



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2025 OFFICIAL SELECTION
COMPETITION

TWO PROSECUTORS

BY SERGEI LOZNITSA

Credits

Director & Writer: **Sergei Loznitsa**

Based on a story by: **Georgy Demidov**

Director of Photography: **Oleg Mutu**

Artistic Director : **Kirill Shuvalov**

Production Designers: **Jurij Grigorovič, Aldis Meinerts**

Sound Designer: **Vladimir Golovnitski**

Composer: **Christiaan Verbeek**

Casting: **Maria Choustova**

Costume Designer: **Dorota Roqueplo**

Make-up Artist: **Marly Van De Wardt**

Editor: **Danielius Kokanauskis**

1st Assistant Director: **Marek Cydorowicz**

Line Producer: **Mārtiņš Eihe**

Starring:

Aleksandr Kuznetsov as **Kornyev**

Alexander Filippenko as **Stepniak & Pegleg**

Anatoli Beliy as **Vyshynsky**

Co-starring:

Andris Keišs as **Duty assistant**

Vytautas Kaniušonis as **Prison governor**

Producer: **Kevin Chneiweiss**

Production Company: **SBS Productions - Saïd Ben Saïd**

Coproduction Companies:

LOOKSfilm – Regina Bouchehri, Gunnar Dedio, Birgit Rasch

ATOMS & VOID – Sergei Loznitsa, Maria Choustova

White Picture – Alise Çelze

Avanpost Media – Vlad Rădulescu

Studio Uljana Kim – Uljana Kim

The Match Factory – Viola Fügen, Michael Weber, Cécile Tollu-Polonowski

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by Sergei Loznitsa

France, Germany, Netherlands, Latvia, Romania, Lithuania | 2025 | 1.33 | 118 min



Synopsis

Soviet Union, 1937

Thousands of letters from detainees falsely accused by the regime are burned in a prison cell. Against all odds, one of them reaches its destination, upon the desk of the newly appointed local prosecutor, Alexander Korniyev.

Korniyev does his utmost to meet the prisoner, a victim of agents of the secret police, the NKVD. A dedicated Bolshevik of integrity, the young prosecutor suspects foul play.

His quest for justice will take him all the way to the office of the Attorney General in Moscow. In the age of the great Stalinist purges, this is the plunge of a man into the corridors of a totalitarian regime that does not bear said name.

A Conversation with Sergei Loznitsa

How did you discover *Two Prosecutors* by the author Georgy Demidov, a scientist and political prisoner of the USSR. What inspired you in his relatively unknown, untranslated story, which begins with a letter written in blood?

Georgy Demidov, author of the novella *Two Prosecutors* was arrested in 1938 in Kharkiv, Ukraine, where he worked as an experimental physicist at the Kharkiv Technical Institute. He spent fourteen years in the Gulag, in its most notorious camps, which he referred to as “Auschwitz without ovens.” Demidov wrote about this experience in his books.

Two Prosecutors was written in 1969, however at the time, such texts were not only impossible to publish, but it was dangerous even to read them at home to one’s family and friends. In August 1980, all of Demidov’s manuscripts were seized by the KGB. In 1988, at the request of the writer’s daughter, the manuscripts were returned. The novella *Two Prosecutors* was released for the first time by the publishing house *Vozvrasheniye* not so long ago, in 2009. It’s a story that waited forty years to be published.

Over the past thirty years, I have collected quite a substantial library of books by prisoners of the Gulag, as well as of the Nazi camps. Naturally, when I first heard about the publication of *Two Prosecutors*, I was fascinated. I read the novella and the story stayed with me...

A few years later, I wrote the screenplay. In a country where tens of millions were displaced or went through the Gulag, and tens of millions perished in the camps, starved to death or just died because of unbearable conditions of existence – the memory of these tragic events lives on in almost each and every family. This memory is still haunting us today.

From the source material, what did you want to achieve with the film, in structure and tone – a combination of contained suspense thriller and dialogue driven chamber piece, with a touch of dark irony sprinkled in...

“Go *there* – but you don’t know where “there” is. Find *it* – but you don’t know what “it” is.” This is a popular plot of Russian fairy tales.

Our hero, just like a protagonist of a fairy tale, is surrounded by the unknown. He does not realize what kind of world he is living in. He does what he considers to be logical and fair, but the world around him is not at all as it seems. Our film’s protagonist, the young Soviet prosecutor Korniyev, is practically playing blind.

The question he must find the answer to is: “*Where am I, and what is happening to me?*”

The film is divided into two parts, with a prologue and an intermezzo between the chapters. The entire first part of the film is actually only the start of Korniyev’s story. It’s only in the 60th minute of the movie, or halfway into the film, that we fully realise exactly what the hero must do.

Though I tried to follow Demidov's text as closely as possible when writing the script, it was also important to me to place the narrative into a wider philosophical and cultural context. The shadows of Gogol and Kafka were persistently looming before me and over the story as I worked on the script.

Gogol, as you may have noticed, I have consciously "invited" into the film with Captain Kopeikin, but Kafka showed up and snuck in by himself - without any special invitation! *Two Prosecutors* is a tragedy. But as in any true tragedy, there is always a place for the grotesque, and for farce.

The film brings us into a specific moment of Soviet history, the terror of Stalin's great purges. What did you consider in depicting this specific moment, for the viewer of today?

Are you implying that a film depicting tragic events of Stalin's terror of the 1930's feels relevant now? Unfortunately, these topics will remain relevant as long as there are totalitarian regimes in power anywhere in the world.

None of the existing societies, no matter how advanced and democratic, are immune to authoritarianism and dictatorship. This is why I believe that the great purges of 1930s still need to be studied and reflected upon.

In 2017, I made a documentary film *The Trial*, based on the archive footage of one of Stalin's show trials of 1930. At this trial, respected Soviet scientists, engineers, economists and captains of industry all publicly accused themselves of crimes that, as it was revealed decades later, they had never committed. Why did they do this? This trial was meant to provoke fear and suspicion among the Soviet population and it became a powerful tool of Stalinist propaganda and terror.

Two Prosecutors is also set during Stalin's purges, when the whole country is gripped with fear. I'm fascinated by this psychological mechanism – both in an individual and in collective psyche, which enables and sustains the existence of a totalitarian society, based entirely on terror.

Such psychological patterns are repeated century after century, generation after generation, and in the end, all totalitarian regimes are, in so many ways, alike.

The story's parallels with the present moment, far beyond Russia and Putinism, are glaring. Do you hope international audiences perceive a reflection of their own societies to some degree?

Of course, we can say that history is repeating itself. Times change, circumstances change and technology develops, but the outcome is always tragic. The temptation to achieve one's political goals by the simple and "effective" means of violence, can prove to be irresistible to the ruling elites of even the most democratic and seemingly incorruptible countries.

I have always been puzzled by the fact that, more often than not, people, sometimes entire countries, cannot grasp their own history, cannot see “the forest from the trees”, and do not understand the meaning of the historical events in which they are participating. In other words: they do not understand the meaning of the events that directly affect their fate. Every time we say to ourselves, “This can’t be happening!” But then it is happening, in the here and now, and we find ourselves powerless to resist it.

There’s an added irony in the film: the system destroying its most ardent supporters, its own ‘True Believers.’ An irony even more striking with a character like Prosecutor Kornyeu, himself a direct embodiment of the state and the rule of law...

The revolution was conceived and carried out by one group of people, but its fruits were enjoyed mostly by another group. Stalin, in his struggle for power, destroyed almost all of his own comrades.

Our protagonist, a young prosecutor just out of university, belongs to the first post-revolutionary generation, brought up in a romantic, idealistic spirit. A fearless and enthusiastic builder of the society of the future, confident in his own righteousness. He cannot even begin to suspect that the world in which he lives is far from ideal.

Such characters often fell victim of the Soviet regime. Time ruthlessly cut them apart. Those who were lucky enough to survive were freed from their illusions by decades in the Gulag.



How do you put together the international cast for a movie like this, hailing from countries all over the “post-Soviet” space? Is there still a sense of common connection around the material, a sense of shared history?

I've cast Russian speaking actors from Lithuania, Latvia and Israel. I met Sasha (Aleksandr) Kuznetsov for the first time last year in Cannes, and that meeting was enough for me to invite him to play the lead role in the film. Then, three months later, we met for rehearsals and started working.

I also invited Alexander Filippenko, a wonderful actor who plays two different roles in the film. Another brilliant actor joining us was Anatoli Beliy, who was the leading actor of the Moscow

Art Theatre until February 2022. Anatoli lives and works in Israel now; he recently appeared in Gesher Theatre's Hebrew language production of *Crime and punishment*. All three of these actors – Aleksandr Kuznetsov, Alexander Filippenko and Anatoli Beliy – left Russia after Russian troops invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

They are joined by the Lithuanian actors Vytautas Kaniušonis, Nerijus Gadliauskas, Lukas Petrauskas, Valerijus Jevsejevas and Vygandas Vadeiša. I worked together with them on a play based on Jonathan Littell's novel *The Kindly* at the Youth Theater in Vilnius. Valentin Novopolskij and Dmitrij Denisiuk are actors from The Vilnius Old Theatre, which was formerly known as the Russian Drama Theater.

We have known each other for a long time – Valentin and Dmitriy have been doing voice-over scenes for my documentary films throughout the years. Now, at last, I had the opportunity to work with them on set. In Riga, I met with the wonderful Latvian actor Andris Keis. We also cast many non-professional actors. For many of them it was their first experience of cinema or of a shoot.

My actors come from different backgrounds, but all of us share the same experience of the Soviet past.

How do you bring to the screen a story that is both intimate in its essence but simultaneously grand in scope? What were you looking for in terms of look and feel of the film?

Originally, I wanted to incorporate archival footage in the film. The film was to begin with the final statements made by the defendants at Stalin's show trial of 1930, and end with a speech by the Chief Prosecutor of the USSR, Vyshinsky, at the show trial of 1938. Later I abandoned this idea, but its traces lingered over the film – in particular, in the image format.

The academy ratio corresponds stylistically to the era in which the action takes place, and to the narrative style itself. There is no camera movement in the film, only static shots. This method of shooting poses certain challenges and requires a considerable degree of ingenuity in composition and editing.

Oleg Mutu, the Romanian director of photography with whom I shoot all my feature films, came up with a special colour scheme. We excluded all the colours of “life” from the visuals – leaving instead black, gray, brown, dark blue, white and, in some places, blood red.

Costumes were made or sourced in accordance with this visual palette, and their authenticity was our guiding principle. Some costumes were sewn by Dorota Roqueplo, our Polish costume designer, from vintage fabrics from the thirties. The textures of the fabric, especially when seen in close-ups, work amazingly well.

The filming took place inside a prison in Riga, dating from 1905, still the Russian Empire times. This prison was recently closed down due to its

conditions not meeting European standards. The smell of the prison and the aura of suffering that has accumulated and lingered there for centuries will probably never go away.

The individual’s powerlessness against a well-oiled state machine is unfortunately a concept that seems as relevant in 1937 as it does today. What’s different now?

Every contemporary society and its individual members face a multitude of challenges. These challenges may be common to all of us, or specific to certain communities. In this sense, we should not forget that there exists a certain “*dis-temporality*”: we all live in the same physical time, and, at the same time, in different historical times. Different communities of people are going through different

stages of historical development simultaneously. But there is one common problem that is shared by all of us: the lack of adequate language to describe what is happening in the here and now.

Without being able to describe, it is impossible to understand. Without understanding, it is impossible to take adequate action. We try to describe the present using the language of the past. However, past experience is no good for this, because life is always changing. Rapidly changing.

For a hundred years now, we have been living in the circumstances described by Kafka, Musil, Orwell, Platonov and other great authors of the twentieth century. But still we seem to expect the arrival of a romantic hero, a savior. They will come, fight the

dragon and solve the problem. What inertia! There are enough examples of this in the political life all over the world, in the aspirations of societies, in the criteria for choosing a “hero” or champion for a culture... but unfortunately, we have a problem – *robin hoods* are fully a thing of the past.

The world has become so complex now that we cannot cope with its problems using simple methods. We need a different language to describe our understanding of the world and, accordingly, our actions. I don’t mean that it is impossible to find such a language, but first we need to at least formulate such a task. This, in fact, is what I am trying to do with my film.



Your films always seem to be reminding us – or burning into our souls – the lessons of history. As you put out such dark, prescient warnings, alarm bells even – how do you stay inspired?

Once upon a time, people lived to an average age of 20 to 25 years. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the average life expectancy in Europe grew to 27 years, and at the end of the nineteenth century – it was 33 years. In the twentieth century it jumped already to about 65 years. See, there are some positive changes, after all! These changes inevitably lead to certain transformations in our consciousness. This is what inspires me.

Sergei Loznitsa

Sergei Loznitsa was born in 1964 in the city of Baranovitchi, USSR (now Belarus) and grew up in Kiev, Ukraine, graduating from the Kiev Polytechnic with a degree in Applied Mathematics in 1987. From 1987 to 1991, he worked as a scientist at the Kiev Institute of Cybernetics, specializing in artificial intelligence research. In 1997, Loznitsa graduated from the Russian State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow. Sergei Loznitsa has been making films since 1996, and by now has directed 28 award-winning documentaries and 5 fiction films.

Loznitsa's feature debut MY JOY (2010) premiered in the main competition in Cannes. His films - both fiction and documentary - have been recognized with major awards

including the FIPRESCI prize at the Festival de Cannes for IN THE FOG in 2012, the Best Director Prize of Cannes' Un Certain Regard section for his feature film DONBASS in 2018, a Special Jury Prize of the L'Oeil D'Or Award in Cannes for BABI YAR. CONTEXT in 2021, as well as the IDFA Award for Best Film for MR. LANDSBERGIS that same year; among many other international awards.

In 2013 Sergei Loznitsa founded the film production company ATOMS & VOID. Based in Europe since 2001, Sergei Loznitsa continues to work on both documentary and fiction projects.



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Selected Filmography

THE INVASION - CANNES SPECIAL SCREENING, DOCUMENTARY, 2024

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF DESTRUCTION - CANNES SPECIAL SCREENING, DOCUMENTARY, 2022

MR LANDSBERGIS - IDFA / IDFA AWARD FOR BEST FILM, DOCUMENTARY, 2021

BABI YAR. CONTEXT - CANNES SPECIAL SCREENING / SPECIAL JURY PRIZE OF L'OEIL D'OR AWARD, DOCUMENTARY, 2021

STATE FUNERAL - VENICE OUT OF COMPETITION, DOCUMENTARY, 2019

DONBASS - CANNES UN CERTAIN REGARD / BEST DIRECTOR, 2018

A GENTLE CREATURE - CANNES COMPETITION, 2017

AUSTERLITZ - VENICE OUT OF COMPETITION, DOCUMENTARY, 2016

MAIDAN - CANNES SPECIAL SCREENING, DOCUMENTARY, 2014

IN THE FOG - CANNES COMPETITION / FIPRESCI PRIZE, 2012

MY JOY - CANNES COMPETITION, 2010

BLOCKADE - IFFR, DOCUMENTARY, 2005



Aleksandr Kuznetsov

Aleksandr is a Ukrainian-Russian actor, who was born in Sevastopol. At the age of 12, he and his best friend tried to run away to the UK, but they were caught by police after getting halfway there. He moved to Moscow to pursue his education, and briefly worked as a sailor, before beginning his acting career in earnest.

In 2015, he graduated from the Russian Institute of Theatre Arts, and soon became a leading actor at the Chekhov Moscow Art Theatre. That same year he was cast in his first prominent on-screen role as 'Marten' in THE SCYTHIAN, directed by Rustam Mosafir.

He has worked consistently in film and television ever since, including: starring as 'Peter' in the award-winning feature ACID; as 'Viktor' in GREAT POETRY; in LETO by Kirill Serebrennikov; and in Netflix's first Russian original series BETTER THAN US. Aleksandr's work includes: the French feature film OUR MEN, which was the closing film of the prestigious Directors' Fortnight selection at Cannes; in the lead role of LAND OF LEGENDS, by acclaimed Russian director Anton Megerdichev; and as 'Krysztof' in the HBO series KAMIKAZE, an 8-part series based on the Norwegian novel "Muleum" by Erlend Loe, which is directed by Kaspar Munk.

His recent work includes the sci-fi FREE FALL by Oleg Urazaykin, and the role of 'Sasha' in the series SHAMAN by Rustam Mosafir. Aleksandr is perhaps best known to international audiences for his performance as 'Helmut' in FANTASTIC BEASTS: THE SECRET OF DUMBLEDORE, directed by David Yates & written by J.K. Rowling.

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