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The Impact of the Second World War on Ebira Polity

Dr. Suberu Ochi Abdulrahman

Department of History and International Studies, Federal University Lokoja, Kogi State

Abstract

When the Second World War is heard or mentioned, what strikes some people's mind is its effect in terms of life and properties lost and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The side effect of the war on the participating colonies was equally remembered. However, But the rural areas of the participating Nigerian communities, received little or no scholarly attention. For that there exists lacuna. The paper intends to discuss the impact of the Second World War in Ebira polity in order to feel the gap. The Second World War was a worldwide affair in which Nigeria and in particular Ebiraland was not left out. The war which started in 1939 came to an end in 1945. The genesis of the war was the harsh conditions imposed on Germany by the treaty of Versailles in 1919, after the First World War. About twenty thousand Nigerians served in the military forces of the ally during the war. The participation of the Ebira in the war enabled them to have experience in Burma and India. It was therefore not surprising to find ex-service men on their arrival back home joined hands with the Ebira elites and began to agitate for the freedom of expression and equal treatment from the autocratic rule of the Atta. This greatly affects the polity of Ebira, which the paper intends to address.

Introduction: There are several research works on Ebira history that touches different fields. Such research works include, The Transformation of Ebiraland, The Search for Leadership in a Nigeria Community: the Igbirra Tao. C.1865-1954 and Leadership and Crisis in Ebiraland to mention but few.¹ The impact of the Second World War on Ebira polity has not received scholarly attention, thus, creating a gap in the knowledge of Ebira history which this work is meant to fill. The focus of the paper is not to give the full account of the causes of the Second World War, but it would be pertinent to give brief account of the Second World War. The Second World War began in September 1939, with the declaration of war by the Britain and France on Germany as a result of Germany invasion of Poland.²

Since the termination of the First World War in 1918, by 1919, the resolution taken after the war only further helped in creating new wounds and in some cases further hurt some healing ones. The genesis of the Second World War came into being during and after the ratification of the treaty of Versailles. This treaty, which was supposed to act as an instrument to not just end the war, but to prevent the emergence of any war similar to it, had

misconceived the grievances that many of the allied states involved in the war, had over the axis states, most especially Prussia. As a result of the First World War, by 1919, leaders of England, Italy, France and the United State met to discuss how Germany was to be made to pay for the damage World War One had caused. President Wilson of the United State wanted a treaty based on his 14 points plan which he believed would bring peace to Europe³, but the French leader, George Clemenceau wants revenge. He wanted to be sure that Germany cannot go in for the third war. On the other hand, Britain's Lloyd George agreed with Wilson but his subject (the Britain public) agreed with French leader. Britain's leader tried to find a compromise between Wilson and Clemenceau. While all these was happening, the Germany had being expecting a treaty based on Wilson's 14 points. What turned out at the end of the treaty of Versailles tends to be the dictate of Wilson and Clemenceau. The Germans were not happy with the terms of the treaty of Versailles. However, they had no choice but to sign the document. Part of the treaty of Versailles includes: Germany should accept the blame for starting a World War One, Germany should had to pay 6,600 million pounds for the damage cause by the war (Reparation), Disarmament etc. To the Germany, the decision of the treaty of Versailles was too harsh. Germany could not afford to pay the reparation because her economy was down.⁴ People became dissatisfied with the Government; and voted to power a man who promised to rip up the treaty of Versailles. His name was Adolf Hitler. Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany in January 1933 and immediately began secretly building up Germany's army and weapons.⁵ This was against the treaty of Versailles. His territorial expansionist aim landed him into trouble. He started with Rhineland, Austria and was called to order by France and Britain. He promised to stop his expansionist move. Hitler did not keep his word and six months later demanded that the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia be handed over to Germany.

By September 1938, Neville Chamberlain, Prime Minister of Britain met with Hitler three times in order to reach an agreement with him that would prevent war. The Munich Agreement stated that Hitler could have the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia so long as he would stop further expansion on Czechoslovakia. Realising that Poland was his next target, Britain and France promised to take military action against Hitler should he invade Poland. By September 1st 1939, German troops invaded Poland.⁶ In response, Great Britain and France declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939. This marked the beginning of the Second World War.

Nigeria being a British colonial territory was dragged into the First World War and Second World Wars. It should be observed that the major powers (Allied and the Axis) had acquired territories in Africa. The ally forces include USA, USSR, France and Britain while, the axis were Germany, Italy and Japan. The British belonged to the allied powers.⁷ During the Second World War, men of the Nigeria Regiment fought against the Japanese in Burma. The Regiment fought so courageously that some individuals in the Regiment received medals for their bravery and gallantry.⁸ At the end of the war, barracks in Kaduna and Zaria were named after the campaigns in which the force gained distinctions. For

instance, the barracks in Kaduna and Zaria were named Mogadishu, Dalet and Chindit. The one in Abeokuta was named Nyangao while those in Lagos were called Ashanti, An, Abalti, Myohaung, Arakan, Tamandu and Marda barracks.⁹

Nevertheless, over 176,000 men from British West Africa served in the British colonial army during the Second World War¹⁰. After the war, large numbers of the survivors returned to West Africa. About 100,000 and 65,000 returned to Nigeria and Ghana respectively, from the Middle East, East Africa, Burma and India. It is pertinent to note that the exact number of Nigerians that took part in the Second World War cannot always be obtained and often vary widely. This was because precise figures are difficult to get as many records were lost during the war. While Coleman puts the number of Nigerians that served in the military forces during the Second World War at 20,000, Onwubiko said that after the Second World War, about 100,000 Nigerians forces survived the war and returned home¹¹. Be that as it may, the most important thing is that thousands of Nigerians participated on the side of the allied forces during the Second World War. These war veterans had seen life in more developed countries, enjoyed high standard of living in the army, seen the strength of nationalist movements in Asia, fought side by side with Europeans and seen their weaknesses which exposed the myth of European racial superiority.

Nevertheless, the war veteran came home with a changed outlook: a strong belief in the equality of all men, a burning desire for a better life for themselves and their people and an urgent demand for the extension to Africa and Nigeria in particular of that freedom for which many of them had fought and died. As soon as the troops returned home in 1946, demobilization was effected. Some of the demobilized troops were given jobs in the Government and Private sectors. The expectations of the men were however not met. Most of them though possessed no basic educational background, had been well-looked after by the army while in active service and had expected preferential treatment in the form of well-paid government jobs. But the rising cost of living immediately after the Second World War did not help matters.¹² This was the era of World-wide economic depression.

The participation of the ordinary Ebira in the war enabled them to have experience in Burma and India. During the Second World War, the number of people recruited in Ebira was quite small as it was difficult to convince the people to turn out for recruitment. People generally dodged recruitment by staying away (from home) on their farms. Part of the reason why they stay away was the fact that they were made to understand that the Germans were a powerful and cruel race who did not like the black people.¹³ Those who took part in the Second World War included William Omo, Alhaji Mohammed Sani Omolori, Salihu Ohida, Johnson Alabi, Alhaji Shehu Atta, Salihu Chatta, Joseph Ohiani, Onivori, Rapheal Ojeba, Umoru Akaaba, Ajayi Ajinomoh, Obejara, Aliyu Ochi Agassa, and Anate Idoji etc. Various ways were adopted for recruitment into the British colonial army in Ebiraland during the Second World War. During the period under discussion, the Divisional Officer (DO) of Ebiraland was Captain C S Mackenzie but Ebira people called him "let me see your hands." This was because, apart from those who voluntarily joined the army, once Mackenzie sees a

man on the street walking aimlessly, he demands to see his hands. If the man's hands is cleaned, it means, he was lazy. For that, such people were conscripted into the army by the Divisional Officer. Most of them that joined the army were taken to Japan. For instance, Late Alhaji Mohammed Sani Omolori was among those sent to Japan.¹⁴

The Ebira who took part in the Second World War enjoyed to some extent the standard of living higher than they had ever experienced before. For instance, some of them were unemployed before their recruitment into the army. The job gave them regular income, clothing, food and medical care. They were also taught combativeness. It was therefore not surprising to find ex-service men on their arrival back home, joined hands with the Ebira elites, and began to agitate for the freedom of expression and equal treatment from the autocratic rule of Atta¹⁵. In most cases, the opposition groups were invariably drawn from the younger elements, teachers and ex-service men with a handful of the Native Authority employees¹⁶. Hence, the aftermath of the Second World War had great effects on Ebira polity.

Pre-Second World War Ebira Polity: In order to appreciate the effect of the Second World War on Ebira polity, it would be pertinent to examine the kind of polity that took place before the Second World War. However, some literary minded and Ebira scholars have written much on the socio-political institutions of Ebiraland¹⁷. Some of these materials have been published while others are unpublished scholarly works. It is therefore suffice to say that Ebira polity which started from the family level ended up with the clan group (Ekura). The administration of all the clans constituting a clan-group lay in the hands of the elders, influential individuals and the Chief Priest (Ohinoyi etc).¹⁸ About six of such clan-groups existed in the past and these included Adavi, Eika, Ihima, Okengwe, Okehi and Eganyi¹⁹.

The socio-political set up of the Ebira society as established by the Ebira ancestor was societal oriented. The essence of these socio-political set up, be it as the head of his family, or clan or tribe was there for the furtherance of the welfare of those he represents. He was not there to exploit the people he was supposed to lead for his personal aggrandizement as that contradicts the legitimacy of his office²⁰. The degree of self-denial imbued in Ebira traditional leadership philosophy is demonstrated in the common wise saying that *ozoku o zuda a vavi*. In other words, the leader should bear the burden of his people. Respect was accorded to any constituted authority which enhanced the smooth running of the day to day administration in Ebiraland. The group of elders consisted of the clan heads, kindred heads and other people whose age, maturity and wisdom commended themselves to the other elders.

The conquest of Ebiraland by the British Colonial authority around 1900 was a mixed feeling. It brought both fortune and misfortune. Fortune in the sense that they brought to the people enlightenment, education, modern civilization and linked the people up with other neighbouring countries. The conquest brought about peace, put to an end the Ajinomoh wars or Jihadist movements and also improved their lots²¹. However, the conquest brought

in misfortune as they almost destroyed the people's culture. The British authority had no respect for their culture and also relegated their traditional rulers who were custodians of their culture, tradition and customs. They introduced a system of administration that was alien to the people. The previous system where the Chief Priest wielded both religious and political powers was directly or indirectly abolished.

The creation of a central leadership for the people of Ebiraland by the British authority brought in Atta Ibrahim as the District Head in November 1917 and later Sole Native Authority in 1923²². The choice of a young man by the British was a serious aberration on the leadership structure that was gerontocratic in Ebiraland. Thus, a seed of discord was sown by the British among the people of Ebira. What ensued were bitterness, rancor and gang-up among other contestants that lost out. The need to retain power by the Atta and the struggle to bring him down stimulated the formation of the first political unions in Ebiraland immediately after the Second World²³.

Impacts of the Second World War on Ebira Polity: During the Second World War, Ebira had good and competent administrative and District Officers. However, by 1945, most of the war veterans had returned home. They included Ohida, Shehu Atta, Umoru Akaaba, Ajayi Ajinomoh, Obejara Aja, Ali Ochi Agassa, William Omo, Joseph Ohiani, Mallam Ahmadu, Mohammed Sani Omolori, Johnson Alabi, Raphael Ojeba etc²⁴. Those who had grudges against Atta's administration for one reason or the other could not voice out openly. By 1951, some pressure and organized groups wanted reform in the Native Authority administration. They questioned the authority, power and style of administration of the Atta and wanted something done about it. This was in line with the universal demand at the time for freedom and democratic governance all over the world²⁵.

It should be observed that the Second World War was fought on the principle of desire for freedom from Hitler's German rule. After the war, there was agitation in different countries for freedom and greater participation in governance. In Nigeria, there was nationalist agitation for freedom from colonial rule and this intensified after the war, particularly in the southern part of the country. People were organized to challenge the British rule and to demand self-government and independence for Nigeria. It was this new wind of change that blew across Ebiraland. As earlier discussed above, a number of Ebira who fought during the war returned home to demand freedom for the people, as they saw it happening in different places. They had seen what was happening politically in some southern parts of the country and so began to make similar demands. Apart from the new wind of change that blew across Ebiraland. There were other groups who had been dissatisfied with the rule of the Atta but could not do anything about it for a long time before then. The arrival of the war veterans boosted their courage and began to speak out.

Nevertheless, some of these groups have been operating separately and secretly up till 1950, when they now forged a common front against Atta. In fact, the effect of the wind of change, and the growing political consciousness across the country stimulated their coming together boldly to work out a common strategy on how best to confront the Atta. To these

groups of people, they felt the only way they could get the support of the masses was to whip up sentiments and make several allegations against the Atta. Members of these opposition groups were prominent members of Roman Catholic Church, most of whom were war veterans like Joseph Ohiani, G.U.Ohikere, William Omo, Rapheal Ojeba, Engr. Mark Icha, J Adaba and, J Obadaki. Other groups who were predominantly Muslims were Mohammed Sani Omolori,(who later succeeded the Atta as the Ohinoyi of Ebira), Habib Raji Abdallah, Kokori Abdul, Salihu Enesi Chatta, Salihu Tajani,and Ahmad Badamasuyi etc.²⁶ By 1951, the various groups had organized themselves into a formidable political union called Ebira (Igbirra) Tribal Union (ITU). The campaign against Atta was intensified and by 1953, the political union had become a force to reckon with.

That notwithstanding, protest against any constituted authority was contained before the Second World War. This could be due to the administrative style of Atta Ibrahim, though, some people may raise an eyebrows over such suppression of protest. The returned of the war veterans brought awareness to the people that constituted authority could be challenged by individual or collectively. The issues of Obejara and William Omo, both of whom were war veterans was a good case in point²⁷. Some war veterans became tin- gods and felt untouchable. Obejara use to wear his military uniform particularly on Okene market day to harassed people. One day, he went after Mr Anate's wife from Eika. When Anate got to know of it, he questioned Obejara as to why he was going after his wife. Obejara felt challenged by a "bloody civilian" and attacked Anate with his jack knife²⁸.

In the attempt to defend himself, Anate's finger was cut-off. Most of the war veterans were outlaw. They do not obey the law of the land neither that of the country. Seeing Anate's finger cut-off, people started running for their dear lives and the market was disrupted. When the Atta of Ebira heard of the incident, he could not do anything. The Native Authority Police were equally handicapped. This was because the District Officer then, Captain C Mackenzie was equally a war veteran, and he supported the outlaw activities of the war veterans in Ebira. To make the Ebira war veterans relevant in the society, he made sure that once in every month, they marched around the society with their uniform. The match was led by Ajayi, after which they proceeded to the D O's office to collect their monthly allowance²⁹. It should be observed that the match around the society created fear in the minds of the people. The war veterans took advantage of that and undo. Worst still, Mackenzie was not in good term with Atta because the British authority were displeased with the stance of Atta on various issues as he was critical of the policy of the colonial authorities. His anti-colonial stance and support for nationalist cause were also displeasing to them³⁰.

In addition, after the Second World War, the Ebira Native Authority introduced the payment of water rate. Most probably, the money was meant for the maintenance of the water board which Atta established in 1937. The people reacted shiftly. While the male adult were to pay 4 shillings 6 pence, the female adult has to pay 2 shillings 6 pence annually³¹. Though, people resisted the water rate as they felt it was too much financial burden on them. Those who had grudges against Atta's administration as well as the war

veterans rallied round one of the night masquerade called *Ikugu* during his annually play, precisely around March in Egbe festival. As a result of the water rate, the masquerade directed one of his songs on the water rate. Thus: Oza ari isa irenu avanya evisaovi oyibo ana mi pumpu ova kwusa ne”. Literally, it means “one cannot be eating food and his mouth will be bringing blood, Oyibo that brings water should come and take it away”. Technically, it implies that you cannot tax us heavily because you have given us water. Come and take it away”.

It was after the Egbe festival that William Omo’s (a war veteran) mother was arrested for not paying water rate, precisely after the Second World War. She was detained in the tax office. When William heard of his mother’ detention, he went to the tax office with his jack knife. Sighting the jack knife with William, the tax officers and N. A. Police staff ran away and he took his mother away³². The matter was reported to the Atta and all effort to arrest him proved abortive. Such action dawn play on the power of Atta who all Ebira sees as untouchable. The awareness created by some war veterans, though rough to the Ebira, but opened their eyes to the understanding that they could challenge the power of the Atta. William Omo was able to free his mother from paying water rate. For William Omo of military background to disperse the Native Authority Police and the tax officers was a matter of discussion and the beginning of an “open eyes”.

William Omo started drawing admiration from people. Friends started visiting him. William was a member of Roman Catholic Mission who had an age long rift with the Atta. This brought him and Joseph Ohiani to political lime light. Both of them were catholic, ex-service men and associates. This was the nexus of what later turned to be the Ebira (Igbirra) Tribal Union (ITU). The coming together of William Omo and Joseph Ohiani attracted other members like Rapheal Ojeba, George Ohikere, and Pa Onumayi of Okeneba etc. Respect to any constituted authority means nothing to some ex- service men. The idea of Pull Him Down syndrome was directed against Atta Ibrahim. The actions of William Omo and Obejara; though opened the eyes of the people, but was negatively directed against Atta. According to Albert Ozigi, the original and main aim of the founders of the ITU was to unite the people for developmental purposes and to seek some administrative reforms which would reduce the power of the Atta, and enable the representatives of the people to participate in the governance of the area³³. It was never their intention to remove the Atta, but to make him realize the need to accept change in the reform of N.A. system. That was why according to Albert said “Abdallah regretted that a radical group later hijacked the party and changed the objectives for their own purposes..., hence he gradually withdrew from the party as he neither subscribed to their new idea nor their method³⁴.

The impact of the Second World War was also felt in other spheres. It should be noted that the Second World War which started in 1939 coincided the Great Economic Depression of 1929 to 1939. The war period witnessed scarcity of salt. By 1941, the price of salt had increased by 100% of what it was before the war³⁵. In August 1945, C.P. Keth, the U.A.C. Manager at Lokoja, gave salt quotas for some stations as: Lokoja 500 bags, Okene 340 bags, Ajaokuta 120 bags, Idah 650 bags, Ibillo 252 bags etc. There were approved

customers and each had his own area through which he could extend sales³⁶. The depot for the distribution of salt was Utenyi, close to Okene palace of the traditional council. The demand for salt in Ebiraland was higher than the supply. Women who engaged in its sale struggle to get from the few supply. It was from such struggle to buy salt that one woman by name Anahi lost her life³⁷. It was in an attempt to out-smart others that she forgets she was standing on top of a stone. Over strengthening of hands to draw the attention of the sale manager to attend to her made her lost her balance, felt down in the midst of the crowd that were not conscious of her plight. It was on that process she lost her life.

Despite the negative impacts of the Second World War, the war had some positive impacts. Lack of imported materials like cloths enhanced the local cloth weaving industry. Ebira cloth has made its name in many parts of Nigeria, it is known as Kano cloth³⁸. The war found the cloth weaving industry already flourishing; it helped to create markets for it. The general policy during the war was to reduce imports into Nigeria and to stimulate local industries³⁹. The D.O, Mr. Stewart, could guarantee a monthly production of at least 800 blankets at 3 shillings 60 pence each. There were demands from Oyo, and Ondo provinces as well as Abeokuta while the prisons department gave contract for 15,000 feet of cloth, and in 1943, 50,000 feet of cloth was sold through the Native Authority⁴⁰.

In addition, the struggle demonstrated by the ex-service men stimulated the nationalist movement in Africa and Ebira in particular. This struggle informed the called for a change in the Native Authority system by the people and the British colonial authority who felt that some traditional rulers were becoming more powerful than expected⁴¹. The N.A council was based on Emir-in –Council where the Emir held sway. Based on the called for a change, it was changed to Emir- and- Council where the council members have the final say on any matters before it⁴². It should be noted that such change was not only due to the struggle by the ex-service men, but the British colonial authority had fell out with some traditional rulers who were not only becoming too powerful, but because they have different ideology towards western education and the call for independence. Democratic council was later put in place in Ebira N.A. This rendered Atta Ibrahim not only powerless but subjected to ridicule by the council members. By 1954, Atta Ibrahim sought to abdicate from the throne and the new political union (ITU) took over the leadership of Ebiraland.

Conclusion: The participation of an average Ebira in the Second World War has both negative and positive effects on Ebira polity. Their standard of living was higher than it hitherto used to be before they joined the army. Their participation in the Second World War made them see the strength of nationalists in Asia, fought side by side with Europeans and enable them to see the weaknesses which exposed the myth of European racial superiority. After the war, the war veterans came home with a changed outlook, a strong believe in the equality of all men, a burning desire for a better life for themselves and their people and an urgent demand for the extension to Africa, Nigeria and Ebira in particular of that freedom for which many of them had fought and died for. By 1946, after their return back home, they were demobilized and many of them were given jobs in the government and private sectors. The war veterans who had been well looked after by the army while in

active service had expected preferential treatments in the form of well-paid government jobs. Unfortunately, most of them possessed no basic educational background and secondly, the rising cost of living immediately after the Second World War did not help matters.

It was therefore not surprising to find ex-servicemen on their arrival back home to join hands with Ebira elites and began to agitate for the freedom of expression and equal treatment from the autocratic rule of Atta. The socio-political set up of the Ebira society as established by the Ebira ancestors before the Second World War was societal oriented. The Ebira polity which started from the family level, ended up with the clan-group (Ekura). The administration of all the clans constituting a clan-group lay in the hands of the elders, influential individuals and the Chief Priest (ohiniyi etc.). The socio-political set up of the Ebira society as established by Ebira ancestors was societal oriented. The essence of these political set ups, be it as the head of the family or clan or tribe was there for the furtherance of the welfare of those it represents. He was not there to exploit the people he was supposed to lead for his personal gains as that contradict the legitimacy of his office. The decree of self denial inhibited in Ebira traditional leadership philosophy is demonstrated in the common wise saying that “Ozoku O. Zuka a vavi”. In other words, “the leader should bear the burden of his people”. Respect then was accorded to any constituted authority. The conquest of Ebiraland by the British colonial authority around 1900 was a mixed feeling. It brought both fortunes and misfortunes as highlighted above.

The creation of a central leadership for the people of Ebiraland by the British authority brought in Atta Ibrahim as the district head in November 1917 and later sole native authority in 1923. The choice of a young man by the British was a serious arbitration on the leadership structure that was gerontocratic in Ebiraland. Thus a seed of discord was sown by the British among the people of Ebira. What ensued were bitterness, rancor and gang-up among other contestants that lost out. The need to retain power by the Atta and the struggle to bring him down stimulated the formation of the first political unions in Ebiraland. This was the situation in Ebiraland before the Second World War.

The awareness created by some war veterans, though rough to the Ebira, but “opened their eyes” to the understanding that they could challenge the power of the Atta. Though, Atta was autocratic, but it should be noted that force was the only language available to all traditional rulers under British colonial authority within the period under discussion. It was through force that many of them who want to achieve were able to put in place infrastructures for the benefit of their people. The I.T.U that later unseat the Atta on 30th June, 1954 could not achieve more when compared with Atta’s administration. The Okene water board and the diary system in Obangede that produces water and milk respectively to the people are no more today. Respect to seniority and constituted authority became a thing of the past. Incinerator and the Public Toilets system which were established at strategic places to serve the general public have gone into the cooler. There is no doubt that autocracy has its negative tendency but when such administrative style was able to put in place infrastructural facilities for the benefit of his people called for re-examination, bearing in mind that forced labour was key to British colonial administration.

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