

The
Economist

Emeka Ojukwu

Emeka Ojukwu, leader of breakaway Biafra, died on November 26th, aged 78

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IT WAS after Nigeria's first military coup, in January 1966, that Emeka Ojukwu came to power as governor of the country's predominantly-Ibo Eastern Region. Though he was himself an Ibo and a lieutenant-colonel in the army, he had not been involved in this Ibo-led plot, nor, less surprisingly, did he take part in the second coup, six months later, which was led by northerners. He was a federalist, which is to say he believed in keeping Nigeria as a federal state.



God had not designed it as such, but the British had. As the colonial power, they had drawn a line round the lands of the three main peoples and 400 or so smaller linguistic groups, governed the mainly-Muslim northerners indirectly through traditional rulers and the mainly-Christian remainder directly, called them in aggregate a nation and, in 1960, given them independence. Two years earlier, a Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe, borrowing from Yeats, had pointed out that “things fall apart”, in a novel of that name. He had quickly been proved right.

Colonel Ojukwu, too, had foreseen the likelihood of bust-up. That was why he had not followed his father into business but, after school in England and then Oxford, had instead gone into the army, which was considered one of the country's sturdier institutions. It did indeed prove to be a lasting source of power, but not of unity. The second coup was followed by the killing of at least 200 Ibo soldiers.

Pogroms of Ibos had already taken place in the North and they now grew more severe, claiming the lives of tens of thousands of easterners, and prompting over 1m of the luckier ones to head for their region of origin. Colonel Ojukwu was soon regretting the broadcast he

had made earlier, in which he had asked Ibos in the North to return home since the situation was “under control”. Instead, the scene was set for a war that was to last for 30 months and claim the lives, it is said, of 1m people through fighting, hunger or disease. Some put the number much higher.

Secession was surely not what Colonel Ojukwu had in mind when he became governor of the East. Just five months before Biafra broke away he was arguing for a looser federation, and he got the promise of it, even though his fellow military governors soon backtracked, realising they had been outwitted. The colonel was clever and more educated than his counterparts, which may have been why he would not defer to his antagonist, Lieut-Colonel Yakubu Gowon, the federal supreme commander; or perhaps he was just proud and obstinate, as his critics had it.

Of course, the general, as he soon made himself, had a difficult part to play. He wanted to show that Biafra was a serious country, self-reliant, efficient, able to take its place as the “first nation-state south of the Sahara”. He also had to present it as a victim, a plucky little population of about 13m, reluctantly taking on a bully with nearly three times as many people and all the resources of an established state. He had to be both bulldog and underdog.

Soft of voice and sad of eye, he played the part brilliantly. Pausing before he answered questions, drawing on a State Express 555 cigarette and talking in tones of measured reasonableness, he came across as the thinking man's soldier. Despite his youth, his bulk lent authority, his beard, grown as a symbol of mourning for the massacred Ibos, lent gravitas. Yet he could also be arrogant and authoritarian, ready to adopt the very practices he affected to disdain—by, for instance, appointing his father to chair two regional corporations.

The “police action” described by Colonel Gowon at the outset turned into a bloody conflict and a merciless siege. It was the first war to be brought by television—and a skilful propaganda machine—into rich-country homes almost daily. It was thus conducted with pictures of starving children and claims of genocide, as well as the promise of oil contracts, daring night-time airlifts, talk of *jihad*, accusations of collusion by aid-workers and weapons supplied (or withheld) competitively by Britain, the Soviet Union and others. It also involved conventional fighting and at this the Biafrans, after a surprising irruption in August 1967 to within 150km (nearly 100 miles) of the federal capital, proved inadequate. By year's end the federal side had taken more than half of Biafra's territory.

The verdict

Historians say, fairly, that General Ojukwu should have surrendered then. Biafra had no

chance of victory, and two years of famine and fighting would have been avoided. At the time, though, Biafra still seemed to offer the prospect of a country better run than most others in Africa, and the fears of genocide were certainly well founded. In the event, General Gowon behaved impeccably, and his troops exacted no revenge. General Ojukwu was pardoned in 1982, returned to Nigeria from exile and re-entered politics, albeit unsuccessfully.

For Africa it was a cautionary tale. The 1960s, in which so many African countries gained independence, had started with a brutal war of secession in Congo. They ended with another. However, Biafra's failure to redraw colonial boundaries by force put an end to most further attempts. If any change is to be made now, it must be by consent, as in Sudan. Perhaps General Ojukwu's stand was needed to achieve this.

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