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My Grandfather Was Alsatian, So I Guess I Am Too? Stories from Strasbourg, France, on Alsatian Identity

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My Grandfather Was Alsatian, So I Guess I Am Too?

Stories from Strasbourg, France, on Alsatian Identity

Elda Hricko, Susquehanna University, interdisciplinary senior thesis research for French and Anthropology, SP 2020

Abstract

Alsatian culture grew strong regional uniqueness during war. The region was alternatively French and German four times in 30 years. They developed their own identity due to the precarious nature of their national identity.

Since 1945, Alsace has been happily French. Most descendants today do not speak the Alsatian dialect and consider their nationality French. While in Strasbourg, I noticed that “Alsatianness” still exists though. Looking at opinions of interviewed informants, literature, and observations of tourist activity in Strasbourg, I explore what it means to them in terms of heritage today.

Questions That Guide the Project

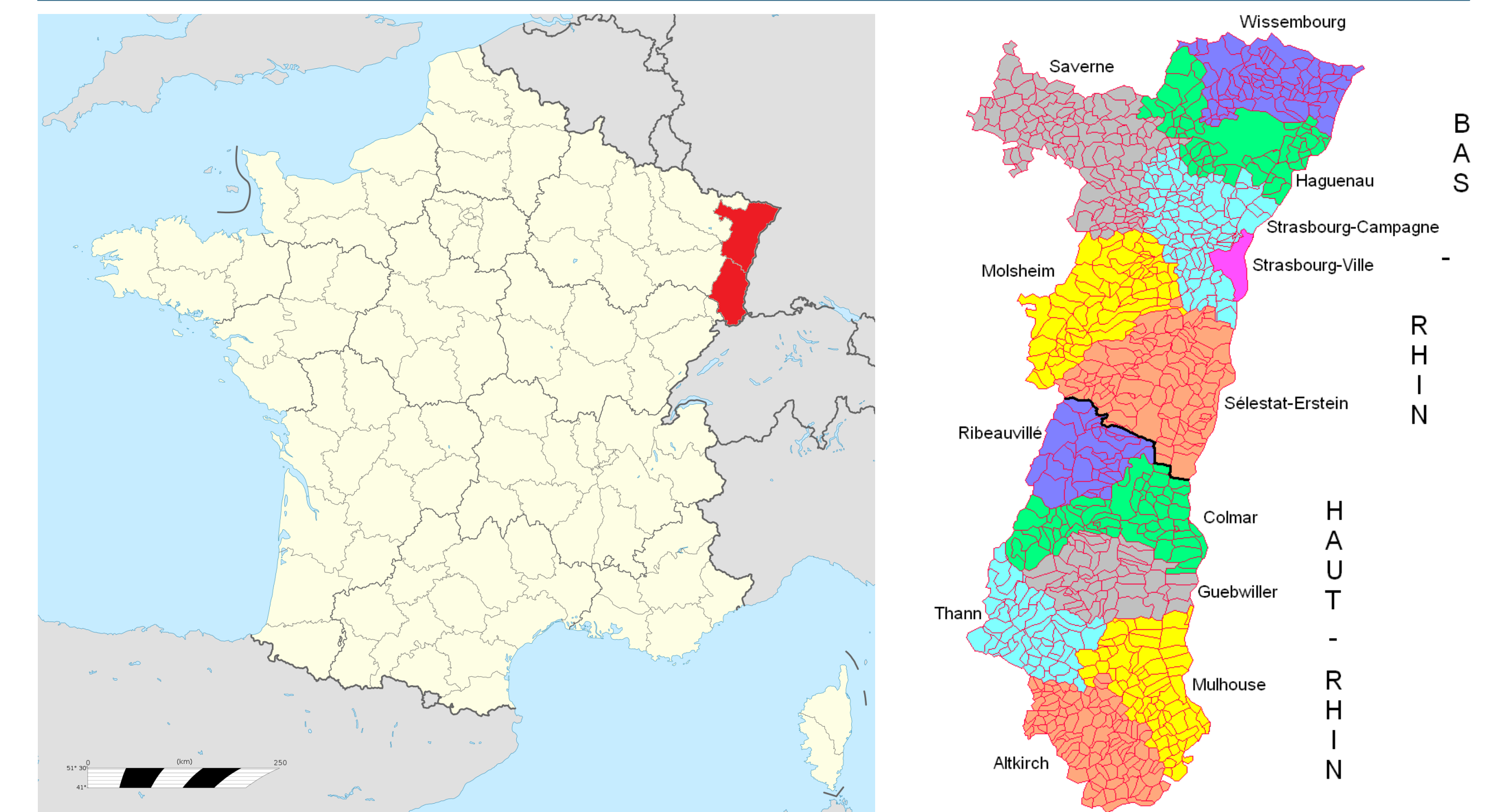
- What is the history of the region of Alsace?
- How are national identities created and/or incorporated in the region?
- How do the people interviewed see Alsatian identity as undergoing transformation or decline?
- How do Alsatian cultural practices/expressions prevail despite significant challenges to regional identity?
- How is Alsatian identity performed today in and around Strasbourg, particularly related to tourism?
- How do tourist locations help preserve the culture?

Methods

- During a semester abroad in Strasbourg, I conducted 12 interviews in French about Alsatian identity.
- I found participants by networking through my host family and professors at the University of Strasbourg.
- My informants and I chatted in a public place or at their home if invited.
- The interviews were 20-60 minutes long, recorded on my phone, and then transcribed.
- I coded the interviews to search for patterns and draw conclusions, drawing upon relevant literature.

Why Study This?

- I chose this topic because I was interested in the competing ideas of *jacobinisme* in Paris and the distinctiveness of France's regions.
- The phenomenon of regional adherence exists today all over the world.
- It is interesting to see how tourism fossilizes cultures that seem to belong to the past when really they still evolve.
- Research of this kind offers insight into dialect use, disappearance, and revival.



Discussion and Findings

A 1930 article from *La Rénovation Scolaire* helps illustrate how Alsace was viewed by the rest of France. It uses ambiguous terms to describe Alsace—I could not tell whether the writers of the article thought Alsace was French or German.

The promotion of Alsatian culture in museums, restaurants, tourist shops, and particular cultural initiatives proves that regionalism is still celebrated in Alsace. Most of my informants consider themselves French, *but* they are also Alsatian as part of their personal familial history. Being Alsatian used to be a national identity that marked the region as distinctive, but today it helps to define personal roots and tells part of the national stories of France and Germany.



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