

Regional Republicans: The Alsatian Socialists and the Politics of Primary Schooling in Alsace, 1918-1939

Alison Carrol

Abstract: This article deals with political discussions over the place of language and religion in interwar Alsatian primary schools through the lens of the local Socialist Party (SFIO). After Alsace's return to France in 1918, primary schools became emblematic of the problematic process of reintegrating the recovered province, and parties from across the political spectrum engaged in discussions about the appropriate language of instruction and whether Alsatian schoolchildren should receive religious education. For the Alsatian Socialists, the answer lay in the broader reform needed to ease the province's reintegration into France, and was associated with their self-proclaimed republicanism. Thus the party argued for secularity, which would place the province on the same terrain as all other parts of France, and for bilingualism, which would allow the retention of Alsatian regional cultures. In so doing, the Alsatian SFIO reveal that not everyone in interwar France associated regional language with religion, or believed that republican ideas needed to come packaged in the French language. Moreover, they offer an insight into the development of regional political cultures and into the varieties of republicanism that existed at the level of grassroots politics in interwar France.

Les socialistes alsaciens et la politique de l'enseignement primaire en Alsace, 1918-1939

Cet article étudie les débats ayant trait à la place de la langue et de la religion à l'école primaire tels qu'ils sont perçus par le parti socialiste alsacien (SFIO) dans l'entre-deux-guerres. Après le retour de l'Alsace à la France en 1918, l'école primaire devient l'emblème des difficultés d'intégration que rencontre la région. Les partis politiques de tout bord engagent alors des débats sur la langue à utiliser à l'école ainsi sur que la place de l'éducation religieuse pour les jeunes Alsaciens. Pour les socialistes alsaciens, la réponse se situe au niveau de la large réforme nécessaire à une réintégration souple à la France. C'est pourquoi le parti préconise la laïcité, qui place l'Alsace sur un pied d'égalité avec le reste de la France, et le bilinguisme, qui contribue à la pérennité d'une culture alsacienne régionale. A travers leur participation à la politique de l'enseignement primaire, la SFIO alsacienne souligne les différentes variétés de républicanisme populaire dans la France de l'entre-deux-guerres.

In May 1926, the Prefect of the Bas-Rhin completed a report on a recent school strike in the town of Hilsenheim in northern Alsace. There, fifteen families had failed to send their daughters back to school after the Easter holidays. This had rapidly been reported by concerned local administrators as a protest against French legislation in the recovered province of Alsace, where the government's attempts to introduce the French language and

Alison Carrol is Lecturer in Modern European History at Birkbeck College, University of London. In 2008, she completed her PhD at the University of Exeter, and in 2010 her thesis was awarded the Prix Etienne Baluze in European Local History. She is currently working on a book about the return of Alsace to France (1918-1939).

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secular education into primary schools had provoked widespread resistance amongst the region's rural communities. The previous year, almost three quarters of primary schoolchildren in the Alsatian countryside had missed school in protest at the planned introduction of inter-confessional schools into the province. Wishing to avoid further unrest, the worried French government requested that the Prefect investigate the matter further, and, to widespread relief, he reported that the incident had not been a strike at all. Rather, in 1926 the province switched from German to French term dates, meaning that the school year finished in the summer rather than the spring, and the families concerned had not realized that the transfer would be taking place.¹

This incident offers some insight into the problems that arose when the French government attempted to reintegrate the "lost provinces" of Alsace and Lorraine after their return to French rule in 1918.² Yet, the government's readiness to interpret this mistake as resistance is equally revealing of the clash that reintegration provoked. This clash was viewed by French officials, and has since been treated in the historical literature, as the result of opposing French-centralist and Alsatian-regionalist visions of Alsace's place within the French nation.³ Discussions over education, however, afford a glimpse into the broad range of local responses to the province's reintegration. In Alsace, parties across the political spectrum treated education as emblematic of the problematic process of reintegrating the province into France. And, all parties engaged with the politics of primary schooling. The Catholic regionalist right led the 1925 strike movement and launched a series of demands for the retention of religious education and German lessons in the region's schools. On the left, meanwhile, local republicans represented by the Socialist Party (Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière, or SFIO) also demanded bilingualism in Alsatian primary schools. But, the SFIO stressed that this should be combined with secularity as the basis for broader republican reform in the province. This analysis contrasted with many of the demands of the Catholic right, with which the province has been more commonly associated.⁴ But, it also clashed with the attitudes of republican administrators in Paris. Through their response to the politics of primary schooling, the Alsatian SFIO offer an insight into the varieties of republicanism that existed at the level of grassroots politics in interwar France.

Republicanism in Alsace had long distinguished itself by its commitment to regional culture, and particularly to regional language. At the Revolution, the region's literary societies stressed the compatibility of the German language and attachment to France.⁵ This

¹ Archives Départementales du Bas-Rhin (hereafter ADBR), 98AL 661, Préfet du Bas-Rhin, Strasbourg, May 12, 1926. On the strikes of 1925, see ADBR, 98AL 326, Commissariat Général de la République to Président du Conseil, Mar. 20, 1925.

² On the problems of reintegrating Alsace, see Paul Smith, "From the Reich to the Republic: Alsace 1918-1925," in *France: Nations and Regions*, ed. Michael Kelly and Rosemary Bock (Southampton, 1993), 182-189; Samuel Goodfellow, "From Germany to France? Interwar Alsatian Identity 1918-1920," *French History* 7 (1993): 450-71; Stefan Fisch, "Assimilation und Eigenständigkeit: Zur Wiedervereinigung des Elsaß mit dem Frankreich der Dritten Republik nach 1918," *Historisches Jahrbuch der Görres-Gesellschaft* 117 (1997): 111-128. This article is concerned only with Alsace, but on the return of annexed Lorraine (reintegrated into France as the department of the Moselle), see Carolyn Grohmann, "Problems of Reintegrating Annexed Lorraine into France, 1918-1925," (Ph.D. diss, University of Stirling, 2000) & Louisa Zanoun, "Interwar Politics in a French Border Region: the Moselle in the period of the Popular Front, 1934-1938," (Ph.D. diss, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2009).

³ See Joseph Rossé et al., *Das Elsass von 1870-1932*, 4 vols. (Colmar, 1936-1938); Pierre Zind, *Elsass-Lothringen. Alsace-Lorraine. Une Nation Interdite 1870-1940* (Paris, 1979); Bernard Schwengler, *Le Syndrome Alsacien, d'Lettsche?* (Bar le Duc, 1989).

⁴ Christian Baechler, *Le Parti Catholique Alsacien 1890-1939. Du Reichsland à la République Jacobine* (Paris, 1982).

⁵ David A. Bell, "Nation Building and Cultural Particularism in Eighteenth Century France: The Case of Alsace," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 21 (1988): 472-490, 485-6.

stance was adopted by subsequent republican groups, and, when a local section of the German Socialist Party (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, or SPD) was formed in the province, its first Alsatian leaders embraced the symbols of French republicanism but combined this with use of the German language.⁶ During the years of annexation, this served to maintain links with France and to foster Alsatian republican political cultures. In 1918, the province was restored to French rule and the local SPD voted unanimously to join the SFIO the following year. Again, local leaders adopted the symbols and rhetoric of French republicanism and proclaimed their attachment to the French republican tradition.⁷ This time, however, their aim was to facilitate the integration of Alsace into the French Republic. The new SFIO Federations in Alsace thought of themselves as republicans, and associated themselves with the republican tradition. Throughout the interwar years, the party articulated their republicanism in the German language, which was the language of the majority of the population. Equally, it saw no contradiction between use of the German language and their French republicanism. The experience of nineteenth century French rule and of annexation had fostered an understanding amongst Alsatian Socialist leaders that French patriotism was compatible with the German language.

This stance clashed with the attitudes of successive governments after the province's return to France in 1918. While late eighteenth and nineteenth century governments had translated laws and decrees into German for dissemination in Alsace, the Third Republic had attempted to spread the French language throughout the country's regions.⁸ Having been subjects of Germany since 1871, the Alsatian population had missed out on these years of French nation-building.⁹ The result was that the stress placed by the French administration upon use of the French language came as a surprise to all political parties in Alsace after 1918. For the French government, on the other hand, Alsace's proximity to Germany, combined with the existence of an Alsatian separatist movement funded by German finances, meant that the dissemination of the French language in the recovered provinces became the central political priority of the governments of the interwar years.¹⁰

A second problem associated with the German language was the connection made in the Third Republic between regional language and the Catholic Church. For the republicans of the early Third Republic, the dissemination of the French language had served the additional function of reducing the influence of the Catholic clergy. The SFIO in Alsace took up the Radicals' anti-clerical position, and worked hard to eliminate religious instruction from Alsatian schools and to secure the introduction of separation of church and state into the recovered provinces. But, it did not adopt their stance on language. Instead, throughout the

⁶ David Allen Harvey, Constructing Class and Nationality in Alsace, 1830-1945 (DeKalb, 2001); Jean-Claude Richez, Léon Strauss, François Igersheim et Stéphane Jonas, Jacques Peirottes et le socialisme en Alsace: 1869-1935 (Strasbourg, 1989).

⁷ Alison Carrol, "Socialism and National Identity in Alsace from Reichsland to République, 1890-1921," European History Quarterly 40 (2010): 57-78.

⁸ On the language policies of the late eighteenth century, see David A. Bell, "Lingua Populi, Lingua Dei: Language, Religion, and the Origins of French Revolutionary Nationalism," The American Historical Review 100 (1995): 1403-1437, 1414. On regional language in the nineteenth century see Timothy Baycroft, Culture, Identity and Nationalism. French Flanders in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (Woodbridge, 2004) and on the Third Republic, see in particular, Eugen Weber, Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France 1870-1914 (Stanford, 1976) & Caroline Ford, Creating the Nation in Provincial France. Religion and Political Identity in Brittany (Princeton, 1993).

⁹ On this period in Alsace, see Detmar Klein, "Battleground of Cultures: 'Politics of Identities' and the National Question in Alsace under German Imperial Rule (1870-1914)" (Ph.D. diss., Royal Holloway, University of London, 2004); Dan. P. Silverman, Reluctant Union. Alsace- Lorraine and Imperial Germany 1871-1918 (London, 1972). On annexed Lorraine, see François Roth, La Lorraine annexée, Etude sur la présidence de Lorraine dans l'Empire allemand (1870-1918) (Nancy, 1976).

¹⁰ On the Alsatian separatists, see Philip Bankwitz, Alsatian Autonomist Leaders. 1919-1947 (Kansas, 1978)

interwar years the Alsatian SFIO sought to disassociate the German language and the Catholic Church, and presented German as the language of regional republicanism. This had important implications for the party's attitude towards schooling, as Socialist leaders argued that German, as the majority language of the province's population, should have an important place in the school curriculum. This stance was the result of historical circumstances which had fostered a strong commitment to regional culture and language. For the left, it allowed the development of a distinctly regional republicanism based on the assumption that republican ideas did not need to be packaged in the French language.

In this way, the centrality of language and religion to discussions over primary schooling meant that education in interwar Alsace acquired acute political importance. This was compounded by existing understandings of the role of education in nation-building. In nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe, states had turned their attention to the construction of national systems of education as part of their efforts to forge a national culture and spread the national language.¹¹ In the lively debate on nation-building in France, scholars have assigned primary schools a pivotal role in the creation of identities, the dissemination of the French language and the adoption of national values.¹² Alsace, with its complex political associations with France and Germany, represents a unique case among French regions. But, as Stephen Harp has shown, primary schools in the province were nevertheless mobilized as part of late nineteenth century attempts to create an imagined national community in Alsace.¹³ This function continued after 1918, when the French administration was keen to alter the system instituted under German rule, which allowed for religious education and classes in German. In Paris, this situation appeared untenable within the secular French Republic. Within the province, responses varied. The resulting clash of expectations led the question of the region's primary school system to become the topic of contentious political debate throughout the interwar years.

This article is concerned with the response of the Socialist Party in Alsace to the question of primary schooling in interwar Alsace, and particularly with their analysis of language and religion. This represents a useful counterbalance to the better known history of the region's Catholic and autonomist right, but it also offers a critical example of the ways in which regional republicanism did not develop in a linear fashion in France. Rather, it was being honed and contested in response to a series of challenges throughout the interwar years. And in Alsace, the Socialists forged their own version of republicanism, which they identified with national ideology and which developed in response to the circumstances in the province. The first section of the article establishes the context of interwar discussions over primary schooling, tracing developments in education before 1918 and the status of the French and German languages in the province. It then addresses the relationship between

¹¹ See Robert Gildea's chapter "Hierarchies of Culture," in Gildea, *Barricades and Borders. Europe 1800-1914* (Oxford, 1987) & Abigail Green's chapter "Educating Patriots," in *Fatherlands: State-Building and Nationhood in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Cambridge, 2001).

¹² On the role of schooling in the process of nation-building, see Eugen Weber's influential analysis of the "modernization of rural France", which placed special emphasis on schools, where republican teachers spread the French language and republican values to children across the nation. Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*; especially his chapter "Civilizing in Earnest: Schools and Schooling." Recent work has nuanced this picture, highlighting the co-existence of the regional and national identities learned in school. See Jean-François Chanut, *L'École Républicaine et les petites patries, 1879-1940* (Paris, 1990); Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Education and Identity in Rural France: The Politics of Schooling* (Cambridge, 1996); Anne-Marie Thiesse, *Ils apprenaient la France* (Paris, 1997) & Thiesse, *La création des identités nationales* (Paris, 1999).

¹³ Stephen Harp, *Learning to be Loyal. Primary Schooling as Nation Building in Alsace and Lorraine, 1850-1940* (DeKalb, 1998). See also Roland Pfefferkorn, "L'Alsace-Moselle: un statut scolaire non-laïque", *Revue des Sciences Sociales* 38 (2007): 158-171; Jules Senger, *Bismarck chez Jules Ferry: le problème scolaire en Alsace et en Lorraine, le régime confessionnel, le bilinguisme* (Paris, 2001).

church and state and the development of electoral politics in the years after the return to France. Section two discusses how the Socialists' attitude towards language and religion affected the party's response to developments in education in the 1920s, as the new French government introduced programs to regulate schooling in Alsace. The final section discusses the SFIO's tactics in the 1930s, as the altered political context led to changes in the party's presentation of its program for education and an increased focus on religion. Throughout, the party demonstrated a regional sense of Frenchness that is revealing of the tensions and varieties of interwar French republicanism.

I

Alsatian primary schools presented a particular problem for the French government after 1918. Firstly, they had missed out on the changes made to the French system between 1870 and 1918, when education had been a fundamental plank in the republican platform of reform.¹⁴ In the 1880s, Prime Minister Jules Ferry's laws had made French primary education free, secular and compulsory, and Emile Combes' ministry had banned religious orders from teaching in 1904. The following year, the government abrogated the Napoleonic Concordat, instituting the separation of church and state in France. Moreover, in the years after 1870, primary schools had become an important means of spreading the French language in areas where Breton, Catalan, Corsican, Flemish or Basque dominated.¹⁵ As a result of these reforms, primary education became associated with the Republican manifesto of centralization, characterized by a standardized curriculum, uniform language and secularity.

Secondly, the German Reich had not modified the *Loi Falloux* of 1850, initially introduced by the French Second Republic to assure the primacy of religious education in France's primary schools. Having been untouched by the province's new rulers after 1870, this legislation remained in application in Alsace in 1918. The Empire's main project had been to make attendance at primary schools obligatory, and the Alsatian curriculum remained distinct from the various programs used in the other German states. The German administration did, however, maintain both the stress on religious instruction and the divisions between Catholic, Protestant and Jewish pupils. As a result, in 1918 when Alsace-Lorraine returned to French rule, the government was faced with a very different education system to that in place across the rest of the country.

The problems that these differences posed educational reformers were compounded by the distinctive linguistic situation in the province. On their arrival in Alsace, French administrators expressed their surprise at the widespread use of the German language. Most Alsatians spoke Alsatian dialect rather than high German, or Hochdeutsch, but, regional variations and the lack of a coherent written form, meant that German was habitually used in communication and in the press across the two Alsatian departments.¹⁶ This posed problems for the French government; as Paul Bastier, the sub-Prefect of Sélestat noted in 1925, "The main German claim on Alsace results from the Alsatians speaking German dialect. Therefore, in Alsace, the political problem is actually a linguistic problem."¹⁷ Such associations between Alsatian dialect and the German language and German national identity meant that the need to teach the Alsatians French took on an urgency that had not been shared

¹⁴ See Robert Gildea, "The Republican Church" in Gildea, *Education in Provincial France, 1800-1914. A Study of Three Departments* (Oxford, 1983).

¹⁵ Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 310-314.

¹⁶ Léon Strauss, "L'Alsace de 1918 à 1945- d'une libération à l'autre", in *La Presse en Alsace au XXe siècle*, ed. Hildegard Chatellier & Monique Mombert (Strasbourg, 2002).

¹⁷ ADBR, 286D 46, Sous-préfet de Sélestat to Préfet du Bas-Rhin, Oct. 29, 1925.

by earlier efforts to teach French to regional populations in Flanders, Brittany or Provence.¹⁸ Despite increases in French usage over the interwar years, by 1931, just 5.6 percent spoke only French and barely over half of Alsace's population spoke "some French," while 43.9 percent spoke only Alsatian dialect or German.¹⁹ A British diplomat stationed in Strasbourg in 1930 recorded his surprise that "everyone, even French officials, seemed to be speaking German."²⁰ Levels of French were still sufficiently low that when they were evacuated in 1939, children received a free French-German dictionary and French grammar book intended, according to an anonymous note in the file, to allow them to "learn French."²¹ Despite the relatively low levels of French usage in 1939, the introduction of the language had been a central component of the Alsatian policy of almost all interwar governments. Various administrations introduced a range of programs to promote the use of French, but concern over popular opinion in the province meant that governments proved reluctant to introduce a blanket policy.

The political importance of language in Alsace was closely connected to the question of religion. This served to affect the way in which language was approached by both administrators in Paris and by politicians in Alsace. Within the province, continued relations between church and state and the unusual provincial role of the clergy served as a point of distinction from the rest of France. Church and state had been formally separated in France in 1905, when Alsace had been under German rule. Separation had not been extended to Alsace, which retained the Napoleonic Concordat regulating the church-state relationship and state payment for church ministers. Given the importance of separation in the Third Republic, the question of the Concordat became a crucial issue in the province's reintegration. More than a decade after the province's return, one French periodical described the religious question as "the principal difficulty of the Alsatian problem."²² Additional problems arose as the Catholic clergy held an unusual political importance in Alsace. In 1871, sections of the Alsatian social and political elite had opted to leave the province for France, rather than become German citizens.²³ In their absence, many priests took on a political role. In 1874, eight of the eleven Alsatian deputies belonged to the Catholic party, a total which included the Bishop of Strasbourg and five other priests.²⁴ The clergy's political visibility declined slightly in the later years of annexation, but they resumed this position of leadership in 1918 as the ruling elite again left the province, this time for Germany. The province also contained a significant Protestant minority; Protestants made up 26.5 percent of the regional population in 1919, a figure that had dropped to 21.4 percent in 1931.²⁵ The province's largely urban Jewish population constituted 1.9 percent of the population in 1919, and 1.7 percent in 1931.²⁶

¹⁸ Laird Boswell notes, German was "the language of the enemy." Boswell, "Franco-Alsatian Conflict and the Crisis of National Sentiment during the Phony War," *Journal of Modern History* 71 (1999): 552-584, 583.

¹⁹ Rossé, Stürmel, Bleicher, Deiber, and Keppi, *Das Elsass*, vol. 4, 199.

²⁰ National Archives (hereafter NA) FO371/14901 (W13614). Foreign Office Commander Maxs, Dec. 18, 1930.

²¹ Harp, *Learning to be Loyal*, 200.

²² Henri Leger, "En Alsace. La question religieuse." Archives Nationales (hereafter AN), F713391, *L'Homme libre*, Jan. 21, 1929.

²³ The Option clause of the Treaty of Frankfurt gave citizens of Alsace and Moselle the right to retain French citizenship, if they left the province within 12 months of the ratification of the Treaty. For a comprehensive analysis, see Alfred Wahl, *L'option et l'émigration des Alsaciens-Lorrains, 1871-1872* (Paris, 1972).

²⁴ Malcolm Anderson, "Regional Identity and Political Change: the Case of Alsace from the Third to the Fifth Republic", *Political Studies* 20 (1972): 17-30, 20.

²⁵ Jean-Pierre Kintz, "Vers une autre économie et une autre société," in ed. Philippe Dollinger, *L'Histoire de l'Alsace de 1900 à nos jours* (Toulouse, 1979), 179. See also Marc Lienhard, « Le Protestantisme alsacien entre 1918 et 1939. Compte rendu d'une table ronde, » *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français* 122 (1976) : 618-630.

²⁶ Kintz, "Vers une autre économie", 179

Such linguistic and religious distinctiveness shaped politics in the region throughout the interwar years, and contributed to a distinct regionalization of local politics. The majority of the population was unable to read the national French press, which permitted the domination of regional publications that tended to focus on Alsatian issues. Moreover, political meetings were held in Alsatian, with the result that external speakers needed either to speak German or to have their speeches translated from French.²⁷ This discouraged non-Alsatian speakers from attending meetings in the province, and contributed further to the regionalization of politics. The SFIO, like its rival parties, used the German language in its press, at political meetings and in its publications. Equally, the enduring strength of organized religion affected party-politics. Local police reports stress the level of obedience that the clergy was able to command.²⁸ This situation was reflected in low levels of abstention in areas with high numbers of Catholics and in the difficulties faced by all parties in organizing political meetings during religious festivals.²⁹

The distinctive situation created by such cultural particularities was compounded by the existence of separate Alsatian parties. The Alsatian Socialists were the only regional party to join an existing French party. Its main rival during the period of German rule, the Catholic Center of Alsace-Lorraine, created a new party in 1919, arguing that no major Catholic grouping in France shared its preoccupations.³⁰ Named the Union Populaire Républicaine (UPR), it retained the Center's social Catholicism and demanded the retention of Alsatian regionalist particularities, notably the Concordat and use of the German language. Less members of the clergy held leadership positions within the UPR than had been the case in the Center, but the party maintained close links with the Catholic Church.³¹ Meanwhile, many former Liberals constituted the Parti Républicain Démocratique, which demanded regional decentralization and the postponement of the introduction of religious legislation, and a section of the Parti Radical et Radical Socialiste represented the Radical program in the region. This was a minority party.³²

In December 1920, the majority of Socialist militants left the SFIO to form the Section Française de l'Internationale Communiste, later the Parti Communiste Français (PCF). The Alsatian Socialist Federations, particularly the sections in the Bas-Rhin, lost militants and leaders.³³ By 1921, the Communist section in the Bas-Rhin had around 4000 members, which represented the fifth highest departmental total in France, and dwarfed the

²⁷ Correspondence that remains from the Bas-Rhin SFIO's women's section describes the difficulties in obtaining external speakers. See Office Universitaire de Recherche Socialiste (hereafter OURS), Fonds SFIO 41, Liste 1, Dossier 21. Paulette Penner to Suzanne Buisson, Strasbourg, Jan. 17, 1938.

²⁸ AN, F7 12755, Commissaire Spéciale de Mulhouse, Rapport Mensuel, May 31, 1928.

²⁹ During the interwar years, overwhelmingly Catholic areas such as Obernai, Sélestat, Rosheim and Seltz all recorded low levels of abstentions. On the need to avoid religious festivals, see the reports of the Bas-Rhin women's section, OURS, Fonds SFIO, Liste 1, Dossier 21, Liselotte Wenher, Strasbourg, Feb. 20, 1939.

³⁰ Christian Baechler, *Le Parti Catholique Alsacien*, 239.

³¹ Christian Baechler has written comprehensively on the UPR. On the clerics involved in its leadership see, "L'abbé Wetterlé, un prêtre patriote et libéral (1861-1931)," *Archives de l'Eglise de l'Alsace* 45 (1986): 243-286; "Le clergé alsacien et la politique, 1871-1939," *Revue d'Alsace* 111 (1985): 125-148; "Les relations entre Mgr Ruch et le clergé alsacien lors de la crise autonomiste de 1925-1929, vues à travers un mémorandum de décembre 1929," *Archives de l'Eglise de l'Alsace* 44 (1985): 297-320; "L'abbé Xavier Haegy (1870-1932). Une politique au service de l'Eglise et du peuple alsacien," *Archives de l'Eglise de l'Alsace* 43 (1984): 287-339.

³² Serge Berstein, "Une greffe manquée: le radicalisme alsacien de 1919 à 1939," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 27, (1970): 78-103.

³³ The Bas-Rhin section suffered the worst effects of the split. Some indication of the variety in views towards the Communist Party across the two departments is offered by voting patterns at the Tours Congress: 102 Bas-Rhin delegates and 51 Haut Rhin delegates voted for the Cachin-Frossard motion in favor of adherence to the Communist Third International. 29 Bas-Rhin delegates and 43 Haut-Rhin delegates voted for the Longuet motion, which rejected adherence to the Third International. *L'Est Républicain*, Dec. 27, 1920.

remaining Socialist membership of 1000.³⁴ The Alsatian Communists were to have a significant impact upon politics in the region. Crucially, the new PCF distinguished itself from the SFIO not only in terms of its attitude towards the Communist International, but also in its national position. The Alsatian Communists argued in favor of self determination for the population of Alsace-Lorraine, denounced French imperialism and demanded Alsatian neutrality. This stance created a clash with the pro-French SFIO that proved difficult for the two parties to resolve. It also led to the expulsion of the PCF's two leaders, Charles Hueber and Jean-Pierre Mourer, for placing the national question over the class struggle.³⁵

Politics in Alsace were affected by the development of autonomism, a political phenomenon that dominates much of the historical literature on the province.³⁶ Autonomists criticized French policy in the region, and argued for the retention of Alsatian particularities, or, in the movement's most extreme form, demanded separation from France. Rather than one party, autonomism represented a movement that permeated the rhetoric of almost all parties in Alsace. It also contributed to the development of the Homeland League, the Heimatbund, whose 1926 manifesto demanded regional administration, bilingualism and respect for the religious status quo.³⁷ Autonomist tensions peaked in the April 1928 trial of autonomist leaders, four of whom were found guilty but subsequently pardoned.³⁸ From the end of the 1920s, autonomism found its strongest expression in the Landespartei, the Bauernbund, and in the Elsässische Arbeiter- und Bauernpartei founded by former PCF leaders Hueber and Mourer.³⁹

This distinctive political environment affected discussions over primary schooling, but it also affected the ideological stance and development of the SFIO in Alsace. In a political environment dominated by autonomism, and in competition for working class votes with the PCF, the SFIO increasingly stressed its pro-French, pro-republican credentials. This led Socialist leaders to assert the party's assimilationist demand that Alsace should be integrated into France on exactly the same terms as all other parts of the *hexagone*. This stance was accepted by its rival parties in the interwar years, and has since been accepted, albeit in modified form, by historians working on the period.⁴⁰ This position is confirmed by the party's uncompromising approach to the issue of separation of church and state, yet it masks important fluidity in the SFIO's outlook, which party leaders nevertheless presented as a coherent vision of the French Republic. Such exceptions included municipal legislation, social reform, and, crucially, use of Alsatian dialect and the German language.⁴¹ Discussions

³⁴ Richez et al., Jacques Peirottes, 70.

³⁵ Hueber and Mourer had forged alliances with the UPR and autonomist parties in Alsatian elections. This culminated with Hueber's election to the post of Mayor of Strasbourg at the head of a coalition of Catholics and Autonomists. After their expulsion from the party, Hueber and Mourer went on to form the Kommunistische Partei Opposition (KPO), and later Elsässische Arbeiter und Bauernpartei in 1935, before gravitating towards the Nazi Party and taking on positions of authority under the Third Reich. For their ideological evolution, see Samuel Goodfellow, "From Communism to Nazism: The Transformation of Alsatian Communists," Journal of Contemporary History 27 (1992): 231-258.

³⁶ See Jena Marie Gaines, The spectrum of Alsatian Autonomism, 1918-1929 (Michigan Microfilms, 1990); Christian Baechler, "L'autonomisme alsacien entre les deux guerres", Historiens et Géographes 27 (1992): 249-255.

³⁷ AN, F7 13395, Manifeste du Heimatbund, "Appel à tous les Alsaciens-Lorrains", June 5, 1926.

³⁸ Georges Ricklin, Le procès du complot autonomiste à Colmar, 1er au 24 mai 1928 (Colmar, 1928).

³⁹ Samuel Goodfellow addresses the varieties of autonomism in Between the Swastika and the Cross of Lorraine. Fascisms in Interwar Alsace (DeKalb, 1999).

⁴⁰ See, for example, François G. Dreyfus, La Vie Politique en Alsace, 1919-1936 (Paris, 1969); Richez et al., Jacques Peirottes, 215.

⁴¹ On municipal legislation, see Archives Municipales de la Ville et de la Communauté Urbaine de Strasbourg (hereafter AMVCUS), 204MW 16, Jacques Peirottes, Rapport sur la loi municipal, Conférence des maires d'Alsace et de Lorraine, Strasbourg, Nov. 20, 1922. On social legislation, see the intervention of Mulhouse

over language came to focus upon education in the province, where their intersection with parallel debates over religion was brought into sharp relief. The political importance of education led the SFIO to focus upon the issue, and its arguments for teaching in German and secular education offers a window onto the regional republicanism that the party forged at the border of the nation.

II

On its election in 1919, the new right wing Bloc National government turned its attention to primary schooling, focusing firstly upon the question of language.⁴² In November 1918, the academic inspector at Colmar reported that all capable teachers would teach two hours of French daily, and that half of all other subjects should be in French.⁴³ In response, SFIO leaders argued that the government was creating a generation which could not understand French or German. Such criticism proved widespread, with a number of politicians and teachers echoing the Socialists' claims throughout the interwar years.⁴⁴ The diary of Alsatian primary schoolteacher Philippe Husser describes a range of problems with this "direct method" used in Alsatian schools, which being beyond the capacities of most Alsatian children, left them to "sink or swim." According to Husser, most found themselves sinking.⁴⁵ While its argument reflected widely-held views in the province, the SFIO interpreted the instruction of French in a different way to its rival political parties. The Socialists argued that giving lessons only in French would have the worst effects upon workers, who relied on primary schools for their education. As a result, they needed to receive their instruction in German to allow them to understand the lessons.⁴⁶ This would be coupled with recognition of the German language in other spheres of public life to ensure that "those [members of the Alsatian population] who cannot learn [French] do not suffer."⁴⁷

The Socialists' stress upon the class-based character of language reflected broader linguistic divisions in the province, where the working classes were far less likely to speak French than the middle or upper classes.⁴⁸ It was also an attempt to assert its revolutionary credentials in light of its rivalry with the PCF, which represented a significant rival for

leader Auguste Wicky and Bas-Rhin leader Georges Weill at the Conseil Consultatif, AN, AJ30 172, Session du Conseil Consultatif, Apr. 14, 1922.

⁴² AN, AJ30 204, Le Recteur d'Académie, Directeur Général de l'Instruction publique et des Beaux Arts to Monsieur l'Inspecteur d'Académie, Strasbourg Oct. 19, 1920.

⁴³ Harp, Learning to be Loyal, 196. The government also instructed teachers that German should not be introduced until children could read, write and speak French in a "semi-fluent fashion". See AN, AJ30 204, Le Recteur d'Académie, Directeur Général de l'Instruction publique et des Beaux Arts to Monsieur l'Inspecteur d'Académie, Strasbourg Oct. 19, 1920.

⁴⁴ This claim was famously made in the French Parliament, the Chambre de Députés in 1927 by a group of autonomists. See "Proposition de résolution invitant le Gouvernement à constituer, à Strasbourg, une Commission scolaire, chargée d'amener une prompte résolution du problème des langues l'enseignement primaire des trois départements d'Alsace et de Lorraine." Présentée par Seltz, Walter, Brom, Meyer, Burger, Oberkirch, Bilger, Pflieger, Silbermann. AMCUVS, 125Z 37, Chambre des députés, Jan. 14, 1927.

⁴⁵ Philippe Husser, Un Instituteur Alsacien. Entre France et Allemagne. Le Journal de Philippe Husser, 1914-1951 (Paris, 1989), 128.

⁴⁶ Der Republikaner, June 28, 1920.

⁴⁷ ADBR, 286D 325, July 23, 1939. Rapport. As the date of this citation indicates, this was a demand that the SFIO launched consistently throughout the interwar years.

⁴⁸ In 1925, the Cartel des Gauches government commissioned the sub-prefects of the region to produce reports on language use. These reports stressed the class-based language divisions. See ADBR, 286D 46, Sous-préfet d'Erstein to Préfet du Bas-Rhin, Oct. 27, 1925; Sous-préfet de Molsheim to Préfet du Bas-Rhin, Oct. 30, 1925; Sous-préfet de Hagenau to Préfet du Bas-Rhin, Oct. 29, 1925.

working class support.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, instruction in German should, the SFIO argued, be complemented by courses in French to allow Alsatian children to learn their national language, and to participate fully in public life.⁵⁰ Again, this was a class-based concern, as the party argued that the working classes' inability to speak French led them to lose out on social and economic opportunities. Therefore, it argued that the only solution to the linguistic problem in the province was bilingualism; that "The French language must be taught to all, without exception, but that knowledge of German must also be promoted, so that each Alsatian can not only read, but also write [German]."⁵¹

Ongoing Franco-German tension in the years immediately after the First World War meant that endorsement of the German language presented a political problem for the SFIO. The party was, after all, demanding use of the language of a rival foreign power. As a result, the Socialists treated bilingualism as an essential aspect of the reintegration process more generally and argued for the use of both languages not only in education but also in the judiciary, in legislation, administration and culture. They stressed that without bilingualism, French legislation would remain a "dead letter" for the majority of the population of Alsace and the Moselle.⁵² This made endorsement of bilingualism an assertion of the party's French credentials, as well as a program that would serve the best interests of the province's working class population. Bilingualism, above all, would facilitate reintegration and allow the integration of Alsatian workers into the French nation. Crucially, it was through education that such bilingualism would be achieved, as Strasbourg SFIO Deputy Georges Weill argued, "We have always demanded that the French language have a... important place in education, so that it can become, as quickly as possible, the intellectual vehicle of all the population. And we have equally demanded that, in our border departments, we use and learn the language, which is currently still the fluent language of the vast majority of its inhabitants. On this double principle, there would be neither discussion nor discord."⁵³

On this matter Weill was correct. While the SFIO stance was distinctive in terms of its stress upon class, demands for bilingualism reflected popular attitudes in the province. Alsatians from all sections of society called for the use of German. Moreover other Alsatian parties focused their attention on the promotion of German, so the Socialist stress on the importance of French also proved popular.⁵⁴ But, the Socialists found themselves in an entirely separate situation as discussions over education became increasingly focused on religion after the end of 1918. This came as a surprise to the SFIO, which viewed the separation of church and state and secular education as fundamental aspects of French national cultures. Consequently, it had anticipated that both would be introduced in Alsace immediately after the return to France. This aim was, however, to be repeatedly frustrated.

When the Bloc National came to power in 1919 it did not attempt to establish secular schools in the recovered provinces. Instead, it introduced a directive allowing parents to excuse their children from religious education. To do so, they needed to contact the local sub-Prefect and wait for a response, but unsurprisingly, this was often a lengthy process. Moreover, the new government did not repeal an 1871 decree which allowed for the

⁴⁹ This was confirmed at the first legislative elections held after the split with the Communists, in 1924. In the Bas-Rhin, the SFIO's share of the vote dropped by 11% (from 36.5% in 1919 to 25.5% in 1924) while the drop was only 2.8% (from 35.5 percent and 32.7%) in the Haut-Rhin, which had been much less affected by the split. Dreyfus, *La Vie Politique en Alsace*, 74-76.

⁵⁰ ADBR, 121AL 163, *Die Freie Presse*, Nov. 17, 1920; see also ADBR, 286D 46, Program of SFIO, May 11, 1924 and ADBR 286D 331. *Die Freie Presse*, Aug. 3, 1928.

⁵¹ *Die Freie Presse*, Feb. 10, 1927.

⁵² ADBR, 286D 46, Program of SFIO, May 11, 1924.

⁵³ ADBR, 286D 46, Continuation of a debate in the Chambre des Députés about language and primary school education in Alsace-Lorraine, Dec.16, 1925.

⁵⁴ See, for one example, the letters page of the *Journal d'Alsace et de Lorraine*, Feb. 21, 1921.

punishment of parents whose children did not regularly attend school with a fine of up to 10 francs, or, in cases of prolonged absence, by imprisonment of a week or more. Local administrators frequently interpreted this law to cover parents whose children missed religious education, and in 1929, one father was sent to prison after his son missed a number of religious education classes, much to the chagrin of the SFIO.⁵⁵

Throughout the years of Bloc National government, the Socialists criticized its failure to introduce secularity to the recovered provinces, arguing that this had denied the Alsatians the opportunity to participate fully in the French nation, and to become French citizens in the complete sense of the term.⁵⁶ It stressed that such obstacles were incompatible with the principles of unity and indivisibility of the Republic, and served only to reinforce the existing isolation that the province's linguistic separation and years of annexation had created.⁵⁷ Like language, religion was connected to the province's reintegration into France and Socialist leaders stressed that the separation of church and state and introduction of legislation would ease the already problematic reintegration process.⁵⁸ It would "allow a faster assimilation of our three departments into the motherland, allowing secular France to finally show its true republican face to its recovered brothers."⁵⁹ In this sense, the failure to introduce secular education was a betrayal of the French Republic; "... From a political point of view, Alsace hoped for change [after 1914]. It became French again, and looked forward to the Republic's return to the old country of liberty... [but] the French *secular* and democratic revolution has become the champion of intolerance in Alsace; it does not smile on republicans."⁶⁰ In this sense, for the Alsatian Socialists, use of the German language was compatible with attachment to the Republic, but a continued place for religious education in the region's schools was not. Instead, this provided a barrier to the province's complete integration into the Republic, and prevented its population from becoming true French citizens.

After the 1924 victory of the center-left Cartel des Gauches, new Radical Premier Edouard Herriot announced his intention of separating church and state in Alsace and the Moselle, a project which would mean the end of religious education in the provinces. The SFIO supported Herriot's proposals, but warned that secular schools should be created in a way which could not be perceived as an attack on religion. The SFIO was right to be worried about the Catholic response. The UPR and clergy arranged a series of protests, repeating the successful tactics that they had earlier used to argue against the proposed separation of church and state in Alsace and the Moselle.⁶¹ They also organized a protest petition which collected 375 000 signatures.⁶² According to the Catholic *Alsacien*, 643 communes in Alsace, two thirds of the total number, protested against the introduction of secular schools.⁶³ Protestant and Jewish leaders also organized resistance, but their smaller numbers meant the protests made less impact.⁶⁴ In light of the situation, Herriot switched tack, and in March 1925, he

⁵⁵ *La République*, July 25, 1929; AMCUVS, 125Z 48, Speech, (nd.)

⁵⁶ ADBR, 286D 327, *Die Freie Presse*, Oct. 19, 1923.

⁵⁷ ADBR, 286D 349, Commissaire Spéciale de Strasbourg (Rapport), Dec. 18, 1923. Report on Radical Party meeting, Dec. 17, 1923. For a repetition of this argument later in the interwar years, see ADBR, 98AL 673/2 *La France de l'Est*, June 12, 1935.

⁵⁸ Archives Municipales de Colmar (hereafter AMC), Stadt Colmar, séance du Conseil Municipal, July 20, 1920.

⁵⁹ AMC Stadt Colmar, séance du Conseil Municipal, July 20, 1920.

⁶⁰ *Die Freie Presse*, Apr. 21, 1921. "Récapitulation." (italics in the original).

⁶¹ See Baechler's chapter "L'Union Populaire Républicaine et la crise autonomiste (1924-8)" in Baechler, *Le Parti Catholique Alsacien*.

⁶² Jean-François Kovar, 'Religion et Éducation: De la concorde à la discorde', in *Chroniques d'Alsace 1918-1939*, ed. Bernard Vogler (Barcelona, 2004), 46-49. 51.

⁶³ *L'Alsacien*, Feb.12, 1925.

⁶⁴ See Catherine Storne-Sengel, *Les Protestants d'Alsace-Lorraine de 1919 à 1939: Entre les deux règnes* (Strasbourg, 2003), 303-305.

ordered Alsatian and Mosellan prefects to allow local municipalities to establish inter-confessional schools. In Alsace, this was rapidly taken up by Socialist dominated councils across the province, but the party remained concerned about the potential Catholic response to the change.

As a result, the SFIO avoided political rhetoric in its explanation of the transfer. Instead, it stressed the practical benefits of the new schools. An explanatory pamphlet issued by Colmar's Socialist municipal council explained that with inter-confessional schools, children would attend the closest school, the program would remain the same, and religious instruction would still be part of the curriculum and given only by a master of the same confession. The SFIO again used the language of social equality, and painted the new school as a place where children associate without difference of religious confession. This would prepare the province's young for an economic future where citizens of all faiths worked alongside one another. In this sense, rather than an attack on religion the school was "an instrument in tolerance and comprehension and will serve to safeguard religious peace."⁶⁵ It would also put all children onto the same footing, regardless of social background, which meant that inter-confessional schools represented the best method of achieving equality amongst Alsatian children. Here, references to class and social advancement that had served the SFIO's support of the German language were used to argue against confessional schools, as the party's approach to schooling reflected its broader political attitudes.

In spite of the SFIO's attempts to appease the Catholic population through its practical presentation of inter-confessional schools, the issue provoked further unrest.⁶⁶ In 1925, Arch-Bishop Ruch of Strasbourg called a school strike for March 16, 1925 in protest at the decision of municipal councils in Strasbourg, Colmar, Schiltigheim, Graffenstaden, Guebwiller and Huningue to introduce inter-confessional schools. This strike was observed by large numbers of Catholics across the region. According to the *Commissaire Général*, in large towns such as Colmar, Strasbourg, and Mulhouse and in certain smaller towns including Ribeauvillé, Guebwiller, Molsheim and Schiltigheim, the proportion of Catholic children absent from school ranged from 20 to 30 percent. But, in the countryside the total of Catholics on strike reached between 70 and 75 percent. Across the two departments of Alsace, 50 percent of students in the Bas-Rhin and 57 percent in the Haut-Rhin missed school on the day of the strike.⁶⁷ Teacher Philippe Husser's diary notes that three children in his class in Sundhoffen did not come to school, and around sixty children were absent from the total 300 in the school. He concluded that the strike "was not general," although the lower than average figures were likely to be a result of the large numbers of Protestants in that area of the Haut-Rhin.⁶⁸ Across the province, levels of participation in the strike were lower amongst Protestant and Jewish children than amongst their Catholic counterparts.⁶⁹

In the days after the strike, the SFIO attempted to downplay its significance. Mayor of Strasbourg Jacques Peirottes stated that 73 percent of children had not been involved,

⁶⁵ ADBR, 98AL 326, Colmar pamphlet Mar. 15, 1925.

⁶⁶ As early as July 1924, the *Commissaire Général* had informed Herriot that the introduction of inter-confessional schools would be possible "step by step... starting with the communes where the municipal assembly, and, as a result, the majority of the population, request the introduction of the inter-confessional school." But, he warned him that many priests and pastors would be unlikely to accept inter-confessionality without protest. AN, AJ30 207, Commissaire Général de la République to Président du Conseil, Strasbourg, July 11, 1924.

⁶⁷ ADBR, 98AL 326, Commissariat Général de la République to Président du Conseil, Mar. 20, 1925. The French government was keen to have an exact account of engagement, so the Commissaire's statistics should offer a relatively accurate picture.

⁶⁸ Husser, *Un Instituteur Alsacien*, 247.

⁶⁹ François G. Dreyfus, *Histoire de l'Alsace* (Paris, 1979).

adding that two thirds of the population of Strasbourg was in favor of secular schools.⁷⁰ This reflected the situation in urban Alsace, which was also the SFIO's main constituency. Yet, as the *Commissaire's* figures showed, the picture in the countryside was very different. Faced with widespread rural participation in the strike, the Socialists switched their focus to the clergy, arguing that priests had coerced families into keeping their children from school. The Bas-Rhin SFIO newspaper the *Freie Presse* contained reports of clerical manipulation, complaining that Alsatian *instituteurs* had distributed *Ligue des Catholiques d'Alsace* tracts to their students. These tracts reportedly described the current situation as a struggle for religious liberties, and stated that all priests would be imprisoned and children banned from prayer if Herriot's proposals went ahead.⁷¹ An article by militant Charles Hincker described his experiences on the day of the strike, when he heard from a friend that his daughter had gone to the *Cercle Catholique* without his permission. On going to look for her, he found her there along with a large group of children, all of whom had their school bags, indicating that their parents had intended that they go to school. The children told him that the clergy had offered them chocolate and sweets if they went to the *Cercle* instead. He told them to go to school, and all of the children did so without protest.⁷²

Such descriptions of manipulation, bribery and coercion on the part of the clergy were not unusual in the interwar Socialist press, particularly as the party was attempting to persuade the government that the clergy had misrepresented the views of the population of Alsace regarding the introduction of French legislation. Here, however, they adopted greater urgency as the SFIO became increasingly concerned that the clergy were hijacking the reintegration process. Nevertheless, many of these anecdotes appear to have been based on some degree of truth. Notes to the Prefect of the Bas-Rhin described clerical coercion to stop children going to school, and Husser stated that in the Haut-Rhin town of Dornach, the curate kept children in the church after the 8 o'clock service to prevent them from attending class and that schools were blocked off to prevent children from getting into the buildings.⁷³ In spite of this evidence, the government was put off by the scale of the Catholic reaction. After Herriot fell from power in 1925, his successors proved reluctant to introduce the legislation and a 1927 *arrêté* confirmed the place of religious education, granting it four hours per week in the curriculum.⁷⁴

While governments appeared to ignore the SFIO's demands for secular education, their stress on the necessity for more classes in German met a better response in 1927. The government fixed the education of German from the beginning of school and introduced a German test in the program of the certificate of studies. Nevertheless, the SFIO criticized the limit on German education of three hours, as well as the assumption that four hours of religious education, given in German, would improve the German language of Alsatian students. Having supported the rights of Alsatian students to opt out of religious education, it argued in favor of more hours for German itself. Equally, it stressed, religious education should be given outside school hours by the priest, pastor or rabbi rather than the teacher.⁷⁵ Here, the intersection between language and religion reveals the particular character of the Alsatian SFIO's republicanism. During the Third Republic, educational reformers had sought to introduce the French language to limit the control that the clergy were able to

⁷⁰ ADBR, 286D 353, Commissaire Spéciale to Préfet du Bas-Rhin, Mar. 30, 1925.

⁷¹ *Die Freie Presse*, Mar. 9, 1925.

⁷² *Die Freie Presse*, Mar. 18, 1925.

⁷³ Husser, *Un Instituteur Alsacien*, 247-8.

⁷⁴ Arrête du recteur Pfister, 30 août 1927. Cited in Dollinger (ed.), *Documents de l'Histoire de l'Alsace* (Toulouse, 1972), 458-9.

⁷⁵ ADBR, 286D 330, *Die Freie Presse*, Sep. 17, 1927.

exercise over regional populations.⁷⁶ In interwar Alsace, the SFIO sought to eliminate the association between religion and regional language by stressing that religious education conducted in German was not sufficient education in the majority language of the province. Alsatian dialect and the German language were not only the language of the regional Catholic Church, they were also the language of local republican politics. This had been the case before 1870, and it remained the case after 1918. As a result, the party sought to separate local language from religion in the national imagination.

This disassociation between regional language and the Catholic Church met with some degree of success, and the French government did not treat the clergy or the continuation of religious education as a barrier to the dissemination of the French language. So while in many ways, the Catholic reaction in Alsace paralleled earlier regional resistance in France to the introduction of secularity in the years before 1905, it was the government's response that differed in the interwar years.⁷⁷ After 1918, successive governments were prepared to tolerate religious education and, to a lesser extent, the use of German in Alsatian schools. This did not represent a more regionalist official policy; rather it reflected the political circumstances in interwar Alsace. Within the province, the SFIO was the only major party to demand the introduction of French legislation, and it did so alongside an attachment to the German language that many French administrators found difficult to equate with its proclaimed republicanism. The PCF denounced French imperialism and the autonomist movement sought regional neutrality, while in Germany, nationalist forces granted financial support to autonomist demands.⁷⁸ And, in spite of the UPR's regionalist demands, Catholic orders had developed a reputation for Francophilia during the years of annexation. Moreover, the Alsatians' use of the German language and attachment to the province's religious particularities did not sit easily with early Third Republican rhetoric that had declared the Alsatians to be staunch French patriots.⁷⁹ When these factors collided with the Bloc National's policy of appeasing and promoting Catholicism, and the center-left's instability and altered priorities in government, they served to create a particular situation. Not only was the late Third Republic less concerned with unity in secularity than often assumed, but its altered political priorities allowed successive governments to tolerate religious education in Alsace. For these governments, language was the priority and they were prepared to tolerate continued religious education in Alsatian schools as they focused on their aim of spreading the French language.

Neither policy pleased the Alsatian SFIO, which wanted official status for the German language, the introduction of secular education and the disassociation of language and

⁷⁶ See Joseph F. Byrnes, Catholic and French Forever: Religious and National Identity in Modern France (Pennsylvania, 2005), 121-55; Baycroft's chapter "The Catholic church in French Flanders" in Culture, Identity and Nationalism; Ford, Creating the Nation, 26, 160; Gildea, Education in Provincial France, 12.

⁷⁷ On earlier resistance in France, see Caroline Ford, "Religion and the Politics of Cultural Change in Provincial France: The Resistance of 1902 in Lower Brittany," Journal of Modern History 62 (1990):1-33, 10 & Sarah A. Curtis "Lay Habits: Religious Teachers and the Secularization Crisis of 1901-1904", French History 9 (1995): 478-498.

⁷⁸ See Bankwitz's chapter "Autonomism, 1919-1939", especially 19-22 in Bankwitz, Alsatian Autonomist Leaders, 1919-1947.

⁷⁹ On the place of Alsace within early Third Republican political cultures, see Karine Varley's chapter "The Lost Provinces" in Varley, Under the Shadow of Defeat. The French War of 1870-71 in French Memory (Basingstoke, 2008); Laurence Turetti, Quand la France pleurait l'Alsace-Lorraine. "Les provinces perdues" aux sources du patriotisme républicain (Strasbourg, 2008). Mona Siegel has discussed the place of the lost provinces in the early Third Republic's education system. She argues that on maps in classrooms of the early Third Republic, Alsace-Lorraine had been shrouded in black or purple, the colors of mourning, and the province became a key repository of French national identity, adopting a critical role within French nationalist discourse. See Mona L. Siegel, The Moral Disarmament of France: Education, Pacifism, and Patriotism, 1914-1940 (Cambridge, 2004), 60-61, 139-140.

religion. Party leaders stressed the pressing need for both these policies to the national SFIO, and used the National Assembly to reassert their demands consistently throughout the 1920s. Whilst discussing the provincial situation with their national colleagues, their focus was on religion. When they attended national party congresses, Alsatian representatives attempted to underline the pervasive influence of religion upon politics in the region.⁸⁰ In part, however, their focus on religion rather than language also reflected their assumption that this aspect of their program would be of greater interest to their national colleagues. Within Alsace, the SFIO made impassioned arguments that it was possible to combine use of the German language with attachment to the French Republic. Nevertheless, it stressed that republican identity required access to the fundamental institutions of the Republic, notably secular education underpinned by the separation of church and state. These attitudes continued to guide SFIO policy in the 1930s, as the party betrayed its increased frustration at the widening gap between the Socialist program and government policy.

III

Through the second decade after the return to France, the SFIO continued to criticize particular aspects of the existing education system in Alsace, such as the continuation of religious education in German rather than distinct German lessons. The party also attempted to foster a more republican atmosphere in the classroom. In Mulhouse in 1933, SFIO councilor Risch complained about the catechism taught in Alsatian schools, which represented “a direct poisoning of youth and public opinion.”⁸¹ Risch stated:

We are republicans... and the way in which the French Revolution is presented by the historical section of the catechism... is revolting... the French Revolution is one of the greatest events in the history of civilization...[but] the historical section only outlines the transgressions against religion. It ignores the changes that the Revolution brought for civilization. A child who reads the historical section would believe that the French Revolution consisted of beheading people, without explaining why that was done. There is not a single word on the great social progress that the Revolution brought... The historical section does not contain one word on the granting of personal liberty... As such, the historical section is absolutely unacceptable for anyone who wants to consider French history objectively.⁸²

The SFIO was concerned that the continuation of religious education in the region's schools granted the Catholic clergy undue influence over Alsatian youth. This built upon an earlier controversy in the town, when the local SFIO council had ordered Gauthier graphics to create an illustration of French history. These images showed the axes of the monarchy and clergy declining, while the axes of the people and bourgeoisie rose throughout history until they came together in 1789 in a tricolor entitled “liberté, égalité, fraternité.”⁸³ According to the Recteur de l'Académie, only five schools in the town put them up, and the administration did not encourage them to do so.⁸⁴ Indeed, Premier Raymond Poincaré told

⁸⁰ XXVe Congrès National, tenu à Toulouse les 26, 27, 28 et 29 Mai 1928. Compte Rendu Sténographique, (Limoges, 1928), 260.

⁸¹ Archives Municipales de Mulhouse (hereafter AMM), D1 a1 1933, 763.

⁸² AMM, D1 a1 1933, 764.

⁸³ ADBR, 98AL 329, Inspecteur d'Académie (Directeur du Département de l'Inspection publique du Haut-Rhin) to Recteur de l'Académie (Directeur général de l'instruction publique), Colmar, Apr. 6, 1927.

⁸⁴ ADBR, 98AL 329, Recteur de l'Académie (Directeur général de l'instruction publique) to Inspecteur d'Académie (Directeur du Département de l'Inspection publique du Haut-Rhin), Mulhouse, Apr. 6, 1927.

the Prefect of the Haut-Rhin that these graphics were “inappropriate” in the province’s inter-confessional schools, much to the frustration of the town’s Socialist municipal council.⁸⁵ Frustrations at this event spilled over into Risch’s analysis of the catechism. In particular, the party worried that the presentation of French history in confessional schools misrepresented France and the republican tradition. This was particularly important given the centrality of French revolutionary history in the ideologies of republicanism and French identity articulated by the Alsatian Socialists.

In this sense, the conflict over religious education in Alsace was part of a broader clash between republican and clerical conceptions of “True France” that characterized the Third Republic.⁸⁶ Throughout its discussions over Alsatian reintegration, the SFIO offered a vision of France rooted in the revolutions of 1789 and the nineteenth century. This France, it argued, had been corrupted by right wing government and it was unfortunate that the return of Alsace coincided with the election victory of the forces of “reaction, capitalists, militarists, clericals, mercenaries and bourgeoisie.”⁸⁷ As a result, it was the responsibility of the recovered populations to return France to its republican course. In 1924, Strasbourg councilor Eugene Imbs had reminded his audience that “during the first Revolution, our ancestors could see a sign on the bridge at Kehl. It read ‘Here begins the country of liberty.’ It is for us to cultivate this ‘country of liberty,’ to transform it according to our ideas, as we envision the true fraternity of the people against capitalism.”⁸⁸

For the SFIO, the nature of France was still in the making, and the reintegration of its lost province offered the opportunity for wider reform of its national institutions. For the Alsatian Socialists the experience of shifting sovereignty had shaped their sense of republican citizenship. Yet the SFIO’s switch in focus to individual aspects of the teaching in schools is also revealing of its growing disappointment at the failure of successive governments to introduce legislation confirming the place of the German language, or introducing secular education into the province. In this atmosphere, on January 29, 1929, Premier Raymond Poincaré reaffirmed the maintenance of the *statut scolaire* in Alsace and the Moselle, underlining the place of religion in the Alsatian education system. The entry of a new center-left wing government in 1932 offered fresh hope for the Alsatian SFIO, and in 1933, this was partially met by the Guy La Chambre circular which allowed parents to remove their children from religious education by making a declaration to the head teacher, rather than informing the sub-prefect and waiting for a response.⁸⁹ The result was that the number of Alsatian children excused from religious education doubled, although the total was still less than 1000 of 150 000 children.⁹⁰

In the mid-1930s, national politics underwent a fundamental shift. The increased strength of the extreme right in France and the accession to power of fascist regimes in Germany and Italy contributed to the formation of an anti-fascist Rassemblement of the forces of the left and the center.⁹¹ Titled the Popular Front, this Rassemblement brought together the SFIO, PCF and Radicals. In Alsace, the front was dominated by the SFIO in

⁸⁵ Der Republikaner, Apr. 2, 1924 ; ADBR, 98AL 326, Préfet du Haut-Rhin to Président du Conseil, Colmar, Mar. 9, 1927.

⁸⁶ See Jessica Wardhaugh, In Pursuit of the People. Political Culture in France, 1934-1939 (Basingstoke, 2009); Herman Lebovics, True France. The Wars over Cultural Identity, 1900-1945, (Ithaca, NY, 1992).

⁸⁷ ADBR, 286D 336, Die Freie Presse, Oct. 5, 1920.

⁸⁸ ADBR, 121AL 857, Commissaire de Police Burleigh, Strasbourg, May 10, 1924. Report on an SFIO meeting held in Strasbourg May 9, 1924.

⁸⁹ Alfred Wahl and Jean-Claude Richez, La Vie Quotidienne en Alsace entre France et Allemagne 1850-1950 (Paris, 1993), 130.

⁹⁰ Harp, Learning to be Loyal, 194.

⁹¹ On the Popular Front see Julian Jackson, The Popular Front in France, Defending Democracy, 1934-38 (Cambridge, 1988).

light of the weakness of the Radicals and orthodox communists, the second of which had been badly affected by the loss of local leaders Charles Hueber and Jean-Pierre Mourer, who had been expelled from the party in 1930. The optimistic mood following the Front's formation led the Alsatian federations to stress once again the particular situation in the province to their national colleagues, in the hope that a Socialist prime minister would introduce the legislation demanded by the local party should he be elected.

At the SFIO's Mulhouse conference of June 1935, the Federation of the Haut-Rhin placed the issue of secular schools on the agenda, and former Mulhouse deputy Salomon Grumbach stressed the pervasive character of religion in Alsatian primary schools, which, he argued, extended beyond the religious education classes on the timetable. Grumbach outlined the ways in which religion seeped into the choice of books, as well as the teaching of history, science and morals.⁹² He called on his colleagues to support the Haut-Rhin Federation's motion in support of secular schooling, affirming the party's earlier argument that its demands were rooted in a spirit of religious tolerance. Grumbach also developed the party's contention that the introduction of secular education would facilitate the region's reintegration, and argued that secularity was the best means of assuring the "French character of the three departments, to remove all the walls that separated [them] from the rest of the country, and to promote the education of the French language."⁹³ Bas-Rhin leader Marcel-Edmund Naegelen reinforced Grumbach's arguments when he called upon their national colleagues to support the Haut-Rhin motion, and to finally allow the Alsatians to "enter into the democratic and secular Republic."⁹⁴ Grumbach and Naegelen's speeches met with loud applause, and agreement that there should not be "two Frances" within the "*République une et indivisible*" before the Congress voted its support for the Haut-Rhin motion.⁹⁵

In their stress upon the urgent necessity to introduce secular education into Alsace and the Moselle, the Alsatian Socialists employed their usual description of confessional schools as a barrier that prevented the region's entry into the Republic. But, they also argued that confessional schools represented a means to "promote the education of the French language."⁹⁶ This did not represent a departure, as the party had always stressed the importance of learning French. But, the province's delegates did not couple this with any discussion of the German language or bilingualism. This reflected their renewed focus upon religious education in light of the polarization of national politics and the resulting threat that they perceived to secular education across the country.⁹⁷

But, there were other reasons for the party's neglect of the question of the German language. Firstly, the political context had changed. The creation of the Popular Front meant that the SFIO's rivalry with the PCF became less important than its rivalry with Hueber's Communist Autonomists, the UPR and the autonomist parties. The SFIO distinguished itself from these parties by its pro-French, national, assimilationist stance which prioritized the question of religion. Secondly, party leaders worried that debate over the use of the German language could prove a distraction from the issue of education, and the pressing need to reduce the influence wielded by the Alsatian clergy. Such concern about the possible response to the party's stance on German reflected awareness of the international context and developments in the Third Reich, but it also betrayed their worries that the national party did

⁹² XXXIIe Congrès National, tenu à Mulhouse les 9, 10, 11 et 12 Juin 1935. Compte rendu sténographique (Paris, 1935), 457.

⁹³ XXXIIe Congrès National, 457.

⁹⁴ XXXIIe Congrès National, 473.

⁹⁵ See the speech of the Girondan delegate Vielle, XXXIIe Congrès National, 460.

⁹⁶ See the speech by Salomon Grumbach, XXXIIe Congrès National, 457.

⁹⁷ XXXIIe Congrès National, 459.

not share their attitude towards the importance of the German language. As a result, the party focused on the question of religious education.

The year after the Congress, the Popular Front government triumphed in the elections and Léon Blum became the first Socialist to take the post of Premier. The new government soon turned its attention to schooling, offering fresh hope to the Alsatian SFIO. In 1936, it introduced an eighth year of schooling for children across France. This was to include Alsace and the Moselle, where children already had one more year of schooling than their counterparts in the rest of the country, and would give Alsatian boys a ninth year in school. In response, Catholic politicians, the clergy and sections of the public launched a fresh protest over the issue, arguing that boys needed to work at fourteen, particularly in rural areas. As a result, the government supplemented the law with a decree that specified that if Alsatian and Mosellan schools renounced the education of German and religion, boys could be relieved of the extra year and released at fourteen as in the rest of France. It stated that in the province, an additional year was necessary in light of the extra time devoted to the supplementary subjects taught in Alsatian schools. A number of Socialist and Radical municipalities took up the offer, leading to a renewal of Catholic resistance in the province.

The clergy organized a petition numbering some 450 000 signatures.⁹⁸ This was a rise from the 375 000 collected in 1925, and worryingly for the government, this was compounded with widespread passive resistance. Teachers failed to report absences, cantonal judges gave dispensations to work at home whether or not the criteria was met, the clergy encouraged parents to disobey the law and several Mayors failed to inform their constituents of the legislation.⁹⁹ In response, the SFIO argued that the Catholic clergy was again attempting to manipulate public opinion.¹⁰⁰ As part of the Popular Front, it was joined by the region's radicals and orthodox communists in condemning "the agitation organized by the clericals regarding the prolongation of education" and expressed satisfaction "that this campaign has failed."¹⁰¹ Meanwhile, the SFIO and local unions passed a series of resolutions congratulating Premier Léon Blum on the legislation. Repeating its earlier stress on tolerance and class, the party stressed that the law was necessary in moral and intellectual terms, and argued that it would bring numerous new opportunities to the province's working classes who would receive a fuller education.¹⁰² Crucially, for the SFIO, the legislation represented a step towards the "*école unique*, the only possible education system in a truly democratic state."¹⁰³ Again, the party adopted the language of social equality to support reform.

The SFIO response was not, however, as vocal as it had been in 1925. This was partly a result of the party's reduced electoral strength. In the 1936 election, it had lost both its remaining parliamentary seats and its total share of the vote had dropped to 11 percent in the Bas-Rhin and 21 percent in the Haut-Rhin, from 1919 totals of 36.5 percent and 36.9 percent respectively.¹⁰⁴ Yet it also reflected the widening gap between the local and national SFIO, which had been brought into focus by Blum's legislation. Firstly, Blum's policy allowed local municipalities to drop the teaching of German. This contradicted the local

⁹⁸ Kovar, "Religion et Éducation", 52.

⁹⁹ Harp, *Learning to be Loyal*, 195.

¹⁰⁰ ADBR, 98AL 333, Comité départemental du Rassemblement Populaire, Haut-Rhin, Mulhouse Mar.11, 1937, signed President Robert Levy.

¹⁰¹ ADBR, 98AL 673/2, IVe résolution du Congrès départemental du Rassemblement Populaire, Mulhouse Apr. 25, 1937.

¹⁰² ADBR, 98AL 333, Union of syndicates du personnel des services publics, CGT du Haut-Rhin to Léon Blum. Signed Joseph Halliser, Mulhouse, Feb. 15, 1937.

¹⁰³ ADBR, 98AL 673/2, IVe résolution du Congrès départemental du Rassemblement Populaire, Mulhouse Apr. 25, 1937.

¹⁰⁴ *Parti Socialiste : Section Française de l'International Ouvrière. XXXIVe Congrès National, 15, 16, 17 et 28 Mai 1937, Marseille, Rapports* (Paris 1937), 54; *Office de Statistique, Compte rendu*, 4 (1919), 10.

SFIO program, which had continually demanded education in German, the mother tongue of most Alsatians, and particularly of the Alsatian working classes. Secondly, according to the Socialist national newspaper *Le Populaire*, the government viewed the legislation as a means to retain Alsatian privileges, in this case the privilege of more extensive education.¹⁰⁵ The Alsatian SFIO, on the other hand, had consistently argued that the Alsatians needed to be subject to exactly the same legislation as the populations of other French regions if they were to become true French citizens. These differences did not have the opportunity to develop into a confrontation. When Blum fell from power the law was reinterpreted so that boys could leave at fourteen with religious and German education intact. Yet whatever the government's intentions, its policy had clearly set them at odds with the local party. In this sense, Alsatian Socialist discussions over education illustrate the diversity of SFIO policy in interwar France, and show that a loose party structure was not a characteristic limited to the parties of the conservative right.¹⁰⁶

While their stance on language distanced the Alsatian federations from their national colleagues, their fervently pro-assimilationist stance distanced them from their electorate. The elections of 1936 compounded the party's electoral decline, and no Socialist was elected in Alsace for the first time since the election of the "sky-blue" Chamber in 1919. Sections of its core constituency continued to support the party's stance; prefectural reports on party meetings in the lead-up to the 1936 election underline the continued support for the SFIO's stance on education.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, the issue of autonomism cut through Alsatian politics, and, in spite of the Socialists' attempts to distance themselves from it, autonomism had a significant impact on the party's electoral fortunes. The SFIO's presentation of itself as uncompromisingly assimilationist made it appear out of touch with the realities of Alsatian politics. Across the region, electoral victories were secured by parties that demanded that Alsace's cultural distinctiveness receive political recognition¹⁰⁸. The SFIO portrayed itself, and allowed itself to be depicted, as a party that demanded that Alsace be treated like all other regions of France. This contributed to its steady loss of votes throughout the 1930s. It also misrepresented the party's program, as the party's vision of Alsace's place within the French Republic involved Alsace acting as a model for nationwide reform in terms of social and municipal legislation, and the retention of Alsatian culture within the region. Republicanism for the SFIO in Alsace involved use of the German language, and acceptance of Alsatian cultural particularities. But, as the party increasingly focused on religion, it was unable to transmit this ideology of republicanism to the Alsatian electorate.

As a result, throughout the 1930s, the SFIO continued to develop the analysis of language, religion and education that it had first articulated in 1918. Indeed, in 1935 the Bas-Rhin Federation passed a resolution that proclaimed its fidelity to the party's 1919 program on Alsatian problems, "particularly with regard to the introduction of the secular laws."¹⁰⁹ This was in spite of the changes in emphasis that events in the interwar years had provoked. Throughout these years, behind all Socialist statements and rhetoric lay two central points. Firstly, that the Alsatian population needed to be subject to the same legislation as the

¹⁰⁵ J-B Severac, "Esprits et corps s'affranchiront," *Le Populaire*, Feb. 10, 1937.

¹⁰⁶ On the right, see, in particular, William D. Irvine, *French Conservatism in Crisis: The Republican Federation in the 1930s* (Baton Rouge, 1979).

¹⁰⁷ ADBR, 286D 345, Commissaire Spéciale to Commissaire Division de Police Spéciale, 31 Mar. 1936. Report on a Socialist meeting in Rhinau ; ADBR, 285D 345, Commissaire Spéciale to Commissaire Division de Police Spéciale, 31 Mar. 1936. Report on Socialist meeting in Marckolsheim.

¹⁰⁸ The orthodox PCF suffered a similar fate. Their share of the vote dropped from 20.1% to 8.2% between 1928 and 1932, while in the Haut-Rhin the party's share fell from 13.3% to 7.8 % over the same period. Meanwhile, the Communist Autonomists picked up only 8.3% in the Bas-Rhin and 0.6% in the Haut-Rhin. See Goodfellow, *Between the Swastika*, 79.

¹⁰⁹ *Die Freie Presse*, Jan. 23-24-25, 1925.

populations of all other French regions if they were to be truly French; this was notably the case for separation and secular education. Secondly, integration into the nation would occur only through the introduction of bilingualism. For the Alsatian SFIO, speaking the French language was a broad aim that would allow the Alsatians to participate in French national cultures. Neglect of the French language, on the other hand, would lead to the economic and intellectual regression of the province. In this sense, language represented a tool for the inculcation of culture and national spirit as well as the means for social advancement for the Alsatian working classes. Nevertheless, while it was a desirable component of identity, it certainly was not an essential one, and the Socialists stressed the importance of continued use of the German language throughout the interwar years. The Alsatian SFIO saw French patriotism as rooted in attachment to the French nation rather than in linguistic criteria. Consequently, it stressed that it was possible to combine attachment to the Republic with use of the German language, just as the eighteenth century Strasbourgeois literary societies had done.

IV

The SFIO's discussions over primary schooling in Alsace reveal that not everyone in interwar France believed that French was the sole language of republicanism. The party argued in favor of bilingualism, and for both French and German education in Alsatian schools. It stressed that lessons in German represented the best means of ensuring social equality for all sections of Alsatian society and particularly the working classes, and also of facilitating Alsace's reintegration into France. It developed these arguments while reasoning that the continuation of religious education in the province represented a barrier to the province's integration into the Republic. Rather than associating regional language with religion and reaction as earlier republicans had done, the Alsatian SFIO argued that German represented the language of republicanism in Alsace. In disassociating language from religion, party militants forged a distinct regional relationship between local language and national political cultures.

Histories of the Third Republic often stress the association between republican articulations of nationality and the French language. The experience of the SFIO in interwar Alsace offers a different picture, as party militants argued that it was possible to combine attachment to the French Republic with speaking the German language. The party's stance was the result of historical circumstances; the period of annexation meant that the region missed out on the years of early Third Republican nation-building, while developing a strong sense of regional identity that was neither French, nor German, but defiantly Alsatian.¹¹⁰ After 1918, this situation was compounded by local cultural particularities, including the widespread use of the German language and the unusual political importance of the clergy. These particularities impacted upon politics, along with all other areas of daily life. For the SFIO, the Catholic Church represented a longstanding enemy, and, as a result, after 1918 the party was keen to adopt the Radicals' anti-clerical mantle in the province as a means to undermine the clergy's influence. The party did not, however, assume the Radicals' attitude towards regional languages. Rather, the SFIO had a longstanding attachment to the German language, a testament to its roots in the German Socialist movement and its understanding of the German language as an important part of Alsatian culture. During the years of annexation, the Alsatian party had appropriated aspects of French revolutionary culture for a

¹¹⁰ On Alsatian identity during annexation, see Paul Smith "À la recherche d'une identité nationale en Alsace (1870-1918)", *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 50 (1996): 23-35' Christopher J. Fischer, *Alsace to the Alsatians? Visions and Divisions of Alsatian Regionalism, 1870-1939* (New York, 2010).

German-speaking audience, as in pamphlets entitled “Freiheit, Gleichheit and Brüderlichkeit” and illustrations of a female figure resembling Marianne.¹¹¹ After the return to France, this attachment, combined with the party’s competition with the PCF and concern for its working class constituency, served to secure the place of the German language in Alsatian socialist ideologies of republicanism. It could not, however, prevent the party’s electoral decline across the period.¹¹²

In a broad sense, the discussions over education in interwar Alsace illustrate the tensions between “national” politics at the center and more regionally based politics at the periphery in interwar France. The Alsatian SFIO forged its own understanding of French republicanism, which accepted the anti-clericalism of the early Third Republic but developed an inclusive attitude towards the use of regional language. The difficulties that party leaders had in convincing national governments of the suitability of their proposals reflected the continued association made by these governments, whether they belonged to the left or right, of regional language and religion. The Alsatian SFIO’s separation of the two issues, on the other hand, offers a window onto varieties of republicanism in interwar France, as well as onto the tensions between central and peripheral political cultures. Of course, in many respects the Alsatian case is unique. A combination of history, culture and political circumstances served to create a set of conditions that were exceptional amongst French regions. Nevertheless, the Alsatians articulated their ideas in republican terms, mobilized republican history and thought of themselves as French republicans. In this sense, they offer a stirring reminder of the ways in which national ideas were reinterpreted at a grassroots, regional level. For the Alsatian Socialists, secularity and regional language were not simply compatible but essential, as they sought to re-shape the political landscape in both their *petite* and their *grande patrie*.

¹¹¹ See David Harvey, *Constructing Class*, 101.

¹¹² Alison Carrol, “The SFIO and National Integration. Regional Socialism and National Identity in Interwar Alsace” (Ph.D. Diss, University of Exeter, 2008).

