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Auswärtiges Amt



GOETHE
INSTITUT

The Russians Are Coming

A play

By Yelena Astaseva (email: helenastaseva@gmail.com)

Translated by John Freedman

Characters:

Tatyana — A Russian woman, 46 years old

Judge

Doctor

(JUDGE and DOCTOR may be of any sex, the director can decide)

A room with barred windows. Two people are in it: JUDGE and TATYANA.

TATYANA. I don't understand why I'm here. I've never been interested in politics. What is going to happen to me? Will I be shot?

JUDGE. I'm a specialist for an independent international military tribunal. Please state your name and occupation.

TATYANA. There has been a mistake. I've always opposed war. You must let me go! I am guilty of nothing!

JUDGE. No one is accusing you of anything yet. In fact, my job here is to get to the bottom of things. Please, tell me your name.

TATYANA. Tatyana Vitalyevna Ivanova.

JUDGE. Your date of birth, your place of residence, and your manner of business.

TATYANA. I was born in 1976. I live in Moscow. I'm an elementary school teacher.

JUDGE. Tell me, Tatyana, did you know that Russia was bombing Ukrainian cities?

TATYANA. Of course not! What are you saying! I didn't know anything.

JUDGE. On February 25, your friend Olya Litvinenko from Mariupol sent you a message on WhatsApp : "Tanya, I am sitting in the basement with my mother. The Russians are bombing us. Mom is crying. What is going on?" How did you answer?

TATYANA. She's no friend of mine... We just studied together once. In the Pedagogy Institute. I haven't seen her in ages.

JUDGE (*reads*). You answered: "Our forces are only firing on military targets. Why are you sitting in a basement? No one is going to harm you."

TATYANA. That's what they said on TV. Only military targets.

JUDGE. On February 28 Olya sent you a video of her battered apartment building that had been hit by a shell. How did you reply?

TATYANA. I said I felt bad.

JUDGE. We have other evidence. (*Reads.*) You replied: "Why are you sending me these fakes? I can see that's not your building."

TATYANA. So, what if that wasn't her building in the photo!? My husband and I visited her last year. For a vacation at the seashore. That was definitely not her building! I would have recognized it.

JUDGE. On March 1 Olya wrote to you: "Mother is dead. She left the building to get some food, and was hit by a shell... I hate your goddam country! I hate Putin! May you all be damned!"

You replied: "Why such hostility, Olya? I'm so sorry about your misfortune, Olya. But we must remain human. I thought we were friends, but you insult my country. My president."

TATYANA. I answered her in a civil tone. And you know how she reacted to me? She responded: "Go *blank* yourself." Can we use obscenities here? I'm a teacher. I try to honor the purity of the Russian language. Basically, she said (*whispers*), "Go fuck yourself." Can you imagine that?!

JUDGE. Then you blocked her.

TATYANA. What was I supposed to do? You know, that's how I am... I'm positive. I try to surround myself with good people. Think only positive thoughts. Our thoughts shape our reality, have you heard that theory?

The last thing I need is all that negative stuff. I understand, her mother died. But that doesn't justify her. For example, my mother died of cancer three years ago. But I never wrote my friend anything nasty about that.

JUDGE. But it's Russia, your country, that is guilty of your friend's mother's death.

TATYANA. What does that have to do with me? Did I bomb her home? Was I the one that killed her?

JUDGE. What do you think about your country attacking Ukraine?

TATYANA. I told you, I didn't know anything about that.

JUDGE. But your friend wrote to you about it.

TATYANA. After which she ceased to be my friend.

JUDGE. But you could hear about the war from other sources.

TATYANA. I'm busy working. I don't have time to study all of these various sources. I have a husband, a son, meals to prepare, clothes to wash, a house to keep clean. Okay, so I knew NATO attacked Russia on the territory of Ukraine, and that everyone there turned out to be Nazis. They were creating bio-geese and militarized mosquitoes or something like that... Why do they hate our country so much?

JUDGE. Who hates your country?

TATYANA. The West. America. Europe. Ukraine, too, of course. The whole world. Everybody except Eritrea. Do you happen to know where this Eritrea is?

JUDGE. It's in Africa. But tell me, why do you think the whole world hates you?

TATYANA. What do you mean? Our spirituality. They have all those gays and lesbians and perversions. Parent No. 1, Parent No. 2. All those genders and transvestites and childfree couples. Pedophiles are in complete control of Europe. Officially! They even have a political party like that. The Pedophile Party. They want all of our sons to be gay! They force children to change their sex. If it's a boy – snip, snip – he becomes a she. You know? I just imagine them trying to do something like that to my son. Never! How could you possibly surrender your son to the knife like that?

That's why the West attacked us. Because we have traditional values. But they were afraid to attack us directly because we have nuclear weapons. So the West attacked us by proxy. Using the Ukrainians.

JUDGE. But it was Russia, in fact, that attacked Ukraine on February 24. Not the other way around. How to you explain that?

TATYANA. It was a preventive strike. If we hadn't attacked them, they would have attacked us first. We were just smarter and we attacked first! So that was defense, not an attack.

JUDGE. So you support the actions of the Russian army?

TATYANA. Of course! Russia is my homeland. Putin is my president. I took an oath of loyalty to my country. One doesn't choose one's homeland, it's like your mother. Would you go against your mother?

JUDGE. So, you support the war?

TATYANA. Of course I'm against war. Be serious! I am always for peace. My grandfather died during World War II. They always taught us in school: the main thing is to avoid war! Ours is a nation of victors. If necessary we can repeat that! I've taught that very notion to the children in our school. At our lessons the children draw pictures of the Dove of Peace! We wrote letters to a Russian soldier on the front lines! And we memorized a poem for Victory Day on May 9. I wrote it myself. (*Sheepishly.*) I sometimes write a little, you know... I dreamed of being a poet when I was young.

Recites expressively, in a mannered way, as a bad actor might:

Our time has come, Russia step forth!
Our Russian leader will seize everything!
Rise up people, big change is coming
Our time has come, the Russians are coming!
Respect our choice, Russia has its own path.
You cannot stifle the Russian spirit, Russians don't bend.
No one dares raise a fist against us!
We raise our flag proudly, the Russians are coming!

Russia has its own God, its own soul and spirit.
Let everyone envy us in sick, trembling fear.
Our reality is ours alone, the height of all heights,
A portal to another world. Russia – step forth!
I am proud to be Russian! I live in Russia!
My homeland is here, for it I will die!

I am Kadyrov, I am Putin. Millions look to us!
Tremble, Ukraine, the Russians are coming!

Tremble, Europe, the Russians are coming!
Tremble, America, the Russians are coming!
The Russians are coming! The Russians are coming! The Russians are coming!

Don't think to judge us, God alone will judge us all!
Step aside, heavens! The Russians are coming!

(Sheepishly.) What do you think?

JUDGE. Very interesting poem, Tatyana. Judging by your line, "Don't think to judge us," you have already assumed someone may judge you.

TATYANA. There's nothing to judge me for personally. I knew nothing. If someone has committed military crimes, it isn't me. I never doubted that those were all fakes.

JUDGE. What fakes?

TATYANA. All of them. For example, one of our young teachers at work was one of those... liberals. She was fired later, naturally. But before that she sent a video around to everyone in our school – all those bombed-out buildings... burned corpses. It was horrible! A severed woman's hand with red polish still on the nails. I knew they were all fakes, of course. You could see the corpses moving in the video. My husband explained it to me. The Ukrainians went and killed their own people then dug up the corpses and scattered them all around. So they could blame the Russian army! Can you imagine that? Later on I had a nightmare about that hand. Then I just quit opening up all the photos and videos everybody sent me. Who needs downers like that?

JUDGE. So, there were other videos?

TATYANA. Well, yeah... My second cousin Galya lives in Ukraine, near Kharkov. She constantly sent me photos of corpses and ruined buildings. As if to say, look what your Russian soldiers are doing. She's completely out of her mind. She sent me a photo of a dead little girl. With bows in her hair. I just cried and cried! I know it's a fake and, yet, I still cry. I just can't stop. You know, my soul is so kind at heart.

JUDGE. But, you didn't believe her?

TATYANA. Of course I didn't believe her. The damn Ukrainians are always bending the truth. Galya, too. She does it all the time. It's in a Ukrainian's blood. Lying, that is. They can't say a single word without lying. Nazis, to put it simple.

JUDGE. Tell me, Tatyana, what do you think a Nazi is?

TATYANA. Well. That's a strange question. Everybody knows. Nazis are fascists.

JUDGE. But I would like to hear your definition.

TATYANA. (*Thinks.*) Uhmmm... Nazis are our enemies. Everybody we're at war with – that's a Nazi. When we were at war with the Germans, they were Nazis. Now we're fighting the Ukrainians, so they are Nazis. Anybody on the side of our enemies – they're Nazis, too.

JUDGE. So, if Europe and the U.S.A. aid Ukraine, they are Nazis?

TATYANA. Of course they're Nazis! Anybody not with us is against us. And they all hate us. Yes. Nazis are all those who hate Russians. All those who don't want to speak Russian, who hate Russia's great culture. By the way, did you know that the monument to Pushkin was removed in Kyiv? Pushkin was a great Russian poet! And they pulled down his statue! Who would do that but Nazis?!!

JUDGE. The monument to Pushkin in Kyiv was removed on October 11. By that time almost every one of Kyiv's electric plants had been destroyed by Russian bombs. The city's citizens were left without heat, electricity and water. What do you think about that?

TATYANA. I didn't know anything about it. I told you, I'm not interested in politics.

JUDGE. I have different information. On October 31 you posted a comment beneath a YouTube video labeled “Kiev without electricity. How Kiev residents survive in a city with no power”:

“That's what the damn Ukrainians deserve... Nothing will end until they come crawling to us on their knees. Let them freeze this winter!”

TATYANA. I wrote that?

JUDGE. Yes, you did.

JUDGE projects notebook screen on a screen hanging on the wall.

On the “RuZZian Patriot” account it is difficult to make out the face on the avatar. It's covered by the letter Z. But our specialists have determined that this account, in fact, belongs to you.

TATYANA. Your specialists are wrong.

JUDGE. On October 15 beneath a YouTube video called “Bombed into the stone age. Ukrainians live in darkness without communication or pasta,” you posted the following commentary:

“We should have done that to them from the very beginning! Bomb the hell out of that den of Nazis! So no one ever remembers them again!”

The comment is made by the same account.

The post is shown in close-up onscreen.

TATYANA. (*Silent, looks at her feet. Lifts head. Speaks aggressively*). Okay, I wrote that. All right? So what? It's their own fault!

JUDGE. But these are peaceful people. What are they guilty of?

TATYANA. There are no peaceful people at war. My husband explained it all to me. They're not only Nazis, they're Satanists! You know? They worship Satan. They call him Iblis. Even their kids are Satanists. Their infants even. Lying there in their baby carriages – they're already Satanists and Nazis. I'm a religious person! Russia is a God-fearing country. Our mission is to save the world from the Antichrist.

JUDGE. Tell me, Tatyana, how did it happen that in Ukraine – where your relatives and friends live – everyone suddenly became Nazis and Satanists?

TATYANA. It's obvious. The debilitating influence of Europe. Plus the drugs. Ukraine's president is a drug addict. They bring him cocaine from the U.S. That Zelensky of theirs is a puppet that the West controls. He'll do whatever the West says because he needs his drugs. He'll have no cocaine if he doesn't do the West's bidding. Meanwhile, the West hates us because it envies our spirituality. They institute sanctions against us. They won't give us visas. They think we'll be scared! The hell we will! Russians don't give in. Whatever they do to us, we'll do right back to them. This is just the beginning. Ukrainians are freezing, Europeans are freezing! Hahaha! We have the gas! Everybody in Europe is going to croak!

JUDGE. So, as you put it, you want people in Europe to “croak”?

ТАТЬЯНА (*remembers where she is; in a frightened voice*). Me? No! I didn't say that. I love everybody. At heart I'm a very positive person. I try to be kind to everyone, I

take no interest in politics. I go to church. I pray for our boys on the front line.

You're probably from Europe, aren't you? I've noticed you speak Russian with an accent. I just can't tell what it is. What country are you from?

JUDGE. What European countries have you been to?

TATYANA. Me? None. I like staying home. I have a dacha outside of Moscow. You can't imagine how lovely it is in summer. The river, the sunshine... True, we have mosquitoes. They bite.

JUDGE. If you've never been to Europe, why do you want everyone there to croak?

TATYANA. I want nothing of the sort. I was joking. Live and let live... As long as the don't come after us with their gays. I don't want my Vanya to be gay!

JUDGE. If you've never been in Europe, how do you know they have gays?

TATYANA. Everybody knows that.

JUDGE. Still.

TATYANA. They say so on TV.

JUDGE. Do you believe the TV?

TATYANA. Of course I do! Nobody's going to lie on TV. We aren't the damn Ukrainians. They're the ones who lie on TV all the time. For example, I saw one video on a Ukrainian channel that showed people in Kherson greeting the Ukrainian army with open arms. They wept and kissed and hugged the Ukrainian soldiers. You could tell right away it was a fake!

JUDGE. How could you tell it was a fake?

TATYANA. First, the grass all around was green, and the trees were in full leaf. But this was November. Moscow already had snow!

JUDGE. Kherson is in the south. It has a warm climate.

TATYANA (*doesn't listen*). Second, Kherson has been a Russian city forever. The people themselves asked us to free them of Nazis. They begged us to annex Kherson. After that we evacuated them all, and gave them free apartments in

Siberia. Nobody, for example, ever gave me a free apartment! I still haven't paid off my bank loan! They're all thankless bastards. Pretending that they stayed in Kherson and were happy to see the Ukrainian army! Makes you wonder what our boys are dying for? Why did we go in there to save them?

JUDGE. You didn't save them. You occupied their city.

TATYANA. Occupation?! What occupation?! That's what the Germans did in 1941 when they came to the Soviet Union. They wanted to conquer us. What we're doing is liberating land that belongs to us. This land belonged to us before 1919.

JUDGE. This is Ukrainian territory according to international law.

TATYANA. International law is fake. There is no international law. Moreover, you have the historical concept of your motherland. That's something you sense in your soul. For example, I sense in my soul that my Russian world exists everywhere there all around Kherson. It's Russian land. I just feel it with my heart. Russian people are able to feel how the limits of our motherland stretch far beyond our borders.

JUDGE. Where else would you say that the borders of your homeland lie?

TATYANA. You could say pretty much anywhere! Ukraine, that's obvious. It's not a real state, it's fiction. Lenin dreamed it up. Poland, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia – that's all the Russian world too. It's just they don't realize it themselves. But we will liberate them soon.

Basically, our land is anywhere that Russian immigrants live. All these countries used to belong to the Great Russian Empire. Until our enemies took them away. But our people still live there! Their rights are violated, they won't let them speak Russian. Can you imagine? The Russian language is the greatest language on earth! There's nothing richer than Russian! It's the language of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Pushkin! They whole world should speak it! And that's how it will be one day! (*quotes her own poetry*) “Step aside, heavens! The Russians are coming!” We will be victorious!

JUDGE. But you weren't victorious.

TATYANA (*dispirited*). Isn't that the truth! NATO and America and all the countries of Europe took up the cause of Ukraine. Do you realize how much aid that was? Fifty countries against us! And we have a small army. It wasn't fair! Why did everybody help them while nobody was on our side but Eritrea? (*Hopefully.*) You're not from Eritrea, are you?

JUDGE. The population of Ukraine is 40 million. Russia has a population of 140 million. Do you really think you have a small army? Speaking of armies, you have a son. Vanya. He's 22. What did you think about him being mobilized?

TATYANA. No sane mother is happy to see her son go fight in a war.

JUDGE. So, you were against it.

TATYANA. Unfortunately, life is not always joyful. We also have duties. A man must do his duty, otherwise he's not a man. (*Sadly.*) As it turned out, my son was not a man. Unfortunately, Vanya was a coward. He told me he didn't want to shoot at live people. Even if they are the enemy. Even if they are threatening him and his country, or even me directly. He's a pacifist. My Vanya is rather divorced from life. He wants to be a writer. He loves Dostoevsky. I like reading books, too, but what of it? That has nothing to do with reality.

JUDGE. Your son received his mobilization notice on September 22. He chose not to go into the army office, but went to your dacha to hide out there. What did you do?

TATYANA. I did my duty before my motherland. Unlike my son, I understand the nature of duty.

JUDGE. So, what specifically did you do?

TATYANA. I called the recruitment office and gave them the address where he was living. You think I was wrong to do that? I know, many will criticize me. Even my husband said I was a fool... Although, I must say, he understood his duty properly. He went and enlisted! As for Vanya... He doesn't know what patriotism is. That's my fault and I'm embarrassed for that.

Here's what I think. The army isn't a kid's club: you join if you want, and you stay home if you don't. Putin gave the mobilization order and the law is the law. Our president was lawfully elected. And 80% of our people supported his decision to begin the special military operation.

JUDGE. Did your son support this decision too?

TATYANA. No, he didn't. He even attended demonstrations, like those "No to War" rallies. All those liberal slogans. That's his business. But we're a democracy. The majority rules. And the majority supported the war. If you live in Russia, you love your homeland. If you're a patriot, you knuckle under to the majority. That's what I

think.

JUDGE. Tatyana, where are your husband and son right now?

TATYANA. I don't know. I don't want to talk about it.

JUDGE. According to my data, your husband Sergei Ivanovich Ivanov, died September 30, 2022, in a battle near Donetsk.

TATYANA. That's not true.

JUDGE. Your son, Ivan Sergeevich Ivanov, died near Kherson on October 11.

TATYANA. I don't believe you. That's all fake news. I did receive some text messages, but who can believe that stuff? I'm not that stupid. What monster would send a mother a text message informing her that her husband and son had perished?

It's all those smart-assed Ukrainians! They're to blame! Damned peasants! They're trying to brainwash us. NATO's behind it all. Weaponized pigeons and mosquitoes. A mosquito bit me last night. One of their biological weapons!

They seized our country! Inserted a substitute for our president. I know perfectly well our president is no longer the same. The real one was handsome as they come. With his military bearing and posture... His semi-hoarse baritone. Well over six foot tall! This one is a midget. His hands shake all the time...

[...]

The End

November 16, 2022

Note: This play employs a fragment of a real poem that is assigned to be memorized by children in a Russian school. The song "To Washington" is also real. Here is the link: <https://youtu.be/guXve8mPLn8>

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