

The Biafran War in Britain:

An Odd Alliance of late 1960s Humanitarian Activists¹

by

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In the summer months of 1968, the images of starving Biafran children began to disconcert the “conscience of the world”, as *Time* magazine stated. As the transnational campaign for humanitarian aid to the population in famine-stricken secessionist Biafra gained momentum, Harold Wilson’s Labour government’s support of the Federal Military Regime sparked increasingly severe criticism; the Biafran population was believed to be facing a genocide enabled by British arms sale to Lagos. In Britain itself, activist groups like the Britain-Biafra Association took the lead in assailing the government. These groups, however, are hard to position within the traditional spectrum of British Politics: conservative journalists like Auberon Waugh or Frederick Forsythe were at the forefront of these campaigns, which also drew in liberals such as Violet Bonham Carter or left-wing activists like Peter Sedgwick or Peter Cadogan. This paper will argue that the language of humanitarianism and human rights served as a common discourse of a campaign that – at least partially – transcended party political allegiances. Moreover, it will situate this campaign within the transformations of international relations in the 1960s and 1970s, which witnessed, as international historians have recently argued, the emergence of a post-Cold War global order; human rights and humanitarianism played a major role in these processes and may be, as will be argued, understood as the last ideology of a seemingly post-ideological age.

¹ The original title of the conference paper was ‘*The Cross-Party Network against the Wilson Government’s Support of the Federal Military Regime in the Nigerian Civil War*’.