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Germaine de Staël appears most often in literary studies as the writer of early Romantic novels and an early proponent of a distinctively ‘German’ literature. In general histories of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, she figures briefly as the target of then First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte’s hostility; her salons in Paris gathered together liberal critics of the Napoleonic regime, so in 1803 he ordered her to leave Paris. She did not return until his fall. Sluga aims to show how closer attention to Staël’s peripatetic mediating activities can recapture “the relevance of female elites to the shifting parameters of diplomacy and the rise of a new Europe-centred liberal internationalism in the early nineteenth century (143).” To this end, she revisits Staël’s personal correspondence and pieces together the many fragments written about her by diplomats and officials from London to St. Petersburg.

Sluga has not uncovered some previously hidden gem of documentation about Staël, yet by bringing together materials previously left uncollated, she has performed a vital service to anyone interested in the diplomatic relations of the early nineteenth century, the origins of internationalism, or women’s history. Previous historians of international relations have ignored or maligned Staël. The great diplomatic historian of the period, Paul Schroeder, paid no attention to her, and the biographer of Napoleon, Felix Markham, derided her, in a passage rightly singled out by Sluga, as “a nymphomaniac maneater” (157). Sluga, in contrast, shows how Staël’s far-flung connections – she was on personal terms with the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the liberal French

1 Paul W. Schroeder, The Transformation of European Politics 1763-1848 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). The Markham book has been reissued several times since 1963. See, for example, Felix Maurice Hippisley Markham, Napoleon (New York: Signet Classics, 2010).
aristocrat Marquis de Lafayette, Russian Tsar Alexander I, Swedish Crown Prince Bernadotte, French King Louis XVIII, and the American diplomat and future president John Quincy Adams, among others – served a variety of international causes, from shaping the final coalition against Napoleon to liberal constitutionalism and abolitionism. No scholar working in a single national history or on international relations only from the point of view of diplomats would have been able to see, much less take the measure of, Staël’s influence.

Sluga’s reinterpretation of Staël’s role should compel a reconsideration of a host of issues. Diplomacy does not just take place in designated conference rooms in talks between official negotiators; Sluga shows how Staël used her revived salon in 1814 Paris to promote Genevan claims, liberalism in Sicily and South America, and even the abolition of the slave trade by steering certain emissaries toward each other and by rerouting the exchanges more generally toward her favorite issues, constitutionalism and liberalism. This broader view also reminds historians that international relations took shape in places and in forms that never appear in state documents or spy reports and that the only way to get at them is to dig deeply into personal correspondence across national borders. Staël used her salons, informal personal interventions with heads of states, and, in particular, her unrelenting flood of letters to prod, prick, and persuade her recipients to act in ways she thought appropriate to the opportunities at hand. Finally, because of Sluga’s own interest in the relation between growing nationalism and internationalism, she shows how Staël, while drawing attention to national feeling in German and Italian states, in the end preferred to see nations as a form of organization useful to the development of civil liberty, not as ends in themselves.

Toward the end of her life (she died in 1817 at age 51) Staël publicly disavowed her past political interventions because she worried that her notoriety made it impossible for her daughter to find an acceptable suitor. She even championed a cult of domesticity for free countries. In this case, however, her actions speak louder than her statements prepared for public consumption. It is to Sluga’s great credit that she includes Staël’s own ambivalence in the story but also uses Staël’s continuing correspondence with the Duke of Wellington, the hero of Waterloo, and ex-President Thomas Jefferson, among others, to show the persistence of her beliefs and her willingness to act on them.

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