Larzac peasants campaign to block expansion of military camp (The Battle of Larzac), 1971-1981

November 1971 to: June 1981
Country: France
Location City/State/Province: Larzac
Location Description: Larzac is a limestone karst plateau in the south of the Massif Central, France. It is primarily an agricultural area.

Goals:
To prevent the expansion of the French military base stationed at Larzac

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 004. Signed public statements
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 082. Refusal to let or sell property
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast) → group hunger fast

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 029. Symbolic reclamations → built sheepfold within proposed military camp boundaries
- 038. Marches → peasant farmers march with tractors to protest loss of farms
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support → peasant farmers brought sheep to Paris to protest loss of their farms
- 082. Refusal to let or sell property

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 029. Symbolic reclamations → built sheepfold within proposed military camp boundaries
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 082. Refusal to let or sell property

Methods in 4th segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 082. Refusal to let or sell property
• 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
• 180. Alternative communication system  » formed journal “la Gardarem Larzac” for campaigners

Methods in 5th segment:

• 029. Symbolic reclamations  » plowed fields belonging to army
• 038. Marches
• 039. Parades  » with tractors
• 082. Refusal to let or sell property
• 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
• 172. Nonviolent obstruction  » disrupted trial with invasion of sheep into the court
• 180. Alternative communication system  » formed journal “la Gardarem Larzac” for campaigners

Methods in 6th segment:

• 038. Marches
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support  » camping out on Champ de Mars
• 082. Refusal to let or sell property
• 180. Alternative communication system  » formed journal “la Gardarem Larzac” for campaigners

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

• 090. Revenue refusal  » refusal to pay 3% of income tax that went towards military
• 186. Preclusive purchasing

Classifications

Classification:
Defense
Cluster:
Environment
Human Rights
Peace

Group characterization:

• Catholic church members
• activists from a variety of demographics
• peasant farmers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
The 103, Larzac Committees
Partners:
Jeuness Agricole Catholique (JAC), Chretiens danse le Monde Rural (CMR), FDSEA, Larzac University, APAL (Association for the Advancement of Agriculture on the Larzac), GFA (Groupement Foncier Agricole)

**External allies:**
Left wing radical groups, Paysans-Travailleurs (Peasant-Workers), LIP factory workers

**Involvement of social elites:**
Jose Bove, Lanza del Vasto

### Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**
- Chretiens danse le Monde Rural (CMR)
- Jeuness Agricole Catholique (JAC)
- LIP factory workers
- Lanza del Vasto
- Larzac Committees
- Paysans-Travailleurs
- agricultural union FDSEA
- the 103

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**
- GFA (Groupement Foncier Agricole)

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**
- APAL (Association for the Advancement of Agriculture on the Larzac)
- Larzac University
- Paysans-Travailleurs (exit)

**Groups in 4th Segment:**
**Groups in 5th Segment:**
**Groups in 6th Segment:**

**Additional notes on joining/exiting order:**
The Paysans-Travailleurs left the campaign because the peasant farmers refused to turn their campaign into a revolutionary movement against the central government.

**Segment Length:** approximately 1.5 years

### Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**
Public authorities of French government, military, local notables

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**
Not known

**Campaigner violence:**
Some of the radical left wing groups involved as external allies used violent approaches to protest, but these were not sanctioned by the main campaigners of nonviolent struggle and the peasant-farmers involved.

**Repressive Violence:**
Not known
Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
6 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
When Francois Mitterrand was elected president of France in 1981, he officially declared the expansion project at Larzac would be abandoned.

The plateau of Larzac is a limestone karst plateau located in the southern Massif Central area of France, extending between Millau (Aveyron region) and Lodeve (Herault region). The area is mainly agricultural and the economy relied mostly on sheep breeding and production of ewes’ milk for Roquefort cheese. Sheep farms dominated the landscape, and the land is rocky, arid, and windswept, with thin and relatively infertile soil. The French army established a military camp on the plateau of Larzac in Aveyron in June 1902, where it served as a garrison and training center.

On October 28, 1971, Michel Debre, the defense minister of France, announced plans to extend Camp Larzac from 3,000 to 17,000 hectares for strategic reasons without consulting the local population. The expansion would destroy more than a hundred farms that were included in whole or in part within the new perimeter of the plant. This government decision threatened many peasant-farmers with expropriation.

Local farmers afraid of losing their livelihood immediately opposed the plan, especially recently settled “modernizing” farmers who were not as deferential to authority. These farmers, along with local elites and union delegates, took the leading role in opposing the government, especially disputing the government’s claim that the land was a desert unfit for agriculture. There were also many leftist radicals from other parts of France that adopted and promoted the Larzac cause as part of a broad and revolutionary, anti-capitalist movement. However, they were initially seen as ‘strangers’ by many in the local community and treated with distrust.

On November 6, 1971, 66,000 people organized by the Department of Federation of Farmers’ Unions (FDSEA) demonstrated against the expansion of the base in Millau. Radical activists organized marches in protest against the camp extensions but without full support from the peasants. While these far left groups were interested in declaiming the ‘internal colonialism’ and militarization of the French state, many of the peasants were not politically motivated and mainly wanted to keep their farms intact. The activists, like Jose Bove, would institute a ‘long march’ on the plateau in order to get to know the locals, raise political awareness, and help in everyday activities. However, due to different cultural attitudes towards sexual habits, poor work discipline and occasionally violent methods, the activists did not generate much approval among the peasants. Some groups such as the Paysans-Travailleurs (Peasant-Workers) organized the first mass protests, but then exited the campaign four years later because the peasants were unwilling to turn the campaign into a revolutionary movement.

The local population was overwhelmingly Catholic, and church leaders became increasingly vocal about protesting the expansion of the military base. Groups such as Jeuness Agricole Catholique (JAC) and Chretiens danse le Monde Rural (CMR) promoted the use of nonviolent tactics for peace. On November 7, the Bishop of Rodez (of Aveyron) issued a statement against the extension of the camp. LIP factory workers also became involved in the campaign and came to many of the rallies.

In the March of 1972, spiritual leader and Gandhi disciple Lanza del Vasto arrived in Larzac and began a series of sermons and a fifteen-day fast with peasants to encourage the use of nonviolent methods for protest. Peasants, residents of Millau, and bishops of Montpellier and Rodez joined with del Vasto in his fast.
By the end of the fast on March 28, 103 families affected by the expansion signed a pledge confirming their opposition to the military base and affirming their solidarity. They also pledged never to sell their land to the army under pressure and to support forms of nonviolent action. This was to be called the “Oath of 103,” and it legitimized the will and power of the peasant-farmers with the support of unions, political parties, and civil society groups. These groups would gain a national appeal and coordinate through “Larzac committees” across France to organize various forms of resistance and support of the movement in consultation with the 103. Farmers would renew the oath in 1975 to continue their campaign.

On July 14, protestors held a demonstration in Rodez that gathered around 20,000 people to demonstrate at a tractor. Later on October 25, 1972, Larzac peasants led a herd of sixty sheep to the lawns of the Champs de Mars in Paris to protest to the central government. On January 7, 1973, protestors attempted to march to Paris with 26 tractors. However, after 8 days they were blocked at Orleans by the CRS (the national riot police) and not allowed to pass through.

On June 10, 1973, the peasants and numerous volunteers from the Larzac committees began laying the foundations for the sheepfold of Blauiere. 3,000 people would participate financially in the reconstruction outside of any official authorization. The sheepfold was built illegally, since consent was denied for anything within the proposed boundaries of the expanded military camp. The sheepfold became the enduring symbol of the campaign and it represented the alliance of outsiders and farmers in the protests, as well as legitimized farming as a life sustaining activity, unlike the building of a military base. It was completed and inaugurated on February 16, 1974.

Protesters organized three major gatherings (rassemblements) held on the plateau during the 1970s to generate support for the campaign. The first was from August 25-26 in 1973, when about 80,000 people from regions of France and Europe converged in Larzac to march. The second rally was also on the plateau on August 17-18, 1974 and became the most successful protest in the campaign. More than 100,000 people traveled to the plateau for a harvest festival called the “Third World Harvest”, where Larzac farmers expressed solidarity with the Third World. The event called for a real policy for peace and opposed sales of French arms abroad, nuclear tests, or an extension of military bases. Then in 1977, on August 13-14, approximately 50,000 protestors came together again to parade with hundreds of tractors.

In the mid 1970s, the campaign gained much national and even international support for its efforts. June 6, 1975 was the publication of the first issue of journal “lo Gardarem Larzac,” which tracked the progress made in the campaign. The journal eventually had up to 4,000 subscribers. In October of 1977, the government brought many lawsuits to court against the farmers in Millau Larzac for draft evasion, obstructing traffic, and other violations. During one trial, the farmers brought a flock of sheep to invade the court. Later that year, farmers and protestors would symbolically reclaim land bought by the army by using 150 tractors and 5,000 people to plow land intended for the military camp.

October 28, 1978 was the national day of action and the Larzac Committees organized many parades, rallies, hunger strikes, and other actions to mobilize supporters. On December 2, 18 farmers marched 710 km from the Larzac to the gates of Paris, supported along the way by local farmers and residents in the FDSEA. 40,000 people protested at the gates of Paris but were blocked by the presence of riot police. And then, on November 27, 1980, 74 members of the families of Larzac staged a demonstration under the Eiffel Tower by camping on the Champ de Mars. They were expelled after five days.

When France elected François Mitterrand as president in 1981, he officially ended the expansion project. He had already announced on June 3, 1980 in the Cabinet that the proposed extensions of Larzac military camp would be abandoned.

The campaign utilized a variety of different strategies to achieve its goals and received widespread national support. During the campaign, people bought shares made available by specially formed agricultural land corporations (called the GFA) to purchase plots on the plateau and therefore prevent their sale to the army. Many residents also refused to pay 3% of the income tax (how much was calculated went to support the army) and donated this money to the peasants in Larzac instead. Supporters also organized fasting campaigns, blockades of army maneuvers, illegal construction projects, educational meetings, festivals, and demonstrations in Paris.
Larzac became a symbol of resistance in France and inspired social movements across the continent as an important model in Europe for how to successfully conduct a Gandhian-style struggle. Because of its history, a group opposing the WTO organized a massive meeting in Larzac in 2003.

Research Notes

Influences:

The leadership and philosophy of Lanza del Vasto was influenced by the nonviolent tactics used by Gandhi (1)

Sources:


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

Nancy Liu, 01/10/2011.

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