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### [Review of: M. Abbenhuis, I. Tames (2022) Global War, Global Catastrophe: Neutrals, Belligerents and the Transformations of the First World War]

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## Book Reviews

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Maartje Abbenhuis and Ismee Tames, *Global War, Global Catastrophe: Neutrals, Belligerents and the Transformations of the First World War*, Bloomsbury Academic: London, 2021; 248 pp., 20 b/w illus.; 9781474275866, £70.00 (hbk); 9781474275859, £21.99 (pbk)

**Reviewed by:** Samuël Kruizinga, *University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands*

The First World War was both a global and ‘total’ conflict. It consumed both human and non-human resources to a degree that, to contemporaries, was experienced as unparalleled. And the war’s manifold effects, whether they were physical, societal, economic or cultural, impacted everyone, although not to the same degree or with the same effects. This is the central quandary of anyone brave enough to attempt to write a history of what Annette Becker has called a ‘total global tragedy’: is it even possible to capture the maelstrom of different experiences, spread out across time and space, and mediated as well by gendered, racial and other hierarchies – let alone do them justice – in a single readable volume? Maartje Abbenhuis and Ismee Tames’ book is not, by their own admission, a new global history of the war, but has a more modest aim: to highlight some of the many ‘human faces’ (9) of this new form of global warfare, and show how the connections between their experiences help explain why something that began as a run-of-the-mill international crisis ended up unmooring a century of expectations, mores and rules, and created a world of highly visible, globally connected but inherently contradictory expectations, ambitions, hopes and fears.

Each chapter focuses on a key ‘moment’ of the war and highlights its global reverberations. Some of these ‘moments’ are concrete events, such as the British declaration of war turning a European into a global conflict, the German invasion of Belgium casting the war as one in which various interpretations of ‘civilization’ and ‘culture’ did battle, the Russian revolution creating scope for radical political and societal changes, and the American declaration of war eliminating spaces for neutral non-commitment vis-à-vis the war. Others are longer-term developments: the political, military, cultural and mental jump from the expectation that the war would be short to a reality of all-encompassing conflict without limits in space or time in 1915, and the increasing strain on individuals, societies, nations and empires as they faced the increasing, and increasingly conflicting, demands of life in total war. The selection of these ‘moments’ will not come as a surprise to scholars

of the war. One, however, is genuinely new and original, and focuses on identity and identity-formation as a key factor in the development of total, global war. If the war was about ‘us’ versus ‘them’, who or what was part of ‘us’?

Here lies the greatest strength of the book. It tells a mostly familiar story, but does so by illuminating just how pervasive and how far-reaching some of the transformations wrought by the war were, and how deeply they impacted ordinary lives. From the neutral Liberian economy destroyed by blockade to the Ngati Porou tribe of New Zealand saluting the Belgian flag following its invasion by Germany, from the desperate letters from an Indian soldier begging his brother not to volunteer for war in ‘civilized’ Europe to the parallel imperial war waged by the French in Volta Bani (current-day Burkina Faso and Mali) in 1915–1917, their tales stay with the reader long after they have finished reading.

What is more, these stories serve to illuminate the book’s central argument: that the total, global First World War produced, enhanced or illuminated so many contradictory hopes, fears, claims, expectations and hatreds that no post-war settlement could ever hope to satisfy them all, producing a world with glaringly visible and globally connected inequalities ‘infused with the grief and anger that the violence of the war had unleashed on the world’ (173).

I do wonder, however, whether the book completely succeeds in making its point. Firstly, the book’s conscious focus on ‘outlier’ examples from places often very far from the familiar Western Front occasionally makes it harder to see the contradictions in the responses to the war that are so central to the core argument Abbenhuis and Tames are making, especially since many of those examples point in similar directions. Moreover, in replicating the familiar structure of many older and decidedly less ‘global’ First World War surveys, it runs the risk of instilling in the reader the sense that the First World War was something that ‘radiated’ out of Europe, rather than a truly worldwide event that was experienced and interpreted using local interpretative frameworks.

A more ‘provincialized’ approach to the war is, perhaps, the next milestone for the ongoing quest to understand total and global war. In the meantime, this book is impressive in its breadth, elegantly written, and provides a short and succinct introduction to the state of the art of research into an ever more global First World War.

Boris Akunin, *Istoriia rossiiskogo gosudarstva. Tsar’-osvoboditel’ i tsar’-mirotvorets. Lekarstvo dlia imperii* [*History of the Russian State. The Tsar-Liberator and the Tsar-Peacemaker. Medicine for the Empire*], Izdatel’stvo AST: Moscow, 2021; 384 pp., 90 illus.; 9785170825790, 1999 rubles (hbk)

**Reviewed by:** Anton Fedyashin, *American University, Washington, DC, USA*

The Georgian-born Russian detective fiction writer and public intellectual Boris Akunin launched the ‘History of the Russian State’ series with the AST publishing house in 2013.