

Answering AS Level British History questions

Castlereagh and Canning

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THE QUESTION FOLLOWS THE OCR AS-LEVEL EXAMINATION papers on period studies of British History.

Question: How successful were Castlereagh and Canning in securing British interests?

Kathy's answer

Castlereagh (1812-22) and Canning (1822-7) were Foreign Secretaries at a very difficult time for Britain. First, Napoleon had to be defeated and then an international settlement had to be agreed which involved negotiations with international major powers who pursued very different aims. They were largely successful in securing British interests because the country continued to be a leading power throughout this period.

Castlereagh and Canning were not friends. They fought a duel at the height of the Napoleonic War. Castlereagh was a poor public speaker whereas Canning was more fluent and witty. Although Castlereagh worked very hard, this might have been responsible for his death because he committed suicide in 1822. Castlereagh was more reactionary in his policies, supporting the repressive measures of Lord Liverpool's government, and his funeral was cheered by the lower classes in London. Canning was more moderate in his domestic policies; he had been a Whig before joining the Tory party and was willing to consider reform when he became Prime Minister briefly after Lord Liverpool resigned in 1827.

Wellington won the military victories against Napoleon but it was Castlereagh who did much to hold together the Fourth Coalition of Britain, Austria, Prussia and Russia. He was then Britain's leading representative at the Congress of Vienna and was very important in shaping the settlement. Other politicians and the public were not very interested in foreign affairs and Castlereagh was given a lot of freedom to make decisions about policy. He wanted to balance the defence of British interests with the avoidance of involvement in continental affairs. While Austria, Prussia and Russia

restored the pre-Napoleonic monarchies, bartered land and argued about the control of Europe, Castlereagh had only one important interest on the Continent: to ensure trade with the Low Countries, especially Antwerp in Belgium. This is why he secured control of Heligoland and free trade on the River Scheldt. It was more important to Castlereagh to secure gains in the wider world. Britain gained Malta and the Ionian Islands as trading bases in the Mediterranean and to prevent an expansion of Russian power in the Mediterranean. The Cape of Good Hope and Ceylon protected the route to India. In the West Indies, St Lucia, Tobago and Trinidad became British, again for commercial reasons. However, he also pressed for the abolition of the slave trade, a popular demand in Britain.

To resolve tensions between the European powers, Castlereagh was willing to support the idea of regular meetings or congresses and Britain became a member of the Quadruple Alliance in 1815 with Austria, Prussia and Russia. However, he became increasingly suspicious of the way in which the autocratic powers, especially Austria and Russia, wished the congresses to become decision-making bodies to intervene in the affairs of more liberal countries. He was particularly suspicious of the Holy Alliance which was proposed by Alexander I of Russia. Castlereagh agreed that France should be brought back into international affairs at the Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle (1818) but became more distant from the other congresses. He was present at Troppau (1820) but did not sign the declaration that approved intervention against revolution. He did not attend the Congress of Laibach. His State Paper of 1820 opposed the use of force to interfere in the affairs of other states. He did not support revolutions, for example, in Italy and Spain - after all he was a strong Tory - but he believed that these were examples of domestic not international problems.

Canning agreed with Castlereagh that Britain should not intervene unnecessarily in the affairs of other states. There were differences between them but these can be exaggerated. He was also suspicious of congresses but these meetings were already less important by the time that he became Foreign

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