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Tear-gassed in the Cévennes

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The events I am about to relate are far less dramatic than those in Cairo, Bagdad and innumerable hot spots throughout the world. But they are no less typical of the times we now live—times pregnant with change, tension-filled and replete with both the possibilities for democratic transformation and for fascistic reaction.

I am reporting from deep inside the interior of the historically insurrectional region called Les Cévennes, famous for its resistance to centralized tyranny since the early seventeenth century and even before. It is a region of low but rugged mountains, a region topographically similar to others along the Mediterranean coast such as southeastern Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. From my high base camp near the tiny village of Soudorgues, I can see the flat horizon that is the Mediterranean, 35 miles in the distance.

The population of Les Cévennes is proud of its rebellious heritage. There are many monuments about and hotels and restaurants named for the “Camisards”—rebels against crown and Catholic Church who successfully opposed the armies of Louis XIV, the absolutist “Sun King.” Bloody guerrilla fighting raged from the late seventeenth century until 1715 when the state came to terms with the rebels, although fighting continued for decades, right up to the French Revolution.

During the Nazi occupation of France, Les Cévenols—as the inhabitants are called—hid and protected large numbers of Jewish children and German deserters, and carried out armed resistance against the occupiers and their collaborators. Many Cévenols, of course, paid the full price for their activities. Today, secret passages and hiding places—some yet undiscovered—remain a common feature of this region and the lives of its rustic mountain people. Since the events of May 1968, the population of Les Cévennes has been supplemented by an influx of large numbers of agitators and visionaries, now well integrated into the indigenous culture and society.

http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/IMG/png/Capture_d_ecran_2011-02-03_a_22.59.48.png

Two weeks ago, on January 21, 2011, several dozens of the turbulent Cévenols staged a non-violent protest against renewed efforts to bring the region under tighter state control. At issue is an on-going government project to consolidate local electoral and administrative districts so as to harmonize resource management and tax levies—what has been bothering the Les Cévenols for the last four centuries.

As if France was not centralized enough, officialdom now wishes to incorporate small municipalities and communal districts into larger divisions dominated by bigger towns and cities in dire need of greater tax revenues. All this is in a context of diminished state funding—part of president Sarkozy’s “reforms”—putting fiscal pressure on every administrative instance all down the line.

The opponents of the project jumped on the occasion when they learned that the top regional and local officials preparing the fiscal noose—mainly members of Sarkozy’s gang—were commandeering an ancient, steam-powered tourist train running between the towns of Anduze and Alès in order to celebrate the “reforms.” The demonstrators—including five village mayors decked out in suits and with their official, honorific tri-colored sashes crossed diagonally over their chests—gathered in front of the train before it could leave the Anduze station. The gendarmes were there too. Among the demonstrators, including children and many elderly people, the atmosphere was gay. Not only was the demonstration non-violent, it was almost joyous.

All was friendly as the five mayors spoke with the commander of the gendarmes. After handshakes all around, the chief gendarme—commandant Frédéric Warion—asked, as reported in the *Canard enchaîné* on February 3 2011:

“What do you plan to do?”

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To which Alain Beaud, socialist mayor of Saint-Sébastien-d'Aigrefeuille and president of the communes opposing the administrative consolidation, said:

“We are just going to cause the train to be a little late, but we are not going to stop it. When we’ve finished, come over and take me by the arm and we will leave.”

Commander Warion nodded and returned to the platform. At his feet, an elderly, white-haired lady was seated with her legs over the rails, the elected officials with their red, white and blue sashes stood shoulder to shoulder astride the tracks. The other good citizens pressed together around and behind them, singing and chanting in favor of local autonomy.

Suddenly, commandant Warion—holding a large aerosol can with an extinguisher-like release lever, and with the demonstrators standing below him—leaned towards them and let loose with a powerful stream of tear gas. At this angle and range it was easy going. His men stood in a line along the platform, making it difficult for the people to rise out of the trap, and Warion was able to maintain his forceful spraying of their heads and faces.

As anyone who has been in a similar situation understands, it is difficult to remain stolidly calm and immobile under the direct impact of tear gas. The body protects itself by reacting in panic to the ensuing pain and blindness. Nevertheless, one white-haired man close to the platform managed to rise up out of the mass of writhing bodies and, voicing his indignation, approached Warion. But the latter simply held him at range with a hand on the oldster’s breast, and then shot the gas pointblank into the man’s face. This accomplished, Warion turned back to the others, aiming long strategic blasts into whomever’s face turned towards him.

There was, however, no general dispersal. In spite of being gassed and momentarily incapacitated, young and old alike continued to demonstrate, but now—understandably—with more anger and vengeful gestures. Those who remonstrated too closely received the customary blows with the standard riot clubs.

Assuming my role as non-embedded war correspondent, I called the Gendarmerie in the town of Alès claiming to be a reporter for an American newspaper. To my regret, but perhaps unsurprisingly, I was not accorded an interview with commandant Warion, nor was any official statement issued. Significantly, I was told that all such requests must be addressed to main headquarters in Paris.

It wasn’t the Battle of Seattle, but it shows how the will to resist exists everywhere where liberty and the right to a secure social and environmental existence are threatened.

We can only imagine the effects of this treatment on future relations between state authority and the local population. With their history of insurrection, and the on-going attempts to reduce them to sources of revenue for a distant state concerned only to close down schools, hospitals, post offices and other facilities needed in rural regions, tensions are building in Les Cévennes, but equally in all provincial areas in France. For the tradition of popular uprising is in no way specific to the Cévenols. What happened in the delightful town of Anduze on January 21 has happened in many places throughout the country. The difference is that most such events are not as well filmed. Here is the link to YouTube, no French language skills required: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5m2BpSjTP0>

Just days before this skirmish, the latest issue of the local magazine called *L’Aigoualité pour tous*—a title that, in French, sounds suspiciously like “equality for everyone”—carried Robert Destanque’s latest editorial. Now, this magazine focuses primarily on ecological issues and is distributed freely in the many cooperatives of the region. It is printed in the small town of Ganges, in the middle of Les Cévennes and near Mount Aigoual, highest peak between the Pyrenees and the Alpes—on a clear day you can see both ranges in the distance as well as the Mediterranean

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Sea. Robert Destanque, born in 1931, is a highly respected leftist documentary filmmaker and novelist. His words to his fellow Cévenols are an uncompromising summons to action:

“No. The power is not in the street, not yet. It hasn't yet really expressed itself. It is reserved, limiting itself to demands and recriminations or appeals to the ministers of a president serving Big Capital and his billionaire friends who personally exploit the resources of this Nation. [But] the anger is there, and anger is an energy that—like all energies—can have contrary effects, positive or negative, depending on the situation. [...] Attention, there is danger. The trap must be avoided. Have no doubt, it is a war that is being prepared—it has already begun and it will be long and without mercy.”

“The wall erected by the capitalist rabble is thought to be impregnable. But here is the target. It is this wall that we must tear down. Now our work must be to inform everyone—from the bottom to the top of the social pyramid—of the coming combat and the absolute duty of each of us to prepare for it physically, psychically and, especially, politically. We must go into overdrive towards—I say it openly—to insurrection. At every level we must raise and harden the tone, affirm the anger and, at the same time, transmit and channel it. Strikes, demonstrations and elections must be used to express this anger. [This] is the only way to have an effect on the people who lie to us, who have contempt for us, who lead the people of France like a vulgar flock of sheep. Our just accumulated anger will become power by the convergence of all popular forces.”

Post-scriptum :

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