

Writing the Region after Nazism: *Völkisch* Legacies, Historiographical Networks, and Regional Identity in Postwar Vorarlberg

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Abstract

This article examines the historiography of Vorarlberg after 1945 as a networked field of regional knowledge production, political identity formation, and selective memory. It argues that older *völkisch*, *volksgeschichtlich*, and folklore-based patterns of interpretation did not simply disappear after National Socialism. They were transformed into a more acceptable postwar vocabulary of homeland, Alemannic distinctiveness, federalism, peasant freedom, and provincial self-assertion. The article reconstructs the academic, institutional, textual, and political connections through which this transformation became effective. Its focus lies on the Innsbruck formation of key actors, the role of the Vorarlberg State Archive and the journal *Montfort*, the canonizing work of Karl Ilg and Benedikt Bilgeri, the cultural-administrative activities of Meinrad Tiefenthaler, Arnulf Benzer, and Elmar Grabherr, and the broader amplification of Alemannic identity through publicists, demographic arguments, honors, and young citizens' books. Rather than equating postwar regional historiography with National Socialist scholarship, the article proposes the more precise concept of semantic and institutional translation. Biographical continuities, citation practices, symbolic recognition, and pedagogical media helped preserve older repertoires while adapting them to the democratic and Catholic-conservative environment of the Second Austrian Republic. The analysis is based on published regional histories, civic books, commemorative texts, newspapers, and archival material. The case of Vorarlberg shows that regional historiography can function as a site of subnational identity politics and as a medium through which ethnicized historical language survives political rupture. The article thus contributes to the study of nationalism, memory, and language politics by shifting attention from the nation-state to the provincial scale of postwar cultural legitimization.

Keywords

Vorarlberg, postwar Austria; nationalism, regional identity, memory politics, historiography, *völkisch*, *Volksgeschichte*, Alemannism, scholarly networks, language politics

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Introduction: Regional History as Identity Politics after 1945

Postwar regional historiography was rarely a politically innocent description of the past. In Austria after 1945, it could serve as a repertoire for provincial self-representation, as a medium of political memory, and as a language through which older ideas of people, territory, origin, and historical character could be reformulated. The case of Vorarlberg is particularly revealing because the province possessed a strong sense of regional distinctiveness, an influential Catholic-conservative political culture, no university of its own, and a small but highly consequential field of historians, archivists, publicists, and cultural officials.

This article asks how regional history in Vorarlberg became a vehicle for identity politics after the collapse of National Socialism. The question is not simply whether individual historians had compromised biographies. It is how an interpretive field operated: how older academic authorities continued to be cited, how provincial institutions gave weight to particular narratives, how public honors normalized authors, how school-related and civic media transmitted simplified historical images, and how the language of *völkisch* and *volks geschichtlich* thinking was softened into the idiom of homeland, custom, federalism, and Alemannic identity.

Vorarlberg's geographical and symbolic position made this process especially productive. The province bordered Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and Germany; it was associated with Alemannic dialects; and it was often contrasted with "Inner Austria" east of the Arlberg. This made regional identity available as both a cultural and political distinction. The idea of the Vorarlberger as industrious, orderly, freedom-loving, democratic, and different from eastern Austrians could be mobilized without necessarily appearing as explicit state nationalism.

The argument follows Alexander Pinwinkler's call to investigate the reach of *volks geschichtlich* traditions after 1945 and to pay particular attention to personnel continuities (Pinwinkler 2005, 37-41). It also builds on the insight that *völkisch* historical thinking drew much of its persuasive power from historical images rather than from abstract doctrine alone (Köck 2015, 12, 63-68). In Vorarlberg, these images were not transmitted by one organization. They circulated through academic lineages, archives, publications, newspapers, commemorative culture, young citizens' books, and provincial cultural policy. Existing Vorarlberg historiography has already provided essential building blocks: Barnay reconstructed the invention of the Vorarlberger and the Alemannic myth; Pichler and Bundschuh criticized the treatment of the 1930s and 1940s and the function of the *Jungbürgerbücher*; Haffner analyzed

Grabherr as a central political-ideological actor; and Niederstätter historicized the State Archive and postwar *Landesgeschichtsschreibung* (Barnay 1988; Pichler 1982; Bundschuh 2000; Bundschuh 2008; Haffner 2009; Niederstätter 2005; Niederstätter 2010). This article contributes by connecting these findings as a single problem of provincial memory politics: how personnel continuities, institutional authority, symbolic recognition, semantic replacement, and civic pedagogy jointly produced a regional historical canon. The contribution of the Vorarlberg case is therefore threefold. It shows that ethnicized repertoires could survive below the nation-state as regional pride; that memory politics also meant producing alternative narratives of autonomy and freedom; and that language historicized political belonging.

Method, Source Base, and the Network Concept

The article combines biographical reconstruction, textual analysis, and a discourse-analytical reading of recurrent motifs. Biographical reconstruction is necessary because the field under examination was small and personal relations mattered. Textual analysis is necessary because the argument depends on recurring formulations, omissions, and substitutions. Discourse analysis is used in a limited sense: the article asks which speakers occupied authoritative positions, which terms became legitimate, which events were emphasized, and which aspects of the recent past were displaced (Keller 2004, 11-12, 61-66).

The term “network” is used qualitatively, not as a formal quantitative network analysis. It denotes a reconstructable constellation of academic training, personal acquaintance, institutional placement, publication, citation, political sponsorship, and symbolic recognition. The evidentiary strength of these links varies. Strong ties are documented through teacher-student relations, patronage, correspondence, administrative positions, or direct sponsorship, as in Wopfner’s and Helbok’s support for Bilgeri, Tiefenthaler’s archival career, Benzer’s cultural-administrative role, or Grabherr’s promotion of provincial history. Medium ties include shared publication venues, laudatory texts, awards, and editorial cooperation. Weak ties consist of shared citation authorities or recurrent motifs. The argument does not treat all these ties as equivalent; rather, it asks how differently documented connections could cumulatively stabilize a field of regional knowledge.

The evidence therefore has to be read at several levels. Archival files document membership, careers, administrative assessments, or attempts at normalization. Printed works show interpretive choices. The journal *Montfort*, commemorative publications, speeches, and awards reveal symbolic legitimization. Young citizens’ books show how scholarly and quasi-scholarly

motifs were translated into civic pedagogy. Newspapers and regional public debates show how historical claims entered political conflict. The source base includes files from the Bundesarchiv Berlin, the Österreichisches Staatsarchiv/Archiv der Republik, the Tiroler Landesarchiv, printed regional histories, the Vorarlberg *Jungbürgerbücher*, and secondary literature listed below.

German quotations are translated in the text when necessary; key German terms are retained where translation would flatten their historical meaning. This is especially important for *völkisch*. Following Weber, the article treats ethnicity not as an objective fact but as a belief in common descent and shared belonging that is produced through boundary-making and historical consciousness (Weber 1921, 234-36). The term cannot be reduced to “nationalist,” “ethnic,” or “racial.” It names a historically specific family of ideas that linked people, descent, territory, culture, history, and political order. In Vorarlberg, the related term *Alemannismus* referred to a regionalized version of such thinking: the claim that the province’s population possessed a distinctive Alemannic historical character that set it apart from Inner Austria.

Völkisch History and the Alemannic Vocabulary

The *völkisch* movement emerged in the late nineteenth century as a heterogeneous anti-liberal and anti-universalist current. It rejected the egalitarian premises of the Enlightenment and interpreted political order through historical, cultural, and ethnic difference (Köck 2015, 50). Its historical thinking was central. According to Köck, *völkisch* ideology drew its authority from historical images and treated history as the proof of political claims (Köck 2015, 12, 63-68). Breuer’s characterization of the *völkisch* as a hypostatization of the historically understood people points in the same direction (Breuer 2008, 19-20).

In Austrian historiography, these patterns intersected with older forms of *Landesgeschichte*. Settlement history, folklore, homeland studies, tribal history, and population history could be pursued as legitimate scholarly fields. Yet they could also carry assumptions about historically grown collective character. Pinwinkler has shown that *volks geschichtlich*-oriented research in Austria drew on nineteenth-century *Volkstum* research and often flourished in the field of regional history (Pinwinkler 2005, 37-39). Folklore studies were particularly important because customs, dialect, house forms, peasantry, and popular tradition could be presented as politically harmless while still serving the construction of a people. Bausinger’s critique of folklore as a conservative “salvation doctrine” is relevant here (Bausinger 1999, 4-10).

Vorarlberg's *Alemannismus* translated these broader patterns into a provincial idiom. It was not simply created by National Socialism. Its roots lay in older regional history, folklore, tribal thinking, dialect consciousness, and the construction of an Alemannic cultural space. National Socialism did not invent this tradition, but it made some of its elements more politically charged by connecting *Stamm*, *Raum*, *Volk*, descent, and German cultural belonging. After 1945, *Alemannismus* could therefore be reactivated only through partial de-radicalization and provincialization. Its typical motifs were the Alemannic *Stamm*, the free peasantry, distance from Vienna, closeness to Switzerland and Lake Constance, and virtues such as diligence, order, sobriety, and independence. It was a language for explaining why Vorarlberg supposedly formed a historically grown community.

The language politics of this field lay in its capacity for substitution. Terms compromised after 1945 could be replaced by less incriminating terms without abandoning the structure of explanation: *Blut* could become *Herkunft*; racial character could become *Wesensart*; *Volkstum* could become *Heimat* and *Brauchtum*; Greater German cultural-space thinking could become Alemannic regionalism; *völkisch* autonomy could become federalism. Such translation worked where three conditions coincided: the new term was compatible with democratic, Catholic-conservative, and federalist speech; the older logic of origin, character, boundary, and historical continuity remained recognizable; and institutions such as the archive, *Montfort*, provincial cultural policy, media, and *Jungbürgerbücher* repeated the revised vocabulary. It failed or became vulnerable where racial, separatist, or apologetic wording remained too explicit, as later criticism of anthropological, demographic, and autonomist arguments showed.

This vocabulary also allowed selective memory. The loss of Vorarlberg's provincial autonomy under National Socialism could be emphasized more strongly than participation in the regime, persecution, or perpetration. The history of the province then appeared primarily as the history of an external violation of regional selfhood. This did not require denying National Socialism. It required shifting the most emotionally charged question from the victims of the regime to the province's own injured autonomy.

Institutional Conditions in Postwar Vorarlberg

Three conditions help explain why this regional historiography could become influential. The first was political stability. The Austrian People's Party dominated Vorarlberg's postwar provincial politics for decades, while long-serving governors such as Ulrich Ilg and Herbert Kessler embodied a Catholic-

conservative understanding of the province (Pichler 2015, 379; Barnay 1998, 264-65). Denazification in Austria was limited and often temporary, and in Vorarlberg former members of National Socialist organizations could return to influential roles under new political conditions (Weber 2004, 59-97). This stability created a favorable environment for narratives that linked provincial identity, Christian-conservative order, federalism, and historical distinctiveness.

The second condition was the media environment. The *Vorarlberger Nachrichten* became the leading regional daily newspaper. The concentration of the regional media market strengthened the capacity of particular public voices to define debates, commemorate actors, and amplify the conflict between older provincial narratives and critical younger historians. Hans Nägele and, later, Franz Ortner are important here not because they were academic historians, but because they connected historical interpretation, journalism, and provincial self-representation.

The third condition was the absence of a university in Vorarlberg. Historical research depended on external academic formation, especially at the University of Innsbruck, and on the Vorarlberg State Archive. The archive therefore became more than a repository. It was a scholarly center, a gatekeeping institution, a publisher, and a symbol of provincial historical authority. The journal *Montfort*, founded after 1945 in the tradition of older regional periodicals, became a central platform for this field.

These structural conditions meant that a comparatively small number of actors could shape the historical canon. The boundary between professional, semi-professional, and public history was porous. A schoolteacher, archivist, cultural official, journalist, or publicist could become historically authoritative if he occupied the right institutional position and if his work was endorsed by the provincial field.

Academic Lineage: Wopfner, Helbok, Ilg, and Bilgeri

The first major node of the network was Innsbruck. Most of the relevant Vorarlberg actors studied history, geography, German studies, or folklore there. Hermann Wopfner and Adolf Helbok were central academic authorities. Wopfner's work on settlement history, the peasantry, and historically grown regional character was less radical than Helbok's, but it helped establish a mode of interpretation in which peasant culture and historical continuity became keys to collective identity (Meixner and Siegl 2017, 913-18; Pinwinkler 2014, 193).

Helbok's significance was more direct. He was one of the prominent representatives of *Volksgeschichte* and linked settlement history, folklore, homeland research, and *völkisch* cultural thinking (Pesditschek 2017, 285-88). In his 1922 text, homeland culture meant the "care of Germanness" (*Pflege des Deutschtums*) (Helbok 1922, 2). In 1935 he rejected liberal reason as the "cold measure" of a past age, invoked "ties of blood," and defined Vorarlberg homeland research as a "national science" (Helbok 1935, 3-9). He also assigned teachers a key role as "educators of the people" (Helbok 1935, 33). These formulations show why his work mattered after 1945: it provided not simply information, but a model for linking scholarship, pedagogy, *Volk*, and *Heimat*.

Karl Ilg demonstrates how academic standing, Vorarlberg origin, Catholic-conservative networks, and folklore scholarship could reinforce one another. He had worked at the Alemannic Institute, habilitated with a study of the Walser, a German-speaking Alpine settlement group in Vorarlberg, and became a successor within the Innsbruck milieu shaped by Wopfner (Rachbauer 2000, 323-24; Johler 1994, 596; Grün 2017, 1326-32). His multi-volume *Landes- und Volkskunde, Geschichte, Wirtschaft und Kunst Vorarlbergs* helped canonize regional knowledge. Its third volume, *Das Volk*, is especially important because it joined anthropology, demography, folklore, and regional identity in one authoritative format (Ilg 1961).

The ambiguities of Ilg's canon are visible in the contributors and arguments it included. Gustav Sauser's anthropological contribution classified the Vorarlberg population through racial-anthropological categories and described alpine, Dinaric, and Romanic components (Sauser 1961, 1-22). Ferdinand Ulmer's demographic essay warned of an "enormous invasion" of refugees and of a Bavarian blood transfusion into the small Alemannic people's body (Ulmer 1961, 27, 100). Ilg thus made room for arguments that translated population change into a language of ethnic threat.

Ilg's commemoration of Friedrich Metz also reveals the mechanism of normalization. Metz, associated with the Alemannic Institute and with National Socialism, was remembered by Ilg in Montfort in a sympathetic tone that emphasized his love for the German people and presented him partly as a victim of Austrian politics (Ilg 1970, 81-86). This kind of commemorative writing did not need to defend National Socialism openly. It could restore respectability by shifting attention from ideological commitment to scholarly merit, friendship, and cultural devotion.

Benedikt Bilgeri formed the most important public canonizing node. He had already worked as a student on the collection of Vorarlberg field names

within the Historical Commission founded by Helbok, and he completed a dissertation on the settlement history of the Bregenzerwald. Wopfner and Helbok supported efforts to publish his work, including applications for funding from the Österreichisch-deutsche Wissenschaftshilfe, which in the 1930s increasingly supported scholarship on German *Volkstum* (BArch R73/16318; Fengler 2017, 1915-17). This case shows a concrete patronage chain: teachers, topic, institution, funding, and *völkisch*-compatible research field.

Bilgeri's later career also shows postwar normalization. Archival material documents his membership in the National Socialist Teachers' League, while administrative assessments after the war emphasized his Austrian reliability and did not make this a lasting obstacle (BArch, NSLB membership card index; ÖStA/AdR, BMU/HR, 29A-Titel, GZ 35.501/1956). He was later freed for work on Vorarlberg history, and the provincial government reported on the progress of his *Landesgeschichte* (Rechenschaftsbericht 1971, 478-79). The first volume was distributed to teachers, making the work not only a scholarly monument but a pedagogically relevant canon.

Bilgeri's *Geschichte Vorarlbergs* transformed the Alemannic code into a narrative of provincial autonomy and political distinctiveness. His interpretation emphasized the long duration of Vorarlberg as a historically coherent community and repeatedly centered freedom, self-government, and threats from outside. At the same time, his fifth volume treated National Socialism comparatively briefly, omitted explicit discussion of the Holocaust, and framed the conflict between Vorarlberg and Franz Hofer, the Nazi *Gauleiter* responsible for Tyrol-Vorarlberg, primarily as a struggle over provincial autonomy (Bilgeri 1987, 37, 186). Later criticism by Niederstätter emphasized emotionality, ideological overload, and methodological unreliability in the handling of sources (Niederstätter 2005, 214).

The important point is not that Bilgeri simply repeated Helbok. He adapted the older Alemannic language to a more strongly Vorarlberg-centered form. In his work, Alemannic identity did not primarily dissolve the province into a larger Germanic region; it made Vorarlberg appear uniquely historical, autonomous, and politically mature. This provincialization of older *völkisch* motifs made the narrative particularly useful after 1945.

Archive, Cultural Administration, and Canon Formation

The second institutional node was the Vorarlberg State Archive. Meinrad Tiefenthaler illustrates the connection between archival authority and older

historiographical traditions. He studied history, German studies, and folklore in Innsbruck, worked as an assistant to Helbok, entered the Vorarlberg archive in 1928, and later became its head (Burmeister 1981, 277-87). During National Socialism he directed the Bregenz branch of the Reichsgau archive and was a member or applicant in several National Socialist organizations (Niederstätter 2010, 630-41; TLA ZL 01311).

Tiefenthaler's postwar introductory text to *Montfort* is crucial. He criticized the misuse of scholarship under National Socialism, yet he also wrote that Vorarlberg could again cultivate homeland research as was appropriate to its nature and useful to the land. He wanted to continue where Alemannia had stopped and insisted that it had to enter deeply into the population's consciousness that Vorarlberg was a historically grown unity (Tiefenthaler 1946, 4-5). This is a key example of semantic translation. National Socialist misuse was rejected; the task of forming provincial consciousness remained.

Tiefenthaler's collaboration with Arnulf Benzer on the 1809 commemorative history shows how archival authority could produce a freedom myth. Vorarlberg 1809 presented the uprising not as an ordinary war, but as a struggle for freedom, self-determination, and the inherited character of the Vorarlberg people. The text contrasted the Alemannic *Stamm* with the Bavarian *Stamm* and described a centuries-old drive for freedom and self-government (Tiefenthaler and Benzer 1959, 5, 79-83). The book was published by the province and thus stands at the intersection of scholarship, commemoration, and official pedagogy.

Benzer's role cannot be reduced to that of a co-author. He studied history and related subjects, was an NSDAP member in 1939 according to party-statistical records, and after 1945 became head of the provincial cultural department from 1945 to 1977 (TLA, party-statistical questionnaire, Arnulf Benzer; Niederstätter 2009, 151-54). He understood culture and history as instruments for rebuilding provincial identity. At his ninetieth birthday celebration he himself emphasized the postwar reconstruction of cultural identity as a central task. He also contributed to *Jungebürgerbücher* and repeatedly operated in the zone between cultural administration, Catholic public life, and historiographical identity production.

Benzer's importance is visible in cases of gatekeeping. Haffner reports that Benzer proposed corrections to Reinhold Bernhard's dissertation in order to remove passages that contradicted the official image of history; after Bernhard refused, Grabherr blocked publication (Haffner 2009, 27-28). Whether read as cultural politics or archival politics, the episode shows that the field did not

merely produce books. It also regulated which historical interpretations could appear under provincial auspices.

Ludwig Welti occupied a more moderate and transitional position. He worked in the State Archive after the war and wrote the main historical contribution to Ilg's volume on history and economy. His tone was less militant than that of Tiefenthaler and Benzer, but he still remained within a framework that tended to contrast Vorarlberg with Inner Austria and to treat the province as an exceptional regional unit (Welti 1968). The manuscript history is revealing: Pichler showed that Ilg removed passages from Welti's text that would have emphasized local complicity, criticized denazification, or disturbed the image of an externally interrupted but otherwise continuous provincial history (Pichler 1982, 196-97). His later *Siedlungs- und Sozialgeschichte* still began from the idea that Vorarlberg was a natural and cultural spatial unit of special character when seen from Inner Austria (Welti 1973, 11).

Karl Heinz Burmeister marks both continuity and break. As archive director from 1970, he professionalized the field and eventually triggered the public controversy by criticizing Bilgeri. Yet even Burmeister initially stood within a landscape still shaped by older assumptions. His 1989 overview retained references to old democratic traditions and gave considerable space to the attempt of Vorarlberg National Socialists to preserve provincial autonomy (Burmeister 1989, 186-91). The significance of Burmeister lies therefore not in a clean rupture, but in a gradual shift of scholarly standards and speaker positions.

Flanking Actors: Population, Media, Juridical Ethnicity, and Political Power

The network extended beyond academic historians. Ferdinand Ulmer provided demographic and socio-economic language that could serve historical identity politics. A former National Socialist with a position in Prague during the war, he was pardoned in Vorarlberg and became head of the provincial statistical office, then a member of the provincial government and Federal Council (Pinwinkler 2014, 197; Barnay 1988, 451-52). His contribution to Ilg's *Das Volk* warned that population growth, refugees, and labor migration could endanger the small Alemannic people's body (Ulmer 1961, 25-100). Through Ulmer, demography became a vocabulary of cultural vulnerability.

Hans Nägele connected historiography with the media sphere. As editor of the *Vorarlberger Tagblatt*, he had helped shape the ideological ground on which National Socialism could take root in Vorarlberg; after 1945 he was interned and later rehabilitated through journalism and regional publications (Barnay 1988, 348-93; Vonbank 1972, 86-91). His works on the textile

industry and the press cited Helbok, Tiefenthaler, and Ulmer and contributed to the rehabilitation of regional economic elites (Nägele 1949; Nägele 1970; Bundschuh 2000, 205).

Nägele's *Vorarlberg, das Alemannenland am Bodensee und Rhein* is important because it compressed the older code into a popular form. He presented the Alemanni as a particularly authentic people, described Vorarlbergers as democrats before the word democracy existed, and repeated the image of the free peasant who resisted external command (Nägele 1972, 9, 56-57). He also narrated the National Socialist period primarily through the conflict over Vorarlberg's provincial autonomy and his own role in defending it. This converted a compromised media biography into a story of regional resistance.

Theodor Veiter added a juridical and publicistic dimension. He was not a regional historian in the narrow sense, but he became one of the most important defenders of Vorarlberg identity against critical historians. His autobiographical self-presentation emphasized Austrian patriotism and resistance, while later research has shown the instability and apologetic function of this account (Behal 2009, 69, 198-99, 239-41; Veiter 1993). His prewar and wartime writings treated national autonomy through a *völkisch* legal vocabulary. *Nationale Autonomie*, published in 1938, grounded autonomy not in democratic slogans of a past epoch but in the *völkisch* community and in the thinking of the new Germany (Veiter 1938, 5-6; Salzborn 2009, 73). After 1945 he attacked denazification as revenge legislation and represented the former National Socialists' legal situation in natural-law terms (Veiter 1949, 14-64).

In the 1980s, Veiter's publications and newspaper interventions defended conservative and provincial narratives against the *Johann-August-Malin-Gesellschaft* and other critical historians. His *Die Identität Vorarlbergs und der Vorarlberger* used the language of ethnic and tribal community and described the Vorarlbergers as a *bodenständig* Alemannic Austrian group (Veiter 1985). His attacks on "left" rewriting of provincial history and his criticism of contemporary history institutes show how historiographical conflict became a struggle over legitimate identity speech (Veiter 1983; Veiter 1984, 21-27, 213-14).

Elmar Grabherr formed the political-administrative node. As highest provincial civil servant from 1955 to 1976, he was neither a professional historian nor a marginal figure. He steered provincial cultural policy and helped shape the official historical image. His friendship with Veiter dated back to their student years in Vienna (Veiter 1993, 117), and a 1942 letter shows personal familiarity with Tiefenthaler (Haffner 2009, 157-58, 202).

Grabherr had served the National Socialist administration as a civil servant and later made himself useful to the postwar *Landesausschuss*, the provisional provincial committee, even coordinating aspects of denazification (Haffner 2009, 227-28).

Grabherr's later role in *Pro Vorarlberg*, a regionalist initiative around the 1980 referendum that demanded stronger provincial autonomy, and in the promotion of Bilgeri's *Landesgeschichte* makes him essential for understanding the political usefulness of regional history. Hillek described him as the intellectual father of the *Pro Vorarlberg* movement (Hillek 1989, 52-54). The interpretation of Grabherr as a strategist of provincial ideology follows primarily Haffner's reconstruction; the archival and printed material used here corroborates his administrative positioning, biographical trajectory, and public role rather than replacing Haffner's interpretation. Pichler and Haffner have shown that his Alemannic thinking included a strong concern with descent, dialect, and *landsmannschaftliche Herkunft* in the provincial service (Pichler 2015, 314; Haffner 2009, 80, 97-100). In Grabherr, historiographical motifs became administrative and political practice.

How the Network Worked: Citation, Honor, Omission, and Semantic Replacement

The field's coherence did not depend on a single formal organization. It functioned through repeated acts of authorization: academic lineage, institutional placement, symbolic recognition, and repetition across genres. Wopfner and Helbok shaped younger actors; the archive and cultural department gave them platforms; prizes and honors made contested figures respectable; and recurring motifs linked scholarly works, journal articles, commemorative books, newspaper essays, and civic publications.

Citation practice was the first mechanism. Older works by Helbok, Wopfner, Ilg, Bilgeri, Tiefenthaler, and related authors were not merely sources of information. They often carried an interpretive frame: Vorarlberg as historically grown unity, Alemannic distinctiveness as explanatory key, peasant freedom as democratic origin, and Inner Austria as contrast. Once these authors became standard authorities, their assumptions could survive even in texts that did not reproduce their more problematic language.

The second mechanism was institutional placement. The State Archive, *Montfort*, provincial cultural policy, school-related distribution, and *Jungbürgerfeiern* ensured that historical interpretation moved beyond specialist debate. This mattered because Vorarlberg lacked a university. The archive and

the province itself could therefore define what counted as legitimate regional knowledge to a degree that would have been harder in a larger academic field.

The third mechanism was symbolic recognition. Honors, titles, laudatory speeches, and commemorative texts transformed authors into moral authorities. Ilg and Bilgeri received the Upper Rhine Cultural Prize (*Oberrheinischer Kulturpreis*), placing them within a transregional Alemannic cultural geography connected to the Toepfer foundations (Boissou 2017, 2007-19). Bilgeri's award honored the representation of Vorarlberg's political path to independence and was celebrated by Benzer in a laudatio that placed him among the great Vorarlberg historians (Benzer 1982, 9-14). Such honors did not simply reward scholarship; they mapped scholarly authority into a cultural-political space.

The fourth mechanism was omission. Much of the older postwar historiography treated National Socialism as an interruption of Vorarlberg's provincial continuity and highlighted the loss of autonomy more than participation, persecution, or perpetration. In Bilgeri's fifth volume, National Socialism occupied little space and the Holocaust was not explicitly addressed (Bilgeri 1987). In Welti's published text, passages that would have complicated the narrative were removed by the editor (Pichler 1982, 196-97). In civic books, the years 1934-45 were often compressed in ways that protected the province's self-image.

Semantic replacement tied these mechanisms together. The vocabulary of race and blood became less central after 1945, but it did not disappear uniformly. In some texts it remained explicit; in others it was replaced by *Heimat*, *Brauchtum*, *Mundart*, *Föderalismus*, *Freiheit*, and *Selbstständigkeit*. This is why transformation is more accurate than either continuity or rupture: the language changed enough to become acceptable, but not enough to remove the older logic of provincial exceptionalism.

***Jungbürgerbücher* and the Pedagogy of Regional Belonging**

The *Jungbürgerbücher*—literally “young citizens’ books”—require brief explanation, since they have no exact equivalent in the English-speaking world. They were connected to *Jungbürgerfeiern*, civic coming-of-age ceremonies for young people entering political adulthood. In Vorarlberg, this practice was introduced after 1945 from Switzerland by Anton Linder, the Social Democratic president of the Chamber of Labor, who had lived in Swiss exile. In 1947, the Chamber of Labor organized the first such ceremony for apprentices and distributed the first Vorarlberg *Jungbürgerbuch*, *Für Freiheit, Demokratie und soziale Gerechtigkeit - Ein*

österreichisches Brevier [For Freedom, Democracy, and Social Justice: An Austrian Breviary]. Unlike most other Austrian provinces, where comparable publications appeared later or remained marginal, Vorarlberg developed this medium particularly early and intensively; Vienna followed only in 1963 and Salzburg in 1975. The Swiss connection and Vorarlberg's geographic and cultural proximity to Switzerland are therefore part of the institutional genealogy of the genre (Arbeiterkammer Feldkirch 1947, 83; Bundschuh 2000, 205-6).

In the Vorarlberg context, these books soon became more than ceremonial gifts. They functioned as semi-official media of civic education, regional historical instruction, and identity formation. Their significance lay precisely in their hybrid status: they were not academic works, yet they drew on historical authority; they were not ordinary schoolbooks subject to federal approval, yet they addressed young people in a formative phase; and they were not merely commemorative publications, yet they helped normalize a particular image of the province's past. Bundschuh described the ceremonies and books as instruments of political education intended to multiply the official view of provincial history and strengthen identity consciousness among young Vorarlbergers; Pichler criticized the "Vorarlberg ideology" in these books for narrowing the view of the 1930s and 1940s (Bundschuh 2000, 205-6; Pichler 1982, 192, 203).

The first 1947 volume, issued by the Chamber of Labor, differed sharply from later provincial books. *Für Freiheit, Demokratie und soziale Gerechtigkeit* combined civic education with democratic and social pathos, presented other Austrian provinces, and addressed fascism and liberation in a relatively direct way while also reproducing the Austrian victim thesis (Arbeiterkammer Feldkirch 1947, 49-59). It thus shows that the genre did not inevitably have to become a vehicle of Alemannic provincialism.

A different line began with Artur Schwarz's *Heimatkunde von Vorarlberg* in 1949 and the official Vorarlberger *Jungbürgerbuch* from 1953 onward. Schwarz's discussion of *Volkstum* asserted that the racial composition of the population determined the spiritual inheritance of the province and that the Alemanni gave Vorarlberg its German face (Schwarz 1949, 183). In the 1953 *Jungbürgerbuch*, the introductory chapter told young readers that Vorarlbergers belonged to a small province whose population occupied a special position within Austria because of its tribal character (Schwarz and Kessler 1953, 9-11).

The same book presented Alemannic nature as sober, clear, democratic, and independent, while describing outsiders, refugees, foreign workers, and labor migrants from Inner Austria as a new social problem. It

reassured readers that Vorarlbergers were strong enough to preserve their way of life (Schwarz and Kessler 1953, 21-23). This is language politics in a pedagogical form. The book did not need to present a full racial doctrine. It taught young citizens to understand belonging through inherited regional character, cultural threat, and the moral superiority of provincial self-preservation.

The later editions of 1957 and 1962 retained this basic structure, while the 1983 volume was more modernized but still transitional. It included older actors such as Ilg and Benzer, treated homeland and custom as central themes, and combined historical overview, regional neighborhood, gender roles, and provincial self-understanding (Kessler 1983; Bernhard 1983; Ilg 1983; Benzer 1983; Mathis 1983). The genre therefore reveals how the network's ideas reached beyond the bookshelves of historians. It made a specific historical language available as civic common sense.

Later formats such as *Vorarlberg kompakt* mark a clearer break. They discuss the Alemannic myth more critically, address National Socialism and persecution more directly, and reflect professionalized standards of regional history (Niederstätter 2017). Yet the importance of the *Jungbürgerbücher* lies in their earlier function. They show that historiography was not only written; it was administered, ritualized, and taught.

The 1980s Conflict and the Change of Speaker Positions

The public conflicts of the 1980s were not an accidental dispute among historians. They were the moment when the older network lost much of its unquestioned authority. Several developments converged: *Pro Vorarlberg*, Grabherr's public activism, Burmeister's criticism of Bilgeri, and the emergence of younger historians around the *Johann-August-Malin-Gesellschaft* (Barnay 1983; Barnay 1998, 273; Bundschuh 2008, 126-47; Walser 2012, 199-205). What was discredited was not simply one author, but a canon that treated selectivity, provincial loyalty, and autonomy as if they were scholarly virtues.

The so-called Vorarlberg historians' controversy is revealing because the defense of the older canon often personalized criticism. Burmeister accused Bilgeri of embellishment, anti-Austrian tendencies, and a contradiction between narrative and source evidence; he also criticized the omission or minimization of uncomfortable themes such as Jewish persecution and separatist continuities. The response to him was not primarily a methodological disagreement over sources, but an attack on loyalty, origin, and belonging. This reproduced the older logic of

provincial historiography: criticism of the dominant historical image could be interpreted as hostility to the province itself.

The younger historians asked different questions. They investigated National Socialism, persecution, elite continuities, industrial history, labor, and mechanisms of silence. Their importance lay not only in particular publications, but in the creation of a counter-public. The *Johann-August-Malin-Gesellschaft* challenged the assumption that regional history should serve provincial cohesion. It treated critical distance as a scholarly virtue rather than as a betrayal of *Heimat*. This changed the criteria of credibility: source criticism, *Tätergeschichte*, and institutional self-examination increasingly counted against, rather than outside, the provincial canon.

The change should not be misunderstood as an immediate disappearance of older motifs. Elements of homeland rhetoric, federalism, direct democracy, and Vorarlberg exceptionalism remained available. Nick's early 1980s empirical study had already complicated the idea that Vorarlbergers understood themselves primarily as Alemannic or were more democratic than others (Nick 1982, 114-71). The decisive change was a shift in speaker positions. The right to speak for the province's past no longer belonged only to those who reproduced the provincial canon.

Conclusion: Transformation, Not Simple Continuity

The evidence requires a differentiated conclusion. Postwar Vorarlberg historiography was not a seamless continuation of National Socialist scholarship. Such an equation would ignore the political conditions of the Second Austrian Republic, the specific logic of Catholic-conservative provincial patriotism, and the differences among the actors. Yet it was also not an unburdened democratic regional history that merely happened to use older words. The more precise concept is transformation.

This transformation operated through translation. Greater German and *völkisch* cultural-space thinking could become Alemannic provincial identity. Blood-and-soil proximity could become homeland, custom, dialect, and peasantry. Political radicalism could be recoded as federalism. Perpetrator history could be displaced by loss of autonomy. Social conflicts could be absorbed into a narrative of a harmonious provincial community. Because these translations were often implicit, they were politically effective.

The core finding is that Vorarlberg's postwar historiography must be understood as a history of connections. Its significance lay not only in problematic formulations or in the biography of single authors. It lay in the interaction of people, institutions, publications, honors, media, and political

interests. Wopfner and Helbok provided academic formation; Ilg and Bilgeri canonized regional knowledge; Tiefenthaler and Benzer linked archive, freedom myth, and civic pedagogy; Ulmer supplied demographic arguments; Nägele connected media and economic apologetics; Veiter juridified ethnic identity and fought critical history; Grabherr connected provincial administration, cultural policy, and regionalist mobilization.

For the study of nationalism, memory, and language politics, the case suggests one way in which ethnicized knowledge could operate at the provincial scale after 1945. It did not have to appear as an explicit party doctrine or national movement. It could be embedded in regional historiography, civic education, archival authority, and federalist self-defense. Under specific Vorarlberg conditions, a regional myth could lose scholarly legitimacy while leaving residues in public language because it had been translated, honored, taught, and repeated.

The case also shows why the opposition between continuity and rupture is insufficient. Continuity suggests sameness; rupture suggests a clean break. The Vorarlberg field shows a more historically typical process: a repertoire of older concepts, actors, and authorities adapted to new institutional and political conditions. Some elements were abandoned, others softened, and still others defended by silence, honor, or displacement. The result was a postwar regional historiography in which older *völkisch* semantics survived not despite democratization, but partly because they could be rearticulated as the language of provincial belonging.

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