Saami and Norwegians protest construction of Alta Dam, Norway, 1979-1981

Time period notes: Symbolic and bureaucratic resistance to the dam began as soon as it was proposed in 1970. The beginning and end dates here reflect the period of active non-violent resistance by the Saami Action Group and People’s Action Group.

July 1979 to: February 1981

Country: Norway
Location City/State/Province: Alta and Oslo
Location Description: The campaign had two fronts: one near the proposed dam site in remote northern Norway, and another 3,000 km away in the capital city, Oslo.

Goals:
To prevent the construction of the Alta Dam and access road. In addition, the Saami activists of SAG wanted national recognition of Saami culture and rights.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 016. Picketing › in front of the barricade where the access road was to be built

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 016. Picketing › in front of the barricade where the access road was to be built
- 016. Picketing › outside of the parliament building
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 036. Performances of plays and music
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 050. Teach-ins
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:
Methods in 5th segment:
Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention  ▶ PAG leaders stated their willingness to die of exposure if police removed their shelter.
- 016. Picketing  ▶ in front of the barricade where the access road was to be built
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 038. Marches
- 097. Protest strike
- 158. Self-exposure to the elements
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

Notes on Methods:
The lull in tactics during the third through fifth segments was due to the government's temporary suspension of the project.

Classifications

Classification:
Defense

Cluster:
Environment
National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Norwegian environmentalists
- young Saami activists

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
The PAG was led by nationally known professors and scientists. Its messaging focused on the rights of nature and environmental conservation, and most of its members were ethnically Norwegian. The SAG focused on the rights of the Saami people to their historic land. Mikkel Eira was the spokesman for the Saami Action Group.

Partners:
Norsk Reindriftssamers Landsforbund (NRL), a group of Saami reindeer owners; Norske Samers Riksforbund (NSR), a more inclusive group representing all Saami

External allies:
World Council of Indigenous Peoples (WCIP); International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA)

Involvement of social elites:
Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
Located inside the Arctic Circle in northern Norway, the Alta River runs through the reindeer herding grounds of the indigenous Saami people. In 1970, the Norwegian Water Resources and Electricity Board proposed a hydroelectric dam on the river. The proposed dam, which would have completely submerged the Saami village of Masi and interrupted reindeer migration routes, was only the latest affront in a long history of Norway’s marginalization of its indigenous peoples. After Saami activists fought successfully to have Masi named a “heritage area,” the project was scaled down, though migration routes were still threatened. The government cleared various procedural hurdles during the 70s, and by 1979 was ready to begin construction on the dam.

Frustrated with the failure of bureaucratic means to stop the project, a group of Norwegian environmentalists formed the People’s Action Group (PAG) in 1978. Although the PAG included some Saami members, its messaging focused on “saving the river” rather than asserting the Saami’s right to their ancestral lands. In summer 1979, PAG constructed a large stone barrier near

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Government of Norway

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
A pro-government group of citizens, calling themselves the "Committee for Order and Work," marched through Alta on January 13, 1981 to protest the influx of environmentalists in their town.

Campagin violence:
None known

Repressive Violence:
None known

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:
Although the dam was built, the Alta controversy led to the establishment of a national Saami Rights Commission, which in turn led to constitutional reform and greater autonomy for Saami peoples. The campaign was instrumental in the crystallization of Saami pride and nation-wide recognition.
the town of Alta to prevent construction of the 36-km access road to the dam site. PAG manned the barrier, which they named “Point Zero,” with its members and allies around the clock to prevent bulldozers from beginning the road.

These efforts won the support of the two national Saami organizations, the Norsk Reindriftssamers Landsforbund (NRL) and Norske Samers Riksforbund (NSL). Saami members of PAG, however, were discontented with the campaign’s failure to frame the dam controversy as a matter of ethnic rights. On October 8, 1979, seven young Saami activists calling themselves the Saami Action Group (SAG) set up a traditional Saami tent outside the parliament building in Oslo, 3,000 km from Alta. Their action had been planned in secret and came as a huge surprise to the rest of the anti-dam campaigners. In a written ultimatum to the government, the SAG vowed to begin a hunger strike if the government did not suspend the dam’s authorization and grant improved political rights and recognition to the Saami people.

With the government’s refusal of their demands, the activists began their hunger strike the following day amid a storm of media attention. Within a day, several thousand Oslo residents signed statements of support and the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (WCIP) and the Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) appealed to Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland for support of the Saami people. Meanwhile, the PAG continued to block construction of the access road at Point Zero.

On October 10, Police informed the strikers that their occupation of the parliament lawn was illegal, and stated that they would be allowed to continue their demonstration across the street for one day only. The strikers agreed to change location, but rejected the one-day restriction and asserted their right to sleep in their tent at night. They held an impromptu tutorial in Saami history and folklore for the gathered crowd and media, including communal songs. Some members of the crowd stepped forward and identified themselves as Saami, including some who had kept their heritage secret since coming to Oslo. Worried that the gathered crowd might become violent if the police attempted to intervene, the SAG stated publicly that “our action is one of passive resistance. The Saami people are a nation with strong traditions of passive resistance.”

The next day, police arrested the seven hunger strikers and dismantled their tent. A supportive member of Parliament was also arrested. Upon their release later that day, the SAG returned to the lawn and defiantly erected another tent among their supporters. One of the strikers, Mikkel Eira, was appointed the official spokesman for all correspondence with the government, and stopped his fast to be able to negotiate adequately.

Police increased their pressure the following day, October 12, by arresting 200 SAG supporters along with the strikers themselves. Following their release, the arrested again gathered in front of the parliament building, but found the lawn blocked by the police force. Several hundred demonstrators sat down in the road in response, but the SAG, feeling that events might slip beyond their control, did not follow suit, and instead asked people to move out of the road. Mikkel Eira negotiated with police for the right to set up their tent across from the lawn, and agreed only to demonstrate until 9:00 pm each evening. The protest remained at the center of public and media attention for the next two days, culminating with a benefit concert on October 14.

Meanwhile, 3,000 km away, PAG demonstrators continued to stymie the bulldozers, but it was rumored that hundreds of police were preparing to forcibly remove them.

These rumors turned out to be unfounded, for on Monday, October 15, the government temporarily rescinded authorization of the dam. The Prime Minister stated that the decision was not made in response to the hunger strike, but out of simple concern for Saami interests. The SAG and PAG each suspended their protests, vowing to return if the dam were re-authorized.

Early in 1980, the government established a Saami Rights Commission, and soon claimed that it had fulfilled its obligation to look into Saami interests before continuing dam construction. Before the Commission of Inquiry even released its report, the government declared its plan to resume building the access road on January 14, 1981, and sent 600 policemen, ten percent of the country’s total police force, north to Alta. In the week leading up to the 14th, the PAG constructed an ice barrier at Zero Point, and conducted training sessions for protesters to chain themselves to this barrier. PAG leaders announced their willingness to freeze to death if police were to remove their shelter while they were chained to the barrier, drawing shock from the national media.
The day before the planned police action, two groups marched through Alta. While the first march, organized by the NSR and NSL, expressed opposition to the dam, the second was a group of exasperated, pro-government locals calling themselves the “Committee for Order and Work.” The next day, police arrived at Zero Point to confront the blockade of 800 demonstrators. Approximately 150 Saami activists sat in front of the ice wall with their tents, and were removed first by the police. Over the course of the day, the police physically removed the other demonstrators, including about 70 who had chained themselves to the ice wall. In order to frame themselves as the maintainers of safety order, the police worked very carefully not to do harm to any of the activists. By midnight, police had removed all members of the barricade, enabling construction of the road to resume.

Later in January, SAG spokesman Mikkel Eira and several others staged another protest hunger strike in Oslo, this time at a university. Despite lasting several weeks, the strike did not command the same media attention as the earlier, more public demonstration in front of Parliament.

The action at Zero Point proved to be the high-water mark of the dam opposition. In autumn 1981, the Supreme Court denied one final challenge to the project by reaffirming that Saami did not have legal claim to their pastoral lands. The Alta Dam began producing electricity in 1987.

Although the SAG and PAG did not succeed in halting construction of the dam, the Alta controversy helped crystallize a sense of identity and pride among Norway’s Saami. When the Saami Rights Commission finally released its report in 1984, it contained a surprisingly bold set of recommendations. The report led to a constitutional amendment ensuring protection of Saami language and culture, as well as legislation granting greater autonomy and political representation. For a group that had previously not been recognized as indigenous, but merely as an ethnic minority, this set of reforms was a huge improvement.

**Research Notes**

**Sources:**


**Additional Notes:**
Paine 1985 was my primary source. In the course of my research, I found much more information on SAG’s actions, especially the Oslo hunger strike, than on PAG’s efforts. Additional information on the PAG, especially their initial blockade in summer 1979, would help balance this case.

This campaign was part of two clusters: "environment" and "national/ethnic identity." Interestingly, the campaign was resoundingly successful in addressing ethnic issues, but failed to meet its environmental goals.

Edited by Max Rennebohm (16/07/2011)
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