

I

War and exile

Everyone must come out of his exile in his own way.

Martin Buber

Famed American photographer Edward Steichen unexpectedly found himself caught up fatefully in the first salvos of the Great War. In August 1914, he was living with his wife, Clara, and two daughters in the small French village of Voulangis, located near the River Marne. Here, in a rented home, dubbed affectionately *Villa L'Oiseau Bleu*, Steichen greeted the advent of war with no small amount of alarm.

At this juncture in his life, Steichen enjoyed an international reputation as a pioneer in photography. He had collaborated with Alfred Stieglitz in founding the Photo-Secession movement, which represented a spirited effort to transform his craft into an art form. As a photographer, Steichen displayed creativity in the manipulation of photography to evoke soft-focus imagery – often with stunning effect. He had worked with color lantern slides. He had used a variety of media to expand his newfound art form – platinum, bromide, gum bichromate, and carbon. The thrust of these experiments aimed to transform photographs into something more elevated than mere technical reproductions of an image caught by the lens of a camera. The label “Pictorialism” was often used to describe the work of Steichen and others to broaden the scope and content of photography. Steichen’s past experience in the graphic arts and painting helped to shape this formative phase of his career. He circulated well within the French art community, fully exploiting these connections to launch a series of exhibitions on modern European art for the American audience. Steichen had



Heroic imagery for pilot and observer preparing for aerial reconnaissance flight, 1918.

Credit: USASC.

also emerged as a skilled and famous portraitist, a skill he would later exploit with great commercial success in the postwar years.

All these stellar achievements – painter, photographer, and art impresario – came to naught in the summer and fall of 1914. His villa stood in the direct path of the advancing German army, a fateful turn of events beyond his control. When the enemy threatened to occupy Voulangis, he hurriedly fled with his family to Paris. Now a war refugee, Steichen decided to migrate home to New York City.

This sudden reversal of fortunes led to an unanticipated and profound personal crisis, forcing Steichen to seek out new directions for his career. His future path was an arduous one, leading to the improbable decision in 1917 – at the time of America's entry into the war – to enlist in the U.S. Army Signal Corps. This extraordinary decision by Steichen set the stage for him to participate in America's wartime experimentation in aerial reconnaissance. Taking the camera aloft in World War I marked the genesis of air reconnaissance for the American military. This wartime

experience would cast a long shadow over the decades that followed. Steichen found himself at the epicenter of this radical shift in intelligence gathering in 1917–1918.

Steichen's encounter with the war became a traumatic and irreversible fault line in his life and career.

IN HARM'S WAY

In late August 1914, Steichen reluctantly abandoned his daily routine at Voulangis to prepare for a possible evacuation to Paris. His home stood in the path of German forces then advancing into Belgium and northern France. Could this German juggernaut be stopped? Whatever the long-term course of the war, he realized that German forces posed a direct threat to the small village of Voulangis. Agnes Meyer, then an occasional visitor to *Villa L'Oiseau Bleu*, caught the mood at the Steichen household: "Mercifully unaware of impending doom," she wrote, "we enjoyed each other and the lovely French countryside whose calm was soon to be shattered."¹

France quickly shifted to a war footing. On August 3, there was a procession of the *Garde Champêtre* marching through Voulangis, beating drums and proclaiming the French mobilization.² As the weeks passed, Steichen lived in a context of danger and uncertainty. He doggedly tried to maintain his daily routine, welcoming guests from America and attending to his garden, where he fretted over the recent planting of some 10,000 seedlings. Penelope Niven captured vividly the unreal atmosphere that prevailed at Voulangis: "The garden was filled with beautiful women, handsome men, lively talk, a drift of piano music from the house, the fragrant opulence of Steichen's flowers, the exuberance of his daughters."³ The odd inertia of the moment, however, was broken when the French authorities commandeered his horses for the national defense as part of martial law imposed on the region.

In a letter to his friend Alfred Stieglitz, written shortly after the declarations of war in the first week of August, Steichen expressed a positive attitude about the conflict: "I have an opportunity to get off a letter to Paris," he wrote, "the railroads are being used by the militia. We only

¹ Penelope Niven, *Steichen: a Biography* (New York: Clarkson Potter/Publishers, 1997), 395. Niven's authoritative biography offers many details on Steichen's life of the eve of the Great War.

² *Ibid.*, 396. ³ *Ibid.*, 356–57.

know that war is inevitable now – and a prickly France is all there – the details of the organization of this tremendous war machine that reaches into Voulangis itself are marvelously complete and efficient.” Steichen went on to reassure his friend that he and Clara had set aside a “fair stock of provisions,” and he was blessed with a “fat vegetable garden.” He added that Voulangis was baking its own bread and “the old men, the young ones, [the] women and children (we are all working) are trying to take in the crops.”⁴

The potential loss of *Villa L'Oiseau Bleu* at that juncture appeared implausible. The charming villa had been fashioned by Steichen into his own rural salon, a magnet for artists, writers, and traveling Americans. Steichen himself enjoyed the lifestyle of a country squire. Those who visited Voulangis remembered vividly his rambling house with its comfortable accommodations, guests arriving and departing, a well-stocked kitchen, a walled garden edged on one side with tall trees, a sunlit studio for the host's ongoing work as a painter and photographer, spontaneous and animated conversations at dinner, a piano for impromptu musical performances, and a happy coexistence of all inhabitants with the cats, horses, and dogs in residence. Steichen impressed his neighbors and many guests with his high energy, formidable work ethic, and avocation as a master gardener. He moved effortlessly from his studio work to tending to his plants and flowers. There was also time set aside for correspondence with family and professional associates in France and America. There were occasional trips to Paris, where he circulated freely within a circle of prominent artists and photographers.

Steichen was a deceptively tall man, over six feet in height, and blessed with good looks. Many remembered his penetrating eyes, personal charisma, and intensity of purpose. At the villa, he often took on a studied informality, dressed in a peasant shirt, assuming for all intents and purposes the garb of a country farmer. Earlier he had adopted the studied appearance of an artist, garbed in flowing capes, loose-fitting shirts, and flamboyant hats. In 1902, he took a soft-focus portrait of himself as an artist with a palette and brush. At Voulangis, such a stylized mode of dress had been abandoned consciously for a more conventional and simplistic look, one that reflected his evolving identity as an expatriate photographer.

⁴ Edward Steichen to Alfred Stieglitz, August 3, 1914, Alfred Stieglitz Archive (ASA), Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Those who knew Steichen were impressed with his eclectic interests and his formidable capacity for learning. He displayed an Edison-like aptitude for self-learning. Once inspired by a new challenge, he was capable of exhaustive experimentation. For example, he managed to master the subtleties of painting, photography, and even plant genetics.

By the eve of the war, Steichen had emerged as an art impresario, becoming one of the most prominent cultural brokers advancing modern trends in art. In the winter of 1914, he made his last long journey from Voulangis to America to organize yet another major art show. This exhibition work had begun in 1907, when he had collaborated with Alfred Stieglitz at Gallery 291 to introduce modernist and avant-garde art to Americans. His first exhibition of French art focused on Auguste Rodin, consisting of 58 pencil and watercolor sketches. Leading up to 1914, Steichen had managed to showcase in New York City the drawings and watercolors of Pablo Picasso, along with the art of Paul Cézanne, Gordon Craig, Arthur Carles, Alfred Maurer, and others. The gallery became the famous venue to promote photography as an art form – a key milestone for Steichen and his associates in the Photo-Secession movement. Steichen also worked diligently to promote lesser-known American artists in Paris.⁵ Steichen had played a major role in introducing contemporary European art to America. The onset of the Great War brought to an end this fruitful period of his career.⁶

The war brought in its wake an enormous surge in patriotic ardor in France, a sentiment Steichen embraced fully and with great emotion. “War became the dominant theme,” he wrote, “[the] first line conscripts who had to go the first day were followed by those who went on the second day, and so on. Horses were requisitioned, and every foreigner was suspected of being a spy. Even some French were suspected.”⁷

TAKING LEAVE OF HOME AND HEARTH

The end of August signaled a crisis for Steichen. He could no longer ignore the unfolding reality near him – the German occupation of his village was a growing probability. He wrote to Alfred Stieglitz on

⁵ Richard Whalen, *Alfred Stieglitz: A Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 219; Niven, *Steichen*, 319.

⁶ Edward Steichen, *A Life in Photography* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1963), text prior to plate 44.

⁷ *Ibid.*

August 27, a hurriedly written message that captured Steichen's sense of urgency and thinly veiled mood of desperation: "It seems strange," he wrote, "to sit here – practically doing nothing and have the knowledge of one of the world's greatest upheavals." For Steichen, there was the suspense of being so close to armies on the move and without the certain knowledge of the actual events. Censorship kept the news at bay, and the place was overwhelmed with fear and rumors, a sense of helplessness. He expressed to Stieglitz his anxiety over a possible German victory and what it would mean to Western civilization. German military prowess, he argued, had impressed the world and now threatened France. But this capacity to field a powerful army concealed from view a grim reality: Germany possessed only a "mask of pretense at civilization." German troops were capable of "cruelty, treachery, and brutality that reeks of the Stone Age." Knowing of his friend's own German heritage, Steichen stated that this assessment of Germany was not some sort of "patriotic French slobber," but based on "facts from the front."⁸

Faced with this prospect of a catastrophic Allied defeat, Steichen accepted the draconian measures taken by the French government to mobilize fully the human and material resources of the nation to resist the invading German armies. Linked to his growing sense of fatalism was a realization that the war possessed a real and foreboding dark side. "I can just imagine," he mused, "the rattle of Gatling guns, the whirl of bullets, . . . the falling of bodies – thousands of them a few miles from here on the northern frontier." For the first time his initial patriotism about the war gave way to a more sober assessment of modern war as a tragic exercise in human folly, but he still affirmed that "humanity would win out."⁹

Mildred Aldrich, a neighbor, left a vivid memoir on how the scattered small villages in the Marne River valley experienced the turbulent days of August 1914. An expatriate writer, Aldrich lived in the nearby village of Huiry. She published a detailed account of these events in the popular book, *A Hilltop on the Marne* (1915).¹⁰ Aldrich was a close friend of Clara Steichen, who made frequent trips to Huiry in the first weeks of the war. Like the Steichens, Aldrich had rented a summerhouse in the Marne valley and lived just six miles away. She expressed an appreciation

⁸ Edward Steichen to Alfred Stieglitz, August 27, 1914, Alfred Stieglitz Archive (ASA), Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Mildred Aldrich, *A Hilltop on the Marne, Being Letters Written June 3–September 8, 1914* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915).

for the region, the undulating hills and fields, the small villages that in her words, “peep out of trees or are silhouetted against the skyline.”¹¹

Aldrich communicated to fellow American expatriate Gertrude Stein the many pressures, restrictions, and burdens that came with the French mobilization. Men of draft age, Aldrich recorded, disappeared from Huiry in those opening weeks of the Great War. Martial law prevailed in the region, distorting daily life in a profound way – everything, she lamented, was subordinated to the demands of national defense. The most visible sign of this draconian regime was the restriction on personal movement and travel by the local inhabitants: Any travel beyond one’s village required a passport. Stores were boarded up and festooned with slogans such as “Vive la France” and “Vive l’Armée.” One darker aspect of the martial law regime was the repression of those with a German background. Aldrich reported that a small group of German nuns, the Sisters of Charity, were arbitrarily detained on the suspicion of being spies. What was unusual about Aldrich’s account was its attentiveness to military movements, including the use of airplanes for intelligence purposes. What Aldrich observed in Huiry was replicated almost mirror-like in Voulangis.¹²

In the last week of August, Steichen received an urgent cable from his friend and patron in New York, Eugene Meyer, advising an immediate evacuation with his family to Paris.¹³ Such an option was fraught with uncertainty and complicated by his limited sources of income. Within days of receiving Meyer’s cable, however, Steichen resolved to leave Voulangis as soon as possible. There were alarming signs that the German forces were on the move and might soon occupy the village. On September 2, he and his family packed up a few cherished belongings and keepsakes and departed for Paris. The moment was very traumatic for the two daughters, Mary and Kate, who were forced to abandon the family pets, including a donkey, a dog, and some rabbits. There was a need as well to arrange for the orderly retreat of Marion Beckett, the sole remaining houseguest. With last-minute instructions from Steichen, the maid and gardener took over the villa, agreeing to oversee the property in the uncertain days ahead.

The escape to New York

Once he reached Paris, Steichen was relieved to have his family out of immediate peril, but the crisis now moved into a new and more

¹¹ Ibid., 9. ¹² Ibid., 52, 65f.

¹³ Edward Steichen, *A Life in Photography*, text following plate 62.

formidable stage. He lacked money. The logical next step was to arrange passage to New York City, where he could depend on the support of family and friends. As a precaution, he sent letters to the American embassy in Paris, the *New York Herald* newspaper, and the Paris American Committee, to alert as many people as possible of his plight.

In retrospect, the escape from Voulangis proved to be timely – he had left just two days before German troops occupied his beloved *Villa L'Oiseau Bleu*. The German advance party trampled down his garden and temporarily took up residence in the villa. Later in the war, French and British occupiers pitched their tents in Steichen's spacious garden, destroying his prize delphiniums and surviving plants. In time, the hooves of horses pock-marked the grounds of the villa. Once abandoned, the Steichen home fell slowly into disrepair and neglect.¹⁴

After a long voyage across the North Atlantic, Steichen and his family finally reached New York City in late September. Awaiting the war refugees at the pier was a small group of friends, including Agnes and Eugene Meyer. The Meyers soon emerged as active patrons of Steichen, offering him and his family accommodations at their farm near Mount Kisco in New York. Other friends rallied to assist the Steichens in the winter of 1914–1915.

Steichen now entered a new phase of life, a twilight world of personal crises, financial woes, and shifting residences. He offered a rather sketchy account of the next two and one-half years in his autobiography, *A Life in Photography*.¹⁵ Once back in New York, Steichen observed that Gallery 291, once the center for his artistic labors, was now moribund, in the “doldrums” with “a dust-covered atmosphere about the whole place.” He was critical of the absence of a viable exhibition program and of his one-time collaborator, Alfred Stieglitz, for his interest in projects of “self-promotion.” The audiences at Gallery 291 were “few and far between.” He wrote a sharply critical article on the once-vibrant center of art and photography. The estrangement from his old life became apparent, seemingly irreversible. He also differed with Stieglitz on the war, taking a passionate stance in support of France in the conflict: “Through the years, France had become another mother country to me, and I sided with her in all arguments with Stieglitz.” For Steichen,

¹⁴ Niven, *Steichen*, 402. Agnes Meyer later reported that the structure had not been damaged, along with the village for the most part.

¹⁵ See Steichen's two-page summary of this critical period in *A Life in Photography*, text following plate 62; Niven, *Steichen*, 409–48.

the sinking of Lusitania by a German submarine was a turning point. When Stieglitz said, “It served them right. They were warned in advance that the ship would be sunk,” their relationship took a turn for the worse. Upon hearing this remark, Steichen observed: “I decided then and there I wanted to get into the war on the American side.”¹⁶

For the next three years, Steichen followed the course of the war in Europe with keen interest. When United States finally entered the war, he pondered how to he could enlist in the war effort. He also realized that war service might interrupt, even reverse, the prolonged downward spiral of his life. There was the alluring goal of becoming a latter-day Mathew Brady.¹⁷ The camera in Brady’s hands had once captured dramatic imagery of the American Civil War. In the context of 1917, Steichen reasoned that it could be once again a valued tool to capture the historic clash of armies in the unfolding global world war.

¹⁶ Steichen, *A Life in Photography*, text, second page, after plate 62.

¹⁷ Rachel Cohen, *A Chance Meeting, Intertwined Lives of American Writers and Artists, 1854–1967* (New York: Random House, 2004), 97.

2

A new life in the military

The Airplane has unveiled for us the true face of the Earth.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

The long-awaited day came on April 7, 1917 – Edward Steichen learned that the United States had declared war on Germany and the Central Powers. He rejoiced at the news and the exciting prospect of American participation in the Great War.

Now, in the altered context of 1917, he actively sought out an avenue to contribute to the American war effort. After three months, he decided to enlist in the U.S. Army Signal Corps, the designated branch with responsibility for military photography. “I wanted to be a photographic reporter, as Mathew Brady had been in the Civil War,” he recalled in his autobiography. “I went off to Washington to offer my services.” He was soon accepted into the Signal Corps as a result of his technical background. At the age of thirty-eight, Steichen found his way into the ranks of the newly formed Photographic Division. Ahead were months of intense work as he emerged as a major figure in organizing and shaping the Air Service’s first air photography branch for combat duty.

STEICHEN AND THE AIRPLANE

Steichen encountered the debut of military aviation in the opening days of the war. With armies on the move, he and other French residents had the novel experience of spotting and tracking airplanes on reconnaissance flights. Typically, they appeared without warning, flying low-level sweeps across villages, farmers’ fields, and open countryside. Their thinly