

Handout 2: Germaine de Staël's Appeal

Germaine de Staël was a philosopher, novelist, writer, intellectual, and major political actor in late 18th and early 19th century Europe. She wrote this essay to the European leaders gathered in Paris to negotiate peace after the fall of Napoleon. Here, Staël urges the leaders to also abolish the slave trade.

An Appeal to the Sovereigns Convened in Paris to Grant the Abolition of the Slave Trade (1814)

In this essay, Staël addresses the leaders of European countries — including France, Spain, Portugal, Austria, and Prussia — that claimed to be Christian but still participated in the slave trade in 1814.

Immediately before this passage, Staël notes that these countries frequently send missionaries to try to convert people in Asia and Africa to Christianity.

She then asks a series of rhetorical questions, which are designed to make a point rather than elicit an answer:

But how could one be called Christian if one is cruel?

Respond:

1. By asking this question, what does Staël imply about the beliefs Christians hold about cruelty?
2. What kind of cruelty does she have in mind?

Reflect:

3. What is Staël trying to say about Christian countries — and their leaders and missionaries — that participate in the slave trade?

Could not the king of France, that pious heir of St. Louis and of Louis XVI, be asked to agree to the abolition of the slave trade so that this humanitarian act might persuade the hearts of those to whom the gospel is to be preached?

pious heir: ruler
chosen by God

Respond:

4. What does it mean to “persuade the hearts of those to whom the gospel is to be preached”? To whom do these hearts belong?
5. Why does Staël seem to think that abolishing the slave trade will have this effect?

Reflect:

6. Why do you think Staël makes this point as part of her argument for abolishing the slave trade?

Could one not ask this same agreement of Spain, who awakened national spirit on the continent? of Portugal, who fought like a great state? of Austria, whose sole concern was the wellbeing of the German empire? of Prussia, where both nation and king proved so simply heroic?

Reflect:

7. Staël attributes several positive qualities to the countries she addresses. What do these qualities suggest about these countries' ability to abolish the slave trade?

There is no country on earth unworthy of justice.

Respond:

8. What kind of justice does Staël have in mind?

Reflect:

9. How does this claim support Staël's argument?

Respond:

10. Why does Staël think that the leaders of these Christian countries are hypocrites? Fill your answer in the chart below:

Belief	Action

Reflect:

11. Do you agree with Staël that the leaders are hypocrites? Why or why not?