

Heerten, Lasse: *The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism. Spectacles of Suffering*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017. ISBN: 978-1-107-11180-6; XIV, 398 S.

**Rezensiert von:** Axel Harneit-Sievers, Heinrich Böll Stiftung Yangon, Myanmar

The Nigerian Civil War / Biafran War (1967-70) was one of the earliest and most severe armed conflicts in postcolonial Africa. Details of its politics are largely forgotten, at least outside of Nigeria. However, the very term „Biafra“ and the imagery created at the time, especially the photos of starving children resulting from the siege of the densely-populated Biafran heartland full of refugees from mid-1968 onwards, continue to linger on in the Western cultural memory.

There is also a more long-term political impact. The „spectacles of suffering“ seen in Biafra and the politics around them contributed to the emergence of global humanitarianism as we know it today – a humanitarianism that is rights-based, operates with a strong focus on public communication and moral persuasion and frames human rights as individual rights independent from, or directed against, the state, while often remaining rather apolitical: This is the broader argument made by Lasse Heerten in a new book that studies the history of the Biafran war primarily as a history of engagement by international state and non-state actors, and to quite an extent as a history of images and narratives.

Part I of the book, after providing a concise historical background to the war, looks at the politics of Biafra as an attempt at self-determination in a postcolonial world of nation states whose colonial boundaries were regarded as largely unchangeable by virtually all international actors. The attempt to establish Biafra as an independent state failed, despite intense attempts at its internationalization. The chapters in this part provide necessary background information, but do not really provide much new analysis, except perhaps on the role of oil companies and on the diplomatic efforts around the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). The diplomatic story of the war is well told; the internal dynamics within Biafra receive little attention.

Part II – in many ways the core part of the book with regard to empirical research – focuses on the actions of non-governmental entities in the campaigns about Biafra. It does so with great detail, accessing a huge diversity of published and private sources, many of which have never been explored for such a purpose.

Heerten goes into great detail when identifying the role of specific actors in the international engagement around Biafra, chiefly among them Christian churches (with quite a diversity within this category), solidarity and support groups, public relation agencies, individual intellectuals and journalists, etc. Based on this, Heerten studies the narratives constructed and pursued by these actors, the interaction of those narratives, and in the final analysis the creation of those very tropes and stereotypes that came to define Biafra as the most serious humanitarian crisis of its time. Heerten follows the emergence of the narratives of mass starvation („Biafran Babies“) and of Biafra as an „African Auschwitz“ – this at a time when the understanding of Auschwitz as the ultimate crime had not yet fully developed. He goes into great detail when describing the attempts – by Biafra’s government and its international supporters and agencies – to frame the Biafran war as a „genocide“ planned or happening. This, of course, was especially directed at the United Nations who nonetheless refused to act, out of respect for national sovereignty. Beyond the armed struggle on the ground, the Biafran War was very much one of narratives. Like the armed conflict it was in the end won by the Federal side who, by 1969, began to successfully challenge the „genocide“ narrative.

The book also looks at the role of the Western political left – after all, all this happened right at the high point of the 1968 international student movement. The Western left largely ignored Biafra, because the conflict neither fitted into the Cold War alliance patterns (the Nigerian Federal government was supported by both Britain and Russia, even though for different reasons) nor into anti-colonial narratives of self-determination. Presenting an impressive variety of debates and discourses the book shows how and why Biafra – despite receiving huge media attention especially in the second half of 1968 – did

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never really become part of the „global 1968“ radical left narrative.

Looking at German and French sources besides the more well-known Anglo-American ones, the book is a treasure trove of sometimes unexpected stories and connections. Who remembers that Martin Luther King planned an attempt to mediate in the war, just before he was assassinated? Besides Christian churches, former U.S. Peace Corps volunteers and certain academics with personal connections to Southeastern Nigeria were markedly found among Biafra's core supporters – but also representatives of the expellees from Germany's pre-World War II eastern territories. Against the leftist mainstream, Jean Paul Sartre supported Biafra, as did Günter Grass who publicly attacked the leadership of the German student movement of condoning genocide.

Part III of the book looks at „the ends and afterlives“ of Biafra after the secession's sudden collapse in January 1970. Much of Biafra solidarity in the West rapidly melted away when it became clear that no genocide was happening and the war had just been that: a war, and a brutal one – but not another Auschwitz. But Heerten shows how some forms of Biafra activism continued and evolved, for example in the form of organisations such as the French „Médecins Sans Frontiers“ (MSF) and the German „Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker“. It was this continuity which contributed to the development of the patterns of human rights activism that we know today: a focus on human rights to be claimed from and, if required, against nation states; a focus on moral righteousness and the role of the „witness“; a strong synergy with the media that allows non-governmental actors a great deal of control over the interpretation of their narrative. Later on, alongside the neoliberal turn, this approach to human rights emerged as an instrument of international politics, first driven by the U.S. against the communist dictatorships of Eastern Europe in the 1980s, and then globalized to justify „humanitarian intervention“ since the 1990s.

This, obviously, is a long line of argument, and especially the last main chapter 10 („Afterlives“) does not apply the same deep level

of analysis that characterized earlier chapters of the book, when it addressed the war and immediate post-war history. This last part cuts a long story very short, perhaps necessarily so; but alongside the conclusion it rushes towards a radical critique of non-governmental organisations whose depoliticized humanitarianism has allegedly become the modern-day equivalent of the colonial „civilizing mission“. Whatever such generalized critique may be worth, it does not do justice to the detailed analysis, at the heart of this book, of the hugely diverse interests, actors and actions that engaged on the Biafra in the late 1960s – which appear so distant from, and at the same time so similar to, current examples of humanitarian disaster.

Despite this criticism, this book is a sound contribution to contemporary history that opens the eye for changes that have shaped – subtly, and sometimes not so subtly – the political and moral fabric of international political discourse and action over the last half century.

Axel Harneit-Sievers über Heerten, Lasse: *The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism. Spectacles of Suffering*. Cambridge 2017, in: H-Soz-Kult 13.07.2019.