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Hadji Murat

Leo Tolstoy · *written 1896–1904; published 1912 · Aylmer Maude translation (1912)*

In 1851 Hadji Murat, a famous Avar fighter and the right hand of the Caucasian leader Shamil, quarrels with his master and comes over to the Russians. He offers to lead them against Shamil in return for help to rescue his family, whom Shamil holds hostage. Tolstoy's last major fiction, based on a true story, opens with a crushed thistle in a ploughed field.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does a proud man do when two great powers each demand his loyalty and neither will give him what he needs?

Tolstoy's answer is a tragedy told without comment. The Russians treat Hadji Murat with curiosity and a little suspicion, and Tsar Nicholas I is shown as vain and cold. Shamil is shown as a ruler as hard as the Tsar. Hadji Murat's love for his family and his pride lead him to a last flight and a last fight. The thistle at the start and the end stands for a stubborn life that will not give way.

KEY CHARACTERS

Hadji Murat
An Avar fighter who breaks with Shamil and goes to the Russians.

Shamil
The imam who leads the resistance.

Prince Mikhail Vorontsov
The Russian viceroy.

Nicholas I
The Tsar, shown as vain.

Butler
A young Russian officer who sees the harm done.

Avdeev
A soldier who dies in the hospital.

Grades 11–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

The Thistle and the Defection

CHAPTERS I–IV

The narrator remembers a crushed thistle. Hadji Murat, having left Shamil, arrives at a Chechen village, sleeps in the house of Sado, and is taken by the Russians to the fort.

- The thistle is the book's central image.
- Sado's house is a place of shelter.
- The Russians' welcome is wary.

02

Among the Russians

CHAPTERS V–XIV

He meets Vorontsov, tells the story of his quarrel with Shamil, and is lodged at Tiflis and then Nukha. A soldier named Avdeev dies in the hospital. Officers study the Avar with curiosity.

- The Viceroy's court is polite and bureaucratic.
- Avdeev's death shows the cost of war for the common soldier.
- Reports travel up to the Minister and the Tsar.

03

The Tsar and the Raid

CHAPTERS XV–XVIII

Nicholas I reads the report, admires his own wisdom, and orders a raid on Chechnya. The raid destroys Sado's village and kills his son, and a young officer, Butler, sees the harm.

- Tolstoy's Tsar is vain and cold.
- Sado's village is the price of a policy.
- Butler's conscience is the reader's.

04

The Family and the Viceroy

CHAPTERS XIX–XXII

Shamil's treatment of Hadji Murat's family is told in full. Hadji Murat waits at the fort, hoping that the Russians will help, and sees that they will not.

- Shamil is shown at home, as a ruler.
- The family's danger is the thread of the plot.
- Hadji Murat's patience runs out.

05

Flight and Death

CHAPTERS XXIII–XXV

By midnight he has decided to flee. His escape from Nukha is discovered and a posse follows. He is killed fighting among the bushes, and his head is sent as a trophy.

- The flight is told with great speed.
- His last stand is a fight in the bushes.
- The narrator remembers the thistle.

Pride and Loyalty | Empire | War | The Thistle

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. Notice how the thistle is used at the start and the end.
2. Tolstoy gives the same attention to the Tsar, the Imam, and the common soldier. Ask what that does.
3. Hadji Murat is neither hero nor villain. Watch how Tolstoy makes him real.
4. The story is based on a real event. Think about what Tolstoy adds.

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