Contents

Introduction.............................................................page 2

French Perception of Germany before 1813............page 2

Germaine de Staël....................................................page 3

De l’Allemagne.......................................................page 4

Effects....................................................................page 11

Conclusion.............................................................page 13

Cited literature.......................................................page 14
I. Introduction

In my work I will deal with the transformation of the French perception of Germany in the early 19th century. The initial point of this transformation from nearly total ignorance to interest is the publication of Mme. de Staël’s book *De l’Allemagne*, first published in 1810, than banned by the Napoleon regime, and, after its re-publication in 1813 a great literary success. Characterising this transformation, the following questions have to be answered: How was the French perception of Germany before de Staël’s publication? Why was there such an ignorance? What did Mme. de Staël’s picture of Germany look like? How did her audience react? Why did she – somehow – succeed with her concept? Trying to answer these questions, I will start with giving a short survey over the French image of Germany before Mme. de Staël reached her audience. Then showing a view biographical facts about the author will be necessary before a deeper analysis of the book, or at least the first two parts dealing with the German character and literature, will follow. I concentrate on these two issues because the first one shows the basis for the whole contemplation and the second one is, from my point of view, the most profound, while the third and fourth topic, philosophy and religion, mainly just amplify the thesis of the text. Referring to the effects of *De l’Allemagne*, the field of French, and also European, literature is the one that has been influenced most heavily. According to the general effects of the book I will concentrate on the French reception, stressing the political impact of Mme. de Staël’s work as well. In my analysis, I will focus on the contents of *De l’Allemagne*. Thus the transformation issue is touched only in answering the question what this transformation caused instead of how it looked like. That would perhaps be a topic for a deeper analysis.

II. French Perception of Germany before 1813

The history of the French perception of Germany is a very complex field, just as complicated as both countries’ historical relations. Certainly, cultural views have always been strongly influenced by the political situation – which between these two countries never had been easy. Concerning the time we focus on, another problem appears: With regard on Germany, we cannot talk about one state, one unified nation. Nevertheless, foreign prejudices treated Germany at least as a unit in culture and mentality, a division was focussed not more than to compare north and south.

In France, the dissociation from the neighbour mainly served the formation and stabilisation of one’s own identity. For a long period of time, the French view was heavily characterised
by a centralisation on its own sphere. Consequently, prejudices of the barbaric, uncultivated German dominated the public opinion in the early modern age, although there had been enough possibilities to correct this perception. But a real exchange failed. Instead, French writers and artists propagated the ideals of the ancient world and projected them on themselves. Thus they put France in the place of the modern cultural centre – and the periphery was Germany. In this manner, French people coming to Germany saw themselves in the role of cultural messengers; they taught “civilisation”, but they did not consider it as necessary to learn from this in their eyes lower culture.

In the 1760ies the status of the Germans was enhanced. With regard to the increasing decadence of French society, Germany took the part of a civilised variation of the “noble savage”; in contrast to French decadence and exaggerated intellectualism, the Germans were appreciated for their purity and naivety. But this perception did not last very long, as Voltaire’s novel “Candide” shows. Finally, French intellectualism was still superior to the German simplicity. This view did not even change after the French Revolution, when many emigrants came to Germany. To explain the differences between the two countries, the climate-theory was a popular model; the peoples of the southern regions (like France) developed a more vivid spirit than the melancholy peoples of the north (like Germany).

All in all we can conclude that the French perception of Germany never has been very positive. Even when the neighbour was put in the role of an idol, this view still did not include the awareness of an equality, so the old clichés soon became evident again and dominated the further relations. This did not change until the early 19th century. Finally French culture and language were dominant in all over Europe; the life-style of the high society was strongly influenced by French fashion, literature and language. Thus it seemed impossible for the Germans to develop their own cultural self-consciousness when even the German monarchs preferred the French culture to their own.

III. Germaine de Staël

With her book De l’Allemagne, first published in 1810, Germaine de Staël took the first important step to change this perception of an absolute French superiority. Her attitude towards her own home country and Germany can be explained by her biography. First, there is the question of nationality; actually she was born in France and spent most of her childhood and youth there, but in fact, her parents were Swiss, she was the daughter of
Jaques Necker, last minister of finance of the Ancien Régime, changed her citizenship after the marriage with a Swedish diplomat and lived several years abroad after she had been forced to leave France in 1803. In her Swiss exile she installed one of the most influential literary salons in Europe. All this seem to be the ideal qualifications for a true cosmopolitan. But this cosmopolitanism as well as her political liberalism and cultural influence provoked the suspicion even of Napoleon himself. And in fact Mme. de Staël was a passionate opponent of the emperor who had forced her to leave the country she considered as her home. Furthermore she was even in her exile observed by French agents, *De l’Allemagne* was forbidden shortly after its first publication in 1810.

While researchers still argue about Mme. de Staël’s true political meaning, her merits for literature and literary studies are highly estimated, although most of her literary works are nearly forgotten – in contrast to her theoretical texts. The first one of importance is *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*, published in 1800, which is considered as the first work of literary sociology. In this context, the author tries to leave the popular path of a literary view concentrating on France. On the contrary she describes “French literature as one between many, even if it takes the part of a *prima inter pares*”. Especially she points out the raising meaning of the *literature of the north* which includes Germany. She even declares her preference for the north, explaining this appreciation with the climate theory; the colder sphere produces a stronger sense for melancholy and seriousness. Thus she operates with a theory which formally had been used against the northern regions, now showing their advantage. From this point of view, France stops being the “measure of all things”. De Staël creates a new criteria for literary value which is not estimated by the taste of one’s own nation but by pure quality.

IV. *De l’Allemagne*

In *De la littérature*, de Staël’s preference for German literature does not take much space between other aspects of literary theory. In her most famous work *De l’Allemagne*, the product of two journeys through Germany in 1803/04 and 1807/08, the comparison between France and Germany becomes the basic issue. In this context it is noticeable that she speaks

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of Germany as one unified state. In fact, “Germany” is, at this time, still very far from being something like that. Neither did the “Germans” feel as one nation themselves, nor was there any clearness about the geographical structure of a pure German region. In other words the author created a common nationality of the German small states which did not exist in reality, at least not politically or geographically. As the integrating element, Mme. de Staël chose the climate on the one hand and culture on the other (while both aspects are, according to the climate theory, strongly linked to each other). From the very beginning of her report she stresses the Germans’ cultural independence from the domination of the Latin peoples, a domination which even leads back to antiquity. Thus Germany developed its own cultural identity, derived rather from Christianity than from the Roman tradition. In her introduction she writes:

“Nearly always, the Germanic peoples resisted the Roman domination; they received their education in later times, and alone from Christianity: changed directly from wildness to Christian society [...], and even though the scholars of these countries have learned from the Greek and Roman writers even more than the peoples with Roman origin, the natural old spirit breathes much more in the German works than the spirit of antiquity.”

This short passage is informative in several ways. At first, it shows the advantage of German cultural development towards the classical Roman character: its independence. While Rome had been dominant in nearly all of western Europe, especially in the later France, they never succeeded east of the Rhine. Thus the Germanic peoples kept there cultural origins until their conversion of Christianity. In other words: They still stuck to their cultural identity when “France” already had lost its own. In this manner this passage can also be interpreted as a criticism of civilisation; Germans had not been domesticated by another people’s culture but stuck to their own nature and tradition, so German culture is characterised by a higher authenticity while French culture concentrates on copying the classical ideals. Here Mme. de Staël somehow finds back to a perception of Germany which had already been popular in the 1760ies, when the neighbour was appreciated for his pureness and his lack of

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3 In another context she applies to the climate theory to explain the inner structure of Germany; while the north is characterised by melancholy and intellectualism, the people of the southern regions are full of the joys of life, but of a simpler spirit. The parallels to the French-German comparison are evident. So when de Staël talks about the German spirit, she always means the north.

In this context she uses a method we already know from her dealing with the climate theory; she takes a negative prejudice and turns it into a positive characterisation. Furthermore she touches a basic fact in the historical developments of both countries, which shows that the book is not only a report of her journey but tries to formulate something like a national anthropology. It shows how both peoples are and – in approaches – how they became like this.

In this manner the first part of the book focuses on the people and the regional conditions of the country. In this context the author never loses the view on France, nearly every trait of character, every advantage of Germany is compared to the French conditions, at least implicitly. As mentioned above, Germans are characterised with the qualities of a lower, but purer civilisation: “The Germans in general are honest and true; nearly always, their word is sacred to themselves and deception is unknown.”

But in contrast to the perception in the 1760ies, she grants the Germans a high state of development in their intellectualism – even a higher one than it is usual in France, while the German intellectuals are just not as many and as influential. While the French submit to the conformity of fashion, even in questions of literature and philosophy, the Germans stick to their individuality. Here Mme. de Staël already touches an issue that will become even more evident in the later chapters: the German intellectualism which granted it the reputation of the country of “writers and philosophers”. Although all this may look like the author praises Germany in order to devalue France, this is not the case. On the contrary, she also stresses the negative sides of this intellectualism and the disadvantages of the German character in general; thus she describes the Germans as apathetic, obedient and slow. In other words they are not able to put their thoughts into actions. In nearly every sense, large contradictions between theory and practice become evident: “The spirit of the Germans does not seem to be connected to their character [...].” De Staël demonstrates that although enlightenment had been generally accepted, authoritarian thoughts are stronger than anywhere else in Europe. Moreover the Germans are lacking in national consciousness, unity and a love of liberty. Here lies a hidden criticism against the shortage of resistance against the French, more exactly spoken

5 The author implicitly refers to Rousseau (p. 21), whose slogan “back to the roots” became a basic principle of the early enlightenment.

6 De l’Allemagne is divided into four parts: Part one focuses Germany, its people and regional conditions, a second part includes literature and art, part three deals with philosophy and part four with religion.

7 p. 27: „Die Deutschen sind im allgemeinen aufrichtig und treu; fast immer ist ihr Wort ihnen heilig und der Betrug ihnen fremd.“

8 „Land der Dichter und Denker“

9 p. 37: „Der Geist der Deutschen scheint mit ihrem Charakter in keiner Verbindung zu stehen; jener leidet keine Schranken, dieser unterwirft sich jedem Joche; jener ist unternehmend, dieser schüchtern; die Aufklärung des ersten gibt selten dem zweiten Kraft.“
against Napoleon’s political domination in Europe. Her criticism of the German inferiority complex towards other nations points into the same direction (but I will refer to the political aspects later).

An important aspect of de Staël’s admiration for Germany is its historical moulding. As I have already shown, she appreciates the people for their independence from the Roman culture. While the French ideals of art are inspired by the classical ancient world, Germany, at least in the beginning 19th century, is fascinated by the middle-ages, a fascination that led to an enthusiastic idealisation of this time in art and literature. Mme. de Staël adopts this idealisation:

“Chivalry meant the defence of the weak, following the rules of fight, the contempt of intrigue, in the Christian sense of love, which brings humanity and love even in war, with one word in all opinions and emotions, which put the holy service of honour in the place of the brutal spirit of arms.”

She even goes so far to interpret crusades as an early movement of European unification – from a historian’s point of view a more than naiv opinion. Nevertheless she projects ideas like humanity and cosmopolitanism, ideas of the modern age, especially of the enlightenment, on the middle-ages and calls them “Chivalry”, a picture that has more to do with the Grimms’ ferry tales than with the facts. And in fact, the Grimms’ collection is a product of this time as well. Actually this was the popular contemporary perception in Germany which we now call romanticism. After a period of time which had been dominated by the influence of classical art, a new generation of young artists, writers and even scientists re-explored their own cultural roots. While the art of the older generation was inspired by the myths and sagas of ancient Greece and Rome, the younger authors wrote and collected ferry tales and folk songs. Mme. de Staël admired this way of getting in touch with one’s own cultural identity rather than the actual products of these researches. Moreover she expresses the opinion that the art of the French Troubadours and of the French middle-ages in general was superior to the German poetry of this time. The disadvantage of the French is just the ignorance of their own origin. Here, Germany is presented as a model, not for the better art, but for the better dealing with their own past. For France, Mme. de Staël sees this as a possibility to stop the decline of values which – in her opinion – occurred since the death of Louis XIV.

This decline means a total rejection of what she calls enthusiasm, the ideals of chivalry. The results were foolishness and hive of intrigue, while in Germany a direct turn from the middle-ages to liberalism could occur: "Everything great, that was done in this country [Germany] in the future, can only be a result of the liberal movement following in Europe to the Age of Chivalry." This may – from a historian’s point of view – be a quite simplifying and naive perception, and in fact, Mme. de Staël had often been criticised for her superficiality. At any rate her description of the Germans in their advantages and disadvantages serve many of the popular clichés. Actually it would be absolutely fatal to take *De l’Allemagne* as a historical source for the state of affairs in the early 19th century Germany. Instead, the reader never loses the impression that the author strongly constructs a historical development like she wants to see it in order to put Germany in the role of a model for France. We already know this method from her construction of nationality, a construction she modifies in later chapters, when she admits that Germany is weakened by the lacking of political unity.

As already said, we may not think that *De l’Allemagne* is a pure praising of the German culture and character. Finally Mme. de Staël seems to be convinced of a general superiority of French culture. This already became obvious in the middle-ages-complex. Furthermore she points out that the French alone are able to connect an easy conversation with important contents, a practise that is considered as superficial in Germany where these thoughts always have to be as deep as possible. Thus it is impossible for the Germans to achieve the French easiness. But nevertheless she modifies the feeling of an absolute superiority of France. After centuries of French domination, the admission of a German equality would be an incredibly large step.

The second big topic of the book is dedicated to the German literature. The title of the first chapter is already a programmatic statement: “Why do not the French give justice to the German literature?” Until the 19th century there was nearly no reception of German literature in France at all. Mme de Staël puts this fact down to the different relation between author and audience in both countries, which can be simplified in the topics of fashion on the French side and individuality on the German side. While in France, cultural life is dominated by fashion, by the taste of the audience, German authors create their audience themselves by their own individual style:

11 p. 47: „Alles große, was hinfourt in diesem Lande vollbracht wird, kann nur eine Folge des liberalen Antriebes sein, der in Europa auf die Ritterzeit gefolgt ist."
12 p. 135: „Warum lassen die Franzosen der deutschen Literatur keine Gerechtigkeit widerfahren?“
“A German author creates his audience, in France the audience has dominion over the author. The French audience has more power than in Germany because there are more people of spirit in France, while German authors, standing high above their judges, rule them instead of receiving rules from them.”

All in all the difference between German and French literature seems to be determined epistemologically; both countries have different ways of thinking which their literatures are documents of. In this context, an early sign of what social scientist later call literary sociology becomes visible, and in fact, Germaine de Staël was one of the first writers, if even not the very first one, who saw a link between the national character of a people and its literature. The literary audience is determined by the specific national, regional or confessional character, which does not form a specific taste, literary taste or fashion is a French peculiarity. Rather this mentality determines a special group’s dealing with literature; while in France, a book is written for the audience, strictly following the rules of national taste, a German writes for himself at first. Thus he creates a deeper connection to his text, he can realise his own thoughts, a deepness that is appreciated by his (German) readers, that may be not as many as the readers of a French colleague sticking to the national taste, but are attracted by the deeper thought. In Germany, artistic authenticity is more important than reaching the masses – at least if we follow Mme. de Staël’s argumentation. She even goes so far to say that the French way of writing – fortunately – opposes the nature of a German author, while in her opinion, French writers of high quality, like Rousseau or Chateaubriand, unconsciously adopted the German attitude in some of their works. But the literary “mainstream” in France still rejects the German mentality. In contrast to the Germans, they judge the neighbour only on the basis of prejudices which still consider them as cultural barbarians. And in fact, Mme. de Staël herself criticises a lacking of cosmopolitanism in German literature, but this alone does not make them barbarians. On the more than seven hundred pages of her book she tries to prove that the Germans are the absolute contrary. Referring to the historical development of German literature, Mme. de Staël points out that

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13 p. 135: „Ein deutscher Autor bildet sein Publikum, in Frankreich gebietet das Publikum den Autoren. Da in Frankreich die Zahl der Menschen mit Geist viel größer als in Deutschland, so hat dort auch das Publikum weit mehr Gewicht, während deutsche Schriftsteller, unendlich hoch über ihren Richtern stehend, sie beherrschen, statt von ihnen Gesetze zu empfangen.”

14 Koeppen, p. 54.

only Wieland followed the “French school”, while other authors, especially Klopstock, explicitly rejected this style and looked for inspiration in the English tradition in order to create something typical German – that has nothing to do with a certain school but as a certain attitude, as I already said.

Taking a detailed look at German poetry, Mme. de Staël stresses that concerning the language, Germany is much more in the tradition of the classical Greek culture than the French, who claim this tradition for themselves. In her opinion, language expresses the national character even in its sound and in its grammar. Thus German thoroughness and deepness is even found in the language itself.

From the literary historian’s point of view, the most important topic in this part is Mme. de Staël’s definition of romanticism. In the first part of the book, she describes the different cultural roots of both countries. In German literature, mythological, fantastical elements of the north are more popular than in France. From this point of view, the time of cultural ascendancy of Germany were the middle-ages, and so contemporary German literature, at least the younger generation of writers, concentrates on this period of time. This can be explained by a lacking of a foreign cultural domestication like it happened in the later France by the Romans, but also – again – by the climate theory:

“This is a rest of the mythology of the north; it is a mood, that is awoken by the long nights of the northern sky: moreover the people’s superstition keeps similarity to the dominating religion, even though Christianity rejects all these unreasonable, scary things.”

Here we come to a second big topic about romantic literature: religion. The medieval culture is unthinkable without the influences of Christianity, but the medieval every-day-life is unthinkable without the practises of superstition. Within the people, religion and superstition were deeply connected, so romantic writers tried to express this connection in their novels, poems and stories as well. Furthermore it is the ideal of chivalry, the imagination of a better, nobler past in contrast to the present which is poor in ideals and poor in belief, which makes this kind of literature so popular. But in this pure idealisation of the middle-ages the reader must not forget to appreciate the advantages of the modern age; Mme. de Staël’s ideal is not the domination of one literary style or the perception of one special period of time but taking the best of everything. For French literature, she sees the chance to get away from their conformist classical style by taking a look at its own cultural achievements of later times.

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16 p. 215: „Das ist noch ein Überrest Mythologie des Nordens; es ist eine Stimmung, welche erweckt wird durch die langen Nächte des nördlichen Himmels; überdies behält der Volksglaube, obgleich das Christentum alle grundlosen Schrecknisse bestreitet, immer eine Ähnlichkeit mit der herrschenden Religion.“
Until the arising of romanticism of German literature there had always been writers who had tried to copy the French style – a habit that stopped with the new generation:

“It is sure that these German writers succeeded because they are, of all writers since Lessing, the ones that contributed the most, to bring the imitation of French literature in Germany out of fashion.”

But this alone does not bring literary perfection. A disadvantage of this new direction is the rejection of *everything* French by some of the German authors. In some ways, following the French taste could even be useful, at least it would prevent the German tendencies of exaggeration:

“If someone makes himself something, he is nothing. One has to remember the good French taste to find the antidote against the strong exaggeration of some Germans as well as one can save himself from the dogmatic frivolity of some French with the profundity of the Germans.”

These four lines are an abstract of Mme. de Staël’s cultural concept. She absolutely rejects the idea of the cultural domination of one country. Her ideal is the concept of learning from each other respecting each other’s peculiarities. This way she formulates a concept of “bilateral” understanding between France and Germany which can only be achieved by creating a cultural self-consciousness which has to be respected by the other side. In this manner, the exchange between both nations is just the second step.

V. Effects

Although these theories sound quite unpolitical, they had a deep political impact. At least for Napoleonic France, that claimed political and cultural superiority nearly all over Europe, *De l’Allemagne* had to be understood as a provocation:

“Staël’s talk of Germany allows a threefold polemical reading, whatever her intention, which many of her discrepancies greatly encourage: first, in defiance of Napoleon, she treats Germany as a coherent unit; second, in defiance of French tradition, she gives Germany a central position in her world of history; third, in defiance of both, she calls the Germans admirable.”

The opposition to contemporary France, namely Napoleon, is never declared explicitly but can be found in the subtext. When she talks about the Germans’ lacking of love of liberty on the one hand and their peacefulness on the other, we can understand this as a criticism of the

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17 p. 480: „Ausgemacht ist wenigstens, dass diese deutschen Aristarchen ins Ziel getroffen haben, weil sie von allen Schriftstellern seit Lessing diejenigen sind, die das meiste beigetragen haben, die Nachahmung der französischen Literatur in Deutschland aus der Mode zu bringen.“

18 p. 480f.: „Wenn man sich zu etwas macht, so ist man nichts. Man muss auf den guten französischen Geschmack zurückgreifen, um das Gegenmittel gegen die kräftige Übertreibung einiger Deutschen zu finden, so wie man sich von der dogmatischen Frivolität einiger Franzosen nur durch den Tiefsinn der Deutschen retten kann.“

non-resistance against the French empire. Moreover, she praises the independence of German culture; she stresses the superiority of a free development of culture towards a the force of colonisation – while the past coloniser was Rome, the present one is France. Consequently, France prevents a free cultural development in all over Europe. This way, Mme. de Staël claims liberty for Germany, which is not able to claim this by itself, and, consequently, for the rest of the continent. Thus a “harmless” cultural contemplation became an act of politics: “When she wrote her book, France and Germany were at war; the text itself is an extension of this war zone, fought over by utterly conflicting views of art, society and man’s place in the world.”

Perhaps De l’Allemagne owes its success in a certain extend to this political impact.

While in France, the second publication of the book started to be a great success after Napoleon’s (temporary) defeat in 1813, many German reactions were less pleasant. Some German intellectuals had expected a complete appreciation of the German character and their merits. This expectations had been disappointed mainly by Mme. de Staël’s conviction of the general cultural superiority of France, namely the merits of the French enlightenment.

Taking a closer look at France again, we find that Mme. de Staël’s work is of importance in the literary historical context as well. Without a doubt Germany can be regarded as the motherland of literary romanticism. De Staël was, as I tried to show, fascinated by this new style (not only because of her close relationships to some of the writers, namely to A. W. Schlegel). John Clairborne Isbell even goes so far to describe her as the most important ambassador of romanticism not only in France but in nearly all over Europe, naming famous authors like Leopardi, Pushkin and Emerson as only three examples for her influence, writers who became “fathers of their nations’ Romantic movement.”

While the German romanticism started in the end of 18th century, Isbell dates its breakthrough in France not before 1830. Before De l’Allemagne arouse an interest for Germany in France, this novelty could not be generally accepted because an interest did not exist – or was even suppressed by the political leadership, like the ban of Mme. de Staël’s book shows:

“Romanticism outside Germany dates its conscious existence from De l’Allemagne: recognising its pivotal role will give France back twenty stolen years of literary history, and restore the missing origin of this Europe-wide transformation of art and society. Hugo, Leopardi, Emerson do not come before, they come after: they are a second generation.”

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20 Isbell, p. 217.
22 Isbell, p. 3.
23 p. 221.
But why did it take so long until this interest arouse on the French side? Of course we cannot blame Napoleon alone for centuries of French ignorance towards German culture, although he did his best to maintain this arrogance. Rather the French needed something like an ambassador who conveyed to them this new perception. Germaine de Staël was the right person for this purpose; her intellectual reputation, her cosmopolitanism and her political view gave to her the respect of the French audience. If Napoleon’s fall caused a decline of the national feeling of superiority can – from my point of view – only be suspected, but may have played a role in the large success of *De l’Allemagne*. Anyway this success shows that the French readers dissociated from the feeling of absolute cultural domination.

VI. Conclusion

In this manner the merit of Mme. de Staël’s book becomes obvious; *De l’Allemagne* initiated at least two transformations which are strongly linked to each other: the transformation of the French view on Germany in general and the Europe-wide breakthrough of a new artistic sense in particular. In the long term, especially the first transformation cannot be overestimated because it broke the imagination of French cultural superiority – which had been lasting for centuries even in intellectual circles. And it meant a raising of Germany’s cultural prestige, an awareness that could not be undone. I touched the German reactions on *De l’Allemagne* only in short, and even though the Germans never had been very fond of the book, their reactions may have contributed to the creation of a common national self-consciousness, if not on the path of agreement, perhaps on the path of dissociation from de Staël’s thesis. This issue might be worth a deeper analysis. Anyway, even though the further relations between both countries remained difficult, even though there had not always been understanding for the other side, at least the French intellectuals could never get back to total ignorance of Germany’s cultural achievements – on the contrary, they were, not by the whole public but at least by liberal intellectuals, appreciated even in times of political opposition of their nations. And even though the new understanding did not cause an everlasting peace between both nations, the path towards a future cultural understanding between the at least the liberal intellectuals of both countries was taken. Thus *De l’Allemagne* awoke not only an appreciation of the Germans but contributed to the uncoupling of political and cultural questions.
VII. Cited Literature

Source:

Literature:
D. G. Charlton: Religious and political thought, in: ibid, pages 33-75.