

Chapter 1. Special military operation

On February 24th, 2022, Putin launched a “special military operation” in Ukraine. That morning, Ella woke up ill. She had had COVID several months prior, but some of her debilitating symptoms were still dragging on. She had panic attacks, tachycardia, and bouts of depression – coming out of the blue. She struggled to switch her thoughts to something positive.

The news about the “special military operation” struck her like a bolt of lightning – it was the first thing she saw when she opened her Instagram that morning. There it was – the video with Putin, speaking about the need “to defend the Russian-controlled territories in eastern Ukraine.”

Low February skies hung heavy over Saint Petersburg and didn’t help her mood at all. She tried her best to think uplifting thoughts, but her mind would circle back to what this “special military operation” might entail. Every once in a while, she would be sucked into a black hole of worry – for the boys.

She worried for her husband, Ilya, and her eldest son, Mark. Ilya was 48, and, technically, he shouldn’t be drafted, but who knows... As someone who had served in the army, he could easily be conscripted. And Mark, oh Mark... He was just twenty. What if they took him? He is a full-time student at Saint Petersburg Pedagogical University, but war is war. What if the government needs more people on the front lines?

To distract herself from the onset of an anxiety attack, Ella went to the kitchen and started peeling potatoes, looking at the rare patches of blue peeping in between the tattered clouds. Ella, Ilya, and their three sons, Mark, Iosif, and Matvey, lived on the 9th floor and got to see a lot of the sky. In Saint Petersburg, it’s considered a privilege to live high enough to see a lot of the sky out the window. You get to catch every ray of precious sunshine breaking in from behind the impenetrable blanket of clouds during the fall and winter months.

Finally, she sat down on the stool by the kitchen table and started mindlessly scrolling through her Instagram feed. After about a minute, she suddenly stopped and stared at the screen with wide-open eyes. In the video, she saw her son, Mark, marching along Nevsky Prospect with a crowd of people, shouting, “No to war!!!” at the top of his lungs.

“What? What is he doing there?” She took a deep breath to fight off a wave of panic that started overwhelming her soul.

“Gosh, not only is he there, but he’s putting it on Instagram! They can come and get him any time now...”

She took a deep breath, desperately trying to collect her thoughts despite the brain fog that still lingered several months after her COVID. A lightning-quick prayer flashed in her mind in between her jumbled thoughts, “Oh God, help!” She paused for a moment, standing in the middle of the kitchen.

“I need to go for a walk,” she decided suddenly, and the thought brought her immediate relief. Without further ado, she put her coat on, got in the elevator, and went down. They lived right next to a huge park where you could get lost for hours. It was a beautiful piece of land overgrown with pines, ash, oaks, birches, and patches of blueberry.

The park was almost empty, and Ella roamed its quaint trails for quite a while. She had always felt an incredible Presence there. The treetops were waving gently in the wind as if dancing to an inaudible tune. The birches looked calm and deep in thought, sweeping the snow with their long slender branches. Whatever thoughts they were thinking, they seemed serene. Ella felt some of that transcendent serenity slowly seeping into her own heart when her phone rang. It was Ilya.

Ilya worked as a handyman and had just finished a work project somewhere in town. He said he was in the metro coming home and he would get some groceries on the way.

“Have you seen Mark’s video yet?” Ella asked.

“No.”

“He’s at the protest.”

“Oh.”

“Police are taking people right from the streets. Do you understand what it means?”

“Crazy,” said Ilya. “I sort of knew he might go, but I didn’t think it would be so soon.”

There was silence.

“We’ll talk more when I get home,” Ilya finally answered and hung up.

Riding back home on the metro, Ilya was thinking about the conversation he’d just had with an old friend over the Telegram App. His dear friend from his hometown was vehemently defending the war, and yet there was something strange about the way he spoke about it. He was reciting propaganda almost verbatim as if it had long been etched into his subconscious mind. Some of his phrases stuck to Ilya’s memory, “Our valiant and noble soldiers will never hurt a civilian,” “We are hitting only military targets,” “No child will suffer during this military operation,” “Ukraine doesn’t stand a chance.”

Ilya had another thirty minutes before his stop, so he had plenty of time to think. Intuitive as he was, something felt odd behind the intonations of his friend. Each of these phrases sounded absurd when examined with a sober mind. “Our valiant and noble soldiers will never hurt a civilian.” “No child will suffer during this military operation.” Who in their right mind can believe that? It sounded like mythology. And yet, his friend spoke with a confidence as he had never observed in him before.

True, propaganda was rampant and ubiquitous. It was literally everywhere – on every building and news channel. You couldn’t avoid it even if you wanted to. It was loud and pushy. It sounded simple and yet surprisingly to the point. “Everyone is against us.” “We are surrounded by enemies.” “Nobody loves us.” “If we didn’t start it, they would have attacked us first.”

And there was something else too – something almost tangible that hung in the air. You could almost read it between the lines of what was being said on every billboard and poster. There was a hidden message. A message like a miracle drug that gives a person a boost of self-esteem. It felt like a mantra that gives you the confidence and meaning in life that you so desperately craved for so many years. When you heard those words, you immediately forgot all your troubles, insecurities, and self-doubt. And you felt like somebody. It communicated some longed-for sense of identity.

“Every itch needs a scratch,” thought Ilya. Propaganda tells you exactly what you want to hear. People buy all that because otherwise, they feel so bad about themselves that it becomes unbearable. We need to numb our pain. “But what is this itch that this propaganda is a scratch for?” He paused as if to feel the weightiness of his own question, and it seemed to him that he was directing the question to God himself.

There was no answer. He sank into a quiet reverie that often comes over you when you tune in to the rhythmic clickety-clackety sounds of the train. From the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of a man and a woman leaning against the train doors. A huge guy with a glum, earthy face was overshadowing a slender lady who was well-dressed but looked angry and unhappy. There was something so familiar about their look.

“Oh,” he thought. “That’s it. People with a deficient self-image often end up with a narcissistic partner. You just need someone in your life who acts confidently enough to give you a sense of security because you are so unsure of yourself. When a nation has a poor self-image, it will instinctively look for a strong ruler, who will make it feel more confident – in exchange for gaslighting.”

A well-known quote from *The Brothers Karamazov* popped up in his mind,

They will regard us as gods and feel grateful to those who have consented to lead the masses and bear their burden of freedom by ruling over them—so terrible will that freedom at last appear to men!

His reverie was interrupted by the announcement, “Attention, please. The doors are closing. The next station is Polytekhnikeskaya.” He stood up and made his way to the doors. The lady stepped out of the way readily, and the guy grunted something under his breath that reeked of alcohol.

Ilya got off the train, stepped onto the escalator, checked his connection, and looked for any messages from Mark.

“Thank God he is home,” he sighed after reading a message from Ella. Walking through the door of the metro station, he slowly strolled toward the grocery store on the corner of the street as he greedily inhaled the chilly winter air. His thoughts were heavy and muddled. “War,” he muttered to himself. “I can’t believe they actually started a war. What should I do if I get conscripted? I don’t want to kill Ukrainians. And I don’t want my boys to kill people. So, what should we do?”

As usual, he was directing these questions half to himself and half to God at the same time, waiting for insight, inspiration, or just a relieving train of thought. But there was nothing. He stopped by the store and got some milk, kefir, meat, and cheese. Two ladies at the register were cheerfully discussing the latest news, jabbering with perfectly happy faces.

“We didn’t have a choice,” said one of them, shrugging her shoulders. “We had to do something to stop those Nazis.”

Ilya grinned. He had been hearing such talk for a long time. “I may have to put up with this for years. I will have to adapt or go crazy.” But the thought of adapting and silently acquiescing to the official point of view made him sick to his stomach. “I can’t keep silent about this.” He resolutely pulled out his phone and typed a short reply to a discussion thread where he and a bunch of his long-time friends were talking about all sorts of things. This conversation was about the “special military operation” and “God’s will.”

Having typed in his honest opinion, he dropped the phone back into his pocket. In about a minute or two, the phone vibrated – someone had written a reply. Ilya pulled out the phone again and read, “The West has always feared and hated Russia. They would have invaded us had we not interfered. It’s undeniable. And see how quickly our troops advance. It must be a sign that God is on our side.”

Ilya gasped and put the phone away, feeling a strange mix of frustration, anger, and despair. He was almost home, but he lingered at the doorstep for a second or two.

“I would rather go to jail than participate in this war.” His mind suddenly cleared and, feeling some relief, he turned the key in the keyhole.