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Newsroom

ARTICLE BY PIERO S. COLLA, MEMBER OF THE OHTE SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY COUNCIL

History teaching and national minorities in Europe: between omissions, rehabilitations and competing memories

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A Sami family in Norway around the 1900s. United States Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs division under the digital ID ppsmc.06257



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1. Exception or trend? "Minorities" in the spotlight in Swedish curricula

The national curriculum of the compulsory education programme in force in Sweden since the start of the 2022 school year (*Lgr 22*), has an innovative structure: 64 of the 247-page document are devoted to the teaching of the country's minority languages and cultures^[1].

This is divided into two parts: the study of the 'mother tongue' (*modersmål*), which is available to all pupils whose everyday language differs from Swedish; and integrative courses for speakers of the five recognised 'minority' languages of Finnish, Tornedalian Finnish (*Meänkieli*), Yiddish, Romani (*Romani chib*) and *Sámi*.

These measures come at the end of a long trajectory of denationalisation of the definition of citizenship first, and school objectives second.

In the common sections of the curriculum, individual access to these resources is complemented through various references to the history and culture of these five communities, the presence of which has been attested for many centuries, as well as to other forms of otherness. At primary school level, for example, the 'social studies' course has 'migration' at the top of the list of main topics. The stories behind the 'Sami religion' (but also Jewish and Muslim festivities) are a part of the early learning activities offered between the ages of seven and nine, while 'culture, history and rights' of the five national minorities are a focus of the 'social studies' curriculum for middle school children (13-15 years). Reference to the identity of the *Sami* nation, which the document identifies as an 'indigenous people' (*urfolk*), reappears in history and religion lessons. On several occasions, the official requirements refer to *Sami* 'cultural heritage', *Sami* 'music' and 'societal issues'. In practice, it is up to the schools and teachers to translate these concepts into appropriate teaching content^[2].

The attention given to these concepts is reflected in the fact that the Swedish nation has been shaped by a variety of contributions throughout its history and that its social structure has recently diversified in terms of language, religion, and morals. Foreign-born individuals now account for 20% of the resident population^[3], (a higher proportion than that of the USA), and the share of non-native speakers is continually increasing^[4]. As a result of this growing diversity, the 'indigenous' *Sámi* language no longer features in the list of the twenty most widely used languages of Sweden.

These measures come at the end of a long trajectory of denationalisation of the definition of citizenship first, and school objectives second. The most important steps along this path of transformation were: the 1975 recognition of the right of every individual to maintain contact with his or her culture of origin (through access to free language teaching); the 1999 recognition of the five 'national minorities', a cardinal element of a plural reading of cultural identity; and the integration of content relating to minorities into the official curricula in 2000 and 2011. All of these innovations have been unanimously supported by the political forces throughout the legislative process.

It would be difficult to determine to what extent the Swedish trajectory represents a response to the acceleration of migratory flows and the demands that brings, or the exemplification of an international trend in the sense of opening up school narratives to the demands and experiences of minority groups. According to this second hypothesis, the revision of the Swedish curricula may offer insight into a crucial issue in the relationship of educational systems to issues of identity and belonging in the 21st century. This is particularly revealing when seen in relation to the reflection on the purposes of history teaching itself, which until recently has been the vehicle *par excellence* for the 'novel' of national excellence in the form of a univocal and oriented narrative of origins.

2. "Denationalising" the curriculum: some historical premises

It is rather unusual (especially in history teaching) that the decompartmentalisation of curricula - the openness to the narrative of the 'other' - is presented in such a consensual way, which the recent Swedish reform has achieved. Although this issue has never been completely absent from the discussion on history programmes at the European level, it comes up against the weight of traditions; contrasting definitions of the concepts of 'nationality' and 'citizenship'; and the strength of the reference to a base of unavoidable founding memories. Memories that peremptorily set in stone the genesis of the national community (its identification with a religion, or a form of government...), or cultivate, in some cases, the nostalgia of its imperial or colonial influence.

In order to attempt a continental overview of the issue, we must begin by refuting a generally held stereotype: namely, that the transmission of a continuous 'national narrative' is a natural and obvious vocation of history teaching in Europe. However, it is more relevant to consider it as an often-frustrated ambition: a permanent object of contestation, arrangement and omission in the history of geopolitical relations and school policies of the last century - from the British Isles to the Iberian Peninsula or Sardinia.

The presence of minorities on national territory invoking a singular path, in relation to the hegemonic national narrative, has been a common feature of European history. In the 20th century, the two world wars further worsened the position of these groups, their sense of identity and the discrimination they faced. After 1945, the Latin, French-speaking, Germanic and Slavic worlds were traversed by the phenomenon of displaced persons or forced migrants. During which time, 55 million individuals crossed the borders of nations, and a geno- and ethnocide of the Jews had just brutally struck a linguistic minority that was well established in all the countries of Central and Eastern Europe: a *Yiddishland* that totalled 11 million people in 1939.

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Although the forced displacement of populations - from the Greeks of Asia Minor to the Germans of Silesia or the Sudetenland, to the Italians of Istria and Dalmatia - accentuated the cultural homogeneity of nation-states, these processes multiplied traumatic re-acculturation experiences, in which schools were a major player. Schoolchildren of both Alsace, whose inhabitants have been exposed to three successive changes in the language of schooling in the space of three generations, and Alto Adige/South Tyrol, a peripheral region of northern Italy bordering Austria faced this experience. The alternation of political upheavals has often made the (re)annexed populations the bearers of a conflicting and demanding memory, which is difficult to dilute in the fixed 'narrative of origins' to which the writing of the school history of the previous century referred. It is a time of disenchantment, of resentment, and of hope to overcome them. The horizon of a European citizenship, pointed out at The Hague by Winston Churchill barely two years after the end of the war, also intercepts the need to overcome the seeds of new internal conflicts.

3. Decentralisation, decolonisation and democratisation: three challenges for the 'national narrative'

Long before the process of European integration promoted the notions of 'subsidiarity' or 'regional policy' on the continent's political agenda; respect for cultural diversity was a condition for the return to democracy in Western Europe. Their composite nature and the memory of a murderous past led countries such as Germany, Italy and Belgium to constitutionalise the protection of local autonomies and cultural specificities, and to progressively widen the scope of their application. As demonstrated in the case of Italy, progress was slow due to the delay in the implementation of the constitutional rules on the creation of the regions as political entities (with competences, destined to increase at the end of the century, in the educational sphere), from 1946 to 1970!

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School policy is a particularly sensitive area for the expansion of this domain. At the time of the Cold War, the urgency was to form coherent civic entities, however ideological divisions stifled temporarily localist claims and made separatism a taboo subject. In most countries, the reiteration of a linear historical narrative is used as a fundamental vehicle for civic education and ideological advocacy. However, the politicisation of the theme of autonomy does not take long in exerting an influence on the field of education. With important discrepancies between confederal, federal or centralist state formations, autonomy progressively creates the conditions for an identification between democracy and respect for identities, and later for the legal recognition of curricula that puts minorities in the foreground.

However, the inclusion of these demands in the schooling system appears extremely differentiated and contrasted. Generally speaking, in the anti-authoritarian context of the 1970s, it benefited from the evolution of history teaching towards the criticism of monolithic narratives, linear chronologies and the primacy of politics, in the sense of valuing the relationship with the territory and with personal experience.

Between 1975-1978, for example, the evolution towards democracy in Spain took place in the name of recognition of the autonomous communities' right to provide separate forms of education. A few years earlier, decolonisation was already in the process of calling into question the validity of national narratives capable of imposing, beyond the European continent, the myth of a common genealogy ('our ancestors the Gauls...'); in the same way, the heritage of an 'internal colonisation', which would have suffocated the cultural diversity of nation-states, was denounced in France at the end of the 1960s; while Belgium was experiencing - under the pressure of the student movement - an affirmation of the autonomist claims of its linguistic communities.

'Nations within nations' often emerge in public discourse and make demands through recognition and linguistic rights. Nations such as the Sámi in Norway, Sweden, and Finland; the Inuit in Greenland who were rendered invisible and peripheral; the Catalans and Basques in Spain; or the actors of a cultural renaissance, such as the Bretons or Corsicans in France; are often the object of political repression. In multicultural empires - such as Great Britain - the phenomenon also manifests itself in the form of a rediscovery, strongly asserting their plurinational character. The autonomy of Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, were negotiated by reinforcing the subnational elements of education, which centres on the memory of their marginalisation in the official narrative. In the Italian context, you can find an analogous phenomenon where non-native populations settled on the margins of the country's borders, such as in Valle d'Aosta, on the borders of Yugoslavia and in Alto Adige/South Tyrol, are not only given the right to a language, but also to a specific history curriculum,

whose contents oppose the unitary State with a critical - or indifferent - gaze.

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4. The issue of minorities in a more integrated and expanded Europe

The road to European unity will indicate, more clearly, the direction: a slow dissociation of cultural identity from its old established base, the nation, and its borders. In the journey from the Single European Act (1984) to the Maastricht Treaty (1992), the road to political integration coincides with a move away from a monocultural definition of nations. The correlative emphasis on the local level and macro-regional solidarities has diminished the role of borders, inviting the valorisation of cultural diversity within historical nations. From the birth of the Committee of the Regions (1993) as a consultative body of the EU, to the signing - on the initiative of the Council of Europe - of the European Charter for Minority Languages (1992), sub-national entities are increasingly appearing as legitimate actors in education policies.

In territories that had barely been freed from the grip of ideology, the role of cultural identity had been confiscated by the only authorised utopia. The powers that be had alternately played the cards of nationalism and instrumental use of inter-community divisions. Some even going so far as to conceal historical conflicts, which were irreducible to the paradigm of the class struggle.

During this time, the initial attention to linguistic diversity is opened to the diversity of particular memories. Article 8(g) of the Convention calls on States to "*make arrangements to ensure the teaching of the history and the culture which is reflected by the regional or minority language*". At the same time, this historical gap reveals the depth of the divisions. For example, the slowness of the process of ratification of the Charter and the choice of countries such as France not to comply is an indicator of a difference of perception. If the Charter's issue is essentially limited to linguistic rights, the legitimacy of the notion of "minorities" - reaffirmed with the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1995) - seems to oppose the continent's legal cultures.

Almost simultaneously however, other phenomena of a different nature - from the intensification of migratory flows to the resurgence of particular memories, well evoked in the French case by Pierre Nora in his *Lieux de mémoire*^[5] - will make the taking into account of minority narratives a topical issue. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was another powerful catalyst in this sense. In territories that had barely been freed from the grip of ideology, the role of cultural identity had been confiscated by the only authorised utopia. The powers that be had alternately played the cards of nationalism and instrumental use of inter-community divisions. Some even going so far as to conceal historical conflicts, which were irreducible to the paradigm of the class struggle.

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After the fall of the Wall, the issues of cultural identity and ethno-cultural fractures within nations resurfaced with a burning, sometimes violent topicality, of which the outbreak of the conflict in former Yugoslavia was the first test. Recognising the multi-ethnic character of the territories of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, and of a number of states of the former USSR that gained independence in 1991, brings the question of the forced transfer of populations after 1945 back into the debate (but also the specificity of the genocide and the identity awareness of the Jews and Roma). In a radically new context, the traces of the multicultural heritage of Central and Eastern Europe are reappearing. The recognition of minorities, at the end of the Cold War, became a precondition for a return to the rule of law.

The Council of Europe is a major stakeholder and guardian of this transition^[6]; in the spring of 1989, it was the first major transnational institution to open up to the principle of enlargement to the ex-communist world.

Moreover, from Italy to Great Britain, the last decade of the 20th century saw a proliferation of decentralisation and devolution of powers. These trends - sustained by the rise of regionalist or autonomist movements on the electoral scene - seem to derive their legitimacy from both the advances of the federalist project at the European level and the principles of self-determination at work in the territories of the former Soviet Empire. The 'return of the nations' on the wave of the collapse of the Soviet empire, the integrating dynamic brought about by the prospect of the Maastricht Treaty, and the affirmation of a 'Europe of the regions' (and of local identities), are intertwined phenomena, despite the obvious contradictions between them.

5. The contradictions of the 1990s

Even when seen from the point of view of the main priorities of history teaching, the consequences of the crisis of the Yalta equilibria

contain clear tensions between antagonistic tendencies. On the one hand - and as an aftershock of the return of ethnic violence in the Balkans - the memory of persecutions and genocides is seen as essential for educational systems. The right of the 'defeated' in history, and of denied or discriminated cultures, to see their heritage perpetuated in school narratives is claimed, and then solemnly recognised by the representatives of the State. On the other hand, the crisis of the great ideological narratives (and of the Soviet system in the first place) is accompanied by the rehabilitation - in the East as in the West - of an identity-based use of history. Forms of 'regional nationalism', or sub-nationalism, the purpose of which seems to consist in retracing the path once traced by the old *nation-building* projects^[7].

Therefore, when the communitisation of the education system in Belgium was completed in 1989, putting an end to any ideal of unity guaranteed by the authority of the central state, the measure, far from encouraging the interpenetration of narratives, accelerated the crystallisation of two adjacent narratives, 'Flemish' and 'Walloon'. The affirmation of localist or even independence movements such as the Northern League in northern Italy and the emergence of a debate on the federal reform of the constitution led to the emergence, in Italy in the 1990s, of the idea of giving a stable place in education to history, idioms and local identities. In the case of the autonomous communities of Spain, on the other hand, the progress in the decentralisation of the educational curriculum led (particularly in Catalonia, Galicia and the Basque Country) to the codification of singular narratives, which amplified and legitimised independence movements.

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Elsewhere, the picture seems to diverge significantly from these centrifugal trends. This is particularly the case for the former colonial empires that found themselves in a crisis of identity and prestige. The rewriting of primary school curricula - during the second term of the Mitterrand presidency (1983-1984) - the reaction against the experiences of a 'new history', emancipatory and non-chronological, maintains the nostalgia of a unitary, stable, and reassuring narrative. In 1984, the United Kingdom's government opposition too called for history to be more firmly anchored in national mythology. In both countries, the highest authorities spoke out in support of the function of history teaching as the cement of national identity. These were the precursors of a rhetoric that spread throughout the continent.

Indeed, the end of the millennium and the beginning of the 2000s were marked, in a large number of countries, by the multiplication of measures supposed to respond to codification and centralisation of the fragmentation of the historical consciousness of national communities. In the Netherlands and Denmark, the debate on a 'national ideal' in the teaching of history foreshadowed a renationalisation of its basis - even if it meant causing a split between the political demand for the teaching of the subject and the position of experts, who insisted on the value of '*historical thinking*'. In Sweden, this trend was supported by placing fundamental 'national values' and civic education at the top of the curriculum^[8]. The crisis of the European project (signified by the failure of the French and Dutch referendums on the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty in 2005) reinforced such trends. Nevertheless, one should beware of simplifications, as in some cases the tendency towards centralist 'normalisation' and the diversification of narratives coincide and even seem to feed each other. For example, the development of a National Curriculum (NC) in England in 1991 resulted in the codification of the equivalent 'Welsh' and 'Scottish' curricula, which was marked by a symmetrical desire to trace a reassuring continuity between instances of autonomy and ancient history^[9]. In Spain at the end of the 1990s, the pluralisation of narratives and curricula led to a rather drastic backlash as Aznar's government attempted to re-impose a unitary ideal, which centred on the traditional landmarks of the monarchical and Catholic heritage^[10]. In the context of the democratic transition of Eastern Europe, the fundamental exercise of rewriting curricula and textbooks, which began in 1990, reveals two contradictory trends. The first trend encourages the reactivation of particular memories and recovers some elements of the cultural pluralism of the former Central European empires. The criteria for accession to the European Union, in view of the 2004 and 2007-2009 enlargements, explicitly include respect for cultural diversity. This will notably allow the emergence, in contemporary Romania, of differentiated curricula in 'minority history and traditions', aimed at the 14 recognised national minorities. In the field of memory and critical examination of the past, the emergence of international forums, such as IHRA^[11], represents another factor of transnational influence, which makes the remembrance of discrimination and the fight against racism a new federating element of history teaching programmes. The heritage of the Jewish minority thus found its place in the school narrative of post-totalitarian Poland^[12].

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In Poland, Romania and the Czech Republic, the new problematic nature of the history curriculum projects a multicultural vision of national identity into the past. However, in a contradictory manner, these openings coexist with the desire to project national pride to the

rest of the world, which had been previously damaged by the Cold War powerplays. At the end of the 2000s, the pendulum was clearly swinging towards the rehabilitation of monocultural narratives and a process of re-nationalisation: a phenomenon that was clearly sustained – in Poland, Russia and Hungary – by the evolution of internal political balances and by the deterioration of relations with the European Union.

Finally, it should be noted that during this contrasting period, regional differences were less and less the main issue in the ideological tensions surrounding school narratives. The contradictions between 'centre' and 'periphery' at the national level; the demands of the peripheries of the old colonial empires; and the demands of 'new' cultural minorities resulting from immigration were taking precedence.

As Françoise Lanthauve reminds us^[13], the 'taking into account of diversity' must be understood as the sediment of revision and codification work undertaken, from the 1950s onwards, in a transnational universe – and to which countries in search of a legitimate normative framework are conforming with increasing attention, after the crisis of the ideologies and educational utopias of the 20th century.

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The propelling role played by supranational institutions, over the long term, in taking into account a positive conception of cultural diversity is indisputable – although the explicit commitment to the inclusion of sub-national destinies and narratives in curricula dates back only relatively recently. Recommendation R (99)2 of the Committee of Ministers to the Member States of the Council of Europe (1999) is an expression of this: it calls for respect at secondary school level for "national and minority identity nationally and regionally".

The concept was reiterated in the Recommendation "on history teaching in twenty-first-century Europe" (2001)^[14], and is also expressed in the definition (2006 and 2018) of "key competences for lifelong learning" by the Council of the EU.

A positive attitude towards communication in the mother tongue involves a disposition to critical and constructive dialogue, an appreciation of aesthetic qualities and a willingness to strive for them, and an interest in interaction with others. This implies an awareness of the impact of language on others and a need to understand and use language in a positive and socially responsible manner.^[15]

6. In conclusion: what future for minority narratives in Europe?

While the rehabilitation of local cultures can lead to an exclusionary, inward-looking, or provincial project, which places a new self-centred narrative at the centre of the discourse^[16], the question that arises is increasingly about the nature and boundaries of the diversity that deserves to be recognised in the history classroom. The time is ripe for 'competing memories', a concept that is gaining ground in this context, and which once again (particularly in France) allows history teaching to be invited into domestic political debates, or into presidential campaigns. The presidential elections of April 2022 were no exception as the nation was used as a narrative tool and was the subject of both symbolic attacks, and a nostalgic reactivation of old idols.

In conclusion, the presence of regions in the current debate presents a considerable diversity, which is only accentuated by certain underlying trends. On the one hand, the increasing decentralisation of school management and didactic programming (which expands the scope of experimentation from a theoretical point of view) and curricula that are less restrictive and less focused on a cognitive ideal. On the other hand, you find the desire of political decision-makers to react to the symptoms of social disintegration by 'renationalising' the content and objectives of education. In this respect, the Swedish case cited at the beginning is again emblematic; while it proclaims, through the adopted curriculum of 2022, the need to encourage the development of the Swedish Sami 'identity' as a people, it stipulates the school's duty to encourage all pupils to 'adhere to the common values of our society'^[17]. Even where it has evolved – in the autonomous regions of Italy, or among the nations that make up the British political space – the affirmation of new narratives face other difficulties. These include the lack of adequate training networks and, more generally, the obstacles placed in the way of the institutionalisation of contradictory or shifting local memories and demands for recognition. The persistent difficulties in implementing, in the case of Italy, the constitutional reforms that pave the way for the transmission of regional cultures in schools can serve as an example. In Sardinia, a region with a strong autonomist political tradition, these provisions were only transcribed into the regional legislative arsenal in 2018. Even in an apparently favourable context, their codification has been laborious and slow.

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The experience of the French regions also bears witness to the resistance to a pluralist opening up of the national ideal. This resistance is due to the inertia of administrative systems, to the symbolic authority of national reference points, but also to the diversity of points of view that remain, on the ground, regarding the segment of this heritage that should be valued^[18]. This is not to mention the fact that the diversification of referents must now be accommodated by other differences, in an interconnected school environment, inhabited - on a continental scale - by the question of the integration of memories with pupils from non-European immigration. Above all, it is a world that must articulate the enhancement of local specificities with the construction of harmonious relations with the majority group, in a Europe that is in the process of reconnecting not only with its differences, but also with the heritage of its unhealed wounds, its prejudices and its desire for revenge.

[1] Skolverket, *Läroplan för grundskolan, förskoleklassen och fritidshemmet - Lgr22*, Stockholm, 2022.

[2] I am referring here to the national curriculum, not to the 'Sámi School' itself (*Sameskola*), which is present in the municipalities where this minority is most present, and where teaching takes place in Sámi and Swedish. On the difficulties of integrating Sámi issues into the curriculum in practice, see C. Svonni, *At the Margin of Educational Policy: Sámi/Indigenous Peoples in the Swedish National Curriculum 2011*, Creative Education, 6, 2015.

[3] 2,090,503 people by 31 December 2021, according to the National Institute of Statistics (<https://www.scb.se/>).

[4] The only available statistics on this subject, on the use of the right to the 'original language' (*moderspråk*) at school, indicate a total figure of around 30%. M. Parkvall, *Språken, den nya mångfalden*, Göteborg-Stockholm, Riksbankens jubileumsfond, 2019.

[5] *Les lieux de mémoire* (under the direction of Pierre Nora), voll. 1-3, Paris, Gallimard, 1984-1992.

[6] Resolution 917 (1989): Special Guest Status with the Parliamentary Assembly, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 11 May 1989

[7] The state of play drawn up in 1991 by the first intergovernmental conference on the teaching of history in a reunified Europe bears witness to the transversal nature of the 'return of the nation' in the curricula (*History Teaching in the New Europe*, Bruges, 9-13 December 1991).

[8] P. Colla, *The quest for a Swedish ethos: an invariant in curriculum reform?* in 'Nordics', *Reforming Education in the Nordic Countries*, 36, 2018, p. 11-26.

[9] Robert Phillips, *History Teaching, Cultural Restorationism and National Identity in England and Wales*, 'Curriculum Studies', 4:3, 1996.

[10] A. Lozada, R. Máiz, *Devolution and involution: De-federalization politics through educational policies in Spain (1996- 2004)*, "Regional & Federal Studies", December 2005.

[11] *International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance*, founded in 1998.

[12] Ewa Tartakowski, *Jews as a touchstone of national history teaching in Central and Eastern Europe since 1945* in *Histoires nationales et narrations minoritaires* (edited by Piero S. Colla, Bénédicte Girault and Sébastien Ledoux), Lille, Septentrion, 2023 (in progress).

[13] Françoise Lanthau, *La prise en compte de la diversité: émergence d'un nouveau cadre normatif?* in "Les Dossiers des Sciences de l'Éducation", 26, 2011, p. 117-132.

[14] Council of Europe, Rec(2001)15.

[15] "Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning" (2018/C 189/01).

[16] The definition of a historical ideal for schools in Flanders, for example, was on the agenda when the new regional government was formed in 2019 (Flemish Government, *Regeerakkoord 2019-2024*, Brussels, 2019).

[17] Skolverket, *Läroplan för grunskolan*.

[18] The contradictions of Alsace, where a possibility of teaching local history was created as early as the 1980s with the introduction of the discipline "Regional language and culture", are emblematic in this sense. Cf. P. Erhard, *Regional language and culture teaching in Alsace from 1982 to 2022: To what extent can language education and history education be synonyms?* dans *History Education at the Edge of the Nation. Political Autonomy, Educational Reforms, and Memory-shaping in European Periphery* (ed. Piero S. Colla and A. Di Michele), New York and London, Palgrave, 2023 (in press).

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