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Philippe Carrard, *The French Who Fought For Hitler: Memories from the Outcasts.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xi + 260 pp. Maps, bibliography, and index. $85.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-52119-822-6.

Review by Nathan Bracher, Texas A & M University.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Philippe Carrard for this ground-breaking study of memoirs penned by the French, Belgians, and Swiss who willfully chose to fight with the Nazi SS troops on the Eastern Front. Indeed, this very particular and hitherto rarely studied corpus of memoirs poses numerous and formidable difficulties. From the practical matters of obtaining printed copies and verifying their authorship, to the problems of situating such narratives with respect to the historiography of World War II and the now voluminous discourses of memory, to the unsettling ethical questions raised in studying authors who not only unapologetically tout sexual and military exploits carried out in the service of Nazi Germany and subsequently claim to have served a noble cause (defeating the Soviet Union), but even go on to bemoan their fate as "unlikeable outcasts," these texts constitute a veritable minefield full of methodological and ideological booby traps that Carrard navigates with great skill and circumspection.

Carrard points out that as unsavory as they may be, these narratives nevertheless provide a significant, if not unproblematic window on the war, on those implicated in its battles, and on their subsequent attempts to tell their story to the public. On the one hand, they corroborate what Omer Bartov has described as the barbarization of the war on the Eastern Front, which became an uninterrupted series of atrocities in the context of a *Vernichtungskrieg*. These memoirs thus once again undercut the myth of a supposedly "clean" Wehrmacht, since they point to atrocities committed by regular German troops, not just by the SS or the Einsatzgruppen. On the other hand, they tend to completely exclude any mention of the extermination of Jews while minimizing or openly condoning the killing of civilians and exactions of food and sex by depicting such crimes as either the just punishment of partisan outlaws or traditional war booty taken by the victors.

Throughout his survey of these "life narratives" penned by French-speaking volunteers for Hitler, Carrard is intent on linking the formal characteristics of their writings with the specific nature of the content conveyed. One of the most interesting applications of this approach comes when he observes that most of these texts feature extensive accounts of the fierce attempts of the Germans to break back out of Soviet lines during their grueling retreat. Instead of narrating events as would some general or historian presenting a sweeping overview with "external focalization," they rather use mainly "internal focalization," telling their story from the perspective of those who experienced these fierce battles as foot soldiers. They thus provide an experiential account of the brutal, confusing experience of infantry on the ground amid the chaos and confusion of combat, focusing not on the big picture of the war, but on what happened to them and how they themselves felt. This internal focalization results in "a partial, fragmentary kind of narrative," but one that conveys the anxieties and frustrations of the narrators (p. 101).

Carrard suggests that such internal focalization is well-suited for illustrating the "demodernizaton" of warfare on the Eastern front noted by Bartov. Since the cold, wet winter made Blitzkrieg and its reliance on air and armored attack impossible, the infantry became the central component. The resulting scattered, but close combats were particularly intense. Carrard proceeds to find a confirmation of Jonathan Littell's notion of dichotomies of the vertical and the horizontal position so loathed in the Fascist imaginary. To their disgust, the SS had to crouch and lie down instead of maintain the desired and masterful upright position. Similarly, instead of manipulating rigid forms and solid substances, they had to deal with wet, soft surfaces, such as mud and snow. In the end, however, even those writings that take the form of a diary do not limit themselves
to reflections and observations recorded day to day on the date indicated in the text.
They often go beyond that time frame and include information gathered and analyses made after the fact with the benefit of both hindsight and outside sources. Yet Carrard argues that the presence of what Genette terms "paralepses", i.e., material in excess of that available from a given point of view, should not disqualify these narratives, since all memoirs contain a bit of it, without which they would be virtually impossible to read or even write.

Among the many other issues addressed by Carrard's careful study is that of these men's motivation. What was it that led them to volunteer to risk their lives for a criminal cause that, in spite of Laval's April 1942 espousal of the Nazi campaign against Bolshevism, never enjoyed the support of the French public? The question becomes all the more vexing when we observe alongside Carrard that some, such as Christian de la Mazière, not only enlisted after the D-Day landing had virtually sealed Nazi Germany's fate, but even fought to the bitter end in the April 1945 battle of Berlin at a moment when its disastrous outcome for the Nazis was a foregone conclusion. Beyond an ideological commitment to oppose communism and usher in a "new Europe" (under Nazi control), and thus to bring about a radical change in a society that frustrated them, Carrard cites George Mosse in affirming that many sought to inject meaning, action, and adventure into their lives by trying to conform to some overarching narrative.

Though not cited by Carrard, Alain Finkielkraut has on many occasion identified this urgent desire to participate and feel oneself closely connected to momentous events as the "enchantment of history" symptomatic of twentieth century ideologies.[1] Indeed, as Carrard observes early on in his analysis of the formal characteristics of these texts, they all declare that they are bearing witness, using a number of techniques to ensure the reader "I was there," "You can ask others," and "I am telling it as I experienced it" (p. 125). Moreover, noting that in 1941 Otto Abetz had toasted the LVF (Légion des Volontaires Français) officers with the words, "I drink to your beautiful gesture,"(p. 152) Carrard points to the parallel with Kant's notion of aesthetics as disinterested, non-utilitarian activity aimed not at serving some pragmatic end, but on giving pleasure by its very form and content. Carrard goes on to mention the visible aestheticization of the battle for Berlin in several of these memoirs, but for some reason fails to see it and Abetz's affirmation as prime examples of the Fascist habit of celebrating violence by transforming history into an aesthetic enterprise and celebrating war as the essence of events and the end of superior human beings.

Yet Carrard's study reveals that in spite of their adherence to Fascist ideology and their attraction to the aesthetics of violence, these memoirists remained curiously intent on affirming their French cultural identity by mocking the German notions of discipline and organization with displays of mockery and sarcasm, just as Christian de la Mazière, in a section of *Le Chagrin et la pitié* not cited by Carrard, recalled that they called the Germans "les Schleus" and were accordingly not taken very seriously by their German comrades in arms. Pointing out that these French volunteers for the cause of Nazi Germany refer neither to prominent French literary Fascists such as Fernand Céline, Drieu la Rochelle, Lucien Rebatet, and Robert Brasillach nor to

the German history and culture celebrated in Nazi lore, Carrard concludes that they display a "resistance to things German." (p. 132)

This supposed "resistance" is all the more striking when compared to that of Brasillach, who infamously wrote of his "love affair" with "German genius" and declared that the memory of having slept with Nazi Germany would remain tender, that of Fernand de Brinon who founded the Comité France-Allemagne to promote French appreciation of things German, and that of Jacques Benoist-Méchin who penned a history of the German army. One wonders, however, whether Carrard is fully justified in emphasizing what he terms "Voltairean" spirit in the ironic or derisive passages of these narratives and in comparing their ironic denunciations of "the war, or more precisely the way the Charlemagne [the division of French SS troops] was used in northeastern Germany" (p. 122) and even "the absurdity or the hopelessness of the operations in which they were engaged" (p. 123) to *Candide*. It is difficult to understand how bemoaning the military futility of such and such deployment of Nazi troops could be appropriately likened to Voltaire's condemnation not only of injustice, cruelty, and oppression but also of the ideology used to camouflage or justify such abuses.

This difficulty of finding comparisons that prove both accurate and appropriate is symptomatic of the methodological quandary that Carrard confronts throughout his careful, detailed study of these narratives and their often unsavory contents. At the outset and at several intervals, he states his disinterest in polemics and value judgments. By analyzing the terms and the narrative means employed by these French-speaking volunteers and by engaging in "methodological empathy," (p. 4) Carrard aims to understand exactly how these individuals understood themselves, their actions, and the events of their times. In practice, however, he does in fact make judgments, if not about the authors, then about their narratives, if only in citing the judgments of numerous other studies that confirm this or that point. Carrard himself moreover rightly points out that, while claiming that they only want to tell their story, these French volunteers for Hitler implicitly and often explicitly attempt to justify what they did, presenting the SS units as respectable, loyal soldiers who fought diligently and courageously for a selfless cause. They thus attempt to plead their case before the tribunal of history even in a context which does not want to hear them, while at the same time finding a therapeutic function in the very telling.

Carrard furthermore insists it is crucial to maintain the distinction between historical (or "referential") and fictional narratives in order to analyze the production and public reception of such texts. This accurate distinction makes ethical questions even more important. Insofar as these memoirists offer a published and therefore public discourse on the past, we must situate that discourse appropriately with respect to the historical record and with respect to the public memory that we promote, commemorate, celebrate, mourn, or decry. We do not have to offer Manichean pronouncements, but we do need to situate such discourses of memory with respect to their times and ours. Interpretation and analysis do not have to be partisan or even strictly normative, but they cannot be "neutral." They cannot cordon themselves off from values that memoirists wittingly or unwittingly promote or negate, particularly collaborationists appealing for what they consider to be their rightful place in history, sometimes mocking their readers for judging history from the bourgeois comfort of an armchair, most often persistently and unrepentantly claiming that they were only acting according to their sense of duty. In this light, Carrard's suggestion that such a stance stems largely from the rules supposedly governing the genre of life narratives of military men, demanding that they be reader-friendly and unapologetic, remains unconvincing.

Perhaps one of the most vexing issues is one that Carrard hints at without fully exploring: namely, to what extent can we accurately interpolate from this relatively small corpus of

memoirs to the actual events in France and on the Eastern front or even to corps of French volunteers for Hitler. In all there are thirty texts, twenty-four of them written by French nationals. Carrard himself notes that, although most of these recruits came for the "très petite bourgeoisie" and even the "lumpenproletariat," none of the writers that he studies belong to that social milieu (p. 136). He moreover points out that not just anyone is capable of writing a coherent, detailed, and rhetorically sophisticated book of memoirs. As well, only two of these memoirists belonged to Doriot's Parti Populaire Français which provided the bulk of the French volunteers for Hitler. It is therefore far from clear whether the motivations, experiences, and postwar attitudes of the large number of little educated, socially disadvantaged recruits correspond to those related by individuals such as the urbane, articulate, and highly self-conscious Christian de la Mazière.

Citing Henry Rousso, Carrard also points out that the number of French engaged in actual military operations was actually quite low (2,500 in the LVF, 3,000 in the Br. Frankreich, and 8,000 in the Div. Charlemagne), both in absolute terms and in relation to contingents from other occupied countries. Carrard adds that in practice neither Germany nor Vichy was really interested in getting France involved militarily in the war and that these volunteers never enjoyed the French public's support, not during the Occupation, when the recruiting offices of the LVF had to be protected against attacks, nor after the war, when returning SS volunteers were pariahs. The hostility was such that they even had problems trying to organize informal gatherings in restaurants. Nevertheless, Carrard suggests that these narratives can "provide noteworthy data to readers interested in France's military collaboration" (p. 89) and contends that their tales of sexual prowess with German women prove the importance and extent of a masculine identity crisis.

It is doubtful whether those attracted by the prospect of serving Hitler with the SS can be construed as providing a legitimate cross-section of French males in general, particularly when we recall that these French volunteers for the Germans only constituted a tiny minority and that those who wrote of their deeds a much tinier one, a priori motivated by the glory of telling. It would, on the contrary, not be implausible to hypothesize that those eager for military adventure, attracted by the SS military units' image of discipline, power, and virility, and eager to prove themselves to a society that had either hitherto ignored or despised them, constituted a very specific subset of males not at all emblematic of French men in general, and that the socio-cultural elite who penned these life narratives were more ideologically driven and arrogant than the lower-class throngs who made up the majority of these volunteers.

Yet one of the principal merits of Carrard's painstaking study is precisely that of bringing to the fore this issue and many others equally deserving further study and debate. Future studies will have to refer to Carrard's pioneering work in subjecting this largely ignored body of writings to detailed empirical description and theoretical interrogation as their basic point of departure. Going forward, researchers will do well to examine the ethical implications of texts claiming not only to present life narratives but contributions to memory, and to distinguish clearly between history and memory. As Henry Rousso has shown, the latter distinction is crucial for going beyond textual or narratological analysis to history.[2] While history seeks to provide a verifiable account of the past by maintaining a critical distance from the people and events studied, memory seeks to collapse the distance between the past and the present, deploying its energy and rhetoric with the view of reviving, transmitting, preserving, and reliving bygone days. While history seeks to ground itself in data and documents that can be independently examined and cross-checked, memory takes its departure from the concrete experience of an individual or a particular social group. Keenly informed by emotion, desire, and ideology, memory tends to be partial and partisan: it accordingly fluctuates over time as a function of the varying perspectives of individuals, groups, and their changing views and needs. And since

memory can thus position itself to distort or even supplant history, it warrants careful surveillance.

NOTES

[1] Cf. Alain Finkielkraut, "Y a-t-il un devoir de mémoire," in *Une voix vient de l'autre rive* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), p. 18.

[2] Henry Rousso, *La hantise du passé* (Paris: Editions Textuels, 1998), pp. 16-25.

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