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*the*  
**PRISONER**

1955

**CAST**

**Alec Guinness** The Cardinal  
**Jack Hawkins** The Interrogator  
**Raymond Huntley** The General  
**Jeanette Sterke** The Girl  
**Ronald Lewis** The Guard  
**Kenneth Griffith** The Secretary  
**Mark Dignam** The Governor  
**Gerard Heinz** The Doctor  
And  
**Wilfred Lawson** The Jailer

**CREW**

Directed by **Peter Glenville**  
Screenplay by **Bridget Boland**, based on her play  
Produced by **Vivian A. Cox**  
Executive Producer **Sydney Box**  
Director of Photography **Reginald Wyer B.S.C.**  
Film Editor **Frederick Wilson**  
Music by **Benjamin Frankel**  
Art Director **John Hawkesworth**  
Costume Designer **Julie Harris**





## ***THE PRISONER:*** **THE INSIDE STORY**

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by Mark Cunliffe

“Religion is the opiate of the masses.” Thus said Karl Marx in his argument that the church was something the ruling class used to instil a kind of subservience within the working classes, based on the theory that a better, more sedate life awaited them in heaven.

Taking this further in his book *The Attitude of the Workers’ Party to Religion*, Vladimir Lenin wrote:

Religion is the opium of the people: this saying of Marx is the cornerstone of the entire ideology of Marxism about religion. All modern religions and churches, all and of every kind of religious organizations are always considered by Marxism as the organs of bourgeois reaction, used for the protection of the exploitation and the stupefaction of the working class.

In the wake of the 1917 Russian Revolution, political repression became widespread as the party viewed the Russian Orthodox Church as collaborators with Tsarist rule following their condemnation of state collectivism and their attitude that the Soviet regime was the antichrist. Stalin believed that religion hampered the development and growth of mankind and, in an effort to break the power of religious belief from his people, a doctrine of ‘state atheism’ was introduced that essentially existed to convert the newly communist population to atheism. Religion itself was never outlawed within the Soviet Union, but it was heavily persecuted. Founded in 1925, the League of Militant Atheists gained a foothold in all walks of Soviet life, including educational institutions, factories and collective farms, which it enjoyed for some sixteen years until the Axis invasion in 1941. Their remit, based on the motto that “the struggle against religion is a struggle for socialism”, allowed them to confiscate religious property and openly harass and ridicule believers as proponents of a kind of superstitious and backward thinking in an effort to abolish religious practice.



As a result, public displays of faith and the publication of religious materials were strongly prohibited, but worse was to occur for the proponents of religion.

From the 1920s through to the early 1940s imprisonment in labour camps, prison camps and mental hospitals were commonplace fates for representatives of the church, along with torture and execution. Within the first five years of the Bolsheviks coming to power it was estimated by the British journalist Richard Pipes in his book *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime* that more than 1,200 priests and 28 bishops had been executed, whilst 6,775 priests and a further 28 bishops in Kiev were murdered. By the 1930s and '40s, the number of Orthodox churches in Russia fell from 29,584 to less than 500, with a twelfth of Orthodox priests left functioning in their parishes as the bloody onslaught continued. In 1937 alone, at the peak of this persecution, it is said that more than 85,000 priests were shot.

The German invasion of Russia in 1941 saw Stalin revive the church in an attempt to instil patriotic fervour and position the USSR as a defender of Christian civilisation. The League of Militant Atheists had been disbanded and its founder, Yemelyan Mikhailovich Yaroslavsky, found himself in the hypocritical position of writing a piece in praise of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, a notable Orthodox Christian, for his outspoken hatred of Hitler and Germany. This rapprochement continued throughout WWII with many priests returning from the gulags and imprisonment on the proviso that they renounce their previous position. Persecution did not completely come to an end, however, and Stalin found, in trumped up charges of German collaboration, a convenient way to dispose of particularly troublesome priests. Despite this, by the ceasefire the church had advanced its position considerably, with some 22,000 Russian Orthodox churches open once more by the 1950s. The USSR's Central Committee had in 1945 issued new resolutions that called for the resumption of anti-religious campaigning and propaganda, with the Vatican as its main target. The intention was to separate the territories of the USSR (some now hard-won in the war) from the influence of Catholicism and, as such, caricatures of Pius XII and other bishops were published depicting them as warmongers and supporters of the harsh brutalities of the Nazis. Alongside this propaganda, Stalin called for the liquidation of Uniate churches in the Ukraine, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Romania, and had them forcibly merged with the Orthodox Church – the better to conform to their overall control. Those who resisted, were critical of, or were seen as a threat to the communist regime

were immediately imprisoned or forced to enter into exile. It is this situation that Peter Glenville's 1955 film *The Prisoner* concerns itself with, most notably in the infamous 1949 show trial of Hungarian cardinal József Mindszenty.

Show trials were a way of silencing and oppressing dissenting voices within Eastern Bloc countries that now came under the USSR following their liberation at the end of WWII. Highly fabricated, trumped up charges were brought against anyone critical or questioning of the regime and confessions and evidence were extracted by any means. The aim of such trials was to deliver a guilty verdict that would serve as an example and a warning to any citizen who considered transgressing or speaking out against the state.

József Mindszenty had a long history of speaking out against government. As a young priest in the wake of the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire immediately after WWI he was twice arrested for speaking out against the socialist policies of the governing Hungarian People's Republic. In 1940, Mindszenty urged his followers to vote against the far-right Arrow Cross Party, a political party heavily modelled on – and in favour of – the Nazi regime. When the party came to power as the Government of National Unity in the last year of WWII, Mindszenty – by now the Bishop of Veszprém – had protested against the fighting in Western Hungary, had supported Hungarian Jews and had objected to being forced to share his official palace with troops. This dissent subsequently led to his house arrest, which he spent at a church in Sopron. Following the end of the war and the collapse of the fascist government, the now free Mindszenty was appointed Primate of Hungary and Archbishop of Esztergom and Cardinal-Priest of Santo Stefano Rotondo in 1945 and '46 respectively. The new government, the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, led by Premier Mátyás Rákosi, also found Mindszenty to be a thorn in their side as he sought compensation for the state seizure of church-owned farmlands and objected to the dissolution of church-run parochial schools. In 1948 Rákosi banned religious orders and proclaimed the troublesome priest to be “the largest landowner in Hungary”, citing personal greed as the prime motivation for his objection to the confiscation of agricultural farmland for the state, as well as a supporter of monarchy and – in stark contrast to the facts – a proponent of the previous fascist wartime regime. With the writing on the wall, Mindszenty penned a note that refuted the charges that were about to be laid out by the state and advised that any confession he might make would be the result of duress. Not long after this, he was arrested.



His predictions of duress proved to be correct. Whilst in custody, Mindszenty was subjected to intolerable torture and repeatedly beaten by rubber truncheons in order to secure a false confession to a series of incredible charges which included the masterminding of the theft of the Crown of Saint Stephen with the ultimate aim of crowning Crown Prince Otto von Hapsburg as King of Hungary, scheming to overthrow the Party, and the desire to start a third World War which, once won by the Americans, would allow him to assume overall political power. Appearing noticeably weak from the effects of torture and incarceration, Mindszenty once again confessed to all charges and almost all of the western press reported their horror at the obvious absurdities of the trial, the violation of human rights and the wicked persecution of an innocent man of the cloth. Caring little for the scorn directed at them from the rest of the world, the Hungarian authorities sentenced Mindszenty to life imprisonment. In response, Pope Pius XII condemned their actions, excommunicating all involved and writing the apostolic letter, *Acerrimo Moerore*, to further denounce them.

Mindszenty gained his freedom seven years later in the Hungarian revolution of 1956. Upon his release, he returned to Budapest and delivered a radio message praising the anti-communist insurgents. When the Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest on the 4<sup>th</sup> November to crush the rebellion, Mindszenty sought political asylum at the US embassy in Budapest, remaining there for fifteen years. It was only when Pope Paul VI granted an annulment of the excommunication order given by Pope Pius that the Hungarian government agreed to allow Mindszenty to leave the country for Austria in 1971. He lived in exile in Vienna where he continued to court controversy by refusing to relinquish the primacy of Hungary in return for the publication of his memoirs. In the end, the Vatican stripped him of the title in 1973, but refused to fill the vacancy whilst Mindszenty was still alive. He died two years later in Vienna at the age of 83.

*The Prisoner* started life as a stage play penned by Irish-British playwright Bridget Boland. Though redolent of the inhumanity that Mindszenty faced, Boland refused to specify the location of her tale or name her characters. In employing an anonymous setting, not only was Boland conveniently exonerated from having to conform to the facts that were by now a matter of public record, it also lent her play a stark implication – this could happen anywhere. It made its debut at the Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh and later at the Globe Theatre, London in 1954 and starred Alec Guinness in the role of the Mindszenty-inspired cardinal, Noel Willman as his interrogator, and Wilfrid Lawson in the supporting role of

the gaoler. Of this trio, only two – Guinness and Lawson – would make the transition to the big screen the following year, with Jack Hawkins replacing Willman in an adaptation from Boland herself.

Shot in stark black and white, *The Prisoner* is a psychological game of cat and mouse whose narrative has been opened out for the purposes of cinema but which seldom escapes its stage-bound nature. This isn't necessarily a flaw or a criticism; for at its heart *The Prisoner* works best as a two-hander, pitting one character against another in a story that demands the intimate atmosphere that a theatre affords. The director, Peter Glenville, having staged the original run of the play at both Edinburgh and London, remains faithful to the source material. Having been a performer himself, it is clear that he is something of an actor's director too. He places much store in the theatrical skill and screen magnetism of Guinness and Hawkins, rather than in any visual or directorial flourishes that a more cinematically-minded filmmaker could contribute. That being said, he does often choose to shoot directly above both men, adrift on the broad canvas, in a way that perhaps begs you to consider them as two chess pieces – the bishop and the rook – though it soon becomes clear that in reality both are little more than pawns in a greater game. Once allies in the resistance movement against the Nazis, they are now cordial adversaries, each being manipulated into losing something of themselves in the battle of wits they are forced to play out.

Guinness delivers a complex performance that befits the character of the Cardinal, a hero of the resistance against the Nazis during WWII and a man who is at once both heavily pious and somewhat arrogant. His fierce intelligence allows him to see the flaws in the case mounted against him long before his interrogators do and he bats them all aside with his sonorous dismissal and a small, wry smile. It's a showier – though no less complex – role than that of the Interrogator and Hawkins rightly underplays his part of the former medical man and committed party member who is now given the task of securing a public confession from the Cardinal by finding the hidden weakness that will ultimately break him – the real reason why he joined the priesthood. In many ways there are parallels to be drawn here with the combative character studies of church and state that would appear in Glenville's later film, 1964's *Becket*.

Outside of the two leads, only that inveterate scene-stealer Wilfrid Lawson makes much impact as a gaoler who, it could be argued, is something of a distant relation of Shakespeare's Porter character from *Macbeth*. I personally fail to see much point in the





inclusion of Ronald Lewis and Jeanette Sterke as a prison guard and a young woman abandoned by a husband who has fled to the West, as their seemingly doomed romantic subplot adds little to the plot or indeed goes anywhere.

Whilst the critical and commercial reception for *The Prisoner* was mostly positive, the film was not without controversy. It was banned in Yugoslavia because the authorities felt it had too much in common with their own 1946 show trial of Croatian Cardinal Aloysius Stepinac, who had been charged with high treason and war crimes. Unlike Mindszenty – and the film’s Cardinal – Stepinac refused to confess to these crimes and personally challenged the legitimacy of the trial from the dock. He was sentenced to 16 years in prison but was released by General Tito in 1951 as a gesture of goodwill and on the proviso that he remained confined to his home parish of Krašić. The ban on the film was not lifted in this territory until the fall of Communism.

At the Cannes and Venice Film Festivals, *The Prisoner* was also prohibited, with each event believing that to screen such a deliberately anti-Communist film would likely cause offence to Communist countries. In contrast to this, some in Boland’s homeland of Ireland actually viewed the film as pro-Communist, though I’m hazarding a guess that those people hadn’t actually watched the film before reaching that decision. This issue was further muddled in Italy, where reactions were mixed to say the least; it was decreed by some as anti-Catholic despite being the recipient of an award from the Catholic Office of the Cinema.

But perhaps the most important audience reaction came from none other than József Mindszenty himself. According to William S. Shepard, a diplomat at the US embassy in Bulgaria that was Mindszenty’s sanctuary for fifteen years, the Cardinal did watch *The Prisoner*. “I do know that occasionally the cardinal would watch films,” Shepard recalled for the BBC World Service in 2012, “because it was legendary how he detested the film that was a fictional version of his own situation. He just didn’t like it.”

*Mark Cunliffe is a regular contributor to thegeekshow.co.uk, the web home of the UK’s largest independent specialist podcast network. A devotee of mostly British and European film, he lives in the north-west of England.*





# WHAT HAS THE CARDINAL DONE? WHY NO TRIAL?

## THE ORDER AMALGAMATED TRUST LOAN POLICY

### NEW LOAN CORPORATION BEHINDS INTRIGUING DEVELOPMENTS ANTICIPATED

#### SCOTTISH OIL BE PLACED INDUSTRY UNDER 20% DUTY



The Cardinal was last arrested in 1954, and the public after that time has been kept in the dark as to what he has been doing. It is now known that he has been in contact with the enemy and is now in the hands of the enemy. It is now known that he has been in contact with the enemy and is now in the hands of the enemy. It is now known that he has been in contact with the enemy and is now in the hands of the enemy.

The Order Amalgamated Trust Loan Policy is a new policy which is being introduced by the Government. It is a policy which is designed to provide for the needs of the people. It is a policy which is designed to provide for the needs of the people. It is a policy which is designed to provide for the needs of the people.

The Scottish Oil Industry is now under a 20% duty. This is a new duty which is being introduced by the Government. It is a duty which is designed to provide for the needs of the people. It is a duty which is designed to provide for the needs of the people. It is a duty which is designed to provide for the needs of the people.

## ABOUT THE TRANSFER

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*The Prisoner* is presented in its original 1.85:1 aspect ratio with mono sound. The High Definition master was provided by Sony Pictures Home Entertainment.

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

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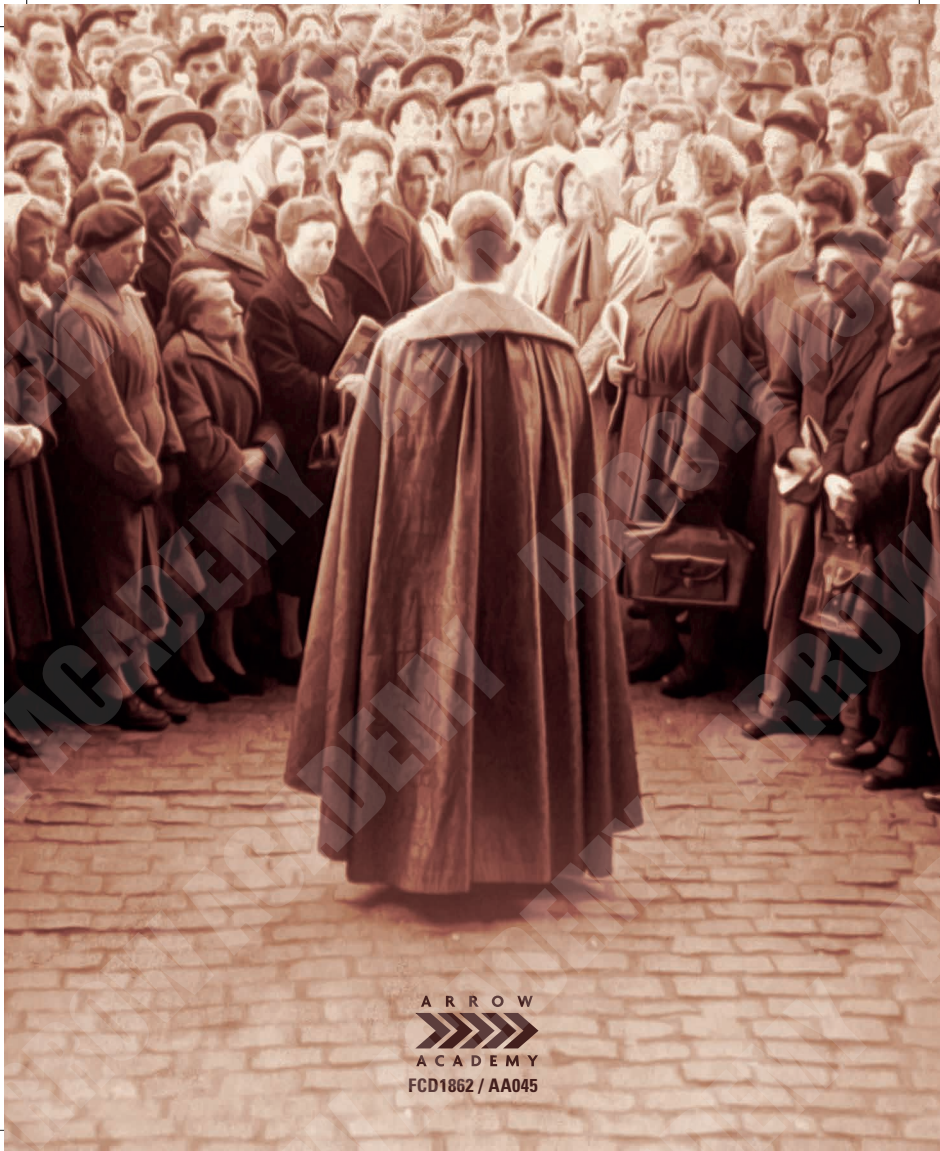
Disc and Booklet Produced by **Michael Mackenzie**  
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**  
Technical Producer **James White**  
QC Manager **Nora Mehenni**  
Blu-ray Mastering **The Engine House Media Services**  
Artist **Peter Strain**  
Design **Obviously Creative**

## SPECIAL THANKS

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Alex Agran, Mark Cunliffe, Ian Froggatt, David James, Philip Kemp,  
Neil Sinyard, Peter Strain





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