



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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French citizens campaign to close five concentration camps for North Africans, 1959-60

Time period notes: *The campaign consisted of a number of major protests that lasted about a day throughout this time period.*

June
1959
to: May
1960

Country: France

Location City/State/Province: *Paris, La Cavalerie, Millau, Lyon, Neuville-sur-Ain, Le Mans, Marseille, Dijon, Montpellier, Grenoble, Nice, Annecy, Caen, Saint-Étienne*

Location Description: *Protests took place in Paris and near the camps, and extended to cities around France.*

Goals:

To call attention to the injustice of interning North Africans without cause, and to close the concentration camps.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support › Appeal to the French president signed by participants.
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › Anti-camp slogans.
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books › Leaflets describing the nature of the protest for the local population.
- 038. Marches
- 052. Silence › Protesters were silent during all actions.
- 138. Sitdown › In front of police barricades.
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast) › Group fast throughout the duration of the protest.
- 199. Nonviolent confinement › Protesters attempted to provoke their own internment.

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals › Leader published an article.
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast) › Group fast throughout the duration of the protest.

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 033. Fraternalization › Leader met with the Ministers of Justice and the Interior

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches › Priests explained the protest to the public.
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books › Instructions for protesters.
- 020. Prayer and worship › Protest began after mass.
- 020. Prayer and worship › Protesters said a prayer in front of the tomb of an assassinated police officer.
- 038. Marches › Protesters attempted to march from church to the camp.
- 138. Sitdown › In front of police barricades.
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction › Protesters blocked the circulation of traffic.
- Other... › Protesters outflanked police to allow other protesters to continue marching.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- members of the ACNV
- other elites
- pacifists
- scholars
- students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Joseph Pyronnet

Involvement of social elites:

Supported by Minister of Justice Edmond Michelet, involved priests and 36 public figures, journalists, and scholars.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Action civique non-violente

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Volunteers

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Political elites-Edmond Michelet

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Action civique non-violente (exit)
- Political elites-Edmond Michelet (exit)
- Social elites (exit)
- Volunteers (exit)
- social elites

Segment Length: 2 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

French government, CRS riot police, local police, Maurice Papon (Chief of Police)

Campaigner violence:

not known

Repressive Violence:

During the final protest of the campaign, police officers shoved, dragged, kicked, and elbowed participants.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The campaigners achieved one part of their original goal--to call attention to the injustice of the camps. The ACNV continued to exist after the end of this campaign and started another soon after. This campaign grew significantly during its existence. It garnered support in cities all around France.

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The May 1959 opening of French government internment camps for Algerians suspected of being subversive agents of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) came towards the end of the Algerian War (11/1954-03/1962). The war, which ended with Algeria winning its independence from France, featured a wide variety of tactics, including torture by both sides. This torture led to the original conferences and protests of l'Action civique non-violente, a group dedicated to the right to resist

oppression.

In June of 1959, Joseph Pyronnet, a young activist and teacher often referred to as “le capitaine” (the captain) by other members of the Action civique non-violente, heard of the opening of the camp at Larzac while at a conference on nonviolence. Pyronnet responded first by sending packages to internees in the camps before realizing that such an action was insufficient. He then wrote an appeal to the French president, signed by attendees of a public meeting, underlining the organization’s belief that the internment camps were in danger of becoming the next iteration of the Nazi concentration camps.

After attending a mass in the town of La Cavalerie on 28 June, sixty people participated in a silent march against the Larzac camp. Protesters distributed leaflets to the population explaining that the protest was not political, but a testimony of conscience. They also underlined their obligation to protest in the same manner for detainees of any class, nation, religion, or race.

The activists also carried banners and fasted throughout the day. Seven members of the group volunteered to ask to be interned in the camp. After talks with the camp director, the protesters were fined and left for Millau, the nearest city, to protest in front of the regional administrative building (sub-prefecture). When confronted with a police roadblock, the protesters sat in front of it. After long negotiations, the activists packed up and left. The June protest resulted in the first press coverage of the camp. The mobilization against the Larzac camp continued through the month of July. From 24 July to 1 August, four volunteers fasted both in front of the camp and in La Cavalerie.

Starting in September, Pyronnet began to expand his non-violent volunteer army. He started a series of conferences and published an article in the *Témoignages et Documents* (Testimonies and Documents) newsletter. Pyronnet also defined more precisely the meaning of a “non-violent army” and formalized the membership process of the ACNV. Pyronnet met with the Ministers of Justice and of the Interior to prepare them for future actions, and through these meetings gained the support of the Minister of Justice, Edmond Michelet.

By April 1960, the ACNV had a heterogeneous group of 32 volunteers ages 20 to 64. Pyronnet and other leaders trained the group in nonviolent methods in a village outside of Lyon, and at the end of the training period, participated in a protest on 10 April 1960 against the Thol camp in Neuville-sur-Ain. Like the protest concerning the Larzac camp, this protest started after Sunday mass. This time, however, the action involved several priests who explained the meaning of the protest to the population. According to the organizers, the procession included 200-250 people, and, as before, they carried banners and fasted. The police blocked the protesters from the beginning, and in response, the group sat in front of the police in silence. Then, police put the protesters in trucks and dropped them off in the woods five kilometers from the town.

When the participants came back, they ran into a new police blockade. The group then employed an original technique to cross blockades. When the protesters saw the police, those in the front would stop right in front of the police, and those who followed behind would outflank the stopped group and the police. If the police tried to stop the protesters attempting to outflank them, the protesters who had stopped would continue marching. Though the tactic was effective, it slowed their progress.

Finally back in the center of town, the activists paused on the steps of the church, as ordered by Pyronnet. Then, they continued to march to the camp before being stopped by a group of CRS (riot control) police. The group was once again put into trucks, and the protesters were dropped off in the Jura mountain range, 100-120 kilometers away from the Thol camp. Nonetheless, the activists declared the protest a success.

On 30 April 1960, the third major ACNV protest took place, against the Centre d’Identification de Vincennes (CIV), a “selection center” that Algerians passed through before continuing on to a camp like Larzac or Thol. The CIV was the biggest of all such centers, and it was especially relevant due to its administrative attachment to the Police Prefecture of Paris, a powerful municipal entity. For this action, the ACNV benefited from the support of 21 public figures, including the journalist Robert Barrat, scholars Jean-Marie Domenach, Théodore Monod, Paul Ricoeur, Henri Marrou, Louis Massignon, Laurent Schwartz, and Pierre Vidal-Naquet. The organizers distributed leaflets demanding the closure of camps like the CIV, and reminded the protesters to not respond to dispersion orders, to stay completely silent even in the face of provocation, and to affirm their firm desire to protest

through dignity and discipline.

On 30 April, 700-1000 people protested. After being ordered to disperse, the activists sat down and were all subsequently put into police vans. The public figures were shut in the basement of the 11th district of Paris' town hall, before being driven in front of the tomb of a peace officer who had recently been killed by the FLN.

With the success of their previous actions featured in the national press, the ACNV protested daily in front of the Ministry of Justice. On 11 May 1960, the core group of protesters surrounded the obelisk of the Place de la Concorde in Paris and held anti-concentration camp banners. Then, the group decided to protest again with more people on 28 May 1960. This time, the protests occurred in different places around the country. Using similar methods as in their previous actions, the organizers edited and distributed a leaflet similar to the others they had produced and organized marches. They also facilitated the participation of more public figures, including members of the Unified Socialist Party (PSU) and anticolonial militants.

Also on 28 May, 15 people brought together by their belief in the ACNV cause came together in front of the monument to the Resistance in Le Mans. According to the prefect of Sarthe, the gathering occurred unnoticed and did not provoke any incident. The same prefect, however, refused to meet with a delegation of protesters. In Marseille, 77 people marched in the direction of the prefecture, sat on the road in front of the police, and stopped traffic. The police attempted to clear the way, then stopped the protesters and drove them to the police station. The authorities conducted an inquiry into the ACNV, but the inquiry was hampered by the social respectability of the ACNV members and by their use of nonviolent methods. In the end, instead of engaging in a long and complicated inquiry, the authorities made the protesters pay a fine of three francs.

A similar situation unfolded in Dijon, where 48 people (mostly university and high school students) gathered. After sitting in the road, the protesters were driven by the police to the outskirts of Dijon. Similar protests occurred in Lyon (60 participants), Montpellier (around 80 participants), Grenoble (220 participants), Nice (60 participants), Annecy (70 participants), Caen (around 200 participants), and in Saint-Étienne (60 participants). Though the number of protesters was smaller outside of the main protest in Paris, the protesters achieved their goal of getting their message out.

On 25 May 1960, Joseph Pyronnet alerted Maurice Papon, the police chief in Paris, of the ACNV's planned protest. The police prohibited the protest on 28 May, but the organizers did not back down. From the beginning, police officers took those who blocked the road to the station, but more and more people joined the protesters. This constant replenishing of protesters irritated the police, and they began to shove, drag, kick, and elbow participants. This repression only encouraged passers-by to join the protesters.

In total, 1500 people participated in the protest, and police arrested 629 people. Police took the protesters to the old Beaujon hospital and imprisoned them there until the following night. The court summoned the organizers of the protest to appear before a prosecutor for organizing and participating in a prohibited protest, but the judge offered to treat the protest as if it had not been declared, which led to the acquittal of the organizers. The Minister of Justice, who initially refused this proposition, reconsidered and dismissed the case.

Though the protest of 28 May sparked the hopes of those against the Algerian War, Joseph Pyronnet decided to stop the campaign for fear of increasing repression against the ever-growing group of protesters who he believed were not prepared to react nonviolently. In the end, volunteers from the ACNV decided to live among those they were trying to protect in the shantytown of Nanterre. Though the ACNV's supporters were still growing, they were unable to achieve their goal of closing the internment camps.

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References:

Quemeneur Tramor, « L'ACNV (Action civique non-violente) et la lutte contre les camps. », Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps 4/2008 (N° 92), p. 57-63

"Trente Personnes Demanderont Dimanche à être Internées Au Camp De Thol Par Solidarité Avec Les Détenus Administratifs Algériens." Le Monde [Paris] 11 Apr. 1960: n. pag. Le Monde. Web. 15 Sept. 2015.

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Research Notes

Influences:

Joseph Pyronnet was highly influenced by Lanza del Vasto and the Communautés de l'Arche.

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Anon. 1960. "Trente Personnes Demanderont Dimanche À Être Internées Au Camp De Thol Par Solidarité Avec Les Détenus Administratifs Algériens." Le Monde.fr. Retrieved September 15, 2015 (http://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1960/04/11/trente-personnes-demanderont-dimanche-a-etre-internees-au-camp-de-thol-par-solidarite-avec-les-detenus-administratifs-algeriens_2085416_1819218.html?xtmc=trente_personnes_demanderont_dimanche_a_etre_internees_au_camp_de_thol_par_sol

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Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Caroline Dreyfuss, 20/09/2015

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