“Hell was let loose on the country”: The Social History of Military Technology in the Republic of Biafra

Samuel Fury Childs Daly

Abstract: The problem of armed crime in late twentieth-century Nigeria was closely connected to the events of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). Legal records from the secessionist Republic of Biafra reveal how violent crime emerged as part of the military confrontation between Biafra and Nigeria. The wide availability of firearms, the Biafran state’s diminishing ability to enforce the law, and the gradual collapse of Biafra’s economy under the pressure of a Nigerian blockade made Biafran soldiers and civilians reliant on their weapons to obtain food and fuel, make claims to property, and settle disputes with one another. Criminal legal records illustrate how military technologies shape interactions and relationships in the places where they are deployed, and how those dynamics can endure after the war comes to an end. This speaks to larger theoretical questions about the symbolic and functional meanings of guns during and after wartime.

Résumé: Le problème des crimes armés au Nigeria à la fin du XXe siècle a été étroitement lié aux événements de la guerre civile nigériane entre 1967 & 1970. Les documents juridiques de la République du Biafra sécessionniste révèlent comment les crimes violents ont émergé dans le cadre de l’affrontement militaire entre le Biafra et le Nigeria. La large disponibilité d’armes à feu, la capacité diminuer du Biafra de faire respecter la Loi et l’effondrement progressif de son économie sous la pression d’un blocus nigérian ont rendu civils et soldats du Biafra tributaire de leurs armes pour obtenir vivres et carburant, ainsi que faire des revendications de propriété et régler les différends entre eux. Les casiers judiciaires sous étude illustrent

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comment les technologies militaires forment les interactions et les relations dans les endroits où elles sont utilisées et de quelle manière cette dynamique perdure après que la guerre soit achevée. Cette exploration soulève des questions théoriques plus vastes sur la signification symbolique et fonctionnelle des armes pendant et après la guerre.

Keywords: Biafra; Nigeria; crime; firearms; technology

On a hot day in November 1968, an elderly man was riding his bicycle home from the Achina market in the Republic of Biafra. A Biafran soldier named Cyril Nwafor, wearing a singlet and armed with a Czechoslovak bolt-action rifle, called out for him to stop. Nonplussed, Emmanuel Ezeokoye kept pedaling, and the soldier began to shout and run after him. When he reached a checkpoint, Nwafor caught up to Ezeokoye, shouted obscenities at him, and shot at him. He missed Ezeokoye but hit a civil defender standing nearby, shooting off his ear. Seeing what he had done, Nwafor ran off into the forest. He was pursued by another civil defender, who wrestled him to the ground, confiscated his weapon, and marched him to the police station. The high court case that followed his arrest turned on the question of whether Nwafor had shot at Ezeokoye from close enough range to constitute an attempt to kill. After lengthy deliberations, the court ruled that it was not attempted manslaughter. He was sentenced to three years' imprisonment for a lesser charge.[1] Like many cases from Biafra, *The State v. Cyril Nwafor* shows judges struggling to understand forms of martial violence that were outside of their experience. In the peacetime case that the judge used as precedent to establish whether Nwafor's intent was homicidal (which he cited from memory, since the court had no law books at hand), the weapon involved was not a gun, but a machete. An agricultural tool was a poor analogue to a rifle for the legal purpose at hand, and Biafra's embattled legal system proved similarly mismatched to the circumstances of wartime. Military-grade firearms like the one that Nwafor carried made for new and alarming forms of violence—not only on the battlefield, but in interactions between civilians.

This trial from the short-lived Republic of Biafra has moldered in the back room of a high court in eastern Nigeria for the last fifty years. It is a case from a court and a country that has long since ceased to exist, and a reminder of a war that many Nigerians would prefer to forget. It is also a portrait of a society that was being transformed by firearms. *The State v. Cyril Nwafor* and many similar cases demonstrate how the presence of guns shaped social dynamics during the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). The incompleteness of this record prevents an analysis of the incidence of armed violence systematically. Rather, these cases are here considered individually, as anecdotes that describe the shape and character of violence in Biafra. They reveal that soldiers frequently used their guns to take advantage of civilians, that civilians turned them against one another, and that the line

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between military operations and violent crime became very indistinct. Similar dynamics prevailed in federal Nigeria, where the "misbehaviour of mad men in uniform," as one foreign observer called it, was an increasingly common feature of life as the war went on.[2] But Nigeria was not generally the site of direct military engagement; most of the fighting took place in Biafra, and it was there that martial violence spilled over into civilian life in the most striking ways. It affected both Igbos, who made up the majority of the secessionist state's population, and the many ethnic "minorities" whose membership in Biafra was often ambivalent or coerced.

Biafra speaks to longstanding questions about the gun in African social history (Aderinto 2018; Macola 2015; Marks & Atmore 1971; Smaldone 1977; Storey 2008). Few objects surpass the firearm in their capacity to shape what goes on around them. Invariably, the firearm takes on meanings beyond the basic task of moving a bullet through space. Is its purpose to fight or to defend, to harass or to protect? Is its power totemic, or does it only have meaning as an instrument of harm? Does its meaning change if the harm it inflicts is against animals rather than humans? Subtleties of make, model, and origin are embedded in all of these questions since, as Luise White has argued, a particular meaning "may flow from the barrel of a specific gun" (2009:256).

This article does not answer these questions, which are ethical considerations as well as historical ones. Rather, it examines an episode when the technology of warfare spilled over from the front into society at large—a period which would influence how many Nigerians used and viewed guns. The article begins by using diplomatic and intelligence records to trace some of the paths by which firearms arrived in Biafra. Drawing upon cases from the Biafran legal record, it then describes how military technologies inflected interactions on and around the battlefield. Finally, it turns to postwar Nigeria, where armed crime became the lens through which many people understood their social and political circumstances. Armed robbery shaped how people lived, transfigured their ethics, and constrained the possibilities of their politics. As in the South Africa of Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff's description, crime in postwar Nigeria became a Maussian "total social fact" (2016:218; also see Glaser 2008). Many threads connect the "fact" of crime in Nigeria to the experience of the Biafra War, and the history of the firearm as a technology is one of them.

The origins of Biafra's arms

The Republic of Biafra's secession from Nigeria in May of 1967 triggered a massive influx of military-grade firearms. Thousands of small arms were brought into the region, along with artillery and other military materials. To many Biafran civilians, the country appeared to be awash with guns. To the military leadership, it was not awash enough; Biafra was under-armed compared to Nigeria for the duration of the war, and troops made do with arms inferior in quality and number to those of their Nigerian opponents.[3]

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As one Biafran officer recalled, "We were always ill-equipped, and the Nigerian soldiers had everything they needed—an army, a navy, air force, plentiful weapons and so on. When we had victories it was usually because it was guerilla war, which required fewer weapons. Soldiers were sometimes sharing one gun to two or three men" (Interview with A.N. Kanu, Umuahia, March 9, 2015). Despite this relative imbalance, however, the war brought a glut of firearms into Biafra.

Biafra both purchased military technologies from abroad and produced them at home. A Nigerian blockade made the production of weapons on an industrial scale impossible, but Biafra's highly skilled technicians devised ways to manufacture armaments even in the absence of infrastructure (Arene 1997; Mbachu 2009). In the first months of the war, scientists and technicians from the University of Nigeria-Nsukka (rechristened the University of Biafra) convened in Umuahia to produce technologies that the blockade prevented Biafra from obtaining abroad. Known as the Research and Production Unit (RAP), this group of scientists developed a range of artillery devices and small weapons. Later in the war, the RAP and affiliated research groups would also develop techniques to refine oil artisanally and to process agricultural chaff into edible substitutes for grain. The manufacture of salt, vaccines, medicines, electronic goods, and armored vehicles also fell within their mandate, which they produced with varying degrees of success (Oragwu 1989). A former clerk in the organization recalled that the RAP also "toyed with" the production of chemical and biological weapons (Ukaegbu 2011:73–94, 80). The best-known technology to emerge from the RAP was the *ogbunigwe* (in Igbo, roughly, "killer of multitudes"), an improvised explosive device made from repurposed oil barrels. This bomb, developed by the scientists Gordian Ezekwe, Benjamin Nwosu, and others, was reported to strike "great terror in the hearts of many a Nigerian soldier," as Chinua Achebe would later recall (2012:156).

Biafra's locally produced artillery was a major accomplishment and a much publicized source of national pride; as Nwosu remarked to the journalist Renata Adler, "[I]n the white world, they would call them inventions. Because we are black, they call them improvisations" (1969:106, see also Garrison 1969:7). But remarkable as it was, the *ogbunigwe* and other improvised military technologies were not a substitute for industrially produced weaponry, and Biafra expended enormous energy obtaining supplies from abroad. It is difficult to trace the complicated routes by which munitions traveled to Biafra.[4] Diplomatic records say little in detail about how the arms trade was carried out, but there are hints that it was very large and complex (Green 1969; Thayer 1969:163–72). The blockade made it difficult for Biafra to purchase weapons in an above-board manner, even from private arms dealers who had no compunction about selling weapons to the unrecognized state. Privately purchased weapons, many of Czechoslovak manufacture, generally came to Biafra via French, Portuguese, or Rhodesian arms dealers. In South Africa, the government did little to control the sale of arms, resulting in a situation where firms sold arms to both the Nigerian

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and Biafran sides.[5] The extent of the arms trade to Biafra by Tanzania and other African allies—usually given as "gifts" rather than sold—remains a topic of speculation.[6] Arms and funds flowed through Ivory Coast and Gabon, where the governments of Félix Houphouët-Boigny and Omar Bongo were among Biafra's most enthusiastic supporters. Along with Portuguese-controlled São Tomé, these locations were Biafra's main portals to the outside world. Gabon was a staging ground for much of the country's diplomatic activity and trade, including for most of its armaments.[7] Many were second-hand surplus from the Second World War. Biafra fought with weapons of many types and origins, including from both sides of the Iron Curtain. Keeping these weapons functional required considerable technical knowledge and, in the absence of spare parts, a great deal of ingenuity.

Mavericks and opportunists of all persuasions were involved in the arms trade, with little accounting for ideology. Many of the arms dealers and mercenaries whom Biafra retained early in the war were French, but France's support for Biafra was shaded and inconsistent (see generally Griffin 2015). The French government never officially recognized Biafra, and in public it provided material and political support to the Nigerian side. To some Élysée advisors, however, an independent Biafra was an appealing prospect. It could be a bulwark of French influence in Anglophone West Africa, and the presence of oil in a friendly client state was an added attraction. There were also larger diplomatic rivalries at work; a French envoy denied to his British counterpart that France was arming Biafra, but added that since Britain was arming Nigeria, "why then should Ojukwu be deprived of his source. It was traditional French policy to support a nation fighting for its own identity."[8] A "Biafra Historical Research Center" was opened in Paris, which served as a liaison office and a way-station for arms (Bat 2012:299). In a conversation with a British official, a pilot claimed that French armaments were shipped from Corsica to the address of the French garrison in Libreville, where they were loaded onto DC-7s for transport to Biafra.[9] Fragments of heavy artillery—the kind not easy to obtain on any market—were found to be of French manufacture, suggesting that commercial arms dealers were not the only ones supplying Biafra.[10] The Republic of Ireland, where the Biafran cause was extremely popular, was another pathway for armaments. In 1969 the Irish police discreetly investigated a charter company retained to fly weapons from Prague to Uli by way of Shannon on the grounds that it had contravened a ban on the use of nationally registered aircraft for the transport of armaments. The investigation revealed a path full of obscuration. The shipment was officially of food and "sporting goods," but in fact it contained a few thousand small arms purchased with a forged end-user certificate. Fearing that this news would confirm rumors that the Irish government was covertly supporting Biafra, the investigation was carefully kept from the press.[11] Another Irish investigation found that arms were sent to both Biafra and Nigeria on Danish ships by way of a Polish port.[12] But formal recognition from France, Ireland,

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or any other European state never came. To the Biafran government, it seemed as if one hand gave support while the other took it away.[13]

Weapons also arrived in Biafra under the cover of humanitarian aid. Many of the relief organizations that operated in Biafra claimed neutrality, but the Nigerian government accused some of them of smuggling arms along with relief material (Okpoko 1986; Omaka 2016). Nigeria singled out the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), especially, of violating its promises to remain apolitical.[14] The ICRC supported Biafra with humanitarian aid, delivered at great expense and considerable risk through Fernando Po and Benin. Nigeria begrudgingly allowed relief flights because, as a British diplomat noted, "it is well known how sensitive the Federal authorities are to the tremendous implications of this problem before the conscience of the whole world."[15] In the view of the Nigerian military, allowing humanitarian aid and the international attention that trailed behind it would only prolong the war and vilify Nigeria by exposing the state of crisis in the Biafran enclave to the outside world. It was widely known that weapons were slipped into shipments of food and medicine. A representative of the Catholic charity CARITAS denied that his organization engaged in any kind of arms smuggling, but admitted that São Tomé was a staging ground for both food and munitions carried by the more openly political Joint Church Aid.[16] Relief flights from the Portuguese island of São Tomé were not subject to Nigerian inspection, and the Nigerian military regularly tried to shoot them down.[17] Some proportion of Biafra's arms arrived via this route.

Secrecy suffused all parts of the arms trade into and within Biafra, and it is impossible to fully account for where Biafra's firearms came from. But regardless of their provenance, guns shaped life in the enclave profoundly once they had been unpacked and distributed. Not all of these arms ended up in the hands of soldiers, and even those that did were often used against other Biafrans rather than in battle. Arms were effectively unregulated, passing easily back and forth between soldiers, civilians, and vigilante groups. As a French intelligence officer noted towards the end of the war, "what is coming to pass in this region is what has happened in Vietnam and in the Middle East: an immense illegal trade in arms."[18] Many informants recalled that the uptick in armed robbery that took place in Biafra had obvious links to the fighting. A lawyer who practiced in Port Harcourt recalled how new and destabilizing the rush to arms was in Biafra: "Here's somebody with a gun. He has never had a gun, ever. No normal young man would otherwise have been in possession of a weapon, and suddenly every young man has one. What do you think he will do with it? He is not *always* fighting the enemy. People saw armed robbery as directly linked to the war" (Interview with Kola Babalola, Port Harcourt, March 5, 2015). Ambiguity over who could "legally" buy and sell firearms gave way to uncertainty over who was entitled to *use* them once they reached Biafra.

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The Changing Meanings of Guns

To many Biafrans, the war looked less like a pitched battle than it did a crime wave. Biafra's courts and police forces remained intact throughout the war, but the crushing humanitarian crisis made it difficult for the Biafran government to address the violence outside of military confrontation, perpetuated by Biafrans against one another. As conditions became increasingly unlivable, armed acts of expropriation and violence became common. Soldiers, civilians, and those such as civil defenders and guerillas who fell somewhere between the two categories all used firearms to provide for themselves as hunger set in. The feverish tone of life in the crowded enclave and the threat of starvation made for many small-scale conflicts over scarce resources. The presence of military-grade weapons in this environment enabled forms of violence, theft, and intimidation that were unprecedented. Before the war, blunt objects, agricultural implements, and poisons were the most common weapons in cases involving killing.[19] During the war, firearms became the most common by far—a development that made violent crime a more visible, frightening, and urgent problem. Armed robbery was the most visible instantiation of the turn to arms. As a former Biafran officer recalled, "in the past the eastern part of the country hardly knew armed robbery. But when somebody is hungry it had to be done out of necessity. People were compelled by necessity. That is how crimes like that grew" (Interview with A.N. Kanu, Umuahia, March 9, 2015).

Tracing the ways in which guns moved throughout this wartime landscape raises the question of how Biafrans and Nigerians related to firearms as objects, instruments, and symbols.[20] Building on an older literature on the cultural aspects of exchange (Appadurai et al. 1986; Brown 2001), the materiality turn in anthropology has encouraged scholars to consider how the non-human entities with which people interact shape social processes, or even how they might be agentive. The idea that a gun may "act" independently of the person using it cuts against how most historians view agency, but it points toward an explanation of why everyday ethics and standards of behavior can change so dramatically in wartime.[21] On the battlefield, firearms cease to be mere tools; soldiers often speak of their guns as being more like companions than objects—ones that whisper into their ears and shape the decisions that they make. To argue that a conscript, or a civilian living in the shadow of the front, exercises "agency"—a concept that historians often treat like a substance that can be measured rather than as a set of social relationships—elides the compulsion that is inherent to soldiering. Here, the actions of soldiers and civilians were almost always mediated by firearms, which became something like a third party in interactions between them. This article stops short of suggesting that guns in Biafra had lives of their own, but it is worth considering how their presence altered the social environment in which they circulated (comparatively, see Kim 2016).

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This is an important consideration for the study of technology in post-colonial Africa (see generally Serlin 2017). In the literature on science, technology, and society in Africa, the most familiar story is one of external imposition, in which a foreign government or corporation uses an African society as a "laboratory" for a new technology, usually with damaging effects. These technologies are often noteworthy for their novelty—new medical procedures or drugs (Peterson 2014), nuclear technologies (Hecht 2012), or new forms of developmentalism (Tilley 2011) have been among the most important objects of study. Another current in scholarship considers African technologies in deep historical time, describing tools, modes of healing, and ways of warfare in the pre-colonial past, often tracing their meandering paths into the present (Eglash 1999; Osseo-Asare 2014; Mavhunga 2017). Biafra's firearms fit neither of these molds; they were neither deeply embedded local technologies, nor new and unknown innovations tested out on Africa. Rather, they occupied a middle ground—they were prosaic objects, but not ones that were well known to most people. They included second-hand firearms from the Second World War, home-made artillery, and guns fashioned from agricultural tools and pipes. Some (like the Dane gun) were familiar, while others (like the Bren light machine gun) were new to eastern Nigeria. But popular understandings of all firearms and how they "acted," new and old, changed in the ebb and flow of the war.

In pre-war eastern Nigeria, the uses of firearms were not inherently martial, nor were guns necessarily understood as instruments of violence (Aderinto 2018). Guns had long been present in the territory that would become the Republic of Biafra—a region in which the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the "pacifications" of British rule, and the anti-colonial revolts of the 1920s all ensured that firearms were a part of the historical landscape (Dike 1981:105–7; Nwokeji 2010:196). Some police officers had been armed in the colonial period, which prompted regular debates about the role of guns in politics and state administration (Rotimi 2001:118–24). But by the time of the war's outbreak, Nigerians were more likely to encounter firearms as household or symbolic objects than as lethal ones. Hunting rifles were common tools in rural areas, and guns played important roles in events such as burials, ceremonies to install chiefs, and weddings. Firing them into the air could connote a range of meanings, from solemn commemoration to celebration. Carrying or displaying firearms—even ones that had rusted beyond being fireable—was a way for local politicians to perform their authority. Gunpowder was a common ingredient in traditional medicines, and it could be used to treat various ailments and deformities.[22] In some eastern towns, guns were power objects, associated with esoteric knowledge, or rituals including divination and oath-taking.[23] None of these uses was martial, and none entailed inflicting physical harm. To be sure, crimes committed using firearms were hardly unknown, and guns always had the capacity to kill even when they were being used for peaceable purposes. But the fact that in pre-war Nigeria they also had a range of *other* meanings meant that enacting violence was one purpose of many (comparatively, see Moyd 2014:73).

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These other meanings fell away in the context of the civil war. In keeping with the rationalist, self-consciously "modern" ideology of their state, Biafrans rarely spoke of guns as anything other than contrivances of war. The Biafran government banned the use of firearms in ceremonies, citing the fact that ammunition was precious, and anyone who possessed a hunting rifle was required to turn it over to the military or a civil defense group (though not everyone did). With the start of the war, firearms abruptly became instruments of violence—not of ritual, the household, or the hunt. This narrowing of guns' social meaning cuts against one of the tropes of African military history; the firearms used in the Nigerian Civil War carried none of the occult associations that they would have in other postcolonial wars (Behrend 1999; Ellis 2007; Lan 1985). Biafran soldiers did not try to bulletproof themselves through charms or amulets (as described in another context by Hoffman 2011), nor did they compare the wielding of firearms to the spiritual work of hunters or ritual specialists—figures which existed in eastern Nigeria, but were not evoked to describe the experience of soldiering (as in Hellweg 2011). If combatants did make these connections, they did so privately, in ways that left no trace in their testimonies before courts or their later recollections of the war. The legal record does not capture everything, and the absence of these metaphysical understandings of firearms in Biafran and postwar Nigerian cases does not necessarily mean that they did not exist, nor that guns became associated with exacting harm to the total exclusion of their other meanings. But new patterns in how they were used and discussed suggest that a significant move in that direction took place.

Firearms in the Biafran Courtroom

Whether they were carried by soldiers, civilians, or people who fell somewhere on the spectrum in between, arms could be used to intimidate, steal, or appropriate privileges usually reserved for state authorities. The legal status of firearms in Biafra was unclear; it was theoretically legal for civilians to own certain types of registered firearms and ammunition, but the emergency measures that Biafra implemented in the first days of the war criminalized the possession of armaments by civilians. This prohibition was inconsistently enforced. The wielding of firearms by soldiers outside of battle was not addressed by the emergency measures, creating a large grey area. Moreover, military-grade firearms did not fit neatly into the schematics of civilian courts, which had established rules for how to treat the possession of rifles and handguns, but not automatic weapons. Distinctions between hunting rifles, handguns, and military armaments proved difficult to police, and was at any rate largely academic in the turmoil of the fighting. Courts sometimes ruled that the "illegal" possession of firearms was critical to civil defense and turned a blind eye to their possession. In other moments, the possession of small amounts of ammunition attracted charges of treason. Armed crime, especially by soldiers, came to be seen as something that the criminal justice system could not consistently or comprehensively address.

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Guns found their ways into many aspects of civic life as starvation became sharper. Biafran troops frequently used their weapons to commandeer supplies from civilians, all of whom were experiencing the same shortages—or worse—as soldiers. To most civilians, armed "commandeering" was not so different from armed robbery. Civilians, too, mimicked the manners of the battlefield in how they interacted with each other, muddling the line between the "necessary" violence of waging war and violent crime. Legal records reveal that the fight against Nigeria was not the war's only violence. Soldiers and civilians within Biafra often came to see one another as the enemy, and many civilians feared the predations of their own army nearly as much as they feared Biafra's putative opponent. Soldiers had little to do in the lulls between fighting, and most of them were chronically underfed. This combination of unstructured time, hunger, and guns proved dangerous for civilians within reach of army camps, as the cases discussed below demonstrate. To many civilians, Biafran soldiers appeared to be a law unto themselves. The Special Tribunal heard many cases where soldiers used the authority of their uniforms or their weapons to compel civilians to work for them, to intervene in local politics where they were stationed, and especially to requisition food and other materials.[24] A toxic mix of martial and criminal violence resulted.

The overlap of violent crime and military activities can be seen in a High Court case from the last months of the war. In July 1969, civilians at a market in Igbukwu arrested a man suspected of being a thief, tied him to a tree, and beat him nearly senseless—something that they felt empowered to do by the Biafran government's increasingly tolerant attitude towards vigilantism. A group of armed militia members nearby intervened, leaving one of their number to guard the alleged thief while the others went to fetch their superior. In the time that they were gone, the man charged with guarding the thief fatally shot him, which he claimed had happened by accident while he was inspecting his weapon. This defense was difficult to believe; the man was an experienced fighter who testified that he knew his own weapon well, which was a rifle that would have been difficult to fire accidentally in the way that he described. It was more likely that the crowd gathered around the thief egged the soldier on to shoot him, as the prosecution claimed, or that the badly beaten accused thief said something to provoke the militiaman who retaliated by killing him. In a brief decision the judge cleared the militiaman of all charges, ruling that

> [T]o amount to murder or manslaughter there ought to be an unlawful killing of a human being. A killing is unlawful if it is neither authorised nor justified nor excused by law–Section 306 of the Criminal Code refers. It is clear that the killing of the deceased was not authorised nor was it justified by law. But is it not excused by law? One of the excuses the law allows is the excuse of accident as provided for by Section 24 of the Criminal Code.[25]

The judge believed the improbable defense that the killing had been an accident and was therefore excused by law. The defendant was even

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acquitted of negligence, the court finding that "the evidence in this case does not reveal any recklessness on the part of the accused. The evidence adduced in his case falls very far short of that required to sustain [an offence]."[26] This decision seemed to surprise even the defendant himself. The state prosecutor declined to appeal the ruling. The case was perfunctory and riddled with irregularities; no mention was made of the legality of the thief's detention, the crowd's assault on him, nor the militiaman's questionably legal possession of a firearm. No one from the crowd of people who witnessed the shooting was called to testify. The firearm was returned to the head of the militia without any compunction about whether he ought to have had it in the first place. Here, the demands of the war outweighed principles of equity and proceduralism. The court tacitly condoned actions which were usually impermissible, including unlawful detention, physical assault, and what was likely a summary and extrajudicial execution.

Military technologies also made confrontations more likely to be fatal. A killing at an army camp near Ntigha in late 1969 illustrates how disagreements could boil over into deadly violence in the presence of a gun.[27] The events of the case began with the arrest of a Biafran soldier for stealing a pail of stockfish from a market woman in a nearby village. His friend and ranking superior, Sergeant Paulinus Unigwe, went to the military police and cajoled and threatened them into releasing him. A blind civilian cook who was standing nearby objected to Unigwe's intervention on behalf of the soldier. A witness testified that Unigwe became angry, grabbing an MK4 rifle from another soldier sitting nearby. "He cocked the rifle and advanced to the deceased [the cook] who was still leaning on the wall with folded arms. Then I shouted on him to stop that joke. He pointed the rifle on the right hand chest of the deceased and asked him to repeat what he said. He fired the rifle and the deceased fell down."[28] In the prosecutor's version of events, the altercation was explained by a longstanding rivalry between Unigwe's family and that of the cook. Unigwe acted upon this old dispute, confident that being in uniform would shield him from prosecution.

Unigwe gave a different account of the evening, claiming that he had been provoked by comments that the cook made about the honor of the army. Unigwe told the court that he had come to the military police to reprimand his subordinate for commandeering the stockfish, not to secure his release. He claimed that the cook went into a violent rant, in which he said that

> [A]ll in the Army were thieves, especially the Commanders, and that that was why God punishes them. The man in green beret warned that such statement could lead him to detention. I then warned the civilian and told him never to call all soldiers rogues. I told him that I fought in the last war and that four of my sons were in the army. I told him but for the gallantry of Biafran soldiers he would not have been there. I told him that but for the fact that he had one eye he would have been in the Army. As soon as I told him that if had he two eyes he would have been in the Army, he said 'God punish you' and hit me at the chest with his fist.[29]

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Unigwe claimed that a scuffle followed in which the cook was accidentally shot with a military policeman's gun. The tribunal was interrupted by air raids, and the final judgment is not available. But however the case ended, the testimonies show how tempers could flare quickly and sometimes fatally when guns were plentiful, but food was not.

Violent crime grew steadily as the war went on, becoming more dramatic and personalized as deprivation set in. Ambiguity about what kinds of violence were permissible spread in Biafra, and "criminal" activities often went unpunished because they were cloaked in the legitimacy of military business, or subsumed by the larger violence of the war. This was not the first time that soldiers and civilians had interacted in eastern Nigeria, but at no point in living memory had life in the region been so permeated by warfare and its machinery. These and other cases demonstrate that, beyond a general uptick in crime, crime became qualitatively different—more capable of inciting fear, and more likely to end in death—as guns became embedded in daily life. This fact speaks to a larger debate about the social effects of firearms. The mere presence of firearms did not necessarily cause a concurrent increase in violent crime, but it made intimidation and theft easier. It also made disputes which otherwise might have been settled with a fistfight more likely to end in death or grievous bodily harm. Judges occasionally took notice of these changes explicitly.[30] Biafra's judges appreciated that poor living conditions made people vulnerable and desperate, but they were disturbed by how frequently Biafrans turned their guns against one another.

Guns and Society in the Postwar

The Nigerian Civil War came to an end in January of 1970 with Biafra's surrender, but the armed violence that the war had made common did not. A surge in everyday violence is often an aftershock of war, and in this respect what took place in postwar Nigeria was not unusual. But armed violence usually fades after a confrontation ends, even if slowly and incompletely. In postwar Nigeria, the wielding of firearms did not diminish, and in fact it increased after Biafra's defeat, spreading throughout reintegrated Nigeria at an alarming rate (Tamuno 1989:93–94; Igbo 2007:158–61). Patterns of armed violence that had coalesced on the battlefield pervaded civilian life. In postwar Nigeria, armed robbery would become a major, drawn-out crisis—one that deeply affected how people lived, how the military government justified its actions, and how the state dispensed justice. The longevity of armed violence in postwar Nigeria cannot be fully explained without understanding how the conflict changed the social meaning of the firearm as a technology. Before the war, one could own, use, or encounter a gun and not automatically understand it as an instrument of assault. After 1970, this would no longer be the case for most Nigerians. The problem was not simply that there was a surfeit of guns; changes in the type of weapons available were as important in shaping postwar life as the sheer number of them.

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The penetration of automatic weapons into eastern towns and villages, for example, had not been deep enough for Biafra to win the war, but it was more than sufficient to lubricate a postwar crime wave there.

Many cases of armed robbery appeared in postwar courts and in the press in the early 1970s. In Onitsha in 1971, a group of ex-Biafran soldiers dug up the firearms they had buried after Biafra's surrender, donned their old Biafran uniforms, and staged a series of house-to-house armed robberies with military precision. One can imagine their victims' surprise when their property was "expropriated" by a unit from an army that had ceased to exist a year ago.[31] In Owerri, a veteran of the Nigerian Army found that Catholic vestments were useful for concealing a gun, and he staged several robberies disguised as a priest.[32] The proceeds of armed crime quickly became the basis of a black market in stolen goods; car-jacking could be especially lucrative. As a magistrate recalled of her time on the bench in Lagos, armed car theft became "rampant" there in the years after the war. Upon being stolen or hijacked, cars were "re-sprayed, given false number plates, and rushed to the borders," where they were sold to unsuspecting buyers (Oguntoye 2008:147). Ex-soldiers were not the only ones who staged armed robberies, and judges were consistently alarmed that people across the social spectrum—young and old, male and female—exhibited knowledge of how to use firearms.

International scrutiny of the arms trade makes it possible to trace at least some of the pathways by which guns flowed into Nigeria and Biafra, but tracing how they moved within Nigeria after the war was over is a substantially more difficult task. Nigeria's postwar military governments took measures to control the spread of weapons from the war, including a blanket ban on the ownership of firearms. This proved very difficult to enforce. What might happen to Biafra's weapons after the fighting had stopped had been a concern from the very beginning of the conflict. As a British diplomat speculated, "[A]fter the war is finished there will be large quantities of weapons available throughout the country for use by dissident groups; it is a very common practice for soldiers to take or send home weapons, ammunition, and assorted items of equipment as souvenirs."[33] These weapons did not, for the most part, enflame other dissident movements after the end of the war, but they would turn up in armed crimes for many years after Biafra's defeat. Judges frequently took notice of the fact that armed robbers were using automatic weapons in everyday crime, some of which appeared to have been buried—which was generally taken as evidence that they were leftovers from the war (Davies 1995:255; interview with Mike Onwuzunike, Enugu, September 14, 2014). Moreover, the "artisanal" manufacture of munitions that Biafra had pioneered ensured that many people knew how to produce, repair, and modify guns illicitly in the decades after the war.[34]

Debates about the social effects of firearms became sharper as armed robbery became "an endemic menace, reaching epidemic proportions in certain areas and communities" (Harneit-Sievers 2006:144). Some responded to this situation by calling for the liberalization of gun laws to allow everyone

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to carry firearms. One editorialist wrote in an Enugu newspaper that the city's denizens needed "the protection of a gun against armed bandits who now make a tradition of selecting victims from the ranks of well-to-do citizens. These robbers arrive at the hours of darkness or even in daylight and dictate their terms with impunity to their victims who certainly would be able to talk back in stern language if they had the defence of a gun."[35] Others doubted that more guns would solve the problem. "Have you heard of the Philippines?" asked a reader of an Enugu tabloid. "Every able-bodied man totes a gun, yet twelve thousand murders are committed there every year. The people don't raise a hair and consider themselves law-abiding."[36] Increasingly draconian measures were taken to stem armed crime, including the establishment of an Armed Robbery Tribunal and the staging of public executions of those convicted. These measures caused unease among the public and the judiciary, but they had little effect on the incidence of armed robbery (Dambazu 1994:85).

Looking back at the war from the 1980s, a former Biafran used his memoirs to connect the war to the unruly times in which he lived. "Alas! The war has created millions of soldiers both official and unofficial throughout Nigeria. The average Igbo boy and girl above twelve years of age has learnt military tactics. So also many Nigerians had the knowledge of military methods. The end of the war did not see the end of indiscipline" (Chigbuh 1984:16). Another chronicler of urban life in the 1970s wrote in a pulpy popular history that "hell was let loose on the country as these youths, in their bid to make their own quick money and join the class of the new-rich, turned to armed robbery, combining the tactics and strategies learnt in the army with the ones learnt from foreign films and books to hold the nation to ransom" (Idowu 1980:15). Echoing the pessimism of those he studied, a foreign sociologist observed that "if a Hobbesian situation existed, it was surely in urban Nigeria" (Lubeck 1987:280). Many Nigerians, especially those with property to lose, came to see armed robbery as the most pressing social problem of their times. The thinness of the archival record makes it difficult to corroborate that perception quantitatively (although see Igbo 2007; Ugwuoke 2010:193–94), but what is clear is that guns remained an intransigent part of postwar life.

Conclusion

In the years after the war, armed crime became an alibi for repression, a barometer of public order, and a major component of Nigeria's reputation in the wider world. For decades after Biafra's disappearance, armed robbery was one of Nigeria's most salient social and political problems (Okezie 2002; Ugwuoke 2010). The history of Biafra's firearms is a key part of this story. More broadly, it is important to consider what characteristics guns have as physical objects—features which might not be captured by a social historical approach, but which military history is primed to see. Seeing guns as social objects at the expense of their *technos* can reveal their affective meanings, but it occludes a sense of how they actually work (see Anderson et al., 2017).

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As military historians understand intuitively, wars often turn upon technical factors—on matters of logistics and materiel that those more attuned to the social dimensions of warfare see as teleological or technologically deterministic. The military historian's obsession with makes and models at the expense of the person at the end of the barrel can be myopic. But however much a war's outcome is determined by broad social and political contingencies, traditional military-historical questions about how many guns there were, and of what types, remain important in explaining conflicts. Here, these factors gave shape not only to the outcome of the war, but to the long shadow of armed crime in late twentieth-century Nigeria.

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2. South African National Defence Force Archive, Pretoria (hereafter SANDF) CSI GP 15 Box 26, untitled report on Nigeria, December 2, 1968.
3. A British intelligence report from 1967 shows how inferior Biafra's supplies were at the beginning of the war: "When the great exodus of Ibo soldiers took place in September last year, most of them fled to the East leaving behind their personal weapons. This meant that in the Eastern Region a maximum total of 700 small arms was held and the Federal Government held the remainder, amounting to approximately 9,000." National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter NAUK) DO 186/30, "Arms deals–actual and alleged," February 21, 1967.
4. Moreover, the local manufacture of weapons and explosives make it impossible to get a clear picture of how many armaments circulated there. On the ambiguities of the arms trade to Biafra generally see Onyegbula (2005); Forsyth (2015). For a comparative account of the difficulty of tracing the trade in firearms see Mathew (2016:82-112).
5. SANDF MIL INT GP 6 Box 28, "Lawrence Flear-Moy," July 28, 1967.
6. SANDF CSI GP 15 Box 26, "Tanzaniese Hulp aan Biafra," July 1968.
7. After the war, this would also be where Ojukwu and other Biafran leaders went into exile.
8. NAUK FCO 65/272, "Denis Greenhill, summary of meeting with the French ambassador," December 19, 1969.
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19. See, for example, Ogefere (1999). It is worth noting that perhaps the most famous criminal episode in colonial-era Nigeria, in which nearly two hundred people were killed in murders staged to look like leopard attacks, did not involve firearms (Pratten 2007).
20. An analysis of this question for an earlier period can be found in Mavhunga (2003).
21. The idea that guns and other instruments of killing can "act" also has some precedent in law (Bennett 2010).
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32. *Nigerian Tide* [Port Harcourt], January 29, 1972, p. 1.
33. NAUK FCO 38/285, “Conversation with WO II James,” December 22, 1967.
34. For example, an armed robber from Enugu in the 1990s revealed that the source of his guns was a man in Awka who maintained an armory that his father had established in the early 1970s (Okezie 2002:187).
35. *The Renaissance* [Enugu], May 21, 1972, p. 4.
36. *The Renaissance* [Enugu], May 28, 1972, p. 8.

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