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**In the ten years between 1971 and 1981, the rural population on the Larzac plateau in southern France opposed the expansion of a military camp. The training ground, which bordered on the outskirts of the village of La Cavalerie and covered 3000 hectares, had been established in 1900. For decades, there was rarely any trouble between the soldiers and the farmers, whose sheep provide the milk for Roquefort cheese. When, at the start of the 1970s, the government planned to extend the camp to 17 000 hectares, acts of radical non-violent civil disobedience began to be carried out, which ended in victory in 1981 for the farmers and their solidarity movement.**

One of the unique features of Larzac's resistance was that non-violent opposition was combined with highly pragmatic and constructive alternative methods, along with a willingness to mutually support each other with practical solidarity.

*In this rocky, arid landscape, set high in the uplands 800 to 1000 metres above sea level, there are few villages and most inhabitants dwell in scattered hamlets and isolated farmsteads. For centuries, the majority of people knew only their immediate neighbours and encounters beyond this took place mainly within the community of the Catholic Church. The people in this remote corner mostly accepted the triumvirate authority of state, military and church without a murmur. Therefore, the shift in behaviour of these traditionally conservative people from obedience to acts of protest and resistance when their existence became threatened by the state was remarkable. A key influence in this evolution was the progressive wing of the Catholic Church in France. Public gatherings began to include issues such as increasing the self-confidence of the rural population and raising awareness of the military industrial complex and the exploitation of so called „under-developed” countries in the Third World.*

The farming communities were not informed by the government of its plans; however regional politicians and speculators were. After announcing its decision, the defence ministry depicted Larzac in the media as a barren lunar landscape. For the few who carved out an impoverished existence there, being relocated was meant to come as a welcome deliverance. The sole economic opportunity for the region was supposedly the extension of the military camp.

In material terms, most of the Larzac residents had little to lose; they could not even have their land expropriated since it was leased and did not belong to them.

Migration from the area in past decades had starkly reduced the number of inhabitants. Farms lacked running water and were without phone lines. The authorities denied subsidies and loans for essential facilities and modernisation work.

However, the government was unaware that in the 1960s several “pioneers” – farmers educated in modern agriculture – had settled in the area. The investments they made and the modernisation work they undertook demonstrated to the traditional community that alternative ways were feasible.

*The sense of unity amongst the affected families grew during the first year after the government's plans were announced. They got to know and trust each other, and learned through experience that they could not rely on politicians or local officials as they had done previously; they had to take matters into their own hands. Various left-wing groups attempted to influence the national supporters' movement: for instance, Maoists wanted to resume the Long March at Larzac, and other “revolutionaries” dreamed of farmers taking up their rifles. Although this raised political awareness, it also helped the Larzac farmers to realise what they did not want. They found that the ideas and modus operandi of the non-violent movement best fitted their moral views, and would not compromise with these principles.*

Cohesion and unity – crucial features of the Larzac struggle – were expressed in various forms of solidarity: in 1972, 103 out of 109 farming families pledged mutual solidarity (the "Oath of 103") in their refusal to

hand over their land to the army. Their dedication and solidarity from outside of the region solidarity increased the emotional, economic and ecological value of the disputed region during the years of resistance.

Constructive measures combined with acts of civil disobedience strengthened the self-confidence of the farmers and their credibility in the eyes of the French public. The actions focused on everyday life, and were therefore not only acts of defence, but designed to improve the farmers' living conditions.

The authorities refused to lay water pipes and phone lines. They assumed that the farms would be vacated and such modernisations would not be needed for the prospective military training area. The farmers began to dig trenches and to lay pipes themselves. This did not pose a problem on privately owned land. However, the pipes also had to be laid under National Highway 4. This meant blocking the important link road between Paris and the Mediterranean for several hours. The farmers began to tear up the roadway. The police wanted to stop this and cleared the road works. At the second attempt two weeks later, the trench extended to the middle of the carriageway by the time the police arrived. This time, several mayors and local councillors came to show solidarity, recognisable by their tricolour sashes. They too were roughly pulled from the ditches and dragged across the dirty, rain-soaked road.

It was only at the third attempt that the pipe was successfully laid under the road. Even though a large contingent of police advanced, the officer-in-charge quickly saw that a group of trade unionists from LIP, the watch and clock producers in Besançon (which at that time was being occupied by workers), had come to support the farmers. He realised that it would be unwise to become embroiled in a confrontation with these two popular resistance movements. (LIP and Larzac were emblematic of the struggle for self-determination in the workplace.) The uniformed officers retreated, having achieved nothing. After a few weeks, the authorities tacitly legalised the pipes by allowing water meters to be fitted.

Supported by external sympathisers, the Larzac residents repaired paths and streets or constructed new ones. The PTT (Postes, Télégraphes et Téléphones, the postal and telecommunications service provider in France at the time) refused to install new lines. Hence, the farmers, with support from postal worker trade unionist, began to erect masts and connect them to telephone wires, thereby setting up a parallel telephone network. They linked isolated farms situated outside the bounds of the military expansion area with the internal network. This enabled messages to be quickly transmitted between the illegal telephone network and the public network.

## **“The land should belong to those who work it”**

Most grazing and arable land was not the property of the farmers but was leased from local authorities or private landowners. Although the farmers were mostly poor and their starting point – in direct competition with the state and the financial power it wielded – difficult, they began to acquire tracts of land designated for the expansion of the military training area. This was risky; they could be threatened with financial losses: if they were forced into compulsory purchases any compensation would be significantly less than what they would have received through voluntary sale.

Joint land ownership was possible through the setting up of cooperatives (GFA – “Groupement Foncier Agricole” [Agricultural Land Group]). These functioned by farmers putting part of their land into a cooperative, whilst non-farmers contributed cash. Collective land ownership secured the survival of modestly sized businesses and narrowed the gap between larger and smaller farms.

In both legal and political terms, compulsory purchases from cooperatives (i.e. a large number of co-owners) would be harder to implement than from individual land owners.

The first GFA at Larzac was founded in December 1973. The cooperatives purchased any available tracts of land that impeded the connection of plots bought by the army. GFAs safeguarded the preservation of long-

established businesses, and allowed new farmers to settle in Larzac. The number of voluntary associations, such as machinery rings (in which labour and machinery are shared) and cooperatives, grew sharply on the Larzac plateau compared with the national average.

One night in March 1975, there was an attack on the house of a farming family in the hamlet of La Blaquière. It was by sheer luck that all eight people asleep in the house survived the attack, which was presumed to have been committed by soldiers (the explosives were from a military source and footprints in the snow led to the neighbouring military training ground). Outrage at this attempt at intimidation motivated neighbours to reconstruct the damaged farmhouse and to build a new sheep pen.

The new construction of this “demonstration in stone” took place despite the authorities' refusal to grant planning permission. It was financed by thousands of French citizens who withheld 3% of their taxes – donating it to the Larzac community instead. The voluntary helpers included those who refused military service of any kind (“total refusers”); an international work camp was organised by War Resisters' International (WRI). Symbols of the various movements involved are engraved on the outer wall of the community shelter. The state never dared to prevent the construction, although its location would have severely impeded any future target practice. After the Larzac movement's triumph, the local prefect (the highest-ranking official of the French state in the département) came to honour this “cathedral of resistance”.

Ever more frequently, farmers and supporters began to occupy farms and agricultural land that the state had bought and left empty. The reactions to these occupations demonstrated the extent of the social recognition garnered by these stakeholder farmers. In October 1974, farmers accompanied a group from the Community of the Ark (a Gandhi-inspired community based on the principles of nonviolence) to occupy Les Truels farm. A group of paratroopers were staying in the main house. The squatters initially took up residence in the outbuildings. The army assumed that the squatters would soon get frustrated and leave. What happened was the exact opposite: after a few days the soldiers left; to this day the bustling community enlivens this small hamlet. A year later, conscientious objectors and total refusers occupied Le Cun farm in the southern area of the plateau and set up a centre for non-violent resistance. After a year, the farm was evacuated by the police because it was not being used for agricultural purposes. However, with help from farmers in the north of the plateau, the peaceful protesters succeeded in constructing a new meeting place.

To prevent any further occupations, the army had “their” farms converted into mini fortresses with round-the-clock surveillance. To make life easier for themselves at Cap d' Ase farm, they had essential structural elements, for example the water tank and the roof, destroyed. This vandalism triggered outrage in the region and triggered a wave of sympathy for Larzac's defenders.

This synthesis of resistance and alternatives was evident, for example, in August 1974 at the harvest festival for the Third World with the slogan “Crops brings life – weapons bring death”. For an entire weekend, one hundred thousand people demonstrated in the rocky landscape, partied and swapped stories about their respective fights. The Larzac farmers asked people to bring either a sack of grain or the equivalent in cash. Later, a group of farmers took the money they had collected to the Sahel, in northern Africa, to help build wells. During the festival, twenty tractors ploughed a large tract of army land close to La Blaquière. During the course of further campaigns, as many as 150 tractors collectively sowed and harvested on army territory.



Some 150 “Larzac committees” – local alliances of supporters from movements such as non-violent antimilitarists, Christians, ecologists and left wing socialists, were launched in French towns and cities. Some districts pledged to sponsor projects or farms. Delegates from these committees met each month at Larzac.

The involvement of the wider public was increased through national campaigns, such as the withholding of 3% of taxes to fund development projects at Larzac, or demonstratively handing back military service ID cards. In both instances, a wave of court cases followed against those engaging in civil disobedience, which drew further attention to this controversial issue.

Many collective acts of solidarity, like the purchasing of land for a GFA by LIP workers or buying a copy of the satirical magazine “Le Canard Enchaîné” [‘The Chained Duck’], yielded political capital. The “Canard” also helped launch “Gardarem lo Larzac”, a magazine which, since 1975, has reported on developments on the plateau and grassroots movements across the world with which Larzac stands in solidarity.

Church groups, trade unions and farmers’ unions helped organise mass rallies. The struggle for Larzac inspired the founding of the progressive farmers’ trade union ‘Confédération Paysanne’ [Farmers’



Federation]. Many of the protests drew public attention on a national level. For instance, farmers brought 60 sheep to Paris and let them graze on the grass beneath the Eiffel Tower. A tractor demonstration stretching 700 km to the capital was designed to demonstrate to the public that this was not about students, left-wing radicals and foreigners, as the pro-government media tried to suggest, but rather about self-confident farmers. When the decision on the compulsory purchases was finally made and farm evictions were imminent, Larzac residents erected a makeshift tent village beneath the Eiffel Tower, where they lived for an entire week until they were evicted by the police.



In May 1981, François Mitterrand was elected president and, as he had promised, formally abandoned the plans to extend the military camp. The Larzac residents continued the construction programme to further regional development. The task now was to settle new farmers on the liberated farms and estates. However, who were to be the owners and managers of the 6000 hectares of land that the state had purchased? The Larzac farmers continued to generate a high level of political pressure to ensure a stable legal form for their collective land tenure. In 1985, the areas mandated to the agricultural ministry were entrusted to the Larzac farmers through the SCTL (Société Civile des Terres du Larzac [Larzac Land Trust]).

Once the land ownership issue was concluded, the farmers fought against the introduction of milk quotas to safeguard and secure smaller businesses. A “Roquefort committee” was formed, which later became the association for sheep’s milk producers. So as not to be solely dependent on conventional distribution channels, the farmers joined forces to create a common interest group for selling their products direct.

In 1999, as a symbolic campaign against increased taxes on Roquefort cheese and other French products imported to the US (in retaliation to the EU ban on imports of US beef injected with growth hormones), Larzac farmers destroyed a half-built McDonald’s franchise in Millau prior to the start of the World Social Forum in Seattle. Larzac felt solidarity with the worldwide movements against the nuclear industry, neo-liberal globalisation, the genetic manipulation of foods and other damage wreaked by industrialisation. So as to be part of creating a just and peaceful world, Larzac participated in international demonstrations against the institutions of neo-liberalism, such as the World Trade Organization and the World Bank (Seattle 1999, Davos 2000 and 2001, Prague 2001, Cancún 2003), and contributed to alternative summits “for a different world” (Porto Alegre 2001, 2002, 2003, Florence 2002, Paris 2003).

On a national level, Larzac mobilised a multitude of social movements through mass rallies (Millau 2000, Larzac 2003 [over 100 000 participants]) following the model of the protests held during the fight against the extension of the military training area. Thus, a regional struggle for self-determination and control over land

developed into a global resistance struggle.

Today, Larzac's stand inspires grassroots movements worldwide. However, the question is whether Larzac is a model that can be copied or whether it constitutes an exception that was successful only because of its particular circumstances. Either way, Larzac continues to exert numerous positive influences on social movements worldwide.

## Further reading:

- Wolfgang Hertle: Larzac 1971-1981. Der gewaltfreie Widerstand gegen die Erweiterung eines Truppenübungsplatzes in Südfrankreich. Weber, Zucht & Co. Kassel 1982 (today Verlag Graswurzelrevolution)
- Roger Rawlinson: Larzac. A nonviolent campaign of the 70's in Southern France. William Sessions Ltd, York 1996. ISBN 1 85072 177 1
- Alexander Alland, Sonia Alland: Crisis and Commitment. The Life History of a French Social Movement, Psychology Press, 2001
- Pierre-Marie Terral: Larzac- De la lutte paysanne à l' altermondialisme Editions Privat. Toulouse. 2011. ISBN 978-2-7089-6918-6.
- Christiane Burguière: Gardarem ! Chronique du Larzac en lutte. Editions Privat. Toulouse. 2011. ISBN 978-2-7089-6920-9.
- Wolfgang Hertle: Larzac 1971-1981 (turkish version) translated by Osman Murat Ülke, Istanbul 2017, ISBN 978-975-7005-513 Distributer: [Pandora.com.tr](http://Pandora.com.tr)

**Documentary film:** Tous au Larzac. Christian Rouaud, Prod. / Dir. 2011. Elzévir Films Paris. (English version youtube: "leadersheep") This two-hour documentary features historical film footage and extended interviews of those most intimately involved in the flight for the Larzac. With remarkable candour and humour, they look back on the decade nearly 40 years later.

**Web site of the Larzac inhabitants:** [www.larzac.org](http://www.larzac.org)

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