5. The Extra-European Foundations of British Imperialism: Towards a Reassessment

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In a justly acclaimed article published in 1972, entitled ‘The Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism’, Dr Ronald Robinson deftly produced a ‘sketch’ for a theory of collaboration. ‘The theory of collaboration’, he wrote, ‘suggests that at every stage from external imperialism [or informal empire] to decolonisation, the working of imperialism was determined by the indigenous collaborative systems connecting its European and Afro-Asian components. It was as much and often more a function of Afro-Asian politics than of European politics and economics’.¹ In conclusion, he enumerates the five main stages or periods of collaboration:

At the outset it depended on the absence or presence of effective indigenous collaborators, and the character of indigenous society, whether imperialist invasions of Africa and Asia were practicable or not. Secondly, the transition from one phase of imperialism to the next was governed by the need to reconstruct and uphold a collaborative system that was breaking down. The breakdown of indigenous collaboration in many instances necessitated the deeper imperial intervention that led to imperial takeover. Thirdly, the choice of indigenous collaboration, more than anything
else, determined the organisation and character of colonial rule. . . . Fourthly, when the colonial rulers had run out of indigenous collaboration, they either chose to leave or were compelled to go. . . . Lastly, since anticolonial movements emerged as coalitions of non-collaboration out of the collaborative equations of colonial rule and the transfer of power, the elements and character of Afro-Asian national parties and governments in the first era of independence projected a kind of mirror image of collaboration under imperialism.²

A first reaction to this basically simple set of propositions is one of wonder at the breadth of its scope. It covers both formal and informal empire in the long period of the expansion of European mercantile capitalism up to the middle of the nineteenth century. It covers the high-noon of nineteenth-century imperialism, and resistance to it (it should be noted that at every stage the theory of collaboration can be inverted to explain non-collaboration or outright resistance). It covers twentieth-century colonisation, nationalism, neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism, development, underdevelopment and non-development. Dr Robinson's theory of collaboration has turned out to be a veritable Pandora's Box, into which a vast range of problematic elements have been crammed.

The theory has been widely accepted by historians and other scholars. It has become a major part of the conventional wisdom in writings on aspects of imperialism, made use of by Marxist and non-Marxist historians alike. This chapter will examine two 'case histories' which illustrate different stages of the theory. The first, the response of the Ottoman empire to European pressure and intervention, relates to the period of informal empire and also suggests the reasons why there was not a European carve-up of the empire until after the First World War. The second case examines the European conquest of West Africa (with a brief excursion into Ethiopia). It will describe the military and violent nature of this conquest and will pose (if not answer) the query, was this conquest an outcome of the breakdown of the collaborative mechanisms in that region? In conclusion, a few general points will be made about collaboration and resistance.