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The Asaba massacre has long been an unspoken atrocity of the Nigerian Civil War. Official records of the war hardly mention it, and even scholarly accounts of the conflict reference it only in passing. In fact, even “the name by which the war is known is contentious,” known alternatively, and depending upon one’s point of view, as either the Nigeria-Biafra War, the Biafran War, the War of Nigerian Unity, or most commonly, the Nigerian Civil War (1 n. 2). Following extensive field research and interviews with victims, survivors, and soldiers involved in the conflict, anthropologist Elizabeth S. Bird and historian Fraser M. Ottanelli provide a comprehensive and authoritative account of the massacre in *The Asaba Massacre: Trauma, Memory, and the Nigerian Civil War*.

On October 7, 1967, the people of Asaba in Midwestern Nigeria witnessed what is arguably the worst civilian atrocity in the Nigerian Civil War—a conflict between the federal government of Nigeria and the secessionist Biafra government. Nigerian soldiers engaged in a systematic massacre of civilians in Asaba who had been told to gather to show their support for the government. Troops separated out women and small children and marched the men and boys down to the city square to be slaughtered. The killings started with soldiers shooting individuals, and it quickly escalated into mass shooting with machine guns. Although the authors estimate that between seven hundred and eight hundred people were killed, the exact number of deaths in this incident remains unknown. The killings in Asaba continued sporadically in the weeks that followed. With most of the men killed or in hiding, it was left to the women and children to retrieve the bodies of their fathers, brothers, husbands, and other relatives for burial. “Most victims, however, were dumped in mass graves or thrown into the Niger” (49). The events that precipitated the Asaba massacre are well documented in other accounts of the Nigerian Civil War, even though much less has been written about this specific incident. Six years after Nigeria gained independence from Britain, violence between the predominately Christian Igbo of Eastern Nigeria and the Hausa and Fulani Muslims of Northern Nigeria triggered the Nigerian Civil War. Leaders of the Igbo-dominated Eastern Region seceded from Nigeria, declaring the territory the independent Republic of Biafra.

The decision by Biafran leaders to invade the Mid-estern Region brought the war to a region that had remained neutral in the conflict. Biafran troops who invaded the Mid-Western Region were accused of rape, theft, extortion, and other violence including the killing of non-Igbo civilians. When Nigerian troops pushed out the Biafrans a few weeks later, they were determined to take their revenge on the people of Asaba, who they assumed to be saboteurs and Biafran sympathizers. The Asaba massacre is one of the many atrocities that marked the war. However, Bird and Ottanelli argue that the massacre at Asaba was a pivotal event that contributed to prolonging a war that claimed well over a million lives. “Asaba ‘proved’ to Biafrans that their fears of genocide were true and that their only option was to fight to the death” (112).

Although the humanitarian crisis in Biafra gained international attention due largely to the distressing images of starving Biafran children published or broadcast by Western media, the Asaba massacre was underreported. Coming just two decades after the Holocaust, why didn’t the Asaba massacre elicit greater moral outrage in Nigeria and in the international community? One explanation the authors provide is that the victorious federal government of Nigeria suppressed information about the massacre, which was not publicly acknowledged until 1999 when victims and survivors petitioned the Nigerian Truth Commission. Another explanation the authors offer is the ambivalence of the international community. Unlike the Congo a few years earlier, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union saw Nigeria as vital to their strategic interests. This made the Nigerian Civil War the first post-World War II conflict that did not evolve into a confrontation between the two superpowers, thus muting its international impact. Britain, which was involved, justified its support for the Nigerian government on the importance of maintaining the integrity of its former colony. In fact, London’s first priority was to ensure

continued access to oil in the petroleum-rich Niger Delta. Britain, the authors argue, “played a key role in both the conduct and the narrative of the war, helping create the conditions that made Asaba possible and subsequently helping to ensure that the story was buried” (69).

The publication of this book comes amid a resurgence in scholarly interest in the Nigerian Civil War and in the revival of Biafran separatist movements. However, unlike most recent studies of the conflict, the account here is not simply a narrative of suffering and victimhood. It is also a story of extraordinary acts of moral courage and resilience, as in the stories of Nigerian soldiers who shielded civilians from the massacre, and of Asaba women who were left to fend for extended families and rebuild communities after the deaths of their fathers, brothers, and husbands. While the account offered in the book is largely descriptive, Bird and Ottanelli also provide some analyses of the massacre and its legacies. The last two chapters locate the massacre in the discourse on reclaiming memory in the age of new media, also placing the massacre into the scholarship on trauma, memorialization, and justice. In crafting their narrative, the authors use several direct quotations from their interviewees, which brings authenticity to the narrative. However, the heavy use of indented block quotations on almost every page tends to impede the narrative flow and sometimes makes for tedious reading. Nonetheless, this book marks an important contribution to scholarship on the Nigerian Civil War. Beyond giving voice to the victims and survivors of the Asaba massacre, this book draws attention to a long-neglected aspect of the war, thereby deepening our understanding of postcolonial conflicts in Africa.