

# History Education at the Edge of the Nation: Political Autonomy, Educational Reforms, and Memory-shaping in European Periphery

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**Publisher:** Springer International, New York

ISBN: 9783031272455

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*DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2223-0386/2023/n30a12>*

## Brief summary

The cast of contributors for this book is quite intimidating and mouth-watering since their biographies, though brief, read almost like a Who is Who in History Education in Europe! All 17 contributors possess colourful qualifications on the teaching and learning of history, thereby making them more than appropriate to interrogate issues around the subject. It leaves any reader looking forward to delve into the contents of the book! The book itself confronts a contested but key topic as it also explores the teaching of the history of national minorities in schools. The pertinent subject of national minorities is approached from a cross-border perspective, since the contributors come from different parts of Europe. In a way the book is acting as ‘the voice of the voiceless’, since national minorities are usually not given any meaningful coverage on such a wide scale as done by this book. Topics around national minorities are usually classified under controversial issues in history due to the emotions, sensitivity, and debates that they evoke and ferment among history learners, teachers, and scholars thereby making them left unexplored. It is such a topic that this book chose to confront, and it was done effectively. The sections in the book comprehensively discuss the subject under consideration. The literary style of the book is quite appropriate. The language used throughout the book enables the reader to trace the essence of the title. The headings and sub-headings of the sections capture a brief overview of the key aspects

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covered.

## **Title**

The title of the book is quite captivating and thought-provoking: *History Education at the Edge of the Nation: Political Autonomy, Educational Reforms, and Memory-shaping in European Periphery*. It leaves the reader spellbound, wondering as to what it means for a subject to be at the edge. The title therefore captures the attention of the reader thereby ensuring that they cannot wait to read the whole book. The authors were very careful in choosing the wording for their title considering that it is such a concise title for such a thick volume.

## **Introduction**

The book was given a fitting introduction titled ‘Denationalising and Reinventing Historical Education — In a Time of History Wars’ which unpacks the complicated relationship between political conflict, social memory, and history teaching in schools from a cross-border perspective. Interestingly, the topic has already attracted a significantly broad corpus of literature. The introduction is quite suitable for the book as it captures the salient themes covered in the sections.

## **Sections**

The book is divided into three sections which converge on common themes around identity politics, educational governance, and the history curriculum (Part I); competing narratives in history schoolbooks, and teaching arrangements (Part II); and managing complexity and multiperspectivity in the history classroom (Part III). The sections are further subdivided thereby making it easy for the reader to follow the themes under consideration. The enduring thrust in the book is on the educational reference to a shared past which is analysed from different perspectives ranging from the textbooks, debates on curriculum reform, and the original narrative solutions resulting from the issue of recognition of otherness. What strikes the reader is the way all the main headings and subheadings are phrased throughout the book. This was consistently done in a way that seeks to capture the reader’s attention to attract them to read the book. The different issues highlighted in the wordy headings and subheadings were then meticulously unpacked throughout the sections in a way that leaves the reader spellbound. Throughout the plethora of issues discussed in the sections

of the book, history education is the golden thread that permeates through the fabric of the diverse issues concocted, helping to neatly and firmly tie them together. The enduring and consistent reference to history education and different curricula is the fortress upon which the sections are firmly premised. History education is intricately fashioned as the tool that sanitises the 'nation-building' role of the curriculum and the lens through which the whole book is fashioned.

The sections are illuminated by the inclusion of content on the political drama in the Balkan region in Part I under the heading 'Challenges of Teaching History for the Bosniak Ethnic Community/National Minority in the Republic of Serbia within the Post-Conflict Setting.' Apart from discussing the critical role of history education, the sections also include critical details in content. This shows the integral role of content in the subject of history and reinforces the claim that history may never be devoid of content no matter how much educators try to emphasise the critical role of equipping learners with the skills of 'proto historians'. Part II stresses the importance of textbooks in the teaching and learning of history. This is a key inclusion in the book, considering the integral role of textbooks in the teaching and learning of history.

The hidden hand of the state in determining the history curricula with the intention to saturate the young minds ideologically is also exposed. Pierre Nora actually characterised school curricula using the befitting metaphor of "national novel" and this has been confirmed in different contexts in Europe. This shows how the book clearly confirms the well-known narrative of the state's use of history teaching for an instrumentation value in most parts of the world. This is confirmed through a concerted effort by one of the contributors (PS Colla) to demystify the sacred narrative of school history that is already contested due to its presentation of the nation state as the main character and autonomous community whose culture determines the form of school history that is served to the learners. Despite the existence of other stakeholders in the school history matrix, admittedly, the nation-state is the most important player.

The issue of national minorities is given coverage due to its sensitivity in European history discourses and it took centre stage in the 1990s after the incorporation into the European Union (EU) of former communist countries with their host of national minorities. However, the recent withdrawal in September 2022 of Russia's membership of the Council of Europe, a key strategic partner of EU may have thrown spanners in the works towards the EU's thrust to consider national minorities as being of strategic relevance. The determination to use history teaching as an antidote for stereotypical discrimination among learners became more relevant during regional conflicts in Chechnya, Georgia, and

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Nagorno-Karabakh but also fermented questions on the infallibility of national narratives together with their unacceptance of different persuasions and interpretations. Apparently, history teaching was supposed to impart tolerance among learners which would in turn spread beyond the confines of the school campuses.

In discussing the teaching of history in schools in South Tyrol from 1945 to the present day with a thrust to move from the promotion of identity to the building of a common history, Andrea Di Michele convincingly presents the instrumental role of education in the regime's attempt to strengthen Italian-ness in the northern borderlands. This appeared to draw similarities with the Habsburg Empire where schools were used to institutionalise the national struggle (how the author and editors missed the wrong spelling of Habsburg, spelt as Hasburg, potentially leaves many readers confused). The teaching of history epitomised fascism as the focal point of Italian history thereby proving the danger that arises if history is abused by the state. However, the collapse of fascism in 1943 led to the introduction of an education for German-speaking people within the Italian system. The post-World War II era witnessed a bitter conflict over contestations about the history curriculum. The author (Andrea Di Michele) did well in unpacking the reasons for the bitter confrontations surrounding the teaching of history through a judicious chronicling of the programme followed in the teaching of the subject in schools.

In a discussion of history teaching in the 'intermediate' state of Luxemburg, Machteld Venken demonstrated how trainee teachers understood the role of history teaching in giving meaning to the supposedly nationalised space in the country. The trainee teachers apparently turned the history classrooms into a metaphorical laboratory in the 1950s–1970s that went on to generate novel ideas and experiments on how best to teach their nation's history. The presentation was covered so well that it shows the importance of adequately preparing history teachers. In Serbia, history teaching is presented as being crucial for developing critical thinking skills and nurturing and nourishing national identity. The subject has therefore been made compulsory for all learners in the country as if to reinforce its integral status in the school curriculum as part of subjects deemed of national importance. Interestingly, Serbia respects the rights of national minorities to the extent that they (minorities) are taught in their mother tongue and have textbooks written in their own languages.

Part III begins with Anna-Lill Drugge and Björn Norlin highlighting the complexities in teaching practice in contemporary Swedish classrooms for history trainee teachers. The possibilities and challenges in teaching about the history and civics of minorities in an informed and sensitive way is brought to the forefront. The main challenge is seen as

the lack of instructional material, since there are no textbooks that cover such topics in an initiated manner. The authors also expose the complexities around the navigation of classroom discussions when the potential risk of unearthing stereotypes and prejudices acts as a constraint. This confirms the challenges commonly faced by history teachers in dealing with controversial topics due to their emotive and sensitive nature.

## **Conclusion**

The conclusion of this thoroughly impressive book presents the conundrum faced by Alsace at the end of the seventeenth century, since it was caught up in the midst of the ambiguity presented by French and German construction processes. The problem of articulating a specific regional narrative linked to the Germanic area and the national French narrative proved quite insurmountable due to the engendered debates which remained unresolved to date. The book concludes with an observation that Alsatian has become both an object of research and of teaching at the University of Strasbourg, thereby setting the stage for a way to change history. This appears to prove that the belief in the use of German and French in the region may also be questioned from certain angles. However, the sense behind the teaching and learning of Alsatian is also questioned despite the normalisation it offers for the Alsatian situation. This appears to be a fitting conclusion to the book, given all the success stories highlighted throughout the sections where the rights and cultures of national minorities are respected. The conclusion appears to reflect that although considerable ground has been covered in the pursuit of honouring national minorities through the teaching and learning of their histories in schools, there are some grey areas to be covered. The authors were able to consistently stick to the narrative highlighted in the title up to its logical conclusion. The book is of great service to the history teaching and learning constituency!