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A magyar külpolitika egy ír szemszögéből: Sir Owen O'Malley diplomáciai
tevékenysége Magyarországon (1939–1941)

An Irish Perspective on Hungarian Foreign Affairs: Sir Owen O'Malley's
Diplomacy in Hungary, 1939–1941

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Abstract

This paper explores British Minister Sir Owen O'Malley's service in Budapest between May 1939 and April 1941 by drawing a parallel between his Irish origin and pro-Hungarian attitude. It argues that while the Foreign Office tried to distance itself from the political struggles in the Danube Basin in post-Trianon years, Sir Owen O'Malley's inauguration as British Minister significantly enhanced diplomatic engagement in British-Hungarian relations, as his Irish heritage prompted empathy towards the Hungarian standpoint in, among others, territorial revision driven by a deep insight into the complexities of power politics in East-Central Europe. The study aims to fill a research gap by examining the so-far neglected primary sources on the O'Malley family and Sir Owen O'Malley's correspondence and memoirs from his service in Budapest. Finally, the present paper seeks to explore the role of national identity and family history in shaping a diplomat's political stance on foreign and domestic affairs.

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Introduction

Twenty-three months in Budapest—a remarkably short time yet one of significance in diplomatic relations between Britain and Hungary. In May 1939, Owen O'Malley arrived in Budapest as the newly appointed British Minister. During the eighteen years before his inauguration, five British Ministers had served in Budapest, and none of whom had such a favourable reputation in Hungary. O'Malley's Irish identity and its influence on his diplomacy, however, have not yet been explored in existing research. Even though he had to act in line with the Foreign Office as a British representative, he aimed to dispel British disillusionment with Hungary, which considerably dominated the early twentieth century.

British isolation from Hungarian politics was markedly driven by the efforts of two British political writers, those of Henry Wickham Steed, the Vienna correspondent for the *Times*, and Robert William Seton-Watson, an influential British historian and publicist.¹ Following the Liberal Party's victory in England in 1905², first Steed and then Seton-Watson turned increasingly critical. In their writings, they claimed that ethnic minorities suffered severely under the Hungarian political system. After their warnings remained largely unheard in Budapest and more importantly, due to the outbreak of World War I, Steed and Watson began propagating the liberation of oppressed minorities by dissolving the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy with the ultimate aim of establishing nation-states in the Danube Basin.³ During the war, their influence significantly increased, not the least by launching the weekly propaganda journal, *The New Europe* as well as their entering government positions during early 1918 where they could effectively influence war propaganda.⁴

On June 4, 1920, at the Paris Peace Conference, the nationality problem, successful anti-Hungarian propaganda, and, above all, the participation in the war ended in the break-up of historic Hungary. With the ratification of the Treaty of Trianon, one-third of the Hungarian ethnic population was detached from the country.⁵ Its territory was reduced by two-thirds and

¹ Géza Jeszenszky, *Lost Prestige: Hungary's Changing Image in Britain 1894–1918* (Budapest: Helena History Press, 2020), 8.

² Géza Jeszenszky, “Magyarország a brit gondolkodásban és külpolitikában, 1848-tól 1945-ig”, *Külgügyi Szemle* 13, no. 2 (2014): 154.

³ Jeszenszky, *Lost Prestige*, 9.

⁴ Ágnes Beretzky, *Four Britons and Nationalism: Henry Wickham Steed, Robert William Seton Watson, Arnold Joseph Toynbee and Carlile Aylmer Macartney in/on East-Central Europe and Beyond (1903–1978)*, (Reno: Helena History Press, 2024), 41.

⁵ Jeszenszky, “Magyarország a brit gondolkodásban és külpolitikában, 1848-tól 1945-ig”, 158.

the population by three-fifths.⁶ The severe penalty imposed by the Entente thus became a national catastrophe for Hungarians.

No one in Hungary could endorse such drastic terms. Consequently, some reconstitution of the pre-1938 borders became a central objective of political thought in the interwar years. As a result, the Hungarian government started pursuing revisionist⁷ foreign policies by seeking steady diplomatic relations in the international arena.⁸ However, one of the prime peacemakers, Britain and vanquished Hungary did not see eye to eye regarding revisionist demands. In 1925, the Foreign Office stated that any alteration of the frontiers drawn in Versailles was not feasible at that time.⁹ Moreover, Britain and Hungary were further distanced when the Hungarian Prime Minister István Bethlen's government increased its Italian orientation and the country soon increasingly shifted toward Germany.¹⁰ Also, Hungary's foreign debt did not appeal to Britain's economic interest in the region.¹¹

From 1937–1938, Britain upheld its policy of offering concessions, labelled as appeasement¹², toward Nazi Germany. On March 12, 1938, under the fig-leaf of just ethnic claims, Hitler's imperialist ambitions led to the Anschluss, the annexation of Austria into the German Reich, which further increased Germany's power in East-Central Europe.¹³ Thus, Britain was increasingly impelled to turn its attention to the Danube Basin. In May 1938, the Foreign Office started investigating whether British political influence could be prompted by economic means in the region. When they also examined the importance of the Danube Basin countries to British interests, Hungary came in last on their proposed priority list.¹⁴

The distanced attitude in the Foreign Office toward Hungary in the 1930s was also significantly influenced by the reports of Geoffrey Knox, who served as British Minister to Budapest between 1935 and 1938. He firmly believed Hungary was already a lost case to London and opined that no money or energy should be wasted trying to save it, where the tables were already turned.¹⁵

⁶ Miklós Zeidler, *Ideas on Territorial Revision in Hungary 1920–1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 41.

⁷ In Hungarian foreign policy, revision referred to the wish to alter the borders settled by the 1920 Treaty of Trianon.

⁸ Zeidler, *Ideas on Territorial Revision in Hungary*, 69.

⁹ Memorandum on the Situation in Central Europe, FO, 11 November 1925, DBFP, xxvii, 128 quoted in Gábor Bátonyi, *Britain and Central Europe, 1918–1933* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 146.

¹⁰ Bátonyi, *Britain and Central Europe*, 151.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹² Britain's diplomatic strategy in the 1930s toward Germany, whose growing power threatened European peace. It involved concessions—even territorial gains—to prevent another war's outbreak.

¹³ András Bán D., *Illúziók és csalódások (Nagy-Britannia és Magyarország 1938–1941)*, (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 1998), 33.

¹⁴ Bán D., *Illúziók és csalódások*, 42.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

Nonetheless, by the summer of 1938, the European situation was further complicated due to German territorial demands in Czechoslovakia. Hitler's ambition for the dismemberment of the country was based on its complex minority setting, including three million Sudeten Germans.¹⁶ Thus, as Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain remained convinced that the policy of appeasement could prevent the outbreak of another war, he signed the Munich Agreement on September 29, 1938, alongside Germany, Italy, and France, conceding the annexation of those parts where Germans were in the majority.¹⁷ The Agreement also stipulated that minority disputes between Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia should be resolved through bilateral negotiations within three months.¹⁸ Soon, the news of the unsettled negotiations, however, met with reluctance in the Foreign Office. Ultimately, on November 2, 1938, in what was later termed as the First Vienna Award, Germany and Italy decided that Hungary would regain over fourteen thousand square kilometres (about 5464 sq. miles) in the south of Slovakia and Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia with a large majority of Hungarian ethnic population.¹⁹ The increasing influence of Germany thus urged Britain to reevaluate its diplomatic strategy in East-Central Europe.

Consequently, British rapprochement with Hungary marked a crucial point in foreign policy when Owen O'Malley, a diplomat of Irish descent, was appointed as the new British Minister to Budapest in May 1939. Although several distinguished historians have conducted extensive research on British-Hungarian interwar relations, among others András Bán D., Gábor Bátonyi, Ágnes Beretzky, Géza Jeszenszky, Gyula Juhász, Ignác Romsics, Miklós Lojkó, or Miklós Zeidler, little or no emphasis has been placed on investigating the roots of Owen O'Malley's empathy towards Hungarians. Unlike his predecessor in the Foreign Office, the very distant if not disagreeable Geoffrey Knox, O'Malley demonstrated a pro-Hungarian attitude and maintained close relations with the political elite in Hungary. Therefore, this paper argues that while the Foreign Office tried to distance itself from the political struggles in the Danube Basin in post-Trianon years, Sir Owen O'Malley's inauguration as British Minister to Budapest significantly enhanced diplomatic engagement in British-Hungarian relations, as his Irish heritage prompted empathy towards the Hungarian standpoint in, among others, territorial revision driven by a deep insight into the complexities of power politics in East-Central Europe.

¹⁶ Balázs Ablonczy, *Pál Teleki 1879–1941: The Life of a Controversial Hungarian Politician* (Reno: Helena History Press, 2024), 182.

¹⁷ Balázs Ablonczy, *Pál Teleki*, 182.

¹⁸ Bán D., *Illúziók és csalódások*, 54.

¹⁹ Ablonczy, *Pál Teleki*, 186.

1. A Genealogical Outlook: Owen O'Malley's Irish Heritage

1.1. The Significance of Family History

To examine the roots of Owen O'Malley's empathy towards the Hungarians, his family background, the foundation of his national identity, and his stance on minority issues could not be neglected. Although his family had settled in England when Owen was born in 1887, his father, Edward Loughlin O'Malley, a high-ranking lawyer and judge, was dedicated to investigating his lineal ancestors from Ireland. During his lifetime, he discovered more than eight hundred letters from his ancestors and unveiled the pedigree of his forefathers going back to the sixteenth century. After his death in 1932, all material was inherited by his son, Owen O'Malley, who diligently continued the exploration on his ancestors, even during his time as British Minister to Budapest between 1939 and 1941. In those two years in Hungary, he frequently sent letters to both the Irish Genealogical Office and distant relatives to gather more information about his family, expand the pedigree, and understand his ancestors' fate.²⁰

For Owen O'Malley, family history was clearly more than a personal matter of interest. When inheriting the letters and pedigrees from his ancestors, he committed to publishing three studies in the *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society* in the 1950s on the fate of his family from the sixteenth century onwards, focusing on the influence of British rule on his ancestors. Additionally, two unpublished volumes, now in the National Library of Ireland, written by Owen O'Malley explore the narrative of his ancestors. In one of these volumes, he put forward the idea that in order to understand history, one must look beyond the lives of influential individuals who shaped the course of events and observe “the unselfconscious unfolding of the lives of ordinary families.”²¹ instead.

Consequently, Owen O'Malley's Irish heritage and his approach to understanding historical events through the narrative of his ancestors played a significant role in his life. Thus, before examining his diplomatic service in Hungary and stance on Hungarian politics, it is crucial to consider how his reflections on his ancestors' circumstances—a family who severely struggled under foreign rule—shaped his identity.

²⁰ Index to the “Correspondence and other papers of the O'Malley family” archive material, MSS 21680, National Library of Ireland. The research for this paper was generously supported by the Irish Bursary Award provided by the Embassy of Ireland in Budapest.

²¹ Owen O'Malley, *History of the Belclare, Co. Mayo, Branch of the O'Malley Family in the 18th Century*, typescript, MSS 5619, National Library of Ireland.

1.2. The Influence of British Rule on the O'Malley Family

Owen O'Malley's ancestors originated from Mayo, a county in West Ireland severely affected by the plantations of the English Crown from the sixteenth century onward. Among the family members were lords and captains, as well as high-ranking nobles who possessed large estates in Mayo and could not escape the devastating results of English colonization. Beginning in the sixteenth century, the systematic reorganization of Irish lands—including the seizure and redistribution of estates to English settlers—served a higher purpose for England to prevent political fragmentation and rearrange the social hierarchy, the Irish landowners, particularly Gaelic families, were forced to pledge allegiance to the Crown.²²

Owen O'Malley was deeply interested in understanding how the English plantations came to disrupt Gaelic families in Mayo by introducing specific declarations and legal amendments that oppressed traditional Irish authorities and laws. In his article written in 1950, he also outlined the impact of the *Composition of the Connacht* agreement from 1585, signed by O'Malley's ancestors. This agreement abolished the Gaelic titles and inheritance law, allowing the Irish chiefs to retain land only if administered on the English model.²³ The English, however, miscalculated the power of Irish traditions, and the social embedding of such rules, as Owen argued:

There is in Mayo and, I am sure, always has been, a wide discrepancy between the letter and the spirit, between law and behaviour. We have a long-established aptitude for disregarding authority and the written word, and in many aspects of life the restraints upon us derive their force from custom and the fear of public disapprobation rather than from the Courts and the officers of the law.²⁴

Thus, the systematic occupation of Irish lands and oppression of Gaelic noble families did not result in assimilation. The deep roots of ethnicity, tradition, and social affiliation were stronger than subservience to foreign rule. From here sprung O'Malley's understanding of the national complexity of the Carpathian Basin that of the post-1920 struggles of Hungarian minorities in the Successor States.

²² Raymond Gillespie, "Plantations in Early Modern Ireland," *History Ireland* 1, no. 4 (1993): 43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27724120>.

²³ Owen O'Malley, "Note on the O'Malley Lordship at the Close of the XVIth Century," *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society* 24, no. 1/2 (1950): 27–28. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25535327>.

²⁴ Owen O'Malley, "Note on the O'Malley Lordship at the Close of the XVIth Century," 28.

Besides focusing on the legal restructuring of Gaelic land administrations, O'Malley's 1952 study also reveals some of his lineal ancestors' resistance to English rule in Ireland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. One of his direct ancestors, Captain Charles O'Malley was actively involved in contemporary political conflicts, such as the fight in the Williamite War between 1689 and 1691 on the side of the deposed King James II, 1685–1688²⁵, whose conversion to Catholicism won the support of the Gaelic Irish.²⁶ The defeat of the Jacobites that is the supporters of James II, in 1691, however, further diminished the power of traditional Irish families, contributing to a sharp decline in Irish Catholic land ownership, which fell from twenty-two to fourteen percent.²⁷ Following the war, Charles O'Malley went into exile at the King's Court of Saint Germain in France. Meanwhile, William III (1689–1702) placed a reward on him, offering ransom for his capture, dead or alive.²⁸

Alongside Charles O'Malley's forced exile, the prolonged political conflicts led many in the O'Malley family to emigrate. In the above-mentioned 1952–article, we can find a memorandum by Charles's great-grandson, George O'Malley, dated 1776. This document reveals that among Charles's five brothers, some settled in Hungary²⁹ and even took up arms against the Turks during the reconquest of Buda Castle in 1686.³⁰ This personal family tie to Hungary further strengthened Owen O'Malley's connection to the Hungarians. The chronology of his letters on genealogical research suggests that he had already been aware of this connection before his service in Budapest.³¹

Moreover, Owen O'Malley's reflection on the struggles of his family in the seventeenth century offers an insight into the broader context of Irish history when resilience and sacrifice characterized ordinary lives. He noted that the experience of his ancestors can be juxtaposed with the fate of most Gaelic families during their “destruction or dispersion”³². The consequences of foreign rule were, as O'Malley stated: “resistance to Cromwellian and Williamite forces, expropriation and outlawry, emigration to the Continent, loyalty to Crown

²⁵ Owen O'Malley, “O'Malleys between 1651 and 1725”, *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society* 25, no. 1/2 (1952): 34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25550062>.

²⁶ Harman Murtagh, “The Williamite War 1689-91.” *History Ireland* 1, no. 1 (1993): 41, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27724047>.

²⁷ Harman Murtagh, “The Williamite War 1689-91.”, 42.

²⁸ Owen O'Malley, “O'Malleys between 1651 and 1725”, 33.

²⁹ Ibid, 34.

³⁰ György Barcza, Hungarian Minister to London, to István Csáky, Hungarian Foreign Secretary, April 29, 1939, MOL, K-64, 79. quoted in András Bán D., *Illúziók és csalódások (Nagy-Britannia és Magyarország 1938–1941)*, (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 1998), 65.

³¹ Index to the “Correspondence and other papers of the O'Malley family”.

³² Owen O'Malley, “O'Malleys between 1651 and 1725”, 37.

and Church, and English promises—never fulfilled—of restitution [...]”³³ His emphasis on restitution requires special attention because as a British Minister, he primarily served to foster British political interests abroad; however, his findings on his family contributed to his sensitivity to ethnic minorities which somewhat distanced him from imperial ambitions.

1.3. The Unfulfilled Promises of Restitution: Parallels with the Hungarian Minority in Transylvania in Post-1920s

The Williamite War in which Owen O’Malley’s ancestor, Charles took part, ended with the signing of the *Treaty of Limerick* on October 3, 1691, with guarantees for the Irish to restore properties and religious liberty. Article I declared that, “Their Majesties, as soon as their affairs will permit them to summon a Parliament in this kingdom, will endeavour to procure the said Roman Catholics such farther security in that particular, as may preserve them from any disturbance upon the account of their said religion”³⁴ Additionally, Article II stated that those “who shall return and submit to their Majesties’ obedience; and their and every of their heir, shall hold, possess, and enjoy, all and every their estates of freehold and inheritance; all the rights; titles and interest, privileges and immunities [...] that were in force in the said reign of King Charles II.”³⁵

These provisions are crucial in understanding the extent of English disregard for land restoration and denominational equality. As mentioned in Owen O’Malley’s article, his family had already been deprived of their lands and reduced to the mere status of tenants before the reign of Charles II (1660–1685), thus eliminating several family members from the list of those whose land was returned.³⁶ Furthermore, O’Malley highlighted that although religious conformity to Protestantism was not essential for social survival in the subsequent years of William’s victory, it gradually became more significant in the seventeenth century, resulting in some of his ancestor’s conversion.³⁷ His investigation corresponds to what happened soon after the ratification of the *Treaty of Limerick*. In 1695, two acts of the early Penal Laws—designed to secure Protestant interests in Ireland and limit the rights of Irish Catholics—were enacted. These included a disarming bill that prohibited Catholics from military service and an

³³ Owen O’Malley, “O’Malleys between 1651 and 1725”, 37.

³⁴ Henry Brooke Parnell, *A History of the Penal Laws against the Irish Catholics, from the Treaty of Limerick to the Union* (Dublin: Printed by H. Fitzpatrick, 1808), 6–7, <https://jstor.org/stable/60216403>.

³⁵ Henry Brooke Parnell, *A History of the Penal Laws against the Irish Catholics, from the Treaty of Limerick to the Union*, 7.

³⁶ Owen O’Malley, “O’Malleys between 1651 and 1725”, 41.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 41.

educational amendment that restricted Catholics' educational opportunities, such as the right to study in abroad.³⁸ This severely contradicted the previous proclamations, suggesting that political interests often demanded false allegations to manipulate the course of events.

The historical experience of the O'Malley family and what Owen O'Malley emphasized in his articles can be juxtaposed with the struggles of Hungarian minorities in the Successor States in the interwar years. In Transylvania, nearly two million ethnic Hungarians suffered severely from the restrictive policies imposed by the Romanian governments after 1920. Their marginalization began with the land reforms of July 30, 1921, which aimed to weaken the denominational network in the region. Ninety-five percent of the lands belonging to the Roman Catholic dioceses of Nagyvárad (Oradea), Gyulafehérvár (Alba Iulia), Temesvár (Timisoara), and Szatmár (Satu Mare) were seized by the Romanian authorities.³⁹

Additionally, a legal conflict escalated when the Romanian government began seizing the lands of those Hungarians in Transylvania who had chosen Hungarian citizenship and moved back to Hungary—the right to do so above the age of eighteen was legally established in the Treaty of Trianon, proclaiming that they could retain their estates in the detached territories.⁴⁰ Those subjected to expropriation became known as 'optants', and by 1923, two hundred and fifty lawsuits had been brought to court in Paris.⁴¹ However, the Optant Problem was not resolved until as late as 1930.⁴² The news of the prolonged legal battle of the Hungarian ethnicity also reached Britain. As Arnold Toynbee, a British historian as well as Director of the prestigious Chatham House, highlighted, the Optant Question pointed out the controversy between the peace treaty provisions and the countries' national legislations.⁴³

The parallel with the struggles of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania is a significant aspect of the analysis at this point as, during his years as British Minister to Budapest from 1939, Owen O'Malley had to navigate British-Hungarian relations in a time when German influence with territorial gains increased in East-Central Europe and the Hungarian revisionist demands for the restitution of Northern Transylvania dominated political thought.

³⁸ Charles Ivar McGrath, "Securing the Protestant Interest: The Origins and Purpose of the Penal Laws of 1695." *Irish Historical Studies* 30, no. 117 (1996): 44, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30008727>.

³⁹ László Diószegi et al., *Magyarok kisebbségben és szóróványban* (Budapest: Teleki László Alapítvány, 1995), 140–141.

⁴⁰ Beretzky, *Four Britons and Nationalism*, 105.

⁴¹ Beretzky, *Four Britons and Nationalism*, 105.

⁴² *Ibid*, 108.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 108.

2. Navigating Politics: Owen O'Malley in/on Hungary 1939–1941

2.1. The Role of 'Personal' Diplomacy: Owen O'Malley's Attitude to Prime Minister Pál Teleki and Regent Miklós Horthy

When Owen O'Malley arrived in Budapest in May 1939, the media covered his inauguration as British Minister favourably for the Hungarians. He was portrayed as a polite gentleman with a modest Irish attitude who genuinely sympathized with Hungary.⁴⁴ In an interview with the *Pesti Napló* on 28 May 1939, O'Malley stated that he had personally asked the Foreign Office to appoint him to Budapest.⁴⁵ His request was rooted in his ancestral connections to the country and his deep empathy for the Hungarians. In his view, the parallels between the two nations, namely respecting individuals' liberty and attachment to the homeland, unite the Irish and Hungarians.⁴⁶ Other Hungarian press agencies, like the *Magyar Nemzet*, also emphasized that the new diplomat of Irish descent had a pleasant character and could be considered a friend of the country.⁴⁷ His positive assessment by the media thus laid the foundation of his reputation in political circles.

During his service in Hungary, Owen O'Malley maintained personal contacts with many in the political elite, which often contributed to his deep understanding of domestic issues and foreign policies. The outbreak of the war in 1939 prompted a closer cooperation with the Hungarian Prime Minister, Pál Teleki, due to the increased need for political exchange and discourse of the East-Central European situation and Germany's imperialist ambitions. In his memoirs, O'Malley described Teleki as "very much a family man, inspiring his intimates and subordinates with unbounded devotion."⁴⁸ He also stated that Teleki respected the English but did not think highly of the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, and Foreign Secretaries Lord Halifax or Anthony Eden. He also stated that despite the severe political pressure from the outside—Germany's influence and the growing network of Gestapo agents—the Hungarian Prime Minister remained incorruptible. Teleki's devotion to Hungary was genuinely appealing to him.⁴⁹ In 1940, O'Malley stated that in the contemporary political sphere in Hungary, no one

⁴⁴ Lili Doblhoff Báró, "Magam kértem, hogy helyezzenek Magyarországra, beszélgetés St. Clair O'Malley-vel", *Pesti Napló*, May 28, 1939, 525, Arcanum.

⁴⁵ Doblhoff, "Beszélgetés St. Clair O'Malley-vel", *Pesti Napló*, May 28, 1939.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Gyula Kunszery, "Owen St. Clair O'Malley", *Magyar Nemzet*, June 2, 1939, 4, Arcanum.

⁴⁸ Owen O'Malley, *The Phantom Caravan* (London: John Murray, 1954), 204.

⁴⁹ O'Malley, *The Phantom Caravan*, 204.

could surpass Teleki's political talent and firm character.⁵⁰ Moreover, he compared Teleki to a prominent Irish politician, Éamon de Valera, the first President of the newly founded Irish Republic in 1921, who conveyed the same fundamental values such as adherence to the Catholic faith, eminent intellectual ability, and devotion to principles.⁵¹

Besides maintaining personal relations with Pál Teleki, Owen O'Malley would regularly meet Regent Miklós Horthy, with whom he developed a lasting friendship. O'Malley and his wife often attended dinners at Horthy's residence. Mrs. O'Malley—who earned a high reputation as a novelist writing under the pseudonym Ann Bridge—noted in one of her letters sent to a family friend in 1940 that Horthy expressed that the political circles in Hungary hoped she would write a book about Hungary for publication in England and the United States. In the same letter, she exclaimed: "I love the place already, I like the people! The Regent is an angel."⁵² The affection was mutual. O'Malley revealed in his autobiography that Horthy offered to take care of his daughter, Jane in Budapest when the diplomatic relations between Britain and Hungary were broken off in April 1941.⁵³ Inherently, O'Malley did not leave his family, especially his daughter, behind; however, Horthy's proposition suggests a deep connection and trust between the two families.

The friendship between Owen O'Malley and Regent Miklós Horthy was also documented in the media. O'Malley cut several press extracts that covered his years in Hungary, most of which focused on his close connection with the Regent. The two often went to the countryside for weekend shots, and Horthy even invited him to his country estate in Gödöllő. In 1940, the *Daily Telegraph* noted that O'Malley won over the Regent with his cultured manner and keen sense of humour. The paper also highlighted that after only eight months in Hungary, O'Malley became one of the most high-esteemed diplomatic members of the political circles.⁵⁴

However, Owen O'Malley regarded his status within political circles as more of a burden than a privilege. In 1939, he struggled with his health, which resulted in his limited capacity to meet social obligations. In his letter to his wife, O'Malley acknowledged the difficulties he faced in his diplomatic role as the European conflict escalated and expressed his fear of the potential outcome of the war. Despite the diplomatic pressure, he was compelled to restrict his social engagements to minor consultations due to his serious digestive problems and abdominal pain. Yet he was committed to learning and contemplating the situation in Hungary

⁵⁰ Ablonczy, *Pál Teleki*, 217.

⁵¹ O'Malley, *The Phantom Caravan*, 205.

⁵² Ann Bridge to Angus Graham, April 10, 1940, MSS 21691, fol. 9, 1309, National Library of Ireland.

⁵³ Owen O'Malley, *The Phantom Caravan*, 211.

⁵⁴ "Minister's Borrowed Guns", *Daily Telegraph*, 1940, MSS 21688, fol. 5, 1279, National Library of Ireland.

from first-hand information. He wrote: “I have got all the people who matter taped—that is, the Regent and PM and MFA and elder statesmen”.⁵⁵ This passage indicates that for O’Malley, the role of ‘personal’ diplomacy was an integral part of his duties. Even during his digestive problems, he continued to record his conversations with Prime Minister Pál Teleki, Regent Miklós Horthy, and Minister of Foreign Affairs István Csáky. Like Teleki, he believed in first-hand consultations without delegating social obligations to a third party, which contributed to the legitimacy of the information flow.

Owen O’Malley’s sympathy toward the Hungarian Prime Minister and the Regent demonstrated a crucial element of diplomatic engagement. The barrier—typically present in official interactions between a diplomat and political figure due to different languages and formal protocol—vanished, allowing personal connections to develop. These personal connections were built on shared principles, such as devotion to the home country or firm religious faith, that ultimately prompted a deep mutual attachment. Consequently, Owen O’Malley’s diplomacy was unique in strategy because of his sensitivity and close connections with the Prime Minister and Regent, which enhanced diplomatic engagement in British-Hungarian relations. O’Malley not only promoted British interests in Hungary but also tried to be cognizant of Hungary’s difficult political position. However, it had its limits as O’Malley represented the Foreign Office.

2.2. The Struggles with the Foreign Office: The Power of Propaganda

Although Owen O’Malley was fully dedicated to dispelling disillusionment with Hungary in the Foreign Office, he was often confronted with the limits of a diplomat’s capacity to influence perceptions in London. He felt that “the Foreign Office and Ministers in London knew nothing to speak of about Hungary or Hungarians and did not want to learn—anyhow not to learn from me.”⁵⁶ This could stem from the distanced attitude of the Foreign Office towards Hungary that characterized the interwar years as well as O’Malley’s predecessor, Geoffrey Knox’s criticism of Hungary. However, from 1939 onwards, O’Malley propagated that he did not share the view that Hungary sold itself to Germany and that the strategic significance of Hungary was worth the Foreign Office’s effort to put the country on the side of Britain.⁵⁷ The radical difference

⁵⁵ Owen O’Malley to Ann Bridge, December 20, 1939, MSS 21691, fol. 1, 1300, National Library of Ireland.

⁵⁶ Owen O’Malley, *The Phantom Caravan*, 202.

⁵⁷ András Bán D., *Illúziók és csalódások*, 74.

between the two ministers' approach to Hungary demonstrates that diplomatic reports were not independent of sympathy and could dramatically shape political decisions.

Owen O'Malley and her daughter were committed to reshaping the propaganda to promote closer engagement in British-Hungarian relations. Thus, Jane O'Malley started editing a daily British bulletin in Budapest that provided the news from London.⁵⁸ However, she expressed her concerns with the press. As she mentioned, suitable propaganda for Hungary was still not realized in London, and the Ministers in London ignored the local situation.⁵⁹ She further emphasized her frustration that while London remained hesitant, the German Legation immediately enhanced its media presence in Budapest following the outbreak of war on September 1, 1939.⁶⁰

Similarly, Owen O'Malley was disillusioned with the Foreign Office. His letter from September 1939 demonstrates his frustration with inadequate communication and delayed decision-making. O'Malley expressed his "hope to galvanize them into the realization of our local difficulties"⁶¹. He further stated that the Foreign Office often put the officials in a position where they were forced to exercise discretion; however, if anything went wrong, they criticized the diplomat and disclaimed any responsibilities, thus trying to have "the best of both ends"⁶².

It is significant to highlight that O'Malley's pro-Hungarian attitude did not prevent him from recognizing the increasing German influence in Hungary. In December 1939, he wrote that Gestapo agents were among the staff in the British Legation, and no one would know who or how to find out who.⁶³ O'Malley was also sceptical of Hungary's non-belligerent status in the war. However, he also pointed out the shortage of British support. He noted that a considerable part of the Hungarian society was distinctly pro-German either out of conviction or due to the Germans' success in winning the political circles and society over through propaganda. Meanwhile, the Foreign Office remained passive, making no effort to counterbalance German wartime propaganda in Budapest.⁶⁴ In the spring of 1940, O'Malley claimed that the reluctance of the Foreign Office to address the issues in Hungary stemmed from the following factors:

⁵⁸ "Girl Propagandist", *Evening Standard*, March 28, 1940, MSS 21689, fol. 2., 1287, National Library of Ireland.

⁵⁹ Jane O'Malley to Ann Bridge, November 4, 1939, MSS 21691, fol. 1., 1300, National Library of Ireland.

⁶⁰ Jane O'Malley to Ann Bridge, November 4, 1939.

⁶¹ Owen O'Malley to Ann Bridge, September 21, 1939, MSS 21691, fol. 1., 1300, National Library of Ireland.

⁶² Owen O'Malley to Ann Bridge, September 21, 1939.

⁶³ Owen O'Malley to Ann Bridge, December 20, 1939, MSS 21691, fol. 1, 1300, National Library of Ireland.

⁶⁴ György Barcza, *Diplomata emlékeim 1911–1945*, I., (Budapest: Európa, 1994), 455.

There was, I think, in the Foreign Office and in most Ministers' minds a hard core of feeling and opinion about Central Europe built up by what may roughly be called the pro-French school of thought and by the patient labour of Czechs—of the charming and persuasive Jan Masaryk and the astute and deceptive Edward Beneš. This was of a nature to make Hungarians, and me also, feel that no burning Hungarian question, such as the merits of the Treaty of Trianon, would be considered fairly in London.⁶⁵

It was well-known for the Hungarian Minister in London, György Barcza, that Edward Beneš⁶⁶ and Jan Masaryk⁶⁷ actively promoted the recognition of the pre-1938 borders and did their utmost to strengthen negative voices about Hungary in the Foreign Office. However, in July 1940, a dispute escalated between Britain and Hungary when the British government recognized the Czechoslovak Committee, led by President Beneš in exile, as the representative body of an independent Czechoslovak state. This strategic move was heavily criticized by Barcza and the Hungarian government.⁶⁸ Consequently, O'Malley had to navigate not only the influence of propaganda but also the issue of territorial revision.

2.3. Owen O'Malley on Territorial Revision in Transylvania

In July 1939, Owen O'Malley informed Foreign Secretary Halifax that the question of border revision was crucial for securing Hungary's alliance.⁶⁹ He highlighted that the Hungarians were justifiably distrustful of Britain because of the Foreign Office's reluctance to address the situation of the Hungarian minority in the Successor States.⁷⁰ In 1940, György Barcza emphasized the escalating conflict of the Hungarian-Romanian situation and the despair of Transylvanian Hungarians. Barcza argued that without revising the borders between Hungary and Romania, lasting peace in the Danube Basin could be unattainable.⁷¹ O'Malley's view on the Hungarian-Romanian situation coincided with Barcza's. He claimed that unless Britain granted Hungary's territorial demands in Romania, Hungary would be lost to Britain.⁷²

⁶⁵ Owen O'Malley, *The Phantom Caravan*, 202.

⁶⁶ After the annexation of Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany in 1938, the Czechoslovak President Edward Beneš established a government-in-exile in Paris, where he advocated for the restoration of Czechoslovak autonomy.

⁶⁷ The Czechoslovak Foreign Minister went into exile to London after the First Vienna Award. He was the son of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia.

⁶⁸ Jeszenszky, "Magyarország a brit gondolkodásban és külpolitikában", 164.

⁶⁹ Owen O'Malley to Halifax, July 3, 1939, PRO, FO, 371/23 116, quoted in Bán D., *Illúziók és csalódások*, 74.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 75.

⁷¹ Gyula Juhász, *Magyarország külpolitikája a 2. világháború kitörésének időszakában, 1939–1940* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1962), 695.

⁷² Bán D., *Illúziók és csalódások*, 84.

The Hungarian Prime Minister's and O'Malley's comments from the 1939s on the Hungarian-Romanian border revision foreshadowed the course of events. Teleki stated that revisionism posed the greatest threat to Hungarian politics, noting that the public was irrational due to the tempting promises from the Germans, and warned that the recovery of Transylvania would result in an absolute commitment to Germany.⁷³ He further claimed that everyone was engaged in politics—even those with little understanding—as people followed emotionally driven political currents.⁷⁴ O'Malley observed similar patterns in Hungarian society, marking that “nobody talks about anything but politics”⁷⁵ in Budapest.

Hungary's revisionist demand in Transylvania was well-known by Hitler. In July 1940, the Soviet Union gradually turned from Germany's ally⁷⁶ to a rival and considered a joint military action with Hungary against Romania. To avoid war in the region at all costs, Hitler urged the bilateral negotiations between Romania and Hungary on border revisions. However, it did not end with a settlement, and military mobilization began. On August 30, 1940, in order to avoid an armed conflict, the Second Vienna Award declared border revision with German-Italian arbitration and Hungary reconstituted the northern part of Transylvania together with the area inhabited by the Szeklers, or Székelys with more than two million people.⁷⁷ However, On September 5, 1940, soon after the signing of the Second Vienna Award, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill stated that any border revision that had been stipulated since September 1, 1939, could not be recognized by Britain.⁷⁸

2.4. The End of British-Hungarian Diplomatic Relations

Owing to the Second Vienna Award, Hungary was on the road to becoming a German satellite. On November 20, 1940, the country joined the Tripartite Pact, further isolating its foreign policy from Britain.⁷⁹ The next day, Owen O'Malley sent a report to the Foreign Office, advocating that Hungary's political decision to sign the agreement with the Axis Powers should not be viewed as a hostile act against London. He emphasized that the political elite, markedly Pál

⁷³ György Barcza, *Diplomataemlékek 1911–1945*, I., 446.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 446.

⁷⁵ Owen O'Malley to Ann Bridge, July 7, 1939, MSS 21691, fol. 1., 1300, National Library of Ireland.

⁷⁶ On August 23, 1939, the Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov and German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop signed a non-aggression pact—commonly known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact—to secure their spheres of influence in East-Central Europe.

⁷⁷ Based on Hungarian and Romanian statistics, only about 50% of the inhabitants were Hungarian. Ignác Romsics, *Hungary in the Twentieth Century* (Budapest: Corvina, 1999), 200–201.

⁷⁸ Bán D., *Illúziók és csalódások*, 107.

⁷⁹ Ablonczy, *Pál Teleki*, 243.

Teleki, remained dedicated to maintaining British-Hungarian diplomacy, and the Hungarian government continued to treat British citizens stationed in Hungary favourably.⁸⁰ Yet, later on, British political circles started considering that Hungarian foreign policy significantly shifted towards the German side by joining the Tripartite Pact.⁸¹

Consequently, Hungary's isolation in the international arena prompted the signing of the Eternal Friendship Pact with Yugoslavia on December 12, 1940.⁸² However, this did not promote British-Hungarian rapprochement. In December 1940, British-Hungarian relations deteriorated due to a change of personnel at the Foreign Office. Anthony Eden was again appointed Foreign Secretary, who did not sympathize with the Hungarians.⁸³ Nevertheless, Owen O'Malley still saw a window open for securing British-Hungarian relations. He actively promoted the plans to establish a Hungarian government-in-exile in the West.⁸⁴

By the spring of 1941, the events had accelerated. Hungary could no longer avoid military intervention in conjunction with Germany. Despite PM Teleki's concerns and even disapproval, a Hungarian-German military agreement on action against Yugoslavia was concluded with the Regent's support.⁸⁵ Thus, yet another opportunity for revision was at hand. On April 2, 1941, Hungarian Minister to London György Barcza sent a telegram to Budapest stating that the Foreign Office would break off diplomatic relations with Hungary in case of participation in an armed intervention against Yugoslavia.⁸⁶ Seeing no way out, by the morning of April 3, Teleki had taken his own life.⁸⁷

On April 6, 1941, Germany launched its attack against Yugoslavia, using Hungarian territory as part of the offensive. This left the Foreign Office with no choice but to break diplomatic relations with Hungary. Therefore, a day later, on April 7, Owen O'Malley—who had been a genuine friend to the Hungarians since his appointment in May 1939—faced the task of informing the newly appointed Hungarian Prime Minister, László Bárdossy, of the termination.⁸⁸ Despite his departure, O'Malley continued to reflect on Hungarian politics in the subsequent years.

⁸⁰ Owen O'Malley to the Foreign Office, November 21, 1940, PRO, FO 371/24 431, quoted in Bán D., *Illúziók és csalódások*, 113.

⁸¹ Bán D., *Illúziók és csalódások*, 115.

⁸² Ablonczy, *Pál Teleki*, 244.

⁸³ Bán D., *Illúziók és csalódások*, 119.

⁸⁴ Owen O'Malley reports to the Foreign Office, January 23, 1941 and January 26, 1941 about the plans for a government-in-exile, PRO, FO 371/26 602, quoted in Bán D., *Illúziók és csalódások*, 129.

⁸⁵ Ablonczy, *Pál Teleki*, 246.

⁸⁶ György Barcza's telegram to Foreign Minister László Bárdossy, April 2, 1941, DIMK V, 681, 991-992 quoted in Bán D., *Illúziók és csalódások*, 129.

⁸⁷ Bán D., *Illúziók és csalódások*, 129.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 132–133.

2.5. Owen O'Malley's Later Reminiscences on Hungary

Owen O'Malley's understanding of the complexity of power politics in the Danube Basin could stem from his knowledge of Hungarian history and his willingness to engage with the local people. However, he did not learn the language and thus he was at the mercy of his English-speaking friends and informants.

O'Malley's surviving commentary from the 1950s is worth studying. He began his observations by analysing Hungary from various aspects, including a geographical comparison with Ireland, highlighting their similar sizes. Considering the social characteristics, O'Malley highlighted that the populace in Hungary could be more accurately described as countrymen rather than townsmen, noting that they were "tolerant and not cemented by religion".⁸⁹ His emphasis on religion and tolerance may be derived from his insight into the Catholic-Protestant division in Ireland as his ancestors suffered the consequences of the intersectionality between state and religion and witnessed sectarian violence from the eighteenth century onward.⁹⁰ Thus, for him, religious tolerance was a respected characteristic of the Hungarian society.

From a historical perspective, it is crucial to elaborate on Owen O'Malley's notes on the significance of Hungary's stance on the German and Russian political influence in Hungary, as well as his daughter Jane O'Malley's observations on the Hungarians' attitude toward Germany and Russia. Owen O'Malley stated that in 1914, after the outbreak of the First World War, the Hungarian government "romantically joined Germany against the hated Russians."⁹¹ The joint fear of Russia and hatred towards Communism dramatically increased when Béla Kun, leader of the Communist Party in Hungary, established the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919. Similarly, in the autumn of 1939, Jane O'Malley emphasized the Hungarians' attitude toward Germany and Russia: "It was a revelation when I came here to find how universally everyone hates the Germans but nothing to the revelation of how willingly they would fall into the hands of the Germans to avoid Russians!"⁹²

The two reflections should also be analysed rhetorically. Both Owen and Jane O'Malley employed emotive language, notably the exceptionally harsh word 'hate' describing the Hungarian stance toward Russia, Britain's ally in the First World War. Contrary to the Foreign Office's standpoint on Hungarian politics in the twentieth century, the O'Malley family's

⁸⁹ Owen O'Malley, "Lecture on Hungary", Hankow, MSS 21688, fol. 5, 1276, National Library of Ireland. Although the date is unspecified the document is likely from the 1950s based on the place of publication.

⁹⁰ Owen O'Malley, "O'Malleys between 1651 and 1725".

⁹¹ Owen O'Malley, "Lecture on Hungary".

⁹² Jane O'Malley to Ann Bridge, October 24, 1939, MSS 21691, fol. 1., 1300, National Library of Ireland.

observations reveal a different narrative about power dynamics in East-Central Europe, showcasing a sensitivity towards Hungary's strategic dilemma. Given its geographical position, Hungary became trapped between two great powers, drastically limiting its political decisions. Thus, the striking contrast between Owen O'Malley's approach to Hungary and that of his predecessor, Geoffrey Knox, was to understand the situation in Hungary not merely in terms of economic and political interests but to recognize the impact of societal factors.

Thus, Owen O'Malley's time from May 1939 to April 1941 as a British Minister to Budapest highlighted the complexities of balancing diplomacy and the use of power politics of the era. His emphasis on 'personal' diplomacy with the Hungarian Prime Minister and Regent enabled him to understand Hungary's difficult position in the international arena. Although his efforts often faced resistance from the Foreign Office, he prompted closer diplomatic engagement between Britain and Hungary in a critical period of history.

Conclusion

“To swim against the tide is not the way to get on in the Foreign Office unless one can swim underwater.”⁹³ Thus wrote Owen O’Malley in his memoir in the 1950s, which can be fully aligned to his years in Budapest between 1939 and 1941. During those two years, he wished to break the universal ‘tide’, a distanced attitude of the British emerging in the twentieth century due to the complex nationality question in the Danube Basin and anti-Hungarian propaganda. However, Owen O’Malley’s approach to Hungarian politics differed from the widespread disillusionment with Hungary characterizing the interwar years.

The paper, therefore, has argued that a parallel can be drawn between Owen O’Malley’s empathy towards the Hungarians and his Irish heritage. His genealogical research revealed that British colonial rule in Ireland severely affected the lives of his family members. His family lost their estates and titles, and their Catholic faith further embedded their marginalization within society. Apart from the grievances of his ancestors, O’Malley was dedicated to studying the legal amendments introduced by the English Crown and their controversies. The unfulfilled promises to retain land and guarantees for equal treatment of religious denominations further deepened O’Malley’s disagreement with British imperialism.

Thus, when Owen O’Malley was inaugurated in Budapest in 1939, he was able to see Hungary’s difficult position in the international field in its complexity. His Irish heritage prompted his understanding of Hungary’s territorial demands in Transylvania and the struggles of ethnic minorities in the Danube Basin. Furthermore, he opposed the reluctance of the Foreign Office to settle disputes in the region due to its favoured economic interests. He enhanced diplomatic engagement by maintaining first-hand consultations with the Hungarian Prime Minister and Regent and promoted the revival of the Hungarophile voices in Britain by constantly propagating Hungary’s significance. Although he primarily served to protect British interests as a Foreign Office Minister, he demonstrated a distinctive pro-Hungarian attitude. Consequently, his legacy for British-Hungarian relations reflects the significance of diplomatic roles in foreign affairs and highlights the influence of identity in shaping diplomacy.

With a widened scope in the future, the research will also examine Owen O’Malley’s role in organizing a Hungarian government-in-exile in Canada following his departure from Budapest. Based on primary and secondary sources, O’Malley remained involved in Hungarian politics even after April 1941. Consequently, his post-1941 correspondence could provide

⁹³ O’Malley, *The Phantom Caravan*, 178.

valuable insights for further research. Additionally, subsequent research in the Public Record Office in London could uncover official reports sent to the Foreign Office by O'Malley, broadening the understanding of his diplomatic strategies. Finally, O'Malley's time as Ambassador to Lisbon from 1945 is also worth investigating, as Regent Miklós Horthy emigrated to Estoril, Portugal, in the late 1940s and may have had connections there with O'Malley. Therefore, the National Archives in Budapest, holding the Horthy family papers, should be included in future research.

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