In the midst of the Terror of 1937

Two Prosecutors: A stubborn young lawyer confronts the criminal methods of the Stalinist bureaucracy

Fred Mazelis
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It is unusual to come across a Russian-language film dealing honestly, even if incompletely, with the tragic and horrific events of 1937, the height of the Stalinist terror in the Soviet Union. Many thousands of devoted revolutionaries, including most of the leaders of the October 1917 Revolution, were put to death between 1936-38 by the counterrevolutionary bureaucracy.

Two Prosecutors, released last year, won the Francois Chalais Prize at the Cannes Film Festival, awarded to features dealing with social and political issues. The film was written and directed by Sergei Loznitsa and is based on a story by Georgy Demidov (1908-87). Demidov was a Soviet physicist, a victim of the purges who spent 14 years in the Stalinist prison camps, most of them in the notorious Kolyma region of Siberia. Later writings of his were based on this experience.

Loznitsa's film opens with an ominous scene of a prison in the city of Bryansk, some 250 miles southwest of Moscow. We see a group of political prisoners, a few of the thousands who are held behind its walls. One of them is ordered to burn thousands of prisoners' letters. Prisoners were in fact allowed to write appeals to higher authorities, but this was a pro forma exercise. The great majority of these letters were never sent, and the occasional one that got through was simply ignored. In this case, however, a small fragment of one letter has survived.

A young prosecutor, Kornyev (Aleksandr Kuznetsov), comes across the fragment when it arrives at his office. It is written in blood by one of the prisoners, the old Bolshevik Stepniak (Aleksandr Filippenko). Kornyev, recently out of law school and in his prosecutor post for only three months, remembers hearing a lecture only a year earlier by this same Stepniak, in which the veteran of the October Revolution spoke about the importance of discovering the truth.

The young lawyer, inexperienced and naïve, apparently knows little about political developments. In any case, he goes to the prison and quietly but persistently insists on seeing Stepniak. After waiting patiently for an interminably long time, he succeeds in overcoming the resistance of the authorities, including not-so-veiled warnings from the prison governor.

Stepniak, showing signs of torture, can barely stand. He insists on speaking to the prosecutor privately, without the presence of the guards. Since his visitor has official credentials, the guards feel obliged to comply. Stepniak's exchange with Kornyev is the heart of the film. He tells a harrowing story of torture and false confessions. At one point he has a coughing spell that suggests he may not be able to continue. He shows Kornyev the bruises on his torso, signs of the damage that has been done to his internal organs—"Look what the NKVD has done to me."

Stepniak explains that he has been imprisoned because he refused to sign death sentences for those he knew to be innocent.

> Those sneaky NKVD fascists … thousands of innocent people have been subjected to unimaginable torture, deprived of food, sleep, just to get them to sign false statements against themselves and others. Honest people have pleaded guilty to crimes that are beyond their comprehension, and the cases go to the courts which act on orders from the same NKVD. They are particularly cruel with the old Party members. … I'm the last member of the Regional Committee in this world, because I'm more stubborn.

Stepniak explains that the authorities need the false confessions to justify the executions that will follow. "The old leaders devoted to the Party, they are being replaced by young, loud careerists. And honest conscientious specialists are being replaced by narrow-minded ignoramuses."

In spite of these powerful words, it becomes clear (although this is not discussed in the film) that Stepniak bears some political responsibility for his own fate. He appeals to Kornyev to go to Moscow. The idea is to try to get word to Stalin himself of the outrages that are being committed by the NKVD. Stepniak has apparently been a faithful supporter of the Stalin faction. He indicts the NKVD in his region, but what about the party leaders, first and foremost Stalin, who preside over the NKVD, have appointed its leaders and given it the marching orders? Above all, what about the policies of Stalin, reflecting the interests of the parasitic and counterrevolutionary bureaucracy, which derives its privileges from the nationalized property forms that were conquests of the Revolution but which undermines these same conquests and is leading the Soviet Union to destruction?

Kornyev resolves to go to Moscow, and from that point on, his own fate has been sealed. The young lawyer has no understanding of the forces he is dealing with. He takes a train to Moscow, obtains an audience with none other than Andrey Vyshinsky, the infamous chief prosecutor at the three Moscow Trials of 1936-38, during which virtually the entire leadership of the October Revolution was exterminated.

Vyshinsky is the second prosecutor referred to in the title of the film. He could not of course be a sharper contrast to the young and unsuspecting Kornyev, who seeks the truth. Vyshinsky politely hears Kornyev's report, tells him he must get more evidence, and sends him back to Bryansk. On his return trip he is "befriended" by two fellow passengers, who offer him a ride when they arrive at the station, and then inform him that he is under

arrest.

Two Prosecutors is a powerful depiction of the Great Purge in the USSR, when, by conservative estimates, hundreds of thousands of communists were killed. The first 40 minutes of the film are appropriately slow-moving, evoking the bureaucratic nightmare with gloom and long, pregnant pauses, as Kornyev speaks with the prison authorities. Following Stepniak's testimony, the film proceeds steadily towards its grim conclusion. While the end is inevitable, it also effectively conveys the nature of the totalitarian regime.

Both Kuznetsov and Filippenko are outstanding in their roles. Anatoly Bely has little to do as a close-mouthed and duplicitous Vyshinsky. Watching the film, the viewer is reminded of the fact that many millions in today's Russia, including possibly these actors themselves, number among their grandparents, or even their parents in some cases, victims of the Stalinist terror.

It is impossible to see *Two Prosecutors* without considering how the party that led the October Revolution was destroyed two decades later. Even a viewer who knows little about the history of the USSR is presented with evidence indicating that Stalinism was the antithesis of Bolshevism.

This is not the approach taken, however, by most of the critics who have reviewed the film in the United States and Britain. In newspapers and websites, such as *The Guardian* and the *New York Times*, it has been described simply as a tale of totalitarian dictatorship, without any reference to the history of the period.

Film critic Glenn Kenny, writing on RogerEbert.com, is among the most blatant in his anticommunism. The very first sentence of his review reads as follows: "The Soviet reign of terror initiated and overseen by Lenin, then escalated and overseen by Stalin, is a world-historical trauma still being felt today."

The Trotskyist movement has long exposed this lie. If Stalinism was the same as Bolshevism, why was it necessary for the ruling bureaucracy to kill the leading revolutionaries, along with hundreds of thousands of their followers?

Only the Trotskyists were able to understand the Terror. As Leopold Trepper, the leader of the Red Orchestra Soviet spy network, wrote decades later, long after he had become disillusioned by Stalinism:

> [The Trotskyists] fought Stalinism to the death, and they were the only ones who did. By the time of the great purges, they could only shout their rebellion in the freezing wastelands where they had been dragged in order to be exterminated. In the camps, their conduct was admirable. But their voices were lost in the tundra.
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> Today, the Trotskyites have a right to accuse those who once howled along with the wolves. Let them not forget, however, that they had the enormous advantage over us of having a coherent political system capable of replacing Stalinism. They had something to cling to in the midst of their profound distress at seeing the revolution betrayed.

There were loyal Stalinists among the victims of the Terror, which through its own counterrevolutionary logic devoured many who had no record of opposition to the bureaucracy. But there were thousands of others, those faithful to the program of Lenin and Trotsky, who were the main targets.

The major weakness of *Two Prosecutors* stems from the fact that this historical background—the genuine opposition to the bureaucracy—is not supplied. The ideological basis of the bureaucratic dictatorship is not discussed: its rejection of internationalism in favor of the nationalist doctrine of "socialism in one country." One must also consider the objective circumstances of isolation and defeats of revolutionary struggles of the 1920s and 1930s, the objective basis for the growth of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Furthermore, it is vital to understand how the ruling caste was strengthened by the successive defeats of the working class internationally, what Stalin represented and why he triumphed.

In the absence of this context, the drama can be taken as evidence of the absolute futility of revolution, based on the reactionary conception that while Bolshevism and Stalinism were not identical, one led inescapably to the other. This may well be the view of both the filmmaker Loznitsa and the writer Demidov, whose story became the basis for the film.

Demidov was arrested in 1938 and sentenced to hard labor. During his 14 years at Kolyma, he made the acquaintance of Varlam Shalamov, the writer of *Kolyma Tales*, one of the most powerful accounts of the experience of the Stalinist camps. Kolyma was also where Nadezhda Joffe, the daughter of leading Trotskyist Adolf Joffe, spent about 20 years. She later wrote her powerful memoir, *Back in Time*, about this period.

Although Demidov was rehabilitated in 1958, following Stalin's death, he remained under continuous surveillance by the Stalinist regime, which feared additional exposure of its crimes. Apparently Demidov never denounced the October Revolution itself. In 1980 the KGB seized all of his work, which was only returned to his daughter during the period of glasnost, after his death.

Loznitsa, a 61-year-old Ukrainian director of Belorussian background, holds views that can probably be best described as liberal or social democratic. At the time of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, he correctly denounced the invasion, but he also resigned from the European Film Academy because he demanded a stronger stand in "solidarity" with Ukraine and the NATO-instigated war against Russia. Nevertheless, only a month later Loznitsa was expelled from the Ukrainian Film Academy when he objected to a ban on Russian films. The Ukrainian anti-communists and nationalists called him a "cosmopolite"—the very same charge leveled by the Stalinist regime in the years of renewed official antisemitism before Stalin's death in 1953.

Loznitsa issued a statement after his expulsion saying that it showed "the academy members had a very different perception of Ukrainian history, which they claim they know better than anyone. Thus, by calling me a 'cosmopolite' and using my refusal to categorically ban the entire Russian culture completely as a proof of my insufficient patriotism, they descend into the Stalinist paradigm of traitors, enemies, and collective responsibility…"

Another one of Loznitsa's films, *Babi Yar. Context* (2021), uses documentary footage to expose the infamous mass murder of more than 30,000 Jews by the Nazis and their Ukrainian collaborators in 1941. Loznitsa no doubt correctly believes that this earlier film is a major reason for the hostile reaction to his latest work.

Somewhat ironically, the reaction of the extreme nationalists and fascistic elements in Ukraine exposes the reactionary character of Loznitsa's own stance on the war in Ukraine. His opposition to Putin, remaining on the level of bourgeois liberalism, has led him to support the imperialist war against Russia, but for the Ukrainian fascists and their allies that is not enough.

Two Prosecutors has been banned in both Russia and Ukraine, and that in itself speaks in its favor. In Russia, the regime of KGB veteran Putin has in recent years rehabilitated Stalin and the methods of the secret police. In Ukraine, Russian is banned as "the language of the aggressor," so a Russian-language film is automatically excluded.

The symmetrical difficulties are a reflection of the fact that *Two Prosecutors*, with its reminder of the internationalist origins of the Russian Revolution, makes nationalists of all stripes uneasy. In any case, whatever the limitations of this film, *Two Prosecutors* is well worth viewing. It may be hard to find, however, following brief runs in a few US and European cities. Banned in Ukraine and Russia, its availability is very limited elsewhere. The cultural establishment is not eager to see an

account of the actual history of the Soviet Union.