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COURSE

Understanding the Nigeria–Biafra War

A 6-module history course on the causes, course and legacy of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970)

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A 6-module history course on the causes, course and legacy of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970)

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About this course

The Nigerian Civil War — also called the Nigeria–Biafra War or the Biafran War — was fought from **July 1967 to January 1970** between the Federal Military Government of Nigeria and the secessionist **Republic of Biafra**, declared in the former Eastern Region. It was one of the most devastating conflicts in post-colonial Africa. Estimates of the number of people who died vary widely, from around half a million to three million; most victims were civilians who died from hunger and disease.

More than fifty years later, the war still shapes how Nigerians think about their country, their identity and each other. Yet many young Nigerians were never taught its history in school.

Our approach

This course aims to help you **understand**, not to tell you what to believe.

- We explain events using widely accepted historical facts, and we point out where historians and participants **disagree**.
- We present the perspectives of people on different sides: federal leaders and soldiers, Biafran leaders and soldiers, civilians in the East, minorities in the region, people in the North and West, and foreign observers.
- We use careful, respectful language. Real people suffered and died; many families still live with the loss.

⚠️ **WATCH OUT**

Content note. This course discusses killings, war, starvation and the suffering of children. Take breaks when you need to, and talk with someone you trust if the material affects you.

How to use the course

Module	Topic
1	Roots of the crisis: from colonial rule to independence
2	1966: coups, killings and the breakdown of trust

Module	Topic
3	From Aburi to secession (January–July 1967)
4	The war, 1967–1970
5	Blockade, famine and the world's response
6	The end of the war, reconciliation and memory

Each module includes key events, explanation, different perspectives, reflection questions and a quick check (answers at the end). Your **study guide** contains a timeline, glossary, people to know, discussion questions and a reading list.

MODULE 1

Roots of the crisis

Lesson 1.1: Making "Nigeria"

Nigeria was created by British colonial rule. In **1914**, the British joined (amalgamated) the Northern and Southern Protectorates into one colony. The territory brought together hundreds of ethnic groups with different languages, religions, political systems and histories — including the Hausa-Fulani and Kanuri in the North, the Yoruba in the West, the Igbo in the East, and many other groups such as the Ijaw, Efik, Ibibio, Tiv, Edo and Nupe.

The British largely ruled the North and South differently. In the North, they governed through existing emirates (indirect rule) and limited Christian missionary activity; in the South, missionary schools spread Western education faster. These differences produced **uneven access to education, jobs and political experience** that mattered greatly after independence.

Lesson 1.2: Regions and rivalry

By the 1950s, Nigeria was organised into regions — Northern, Western and Eastern (and later Mid-Western, created in 1963). Each region came to be dominated by a major political party linked to its largest ethnic group:

Region	Main party	Leading figures
Northern	Northern People's Congress (NPC)	Sir Ahmadu Bello (Sardauna of Sokoto), Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa
Western	Action Group (AG)	Chief Obafemi Awolowo
Eastern	National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC)	Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe

The Northern Region was larger in population than the other regions combined, which shaped the balance of power in the federal parliament. Minority groups within each region often felt dominated by the majority group and pushed for their own states.

Lesson 1.3: Independence and the troubled First Republic

Nigeria became independent on **1 October 1960**, with Tafawa Balewa as Prime Minister and Azikiwe later becoming President (a largely ceremonial role) when Nigeria became a republic in 1963.

The early 1960s brought serious strains:

- **Disputed censuses** (1962–1963) — because population determined political representation and resources, census results were fiercely contested.
- **Crisis in the Western Region** (from 1962), including the trial and imprisonment of Obafemi Awolowo.
- **The 1964 federal elections**, widely seen as flawed, and the violent **1965 Western Region election**, after which unrest in the West earned the nickname "Wild Wild West".
- Growing feelings in many communities that politics had become a winner-takes-all contest between ethnic blocs.

📘 **EXAMPLE**

Different views of the same period. Many Northerners saw their leaders as protecting their region from domination by a more educated South. Many Southerners felt the North controlled federal power unfairly. Many minorities in all regions felt ignored by everyone. Understanding these different fears is key to understanding what came next.

✍️ **YOUR TASK**

Reflect: Why might the way Nigeria was created and governed under colonial rule have made national unity harder after independence? Write a paragraph.

✅ **QUICK CHECK**

1. In what year were the Northern and Southern Protectorates amalgamated?
2. Why were census results so politically important?

MODULE 2

1966: coups, killings and the breakdown of trust

Lesson 2.1: The January 1966 coup

On **15 January 1966**, a group of young army officers, led prominently by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu and others, staged a coup. Prime Minister **Tafawa Balewa**, the Northern Premier **Ahmadu Bello**, the Western Premier **Samuel Akintola**, Finance Minister **Festus Okotie-Eboh** and several senior army officers — many of them Northerners — were killed.

The coup failed in Lagos, and the army commander, **Major-General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi** (an Igbo officer), took control and became head of a military government.

The coup plotters said they wanted to end corruption and political violence. However, because most of the plotters were Igbo, most of the prominent victims were Northern and Western leaders, and key Eastern politicians were not killed, **many Northerners came to see the coup as an Igbo plot**. Historians still debate the plotters' motives; many argue the coup was not planned as an ethnic plot, but its outcome was widely interpreted that way.

Lesson 2.2: Unification Decree and rising fear

In May 1966, Ironsi's government issued **Decree No. 34**, which abolished the federal system and made Nigeria a unitary state with a unified civil service. Many in the North feared this would allow better-educated Southerners — especially Igbo civil servants — to dominate jobs in the North. Protests followed, and violence against Igbo and other Easterners living in the North broke out in **May 1966**.

Lesson 2.3: The July 1966 counter-coup

On **29 July 1966**, mainly Northern officers staged a counter-coup. **Ironsi** and his host, the Western Region military governor **Lieutenant-Colonel Adekunle Fajuyi**, were killed in Ibadan, along with many Igbo officers and soldiers.

Lieutenant-Colonel Yakubu Gowon, a Northern Christian from a minority group, emerged as head of the Federal Military Government. The military governor of the Eastern Region, **Lieutenant-Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu**, refused to recognise Gowon's leadership, arguing that he was not the most senior officer and that the counter-coup was illegitimate.

Lesson 2.4: The killings of 1966

In **September and October 1966**, large-scale massacres of Igbo and other Easterners took place in the North. Thousands were killed — estimates vary greatly — and many more were injured. Hundreds of thousands of Easterners fled back to the Eastern Region, often arriving with nothing. In the East, some Northerners were attacked in reprisals.

These killings are central to understanding the war. For many Easterners, they proved that their lives were not safe in Nigeria and that the federal government could not or would not protect them. Many Biafrans and later historians describe these events as **pogroms**.

📘 **EXAMPLE**

Perspectives. For many in the North, the January coup and the deaths of their leaders created anger and fear of domination. For many in the East, the counter-coup and the massacres felt like collective punishment of an entire people for the actions of a few officers. Both sets of fears were real and deeply felt — and the failure to address them led toward war.

✍️ **YOUR TASK**

Reflect: How did the January coup, the unification decree, the July counter-coup and the killings of 1966 each contribute to the breakdown of trust? Make a cause-and-effect chain.

End of the free sample

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