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Skiing as a Unifying Element during the French Occupation in the Montafon, Western Austria, after World War II

Introduction

After World War II Western Austria, namely the federal states Tyrol and Vorarlberg, was occupied by French troops. In the Montafon, a valley in the very south of Vorarlberg, they stayed from May 1945 to November 1953.

After giving a short overview of the various contacts between France and the Montafon throughout history, the highlights of the beginnings of skiing in the Montafon are briefly presented. Skiing was not yet that popular before the outbreak of World War I. During the interwar period skiing experienced its first boom years, as the numerous newly founded ski clubs proved. However, the main focus of this paper is on the period of French occupation.

The French and the Austrians had several things in common, for example, they shared one great passion – skiing. Therefore, the French military administration allowed the Austrians to build up an infrastruc-

ture for skiing and to organise provincial and Austrian championships as well as international FIS-races. As a consequence, the Montafon gained a certain degree of popularity in the world of skiing during the period of occupation. Occasionally, the French and the Austrians even skied together and made friends. Many of these friendships lasted for decades and over generations, with some of them even having been maintained up to the present day.

This paper will illustrate the importance of skiing as a unifying element during the period of French occupation. As it is a regional study, the paper intends to achieve this aim by exemplarily focusing on one valley, namely the Montafon.

The Montafon: A Valley in the Austrian Eastern Alps

The Montafon is a valley in southern Vorarlberg, the westernmost province of Austria. It belongs to the political district of Bludenz, is 39 kilometres long and has an area of more than 560 km². It consists of ten municipalities, namely Bartholomäberg, Gaschurn, Lorüns, St. Anton im Montafon, St. Gallenkirch, Schruns, Silbertal, Stallehr, Tschagguns and Vandans. The main village is the market town Schruns. The valley is surrounded by three mountain ranges – the Rätikon, the Silvretta and the Verwall.

The valley has around 16,500 inhabitants as well as around 20,000 accommodation facilities for tourists with about two million overnight stays per year, most of them in winter. Besides tourism, hydropower is an essential source of income for the inhabitants of the Montafon.¹

Historical Points of Contact between France and the Montafon

Seasonal Workers from the Montafon in France

In earlier days, the bleak Alpine landscape made it very difficult to feed all the people in the Montafon. As a consequence, they cultivated the whole vegetation area, which is called Alpine transhumance. People did not only cultivate their farm at the bottom of the valley (at an altitude

of 650 to 1,000 m above sea level). From May to June and then again in September they also cultivated the Alpine foothills (around 1,200 to 1,600 m above sea level) and summertime was spent on the Alpine pastures (around 1,600 to 2,000 m above sea level).²

Nevertheless, the harvest was insufficient to feed all the people in the Montafon. As a consequence, during the whole post-medieval period, people from the Montafon – men, women and even children – had to leave their homes as seasonal workers. Many men and women went to France where they worked as construction workers, harvest hands or as so-called “Krauthobler”, workers who went from door to door to slice cabbage with a special slicer, called “Krauthobel”.³ Even children were sent away to work abroad. As most of them were sent to Swabia in southern Germany, they were known as Swabian children.⁴

Thanks to hydropower as well as to the rise of tourism, alpinism, and skiing, numerous jobs have been created in the Montafon since the early 20th century. Consequently, Alpine transhumance and seasonal work have lost their previous importance, although Alpine transhumance has not completely vanished down to the present day.

The Napoleonic Area

Writing about the historical relations between the Montafon and France, the Napoleonic area should not go unmentioned. In 1799 the Montafon was a battleground during the coalition wars against Napoleon and the battle at the Schlappin Ridge in that year is still part of the collective memory of the valley thanks to the memorial for the regional governor of that period, Johann Josef Batlogg. As a consequence of the Napoleonic wars, Vorarlberg and Tyrol were under the foreign rule of the Bavarians from 1806 to 1814. Furthermore, numerous soldiers from the Montafon lost their lives during Napoleon’s disastrous invasion of Russia in 1812.⁵

However, it was not until May 1945 that French soldiers returned to the Montafon to occupy the valley for more than eight years. Before writing about that period of occupation in general and the importance of skiing at that time in particular, a short overview of the development of skiing in the early 20th century will be given.

A Short History of Skiing in the Montafon before 1945

The Early Beginnings of Winter Sports before World War I

On 15 December 1906 the first winter sports club of the Montafon was founded in the market town of Schruns and two months later, on 17 February 1907 its counterpart in the neighbouring village of Tschagguns was initiated.⁶ The clubs were not called ski clubs as in those days skiing was not yet as popular as tobogganing. Therefore, the first event organised by the club in Schruns was a tobogganing race which took place on the day of the foundation of the club in Tschagguns. To the day one year later, the first ski race was hosted by the Winter Sports Club Tschagguns. Two years later, on 20 February 1910 the two clubs were entrusted with the performance of the first provincial ski championships of Vorarlberg, namely a downhill race from the mountain Golm down to the centre of Tschagguns. Additionally, an exhibition ski jumping event took place on a small hill made of snow and delighted the audience. However, in 1914 the outbreak of World War I interrupted the rise of skiing in Schruns and Tschagguns.⁷

Skiing in the Interwar Period

In the interwar period numerous winter sports and ski clubs were (re-) founded in the Montafon:

- 1919: Ski Club Gaschurn
- 1921: Winter Sports Club Schruns
- 1927: Winter Sports Club Tschagguns
- 1927: Ski Club Silvretta Partenen
- 1929: Ski Club Gargellen
- 1931: Winter Sports Club St. Gallenkirch
- 1933: Ski Club Vandans.⁸

The number of skiing events multiplied in the 1920s and 30s. There were not yet any ski lifts then but two ski jumps were built, namely the Rhätikon Ski Jump (hill record: 47 m) in 1931 and the much larger Zelfen Ski Jump (first hill record before World War II: 80 m) in 1938.⁹

In addition to that the provincial ski championships of Vorarlberg were carried out by the clubs in Schruns and Tschagguns in 1933.¹⁰

Furthermore, the American Nobel Prize winning author Ernest Hemingway, who in those days was still an unknown journalist who lived in Paris, spent the winters of 1924/25 and 1925/26 in the Hotel “Taube” (Pigeon) in Schruns.¹¹ He was a passionate skier and as he wrote about his time in the Montafon in his short story “The Snows of Kilimanjaro”¹² and in his novel *A Moveable Feast*,¹³ the Montafon of the interwar period found its way into world literature.

Skiing and National Socialism

The National Socialists instrumentalized sports in general and skiing in particular and misused it as a tool for their gleichschaltung, which aims for an (enforced) political conformity. The misusage of the Olympic Games of 1936 in Garmisch-Partenkirchen and Berlin is the best example of that. In the Montafon, the Zelfen Ski Jump was misused by Nazi propaganda. In the first years of World War II there were still ski championships organised. The district championships (“Kreismeisterschaften”) of Vorarlberg took place in Tschagguns in 1939. Their main organizer was the National Socialist League of the Reich for Physical Exercise. In 1941 even Albert Speer, Hitler’s eventual Reich Minister of Armaments and War Production, came to the Montafon for skiing and to inspect the construction site of the Silvretta Reservoir Dam. This dam was important as the Nazis regarded hydropower as essential for the energy supply of the Third Reich.¹⁴

The French Occupation Period in the Montafon

Peaceful Invasion of the French on 4 May 1945

On 29 April 1945 French troops crossed the border of Vorarlberg. Although there were some fights around the larger cities, the French already reached Bludenz, the very southern district of Vorarlberg, on 4 May. From there they moved on to Schruns the same day.¹⁵ Dr. Hermann Sander (1920–1998), a young medical doctor from Schruns, remembered the end of the war in the Montafon as follows:

“The Approach of the French

[...] The French approached and the Montafon should be handed over to them as peacefully as possible. [...]

On Thursday, 3 May, we [Dr. Sander and a group of like-minded men] occupied the post office, the police station and the town hall and degraded their Nazi leaders. [...] The next day we appointed Dr. Erwin Heinzle as mayor.

The Invasion of the French in Schruns

Close to 3 p.m. Captain Hubert and Colonel Ruthard drove to Lorüns with [...] a motorcycle combination and a huge white flag. They assured the French that no single shot would be fired if they moved straight on to Schruns. They were still afraid of the Alpine fortress which would be occupied by [a kind of] werewolves. They believed our peace negotiators and with their tanks ahead they moved into Schruns, which was decorated with red-white-red and red-white flags, around 6:30 p.m.. Mayor Erwin Heinzle, Herbert Mühlbacher and I welcomed the French at the church square in German uniforms but with red-white-red brassards. [...]”¹⁶

According to an eyewitness who lived in the centre of Schruns, tanks were driving through the village without any interruption. Later the local people found out that there were only eight tanks which were driving around in a circuit. The tanks were not needed anyway because the Montafon was surrendered to the French without a single shot being fired.

Similarities on and off-piste

After World War II Austria was occupied by France, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States. The two westernmost provinces of Vorarlberg and Tyrol (excluding Eastern Tyrol) were under French rule. In the Montafon the French troops remained from 4 May 1945 to 22 November 1953.

The French and the Austrians had several things in common. They both regarded themselves as victims of the German National Socialists. As a consequence, the French called Austria “pays ami”, a “friendly

state”, which was not treated rudely at all. Austria benefited from this myth of being a victim for decades. It was not until 1991 that the then Austrian Chancellor Franz Vranitzky no longer denied the joint guilt when he admitted the Austrian crimes and asked for forgiveness.¹⁷

In some cases the soldiers and the local women, many of them widows, became very close to each other. The majority of the occupying soldiers were Moroccans and some of them started sexual liaisons with local women. Numerous so-called Moroccan Kids were born. The situation of these kids and their mothers was very difficult and the topic was taboo up to the recent past.¹⁸

Besides these similarities off-piste, many French soldiers and the local population shared one passion on slope – skiing. This common passion is the topic of the following chapters of this paper.

Revival of Skiing in the Montafon during the Occupation Period: Provincial and Austrian Ski Championships in 1946 and 1947

As early as in the summer of 1945, the Winter Sports Club Tschagguns began to re-organise and the successful ski racer and Austrian ski champion of 1932, Edwin Hartmann, became its new executive director. Although the situation was very difficult immediately following the war, Hartmann and his team carried out the first post-war provincial championships of Vorarlberg in January 1946. 155 men and women participated in the Alpine combination (downhill and slalom). The championships were a great success and as a consequence the Austrian Ski Federation, ÖSV, engaged the club to organise the first post-war Austrian ski championships (Alpine and Nordic) in 1947. As a consequence, a ski lift and a ski jump for the Nordic combined were built in Tschagguns in 1946 which was the starting point for an expansion of the infrastructure in the fields of tourism in general and winter sports in particular.

The construction of a new ski jump had become necessary because the Zelfen Large Hill was not suitable for the Nordic combined due to its overly large size. The new ski jump was planned by Engineer August Ohneberg. A wooden construction was built for the approach and the skeleton was 25 meters long and ten meters high. Its construction was supported by political prisoners who helped to complete the new ski jump before the onset of winter. On 29 December 1946, Edwin Hart-

mann made the first jump and afterwards its name was uncovered. It was named after its constructor, namely “Ingenieur Ohneberg-Schanze” (Engineer Ohneberg Ski Jump).

The second important project of 1946 in Tschagguns was the “Grabserlift” (Grabs Chair Lift) which was a pioneering construction in those days. While button lifts had already been known before the 1940s, chair lifts were a quite new invention. The one in Tschagguns was the first in Vorarlberg and the second (and longest) in Austria.¹⁹ On 15 February 1947, it was described in a local newspaper as follows:

“The skier sits, with or without skis, in a chair (therefore, according to a Swiss custom, called ‘Sesseli-Lift’)²⁰ and mostly floats about half a metre up to one metre above the ground, while, in the case of a ski lift, the skier sits on a button and his skis, which are clipped on, slide on the snow (button lift). Thus, the ‘Sesseli-Lift’ is independent from the terrain and especially from the snow situation and from the season. It can be run all-the-year. In Switzerland, there are already operating several chair lifts of this kind and they are so popular that people are already talking about a so called ‘Sesseli’-fever and this development is not faced without concerns, for example by conservationists. Nevertheless, the chair lift will conquer the Austrian winter sports destinations, respectively the alpine countries.”²¹

The construction of the lift was finished right before the Austrian Ski Championships which took place from 18 to 23 February 1947. The realisation of the championships was quite a challenge for the Winter Sports Club Tschagguns and the neighbouring club of Schruns which was the co-organiser of this large event with 260 Austrian sportsmen and sportswomen participating. In those days, it was not easy to supply all the athletes and their attendants with enough food because food consumption was restricted by food stamps.²² Jakob Brugger, secretary and annalist of the Winter Sports Club Tschagguns, remembered how the organisers succeeded to get enough food for the athletes:

“[They] bought extra meat on the famous and also notorious ‘black market’ [...]. There were people who were able to organize

various ‘scarce articles’ for us. We approached such a ‘businessman’, also called ‘black marketeer’, and after nightfall he delivered us the desired quantity of beef to a certain place, where the innkeepers could pick it up.”²³

A night ski jumping event at the Engineer Ohneberg Ski Jump with 72 starters and 7,000 spectators was the most spectacular event of the championships. The competition was won by Sepp Bradl, who had been the first ski jumper to jump further than 100 meters (in Planica in 1936). Other Austrian champions who should become successful athletes in Alpine skiing were Dagmar Rom (two world championship titles in Aspen in 1950) and Othmar Schneider (Olympic gold medallist in Oslo in 1952).

In spite of the difficulties in supply and of various technical problems, the championships were a success and a valuable promotion for the winter sports destination Montafon. The innovative spirit and the great engagement of the winter sports functionaries of Tschagguns and Schruns were essential for the successful realisation of these events. However, one has to admit that they would not have been possible without their toleration by the French administration who put no obstacles in the organisers’ way.

A New Alliance and New Ski Lifts between 1947 and 1952

During the organisation of the Austrian Ski Championships of 1947, which had been organised by the clubs of Tschagguns and Schruns, it became clear that the various clubs could achieve much more if they pooled their forces. Consequently, the physician Edwin Albrich from Schruns initiated the creation of the Ski Club Montafon, an umbrella organization for all winter sports and ski clubs of the valley. It was founded on 27 November 1949 and its first members were the winter sports clubs of Schruns, Tschagguns, St. Gallenkirch, and Vandans as well as the Ski Club Gargellen. The Winter Sports Club Silvretta-Partenen and the Ski Club Gaschurn joined the Ski Club Montafon within the first two years.²⁴

In an article in a local newspaper the ethnologist Richard Beitzl from Schruns summarised the main aims of the newly founded umbrella organisation:

“Extension of the Natural Opportunities

The aim of the Ski Club Montafon cannot be expressed shorter than with the [...] word ‘Ski Stadium Montafon’. Due to comradely and generous cooperation, the existing touristic infrastructure and accommodation facilities, the sports facilities and mountain railways, but especially the sports clubs with their supporting and active members themselves should be modernized, extended and appropriately deployed. Each village of the Montafon will feel the vitalization of the sportive and – thanks to tourism – also of the economic blood circulation [...].”²⁵

As the following table illustrates, a large the number of lifts were built all over the Montafon during the occupation period and these lifts were without any doubts essential for the tourist upswing of the whole area.

Year	Village	Description of the Lift
1947	Tschagguns	“Grabserlift”: First chair lift in Vorarlberg (with one chair)
1947	Gaschurn	“Mottalift” (a button lift with two buttons)
1948	Gargellen	Button lift next to the Hotel “Madrisa”
1949	St. Gallenkirch	“Rehsee-Schlepplift” (a button lift)
1950	Schruns	“Hochjochbahn” (a chair lift consisting of two sections)
1951/52	Gargellen	First section of the “Schafbergbahn” (a chair lift with one chair)

Lifts built in the Montafon between 1947 and 1952.²⁶

The “Hochjochbahn” up to the top of the Hochjoch, the local mountain of Schruns, was essential for the international races of the early 1950s, the so called “Internationale 2-Pisten-Rennen” (International 2-Pistes-Races) which made the Montafon known in the international world of ski sports.

The International 2-Pistes-Races of 1951, 1952 and 1954

In the folder of 1951 the organisers wrote the following introduction about the races:

“The Montafon, which was the venue of the Austrian Ski Championships of the year 1947 and, therefore, became an internationally known centre of winter sports, will once again be the location of a major alpine event on February 24th and 25th, 1951. On these two days the Ski Club Montafon carries out the International 2-Pistes-Races in the winter sports double municipality Schruns-Tschagguns.”²⁷

The 2-pistes-races for men and women consisted of an Alpine combination of two downhill races. Additionally, a slalom race was carried out. For the two downhill races, one from Grabs to Tschagguns and one from the Hochjoch to Schruns, the two chair lifts were essential. Without them there might have been no races at all.

In 1951, all starters (with the exception of a single athlete from the United States) were Austrians. The local hero Luise Jaretz was able to win all races which delighted the people in the Montafon. The international response was very positive. Besides the advertising effect for the winter sports destination Montafon, this resulted in an internationalisation of the starting field for the year 1952. Racers from Austria, Germany, Switzerland, France, and the United States fought for victory. None other than Toni Sailer, not yet older than 17 years, reached the second place of the Alpine combination.

A lack of snow resulted in the cancellation of the races of 1953. When the races of 1954 were carried out as FIS-§-1 races, the highest category of those years, and with three Olympic gold medallists among the starters, namely Stein Eriksen (Norway), Henry Oreiller (France) and Othmar Schneider (Austria), the French troops had already left the Montafon several months before.²⁸

During the period of French occupation the local people from the Montafon were not only able to organise national and international rac-

es but they could also enlarge the touristic infrastructure, such as with numerous ski lifts. This would not have been possible without the acceptance of the French troops.

“Ski Contacts” on Behalf of Improved Cross-National Relations?

From time to time the French soldiers and the locals even met on the slopes. In some cases French soldiers even settled down in the Montafon after the end of the occupation period. Some examples will now be presented.

Injured French Soldier Saved by Austrian Boy

In 1947 the eight-year-old boy Helmut Marent was home alone. He lived next to the slope from Grabs to Tschagguns and he saw that a French soldier had fallen while skiing. The soldiers' comrades did not notice and as it was in the evening no other skiers came. The boy left the house and helped the soldier. He brought a toboggan out on which the soldier could lie down. On his skis the boy brought him down to the village where his comrades were already waiting and looking for him. Without the boy's help the soldier might have had to spend the night outdoors which would have been very dangerous in winter. One year later the soldier returned to the Montafon and brought the boy a bag of sweets to thank him for the rescue.²⁹

This eyewitness report is a good example of how skiing can bring nations together. Skiers help each other if they are in trouble no matter whether they are of the same or different nationalities.

French Soldier “removed” by Austrian Toboggan

However, not all international encounters were completely peaceful. In March 1946 the Winter Sports Club Tschagguns held a tobogganing race with 55 female and 119 male participants (an example of the post-war popularity of that sports). Jakob Brugger, the annalist of the club, wrote down a small episode about that race: A French officer blocked the race track repeatedly. Although he was warned several times, he did not stop his behaviour. As a consequence, he was “rather rudely removed by a toboggan”.³⁰ The problem was solved and the incident did not have any further consequences.

French Corporal participating in 2-Pistes-Races

The French administration did not only allow the Ski Club Montafon to organise national and international races, but in one case even allowed a French soldier to compete. Corporal Francis Groll was one of the starters in the 2-Pistes-Race of 1952. It seems that he was – in contrast to other starters – not a professional racer as he came in last among 23 male starters.³¹ However, he shared the locals' passion for skiing and maybe thought that it is the taking part that counts.

French Soldier settled down in Vorarlberg

Peter Campidell was one of numerous French soldiers who decided to stay in the Montafon after the end of the occupation. He settled down in Partenen³² and the Montafon Archive in the Montafon Folk Museum in Schruns has numerous pictures from him which show French soldiers skiing in the mountains of the Montafon. These pictures are an important source for historians focussing on the occupation period in general and on skiing in those days in particular.³³



French soldiers in the Montafon.³⁴

René Boillot and Franz Vonier

In the years after World War II, Franz Vonier was one of the best skiers from the Montafon and he was even the three time academic ski world champion. He and the French soldier René Boillot became friends and one day Boillot asked Vonier to put together a team of skiers from the Montafon and invited them to accompany him to his home, the village Les Hôpitaux-Neufs right on the French-Swiss border. They were accommodated in a good hotel and were treated as friends. Vonier returned to Les Hôpitaux-Neufs several times which was quite complicated in those days as an Austrian needed numerous documents if he wanted to travel to France. One day Vonier did not have all required documents and therefore his friends smuggled him across the border in their car boot.

After the end of the occupation period Boillot made the same decision as Campidell and decided to stay. He settled down in Bludenz where he ran a printing company for many years. He and Vonier remained friends.³⁵



Franz Vonier skiing in Les Hôpitaux-Neufs.³⁶

The End of the French Occupation on 22 November 1953

In 1952 the Soviet Union decided that they would no longer charge the costs for the occupation from Austria and the other occupation forces decided to do the same. However, France could not afford to pay for the supply of

their troops in Vorarlberg and Tyrol and therefore they decided to leave before the ratification of the Austrian Independence Treaty. As a consequence, the French troops left the Montafon on 22 November 1953. There was a farewell celebration in the Hotel “Taube” (Pigeon) in Schruns and the local politicians as well as the representatives of the French military showed their respect to each other. The eight-year period of occupation had finally come to an end.³⁷

Conclusion

If an area is occupied by military forces of another country, the situation is always very difficult for both the occupiers and even more for the occupied. History shows that very often the occupied protest against the occupiers. These protests can range from passive resistance to open rioting or even guerrilla activities such as bombings and suicide attacks. Under these circumstances friendships between occupiers and occupied are more or less impossible.

However, the occupation of the Montafon by France between May 1945 and November 1953 was on the whole peaceful. Due to the fact that France and Austria both regarded themselves as victims of the aggressions of Nazi Germany, this common fate strengthened the international understanding as well as the French consideration towards the occupied population of the Montafon.

A similar culture and common interests and passions can simplify and diffuse tense situations between the occupiers and the occupied. In this paper, a local study on the Montafon, the importance of the common passion skiing for the reconciliation between France and Austria has been elaborated through several examples. Of course one has to admit that skiing was only one piece of the complex puzzle of reconsideration but it has without doubt contributed to it. An analysis of the developments in other mountain valleys in Vorarlberg and Tyrol will probably lead to the same conclusion. Further studies on the history of sports during the occupation period are worthwhile to conduct in the future.

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