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Recall Roster

Recalling forgotten, neglected, underrated, or unjustly out-of-print works

Leo Tolstoy, *Hadji Murád*. Preface and Notes by Aylmer Maude. Introduction by Azar Nafisi. The Modern Library: New York, 2003.

SINCE THE INVASION OF AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ, American military personnel have informally adopted the word *hadji* (or *hajji*) as a slang term for non-US personnel and equipment in the Middle East. The word has its origin in the Arabic and Persian word for pilgrim, and it denotes one who has completed the *haj* or pilgrimage to Mecca. Traditionally, *hadji* provides an honorific for one who has completed this pilgrimage, but with the term's expanded use in military slang has come a less positive connotation: the term has in some contexts become an ethnic slur, even though it continues as an honorific among middle-eastern followers of Islam. Tolstoy's use of the term is in the honorific sense, although his novella *Hadji Murád* is a fine study of the conflicting world-views that nurture such incongruent perceptions.

In 1851 Leo Tolstoy served as a private in the Russian Army of Czar Nicholas. His assignment was to Chechnya, a region where local Muslims were factionalized as they waged hit-and-run warfare against the Russian occupiers. A little over five decades later, Tolstoy would write a fictionalized account of the time, a story that centered upon the historic Hadji Murád, an Islamist insurgent who found himself

in desperate straits as he tried to save his family from his own Muslim leader, the Iman Shamil. The novella was not published until 1911, the year after Tolstoy's death. Because this novella deals with the clash not only of Russians and Chechens, but also more generally with the cultural conflict between East and West, Christian and Muslim, a modern conventional army against an insurgent force, and because it is informed by Tolstoy's decades of reflection, this brief work (150 pages) is worthy of reconsideration.

The historical Hadji Murád had in fact been a Naib (governor) serving under the Iman Shamil, a service that Tolstoy depicts as complex and strained, a service that ended when Shamil held Murád's family hostage to extort military service from Murád.

Tolstoy was present in 1851 when Murád surrendered to the Russians, an attempt to gain Russian favor and support for an effort to attack Shamil and free Murád's captive family. Tolstoy, upon meeting Murád in December 1851, wrote to his brother Sergius, "If you wish to show off with news from the Caucasus, you may recount that a certain Hadji Murád (second in importance to Shamil himself) surrendered a few days ago to the Russian Government. He was the leading daredevil and 'brave' of all Chechnya, but has been led into committing a mean action."

Hadji Murád is widely available as an Internet download or in more traditional binding in a number of printings. Let me suggest the Modern Library Classics edition (page numbers here refer to it) for its introduction by Azar Nafisi (*Reading Lolita in Tehran*, and *Anti-Terra: A Critical Study of Vladimir Nabokov's Novels*) and for the preface by Aylmer Maude, who translated the work in 1911. Nafisi quotes Tolstoy, who writes, "It is not only Hadji Murád and his tragic end that interests me. I am fascinated by the parallel between the two main figures pitted against each other: Shamil and Nicholas I—they represent the 2 poles of absolutism—Asiatic and European."

That these two poles of absolutism continue to stress the global community over 150 years later makes *Hadji Murád* required reading and re-reading for our time. Sitting on the Russian throne is the arrogant Emperor Nicholas, who wages war from the Winter Palace. There the court flatters and isolates him. His Minister of War, Prince Chernyshov, gains the shallow Nicholas's confidence easily. He casts Murád's surrender not for what it was—a calculated attempt to reunite a separated family—but as a validation of the Emperor's strategic brilliance:

"Evidently the plan devised by your Majesty begins to bear fruit," said Chernyshov.

This approval of his strategic talents was particularly pleasant to Nicholas because, though he prided himself upon them, at the bottom of his heart he knew that they did not

really exist, and he now desired to hear more detailed praise of himself.

“How do you mean?” he asked.

“I mean that if your Majesty’s plans had been adopted before, and we had moved forward slowly and steadily, cutting down forests and destroying the supplies of food, the Caucasus would have been subjugated long ago. I attribute Hadji Murád’s surrender entirely to his having come to the conclusion that they can hold out no longer.”

“True,” said Nicholas. (89-90)

Tolstoy’s Nicholas is a man who says his prayers, “repeating those he had been used to from childhood—the prayer to the Virgin, the apostles’ Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer, without attaching any kind of meaning to the words he uttered” (87). He’s also a leader proud that his wisdom follows the letter of the law. When deciding punishment for a minor criminal his

...inner voice suggested the following decision. He took the report and in his large handwriting wrote on its margin with three orthographical mistakes:

“Diserves deth, but, thank God, we have no capitle punishment, and it is not for me to introduce it. Make him run the gauntlet of a thousand men twelve times. Nicholas.”

He signed, adding his unnaturally huge flourish.

Nicholas knew that twelve thousand strokes with the regulation rods were not only certain death with torture, but were a superfluous cruelty, for five thousand strokes were sufficient to kill the strongest man. But it pleased him to be ruthlessly cruel and it also pleased him to think that we have abolished capital punishment in Russia. (91)

Whenever Nicholas was disturbed, “he dwelt on a thought that always tranquilized him—the thought of his own greatness” (87).

Though Tolstoy paints a less detailed portrait of the Iman Shamil, the broad strokes reveal a man much like Nicholas, calculating, cruel, and manipulating. Shamil holds Murád’s family hostage hoping to ransom them for Murád’s return. Shamil displays a mock concern for Murád’s son not unlike Nicholas’s support for humane justice. First, Shamil tells Murád’s son he’ll behead him; then changes his mind, “I have had pity on thee and will not kill thee, but will put out thine eyes as I do to all traitors!” Murád’s relationship with Shamil is complex. In the years before

Murád joined Shamil, they'd often found themselves on opposite sides. In fact, Murád's joining Shamil, like his surrender to the Russians, had been a defensive act, Murád's last ditch effort to save himself from yet another faction.

In contrast to his depictions of Nicholas and Shamil, Tolstoy reveals a Murád who is seasoned, courageous, idealistic, and tough as nails. A risky escape from an old enemy had left Murád crippled. Later in the novella Murád explains:

“Forty soldiers with loaded guns had me in charge. My hands were tied and I knew that they had orders to kill me if I tried to escape.

As we approached Mansokha the path became narrow, and on the right was an abyss about a hundred and twenty yards deep. I went to the right—to the very edge. A soldier wanted to stop me, but I jumped down and pulled him with me. He was killed outright but I, as you see, remained alive.

“Ribs, head, arms, and leg—all were broken! I tried to crawl but grew giddy and fell asleep. I awoke wet with blood. A shepherd saw me and called some people who carried me to an aoul. My ribs and head healed, and my leg too, only it has remained short,” and Hadji Murád stretched out his crooked leg. (73)

Tolstoy wrote Hadji Murád between 1896 and 1904, but, as previously mentioned, was not published until 1911, the year following his death. The temporal distance of five decades between Tolstoy's service in the Caucasus and his composition compliments the artistic distance he places between himself and the characters in the story. Nevertheless, the details ring of truth as well as personal experience. Like one of the major characters, Butler, “a handsome officer who had recently exchanged from the Guards” (97), Tolstoy escaped Moscow and his heavy gambling debts through his assignment to the Caucasus. There despite his noble birth, Tolstoy served as a private, a circumstance that surely illuminated complications that arose from common contradictions between military rank and noble position during that time. Butler was eager for the adventure of combat: “He was filled with a buoyant sense of the joy of living, and also of the danger of death, and with a wish for action, and the consciousness of being part of an immense whole directed by a single will” (97). Later, when Butler sees the grisly evidence of Hadji Murád's death, he's left with nothing to say but the platitude “That's war.” He can only reflect in silence as his Major's wife declares “War? War, indeed!... Cutthroats and nothing else” (140). Tolstoy, similarly disgusted by the carnage at Sevastopol, left the army in 1855.

What strikes a modern reader of Hadji Murád is the currency of an experience now almost 160 years in the past. Here's a story about cultural and religious confrontation populated by characters noble and arrogant, but above all human. After his surrender to the Russians, Murád attends the customary Monday evening soiree at the home of his captor Colonel Michael Semenovitch Vorontsov. Here the turbaned Murád gazes calmly at "young women and women not very young wearing dresses that displayed their bare necks, arms, and breasts, turned round and round in the embrace of men in bright uniforms" (60). Then,

After the hostess, other half-naked women came up to him and all of them stood shamelessly before him and smilingly asked him the same question: How he liked what he saw? Vorontsov himself, wearing gold epaulets and gold shoulder-knots with his white cross and ribbon at his neck, came up and asked him the same question, evidently feeling sure, like all the others, that Hadji Murád could not help being pleased at what he saw. Hadji Murád replied to Vorontsov as he had replied to them all, that among his people nothing of the kind was done, without expressing an opinion as to whether it was good or bad that it was so. (60)

While some troops danced, others died. There's the soldier Avdéev, who went to war in his brother's place. His death from combat gave relief to his unfaithful wife, who, pregnant by a shopman, would now be free to marry him. Like costs in other wars, this one's fell unevenly on its participants.

Still, against the ugliness of war, Tolstoy has been able to raise in relief the essential humanity of Murád as the story's protagonist. The enfolding metaphor Tolstoy offers for Murád is that of a thistle the story's narrator finds in the roadway:

Evidently, a cartwheel had passed over the plant, but it had risen again and that was why, though erect, it stood twisted to one side, as if a piece of its body had been torn from it, its bowels had been drawn out, an arm torn off, and one of the its eyes plucked out; and yet it stood firm and did not surrender to man, who had destroyed all its brothers around it...

"What energy!" I thought. "Man has conquered everything, and destroyed millions of plants, yet this one won't submit." (4-5)

This work by Tolstoy offers no relief to the judgment of war given by the Major's wife, but in reflection, we might learn that the tough beauty of an idealistic and independent warrior can survive the malice and ineptitude of cutthroats.

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