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## **A Lonely Winged Crusader Did Count Carl von Rosen “Do the Right Thing” in Biafra?**

What distinguishes a courageous hero from a courageous fool? <sup>1</sup> To some, the Swedish Count Carl Gustav von Rosen (1909-1977) was a heroic pilot who repeatedly renounced social privilege to risk his life to save innocents from aggression. To others--especially during the Nigerian civil war against secessionist “Biafra” -- the Count was a bumbling innocent abroad, somebody who inadvertently increased human suffering by helping to prolong the war. <sup>2</sup>

In the 1930’s, the Count flew for Ethiopia against imperialist Italy; by so doing, he became the Red Cross’ first relief pilot. He then briefly flew for Finland against invading Russia. But his greatest fame--and controversy-- occurred in 1968-1969, when he aided Biafra’s secessionist attempt against sovereign Nigeria. First, he broke a Nigerian blockade against relief supplies for starving Biafrans. Then he helped run a massive aerial relief effort--the world’s largest since the 1940s Berlin Airlift--which totaled 7,800 flights by war’s end. <sup>3</sup> Finally, as Biafra’s death toll climbed into the hundreds of thousands, von Rosen covertly organized and led an improvised force of lightly-armed propeller planes against the vastly superior Nigerian military. Events took their toll and by mid-late 1969, von Rosen apparently stopped flying for Biafra and returned home to Sweden. The Count had accepted only nominal expenses for any of these three endeavors.

Why look at von Rosen? After all, his involvement in Biafra had limited effect--Nigeria won the twenty-month civil war in January 1970--and history largely relegates the Count to footnote status. Yet, von Rosen influenced major changes within the humanitarian world, all of which have continuing relevance. The Biafran relief effort--in which the Count played a catalytic role-- created what Alex de Waal terms the “humanitarian international: “the growing “international elite of...international relief agencies, academics, consultants...human rights workers,” David Rieff notes that “Many of the most influential North America, British and Irish aid workers of the past 30 years...got their start during the Biafran war” *Medicins San Frontieres*, winner of the 1999 Nobel Peace Prize, grew out of the Biafran relief effort. “The humanitarian legend of Biafra” <sup>4</sup> became a

major impetus for the “responsibility to protect” doctrine.

Key to this article is how von Rosen’s Biafran exploits illustrate the complexities of heroism, of “doing the right thing.” Attributes usually associated with heroism include risk/sacrifice of self for a greater good, and ethical methods. Count von Rosen’s personal intentions, his courage and his combat ethics meet many of these standard criteria of heroism.<sup>5</sup>

Another reason for examining von Rosen is that he confronted three major dilemmas-- all of which have continuing relevance. First, *whether humanitarian relief perpetuates human suffering by prolonging conflicts*. Well-intentioned aid when inserted into a conflict loses its neutrality, since local combatants will try to use the aid for their own purposes. Von Rosen’s relief and military operations make him a hero to many but a fool to others, since secessionist Biafra used his contributions to knowingly lengthen the war’s duration.<sup>6</sup>

Second, *whether sovereignty be absolute or should it be conditional*, i.e. depending on the government’s treatment of its civilians. Reflective of the classic divide between legal positivism and natural rights, von Rosen intensely believed in his--and the world’s--responsibility to protect civilian victims of war, rather than to acquiesce with the colonial boundaries of a repressive state. Critics of the Count countered that a successful secession would approach the apex of political foolishness: and independent Biafra would eviscerate Nigeria, could trigger secessionist violence in already-shaky African states and, generally, weaken international sovereignty--the glue of international relations since 1645.

Third, *whether armed struggle against perceived repression require a “reasonable chance of success.”* If so, what constitutes “reasonable” and “success?” Von Rosen believed, *ipso facto*, that any defense of innocents against armed repression was just, regardless of the possible odds. Critics replied that Biafra could not win the war against a more powerful Nigeria and therefore, prolonging the suffering was foolishly immoral.

This article begins by summarizing the Biafran war and examines von Rosen’s intent and methods during the conflict. It then analyzes (1) the possible connection between humanitarian relief and conflict prolongation (2) the absolute vs. conditional sovereignty issue, and (3) what constitutes a

“reasonable chance of success”—all to determine whether von Rosen was more hero than fool, more a Lancelot than a Quixote.

Footnotes:

1. The debate between courageous heroism and foolishness is long-standing. Socrates discussed it with two generals (without resolving it) in Plato’s “Laches,” [classicsmit.edu/Plato/Laches](http://classicsmit.edu/Plato/Laches).
2. This is the first English-language journal article about Count von Rosen. He wrote “Biafra:Ghetto” in 1969 in Swedish (trans. Into French) and – von Rosen, his daughter-in law wrote his biography, *Dödsorak Ogaden (cite)*, which has one chapter on Biafra, in 2013.
3. John Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* Princeton University Press, 1977. p. 210.
4. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, “Humanitarian Aid and the Biafra War: Lessons Not Learned,” Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, 2009 (ISSN 0850-3907).
5. Many of this paper’s heroism attributes come from, or relate to, Just War theory. An introductory text on Just War is *The Morality of War: A Reader*, David Kinsella and Craig L. Carr, eds. (Lynne Rienner Boulder CO, 2007).
6. Two oft-cited admonitions reflect a long-standing tension between intent and result: Edmund Burke’s “the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing” versus Johnson’s warning that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.”