

"[Tolstoy is the] greatest of all novelists."
—VIRGINIA WOOLF

HADJI MURÁD

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Classics

Leo TOLSTOY

Translation, Preface, and Notes by
AYLMER MAUDE
Introduction by AZAR NAFISI

“...The two stacks of hay there had been burnt; the apricot and cherry trees he had planted and reared were broken and scorched; and, worse still, all the beehives and bees were burnt. The wailing of the women and of the little children who cried with their mothers, mingled with the lowing of the hungry cattle, for whom there was no food. The bigger children did not play, but followed their elders with frightened eyes. The fountain was polluted, evidently on purpose, so that the water could not be used. The mosque was polluted in the same way, and the Mullah and his assistants were cleaning it out. No one spoke of hatred of the Russians. The feeling experienced by all the Chechens, from the youngest to the oldest, was stronger than hate. It was not hatred, for they did not regard those Russian dogs as human beings; but it was such repulsion, disgust, and perplexity at the senseless cruelty of these creatures, that the desire to exterminate them—like the desire to exterminate rats, poisonous spiders, or wolves—was as natural an instinct as that of self-preservation.”

Leo Tolstoy

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*Translation, Preface, and Notes
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In 1851 Leo Tolstoy enlisted in the Russian army and was sent to the Caucasus to help defeat the Chechens. During this war a great Avar chieftain, Hadji Murád, broke with the Chechen leader Shamil and fled to the Russians for safety. Months later, while attempting to rescue his family from Shamil's prison, Hadji Murád was pursued by those he had betrayed and, after fighting the most heroic battle of his life, was killed.

Tolstoy, witness to many of the events leading to Hadji Murád's death, set down this story with painstaking accuracy to preserve for future generations the horror, nobility, and destruction inherent in war.

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LEO TOLSTOY

Count Lev (Leo) Nikolayevich Tolstoy was born on August 28, 1828, at Yasnaya Polyana (Bright Glade), his family's estate located 130 miles southwest of Moscow. He was the fourth of five children born to Count Nikolay Ilyich Tolstoy and Marya Nikolayevna Tolstaya (née Princess Volkonskaya, who died when Tolstoy was barely two). He enjoyed a privileged childhood typical of his elevated social class (his patrician family was older and prouder than the tsar's). Early on, the boy showed a gift for languages as well as a fondness for literature—including fairy tales, the poems of Pushkin, and the Bible, especially the Old Testament story of Joseph. Orphaned at the age of nine by the death of his father, Tolstoy and his brothers and sister were first cared for by a devoutly religious aunt. When she died in 1841 the family went to live with their father's only surviving sister in the provincial city of Kazan. Tolstoy was educated by French and German tutors until he enrolled at Kazan University in 1844. There he studied law and Oriental languages and developed a keen interest in moral philosophy and the writings of Rousseau. A notably unsuccessful student who led a dissolute life, Tolstoy abandoned his studies in 1847 without earning a degree and returned to Yasnaya Polyana to claim the property (along with 350 serfs and their families) that was his birthright.

After several aimless years of debauchery and gambling in Moscow and St. Petersburg, Tolstoy journeyed to the Caucasus in 1851 to join his older brother Nikolay, an army lieutenant participating in the Caucasian campaign. The following year Tolstoy officially enlisted in the military, and in 1854 he became a commissioned officer in the artillery, serving first on the Danube and later in the Crimean War. Although his sexual escapades and profligate gambling during this period shocked even his fellow soldiers, it was while in the army that Tolstoy began his literary apprenticeship. Greatly influenced by the works of Charles Dickens, Tolstoy wrote *Childhood*, his first novel. Published pseudonymously in September 1852 in the *Contemporary*, a St. Petersburg journal, the book received highly favorable reviews—earning the praise of Turgenev—and overnight established Tolstoy as a major writer. Over the next years he contributed several novels and short stories (about military life) to the *Contemporary*—including *Boyhood* (1854), three *Sevastopol* stories (1855-1856), *Two Hussars* (1856), and *Youth* (1857).

In 1856 Tolstoy left the army and went to live in St. Petersburg, where he was much in demand in fashionable salons. He quickly discovered, however, that he disliked the life of a literary celebrity (he often quarreled with fellow writers, especially Turgenev) and soon departed on his first trip to western Europe. Upon returning to Russia, he produced the story "Three Deaths" and a short novel, *Family Happiness*, both published in 1859. Afterward, Tolstoy decided to abandon literature in favor of more "useful" pursuits. He retired to Yasnaya Polyana to manage his estate and established a school there for the education of children of his serfs. In 1860 he again traveled abroad in order to observe European (especially German) educational systems; he later published *Yasnaya Polyana*, a journal expounding his theories on pedagogy. The following year he was appointed an arbiter of the peace to settle disputes between newly emancipated serfs and their former masters. But in July 1862 the police raided the school at Yasnaya Polyana for evidence of subversive activity. The search elicited an indignant protest from Tolstoy directly to Alexander II, who officially exonerated him.

That same summer, at the age of thirty-four, Tolstoy fell in love with eighteen-year-old Sofya Andreyevna Bers, who was living with her parents on a nearby estate. (As a girl she had reverently memorized whole passages of *Childhood*.) The two were married on September 23, 1862, in a church inside the Kremlin walls. The early years of the marriage were largely joyful (thirteen children were born of the union) and coincided with the period of Tolstoy's great novels. In 1863 he not only published *The Cossacks*, but began work on *War and Peace*, his great epic novel that came out in 1869.

Then, on March 18, 1873, inspired by the opening of a fragmentary tale by Pushkin, Tolstoy started writing *Anna Karenina*. Originally titled *Two Marriages*, the book underwent multiple revisions and was serialized to great popular and critical acclaim between 1875 and 1877.

It was during the torment of writing *Anna Karenina* that Tolstoy experienced the spiritual crisis that recast the rest of his life. Haunted by the inevitability of death, he underwent a "conversion" to the ideals of human life and conduct that he found in the teachings of Christ. *A Confession* (1882), which was banned in Russia, marked this change in his life and works. Afterward, he became an extreme rationalist and moralist, and in a series of pamphlets published during his remaining years Tolstoy rejected both church and state, denounced private ownership of property, and advocated celibacy, even in marriage. In 1897 he even went so far as to renounce his own novels, as well as many other classics, including Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, for being morally irresponsible, elitist, and corrupting. His teachings earned him numerous followers in Russia ("We have two tsars, Nicholas II and Leo Tolstoy," a journalist wrote) and abroad (most notably, Mahatma Gandhi) but also many opponents, and in 1902 he was excommunicated by the Russian holy synod. Prompted by Turgenev's deathbed entreaty ("My friend, return to literature!"), Tolstoy did produce several more short stories and novels—including the ongoing series *Stories for the People*, "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" (1886), *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889), "Master and Man" (1895), *Resurrection* (1899), and *Hadji Murád* (published posthumously)—as well as a play, *The Power of Darkness* (1886).

Tolstoy's controversial views produced a great strain on his marriage, and his relationship with his wife deteriorated. "Until the day I die she will be a stone around my neck," he wrote. "I must learn not to drown with this stone around my neck." Finally, on the morning of October 28, 1910, Tolstoy fled by railroad from Yasnaya Polyana headed for a monastery in search of peace and solitude. However, illness forced Tolstoy off the train at Astapovo; he was given refuge in the stationmaster's house and died there on November 7. His body was buried two days later in a forest at Yasnaya Polyana.

INTRODUCTION

Azar Nafisi

Don't despair of becoming perfect.

Leo Tolstoy, from a letter to Valeria Arsenyeva.

"I have done nothing but copy out *Hadji Murád*," Countess Tolstoy wrote in her journal in 1909, a year before her husband's death; "it's so good I simply could not tear myself away from it." Sonya Tolstoy was an astute judge of her husband's work and a devoted admirer, claiming to have copied out *War and Peace* nine times. Yet many prominent writers and thinkers have surpassed her in their enthusiastic praise of *Hadji Murád*. Isaac Babel and the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein have been among its ardent admirers, and one critic, Harold Bloom, has gone so far as to claim that *Hadji Murád* "is my personal touchstone, for the sublime of prose fiction, to me the best story in the world, or at least the best that I have ever read."

Hyperboles abound when describing Tolstoy. There is a slightly mad tale about Dostoevsky running through the streets of St. Petersburg waving a copy of *Anna Karenina* and shouting, "This man is God of art!" Gorky felt that God and Tolstoy were like two bears in a den, while Proust called him a "serene God." George Steiner said it best when he stated that "Tolstoy's relation to his characters arose out of his rivalry with God and out of his philosophy of the creative act. Like the Deity, he breathed his own life into the mouths of his personages."

Tolstoy's genius—the source of his rivalry with God—lies precisely in his ability to locate the divine and the sublime at the core of the earthly and the mundane, reminding us of Vladimir Nabokov's advice to his students to "caress the details, the divine details." Like Pierre in *War and Peace*, Tolstoy "had learned to see the great, the eternal, the infinite in everything, and therefore, in order to enjoy his comprehension of it, he naturally discarded the telescope through which he had been gazing over the heads of men, and joyfully surveyed the ever-changing, eternally great, unfathomable, and infinite life around him."

Tolstoy wrote *Hadji Murád* between 1896 and 1903, years during which he was spending most of his time writing his virulent tracts against the art of fiction and denouncing some of the best writers in the world, including Shakespeare. John Bayley calls *Hadji Murád* "one of [Tolstoy's] last, his finest and in a sense one of his most especially tranquil tales: one would not guess that the man who wrote it had become a religious crank and a fervent disbeliever in literary art." Ironically, *Hadji Murád* is the triumph of art over any religious tract. It subverts all the absolutes Tolstoy believed in and is one of the best negations of his own claims against art and fiction.

As with all great writers, for Tolstoy the act of writing was a process of discovery. It is his restless curiosity, his tortuously erotic desire to see through, penetrate, and possess the objects of the physical world that bestow such lucidity and vibrancy upon his works. He had said, "[L]ife consists in penetrating the unknown, and fashioning our actions in accord with new knowledge thus acquired." He tried to understand the unknown through religious writings and probing, but his religious and philosophical inquiries remained too pedantic and dogmatic to lead to any real discovery; they had already become clichéd in his own lifetime. It was in his stories that Tolstoy could use his imaginative powers as windows to knowledge.

We will begin with the first page of *Hadji Murád*. The story opens with the anonymous narrator's account of a midsummer day near the end of the hay harvest and the start of reaping the rye. He passes a field of flowers and decides to make a nosegay. Coming across a solitary and broken thistle in the roadway, he muses how despite its broken state "it stood firm and did not surrender to man, who had

destroyed all its brothers around it..." The thistle reminds him of the story of the Avar chieftain, Hadji Murád, who defected to the Russians in 1851.

What makes the opening scene so wonderfully memorable is not the thistle—a rather obvious and trite symbol—but what seems incidental to the account: the lovingly and meticulously described flowers, "red, white and pink scented tufty clover; milk-white ox-eye daisies with their bright yellow centres and pleasant spicy smell; yellow honey-scented rape blossoms; tall campanulas with white and lilac bells, tulip-shaped; creeping vetch; yellow, red and pink scabious; plantains with faintly scented, neatly arranged purple, slightly pink-tinged blossoms; cornflowers, bright blue in the sunshine and while still young, but growing paler and redder towards evening or when growing old; and delicate quickly withering almond-scented dodder flowers."

Through this breathtaking and festive description of the flowers, Tolstoy puts the reader directly amidst the imaginary world of his story, making a fictive experience feel real. The flowers are in the narrative not to convey a message or explain a point but as a part of what Isaiah Berlin calls the "furniture" of Tolstoy's fictional world. In this world each character and object stands on its own, independent and yet part of the larger universe of the story.

Tolstoy had written to his friend Goldenweiser that "[a] good work of art, can in its entirety be expressed only by itself." In Tolstoy's best fiction—and *Hadji Murád* is among the best—a fictional occurrence gains the feel and texture of real experience. A sensual world is created that resonates with meanings and implications. It is not until we enter this world, mix and mingle, smell and touch and see, that we can delve into its connotations and meaning.

It is a cold November evening in the year 1851 in Makhket, a hostile Chechen *aoul* fifteen miles away from the Russian territory. "The strained chant of the muezzin had just ceased, and through the clear mountain air, impregnated with *kizyák* smoke, above the lowing of the cattle and the bleating of the sheep that were dispersing among the *sáklyas* . . . could be clearly heard the guttural voices of disputing men, and sounds of women's and children's voices rising from near the fountain below." Into this world of wonderful sounds, sights, and smells rides the renowned Avar chieftain, Hadji Murád. Once he rode with his banner, accompanied by dozens of disciples—*murids*—"who caracoled and showed off before him." Now he is alone and silent, a stranger among his own people, escaping them to take refuge among their enemies. Hadji Murád's silence is a note of discord, a foreshadowing of trouble; it works as a loud warning.

The narrator's eye becomes a film camera, meticulously recording the movement of characters, creating the terrain, capturing sounds and images in motion, coaxing the reader into following each move around each bend. The world he describes has an air of brilliancy about it, clean washed, to borrow a phrase from one of Tolstoy's own stories. This is peculiar to Tolstoy, the ability to portray the most mundane scenes and ordinary gestures as if they have just been discovered by him, a method best explained by the Russian formalist critic Victor Shklovsky: "The most common strategy in Tolstoy is one of refusing to recognize an object, of describing it as if it were seen for the first time."

For the next hundred and twenty pages, as Hadji Murád moves from Chechen villages to Russian military posts, from ballrooms and houses to woods and open fields, scenes arise magically as if from a mist, and with each move different aspects of two opposing and hostile worlds—the Russians' and the Chechens'—their sounds, sights, and smells are evoked like brilliant vistas in clear nights. As Hadji Murád rides by, we register the sky and stars above and the moist hard ground below, the movements of sloe-eyed young Chechens, and the playfully seductive Russian noblewomen. As he mounts his horse, followed by his somber *murids*, or limps into offices of powdered French-speaking Russians and into their perfumed ballrooms, bit by bit the narrator creates for the reader two antagonistic camps, both of which, although in collision with each other, enter an unconscious collusion to destroy him.

The narrator informs us that his story has taken shape out of what "I had partly seen myself, partly heard of from eye-witnesses, and in part imagined." *Hadji Murád* is based on a historical event, witnessed

by young Tolstoy during his military service in the early 1850s. In order to write it, Tolstoy carried out meticulous research, collected over eighty books, and went after every single detail. He even tried to discover the color of the horses, and the particulars of Hadji Murád and his escorts' ride on their last raid. He searched for the key to the czar's character, wanted to know details of his everyday life, anecdotes of history, his wife's behavior toward him, his intrigues at a masked ball.

But what makes the story interesting is not its historical significance. Great literature is great exactly because it cannot be reduced to news, or to paraphrase Ezra Pound, literature is news that remains news. Part of Tolstoy's magic is that he takes a historical event and turns it into a story that remains news a hundred years later.

As we almost breathlessly move in and out of the dazzling scenes, we are startled by how contemporary *Hadji Murád* seems. How could a story written at the beginning of the last century echo so realistically the most pressing issues of this century: the seemingly irreconcilable war between the Chechens and Russians, the bloody confrontations between Islam and the West, the clash of civilizations, colonialism, and the resultant fury, contempt, resentment, and frozen hatred? The Chechens' disapproval of the Russians' heathen ways, the Russians' condescension toward the Chechens' primitiveness, and their brutal rejection of one another all seem disturbingly familiar to readers in the twenty-first century.

This is a world in which life is too cheap, bullets are exchanged merrily, officers think of war as a pleasant pastime, and murder is justified by denying the other side's humanity. "The feeling experienced by all the Chechens, from the youngest to the oldest, was stronger than hate. It was not hatred, for they did not regard those Russian dogs as human beings; but it was such repulsion, disgust, and perplexity at the senseless cruelty of these creatures, that the desire to exterminate them—like the desire to exterminate rats, poisonous spiders, or wolves—was as natural an instinct as that of self-preservation."

Yet acts of cruelty are not committed only by cruel and brutal men. Take Poltorátsky, a company commander, a good-humored man, and an elegant officer, who takes the war lightly and merrily. A small group of Chechens attack his company but soon retreat. Yet he decides to arrange a "delightful" battle and orders his men to attack the Chechens, inciting them to fire back, causing the senseless death of a young soldier, Avdeev. What is awful about Poltorátsky is not the fact that he is brutal or cruel but that he is just a very ordinary man, a bit silly but harmless; it is not through his cruelty but his carelessness that the young soldier dies, pointing to the senseless and arbitrary nature of the war as well as a lack of moral accountability within the Russian nobility. Poltoratsky's indifference toward the well-being of his men is repeated on a much larger scale by his superiors, especially the czar.

Avdeev's fate resonates throughout the story. He is a young man who, at the insistence of his parents, volunteers to go into the army in place of his older brother, who has children. His regiment falsifies the record by amplifying the number of attackers and glorifying its own deeds, lying about enemy casualties and elevating the numbers from nothing to a hundred. Avdeev's wife, while mourning aloud for his death, is secretly pleased because she is pregnant with her boss's baby. His mother is the only one who genuinely mourns his death; she has a requiem chanted for him and has his name entered among those for whose souls prayers were to be said, but she weeps for him for as long as she can spare the time and is forced to return to her work. Thus Avdeev dies many times, first by the enemy's random bullet, and again by the false report of his superiors, the betrayal of an unfaithful wife, and the forgetfulness of a family too burdened with work to spend time remembering him.

This story is full of surprises. When Avdeev first meets some Chechens—messengers from Hadji Murád—he remarks, "Really, they're just like Russians." And they are. Just as we conclude that the story is about colonialism and the clash of two opposing cultures, we are shocked into the realization that these cultures have more in common than we had imagined. *Hadji Murád* on one level is a perceptive study of the abuses of power in the name of culture, religion, or country. "It is not only Hadji Murád and his tragic end that interests me," Tolstoy wrote, "I am fascinated by the parallel between the two main