Oregon Undergraduate Research Journal
20.1 (2022) ISSN: 2160-617X (online)
blogs.uoregon.edu/ourj

The Sacred and the Holy in Tolstoy's *Hadji Murád*: Irreconcilable Tensions Between War and God

Raimy Khalife-Hamdan*, Romance Languages and Global Studies

ABSTRACT

Twentieth-century French thinker Emmanuel Levinas' distinction between the sacred and the Holy — the spiritual journey "du sacré au saint" — is key to understanding his philosophy. While the sacred emanates from religiously-justified violence, the Holy manifests in the ethical relationship with "the other." This essay explores the fundamental distinction between the sacred and the Holy in relation to Leo Tolstoy's novella *Hadji Murád*. Adopting a Levinasian view, the author unravels Tolstoy's moral message: the sacred violence of war fuels the totalization of the other, which blinds its perpetrators to its un-Godliness and facilitates the continuation of violence. Even when narratives of war implicate God to glorify violence, war is the un-Holy. To signal the sacred, the author extracts examples from Tolstoy's novella of the Holy emerging from humans' selflessness. Through the story of *Hadji Murád*, Tolstoy begs his reader to revive God in all his Holiness, which entails an ethical surrender to the other. Today's reader must re-interpret the Divine as Levinas does, for collective peace depends on it.

1. INTRODUCTION: LEVINAS' PHILOSOPHY & TOLSTOY'S *HADJI MURÁD*

À la guerre, comme à la guerre[1] — these words, casually announced at a dinner among nobility in Russian writer Leo Tolstoy's (1828-1910) novella *Hadji Murád,* haunt the reader of the 21st century, a century which seems to be perpetually infested with violence. While *Hadji Murád* is eerily absent of the dominant moral figure typically present in Tolstoy's works, Tolstoy's depiction of the Caucasus War is far from amoral and urges the reader to consider how religion is exploited and politicized by self-interested Muslim and Christian leaders. In resonance with French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas' (1906-1995) distinction between the sacred and the Holy, *Hadji Murád* offers an ethical lens through which one can meaningfully reflect on tensions between war and religion. Furthermore, Levinas' conceptualization of the sacred — which emanates from religiously-justified violence — and the Holy — which manifests in the ethical and selfless relationship with the other — is the moral narrative underpinning Tolstoy's novella. War

[1] Author's translation: "All is fair in love and war."

*Raimy Khalife-Hamdan is a fourth-year student at the Clark Honors College majoring in Romance Languages and Global Studies, with a focus in migration, refugees, and displacement. She is particularly interested in the intersection of religious radicalization, armed conflict, and forced displacement. Her most recent research centers on interreligious coexistence and everyday peacemaking between Shi'a and Catholics in Southern Lebanon. She draws heavily from Levinas' philosophy as she explores the manifestations of real-world peace in regions of sectarian violence, which inspire this essay. Please direct correspondence to rkhalife@uoregon.edu.

is entirely un-Holy, no matter how much its leaders implicate the Divine, who is God, to legitimize and glorify their violence.[2] This sacred violence of war hinges on the dehumanization of the "other," which facilitates the continuation of war and blinds its perpetrators to its pure un-Holiness. Like Levinas, Tolstoy proposes that to attain the Holy (and thus surpass the sacred), one must not sacrifice the other for a religious-political system but must instead surrender entirely to the other's needs.

As this work's mentor Dr. Steven Shankman writes in his essay "The Posteriority of the Anterior," both Tolstoy and Levinas "posit a self that is primordially haunted by the other" (161). Because they write in different epochs, it is intriguing to examine the overlap in both writers' works. Levinas, who integrated phenomenological analysis with insights from Jewish spirituality, considers the ethical relationship between "the self" (whom he refers to as "I") and the other (who is any person other than the self). Such a relation centers on the self's never-ending responsibility for the other. Importantly, this responsibility is asymmetrical, because the self must act for the other without expectation of being supported and served in the same way. Certainly, the self meets a multiplicity of others throughout a lifetime — including individuals of different nationalities, religions, ethnicities, and backgrounds — but Levinas emphasizes the singular other to show that humans encounter others one at a time. Levinas summarizes that the ethical responsibility "is the principle of absolute individuation" and that "I am responsible for a total responsibility" (Levinas, Ethics and Infinity 81, 99). The self bears an infinite duty to serve the other and even undertake the other's responsibilities, which marks the self's true "individuation" — that is, the self's ability to exist as an ethical human independent from others. If the self rejects this ethical responsibility, they do not individuate themself as a unique individual. Moreover, religion in its non-politicized form has the power to remind the self of its individual responsibility; for instance, Levinas claims that the Holy Scriptures can awaken the self to act morally (117-8). This moral awakening solidifies the self's subjectivity, which signifies the self becoming an absolutely individuated, ethical agent.

Central to Levinas' understanding of ethics and religion is the distinction between the sacred ("le sacré") and the Holy ("le saint"), which is relevant to digest Tolstoy's *Hadji Murád* through a moral lens.[3] While the sacred is religiously-justified violence, the Holy refers to the Divine nature of ethics. Levinas writes, "the sacred envelops and transports man beyond his powers and his wills. The numinous cancels the relationships between people by making beings participate, even in ecstasy, in a dark drama that these beings did not want, in an order in which they are damaged" (Levinas, Difficile Liberté 28-29).[4] Levinas conceptualizes the sacred as what disintegrates the subjectivity of individuals; consequently, it disintegrates the ethical relationships between them. The sacred is a paradigm of force and violence that blurs the differences between the self and the other, reducing both to faceless pawns of a totality — the formation of a group identity at the expense of individuals' unique and complex identities. The sacred space simplifies humans,

---

[2] In this paper, the author uses "God" and "the Divine" interchangeably, with the understanding that not all religious communities refer to their Divine figures with the name "God." The author capitalizes "Divine" just as "God" is capitalized.
[3] Although Levinas does not consistently capitalize "Holy" in his works, the author does so in this paper to emphasize the fundamental distinction between the sacred and the Holy, since the former is the violent un-divine whereas the latter is most intimately connected to God, hence the capitalization.
[4] Unless otherwise noted, quotes are the author's own translations.

transforming them from individuated, ethical agents into so-called "beings," as if puppets on a string. Levinas pushes the Holy as a remedy for the ethical evasiveness that the sacred entails, equating the constant pursuit of ethical conduct to the "exigency of [H]oliness" (Levinas, EI 105-106). Describing the Holy, Levinas writes that "the rigorous assertion of human independence, from one's intelligent presence to intelligible reality" can destroy the sacred and introduce the Holy. Only through this process can "man rise to the spiritual notion of the Transcendent" (Levinas, DL 30)[5] (Levinas uses "the Transcendent" synonymously with "the [H]oly"). True spirituality stems from the individuated self maintaining their own agency, defining reality through a commitment to ethics whilst actively contesting sacred violence. By accepting a responsibility for the other's wellbeing, the self demonstrates subjectivity at the highest level (Holiness), where the sacred shatters and the Holy awakens.

Russian writer Tolstoy also hints at the ethical duties leading to true spirituality in *Hadji Murád*, which was published posthumously in 1917. The novella, based on Tolstoy's military service in the nineteenth-century Russian campaign to conquer the Caucasus Mountains, recounts the journey of the skilled Avar chieftain, Hadji Murád, who allies with the Russians after breaking with the Chechen leader, Imám Shamil. The story takes place in mid-nineteenth century Russia, a period during which the Russian military indeed embarked on an imperial conquest to expand their empire by confronting, fighting, and conquering indigenous Chechen populations. Through appalling descriptions of Russian Christian Emperor Nicholas I's autocratic rule, Chechen Muslim leader Shamil's ruthless leadership, and the one-dimensional Russian nobility's moral blindness, Tolstoy evokes an honest critique of a society at war. Although he does not employ the same vocabulary as Levinas (i.e., "sacred" and "Holy"), Tolstoy describes in gruesome detail the inhumane realities of violence to emphasize the truth of the religiously-justified war: its un-Godly sacredness. Leaders on both the Russian and Chechen sides participate in this sacred conflict by exploiting God's name as they attack and oppress. Sensing that their religio-political identities are threatened by the other, these brutal leaders each attempt to suppress the other's *otherness* — that which separates these individuals from one another. In the nineteenth century, Russians and Chechens alike employed violent measures such as forced assimilation and dehumanization, but a hundred years later, leaders of today's countless wars continue to employ these strategies to silence and harm individuals while using sacred justifications. Yet Tolstoy also shows that there are people who simply enjoy violence for the sake of violence, unconcerned about securing sacred meaning, which Tolstoy criticizes as a deeply un-Godly wound in humans' moral conscience.

In resonance with Levinas' philosophy that ethics lead to Holiness, Tolstoy suggests that the human conscience's recognition of the moral and the immoral can (and often does) override religious mandates and open the path to true spirituality. Through his portrayal of simple and selfless characters who are not outwardly religious, including a humble Chechen villager and a Russian soldier's peasant mother, Tolstoy demonstrates that true spirituality and prophetism emerge through the enactment of one's responsibility for the other, not through religious rule nor ritual. In today's world filled with constant political conflict, sectarian violence, and human rights violations, Tolstoy and Levinas' messages offer key insights. If analyzed with a Levinasian focus

[5] Author's translation

on the Holy, *Hadji Murád* offers an opportunity to reflect on and re-interpret the Divine as the conscious application of ethics rather than the blind practice of tradition.

2. THE SACRED VIOLENCE OF WAR: WEAPONIZING GOD'S NAME

From the very first pages of *Hadji Murád*, Tolstoy pushes his reader to understand war as destructive violence that devours the other's identity to preserve a greater totality, which renders war sacred, according to Levinas' thought. As Tolstoy's narrator walks through some wild fields, he notices a so-called "Tartar" thistle mutilated by a plough. The narrator personifies this "Tartar" plant, describing how "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 its eyes plucked out" (Tolstoy 4). In humanizing the plant's mangled form through personification, Tolstoy makes a moral statement by forcing images of war's physically destructive impact into the reader's mind. The narrator reflects, "what a destructive creature is man… How many different plant-lives he destroys to support his own existence!" (4). War hinges on the perpetuation of a totality's existence (whether this totality is Russia or Chechnya, Christianity or Islam, and so on), so it fuels violence against the other who does not fit within that totality. In the case of the Caucasus War, imperial Russia attempts to expand the self by conquering others (Chechens) in the sacred names of the Orthodox faith and the nation. Indeed, Levinas asserts, "the sacred that envelops and transports me is violence" (Levinas, DL 29)[6]. Sacred narratives, whether about religion or the empire, position imperial actors within violent physical and mental spaces, and this posits grave consequences for those who do not conform to the totality.

Ultimately, the novella highlights the outrageous human toll of Russia's imperial project. While reflecting on *Hadji Murád*, readers must ask themselves: How many Chechens will the Russians kill in their invasion? How many Muslims will the Christians kill? How many others will one kill to support their own existence? These questions resonate with Levinas' reflection: "by being, by persisting in being, do I not kill?" (Levinas, EI 120). Those who kill are not only combatants but also civilians who passively accept war. As Tolstoy's narrator continues walking across the fields, he comments on a "*lifeless* black field," which anticipates the cruel Emperor Nicholas I's "*lifeless* gaze" and the brutal Imám Shamil's "*immovable* stony expression" (Tolstoy 4, 88, 110; emphasis added). War is incited by the lifeless people who believe they will benefit from violence, for their subjectivities — that is, their ethics and application of those ethics to reality — are asleep. Like the ploughed field, the world today may soon become lifeless if the un-Holy violence continues. This opening scene is Tolstoy's ethical call against all destruction and death that war unleashes onto humans, who, like the festive flowers painting the novella's first page, are beautiful, colorful, and full of light and life.

Yet just as today's world leaders often ignore this moral appeal in their quest for hegemonic power and influence, so too do the Russians waging war in *Hadji Murád*. Fueling this sacred war is the exploitation of religion as an imperial instrument to oppress and persecute the other, which corrupts the notion of God. Tolstoy mentions the Russians' attempts to punish the "mutinous peasants who did not wish to accept the Orthodox faith" (Tolstoy 93). Ethics are evidently absent in these forced and violent conversions. The Russian Empire persecutes and attacks those who

[6] Author's translation

refuse Russian hegemony in the form of the Orthodox religion. In this case, the empire resembles the totality as Levinas understands it — as a violent system that attempts to synthesize the other. But the other is inherently *beyond* the Orthodox totality, for Levinas says, "the other is essentially what is unforeseeable" (Levinas, EI 67). The other is unable to be completely known because no system can define and account for every individual in all their complexity and uniqueness. The Muslim peasants are beyond the Russian Empire and the institution of the Orthodox faith because these totalities cannot comprehend their identities. Hence, the peasants' existence outside the Russian and Christian labels proves that the totality cannot truly be achieved, and thus, their otherness threatens Russian totality. By forcing Muslim peasants to adopt the Orthodox faith, Russian officials use conversion to suppress the other's unique identity, which is a sacred form of violence. In the process, the Orthodox faith loses its true spiritual value.

Unsurprisingly, most Russian and Chechen leaders in *Hadji Murád* do not prioritize true spirituality even when they feign piety. High-ranking military official and Russian nobleman Mikhail Vorontsóv, for instance, wears the White Cross of the Order of St. George around his neck, but this cross does not inspire him to advocate for peace (Tolstoy 51). Rather, Vorontsóv focuses on his wealth and power, actively supporting Russian expansion through his senior leadership position in the war. Ultimately, the cross — the very symbol of the Christian institution — does not awaken Vorontsóv's unique responsibility for the other. He does not respond to his duty to protect the other from war's harms, which would lead him to true spirituality since individuals' ethical commitment is the "exigency of [H]oliness" (Levinas, EI 105). Echoing this point, Tolstoy ridicules the superficial faith of the merciless Russian Emperor Nicholas I, who says his prayers "without attaching any kind of meaning to the words he uttered" (Tolstoy 87). These Christian leaders do not derive moral inspiration from religious symbols nor rituals. Reduced to a meaningless routine and inserted into the lives of self-interested humans, religion rots when absent of the Holy. Tolstoy's readers must consider whether religion preserves a Holy essence in their day-to-day lives or whether it has lost its ethical significance altogether.

Based on Levinas' assertions, exploitation of the Divine's name to justify violence indicates that religion has become amoral. The weaponization of the Divine is a sacred paradigm, perpetuating violence and fueling the erroneous notion that self-interested politics help achieve Divine-approved justice. When legitimized by evoking God's name, violence becomes more alluring. This is why Emperor Nicholas I is a dangerous man: he presents himself as a representative of God's words while advocating for bloody measures. For instance, he decides to sentence a young Russian to run the gauntlet twelve thousand times by closing his eyes until, supposedly, a "spirit moved him [...] as though an inner voice had told him what to do" (Tolstoy 91).[7] This "spirit" seemingly serves as a celestial voice, as though Nicholas I were a prophet communicating with God to decide how to punish the youth. In this way, Nicholas I implicates the ostensible "spirit" in the torture he inflicts upon the other, which epitomizes Levinas' understanding of the sacred.

[7] "Running the gauntlet" is a corporal punishment during which a person is forced to run between rows of people striking with weapons.

Very similarly, Chechen leader Imám Shamil "supposedly listen[s] [...] to the voice of the Prophet, who spoke to him and told him what to do" (Tolstoy 113). This assertion links Shamil's ruthless acts to Allah's approval as if He truly supported Shamil's political violence. Because the sacred violence instrumentalizes religion to wage wars against religious others, leaders like Shamil and Nicholas construe Islam and Christianity — as well as Allah and God — as fundamentally incompatible with one another. This myth reinforces the dichotomy between Chechens and Russians and inspires the polarizing rhetoric employed to justify religious war. Yet ultimately, the Muslim and Christian leaders of the Caucasus wars are not so different in their practices, as both reduce the Divine to an exploitable tool for violence. We see this sacred tactic continue today across our contemporary world. The most salient example may be modern terrorists who profess religious motivations and goals in their acts of violent extremism, blind to the truth that the Divine is in the ethical — not the sectarian violence.

Furthermore, Tolstoy shows how the sacred nature of politicized religion entrances people like Imám Shamil and Emperor Nicholas I, drawing them into a selfish "order in which [relationships between people] deteriorate" (Levinas, DL 29).[8] Religiously-justified violence corrupts the human-to-human connection. Naturally, the politicization of religion betrays morality when it is not "checked and criticized starting from the ethical" (Levinas, EI 80). The politicized Divine risks becoming — and in Tolstoy's novella, does become — entirely unethical and therefore entirely un-Holy. For example, Shamil's violent application of Sharia law radiates unethical sacredness, resulting in two people's hands cut off and one man beheaded (Tolstoy 112). Even today, various countries in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa utilize the Sharia legal system in full or in part. However, Sharia law's violent application does not represent true Holy law and does not ensure Holy justice because it violates ethics, and practicing violence in any religious context is an abuse of religion. As Levinas explains, the Holy Scriptures "command all the gravity of the ruptures where in our being the good conscience of its being-there is put into question" (Levinas, EI 117-8). The Holy texts inspire the self to question their "being," which Levinas associates with the stagnant spirituality of a person who conforms to unethical sacred totalities. Levinas would extend the Holy Scriptures to comprise the Islamic texts because "ethical truth is common" to all religions (115). The Bible and the Quran are Holy because they awaken the ethical conscience of their readers. Thus, the violent implementation of Sharia law inherently misconstrues the meaning of the Quranic texts and corrupts Islam, drawing Allah's ethically pure name into the violent terrain of the sacred.

Another connection concerning the sacred can be made between the violent practice of Sharia law and the biblical episode at Mt. Moriah with Abraham and his son. As Shankman describes in *Other Others,* the sacred manifests at Mt. Moriah where Abraham builds an altar upon which he intends to kill his son, after having presumably been commanded by God to do so. When conceived as a place of murder, this altar "trembles with the dark mysteries of the sacred" (Shankman 18). In a similar manner, Sharia law's violent application is entirely sacred, for it authorizes the murder of the other in the Divine's name. However, in the biblical episode at Mt. Moriah, the altar ultimately "becomes a site of the holy" since Abraham does not kill his son in the name of God and instead honors his responsibility to protect the other from death (18). In this

[8] Author's translation

sense, resisting the violent application of Sharia law by protecting and cherishing the other's life and wellbeing may well shatter the sacred.

Yet the sacred is not the only inspiration for violence done onto the other. To further condemn the Caucasus War led by the imperial Christian Russians against the Muslim Chechens, Tolstoy ridicules the perpetrators who enjoy violence for the sake of violence, presenting an ugly image of humankind in which all notions of religion are absent. Tolstoy portrays the Russian commander Poltorátsky as a career-focused character void of spiritual consciousness, as he does not call to God or any spiritual ideology to justify the violence that entertains him. His actions are void of both the Holy and the sacred. Upon meeting some Chechen fighters, Poltorátsky decides to "arrange for a battle that will be simply delightful" (Tolstoy 30). In characterizing the battle as "delightful" despite its deadly implications, Poltorátsky dismisses his ethical duty to protect the human beings in both his own troop and the Chechen troop. While Levinas believes that "the fear of the death of the other is certainly at the basis of the responsibility for him," Poltorátsky is trapped in the self-interested being and remains heedless of his responsibilities in the landscape of war (Levinas, EI 119). The "delightful" battle results in the young soldier Peter Avdéev's death, which does not perturb Poltorátsky, for he is disturbingly out of touch with the real suffering he causes. Poltorátsky is unfazed by the death of Peter Avdéev, who is on Poltorátsky's "side" of the imperial totality.

However, Tolstoy also insinuates that even if Poltorátsky had been inspired by sacred narratives about the Orthodox faith and the Tsar's empire, it is doubtful that he would have cared about the death of his young soldier. After all, even as leaders like Emperor Nicholas I and Imám Shamil flaunt their religious identities, they treat their own followers' lives with impunity. The sacred is useless in war, Tolstoy proves, because it results in the same destruction and death as the non-sacred. Any justification of violence is hence immoral. Arguably, Poltorátsky's non-sacred (and absolutely un-Holy) violence is more honest than the sacred violence of Nicholas I and Shamil, since Poltorátsky does not try to legitimize his actions with God's supposed approval. He does not force God's name into the corrupt landscapes of the battlefield. Tolstoy shows that for self-interested humans like Poltorátsky, life is cheap not only in the other's troop but also in one's own.

Still, Poltorátsky — like all the leaders in the modern world who have neglected their ethical duties in favor of power — lays claim to what is beyond him: the other. This is a profound moral crime, Levinas would argue, for it totalizes the other's unique otherness. By treating Peter Avdéev's singular and precious life like a game piece with which to amuse himself, Poltorátsky denies Peter Avdéev his identity, one which is intrinsically alien to Poltorátsky. This blurs the distinction between the self and the other, a key characteristic of the violent totality. To connect this discussion of the metaphysical to an example of the purely physical, modern militaries reproduce this violence in today's world order, as officials often legitimize civilian casualties as ugly necessities in war. In the process, they steal the lives of their others as if those lives were their own to instrumentalize. Levinas would argue that this is the mindset of the "being;" "Should I be dedicated to being?" he prods (EI 120). Through descriptions of Poltorátsky's morally reprehensible behavior, Tolstoy implicitly offers a response: one must not be dedicated to "being," since this self-interested state results in the deaths of many others. Levinas insists that "one cannot think God and being together," meaning that true spirituality cannot be enacted through

this stagnant, non-ethical "being" (77). Clearly, Poltorátsky is far from God as he perpetuates his irresponsible "being" that denies life to many. Presenting this ugly image of humanity, Tolstoy urges a revival of God in His ethical meaning — instead of the sacred one — so that others do not continue to die senselessly in this world.

If immoral and therefore un-Holy commanders like Poltorátsky continue ruling humanity, the violent paradigm of war will continue reducing the other to a piece of a whole, forcing them into the totalizing experience of the sacred. In *Other Others*, Shankman explains that Levinas associates the sacred with "the experience of participation in a cosmic whole," which places an emphasis on "a participation in a totality of which you and I are mere parts" (Shankman 13). Reproducing the Levinasian understanding of the sacred, the letter announcing Peter Avdéev's death to his family details that "Peter had been killed in the war, defending his Tsar, his Fatherland, and the Orthodox Faith" (Tolstoy 48). This immediately links Peter Avdéev's senseless death to an empire and a religion, which flawlessly exemplifies the sacred experience of the subject subsumed by the political-religious totality. Peter Avdéev's complex and unique individuality is negated when his life is reduced to a part of the empire's sacred narrative of defense and glory. The letter announcement described in *Hadji Murád* reconstructs Peter Avdéev's life as specifically crafted for the Tsar's consumption. The Holy is absent in unjustifiable deaths caused by leaders' understanding of murder as acceptable, and even desirable, for the totality's expansion.

Similarly, the army's official summary that "two privates were slightly wounded and one killed" during Poltorátsky's "delightful" battle further dehumanizes Peter Avdéev (Tolstoy 44). Peter Avdéev — who Levinas would say is uncontainable because he is a unique human other — is reduced to "one killed" for the cosmic whole. He becomes a nameless, faceless, and soulless word that will soon be forgotten. He is not Peter, not Peter Avdéev, but "one" who will soon become no one. This is the result of the sacred; to sustain itself, the Tsar's imperial totality mercilessly consumes humans both outside and inside of it. Although they may convince the other to join a battle, sacred narratives do not protect the other. Rather, they construe the other as a pawn and drag them into violence. This aggressive militaristic consumption of the other has not halted over time. Today, millions of others — both military and civilian — have been killed by totalities waging sacred wars against one another for the sake of a mission, whether sectarian, political, or both.

During these sacred wars, leaders employ dehumanization to facilitate violence, as it blinds its perpetrators to the other's unique otherness. In *Hadji Murád,* Imám Shamil diabolizes the Russians by insisting that "it is better to die in enmity with the Russians than to live with the Unbelievers," which categorizes an entire group of others on the sole basis of *non-religious* and denies each their individual human uniqueness (Tolstoy 112). The dehumanizing and generalizing label of "Unbelievers" paints Shamil's movement as a sacred *jihad* ("holy war"), coating the war's violence with religious justification. Civilian Chechens also participate in dehumanization, although Tolstoy portrays them with more sympathy. One Chechen villager reports that "the Russian dogs burnt the hay in the Mitchit [village]" (Tolstoy 7). This villager laments the destruction inflicted upon his community by the Russians, but his language is not innocent and perpetuates animalization of the other. Animalization, as a form of dehumanization, has been a common element of genocide that has been seen both historically and in the present day. Like the swine, the dog is considered to be impure and devilish in Islam. By equating the Russian human

to a non-human being, this villager denies the other's humanity. Although civilian Chechens hold less power than the war's military leaders, they still have ethical responsibilities to the other that they dismiss in their dehumanizing rhetoric. However, these Chechen villagers are the true victims of the Caucasus War, which legitimatizes their defense against imperialism and, therefore, does not render their violence sacred in the way that Imám Shamil's is.

Considering the power imbalances in the Caucasus War, dehumanization by the immense Russian totality has even bloodier human consequences than the Chechen villagers' rhetoric. During an atrocious raid on a village, a Russian officer named Butler passes a corpse, but he "only saw with one eye the strange position of the waxen hand and a dark red spot on the head, and did not stop to look" (Tolstoy 99). Here, dehumanization manifests in the refusal to look at the other's face since this symbolizes a refusal to acknowledge the human identity in the other. The bloody corpse evokes the image of the mutilated Tartar plant in the novella's first chapter, a reminder of the destructive forces of imperialism. Levinas explicates that "the face is what one cannot kill, or at least it is that whose meaning consists in saying: 'thou shalt not kill'" (Levinas, EI 87). By only looking "with one eye" at the human impact of warfare, Butler perpetuates the irresponsible killing, for he does not absorb the face's reflection of the Holy commandment against murder. Unacknowledged, Butler treats the dead other as faceless, extracting the humanity from their body. When he turns away from the dead other's face, Butler disconnects from the truth of war, which is its absolute sacredness and un-Godliness, because to recognize this truth means to recognize that he has failed the Holy commandment to protect the other from death. Butler refuses to become an individuated self and thus refuses true spirituality. The dead other is forgotten because the living man does not acknowledge them.

Although Tolstoy's contemporary reader may not be a soldier on the battlefield, they may still overlook and forget the dead other's face shown everywhere in modern media, newspapers, books, and television. However, Tolstoy's novella makes it clear that the dead other must be confronted. Privileged with ignorance, most civilians are complicit in today's corruption, famines, and wars, since Levinas argues "I am responsible for a total responsibility" (EI, 99). In *Hadji Murád,* Tolstoy forces his reader to face war's traumatic effect on innocent humans, filling the reader's conscience with the "wailing of the women and the little children who cried with their mothers" (Tolstoy 101-2). The Russians' enthusiastic perpetration of violence to expand and defend their sacred Christian Fatherland is far removed from the Holy. Amid Butler's violent raid, the women's wails, and the children's cries, God is absent. Over a century after *Hadji Murád*'s publication, Tolstoy's raw depiction of war leaves the reader of the twenty-first century horrified. Yet ideally, it also leaves them far more attuned to all of the Godless conflict that is still devouring Earth — and far more impassioned to bringing about its end. The sacred impedes the formation of a strong, united humanity. Tolstoy begs for humans to re-orient their lives to prioritize the ethical, which will lead to the emergence of the un-politicized Divine and truest spirituality: the Holy.

3. SPIRITUAL RUPTURES: WHERE THE SACRED BECOMES THE HOLY

Amid the un-Holy violence submerging Tolstoy's novella, some characters come alive by engaging in an ethical dynamic that contrasts with war's selfishness. Secondary characters woven throughout Tolstoy's narrative epitomize the Holy in their acts of kindness. For instance, a Chechen villager named Sado internalizes a complete responsibility for the other. This makes him

a true self, as he breaks from the self-centered being (which is a passive, non-individuated, and non-ethical being) via his commitment to ethics. When the novella's hero, Hadji Murád, seeks refuge after escaping from Imám Shamil, Sado — knowing the dangers of serving the other — opens his home to him anyway. In fact, "he considered it a duty to protect his guest though it should cost him his life, and he was proud and pleased with himself" (Tolstoy 11). The possibilities of punishment and death do not frighten Sado, for he desires to sacrifice his life for the other. In resonance with Levinas' belief that an awoken subject "is more and more extended with regard to the other, extended up to substitution as hostage," Sado becomes a self who transcends his passive being and approaches Holiness through his willingness to substitute his life with the other's (Levinas, EI 108). Sado eagerly becomes Hadji Murád's champion, valuing Hadji Murád's survival more than his own.

Sado's altruism introduces the ethical dynamic of Holiness that differs radically from the typical selfish desire for self-preservation that dominates war. Sado places the other's life above his own, and this selflessness founds the ethical relationship Levinas understands as the never-ending responsibility for the other, no matter the real-world consequences on the self. Despite the dangerous risk, Sado feels "exceptionally bright and animated" when serving Hadji Murád, as if he were more alive when sacrificing his life for the other (Tolstoy 11). Indeed, Levinas would comment that Sado is more alive because he accepts his ethical responsibility for the other, which makes him not just a being but an individuated self. In the moral realm, Sado's subjectivity awakens, which contrasts with Shamil and Nicholas I's "lifeless" gazes that remain void of individuation.

Levinas would explicate that the "Infinite," which symbolizes the self's infinite responsibility for the other, encourages Sado's ethical awakening. According to Levinas, this Infinite "commands and in this sense it is interior," so that the self's responsibility for the other is "that reverting in which the eminently exterior [...] concerns me and circumscribes me and orders me by my own voice" (EI 110). With this, Levinas suggests that the commandment to serve the other — who is "eminently exterior" because the self cannot know the other — becomes an interior voice urging the self to acknowledge the other. This interior voice is the human conscience, which focuses the self outwards so that, ultimately, the inward self is pushed to serve the external other. As Sado hears his conscience, he is called away from his interiority that worries for his selfish survival; instead, he responds to the external other (Hadji Murád) who needs his service. This again reminds us of Levinas' question: "Do I have the right to be?" Unlike Butler and Poltorátsky, Sado refuses to "be." He understands that his being is worth sacrificing because doing so aids Hadji Murád to live. This is the Holy work, which can be honored and replicated in all humans' lives no matter their religious affiliations, as it concerns a responsibility that is not sectarian but ethical.

The other characters in *Hadji Murád* who honor the Holy are women who are inspired by their conscience, rather than by the name of God, to enact their unique responsibilities for the other. In Mrs. Avdéev's selfless relationship with her son, the Holy emerges. In opposition to her stingy husband, Mrs. Avdéev insists on sending Peter Avdéev money while he is away, which demonstrates her care for him despite her modest means. Mrs. Avdéev does not act kindly because she believes God orders her to but rather because she genuinely cares for her son. In a letter to him, she writes, "my darling child, my sweet dove, my own Peterkin! I have wept my eyes out

lamenting for *thee*, *thou* light of my eyes" (Tolstoy 48; emphasis added). Despite having limited time and means as a working peasant, she places enormous consideration on Peter Avdéev's wellbeing, and her heart is with him. The Tartar language commonly employs "thou" to refer to the other with welcoming kindness, but this is less common in the Russian language. Levinas would later explain that, by instinctively addressing her darling Peter with "thou," Mrs. Avdéev unknowingly honors the Holy. Just as institutionalized religion can be independent of Holiness, so too can Holiness be independent of conventional religious ritual and practice. The true Holy manifests in Mrs. Avdéev's loving words that come so naturally from her conscience, for "the exigency of [H]oliness" is intrinsically the never-ending duty to serve the other (Levinas, EI 105).

The Holy again manifests in Mrs. Avdéev's actions when she undertakes a responsibility for Peter that continues after he dies. To honor his death, Mrs. Avdéev has a requiem chanted for her son and distributes holy bread to all church attendants "in memory of Peter the servant of God" (Tolstoy 49). By actively taking these measures to serve her son beyond the end of his life, Mrs. Avdéev honors and humanizes him — in contrast to the military officials, who minimize Peter to "one killed" (44). In her dedication of rites to him, Mrs. Avdéev does not allow Peter to fade away as he does in the military's impersonal report. This illutrates Mrs. Avdéev as a responsible, ethical, and individuated subject, which is integral to the Holy. She practices true spirituality in her ongoing response to her son, who is her other. She relies on religious rituals not to honor God but to honor her son. This is ultimately the Holy work.

Mrs. Avdéev epitomizes maternity as "the relationship of the ego with a selfsame ego who is nonetheless a *stranger* to the ego" (Levinas, EI 71-72; emphasis added). Mrs. Avdéev does refer to Peter as "*my* sweet dove, *my own* Peterkin" to recognize her relation to him (Tolstoy 48; emphasis added). However, she does not attempt to possess Peter. Indeed, she sees him as someone beyond both the Avdéev family and the military, which she demonstrates by referring to him as "Peter the servant of God" (49). She imagines him as grander than the identities of son and soldier, surpassing the confining totalities of family and empire to connect Peter Avdéev to God, who is infinite. In this way, Mrs. Avdéev spiritually overcomes the sacred violence of the imperial narratives perpetuated in the names of the Russian Tsar, Fatherland, and Orthodox faith.

In line with Levinas' philosophy, these individuals enacting the ethical relationship are true prophets. Since Levinas understands prophecy as the "unlimited ethical exigency" — that is, continuously prioritizing one's ethics and, by extension, continuously serving the other over all else—the prophet pushes humanity in a *universally moral* rather than *institutionally religious* direction (EI 114). As a prophet calling for the Holy, Hadji Murád's mother also protects the other from violence and death. After her son Akhmet dies because she nurses another child, Hadji Murád's mother refuses to become a wet nurse when Hadji Murád is born. She clings onto her responsibility for Hadji Murád and insists, "I should again kill my own son; and I will not go [to nurse]" (Tolstoy 62). Unlike Poltorátsky, whose conscience is asleep in the face of violence, Hadji Murád's mother is fully awake and recognizes the consequences of her actions. She grasps her responsibility as an ethical self and understands the harm her actions may cause to the other; she demonstrates this by immediately taking responsibility for the death she could cause to her son.

This scene is similar to the biblical episode at Mt. Moriah, as both cases concern the potential death of a child. But unlike Abraham, who at first accepts the idea of sacrificing his son Isaac and

accepts Holiness later on, Hadji Murád's mother refuses the possibility of harming her son from the start. Her motherly intuition and her ethical conscience reject this prospect. As she commits to preserving baby Hadji Murád's life, the Holy shines. After all, "the incarnation of human subjectivity guarantees its spirituality" (Levinas, EI 97). Led by their conscience to care for their children, mothers like Hadji Murád's and Peter Avdéev's are the novella's true prophets. They honor the Divine through an openhearted maternal relationship rather than through religious practices and rituals. These characters show the pure Holiness of the ethical, which contrasts sharply with the sacredness of religiously-justified violence. People in today's world must also see their others as sons and daughters to establish a selfless relationship of giving and nurturing, tenderness and patience.

Finally, Mary Dmítrievna also serves as an awakened prophet when she recognizes and resists the un-Godly violence done onto the other during war. Seeing Hadji Murád's dead face for the first time after his murder, Mary Dmítrievna cries out to the men around her, "[Y]ou're all cutthroats! … I hate it!" (Tolstoy 140). Unsurprisingly, Officer Butler responds, "[T]hat's war," which demonstrates how those who absently accept the violence perpetrated by a totality will readily consume and reproduce the religious and political narratives constructed by the same totality. State and military officials across the globe today certainly reinforce this passive attitude of "à la guerre, comme à la guerre."[9] This attitude epitomizes the lifelessness of the non-individuated human. With her awoken subjectivity, Mary Dmítrievna exclaims, "War indeed! … Cutthroats and nothing else. A dead body should be given back to the earth and they're grinning at it there!" (140). Not only does she acknowledge that a dead body merits a proper burial and must not be disrespected by being tossed around like a trophy; she also recognizes the unjustifiable nature of the sacred war. She sees the cruelty of the commanders and soldiers who fight to expand the Russian religiopolitical totality to which she belongs. While she cannot serve Hadji Murád, for he is dead, she still challenges the violence of war, embodying a "rigorous affirmation of human independence, of its intelligent presence in an intelligible reality" that Levinas associates with Holiness (Levinas, DL 30).[10] Turning away from the selfishness of being, Mary Dmítrievna acts as an individuated self with a clear conscience. In this way, she realizes the truth of war: its un-Godliness. Levinas comments, "there is prophetism and inspiration in the man who answers for the Other" (Levinas, EI 113). When she sees Hadji Murád's face, Mary Dmítrievna becomes a prophet, breaking away from the imperial totality and begging her male counterparts to move in a moral direction.

This scene with Mary Dmítrievna demonstrates a Holy eruption amid a widely accepted war. Mary Dmítrievna is neither an emperor nor a priest, yet her moral gesture is Holy. No matter their positionalities, all people can serve as prophets in this modern world. One does not need to have religious knowledge to enact true spirituality — only an ethical conscience. In fact, the simplest individuals with the fewest resources can be the most spiritual. The prophets of Tolstoy's novella call to leaders and civilians of the twenty-first century to revive a Holy mission, one that preserves the ethical relationship with the other and resists hegemonic totalization. The sacred has brought

[9] "All is fair in love and war"
[10] Author's translation

immense destruction, dehumanization, and death to this world. To support a future of peace, all humans have a Holy responsibility to dedicate their lives to the other's wellbeing.

4. CONCLUSION

While decades have passed since Levinas re-imagined God to establish a direct relation between ethics and the Holy, his philosophy remains incredibly pertinent today. As ideology-justified movements ranging from Zionist political violence to Islamic jihadism continue to cause great harm in the world, humans must consider how these are sacred movements perpetuating totalities, void of the Holy as Levinas understands it — as the ethical. In *Hadji Murád,* Tolstoy begs his reader to revive God in all His Holiness. Capturing Levinas' distinction between the sacred and the Holy, Tolstoy suggests that to attain the Holy, one must put the other's wellbeing first instead of overlooking, dismissing, or even attacking the other to protect one's insulated identities. In this way, humanity may transition from the sacred to the Holy, a transition which is desperately needed to avoid a world as lifeless as the empty black field Tolstoy deplores in his first chapter. A future of collective peace requires this selflessness.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I emphasize my most profound gratitude to Dr. Steven Shankman, who has offered me tremendous support as a scholar. Your guidance, patience, and kindness inspire me, Professor. Thank you.

WORKS CITED

Levinas, Emmanuel, and Philippe Nemo. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Translated by Richard A. Cohen, Duquesne University Press, 1985.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Difficile liberté : essais sur le judaïsme*. Albin Michel, 2014.

Tolstoy, Leo, and Aylmer Maude. *Hadji Murad*. Modern Library, 2003.

Shankman, Steven. *Other Others: Levinas, Literature, Transcultural Studies*. State University of New York Press, 2010, pp. 11–18.

Shankman, Steven. "The Posteriority of the Anterior: Levinas, Tolstoy, and Responsibility for the Other." *Reading Backwards: An Advanced Retrospective on Russian Literature,* edited by Muireann Maguire and Timothy Langen, Open Book Publishers, 2021, pp. 159-170.