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Larzac— a victory for nonviolence

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Roger Rawlinson was born on 27 January 1918 and was brought up on his father's farm until the age of seven. On his father's death the family moved to France where Roger spent most of his school years. He is bilingual.

His experience in the Second World War (spent mostly in the Middle East) convinced him that war would have to be abolished just as slavery and other unjust practices already have been. He has actively supported the peace movement ever since, and now helps the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Amnesty International. His interest in Gandhian nonviolence led him to make regular visits to the Larzac and to investigate and write about this nonviolent battle as it progressed.

Roger Rawlinson is married with two sons. A professional photographer for many years, he now devotes much of his time to writing about nonviolent struggles and working in his organically-grown garden.

Picture inside front cover

JUST HOW FAR MUST WE GO? The Larzac shepherds brought their sheep all the way to Paris and let them graze around the Eiffel Tower to try and bring home to the Government the extent of their determination and concern (see page 14).

Introduction

For ten years the peasant-farmers of the Larzac plateau in southern France fought to save their land from a take-over by the army. The Government's plan to extend the existing military camp on the plateau from 3,000 to 17,000 hectares* would have forced them off the land and dealt a further blow to a region already suffering from economic neglect and unemployment.

It should be explained that the term 'peasant' is used here as it is understood in France and not in its pejorative sense. French people who belong to the land and make their living on it are usually proud to call themselves peasants and none more so than the Larzac folk.

An unusual aspect of the battle was that it was not conducted through the usual political channels. The peasants realised that unless they remained in full control their cause might well be used for party political purposes and their true interests be forgotten. The extension plan was finally abandoned when the Socialist leader, François Mitterrand, was elected to the Presidency in May 1981 and his party came to power in the June general elections. François Mitterrand had taken a personal interest in the Larzac and a promise made a long time before was being honoured. However, the decision made by a political leader who held conventional views on defence policy was no doubt also prompted by political considerations. The Larzac affair had attracted considerable public support throughout the country and it was clear the peasants would have been prepared to continue their resistance. Their unity, their determination and persistence over the years were the chief reasons for their success.

There are reasons to believe that nonviolence will increasingly be used in confrontations with governing powers which ignore the interests and well-being of their people. It is therefore very important to understand how this method works and how successful it can be. In a democratic country like France people who resist the state are in less danger of brutal repression than those living under a dictatorship. For this reason the people of Larzac were able to experiment very much further than they might otherwise have done with a wide range of nonviolent techniques.

* 1 hectare = 2.47 acres.

The story is little known in the English-speaking world because of the language barrier and the media's preference for party political strife and violent confrontations. The nonviolent basis on which the battle was conducted and the active support of so many outside supporters makes it the first large sustained Gandhian-style struggle in France and, arguably, in Europe. It has inspired and encouraged many people faced with a similar threat to their livelihood and life style by a remote centralised administration. At the same time it has given new heart to movements concerned with diverse though related issues: peace and disarmament, human rights, the protection of the environment, etc.

The Larzac experiment may hopefully help us to gain a deeper understanding of nonviolence and its potential as a positive and dynamic means of meeting conflict situations.

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The Threatened Land

The Government's intention to enlarge the military camp was first revealed in October 1970 by the Secretary of State for Defence at a local congress of the UDR (the Gaullist party) held at the village of La Cavalerie in the centre of the plateau. Rumours of such a plan had been circulating for years but people had ceased to pay much attention to them.

As news of the intended take-over spread it created a feeling of consternation amongst the peasants who were unable to discover details of the plan.

The Camp

The camp was established at La Cavalerie in 1901 with the approval of the Mayor and Council who hoped to gain economic benefits for the village. Three thousand hectares of land belonging to the commune* was provided; 500 hectares were sold to the army and the rest was ceded to them on the understanding that sheep could graze there when not in use. Later agreements allowed manoeuvres outside the camp's boundaries. The infantry and horse-drawn artillery of those days did little damage to the land. The soldiers, mostly reservists, were welcomed as they brought life to the community and spent their money in local bars.

In 1963 a few peasants expressed their willingness to sell land to the army. This gave rise later to assertions that local people wanted the camp to expand. In 1965 there were rumours that the camp might close and the mayors of several villages appealed to the Government to maintain or even increase the military presence. At the same time, many peasants were getting increasingly angry as troops with track vehicles exercised on their land causing long-term damage to the shallow topsoil typical of the area. Low-flying helicopters caused abortions among the ewes. Compensation was difficult to claim and often inadequate.

Land and People

The Larzac is an arid limestone tableland south of the Massif Central covering an area of a thousand square kilometres, most of it in the Department of Aveyron. The N9 runs south across the centre of the

* Commune—approximates to a parish but may include a town.

plateau. Side roads lead to fine old stone-built farmsteads. Flocks of sheep guarded by shepherds and their dogs graze on the sparse grass growing between outcrops of rock and box or juniper bushes. In unfenced fields crops grow in depressions where more fertile soil lies. Pinewood plantations can be seen in some parts. The plateau, rising 800 to 900 metres above sea level, is surrounded by canyon-like valleys. It is exposed to strong winds, the summers are hot and dry and the winters cold and snowy.

Its inhabitants have had to adapt themselves to a hostile environment, difficult soil conditions and an isolated life. Within living memory the system of society was patriarchal, based on allegiance to church, fatherland and family. Today's community is still conservative and mostly Catholic. Even before the first world war, young people were leaving the plateau as the subsistence farming of those days offered few prospects. The heavy toll of two world wars hastened this demographic decline. However, in the early sixties, this trend began moving into reverse as young men started to return.

The flocks consist mostly of ewes bred for their milk which is used to make Roquefort cheese. They are kept indoors in winter and at night in the grazing season, a system which allows lambing to take place under cover and helps to maintain the delicate ecological balance of the land. The farmers earn most of their income from sheep farming and the rest from cereal crops.

Guy Tarlier was one of the first to react to the take-over plan. A big man with a large moustache, he had been a captain in the army, had farmed in Africa and in 1966 had settled on the farm of Devez Novel. Improved farming practices and modern machinery had enabled him and other newcomers to obtain a better return from the land and even reclaim areas from the wilderness. In some cases two or three men would pool their resources to run a farm collectively. They were in no mood to surrender the fruits of their labour. Even the agricultural authorities seemed unaware of this renewal of activities. With the help of the Burguière brothers of the farm of L'Hôpital, and Jean-Claude Galtier of the collective farm of Les Beaumes, Guy Tarlier brought out a pamphlet, *A Few Peasants of the Larzac*, which outlined the silent revolution which had taken place in the north-western zone in the previous decade. The area under plough had doubled and so had milk production.

A Common Threat

After Defence Minister Michel Debré had confirmed the plan, Guy Tarlier contacted Louis Massebiau of La Cavalerie, delegate to the

Farmers' Union, and soon peasants from all over the plateau, normally isolated from one another, began to meet and discuss the common threat. They all agreed they could never leave the land but how could they defend themselves?

Those notables who opposed the extension decided to form an Association for the Safeguard of the Larzac. The Deputy (MP) Louis-Alexis Delmas and the Mayor of Millau, a town just north of the plateau, had declared themselves in favour of the extension, but out of courtesy they were invited to the inaugural meeting of the Association in January 1971. There was, however, no shortage of opponents of the military project willing to back the Association. In the words of Henri Ramade, its chairman, members included 'all tendencies, from the PSU (Unified Socialist Party) to the Countess of Billy'. Only two peasants sat on the Association's council. With many different views to reconcile, the Association could never be very militant but it did perform a useful service by its publicity activities. Its most important initiative was the publication of the *White Book* in May 1981. This study of the life and activities of the Larzac provided a wealth of information which proved invaluable to its defenders. The extension project, involving the take-over of 14,000 hectares of land, would lead to 58 farms closing down while 40 others would be seriously affected. 527 people, including 107 farmers, would be directly concerned. Also at risk would be the 20,000 sheep within the extension area, most of them ewes which provided the milk to make 325,000 kilograms of Roquefort. Milk yields had more than doubled. This unpolluted land with a wild beauty of its own had much to offer to those interested in open-air pursuits, natural history, archaeology, etc. The plateau is a refuge for many species of fauna and flora. It is rich in prehistoric sites and was a feudal estate of the Knights Templars and Hospitallers as evidenced by fortified farms, the ramparts of La Cavalerie and the walled city of La Couvertoirade, the Commandery of the Knights, where traditional crafts are practised—an additional attraction for tourists.

It is in the small town of Roquefort west of the plateau that the cheese of that name is made. Only a small proportion of ewes' milk is provided by the Larzac but it is the nearest supply point, and the milk is regarded as superior. Important investments had been made on the plateau by the Roquefort cheesemakers and they were the first to back the peasants by financing publicity. One of them, Pierre Laur, a local man much attached to the Larzac, drove thousands of kilometres with Henri Ramade or one of the farmers to speak at meetings all over the country to rally support.

The Varying Factions

Unlike the businessmen of Roquefort, the shopkeepers of Millau and La Cavalerie favoured the extension as they hoped to gain from increased activity at the camp. With industrial decline, Millau was facing grave problems of unemployment and the migration of young people to northern cities. Two thousand new jobs had been promised if the extension went through, but the Mayor had to admit that the most which could be expected was some 80 jobs at a tank repair-shop.

A march took place from Millau to La Cavalerie in May 1971, organised mainly by the peace movement and political forces of the left and centre, though not by the Communist party nor the CGT (Communist-led trades unions). Guy Tarlier was the only peasant to join the march.

The Occitan regionalists were amongst the most dedicated supporters of the peasants. They represent the aspirations of many southerners for recognition of their own language and culture and greater control over regional matters. Their influence over the peasants was not negligible.

During the summer young 'Maoists' came to work on the farms, collect information and discover how they could help the peasants. However, it became obvious that they were more interested in political theory than in hard work and after a week they were asked to leave.

The Peasants Take Charge

The peasants were getting tired of being accused of being co-opted by political groups. To show they were capable of acting on their own, they organised a demonstration in September 1971 which gave them the opportunity of showing their displeasure with the Mayor of La Cavalerie who held the contract to supply the camp, and who was strongly in favour of the extension. As manure was dumped in front of the Mayor's residence, Louis Massebiau, in an emotional speech in true peasant-revolt style, exclaimed that if necessary they would 'take up hayforks in defence of their livelihood'.

Michel Debré had stated he would consult the Prefect (the representative of the central Government) before implementing the extension plan. The Aveyron Prefect, Pierre Cazejust, promised that all concerned would be consulted. If on analysis the project proved negative he would say 'No'.

Towards the end of October 1971 Cazejust was suddenly transferred, and on 28 October Debré announced his decision to go ahead with the extension; it was vital for the defence of the nation. Rights of access to

pastures would be allowed several days a month. A piped water supply to the farms would be provided and other public works put in hand.

To the peasants who had fully expected to be consulted, this sudden announcement on television came as a great shock. They felt they had been betrayed. The Farmers' Union had already sent out a call for a mass demonstration on 6 November. The Minister's statement ensured a large turn-out. Some 6,000 people gathered at Millau, most of them peasants. M. Bruel, vice-chairman of the union, expressed the hope that consultations would still take place in spite of the fact that M. Debré had earlier refused to meet him.

On 10 November 1971 delegates from the Union and the Safeguard Association were received at the Ministry. Debré said he would not change his decision, however a Planning Commission would be set up. At the first meeting of the Commission it was clear that it would only be considering how best to implement the extension. Four further meetings were held but no satisfactory conclusion was reached.

Reasons for the Extension

French defence strategy is based on nuclear 'dissuasion' which, given the destructive power of nuclear weapons, would mean the devastation of the country should a nuclear exchange occur. Realising this, the High Command felt compelled to develop alternative options necessitating conventional forces, in particular, mobile armoured brigades equipped with tanks and artillery. It was for these units that training areas such as the Larzac were said to be required. However, not all military experts agreed on the necessity for large camps, while even those who did doubted whether the Larzac was suitable. Some experts thought that manoeuvres could just as easily take place in the open countryside. This was already happening in any case; the Larzac range was a receptacle for shells and missiles fired over the valleys from surrounding hills. A map used by British units manoeuvring on the plateau in 1972 showed that the exercise area covered 100,000 hectares.

Chief of Staff General de Boissieu, although he had helped Debré to justify the extension, stated later: 'We have studied the enlargement of the camp of Larzac. The military were not enthusiastic as it is rugged, very rocky and difficult to manoeuvre on'.

The reasons for Debré's decision appear to have been political rather than technical. In *L... Comme Larzac* (a book covering events up to 1973) it was suggested that Michel Debré wanted to keep on good terms

with his generals who felt neglected because most of the nuclear weaponry had gone to the navy and airforce. Deputy Delmas then came up with the idea of reviving the original plan dating from 1951. Still living in the past, he assured the minister that his constituents wanted the extension. This opportunity to please the army seemed too good to be missed and Debré went ahead with the plan. He was clearly unaware of the changed situation on the plateau.

The Larzac is only one of several large camps situated in southern France in accordance with NATO strategy. In February 1972 a delegation from the Safeguard Association visited the plateau of Canjuers in Provence where 35,000 hectares had been appropriated for military purposes. They were amazed at what they found. Promises had been made that neither farming nor tourism would suffer, and yet the peasants had been driven off the land. The village of Broves had been wiped off the map, and access for tourism was strictly limited. A local notable told the delegation, 'Our mistake was not to have hit hard enough at the beginning. We allowed ourselves to be outwitted'.

Outside Support

By the beginning of 1972 the elected bodies of Aveyron, apart from Millau Council, had declared their opposition to the extension. They recognised that the agricultural products of the plateau and the Roquefort industry were important elements in the economy of the Department.

However, more important for the peasants than the passing of resolutions was the active help given by committees set up all over the country. On 15 December 1971 a press conference in Paris brought together many organisations. Later a good number of these lost interest, but at peak periods in the battle the peasants could rely on the backing of some 150 Larzac committees which organised campaigns and publicity. At the end of 1974 a co-ordination committee was set up in Millau where the annual meetings of the committees took place. This allowed supporters to keep in touch with the grass-roots and co-ordinate their activities more closely with the peasants.

Every summer information centres were set up on the plateau along the N9, where motorists passing through could obtain literature and view exhibitions explaining the struggle. Many thousands of people called at the centres each year.

Active Nonviolence

The Church

Most of the peasants are very attached to their Catholic faith and the approval of Church leaders was important to them. Young priests and Rural Catholic Action Groups soon became active defenders of the Larzac. The Church declared its position on 7 November 1971 when a pastoral letter was read from the pulpit of churches in Aveyron, including the one at La Cavalerie where the priest was the camp's chaplain and a supporter of the extension. The letter represented the considered and prayerful thoughts of the Bishop of Rodez, Monsignor Ménard, and some 40 priests of the diocese. It declared in part: 'The considerable expansion of the camp at Larzac poses a grave question to the priests and Christians of our region. At a time when human consciousness is progressing in the direction of peace we would be dismayed to see our region committed to developments of a military nature . . .'

The synod of the Reformed Church also declared himself on the peasants' side and asked for the decision to be re-examined.

A Turning Point

The peasants now had considerable support but were uncertain what to do next. Some favoured more vigorous forms of protest. However, the ideas of two devotees of nonviolence provided the answer.

On 1 March 1972 a talk on 'Active Nonviolence' was given at Millau by Lanza del Vasto, author, Catholic disciple of Gandhi and founder of the Community of the Ark. The audience of about a thousand was obviously captivated by this tall, bearded 72-year-old 'prophet' in white homespun clothes who spoke of nonviolence as something entirely compatible with Christianity. The Community, numbering over 100 people, enjoy a simple peasant-style life a few kilometres to the south of the plateau. They had already had experience of campaigning against torture during the Algerian war, against nuclear weapons etc, and now offered their services to their neighbours.

A week later Abbé Jean Toulat, author of *The Bomb or Life* came to lecture on 'The Larzac and Peace'. He suggested 'nonviolent civilian defence' as an alternative to military defence. 'To prevent the army from

taking root on the Larzac is to help peace. It is therefore a just endeavour'. He warned them not to be provoked into using violence. 'To molotov cocktails you will prefer Gandhi cocktails—that is to say a mixture of truth, courage, love, humour and imagination . . . You will find forms of action which while showing respect for men will reach their hearts and force them to examine their consciences'.

By agreement with the peasants Lanza del Vasto began a two week fast at La Cavalerie on 19 March. The peasants took turns at fasting with him, some for a day, others longer. Prayers were said each morning and evening followed by a talk by Lanza and discussion. As they sat quietly together the peasants began to realise their unity. This led 103 of them (out of a possible 107) to sign a pledge. Roger Moreau, a companion of the Ark, explained it this way: 'For a fortnight the peasants who had no idea what to do to defend themselves, sat in this room around Lanza who was fasting and they meditated. It became a retreat. In this way, and they all say it now, their unity crystallised and out of it came the Manifesto of the 103. They took a joint pledge not to sell their land to the army and the group of the 103 was born that very moment and so was their strength, I believe'.

The pledge was made public on 28 March 1972. The Bishops of Rodez and Montpellier joined Lanza in the fast and at midday celebrated mass together. The Protestant pastor read the lesson. Lanza broke his fast on Easter Saturday, 1 April, as 3,000 young 'marchers for peace' arrived. They were Friends of the Ark, peace people, Occitan and socialist activists. They held forums, gathered information or just cooked meals. At night they bivouacked in the open. The peasants, accustomed to the television image of long-haired young people as destructive agitators now discovered something different—the idealism and generosity of the young who want to change the world.

During the following three days 'Operation Open Farm' allowed thousands of people, mostly country folk from outside, to discover for themselves that the Larzac is a live and productive land. These events were well reported by the media. For the first time on TV screens the Larzac was shown as it really is, rather than as a desert with derelict farms and a few old people as previously presented.

Peasants and Workers

The peasants' attitude to the outside world evolved as through their struggle they were brought face to face with social and economic problems of other sections of society. It was important to break down the reserve

which existed between the rural population and the workers of Millau. A spectacular action which helped to achieve this was mounted in February 1972. Large bonfires were lit on the cliffs overlooking the town while friends below switched on the town's siren and distributed leaflets.

Samex, a firm making trousers and employing 150 women, went on strike on 24 March because of low wages, the speeding up of the production line and other unfair practices. A week later an agreement was signed but at Easter the owner sacked 25 of the girls. A group of 30 women then staged a sit-in at the factory and asked the peasants to come and see for themselves. The men who visited the factory were amazed at the way the girls were treated. Noticing they were running short of food they returned next day with farm produce and, taking advantage of a meeting of the Agricultural Credit Society attended by 300 farmers, they collected 4,000 francs for the girls' strike fund. After long negotiations a new agreement was signed and on 9 April the women and the peasants paraded through the streets to celebrate.

This experience opened the eyes of the peasants to the problems of industrial workers. They were soon in touch with workers in other industries, notably those of Henfer, a boilermaking firm threatened with closure throughout the seventies. These contacts between peasants and workers proved to be of mutual benefit.

When Lanza left after the fast, a couple from the Ark, Roger Moreau and his wife Susana remained on the Larzac. Roger became the co-ordinator of the 103. The plateau was divided into six neighbourhood districts. Two delegates from each would meet every week and Roger would note their decisions and see they were carried out. The 103 peasants only came together on important occasions. Decisions were taken according to the feeling of the meeting. Voting took place on only two occasions.

When on 26 May 1972 Debré announced that a public inquiry would take place, the 103 and the Rodez Larzac Committee sent out a call for a demonstration on the national day, 14 July. A traditional occasion was visualised with speeches and banners. However, Guy Tarlier wanted something with greater impact which would demonstrate the determination of the 103; they should all go to Rodez on their tractors, 150 kilometres there and back. Guy had the backing of a hard core of the 103 but he had to persuade the Farmers' Union before the more traditionally-minded peasants of southern Larzac agreed to what at first seemed an irresponsible idea.

When the 103 drove their tractors into Rodez after a six-hour journey a

crowd of 20,000 were there to welcome them. Many had come from outside the region. Posters carried slogans, such as 'On the Larzac Debré wants to teach Men to kill their Brothers' or 'Sheep, not Guns'. Robert Gastal, representing the 103, made an impassioned speech, the first he had ever made. He ended, 'We shall make a gigantic thing of the Larzac affair. . . We shall not hesitate to take the road to Paris if Debré does not reverse his decision'. Then in Occitan—'La libertat paso per Larzac. Gardarem lo Larzac'.

No mention was made of the tractorcade by the media. Prominence was given instead to a minor incident—a few young men who burned the tricolour. However, the demo had caught the imagination of the public. It was also a warning to the Government.

The Public Inquiry

It was in an atmosphere of intimidation that the Inquiry took place at the town hall of La Cavalerie from 16–30 October 1972. Gendarmes patrolled the village and carried out identity checks—sometimes in a provocative manner. The Prefect had announced the date of the Inquiry only five days before but the 103 reacted quickly; 2,000 sheep were brought to the main square, blocking access to the town hall for several hours. Two days later the peasants and their families came to sign the following statement in the register: 'I consider the extension to be a catastrophe for the region and for all men. I shall never leave whatever means are employed to drive me out'. Thousands of people, including Monsignor Ménard and other notables, came to add their protests in the register. Dossiers containing evidence against the project were submitted by many organisations.

On 25 October a few peasants discreetly took 60 ewes with 'Save the Larzac' marked on their fleeces to Paris, there to graze on the lawns of the Champ de Mars below the Eiffel Tower. The spot had been chosen because it is the site of France's first military training ground. Since the authorities were taken by surprise, sheep and shepherds were able to remain for two hours before being escorted out of town by the police, long enough for the press and TV to gather some unusual material. Thanks to this imaginative action the media, strangely silent about the Larzac in previous months, now brought the issue before the public again.

The three commissioners who considered the case took only a few days to look through thousands of letters and documents and consult a few personalities including a general. Their report presented to the Prefect on 10 November was entirely favourable to the extension. The verdict, however,

was not announced until 26 December 1972 when the Prefect signed the decree declaring the project to be 'of Public Utility'.

Before even the verdict had been made public the 103 had realised that the commissioners' task was merely to ratify a decision already taken. However, in an attempt at conciliation two Farmers' Union officials accompanied by Guy Tarlier, Robert Gastal and Philippe Fauchot secretly met M. Debré's principal Private Secretary, Paul Masson, in Paris at the end of November, but Debré's confidant was only prepared to discuss minor concessions. In December Guy was shown a copy of a letter to the President of the Chamber of Agriculture in which Debré reaffirmed that the decision to enlarge the camp was irrevocable. With this information the 103 were able to persuade the Farmers' Union to agree to their plan for a tractorcade to Paris. The Union gave their backing but only as far as Orléans, 65 kilometres from the capital.

A group of 26 peasants led by Elie Jonquet left on their tractors for the week-long journey to Paris on 7 January 1973. As they drove north it became a triumphant progress. Peasants met them as they passed through the villages. They were welcomed by mayors in many towns and villages and given a civic reception. They spoke at meetings organised by local Larzac committees. Philippe Fauchot and others spoke to a large audience at Orléans, but the following day they were prevented from leaving on their tractors by squads of CRS (riot police). The government had banned the tractorcade from entering Paris. The peasants reached the capital by other means and presented their case at a large meeting arranged for them.

A Watershed

The march had made a big impression and mobilised further support. It had clearly embarrassed the Government. It was also a watershed in the battle. The 103 and their supporters now began to use illegal as well as legal means of fighting but the methods they employed were never destructive. The first act of civil disobedience involved returning military papers issued to conscripts on their transfer to the reserve. Sixty peasants returned their papers to the Ministry of Defence in 1973. A letter accompanied the papers stating amongst other reasons: 'I don't want the Larzac to become a vast demonstration area to show the people of the Third World the most efficient way of killing each other. . .' They added they would be prepared to receive their papers back if the extension were to be cancelled. The Ministry sent the papers back, pointing out that this offence could lead to loss of civil rights. The papers were once more returned and the men were not troubled

again. Their action had a snowballing effect. Reservists all over the country began to return their military papers in support of the Larzac. By 1980 many people, including priests, had made this gesture. Some 500 were fined or otherwise penalised.

Many conscientious objectors also linked their objection to the Larzac. In this way the issue was constantly being raised in the courts, in tribunals and courts-martial and consequently in the media all over the country.

Perhaps nothing better symbolised the determination of the Larzac folk to preserve their land for peaceful purposes than the construction of a building for sheep or 'bergerie' to accommodate 500 ewes at the fourteenth century village of La Blaquièrre. A building permit was refused as the site was within the perimeter of the extension, but the 103 went ahead as it was needed to replace an old bergerie in danger of collapsing. The first stone was laid on 10 June 1973 in the presence of some 3,000 people including notables of the region. It was also an occasion for a country fête and dancing. The bergerie was built in traditional style with stone arches to support the roof. An electric milking system was later installed. The work was carried out by volunteers from all over the country who gave their services free. A Franciscan monk, Robert Pirault, took charge of the project and a skilled stonemason gave advice. The building was completed in January 1976 but by February 1974 work was sufficiently advanced for it to be handed over to Elie Jonquet and Auguste Guiraud who ran the farm collectively. This magnificent architect-designed building—it has been compared to a cathedral—became a focal point of the battle and again an embarrassment to the authorities who did not dare intervene.

Agricultural Development

The peasants were impressed with the tenacity of purpose of young volunteers they looked upon as 'leftists'. Some worked on the site for a year, others longer. A few remained and settled on the plateau. Without free labour the job could not have been completed, but equally essential was the financing of the project.

In early 1973 an Association for the Development of Agriculture on the Larzac (APAL) was formed under the treasurership of Léon Burguière, retired farmer and father of the Burguière brothers. Most of the funds acquired by APAL were contributed by the Tax Refusal-Redistribution Movement—people who withheld three per cent of the taxes and redistributed the amount to peacemaking projects. The movement grew rapidly and by 1980 some 4,500 'refusers' had contributed. The peasants

were again amazed at the generosity and self-sacrifice of people who risked having their belongings seized by the taxman or being prosecuted as some were. Léon Burguière received many letters from refusers who expressed their support for the Larzac in these or similar terms: 'You are the symbol of all who fight for justice and peace, for a world of nonviolence and fraternity'.

APAL became the means of financing all development on the plateau since the authorities refused to provide loans and subsidies, issue building permits or even maintain public services. Over the years the peasants built 14 farm buildings, built or extended eight dwellings and carried out maintenance work on the roads, most of this illegally.

A new primary school was also built on the plateau by the authorities under pressure from parents. It was opened with 30 children in October 1973—a unique occurrence in rural France.

Volunteer workers made an important contribution to development on the plateau. The Larzac Co-ordinating Committee provided camp sites but little else. The volunteers were expected to arrange their own transport, bring their own camping equipment, food and even tools if they could, yet they came in their hundreds every year, usually in the summer to work on building sites or on the roads. They even set up a telephone network linking 26 farms. Nearly a thousand came in the summer of 1979, more than 800 (over half from Germany) in 1980. This work, most of it illegal, provided the buildings and the infrastructure necessary for the peasants to continue farming efficiently. To the volunteers, working and sharing in fellowship was often a new and enriching experience.

A Festival of Solidarity

After the march to Paris the 103 agreed to collaborate with the 'Peasant-Workers' in planning a large demonstration in the summer. The Peasant-Workers are a left-wing union which protects the interests of peasants who work family farms without paid labour and who, unlike big farmers, are not adequately financed. They agreed to the request of the 103 that this joint venture should be conducted on nonviolent lines. Organisations in Millau were asked to mobilise support amongst industrial workers. The Communist party and union refused but the Socialist party and Socialist union (CFDT) and the PSU were, as usual, more helpful.

The Peasant-Workers' march to the Larzac was well organised. Contingents from five different rallying points took one to two days to travel down by road. Meetings took place at appropriate halts where peasants

were in conflict with the authorities, at Fontrevault (Maine et Loire) for instance, where peasants had been resisting an army take-over since 1956. On 25 August 1973 60,000 people gathered on the plateau at the Rajal del Gorp, a natural amphitheatre surrounded by spectacular rock formations. The growing solidarity between workers and peasants was emphasised by a strong contingent from the Lip factory, a watchmaking firm of Besançon taken over by its workers when its owner closed it down. The 103 had earlier publicised their cause. Both Lip and the 103 were defending their tools of work, hence the slogan 'Lip-Larzac, Same Struggle' seen on many banners. Also present were people from the Ecology and left-wing movements, Occitan, Breton and Basque regionalists. Talks and debates went on well into the night with musical interludes and singing. One of the speakers, ex-General La Bollardière who had left the army in protest against torture in Algeria, attacked French defence policy and suggested nonviolent 'combat' as an alternative. The demonstrators bivouacked for the night at the Rajal and next day the crowd, now 80,000 strong, marched to La Blaquière, singing the Song of the Larzac. The bergerie, now rising from its foundations, was explained to them. The Lip workers left a clock to be set in the wall of the building.

The Farmers' Union had given only muted support to the march to Paris. Now even they had to admit that the summer rally had been a great success. The 103 still had a firm footing in the local branch of the Union even if they could not rely on it at national level. They had also gained reliable allies in the Peasant-Workers.

The Land Trust

In order to weaken the resolve of the 103 the army began to buy land whenever they could, often from absentee landlords. To meet this situation a Land Trust was formed in December 1973 and placed under the direction of Robert Pirault. Land prices had soared since the announcement of the plan and some landowners were tempted to sell. Robert encouraged them to sell to the Trust and many did. In order to finance this operation, individuals were asked to invest in shares at a thousand francs each. For the next five years ten million francs were collected and over a thousand hectares purchased and leased to farmers. The peasants used the Trust for the purposes of the struggle rather than for profit. Its operations allowed several farms (with their farmers) to continue in activity. Land was also bought for strategic reasons. For instance, the purchase of the farms of Costeraste and

La Tune on the borders of the camp blocked access to land bought by the military further south.

The army, using the tax-payers' money, were able during the same period to buy nearly 6,000 hectares (including land sold by the commune of La Cavalerie), but they acquired only four farms and most of their holdings were small and dispersed and of no use for manoeuvres. Small areas of land bought by the Trust could, however, be used for agriculture, however dispersed they were.

Harvest for the Third World

In 1974 the 103 concentrated on organising another large popular rally. Some 100,000 people came together at the Rajal from 16 to 18 August. The main slogan was 'Arms Kill. Wheat Gives Life'. Large banners proclaimed 'Solidarity—Workers—Peasants—Third World'. Friday night was devoted to speeches and debates. The main event on Saturday was the harvesting of a wheat crop intended for the starving people of the African Sahel. As the crowd assembled afterwards to listen to musicians, the unity of the festival was suddenly shattered. François Mitterrand, present as an individual, was mobbed by a group of Maoists and had to be rescued by the rally marshals. This incident, though unrepresentative, was nevertheless unfortunate as just before the spring elections which had brought Valéry Giscard d'Estaing into power, the Socialist leader had promised during a visit to La Blaquière to cancel the extension should he become President.

In a surprise action on Sunday a field belonging to the army was ploughed by the peasants. As a police helicopter circled overhead the crowd responded by singing 'Alouette, je te plumerai . . .' (Alouette is also the make of a French helicopter.)

Two farmers, Philippe Fauchot and Raymond Laval, travelled to Upper Volta in December 1974 to hand over 40,000 francs collected at the festival and to see for themselves the problems of the Sahel peasants.

Squatting

Squatting on unused army land was an important element in the struggle. The army had acquired Les Truels, a farm abandoned for years. The 103 had considered farming the land but did not have the necessary resources. It was eventually agreed that Roger Moreau and Claude Voron and their families of the Ark should move in. When they arrived on 5 October 1974 they found the farm-house occupied by parachutists, so they moved into the

out-buildings and, with the help of peasants who had accompanied them, they found a place for their cow and began ploughing the land. No opportunities were missed to fraternise with the soldiers. After a week the platoon was withdrawn, the Camp Commandant no doubt realising the dangers for his men of living in proximity to a nonviolent community.

Les Truels soon became a productive farm with goats and a flock of sheep. The community was still in occupation at the end of the battle.

By the end of the seventies, eight new farmers were using farmland belonging to the army. Amongst them were Pierre-Yves and Josette de Boissieu, who started keeping goats at Les Homps in September 1975 using mainly buildings and land owned by the army. This was particularly embarrassing to the Government as Pierre-Yves was a nephew of ex-Chief of Staff General de Boissieu.

In September 1976 an application by the Defence Ministry for injunctions to be served on squatters at Les Truels, Le Cun, Montredon and Les Mares, was refused by the Court on the grounds that it was not competent to deal with matters concerning army land.

Squatters demonstrated that it was possible to earn a living on land earmarked for military purposes and presented one more obstacle to the implementation of the extension.

The Battle of the Trenches and Other Events

Water has always been a thorny problem on the Larzac as rain-filled cisterns are not always sufficient for the needs of its inhabitants. In 1972 piped water was offered as part of 'compensation' for the extension. Thanks to a water committee chaired by the Mayor of Creissels, M. Bernat, the mains had reached the plateau in 1974 but the authorities would not connect the supply to farms within the extension. On 4 January 1975, however, the peasants started to carry out the work themselves with the agreement and in the presence of M. Bernat and two Aveyron councillors. A trench had been dug halfway across the N9 when the gendarmes arrived. In what became known as 'the battle of the trenches' the peasants were roughly pulled out of the trench, sat in it again and were dragged out several times. After negotiations the men were allowed to lay the ducts and refill the trench.

A 400-strong demonstration took place at the same spot on 25 January. This time, supporters of the 103, including mayors, councillors and agricultural notables, joined them in a sit-down across the N9. As the press was present, the gendarmes wore their parade uniform and were converted

to nonviolence for the day as they gently lifted the demonstrators to the side of the road. The peasants completed the job on 15 June, taking advantage of the presence of a coachload of Lip workers on a fraternal visit. The gendarmes eventually arrived in riot gear, but stood by as workers and peasants in jovial mood refilled the trench and poured champagne down the pipes to celebrate. Mains water was later brought to the farms with the help of voluntary labour and funds from APAL.

Before the State could take over the land a number of procedures needed to be completed. The purpose of the Survey Inquiry was to enable landowners to check the boundaries of their holdings. Public meetings and demonstrations organised by the Millau Larzac Committee ensured that the Inquiry, open from 12 February to 5 March 1975, was effectively boycotted. At the insistence of the Prefecture, Inquiry centres were established in 11 communes, including Millau, in spite of objections by ten councils. Only La Cavalerie approved. Millau had objected because of the action just taken by the army to stop a project partly financed by the council to develop the Larzac aerodrome for civilian purposes.

On 21 February farmers' wives in a well co-ordinated action entered the centres and destroyed files relating to the Inquiry. On Saturday, 1 March hundreds of people invaded the town hall of Millau. Auguste Guiraud led the Inquiry Commissioner firmly but without violence out of the building.

On the same day two delegations visited Yvon Bourges, Debré's successor at the Ministry of Defence, one from Millau Council led by the Mayor, the other led by the Chairman of the Chamber of Agriculture. Neither delegation got any satisfaction. The minister told them the decision was irrevocable but indicated that the peasants would not be evicted by force. Further administrative procedures would be completed, then further steps could wait until they became weary.

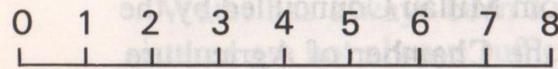
At 3.00 in the morning on 10 March, Auguste Guiraud's house at La Blaquièrre was blasted by a bomb placed at the entrance. Auguste, his wife and seven children and the shepherd escaped unhurt although the interior of the building was wrecked. The stone arches supporting the roof had prevented a worse tragedy. Responsibility for this crime was never established.

Demonstrations took place in many towns in France on 15 March 1975. In Paris 10,000 people took part. After the attack on the Guiraud family, feeling ran high in Aveyron. The peasants on their tractors joined a 2,000-strong crowd in Millau. A delegation was received by M. Menhert the Sub-Prefect. A report of the excuses he made for not having acted over the

The Larzac Plateau

Only the place names necessary for understanding the story are indicated. Minor roads are not shown apart from the St. Martin road.

-  Camp limits
-  Camp extension boundary
-  Edge of the plateau
-  Farms mentioned in the text



One kilometre = 5/8 of a mile



bombing (he had not even visited La Blaquière) infuriated the crowd who then attempted to occupy the Sub-Prefecture. After the gate had been broken down by a tractor, the gendarmes used truncheons and tear gas on demonstrators and spectators alike. After a councillor had seen M. Menhert, hostages taken by the police were released and the crowd dispersed peacefully. For the first time there had been a riot atmosphere in Millau. The citizens, with no sympathy from the Sub-Prefect, had reacted in traditional fashion.

An action week in June 1975 organised by the Larzac Committees all over France passed off peacefully.

Gardarem lo Larzac

The 103 and the Larzac Committees launched a monthly journal, *Gardarem lo Larzac* on 6 June 1975. Edited by Léon Maillé from his farm of Potensac, it gave full coverage to the battle but also carried information about struggles in other regions and even abroad, where people were faced with losing their land and livelihood through military or civil development schemes which would also have a disastrous effect on the environment and quality of life of the population. The policy of the 103 was to forge strong links between these movements and their own. Henceforth they were often represented at meetings or demonstrations concerned with similar problems. Their relationship with the people of Plogoff in Brittany was particularly strong. A nuclear power station was to be built there against the wishes of the population. The peasants gave practical help to their Breton comrades on many occasions.

It was also not unusual for members of the 103 or their supporters to appear in court to bear witness on behalf of conscientious objectors who linked their objection to the Larzac struggle. On a memorable occasion in Millau involving COs the court proceedings were interrupted when ewes were introduced into the court room. Even the judge could not help smiling.

Study Centres

A 'Larzac University Association' was formed in May 1975 at the hamlet of Montredon where those interested in problems of the environment, energy, agriculture, etc could attend summer sessions led by university lecturers.

With the agreement of the 103, four conscientious objectors and the wife of one of them occupied the farm of Le Cun on the south of the plateau on 4 October 1975. The farm had been bought by a speculator, then resold

after ten years at a profit of 900 per cent. The squatters renovated the building and set up a Peace Centre for research into nonviolent civilian defence. A library was built up and sessions were held for visiting groups interested in studying a nonviolent battle in progress.

On 25 October 1976 the young people were evicted illegally by the army and found refuge in the nearby village of La Blaquèrerie. The Centre, known henceforth as 'Le Cun', continued its work under the leadership of Hervé Ott, a minister of the French Reformed Church. Le Cun volunteers—there were 12 of them by 1981—were expected to support themselves by part-time work, usually on the farms. Hervé's part-time paid occupation was to go on speaking tours on behalf of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Week-long sessions continued to be held every year throughout the summer to enable parties of visitors to learn about the Larzac first hand—one more way of increasing country-wide support.

In August 1977 work began without permit on a permanent home for the Centre on a site owned by the Land Trust in the north. In May 1978 Hervé and Robert Pirault were fined 500 francs and ordered by the court to pull down the walls already erected. The fines were never paid and the order was ignored. As in other cases of illegal building the authorities did not pursue the matter. They realised that further court appearances would only provide further occasions for publicising the cause of the 103. The Centre finally moved into a temporary building on the site in May 1979 and work was resumed on the permanent building just before the May 1981 elections.

Confrontation

After the 1972 public enquiry the 103 had, through their lawyers, lodged an appeal with the Toulouse Administrative Tribunal. When this was rejected in 1974 the case was submitted to the highest appeal court, the Council of State. This appeal was lost in February 1976. So five years after the extension plan had been announced the Government had virtually won the battle on the legal front, though there were still some procedures to be completed.

Many believed that the peasants had won a psychological victory. However, attitudes had hardened and the following five years were to see a growing confrontation with the army.

A New Pledge and Renewed Consultations

Rumours that the 103 were divided had been circulating for some time. The land purchasing officer, Captain Delcamp, even suggested that most of the peasants would sell but for fear of 'left-wing agitators'.

The peasants published a new pledge on 26 November 1975: '... to put an end to all the lies and insinuations aimed at deceiving the public about our true state of mind we publicly confirm our opposition to the extension plan and, confident of our rights, we renew our engagement to reject all attempts at seduction or intimidation and all offers to purchase our land on the part of the army. With the support of popular backing we undertake to fight as long as one of us is threatened'. The new manifesto was signed by 102 farmers but the term 103 continued to be used. Changes had of course occurred since 1972. Some peasants had died and others had retired, but their farms had been taken over by equally committed individuals. Two refused to sign again but did not sell their land. Eleven however had broken their pledge. Seven peasants from La Cavalerie, under pressure from the Prefect, had sold parcels of land but had not parted with their farms. One had sold pastureland of no strategic value. Two had sold their entire farms but were allowed to remain on them temporarily. In addition a non-signatory had sold his farm. The total area lost to the army in this way amounted to just over 9 per cent of the extension. The unity of the peasants had been breached but with no serious consequences and the new signatories constituted a more committed group.

The new Prefect, Julien Vincent, in a speech to Aveyron Council in December 1975, declared that the peasants would not be coerced. A solution must be found for them to live together with the army. He called for a new round of consultations.

Meetings with the new Sub-Prefect, M. Buffet, were held in March–April 1976. The delegates were told that the Prefecture hoped to persuade the army to accept no more than 4,000 hectares. The 103 were divided on whether to accept a compromise or hold out for complete victory. At a meeting on 11 May they all agreed that it was not up to them to make any proposals. They then voted on the motion: 'Do you agree to study a proposal for a mini-extension coming from the Prefect and without prejudice to the pledge of the 103?' The results were: Yes 59, No 22, Abstentions 21. On being told that a proposal was expected of him the Prefect said, 'No, the 103 should propose a plan'. A week later he contradicted himself and said he would contact them when he was ready to suggest a solution. However, nothing happened and when the 103 heard that the army had intensified its land-buying activities even during the talks with M. Buffet, they decided it was time to strike at the heart of their opponents' territory.

A Raid on the Camp

On 28 June 1976 a group of 22 peasants and other residents of the plateau entered the camp at La Cavalerie and occupied the office dealing with land purchases. Their aim was to denounce the army's purchasing operations and discover details of land speculation. Two hours later they were dislodged by gendarmes using tear gas, and arrested, but not before they had destroyed most of the files.

At the Millau Court on 29 June and 2 July the Judge, claiming that the older established farmers had been led by newcomers, handed out five to six months' suspended sentences to five of the former, while the 17 others were sentenced to prison terms of one to three months—terms varying in length in inverse proportion to length of residence on the plateau. A law allowing peasants to have their sentences suspended in times of drought was then invoked and all the farmers, apart from Pierre-Yves de Boissieu (the General's nephew) were set free on 3 July. These included Guy Tarlier and Roger Moreau. Three weeks later those remaining in prison were released on appeal. By that time the two women amongst them, Marie-Geneviève Carret and Marysette Tarlier had completed their prison sentences of respectively one and two weeks. At the appeal court on 24 November 1976

the men and women claimed equal responsibility. The judge agreed and the sentences were reduced to five months, suspended for all.

This action had attracted considerable support for the 103. Factories were closed and large crowds demonstrated in Millau on 2 July. The gendarmes threw gas canisters as a crowd in front of the Court House were dispersing peacefully and accidentally blinded an onlooker in one eye. This was the only serious injury suffered during the whole ten years.

Speculation

There was no doubt that certain individuals with political connections benefited from land-buying operations on the plateau. Land prices had risen five to ten times because of the extension plan. The worst case of speculation was the one concerning Count Guy de Bernis. In 1966–67 he had bought the estates of Montredon, Le Sot, Cavaliès and Les Homps—a total of 740 hectares. Most of it was allowed to lie fallow. De Bernis sold all the Norway pines off the estates and some old houses as second homes, thereby virtually recovering the cost of purchase. In 1975 he sold 60 hectares of Les Homps at the current inflated rate to the Land Trust (who then let it to Yves de Boissieu). In 1976, however, at the very time the 103 were having talks with the Sub-Prefect, de Bernis sold to the State the remaining 680 hectares for 2,700,000 francs—six times the original purchase price.

Cultivating land sold to the army and lying fallow was one way the 103 drew attention to the misuse of land for money-making and warlike purposes—an action which, though illegal, pointed to the peaceful role of peasants as food producers.

The farm of Le Pinel sold by one of the two men who had broken the pledge was occupied by the army when he left in October 1977. On 17 December the peasants ploughed 15 hectares of land at Le Pinel, watched from behind barbed wire by soldiers armed with rifles and fixed bayonets. Many people from the plateau and Millau came to help. On 22 April 1978 the land was cleared of stones and sown with barley with the help of 25 tractors and hundreds of demonstrators. The harvest was gathered on 26 August with four harvesters and many people helped to truss and load the straw. The proceeds were paid into a fighting fund for Millau workers. Cultivating and harvesting sessions such as these were repeated in other parts of the plateau. They were happy and inspiring occasions for the peasants, town people and Larzac Committee members taking part.

Confrontation at Cavaliès

Two young men, one of them a shepherd, moved into the farm of Cavaliès with 30 ewes on 3 October 1976. Three days later they were evicted by gendarmes and the farm was occupied by the army and turned into a 'fortress' complete with barbed wire entanglements and guarded by armed sentinels. The squatters were allowed by SAFALT—an official body which sells or leases land to farmers, to settle on land which they owned close by. Peasants who had come to support the action were at one point attacked by soldiers with staves and Pierre Burguière was badly beaten up. Some shopkeepers of La Cavalerie came to distribute free wine to the troops. They were members of the 'Movement for Peace and Order', a small pro-army group which occasionally surfaced during the battle.

A temporary building was erected for the new farmers and later a bergerie for their ewes was built, illegally but with the approval of the agricultural organisations. Cavaliès became the scene for a permanent confrontation. The army set up a look-out post overlooking the new Cavaliès and the farmers were subjected to abuse and harassment.

Altogether five farms were transformed into fortresses. Efforts were made by the peasants to fraternise with the conscripts. Occasionally some of them would come over to speak to the peasants or even help with work on the farms. When they arrived on the Larzac the soldiers were brainwashed, told they were in danger of being attacked by the peasants and warned against the 'hippies'. Units were not allowed to remain for more than a fortnight, but many of the men saw through army propaganda and one or two officers even admitted they were given a distasteful task.

Army Manoeuvres

The army once manoeuvred with impunity outside the camp but from 1974 onwards the 103 began to intervene whenever exercises were held on their land.

On 2 May 1974 parachutists were dropped on the western part of the plateau after a warning by the Commandant of the region, General Bigeard, that they were being parachuted into 'a hostile population zone'. Fighter planes dived low, scaring the ewes and incendiary bombs were dropped. The farmers concerned, Tarlier, Alla and Jean-Marie Burguière, remonstrated strongly with officers and Guy Tarlier climbed into one of the army lorries and drove it off his land.

Large-scale manoeuvres like this were not repeated but after the camp Commandant had said in 1977, 'Troops manoeuvring must make

themselves at home on the Larzac', incidents between peasants and the military became more frequent.

On 15 May 1975 a group of peasants blocked the highway with their tractors and stopped a convoy of lorries. Leaflets were distributed to the conscripts who were very willing to receive them. After two hours the Colonel, fearing his men would be 'corrupted', ordered them to disembark and continue the journey to the camp on foot. As a result of complaints, certain areas were banned to the military. Army vehicles were, however, constantly straying into forbidden zones. Local peasants would stop them by blocking the way. If necessary, reinforcements were called from neighbouring farms. Sometimes tyres were deflated or slogans painted on army vehicles. Eventually the soldiers would contact the camp by radio and receive orders to return. Sometimes artillery exercises would be halted. In May 1980, for instance, firing practice by two batteries on one of the farms was stopped by peasants who towed away one of the guns with a tractor.

Army lorries driven at high speed along narrow roads by inexperienced conscripts had created accidents along the St. Martin road. In May 1978 mothers who had protested in vain about the danger to their children, held up military traffic on the road for a week during periods when children were taken to or from school. The Sub-Prefect then called a meeting of all road-users and it was agreed that the army should not use the road during those periods.

Attack on Les Truels

During the night of 30 January 1978 a young lieutenant led a party of men on foot to the farm of Les Truels. They slashed the tyres of four vehicles, put sugar in the tanks and blocked the only road out of the farm with tree trunks. Susana Moreau was expecting a baby any day. If there had been complications it might have been impossible to take her to hospital in time. The baby boy arrived safely a week later. The raiding party who had left their tracks in the snow were easily traced to the 'fortress-farm' of Le Pinel. The officer had to leave the army—not because of this criminal act but for having been found out.

Acts of vandalism by individual soldiers did occur but the peasants were more concerned when the army started fires accidentally. Many hectares of woodland and pasture were destroyed in this way near Montredon in September 1978.

A Trial of Strength

In a new round of consultations at the end of 1976 the Sub-Prefect asked the peasants and other landowners to meet him. He suggested only minor boundary changes so the talks came to an end.

In a by-election in December 1976 Léon Maillé, the editor of *Gardarem lo Larzac*, was elected to Millau Council—further evidence of the importance attached to the Larzac by the town's citizens. The swing to the left in the municipal elections of March 1977 gave a measure of hope to the 103. The new mayor, Manuel Diaz, declared his opposition to the extension and for the first time the Council voted by a clear majority against the plan.

The 103 organised a large summer rally in 1977, the first for three years. General elections were due in 1978 and the parties had to be reminded that the Larzac was still a live issue. 50,000 people gathered on the plateau on 13 August. The theme for discussion was 'The right to live and work in one's own home town or village—how to stop the Government planners from breaking up communities'. The following day in heat-wave conditions everyone marched across the artillery range to the ruins of the hamlet of Les Agastous. As an expression of solidarity the march was led by tractors driven by peasants from outside the Larzac. At Les Agastous one of the speakers, Jeanne Jonquet of La Blaquièrre, pointing to the shattered buildings, exclaimed, 'You see what the army is capable of doing. Let women take thought, let them become aware that by refusing their sons to the army they could become the principal rampart against war. . . The army shall not have our land! The army shall not have our children!'

The Prefect had sanctioned the march inside the camp. The soldiers had been confined to barracks and as usual there was not a uniformed policeman in sight. It had been proved once more that the Larzac commanded massive public support.

In the general elections of 1978 the RPR (conservatives) under Giscard d'Estaing were returned to power, though with a reduced majority. In South Aveyron the RPR candidate Jacques Godfrain was elected Deputy, but the left had increased its share of the vote.

The final procedures enabling the State to take over the land in nine

communes were set in motion on 27 September 1978. These were the Land Transfer decrees, the last of which was signed on 18 December, and the Compulsory Orders, the last one signed on 31 January 1979.

At a press conference attended by 500 people on 29 September 1978 the Prefect announced that the decrees would take effect in two communes at first. The extension was essential for national defence and was entirely compatible with local interests.

The Riposte

The 103 saw these moves by the Government as a new trial of strength imposed on them and they were quick to react. On the same evening a group of peasants, men and women, representing all sectors of the plateau, started a four-day fast in the cathedral of Rodez. The new Bishop, Mgr. Bourrat, issued a declaration supporting them which was circulated to the churches in leaflet form. Hundreds of people called on them. A fast was also held in Millau town hall with the approval of the Council.

The capacity of the 103 to attract support at short notice was demonstrated on 8 October when army land at Le Pinel, Le Tournet and Montredon was ploughed up in front of thousands of people. They were asked to hold themselves ready for a harder struggle ahead.

A national day of action was called for on 28 October. Many towns responded with public meetings and demonstrations. Ecological, nonviolent and political groups participated in events which were often linked to local problems. Before, during and after the 28th, fasts were held in 50 towns including some outside France, each of them involving five to 50 people and lasting from two days to a week. The fast in Paris took place at the church of St. Séverin from 23 to 28 October. Four peasants, Jeanne Jonquet, Susana Moreau, Jean-Marie and Janine Burguière, were joined in the fast by well-known nonviolent activists including Lanza del Vasto and Jacques de Bollardière. They sent a letter to President Giscard. François Mitterrand was one of many visitors who called to wish them well. At a press conference messages of solidarity were received from many organisations—also a communiqué from Jean-Paul Sartre giving his total support.

On the same day the 103 announced a march on foot to Paris to appeal to the President as Supreme Military Commander to cancel the military project.

Twenty peasants set off from La Blaquière on 8 November 1978. At each stage of the walk they were accompanied by local supporters and Larzac

folk who took turns at joining them. In towns and villages on the way they were welcomed by mayors and notables. Meetings at each halting place enabled local people to hear first-hand accounts of the Larzac situation.

The Paris organisers had been unable to obtain permission for a march to the centre of the city. The authorities would only allow a procession along the outer boulevards. 40,000 supporters joined the peasants as they reached the capital on Saturday, 2 December 1978. The peasants led the procession which, according to their wishes was silent and dignified. However, shortly after the start young 'autonomes'—leftists without a party who habitually turn up at demos—got ahead of the march and began throwing projectiles at the police. Agents provocateurs were also active, as revealed by press photographs. The police retaliated with gas grenades. At great risk to themselves the demo marshals formed a human barrier between the procession and the gas-polluted area where police and rioters confronted one another. In this way the procession was able to go forward and eventually disperse peacefully as planned.

On the same day demonstrations of solidarity took place in several European cities including London.

President Giscard had refused to meet the marchers but a delegation of 11 peasants was received by Paul Masson at the Defence Ministry on Sunday, the day after the demo. Bourges' private secretary offered further meetings with a representative of the Ministry. At the second of these meetings, at Rodez in April 1979, the two sides outlined their respective positions. The peasants and agricultural representatives insisted that:

- Discussions should be about the root of the problem—the extension itself;
- No farmer should be forced off the land he farmed;
- Expropriation procedures should be suspended before further talks.

At a meeting in Paris on 15 May, Masson said he could not discuss changing the original decision. He agreed however to suspend the judicial procedure for two months on the understanding that the Sub-Prefect would meet the peasants district by district and examine each individual's situation.

These meetings brought no comfort to the Government as the peasants, apart from three men who were prepared to move, expressed the wish to remain on their farms. A delegation was received by M. Buchet, Masson's successor, on 11 October 1979 and was offered a plan which would 'save' 68 of the 83 farms concerned; 2,300 hectares within the extension would be

made available for grazing seven months of the year and to this would be added 350 hectares outside the extension. 270 hectares of arable land would be made available for cultivation inside the extension. To this the peasants replied that sheep needed feeding all the year round while the area reassigned to the 68 farms was derisory when compared to the 5,456 hectares they would lose. In any case, much of the land offered in 'compensation' was wooded and of little use for grazing. The plan was completely unrealistic.

These direct and lengthy talks with Government representatives in the presence of the Prefect and army representatives had the merit of clarifying the situation in a way that the 1972 and 1976 talks had failed to do; the policy to implement fully the extension plan had not changed. The talks also highlighted official contradictions. For instance, certain farms were not listed as having to close down because the farmhouse was not within the perimeter of the extension. Fifteen farms on the borders of the extension would lose part or all of their land. This applied to the farm of Deveze Novel which was not listed as having to disappear because Guy Tarlier's residence was not included within the extension. This allowed Yvon Bourges to repeat time after time in public that only ten farmers would have to leave. The 103 estimated that 34 farms would disappear and others would not remain viable for long.

Officials continued to make conciliatory statements in an attempt to soothe the public. The new Sub-Prefect, Sarton du Jonchay, declared: 'The extension of the camp cannot take place without the agreement of the population'. Shortly after, the municipality of Millau organised a referendum to allow every citizen to express his opinion. It was preceded by a month-long information campaign run by a committee of councillors, peasants and representatives of organisations using the plateau—ramblers, scouts, climbers, pot-holers, ornithologists, etc. The Prefect, M. Bernard, warned that it had no legal basis. Its results would have no official value. The referendum taking place on 17 February 1979 showed that 68 per cent of the electors used their vote. 88 per cent of these voted 'no' to the extension. At Creissels 78 per cent voted and 92 per cent of these said 'no'.

The Expropriation Judge

The compulsory purchase orders having been signed, a judge had to visit each commune in order to view the land and agree with its owners about compensation. Judge Grenet visited La Cavalerie on 24 April 1979 but the peasants stopped him from carrying out his duties by blocking roads and

staging a sit-down in front of the gendarmerie where he had taken refuge. The following day he met 20 landowners who between them owned only 25 hectares. When he arrived at L'Hospitalet on 16 May the presence of demonstrators outside the town hall made him decide to retreat. The next day only six landowners turned up to meet him at the town hall out of the 35 invited.

Judge Grenet visited other communes with even less success. The mayors, unlike those of La Cavalerie and L'Hospitalet, refused to open their town halls. Rendez-vous were arranged out of doors instead. On 6 December the judge, accompanied by 300 gendarmes in riot gear commanded by Colonel Bloy, arrived at La Blaquerie to find the road barred by three barricades, one of them of burning tyres. Having made a detour, they found themselves facing a silent crowd of local people and Larzac supporters, headed by the Mayor of La Couvertorade, M. Dupont, who calmly told the judge he would not allow him to go any further. It was a tense moment. Challenged by Colonel Bloy, M. Dupont repeated his statement three times. Before he turned back, Judge Grenet asked if any landowners wanted to see him. There was no answer. In the afternoon he returned and the same scenario was repeated, but this time three landowners, none of them peasants, agreed to meet him. Those three were the only ones, out of a possible 147, to meet the judge during the rest of his visits. The judge and his escort were received in much the same way at the other rendez-vous. At Pierrefiche the locals took no chances and erected a large number of barricades. On his visit to the commune of Millau the judge arrived at the first barricade near Potensac without an armed escort. As usual he was denied access by the mayor and the demonstrators. After being assured there were no landowners wanting to meet him he left, saying clearly that he would not be coming back. The councillors and the press then left but the demonstrators remained. An hour later the judge was back again but this time from the opposite direction, in front of the St. Martin barricade. This time he was accompanied by gendarmes. Colonel Bloy seemed beside himself, shouting, 'We must clear the road! The judge is not with us!' As the peasants and supporters began sitting on the road, gas grenades were released and the colonel ordered his men to use their rifle butts. The gendarmes seemed ill at ease and used only the minimum of force but some of the demonstrators were injured as they were slowly pushed back. Then suddenly the gendarmes stopped. The reason for this was that a councillor who had remained on the plateau phoned through to Rodez where Aveyron Council was in session. When the councillors were told what was happening

the Prefect who was present felt obliged to order the gendarmes to pull back. He then went on to lay the blame on the judge and the colonel.

The press were indignant at the judge's duplicity. *Gardarem lo Larzac* asked sardonically whether he was the promised 'mediator'. A month before, on 16 November 1979, Giscard d'Estaing, on a visit to Rodez, had agreed to consider a demand by agricultural notables for the appointment of a mediator. At the presidential banquet in Rodez eight councillors turned their plates upside down and refused to eat or drink as a gesture of solidarity with peasants who were fasting for a week at the Chamber of Agriculture.

Military Development

An important development programme was announced by the army and work began on it in 1978. The 103 considered this was a propaganda exercise designed to persuade people that the expansion of the camp was inevitable. Most of the work was concerned with repairs and improvements to the camp. Even the rebuilding by army engineers of the railway line linking the main Béziers-Paris line to L'Hospitalet could be explained by the need for an alternative means of transport for men and armaments, instead of using the road which created traffic jams in Millau.

This project, however, became a matter of increasing concern to the inhabitants of L'Hospitalet as they discovered that the railway station was to be built close to the village. The mayor and council, under pressure from the villagers, decided to build a community centre on the site reserved for the station. The first stone was laid on 26 July 1979 in the presence of personalities of the region. As usual no building permit was obtained and the work was carried out by voluntary workers.

Changing Attitudes

During the first phase of the battle most of the political representatives and agricultural notables of Aveyron gave their backing to the peasants. They may not all have been fundamentally opposed to the extension but they found it intolerable that the Government should take the decision without consulting them. After the 1973 demo organised by the Peasant-Workers, attitudes changed. The president of Aveyron's Farmers' Union justified the second phase of relative inactivity on their part—from 1973 to 1978—in these words:

'At the beginning the battle was regional. We backed it fully. When the problem was taken up by people from outside, our approach was more cautious. I am thinking, for instance, of the large summer rallies. We

could not give the seal of approval to antimilitaristic or anti-Government themes . . . This phase of the battle may have given it a national dimension but it perhaps prevented a regional solution.'*

By 1973 Government propaganda, presenting the struggle as being led by leftists and 'hippies', was also having its effect. The local political establishment became less willing to intervene.

The situation began to change in 1976 when the local Farmers' Union, impressed by the success of the 103's operation inside the camp, once again gave them unstinted support. After the 1977 local elections, Millau and other municipalities declared themselves hostile to the extension. However, it was not till 1978, when the State took the offensive by signing the Land Transfer decrees, again without prior consultation, that the third phase began. All the regional institutions reacted vigorously with public declarations and representations to the Prefect. Many went further as we have seen—for instance, the unprecedented action of the mayors in refusing to co-operate with Judge Grenet.

The Overall Agreements

After the 103 had turned down M. Buchet's plan in Paris in October 1979, the Prefect asked the elected representatives to propose a new solution. Many of them responded eagerly; this was, after all, what they were there for. Too often in the past they had been ignored. Even the deputy, M. Godfrain, who had never shown any interest in the Larzac, joined in talks with the authorities and the agricultural bodies in formulating a new 'Overall Agreement'. These proposals as they affected the peasants were as follows:

- ★ The extension would be reduced by 155 hectares, so that the farm buildings of Deveze Novel, Potensac and La Resse would be outside the extension.
- ★ 71 farms (out of 83) could continue to exist on the periphery of the extension as the buildings of 69 of them would be excluded from the extension and new buildings would be provided for the two others.
- ★ Land to allow these farms to continue would be made available inside the extension on terms and conditions to be agreed with the State.
- ★ La Blaquièrre would be protected and public access allowed under regulations agreed between Millau and the army. Those who worked there could remain until resettled outside the extension.

* *L'avenir de Millau*, 13.6.80.

The peasants, who had not been consulted, declared that these agreements were totally unacceptable. The 115 hectares was a minute proportion of the land the military had always wanted. Twelve farms would disappear and there was no guarantee that the rest of the farms would not follow later.

The 103's lawyer advised expropriated landowners to appeal on grounds of incorrect procedure, and many of them did so. The verdict was announced by the 'Cour de Cassation' on 7 May 1980. Sixty-six of the compulsory purchase orders were found to be invalid. They had not been ratified by the Sub-Prefect before being forwarded to the Prefect as required by law. The whole legal process had to start again, beginning with the land survey inquiry. The decree of Public Utility had been extended for five years in 1977 so the new round of procedures had to be completed by 1982. The Administration went ahead with such haste that new mistakes were made, providing grounds for further appeals. Two hundred expropriated landowners eventually appealed.

On 26 November 1980, the day before the new expropriation decrees took effect, five peasants attended a press conference in Paris called by towns twinned to the Larzac. The following day a group from the Larzac, including children, joined them on the Champ de Mars where they quickly erected their tents between the Eiffel Tower and the Military College. When the police protested, they told them they intended to stay until the expropriation procedures were stopped. This action also prefigured symbolically the exile to which the families would be condemned. Their presence in the centre of the capital provided the media with a human story which was good publicity for their cause. Larzac supporters brought them food, blankets and other material to make their stay more tolerable in the prevailing snowy weather. Messages of solidarity came from all over France and from Germany. The Presidential election campaign had begun and one of the candidates, the Mayor of Paris, Jacques Chirac, who was responsible for law and order, failed to take immediate action in order, it was said, to embarrass Giscard d'Estaing.

The Larzac folk were evicted on 1 December. Before their return home they were accommodated for a few days on a barge moored to the riverside in the centre of Paris which had been provided by one of the suburbs twinned to the Larzac. As always their sense of humour prevailed. A large banner on the boat proclaimed: 'On Nous Mène En Bateau', the equivalent of 'We Are Being Sold Down the River'.

On 19 February 1981 the 106 farmers concerned were called to a

meeting in Millau by the agricultural organisations, but only 46 turned up. After the text of the overall agreements had been read out and explained they were asked to vote by secret ballot on the question 'Do you agree with the spirit of the text?' The result was: No 31, Yes 9, Blanks 3. The agreements were signed at the Ministry on 23 February. The representatives of the agricultural organisations, having failed to obtain the approval of the 103, were not present but had sent a letter indicating their support for the agreements. Most people in the region felt bewildered.

The signatories, which included supporters of the Larzac on the council, assured the 103 and the public that the agreements did not represent a final settlement. The text was a framework within which further negotiations could take place. The peasants came to a different conclusion. The wording, for instance, 'To allow the military camp of the Larzac to be used within the boundaries now definitely fixed' showed that the take-over of 14,000 hectares (less 115 hectares) was taken for granted in the agreements. They once more reaffirmed their determination to carry on the fight.

The Presidential Elections

The 103 published an open letter to all the candidates in the election. They were asked what their position was regarding the Larzac, legislation for conscientious objectors, defence policy and the Third World. François Mitterrand replied that if he came to power he would cancel the Larzac project in its entirety. He agreed that a new statute for CO's was required. The struggle for peace and disarmament was in the Socialist tradition but defence would have to remain based on nuclear 'dissuasion'. Help would be given to the Third World.

When the news of Mitterrand's victory came through on 10 May 1981 there was jubilation on the plateau and amongst supporters of the Larzac everywhere. On 2 June a delegation of peasants was received by the Government. The next day the Council of Ministers decided simply to annul the military project. It was total victory. The army immediately evacuated the five farms they had occupied and were henceforth confined to the original camp. The 103 also shared in the jubilation of their friends of Plogoff in Brittany when they heard that the nuclear project in that region had been abandoned.

After the Battle

There were many legal complications to unravel regarding land ownership and leases because legal procedures had not all reached the same

stage in every case. However, whatever the situation, all the land was reassigned to agricultural use. Land already in the hands of the State, whether through voluntary purchase or appropriation, could be retroceded on the demand of former owners.

The 103 now formulated proposals which would allow all the farmers on the plateau to participate more directly in organising agriculture and improving the social environment. They could exercise more control over land use through the Land Trust. The advantages of working in common could best be achieved by encouraging the formation of further GAEC's (collective farms) and CUMA's (Co-operatives for the Use of Agricultural Machinery). With 1,000 hectares abandoned by the army and further land reclamation, ten new farms could be started. Finance could be provided by the peasants' own 'Mutuelle' Loan Society, formed a year before, by the official 'Crédit Agricole' and the usual state subsidies. Other exciting ideas included the development of renewable energy sources; wind generators and a solar heating unit were already in use on the plateau. Another suggestion was to build holiday centres for all who would benefit from spending time close to nature, such as children and the handicapped. Above all the 103 wanted the Larzac to continue being a meeting place for those interested in peace and research into nonviolent means of fighting for liberation.

To show their solidarity with all those struggling against oppression the peasants, together with the Larzac Committees and Le Cun, organised an International Meeting for Peace which took place at Le Pinel, the farm sold by a defector from the 103, in August 1981. Some 3,000 people met to consider some of the many factors which make for war. Ten foreign delegations attended, including Afghan refugees, people from Latin America and a group of Japanese peasants who described their 15-year-old struggle against the development of Narita airport.

After the International Meeting, an appeal was sent out from the Larzac calling on French people to join the growing movement against nuclear weapons in Europe and to protest against France's own nuclear weapons systems.

The Larzac had become more than a symbol to all those seeking a more peaceful world. It offered a solid hope that, in the words of a delegate from El Salvador as he left the plateau, 'Hasta la victoria. Venceremos.' ('We shall overcome.')

Lessons to be Learned

The Larzac is not necessarily a blueprint for nonviolent campaigning as every situation is different, depending on the people, their culture and traditions, their physical and social environment and the kind and degree of oppression facing them. The important thing is to understand the spirit which lies behind this method of defence. Once this has been done, the means to be used, whether legal or illegal, will depend on the circumstances. Imaginative actions can be invented which are best suited to appeal to the heart and sense of justice of all those involved, including allies and opponents.

An analysis of the manner in which the Larzac battle was conducted should indicate some of the essential ingredients which made it succeed. Perhaps the most important factor was the unity of the peasants. This unity already existed potentially before the struggle as they lived in the same geographical environment, they followed the same occupation, they had the same cultural and religious background. The fast by Lanza del Vasto was undoubtedly the catalyst which made them aware of this basic unity which was to be their strength. From the beginning most of them rejected party political involvement or more forceful methods. At the same time they were not prepared to accept an arbitrary decision which ignored their interests and the human and economic realities of the region. When for the first time they were made aware of the teachings of Gandhi they realised that there existed a completely different way of fighting back which would not alienate them from their sympathisers and was not in conflict with their Christian faith. The approval of the Church was the final factor which persuaded them to choose nonviolence.

A small number of nonviolent activists settled on the plateau. Some of them took up farming and were soon regarded as part of the peasant community, while others helped the 103 in routine administrative and publicity work or on building sites, activities which the peasants would have found difficult to carry out effectively on their own, as work on the farms took up so much of their time. The peasants also needed all the outside support they could get. The nationwide network of Larzac committees was of vital importance in keeping their cause in the public eye, particularly at

times when the media was silent about the issue. On special occasions, when it became necessary to give a warning to the Government, it was possible to call on a large number of individuals and organisations to take part in large demonstrations since anti-militarists, pacifists, ecologists, human rights activists, regionalists and many others saw in the Larzac something of their own concerns, something with which they could identify and for which they could actively work. Left-wing groups helped to organise demos at times, but this was done on the 103's own terms—strictly on a nonviolent basis. The Socialist party was sympathetic but took no action. Their power base is, of course, centred on the industrial working class rather than on the farming community. The Communist party showed no interest at all.

It is difficult to judge to what extent François Mitterrand's pledge on the Larzac influenced the result of the 1981 elections. It was only one of a number of relatively minor issues compared with, for instance, unemployment. Why then did he make this promise? Apart from the Socialist leader's personal interest, he no doubt realised that a commitment to cancel the military project would win him friends and extra votes and dispose of at least one problem before he got into power. Although the 103 were distrustful of politicians, they knew that a final solution depended on a decision taken at governmental level and they were always willing to talk with those in power. They also took full advantage of the legal process to further their case.

The battle was essentially defensive. The 103 responded to each hostile move by the Government with just sufficient pressure to stop it in its tracks but not enough to give it an excuse to use the considerable powers at its disposal. This graduated response meant a long slow haul. The capacity to last, to exercise patience and restraint—not always appreciated by outside supporters who wanted to see quick results—was another important factor in bringing the fight to a successful conclusion. It also had many advantages. It gave the peasant community time to evolve. In 1973 one of the 103 was heard to say he hoped victory would not come too soon as there was so much to learn about active nonviolence, not only in the conduct of the battle but also in everyday life. It allowed progressively harder actions to be carried out, actions such as stopping military exercises and painting slogans on army vehicles which would not have even been contemplated at the beginning. It also gave local authorities time to modify their attitudes. Thus it would have been inconceivable at one time for village mayors to impede the course of the law, but towards the end it seemed the right thing to do. As

administrative procedures slowly took their course, countermeasures were taken by the 103 every step of the way, which made the work of the authorities ineffective. The Government, through the Prefect or the Ministry of Defence, held countless meetings with the peasants or their representatives, but all these ended in stalemate. The army bought land but could not use it. Expropriated landowners would not, for the most part, discuss compensation. Even when the land was legally appropriated the Government found it politically inexpedient to evict owners or tenants. The authorities were even reluctant to proceed with court cases.

Constructive civil disobedience was, as we have seen, an important feature of the struggle. Cultivating army land, building, road repair work and so on impressed the public and enhanced the image of the peasants as responsible, hard-working food producers. Outside supporters were able to become directly involved in a variety of ways—through the Larzac Committees, the Land Trust, the tax refusal-redistribution movement or by working on the plateau at the peace centre or on building sites.

An important outcome of the battle was the way in which so many of those taking part matured in their thinking and attitudes. The peasants in particular came out of their isolation and learned to co-operate better with each other, not only in the conduct of the fight but in their everyday work. They started off with the idea of simply defending their land, their tool of work, but soon realised that their problem was not unique. They discovered that many people throughout the world were, in many cases, suffering from worse injustices than they were through the abuse of governmental power and increasing militarisation. They learned how effective nonviolent action can be in obtaining more control over their lives and ended up as active participants in a growing movement for justice and peace.

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Above: A typical scene on the northern edge of the Larzac plateau. Shepherds and their flock on the farm of Les Truels.



Below: Voluntary workers building the 'bergerie' or sheep farm at La Blaquièrre without official permit in June 1974. The wooden structure forms the temporary centre support for the stone arch during construction; these roofing arches are typical of local architecture.