

STEIN AND HISTORY

Let me recite what history teaches. History teaches.

—Stein, “If I Told Him, A Completed Portrait of Picasso”

What does history teach at this point after the devastation of World War I? It appears to teach itself. Is it then the nature of history to unfold with the internal logic of destiny? If character is the natural force of one's anatomy and temperament, history may well be the natural force of geography and zeitgeist—both displaying representative rhythms beyond human control. Such a view, laced with sufficient in-

Joan Retallack, "Stein and History"

from the introduction to

Gertrude Stein: Selections

University of California Press, 2008) INTRODUCTION / 55

determinacy, could in fact be closer to chaos theory (a model of history currently favored by some historiographers) than to destiny. But Stein wants to think that history moves along trajectories created by a limited number of identifiable intersecting forces: the character of eras, and national (cultural) character, like that of the Germans, who she thinks tend to elect leaders who pull them in directions they don't want to go—toward destruction, even suicide.⁵⁷ For Stein, politics is a function of intertwined characterological force fields rather than a collectivity of individual choices, though the genius of a series of great men, and the occasional exceptional woman (like the suffragist Susan B. Anthony or herself), can steer things in new directions.

This view of history (and politics) becomes most explicit in Stein's writing during World War II—in the 1940 essay "The Winner Loses: A Picture of Occupied France," the 1942 allegorical *Mrs. Reynolds*, the 1943 diaristic *Wars I Have Seen*, and even the 1946 play *The Mother of Us All*. But the great remove of the inexorable sweep of history from the foreground of concerns and pleasures of ordinary life is best reflected in the structure of her 1930 prose poem *History or Messages from History*. "History is placed where it is and hope is full of wishes," she writes. (263) If one is not a player on the grand stage of history, one can only hope, dream, wish, prophesy, predict. No possibility of direct access or agency is possible for ordinary people. (Stein seems to have categorized herself as ordinary in this single respect.) The primary wish is simply that the goings-on of history won't intrude into one's garden or one's kitchen or one's atelier.

With that in mind, one can make some sense of the otherwise enigmatic distinction between history ("the learning of spectacular consistency" [269]) and what Stein calls "the historical." "The historical" occurs on the anecdotal scale of everyday life and turns out to be more complicated than the sweep of homogenizing forces driving history.

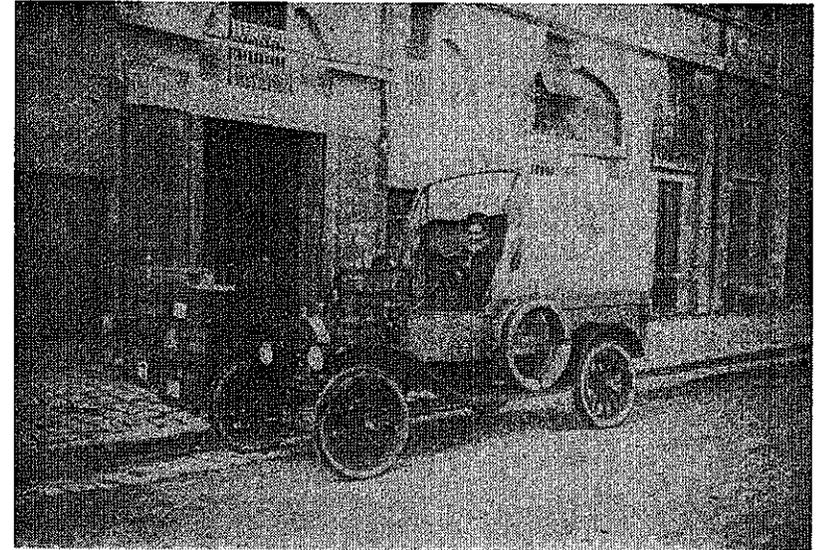
The surface indeterminacy of *History or Messages from History* makes impossible the simplistic certainties of a Weingerian calculus of characterological destiny. It's rife with multiple perspectives, contradiction, and oblique commentary. For instance, those—particularly women—living in the sensual presentness of daily life (echoes of Weinger, admittedly) are at odds with the authoritative character of history: "There is no history in gentleness. She gently found mushrooms. She questioned the authority. . . . No history is proof against everything. Moonlight in the valley is before and after history." Does "she" question authority *by* turning her attention to mushrooms and moonlight? If so, the resistance to history appears to be less a matter of taking issue than of living well. Since history eventually blows over, like any other storm, one's foreground is best occupied with pleasures of domesticity—love, sex, food, dogs, gardening, village neighborliness.

The first section of *History or Messages from History* is devoted to these intimate essentials, interspersed with the language of weather reports ("storm followed by rain but no hail"). A feminine landscape at odds with masculinist authority? "Do they feel that this is their donation to lending, alas no, they are caught because they have won the right to be in meaning. I mean I mean was not said of women." (255) *Can women mean?* And later: "They were outstanding in coining words without women." (264) And: "The lesson of history so she says is that he will do it again but will he we hope not. . . . What is history. They make history. . . . What is history they make history. . . . Intention is not history." (267) The mixture of barbs at patriarchal power (the "they" in these passages?), along with contradictory valuations of the nature of women, against the almost Hegelian backdrop of historical determinism should not be entirely surprising for an American so long in France. Romantic idealist notions of history coursing on autopilot toward its own apotheosis were part of the masculinist "genius" of the

European zeitgeist. Stein comes off as more European pessimist than American optimist in her attitude toward history.

“There are two things that are interesting history and grammar,” Stein writes. (262) As we know all too well, however, history can be in strenuous competition with grammar. Grammar, for Stein, is the logic of composition with words. In her view, it is malleable, subject to reinvention, and in that reinvention new ways of being in one’s time become possible (the argument of “Composition as Explanation”). This is her life’s work; therefore precautions must be taken to prevent the logics of history from interfering with attention to grammar. Stein’s political conservatism, given Europe’s turbulence and her need for domestic order, is also not surprising. The life she carefully composed with Alice was essential for the prodigious flow of her work; nevertheless, history would disrupt it for long stretches during World War I. During World War II, it was transformed.

At the outbreak of the first war, Stein and Toklas were caught in England (staying with the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead and his wife, Evelyn). When they returned to France, they became active in the war effort. In 1916, after the battle of Verdun, Stein made arrangements to procure a Ford motor van and have it shipped to France at her expense in order to deliver medical supplies to the front for the American Fund for the French Wounded. At war’s end, she and Toklas continued to contribute to the agency’s efforts to feed and house displaced French civilians. The lighthearted account of their wartime “adventures” in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* may deflect the admiration they deserve for freely choosing (against their friends’ advice) to return to France during wartime and to do volunteer work, not without its dangers, from 1915 to 1917. Their courage and concern for the wounded and displaced brings to mind Walt Whitman during the American Civil War.



Toklas and Stein (behind the wheel) in a Ford van carrying medical supplies (c. 1917).

Courtesy Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

The devastation of World War I of course made the increasing possibility of another “general European war” in the late 1930s particularly terrifying—to such an extent that many, including Gertrude and Alice, managed to reject its inevitability for what seems by hindsight an unreasonably long time. When it did finally become undeniable that history was once again to invade everyday life, Stein reluctantly had to admit that this time, as Jews and lesbians, she and Alice could be direct targets of Germany’s destructive historical logic. Now she didn’t presume to understand it. In *Wars I Have Seen* (c. 1940–43), Stein writes:

The times are so peculiar now, so medieval so unreasonable that for the first time in a hundred years truth is really stranger than fiction. Any truth. . . . How can a nation that feels itself as strong as the Germans do

be afraid of a small handful of people like the Jews . . . they must be afraid because as Edgar Wallace loves to say over and over again, hate is fear, and why, what can they [the Jews] do to them, after all what can they do to them. (WIHS, 114)

Note the “they” when referring to Jews. Though she knew that racist logics could fatally identify her as Jewish, this did not seem to be her primary self-identification. But for even the most assimilated Jews in Europe, “Jewishness” came into the foreground when it was linked with fear—fear of destructive campaigns launched out of the fears of others.

Stein was viscerally terrified; she wrote often of the sick feeling in her stomach, of waking queasy after disturbing dreams full of ominous portents. But, again, she and Alice—this time despite urgent warnings and entreaties from friends and American officials—stayed on in what Stein referred to with emotion as “the country of my adoption.” The decision, encouraged by her country neighbors’ agreement that there couldn’t possibly be another war, indicates not only the degree to which Stein was dependent on familiar domestic routine for her work, but also the intensely intimate connections she and Alice had with the people in the villages where they lived. Books of prophesy and prediction were consulted, primarily an astrological book titled *The Last Year of War*, by one Leonardo Blake, a book she called her bible, and that, to her credit, she burnt at the signing of the armistice, though, she would later write in “The Winner Loses,” “it certainly had been an enormous comfort to us all in between.” (HWW, 114) But these attempts at escaping the revenge of the real could not work indefinitely. She was finally profoundly shaken by real-life events:

We were spending the afternoon with our friends, Madame Pierlot and the d’Aiguys, in September ’39 when France declared war on Germany—England had done it first. They were all upset but hopeful,

but I was terrible frightened! I had been so sure there was not going to be war and here it was, it was war, and I made quite a scene. I said, “They shouldn’t! They shouldn’t!” and they were very sweet, and I apologized and said I was sorry but it was awful and they comforted me—they, the French, who had so much at stake, and I had nothing at stake comparatively.

Well, that was a Sunday.

And then there was another Sunday and we were at Béon again that Sunday, and Russia came into the war and Poland was smashed, and I did not care about Poland, but it did frighten me about France—oh dear, that was another Sunday.

And then we settled down to a really wonderful winter. (HWW, 113)

Throughout the four years of Vichy and the occupation, Stein and Toklas, with some intermittent scares, managed to live relatively peacefully (along with a considerable number of other Jews protected by the local populace) in two small villages not far from Lyon, near the Swiss and Italian borders. The “wonderful winter” she writes about in “The Winner Loses” was so because she and Alice felt far from Poland and far from bombing raids in the country house they had settled into after a short trip to Paris to put things in order and get extra clothing: “Those few hours in Paris made us realize that the country is a better place in war than a city. They grow things to eat right where you are, so there is no privation. . . . there was plenty of meat and potatoes and bread and honey and we had some sugar and we even had all the oranges and lemons we needed and dates.” (HWW, 113) Stein is writing this in 1940, and she clearly thinks the worst is over now that Maréchal Pétain, the savior of France in World War I, has come, as an old prediction said he would, an old man on a white horse, to once again save France from Germany.

Stein’s controversial support of Vichy was related to her conservatism. Her view of the social contract was that it is the job of government to defend its citizens from their enemies so that life can continue



Stein digging in her garden
in Bilignin (c. 1937).

Photograph by Gilbert A. Harrison. Courtesy
Yale Collection of American Literature,
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

on peacefully and pleasurably. In return, citizens obey the law and pay taxes. Stein writes of Vichy: “the government of France had changed, but that did not worry anyone. It was natural that, since the Third Republic had not defended them from their enemies, it would end. . . . [T]o the French a government is something outside which does not concern them; its business is policing, defending . . . ; it is to be hoped that it will not cost too much, and naturally it leaves everyone to lead their own French life. . . . Everybody was happy.” (HWW, 129–30) She also supported Pétain during the early part of the German occupation (her feelings about him changed over time), and her

reasons were as complicated as the many layers of village life at the time. In *Wars I Have Seen*, it’s clear that Stein sympathized with both the Vichy government *and* the Resistance fighters known as the Maquis—the Maquis, more wholeheartedly; Vichy, in a spirit of uneasy “pragmatism.” She writes of denunciations, arrests, and the bravery of the “mountain boys” in the Maquis—the hard time they were giving the German soldiers—with relish. When Pétain raised the French flag again in Paris, she was delighted, but “then the next day we were all disappointed because Pétain had to go on talking about the partisans and all the rest of it but I suppose he had to quiet the Germans after what he did do.” (WIHS, 175) She stresses many times in *Wars I Have Seen* how tangled feelings were:



Stein with one of her beloved dogs, Basket II,
in Bilignin (winter 1939–40).

Courtesy Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke
Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

After the armistice in '40 I was surprised . . . so many of them were not sure that they did not want the Germans to win. And I said why, I do not understand, how can any Frenchman feel that way. . . . I said why, and, I said it pretty violently and pretty often. The man at the bank explained something: He said there are a great many different points of view and one single man can have quite a great number of them . . .

[he] could want the English to win . . . because he wants business to be secure . . . at the same time he has a son who is a prisoner, his only son, and he wants the Germans to win because his son would come home to him . . . then at that time Germany was allied to Russia and might that mean communism and then he would want the English to win. . . . And then there was Pétain. So many points of view about him, so very many. I had lots of them, I was almost French in having so many. (WIHS, 81–82)

This has a ring of truth that postwar certainty about dichotomized clarities of right and wrong positions betrays. The passage is followed by pages of varied and detailed circumstances of peoples' lives, ending with, "Well anyway there was the armistice. Pétain made it and we were all glad in a way and completely sad in a way and we had so many opinions." (WIHS, 87) Stein's instinctive solidarity is with the villagers, who hate the occupation yet want to survive. She doesn't judge those who choose to collaborate with Vichy, as long as they are doing no evident harm to their countrypeople. In her much-criticized 1942 introduction to a planned volume of translations of the essays of Pétain, a project initiated by an old friend, Bernard Faÿ, newly appointed to the Vichy government, Stein wrote: "he is very like George Washington because he too is first in war first in peace and first in the hearts of his countrymen . . . and now he had to defend his armistice as he had defended Verdun."⁵⁸ This reading of French politics through a mythic American lens may well have interfered with more useful intuitions.

As the war dragged on and Germany's brutality became more and more clear, Stein's sentiments changed. In her writing, she registers the dislike of Pétain by the French and Americans, noting a French family that thinks he's "a cretin." (WIHS, 92) She doesn't defend him as she once did, though she remains sympathetic. Remarking that he's an old man, old and forgotten, she shifts the focus to his heroism during



Stein and Bernard Faÿ in Bilignin (c. 1932).

Courtesy Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

World War I and remarks, "there are still some firm reactionaries who are convinced that all maquis are terrorists." (WIHS, 206)

But the overriding value she shared with her neighbors was the desire for a relatively peaceful continuance of normal life. Her friendship with Faÿ was part of that. A professor of American culture at the

Collège de France, he had been a close literary friend and staunch supporter of her work since the early 1920s. During the occupation, Faÿ was appointed director of the Bibliothèque Nationale, and he used his influence to arrange that Stein and Toklas not “be harmed as long as they kept silent and neutral, which they did”—at least publicly.⁵⁹ The translation project was conceived by Faÿ (who was indicted for collaboration after the war) to ingratiate Pétain to the American public. It seems laughably ironic that he actually thought Pétain’s image would be bolstered by Stein’s “prestige” in America, where she was at the time trying unsuccessfully to get a U.S. publisher for her allegorical satire *Mrs. Reynolds* (with characters based on Hitler and Stalin). The novel’s only visibility while she was alive was a lampoon in the *New Yorker*’s “Talk of the Town” pages, written by a staff writer who had somehow acquired the typescript.⁶⁰

There has been skepticism about how Stein and Toklas managed to remain safe in occupied France, despite their being so obviously the kind of people the Nazi-Vichy government was deporting to concentration camps, without their having at least passively condoned (not cared about) the worst actions of the Vichy government, the facilitation or carrying out of deportations. Faÿ’s connections helped, but there were other, probably more significant, reasons for their undisturbed life during the occupation. Stein functioned best and most happily as a homebody and “villager” (even in Paris). In the countryside, she and Alice had many friends and no enemies (though they once briefly feared they might be denounced by a disgruntled servant). When Stein’s family allowance could no longer be sent from the United States, she was loaned money by a close friend and neighbor, Paul Genin. Joan Chapman, the daughter of Paul and Elena Genin, was in her teens when Stein and Toklas were frequent visitors in their house near Belley. She remembers how the gregarious

Stein was respected, trusted, and liked by her neighbors. She wrote books and plays for the children and put on theatricals in which they (Joan among them) acted. She was interested in their lives, expressed compassion for their young men affected by the war. She and Toklas were protected by goodwill; anyone could have turned them in, but no one did.⁶¹

Stein recounts the decision to stay put in “The Winner Loses.” She asked the advice of a village doctor she and Alice knew. His reply was considered, ending this way: “Everybody knows you here; everybody likes you; we all would help you in every way. Why risk yourself among strangers?” A farmer she met on a walk offered his opinion: “Vous faites bien, mademoiselle. We all said ‘Why should these ladies leave? In this quiet corner they are as safe as anywhere. . . . and we know you will help us out in any way you can and we will do the same for you. Here in this little corner we are en famille, and if you left, to go where?—aller, où?’” (HWW, 121) The most substantial criticisms of Stein may be that she and Toklas availed themselves of a collaborator’s assistance, bought black market goods (an almost universal practice if one could afford them), and did not appear to feel sufficient empathy with the plight of other Jews in Europe.

How much Stein and Toklas understood (actually took into their consciousness) about the fate of Jewish deportees is questionable. No doubt there was self-protective denial. Refusal of those not in the thick of it to believe the full horror of what was happening was common. Events like Kristallnacht that were reported in the French papers could seem as far away as Poland to someone who was not inclined to identify with German Jews. Once the Vichy government was in place, all journalism was censored, and no communication with the United States was allowed during the last two years of the war, so everyone lived with only local news. Nonetheless, there was word of mouth, and

the seeming lack of concern for other Jews is disturbing. Catharine Stimpson brings a helpful perspective: "What hasn't been said about Stein . . . in this regard is that she was descended from Central European Jews who had left that part of the world and settled and become assimilated to a different kind of reality. She absented herself from that reality and assimilated herself to yet another. . . . The idea of the disembodiment of diasporic experience is something that might be worth thinking about."⁶² It seems clear that the vacuum created by "disembodiment" from her Jewish heritage was amply filled by the determined embodiment of her local and domestic life.

If one can take Stein at her word in *Wars I Have Seen*—and I mostly tend to trust that its confusions and contradictions are honest ones—it's questionable whether full knowledge of the fate of deportees had reached Stein when, late in the war, the American consul in Lyon (near Bilignin, where they were living) joined other friends in urging Stein and Toklas to flee to Switzerland. They became alarmed and then vacillated—thought of going, then not. Here is a passage that describes the final decision to stay (one they worried several times afterward might have been an error):

We both felt funny and then I said. No, I am not going we are not going, it is better to go regularly wherever we are sent than to go irregularly where nobody can help us if we are in trouble, no I said, they are always trying to get us to leave France but here we are and here we stay. (WIHS, 50)

Could Stein really have felt it was better to "go regularly" by being "sent" somewhere in a roundup of Jews if she knew it would be not just a temporary inconvenience but a trip to a death camp? She recounts that decision early in *Wars I Have Seen*; in the epilogue, she writes of talking with American soldiers after the liberation:

They used all of them to want to know how we managed to escape the Germans and gradually with their asking and with the news that in the month of August the Gestapo had been in my apartment in Paris to look at everything . . . I was quite frightened. All the time the Germans were here we were so busy trying to live through each day that except once in a while when something happened you did not know about being frightened, but now somehow with the American soldiers questions and hearing what had been happening to others, of course one knew it but now one had time to feel it and so I was quite frightened, now that there was nothing dangerous and the whole American army between us and danger. One is like that. (WIHS, 255)

What Stein is saying "one knew" along the way will probably always be a contentious issue because it's so tied up with the morally imbued question of how much one *should* have known. Edward R. Murrow, the respected newscaster who had covered the war for its duration, was one of the first to enter Buchenwald after the liberation. He broadcast his report from the site, expressing incredulity at what he saw and, expecting the same from his listeners, concluding: "I pray you to believe what I've said about Buchenwald."⁶³ However much one might have suspected, those inklings—if one could do nothing about them (as Jews, Stein and Toklas were hardly candidates for the Resistance)—had to be submerged in order to "live through each day," perhaps all the more so the worse the suspicions were. Adorno wrote similarly about the circumstances of the time: "When the National Socialists began to torture, they not only terrorized the peoples inside and outside Germany, but were the more secure from exposure the more wildly the horror increased. The implausibility of their actions made it easy to disbelieve what nobody, for the sake of precious peace, wanted to believe, while at the same time capitulating to it."⁶⁴

Stein celebrated the liberation of France with equal pride in the

Americans and her adopted country. Loyal to someone who had been loyal to them, she and Toklas visited Fay after his arrest and wrote a testimonial to aid his defense. It said, among other things: "he certainly did certain things that he should not have done, but that he ever denounced any body, no, that I do not believe."⁶⁵ This was the man to whom she had dedicated *Lectures in America* in 1935: "To Bernard Who Comfortingly and Encouragingly Was Listening as These Were Being Written." Stein's politics on the relationship between national governments and their citizens (her considered opinions rather than reactions to peril) had to do with the value of personal freedom. At war's end, she celebrated the restoration of "liberty." Her few public postwar statements were strangely devoid of the retrospective horror one expected (or wanted) her to voice. Her story of the greatness of America had to do with inventiveness, individualism, self-reliance, the pursuit of happiness. It was conservatively Emersonian and Republican. She detested Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal because she thought it would sap the energy of individual initiative. American politics, in her opinion, had taken a wrong turn between the two Roosevelts.