

Universalizing the Holocaust:

Discourses of Genocide and Human Rights in the Biafran War (1967-1970)

In the summer months of 1968, images of starving children in famine-ridden secessionist Biafra began to disconcert the “conscience of the world”, as *Time* magazine stated. Many contemporaries drew on discourses about the Second World War in their efforts to come to terms with the postcolonial crisis in Nigeria. In the humanitarian narratives presented in parts of the mass media and in publications by different activists, comparisons of the “genocides” of the Jews and the Igbos, the “Jews of Africa”, were widespread; the sites of starvation were described as Africa’s “Dachau camps of Hunger”, the head of Nigeria’s military government likened to Hitler. Most of these tropes were not mere comparisons, but forthright metaphors. According to interaction theory, metaphors generate meanings on both sides of a metaphor: on the side of the vehicle and of the tenor. The semantics of the Biafran War and of Nazi Germany’s crimes against humanity were consequently *both* changed by these tropes. In their effects on semantics about Biafra, the function of these metaphors is rather blatant: they were used to add power to claims for Biafran independence and the humanitarian campaign. How these metaphors affected meanings of the Holocaust, however, is a more complicated issue. In this paper, it will be argued that such metaphorical discourses were vital for the universalization of the Holocaust as a master narrative of human rights atrocities: The Holocaust was not universal as such; it needed to be retrospectively universalized by historical actors. This paper will draw on different sources such as governmental press releases, minutes of parliamentary debates, reports in the mass media and publications by humanitarian activists to analyse the functions of Holocaust semantics in transnational political communication about the Biafran War.

NOTE (FROM SIMON): *This paper and abstract were received on January 2. Ms Heerten wrote: “I am very sorry that I did not already send you the paper yesterday - rather unfortunately, I somehow memorised January 2 as the deadline and only found out about my mistake some hours ago when it was already too late. I hope very much that you are still able to accept my abstract, as I would indeed love to participate.” I wasn’t sure what our policy was on late submissions, so I replied: “Many thanks for your submission to the Graduate Student Conference, ‘Claiming the World: Universalisms in Doctrine and in Action,’ hosted by the Department of History at Columbia University on 27 March 2009. I’m not sure what the steering committee’s policy will be on submissions received after the deadline, but I will forward your submission to the committee along with all the others. I hope that it will indeed*

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be considered. The committee will contact all those who have submitted proposals shortly with their decision, once they have been able to examine all the submissions together.”