

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Neo-Imperial Cold War? Biafra's Franco-African Arms Triangle

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## Abstract

During the Nigerian Civil War, France became the main supplier of military assistance to the secessionist Biafra. In a neo-imperial pursuit to weaken the potential regional hegemon Nigeria, it secretly provided arms and ammunition to the Biafrans in collusion with Côte d'Ivoire and Gabon. Yet the driving force behind this Franco-African arms triangle was not the Elysée, but the Ivorian president Félix Houphouët-Boigny. Newly unearthed documentary evidence from French archives enables this article to break new historiographical ground: firstly, to show the Elysée's sheer reluctance to militarily assist Biafra and lack of a coherent policy in doing so; secondly, to confirm Houphouët-Boigny as the "mastermind" behind the arming of Biafra, as well as to identify his Cold War motivations; thirdly, to uncover Gabonese president Omar Bongo's increasing agency and influence in the scheme; fourthly, to demonstrate that it was the Ivorian and Gabonese presidents who transformed the arms triangle into a square by bringing the Rhodesians and, especially, the South Africans in; and, finally, to retrace the emergence and functioning of the "African-French" military assistance to Biafra at the policy level not only from Paris's, but also Abidjan's and Libreville's perspectives.

**Keywords:** West Africa; Nigeria; Côte d'Ivoire; Gabon; South Africa; Zimbabwe; civil wars; imperialism; military; postcolonial

## Introduction

On 6 July 1967, the Nigerian Civil War broke out when the Federal troops moved on the former Eastern Region in an attempt to bring the secessionist Republic of Biafra back into the fold. The war was the tragic culmination of years of instability in Nigeria, which had started with political turmoil during the last years of the First Republic. The prewar crisis was marked by a coup and a counter coup in 1966, and ethnic tension and violence against Igbos in the run up to the secession of the Igbo-majority Eastern Region on 30 May 1967.<sup>1</sup> The conflict was, as such, of a predominantly domestic nature, pitting the Federals against the Biafrans. Yet, it gained a significant international dimension, with Britain and the Soviet Union supporting Nigeria, while Côte d'Ivoire, France, Gabon, Portugal, Rhodesia, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zambia chose to help Biafra. This seemingly paradoxical constellation was the result of the combined presence of colonial legacies, colonialist and white supremacist rearguard action, neo-imperialism, regional rivalries, as well as

<sup>1</sup>On the First Nigerian Republic and its failure, see, for instance, Larry Diamond, *Class, Ethnicity and Democracy in Nigeria: The Failure of the First Republic* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988); for the military coups and their causes, see, for instance, Robin Luckham, *The Nigerian Military: A Sociological Analysis of Authority and Revolt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971); and for the violence against Igbos and the war itself, see, for instance, John de St. Jorre, *The Brothers' War: Biafra and Nigeria* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009 [1972]).

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economic and Cold War interests.<sup>2</sup> The Nigerian Civil War thus stood in stark contrast to other “Third World” and African proxy wars during the East-West conflict, which predominantly ran along Cold War fault lines.<sup>3</sup> London’s and Moscow’s simultaneous support for Lagos can, especially in the Soviet case, be explained by Cold War calculations for the great prize of the oil rich and potential regional hegemon, Nigeria.<sup>4</sup> This Cold War logic did not apply to Paris, however, which turned into Biafra’s main provider of military assistance and thus came to indirectly oppose its Western ally Britain.

Officially, France did not give any aid of a military kind to the secessionists. Maurice Delauney, who at the time was the French ambassador in Gabon — through which the bulk of French arms, ammunition, and mercenaries transited — notably insisted in his memoirs on the humanitarian nature of French aid.<sup>5</sup> Paris did indeed provide substantial relief to hunger-stricken Biafra. But not only could humanitarian and military assistance be intertwined, but it also became an open secret that France was arming the secession.<sup>6</sup> General Charles de Gaulle and his *Monsieur l’Afrique* Jacques Foccart, who headed the General Secretariat to the Presidency of the Republic for the Community and African and Malagasy Affairs (hereafter General Secretariat), aimed to protect, strengthen, and even extend France’s postcolonial *pré carré* (enclosed area of influence) in Africa.<sup>7</sup> In this neo-imperial endeavour, the vast, populous, resource-rich, and thus potentially hegemonic anglophone Nigeria was an obstacle. Consequently, the Elysée favoured the implosion of the federal construct of Nigeria. An additional appeal, meanwhile, was the prospect of taking oil concessions from the British for French companies in Eastern Nigeria. Finally, the “Fachoda complex,” the strong anti-British sentiment inspired by the heydays of colonialism in Africa, was also present in de Gaulle’s and Foccart’s calculations. As a result, Paris provided military assistance to Biafra, including mercenaries and training, but especially arms and ammunition.

These covert French machinations have become generally known through the works of a number of scholars and journalists.<sup>8</sup> Yet these authors, as well as Christopher Griffin — who has so far offered the most extensive and detailed assessment of France’s covert role in the Nigerian Civil War — have not substantiated their claims on the basis of contemporaneous French archival

<sup>2</sup>For the international dimension of the Nigerian Civil War, see John J. Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

<sup>3</sup>Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup>John W. Young, *The Labour Governments 1964-70, Volume 2: International Policy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), ch. 8; Maxim Matusevich, *No Easy Row for a Russian Hoe: Ideology and Pragmatism in Nigerian-Soviet Relations, 1960-1991* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003), ch. 3.

<sup>5</sup>Maurice Delauney, *Kala-Kala, de la grande à la petite histoire, un ambassadeur raconte, 1945-1980* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1982), 213.

<sup>6</sup>Marie-Luce Desgrandchamps, *L’humanitaire en guerre civile. La crise du Biafra (1967-1970)* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2018); Marie-Luce Desgrandchamps, “Soutien militaire et aide humanitaire. Les ambiguïtés de la France au Biafra,” *Relations internationales* 165, no. 1 (2016): 81–96.

<sup>7</sup>Olivier Zajec, “French Military Operations,” in *The Handbook of European Defence Policies and Armed Forces*, eds. Hugo Meijer and Marco Wyss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 800n16. On the establishment of France’s postcolonial sphere of influence in Africa, particularly West Africa, see Marco Wyss, *Postcolonial Security: Britain, France, and West Africa’s Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>8</sup>Guy Arnold, *Mercenaries: The Scourge of the Third World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), ch. 2; Jean-Pierre Bat, *Le syndrome Foccart: La politique française en Afrique de 1959 à nos jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), 299–302; Jean-Pierre Bat, *Les réseaux Foccart: L’homme des affaires secrètes* (Paris: Nouveau Monde éditions, 2018), ch. 13; Walter Bruyère-Ostells, *Dans l’ombre de Bob Denard: Les mercenaires français de 1960 à 1989* (Paris: Nouveau Monde éditions, 2014); Benoît Collombat, “Manipulation française au Biafra,” in *L’empire qui ne veut pas mourir. Une histoire de la Françafrique*, eds. Thomas Borrel, Amzat Boukari-Yabara, Benoît Collombat, and Thomas Deltombe (Paris: Seuil, 2021), 309–19; Maurin Picard, “Les mercenaires français à l’assaut du continent africain,” in Borrel, Boukari-Yabara, Collombat, and Deltombe, *L’empire*, 408–10; Anthony Mockler, *The New Mercenaries* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1985), ch. 6; Gerry S. Thomas, *Mercenary Troops in Modern Africa* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984).

evidence.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, by predominantly relying on Foccart's diaries and interviews, Griffin provides an inevitably Elysée-centric narrative. This not only masks that Paris did not necessarily have a clear and conscious policy vis-à-vis Biafra, but also fails to sufficiently take African actors and agency into account.

In arming the secessionists, the French were indeed not alone, but worked closely with the leaders of Côte d'Ivoire and Gabon. Abidjan, Libreville, and Paris effectively formed an essential armaments triangle for Biafra. Moreover, the African pillars of Biafra's Franco-African arms triangle were not solely couriers for French arms and ammunition to Biafra. Political scientist Daniel Bach has notably raised that Côte d'Ivoire's president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, influenced de Gaulle's stance towards Biafra.<sup>10</sup> The journalist Antoine Glaser, meanwhile, has briefly referred to the Ivorian leader's influential role in the Nigerian Civil War to support his case that more often than not African leaders were in the driving seat in Franco-African relations. In turning the concept of *Françafrique* on its head, he has therefore suggested to use the term "AfricaFrance" instead.<sup>11</sup> In *Françafrique*, the collusion between France and its former colonies to advance French and francophone interests in Africa, Houphouët-Boigny played indeed a pivotal role; so much so that Glaser's interpretation can seem at times justified.<sup>12</sup> The Ivorian president was certainly more than just "France's Man in Africa."<sup>13</sup> What is key here, however, is the question of whether or not in the case of Biafra or in their collusion in Africa more generally, Abidjan's and Paris's worldviews and rationales consistently aligned. They cooperated but, in contrast to the general tenor of the literature, not necessarily for the same reasons and agendas. While both were determined to play an influential if not dominant role in West Africa and even the region, the Elysée was so absorbed by its neo-imperial ambitions that in contrast to Houphouët-Boigny it was not driven by Cold War considerations.<sup>14</sup> This difference was notably visible in and despite their shared support to Biafra during the Nigerian Civil War. Unlike the general, the Ivorian leader was very much perturbed by Moscow's support for and increasing influence in Nigeria.

Houphouët-Boigny certainly also had strong regional ambitions, which dated back to the post-war years and the early days of the Rassemblement démocratique africain (African Democratic Rally), which brought together leading African politicians from French Africa. The ambitions then came out into the open during the negotiations to salvage the French empire first with the *loi-cadre* and then the French Community in the late 1950s. The Ivorian leader notably clashed with Senegal's Léopold Sédar Senghor over the organisation of Francophone Africa and with Guinea's Ahmed Sékou Touré over the issue of independence.<sup>15</sup> During the transfer of power and following independence, he then became embroiled in an escalating rivalry with Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, which brought him into a strategic alignment with Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the prime minister of the First Nigerian Republic.<sup>16</sup> Then, together with Paris and somewhat as

<sup>9</sup>Christopher Griffin, "French Military Policy in the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 26, no. 1 (2015): 114-35.

<sup>10</sup>Daniel Bach, "Nigeria's Relations with France and Selected Francophone West African States, 1960-1975" (PhD dissertation, University of Oxford, 1978), 278. See also Jessie Lhoste, "La diplomatie française face à la crise du Biafra, 1966-1970," *Bulletin de l'institut Pierre Renouvin* 27 (2008): 23-24.

<sup>11</sup>Antoine Glaser, *AfricaFrance: Quand les dirigeants africains deviennent les maîtres du jeu* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard/Pluriel, 2017), particularly 26 and 29.

<sup>12</sup>Jean-Pierre Bat, "Big Brother" ou la géopolitique africaine de Félix Houphouët-Boigny," in Borrel, Boukari-Yabara, Collombat, and Deltombe, *L'empire*, 305-6.

<sup>13</sup>Pierre Nandjui, *Houphouët-Boigny: L'homme de la France en Afrique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995).

<sup>14</sup>Wyss, *Postcolonial Security*.

<sup>15</sup>Tony Chafer, *The End of Empire in French West Africa: France's Successful Decolonization?* (Oxford: Berg, 2002); Joseph-Roger Benoist, *L'Afrique occidentale française: De la conférence de Brazzaville (1944) à l'indépendance (1960)* (Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1982); Bat, *Le syndrome Foccart*, 83-87.

<sup>16</sup>Marco Wyss, "The Nkrumah Factor: The Strategic Alignment of Early Postcolonial Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria," *The English Historical Review* 138, no. 592 (2023): 591-619. For Houphouët-Boigny's difficult relationships with both Ghana's Nkrumah and Guinea's Touré, see Jacques Baulin, *La politique africaine d'Houphouët-Boigny* (Paris: Eurafor-Press, 1980), chs. 1 and 2.

a foretaste of the Biafran episode, he extended his reach beyond France's former colonies into the Congo to put the neo-colonial stooge *par excellence*, Moïse Tshombe, into power. Yet this episode, like the Biafran one, ended in failure.<sup>17</sup> In his support to Biafra, Houphouët-Boigny also seemed to be motivated by humanitarian concerns, notably by the plight of Biafran civilians and especially children. This was at least the message he aimed to bring across publicly. But behind the façade of diplomacy, and as this article demonstrates, the major Soviet and limited Arab support to Federal Nigeria heightened his fears of the interrelated expansion of communism and Islam in Africa.

In his early days as a member of the French National Assembly during the postwar years, Houphouët-Boigny and his party had been affiliated with the French Communists. But despite making socialist soundbites, the Ivorian leader was an extremely prosperous farmer and landowner who was steeped in tradition, and his relationship with the communists was a marriage of convenience, because they were at the time the only metropolitan party willing to support his agenda for African emancipation within the French empire. Then, when in the early 1950s he switched allegiance to France's political establishment, he broke with the communists.<sup>18</sup> Thereafter, he emerged as an increasingly vociferous and leading anti-communist in Africa, and in the early years of independence he became ever more concerned about Soviet and, by extension, Communist Chinese encroachments in Africa.<sup>19</sup> By the time of the Nigerian Civil War, he saw the future of Africa not being fought out along racial lines, but between communist and anti-communist forces. This was also the underpinning rationale for his rapprochement with Rhodesia and, especially, South Africa, supposed bulwarks against communism in Africa.<sup>20</sup> The communist offensive in Africa, meanwhile, was in his view supported by such "radical" Arab countries as Algeria and Egypt. In addition to their seeming support of communism, and despite his relative religious tolerance at home, he feared that their influence in a northern, Muslim-majority Nigeria could lead to "punitive" operations against Côte d'Ivoire for its pro-Israeli stance and close relationship with Israel more generally.<sup>21</sup> During the early years of independence, Abidjan's relationship with Tel Aviv had indeed been close, with the Israelis providing development aid and even military assistance.<sup>22</sup> The Ivorian leader's motivations in supporting Biafra can thus be placed in an escalating foreign and security policy pattern in African affairs.

Yet while at least Houphouët-Boigny's agency has increasingly come to the fore, that of his Gabonese junior counterpart, Omar Bongo, has largely been neglected. Instead, his part in arming Biafra has been portrayed, even by himself, as the result of France's manipulation. Whereas Bongo later admitted and even regretted his involvement, young and inexperienced at the time of the Nigerian Civil War, he claimed to have been instrumentalised by France.<sup>23</sup> In reality, he rather listened to his elder counterpart in Abidjan and, more significantly, pushed Paris himself to do more

<sup>17</sup>Jean-Pierre Bat, *La fabrique des "barbouzes": Histoire des réseaux Foccart en Afrique* (Paris: Nouveau Monde éditions, 2015).

<sup>18</sup>Frédéric Grah Mel, *Félix Houphouët-Boigny: I – Le fulgurant destin d'une jeune proie (?–1960)* (Abidjan: Editions du CERAP, 2003); Jacques Baulin, *La politique intérieure d'Houphouët-Boigny* (Paris: Eurafor-Press, 1982), chs. 1 and 2; Marcel Amondji, *Félix Houphouët et la Côte d'Ivoire. L'envers d'une légende* (Paris: Karthala, 1984), chs. 2–4.

<sup>19</sup>Wyss, *Postcolonial Security*.

<sup>20</sup>Anna Konieczna, "L'Afrique du Sud, un partenaire particulier pour le 'dialogue,'" in *Jacques Foccart: archives ouvertes (1958–1974). La politique, l'Afrique et le monde*, eds. Jean-Pierre Bat, Olivier Forcade, and Sylvain Mary (Paris: Presses de l'université Paris-Sorbonne, 2017), 360.

<sup>21</sup>Frédéric Grah Mel, *Félix Houphouët-Boigny: III – La fin et la suite* (Abidjan: Editions du CERAP, 2010), 71–93.

<sup>22</sup>Arthur Banga, "Civic Service and the Question of Extra-Military Missions of the Army in Franco-Ivorian Military Relations (1960–1970)," *International Journal of Military History and Historiography* 44, no. 2 (2024): 279–303; Gadi Heimann, "A Case of Diplomatic Symbiosis: France, Israel and the Former French Colonies, 1958–1962," *Journal of Contemporary History* 51, no. 1 (2016): 145–64; Wyss, *Postcolonial Security*, ch. 6.

<sup>23</sup>Omar Bongo, *Blanc comme nègre: Entretiens avec Airy Routier* (Paris: Grasset, 2001), 87–90. For a humanitarian focused account of Bongo's role in the Nigerian Civil War, see Elikia M'Bokolo, *Médiations africaines. Omar Bongo et les défis diplomatiques d'un continent* (Paris: Editions de l'Archipel, 2009), 92–101.

to militarily help the Biafrans. Moreover, and this is yet another historiographically neglected dimension, it was Bongo who, together with Houphouët-Boigny, brought the Rhodesians and, especially, the South Africans into Biafra's Franco-African arms triangle and turned it into a square.<sup>24</sup> The Gabonese president followed the lead of his elder in Abidjan. The Nigerian Civil War provided an ideal opportunity for Bongo to become a key partner of Houphouët-Boigny — the doyen of Francophone Africa — and, as a corollary, of Paris.

This is the first work to study Biafra's Franco-African arms triangle on the basis of a substantial corpus of French documents. Extensive research in the French Diplomatic Archives at La Courneuve and Nantes, the Defence Historical Service in Vincennes, and the National Archives in Pierrefitte-sur-Seine unearthed sources on military assistance under a mountain of documents portraying the French role in the Nigerian Civil War, notably in the realm of humanitarian assistance. This new and substantial contemporaneous documentary evidence enables this article to break new historiographical ground: firstly, to show the Elysée's sheer reluctance to militarily assist Biafra and the lack of a coherent policy in doing so; secondly, to confirm Houphouët-Boigny as the driving force and "mastermind" behind the arming of Biafra, as well as to identify his Cold War motivations; thirdly, to uncover Bongo's increasing agency and influence in the scheme; fourthly, to demonstrate that it was the Ivorian and Gabonese presidents who transformed the arms triangle into a square by bringing the Rhodesians and, especially, the South Africans in; and, finally, to retrace the emergence and functioning of the "African-French" military assistance to Biafra at the policy level not only from Paris's, but also Abidjan's and Libreville's perspectives.

In light of the significant African agency in this arms triangle, the lack of relevant archival evidence from Côte d'Ivoire and Gabon — both at the national and the regional level — can seem problematic.<sup>25</sup> Yet even if these countries had well-resourced and accessible archives, the existence or unearthing of documents of this most secretive episode would not be a given. It took notably long and painstaking research in French archives to find the first ever concrete evidence of the Francophone arming of Biafra. More importantly, however, the voices of Houphouët-Boigny and Bongo are not only transmitted indirectly through the French archives, but the latter also contain letters written by them. In combination with a critical reading of the French documents, these mis-sives allow us to gain significant insights into the reasoning of the two Francophone African presidents. Moreover, in line with the "hodgepodge" approach put forward by Luise White,<sup>26</sup> this article also relies on such published sources as Bongo's memoirs and Houphouët-Boigny's speeches.<sup>27</sup> But even in this case it is interesting to note that — probably because of the contentious nature of their role in the Nigerian Civil War — such sources are rather limited on Biafra. In the case of the Ivorian president, some key published sources are — probably because of their largely hagiographic intent — even entirely silent on the Biafran secession.<sup>28</sup>

With this unbalanced yet groundbreaking corpus of primary sources, this article will study Biafra's Franco-African arms triangle: firstly, by discussing how the Ivorian president initiated moderate deliveries of French arms and ammunition to Biafra in the first year of the war; secondly, by

<sup>24</sup>On France's and, to a lesser extent, Côte d'Ivoire and Gabon's relations with South Africa in relation to Biafra, see notably Anna Konieczna, "L'Histoire d'une 'relation spéciale': Les relations entre la France et l'Afrique du Sud dans les années 1958-1974," (PhD dissertation, Sciences Po Paris, 2013), part III, ch. 3.

<sup>25</sup>On the issue of regional archives compensating for or complementing national archives in Africa, see Alexander Keese and Annalisa Urbano, "Researching post-independence Africa in regional archives: possibilities and limits in Benin, Cabo Verde, Ghana and Congo/Brazzaville," *Africa* 93, no. 4 (2023): 542–61.

<sup>26</sup>Luise White, "Hodgepodge Historiography: Documents, Itineraries, and the Absence of Archives," *History in Africa* 42 (2015): 309–18.

<sup>27</sup>On such sources, and the methodological issues they can entail, see, for instance, Moses E. Ochonu, "Elusive History: Fractured Archives, Politicized Orality, and Sensing the Colonial Past," *History in Africa* 42 (2015): 287–98.

<sup>28</sup>See, for instance, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, *Le Petit livre vert du Président de la République: un Sage a dit...: recueil des pensées du Président Houphouët-Boigny* (Abidjan: Ministère de l'Information, 1974); and Félix Houphouët-Boigny, *Textes de référence* (Abidjan: Fraternité Hebdo Éditions, 1980).

presenting Houphouët-Boigny's successful efforts, in coordination with the Gabonese president and the Biafran leader Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, to escalate the military assistance following Paris's July 1968 statement in support of the secessionist republic; and, finally, by relating how, assisted by Bongo, the Ivorian president not only managed to sustain a modicum of arms deliveries despite first de Gaulle's and then George Pompidou's reluctance, but also brought the Southern African white supremacists into the picture during the last year of the conflict.

### Improvisation

Federal Nigeria was, since at least its independence in October 1960, marred by political and ethnic tensions between and within the three ethnic-majority regions; with the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the West, and the Igbo in the East. In combination with a structural imbalance that favoured the Northern Region, government corruption, as well as (sub-)regional and Cold War pressures, this provoked a spiral of instability that led to a bloody military coup in January 1966, which swept away many of the leading figures of the First Nigerian Republic. Major General Johnson T. U. Aguiyi-Ironsi, the General Officer Commanding of the Nigerian Army, managed to reestablish order, but then took charge of the country himself.

This first military regime was not to last, however. In July 1966 it was brought down by yet another putsch, of northern forces, who not only had seen the first coup as a southern takeover, but were also opposed to Ironsi's "anti-federal" unitary policies for Nigeria. Although he had not been among the plotters, this then brought the Chief of Army Staff, Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon, to power. While he tried to hold on to a federalised Nigeria, he saw himself increasingly confronted by Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, who had been appointed as military governor of the Eastern Region by the previous regime, and was not willing to accept the authority of the new one. Despite reconciliation attempts, the animosity between the two military leaders only escalated. In addition, pogroms against Igbos in the North and the failure of the Federal Government to prevent or stop them from happening led to a sense of heightened insecurity in the Igbo-dominated Eastern Region, especially once the Western Region had pledged its support to Lagos. As a result, on 30 May 1967, the East declared its independence as the Republic of Biafra with Enugu as its capital. With its blockade of the Eastern Region proving insufficient to bring the secessionists back into the fold, the Federal Government resorted to a military response. By 6 July 1967, the Nigerian Civil War had begun.<sup>29</sup>

At least initially, the conflict was clearly of a domestic nature, and did not run along any major ideological fault lines. Major international involvement did not initially materialise. Britain, while favouring the integrity of Nigeria, tried to remain as neutral a stance as possible, and only hesitantly sided with Lagos to protect its economic — predominantly oil — interests in Nigeria. Even so, London was only willing to provide limited military assistance to the Federals, and refused to provide such major weapons systems as aircraft. This provided an irresistible opportunity for the Soviets to make inroads into Nigeria by providing the jet aircraft the Federal Government so desperately wanted. The Americans, meanwhile, heavily absorbed by their war in Vietnam, opted for an officially neutral position while leaving the protection of Western interests to the British. Finally, the French too opted, at least officially, for neutrality.<sup>30</sup> Yet it was questionable whether, in light of their past diplomatic rift with Nigeria — notably over nuclear tests in the Sahara — and neo-imperial interests, as well as with such allies as Houphouët-Boigny in the region, they would really remain aloof.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, while the French president was secretly hoping for Biafra to succeed, his Ivorian counterpart managed to convince him, with the help of Foccart, to give some military aid to Ojukwu.

<sup>29</sup>Michael Gould, *The Biafran War: The Struggle for Modern Nigeria* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 8–64.

<sup>30</sup>Stremmlau, *The International Politics*.

<sup>31</sup>Bach, "Nigeria's Relations with France," 15–24.

During the phony war period between the Eastern Region's proclamation of secession and the first shots being fired, Houphouët-Boigny showed understanding for the Biafran project, but was hopeful that bloodshed could be avoided. Moreover, he considered Nigeria to be within the remit of the British and the Americans.<sup>32</sup> De Gaulle confided to Foccart, meanwhile, that while France should neither intervene nor pick a side, it was preferable to have a divided rather than a massive Nigeria. "[M]y God," he apparently concluded, "if Biafra succeeded, it would not be worse for us."<sup>33</sup> Once the war had broken out, this position became more pronounced. While sticking to non-interference, during summer 1967 the president repetitively expressed his hope for a Biafran victory and the implosion of Nigeria.<sup>34</sup> The Ivorian president too, even though he publicly held up the inviolability of borders in Africa, was secretly cheering for Biafra.<sup>35</sup> But unlike de Gaulle, he did not want to remain inactive. In meeting with the general in late September, he notably stressed that Biafra needed help and suggested that the French oil company Elf-Aquitaine pay its royalties to Enugu instead of Lagos to finance arms purchases in Portugal, which was Biafra's key military logistics hub during the early phase of the war.<sup>36</sup> De Gaulle, who could not see how Biafra could be helped otherwise, approved this plan.<sup>37</sup> Most of the royalties had already been paid to Nigeria, however, and only some of the money reached Enugu.<sup>38</sup> In order to help the Biafrans continue fighting and notably to hold on to their capital, Houphouët-Boigny thus called again on Paris; this time also specifically for weapons. When confronted with this request by Foccart, de Gaulle apparently exclaimed that this was not possible. But his man for African affairs came up with a solution; to give Second World War weapons that had been seized from the Germans and the Italians — after having removed their serial number to make them untraceable — to the Ivorian president, who could then pass them on to the Biafrans. This plan was approved by the French president, and thus began the secret French arms supplies to the secessionists, albeit on a very small scale.<sup>39</sup>

Although the French Foreign Ministry, under Maurice Couve de Murville's leadership, advised him against, de Gaulle chose to listen to the duo of Houphouët-Boigny and Foccart, and therefore to support Biafra.<sup>40</sup> The Quai d'Orsay, by contrast, wanted to abide by France's officially proclaimed policy of non-interference, respect Nigeria's sovereignty and integrity, keep the Biafrans at arm's length, and certainly not arm them. Officials in the French Foreign Ministry thus got irritated when in January 1968 the former Nigerian ambassador and now Biafran representative in Paris, Raphael Chukwu Uwechue, criticised "France's negative attitude" towards the Nigerian Civil War. In no uncertain terms was he reminded that complaints by the Biafran authorities were misplaced. While the French government had refused any new arms sales contracts to the Federal

<sup>32</sup>Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine [hereafter AN], Archives du secrétariat général des Affaires africaines et malgaches de la Communauté (5 AG F), 5 AG F/535, Audience du Président Félix Houphouët-Boigny, Présidence de la République, Secrétariat Général pour la Communauté et les Affaires Africaines et Malgaches [hereafter Secrétariat Général], 13 June 1967.

<sup>33</sup>Jacques Foccart, "Lundi 19 et mardi 20 juin, Biafra: ne pas donner l'impression d'avoir choisi, mais," in *Journal de l'Élysée: Tous les soirs avec de Gaulle (1965–1967)*, vol. 1, ed. Philippe Gaillard (Paris: Fayard/Jeune Afrique, 1997), 664.

<sup>34</sup>Foccart, "Lundi 10 et mardi 11 juillet, 'Il ne serait pas mauvais pour nous que le Nigeria éclate.' Lettres et télégrammes," and "Samedi 29 juillet, Une certaine neutralité au Biafra," "Mercredi 23 août... 'Moi, je suis pour le Biafra,'" in *Journal* 1, 676, 686, 694.

<sup>35</sup>AN, 5 AG F/535, Audience du Président Félix Houphouët-Boigny, Secrétariat Général, 27 Sep. 1967.

<sup>36</sup>On Portugal's role in the Nigerian Civil War, see João Sérgio Gilzans d'Oliveira Freire, "Portugal na guerra do Biafra. A diplomacia do Estado Novo em África: 1967 – 1969" (PhD dissertation, University Autónoma de Lisboa, 2016).

<sup>37</sup>Foccart, "Mercredi 27 septembre, Payer la dette d'Elf au Biafra," in *Journal* 1, 721.

<sup>38</sup>Foccart, "Mercredi 4 octobre.... Biafra: ne pas se presser," in *Journal* 1, 728–29.

<sup>39</sup>Foccart, "Mardi 17 et mercredi 18 octobre... Comment livrer secrètement des armes au Biafra," in *Journal* 1, 744.

<sup>40</sup>Foccart, "Jeudi 14 décembre, 'Ménager l'avenir au sujet du Biafra,'" in *Journal* 1, 787; Jacques Foccart, "Vendredi 2 février, Biafra: Couve n'est pas d'accord," in *Journal de l'Élysée: Le Général en mai (1968–1969)*, vol. 2, ed. Philippe Gaillard (Paris: Fayard/Jeune Afrique, 1998), 33. For a critical account of France's military assistance to Biafra and Foccart's role therein from the perspective of the Quai d'Orsay, see Jean-Marie Soutou, *Un diplomate engagé: Mémoires 1939–1979* (Paris: Editions de Fallois, 2011), 333–37.

Government, it had turned a blind eye to private weapons exports to Biafra — notably of Alouette helicopters and B-26 bombers — supposedly intended for Portugal.<sup>41</sup> Such arms transfers put French diplomats in a difficult position, because it was they who had to deny any governmental involvement or tolerance for them in response to Nigerian complaints.<sup>42</sup> It was thus not surprising that the Quai d’Orsay, which was largely left in the dark by the Elysée — at least initially — of the covert military assistance to Enugu, was against getting behind Ojukwu.

Simultaneously, however, with Biafra facing the onslaught of the Federal forces, which were increasingly well equipped by a combination of British and Soviet weaponry, the Ivorian president called for more French military aid to the secessionists. While in early January 1968 he thanked de Gaulle for the first batch of weapons for Biafra, he also asked him for more military matériel. The general was willing to send more weapons to Côte d’Ivoire but, as he stressed to his Secretary General for the Community and African and Malagasy affairs (hereafter secretary general), the eventual decision to send them to Biafra would be Houphouët-Boigny’s.<sup>43</sup> Obviously, and as Foccart observed to the general later that month, the Ivorian leader did so with de Gaulle’s blessing.<sup>44</sup> The impetus for arming Enugu, however, repetitively came from Abidjan. The Ivorian president championed informal support to the secessionist republic, which according to him was a “rich country that could become a serious friend.”<sup>45</sup>

While in spring 1968 Houphouët-Boigny began to actively consider officially recognising Biafra like Tanzania’s Julius Nyerere had just done, he called on de Gaulle to enable the Biafrans to use their potential wealth in support of their independence struggle, and to provide arms and ammunition. He notably had a multipronged plan in mind: French oil company ERAP could pay royalties in advance in exchange of exploitation rights in Biafra; French industry could provide helicopters and planes for which payment would be, at least partly, deferred; and Paris would meet Enugu’s urgent need for arms and the aerial means for their transport by giving them to Côte d’Ivoire, which would then pass them on to Biafra.<sup>46</sup> There is no record of this meeting between de Gaulle and Houphouët-Boigny, but according to Foccart, the general afterwards asked him to look into how and to what extent “some weapons and ammunition” could be given to the Biafrans via Côte d’Ivoire. Meanwhile, prompted by the Ivorian leader, de Gaulle and his secretary general also discussed the cooperation of the French oil industry in support of Biafra.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, Houphouët-Boigny managed to extract increasing covert support for Enugu from Paris.

Meanwhile, Houphouët-Boigny also committed to Biafra publicly, notably by recognising it diplomatically on 14 May.<sup>48</sup> This was just shortly after the secessionist republic’s recognition by Gabon’s Bongo, who in so doing had not heeded French, but rather the Ivorian leader’s advice. In justifying their decisions, both francophone African leaders invoked humanitarian — as opposed to political — reasons.<sup>49</sup> Already shortly before Côte d’Ivoire’s recognition of Biafra, during a press conference in Paris on 9 May, Houphouët-Boigny struck a humanitarian chord. In the strongest possible terms, he voiced his “indignation at the inexplicable indifference, the guilty indifference of the whole world with regard to the massacres of which Biafra has been the scene for more

<sup>41</sup>Centre des Archives diplomatiques de La Courneuve [hereafter CADC], 60QONT/19, Note, a/s. “Centre culturel du Biafra” à Paris. Entretien avec M. Uwechue, Sous-Direction d’Afrique, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (MAE), 10 Jan. 1968.

<sup>42</sup>CADC, 60QONT/11, Barbey (French Embassy Lagos) to MAE, 11 Nov. 1967; AN, 5 AG F/2235, Lebel (Direction Politique, Afrique-Levant, MAE) to French Embassy Lagos, 11 Nov. 1967.

<sup>43</sup>Foccart, “Vendredi 5 janvier... Guerre du Biafra,” in *Journal* 2, 14.

<sup>44</sup>Jacques Foccart, “Mardi 23 janvier... Biafra,” in *Journal* 2, 25.

<sup>45</sup>AN, 5 AG F/1804, Fiche - Le président Houphouët-Boigny et les problèmes d’Afrique Occidentale, Ministère des Armées, S.D.E.C.E., 29 Mar. 1968.

<sup>46</sup>AN, 5 AG F/535, Audience du Président Houphouët-Boigny, Secrétariat Général, 2 May 1968.

<sup>47</sup>Foccart, “Vendredi 3 mai, Des armes pour les Biafrais?,” in *Journal* 2, 87–88.

<sup>48</sup>AN, 5 AG F/1804, Raphaël-Leygues (French Embassy Abidjan) to MAE, 14 May 1968.

<sup>49</sup>AN, 5 AG F/1804, Raphaël-Leygues (French Embassy Abidjan) to MAE, 15 May 1968; Stremlau, *The International Politics*, 137–39.



than ten months.” Addressing his “black brothers” in particular, he criticised Nigeria for first having rejected the Igbo people and now waging a murderous war on them, and denounced the Soviet Union and especially Britain for militarily assisting the Nigerians. This criticism was coupled with a call for humanitarian aid and a political solution to the conflict.<sup>50</sup> Then, a few months later, during his speech on the occasion of the national holiday, he justified the diplomatic recognition of and support to Biafra as solely based “on the human aspect of the problem.” Having “no role or interest ... in this massacre resembling a conflict,” he went on, “Côte d’Ivoire will continue to awaken universal consciousness and firstly African consciousness.”<sup>51</sup> The humanitarian rationale, and the aim of winning more African states over to the Biafran cause, remained at the forefront of his public statements on the Nigerian Civil War, notably during his New Year’s message on 31 December 1968. Increasingly frustrated with the great majority of African countries refusing to recognise Biafra, he considered independence sufficiently justified by “18 months of fierce resistance and hundreds of thousands of corpses.”<sup>52</sup>

There were strong political motivations in Houphouët-Boigny’s pro-Biafra advocacy. According to the French ambassador to Côte d’Ivoire, Jacques Raphaël-Leygues, who met with the Ivorian leader in the wake of Abidjan’s recognition of Biafra, there were a multitude. While he also listed humanitarian concerns, he saw Houphouët-Boigny motivated by “an old animosity against the English,” who relied for maintaining their influence in Nigeria on the “elementary and uneducated” tribes of the North, rather than on the country’s more advanced ethnicities; a fear that if the Nigerian Federation as a whole would become part of one of the two superpower blocs it would have a destabilising impact on West Africa; his historical opposition to federations; and, finally, a wariness of military regimes.<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile, the Ivorian leader also had strong Cold War and regional security reasons. In an emotional letter to de Gaulle of 24 July 1968, in which he elevated Ojukwu on a pedestal, he notably warned about the “evil influence ... of the Arab revolutionaries of Algeria and Egypt [who supported Federal Nigeria] and the implantation of their Russian and Chinese communist allies,” not only for Nigeria, but for Africa as a whole. He thus appealed to the general to urgently help Biafra, because “[y]ou can still help Africa. Do not miss, I beg you, to do it.”<sup>54</sup>

Houphouët-Boigny was determined to help Biafra get the military means it needed to fight for its survival against Federal Nigeria, and in this undertaking, he counted on his country’s exclusive security partner, France. In the first year of the Nigerian Civil War, he succeeded in obtaining from de Gaulle — with the assistance of his co-conspirator Foccart — arms and ammunition for Ojukwu. This was, however, all improvised and guided by a piecemeal approach. With the British and the Soviets replenishing the stocks of the Federals, the Ivorian president implored his French counterpart to give the Biafrans more substantial and sustained military assistance. This was about to happen, notably after Paris had taken a public stand in support of Biafra.

## Escalation

By summer 1968, Houphouët-Boigny had been lobbying de Gaulle in favour of Biafra for almost a year. In so doing, he had succeeded, with the help of Foccart, to obtain a trickle of arms and

<sup>50</sup>*Fraternité Matin*, 10 May 1968, in Grah Mel, *Félix Houphouët-Boigny: III*, 72–78.

<sup>51</sup>Félix Houphouët-Boigny, “Message à la nation, Abengourou 7 août 1968,” in Félix Houphouët-Boigny, *Anthologie des discours 1946-1978: du 16 février 1963 au 9 février 1971*, vol. 2 (Abidjan: Cêda, 1978), 912.

<sup>52</sup>Félix Houphouët-Boigny, “New Year’s Message, 31 décembre 1968,” in Houphouët-Boigny, *Anthologie des discours*, 2, 927–30.

<sup>53</sup>AN, 5 AG F/1804, Raphaël-Leygues (French Embassy Abidjan) to MAE, 17 May 1968.

<sup>54</sup>AN, 5 AG F/535, Houphouët-Boigny to de Gaulle, 24 July 1968. For this line of reasoning, see also: AN, 5 AG F/1804, Raphaël-Leygues (French Embassy Abidjan) to MAE, 29 July 1968; AN, 5 AG F/2237, La Côte d’Ivoire et le Biafra, Raphaël-Leygues (French Embassy Abidjan) to Direction des Affaires Africaines et Malgaches (MAE), 10 Sep. 1968; Service historique de la Défense, Vincennes [hereafter SHD], GR 10 T 653, Rapport de Fin de Mission, Décembre 1968, Mathieu (French Embassy Abidjan), 16 Dec. 1968.

ammunition for the Biafrans, who otherwise had to scrape together weapons on the private and illegal arms market through Portugal. Yet, France's support was not only secret, but it was also clearly insufficient to allow Ojukwu and his men to hold their ground against the numerically superior and much better equipped Nigerian forces. Despite initially being able to launch a counteroffensive and temporarily capture the Mid-Western state, Biafra rapidly found itself again on the defensive, lost its capital Enugu and sea access, and was increasingly reduced to a rump state.<sup>55</sup> Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Tanzania, and Zambia, the four African states that had not toed the pro-Nigerian line of the Organisation of African Unity and recognised Biafra,<sup>56</sup> clearly did not have the means to transform the Biafran army into a more formidable fighting force. The Ivorian president was determined, however, to obtain the military assistance Biafra required from the French government, which on 31 July 1968 finally pronounced itself in favour of the secessionist republic, albeit without officially recognising it. In response to strong domestic compassion for the plight of the Igbos as a result of effective Biafran propaganda in Europe and especially France,<sup>57</sup> and to throw Ojukwu a diplomatic lifeline following Houphouët-Boigny's pleas, Paris observed that the Biafrans had "demonstrate[d] their will to assert themselves as a people" and recognised their right to "self-determination."<sup>58</sup> Emboldened by and in line with this more supportive attitude of the general, the Ivorian leader extracted a more substantial and sustained flow of arms and ammunition to Biafra from France until spring 1969. But this required repetitive pleading with de Gaulle not only by himself, but also by his Gabonese counterpart Bongo.

In response to Houphouët-Boigny's imploring letter of 24 July 1968, de Gaulle wrote to him on 31 July that "[t]he French government clarifies ... today ... its position on this serious affair and this position is clearly positively in favour of the life of Biafra and of its personality as a people."<sup>59</sup> Visibly delighted by this, the Ivorian president told the French ambassador to Côte d'Ivoire, who handed him the general's letter, "whatever happens, I now have my reward."<sup>60</sup> From Libreville, meanwhile, France's ambassador to Gabon reported that Ojukwu, with whom he had met, was very touched by the French statement and expected it to have "significant international repercussions and to change the attitude of many African states."<sup>61</sup> In addition to this diplomatic support, however, Biafra also needed the means to continue fighting. Following a visit by Ojukwu to Abidjan in early August, Houphouët-Boigny consulted with his defence minister what arms and ammunition he could immediately provide.<sup>62</sup> Yet, for more substantial military assistance, he continued to look to Paris. There, on 12 August, de Gaulle told Foccart that he was willing to satisfy the Ivorian president's requests for as long as Houphouët-Boigny managed to get the weapons to Biafra.<sup>63</sup> Although the French president had given the green light, in late August he had to learn from his secretary general that the arms were yet to be delivered, because the French foreign minister was stalling. Apparently angry, the general insisted that his orders ought to be executed, and simultaneously authorised the delivery of a DC-4 airplane to Gabon for arms supplies to Biafra, which had been jointly requested by Houphouët-Boigny and Bongo.<sup>64</sup> Couve de Murville had to toe the line, and in the tripartite meeting he had with Foccart and Cooperation Minister Yvon Bourges on 26

<sup>55</sup>Gould, *The Biafran War*, 63–71; de St. Jorre, *The Brothers' War*, 147–231.

<sup>56</sup>Stremlau, *The International Politics*, 127.

<sup>57</sup>Karen E. Smith, *Genocide and the Europeans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 70–71.

<sup>58</sup>"Pro-Biafran Statement by France's Council of Ministers," in Anthony H. M. Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: A Documentary Sourcebook 1966-1970, Volume II: July 1967-January 1970* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 245; The National Archives, Kew, London [TNA], FCO 25/234, No. 778, Everson (British Embassy Paris) to Foreign Office, 31 July 1968.

<sup>59</sup>AN, 5 AG F/535, De Gaulle to Houphouët-Boigny, 31 July 1968.

<sup>60</sup>AN, 5 AG F/1804, Jacques Raphaël-Leygues (French Embassy Abidjan) to MAE, 2 Aug. 1968.

<sup>61</sup>AN, 5 AG F/2236, Delauney (French Embassy Libreville) to MAE, 3 Aug. 1968.

<sup>62</sup>AN, 5 AG F/2238, Message du SDECE 9 Août 1968 à 20 H.15, 9 Aug. 1968.

<sup>63</sup>Foccart, "Mercredi 31 juillet au dimanche 18 août... Armes pour le Biafra," in *Journal* 2, 315–16.

<sup>64</sup>Foccart, "Samedi 24 août, Armes pour le Baifra," in *Journal* 2, 317–18.

August, it was decided to transfer the DC-4 to Gabon.<sup>65</sup> France's arms supplies to Biafra remained secret, however; so much so that the French Foreign Ministry met formal Biafran weapon requests by insisting on the official arms embargo Paris had imposed in response to the Nigerian Civil War, and recommending to turn to the African countries with which they had relations.<sup>66</sup>

Meanwhile, the pressure on the Elysée from Ojukwu's supporters in francophone West Africa increased. In late August, following a meeting with Bongo, Delauney wrote to Foccart that it was not only urgent to send weapons, but also military assistance personnel to Biafra to help with organising the materiel that was arriving from various sources. He also reassured the secretary general that in Libreville, from where the French arms and ammunition were expedited to the Biafrans, they were doing what they could.<sup>67</sup> Gabon was now fully part of the secret arms supply scheme, and its president even called on his Ivorian counterpart to make the aid to the Igbo more effective and visible.<sup>68</sup> Although Houphouët-Boigny agreed as such, he called for caution, because he did not want to compromise France and provoke an incident that could lead to a confrontation with Nigeria that could drag the French in through their defence agreements.<sup>69</sup> The Ivorian leader's reading of the situation was correct. De Gaulle was willing to provide weapons, but only in secret, and inasmuch as possible without leaving a written trace.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, he rejected a request by Bongo for French protection of the air bridge between Libreville and Biafra and, more generally, was annoyed by the Gabonese president's frequent pleas.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, by autumn 1968, Biafra's arms triangle between Abidjan, Libreville, and Paris was set up.

In this arms triangle, the Ivorian and Gabonese presidents assessed with Ojukwu and other Biafran leaders their military assistance needs, and then put them forward to the Elysée, where they were discussed. Once agreed, the French arms and ammunition then transited through Abidjan and Libreville to Biafra. This joint effort by Houphouët-Boigny and Bongo was extensively assisted by the French ambassadors in their countries, Raphaël-Leygues and Delauney in Abidjan and Libreville, respectively, as well as Foccart in Paris.<sup>72</sup> Ever more on the defensive, the Biafran appeals for military assistance became increasingly desperate. In a meeting with the Gabonese president and the French ambassador in Libreville on 20 September 1968, Ojukwu's plenipotentiary ambassador Sir Louis Mbanefo and special adviser Dr Michael Okpara warned that the military situation was "very difficult." Without firepower, they stressed, Biafra could only fight a defensive war and would soon no longer have a single airfield. This, they argued, would be the end of the official resistance. Consequently, they implored first Bongo and then Delauney to send more weapons via Libreville.<sup>73</sup> The view that Biafra needed more arms and ammunition was shared in an assessment by French military planners in the French Ministry of Armies, which also pointed to

<sup>65</sup>AN, 5 AG F/386, Compte rendu de la réunion tripartite du 26 août 1968, 26 Aug. 1968.

<sup>66</sup>CADC, 60QONT/19, Note pour le Secrétaire Général, A/S. Sujets susceptibles d'être abordés lors de votre entretien avec M. Azikiwe ou M. Mojekwu le 30 Août 1968, Sous-Direction d'Afrique to Alphand (both MAE), 29 Aug. 1968; CADC, 60QONT/14, Note, A/S. Entretien du Secrétaire Général avec M. Mojekwu, Ministre biafraïse de l'Intérieur, Sous-Direction d'Afrique (MAE), 31 Aug. 1968; CADC, 60QONT/19, Note, A/S Biafra, Entretien du Secrétaire Général avec M. Azikiwe en date du 7 septembre 1968, Sous-Direction d'Afrique (MAE), 7 Sep. 1968.

<sup>67</sup>AN, 5 AG F/2016, Delauney (French Embassy Libreville) to Foccart (Secrétariat Général), 28 Aug. 1968.

<sup>68</sup>SHD, GR 14 S 258, Rapport mensuel du mois de Septembre 1968, Binet (French Embassy Gabon), 30 Aug. 1968.

<sup>69</sup>AN, 5 AG F/1804, Raphaël-Leygues (French Embassy Abidjan) to MAE, 30 Aug. 1968.

<sup>70</sup>Foccart, "Lundi 16 septembre... 'Je ne veux pas traiter ce problème par écrit'" and "Vendredi 20 septembre... Biafra: l'art d'écrire sans en avoir l'air," in *Journal* 2, 340 and 348–49.

<sup>71</sup>Foccart, "Lundi 2 septembre... Biafra" and "Jeudi 5 septembre," in *Journal* 2, 324 and 330–31.

<sup>72</sup>SHD, GR 10 T 653, Rapport Mensuel, Mois d'Août 1968, Mathieu (French Embassy Abidjan), 6 Sep. 1968; AN, 5 AG F/2016, Message Téléphone par le Lieutenant-Colonel Robert à 11 h à M. Balesi, 7 Sep. 1968; AN, 5 AG F/2237, Fiche – Côte d'Ivoire – Biafra: Démarches du colonel Ojukwu, Ministry of the Armies, S.D.E.C.E., 7 Sep. 1968; AN, 5 AG F/2016, Note, Présidence de la République, Secrétariat Général, 12 Sep. 1968; AN, 5 AG F/2237, Fiche – Nigéria – Côte d'Ivoire – Gabon: Au sujet du Biafra, Ministry of the Armies, S.D.E.C.E., 16 Sep. 1968; SHD, GR 9 Q5 132, B.M. No 89, Nigéria, Afrique Noire - Période du 23/9 au 20 Octobre 1968, n.d.

<sup>73</sup>AN, 5 AG F/2238, Delauney (French Embassy Libreville) to MAE, 20 Sep. 1968.

the irregularity of military assistance as the main weakness preventing the Biafran general staff from undertaking any major operations with the certainty of being able to sustain them.<sup>74</sup> Yet, informed by French representatives on the ground, the same planners also established a list of Biafra's armaments needs, which consisted of ammunition, infantry support weapons, and anti-aircraft defence. More specifically, the list included such weapons as recoilless guns, grenade launchers, anti-tank missiles, mortars, machine guns, anti-aircraft guns, and artillery pieces, as well as the related ammunition.<sup>75</sup> Consequently, the weapons France provided to Biafra were — with the exception of some smaller artillery pieces — mainly small arms and light weapons. Nevertheless, and despite gloomy assessments of the situation on the battlefield and the Biafran position more generally, according to Foccart the French arms deliveries positively affected Biafra's position on the battlefield.<sup>76</sup> In autumn 1968, the increased supply of French weapons to the Biafrans and their impact on the war was also noticed by Nigerian commanders on the ground, and led to indirect complaints by the British Foreign Office to the French Embassy in London that France was prolonging the war.<sup>77</sup> Unsurprisingly, the French denied any wrongdoing.<sup>78</sup>

Yet, exactly when French arms and ammunition were making a difference on the battlefield, and despite Biafra's need for more, de Gaulle came to question France's military assistance. In mid-October, in response to renewed requests by the Ivorian and Gabonese presidents for more weapons for the Biafrans, he expressed his doubts to Foccart whether the French materiel was effectively used.<sup>79</sup> For the time being, he was thus opposed to any major further arms deliveries, authorised only a small one, and first wanted a mission of officers to be sent to Biafra to assess the situation on the ground.<sup>80</sup> In Abidjan, Houphouët-Boigny was apparently greatly afflicted by this sudden stop of French military assistance. He emphasised to Raphaël-Leygues that this would force the Biafrans, who were finally regaining the initiative with the little support they had received, to halt halfway.<sup>81</sup> At the end of October, the Ivorian president thus decided to send his defence minister, Kouadio M'Bahia Blé, to Paris to make the case for renewed arms and ammunition supplies to Biafra.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, he once more wrote a passionate letter to de Gaulle, whom he addressed as the "recourse, the only recourse to save this unfortunate country, and ... to save Africa." In this dramatic appeal to the general to help Biafra, Houphouët-Boigny emphasised that the Federal forces were strongly and ever more equipped by the Soviets and the British with the blessing of the Americans, and assisted by the "fanatical Arabs of Algeria and Egypt." The Biafrans, by contrast, were poorly armed. But they were "animated by an unwavering faith in the destiny of a free and independent Biafra, as well as in the destiny of a truly free and independent Africa." "Accepting to die for their ideal," he went on, "they could with a minimum of armament hope for the miracle of first a recovery, then a reversal of the situation."<sup>83</sup>

Whereas France's covert support to Biafra was "not unreservedly approved by all policymakers" in Paris, Houphouët-Boigny had with Foccart a strong advocate for his position in the Elysée.<sup>84</sup> Prompted by the Ivorian leader's letter, the secretary general took up the issue of arms supplies to Biafra with de Gaulle, and received the Ivorian defence minister, who the general did not want to receive. The French president was not categorically opposed to help the Biafrans, but

<sup>74</sup>SHD, GR 1 R 222, Soutien au Biafra, [author unknown, but most likely someone within the French Ministry of Armies], n.d. [likely autumn 1968].

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, Annexe I, Annexe II, Annexe III.

<sup>76</sup>Foccart, "Mercredi 2 octobre," in *Journal* 2, 369.

<sup>77</sup>Olusegun Obasanjo, *My Command: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1980), 151.

<sup>78</sup>AN, 5 AG F/2237, A.S.: Du Biafra, Courcel (French Embassy London) to MAE, 28 Oct. 1968.

<sup>79</sup>Foccart, "Mercredi 16 octobre... Biafra," in *Journal* 2, 389.

<sup>80</sup>Foccart, "Vendredi 18 octobre... Biafra" and "Mercredi 23 octobre... Biafra," in *Journal* 2, 393 and 403.

<sup>81</sup>AN, 5 AG F/1804, Raphaël-Leygues (French Embassy Abidjan) to MAE, 25 Oct. 1968.

<sup>82</sup>AN, 5 AG F/1804, Raphaël-Leygues (French Embassy Abidjan) to MAE, 26 Oct. 1968.

<sup>83</sup>AN, 5 AG F/535, Houphouët-Boigny to de Gaulle, 26 Oct. 1968.

<sup>84</sup>AN, 5 AG F/902, Foccart (Secrétariat Général) to Raphaël-Leygues (French Embassy Abidjan), 4 Nov. 1968.

first wanted to have the report of the mission of officers that had been sent to Biafra.<sup>85</sup> By early November 1968, the mission's pre-report had arrived at last.<sup>86</sup> Meanwhile, over the course of the month, the appeals for French help from Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, and Biafra escalated. First Houphouët-Boigny asked for the replacement of the Ivorian arms and ammunition he had delivered to Biafra.<sup>87</sup> Then Bongo not only asked for more help "of all nature for Biafra,"<sup>88</sup> but fearing Nigerian reprisals because of his support to the secessionist cause, he also asked for French protection and substantial military assistance for the Gabonese forces.<sup>89</sup> Finally, Ojukwu wrote to Michel Debré, who had replaced Couve de Murville as foreign minister, to ask for more military assistance. This was, according to the Biafran leader, needed more than ever, because Britain had stepped up its arms deliveries to Nigeria "to spite" the French.<sup>90</sup> Biafra indeed desperately needed weapons, because since mid-October hardly any assistance had arrived from France.<sup>91</sup>

Confronted with this flurry of requests, for which Foccart advocated within the Elysée,<sup>92</sup> de Gaulle and his government largely gave in. In relation to Ojukwu's request, the general was initially dismissive and then evasive.<sup>93</sup> Bongo's perceived needs, meanwhile, were partly met. The French military presence in Gabon was to be strengthened, but not as much as desired, and the Gabonese forces were to receive arms and equipment, albeit not of the quality and in the quantity that had been requested.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, he was reassured by de Gaulle that Gabon's security was guaranteed by the Franco-Gabonese defence agreement.<sup>95</sup> Houphouët-Boigny's request, however, was fully met. Although de Gaulle was concerned by the cost of this military assistance in light of France's financial difficulties, and observed that it would thus have to be reduced, Foccart eventually managed to convince him that this support could be decisive for Biafra.<sup>96</sup> Following a meeting with Debré and Pierre Messmer, the minister of the armies, de Gaulle gave Foccart the green light for the arms deliveries to Côte d'Ivoire that were ultimately destined for the Biafrans, and to inform Houphouët-Boigny without leaving a written trace about this ultimate aim.<sup>97</sup> The Ivorian president thus simply received a typewritten letter signed by the general, which stated that his defence minister had been received by Messmer and his requests would be answered positively.<sup>98</sup> Consequently, even though Ojukwu's request was not directly met, he and his forces would receive French arms and ammunition through Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>85</sup>Foccart, "Mercredi 30 octobre," "Lundi 4 novembre... Houphouët-Boigny et le Biafra," "Mardi 5 novembre," in *Journal* 2, 407, 418–19, and 420–21, respectively.

<sup>86</sup>Foccart, "Jeudi 7 novembre...Biafra," in *Journal* 2, 425.

<sup>87</sup>Foccart, "Vendredi 8 novembre, Biafra," in *Journal* 2, 428.

<sup>88</sup>AN, 5 AG F/653, Note à l'attention de Monsieur le Président de la République, Audience du Président Bongo, Présidence de la République, Secrétariat Général, 9 Nov. 1968.

<sup>89</sup>AN, 5 AG F/650, Audience du Président Bongo le lundi 11 Novembre à 16 heures 30, 11 Nov. 1968; AN, 5 AG F/653, Bongo to de Gaulle, 13 Nov. 1968.

<sup>90</sup>CADC, 60QONT/19, Ojukwu to Debré (MAE), 9 Nov. 1968.

<sup>91</sup>Centre des Archives diplomatiques de Nantes [hereafter CADN], 362PO/1/100, Réunion du 21.11.68 – 16 h 30 [most likely French Embassy Libreville], 21 Nov. 1968.

<sup>92</sup>Foccart, "Mardi 12 novembre," in *Journal* 2, 436.

<sup>93</sup>Foccart, "Mercredi 13 novembre" and "Mercredi 20 novembre," in *Journal* 2, 437 and 451.

<sup>94</sup>AN, 5 AG F/386: Compte rendu de la réunion tripartite du 14 novembre 1968, 14 Nov. 1968; Compte rendu de la réunion tripartite du 21 novembre 1968, 21 Nov. 1968; Compte rendu de la réunion tripartite du 28 novembre 1968, 28 Nov. 1968. Foccart, "Vendredi 15 novembre," in *Journal* 2, 442.

<sup>95</sup>AN, 5 AG F/24, De Gaulle to Bongo, 3 Dec. 1968.

<sup>96</sup>Foccart, "Vendredi 22 novembre" and "Mardi 26 novembre," in *Journal* 2, 439 and 469.

<sup>97</sup>Foccart, "Mercredi 27 novembre, Des armes 'pour Houphouët' destinées au Biafra. Messmer" and "Vendredi 29 novembre... Biafra: 'Pas d'écrit à ce sujet,'" in *Journal* 2, 471–72 and 476–77.

<sup>98</sup>AN, 5 AG F/535, De Gaulle to Houphouët-Boigny, 29 Nov. 1968.

<sup>99</sup>Foccart, "Mercredi 11 décembre... Biafra," in *Journal* 2, 498.

The arms supplies the Biafran forces were receiving from France and other sources remained, however, quantitatively insufficient and too irregular.<sup>100</sup> Biafra's African friends, assisted by Foccart, thus continued to pin their hopes on France and appeal to de Gaulle for help. In mid-January 1969, it was Nyerere's turn. In a personal meeting, the Tanzanian president made the "urgent appeal" to his French counterpart "to allow Biafra to militarily survive." The general reassured Nyerere that France was helping the Biafrans "in this direction," but indirectly.<sup>101</sup> Yet according to Foccart, the Elysée was not doing enough. When, following a briefing about Biafra's desperate situation and British military assistance to Nigeria, de Gaulle exclaimed "Oh! these English pigs," his secretary general reminded him that "[i]f ...we want to win, we have to act and act rapidly."<sup>102</sup> This view was shared by Foccart's key partner in Africa, Houphouët-Boigny. In early February, he once more appealed to de Gaulle in writing. After reiterating his criticism against Britain and the Soviet Union, as well as Algeria and Egypt, he emphasised that the coming six months would be decisive, and that Biafra could win "with a tenth of the arms and ammunition its adversaries had." This was what he hoped to obtain from the General. He therefore attached a list of arms and ammunition to the letter, and announced that he would come to Paris to discuss the issue in person.<sup>103</sup> The Ivorian president was determined to help Biafra, which remained his number one concern, and in the meantime even bought a ship in France to transport French weapons destined for the secessionists.<sup>104</sup> In response to his letter, de Gaulle, who as now usual did not want to leave a trace about his support to Biafra, wrote that he would discuss his request with him in person.<sup>105</sup> When they met on 20 February, Houphouët-Boigny seemed to have succeeded in convincing the general, who afterwards ordered Foccart to assess the scale and price of the required military assistance.<sup>106</sup>

The next month it was Bongo's turn to appeal to de Gaulle.<sup>107</sup> In his letter of 1 March, which was accompanied by a list of the ammunition the Biafrans required, he emphasised, like his senior counterpart in Côte d'Ivoire, that the next six months would be decisive. In making his personal and urgent request for ammunition, he emphasised that "[y]ou alone, My General, hold in your skilful and generous hands the key to the ultimate Biafran resistance that would definitely open the eyes of those who hesitate and dither and would change, I am certain, the face of things."<sup>108</sup> Seemingly without hesitation, de Gaulle answered Bongo only two days later that his request would be satisfied.<sup>109</sup> With the general's blessing in hand, the Gabonese president then asked the French minister of the armies to speed up the delivery of the ammunition.<sup>110</sup> Meanwhile, the French mission in Biafra assessed and helped to coordinate the military assistance on the ground.<sup>111</sup>

Consequently, by late March 1969, Biafra's Franco-African arms triangle was running relatively smoothly, and the mechanisms and process had been customarily established. While de Gaulle was generally favourable to provide military assistance to the Biafrans, he had to be prompted by his

<sup>100</sup>AN, 5 AG F/2239, Note d'information, Le problème du Biafra, Premier Ministre, Secrétariat Général de la Défense Nationale, Centre d'exploitation du renseignement, 9 Jan. 1969.

<sup>101</sup>CADC, 60QONT/20, Entretien entre le Général de Gaulle et Monsieur Nyerere, Présidence de la République, Secrétariat Général, 16 Jan. 1969.

<sup>102</sup>Foccart, "Jeudi 30 janvier... Biafra: 'Ah! ces cochons d'Anglais!'" in *Journal* 2, 577–78.

<sup>103</sup>5 AG F/2247, Houphouët-Boigny to de Gaulle, 9 Feb. 1969.

<sup>104</sup>AN, 5 AG F/535: Audience du Président Houphouët-Boigny, Présidence de la République, Secrétariat Général, 19 Feb. 1969; Handwritten note, Secrétariat Général, n.d. [most likely mid-Feb.].

<sup>105</sup>AN, 5 AG F/2247, De Gaulle to Houphouët-Boigny, 14 Feb. 1969; Foccart, "Mercredi 12 février" and "Lundi 17 février," in *Journal* 2, 594 and 603.

<sup>106</sup>Foccart, "Jeudi 20 février... 'Houphouët ne pense qu'au Biafra,'" in *Journal* 2, 608–9.

<sup>107</sup>AN, 5 AG F/651, Bongo to Foccart (Secrétariat Général), 1 Mar. 1969.

<sup>108</sup>AN, 5 AG F/651, Bongo to de Gaulle, 1 Mar. 1969.

<sup>109</sup>AN, 5 AG F/2016, De Gaulle to Bongo, 3 Mar. 1969.

<sup>110</sup>AN, 5 AG F/651, Bongo to Messmer (Ministry of the Armies), 13 Mar. 1969.

<sup>111</sup>Foccart, "Mercredi 26 mars... Bongo achète des canons espagnols pour le Biafra. 'Et qui paie?'" in *Journal* 2, 662.

Ivorian and Gabonese partners to escalate the supply of arms and ammunition and deal with it as a matter of urgency. There was, however, trouble on the horizon. Not only had a secessionist victory become ever more unlikely, but also the general's long political career came to an end. It was thus questionable whether first he, and then his successor, would sustain the military assistance to Biafra, at least at a more substantial level.

### Retention and diversification

By spring 1969, the conflict in Nigeria had been a war of attrition for months. Whereas the Biafrans still managed to pull off some tactical successes, in light of the discrepancy of military resources between the belligerents, it was clear that it was only a matter of time until they would be defeated. Meanwhile, the hunger and starvation inside shrinking Biafra, which was astutely advertised by Ojukwu's regime, concentrated minds around the world. This situation did not only lead to an extensive international humanitarian aid effort, but also to numerous peace initiatives and negotiations, initiated by the Organisation of African Unity, the Commonwealth, and individual African leaders. There seemed to be no peace in sight, however, for as long as Ojukwu refused to settle for anything less than full independence.<sup>112</sup> Since he had been emboldened by French support and military assistance, which allowed him to keep on fighting, Paris had the potential power to reign him in by withholding arms and ammunition. Although the Elysée apparently considered this option in spring, the Biafran leader could count on his francophone African allies' lobbying, and was "lucky" that de Gaulle wanted him to be able to negotiate from a position of strength.<sup>113</sup> It was questionable, however, whether, after the general had lost his constitutional referendum of late April 1969 and resigned, his successor would continue to listen to Houphouët-Boigny and Bongo. While they managed to retain a moderate degree of French military assistance, they also increasingly sought to bring the Southern African white supremacists into their scheme.

In early April 1969, Foccart announced to de Gaulle that the Biafrans had succeeded to halt the Federal offensive thanks to French arms deliveries. Paradoxically, however, this did not provoke the positive reaction the secretary general might have anticipated. Instead, following a discussion of tonnages and financial cost, the general exclaimed that there would be no more arms shipments "until new orders that might be given."<sup>114</sup> But de Gaulle rapidly came back on this decision. When only a week later he was informed that Biafra's situation had become alarming, and Foccart therefore argued that it was time for Ojukwu to negotiate, he apparently doubled down in order to help the Biafrans gain a stronger negotiating position.<sup>115</sup> Although to the Elysée's relief the situation on the battlefield seemed to have stabilised only a few days later,<sup>116</sup> in his last days in office the general remained committed to militarily aiding the secessionists. Houphouët-Boigny was apparently confident "that with regard to the supply of materiel to Biafra there [were] no more difficulties,"<sup>117</sup> and during his last meeting with de Gaulle as president, he obtained yet another major arms shipment for Biafra.<sup>118</sup> With the general's sudden departure from France's highest office, however, came a period of uncertainty for both Biafra's friends and enemies.

In order to bring an end to France's military assistance to Ojukwu, the Federal Commissioner of External Affairs, Dr Okoi Arikpo, met in early May with his French counterpart to criticise France's

<sup>112</sup>Stremlau, *The International Politics*; Desgrandchamps, *L'humanitaire en guerre civile*.

<sup>113</sup>Jacques Foccart, *Foccart Parle: Entretiens avec Philippe Gaillard*, vol. 1 (Paris: Fayard/Jeune Afrique, 1995), 348.

<sup>114</sup>Foccart, "Mercredi 2 avril... Biafra: le coût des armes. Les affiches du référendum," in *Journal 2*, 671.

<sup>115</sup>Foccart, "Mercredi 9 avril, Biafra: 'Rien n'est jamais perdu dans une guerre pareille,'" in *Journal 2*, 673–74.

<sup>116</sup>Foccart, "Jeudi 10 avril" and "Mercredi 16 avril, Houphouët: 'Ah! ce que nous aurons du mal à faire l'Afrique!'" in *Journal 2*, 679 and 695.

<sup>117</sup>AN, 5 AG F/535, Audience du Président Houphouët-Boigny, Présidence de la République, Secrétariat Général, 16 Apr. 1969.

<sup>118</sup>Foccart, "Jeudi 17 avril... Six mille fusils pour le Biafra?," in *Journal 2*, 701.

arms embargo against Nigeria, indirectly accuse Paris of arms and ammunition supplies to Biafra, and to make the case for Nigerian unity. Although Debré was a “co-conspirator” in Biafra’s Franco-African arms triangle, he stated that “France does not release, does not sell, does not give weapons to Biafra.”<sup>119</sup> Despite ever mounting evidence of French military assistance to the secessionists, Paris continued to deny any involvement. A month later, the Nigerians made a formal protest to the French Foreign Ministry that the light aircraft that was — under the leadership of Swedish pilot Count Carl Gustaf von Rosen — conducting successful air raids on Nigeria, was equipped with missiles from France.<sup>120</sup> But all they received was yet another denial.<sup>121</sup> Meanwhile, Biafra’s African supporters were working hard to keep France in the game.

In late June, during a meeting in Libreville between a Biafran delegation led by Mbanefo, Bongo, and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, the latter notably expressed his hope to Delauney — who was also present — that French military assistance would continue.<sup>122</sup> Yet the main impact on Paris, where Foccart was preparing the ground with de Gaulle’s successor Pompidou,<sup>123</sup> was again Houphouët-Boigny. In once more reiterating the Ivorian president’s anti-Islamic and anti-communist motivations in the Nigerian Civil War, Raphaël-Leygues announced on 11 July 1960 that Houphouët-Boigny was coming to Paris to ask the French president to maintain the military assistance to the secessionists.<sup>124</sup> Biafra remained indeed “by far” his main preoccupation, even though he was now also increasingly searching for a diplomatic issue to the conflict.<sup>125</sup> In his meeting with Pompidou of 16 July, Biafra was thus, unsurprisingly, the main topic. The Ivorian president apparently came out of the meeting “very happy,” certainly because he had found common ground with his French counterpart.<sup>126</sup> Consequently, when Ojukwu wrote to Pompidou a few days later to express his fear that the new president could distance himself from France’s policy of support to Biafra, he was reassured thanks to Houphouët-Boigny’s groundwork.<sup>127</sup> Despite the new stewardship of the Elysée, France thus continued to provide military assistance to Biafra, including to Ojukwu’s guerrilla arm, the Biafran Organisation of Freedom Fighters.<sup>128</sup>

Houphouët-Boigny remained convinced that for as long as arms and ammunition supplies to Biafra continued, the Federal troops would not be able to win.<sup>129</sup> Therefore, and in order to complement the not always guaranteed and seemingly insufficient French military assistance, together with Bongo he reached out and increasingly cooperated with the South Africans and, to a lesser extent, the Rhodesians. Already in early February 1969, the Ivorian president had stated, during

<sup>119</sup>CADN, 332PO/1/4, Compte rendu de l’audience accordée le 2 mai 1969 par M. Michel Debré à M. Arikpo, Commissaire aux Affaires Etrangères de la République fédérale du Nigéria, 7 May 1969.

<sup>120</sup>CADC, 60QONT/11, Note pour le Ministre, a/s. Entretien avec l’Ambassadeur du Nigeria, Direction des Affaires Politiques, Afrique – Levant, Sous-Direction d’Afrique (MAE), 4 June 1969. On the role of von Rosen and his ‘Minicons’, see, for instance, Mockler, *The New Mercenaries*, 133–38.

<sup>121</sup>CADC, 60QONT/20, Alphand (Direction d’Afrique-Levant, S/Direction d’Afrique, MAE) to French Embassy Lagos, 9 June 1969.

<sup>122</sup>AN, 5 AG F/2016, Objet: Visite au Gabon du Président Kaunda, Delauney (French Embassy Libreville) to MAE, 27 June 1969.

<sup>123</sup>Jacques Foccart, “Mardi 1<sup>er</sup> juillet” and “Vendredi 11 juillet,” in *Journal de l’Elysée: Dans les bottes du général (1969-1971)*, vol. 3, ed. Philippe Gaillard (Paris: Fayard/Jeune Afrique, 1999), 77–78 and 90.

<sup>124</sup>CADC, 60QONT/14, Objet: Situation en Côte d’Ivoire, Raphaël-Leygues (French Embassy Abidjan) to MAE, 11 July 1969.

<sup>125</sup>AN, 5 AG F/535, Audience du Président Houphouët-Boigny, Présidence de la République, Secrétariat Général, 15 July 1969.

<sup>126</sup>Foccart, “Mercredi 16 juillet, Houphouët-Boigny à l’Elysée” and “Jeudi 17 juillet,” in *Journal* 3, 92 and 94.

<sup>127</sup>AN, 5 AG F/36, Lettre du 18 juillet 1969 du général Ojukwu adressée à Monsieur le Président de la République, 18 July 1969; Foccart, “Mardi 26 août,” in *Journal* 3, 101.

<sup>128</sup>AN, 5 AG F/2665, Note à l’attention de Monsieur le Secrétaire Général, OBJET: Biafran Organisation of Freedom Fighter (B.O.F.F.), Maldan (Présidence de la République, Secrétariat Général), 22 July 1969.

<sup>129</sup>AN, 5 AG F/535, Note à l’attention de Monsieur le Président de la République, Audience du Président Houphouët-Boigny, Présidence de la République, Secrétariat Général, 15 Sep. 1969.



a meeting in Libreville with Bongo and a Biafran delegation, that with the destiny of not only Biafra but also Africa at stake, it was necessary “to ally oneself even with the devil” — that is, South Africa.<sup>130</sup> As a result, Houphouët-Boigny and Bongo began a rapprochement with Rhodesia, and especially South Africa, through which they hoped to secure additional military assistance for what they considered their shared anti-communist cause of supporting Biafra. In March 1969, support and arms supplies to Biafra were notably on the agenda when the Gabonese president met with Rhodesian Information Minister P. K. van der Byl, and the Ivorian president met South African Minister of Defence P. W. Botha.<sup>131</sup> In the case of South Africa, by autumn 1969, the rapprochement had evolved into a real partnership, and through the Ivorian and Gabonese presidents Pretoria had been brought into the Franco-African arms triangle, which was thus transformed into a square. Therein, the South Africans not only found like-minded African partners, but they also hoped that Houphouët-Boigny and Bongo would help them improve their relations with Biafra’s other African supporters, Tanzania and Zambia. This clearly transpired when Botha met on 26 and 27 October with Bongo in Libreville and Houphouët-Boigny in Abidjan respectively to discuss military assistance to Biafra in their common crusade against communism in Africa.<sup>132</sup> After his visits to Gabon and Côte d’Ivoire, the South African defence minister travelled to Paris, where he met with Foccart and now Defence Minister Debré.<sup>133</sup> The Elysée feared the potential reputational damage for itself and its Ivorian and Gabonese allies if they were exposed colluding too extensively with the apartheid regime.<sup>134</sup> But it wanted to coordinate its military assistance to Biafra with that of Pretoria, particularly on the ground, where a French team had since been joined by a South African one.<sup>135</sup>

Ultimately, however, the combined effort of Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon, France, and South Africa proved insufficient to save Ojukwu’s forces from defeat. By December 1969, the news from the battlefield had become alarming. In Paris, Foccart informed Pompidou that the situation was so bad that the French and South African missions were retreating. While this “strongly displeased” the French president, his secretary general stressed that it would be better to send the Biafrans “useful things rather than some small material without a real interest.”<sup>136</sup> By the end of the month, the situation had become desperate.<sup>137</sup> In writing to Houphouët-Boigny, Ojukwu insisted that while he “would not fail, and would not succumb,” he also could not hide the difficult situation he and his followers found themselves in, increasingly encircled by Federal forces. The Ivorian president thus redoubled his efforts to find a diplomatic solution to the conflict that would at least salvage a part of the Biafran dream,<sup>138</sup> and in his New Year’s message he expressed his hope that 1970 would bring peace to the Biafran people.<sup>139</sup> Meanwhile, into early January 1970 both Houphouët-Boigny and Bongo made last ditch appeals to the French to provide the military assistance that would allow

<sup>130</sup>CADC, 60QONT/37, Posier (French Embassy Libreville) to MAE, 4 Feb. 1969.

<sup>131</sup>AN, 5 AG F/2243, Delauney (French Embassy Libreville) to MAE, 18 Mar. 1969; AN, 5 AG F/535, Audience du Président Houphouët-Boigny, Présidence de la République, Secrétariat Général, 20 Mar. 1969.

<sup>132</sup>AN, 5 AG F/2016, Delauney (French Embassy Libreville) to MAE, 28 Oct. 1969; AN, 5 AG F/1805, Objet: La Côte d’Ivoire et la République Sud-Africaine, Dubois (French Embassy Abidjan), 29 Oct. 1969.

<sup>133</sup>Foccart, “Mardi 23 septembre... Biafra: Afrique du Sud, Air France, Matra, etc.,” and “Mardi 28 octobre, Visite du ministre de la Défense de Pretoria,” in *Journal* 3, 119 and 139–40.

<sup>134</sup>AN, 5 AG F/36, Côte d’Ivoire, 1083-1089, Secrétariat Général, 30 Oct. 1969; AN, 5 AG F/1805, Objet: Audience avec le Président Houphouët-Boigny, Raphaël-Leygues (French Embassy Abidjan) to MAE, 6 Nov. 1969.

<sup>135</sup>Foccart, “Lundi 24 et mardi 25 novembre, Debré, l’Afrique du Sud et le Biafra,” in *Journal* 3, 153. On the South African team see, for instance, Peter Stiff, *The Silent War: South African Recce Operations 1969-1994* (Alberton, South Africa: Galago, 1999), ch. 2.

<sup>136</sup>Foccart, “Vendredi 19 décembre, La situation empire au Biafra,” in *Journal* 3, 173.

<sup>137</sup>Foccart, “Lundi 29 décembre, Agonie du Biafra,” in *Journal* 3, 179.

<sup>138</sup>AN, 5 AG F/1805, Raphaël-Leygues (French Embassy Abidjan) to MAE, 29 Dec. 1969.

<sup>139</sup>Félix Houphouët-Boigny, “Message de nouvel an à la nation, 31 décembre 1969,” in Houphouët-Boigny, *Anthologie des discours* 2, 977.

Ojukwu to reverse the situation.<sup>140</sup> Whereas Foccart still played with the idea of what could be done if the frontlines were stabilised, Paris had given up on Biafra.<sup>141</sup> The last achievement of Biafra's Franco-African supporters was to extract Ojukwu and get him into safety in Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>142</sup> By 13 January, there was no more air connection with Biafra,<sup>143</sup> and Chief of the General Staff Philip Effiong, who had been left in charge by the Biafran leader, had no other choice than to surrender.<sup>144</sup> This was not only Ojukwu's, but also Houphouët-Boigny's defeat, who, heavily affected, blamed the British and the Americans for having strengthened communism in Africa through their support to Nigeria.<sup>145</sup>

## Conclusion

During the Nigerian Civil War, France evolved into Biafra's main provider of military assistance. While this clearly allowed the Biafrans to hold out longer against the much wealthier, more populous, and substantially better equipped Federals, it also prolonged and dramatically increased the suffering and death toll in the former Eastern Nigeria. Paris accepted this collateral damage in pursuit of strengthening its neocolonial position in a proxy war against its former imperial foe Britain. This article shows, however, that the Elysée did not have a clear policy or coherent strategy in its military support to Ojukwu. Instead, facilitated by Foccart, a generally reluctant de Gaulle was dragged into a more active role in the conflict through Houphouët-Boigny, who pursued a clear pro-Biafran strategy in response to his humanitarian concerns, political ambitions, and, especially, threat perception.

At first, the Ivorian president convinced his French counterpart to give some financial support to Biafra through French oil companies, and then Second World War arms and ammunition to Côte d'Ivoire, which would then be passed on to Enugu. By repetitively pleading with de Gaulle, he thus succeeded in helping to equip the struggling Biafran forces with weapons piecemeal during the first year of the civil war. Then, through his continuous lobbying of the general, he not only contributed to Paris publicly taking a position in favour of Biafra in midsummer 1968, but also managed to obtain more substantial and regular French military assistance for the secessionist forces from autumn onwards.

In his endeavour to arm the Biafrans to defend themselves against the numerically superior and better equipped Federals, Houphouët-Boigny's humanitarian concerns for the beleaguered and starving Biafran population certainly played a role. Yet, by indirectly opposing the potentially hegemonic Nigeria, he was also driven by his quest for leadership in the region and, probably more importantly, religiously tainted Cold War motivations. As his repetitive pleas to de Gaulle and the assessments of the French ambassador to Côte d'Ivoire demonstrate, as a result of Algerian, Egyptian and, especially, extensive Soviet support to Lagos, he feared that Nigeria could be taken over by pro-communist Arabs and Moscow, and thereby tilt the regional balance in favour of the Soviet bloc. This was different from Paris, which seemed predominantly concerned with its neo-imperial clout and economic interests in the region, rather than the Cold War.

In his regional Cold War, the Ivorian president was increasingly assisted by his junior counterpart in Gabon. Although relatively inexperienced, Bongo came to play an active role in extracting

<sup>140</sup>Foccart, "Vendredi 2 janvier, Au Biafra, l'ennemi triche!," in *Journal* 3, 184; AN, 5 AG F/653, Bongo to Pompidou, 5 Jan. 1970.

<sup>141</sup>Foccart, "Mardi 6 janvier, Biafra," in *Journal* 3, 188–89.

<sup>142</sup>Foccart, "Dimanche 11 janvier... Biafra: Ojukwu est sauvé," in *Journal* 3, 193.

<sup>143</sup>CADN, 362PO1/1/100, Delauney (French Embassy Libreville) to MAE, 13 Jan. 1970.

<sup>144</sup>De St. Jorre, *The Brothers' War*, ch. 15.

<sup>145</sup>AN, 5 AG F/2239, Dubois (French Embassy Abidjan) to MAE, 14 Jan. 1970; AN, 5 AG F/535, Audience du Président Houphouët-Boigny Président de la République de Côte d'Ivoire, Présidence de la République, Secrétariat Général, 8 Apr. 1970.

arms and ammunition for Biafra from Paris. This led to the establishment of Biafra's Franco-African or, rather, African-French arms triangle, in which Libreville became the key transit route for arms supplies to Ojukwu's forces. In this scheme, the Ivorian and Gabonese presidents first assessed the military assistance needs with the Biafran leader and his lieutenants, and then passed them on to the Elysée, which ended up supplying the arms and ammunition through Côte d'Ivoire and Gabon. His key involvement in this triangle allowed Bongo to position and ingratiate himself as an essential partner for both Paris and Abidjan. This not only strengthened his position in the region, but also brought the added benefits of consultations with Houphouët-Boigny, the doyen of francophone Africa, as well as privileged access to the Elysée and additional French assistance.

Whereas the Ivorian president could find his Gabonese counterpart overenthusiastic at times, he could count on his support in keeping the French committed, and in bringing new suppliers in. When in spring 1969 France entered a period of political turmoil that eventually led to de Gaulle's resignation, Houphouët-Boigny — flanked by Bongo — secured the retention of France's military support to Biafra from the new French president. Yet with Pompidou seemingly less committed than his predecessor and the perceived insufficiency of French arms supplies, the Ivorian and Gabonese presidents brought the Southern Africans, particularly Pretoria, into the Franco-African arms triangle, which thus became a square.

Eventually, however, all of the Ivorian leader's efforts in favour of Biafra were in vain. Ojukwu fled to Abidjan, and in his stead Effiong had to throw in the towel in January 1970. In this failed venture, Houphouët-Boigny was not France's stooge, but the guiding spirit that also mobilised his junior in Gabon, and brought — among others — the Southern African white supremacists into a rather unusual alliance. In addition to supposed humanitarian motives and regional ambitions, the Ivorian president saw himself also in a crusade against Arab and communist influence in sub-Saharan Africa, wherein the end justified the means. The Nigerian Civil War was, ultimately, Houphouët-Boigny's Cold War, in which he pursued what he saw as Côte d'Ivoire's national interests and security.

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