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Editors,  
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Comar Cruise O'Brien's brilliant article (NYR, 12/21) does much both to correct the one-sided press coverage of the tragedy of Biafra and to undermine the spurious reasoning by analogies. Mr. O'Brien has turned away the blanket of abstractions about "Federation" vs. "Balkanization", "nationalism" vs. "tribalism", and laid bare the ugly reality of Northern emir-dominated, neo-colonialist Nigeria where some 30,000 Ibos were massacred last July and two million more driven back to the Eastern Region only to be invaded by genocidal-minded "Federal" troops seen after the Region declared its independence under the name of the Republic of Biafra. Just before the fall of Enugu I received a letter from a friend there who fully confirms Mr. O'Brien's statement that, for the Ibos, the choice concerned, not ideological abstractions, but a matter of survival or extermination. The writer of that letter had always called himself a Marxist-Humanist. At the time of the July 1966 massacre he had been a trade union organizer in the Middle Belt, and barely escaped with his life. This young man in his later twenties, though an Ibo, had not previously lived in the East Region. Yet he now wrote: "I shall never move outside the Eastern Region so long as I live." This letter is representative of what had been Nigerian nationalism.

Why, however, must Mr. O'Brien turn the tragic situation into a virtuous one by transforming the forced compulsion to secede into still another abstraction -- "Now that they (the Ibos) have in very truth formed a nation on their own soil under the pressures of history" -- and pit the Ibo "nation" against the "mystique of 'Nigeria'" as if Nigerian nationalism was only something the Ibos "invented" in the 1950's? "The irony", writes Mr. O'Brien, "is that the mystique of 'Nigeria', under which they are now being crushed, was in large part their own creation. The Ibos were once proud to call themselves Nigerian nationalists although there was no Nigerian nation and although at that time--some years before independence--no one else thought in such terms."

Now, it is true that the Ibos were in the forefront of the struggle for the freedom of Nigeria from British imperialism. They began that struggle for the freedom in the 1930's, not in the 1950's. In the full tradition of African nationalism which had always been universalist, Nnamdi Azikiwe (Zik), who can rightly be called the father of Nigerian nationalism, at first condemned territorial nationalism. Whether he propagated for Nigerian independence from his self-exile in Accra in 1935, or from Lagos (1937 and thereafter), the spirit that animated both his activity and the papers he founded was that which he first comprehensively expressed in his book, Renascent Africa--the freedom of the continent of Africa from European colonialism. The uniqueness of African nationalism was not lost when the realities and complexities of the freedom struggle made it necessary to conduct the actual struggles within the "national" boundaries erected by Western imperialism. And it did not change its character when, from an idea propagated by small groups of intellectuals, African nationalism became a mass movement. This is especially true of Nigeria where Zik, from the start, concentrated his attention on the multi-

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tribal militant youth, the new generation that, under the impact of World War II, wanted "freedom now". By 1945 a new force--organized labor--swept unto the historic stage with a general strike. Of all the leaders of Nigerian nationalism, including the Yorubas who preferred "cultural nationalism" and regionalism, Zik alone came out in support of the general strike, thereby imparting a new, a proletarian quality to his Nigerian nationalism. He at once became a national hero. Needless to say, it was not because he alone or the Ibos as a whole "invented" Nigerian nationalism. The truth is both less magical and more powerful. The alignment with labor disclosed a new unifying force in Nigerian nationalism present within the colonial entity called Nigeria.

Although only a few Northerners had participated in the general strike, it was the beginning of a Nigerian nationalist movement in the North, one not led by the conservatives only in order to oppose militant "Southern" nationalism, but one led by Northern militants. It was aided in its work by the fact that one page of Zik's paper was written in Hausa. It was, naturally, not a question only of language, but of the nationalism propagated in that language--a nationalism that opposed both British imperialism and their own ruling class. It is true that Nigerian nationalism in the North never had the mass support it had in the South and especially the East. It is true that when the North "as a whole" embraced "nationalism" it was only because it was sure that it was favored by British imperialism to be the rulers of an "independent" Nigeria, and that, once in power, Zik worked hand in glove with Balewa to deny democracy to the Midwest, to the Yorubas. It is not true that that is all there was to Nigerian nationalism. One event of my 1962, trip to Nigeria stands out especially in my mind--a mass rally called by the National Trades Union Congress, the Nigerian Youth Congress and the Lagos Tenants Council to protest the government's austerity budget. The speaker who got the biggest applause was a Hausa youth who described the conditions of life and labor of the talakawa (peasant masses) in the North where conditions were "no different than when we were a colony" because now, "with Zik's help" the stranglehold of "our emirs" over the talakawa is anointed as "nationalism". "What we need", he concluded, "is a real revolution. We need to get rid of the scoundrels in Parliament."

It is true that, along with the "new" military junta in Lagos (who now get aid also from Russia) British imperialism wants Nigeria intact for what Marx in his day called "order mongering" purposes. It is not true that neo-colonialism emerged out of Nigerian nationalism. The truth is that by the 1950's the Cold War had reached the shores of Africa and the global conflict between the two nuclear titans affected drastically the character not only of Nigerian nationalism but the whole of African nationalism. Up to the fifties, even when a founder like Zik moved away from the high point reached in 1945-48 and began to play the game of nationalism according to the rules set by British imperialism, this did not affect the Zikist youth movement which continued to function without him. Indeed the revolutionary activity at first intensified so that when the Zikist movement was banned by British imperialism, it simply renamed itself the

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Freedom Movement and continued its struggle against "all forms of imperialism and for the establishment of a free socialist Republic of Nigeria, fighting in and out of parliament, employing non-violent revolutionary tactics."

By the end of the 1950's, on the other hand, the pull of the objective forces (both of the vortex of the world market and the new stage of imperialist struggle for world mastery politically) became irresistible to the nationalist leaders who moved away from dependence on the spontaneity, the self-activity of the masses that had made political independence a reality, and, instead, began "choosing sides"--"the East" or "the West"--as a substitute for the deepening of the African Revolution. Under the circumstances, to date the movement for Nigerian independence to the Fifties is not only an historical inaccuracy, but, what is far worse, blinds us to the historical distinction between the independence movement "As Reason" and its regression into state power, and thereby makes it impossible to draw any lessons from history for today, which was, rightly, Mr. O'Brien's preoccupation.

There has always been a dualism in "the pressures of history" and it will not do to cover up this dualism with phrases like "in very brush" and "on their own soil." In coming to the support of Biafra-- and world opinion must be mobilized to stop the slaughter and the cowering of the Ibos in the name of a non-existent "Nigerian nation", in the name of "order mongering"--let's not, for heaven's sake, elevate the new nation of Biafra to where we forget that it is a retreat, a necessary, an imperative retreat, but a retreat nevertheless, and not a victory for African nationalism, for the African Revolution that remains unfinished.

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Raya Dunayevskaya