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The Cold War and Air Force Politics in Independent Nigeria (1960–1962)

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Abstract

The term “military” within the Nigerian context tends to be a misnomer for the Army, with the Navy and Air Force often at the scholarship margins. This article presents a corrective: it shifts the emphasis from the Nigerian Army within the historical discourse on politics and its impact on the military in Nigeria. The paper instead examines the Cold War political origins of the Nigerian Air Force (NAF) as an under-researched service branch of the Nigerian military. In 1962, after two years of political negotiations, Nigeria’s politicians shunned British overtures and opted for West German assistance in establishing an air force. In examining the Cold War political environment, including the actors and decision-making in the two years leading to that outcome, the article employs interview data and historical sources from the National Defence College Abuja and the UK National Archives, including communiqués, letters and other forms of official corpus.

Keywords

Cold War in Africa – Nigeria – West Germany – USSR – Canada – India – Britain – Politics – Nigerian Air Force

Historically, the scholarly debate on politics and the military in Nigeria primarily focuses on the Army.¹ There is a rationale for this seeming academic bias. The Army is the most visible, historied and politically active of Nigeria’s tri-services,

¹ Panter-Brick, 1970.

to wit: the Nigerian Air Force (NAF), Navy and Army.² Consequentially, the most influential scholarly publications on the military and politics in Cold War-era Nigeria tend to be Army-centric.³

In his classic work, *Strands in Nigerian Military History*, s.c. Ukpabi focuses entirely on the Army, without discussing how the other service branches, and, in this case, the Air Force, eventually feature within this thesis on military history in Nigeria.⁴ Robin Luckham's seminal work, *The Nigerian Military*, despite the name, is a sociological analysis of the Army and the Army alone.⁵ Another influential work, Adegboyega Ajayi's *The Military and the State in Nigeria*, focuses on the Nigerian Army, with no substantive discussion of the Airman's role in Nigeria's political history.⁶ Jimi Peters, meanwhile, notes that many Nigerians viewed the military as "a tool of the colonial government", which maintained colonialist tendencies even after independence.⁷ However, the Air Force only emerged within Nigeria's First Republic—after independence—which suggests that it could not possibly have been a colonialist tool *per se*; and yet, by association with the Army and Navy as colonial-era institutions, it is implied to be. Such nuances of the NAF's origins tend to be overlooked in the historical debate on politics and the Nigerian military.

The article explores the peculiar political background of the NAF, as the newest of the tri-services and the only one lacking colonialist origins. A key differentiator of the Air Force within the historical narrative of the military and politics in Nigeria is the institution's emergence during the Cold War and at the start of Nigeria's short-lived First Republic (1960–1966). This article seeks to expand on the current debate on the origins of the NAF, emphasising the Cold War and domestic politics of the era. The paper presents a corrective to the historical emphasis on the Army within the debate on how First Republic politics influenced the Nigerian military.

The analysis is split across four broad areas. First, the paper conducts a literature review that situates Nigerian airpower origins within the broader debate on airpower and civil aircraft applications in colonial Africa. Second, the paper explores the political and military rationale behind the air force establishment debate. Put simply, this section of the paper seeks to address the question: why did an independent Nigeria require an air force? Third, using historical

2 Peters, 1997.

3 Peters, 1997, 1–17; Luckham, 1969.

4 Ukpabi, 1986.

5 Luckham, 1969.

6 Ajayi, 2007.

7 *Ibid.*, xi.

and interview material, the paper critically examines the Cold War-era political environment in which the NAF emerged. Finally, the paper reflects how the Cold War-era politics indelibly shaped the NAF's institutional and operational identity.

1 The Origins of Airpower in Colonial Africa

The history of airpower in Nigeria⁸ sits within the broader history of the practice in Africa. It is a history that predates the Great War, going back to the Italian-Turkish war in Libya (1911).⁹ Within that theatre, the early-model aeroplanes (*Nieuport*, *Blériot*, *Deperdussin*, *Etrich* and *Farman* machines) had neither the ordnance nor the manoeuvrability to conduct effective offensive sorties.¹⁰ Thus, if hand grenades were not being dropped out of the cockpit on Libyan towns, the best use of airpower at the time was for aerial reconnaissance.¹¹

By the outbreak of the Great War in Africa in 1914, the previous use of airpower on the continent proved instructive for the servicemen and politicians tasked with military operations.¹² The British, although not the first to deploy aircraft in Africa, by 1914 were exploring the prospect of a coordinated air force squadron across West Africa. Furthermore, Nigeria was already part of that conversation. As one official commented in 1914,

8 I owe a number of individuals gratitude in helping me complete research on this project. I am grateful to Colonel Bunza at the National Defence College (formerly War College) for affording me access to the trove research material in the College library. I am grateful to Air Commodore Pawa to his insight into NAF platforms within the institutions formative years. I am grateful to the NAF Wing Commander in the Presidential Fleet, who shall otherwise remain anonymous, for his corrections/corroboration within this work. I am grateful to the anonymous peer reviewer for advice around Canadian and Indian roles within this narrative. Finally, I am grateful to my Director at the CSTPV, Tim Wilson for launching a Twitter crusade that saw a number of prominent German historians come to my rescue as I had initially struggle to ascertain whether this Herbert Becker, discussed here, was the person I thought he was. I am grateful to all the German historians that responded and, in particular, to Michael Miller, who provided page scans of the out-of-print work by Bradley, Würzenthal and Model's work, *Die General und Admirale der Bundeswehr 1955–1997*. It was there that the puzzle of Herbert Becker was finally resolved. I am also grateful to Tim for the German translations within this article.

9 Omissi, 1990, 5.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Killingray, 1984, 429.

I suppose in a few years aeroplanes or airships will be used in West Africa. They would be invaluable against hill pagans, and the terror caused by them would probably do away with any necessity for bloodshed. If one were stationed in each province, of Northern Nigeria, say, and a proper signalling system instituted, help would always be at hand for the residents in the outstations. Even now, the initial cost would not be more than the WAAF vote, and the saving thereafter would almost equal the grant-in-aid, for the forces would be reduced to small flying detachments.¹³

Such a squadron would not materialise for quite some time. Indeed, before 1914, no European powers had aircraft stationed in North Africa,¹⁴ and even deep into the Great War campaign in German *Kamerun* by 1916, aircraft were perfunctory to the calculus of British commanders' operations in West Africa.¹⁵ Instead, most West Africa campaign operations were prosecuted on *terra firma*, solid earth. Land units, not aircraft, likewise conducted bombings and reconnaissance.¹⁶

During the Second World War, the focus of airpower would once again be on state-on-state warfare between European powers in Africa.¹⁷ By the end of the conflict, various territories across the continent had aircraft stationed for the colonial authorities' use.¹⁸ This was also the case for Apartheid South Africa, which, by 1920, had established an Aviation Corps—long before any Independent African regimes.¹⁹

Following the Second World War and into the late-1950s, when the independence wave swept across Africa, aircraft staging facilities were built across the continent.²⁰ These facilities were primarily employed for military aircraft and were instrumental in colonial regimes' "military coercion" and counter-insurgencies, such as that by the British against the Mau Mau in Kenya in the 1950s, where "airpower was also widely used."²¹

As more African states became independent in the 1950s, civil aviation and airpower growth for military applications meant more countries sought to develop air forces soon after. Ghana, Independent from March 1957, was the

13 Tremearne, 1910, 126.

14 Killingray, 1984, 430.

15 Jones, 1931.

16 Gorges, 2004.

17 Hall, 2007.

18 Ibid.

19 Becker, 1991, 25–29.

20 Pirie, 2009.

21 Law and Jackson, 2016, 106.

first sub-Saharan African country to develop an air force in July 1959.²² Politicians in neighbouring Nigeria, a much larger and as yet still-colonised territory, would point to the Ghanaian example and look to emulate it.²³ Indeed, shortly after Nigeria became independent in 1960, establishing an air force emerged as a central item within its defence agenda.

2 The Politics of Defence Spending in Nigeria's First Republic

The decade between 1960, when Nigeria gained independence, and 1970, when the Civil War of Nigeria ended, is a critical historical period. The departure of the British and the start of Nigeria's First Republic saw the emergence of the three main political parties, namely the Yoruba-led Action Group (AG) in the Western Region, the Igbo-led National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) and the Northern People's Congress (NPC). The AG formed the core of the political opposition, headed by Obafemi Awolowo.²⁴

The NPC was led by Sir Ahmadu Bello, the *Sardauna* of Sokoto and Premier of the Northern Region. Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, deputy leader of NPC, served as the Prime-Minister and Head of government. Nnamdi Azikiwe led the NCNC as Governor-General between 1960 and 1963, when he became President. Together, the NPC and NCNC formed the government.²⁵ The period between 1960, when Nigeria became independent, and 15 January 1966, when a military coup *d'état* overthrew the government, constituted the First Republic of Nigeria.²⁶

As the First Republic matured, it became a period of political turmoil, defined by acrimonious relations between the government and the opposition and a concerned citizenry.²⁷ Independence, hailed as having much potential for national unity and political stability, largely failed to deliver on this promise.²⁸

Regarding the air force as part of a military expansion debate post-Independence, the government were keen on such a move—with a number of hawkish politicians within the ruling party keen on expanding defence expendi-

22 Addae, 2005.

23 Wyss, 2018.

24 Diamond, 1988.

25 Ibid.

26 Siollun, 2009.

27 Muffett, 1982; Diamond, 1988; Jackson, 1972; Ojo, 2016; Akinbode, 2019; Schwarz, 1968, 198–200; Anifowose, 1982.

28 Ibid.

ture.²⁹ On the other hand, the opposition was against developing airpower³⁰ at the expense of other budgetary commitments.³¹ Aircraft are expensive assets: to acquire, maintain and deploy, in any capacity. Consequentially, Awolowo and the rest of the opposition were not in favour of spending precious government resources on buying military aircraft for which, he argued, there was no apparent use. Instead, the opposition was of the view that the improvement of the lives of ordinary Nigerians, not budgetary expenditure on hawkish military policies, should be prioritised.³²

This issue of fiscal priorities, coming at a time when the government was said to be spending too much money and thus urged to consider “rigorous pruning of expenses”³³ is critical to understanding the opposition’s stance around the development of an air force.

Instead of allocating money towards what he felt was unnecessary defence expenditure, Awolowo reminded the government that its duty was “to save money on approved capital estimates.”³⁴ Indeed, this philosophy of fiscal responsibility around defence matters was one that Awolowo would carry with him into his office as Minister of Finance under the General Yakubu Gowon administration.³⁵

Even within the NCNC, there was opposition to the government’s use of funds for defence matters at the expense of other areas. Along these lines, Azikiwe was queried on the issue by his own party members and fellow Igbos, who also feared that northerners already dominated the military institution³⁶ and that further defence spending would only entrench the issue.³⁷ For instance, Dr G.C. Mbanugo, Chairman of the NCNC Working Committee in Eastern Nigeria, criticised the government’s “spending [of] over £50 million on the Northern Nigeria Army in the name of the Federal Republic.”³⁸ The Southerners’ concerns were not without merit, insofar as “almost all of the scheduled defence spending had been disproportionately allocated in favour of the Northern Region, which the ruling NPC represented.”³⁹

29 Wyss, 2018.

30 Headlines (Lagos), 1988, 2–3.

31 Diamond, 1988.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 185, 253.

34 Abegunrin, 2015, 83.

35 Abegunrin, 2015.

36 Siollun, 2009.

37 Diamond, 1988, 142–143.

38 Ibid., 143.

39 Dudley, 1966, 21–22.

However, the AG, and indeed Awolowo's supporters within the party, had been increasingly frozen out of the statutory boards that allocated government spending in defence and other areas.⁴⁰ In this sense, the opposition could verbally oppose the government's fiscal policy, but, short of voting against those policies in a parliament stacked with pro-government politicians, could do little else to impede them.⁴¹ Furthermore, on the issue of defence expenditure, Balewa's government was "backed by the NPC, which controlled the Northern Government and most of the key Federal ministries (including Defence)."⁴²

3 The Need for an Air Force in Independent Nigeria

Whereas Nigeria's government wanted an air force from a financial standpoint and its opposition did not, the reasons cited by either side were not solely informed by military concerns. After all, as Claude Welch observes, none of the foremost political figures in the Sardauna, Azikiwe or Awolowo "had ever served in the armed forces, and they apparently had few close acquaintances with any military experience."⁴³ Nevertheless, some military considerations of note featured in the debate on the need for an air force in Nigeria.⁴⁴

For example, the air force question gained momentum during the Nigerian Army's deployment to the United Nations Operation in the Congo (ONUC; French: *Opération des Nations Unies au Congo*) in November 1960.⁴⁵ Nigeria's contingent would eventually lead that UN mission to end the Congo Crisis, and an independent air force was viewed as necessary for the Army's independent military function *in situ*.⁴⁶ This was insofar as RAF pilots could not obey Nigerian Army orders for the duration of that mission (1960–1964).⁴⁷ Nor was this need established only within Nigeria's military role in the Congo Crisis. In Tanganyika, when in 1960 the first Nigerian peacekeeping troops deployed to Dar-Es-Salaam to replace British Army Commandos, RAF aircraft were deployed to assist the Nigerian contingent.⁴⁸ During these missions, in the Congo and Tan-

40 Abegunrin, 2015, 92.

41 Dudley, 1966.

42 Diamond, 1988, 221, 228.

43 Welch, 1972, 206.

44 Pawa, 2012.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Maloney, 2001; Lefever and Joshua, 1966.

48 British Pathé, n.d; Pawa, 2012.

ganyika, Nigeria first saw the need for a local air force assisting the Army.⁴⁹ Such an air force would also support the government's transport requirements, as the RAF, even after Nigeria's independence, continued to assist Nigerian lawmakers with air duties, with Nigeria providing overflying and air staging facilities for the RAF in return. Moreover, these terms were enshrined within the Anglo-Nigeria Defence Pact.⁵⁰

The Pact, its terms, and its debate within Nigeria's political environment are relevant to this narrative. All three arguably influenced Nigeria's defence policy shift and its preferred partnership for air force assistance in the early-1960s.

4 Nigeria's First Republic Defence Shift from Britain

With Britain soon to leave Nigeria by the late-1950s, she hoped to ensure political stability in her former colony, and stronger relations in the security and defence space emerged as a crucial part of talks between both sides in the late-1950s.⁵¹ In this sense, Britain sought to play an enduring role in Nigeria's security and defence planning.⁵²

One of the earliest instruments by which a defence and security relationship was to be developed after independence was the Anglo-Nigerian Defence Pact. This idea was floated by the British government, which was keen to keep Nigeria in its orbit of influence. The Pact's origins can be traced to September and October 1958, when the Nigeria Constitutional Conference was held. The Conference Report stated, in Paragraph 83 that,

Throughout the talks, the conference was conscious of all the dangers confronting the free world today, and it recognised that an independent Nigeria would be subject to new and heavy pressures. In this connection [...] the Federal prime Minister and the premiers were at one with Her Majesty's Government in believing that there would be a mutual advantage to Britain and Nigeria in cooperation in the field of defence and that they had exchanged views and reached unanimous agreement on the facilities and help which each country will render the other after independence.⁵³

49 NAF, 2012.

50 Peters, 1997.

51 Osoba, 1987.

52 Ibid.

53 Federal Government, n.d.

In practice, the reception of the defence pact indicated how delicate Britain's relationship was with its soon-to-be-former colony and how much politicians in Nigeria, particularly from the opposition, wished for Nigeria to explore other partnerships besides that with its coloniser. As part of the Pact, the British had sought to establish a military base with some Royal Air Force (RAF) assets *in situ*. However, this idea was soon abandoned, "perhaps because it was felt that it would be too difficult to sell the idea to the public."⁵⁴

Regarding the airpower relevant areas of the Pact, there were five articles, but Articles 3 and 4 are worth noting. Article 3 was to permit the military aircraft of Britain and Nigeria (as and when it had the requisite military air platforms) and non-military aircraft that were requisitioned for military purposes "complete and unrestricted" airspace access.⁵⁵

Article 4, meanwhile, was to allow existing airfields in Lagos and Kano, used as RAF overflying and air staging facilities, to be repurposed or used by the British government, for military exercises and operations, on request. On Britain's part, it was to avail Nigeria of the results of military exercises conducted with the assistance of Nigerian airfields.⁵⁶

Overall, the Anglo-Nigerian Defense Pact seemed to favour Britain more than it did Nigeria, even though it did provide some substantive military assistance benefits, such as its stipulation of British assistance towards Nigeria, in establishing an air force.⁵⁷ Consequentially, that signed Pact would become an issue of resentment from Nigeria's side as not only did it seem to favour the British more but also, as opposition politician Chief Obafemi Awolowo pointed out, so far as the airpower aspects of the Pact went,

Between Nigeria and Britain, it does not make sense to speak of mutual defence or of provision of overflying and air staging facilities in each other's territory. For one reason, we are not in danger of attack by our immediate neighbours, nor do we have aggressive designs on them. For another, we have no aircraft for which we need overflying and air staging facilities (unrestricted or otherwise) in British territory.⁵⁸

Nigeria's unease with elements of the Defence Pact also seemed to have been acknowledged by Britain, judging by a UK House of Commons debate where it

54 Peters, 1997, 71.

55 Ibid.

56 Federal Government of Nigeria, n.d.

57 Wyss, 2018, 105.

58 Headlines (Lagos), 1988, 2–3.

was said that Britain's decision not to ask to construct additional facilities on Nigerian land "was very much welcome by the Nigerian ministers."⁵⁹

Nevertheless, Britain did not abandon its strong defence and security ties with Nigeria. Indeed, regarding the as-yet non-existent air force, as Nigeria began planning the transition towards independent rule, Whitehall was keen to help Lagos set up such a force. This is insofar as the two Nigerian service branches in existence by independence; namely, the Army and the Navy were British constructs. Moreover, by independence, both service branches relied on equipment and staff provided by Britain.⁶⁰

Indeed, the intimacy between Nigeria and Britain in naval and land warfare assistance suggested that whereas Nigeria had reservations about the Pact, including the air force assistance stipulation, Lagos still preferred close defence ties with Whitehall. Consequentially, the "UK government dismissed as harmless the references of Nigerian leaders to non-alignment and neutralism."⁶¹

Such downplaying of a significant shift in Nigerian foreign policy came even though, by the late-1950s, the Soviets floated neutralism as an alternative for newly Independent African states. Moscow's view was that such states, notwithstanding existing close ties with former Western colonisers, may have wanted to explore other options.⁶² Moreover, such tentativeness towards *de facto* Western alignment and a political curiosity about Eastern-bloc political relations applied to Nigeria.⁶³

Initially, Britain viewed a political neutrality doctrine as unlikely within Nigeria's strategic culture of the era. After all, Nigerian leaders were pro-Western, expressed interest in "a policy of close friendship towards Great Britain,"⁶⁴ and had, at best, embryonic foreign relations with the Soviet Union compared to Britain. Nevertheless, Soviet interests in independent Africa meant that by 1959, Whitehall seemed partially resigned to the eventuality that should Nigeria make external contacts outside of British political arrangements, such contact might change Nigeria's politico-military calculus and "encourage a movement towards political neutralism."⁶⁵

59 UK Government, 1961, 1497.

60 Wyss, 2018, 105.

61 Ibid.

62 Hoffmann and Fleron (Eds.), 1980.

63 Peters, 1997.

64 Colonial Office, 1958a.

65 Colonial Office, 1959a, 586–587.

5 Nigeria's Mixed Signals

In April 1959, the Honourable George Ward, Secretary of State for Air under Harold Macmillan from 1957 to 1960, visited Kano to inspect RAF air staging facilities. During the visit, Samuel Akintola, a key government politician and the Minister of Communications and Aviation, again stated the government's interest in British airpower assistance, specifically in helping to set up an air force in Nigeria. In that instance, Ward was receptive to the idea and "and promised information on British assistance to the Indian and Pakistani air forces."⁶⁶

Afterwards, George would contact the Colonial Secretary, Alan Lennox-Boyd, telling him that it was in Britain's interest to get Nigeria to engage the UK. The Air Secretary pointed out to the Colonial Secretary that a defence and security arrangement would safeguard British staging and overflying manoeuvres in Nigeria.⁶⁷ The Colonial Secretary agreed. To Lennox-Boyd, were Nigeria to look elsewhere, that would constitute an unprecedented departure from a relationship between both countries touted as strategically important.⁶⁸ Ward would, subsequently, make good on his promise to Akintola, offering to make RAF officers available to give more detailed advice. Despite this, Nigeria still seemed undecided about if Britain should help set up its air force, just that politicians wanted one.

After Akintola, the Nigerian Aviation Minister, was summoned back to Lagos, the Air Minister, George Ward, had wished to resume overtures to Nigerian officials.⁶⁹ However, the Colonial Office advised the Air Ministry not to press the issue.⁷⁰ Consequently, "the only tangible result of this episode was the provision of two RAF surplus aircraft to establish a Nigerian Government Flying Training School."⁷¹

Even so, the Air Ministry remained undeterred and was unwilling to sit out an opportunity at gaining long-term influence over the air force as Nigeria's third service branch. Thus, in later January 1960, the Vice-Chief of the Air Staff (VCAS), Air Marshal Sir Edmund Hudleston, asked the Secretary of State for Air, George Ward, to nudge Muhammadu Ribadu, Nigeria's Defence Minister, around the question of British air force assistance.⁷² At this time, senior British

66 Colonial office, 1959b.

67 Ibid.

68 Colonial Office, 1959c.

69 Colonial Office, 1959d.

70 Colonial office, 1959e; Colonial Office, 1959f.

71 Colonial Office, 1959g; Air Ministry, 1959a.

72 Nigeria Defence Forces, 1960.

officials at Air Ministry also began to caution that Nigeria's indecision might be a sign that it may not go with the RAF. Sir Edmund Hudleston, in a communiqué to Ward, noted the "grave embarrassment to us [Britain] if Nigeria were to turn to some other country for 'air advice' *c.f.* Ghana."⁷³

In reality, Lagos never floated Accra as a source of airpower support. Nigeria's pride as a major political and military actor in the West Africa region precluded asking its smaller neighbour for help. If anything, Nigeria's increased interest in an air force service branch was, in part, motivated by jealousy and fear. These were reactions to a Ghanaian air force operational since 1959 and that even had its own indigenous Chief of the Air Staff, in J.E.S. de Graft-Hayford, by September 1961.

Ghana's laudable strides in its air force establishment were achieved using a mix of Israeli instructors, RAF trainers and staff, Indian technicians and command personnel, Royal Canadian Air Force personnel and RAF training and Soviet air assets. In this way, Ghana went for a pragmatic approach to establishing its air force, refusing to commit to one Cold War bloc or the other.⁷⁴ For Nigeria, such a position of political neutrality was desirable—but Britain's defence and security appeal was strong.

Immediately after Independence in October 1960, Nigeria continued to push for its own air force. Whereas politicians did not know what kind of air force should be established, how it should be established and by whom, Lagos's interest in an air force became more pronounced and official. Perhaps the most official declaration of intent came on 19 November 1960 when Muhammadu Ribadu, Nigeria's Defence Minister, cited Article 2 of the Anglo-Nigerian Defense Agreement and the specific paragraph that mentioned British assistance for establishing an air force in Nigeria.⁷⁵

This defence and presentation came to the House of Representatives. The Defence Minister pointed out that it was RAF planes that put up a "fine display of flying during the Independence Celebrations" the previous month. Ribadu noted that it was improper that Nigerian military planes and personnel did not do this—urging the need to establish an air force as soon as possible but also floating Britain as the most logical partner, pointing out that "the Royal Air Force of the United Kingdom will provide excellent advanced air training for our airmen."⁷⁶

73 Ibid.

74 Colonial Office, 1960.

75 Federal Government, 1960a.

76 Wyss, 2018, 10.

The British remained keen for this to be the case, and in January 1961, a request was put in for the UK military adviser in Lagos to continue discussions on air force assistance. This came after the UK high commissioner in Lagos, Anthony Head, had expected but never seen Nigeria's substantive approach on the matter. For that reason, the UK Defence Attache in Lagos was asked to be discrete in his overtures "to avoid the impression that we [the British] are trying to foist onto the Nigerians something they may not want."⁷⁷

There seemed to be some progress made in this regard by March 1961. Visiting London that month, Nigerian Defence Minister Ribadu enquired about the possibility of an air force adviser from within the Commonwealth and possibly Britain for Nigeria. Taking the enquiry, the Commonwealth Secretary Duncan Sandys passed it on to the Air Ministry, which was "not only was willing to provide an adviser but even recommended sending an RAF team to Nigeria to advise the Nigerian government on the form of the Nigerian air force."⁷⁸

Air Secretary Julian Amery was in Lagos with the air force establishment on his agenda by mid-May. The Air Ministry saw a "tendency for newly independent countries to look for assistance elsewhere" and sought to prevent this in Nigeria by emphasising the pragmatism of going with the British.⁷⁹ However, pragmatism was not the only consideration here. Marco Wyss points out that "Nigerian attitude toward Britain, the world, and, as a corollary, neutralism was changing."⁸⁰ Moreover, within the military debate in Nigeria, the air force would be one of the first beneficiaries of this change.

Nigeria was now an independent nation. Yes, its politicians remained pro-British and Western-oriented. Nevertheless, at the same time, for the first time in a century, Nigeria relished its freedom from British-imposed "administration" of its affairs and from having to accept Whitehall's decision-making as law. A pragmatic British solution to Nigeria's air force question was still a British solution. Lagos was keenly aware of and sought to avoid such a scenario.

6 Nigeria Explores Defence Assistance from Canada

Part of why Whitehall was confident that Lagos "would eventually turn back" to Britain for air force assistance, going as far as to say this to the US,⁸¹ is that at

77 Commonwealth Relations Office, 1960.

78 Wyss, 2018, 110.

79 Ibid., 110–111.

80 Ibid., 111.

81 US Department of State, 1962.

least two of the other countries contacted by Nigeria—Canada and Sweden—seemed unlikely to provide Nigeria with the assistance it required. Sweden had only expressed a desire to provide Nigeria with nominal air transport assistance, not substantive air force military assistance. Furthermore, discussions with Canadian aircraft manufacturer de Havilland, a British subsidiary, stalled.

However, the Canadian government itself was also part of the conversation to assist Nigeria in establishing an air force. Christopher R. Kilford suggests that, in the late 1950s, Canadian ministers noted how “in Ghana and Nigeria, Canada was helping to establish armed forces” and also alludes to Canadian “plans for establishing missions in [...] Nigeria and Nyasaland.”⁸² There is much substance to such a claim in Nigeria, quite aside from the fact that Canada did provide “fairly substantial” aid to Nigeria by the late-1950s.⁸³

More specifically, Canada’s decision to provide Ghana with military assistance piqued the interest of Nigerian politicians and indicated that Ottawa might be open to an air force request from Lagos. Along these lines, Muhammadu Ribadu, the Nigerian Defence Minister, was scheduled to visit Ottawa in late September 1961 “to discuss military assistance for his country.”⁸⁴ It was expected that Ribadu “would seek help in training the army, navy and for drawing up plans to create a new Nigerian air force.”⁸⁵

However, Ribadu was not properly debriefed by Nigerian Army commanders before his Ottawa trip and so could not discuss the specific matter of the air force assistance question. Despite this, the High Commission in Lagos made a last-minute intervention, along with the floating the possibility that training spots in Canada be allocated to the Nigerian military. However, the extent of assistance being requested—up to eight Beaver and four Caribou transport aircraft—meant that such an assistive task would have drained Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) resources.⁸⁶

Consequentially, Canada’s Minister of National Defence, Douglas Harkness, was not optimistic that Canada could fulfil Nigeria’s request.⁸⁷ Harkness did not want the Department of National Defence to be weighed down by a significant military aid program. As a result, Canada only agreed to make a few spaces available for Nigerian military cadets wishing to attend existing Cana-

82 Kilford, 2010, 91, 100.

83 *Ibid.*, 101.

84 *Ibid.*, 104.

85 *Ibid.*

86 Donaghy, 1995, 79.

87 Kilford, 2010, 91, 105.

dian Army, air force and navy institutions in Canada: a compromise by the Department of National Defence described as “disappointingly small.”⁸⁸ As for the air force assistance request, the Department ignored this altogether, without as much as mentioning the matter within the relevant communiqué.⁸⁹

There were political downsides to Canada’s decision. Not going through with this opportunity, i.e. declining to assist Nigeria with its air force question *in toto*, would lend itself poor optics in three ways. First, in declining to assist Nigeria with air force assistance, Canada’s Department of National Defence would be compromising a potential market for Canadian military aircraft. Second, Canada would be going against the recommendations of its own Cabinet Defence Committee from June 1961, that Canada “accept as part of its defence commitments the training, if and when requested, of military personnel of Commonwealth countries.”⁹⁰ Third, by sticking to such a small defence assistance remit, which precluded the fulfilment of larger defence assistance requests such as Nigeria’s, the Department of National Defence was undermining the rationale behind Canadian military assistance policy to the developing world. That policy held that Canada make a “contribution to the establishment of efficient and stable military forces in friendly countries where armed forces are often the largest single group of disciplined and trained personnel, and usually a good influence for law and order.”⁹¹

Furthermore, Canada had already sent a training team to Ghana as part of a military assistance package and felt obliged to do the same with Nigeria. After all, Nigeria’s Prime Minister, Tafawa Balewa, towed a more pro-Western line than Ghana’s Nkrumah.⁹² Along these lines, as one communiqué to Howard Green, Canada’s Secretary of State for External Affairs, observed,

Canada has sent a full training team to Ghana a neighbouring but smaller Commonwealth country, whose government follows a neutralist and occasionally anti-Western foreign policy. We believe that from a purely political point of view, it would be inadvisable to come up with a significantly smaller proposal to the Nigerians who follow a generally friendlier line.⁹³

88 Donaghy, *op. cit.*

89 Donaghy, 1995, 79, *supranote* 31.

90 *Ibid.*, *supranote* 29.

91 *Ibid.*, *supranote* 26.

92 Anglin, 1958.

93 Donaghy, 1995, 79, *supranote* 32.

In the end, the Cabinet Defence Committee determined that prior military assistance to Ghana made it incumbent that Nigeria's own requests were not denied. At the least, it was decided that military assistance to Nigeria was around on par with that for Ghana. Consequentially, Canada's military was to support Nigeria's request, with specific assistance for each service branch.⁹⁴ Thirty-two Nigerian cadets were to be trained in Canada, which "would absorb over half the estimated cost of \$275,000."⁹⁵

However, regarding its specific air force establishment request, Nigeria wanted a more robust commitment from Canada, including a complete training and assistance package with pilot and air technical assistance support. As the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) lacked the capacity to deliver such a package, it opted for a programme to assist the Nigerians in selecting suitable candidates for pilot training. As part of this assistive programme, the RCAF deployed a pre-pre-training selection team to Nigeria, which arrived in January 1963. Working with a list of 120 candidates whom Nigeria approved, the RCAF in-country team selected 16 for a two-year pilot training course in Canada.⁹⁶

Despite Canada's Cabinet assistance, Nigeria needed more than trained pilots. Aircraft, technical assistance, a maintenance package, and a longer-term in-country training package for a broad range of airman roles were also required. The RCAF could not provide any of this. Nigeria, therefore, still lacked the backbone of an air force and had to keep seeking a substantive partnership in this area.

Furthermore, Canada's refusal to exert a more significant effort in Nigeria also had a political side effect. From that point, the Department of External Affairs became reluctant to meet several new Ghanaian military assistance requests "for fear of upsetting the balance of Canadian efforts in West Africa."⁹⁷

7 India Emerges as a Front Contender

Whereas the Canadian air force support option eventually stalled, from late 1962, military assistance specific to establishing an air force, as proposed by India, also initially seemed quite promising—perhaps even more so than the

94 Kilford, 2010, 91, 105.

95 Donaghy, 1995, 79.

96 Kilford, 2010, supranote 276.

97 Donaghy, 1995, 80.

Canada case. Indeed, following talks with Delhi in 1962, by November that year, Muhammadu Ribadu had decided that India was Nigeria's best choice for the air force establishment.

Unlike the other competitors, Delhi was keen on meeting the exact specifications for air force assistance required by Lagos. India brought in a blend of expertise and affordability and seemed more receptive to Nigeria's ideas—such as where training for pilots should be held (Ribadu preferred for this to be in Nigeria) and what the timeline for the air force establishment should resemble.⁹⁸ India also had a unique advantage in that, like Nigeria, it could boast a British-derived military culture. Alongside the fact that Indian military personnel were English-speaking, this played a role here (and would also influence India's establishment of Nigeria's Defence Academy in 1964).⁹⁹ Nevertheless, Ribadu chose not to isolate the British from his plans, asking that the RAF assist with “advanced flying on more complicated planes and ground staff training”.¹⁰⁰ Such a scenario would effectively give India a major role and Britain a minor one in the air force establishment schema.¹⁰¹

British officials, however, had little interest in playing a perfunctory role to that of the Indian airmen, technicians and trainers *in situ*. Along these lines, Head advised against sending a Royal Air Force team to Lagos in what would have been a largely assistive capacity to India. Instead, Head reiterated what Harold Watkinson, the UK Minister of Defence, had said to Ribadu months early in September 1961.¹⁰²

Air Marshal Sir Paul Davie Holder, Assistant Chief of the Air Staff (Training) at the Air Ministry, aired similar comments to Head—he did not want his airmen *in situ* “to be placed in a subordinate capacity to an Indian team, as we would then either have to endorse their ideas or cause trouble by rocking their boat.”¹⁰³ Moreover, in Holder's view, such a scenario could see Lagos attempt to play Delhi against London to end up with a cheaper assistance package for the air force project.¹⁰⁴

Furthermore, London calculated that the Nigerians, developing an air force from scratch, would be more preoccupied with other matters relevant to set up and basic training. Therefore, advanced training for Nigerian pilots was unlikely

98 Wyss, 2018.

99 Pawa, 2012.

100 Air Ministry, 1962a.

101 Wyss, 2018, 122.

102 Ministry of Defence, 1961.

103 Air Ministry, 1962b.

104 Ibid.

to be required in the short term. Moreover, the Indians were more than capable of scaling up the level of training required if and when Nigerian pilots required it.¹⁰⁵

Holder also was wary of the potential of Anglo-Indian tensions *in situ*. RAF officers trying to do similar jobs but under different parameters to the Indians in Nigeria might have rubbed them wrong. In such an instance, Holder observed, the Indians might then become “more reluctant to seek our help, later on, should they subsequently get out of their depth.”¹⁰⁶

There was also the monetary consideration of deploying RAF training teams to assist the Nigerians in Nigeria. The recommendation by the UK Minister of Defence Watkinson, tightly aligned with Head’s view, was that Britain would only wish to assist with Nigerian pilots’ training if that training was conducted in the UK.¹⁰⁷ This stipulation is not entirely unusual and seemed essentially pragmatic from Britain’s perspective. After all, financial prudence and defence agreement lucrativeness were just as relevant to foreign sponsors’ political and economic calculus as they were to Nigeria.

None of Nigeria’s potential defence partners was expected to help its government develop an air force for free, and both sides would have looked to the most cost-effective arrangements for their respective governments. Along these lines, the British desire to train Nigerian pilots in the UK might be seen in the light of opposing interests: whereas overseas training in Britain would have been more expensive for Nigeria, it would have been cheaper and hence more profitable for the UK. Instead, Nigeria opted for in-country training, which the Indians had agreed to provide.¹⁰⁸

Consequentially, the picture being painted by the Air Ministry in November 1962 was that Britain had lost out in the five-way race to support Nigeria. In reality, it was more of a three-way race, as it turns out. Canada declined; Sweden offered only commercial aircraft sales, leaving just Britain, India and West Germany. That it lost out on its proposed air force assistance mission to Nigeria and that it did so to India, “a fellow member of the Commonwealth, albeit one that was a member of the Non-Aligned Movement,”¹⁰⁹ must have been a tough pill for the Air Ministry and Britain, to swallow.

Indeed, the UK high commissioner in Lagos, Anthony Head, in what seemed to be an admission of defeat, wrote that he was “sorry and disappointed that

105 Wyss, 2018, 122.

106 Air Ministry, 1962b.

107 Air Ministry, 1962a.

108 Wyss, 2018.

109 *Ibid.*, 122.

our negotiations and ability to influence the Nigerians in the field of Defence have been so unsuccessful.”¹¹⁰ However, India’s role in Nigeria’s air force development also suffered setbacks.

Specifically, after the Sino-Indian War of October–November 1962, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who faced disappointment with domestic calls blaming him for neglecting Indian military defences, sought to build up the Indian Air Force capabilities. One lesson learned by India from the Sino-Indian War was its deficiencies in both land warfare and airpower planning and capabilities. Moreover, with the Indian Air Force not employed in a Close Air Support (CAS) capacity, when it could have been, there were questions around India’s seemingly self-imposed “restrictions on the use of airpower” and how well India’s air force was integrated within a joint or even combined arms approach with its Army.¹¹¹

For such reasons, with Nigeria requiring assistance so soon after India’s subpar showing in a war where its air force could have played a role but did not, the “Indian government no longer seemed interested in or capable of assisting the buildup of a Nigerian air force.”¹¹² At this point, Nigeria threw a curveball: instead of London, Lagos turned to Bonn. Nigeria’s government had opted at the last minute for West German, not British air force assistance.

8 The German-German Diplomatic “War” in Africa

Nigeria’s military assistance pivot towards West Germany, a Western-aligned state, surprised Whitehall. Nigeria, after all, had already explored other members of the bloc with virtually no success. Canada had pulled out from the running. So had Sweden. The US viewed Nigerian defence and security as a British matter and had no stated or demonstrable interest in competing with Britain by providing military assistance for Nigeria’s air force plans.

However, the British failed to account for the “West Germans, who had no such scruples”.¹¹³ As some background, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), West Germany, competed with the German Democratic Republic (GDR), East Germany, in Africa and took particular interest in Nigeria. The FRG certainly had the expertise and a rich military tradition qualifying it for a defence partnership with Nigeria.

110 Commonwealth Relations Office, 1962a.

111 Sukumaran, 2003.

112 Wyss, 2018, 123.

113 *Ibid.*, 119.

Furthermore, Germany was not a new political player in Africa. The country possesses an Imperial history in West Africa (German *Kamerun*, as it was called) going back to the 1880s, pursuant to the Conference of Berlin.¹¹⁴ However, the Germany making inroads into Africa in the early 1960s was a very different Germany from Imperial Germany, the *Weimar* Republic, or Nazi Germany.

Much had changed since Germany's last adventures in West Africa—this time, it was not one but two Germanys jostling for political leverage in the wake of decolonisation from the late 1950s and the arrival of the Cold War to the African continent. The Western-leaning FRG (West Germany) and the Eastern-leaning GDR (East Germany),

Having been built up by their superpower patrons and fully integrated into their respective alliances [...] disputed which had the international legitimacy to represent Germany. In what became a German-German Cold War, Bonn and East Berlin fought for diplomatic recognition by other countries.¹¹⁵

By the mid-1950s, supported by the West and demonstrating remarkable economic recovery, the FRG had pulled ahead of East Germany. Only a few fellow communist states recognised East Berlin's authority. The GDR, nevertheless, saw an opportunity for political and diplomatic recognition on an African continent with over a dozen sovereign states. This political opportunism underpinned its "contest" on the African continent with West Germany.¹¹⁶ Such a political and ideological contest was relevant insofar as newly independent countries, on paper, were still emerging as nation-states and so were prone to influence and as yet not too keen to continue a neo-colonialist tradition with former Western European states that had only just granted them, or were forced to grant them, independence.

Here, East Berlin saw a chance to kill two birds with one stone while doing as little as possible to antagonise the Western powers: it could lobby for diplomatic recognition from the emerging countries while also throwing its hat into what was quickly becoming a proving ground for East-versus-West ideologies within the Cold War struggle for the Third World. Consequently,

114 Haupt, 1984.

115 Wyss, 2018, 120.

116 FRG, 1962, 360.

As the first countries gained independence in sub-Saharan Africa, the East Germans rushed to the new African capitals to establish friendly and, preferably, diplomatic relations. However, to forestall such an outcome, and in line with the Hallstein Doctrine, which implied that the FRG would not maintain or establish diplomatic relations with any state that recognised the GDR, Bonn dispatched its own diplomats to Africa.¹¹⁷

Nigeria is often seen as a strategic partner on the African continent due to its large population and rich resources. This was the case even during the Cold War. Winning over Lagos would have been a significant coup for Bonn or East Berlin, especially in a political regime where the country's politicians began striking a neutralist tone and actively sought out new political partnerships. What better way for Bonn to court Nigeria than by assisting her with establishing an air force—an area where the West Germans were arguably amongst the most competent in the world?

However, the air force question would only be posed much later to Bonn. Before then, in the two years following Nigeria's Independence (c. 1960–1962), West Germany had begun deepening friendly, political and economic ties with Nigeria. Indeed, by late 1962, only the US and Britain were more substantive aid donors than West Germany to Nigeria.¹¹⁸ The FRG also invested a lot in foreign trade, with West Germany being Nigeria's second-largest trading partner, after Britain, at the time.¹¹⁹ This is not to say that Lagos, in 1962, was Western-aligned *per se*. On the contrary, since Nigeria gained independence, it had attempted to build an economic relationship, if not altogether a strategic one, with the Eastern bloc, such as via signing some trade agreements.

Despite this, Lagos seemed unable or unwilling to make substantive political inroads with the Eastern bloc.¹²⁰ This worked well for the Western-aligned states, such as West Germany, seeking to build relations with Nigeria.¹²¹ Indeed, within the existing economic and aid relations between West Germany and Nigeria, relations were warm enough for Lagos to approach Bonn regarding the air force matter.

117 Wyss, 2018, 120.

118 Idang, 1973, 140.

119 Ibid.

120 Idang, 1973.

121 Ibid.

9 West Germany Plays the Role of Spoiler

By 1962, the question of which state would provide military assistance for an air force in Nigeria had been dragged out for over two years. Consequently, with India now disinterested, with Sweden and Canada never really committed, and with Britain as the former coloniser that Nigeria was keen to get away from, West Germany stood out as an unlikely clear winner in this five-way “competition.”

In the early 1960s, not only did Nigeria hold West Germany in high regard due to its technological and military expertise, Bonn, on its part, knew that it had substantial political capital in Lagos and “was held in high esteem” by Nigerian politicians.¹²² Accordingly, West Germany moved to exploit this in the relations that followed. Moreover, the FRG was keen to take up the Nigerian request to help establish an air force, even though Bonn knew this was likely to ruffle some feathers in Whitehall. Thus, whereas the official line was that existing Anglo-Nigerian security and defence arrangements should not be undermined by a German Air Force (*Luftwaffe*) mission to Nigeria, Bonn nevertheless was committed to assisting Nigeria with its air force question.¹²³

Nigeria, meanwhile, needed little prompting in courting West German military assistance. The combination of German expertise, technological proficiency, and Western alignment meant that Nigeria could potentially get the best of both worlds here. After all, the Nigerian government’s statecraft was under fire by political opposition, who argued that the government’s foreign policy, which should have been more neutralist and Pan-Africanist, remained tied to Britain’s apron strings. Domestic opponents of the Anglo-Nigerian Pact, as an example, argued that Nigeria had traded colonialism for neo-colonialism in the post-Independence era. A non-British military agreement for Prime Minister Balewa’s government would go some distance in assuaging such domestic concerns around foreign policy direction.¹²⁴

On the other hand, whereas Britain was bound to be unimpressed by Nigeria’s decision to go with the *Luftwaffe* and not the RAF for its air force question, it could have been worse—suppose the Nigerians had crossed the Iron Curtain and sought Soviet assistance instead? For such reasons, Whitehall considered Bonn, as a partner for the Nigeria air force project, “much preferable to some

122 Wyss, 2018, 123.

123 Ibid.

124 Osaghae, 1998, 50–52; Osoba, 1987; Idang, 1970; 1973, 136–137; Ojedokun, 1968; Ojedokun, 1971.

other possible choices.”¹²⁵ Moreover, on West Germany’s part, so long as the agreement with Nigeria was properly managed, Britain was unlikely to feel antagonised.

So far as careful management went, Germany’s first ingress into the Nigerian defence and military space was not around the air force question but land warfare.¹²⁶ This background leads to the emerging politics of the FRG of the time, and the question of West German post-war rearmament in the early 1960s, which resulted in substantial arms surpluses and excess defence platforms.¹²⁷

This period coincided with a time when the emergence of African states in the late 1950s to 1960s resulted in the formation of armed forces and the need for armaments by incumbent governments.¹²⁸ Hoping to meet this weapons acquisitions demand during Africa’s era of decolonisation in the early 1960s, the *Bundesministerium der Verteidigung* (BMVg), the Federal Ministry of Defence in West Germany would play a central role. The BMVg established a programme to coordinate the exportation of surplus armaments, which would also engage client states in the area of military assistance.¹²⁹ Along these lines, in June 1961, the BMVg was authorised by the Federal Defense Council “to decide—in consultation with the Foreign Office—on individual states’ requests for military assistance.”¹³⁰ Driving this initiative on the Hardthöhe, which was the first official seat of the West German Ministry of Defence, was *Brigadegeneral* Herbert Becker.

10 The Role of Brigadier Becker

Becker had served in the Luftwaffe, rising through the ranks to become a *Brigadegeneral* by 1944.¹³¹ Becker would retain that commission and remain influential on the Hardthöhe, so far as West German Third World foreign policy was concerned.¹³² Becker stayed active in the decades following the war.¹³³

125 Commonwealth Relations Office, 1963a.

126 Wyss, 2018, 121.

127 Gray, 2016, 330–331.

128 Ibid.

129 Ibid.

130 Wyss, 2018, 121.

131 Bradley, Würzenthal and Model, 1998, 95–96.

132 Gray, 2016, 330–331.

133 There was nothing unusual about this. Many, if not most, Nazis who were not at the very highest echelons of power, lived their lives in relative obscurity. Several were less than

However, in his appointment as Head of the Defence Economy subdivision at the West German Ministry of Defence, responsible for recognising West German entrepreneurial opportunities in the Third World, Becker became somewhat overbearing in exerting West German influence in Nigeria.¹³⁴ Indeed, along these lines, Becker developed a hectic travel activity, with the Foreign Office often caught on the wrong footing due to his seemingly carefree agreements aimed at shoring up the FRG's position in the Third World.¹³⁵

As adjutant to Bundesminister Strauß,¹³⁶ Becker would cultivate a relationship that brought him an unusual amount of Third World influence from the Hardthöhe. With so many other European Powers jostling for power in Africa during the Cold War, the FRG had to play a cautious card in the region. However, "with people such as the overzealous Brigadier General Herbert Becker on the ground," it only seemed a matter of time before "the West Germans would [...] tread on the toes of the former colonial powers in Africa".¹³⁷

As a case in point, in October 1961, Muhammadu Ribadu, at the urging of Becker, had requested that FRG armaments manufacturer *Rheinmetall* assist the Nigerian Army with a rifles manufacturing contract. In addition, the possibility of *Rheinmetall* helping establish an ordnance factory in Nigeria was also floated.¹³⁸ Unsurprisingly, the *Rheinmetall* deals were pushed by Becker who had previously served at *Rheinmetall*.¹³⁹

However, there was a problem here: Britain had also offered Nigeria its assistance in establishing the same ordnance factory.¹⁴⁰ It is unlikely that Becker was unaware of this fact and that his contacts in Nigeria neglected to appraise him of British involvement in Nigerian ordnance procurement and manufacture. Consequentially, Nigeria's enquiries around a West German ordnance factory were likely to concern the British. This indeed proved to be the case.

Learning through diplomatic channels that Bonn somehow was in line to execute that contract, the UK High Commissioner in Lagos, Anthony Head had a furious outburst—noting that the Nigerians' business with *Rheinmetall* was

obscuring, working within the government of West Germany, and military officers also retained their commissions and served in the West German armed forces. See: Critchfield, 2003; The BBC, 2011; Mustermann, 2016; Woody, 2016; Lee, 2020; Dispropaganda, 2019.

134 Gray, 2016, 330–331.

135 Ibid.

136 Bradley, Würzenthal and Model, 1998, 95–96.

137 Wyss, 2018, 121–122.

138 Ibid.

139 Bradley, Würzenthal and Model, 1998, 95–96.

140 Ministry of Defence, 1961.

“a frightful waste of money as it will mean jettisoning the FN¹⁴¹ rifle [which Nigerian troops used] and turning over to a German weapon.”¹⁴²

Now, the ordnance factory contract was not on the scale of the air force establishment. Even so, Head felt there was yet time, as of January 1962, “to knock some sense”¹⁴³ into Ribadu, not just regarding a West German ordnance factory he saw as a waste of funds that would “disrupt training with British weaponry” but also with regards to Nigeria’s air force question.¹⁴⁴ However, much to the disappointment of the UK High Commissioner in Lagos, “his arguments were in vain,” and “the ordnance factory proved to be the beginning of a growing West German–Nigerian defence relationship.”¹⁴⁵

Part of the emergent West German influence in Nigeria’s military assistance space was also down to Muhammadu Ribadu’s inclination towards Bonn. Specifically, having tried for years by now to agree with a Western or Commonwealth partner on establishing a Nigerian Air Force, the Nigerian Defence Minister was keen to bring his plan to fruition. Ribadu also saw the value in cultivating a separate security and defence agreement with West Germany, aside from the existing and now precarious Anglo-Nigerian Pact.

In the Spring of 1962, the Nigerian Defence Minister expressed interest in an official visit to West Germany. Bundesminister Strauß was counselled by his adjutant, *Brigadegeneral* Becker, who impressed upon him Nigeria’s strategic relevance to the FRG. Consequently, the West German Defense Minister reached out to his Nigerian counterpart and invited him on a tour of West Germany.¹⁴⁶

Whereas military assistance was not an official item on Ribadu’s itinerary, Strauß unofficially wished to demonstrate to Lagos that West Germany had a vibrant armaments industry and that the *Bundeswehr* held strategic potential in Nigeria’s pitch for military professionalisation in the 1960s.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, Ribadu’s visit was to signal to Lagos that Bonn was both politically and economically viable as an ally, if not as a defence and security substitute to the British *per se*.¹⁴⁸ In this enterprise, Strauß appeared to have largely succeeded: Ribadu

141 FN: *Fabrique Nationale*. The British and other Commonwealth armies like Canada used the FN rifles but it was a Belgian design. The FN rifle was also commonly used within troops of British colonies, such as Nigeria.

142 Ibid.

143 Commonwealth Relations Office, 1962b.

144 Wyss, 2018, 122.

145 Ibid.

146 FRG, 1962, 360.

147 Ibid.

148 Wyss, 2018, 122.

finished his visit with an even more profound impression of both. Indeed, it would not be a stretch to infer that the Nigerian Defence Minister's visit to West Germany in the Spring of 1962, the receptiveness of Strauß, and the persuasion of Brigadier Becker all played a defining role in Nigeria's eventual choice of West German assistance for the establishment of an air force.

However, there was still the matter of Britain's reaction. How would London respond to West Germany signing a defence agreement with Nigeria when British politicians had tried to salvage the abrogated Anglo-Nigeria Defence Pact for the past few years? Bonn approached this question as best as it could: diplomatically.

The ideal scenario for West Germany was not only to ensure the British were informed of its arrangement with Nigeria but that Whitehall was carried along every step of the process—preferably even as a sort of partner. Along these lines, and right from the start in March 1963, the FRG informed the British of the likelihood that a West German assessment team—not a mission team—was to be sent to Lagos to ascertain what the Nigerians had, what they wanted, what they needed, and what was possible to deliver, given their budget. However, the news that Germany had effectively begun establishing an air force for the Nigerians went down poorly with British policymakers.

Indeed, so poor was the mood in Whitehall that the Commonwealth Relations Office was initially sceptical that Balewa, who was openly pro-British, sanctioned—or was even aware of—Muhammadu Ribadu's supposed agreement with the FRG. However, the mood in Whitehall was somewhat improved when it was clarified that the Foreign Office of West Germany was trying to gain Whitehall's approval. The West German Foreign Office had apparently also been caught off-guard by Becker's hasty facilitation of an arrangement between the West German Ministry of Defence and the Nigerian Ministry of Defence.

Down the line, Becker's overzealousness, so far as the establishment of the Nigerian Air Force was concerned, eventually caught up with his career. Specifically, his recommendation for surplus *Dornier Flugzeugwerke* aircraft for the Nigerian Air Force was investigated in connection with a training program for pilots.¹⁴⁹ Consequentially, Becker would eventually be sidelined—Bonn diplomats got tired of being awakened "*jeden Morgen in der Furcht vor dem, was sie als Nächstes erfahren würden*" (every morning in fear of what they would learn next) concerning what Becker was up to.¹⁵⁰

149 Gray, 2016, 330–331.

150 Ibid.

Strauß, who was left out of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's government in December that year and forced to step down due to the *Spiegel* affair of 1962,¹⁵¹ despite being accused of being a Nazi sympathiser,¹⁵² leaned away from Becker's advice and instead began to consult selected representatives of the West German Parliament, especially regarding arms exportation in bulk to Third World states.¹⁵³ Kai-Uwe von Hassel, who was Strauß's successor at the BMVg, would do away with Becker altogether.¹⁵⁴ However, this was not before Becker "*hatte überall auf der Welt seine Eier gelegt, was sich nun, als die Küken schlüpfen, zu rächen began*" (translation: "had laid his eggs all over the world, which began to take revenge when the chicks hatched").¹⁵⁵

Indeed, months after Strauß's departure, Becker's metaphorical chickens had come home to roost. The March 1963 communiqué received by the British from the FRG Foreign Office was yet another outcome of Becker having caught West German diplomats on the wrong footing, much to their embarrassment and to the surprise of their British counterparts.

Despite what had been a "rapid and independent sanctioning of the Nigerian request" by the BMVg, the misunderstanding involving the Ministry, the Foreign Office and British officials was cleared. Moreover, Whitehall seemed somewhat reassured that Bonn, particularly the West German Foreign Office, had "woken up to the need to put the federal government house in order regarding arms supplies to cooperate with other Western powers concerned".¹⁵⁶

Still, British officials remained wary of the interest taken by Bonn in Nigerian security and defence and around the air force question more precisely. Nor were they "[...] amused by the increasing West German military activity in Nigeria and Africa more generally".¹⁵⁷ However, that was as bad as these tensions got, and matters failed to escalate. This, in part, was because the FRG Foreign Office was sensitive to the mood in Whitehall and well aware that the British were displeased with West German military activity overtures to Lagos.¹⁵⁸

151 Turner, Vermerk, 1963, 84–86; Marek and Görtz, 2012.

152 Der Spiegel, 1964.

153 Gray, Op. Cit.

154 Early on in von Hassel's tenure (c. 1964), FRG records no longer indicated a role for Becker. This probably had something to do with the fact that Foreign Office diplomats were tired of him, with Becker also coming to the attention of the British. See: FRG Foreign Ministry, 1963.

155 Ibid.

156 Commonwealth Relations Office, 1963c.

157 Ibid.

158 Vermerk, 1963.

This “sensitivity” of the Foreign Office to Whitehall’s mood was just as well: there was little the West Germans could do to conceal their air force activity in Nigeria, due to the sheer scale of the military assistance they began to provide. Indeed, in its Nigeria agreement, the FRG committed to train some 1,100 Nigerian air force personnel and deliver 56 aircraft.¹⁵⁹ On that scale, a military assistance program could scarcely be secret—either from the British or indeed from a West German public that was averse to a new wave of militarisation¹⁶⁰ and potentially inclined to vote out hawkish politicians.¹⁶¹

Consequently, “as soon as the first West German air force advisers were sighted in Lagos in June 1963, the program became public knowledge.”¹⁶² This also “led immediately to an outcry in the FRG and further questions about Bonn’s military activities in the Third World.”¹⁶³ To assuage its domestic critics, the West German government,

Emphasised the relatively modest cost of the programs, the coordination with allies, and the fact that representatives of the Bundestag had been informed. Moreover, Federal Chancellor Konrad Adenauer justified the aid as a contribution to the political stability of a newly independent state.¹⁶⁴

After the BMVg was formed in 1955, and between the late-1950s and early-1960s, the FRG sought to make political inroads in Africa. Brigadier Becker was the architect of much of this activity that eventually culminated in the Nigerian Air Force programme by 1963. The British knew this and were uncomfortable regarding Becker’s interference in Africa, including in Nigeria. Consequentially, Becker was singled out here, with his name and exploits featuring prominently in a communiqué from the 1st Secretary of the British Embassy, Robert Brash, to the West Germans.¹⁶⁵

159 Ojedokun, 1968, 124; Peters, 1997, 82.

160 Military force in West Germany was still a delicate subject for the public by the 1960s. Indeed, c. 1955, when the government of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer formed the BMVg, the rearmament process faced public backlash. This mainly was over widespread concerns that it contradicted the occupation statute, implemented by the Allies in 1949 to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the FRG. Consequently, and to avoid public alarm, rearmament—part of which required creating a Federal Ministry of Defence (BMVg)—was surreptitious. This was (unofficially) referred to as *Amt Blank*. See: Turner, 1987

161 Turner, 1987; Gray, 2016, 332.

162 Wyss, 2018, 125.

163 Ibid.

164 Ibid.

165 Vermerk, 1963.

Having seen Whitehall's strong views on the matter, Bonn insisted that Kai-Uwe von Hassel, Strauß's replacement as the West German Minister of Defence from January 1963, run a tighter ship within his portfolio BMVg do a better job controlling its staff and officials. The specific reference to Becker was also passed on.¹⁶⁶ Following this, Becker was eased out of the Hardthöhe. Still, long before he was retired in 1965,¹⁶⁷ Becker's influence on the establishment of an air force in Nigeria, and the FRG's role in that agreement, had already left its mark.

Lagos had made its choice, and British policymakers came to take a pragmatic view of the whole affair: they understood the predicament of Bonn. Had the FRG rebuffed Nigeria's interest in a West-German established air force, then Lagos, having practically exhausted its viable Western options and still under pressure domestically to pivot away from the British, may well have approached the GDR or another Soviet communist state to assist it with its air force question.¹⁶⁸

Thus, by being receptive to Ribadu's concerns, West German officials at BMVg may well have removed incentives for the Nigerian Minister of Defence to approach "less desirable sources".¹⁶⁹ Conceding that Lagos could have opted for East Berlin, rather than Bonn, and that as unexpected as the outcome was, it could have been worse at a time when Soviet foreign policy began to pivot towards new partnerships in Africa.¹⁷⁰ UK officials were, therefore, willing to come to some sort of arrangement with the FRG in Nigeria, one that ensured the latter that not look forward East for military assistance.¹⁷¹

11 Alternatives to the West? Soviet Ideological, Political and Military Interests in Africa

Whereas West Germany did everything it could to avoid antagonising the British in Independent Nigeria, the Anglo-Nigerian defence and security arrangement seemed to be falling apart all by itself—West Germany could take no responsibility for the collapse of that relationship, which began to unravel long before the *Luftwaffe* mission to Nigeria.

166 Ibid.

167 Bradley, Würzenthal and Model, 1998, 95–96.

168 Wyss, 2018.

169 Commonwealth Relations Office, 1963c.

170 Iandolo, 2012.

171 Ibid.

From January 1962, when the Anglo-Nigerian Defence Pact was abrogated¹⁷² and indeed before—since the Cold War came to Africa in the late 1950s—British officials were faced with the threat posed by communism's ingress in Africa. With several newly independent states having the option of a neutralist posture, which would enable them to formulate foreign policies without influence from their former imperial masters, the Soviet bloc suddenly became a possible alternative for weapons and military assistance during the Cold War.¹⁷³

For Britain, West Germany as Nigeria's choice was far more welcome than the possibility of East Germany, or indeed the Soviet Union. Nor was it a foregone conclusion that Nigeria would not build warm relations with the Soviets. After all, Ghana under Nkrumah had gone against the grain and done just that.¹⁷⁴ Furthermore, the Soviets were keen to make political inroads amongst Africa's newly-independent states.

Indeed, whereas Stalin viewed the African nationalist leaders with suspicion, referring to them as "bourgeois imperialist lackeys,"¹⁷⁵ Nikita Khrushchev and the subsequent Khrushchevian policies as the Cold War wore on in the 1960s led to a different approach.¹⁷⁶ This shift from Stalin's policies now saw the Soviets "quite prepared to work hand-in-hand" with African states "since they could [...] be used in a concerted effort to undermine the West's influence".¹⁷⁷

This new Cold War paradigm signalled the opening of a previously non-existent political front: between Western and Eastern ideologies and political struggle in Africa.¹⁷⁸ The Soviets, pushing deeper South of the Sahara after previously making ideological, political and military inroads within the Horn Region of Africa, were determined to make new friends deep within the continent's interior, whether via ideology or pragmatism.¹⁷⁹

With regards to the ideological thrust, "Khrushchev's dream was as simple as it was visionary: once the developing world saw the full economic potential of socialism, it would turn its back on the capitalist and colonialist West and adopt socialism as a way of life".¹⁸⁰ That Ghana's Nkrumah, next door to Nigeria, embraced aspects of Soviet ideologies—such as his references to socialism as "the system that better fitted traditional African values"—meant that the

172 Peters, 1997.

173 Heldman, 1981.

174 Anglin, 1958.

175 Ogunbadejo, 1980, 297.

176 Anglin, *Op. Cit.*

177 Ogunbadejo, *Op. Cit.*

178 Hoffmann and Fleron (Eds.), 1980.

179 Yordanov, 2016.

180 Iandolo, 2012, 685.

Soviet held out hopes that eventually the tide would turn and the “generally icy relationship” with Nigeria would improve.¹⁸¹

Unlike Stalin, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev called “for an offensive in the Third World.” This call, moreover, preceded attempts by the Soviets to gain politico-military currency in Independent Africa.¹⁸² However, in the case of Nigeria—and the Nigerian Air Force in particular—a different dynamic was at play.

Certainly, Khrushchev had grand designs on Africa as a Soviet sphere of influence in the 1960s.¹⁸³ As Natalia Telepneva writes, “the late 1960s deserve more attention as a moment of transition in Moscow’s policy. During this period, Moscow launched a new phase of engagement with Africa, especially in the military sphere.”¹⁸⁴ Furthermore, the wave of independence and nationalism in Africa fed into the Kremlin’s foreign policy of international politics as “a zero-sum game, and so what the West loses must be a gain to the East.”¹⁸⁵ Moreover, Soviet military influence in Nigeria would become more robust by the latter half of the 1960s, emerging and eventually surpassing that of the FRG during the Civil War of Nigeria (1967–1970).¹⁸⁶

Even as that conflict broke out, when Nigeria’s Western allies, most notably Britain, remained cautious about picking sides, the alliance between Lagos and the Kremlin had already “been acknowledged by both sides.”¹⁸⁷ Indeed, by the end of the Civil War of Nigeria, the Nigerian ambassador in Moscow, George T. Kurubo, was emphatic in his position that the Federal forces’ decisive victory of Biafra separatists in the war was underpinned “more than any other single thing, more than all other things together”, by Soviet assistance.¹⁸⁸

The Soviets, who had since warmed up to Nigeria’s military government, promptly responded in kind.¹⁸⁹ Soviet-Nigeria relations showed by the late-1970s that despite Nigeria’s military leadership having no interest whatsoever in the Soviets’ “socialist orientation”, foreign relations between both countries worked well. This was partly because the “Soviets effectively accepted the primacy of pragmatic geopolitics over ideology.”¹⁹⁰

181 Ibid., 686; Matusevich, 2017, 200.

182 Heldman, 1981.

183 Ogunbadejo, 1980.

184 Telepneva, 2019, 6.

185 Ogunbadejo, 1980, 297; see also: Yordanov, 2016.

186 De St. Jorre, 2009; Matusevich, 2017.

187 Matusevich, 2017, 214 supranote 25.

188 Hoagland, 1970.

189 Ibid.

190 Matusevich, 2017, 212.

Notwithstanding such non-ideological alignment, warm relations, and attendant military assistance between the Soviet Union and Nigeria from 1967, within the earlier part of that decade, West Germany had the final say as Nigeria's foreign partner in the formation of the air force. In that period of the early-1960s, even as West German-Nigeria defence relations blossomed, early Soviet political ingress into Nigeria, by contrast, "had been met with a distinctively cold-shouldered response".¹⁹¹

The British may have been worried that Nigeria, like Ghana, could pivot towards the Warsaw Pact and away from Western relations. In reality, there was little chance of this happening. Like other African leaders who formed relations with the Soviets, Nkrumah was not "simply subservient to Moscow but often followed an independent course" with regard to his and Ghana's interests and principles.¹⁹² Furthermore, Balewa's administration, in fighting off the local opposition to Western "neo-colonialism", made a point of building relations with Britain and the West¹⁹³ while simultaneously holding off Soviet ideological and political advances.¹⁹⁴ Ultimately, so far as its air force question was concerned, Nigeria's pivot towards traditional Western partners saw West Germany emerge as the primary military assistance agreement beneficiary.

12 West Germany and Nigeria Sign an Air Force Agreement

Specifically, on 19 April 1963, the FRG signed an agreement with Lagos pledging to help with the buildup of the Nigerian Air Force. The defence agreement with West Germany was comprehensive. First, an advisory component covered the air force's plans, protocols, training, and equipment. The air force structure and its tactical role in support of the Army were also blueprinted by the West Germans. As part of this process, the FRG sent an advisory group, facilitated Nigerian pilot training *in situ* (something the British Air Ministry declined), and agreed to support the new air force, called the Nigerian Air Force, by establishing new units, including operating bases, and training locations strategically across Nigeria.¹⁹⁵

Indeed, unlike the Canadians who could not admittedly effectively form up an air force for Nigeria, the West German aircraft industry sold the Nigerians 78

191 Ibid., 199.

192 Telepneva, 2019, 6.

193 Osoba, 1987.

194 Matusevich, 2003.

195 Peters, 1997, 82.

aircraft, plus support equipment and spares. Along these lines, a little later in 1964, C.M. Drury, Canada's Minister of Industry and Defence Production, would observe that West Germany's emergence as Nigeria's eventual air force assistance partner and, in particular, the extent of support the country was able to provide, "had dreadful results" for the prospects of Canadian military assistance to Nigeria; particularly in the air space.¹⁹⁶

Despite this comprehensive air force agreement with Lagos, the West Germans remained conscious that they had made unexpected progress in Africa. They now had a deepened military relationship with Nigeria in just a few years, compared to the British, who had colonised the territory and had been there for a century. Thus, the FRG was careful not to create further cause for British disquiet. Efforts to assuage British concerns, such as the low-profile removal of Becker, could be interpreted as part of West German attempts to walk the political tightrope between keeping to its defence agreement with Nigeria and not causing unrest in Whitehall. Along these lines, the FRG shared, *in toto*, "the details of the West German-Nigerian air force assistance agreement with Britain" and refused "Nigerian requests to avoid contact with the British in Nigeria."¹⁹⁷ That way, West Germany fulfilled Nigeria's request and avoided ruffling British feathers. Moreover, in quietly removing Becker, the FRG also addressed growing concerns about overreach in Africa underpinned by roguish German agent behaviour.

13 Conclusion

In emerging within an independent Nigeria, the NAF, *ab initio*, was a service branch that disinherited the colonialist histories of the Army and Navy. The negative connotations of a military institution created by Britain for "extreme cruelty and violence [...] used in furtherance of its colonial project"¹⁹⁸ could not be extended to the formation and role of the NAF. The Air Force, after all, was created a century after Captain John Hawley Glover first formed up the Hausa Constabulary Force to subjugate locals and protect British interests in the city of Lagos.¹⁹⁹ This marked departure in its origins and function, even by itself, lent the NAF a unique identity within the tri-services. However, the Nigerian Air Force was also unique in other ways.

196 Kilford, 2010, supranote 276.

197 Commonwealth Relations Office, 1963b.

198 Siollun, 2021, 2.

199 Omeni, 2022.

Whereas, since the early 20th Century, airpower had a lengthy history of applications within African colonial warfare, the timing of the NAF's emergence in the early-1960s was instructive to its perceived role at the time. Unlike the history of airpower that came before it, the NAF was not primarily developed to drop bombs on rebels within Nigerian territory or foreign threats outside it. Instead, the Air Force was created to support the Nigerian Army's transport requests during operations, divesting this requirement away from the RAF's ad-hoc assistance.

As discussed earlier in the article, the RAF also provided Nigeria's lawmakers with transport duty assistance. Yet, this dependency on Britain was problematised for an Independent Nigeria: by the opposition and even by the government. Along these lines, political negotiations that underpinned the NAF's creation suggested that Nigeria needed an air force to help her establish military independence outside of continued British assistance.

The defence pivot towards India and West Germany indicated Nigeria's political ambivalence towards British enduring defence influence. Moreover, this apparent snub of British offers of support came when the Nigerian government was under political pressure from within to divest its military and foreign policy relations away from the former colonial master.

Such concerns played out within the Cold War era environment of the early-1960s, which saw West Germany keen to maintain cordial relations with Britain, even as East Germany made overtures within the African sub-continent and Soviet influence threatened, on paper at least, to undermine Anglo-Nigerian relations. In practice, Nigeria in the 1960s never displayed the pivot towards communism that Nkrumah's Ghana did and for which Western allies, including Canada and the UK, expressed disquiet. Ultimately, pragmatism and a shift in expectations of an independent Nigeria, instead of political ideology, *per se*, underpinned the NAF's creation.

On a final note, the decade that followed saw the NAF thrust into a civil war from 1967, when its pioneer officers still lacked the requisite training and experience to establish an air force independent of existing Army culture. Consequentially, the institution was forced to depend heavily on the Nigerian Army, with several Army officers seconded to effectively command and establish an operational role for the wartime Air Force. Furthermore, with Britain initially reluctant to commit to Nigerian airpower assistance during the war, the NAF also had to solicit Soviet airpower assistance, including aircraft and training—both directly and via Egypt as a proxy—between 1967 and 1970. Such wartime necessities, and the abrupt changes to the West German Mission plan, abandoned due to the outbreak of war, had long-term implications for the post-war NAF's institutional identity, inventory and operational role.

However, such changes were par for the course at a particularly volatile period of Nigeria's political history.

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