

Sandra Ott. *War, Judgment, and Memory in the Basque Borderland, 1914–1945* (Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2008).

Reviewed by Chad R. Cussen

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Historians incorporate interdisciplinary approaches to history with various degrees of intensity and effectiveness. Is the historical discipline a social science or is it confined solely within the humanities? Historians find numerous answers to this question. Perhaps hesitant to admit, historians rely on interdisciplinary approaches regardless of their methodological biases. Sandra Ott's *War, Judgment, and Memory in the Basque Borderlands* offers another work to bring together various approaches into what can be defined as broad historical research in a specific regional locale. Ott's book is a regional study that effectively integrates larger national trends. While combining heavy doses of anthropology, social history, and cultural history, Ott examines a minute Basque community nestled in Southern France within the Western Pyrenees: Xiberoa (Soule in French).³⁸⁰ Ott argues that Xiberoans carried defined terms of social and cultural legitimacy through judicial and behavioral judgments in wartime experiences, including occupation and resistance among others. Ott defines these social and cultural dynamics as a moral community: "distinctions between insiders and outsiders defined the boundaries of the moral community in spatial and linguistic terms, in social and symbolic acts, in customary law, in trans-Pyrenean treaties, and in popular culture. Membership in a moral community entailed a shared habitus, compliance with certain moral codes and behavioral norms, and validation by public opinion."³⁸¹ Thus, Ott employs these techniques within Xiberoan experiences during wartime (both World Wars) and how these experiences shaped their identity in the years after, including memory.

Divided into thirteen chapters, Ott produces a solid organizational structure to the book. Chapters one and two trace relational developments Xiberoa's diverse social makeup. Xiberoa's inhabitants shared "long-standing traditions of trans-Pyrenean migration, immigration, and human displacement [...] although Xiberoa was relatively isolated geographically, even its most secluded inhabitants had contacts with the world around them."³⁸² Moreover, it is here that Ott establishes the moral community, formulated, in part, from anthropological structures developed by Pierre

³⁸⁰ Sandra Ott, *War, Judgment, and Memory in the Basque Borderlands* (Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2008), xii-xiii.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 7.

Bourdieu. Despite the traditions of contact between diverse social groups, Ott argues that Xiberoans formulated their communities around “house” inhabitants and strangers, or simply those who emigrated from abroad.³⁸³ , Ott shows that Xiberoans carried a strong regional identity into the Great War, the Second World War, and beyond.

Ott supports these conclusions about local identity within the context of war. Echoing much of Eugen Weber’s ground-breaking work *Peasants Into Frenchmen*, Ott explores Xiberoan obstinacy, reluctance, and difficulty in defining themselves as “Frenchmen” during the Great War.³⁸⁴ Wartime desertion or conscription evasion proved a common feature within Xiberoan communities. For those who did serve on the Western front, language difficulty proved an immense problem for Xiberoans. French military leaders used this to their advantage by promoting regional identity within the military. For example, military leaders created competitions between Bretons and Xiberoans—either group would attempt to prove their physical superiority on the battlefield.³⁸⁵ During the Interwar period, class conflict over returned veterans, commune workers, and factory owners dominated Xiberoan communities. Ott shows that Xiberoan communities proved dynamic and abrasive, which resulted, at least in part, by the combination of regional and newly conceived notions of national identity.

The central chapters emphasize Xiberoan’s experience under Vichy rule and German occupation. Xiberoan authorities, coupled with public sentiment, generally supported Pétain’s Vichy in the early stages of the Second World War. However, Ott shows that Xiberoans became discontent with the status quo. Although many Xiberoans displayed conservative tendencies, Ott argues that Xiberoans displayed sentiments more closely aligned with xenophobic tendencies, although Ott never employs the term. Perhaps a more appropriate observation shows that Ott’s analysis relies heavily on ideology. Xiberoan communities, from the outset of Spanish Civil War refugees, were characterized as largely hostile towards communist affiliates. Authorities in Béarn, the province bordering Xiberoa to the east, constructed the important Gurs concentration camp in the late 1930s, which held nearly nineteen-thousand prisoners at its height including communists and Jews. Anti-Semitism, however, proved a relatively quiet issue, at least presented by Ott. Again, ideology takes precedence in this analysis.³⁸⁶ Important for Ott is the way the moral community challenged Xiberoan communities through complaisance, resistance, and denunciation, especially the latter two. The moral community, through human communication, rumor, and imagination, proved highly malleable in these situations.

³⁸³ Ibid., 8.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 34-36.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., see chapters 3 and 4.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., see chapters 6-10.

Ott finishes the book with an exploration of divided memories. Commemoration, through ritual and communication, played an important role in understanding the Xiberoan experience. Such issues surfaced as late as 2004 with the sixtieth anniversary of Xiberoan resistance. As Ott shows, such commemorations proved highly contentious for current inhabitants and remaining survivors. Family members and supporters of distinct resistance groups—Secret Army, CFP, FTP, International Brigade, and Guérilleros—all vied for adequate representation in public commemorations.³⁸⁷ Moreover, each group, or rather its representatives, asserted their long-established traditions and values within the structure of the moral community. Divisions within the moral community remained well intact into the twenty-first century.

Ott concludes that Xiberoa's moral community remained divided through its experiences before, during, and after wartime. Even though resistance groups coalesced during German occupation, Xiberoans were torn over how each represented themselves and conducted their resistance. In other words, conceptions of the moral community were never fully integrated and unified.³⁸⁸ Ott's analysis proves intriguing and important for our understanding of regional and national identity. Ott suggest that regional identities operate over national identity, at least in this case. Divisions apparent before the world wars remained within Xiberoa's moral community. Expanding from past works, like Weber's *Peasants* and Gildea's *Marianne in Chains*, Ott expands our understanding of regional/national dynamics and argues that these go well beyond the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries. Ott integrates archival research, memoirs, and a strong emphasis on local ethnographic fieldwork into a well-balanced and nuanced study. At times, Ott fails to adequately address how these sources mesh and support one another. Oral testimony in 2004 can be quite contentious for events that originate at the turn of the nineteenth-century. It is difficult to see how one can make such connections without an adequate explanation which is lacking in this study. Critics of anthropological studies may latch on to this fact. Regardless, Ott should be commended for making broader connections between the past and present and between the region and nation. Expanding our understanding of such social and cultural complexities proves an asset for historians attempting to bridge memory with the past.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 182-184.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 210.