on the Biafran side versus the Nigerian side.

II.3 The Nigeria-Biafra War

Regarding what took place in the war and discussions of the causes of the war, political scientists seem to focus on the "bigger picture" of the conflict and its implications for our understanding of African violence. However, in an interview with Nigerian author, "Chinua Achebe on Biafra" describes the daily life of the average Biafran and discusses the Biafran struggle. Achebe discusses how, for Biafrans during the first eight months of the war, there was a constant fear that air attacks could hit at any moment: "It does not take long-a few seconds-and 120 people are charred to ashes, charred black, and perhaps 20 buildings wrecked, and this is a very real thing" (Achebe 1968, 31). All throughout Nigeria people were being taken out of their homes and massacred, and the fear of this had caused millions of Nigerians to move from their homes into places where they had no family and no roots. He describes the Biafran struggle as a

feeling and experience that “one cannot escape the impact of,” writing that he never believed Biafra would be attacked because “it seemed to me so plain, so obvious that the people had been wronged so much” by the state that was supposed to provide them with security, the “basis for existence” (ibid.). He shares his experiences with anti-Igbo rhetoric he heard at the personal and national levels, the blatant hatred Nigeria had for Igbos and other Biafrans, and the association of Igbos and other easterners with aggression in their pursuits for wealth and education. Regarding the reintegration of Biafran in Nigerian society, the author says that “this is nonsense – we know they will not – there is so much bitterness on both sides,” (Achebe 1968, 32). For Biafrans, it was horrifying to see the same government that had promised to protect their lives and property plan and execute mass killings against them. Atrocities were committed by both sides; this ultimately begs the question of how reconciliation is possible. Achebe concludes by arguing that there “is really no use talking of unity; you don’t unite the dead, you only unite the living, and there must be a minimal willingness on the part of those who are to be united” (Achebe 1968, 32).

While Achebe is concerned with elucidating the notion of the Biafran struggle, “Who Killed Biafra” by Stanley Diamond analyzes the defeat of Biafra, offers an account of the “Igbo people's heroic struggle against overwhelming military and economic powers,” and examines British support for Nigeria throughout the war (Diamond 2007, 339). Diamond argues that the defeat of Biafra was not a victory for Nigeria, but a victory for the neo-colonialists, and that the latter will use this victory to rewrite the history to accommodate their interests with the Nigerian state. The rewriting of this history entails the framing of Biafrans as the aggressors against the Nigerian regime, and he argues that “Nigeria and its allies, misrepresenting the depth of the Biafran struggle in an effort to mitigate their own responsibility, have done everything in their power to underestimate the past suffering and the present condition of the Biafra” (Diamond

2007, 341). While Nigeria received substantial aid from Western powers, half of the Biafran arms were made in Biafra by Biafrans, and they had to face the overwhelming responsibility of the economic and military collapse as they fought for their cause. Diamond discusses both French and British involvement in the war on their respective sides, and he argues that British involvement was about more than Biafran oil, though that played a major role in Britain's support for the Nigerian government. For the British, "Nigeria was the rudder of black Africa": if Britain could indirectly control Nigeria's postcolonial, independent state, it could have a hand on the continent itself and extend its power in other territories (Diamond 2007, 346). The author notes that while Igbo people resisted British indirect rule, they were still open to the idea of Nigerian unity after the state achieved independence; however, they were not embraced in the political, economic, and social spheres they tried inhabiting as the colonial structures which inhibited their active participation in these spaces were maintained after independence (Diamond 2007; Anthony 2014). He argues that the East finally decided to secede from the state when it was clear that Britain's neo-colonial hand would not be contested by the state and when the cultural differences between the North and the East were too great to face. Diamond concludes by writing that the denial of the validity of the Biafran struggle is part of a greater Western attempt to obscure imperial intentions and is "fully in accord with our knowledge of the internal mechanisms of contemporary, bureaucratic, highly rationalized states in their imperial phase" (Diamond 2007, 359).

In "Biafra and the Nigerian Civil War" by Franklin Parker, the author gives insight into the conflict as he writes this piece at the beginning of the war's third year raging on. Parker gives a background to the war, discussing the regional and "tribal" differences that led up to the conflict, the "ambitious Ibos" and what he calls the "backward tribe," and he gives a timeline of

the movement beginning with the coup and counter coup up to the blockade of the Biafran territory by the Nigerian government (Parker 1969). He describes the Igbo people as prideful and arrogant, the “Jews of Africa” (ibid., 8). Regarding the coup on January 15, 1966, in which five Igbo officers led an attack that killed Federal Prime Minister Belewa and other northern leaders, he argues that the attacks were fueled by “Igbo disgust over corruption in the federal government” (Parker 1969, 8). This language, as we will later discuss in our examination of Chinua Achebe’s memoir, was extremely dangerous and led to the “justified” targeting of innocent Igbo civilians. Parker also discusses the economic blockade, arguing that starvation was being used as a “weapon of war,” leading to food shortages, malnutrition of children, and a devastatingly high death toll; he notes that, according to observers, the death toll of Biafrans increased from 3,000 deaths daily in August of 1968 to 8,000 deaths daily in October (Parker 1969). Finally, within the discussion of possible reconciliation and peace talks, the author notes that peace negotiations up to that point have failed, and that if things were to continue as they were, there would be “little left of the Ibo people,” alluding to the question of genocide previously discussed (ibid., 10).

In the same vein as Parker, Michael Gould discusses causes of the war in his book entitled *The Struggle for Modern Nigeria: The Biafran War 1967-1970* while placing heavy emphasis on the ethnic and religious differences of the parties involved. In Chapter 2, he discusses the historical background for the war, and his central argument is that the “historical” ethnic and religious differences between the North and the South made war inevitable. While he does provide alternative explanations for the war’s rise, including colonial legacies and irreconcilable differences between Gowon and Ojukwu, his perception of the conflict as stirred by ethnic and religious differences between the Igbo and Hausa peoples speaks to a greater issue.

While ethnicity and religion were relevant in the war, as we will discuss justifications for atrocities through personal interpretations of Islam and ethnic divisiveness between Igbos and Hausas, to say that ethnicity and religion caused the war is dangerously reductive. Gould argues that ethnic divisiveness is ancient in Nigeria, and that topography was relevant in causing more divisiveness, but he does not discuss how Britain used topography to divide the ethnic groups further and place the South under the control of the North. The book provides an analysis of the war, its legacies, and ethnic relations in Nigeria today, but ultimately perpetuates the Western narrative that African violence is rooted in conflicting ethnic and religious differences.

II.4 Analysis/Argument

While many scholars have discussed the causes of the Biafran War, there still seems to be contestation on whether this was a conflict that stemmed out of ethnic differences. Authors like Leo Kuper would argue that the war was caused by Nigeria's ethnic pluralism, but that does not engender violence on its own (Fearon and Laitin 2003). In the following argument, this paper will discuss the extent to which ethnic plurality had an impact on the beginning of the war, if it did at all, and will discuss the ways in which the British colonial power used these ethnic differences to stir hatred between the three major ethnic groups.

Many authors do not discuss who or what Biafra was. When one thinks of Biafra, perhaps they imagine the eastern-most region of Nigeria, or perhaps they equate the Biafran people with the Igbo people. However, as we will discuss further, Biafra could not be defined through one monolithic culture or ethnic group; while their experiences as Biafrans were in many ways shaped by their ethnic identity, Biafran people were united under their fight against structural violence in the postcolonial state, not solely ethnicity. To perceive the war as an ethnic struggle

without discussing the tensions intentionally created by the colonial government is to minimize the depths of the Biafran struggle. While ethnicity is produced historically and is an important aspect of the war, it should not be the starting point of the analysis. In reality, both the people and the movement are defined through their plurality, as Arua discusses in “Biafra, Humanitarian Intervention and History” (Desgrandchamps et al. 2020). While scholars have alluded to what Biafra encompasses, it is still unclear who was part of Biafra. Biafran and Igbo are often used interchangeably in the literature previously discussed, though we know that Igbos were not the only Biafrans, and other smaller ethnic groups and Yorubas associated themselves with the Biafran cause. Furthermore, when discussing the experiences of both Biafrans and Nigerians during the war, the phrase “Biafran struggle” is used heavily to describe both the reason for seceding and the experiences during the secessionist movement. However, I argue that there is still a lack of clarity on what this struggle entailed and what it looked like at an individual and local level.

Moreover, the authors who discuss the notion of Biafran genocide fail to provide empirical evidence of the atrocities to conceptualize why the question of genocide is prevalent in the Biafran context. The authors often compare the conflict to European genocides, again demonstrating the inclination for Western scholars to understand African realities through the lens of Western history and experiences. Furthermore, the authors rarely discuss how British interventionism within the Biafran War led to greater devastation and a prolonged conflict. British intervention, which amounted to the consistent provision of relief supplies and arms to Nigerian soldiers as well as the public support of the Nigerian government in front of the international community, within the Biafran War had nothing to do with moral obligations to humanity but was rather a result of protecting oil interests in the Biafran territory (Uche 2008).

Ultimately, these shortcomings within the literature could be remedied by an analysis of the micropolitics of the war, in which there is an examination of daily Biafran life, the acts of violence committed against Biafrans, as well as the different Biafran perceptions of their own struggle.

It is because of these attempts made by Western scholars to reconstruct African realities (Diamond 2007), African conflicts, and intervention in Africa, that I argue that scholars should look to art, novels, music, film, poetry, and other forms of creativity by non-Western artists in order to understand non-Western realities, specifically Nigerian and Biafran artists within the context of the Biafran War. By examining art from those who have been directly impacted by the war, who live in the legacies of the conflict, and who use their platform to share lived experiences, scholars would be able to understand a different perspective on the conflict that has yet to be discussed thus far in political science. This paper examines the different elements of the Biafran War, including the beginning of the conflict and its roots, the daily lives of Nigerians during 1967 to 1970, and the idea of the Biafran struggle, through the lens of four art pieces by four Nigerian artists, and it argues that political scientists would benefit greatly by expanding their scholarly sources to include non-Western artists and their non-scholarly work to understand non-Western phenomena.

III. *Storm Over Biafra; Three Biafran Children*

Ben Enwonwu is a revered Nigerian artist who paved the way for future African painters and creatives and pioneered modern contemporary African art through his interpretations of war, tragedy, and humanity through his art. Enwonwu was born in Nigeria, in the region that would later become known as Biafra, and he used his critical acclaim to open the way for more

postcolonial art and creativity while exposing the world to African realities beyond Western conceptualizations (Ogbechie 2008). He created art surrounding the Biafran War, sharing stories of heartbreak, devastation, reconciliation, and hope, and in many ways, he exposed the world to Nigerian and Biafran realities that were not shown in the media. Enwonwu has an interesting perspective on the conflict because he did not support the secessionist movement and did not consider himself to be Biafran, though he was Igbo and did feel sympathy for the Biafran people as well as “anxiety over the war’s impact on the future of Nigeria” (Ogbechie 2008, 171). Though he was branded a traitor by Biafrans, his perspective as an Igbo man in opposition with the Biafran cause in many ways, I believe, allowed him the privilege of documenting life during the war outside the restraints of personal biases and obligations to a particular side. As we will see in his art, he was not concerned with pushing an agenda for a one side or supporting popular media representations of the war; rather, he was concerned with sharing the realities of the war for people on both sides of the conflict and documenting the humanity of Biafrans by giving them voices and faces outside of the media.

Enwonwu’s Biafran landscapes attempt to show the devastation that was brought onto Biafran land and people, and the chaotic nature of the scenes he paints reflects the dark, somber nature of the war itself. Being that he was from the war-torn region, his “Biafrascapes” depict the sense of loss he felt as war ravaged through his home (Lezcnar n.d.). On the other hand, his portraits of children before and during the war attempt to expose the different realities that different Biafrans faced; for some children, death and starvation was the reality, but for other children this may not have been the case. He portrays the multiplicity of Biafran realities, and above all, he reveals the humanity of all Biafrans during a time when they were portrayed as symbols of a movement rather than people who experienced life during a tragic war. The

following section examines two pieces of artwork seven years apart, gives a description of the paintings, examines artistic and scholarly analyses of the art, and discusses how these pieces gives direct insight into the realities of the Biafran War and its impact on the Nigerian people.



Figure 1

Storm Over Biafra was released in 1972 and is a dark piece that portrays the tragedies and chaos of the war in the Biafran region. While it may feel quite busy as there is no particular focal point, Enwonwu's use of color, the juxtaposition of bright and dark paint strokes, and the figures he paints all speak to the message he attempts to convey about the war. Beginning with the tumultuous portrayal of war in the lower section of the painting, Lezcnar argues that "the lacerating brushstrokes that cover the painting can be read as conveying the devastation brought to bear on the secessionist state" (Lezcnar n.d.). Similarly, a description of the piece by the National Museum of African Art notes that the "stormy skies and scattered cattle bones" as well as the tall grass and birds flying frantically in the foreground "refer to the widespread death and

destruction that occurred” during the conflict (“Storm over Biafra – Works – National Museum of African Art - Smithsonian Institution” n.d.). While this painting is not a “realistic” imagining of the war, it does draw on and evoke real emotions and experiences caused by the war, ultimately alluding to the problem of negotiating the post-war situation in Nigeria in which a “veil of silence” has defined the state’s response to the war’s legacy (Lezcnar n.d.).

While this piece reveals the pain felt by Biafrans and evokes this sense of helplessness that was felt as they fought a war many believed they were destined to lose, “the refined strokes over the painting combined with the contrast between bright and dark, reveal a certain power and optimism” (Scheerder 2017). The darkness of the clouds, and the piece as a whole, helps distinguish areas where Enwonwu uses lighter colors, and it almost makes one question if there is light beyond the dark clouds. The imagery of the clouds over the people of Biafra, while expressing the nature of the people’s reality as they faced great loss and displacement in a state that did not recognize their autonomy and their humanity, is also a reminder that no storm lasts forever. This piece was released after Biafrans had surrendered, and it is both a recognition of the loss Biafrans faced as they had to find a way to assimilate back into Nigerian society and a reminder that there are better days ahead for Enwonwu’s people. It seems that the artist recognizes that while the secessionist state was not achieved, there is still hope for reconciliation (“Storm over Biafra – Works – National Museum of African Art - Smithsonian Institution” n.d.).



Figure 2

As discussed previously, Biafran secessionist leaders relied heavily on media portrayals of the effects of the famine to gain support for their movement and spread awareness to the international community. The portrayal of starving children in Biafra in the media led to the widespread trope of “starving African children,” and while this media portrayal did lead to more awareness of the Biafran cause and the devastation brought by the blockade, Enwonwu attempts to portray a different reality for Biafran children through this piece entitled *Three Biafran Children*, released in 1966 (Heerten and Moses 2014). In this piece, there are three children, one who seems to be making eye contact with the audience, and two who look off to the right of the painting, seemingly looking at something the audience cannot see. Art historian Neil Coventry argues that the painting “shows a healthy child on the left, a sick child in the middle and a

dying/fading child on the right,” and while perhaps this is the case, Enwonwu does not depict these children as objects of suffering (Lezcnar n.d.). He paints these children in a way that expresses their humanity and shows the variation in lived experiences of Biafrans despite propaganda or media imagery. By painting three children in different conditions, none of whom are outwardly expressing misery and all of whom are well-clothed in brightly colored clothing, he is contesting the reductionist nature of media portrayals of Biafrans while wrestling with Western conceptualizations of Africans and their realities (ibid.).

Enwonwu’s unique perspective and his moral obligation to share Biafran realities lend greatly to his ability to share honest depictions of the war through the eyes of those who lived through it. While *Storm Over Biafra* and *Three Biafran Children* give insight into these realities, they are only a fraction of the artistic manifestations that came out of the Biafran War, not only from Enwonwu himself but also several other painters who shared legacies of the war through painting and other imagery. By examining Enwonwu’s depictions of Biafran realities, we learn a different perspective of the war that is not discussed in scholarly examinations of the war, and by excluding the artist’s perspective, we lose an opportunity to discuss this nuanced portrayal of the war and its implications on the Nigerian post-war state. Enwonwu himself argues that the common assumption that art does not affect politics and vice versa underestimates the practical purpose of art as a way of understanding political phenomena and events affecting people’s worlds (Enwonwu 1956). By broadening our understanding of what deserves analysis within political science, we take advantage of art as a tangible way to understand the world, war, and the multiplicity of human experience within war.

IV. *Half of a Yellow Sun* – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

While Enwonwu provides a non-Biafran perspective on the war that emphasizes the devastation brought upon all people, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie focuses on the range of Biafran experiences in her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Adichie is a renowned Nigerian author and speaker, known for her ability to express the experiences of different African people in ways that do not “other” them or render them inept. She is very about her issues with Western media portrayals of Africans, writing that “if I were not African, and if all I knew of Africa came from the U.S. media, I would think that all Africans were incomprehensible people perpetually fighting wars that made no sense, drinking muddy water from rivers, almost all dying of AIDS and incredibly poor” (Adichie 2008, 45). It is partly because of this popular portrayal of Africans that she makes it a point to “recognize the equal humanity” of the characters she writes about and engages with within her literature, as she believes that literature is an efficient way to expose and combat stereotypes (ibid.). Within her war novel, entitled *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie beautifully captures the way the Nigeria-Biafra War entrenched itself into the daily lives of those who would soon consider themselves Biafrans, and she takes her readers through the stories of five characters with so much to lose as they navigate life, love, heartbreak, and loyalty during the war. In this analysis, I provide a summary of the novel, discuss scholarly analyses of the takeaways and themes throughout the text, and note the ways in which Adichie’s portrayal of the different Biafran experiences should help shape our understanding of the war within political science.

The story begins in the early 1960s, following Nigeria’s independence, with a boy named Ugwu who arrives in Nsukka from a rural village to work as a houseboy for an impassioned and radical professor named Odenigbo. We soon meet the beautiful Olanna, the

daughter of a wealthy Nigerian chief, who Ugwu notes, “smelled of coconuts” and spoke both English and Igbo “magically” (Adichie 2006, 28). Odenigbo and Olanna are in love, and Olanna soon moves to Nsukka to live with Ugwu and his master and teach at a university. The book switches perspectives each chapter, and by chapter 2 we meet Kainene, Olanna’s sardonic twin sister who works for their father’s business. We also meet Richard, a British white man who moved to Nigeria to write about the culture and art, who meets Kainene at a party and soon after breaks up with his girlfriend Susan to pursue her instead.

Odenigbo regularly hosts dinner parties for his colleagues at Nsukka University in which they discuss politics, and Ugwu becomes fascinated with their heated discussions, often listening to his master and his colleagues argue for hours. Fast forward to the late ‘60s, Olanna and Odenigbo have a baby, who we later find out is the biological child of Odenigbo and Amala, Odenigbo’s mother’s house girl. Tensions rise between Igbos and Hausas after the first coup, and by the time the secession is announced, anti-Igbo rhetoric has increased greatly. Olanna realizes how serious the ethnic hatred has become when she visits her family and her ex-lover Mohammed in Kano, a city in the North, but is forced to rush to the train station to escape death by northern radicals. On her way out of the city, she first stops by her aunt and uncle’s compound and finds her Uncle Mbaezi and Aunty Ifeka killed, with Arize, her pregnant cousin, nowhere to be found. As she leaves the house in a daze, she sees Uncle Mbaezi’s “friend” she had met years before walking over Igbo bodies, kicking corpses to check if they were still alive and saying that this is the will of Allah (Adichie 2006). On her way back to Nsukka from Kano, she is crammed on a train next to a woman holding a calabash, and when the woman uncovers the bowl, Olanna sees the head of a little girl with braided hair and grey skin.

Soon after, Odenigbo and his family hear Ojukwu's voice on the radio announcing that, since they "can no longer be protected in [their] lives and in [their] properties by any government based outside of eastern Nigeria," the region they once regarded as eastern Nigerian is henceforth a sovereign state known as The Republic of Biafra (ibid., 203). This news is received with great joy by the now-Biafrans, and they celebrate their freedom and hope on the streets, thinking that the state that hated them so much would never fight to keep them as part of Nigeria. However, the Nigerian government declared a police action shortly after this announcement, which ultimately led to a war once Biafrans refused to be annexed. As the war tears through cities in the east, Odenigbo, Olanna and their family are forced to relocate on multiple occasions, narrowly dodging the wrath of the northern forces. During their travels, Ugwu yearns to help fight the war, wishing he could wear the patch of half of a yellow sun that signified the Biafran cause.

By the late 1960s, the scene is one of devastation. The federal blockade has caused severe starvation and people are dying daily from *kwashiorkor*, a disease brought on by malnutrition. Richard writes articles about the war to illustrate the suffering of the people, and Kainene runs a refugee camp. Ugwu has been conscripted into the war, and his eyes are opened to the horrors committed by soldiers during wartime, he himself taking part in a gang rape. He gets wounded in battle and is suspected to have died, but he is found in a hospital by Richard and is reunited with Olanna, Odenigbo, and Baby, as well as the rest of their family. Ugwu lives with the memories of the war, his sins, and Eberechi, the woman he fell in love with before he fought in the war, and he writes a book about the war and his experiences entitled *The World Was Silent When We Died*.

Ernest Emenyonu discusses the ways that the novel provides clear understanding of the causes of the war and the military progress of the conflict, as well as how these developments affected the individual lives of the main characters who were all from different ways of life and still important stakeholders as non-combatants (Emenyonu 2017). Adichie confronts the discussion of the war through eyes of the Biafran people, since, the author argues, they were stripped of their voices during the actual war (ibid.). Emenyonu emphasizes the importance of Olanna's perspective and space within the novel as a university-educated Igbo woman who experienced "the displacement and deprivation that characterize many of Africa's civil wars" (Emenyonu 2017, 130). As we follow Olanna and her family as they travel from town to town narrowly dodging the advancing Nigerian army, they finally find refuge in Orlu with Kainene. Emenyonu parallels Olanna's experience of forced relocation to Biafra itself, arguing that each time her family was forced to flee a town and set up their home in another location, they had to sacrifice much of what once belonged to them and continue working with what they had (ibid.). Similarly in Biafra, with the advancing Nigerian soldiers, so much territory was sacrificed, or stolen, until "Biafra itself [was] eventually reduced to a mere enclave" (Emenyonu 2017, 131).

Furthermore, in order to grasp the full picture of how powerful this novel is as a tool for understanding the war, we must also examine the book-within-the-book, *While the World Watched*, and the ways it explicitly describes the extent to which starvation was employed intentionally to crush the spirits of Biafrans, but also how it led to a longer conflict (White 2007):

Starvation was a Nigerian weapon of war. Starvation broke Biafra and brought Biafra fame and made Biafra last as long as it did. Starvation made the people of the world take notice and sparked protests and demonstrations in London and Moscow and Czechoslovakia. Starvation made Zambia and Tanzania and Ivory Coast and Gabon recognize Biafra, starvation brought Africa into Nixon's American campaign and made parents all over the world tell their children to

eat up. Starvation propelled aid organizations to sneak-fly food into Biafra at night since both sides could not agree on routes. Starvation aided the careers of photographers. And starvation made the International Red Cross call Biafra its gravest emergency since the Second World War. (Adichie 2006, 297).

This excerpt perfectly illustrates how the same tactic used to break the people of Biafra brought Biafra international attention and helped the secessionist territory gain recognition from other African states (White 2007). E. Frances White recognizes this as one of the novel's "central ironies;" enforced starvation was meant to crush Biafra, and yet it also "brought it the international attention that sustained its rebellion for three years" (ibid., 10). On the other hand, however, the imagery of starvation also enforced this idea of the starving African, which White does not discuss in his analysis, though Enwonwu does touch on this in his depiction of the three Biafran children. Adichie analyzes the dichotomy of the starving child imagery as a tool for the conquest of Biafra and a tool for the internationalization of the conflict by Biafran leaders, as political scientists have also done, but she also alludes to the damaging effect this imagery had on Western perceptions of Africans as she writes that starvation "made parents all over the world tell their children to eat up," and, as is common to hear, to be grateful for food the same way starving African children would be (Adichie 2006, 297). This element of the effects of the economic blockade goes undiscussed in political science scholarship but is important to our understanding of the full extent of the war's legacies not only on Nigeria, but on the continent.

Adichie also puts into perspective how important the Biafran identity was for Biafrans. As White writes, "part of the book's chilling quality comes from the almost seamless way people move from thinking of themselves as Nigerians to thinking of themselves as Biafrans. How quickly the word "Nigerian" shifts from self-identity to epithet" (White 2007, 10). Adichie illustrates how the massacres leading up to the secession was the last straw for the Igbo people,

writing that “what mattered was that the massacres frightened and united the Igbo. What mattered was that the massacres made fervent Biafrans of former Nigerians” (Adichie 2006, 257). Though simple, this phrasing is essential to understanding the Biafran cause: Biafra did not appear out of thin air. The people of southeast Nigeria were forced into creating a separate state that would respect their autonomy and value their lives. However, the importance and centrality of Biafran identity within the war is something that goes undiscussed in scholarly literature, as political scientists seem to focus on the history of ethnic identity.

Biafrans did not assume a single ethnic identity: they did not refer to themselves as the “Igbo Republic” because their struggle stretched beyond the confines of ethnicity. They were Biafrans, and while ethnicity was helpful in creating a unifying identity, their desire to live in a state that was intent on disintegrating the structural violence inflicted upon the population during colonialism and perpetuated after independence was what strengthened their cause and fueled their fight. Biafran identity, in many ways, helped sustain the war effort until the very end. Adichie illustrates how Biafra was not just a secessionist movement or a state-in-the-making, it was central to the lives of those who identified with it because it provided those who had been subjugated and repressed for so long by Nigeria a new sense of security and hope. It provided them a place to call their home, where they would be appreciated and accepted for their ways of life, their cultures, and their passions.

Moreover, Adichie discusses the role of colonialism in creating the conditions for the war to arise, as well as British intervention in sustaining the war. Though Western media portrayed the war as caused by age-old ethnic hatreds, the characters understand and discuss the reality of the war’s causes. In Richard’s letter to the Herald, he writes that if there is hatred between the ethnic groups, then it is very young and “has been caused, simply, by the informal divide-and-

rule policies of the British colonial exercise. These policies manipulated the differences between the tribes and ensured that unity would not exist, thereby making the easy governance of such a large country practicable” (Adichie 2006, 209). Similarly, Ugwu’s book within the book discusses how the British needed to keep Nigeria intact post-independence in order to protect their colonial legacy. He writes that they did this by fixing the pre-Independence elections to ensure that northerners would be central actors in the federal government and by creating a new constitution in which the North was given control of the South (Adichie 2006). And with the South eager for a taste of freedom and independence from the colonial state, they accepted the new constitution, knowing little of the destruction that would meet them only a few years later. “At Independence in 1960, Nigeria was a collection of fragments held in a fragile clasp” (ibid., 195).

In a conversation with Miss Adebayo, Okeoma tells her that she should not defend British Ambassador David Hunt and his talks of bringing peace to Nigeria. “Why is he coming to tell us how to put out a fire,” Okeoma says, “when it is he and his fellow British who collected the firewood for it in the first place?” (ibid., 199). Okeoma argues that it is absurd to allow those who created a problem, those with malicious intentions, to also create the solution. He alludes to the understanding that the British intentionally created divisiveness between the different ethnic groups and spurred Igbo hatred during and after colonialism. On the other hand, Odenigbo discusses the tragedies of the postcolonial state outside of the war and conflicts, and both he and Ugwu are characters with unique perspectives on the postcolonial state since they both were raised in rural villages but ended up obtaining Western educations. Because of this duality, they must both navigate how to empathize with the struggles of those without opportunities for a formal education while still rejecting the Western influence on their own education and the

Nigerian postcolonial state. Odenigbo argues that “the real tragedy of our postcolonial world is not that the majority of people had no say whether or not they wanted this new world; rather it is that the majority have not been given the tools to negotiate this new world” (Adichie 2006, 129).

Finally, I believe it is important to note how Adichie juxtaposes Richard from the rest of the white people she portrays in the text, and the role he plays not only as a white man, but as a white Biafran. Her framing of Richard speaks to the larger discussion of westerners being viewed as the “white saviors” of Africans, and she seems to simultaneously disrupt and challenge this narrative through Richard’s portrayal. In his interactions with other British white people, he seems to face an internal struggle in which he tries to find his place in a space where people are shamelessly racist and bigoted toward Nigerians, seeing them as morally and intellectually inferior, while he himself does not share those same views but also does not express his dissent toward their opinions openly. There is a moment in the book where Richard is called out by Okeoma, one of Odenigbo’s colleagues and house guests, when the former is discussing his interest with Igbo-Ukwu art and says how it is incredible that “these people” could perfect such a complicated art-form (Adichie 2006, 141). Okeoma questions why it is so surprising that “these people are capable of such things,” and though Richard believes he would have been surprised even if the people were white, it becomes apparent to him that he is not exempt from internalizing the racism he was raised with, and he must be aware of this (ibid.). In this way, she challenges her audience to reflect on their own internal biases against African populations and, again, speaks to the issue of challenging Western perceptions of Africans.

Adichie frames Richard against other white people, and she shows how they were frequently amused by the ethnic relations of the country, often mocking their intellect: Susan, Richard’s former girlfriend, describes the “the Hausa in the North were a dignified lot, the Igbo

were surly and money-loving, and the Yoruba were rather jolly even if they were first-rate lickspittles” (ibid., 69). At the parties Richard accompanied Susan to, he noticed the way other Englishmen spoke of Nigerians: “They chuckled about how tribal Nigerian politics was, and perhaps these chaps were not quite so ready to rule themselves after all” (ibid. 66). Adichie portrays how easy it is for these people to dismiss Nigerian, and ultimately African, politics to “tribalism” without examining the damage they caused to the state. She also portrays how easy it is for Richard - a white man who recognizes that the war was caused by British colonialism as he writes in his letter to the *Herald* - to stay silent. As previously stated, Adichie rejects the Western trope of the “white savior,” and instead emphasizes the humanity and flaws of Richard as she does with the rest of the characters to remind her readers that in times of war, Africa does not need a white hero. Indeed, there oftentimes is no hero and no victory as all people must learn to live with what is left from all that has been destroyed (Mavhunga 2018).

Adichie provides perhaps one of the greatest literary contributions to the study of the Biafran War, and she addresses numerous issues through *Half of a Yellow Sun* while framing the story from the perspectives of people from strikingly different backgrounds. Not only does she provide a clearer understanding of who Biafrans were, why they were so passionate about their cause, and how the war played out, but she also illustrates that even during times of war, people are still people. She focuses on the humanity of her characters and the micropolitics of their interactions with others to illuminate the larger issues of ethnic relations before and during the war and the extent of violence committed against innocent people. Furthermore, her portrayal of Biafran identity through the eyes of the five main characters helps clarify our understanding of what this identity was to Biafrans, and her assertion of the centrality of the deeply entrenched structural violence committed against Igbos in forming this identity clarifies that ethnicity is

simply not enough to explain the rise of this conflict, as political scientists have suggested. Ultimately, Adichie challenges popular perceptions of Africans through the multiplicity of her characters while elucidating details of the war and the Biafran experience that go undiscussed in political science.

V. *The Casualties* – J. P. Clark

Though Adichie mainly focuses on the experiences of Biafrans and the rise of the war, John Pepper Clark provides an alternative lens for examining the war, focusing on the devastation this war brought to both Nigerians and Biafrans alike. Clark is an internationally acclaimed Nigerian poet known for his humorous pieces laced with irony and satire; he was both an author and a “prophet to his society” who told stories of the world around him and his culture (Ighile and Nwodo 2013). His collection of poems inspired by the Biafran War, entitled “Casualties”, is a departure from his earlier work and embraces the somber nature of the war while beautifully expressing themes of pain, death, plea, unity, and hope. While Clark was not Biafran himself, his work that comes out of the Biafran War speaks to the pain he felt as he watched his country being torn apart by violence, and he openly laments the lives lost of both Biafrans and Nigerians because of this war. *The Casualties*, one of the poems from the collection, was written after the war ended, and it reflects on the sheer devastation felt by all Nigerians and Biafrans as people lost their lives to *kwashiorkor*, as soldiers fought to the death for their territory, as homes were raided and people were displaced, as parents outlived their children, and as the war broke the spirits of thousands. Ultimately, it is a message to the state and the people of Nigeria that war must be avoided at all costs (Nnaji 2014). This section examines the language used in the poem to tell the stories of the war, discusses Clark’s focus on stirring

emotions rather than providing a historical account of the war, and analyzes Clark's call to peace among the Nigerian and Biafran people.

Clark's language demonstrates that the purpose of this piece is to say that everyone, all Nigerians and all Biafrans, are the casualties of the war. All people "were originators, facilitators, and victims of the national tragedy" (Ighile and Nwodo 2013, 51). As Ighile and Nwodo note, the poet laments the tragedy of the war, but also believes that all were complicit in allowing the war to begin (ibid.). Clark artistically argues that all people who lived and died on Nigerian and Biafran soil during the war are casualties by listing out the clear cases of casualties and then writing that they are not the only ones, for example "The casualties are not only those who are dead; they are well out of it. The casualties are not only those who are wounded, though they await burial by installment. The casualties are not only those who have lost persons or property, hard as it is to grope for a touch that some may not know is not there" (Nnaji 2014). Through this rhetoric, he shows that all are casualties of the war, as those left behind must survive with the legacies of the war and the memory of who and what has been lost.

Clark writes "the casualties are not only those who started a fire and now cannot put it out. Thousands are burning that had no say in the matter. The casualties are not only those who escaping the shattered shell become prisoners in a fortress of falling walls" (Casualties n.d.). In this piece of the poem, he alludes to the notion that those who were fighting the war and those who were running from death had little say in whether the war began. This connotes the principle-agent problem that is heavily discussed in IR and discourse on war, as civilians had no say in the beginning of the war, but they were the ones to suffer the consequences. As previously stated within Adichie's analysis, the poem explains how Biafrans did not necessarily want to fight a war; they wanted to regain their security and be liberated from the structural violence

inflicted upon them by the state. However, after the state refused to let Biafra secede, they were willing to fight for their lives, their territory, and their newfound identity. Clark also alludes to the fear Biafrans must have felt as they fled their homes to find safety in different towns within the Biafran territory, only to be trapped and surrounded by federal troops while having limited resources due to the blockade.

Because we cannot hear each other speak,
Because eyes have ceased to see the face from the crowd,
Because whether we know or
Do not know the extent of wrong on all sides,
We are characters now other than before
The war began, the stay-at-home unsettled (Casualties n.d.)

In this section of the poem, Clark speaks to the futility of the war at solving the deeper issues at hand within Nigeria. While the fighting was happening, while people were dying of starvation and *kwashiorkor*, which he mentions at the end of the poem, people were not hearing each other and were ultimately no closer to the solution for their problems. The poet writes that as fighting raged on, people on both sides of the war no longer saw each other for their humanity, people did not hear the pleas of those on either side of the war, and, Clark argues, the actual cause of the war was obfuscated by the amount of carnage and devastation. People did not know “the extent of the wrongdoings” on either side of the war; Nigerians did not see how their crimes destroyed the Biafrans and led to millions of deaths because, according to the language used by Clark, the humanity of the people of Biafra was of no concern. On both sides of the war, people were no longer humans but representations of the political turmoil that plagued Nigerian and Biafran soil. Furthermore, this portion of the poem holds great weight, and it truly emphasizes why Clark was considered a poetic prophet in Nigeria. The language evoked prophecies the fact

that the conditions that allowed the war to arise were never truly remedied; though we may see greater political representation of different ethnic groups in different social and political spheres within Nigeria today, the legacies of the war and the divisiveness it caused often go unaddressed (Cheyney-Coker 1971).

Poetry is the “continued reflection of human life and all [of its] complexities,” and poets tell the story of the world they visualize while reflecting on the human experience in a way we do not see within political science (Nnaji 2014, 21). Clark was known for having served as “a cultural repository, a bastion of learning, the advisor of court princes and governors, but above all, a voice whose premonitions about both the present and future were never born lightly by ruler or ruled” (Cheyney-Coker 1971). His distinguished role in Nigeria and the esteem his art held should not go unnoticed and undiscussed, and by using his pieces to contextualize the war through an artistic lens, scholars would gain a perspective that has, up to this point, gone overlooked within the scholarship. Clark and Adichie both focus on discussing the human experience within the war; however, while Adichie perceives Biafrans to be the main victims of violence by the state, Clark finds the people on both sides of the war culpable of allowing the war to arise to begin with, whether they realize their culpability or not.

VI. *There Was a Country* – Chinua Achebe

Finally, when discussing art and Biafra, we must examine Chinua Achebe’s final piece of work. Though this piece is very different from the latter works examined, the author’s contribution to the discourse on the Biafran War must not go overlooked. Achebe is perhaps the most influential African author and novelist of the 20th century. His work inspired a generation of African novelists and his novels shared worlds of histories and experiences of Nigerian

people. In “African ‘Authenticity’ and the Biafran Experience,” Adichie regards Achebe as “the writer whose work gave me permission to write my own stories” (Adichie 2008, 42). His sharing of African stories, of characters with Igbo names, of human experiences experienced by African people, all helped expose literature to the validity and humanity of Africans and their experiences and stories. In his final work, this coming-of-age memoir that recounts his own story from childhood to adolescence to adulthood, Achebe takes the reader through the development of his consciousness as a writer and activist while reflecting on one of the most tragic civil wars in history. *There Was a Country* examines the Biafran War through Achebe’s eyes, and it tells the story of a newly independent state struggling to be free from the weight of a colonial legacy while not taking action to remedy the divisiveness the colonialists created. Ultimately, Achebe exposes his readers to the deeply troubling realities of the war from the perspective of someone who was an integral part in the internationalization of the conflict. This section details Achebe’s novel beginning with his account of the military coup on January 15, 1966, and it examines the implications of his perspective on our understanding of the conflict, specifically the economic blockade.

“Nigeria was not ready or willing to face her problems. If her leaders had approached their duty with humility, they all might have realized long before the coup that the country was in deep trouble” (Achebe 2012, 64). Shortly before the coup that would change Nigeria forever had happened, Achebe was speaking with his publisher about the release of his then-new novel *A Man of the People*, which heavily criticized the Nigerian political body and predicted a coup. However, even though he predicted the coup led by Igbos, even while Nigerians knew there were deeply embedded troubles within the state, Achebe notes that neither he nor the rest of the populous expected a coup to *actually* take place because “the story Nigeria had of herself was

that something like a military coup would never happen; Nigeria was too stable for that” (ibid.). He writes that the weeks following the coup were tumultuous; there was general confusion on what took place during the coup, people fabricated stories and eventually determined that the coup was a plot by the “ambitious Igbos of the East” to take control of Nigeria (ibid.). Achebe notes that the ethnicization of the coup was expected, as tribalism was ubiquitous within the state as a way for people to make sense of the world and assign blame to an ethnic group or people other than themselves. Following the coup, there was a thirst for revenge which, according to Achebe, was an excuse for Nigerians to take out their disdain for Igbos “who led the nation in virtually every sector... This group, the Igbo, that gave the colonizing British so many headaches and then literally drove them out of Nigeria...” (Achebe 2012, 67). He recounts that soldiers were using their authority to unjustly execute and commit crimes against Igbos, and military officers in the North were conducting pogroms against the people.

Achebe and his family moved out of their home shortly after the coup and found safety at a friend’s home, but not long before he realized the situation had gotten out of hand and he would need to send his family abroad to keep them safe. As Igbos then began to pack up their homes and relocate to the East, Achebe notes how people they had lived with for years, neighbors, friendly faces they had come to know so well, now jeered and mocked them while expressing anti-Igbo sentiments and rhetoric (Achebe 2012). They expected to hear something from the intellectuals and the leaders, but as the massacres increased and Igbos were being driven East, all they heard was “they had it coming to them” (ibid.). Achebe writes that he was one of the last to leave Lagos for safety as he struggled to come to terms with the fact that the country was disintegrating before his eyes, and he held a deep sense of disappointment for his country, not just because people were disappearing left and right and innocent Igbos were being

targeted by mobs, but mainly because the federal government sat by and watched. For years leading up to the coup, the populous was disillusioned with the political class of Nigeria as corruption was widespread and it was clear that those with political power were mainly concerned with keeping their power rather than using their influence to incite meaningful change post-independence. This was reflected in the silence Igbos were met with by the political elites as they were indiscriminately targeted and murdered by their fellow Nigerians.

He discusses the history of ethnic resentment toward Igbos, which he argues is as old as Nigeria itself (Achebe 2012). When he writes that this hatred is as old as the country, one must remember Nigeria became Nigeria in 1914; Achebe is not referring to the pre-colonial territory that eventually became Nigeria during colonialism. This hatred should be traced back to its colonial origins, as Adichie alludes to heavily in her novel, though Achebe recognizes that it has been perpetuated and reiterated by Nigerians. Igbo culture, contrasted with the Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba cultures, innately gave Igbo people an advantage over their compatriots, according to Achebe. Igbo culture values individualism and is highly competitive, as opposed to the Hausa-Fulani culture which hinders their people through a heedful religion, and Yoruba culture which is deeply hierarchical (ibid.). Igbos are raised to fear no man or god, but wholeheartedly pursue their ambitions despite obstacles, believing that any man can do anything and that opportunities were meant to be utilized to their fullest. This ambition, as well as other factors “land hunger”, he writes, has led the Igbos to dominate different spheres – social, economic, educational, etc. – within Nigeria (Achebe 2012, 75).

“In most other nations the success of an ethnic group as industrious as the Igbo would stimulate healthy competition and a renaissance of learning and achievement. In Nigeria it bred deep resentment and both subtle and overt attempts to dismantle the structures in place for meritocracy in favor mediocrity, under the cloak of a need for “federal character” – a morally

bankrupt and deeply corrupt Nigerian form of the far more successful affirmative action in the United States. (Achebe 2012, 78)

He argues that the attempt to inhibit any people from reaching their full potential, the “denial of merit” of any kind regardless of ethnicity, race, gender, etc., is a social injustice and leaves those who are repressed as victims (ibid.). Such is the case for the Igbos.

The author recounts memories of hearing false rumors that the war had ended during his time in Okporo. The stories circulating that the war ended or that the Biafran troops were winning the war brought people hope, but that hope began to diminish when federal troops invaded Okporo, leaving civilians with horrific stories of women being raped and murdered violently (Achebe 2012). However, though the Nigerian army was gaining more Biafran territory by 1968, and though “Gowon’s three-pronged attack had surrounded millions of civilians who were harbored in a narrow corridor around Umuahia,” Biafra still surprised Nigeria with its determination to win the war and to be recognized as a sovereign republic (Achebe 2012, 209). Biafrans guerilla war strategy that they borrowed from Che Guevara’s playbook allowed them to withstand attacks by “breaking conflict zones into classic smaller wars” all while being outmanned and outgunned, but it did lead to the cession of more territory (ibid.). Achebe notes the great discipline that is required of individuals who take part in guerilla warfare in order for it to be successful, again alluding to Adichie’s discussion of the dedication of individual combatants to the Biafran cause. However, the ceding of more territory led to Biafrans paying a great price in human lives, as those trapped in Umuahia could not plant their crops and combat the famine. The famine worsened as the war continued, with cases of marasmus and *kwashiorkor* becoming more widespread, as well as other diseases afflicting the entrapped population. “Some estimates are that over a thousand Biafrans a day were perishing at this time, and at the height of Gowon’s economic blockade and ‘starve them into submission’ policy, upward of fifty thousand

Biafran civilians, most of them babies, children, and women, were dying every single month” (Achebe 2012, 210).

Furthermore, Ojukwu’s “Biafran babies” speech, which accused Gowon of attempting genocide against Biafrans, led more people internationally to understand the humanitarian emergency that was taking place in Biafra, but it also absolved Ojukwu and his cabinet from taking responsibility for any rage or resentment that may have begun building up in Biafrans. The speech also, Achebe distinctly notes, was another opportunity to frame Gowon, Ojukwu’s arch nemesis, negatively in the public eye. Following the speech, Ojukwu saw his opportunity to dispatch ambassadors to different countries, looking for more support and pro-Biafra policies. However, they were met with little help; Achebe quotes Sir Louis Mbanefo and his condemnation of the United States: “We are especially resentful of the ambivalent pretenses the United States makes, that it is trying to help us... If we are condemned to die, all right, we will die. But at least let the world, and the United States, be honest about it.” (Adichie 2012, 211). Ultimately, despite the world seeing how the Biafran struggle, despite the world seeing starving soldiers and children, despite the great humanitarian need in Biafra, the West stayed silent while Biafrans died – Achebe does discuss the help Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie offered in using air and land transport to provide supplies to those starving in Biafra, both soldiers and civilians alike (ibid.). However, the majority of the world saw Biafrans starving and dying – the images used by Biafrans to draw attention to the travesty happening due to the blockade were not just propaganda to draw attention to the cause, they were the real children and adults dying at the hands of the Nigerian government and all who stood by and watched – and did not do enough.

Achebe gives his reader an understanding of who Biafrans were and their experiences as their country and the people they knew for years turned their faces toward them in disdain. Like

all other artists I have discussed previously, he has a unique experience and connection to Biafra. He considered himself Biafran but had the advantage of being an internationally recognized and adored writer who was greatly esteemed by Nigerians and, eventually, Biafrans. Therefore, while he still suffered among fellow Biafrans and encountered numerous near-death experiences, he also had direct access to information from few Biafran leaders and had insight into what was happening at their level. His discussion of the role of ethnicity in the war does contribute to the scholarship on the causes of the war: by saying that the ethnic hatred of Igbos is as old as Nigeria but is not engrained in “ancient tribalism” clarifies the argument that ethnic hatred was indeed stirred by British colonizers but has been reiterated by civilians. Furthermore, by placing a greater emphasis on discussing how things escalated to the point where thousands of Biafran civilians were dying daily, we are able to see the different elements that led to the prolonged conflict. While Biafrans were determined to win, there was also the issue that Gowon and Ojukwu hated one another, and neither could come to an agreement to end the suffering of Biafrans and Nigerians. This, again, refers to the principle-agent problem that Clark also alludes to in his poem. A further analysis of his entire book would perhaps reveal more places where the existing scholarly literature lacks and would open a space for a deeper discussion of the Biafran War that honors the experiences of those who lived through it.

VII. Conclusion

These four artists and their works inspire meaningful reflection on the Biafran War, and this reflection subsequently reveals truths and insight into the war that has thus gone unexplored within the existing scholarly literature. For Enwonwu, by portraying travesty through landscape and chaos, we feel a new sense of somberness that should be associated with the war; by

portraying Biafran children in three different health conditions, we have an opportunity to explore the multiplicity of the Biafran experience despite the popular portrayal of the starving African child. For Adichie, she allows us to connect with the characters and feel the depths of their loss while understanding ethnic relations prior to and during the war. Furthermore, she explores the role of colonialism in stirring ethnic divisiveness and allows her characters to show how important the Biafran identity was to Biafrans. On the other hand, Clark uses poetry to discuss the futility of the war in solving the greater issues at hand in Nigeria. He “prophesies” the notion that the war would not actually resolve the divisive race relations among the three major ethnic groups, and his call for peace beckons a new order that will acknowledge the damaging effects of both the colonial legacy and the war’s legacy on Nigerians. Finally, Achebe’s discussion of the history of ethnic hatred toward Igbos puts into perspective the gravity of how important it is for postcolonial state leaders to intentionally work to dispel the damaging effects colonialism had on the perceptions of one’s own ethnic group in relation to other ethnic groups within a state. As discussed previously, British colonizers were intentional in the ways that they divided the population by ethnic group and territory, and they capitalized on the differences of each ethnic group to subjugate everyone under their rule. However, as Achebe and Adichie discuss in their novels, it is the responsibility of the state leaders to remedy these damages to protect the autonomy and value the multiplicity of different people.

The lessons one can learn from examining these bodies of work from an analytical perspective should persuade political scientists to value the voices of Nigerian and Biafran artists in their discussion of the war. Political science oftentimes overlooks or undermines the experiences of African populations, and while this is perhaps unintentional, the damages are still reflected in the way individuals may try to disassociate from pieces of their history that are part

of their state's legacy. They are also reflected in the simplification of African violence; while it is easier to blame violence on "age-old" ethnic relations or the weakness of the state in controlling violence, a deeper look into the intimacies of the war reveal realities and nuances that provide opportunities for richer discourse and analysis. The Biafran War was perhaps the most devastating conflict in Africa's history, and yet there is very little literature discussing the effects of the war, substantive analyses of causes of the war that recognize the role Britain played in creating and prolonging the war, and other elements. While art cannot illuminate all the answers that political scientists seek to discover, I argue that there is value in utilizing the artistic representations of African realities by artists from these countries in order to uncover new insights and build different theories that will provide a more substantive analysis of war and violence.

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Notes

1. **Figure 1:** Ben Enwonwu, Storm over Biafra, oil on canvas, Smithsonian, 1972.
2. **Figure 2:** Ben Enwonwu, Three Biafran Children, oil on canvas, 1966.