

*Considerations  
on the Principal  
Events of the  
French Revolution*



Madame de Staël

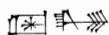


CONSIDERATIONS  
ON THE PRINCIPAL  
EVENTS OF THE  
*French Revolution*

GERMAINE DE STAËL

Newly Revised Translation of the 1818 English Edition

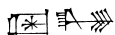
Edited, with an Introduction and Notes,  
by Aurelian Craiutu



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Introduction, note on the present edition, annotations, bibliography, index,  
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# *Contents*

Introduction	vii
Note on the Present Edition	xxv
Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution	I
Select Bibliography on Madame de Staël	757
Index	769

## *Introduction*

Liberty! Let us repeat her name . . . for all that we love,  
all that we honor is included in it.

—*Madame de Staël*

### A Thinker for Our Times: Madame de Staël, Her Life and Works

Very few individuals have left as deep a trace on their age as Anne Louise Germaine, Baronne de Staël-Holstein (1766–1817). She was one of the greatest intellectuals and writers of her time, and the influence of her works crossed national borders, cultures, and disciplines. Her powerful and sparkling personality impressed everyone she met, from Byron and Chateaubriand to Tsar Alexander I and Napoléon. Staël's popularity was such that in 1815, soon after Napoléon's fall from power, one of her contemporaries observed that "there are three great powers in Europe: England, Russia, and Madame de Staël."<sup>1</sup>

#### *Life of Madame de Staël*

Who was this powerful woman accepted into the most exclusive circles of her time and destined to become one of the most famous French writers? Born on April 22, 1766, Madame de Staël belonged to the distinguished Necker family, at one point among the richest families in Europe. Germaine's mother, Suzanne Curchod, was a highly educated woman from Lausanne who closely supervised her daughter's education, seeking

1. See Fairweather, *Madame de Staël*, 3.

to give her a truly encyclopedic knowledge of disciplines as diverse as mathematics, languages, geography, theology, and dance. Madame Necker held a famous salon attended by such celebrities as Voltaire, Diderot, Holbach, Helvétius, d'Alembert, Gibbon, Hume, and Walpole.

Madame de Staël's father, Jacques Necker (1732–1804), a Swiss Protestant, had risen to prominence as a banker in Paris. He made a name for himself in the political realm as Louis XVI's minister of finance and was a leading actor during the initial stages of the French Revolution. Necker is remembered today for taking the unprecedented step in 1781 of making public the country's budget, a novelty in an absolute monarchy where the state of finances had always been kept a secret. Necker, who thought this custom both unlawful and ineffective, realized that public opinion had become an invisible power exercising a major influence on the country and the court. Justifying his decision, Necker wrote: "Darkness and obscurity favor carelessness, [while] publicity can only become an honor and a reward."<sup>2</sup> The public success of Necker's *Compte rendu* was tremendous: more than three thousand copies were sold the first day of its publication.

Necker was also the author of important books in which he vigorously defended liberty, constitutionalism, and moderate government: *On the Executive Power in Large States* (1792), *On the French Revolution* (1796), and *Last Views on Politics and Finance* (1802). Necker's reflections on the French Revolution, an unduly ignored masterpiece, are a detailed account of his conduct during the turbulent events of 1788 and 1789, and especially during the month of July 1789, when his dismissal by King Louis XVI was followed by the fall of the Bastille and his subsequent recall by the monarch. In his political writings, Necker justified his preference for a tempered monarchy similar to the one existing in England, and he became one of the leading theorists of executive power in modern political thought.<sup>3</sup>

Madame de Staël achieved fame as a novelist, political thinker, sociologist of literature, and autobiographer. To her thorough education she added vast political experience and an intense personal life that blended

2. Necker, *Compte rendu* (Paris, 1781), 1–2.

3. For an interpretation of Necker's political ideas, see Grange, *Les idées de Necker*.

love and politics in an original way, as her rich correspondence demonstrates.<sup>4</sup> A romantic and restless soul, Madame de Staël attracted the friendship of the most important men of her age, from Talleyrand, Goethe, and Benjamin Constant to J.-C.-L. Simonde de Sismondi, Prosper de Barante, and August Wilhelm von Schlegel. She witnessed firsthand the most important events of the French Revolution, which she followed closely from Paris and, later, from her exile at Coppet, in Switzerland, where she lived between 1792 and 1795, anxiously watching from a distance the rise of the Jacobin democracy, the Terror, and the fall of Robespierre on 9 Thermidor.

Her health declined in 1816, and in February 1817 she became bedridden. Her mind remained as sharp as ever, though, and Staël had the opportunity to reflect one more time on her extraordinary life and achievements. In a letter to Chateaubriand she confessed: "I have always been the same: lively but sad. I love God, my father, and liberty."<sup>5</sup> She died on July 14, 1817, at the age of fifty-one.

### *Works of Madame de Staël*

Staël's first major book, *Letters on the Works and Character of J.-J. Rousseau*, appeared in 1788 and established her reputation in the Parisian circles of that time. In the aftermath of the Revolution she gained a long-awaited opportunity to again pursue her literary interests and also to become involved in politics. She published *On the Influence of Passions on the Happiness of Individuals and Nations* in 1796, followed four years later by *On Literature Considered in Its Relations to Social Institutions* (1800).<sup>6</sup> Her famous novel *Delphine* appeared in 1802, and *Corinne* was published five years later. After 1795, Madame de Staël returned to Paris for longer sojourns, commented on the major political events of the day, and formu-

4. For an excellent selection from Staël's correspondence, see Solovieff, *Madame de Staël, ses amis, ses correspondants. Choix de lettres (1778-1817)*.

5. Quoted in Solovieff's introduction to *Madame de Staël, ses amis, ses correspondants. Choix de lettres*, 16.

6. An American edition of this book was published under the title *The Influence of Literature upon Society* (Boston: W. Wells and T. B. Wait and Company, 1813).

lated various policy proposals meant to bring the Revolution to a successful end.

In 1797 she completed the initial part of her first major political work, *On the Current Circumstances Which Can End the Revolution*, whose full text was not published until 1979. The republican tone of this book might surprise readers familiar only with Staël's later political writings, which portray her as an enthusiastic defender of constitutional monarchy *à l'anglaise*. Inspired by the principles of the Enlightenment, she put forward a powerful critique of the excesses of the Jacobins while also taking to task the errors of the ultraroyalists who sought to reverse the course of French history. In order to "close" the Revolution, Madame de Staël favored a republican form of government based on popular sovereignty, representative government, and respect for private property, seen as the foundation of all political rights. She also expressed concern for the low public-spiritedness of the French, which she regarded as a corollary of the disquieting civic apathy fueled by the country's postrevolutionary fatigue.<sup>7</sup>

In 1803 Madame de Staël was forced into exile by Napoléon. Her unfinished memoir, *Ten Years of Exile*, recounts her peregrinations in Europe and documents her critical attitude toward the imperial government. *On Germany* was completed in 1810. In it she praises Prussia and never mentions Napoléon, who had waged an eight-year war against that country. The book did not appear in France because the police confiscated the volume's proofs and type blocks and the ten thousand copies already printed. *On Germany* was finally published in London in 1813. Napoléon, angry and humiliated by Staël's defiant refusal to remove some offending passages, emphatically forbade the publication of the book because it was allegedly "un-French."<sup>8</sup>

Shortly before her death in 1817, Madame de Staël completed her last

7. A similar concern can be found in Benjamin Constant's famous lecture, "The Liberty of the Moderns Compared to the Liberty of the Ancients," which drew inspiration from various ideas of Madame de Staël.

8. The word "un-French" was General Savary's. See his letter to Madame de Staël in Herold, *Mistress to an Age*, 491–92. For more information, see *Ten Years of Exile*, pt. II, chap. i, 101–10.

and arguably most important political work, *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution*. She managed to revise only the first two volumes and a part of the third one. A French edition of *Considerations* was published in 1818 by her son and her son-in-law, Auguste de Staël and Victor de Broglie, respectively, assisted by her friend August Wilhelm von Schlegel. A three-volume English translation of the book came out the same year in London, but the translator's name was not mentioned on the front page.

### Madame de Staël and Napoléon

Madame de Staël's hatred of tyranny and passionate defense of freedom were bound to clash with the institutions of the new regime of Napoléon Bonaparte. Staël met Napoléon for the first time in 1797 and later recalled that she felt unable to breathe in his presence. She became a fierce critic of the First Consul when his absolutist and bellicose tendencies became evident. Napoléon, Madame de Staël argued, subjected his critics to countless persecutions and engaged the country in extravagant military campaigns, taking pleasure only in the violent crises produced by battles. "Emperor Napoléon's greatest grievance against me," Staël wrote in the opening chapter of *Ten Years of Exile*, "is my unfailing respect for true liberty."<sup>9</sup> She deplored the absence of the rule of law in France and argued that public opinion itself was powerless without the authority of the law and independent organs to express it. A famous political figure during that time, Staël was received in the most select circles in England, Germany, Sweden, Austria, and Russia. Tsar Alexander I, who gave Madame de Staël a Russian passport, enjoyed her company and conversation and welcomed her to Russia. At Coppet, she rallied a powerful opposition to Napoléon that brought together many friends of liberty who had become the Emperor's staunchest critics.

Her admiration for Prussia, expressed in *On Germany*, clearly conveyed her opposition to Napoléon. By praising the German culture and spirit, Madame de Staël offered a thinly veiled critique of the Emperor's policies.

9. *Ten Years of Exile*, 4.

A believer in the benefits of the cross-fertilization of ideas, she suggested that France needed an influx of new foreign ideas and, above all, freedom to overcome its political predicament.

In 1814 Madame de Staël welcomed the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy. She returned to Paris, where she followed with great interest the debates on the new Chamber of Deputies while also seeking to recover the two million livres that her father had loaned to the French state during the Revolution. She claimed that the Charter of 1814 contained all the political principles that had previously been advocated by Necker, but she also expressed her concerns about the long-term viability of the new constitutional text. This odd mixture of royal concession and political contract was, she argued, inferior in many respects to the unwritten English constitution based on a sound balance of powers.<sup>10</sup>

### The Ideas of *Considerations*

The first years of the Bourbon Restoration provided an open arena for vigorous political debates among partisans of the Old Regime, supporters of constitutional monarchy and representative government, and those who wanted to continue the Revolution. The debate over the legitimacy of the principles of 1789 forced the French to come to terms with the violent episodes of the French Revolution. Not surprisingly, most of the historical writings published during the Bourbon Restoration display an unusual degree of political partisanship, as historians sought to use the lessons of the past to justify their own political agendas. Those who *wrote* history during this time often also tried to *make* history. Liberal writers such as Guizot, Constant,<sup>11</sup> and Madame de Staël insisted that the initial episodes of the Revolution should be seen neither as a prelude to the Terror nor as a complete break with the feudal past, but instead as the inevitable outcome of factors that had been at work for a very long time in the Old Regime. In advancing this argument they were often obliged to

10. For more details, see Herold, *Mistress to an Age*, 544–49, 562–78. On the Charter of 1814, see Aurelian Craiutu, *Liberalism Under Siege*, 70–75.

11. Constant discusses Staël's *Considerations* on pp. 840–52 of his essay "De Madame de Staël et de ses ouvrages," in Benjamin Constant, *Oeuvres*, ed. Alfred Roulin.

resort to a selective reading of the past, one that insisted either on discontinuities or on long-term social, cultural, and political patterns. But regardless of their sophisticated hermeneutical strategies, all French liberals of the time shared two common characteristics: they defended the principles of representative government and constitutional monarchy, and they admired the English model that had successfully blended liberty and order and protected the country against revolutionary turmoil. Staël memorably captured the new liberal catechism in *On the Current Circumstances* when arguing that, in France, liberty was ancient and despotism modern.<sup>12</sup>

*Considerations* aimed at contributing to this rich and intense historical debate, even if in some respects it was fundamentally a composite that added few original points beyond the sometimes exaggerated praise of Necker's political views and actions.<sup>13</sup> Yet, Madame de Staël's unique perspective, combining firsthand political experience and a subtle intellect with an elegant style and passionate voice, offered a convincing justification of the principles of constitutional monarchy that had inspired the authors of the Charter of 1814. It is important to remember that Madame de Staël did not intend to write a purely historical work retracing step by step the main events and phases of the French Revolution and its aftermath. As she stated in a short foreword to the original edition, her initial goal was to write a book examining the actions and ideas of her beloved father, Jacques Necker, who looms large in the pages of this book. But in the end, Madame de Staël went beyond her original goal and offered a comprehensive view of the main events and actors of the French Revolution. By strongly criticizing Napoléon's actions and legacy, she put forward a vigorous liberal agenda that championed the principles of constitutionalism and representative government. Thus, *Considerations* consolidated Madame de Staël's image as a passionate friend of liberty who feared mob rule and violence and advocated political moderation, the rule of law, and representative government.

12. *Des circonstances actuelles qui peuvent terminer la Révolution et des principes qui doivent fonder la république en France*, 273.

13. See Gauchet, "Staël," in *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, 1009.

The title of Staël's book was probably a rejoinder to Joseph de Maistre's *Considerations on France*, originally published in 1796 (a new edition came out in 1814), while some of Staël's ideas might have been a response to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Although Burke saw the French Revolution as the result of accidental forces that brought forth the sudden collapse of the Old Regime in 1789, Madame de Staël viewed the events of 1789 as the outcome of the general development of European civilization.<sup>14</sup> Thus, she challenged not only the ultraroyalist opponents of the Revolution, who wanted to restore the old alliance between throne and altar, but also those who argued that the Revolution had been the mere result of accidental or transitory causes. She saw the events of 1789 as part of a greater historical development that consisted of three eras: the feudal system, despotism, and representative government. According to this interpretation, the same social and political forces that had brought about the Revolutions of 1648 and 1688 in England were also the prime cause of the revolutionary wave in France a century later: "Both belong to the third era in the progress of social order—the establishment of representative government. . . ."<sup>15</sup> In other words, far from being fortuitous, the fall of the Old Regime in 1789 was in fact the inevitable outcome of a long historical evolution that could not have been arrested by the efforts of a few individuals.

In this regard Staël's analysis anticipated Tocqueville's meticulously researched diagnosis of the internal crisis of the Old Regime. By focusing on the lack of public spirit and the absence of a genuine constitution prior to 1789, she demonstrated that the Revolution was an irreversible phenomenon that arose in response to the deep structural problems of the Old Regime. Although she stopped short of claiming (like Tocqueville) that the real Revolution had actually occurred prior to 1789, Madame de Staël's account gives the reader a strong sense of the inevitability of the events of that year.

All these ideas loom large in the first two parts of the book in which

14. This idea also is at the heart of François Guizot's *Histoire de la civilisation en Europe* and his *Histoire de la civilisation en France*.

15. *Considerations*, pt. I, chap. i, 24–25.

Staël reflects on the state of public opinion in France at the accession of Louis XVI and discusses Necker's plans for finance and his famous account of the kingdom's finances. Other important topics include the plans of the Third Estate in 1788 and 1789, the fall of the Bastille, and the actions of the Constituent Assembly. About the latter, Madame de Staël has many good things to say, in contrast to Burke's more negative account that highlighted the Assembly's excesses and limitations. In her view, the achievements of the Assembly ultimately outweighed its shortcomings: "We are indebted to the Constituent Assembly for the suppression of the privileged castes in France, and for civil liberty to all. . . ." <sup>16</sup> It was the Constituent Assembly that effaced ancient separations between classes, rendered taxes uniform, proclaimed complete freedom of worship, instituted juries, and removed artificial and ineffective restraints on industry. Above all, the decrees of the Constituent Assembly established provincial assemblies, spreading life, emulation, energy, and intelligence into the provinces. In this regard, it is worth pointing out again the similarity between Staël's interpretation of the political dynamics of the initial phase of the Revolution and Tocqueville's. Both believed that the events of the first half of 1789 displayed sincere patriotism and commitment to the public good, combining enthusiasm for ideas with sincere devotion to a noble cause that made a lasting impression on all true friends of liberty in France. <sup>17</sup>

Yet, Madame de Staël was far from being an unconditional admirer of the Constituent Assembly. In fact, she criticizes it for having displayed an excessive distrust of executive power that eventually triggered insuperable tensions between the King and the representatives of the nation. The Constituent Assembly wrongly considered the executive power as an enemy of liberty rather than as one of its safeguards. The Assembly proceeded to draft the constitution as a treaty between two opposed parties rather than as a compromise between the country's various social and political

16. Ibid., pt. II, chap. iv, 190.

17. "I have never met," Tocqueville wrote in *The Old Régime*, "with a revolution where one could see at the start, in so many men, a more sincere patriotism, more disinterest, more true greatness. . . . This is 1789, a time of inexperience doubtless, but of generosity, of enthusiasm, of virility, and of greatness, a time of immortal memory." (*The Old Régime and the Revolution*, vol. I, 208, 244)

interests. It “formed a constitution as a general would form a plan of attack,”<sup>18</sup> making a harmonious balance of powers impossible and preventing the import onto French soil of bicameralism. The unfortunate choice of a single chamber was incompatible with the existence of effective checks and balances capable of limiting the growing power of the representatives of the French nation.

Staël’s *Considerations* also vindicates, albeit in a moderate tone, the principles of 1789 that sought to improve the system of national representation and the right of the Third Estate to full political representation. The boldest claim of this part of the book is that France lacked a true constitution and the rule of law during the Old Regime. The *parlements*<sup>19</sup> were never able to limit the royal authority, which had retained the legal right to impose a *lit de justice*.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the Estates General were convened only eighteen times in almost five centuries (1302–1789) and did not meet at all between 1614 and 1789. Although the *parlements* could (and occasionally did) invoke the “fundamental laws of the state” and asserted their right to “register” the laws after they had been “verified,” it was not possible to speak of the existence of a genuine constitution in the proper sense of the word. “France,” Madame de Staël wrote, “has been governed by custom, often by caprice, and never by law. . . . the course of circumstances alone was decisive of what everyone called his right.”<sup>21</sup>

Staël did not hesitate to list a long series of royal abuses, including arbitrary imprisonments, ordinances, banishments, special commissions, and *lits de justice* that infringed upon the rights of ordinary citizens and were passed against their will. In her view, the history of France was replete with many attempts on the part of the nation and the nobles to obtain rights and privileges, while the kings aimed at enlarging their prerogatives and consolidating their absolute power. “Who can deny,” Madame de Staël concludes in this important chapter (part I, xi), “that a change was

18. *Considerations*, pt. II, chap. viii, 211.

19. The *parlements* were sovereign courts of law and final courts of appeal for the judicial districts of the country.

20. A special session of the *Parlement of Paris* called by the monarch to impose the registration of his royal edicts.

21. *Considerations*, pt. I, chap. xi, 104.

necessary, either to give a free course to a constitution hitherto perpetually infringed; or to introduce those guarantees which might give the laws of the state the means of being maintained and obeyed?"<sup>22</sup> On this view, the Revolution of 1789 appeared justified insofar as it sought to put an end to a long reign based on arbitrary power and obsolete and costly privileges.

In other chapters from parts II and III, Staël criticizes the blindness and arrogance of many political actors whose actions and ideas paved the way for the Terror of 1793–95. She also denounces the institutionalization of fear fueled by the perverse passion for equality displayed by the French. "True faith in some abstract ideas," she argues, "feeds political fanaticism"<sup>23</sup> and can be cured only by the sovereignty of law. Her conclusion is remarkable for both its simplicity and its accuracy: liberty alone can effectively cure political fanaticism, and the remedy for popular passion lies above all in the rule of law. The institution that alone can bring forth ordered liberty is representative government; it is the only remedy through which "the torches of the furies can be extinguished" and that can adequately promote limited power, a proper balance of powers in the state as well as the right of people to consent to taxes, and their ordered participation in legislative acts.

Part IV examines the Directory and the rise of Napoléon Bonaparte. Madame de Staël draws an unflattering (and somewhat biased) portrait of the future emperor by emphasizing not only his unbounded egotism and intoxication with power but also his lack of emotion combined with an unsettling air of vulgarity and political shrewdness. Staël pays special attention to analyzing Napoléon's rise to power in the aftermath of the Terror, believing that he was not only a talented man but also one who represented a whole pernicious system of power. She claimed that this system ought to be examined as a great political problem relevant to many generations. As she memorably puts it, no emotion of the heart could move Napoléon, who regarded his fellow citizens as mere things and means rather than equals worthy of respect. He was "neither good, nor violent, nor gentle, nor cruel. . . . Such a being had no fellow, and therefore could

22. *Ibid.*, pt. I, chap. xi, 111.

23. *Ibid.*, pt. III, chap. xv, 354.

neither feel nor excite sympathy. . . .”<sup>24</sup> Intoxicated with the “vile draught of Machiavellianism” and resembling in many respects the Italian tyrants of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Napoléon managed to enslave the French nation by shrewdly using three means. He sought to satisfy men’s interests at the expense of their virtues, he disregarded public opinion, and he gave the French nation war for an object instead of liberty.<sup>25</sup> Through these means he managed to dazzle the masses and corrupt individuals by acting upon their imagination and captivating them with a false sense of greatness.

These chapters convincingly illustrate Staël’s hatred of absolute power and shed light on her staunch opposition to the Emperor, for whom she held a deep aversion.<sup>26</sup> Anticipating a common *topos* of Restoration liberal thought, she notes that Napoléon’s absolute power had been made possible by the leveling and atomization of society, and she explains his fall from power by pointing out the influence of public opinion and the inevitable limits of that power. In the end, Madame de Staël argues, Napoléon left a nefarious legacy that strengthened the coercive force of centralization and fueled the atomization of society. The system of egoism, oppression, and corruption he founded derailed the normal political development of the country and wasted countless resources. Being a man who could act naturally only when he commanded others, Napoléon degraded the French nation, which he used to advance his own political ambitions and plans. In *Ten Years of Exile*, Madame de Staël wrote that since Napoléon’s character was “at war with the rest of creation,” he ought to be compared to “the Greek flame, which no force of nature could extinguish.”<sup>27</sup>

Parts V and VI of the book contain a vigorous defense of representative government in France and offer a detailed examination of the English po-

24. Ibid., pt. III, chap. xxvi, 409.

25. For more details, see ibid., pt. IV, chap. iv, “Progress of Bonaparte to Absolute Power.”

26. She recollected their first meeting as follows: “Yet nothing could triumph over my invincible aversion for what I perceived in him. I felt in his soul a cold sharp-edged sword, which froze the wound that it inflicted.” (Ibid., pt. III, chap. xxvi, 409–10)

27. *Ten Years of Exile*, 93.

litical system, culminating in moving praise of political liberty and limited power. The political agenda of *Considerations* is illustrated by chapters xi and xii of part V, in which Madame de Staël examines the system that the Bourbons and the friends of liberty ought to have followed in 1814. Worth noting here is Madame de Staël's passionate defense of decentralization and self-government as two effective means of combating Napoléon's legacy of centralized despotism. Opposing those who believed that the French were not made for liberty, Staël points to the rising force of public opinion and warns that every effort to sail against the new democratic torrent will be futile in the long term. After reminding her readers that hypocrisy in the pursuit of liberty is more revolting than its complete denial, she adds confidently: "Let this torrent enter into channels, and all the country which it laid waste will be fertilized."<sup>28</sup>

Part VI contains a detailed account of the main principles undergirding representative government, liberty, and public opinion in England. Madame de Staël did not seek to be a neutral observer of the English scene; her normative approach stemmed from her belief that France must imitate the political institutions of England in order to overcome its legacy of despotism and centralization. "That which is particularly characteristic of England," she noted in a Burkean vein, "is a mixture of chivalrous spirit with an enthusiasm for liberty"<sup>29</sup> fostering a fortunate balance between all social classes, which makes the English nation seem, "if we may say so, one entire body of gentlemen."<sup>30</sup> Unlike the French nobles, the English aristocrats were united to—and identified themselves with—the nation at large and did not form a privileged caste detached from the management of local affairs. Of special interest will be the discussion of the relationship between economic prosperity, legal protection, rule of law, and political freedom, as well as the discussion of the seminal influence of religion and morals on political liberty, anticipating Tocqueville's analysis of religion as a bulwark of political freedom in America. Referring to the English government, Staël writes: "The government never interferes in what can

28. *Considerations*, pt. V, chap. xi, 606.

29. *Ibid.*, pt. VI, chap. iv, 671.

30. *Ibid.*, pt. VI, chap. iv, 671.

be equally well done by individuals: respect for personal liberty extends to the exercise of the faculties of every man.”<sup>31</sup> Madame de Staël also praises the balance of power between Crown and Parliament, the countless opportunities for improving the political system without any major convulsion, and the fortunate balance between old and new political and legal forms giving liberty both the advantage of an ancient origin and the benefits of prudent innovation. She saw in publicity and freedom of the press the two pillars of representative government that create a strong bond between the governed and their representatives: “Public opinion bears the sway in England, and it is public opinion that constitutes the liberty of a country.”<sup>32</sup>

The last chapter of the book, “Of the Love of Liberty,” memorably summarizes the reasons why people need freedom and are ready to die for it. Madame de Staël’s vigorous appeal to liberty can still inspire us today: “Liberty! Let us repeat her name with so much the more energy that the men who should pronounce it, at least as an apology, keep it at a distance through flattery: let us repeat it without fear of wounding any power that deserves respect; for all that we love, all that we honor is included in it. Nothing but liberty can arouse the soul to the interests of social order.”<sup>33</sup>

### The Reception of *Considerations*

Soon after its publication, *Considerations* became a classic *sui generis* in France and was regarded as a first-rate contribution to the ongoing political and historical debate on representative government and its institutions in nineteenth-century France and Europe. Staël’s book was praised for having opened the modern era of French liberalism.<sup>34</sup> It was hailed as

31. Ibid., pt. VI, chap. iii, 653.

32. Ibid., pt. VI, chap. iv, 668.

33. Ibid., pt. VI, chap. xii, 753–54.

34. For an account of the reception of Madame de Staël’s work, see Frank Bowman, “La polémique sur les *Considerations* sur la Révolution française,” *Annales Benjamin Constant*, 8–9 (Lausanne and Paris: Institute B. Constant and Jean Tonzot), 225–41. For an analysis of the liberalism of the Coppet group (Necker, Staël, Constant, and Sismondi), see Lucien

a genuine hymn to freedom based on a perceptive understanding of the prerequisites of political freedom as well as on a detailed analysis of the social, historical, and cultural contexts within which political rights and political obligation exist. As time passed, however, the book fell into oblivion and shared the fate of French nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberals who became marginalized and ignored in their own country. Not surprisingly, *Considerations* went out of print for more than a century, from 1881 to 1983.

*Considerations* triggered a number of powerful critiques among Staël's contemporaries, who disagreed with some of its ideas and interpretations. One such critical response came from Stendhal, who was put off by Staël's exceedingly harsh treatment of Napoléon. Another came from the pen of Jacques-Charles Bailleul, who published an extensive, two-volume (chapter by chapter) critique of the book.<sup>35</sup> But it was Louis de Bonald, a leading writer himself and a prominent representative of the ultraroyalists, who put forward the most trenchant critique of Staël's book. In *Observations on the Work of Madame de Staël Entitled "Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution"* (1818), Bonald argued that Madame de Staël failed to give an impartial account of the Revolution, preferring instead to reinterpret its main events in order to vindicate her father's actions and legacy. The Catholic Bonald went further and attacked Staël's political ambitions as well as her liberal principles and values and Protestant outlook. Ultraconservatives like Bonald and Maistre disagreed with Staël's emphasis on the inevitability of the Revolution as well as with her claim that France did not have a proper constitution prior to 1789. If there was anything inevitable in the Revolution, Maistre claimed, it concerned God's punishment for the excesses of the Enlightenment. Not surprisingly, some regarded the Revolution as a unique (and Satanic) event in

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Jaume, ed., *Coppet, creuset de l'esprit libéral*, especially the essays by Lucien Jaume ("Coppet, creuset du libéralisme comme 'culture morale,'" 225–39), Luigi Lacchè ("Coppet et la percée de l'État libéral constitutionnel," 135–56), and Alain Laquière ("Le modèle anglais et la responsabilité ministérielle," 157–76).

35. The full title of Bailleul's book is *Examen critique de l'ouvrage posthume de Mme. la Bnne. de Staël, ayant pour titre: Considérations sur les principaux événemens de la Révolution française*.