

# “All is fair in love and war”

## Reflections on war crimes during the Biafra-Nigeria war

“All is fair in [love and] war”—this phrase has been habitually used by people who justify atrocities committed during the Biafra-Nigeria (*un*)civil war. Within the context of that war, however, the adage could be more rightly rephrased as, “all is fair in hatred and war,” since there was nothing amicable about that tragic event. That said, it is necessary to identify some of the major atrocities typically cited by historians and other analysts. They include, among others:

- The flagrant massacre of hundreds of Asaba boys and men in 1967
- A starvation policy for which children and the elderly were prime victims
- The bombing of civilian populations (the largest slaughter occurring in Otuocha Aguleri where over 500 civilians lost their lives in a single air attack in 1968)
- The murder of refugees in refugee camps
- The rampant rape of girls and women.

“All is fair in war” suggests that war crimes do not exist logically since wars are inherently ruthless. I have no problem with this theory if it is applied equally to all situations of conflict and not just the Biafra experience. We shouldn’t therefore have a problem with Adolf Hitler since his murder of millions of Jews occurred during a war. He should be exonerated because “all is fair in war.” We shouldn’t have a problem with Boko Haram because, as far as this Jihadist organization is concerned, it is at war with those who would disrupt the implementation of core Islamic doctrines. Victims of Boko Haram attacks may not believe that they are at war with Boko Haram. But, for a war to take place, two parties do not necessarily have to desire a war or agree on the existence of a war. All it takes is for one party to launch an attack for a war to commence. This was the case during World War II when the Japanese attacked the USA at Pearl Harbor, when the Nazis attacked the Poles and the French, and, ironically, when Nigeria launched its “Police Action” attack on Biafra.

Using the same “all is fair in war” philosophy, we shouldn’t have a problem with the carnage unleashed on Nigeria’s Middle Belt by the Fulani. While the people of the Middle Belt may argue that they are not at war with the Fulani, the Fulani believe they are at war with them and this is sufficient to establish that a war (even if not full-scale) exists between both parties. As far as the Fulani are concerned, they have a right to settle anywhere in their country, Nigeria, and anyone who denies them that right is essentially declaring war against them. They are therefore entitled to wage war against Middle Belters or any other Nigerians that attempt to impede their right to set up house in any part of the country. This is their thinking.

The truth, however, is that war crimes exist and are largely defined by atrocities committed against unarmed civilians. No one faults Hitler for engaging in combat with allied forces and killing their soldiers. His crimes principally involved the torture and murder of unarmed civilians. Similarly, Yakubu Gowon is not held accountable for the murder of armed Biafran soldiers but for the torture, starvation and decimation of unarmed civilian populations.

When “all is fair in war” is used to excuse war crimes committed during the Biafra-Nigeria war, does it also apply to the wanton destruction of the lives and property of thousands of Easterners (mainly Igbos) in Northern Nigeria before the war? Or can the theory also be used to justify pre-war atrocities? And what about post-war persecutions like the seizure of property and businesses owned by Igbos in various parts of the country?

Sadly, proponents of the “all is fair in war” principle are inadvertently isolating themselves without realizing it. When chickens come home to roost, as they always will, and these individuals find themselves on the receiving end of the type of onslaught that they once subjectively condoned, they wonder why support is slow and scarce. If you doubt me, ask people of the Middle Belt and northern victims of Boko Haram.