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The woman who put Napoleon in his place

Germaine de Staël, of Genevan origin, was a woman of letters and a leading intellectual who lived in Paris but had to flee to exile in Switzerland more than once.

CHARLES LINSMAYER

When asked whom he thought was the most important woman of all time, Napoleon incurred Germaine de Staël's wrath. "The woman who breeds the most offspring," he replied. Madame de Staël, a Genevan born in Paris in 1766, could have almost vied for this title, having given birth to five children herself. Although she married a Swedish baron in 1786, de Staël was anything but monogamous. Hardly anyone knew which lover fathered which of her children.

Madame de Staël certainly did not cover herself in glory as a mother. Instead, she will be remembered for her brilliant intellect, for her unbending determination to affirm herself as a woman, and, not least, for her pointed letters that earned European notoriety and infuriated the self-appointed emperor, Napoleon.

Madame de Staël survived the Revolution of 1789, to which she was initially well disposed, in her country refuge in Coppet near Geneva. However, after the fall of Robespierre she returned to Paris in 1794, where she hosted salons for the conservative intelligentsia. She warmed to Napoleon initially, but fell out with him over France's invasion of Switzerland and the subsequent creation of the Helvetic Republic.

Italy and Germany

Madame de Staël's literary successes are based on trips abroad that she made despite the precarious times in which she lived. "Corinne ou l'Italie" (Corinne, or Italy; 1807) is both the story of a love affair between a British peer and the beautiful Corinne, and an ardent homage to the culture and history of Italy. "De l'Allemagne" (Germany), the book in which de Staël famously calls Germany the "country of poets and thinkers", is based on the author's visits to Berlin and Weimar in 1803 and 1804, during which she came into contact with Goethe and Schiller. Napoleon banned the first edition of this work from France in 1810, ordering manuscripts and printing plates to be destroyed before forcing the author to retreat to Coppet. Madame de Staël still felt unsafe in Switzerland, so she fled to England in 1812, where "De l'Allemagne" was published in 1813.

Europe's liberal conscience

Napoleon's anger was understandable, because this tribute to poetic Germany was in reality a beautifully disguised protest against cultural repression in France, proving to him like no other work how eloquent an adversary de Staël had become. For France's potent dictator, Madame de Staël had long become the embodiment of Europe's liberal conscience. But these were not the only works that annoyed Napoleon. The emperor went as far as penning an anonymous, scathing critique of "Delphine", while "Corinne ou l'Italie" enraged Napoleon simply because the novel, despite being written in the year of his Italian coronation, failed to mention him at all.

"A work of interest"

When Germaine de Staël passed away on 14 July 1817 at the age of 51 after a life full of emotion, passion and sensual experiences, her Parisian salon had long since reopened in all its old splendour while Napoleon had been banished to Saint Helena forever. There, he confessed to his confidant Las Cases in August 1816, after reading de Staël, that his rival and "Corinne" preyed on his mind. "I see her, I hear her, I feel her. I want to flee from her, and I throw the book down. I had a happier recollection of the book than I do today. I will nevertheless persevere – I want to know how it ends. It does still seem to me to be a work of interest."

Bibliography: "Über Deutschland", the German translation of "De l'Allemagne", is available as a Reclam paperback.

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"Oh society, society! How hard it makes the heart, how frivolous the mind! How it leads us to live only for what others will say of us! If human beings could but meet freed from that influence which all collectively exercise upon each other, how pure the air that would penetrate into the soul! What new ideas, what genuine emotions would refresh it!"

(Excerpt from "Corinne ou l'Italie", Germaine de Staël; 1807)