

## **Cooperation and Empire**



# COOPERATION AND EMPIRE

## Local Realities of Global Processes



*Edited by*

Tanja Bühner, Flavio Eichmann, Stig Förster and  
Benedikt Stuchtey



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# **Introduction**

## **Cooperation and Empire: Local Realities of Global Processes**

**Tanja Bühner, Flavio Eichmann, Stig Förster  
and Benedikt Stuchtey**



During the First World War the young British officer Thomas E. Lawrence played a leading role in the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire that helped the allies win the war in the Middle East. Lawrence's adventures and his open sympathy for the Arab cause earned him not only promotions but also the admiration of many Arab warriors. He became famous as Lawrence of Arabia. At the Peace Conference in Paris Lawrence served as an advisor to Prince Faisal's delegation and often sided with the Arab cause against the aspirations of the imperialistic powers who intended to carve up the defunct Ottoman Empire and distribute the spoils of victory among themselves. Some British countrymen therefore accused Lawrence of having 'gone native'.<sup>1</sup> Had he really abandoned loyalty to his country or did he just regard the allied policy of broken promises vis-à-vis the Arabs as shameful? Was Lawrence primarily an agent of British imperial interests, a friend of the Arab cause or something in between?

In the mid-1880s the British civil servant Wilfrid Scawen Blunt visited India. He reported on a growing conflict among the 'natives'. On the one hand 'Westernizers', though well-meaning, were all too Anglophile, almost justifying British imperial rule. On the other hand, 'traditionalists' opposed Western education as it symbolized an essentially non-religious life. Blunt, who was one of the most prolific critics of European expansionism in his time, blamed the Westernizers for accommodating too easily to Western power.<sup>2</sup> But were they collaborators in the sense of being traitors to their

own country or nation, who aided the British in their imperial designs in South Asia, when both concepts did not even exist at the time? Or should we rather see them as personally and intellectually flexible people who could project themselves in new contexts? Could their position even have been that of translators who helped bridge Western ‘rationalism’ with non-European cultures? And what about the thousands of indigenous clerks and soldiers in the service of the East India Company?

These and many similar cases raise questions of loyalty and dissent, of collaboration and resistance and of the crossing of boundaries against the background of imperial expansion and rule. Why did indigenous actors engage in negotiations with imperial interlopers at all? To what extent did their interests overlap? Was a faithful and mutually beneficial relationship possible or could empires only produce contingent arrangements? How far did these cross-cultural interactions create imperial situations on the ground, and to what extent did pre-colonial cultures, socio-political and economic realities determine cooperative structures? In any case, these encounters merit further investigation.

## THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

First, however, we should discuss the conceptual and theoretical dimensions of this issue. In the 1970s and 1980s, the British historian Ronald Robinson challenged the hitherto predominant Eurocentric theories of imperialism. He formulated a peripheral approach, arguing that indigenous<sup>3</sup> collaboration represented both a formative and continuous factor of imperialism. Robinson’s theory particularly emphasized that by collaborating with the colonial state, indigenous actors contributed to the creation of empires, to their preservation and eventually to their dissolution.<sup>4</sup>

To some extent, Robinson’s thesis may have been a truism. Yet, most historians before him had largely ignored the role of indigenous collaboration. Unlike his seminal essay ‘The Imperialism of Free Trade’, co-authored with John Gallagher in 1953,<sup>5</sup> Robinson’s theory of collaboration did not provoke intense debate. Nevertheless, his peripheral turn contributed to the emergence of area studies that became the predominant paradigm in extra-European history in the 1980s, focusing on local initiatives, forces and actors. However, area studies soon became so empirically specialized and detached both from imperial centres and each other that they could no longer be combined with other case studies or incorporated into a broader context.<sup>6</sup> New ‘grand theories’ about the process of imperialism became rare and had disappeared altogether by the 1990s.<sup>7</sup> In addition, many

scholars shifted their focus to national narratives of postcolonial successor states.<sup>8</sup> Imperial history thus came to be associated with colonial rule and bureaucratic authoritarianism, narratives of Western superiority and, in some cases, even covert racism.<sup>9</sup> Considering the personal background of this generation of scholars – Robinson, Gallagher and many of their colleagues served in the British colonies during the Second World War – such a view on the colonial state appears to be hardly surprising.<sup>10</sup> Confronted with the cultural turn in the 1980s, some of them consequently even predicted the demise of their own field of research.<sup>11</sup>

The very end of imperial history seemed to be marked by the rise of postcolonial studies in the 1990s, which can essentially be seen as an application of Edward Said's 'Orientalism'<sup>12</sup> thesis from the field of literary studies to history. Scholars henceforth predominantly dealt with representations of imperialism, analysing images, symbols and colonial discourses in order to understand both how 'the other' was depreciated through the gaze of the colonizers and how the colonizers thereby constructed their 'superior' identity. This scepticism towards Western structures of knowledge, as well as the authentic perceptions of the other, runs contrary to Robinson's theory of collaboration, which presumes a mutual understanding of colonizers and colonized and at least some correct empirical knowledge of the others' socio-political situation and interests. He had already implicitly challenged this cultural essentialism by posing the question in his work of 1972 of 'how a handful of European pro-consuls managed to manipulate the polymorphic societies of Africa and Asia, and how ... comparatively small, nationalist elites persuaded them to leave'.<sup>13</sup>

Leading practitioners of the currently dominant fields of global studies and world history have built on exactly these insights. As Jürgen Osterhammel has pointed out, considering the generally very low material input and deployment of personnel during European expansion, it is completely implausible that such a process could have taken place in a context of socio-cultural ignorance and implemented in a one-sided manner.<sup>14</sup> Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper have also emphasized that 'rulers of empires could never send out enough governors, generals and tax collectors to take charge of territories incorporated' and consequently depended on 'the skills, knowledge and authority of people from a conquered society'.<sup>15</sup> It is not surprising then that current approaches within global and transnational history broadly agree that one of the salient issues must be the study of concrete interactions between the 'colonized' and the 'colonizers' and that particular attention should be given to the crucial figures of brokers and intermediaries, who acted as a go-between by translating and negotiating political as well as cultural compromises.<sup>16</sup> These figures provided access to local knowledge

about politics, economies, revenue systems, cultures, and eventually about the exploitation of these resources.<sup>17</sup> Intermediaries were also central to the process of decolonization. One of the main causes of decolonization, for instance, was the replacement of 'traditional' indigenous collaborators such as chiefs with a bureaucratized colonial state in the late nineteenth century, which led the colonial state to lose touch with its subjects.<sup>18</sup>

On closer examination, both global and transnational history, and even postcolonial studies after Said, are thus essentially dealing with similar issues as Robinson, merely conceptualizing them on a different level, from a different angle and enunciated in a different jargon. Robinson's figure of the 'Europeanized collaborator'<sup>19</sup> can be seen as related to Homi K. Bhabha's 'Mimic Men',<sup>20</sup> who served similar functions as the currently prevalent figure of the 'intermediary'. In addition, the postcolonial notion of 'hybridity' and its claim to exceed binary categories resonate strongly with Robinson's idea of collaborative systems as fields of interaction between European and extra-European components.<sup>21</sup> This is demonstrated by Robinson's definition of imperialism as 'an inter-continental process, [in which] its true metropolis appears neither at the centre nor on the periphery, but in their changing relativities'.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, approaches of global and transnational history point out the reciprocal complexities of the various transcultural encounters<sup>23</sup> and propose the idea of non-centred global connectedness as an alternative to the national and imperialistic narrative. Finally, Robinson's emphasis on indigenous actors opened the way for non-Eurocentric perspectives<sup>24</sup> and theories of indigenous agency.<sup>25</sup> These are central issues to the New Social History,<sup>26</sup> which argues that colonial subjects were not helpless victims of superior forces and institutions, but historical actors who were active agents and who acquired information, tools and resources.<sup>27</sup>

Given these common research agendas, combined with current pleas to recognize that the different approaches of imperial, postcolonial and global history can supplement each other rather than being incompatible,<sup>28</sup> it is time to revisit Robinson's notion of collaboration and thus try to overcome existing methodological shortcomings. While imperial history tends to provide a one-sided perspective of the implementation of imperial rule, the postcolonial approaches of Said and Bhabha have failed to analyse how colonialism actually worked on the ground.<sup>29</sup> By creatively blending the concept of imperial history with new perspectives of postcolonial and global history, *Cooperation and Empire* aims to break new ground and provide a better understanding of how empires worked in practice and how collaboration functioned as a product of complex interaction. While discourse theory should not be rejected completely, postcolonial claims and concepts need to be supported by empirical evidence. Postcolonial sensibilities for

ambiguity can help us overcome Robinson's rather binary conception of collaboration as an interaction between colonizers and colonized. This opens up new views on in-between spaces, sites of cross-cultural negotiation, where innovative socio-political, economic as well as legal realities and novel identities emerged. Similarly, Robinson's focus on high politics and collaboration between elites, his model of elite co-optation, will in this volume be complemented by analyses of subaltern transactions, non-state centred co-operative connections within 'colonial' societies and perspectives from the margins of empire.

Opening up Robinson's theory of collaboration methodologically also brings into view a considerably broader range of agents. This book thus differs from recent studies on intermediaries in the colonial context insofar as it is not only focussed on specific groups of intermediaries in specific areas.<sup>30</sup> Instead it takes into consideration different regions on all continents as well as a wide variety of agents such as chiefs and kings, diplomats, clerks, soldiers, native guards, interpreters, teachers, scientists, women, 'white' settlers and socially marginalized people with only limited access to the colonial state or other centres of power. In addition, this book not only revolves around individual actors or groups, but analyses these agents in the larger framework of the institutions, socio-political, economic and cultural realities in which they were embedded. Furthermore, special attention will be given to the imperial structures, networks and practices that emerged or were created by these cross-cultural interactions. Robinson's focus on political and economic fields of cooperation will be extended to include current topics of research such as education, warfare and intercultural diplomacy, and precolonial structures persisting within the colonial state that have so far often been ignored in analyses of empires. At the same time, studies of imperial administrative structures, high politics and military expansion, which have been neglected by the recently predominant cultural, global and transnational historiography, will return to centre stage – not of course as one-sided accounts of imperial impact but in the context of reciprocal encounters. The aim of this book is to examine these forms of cooperation from both sides, to uncover indigenous motives, interests and strategies in their engagement, while remaining aware that because of the prevalence of European sources, there is a danger that imperial norms and prejudices will be reproduced.

Our modifications regarding methodological approaches and perspectives also involve a reconsideration of Robinson's terminology. For native English speakers and for Robinson himself the term 'collaboration' might have had a neutral character. But for German and French readers, for instance, it is impossible to dismiss the term's pejorative connotation, given

its historic reference to the collaboration with the Nazi occupying forces in Europe. This is similar for audiences in postcolonial states, as the term, with its negative connotations, has also been applied to studies of anticolonial, revolutionary and nationalist independence struggles, more or less explicitly accusing indigenous groups of siding with imperial powers as traitors to the national cause. By considering collaboration as the very antithesis of resistance, such labelling is not only based on an anachronistic perspective of the postcolonial nation state.<sup>31</sup> This pejorative terminology also opens up a dichotomy, which this volume aims to replace with a more balanced view of the relationship between ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’.<sup>32</sup>

Given these reservations, the term ‘collaboration’ does not seem a very viable heuristic tool at first sight. Scholars of global, world and transnational history thus tend to refer instead to the concept of the indigenous intermediary,<sup>33</sup> but as outlined above this exclusive figure would not cover all agents and topics addressed in this volume. Colin Newbury has suggested replacing Robinson’s concept of ‘collaboration’ with a patron-client relationship.<sup>34</sup> This model might be appropriate to describe early encounters, for instance when European minorities entered as clients into a social space that was not regulated according to their norms, yet it is limited to asymmetrical and pre-modern relationships. Similarly, Richard White’s famous concept of the ‘Middle Ground’ is only adequate for cases in which the actors involved could not expect large-scale material support from their respective bases of power.<sup>35</sup>

The term ‘cooperation’ seems to be a more promising alternative. It covers a wide range of imperial-indigenous relationships and it suggests an interaction between two equals or two parties of different standings in which even the minor partner had a certain level of bargaining power. Yet in contrast to ‘collaboration’ – and similar to concepts of global history such as ‘non-centred connectedness’ and ‘mutual encounters’ – it connotes a rather positive interaction (talking frequently as it does of joint efforts, alliances, exchange of services, projects, partnership) and can thus, if used in an unreflective way, obscure or euphemize unequal and exploitative relationships.<sup>36</sup> However, imperial coercion and forms of cooperation were often two sides of the same coin: when cooperation failed, the colonial state usually made a violent effort to enforce it. Exploitation, brute force and forms of cooperation often occurred simultaneously, yet frequently materialized on different levels and thus affected the various social classes differently. Despite such violent enforcement, the colonial state remained relatively weak, which even in asymmetrical power relationships provided room for manoeuvre for local agents. Only in extreme situations were the latter reduced to mere stooges.<sup>37</sup>

Nonetheless, we should bear in mind the inherently coercive nature of the colonial context and there are therefore certain limits to the concept of cooperation. In highly exploitative relationships such as slavery even the term 'forced cooperation' fails to convey the full extent of dependence, no matter how qualified the definition. In addition, we must be particularly careful with official representations of the form and language of consent, as they might hide imposed authorities. Since European imperial agents aspired to legitimize expansion and colonial rule – not only towards native peoples and rival imperial powers, but also towards the metropolitan government – they were keen to obtain testimonials of consent from representatives of indigenous societies, which were frequently gained by coercion.<sup>38</sup> To sum up, we have to differentiate between a wide range of cooperative relationships and structures, in which both the motives of the actors involved and the degree of imperial coercion varied greatly.

There is also another group of indigenous actors who voluntarily served the imperial project but who cannot be captured by the concept of 'cooperation'. Their behaviour is best described by the term 'collaboration', which needs to be reintroduced in our analysis here in order to adequately label their activities. It is not our intention to hereby resurrect anachronistic concepts such as the nation state or to condemn certain behaviour, such as switching allegiance from an indigenous to an imperial patron and deferring to a regionally common strategy in order to enhance one's professional position. But voluntary decisions to serve the imperial project acquire a treacherous character when indigenous actors are aware that the imperial interlopers will profoundly change or even destroy local or interregional socio-political power structures, unlike earlier conquerors who merely co-opted local structures. Many of these collaborators were perfectly aware that their actions would radically change the common people's way of life for the worse. One such example might be Ghulam Husain Khan, who like his forefathers had served in the Mughal and Bengal nawabi governments, but in the 1770s offered his services to the British. Khan described the drain of wealth of Bengal caused by the misgovernment and corruption of the East India Company officials, to the disadvantage of the local nobility, service gentry and the mass of the people. He was also convinced that the British would remain ignorant of indigenous customs and principles of government and thus would not establish a mutually beneficial cooperation with the Indian societies.<sup>39</sup> Christopher A. Bayly has accurately described such Indian career diplomats and experts, who switched to British imperial service at the expense of the declining centre of the Mughal Empire, as 'uneasy collaborators'.<sup>40</sup>