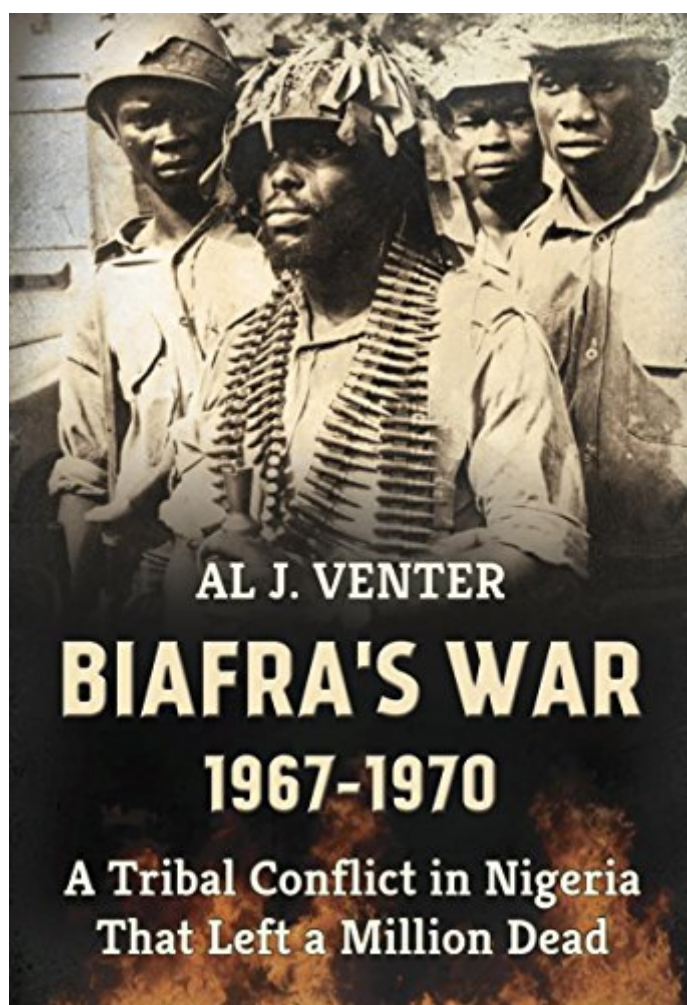


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Biafra's War 1967-1970: A Tribal Conflict In Nigeria That Left A Million Dead



Synopsis

Almost half a century has passed since the Nigerian Civil War ended. But memories die hard, because a million or more people perished in that internecine struggle, the majority women and children, who were starved to death. Biafra's war was modern Africa's first extended conflict. It lasted almost three years and was based largely on ethnic, by inference, tribal grounds. It involved, on the one side, a largely Christian or animist southeastern quadrant of Nigeria which called itself Biafra, pitted militarily against the country's more populous and preponderant Islamic north. These divisions are almost always brutal and persist. Not a week goes by without reports coming in of Christian communities or individuals persecuted by Islamic zealots. It was also a conflict that saw significant Cold War involvement: the Soviets (and Britain) siding and supplying Federal Nigeria with weapons, aircraft and expertise and several Western states – Portugal, South Africa and France especially – providing clandestine help to the rebel state. For that reason alone, this book is an important contribution towards understanding Nigeria's ethnic divisions, which are no better today than they were then. Biafra was the first of a series of religious wars that threaten to engulf much of Africa. Similar conflicts have recently taken place in the Ivory Coast, Kenya, Southern Sudan, the Central African Republic, Senegal (Cassamance), both Congo Republics and elsewhere. As the war progressed, Biafra also attracted mercenary involvement, many of whom arriving from the Congo which had already seen much turmoil. Western pilots were hired by Lagos and they flew the first Soviet MiG-17 jet fighters to have played an active role in a Western war. Al Venter spent time covering this struggle. He left the rebel enclave in December 1969, only weeks before it ended and claims the distinction of being the only foreign correspondent to have been rocketed by both sides: first by Biafra's tiny Swedish-built Minicon fighter planes while he was on a ship lying at anchor in Warri harbour and thereafter, by MiG jets flown by mercenaries. Among his colleagues inside the beleaguered territory were the celebrated Italian photographer Romano Cagnoni as well as Frederick Forsyth who originally reported for the BBC and then resigned because of the partisan, pro-Nigerian stance taken by Whitehall. He briefly shared quarters with French photographer Giles Caron who was later killed in Cambodia. Prior to that Venter had been working for John Holt in Lagos. It is interesting that his office at the time was at Ikeja International Airport (Murtala Muhammed today) where the second Nigerian army mutiny was plotted and from where it was launched. From this perspective he had a proverbial ringside seat of the tribal divisions that followed as hostilities escalated. Venter took numerous photos while on this West African assignment, both in Nigeria while he was based there and later in Biafra itself. Others come from various sources, including some from the same mercenary pilots who

originally targeted him from the air.

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Customer Reviews

First and foremost let me start by saying that this is NOT a bad book. Al J. Venter has a very easy-going style and writes in the manner of an experienced Africa hand who has spent decades covering various wars and conflicts around the continent and knows exactly what he is talking about. However, I picked up this book expecting it to be a popular history of the Biafra War and instead found it to be much more of a collection of various articles about various aspects of the war than a history. This is both good and bad. While Venter really does a great job of capturing the "ground's eye" view of what the conflict looked like (mostly from the Biafran side), he does not spend much time talking about the overall strategies of either side, other than that the Federal Government sought to surround and starve Biafra into submission and that Biafra sought to win the PR battle and just...survive. That's about it. As a result, while there are great chapters on diverse topics such as the Biafran air force, the mercenaries in Federal Service, foreign impressions of the war, and so on, there tends to be quite a lot of overlap and as a result the reader finds him/herself

constantly being told that the Egyptian Mig and Sukhoi pilots were terrible, that the Nigerians bombed anything that moved, civilian or otherwise, the BBC was biased in favor of the Nigerians, that Count Gustav von Rosen died after the war in Ethiopia, that Bob Denard and his mercenary band only pretended to storm out of Biafra but actually stayed on to serve French interests under the radar, and so on. While this is all relevant and does not appear out of place, all of these facts are driven into the ground due to poor editing. Likewise, in several chapters Venter does not so much write as extensively quote Frederick Forsyth's Biafra Story, as well as memoirs of various Nigerian army officers, foreign intelligence reports, and so on. As a result, it sometimes feels as though Venter is not so much writing his own work on the Biafra conflict as simply quoting what other people have said about it. While this speaks volumes to Venter's esteem for Forsyth, at times I found myself grumbling "fine, fine, fine. I guess I'll go read HIS book instead." In short, while this book serves as a good primer on the Biafra war and covers a wide variety of topics from a wide variety of topics, it is repetitive, poorly-edited, and fails to provide an overarching narrative to the conflict. Not a bad book by any stretch of the imagination, but not what I was hoping for.

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