One of the most striking moments in Marcel Ophuls’s celebrated documentary _Le Chagrin et la pitié_ [The Sorrow and the Pity] (1971) is certainly André Harris’s interview with Christian de La Mazière, the former French SS volunteer. Filmed at the castle of Sigmaringen, in remembrance of a “pitiful expedition” he had undertaken there in the hope of meeting Marshall Pétain (La Mazière 2003, 203), La Mazière recounts how he enlisted in the SS in the summer of 1944, then went on to fight the Russians in Pomerania in February–March 1945. This interview, as Henry Rousso (1987a, 119) points out in his analysis of Ophuls’s movie, brought to light an aspect of the Occupation that had been “unrecognized and forgotten”: Thousands of Frenchmen had volunteered to fight on the German side during World War II. Moreover, according to Rousso, these men had not acted out of “venality” or “moral or intellectual turpitude,” as some stereotype of the collaborationist has it; they had become involved out of “political and ideological conviction” – to defend on the battlefield the cause that for them was the correct one.

While La Mazière’s appearance in _Le Chagrin et la pitié_ reminded viewers of the military side of the collaboration, it also signaled the existence of a specific type of memory: Several of the French who had fought with the Nazis were ready to testify, more precisely, to tell why they had enlisted, what they had experienced during the war, and how they had (or had not) adjusted after the end of the conflict. In fact, La Mazière’s testimony was not the first one to be offered. A few among the former volunteers had already published memoirs, some as early as 1948. But the texts they had written had largely gone unnoticed, a fate shared by many other testimonies about the war brought out at a time when the French – to use the names
of the initial stages in what Rousso (1987a) calls the “Vichy syndrome” – first seemed unable to complete their “work of mourning,” and then “repressed” most critical subjects related to the period of the Occupation. According to the statistics that Annette Wieviorka supplies in her study of the genocide, French deportees had produced over 100 books and pamphlets about the camps between 1944 and 1947; but these reports had been ignored at the time, as most people in France were anxious to resume life as usual after four years of hardship, and historians presumed that the deportees did not want to speak about an ordeal that was “unspeakable” to begin with (Wieviorka 1992, 163). The “repression” that Rousso describes was not specific to one country, however. As several scholars (e.g., Zelizer 1998, 166) have noticed, works about the dark aspects of World War II that later became bestsellers, such as Elie Wiesel’s Night, Anne Frank’s Diary, and Primo Levi’s Survival in Auschwitz, were first turned down by publishers in the United States, Holland, and Italy; audiences, it was assumed, were not ready for this kind of woeful material.

Professional historians have investigated the military sides of the collaboration, and I occasionally draw on their works to provide a context for the narratives that the volunteers are reciting. My objective, however, is not to add to this type of research by producing a new, more accurate account of the events in which the volunteers were involved in such places as Belorussia, Galicia, Pomerania, and Berlin. It is to investigate the texts that those volunteers have written and, in so doing, to investigate a particular type of memory. Indeed, among the many studies that explore the subject “memory of Vichy,” few take up the topic “memory of France’s military collaboration with the Germans.” In fact, the only significant references to the volunteers’ testimonies I found are included in Les Echos de la mémoire: Tabous et enseignements de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale [Echoes of Memory: Taboos and Lessons of World War II] (1991), the proceeding of a colloquium edited by Georges Kantin and Gilles Manceron. In their contributions to this volume, Pascal Ory, Marie-José Chombart de Lauwe, and Christophe Champclaux consider issues raised by memoirs written by collaborationists, including those by some of the former volunteers. They ask, among other things, whether those memoirs are dangerous because they offer a certain fascination for the evil, celebrate war as the site of heroic adventures, and present a complacent view of the Nazi military units that the French volunteers had elected to join. I will, of course, return later to these controversial issues, as they pertain to discursive and ethical matters that are central to the texts I am considering.
Several reasons account for the lack of research on the memory of France’s military collaboration. The main one arguably pertains to focus of interest. Since the renewed concern for the Vichy period in the 1970s, work on memory has generally centered on the “good,” “worthwhile” testimonies of camp survivors (e.g., Wieviorka 1998, Coquio 1999) and to a lesser extent on those of members of the Resistance (e.g., Guillou and Laborie 1995, Boursier 1997). The reminiscences of other categories of war participants, however, have not been granted the same attention. While scholars (e.g., Durand 1994, Harbulot 2003, Vittori 2007) have investigated the ordeal of the French prisoners of war and of the men forced to go work in Germany on the program Service du Travail Obligatoire (STO), they have hardly concerned themselves with studying the way members of these ill-fated groups remember the war in their testimonies. There still seems to be some discomfort about what POWs and draftees of the STO have to say, possibly because they do not qualify as victims as obviously as do the political and the racial deportees. As Richard Vinen puts it in the chapters of The Unfree French (2007) he devotes to these groups, POWs are felt to be “inadequate in some way,” especially if they did not manage to “escape or be repatriated” before 1945 (212); and forced laborers of the STO, “blamed for going,” are also upon their return “encouraged to keep quiet” about their experience because it no longer fits into “France’s vision of herself” (278). That discomfort, of course, is compounded in the instance of the volunteers: It is difficult to summon much sympathy for people who chose to fight for the Nazis, and whose cause, to begin with, never really agreed with France’s “vision of herself.” Likewise, it is legitimate to ask whether devoting a whole book to the memory of the military collaboration is wise, as it may, indirectly at least, imply the rehabilitation of individuals and standpoints that were rightly denounced after the war.

My assumption is that no subject should be taboo for scholarly research, and that examining the writings left by a certain group does not mean endorsing the values represented by that group. In this instance, studying the texts that the former volunteers have produced involves neither sanctioning National Socialism, nor issuing a blanket condemnation to the individuals who, for reasons I review later, elected to fight with the Germans on the Eastern Front. I aim to assume the position that the sociologists Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot describe in their self-reflexive comments about the work they have conducted on social classes (e.g., the French haute-bourgeoisie), places (e.g., castles), and activities (e.g., hunting) with which they clearly have few affinities.
Specifically, adopting the “empathy” that Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot (71) deem to be necessary for the understanding of a group, whatever one might think of its members’ behavior, I abstain from making judgments on the choices and the actions of my memoirists. Indeed, the latter have already been sentenced in several ways: They were defeated on the battlefield, where they became part of the German collapse; in the courts, where they were found guilty of treason; and in the judgment of History, where they are now linked with a side that is regarded as criminal. Adding my own condemnation would thus be pointless and smack of self-righteousness; as Tzvetan Todorov has submitted in his essay on the abuses of memory, “to give lessons of morality has never been evidence of virtue” (43). The methodological empathy that I model after the sociologists’, however, is not without limits. I do not shy away from taking up the political and ethical issues that the volunteers’ memoirs are raising, for instance, when the authors describe the way they treated civilian populations in Belorussia, claim that they were unaware of the existence of extermination camps, and express no regret about their involvement during the war.

My corpus is restricted to published works. Unlike the body of texts used by Paul Fussell in The Great War and Modern Memory, it does not include material that is only available in the archives of war museums and specialized libraries. It consists of thirty memoirs, twenty-four of which were written by French volunteers. For the sake of comparing experiences and attitudes, and because their authors are French-speaking, I have admitted six additional testimonies provided by volunteers coming from Alsace, Belgium, and Switzerland. This list makes no claim at exhaustiveness. Not counting the memoirs that have remained in the manuscript stage, more texts may be out there, brought out at the author’s expense or by small, quickly vanished presses. Scholars, in this area, like in many others, would be imprudent to submit that they have read “everything,” as long out of print, nowhere to be found texts can at some point turn up on internet sites like Abebooks or be reissued by publishing houses that specialize in “alternative” materials about World War II, such as Arctic, Dualpha, L’Homme Libre, and Lore. Thus, I had completed a first draft of this study when Lore brought out (in 2008) Bayle’s De Marseille à Novossibirsk, a book that the author had first self-published in 1994, and that I had been able to obtain only in its German translation. Those same publishing houses have also unveiled new texts (no less than six in 2007 and 2008 alone), though without always explicating when those texts had been written or how they had found their way to the desk of
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a publisher at this point in time. According to the head of one of these firms, who spoke under the condition of anonymity, the sudden arrival of so many volunteers’ memoirs is due to the fact that their authors have recently died; the veterans had written their reminiscences and were eager to see them in print, but they did not want to cause any trouble in their old age and had left to their families the responsibility for contacting publishers after their death.

The fact that we know when the veterans’ memoirs were published but, in most cases, not when they were written is certainly a liability with respect to their status as historical documents. It makes it difficult to determine what prompted an author to come out of his silence when he did, obliging us to take at face value the explanations that he himself is supplying. More importantly, it keeps us from placing the memoir in a precise context, that is, from ascertaining which contemporary groups, political or other, its author might have been addressing or seeking approval from. The more general historical framework in which the volunteers’ recollections can be situated is of course the Cold War. From the early 1950s on, as Ronald Smelser and Edward Davies argue in their study of the “myth” of the Eastern Front, it became acceptable to conceive of the Wehrmacht’s operations in the USSR as “a prelude to our own struggle against Soviet Communism” (3). Though made about the United States, Smelser and Davies’s diagnosis is certainly valid for France. In fact, part of French public opinion had probably turned earlier against the USSR, as the imposition of communist regimes upon several countries in Central Europe, as well as the presence in France of a strong, then Stalinist Communist party, made people both wary of the USSR and liable to buy into “alternative” views of the Second World War.

While the texts in my corpus pose problems of dating, they also raise issues of representativeness similar – though not identical – to those identified by Raul Hilberg (2001, 48) in his discussion of the testimonies of Holocaust survivors. Submitted to the standards of the social sciences, the surviving volunteers as a whole do not form in Hilberg’s terminology a “random sample” of the volunteer community. That is, those who testified do not form a “random sample” of the surviving volunteers, and their testimonies do not form a “random sample” of their experiences. True, such considerations of method do not invalidate the volunteers’ memoirs, as they do not invalidate the testimonies of Holocaust survivors and of their families. But they must be taken into account, as one might ask under what conditions individuals can represent the group to which they belong; in this instance, to what extent about thirty memoirists can
be viewed as speaking “for” the thousands of French, Belgian, and Swiss men who elected to bear arms for the Germans during World War II. I take up these issues in Chapter 6, though obviously not from the statistical perspective that Hilberg had in mind. Doing a close reading of the works under consideration, I assess their authors’ claim to “represent” their comrades, in the different meanings that much-glossed verb may have in a particular type of discourse, namely, the memoir.

As a genre, the memoir belongs to the more comprehensive category that Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001) call “life narratives”: A category that includes autobiographies, letters, and diaries — texts in which individuals recount what they themselves have experienced at a certain time and place. While autobiography has been the subject of numerous studies, the memoir has attracted less attention. The theorists who have sought to differentiate between these two types of life narrative have generally done so in terms of subject matter. Martin Löschnigg, for example, writes in his entry “Autobiography” in the Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative that autobiographies emphasize “inner life,” whereas memoirs foreground “the author’s public role among well-known contemporaries” (35). Similarly, the Merriam Webster’s Encyclopedia of Literature states that while writers of autobiographies are concerned “primarily with themselves,” memoirists are usually “persons who have played roles in, or have been close observers of, historical events, and whose purpose is to describe or interpret those events” (749). Löschnigg’s and Merriam Webster’s definitions certainly apply to the classical model of the memoir, such as Saint-Simon’s Mémoires and Chateaubriand’s Mémoires d’outre-tombe [Memoirs from Beyond the Grave], as well as to modern texts written by politicians and high-ranking soldiers, such as Winston Churchill’s The Second World War and Charles de Gaulle’s Mémoires de guerre [published in English as War Memoirs]. In current usage, though, “memoir” often refers to the recollections of ordinary people, people who, in some cases, lived through historical events but played no “public roles among well-known contemporaries.” Furthermore, the term today seems to imply a restriction in time rather than a choice of subject matter. “Autobiography” suggests temporal comprehensiveness: The author recounts her/his life from childhood up to the moment of writing. “Memoir,” on the other hand, refers to a limited time span. As Marcus Billson submits in his essay on the genre, the author “relates a segment of his own life that was important to his identity as a social being,” such as “an exile, an imprisonment, the course of a career, participation in war, in politics, in an artistic coterie” (267). As far as number is concerned, the
singular “memoir” is used in current practice to denote a genre, and the plural “memoirs,” a certain type of contents synonymous with “memories” or “recollections.” In this respect, Anglo-American usage differs from French usage; in French, the plural “mémoires” means both “a memoir” and “recollections,” whereas the singular “mémoire” signifies “memory” (in the sense of “capacity for remembering”) if the gender is feminine, “report” or “study” if it is masculine.

The texts in my corpus certainly fit this present-day Anglo-American sense of “memoir,” even though they may be labeled “mémoires” in French. Most of them were written by low-ranking soldiers, soldiers who were involved in “historical events” but did not lead what Jean-Louis Jeannelle (10) calls the “vies majuscules [lives writ large]” of such people as Churchill and de Gaulle. The volunteers, moreover, devote little space, if any, to their activities before and after the war; they usually center on the war itself, that is, on the period in their lives that they regard as tellable – as worthy of being recounted and preserved. In this respect, their memoirs are structurally similar to numerous life narratives produced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, beginning with texts written by camp survivors, which, for that matter, often have “memoir” in their subtitle: Vivette Samuel, Rescuing the Children: A Holocaust Memoir; Alexander Donat, The Holocaust Kingdom: A Memoir; Jana Renée Friesova, Fortress of My Youth: Memoir of a Terezin Survivor, and the like. To be sure, the deportees did not leave their homes of their free will, and the experiences that they report are radically different from those of the veterans in my corpus. Still, like the volunteers’, most of their memoirs have authors who are little-known, ordinary people; and like the volunteers’, they recount not a whole life, but the particular moment – however painful – that made that life extraordinary and therefore worth being told and remembered. I will return at times to this parallel between the volunteers’ and the deportees’ memoirs, as the latter have come to serve as a paradigm for memoirs in general and traumatic war memoirs in particular.

My approach to the volunteers’ reminiscences is both thematic and textual. When I take up, say, the topic “combat on the Eastern Front,” I do not just ask where the volunteers fought and what they did or did not accomplish; I also consider the rhetorical strategies and conventions of representation on which they draw, examining, among other things, the point of view from which they describe the fighting, the terms that they employ to designate the enemy, and the reference systems on which they rely to account for their experiences. Such an approach may seem
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inappropriate in the case of historical testimonies, where “content” usually receives priority. However, as Carole Dornier and Renaud Dulong (2005) have argued in their introduction to a series of essays devoted to the testimony as genre, “memory” does not spontaneously metamorphose into “a memoir.” It must at some point undergo a process of textualization, and I intend to investigate that process when I examine the volunteers’ accounts of their experiences.

My purpose is thus twofold, as it fits an interdisciplinary endeavor that partakes both of historiography and of a literary reading of texts that do not belong to “literature,” at least not if defined as “works of imagination.” By exploring a set of reminiscences that, for understandable reasons, have been largely suppressed, I want to contribute to the knowledge of the memory of World War II in France. By probing the ways in which those reminiscences are inscribed in memoirs, however, I also want to add to the poetics of that genre – to the study of the rules, codes, and conventions that shape the textualization of personal experiences. The attention I lend to procedures of writing, however, is not imperialistic. In contrast to Hayden White (1987) and others, I do not believe that all texts eventually have the same status, and that the distinction that Dorrit Cohn (1999) establishes between “fictional” and “referential” discourses should therefore be collapsed. For one thing, my memoirists claim to make true statements about the past, and that claim, although it should not remain unexamined, must be taken seriously. Indeed, it has important textual implications: it shapes several aspects of the writing, aspects whose function is to tell readers, or to confirm for them, that the book they hold in their hands describes events that the author actually lived through.

The questions I ask of the memoirs in my corpus unfold in seven stages. Chapter 1 provides the kind of background information that is necessary for the understanding of the veterans’ recollections. I describe the organizations that the volunteers could join and then review the studies that historians have devoted to France’s military collaboration. Chapter 2 takes up an issue that is crucial for the memoir as genre: authenticity. I examine the strategies that the memoirists employ to establish that they were “really there,” and then describe the debates that have been taking place about some of the books they have written, for example, about Guy Sajer’s Le Soldat oublié. I also consider problems of authorship, as some of the texts in my corpus were avowedly written with the collaboration of ghostwriters, whereas others probably received an assistance that remained unacknowledged. Chapter 3 raises the related but
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distinct question of veracity: If the memoirists were “really there,” are they reliable? I look at a test case – diverging testimonies about the battle of Berlin – and then discuss passages in which the volunteers seem to over- or underreport the events in which they were involved, such as the atrocities that they witnessed on the Eastern Front. Passages of this type, I argue, pose an important question about the memoir as a genre, namely how the veracity of a testimony can be assessed when the version of an event that it offers can be confronted neither with other versions nor with documentary evidence. Chapter 4 explores some specifics of the volunteers’ writing related to modes of remembering and types of focalization. The veterans display total recall, which means that they account in detail for events in which they participated several years or even decades earlier. They also report those events “from below,” that is, from the limited perspective of the foot soldier often stuck in mud and snow. I show how this way of describing the fighting illustrates what Omer Bartov calls the “demodernization” of warfare on the Eastern Front, and Jonathan Littell, the demise of the ideal of the “hard,” “vertical” fascist soldier. Chapter 5 investigates the ideological facets of the volunteers’ testimonies. Buying unconditionally into Nazi propaganda, the veterans demonize the Soviets and disparage the western Allies for such “war crimes” as the bombing of the German cities. But they also describe their experiences at the front by drawing on French poetry, British drama, and American film, that is, by turning to a reference system that almost entirely ignores Germany’s contribution to literature and the arts. I discuss that contradiction, submitting that it exposes the volunteers’ ambivalence toward Germany – their endorsement of German political and military goals, as well as their parallel indifference to things German in the cultural domain. Chapter 6 examines how the volunteers justify themselves – how they account for decisions that will certainly trouble today’s readers. Specifically, I ask how the veterans explain why they enlisted on the side that is now universally viewed as the “wrong” side; how they vindicate their resolution to fight to the end, when the war was obviously lost; and why they elected to testify afterward, at the risk of losing their jobs and alienating their friends when their tainted past would resurface. Chapter 7 examines how the veterans describe their postwar status, that is, how they portray themselves as people who did not commit any offense and were unfairly sentenced in their own countries, both by the justice system and in public opinion. I ask whether this self-assessment is warranted and show how the volunteers themselves have contributed to their exclusion. Pointing out that the veterans’ unbending attitudes raise ethical issues, I ask in
my Conclusion whether we should regard their testimonies as danger-
ous. I present the arguments of critics who hold texts of this type to be
harmful, because their authors are blind to the truth, cannot accept con-
tradiction, and reject any kind of guilt. Looking at the memory boom
of the past twenty years, however, I also surmise that the volunteers’
reminiscences enable us to pose several fundamental questions about life
writing, specifically to ask whether all testimonies are fit to be preserved,
and how we should treat the ones that uphold positions now regarded as
unacceptable.

The scholarly apparatus on which I draw to conduct my analyses is
most diverse. It includes works on World War II, especially on the Eastern
Front (e.g., Bartov 1986 and 1991, Grenkevich 1999, Slepyan 2006,
Müller and Ueberschär 2009); on the contribution of foreign volunteers
to the German war effort (e.g., Gordon 1980, Conway 1993, Estes 2003,
Giolitto 1999, Müller 2007); on the representation of World War II in
literary and nonliterary texts (e.g., Higgins 1987, Smelser and Davies
2008); on memory and testimony as sources for our knowledge of the
past (e.g., Cru 1929, Loftus 2000, Dulong 1998, Ricoeur 2000); and on
the poetics of personal texts, as opposed to fictional ones (e.g., Lejeune
1975, Smith and Watson 2001, Suleiman 2006). Because I wish to avoid
circularity, however, I will also question that apparatus. More precisely,
I will ask to what extent the corpus I am considering obliges us to revisit
the current views about the military collaboration; the idea that testimo-
nies provide us with a window into the past; and the status of the memo-
ir as a “factual,” “referential” text (Genette 1991, Cohn 1999), whose
conventions must be distinguished from those of fiction. My analyses,
therefore, participate in the ongoing debates on the nature and function
of memory and on the appropriateness of a textual reading to the com-
prehension of nonliterary works. “Participating,” however, does not mean
“closing.” I want the issues that I raise throughout the book to remain
open, all the more so since those issues concern a body of texts that so
far has remained relatively unexplored. Ultimately, I hope that my study
will prompt further research on the subject of the memory not just of the
“French who fought for Hitler,” but of other groups who were involved
in World War II and whose testimonies – for some reason – have not been
investigated as they could have been.