

Two Prosecutors [12A]

2025 Fr/Ger/Netherlands/Latvia/Romania/Lithuania/Ukraine 118 mins

UK released **27 March 2026**

Director **Sergey Loznitsa**

Screenplay **Sergey Loznitsa; (book by Georgy Demido)**

Cinematography **Oleg Mutu**

Music **Christiaan Verbeek**

Cast **Aleksandr Kuznetsov** (Kornyev); **Aleksandr Filippenko** (Stepniak / Pegleg); **Anatoliy Belyi** (Andrey Vyshinsky)

The run-up to the outbreak of World War II saw the curious phenomenon of people fleeing Stalin's Soviet Union for refuge in Nazi Germany, their reasoning being that Hitler wasn't anywhere near as bad. Bizarre as this notion may seem in hindsight, at the time Stalin's Great Terror had unleashed what were then unprecedented horrors.

The film is set in 1937, at the height of the Terror. A Methuselah-like prisoner is asked to burn a sackful of letters: he skim-reads pleading letters to Comrade Stalin which each insist on its author's innocence, before alighting on a scrap of paper from one Stepniak, whose text seems written in blood.

Defying explicit rules, this he saves, and it somehow reaches newly qualified local prosecutor Aleksandr Kornyev (Aleksandr Kuznetsov). Intrigued by Stepniak's claim to be harbouring "vital information", he invokes his office's authority and requests an audience. He faces a seemingly endless wait, filled with endless trudging along corridors and flights of stairs, or sitting on hard-backed chairs in nondescript rooms, while being given transparently bogus excuses for the complications of this notionally routine visit.

Two Prosecutors itself, and much else in Loznitska's, output would surely have been denounced as 'formalist' by Stalin's apparatchiks, an accusation that could lead to the premature termination of an artist's career and even life. In the case of *Two Prosecutors* – shot in desaturated near-monochrome by Loznitsa's regular colleague, the Romanian cinematographer Oleg Mutu –

this formal rigour extends to a locked-down camera and the squarish Academy aspect ratio (in use during the Stalinist period itself) framing a variety of compositions that treat the film's characters as mere chess pieces, their moves strictly circumscribed, with capture a constant threat. The film revolves around three context-setting monologues, delivered by Stepniak and a disabled war veteran nicknamed 'Pegleg' (both played by Aleksandr Filippenko, one shaven-headed, the other under a hairy thicket), and finally by Korniyev himself, once he's managed to see Chief Prosecutor Andrey Vyshinsky (Anatoliy Belyi), a real historical figure who was one of the key people in Stalin's purges – a fact of which Korniyev is sublimely unaware. Korniyev is an archetypal dramatic hero, a man doggedly in quest of both truth and justice, his visibly broken nose (shown in profile at an early stage) belying his slight frame and suggesting that he can fight his way out of a corner if need be. There's no questioning the fundamental righteousness of his cause, but the era's history suggests not merely that he's certain to fail but that elaborate mechanisms have been put in place to guarantee it. The film's regular recourse to the relief of comic grotesquerie comes via Gogol and Kafka (both acknowledged influences), but its study of the mechanism of total oppression and the cynical sidelining of a once-respected legal system resonates well beyond the 1930s. In particular, there will surely be an audible reaction to Stepniak's despairing line about how "honest, knowledgeable experts are substituted by ignorant charlatans".

Michael Brooke, *Sight and Sound*, 25 March 2026 (abridged)

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