



FAIDHERBE MONUMENT

Lille, France

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Executive Summary

For the bicentenary of the birth of French General Louis Faidherbe in 2018, a protest campaign named 'Faidherbe Doit Tomber' (Faidherbe Must Fall) was organised contesting the *Monument au Général Faidherbe* (monument to General Faidherbe) located in Lille, France. The statue, which was erected in 1896, celebrates the general's heroism during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871. Since 2017, the monument has been heavily contested due to Faidherbe's one time position as governor of Senegal, during which time he conducted particularly violent and destructive campaigns in order to further French trading interests. The protest was sparked by the 2017 debate over a statue of Faidherbe located in the city of Saint Louis, in Senegal, and then further influenced by the French Black Lives Matter movement in 2020.

Introduction

The monument to General Louis Léon César Faidherbe was inaugurated on October 25, 1896, on the square Richebé in Lille, France.¹ In 1975, it was inscribed in the list of *monuments historiques* (historic monuments), entitling it to protection from the French state.² Known in France for his military skills, his presence and legacy are most apparent in his home city of Lille and the surrounding region. He is recognised for leading the Armée du Nord (Northern Army), which, although eventually defeated, put up a strong fight against the Prussians despite its small size and ranks of inexperienced soldiers.³ While his military achievements are celebrated, his actions while serving in Senegal, eventually as governor, have until recently been less well known. Faidherbe had a reputation during his lifetime as a particularly ruthless commander in Africa, often engaging in violent campaigns against Indigenous populations, which were seen as a threat to French interests in the region.⁴

In 2015, following the 'Rhodes Must Fall' campaign in South Africa, a worldwide conversation began concerning the presence of imperialist symbols in public spaces, most notably statues and monuments dedicated to colonial figureheads. The movement *Faidherbe Doit Tomber* (Faidherbe Must Fall) was established in 2018 on the bicentenary of the general's birth by the association *Survie, Survie Nord* with the objective to advocate for the removal of the Faidherbe statue in Lille.⁵ In the summer of 2020, following the murder of George Floyd in the United States and ensuing Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, momentum for *Faidherbe Doit Tomber* escalated and the statue was subject to public protests.⁶ As of January 2022, no action has been taken to remove, repurpose, resignify, or recontextualise the statue.

Background

Louis Faidherbe

Louis Léon César Faidherbe was born in Lille on June 3, 1818.⁷ From 1843 to 1847, he served in Algeria during the French conquest, where he gained his first experience in colonial warfare and was granted some opportunities for command. While in Algeria, he expressed inconsistent views toward local populations. According to historian Leland Barrows, while he never stopped to question the premise of French imperialism in Africa, he came to form respect for the Arabo-Berber culture and even learned some Arabic.⁸ Working under the governor of Algeria, Thomas Bugeaud, Faidherbe bore witness to violence and massacres committed as part of a civilising mission to implant French culture in North Africa. Describing what he saw in a letter to his mother, he wrote 'you are seeing a war of extermination, and, unfortunately, it is impossible to

¹ Rodolphe Gauthier, "Faidherbe Doit Tomber: de la propagande de l'art à l'art de la propagande," *Lundimatin*, April 9, 2018.

² Ministère de la culture, "Les monuments historiques," *Ministère de la culture*, accessed May 6, 2021.

³ Justine Pluchard, 'Pourquoi Faidherbe fait-il polémique à Lille?' *Vозер*. Accessed February 10, 2022. Published June 17 2020.

⁴ Barry Boubacar, *The Kingdom of Waalo: Senegal before the Conquest*. (New York: Diasporic Africa Press, 1985). p. 226

⁵ Survie Nord, "Faidherbe Doit Tomber Brochure," *Survie Nord*, accessed May 06, 2021.

⁶ Florian Bobin, "The mark of the former colonizer: an interview with Khadim Ndiaye and Salia Sylla," *Africa is A Country*, July 21, 2020.

⁷ Faidherbe doit tomber, "Qui était Louis Faidherbe (1818-1889)?" *Faidherbe doit tomber*, accessed May 6, 2021.

⁸ Leland C. Barrows, "Faidherbe and Senegal: A Critical Discussion," *African Studies Review* 19, no. 1 (1976): 98

do otherwise.⁹ In 1853, Faidherbe was transferred to Senegal, where he was appointed to head a small detachment of army engineers in the town of Saint-Louis, on what was initially intended to be a temporary basis. Saint-Louis was one of the oldest European trading posts on the West African coast and was at the time the only French colony within Senegalese territory. During his first years in Senegal, Faidherbe was tasked with implementing the 'Plan of 1854.' This assignment, mandated by French oil company *Maurel et Prom*, involved the building of forts along the Senegal River to maximise French control of the acacia gum trade well into the Senegalese interior.¹⁰ According to Barrow, Faidherbe was chosen for this assignment because he had already shown himself to be undaunted by conducting raids against native populations in order to solidify French dominance in the territory.¹¹

Faidherbe was appointed governor of Senegal in 1854, sponsored by officials in the metropole and independent trading companies. One of the main tenets of leadership was the need to establish French dominance in West Africa by defeating every native population in armed conflict at least once.¹² The Senegalese interior was inhabited by several native kingdoms who also used the river for trade and transport. Continuing from his mandate from the Plan of 1854, Faidherbe felt that France should be the dominant force on the river, as opposed to one trader among many. To achieve this end, Faidherbe set about driving the native tribes and kingdoms away from the river. His contingent displaced the Toucouleur people to the east of Upper Senegal, pushed the Moors back north and annexed the Waalo Kingdom on the Southern side of the river. At the crucial Battle of Logandème, in the town of Fatick in May 1859, Faidherbe fought the Serer people of the Kingdom of Sine during the reign of King Coumba Ndoffène Famak Diouf, which ended with the town being burned to the ground.¹³ According to activist group *Faidherbe Doit Tomber*, Faidherbe's governorship was overall marked by an uninterrupted series of military campaigns, often characterised by their particularly violent nature. The group's dossier includes a statement from historian Vincent Joly, arguing that although Faidherbe also conducted large scale building projects and improved infrastructure, especially along the Senegalese coast, he was first and foremost a destructive influence. While he engaged in building projects which were in France's interests, his conduct towards native peoples in the Senegalese interior was, first and foremost, violent and destructive.¹⁴

During the Franco-Prussian War, many colonial officers, including Faidherbe, were called back to France and given higher ranks in order to replace the generals that had been killed fighting for Napoleon. Faidherbe thus became a divisional general in November 1870, and a month later was appointed as commander-in-chief of the Armée du Nord. He won several small victories against the Prussian First Army, most notably in Bapaume on January 3, 1871. However, in the winter of 1870-1871, his army suffered from limited supplies and low morale. As a result, at the battle of Saint-Quentin on January 19, 1871, Faidherbe and his army were defeated.¹⁵ In the last years of

⁹ Faidherbe Doit Tomber "Qui était Louis Faidherbe (1818-1889)?," *Faidherbe Doit Tomber*, accessed February 10, 2022.

¹⁰ Leland C. Barrows, "Faidherbe and Senegal: A Critical Discussion," *African Studies Review* 19, no. 1 (1976) p. 95.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 99

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Barry Boubacar, *The Kingdom of Waalo: Senegal before the Conquest*. (New York: Diasporic Africa Press, 1985). P. 226

¹⁴ Faidherbe Doit Tomber "Qui était Louis Faidherbe (1818-1889)?," *Faidherbe Doit Tomber*, accessed May 6, 2021.

¹⁵ Alain Coursier, *Faidherbe, 1818-1889: du Sénégal à l'Armée du Nord* (Paris: Tallandier, 1989).

his life, Faidherbe was elected as senator in 1879.¹⁶ He died on September 29, 1889 and received a public funeral. Four statues in his memory were erected after his death in Lille, Bapaume, Saint-Quentin and Saint-Louis in Senegal. Several streets are named after him across France, mostly in Lille. A métro station in Paris, *Faidherbe-Chaligny*, also bears his name.

The Statue

The idea for a statue commemorating Faidherbe in Lille was conceived at the time of Faidherbe's death in 1889.¹⁷ It was commissioned by the governing mayor of the city and inaugurated on October 25, 1896, on the square Richebé.¹⁸ The construction of the statue was not only funded by the state, but also by contributions from individuals and civil society groups.¹⁹ The public support for a statue honouring a war hero and patriot during the time of the Third Republic was significant, and indicated the importance attributed to the defense of the northern part of France by Faidherbe's Armée du Nord despite France's humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War.²⁰ This bronze statue was completed by Antoine Mercié on the pedestal designed by architect Paul Pujol. It was inscribed as a *monument historique* in 1975.²¹ This legal status protects the statue, due to its relevance and significance as a historical cultural heritage, as it symbolises a defining moment in French: the story of Faidherbe's 1871 victory against the Prussians at the battle of Bapaume during the Franco-Prussian war.²² Like most public monuments, Faidherbe's statue serves to commemorate and celebrate its likeness.

Though the monument was erected with the explicitly imperial symbol in a public space.



Figure 1: 'Close-up of the statue' Image by Vassil via Wikimedia Commons CC 1.0 Public Domain

History of the Contestation

Contestation before 2020

In 2017, a statue of Faidherbe in Saint-Louis, Senegal collapsed due to heavy rainfall and was swiftly restored by the city authorities.²³ Faidberbe's reputation in Senegal is mixed: while there has been some mobilisation against his memory since the 1970s, many others still regard him as

¹⁶ 'Louis Faidherbe,' Encyclopaedia Britannica. Accessed February 10, 2022.

¹⁷ LinkFang, "Monument au général Faidherbe," LinkFang, accessed March 12, 2021.

¹⁸ Florian Bobin, "The mark of the former colonizer: an interview with Khadim Ndiaye and Salia Sylla," *Africa is A Country*, July 21, 2020.

¹⁹ 236 communes in the North, former combattant associations, youth, women, teacher, sport ... associations brought their financial contributions to the statue. See Rodolphe Gauthier, "Faidherbe Doit Tomber: de la propagande de l'art à l'art de la propagande," *Lundimatin*, April 9, 2018

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ministère de la culture, "Les monuments historiques," *Ministère de la culture*, accessed May, 6 2021

²² Rodolphe Gauthier, "Faidherbe Doit Tomber: de la propagande de l'art à l'art de la propagande," *Lundimatin*, April 9, 2018.

²³ Le Sénégal décide de réinstaller à Saint-Louis la statue de Faidherbe,' VOA Afrique. September 8 2017.

an important and valued part of Senegalese history. His legacy is not simply that of a warmonger, but also the founder of the modern state. As an engineer, he is credited with significantly improving Senegal's urban infrastructure, a network of roads and bridges, as well as securing the territory against attacks from neighbouring kingdoms.²⁴ The late journalist Golbert Diagne, interviewed by the BBC, thought that "without the works carried out by Faidherbe, Saint-Louis would never have been recognised in 1895 as the leading city in West Africa. To destroy the statue of Faidherbe, who built, among other things, a bridge which is unlike any other in the world, would be an injustice."²⁵

That being said, the fall of Faidherbe's statue resulted in larger-scale protests than had been seen in recent years and online activism against the perpetuation of colonial symbols in Senegal.²⁶ As a result of the city authorities' decision to replace the statue, this time surrounded by metal fences to deter activists, Senegal born philosopher and historian Khadim Ndiaye founded the group *Collectif sénégalais contre la célébration de Faidherbe* (Senegalese Collective against the Celebration of Faidherbe).²⁷ Their first act was an open letter to the mayor of Saint Louis, drawing attention to the violence committed by Faidherbe in Senegal, and calling for the statue's permanent removal.²⁸

The Senegalese Collective were a direct inspiration to the group *Faidherbe Doit Tomber*, which was founded as a subsidiary of *Survie Nord* on the bicentenary of Faidherbe's birth in 2018. They were founded in partnership with the Senegealese Collective, as well as le *Collectif Afrique* (The Africa Collective), *l'Atelier d'histoire critique* (The Workshop of Critical History) and *le Front uni des immigrations et des quartiers populaires* (FUIQP - The United Front of Immigration and Working-class Districts).²⁹ Drawing inspiration from their West African counterpart, the group penned an open letter to the mayor of Lille, Martine Aubry³⁰, in a plea for the recognition of Faidherbe's 'crimes against humanity' and the removal of his statue in a concerted and recognised effort to 'recognise the crimes of slavery and the tragedy of colonisation.' It concluded:

We, descendants of colonised peoples, anti-colonists, and antiracist residents, ask for the removal of Louis Faidherbe's statue and all of the glorifying symbols of colonialism in Lille's public spaces. We ask that victims of colonisation and those that heroically resisted it are honoured in their place.³¹

The campaign sought to convince the Lille City Hall, represented by Mayor Aubry, to follow the example set by other cities like New York, Johannesburg or Barcelona, which recently removed colonial symbols in their public spaces.³² For instance, the campaign referred to the city of Berlin

²⁴ 'Case Study V: Colonial legacies in Senegal. Louis Faidherbe Statue, Saint Louis.' in *Contested Histories in Public Space. Principles, Processes, Best Practices*. London: International Bar Association, 2021. 128

²⁵ Golbert Diagne, "Pourquoi l'indépendance du Sénégal en 1960 est une erreur et pour quelles raisons je défends Faidherbe?" NDAR Info 7 June 2018.

²⁶ Alexandre Capron. 'Au Sénégal, la statue d'un colon français s'écroule et provoque des réactions hostiles,' *France 24*. September 8 2017.

²⁷ Faidherbe Doit Tomber, 'Faidherbe vu du Sénégal,' *Faidherbe Doit Tomber*. Accessed March 3 2022.

²⁸ Khadim Ndaïye, 'Lettre ouverte à M. Mansour Faye, maire de Saint-Louis du Sénégal : Le sanguinaire général Faidherbe ne mérite pas d'avoir une statue au Sénégal.' *Le Quotidien*. September 8 2017.

²⁹ Faidherbe Doit Tomber, "À propos," *Faidherbe Doit Tomber*, accessed May 06, 2021.

³⁰ Martine Aubry (1950) has been mayor of Lille since 2001, the first woman to hold this position.

³¹ Ibid.

³² AFP, "De Lille à Saint-Louis, la statue du général Faidherbe interroge le passé colonial de la France," *Le Point*, May 24, 2018.

which announced that they would rename a number of streets commemorating German colonisation in Namibia and would, instead, honour African independence fighters.³³ In 2018, however, Martine Aubry stated that while the debate 'has its legitimacy', the municipality has neither 'the intention to remove the statue (...) restored for its heritage value, nor to rename the street'.³⁴ Weighing in on this debate, historian Alain Coursier, author of Faidherbe's biography, commended the mayor's decision, arguing that one cannot 'review history with today's eye,' noting also that Faidherbe was primarily a war hero who defended Hauts-de-France from the German invasion in 1970, an episode that cannot be 'brushed aside'.³⁵

Contestation Since 2020

In 2020, the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer unleashed 'Black Lives Matter' protests all over the world.³⁶ In France, demonstrators expressed anger at racial injustices and police brutality—particularly with regard to minorities from France's former African colonies. Within the European context, many campaigners affiliated with Black Lives Matter turned their attention to combatting the continued celebration of colonial figures by protesting against, graffiti and, in some cases, forcibly tearing down statues in their honour. While there already existed numerous campaigns against various statues - most notable *Rhodes Must Fall* - the Black Lives Matter movement provided a unified and worldwide slogan under which to campaign against colonial legacy and institutionalised racism. In 2020, the already existing public debate surrounding statues of colonial figures intensified and became increasingly heated on both sides. The most common arguments for removal included that statues honouring such figures glorified colonialism in a way that was not deemed acceptable in cities that often prided themselves on diversity. On the other side of the debate, those advocating for the statues to remain in place often expressed the concern that removing statues in part constituted an erasure or whitewashing of history.

In June 2020, demonstrators gathered in Lille to protest the continued display of Faidherbe's statue in the city centre. Between 200 and 300 people called for the removal or 'at least the contextualisation' of the 'violent and racist figure of French colonial history'.³⁷ The protestors were made up of representatives of the Survie association, FUIQP, the collectives *Afrique* and *Défense des Sans-papiers*, and the *Atelier d'Histoire Critique*. During this protest in June, the Faidherbe statue was tagged with graffiti, which have since been removed, featuring the words 'colon', (colonialist) 'assassin,' and 'Sénégal'.³⁸ Jean-François Rabot, a member of Survie, asserted that Faidherbe, despite his heroic efforts in France, 'also colonised Senegal in an extremely violent way, bragging to have burnt villages, and developed all sorts of racist theories'.³⁹ The protest was also attended by around 15 'identitaire' (identity) counter protestors who stood in front of the police

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ AFP, "De Lille à Saint-Louis, la statue du général Faidherbe interroge le passé colonial de la France," *Le Point*, May 24, 2018.

³⁶ Julien Bouteiller, "Racisme et colonisation. Faut-il déboulonner la statue de Faidherbe à Lille?," *Lille Actu*, June 20, 2020.

³⁷ Le Parisien avec AFP, «Faidherbe doit tomber» : manifestation à Lille pour le retrait d'une statue «symbole du colonialisme», *Le Parisien*, June 20, 2020.

³⁸ AFP, "La statue du général Faidherbe taguée à Lille," *Franceinfo*, June 21, 2020.

³⁹ Le Parisien avec AFP, «Faidherbe doit tomber» : manifestation à Lille pour le retrait d'une statue «symbole du colonialisme», *Le Parisien*, June 20, 2020.

and shouted 'on est chez nous' (We are at home.) Though there was a small altercation between the protestors and counter-protestors, the police immediately stepped in to restore calm.⁴⁰

Rabot claimed that the protestors were not interested in forcibly removing the statue, but rather they asked that the City Hall at least put up a plaque explaining the acts of violence that Faidherbe committed. Ideally, though, the protestors would like the statue to be removed, legally, and placed in a museum. Thomas Deltombe, historian, representative of the Collectif and coordinator of the 'Faidherbe Doit Tomber' campaign, declared that 'we do not intend to erase his history, instead we want to give him his history back—nobody here even asks themselves who Faidherbe is anymore.'⁴¹ The *Faidherbe Doit Tomber* campaign has also created a worldwide map with all of the roads, squares and monuments honouring Faidherbe, in an effort to emphasise their large number.⁴² These range from the Boulevard Faidherbe in Guadeloupe, to the Hotel Faidherbe in Senegal, to the extensive number of roads, schools and squares named after him all over France.

Decision-Making Processes

In the case of the Faidherbe statue, the decision-making and support process took place at both a local and national level. Protestors have been calling for the removal or the recontextualization of the statue since at least 2018. However, their demands have repeatedly been refused by Lille City Hall. The mayor's decision is supported by President Macron's statement in 2020 that France will not remove statues of colonial-era figures. In a televised address, Macron said:

The republic will erase no trace or names of its history, it will forget none of its works, it will tear down none of its statues. We must instead lucidly look together at our history, and in particular our relationship with Africa.⁴³

Shortly after the protests and tagging of the statue in June 2020, Martine Aubry expressed that she was open to installing a plaque in front of the statue explaining all aspects of Faidherbe's work and legacy.⁴⁴ However, she also insisted that the statue does not honour him for his exploits in Africa, but simply symbolises and represents his victory in battle against the Prussians in 1871. Aubry echoed the position of historian Alain Coursier, author of Faidherbe's biography (1989), who claimed that one cannot 'review history with today's eye,' noting also that Faidherbe 'preserved the Hauts-de-France, as we say today, from the German invasion in 1870,' an episode that cannot be 'brushed aside.'⁴⁵ Aubry also stated that 'we have to respect history' and emphasised the importance of the statue's legal status as a *monument historique* (historical monument).⁴⁶ She further expressed regret regarding the demands of removal of statues of other figures such as Jules Ferry, Winston Churchill, and General Charles de Gaulle.⁴⁷ Aubry would envision a future

⁴⁰ Benjamin Dutheoit, 'Lille: le collectif «Faidherbe doit tomber» interpelle la mairie devant la statue,' *Le Voix du Nord*. 20 June 2020.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Google Maps, "Le colonialiste Faidherbe près de chez vous," *Google Maps*, Google, accessed May 06, 2021.

⁴³ Rym Momtaz, "Macron says France won't 'tear down statues' amid anti-racism protests," *Politico*, June 14, 2020.

⁴⁴ F.B. avec AFP, "Lille: Aubry Envisage La Pose d'Une Plaque Explicative Devant La Statue de Faidherbe," *BFM LILLE*, June 22, 2020.

⁴⁵ Ibid. See also Bénédicte Grailles, "Le Nord, rempart de la France: Images publicitaires, chansons et monuments de 1870 à 1914," *Revue du Nord* 2005/2-3 (n° 360 - 361), pp. 613-632.

⁴⁶ F.B. avec AFP, "Lille: Aubry Envisage La Pose d'Une Plaque Explicative Devant La Statue de Faidherbe," *BFM LILLE*, June 22, 2020

⁴⁷ Ibid.

plaque to explain that the city of Lille honours some of Faidherbe's actions but also disapproves of others. The campaign group *Faidherbe Doit tomber* did not find this proposal to be satisfactory, arguing that by only acknowledging that this would not negate the instances of oppression, destruction and racism that Faidherbe was responsible for.⁴⁸

In her re-election campaign in 2020, Martine Aubry said she would ask a commission responsible for the appointment of streets, statues, and sculptures to work to preserve their history as well as denounce what goes against their values.⁴⁹ As of March 2022, no move has been made to add a plaque with a contextualisation and explanation of the history and controversy surrounding Faidherbe in front of the statue, despite Aubry being reelected in early July 2020.

Summary and Conclusions

The statue of Faidherbe in Lille was erected to celebrate the general's victory in the Franco-Prussian war. While Faidherbe successfully lead the *Armée du Nord* in the Franco-Prussian War, which was partially responsible for protecting the city of Lille and the surrounding region, most of his career was spent in Africa. With his tenure in Africa, his legacy has been highly contested. On one side, he was praised for launching large-scale infrastructure works aimed at breaking the isolation of the colony, benefiting the city of Saint-Louis, and, on the other, was known to act ruthlessly in order to protect French colonial interests, and was responsible for massive violence against native peoples.⁵⁰ Nicolas Butor from the association *Survie Nord*, stated their work and activism around the statue of Faidherbe are an effort to bring awareness to the complete history of the general. Butor explains that *Survie Nord* aims to incite others to question whether Faidherbe and other figures, should be honoured by monuments in public spaces, which glorify their actions.⁵¹ Though the change in terms of policies has not been made, there is now greater public awareness in France regarding Faidherbe's complete legacy and actions in Africa. Butor is optimistic about eventual progress to come either through the recontextualisation, repurposing, or rehoming of the statue to a museum.⁵²

Since the summer of 2020, no further protests have occurred in Lille. The local authorities have not planned to either remove or add contextualisation to the statue.

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⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Senegalese historian Amadou Bakhaw Diow stated, "many Senegalese have ambivalent feelings about him: he is seen sometimes as a colonial conqueror confronting armed resistance from the Senegalese kingdoms, and sometimes as the creator of the modern state and liberator of the black Senegalese from extortion by the Moors of neighbouring Mauritania." in 'Case Study V: Colonial legacies in Senegal. Louis Faidherbe Statue, Saint Louis.' in *Contested Histories in Public Space. Principles, Processes, Best Practices*. London: International Bar Association, 2021. p.128

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

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https://actu.fr/hauts-de-france/lille_59350/racisme-et-colonisation-faut-il-deboulonner-la-statue-de-faidherbe-a-lille_34406480.html. (PDF 10)
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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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