

## Project Overview

### Peace on the Mountain – Heritage Activism and Ethnic Reconciliation in the Alps: A Case Study of the Annahütte Alpine Lodge

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*ARCH International and ARCH-Europe*

Look, there, to the mountains,  
from there comes one who brings good tidings,  
who proclaims peace!

-Old Testament, Book of Nahum

Even more than rivers, mountain ranges have historically served as natural boundaries defining and defending the borders between tribes, ethnic groups and nations. The qualities that made them suitable as a boundary – that they were difficult to traverse, with harsh weather conditions in the winter and a challenging topography – meant that the mountainous regions were more often the locales for small-scale peaceable activities: trading, herding, foraging, and the seasonal grazing of livestock on mountain pastures. But eventually, given human nature, ways were found to include them in warfare. Hannibal decided to reach Italy by the Alpine route for the element of surprise, but it was bitterly difficult for his troops, who came largely from Iberia and North Africa and who were, therefore, unaccustomed to harsh winters or steep terrain.

In the Middle Ages, the Swiss used their familiarity with the mountains to significant military advantage. Soon, other Alpine countries followed suit, training portions of their armies as light infantry mountain troops, capable of operating in this terrain. Until the present day, the “Gebirgsjäger” (mountain hunters) are considered the elite of the Austrian military, and remain a core part of the country’s defense strategy. As a small non-NATO country, they believe that partisan resistance against an invader or occupier by making use of their familiarity and operability in mountainous terrain may be a good tactical strategy.

Based on the lessons learned from WWI (Vergara, 2022), in WWII the U.S. recognized the need for troops that could function in the Alps. They set up a special school in Colorado, recruited young men who already had a skiing background, and formed them into the Tenth Mountain Division. This division saw combat in the Italian and Austrian Alps; after the war, a number of the demobilized soldiers founded ski schools in Colorado and gave critical impetus to the popularity of that sport in the U.S.

These various dramatic events have left their mark, and historians and archaeologists have been able to study the artefacts and to uncover fortifications, tunnels, arms depositories, discover paths and trails, and even salvage the bodies and skeletons of fallen soldiers released from snow and ice due to retreating glaciers (Gravino, 2014). Several historic touring trails have been established for hikers with an interest in military history. The Freedom Trail over the central Pyrenees is a 36-mile historic hiking route that was officially established in 1994, commemorating a secret WWII escape route to Spain (Le

Chemin de la Liberté, 2023). The WWII Heritage Trail in the National Park of American Samoa leads hikers to abandoned cannons and teaches them about the lives of the soldiers who were stationed there (National Park Service, 2021). One popular historic trail in the Alps is the so-called “Friedensweg Karnische Alpen” or “Karnischer Höhenweg”. It leads to old battlegrounds and WWII constructions as well as memorials and museums, along with a challenging seven days’ hike along the mountain range which today demarks the border between Austria and Italy (Karnischer Höhenweg, 2023).



**Figure 5.** Arrow marking the location of Annahütte. Credit: Working Group Annahütte Neu.

ARCH International and their partner ARCH Europe have been particularly fascinated by a different aspect of Alpine military heritage: the grassroots effort of civil society and cultural heritage groups on three sides of a mountain peak shared by Austria, Slovenia and Italy to revive and repurpose a historic Alpine lodge into a site for friendship, reconciliation and peace-building.

Alpine lodges have a long tradition in this region. They have long served as emergency shelter in the event of a sudden change in weather – always a distinct possibility in the Alps! They also acted as shelters in which to spend the night during multi-day tours, and as a destination for hikers, where they could rest and eat. “Our” particular lodge was originally known as “Berta-Hütte” after the intrepid woman who first built and ran it. The location is stunning, the lodge was situated on a high-altitude meadow at the base of the Mittagskogel. See Figures 5. Moreover, the lodge itself was an impressive structure, as it comprised not merely a rustic wooden shelter but a proper building with two stories, a stable for livestock and a storage room built into the nearby cliffside. See Figure 6. Inventory lists created for the insurance company proudly include e.g., 28 table linens, 50 feather duvets, 26 beds, 250 kg of corn and barley and 1500 picture postcards. See Figure 7.



*Annahütte, Alm-Ringberg*

**Figure 6.** Historic Photograph of Annahütte. A large group of people are hiking up the hill towards Annahütte. Credit: Working Group Annahütte Neu.

Inventarverzeichnis auf der Annahme am Mittagkegel  
 aufgenommen am 3. September 1939 unter den Zeugen N. Münch Zollassistent  
 und F. Rappel Zollassistent, Beamte der Zollgrenzwache in Latschach.-

Stück	Gegenstand :	Stück	Gegenstand :
26	Betten mit Einsatz	1	Schubkarren
5	Waschtische weiss	51	Decken 26 mit Monogram
2	Spiegel eingerahmt	17	Matratzen mit Rosshaar
8	Tische natur lackiert	48	Stohrsacke
16	Sessel -"-	2	Fahnen
2	Sparrherde weiss emailiert	50	Leintücher Gebirgslei.
2	Hängeuhren	1	Tuchend
1	Führerbild	54	Fülster mit Federn ge.
1	Kruzifix	12	Tischtücher weiss u. r. f.
5	Vorhänge gestickt	12	Savieten
1	Grammophon mit 44 Platten	24	Handtücher aus Leinen
2	Freistafeln	24	Geschirrtücher
2	Maxiampfen	620	Ansichtskarten
1	Kredenz gross	1	Koffer klein
1	Speiskasten	1	Fernglas 15 fach
4	Kachelöfen dauerbrand	2	Taschenlampen
1	Kasten für Kleider	1	Kleiderhanger
1	Koffer gross	1	Eisenrechen
1	Hüttenbush	2	Krampe
1	Gebietskarte gemalen	2	Schaufeln
1	Landkarte	1	Haue
1	Tragsattel mit Riemenzeug	1	Kette 3 mt. lang
2	Bisontträger	1	Holzhacke
4 4	Tragkörbe	30	Eisenstoke
1	Karren	4	Holzboxen
1	Vorderwagen ohne Räder	2	Waschbösen 50-55

Figure 7. Inventory list, Page 1 of 4, 1939. Credit: ARCH-Europe.

But the location was more than just picturesque – it was also highly tactical. On this border, nationalities and language groups met, collided, and struggled for dominance. It became tradition to celebrate a “Kirtag” (the strong local tradition of a “churchday”) with visitors coming from all national communities, be they German-, Slovenian- or Italian speaking.

WWI caused a massive and painful reconfiguration of the territory. The Habsburg empire was no more. Italy was a kingdom. Slovenes, Serbs and Croats formed a kind of union and became the short-lived Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (soon to be Yugoslavia) at the end of 1918. Borders had to be redrawn, and this one – between nascent-Yugoslavia and Austria – was the most contentious, because these ethnicities were intertwined without the possibility of clear demarcations between groups. After a great deal of turbulence and ongoing fighting between military and paramilitary groups, and with heavy diplomatic intervention by the Entente and especially the U.S., it was agreed that the decision would be reached by a plebiscite. A clear majority of the population in the de facto Austrian zone of this border region – a 1910 census cited it as 70% – spoke Slovenian as its first language and was ethnically Slovene. To complicate matters further, because of its mixed population, this area of Carinthia had also evolved its own German-Slovene dialect spoken by almost all inhabitants. Austrian political messaging before the plebiscite promised, and the Carinthian parliament voted to confirm,

that Slovenian would remain equal to German if the region voted to stay with Austria. The results of the plebiscite were 22,025 to 15,279, or 59.1% vs. 40.9% in favour of Austria. But that was not the end of the story (debate continues to this day). The plebiscite divided neighbours and families. The announcement of the results were followed by demonstrations, riots and individual attacks. Some of this rancor still remains.

Berta-Hütte became a victim of the post-plebiscite turmoil. The pro-Austria supporters clashed there against an opposing militia/partisan group. In the course of the battle, the lodge was set on fire and burned to the ground. Under the name of Berta-Hütte, a new lodge was built on the east-flank of Mittagskogel, while the former lot remained vacant.

Although this had been such a terrible blow, in the 1930s the Austrian Adunka family negotiated with the landlords of the lot for the right to rebuild the lodge. Thanks to the wonderful location and good memories of the place on the west flank of Mittagskogel, they found the energy and the funds to rebuild the lodge, now renamed for Mrs. Anna Adunka – Annahütte. For a short while, it again nestled in its beautiful spot for visitors to enjoy. See Figures 8-9.



**Figure 8.** After the destruction of the first Annahütte it was rebuilt in 1932 with the participation of many volunteers. Credit: Working Group Annahütte Neu.



**Figure 9.** Proud celebration after the first rebuilding of the lodge in the aftermath of WWI. Credit: Working Group Annahütte Neu.

Then came WWII. See Figure 10. As Austria was subsumed into Germany, this border once more became a nexus of conflict. This time, the Nazi administration formally confiscated the hut for the use of its paramilitary border police. The owners were ordered out and have up until this day not been compensated. Over the course of mountain warfare, the lodge was once more was set on fire and reduced to ashes.



**Figure 10.** Soldiers arrive at the Annahütte. Due to its location right by the border, the mountain lodge also attracted military attention during WWII. Credit: Working Group Annahütte Neu.



**Figure 11.** The Annex of Annahütte remains to this day, here it is covered in snow. Credit: ARCH-Europe.

Under Tito, the line between Austria and Yugoslavia became a hard demarcation in the Cold War. But with the independence of Slovenia, and more so when the tri-border countries all became members of the E.U., the obstacles were removed and ordinary people were free to express their ideas and engage with one another in entirely new ways.

And engage they did! Their chosen focal point became Annahütte. Although the professed goal was to rebuild it, in the meantime, the remaining cement foundation of the former structure and the storage room in the cliff (still intact!) quite sufficed as a stopgap measure. See Figure 11.



**Figure 12.** Village fair and field mass in 2013, with the message of European unity. Credit: Working Group Annahütte Neu.



**Figure 13.** Village fair and field mass in 2013, with the message of European unity. Credit: Working Group Annahütte Neu.

Local groups specializing in traditional music and historic music instruments trudged up to perform. Priests from the three countries led pilgrimage groups up their respective mountain paths, meeting at the top for a shared field mass (“Kirtag”) together with all the traditions and celebrations. They created the ritual of pilgrimage across the three countries, carrying and exchanging a carved wooden cross. See Figure 12. There were festivals, dances and nature tours, all self-organized by local individuals. Identity was re-defined as being about nature, food and music – things that can be shared across ethnic and language groups. See Figure 13.

Effortlessly, an umbrella coalition formed that includes heritage groups, nature conservation groups, church groups, e-bikers, hikers and ordinary folks determined to build strong inter-ethnic and multi-linguistic ties as a rampart against future conflict. See Figure 14.



**Figure 14.** Members of ARCH-Europe and ARCH International attend a public event at Annahütte. Credit: ARCH-Europe.

Today, a second generation of activists organizes the yearly “Kirtag” and strives for a revival of the lodge. The common vision remains to rebuild the lodge. Architecture students at Milan University created potential designs. ARCH Europe got involved to moderate between the various parties and to support funding and organization. Supporters have funded a water study and identified architects with experience in building eco-lodges in order to ensure an environmentally-appropriate design. The municipal tourism department of the city of Villach now has volunteered to take on the day-to-day management of the lodge.



ARCH Europe and ARCH International also aim to establish a permanent exhibit, either in the lodge and/or as an outdoor feature. It can deal with the history of human settlement and population movements in this region, where Celtic, Roman, Slavic and Bavarian groups are historically documented (at least to some degree) and where the cultural melting pot is reflected in the names of mountains, rivers, villages and cities. We hope to better understand the cross-alpine trade routes, out of which the mummified Ötzi is one silent witness. Nor must one shy away from discussing the violence and its background in the nationalist movements of the late 19th century and beyond. Through various exhibitions, we can open a wide horizon of the history of this site to its visitors.



**Figure 15.** ARCH-Europe Team on a hike to Annahütte. 2022. Credit: ARCH-Europe.

One of the conflicts to be resolved is obtaining the permission of the current authorities in charge of the land on which the site rests. Control of these former Habsburg properties had been passed from the Wittgenstein-family to the Reichsforste of the Nazi-regime, and then to Austria's Bundesforste (the National Forestry Service). In theory, the lease-holding Adunka family ought still to have a claim.

While the National Forestry Service's mandate is to support public access and use of public lands, they have been slow (three decades and counting) to allow the project. The reasons are unclear, and several of the earlier reasons put forward have been or plausibly could be countered. Under today's advanced technologies, a minimal footprint lodge (for which there are many precedents) is possible. A site that combines the appreciation of nature with cross-border friendship and peace-building, and which, furthermore, already enjoys so much loyalty and enthusiasm would be a grand next chapter. See Figure 15.

**If you would like to support the cause of Annahütte please visit our website to sign an open letter, share your related research, and more: <https://arch-eu.org/projects/>**

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