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Oka Crisis

14–18 minutes

The Oka Crisis, also known as the Kanesatake Resistance or the Mohawk Resistance at Kanesatake, was a 78-day standoff (11 July–26 September 1990) between Mohawk protesters, Quebec police, the RCMP and the Canadian Army. It took place in the community of Kanesatake, near the Town of Oka, on the north shore of Montreal. Related protests and violence occurred in the Kahnawake reserve, to the south of Montreal. The crisis was sparked by the proposed expansion of a golf course and the development of townhouses on disputed land in Kanesatake that included a Mohawk burial ground. Tensions were high, particularly after the death of Corporal Marcel Lemay, a Sûreté du Québec police officer. Eventually, the army was called in and the protest ended. The golf course expansion was cancelled and the land was purchased by the federal government. However, it did not establish the land as a reserve, and there has since been no organized transfer of the land to the Mohawks of Kanesatake.

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Causes

Historical Background

There was a long history behind the crisis at Oka. The Mohawk had been pressing for recognition of their right to the land since 1761. Almost immediately after Britain conquered New France, the Mohawks of Kanesatake wrote to government officials in Britain. They described living under unfavourable rules that threatened their livelihood. They contested their right to the land and asked to be freed from the authority of the Sulpicians, a Roman Catholic order that had been granted the land by King Louis XV in 1717. The Sulpicians had also begun selling the land to White settlers. The British ignored these demands.

The Mohawk continued to contest their right to the land over the next 150 years; each attempt was rejected. In 1851, they petitioned Lord Elgin, governor general of Canada, asking him to recognize their right to the land. The request was denied. In 1859, the Province of Canada gave the Sulpicians official title to the land. In 1868, the government of the new Dominion of Canada denied that the Mohawk's original land grant reserved land specifically for them. The federal government later classified Kanesatake as an "interim land base" and not a reserve. It therefore was not covered under the Indian Act. (See also Indigenous Land Claims.)

The Mohawks of Kanesatake's case over land rights was heard by the Quebec Superior Court in 1910; in 1912, it was heard by the Court of King's Bench and finally by the [Judicial Committee of the Privy Council](#) — Canada's highest appeals court at the time. The Judicial Committee ruled that official title to the land was held by the [Sulpicians](#). By the end of the [Second World War](#), the Sulpicians had sold all of their remaining land and had left the area. The Mohawk of Kanesatake were now confined to about 6 km², compared to the 687 km² they once held. However, ownership of the Mohawks' common area, known as "the Pines," remained unresolved.

The Mohawk people of Kahnawake, Kanasetake and Akwesasne asserted [Aboriginal title](#) to their ancestral lands in 1975. But their [land claim](#) was rejected on the grounds that, since they did not hold the land continuously from time immemorial, their Aboriginal title was voided. The Kanesatake [band](#) filed a second land claim with the federal government in 1977. It was rejected in 1986, on the grounds that it did not meet the full legal criteria. (See also [Oka Crisis Timeline](#).)

Causes

Golf Course Expansion

In 1961, a nine-hole golf course was built on the Pines. Despite the fact that the land came very close to a traditional Mohawk burial ground, the Mohawk claim was rejected, and the golf course was built.

In 1989, the mayor of Oka, Jean Ouellette, announced a plan to build a townhouse complex and expand the golf course into the Pines and over the Kanesatake ancestral [cemetery](#). Since the Kanesatake [band's](#) land claim had been rejected in 1986, they were not consulted.

Despite months of protests by the Mohawks of Kanesatake, as well as concerns expressed by the [Quebec Minister of the Environment and Minister of Native Affairs](#), construction was scheduled to begin in March 1990.

1

Blockade and Police Raid

To halt further development of the Pines, a group of people from Kanesatake constructed a barricade on a local road, blocking access to the area. Mohawk from two nearby [reserves](#) — Kahnawake and Akwesasne — along with a group of activists called the Mohawk Warrior Society, joined the protest, helping man the barricades.

After two injunctions to remove the roadblock were ignored, [Oka](#) town council asked the provincial police force, the [Sûreté du Québec](#) (SQ), to intervene. On the morning of 11 July 1990, the SQ advanced on the barricade. They used tear gas and concussion grenades to create confusion (although the gas blew back towards the police). During the brief gunfight that followed, SQ Corporal Marcel Lemay was killed. The SQ retreated. It was unclear who fired the first shot or who killed Lemay. (See also [Oka Crisis Timeline](#).)



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A Photojournalist joins several Mohawk people on a barricade in the Pines, summer 1990. (©Robert J. Galbraith, courtesy Kanien'kehá:ka Onkwawén:na Raotitióhkwa Language and Cultural Center)

1

Escalation

Resistance continued, with Indigenous supporters from the area and across the country joining the Mohawk warriors at the barricades. The SQ constructed their own blockades and checkpoints on roads leading to Oka and Kanesatake. Mohawk from the nearby Kahnawake reserve blockaded the Mercier Bridge in support; this cut off access between Montreal's southern suburbs and the Island of Montreal. The resulting chaos angered area residents. Relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the area worsened. The SQ had to deal not only with the barricades, but also with frustrated and hostile civilians. Many of them blamed the SQ for the situation. At the same time, the Mohawk demands expanded to include full sovereignty.

2

Federal Involvement

In mid-July, the RCMP was brought in to help the SQ. At the same time, Quebec Premier Robert Bourassa requested the help of the Canadian Armed Forces.

On 20 August, the armed forces' Operation Salon began. Four thousand soldiers took up positions in and around Kanesatake and Kahnawake, along with armoured military vehicles, helicopters, artillery, police vessels on the Ottawa River, and other equipment. Members of the Royal 22e Regiment (the "Van Doos") took over from the SQ at the Kahnawake and Kanesatake barricades. They assumed a position only metres from the Mohawk warriors. (For context, around 5,100 Canadian military personnel served in the Persian Gulf War, with a peak of about 2,700 in the region at one time. According to military historian Timothy C. Winegard, the armed forces' operation at Oka was so extensive it used up their entire national stockpile of barbed wire.)

The Mohawk were under heavy pressure. Increasing numbers of soldiers took positions at the Pines and elsewhere in the Montreal area. Reconnaissance aircraft circled above. By 29 August, negotiations had put an end to the blockade of the Mercier Bridge, though it would take eight days for the barricade to be dismantled and the bridge to reopen. On 1 September, with about 40 Mohawk warriors remaining on the barricades, the Army advanced. The next day, soldiers dismantled the barricades.

The remaining warriors, as well as some women and children, took refuge in a residential treatment centre for drugs and alcohol on highway 344 across from the Pines, which had been used as a negotiation centre. They continued to negotiate but had little leverage. Their aim was to hold out until Parliament resumed on 24 September. (It had been on recess over the summer.) They hoped that their demands would be the focus of debate. (See Oka Crisis Timeline.)

3

Tekakwitha Island Standoff

On 18 September 1990, SQ officers and army soldiers landed on Tekakwitha Island, on the outskirts of Kahnawake, and proceeded towards the community. At the bridge into the reserve, they were met by hundreds of Mohawk. The soldiers attempted to lay razor wire, but it was dismantled by Mohawk, who also threw rocks and assaulted the soldiers. The soldiers fired tear gas and warning shots, and assaulted Mohawk with the butts of their rifles. After

seven hours, the soldiers were airlifted out by eight Chinook helicopters. Twenty-two soldiers were injured, along with 75 Mohawk, ranging in age from five to 72.

4 The Resistance Ends

The deployment of troops in both Oka and the [Persian Gulf](#) dominated the debate in [Parliament](#) when it resumed its fall session on 24 September. In the [House of Commons](#) the next day, [Prime Minister Mulroney](#) promised to meet some of the Mohawk's unspecified demands.

The resistance ended on 26 September 1990. Thirty men, 16 women and six children suddenly left the centre; they surprised the army command, which had expected an orderly surrender. During the confusion, a soldier stabbed 14-year-old [Waneek Horn-Miller](#) in the chest with a bayonet. She had been carrying her four-year-old sister, Ganyetahawi, to safety after weeks behind the barriers while their mother, [Kahn-Tineta Horn](#), served as a negotiator. The incident became front page news across the country.

Several warriors were detained by the military, and a number were later charged by the [SQ](#). Five were convicted of crimes, including assault and theft; only one served time in jail.

4 Public Response

There was substantial media coverage of the resistance across the country and internationally. [Public opinion](#) on the matter varied widely. Many Quebecers, especially those living in the immediate area, were angered by the blockades. In one incident (captured in [Alanis Obomsawin's](#) 2000 [documentary](#) *Rocks at Whiskey Trench*), local residents stoned about 75 cars containing mostly women, children and the elderly as they tried to leave the Kahnawake reserve. In another, 10,000 people marched through the nearby town of [Châteauguay](#), demanding that the blockade of the Mercier Bridge be removed. Protesters hanged and burned an effigy of a Mohawk warrior. This continued for several nights in a row.

However, others sympathized with the protesters, including John Ciaccia, then Quebec Minister of Native Affairs, who repeatedly urged the Town of Oka to reverse course. Protests were also held across the country in support of the Mohawk. In a show of solidarity, [First Nations](#) across Canada organized protests or erected blockades, including several in [British Columbia](#) that blocked [roads](#) and railways. The [Canadian Pacific Railway's](#) John Cox told media at the time: "Virtually all our transcontinental traffic has been disrupted. We are at the mercy of individual bands and whatever decisions they make."



Significance

Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples

The Oka Crisis played an important role in the creation of the [Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples](#). It was established by [Prime Minister Mulroney](#) on 26 August 1991 to investigate questions about [Indian Status](#) and other issues that the resistance brought to the fore.

The Commission released its report in 1996. The main conclusion was the need for a complete restructuring of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. Some of the broader recommendations included a proposal for a new [Royal Proclamation](#). This would require the government to commit to a new set of ethical principles respecting the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the state. This new relationship would acknowledge and respect Indigenous cultures and values, the historical origins of Indigenous nationhood and the inherent right to Indigenous self-determination. (See [Indigenous Self-Government in Canada](#).)

Implementing many of the recommendations in the Royal Commission would require [constitutional](#) change. Most of the recommendations were not implemented.

Outcome

Aftermath

During the crisis, the [federal government](#) agreed to purchase the Pines to prevent further development. The golf course expansion and townhouse construction were cancelled. After the crisis had ended, the government purchased additional plots of land for Kanesatake. In 2001, the *Kanesatake Interim Land Base Governance Act* confirmed that the land was to be reserved for the Mohawks of Kanesatake. However, it did not establish the land as a [reserve](#), and there has since been no organized transfer of the land.

Investigations conducted after the crisis revealed several problems in the SQ's handling of the situation, including command failures and [prejudice](#) among SQ members. The only official, full-scale hearing into the event was the [coroner's](#) inquiry into Corporal Lemay's death. It has never been determined who fired the shot that killed him.

Significance

The Oka Crisis, also known as the Kanesatake Resistance, played an important role in the creation of the [Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples](#). This in turn contributed to new agreements between governments and [Indigenous peoples](#), including the Paix des Braves (Peace of the Braves) between the Grand Council of the Crees and the Quebec government. Since the resistance, [federal](#) and [provincial](#) governments have developed greater awareness of the territorial rights of [First Nations](#) and the need to consult [Indigenous peoples](#) when considering [development](#) projects. (See [Duty to Consult](#).) Overall, the crisis made more Canadians aware of [Indigenous rights](#) and [land claims](#); it also illustrated the potential for future conflict if such claims were not resolved in a timely, transparent and just manner.

The Kanesatake Resistance inspired [Indigenous peoples](#) across Canada to take action. For example, the resistance has been linked to the [Idle No More](#) movement, as well as demands for an inquiry into [missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Canada](#). Some experts suggest that the resistance had an impact outside Canada as well. According to [University of Ottawa](#) professor Marcelo Saavedra-Vargas, Oka was an "awakening" that has inspired indigenous movements elsewhere, such as in Bolivia.

See also [Indigenous Land Claims](#); [Aboriginal Title](#); [Indian Act](#); [Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Canada](#); [Indigenous Self-Government in Canada](#).

concession (3.5 *lieues* of frontage, 3 *lieues* deep) named seigneurie du Lac-des-Deux-Montagnes.^[22]

In 1721, the Sulpicians moved the Sault-au-Récollet mission to two villages on seigneurie du Lac-des-Deux-Montagnes territory with the Algonquins and Nipissings being assigned the **village** to the east and the Mohawks being assigned the village to the west including territory known since the late 1880s as "The Pines" (formerly "sand dunes behind the village ... part of the Common Lands on which the Mohawks pastured their cattle")^[23] and the adjacent indigenous cemetery.^{[24][25]} This meant the Indigenous inhabitants were forced to move once again. To cushion the blow, they were promised ownership of the land they would inhabit.^[26] The seigneurie du Lac-des-Deux-Montagnes was expanded through two grants, one in 1733, consisting of small pie-shaped segment with 2 *lieues* of frontage to the east of initial concession land, and, in 1735, a larger segment representing about 40% of the seigneurie's total area.^{[24][27][28]} In all three grants the land was provided under the guarantee it would be used for the benefit of Indigenous residents.^[29]

Land dispute

Following the conquest of New France in 1760, the Act of Capitulation of Montreal guaranteed that all the "Indians" who had been allied to the French would be free to remain on the land they inhabited unless those lands were formally ceded to the Crown. This was restated by the Treaty of Paris and again in the Royal Proclamation of 1763.^[30] Hence, the Mohawk began advocating for the recognition of their land rights to British officials. Similar claims in Kahnawá:ke and Ahkwesáhsne were recognized, but the Kanehsatà:ke requests to be released from the rule of the Sulpicians and reporting of seminary officials to white settlers were ignored.^[1] Then the Sulpicians aided the British in crushing the Patriot's War of 1837–38, the seminary's land title was confirmed.^[30] The Mohawk continued pursuing their right to the land, petitioning, and failing, to obtain the recognition of Lord Elgin's recognition of their claims in 1851. Eight years later, the Province of Canada extended the official title of the disputed land to the Sulpicians.^[1]

In 1868, one year after Confederation, the chief of the Oka Mohawk people, Joseph Onasakenrat, wrote a letter to the seminary claiming that its grant had included about 23 km² (9 sq mi) reserved for Mohawk use in trust of the seminary, and that the seminary had neglected this trust by granting themselves (the seminary) sole ownership rights.^{[31][32]} In 1869, Onasakenrat attacked the seminary with a small armed force after having given the missionaries eight days to hand over the land. Local authorities ended this stand-off with force.^{[33][34]} In 1936, the seminary sold the territory under protest by the local Mohawk community. At the time they still kept cattle on the common land. By 1956, the Mohawk were left to six remaining square kilometres from their original 165.^{[32][34]}

In 1959, the town approved the development of a private nine-hole golf course, the Club de golf d'Oka, on a portion of the disputed land.^[32] The project area bordered The Pines, as well as a Mohawk burial ground in use, at that time, for nearly a century.^[35] The Mohawk suit filed against the development did not succeed. Construction also began on a parking lot and golf greens adjacent to the Mohawk cemetery.

In 1977, the Kanehsatà:ke band filed an official land claim with the federal Office of Native Claims regarding the land. The claim was accepted for filing and funds were provided for additional research of the claim. In 1986 the claim was rejected on the basis that it failed to meet key legal criteria.^[36]

In March 1989, the Club de golf d'Oka announced plans to expand the golf course by an additional nine holes. As the Office of Native Claims had rejected the Mohawk claim on the land three years earlier, **his office did** not consult the Mohawk on the plans. No environmental or historic preservation review was undertaken. Protests by Mohawks and others, as well as concern from the Quebec Minister of the Environment, led to negotiations and a postponement of the project by the municipality in August pending a court ruling on the development's legality.

Lead-up to the crisis

On June 30, 1990,^[37] the court found in favour of the developers, and the mayor of Oka, Jean Ouellette, announced that the remainder of the Pines would be cleared to expand the golf course to eighteen holes and to construct 60 condominiums. Not all residents of Oka approved of the plans, but opponents found the mayor's office unwilling to discuss them.^[38]

On March 11, as a protest against the court decision to allow the golf course expansion to proceed, some members of the Mohawk community erected a barricade blocking access to the **dirt side-road between Route 344** and "The Pines".^[39] A court injunction in late April ordering the dismantling of the barricade was ignored, as was a second order issued on June 29.^[40] Mayor Ouellette demanded compliance with the court order, but the land defenders refused.

On July 5, the Quebec minister of Public Security, Sam Elkas, said, regarding the land defenders at the Pines, that "they have until the 9th [of July], after that date it's going down."^[41] The next day, the Quebec Human Rights Commission alerted John Ciaccia and Tom Siddon, respectively the provincial and federal native affairs ministers, of the rapidly increasing threat of conflict near Oka and the need to establish an independent committee to review the historical Mohawk land claim.^[30] Ciaccia wrote a letter of support for the Mohawk, saying that "these people have seen their lands disappear without having been consulted or compensated, and that, in my opinion, is unfair and unjust, especially over a golf course." This did not sway the mayor.^[3]

Crisis

Police raid

At 5:15 a.m. on July 11, police officers arrived at the Mohawk barricade blocking the southern entrance to the Pines. Police cars and vans, as

well as rental trucks parked in front of the barricade. Police officers took tactical positions from high vantage points in the trees or hid in ditches, semi-automatic weapons at the ready. Others walked to the **barrier**. At the same moment, another police contingent approached the northern barricade, referred to as "Sector Five". In total, about a hundred officers, including a tactical intervention squad and riot police, surrounded the Mohawk warriors and their allies.^[39]

The previous day^[37] the mayor of Oka, Jean Ouellette, had asked the SQ to intervene with the Mohawk protest, citing alleged criminal activity at the barricade.^[42] While the protesters had expected town officials or municipal workers, they had been promised by an SQ officer that the police would not intervene in this civil injunction. While they were reportedly willing to be arrested in the defence of their land, they had hoped to avoid violence.^[39]

The Mohawk women present at the southern barricade purportedly took charge of the interactions with authorities as they recognized the protection of the land as their own duty. A dozen of them, arms stretched out to signify their being unarmed and having no violent intent, walked towards the police. Authorities said they would speak only to a designated leader, while the group of women said that they were all representing the interests of the group and no single leader existed. Tensions escalated as the authorities would not discuss matters with the Mohawk women. Eventually the group compromised and asked a male protester to come forward and talk with the officers. This was in vain.^[39] The SQ deployed their Emergency Response Team (ERT), a police tactical unit, threw tear gas canisters and concussion grenades^{[43][25]} at the protesters in an attempt to force them to disperse.

The Kahnawá:ke Warrior Society was called in for reinforcements, and by 6:20 a.m. they were seizing Mercier Bridge and the highways which fed into it. They gained control of the two lanes of Highway 138, and then pushed back the thousands of cars to Châteauguay. Over the next three hours they created a no-man's land between two barricades while other contingents blocked Highways 132 and 207 as well as Old Châteauguay Road.^[39]

Around 7:30 a.m. a front-end loader (sometimes cited as a bulldozer) and helicopter arrived, and the police moved closer to the barricade.^[39] Trees were sawed down by the Mohawk and added to the barricade while additional police cars arrived. Members of the surrounding Mohawk communities joined those already present at the Pines as tear gas canisters were thrown at the southern barrier. Around 8:30 the front-end loader rammed the barricade. Then armed police officers moved into the Pines,^[39] and gunshots were fired from both sides.^[43] Then the police retreated, abandoning six cruisers and a bulldozer. Although an initial account reported that 31-year-old SQ Corporal Marcel Lemay had been shot in the face during the firefight,^[44] a later inquest determined that the bullet which killed him struck his "left side below the armpit, an area not covered by [his] bullet-proof vest".^[4] Despite a 1985 SQ directive mandating that all officer communications be recorded, no record of the events was provided to the court, which the coroner decried as "unacceptable" and "even comical".^[41]

Prolonged siege

Upon their return, SQ officers established a perimeter around the protesters both at Kahnawá:ke and Kanehsatà:ke, blocking all access routes with rows of police cars and sandbags, preventing supplies like food and medication to be delivered and blocking ambulances from intervening. Representatives from the Quebec Human Rights Commission were also prevented from entering, despite the Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedom.^[39] In turn, protesters fortified their barricades and erected new ones, but police forced their way in to arrest, search and interrogate.^[45] On July 12, at the request of the Quebec minister of Public Security, the Canadian Army began sending plain clothes military officers, C-7 rifles, night-vision equipment, bulletproof vests and armoured vehicles.^[39]

Before the raid, there were approximately 30 armed Mohawk in and around the barricade; following the gun battle, this number grew to 60–70 and later grew to 600.^[2] The Mohawks seized six vehicles, including four police cars, and commandeered the front-end loader to crush the vehicles and use them to form a new barricade across Route 344.^[44]

The Mohawk established a network for communications among the Mohawk villages/reserves of Ahkwesáhsne, Kanehsatà:ke and Kahnawá:ke, using hand-held radios, cellular phones, air raid sirens and fire hall bells, as well as local radio stations, and patrols.^[25] The local Mohawk were joined by Indigenous people from across Canada and the United States. People from Micmac communities, as well as a Buddhist monk and Filipina acupuncturist joined the protesters in the early weeks of the fight. Fifteen activist-students were sent from all over Canada by the Canadian Federation of Students to write a policy paper, but most of the students decided to stay on in aid to the Mohawk cause instead. Additionally, over a hundred Oneida people from New York, Wisconsin and southern Ontario, an Quebec Algonquin man and several women from western Canada and Mexico all came to help. The Mohawk Warriors and protesters also received an outpour of support from native populations across the country.^[39]



Members of the SQ 3 September 1990

The Mercier Bridge was blockaded at the point where it passed through Mohawk territory, thereby sealing off a major access point between the Island of Montreal and Montreal's densely populated South Shore suburbs.^{[39][46]} This frustrated commuters, which resulted in violent confrontations. At the peak of the crisis, the Mercier Bridge and routes 132, 138 and 207 were all blocked, creating substantial disruption to traffic.

Corporal Marcel Lemay's funeral was held on July 16, and was attended by around 2000 people, including police officers from across Canada and the SQ director. The Warrior flag was lowered to half-mast in the Pines. On July 17, the Red Cross was finally granted entrance by police to provide emergency food relief, but this access was rescinded quickly, forcing residents to smuggle provisions in. The Mohawk coalition now speaking on behalf of the resistance agreed on three preconditions for negotiations; free access to food and advisors, as well as the presence of independent international observers, which both the provincial and federal governments firmly opposed.^[39]

Anger grew among local residents as the crisis dragged on. A group of Châteauguay residents started building an unauthorized, unplanned roadway circumventing the Kahnawá:ke reserve. Long after the crisis, this unfinished roadway was eventually incorporated into Quebec Autoroute 30.^[47] Residents of Châteauguay assaulted a Mohawk woman trying to buy groceries, tried to prevent her from leaving the store, from which she had to be escorted by police, and threw tomatoes at her and her children. They also burned multiple effigies of Mohawk warriors^[30] while chanting "*sauvages*" (savages).^[3]

By August 12, the crowd at Mercier Bridge had become a rioting mob several thousand strong, destroying police vehicles and wounding officers. The SQ apparently lost control of the situation, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) were deployed. This resulted in 35 people,^[30] including ten constables, being hospitalized for their injuries.^[5] The heated context of the "failed" Meech Accords and earlier that summer, as well as the tensions between French and English speakers in the province only served to complicate public sentiment vis-a-vis the Kanehsatà:ke resistance.^[30] Radio host Gilles Proulx raised tensions with comments such as the Mohawks "couldn't even speak French", while Simon Bédard of CJPR called for "cleaning everything up" by killing "fifty, one hundred, one hundred and twenty-five" people, burying them and forgetting about it.^[45] These remarks inflamed tempers that had been running especially high from comments preceding this crisis, including those by Ricardo Lopez, the federal Member of Parliament for Châteauguay, who denigrated the Mohawk.^[48]

Official Intervention by the Army

Nightly gatherings at the blockaded Mercier Bridge were growing in size and violence, adding to the pressure put on SQ forces, leading the Quebec premier Robert Bourassa to announce that in accord with Section 275 of the National Defence Act, he was requesting official military support from the Canadian Army on August 27.^[45] The same day Prime Minister Brian Mulroney appointed Quebec Chief Justice Alan Gold as special mediator, to negotiate an agreement with the land defenders.^[30] On August 28, press conferences are held by military leadership to announce the upcoming intervention and by Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney to denounce the actions of the protesters. Lieutenant-General Kent Foster announced the upcoming use of three Leopard assault tanks and that Brigadier-General Armand Roy was given full autonomy to attack at will with the objective of obtaining "unconditional surrender" from the Warriors.^[49]

In response, families with children and elderly members attempt to flee Kahnawá:ke and are met at the barricades by a crowd throwing stones and large rocks at their cars. Though the SQ had guaranteed safety for the evacuees, they did not attempt to stop the crowd from breaking windshields and windows. Several people were wounded and Mohawk elder Joe Armstrong, 71, was struck in the chest by a large rock, and suffered a fatal heart attack the following day.^[50] The following morning, army forces replace SQ officers surrounding Kahnawá:ke and Kanehsatà:ke.^[45]

General John de Chastelain, Chief of the Defence Staff, placed Quebec-based troops in support of the provincial authorities; some 2,500 regular and reserve troops from 34 and 35 Canadian Brigade Groups and 5 Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group were put on notice. On August 20, a company of the Royal 22^e Régiment, known colloquially in English as the "Van Doos", led by Major Alain Tremblay, took over three barricades and arrived at the final blockade leading to the disputed area. There, they reduced the stretch of no man's land, originally implemented by the SQ before the barricade at the Pines, from 1.5 kilometres to 5 metres. Additional troops and mechanized equipment mobilized at staging areas around Montreal, while reconnaissance aircraft flew air photo missions over Mohawk territory to gather intelligence. On August 29, the Mohawks at the Mercier Bridge negotiated an end to their protest blockade with Lieutenant-Colonel Robin Gagnon, the "Van Doo" commander who had been responsible for the south shore of the St. Lawrence River during the crisis.

While the Warriors at Kahnawá:ke had reached an agreement with government officials and had begun dismantling their barricades, Kanehsatà:ke was now more vulnerable and isolated than ever. Though the land dispute which had led to the crisis was resolved in principle, since the federal government had secured the purchase of the land from the developers and the town of Oka, it had yet to transfer the land title into Mohawk hands. Furthermore, the protesters at Kanehsatà:ke were still waiting on safety guarantees for themselves and their allies before risking giving up their last bargaining chips.^[49] Nonetheless, Quebec Premier Robert Bourassa announced that negotiations were over and demanded that international observers leave. They reluctantly submitted to his request, and were replaced by local church and human rights observers. Multiple parallel and sometimes secret talks were held, unbeknownst to many of the parties involved.^[30] With the bridge no longer occupied and Kahnawá:ke essentially neutralized, the armed forces marched into Kanehsatà:ke on September 1. They dismantled the last barricade on Highway 344 on September 2. The next day, only 24^[49] Warriors were left defending a territory of only a few hundred meters and were surrounded by ravines, the lake, over 400 soldiers with machine guns, armoured vehicles and helicopters. They were sheltered in a treatment center, at the top of a hill, with dormitories, a kitchen, food reserves, and communication equipment. What followed was the last leg of a prolonged siege.^[30]

By September 6, Mercier Bridge was functional again. Journalists were forbidden from approaching the Warrior stronghold and the army cut all cellphone service entering and leaving the treatment center. Anyone who left the compound was promptly arrested, including legal counsel Stanley Cohen.

Resolution and aftermath

September 25 witnessed the final engagement of the crisis: a Mohawk warrior walked around the perimeter of the blockade area with a long stick, setting off flares that had been originally installed by the Canadian Forces to alert them to individuals fleeing the area. The soldiers turned a water hose on this man, but it lacked enough pressure to disperse the crowd surrounding him. This crowd taunted the soldiers and began throwing water balloons at them, but the incident did not escalate further.^[5]



Members of the Seton Lake Indian Band blockade the BC Rail line in support of Oka, while an RCMP officer looks on. Later in the day, several elders protesting were arrested, and a confrontation with the band community ensued as Mounties drove the cars holding those arrested through the reserve en route to Lillooet.

Finally, after 78 days of fighting and 26 days of siege without supplies being let through, the land defenders decided to end the struggle. The remaining protesters began walking home, but all were arrested either while leaving *Kanehsatà:ke* or while entering Oka. As the military began arresting land defenders and some began to flee, 14-year-old *Waneek Horn-Miller* was stabbed near the heart by a Canadian bayonet, and nearly died.^[52]^[32] The journalists who had managed to stay with the Mohawk people in the treatment center were now held and interrogated. The *Kanehsatà:ke* Resistance was over.^[49]

Among those charged and convicted for their participation was Ronaldo Casalpro (who used the alias Ronald "Lasagna" Cross during the conflict). Casalpro was beaten by *Sûreté du Québec* officers after his arrest, and while three were suspended without pay, the case took so long to process that they had already left the force.^[53] Two SQ officers were suspended and investigated for allegedly beating Casalpro while in captivity, but were not subsequently charged.^[53] Cross served a six-year sentence for assault and weapons charges related to his role in the crisis and died of a heart attack in November 1999.^[53] Casalpro's brother, Tracy Cross, later served as the best man at the wedding of slain SQ Corporal Lemay's sister, Francine, who had reconciled with the community after reading *At the Woods' Edge*, a history of Kanesatake.^[54]

The golf course expansion that had originally triggered the crisis was cancelled and the land under dispute was purchased from the developers by the federal government for \$5.3 million.^[1] The municipality initially refused to sell the land until Mohawk barricades were dismantled, but acquiesced when the government threatened to *expropriate* the land without compensation.^[55] The federal government of Canada did not transfer this land to into *Kanehsatà:ke* ownership nor establish it as a land reserve.^[13]

The Oka Crisis motivated the development of a national *First Nations Policing Policy* to try to prevent future incidents, and brought Indigenous issues into the forefront in Canada.^[51] In 1991, Ouellette was re-elected mayor of Oka by *acclamation*. He later said of the crisis that his responsibilities as mayor required him to act as he did.^[56]

In media

The Oka Crisis was extensively documented and inspired numerous books and films.

Canadian filmmaker *Alanis Obomsawin* has made *documentaries* about the Oka Crisis, including *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993) and *Rocks at Whiskey Trench* (2000). These and two additional documentaries on the crisis were all produced by the *National Film Board of Canada*: Christine Welsh directed *Keepers of the Fire* (1994), which documents the role of Mohawk women during the crisis, and Alec MacLeod created *Acts of Defiance* (1993).^[38]

Montreal Gazette journalist *Albert Nerenberg* switched careers after smuggling a video camera behind the barricades and making his first documentary, called *Okanada*.^[57]

Gerald R. Alfred, a *Kahnawá:ke* Mohawk who was part of the *band council* during the crisis, and who later became a professor of *political science*, wrote *Heeding the Voices of Our Ancestors: Kahnawake Mohawk Politics and the Rise of Native Nationalism* (1995). This was based on his *PhD dissertation*, which examined the issues.

John Ciaccia, the *Minister of Native Affairs* for Quebec at the time, wrote a book about the events related to the Oka Crisis. His book, titled *The Oka Crisis, A Mirror of the Soul*, was published in 2000. Harry Swain, then the federal deputy minister of *Indian Affairs and Northern Development*, wrote "Oka: a Political Crisis and its Legacy," in 2010.

Robin Philpot wrote a book about *English Canada's* use of the crisis as a political tool following the failed *Meech Lake Accord*: *Oka: dernier alibi du Canada anglais* (1991).

Anarchist author and activist *Peter Gelderloos* said that the Oka Crisis should serve as a model for activists to get what they want for four reasons.^[58]

1. "It succeeded in seizing space.
2. It spread ideas of indigenous sovereignty and inspired many others in North America to fight back.
3. It did not have elite support.
4. The golf course expansion on their lands was defeated, and the conflict came to a dignified conclusion for the Mohawk."

The 2020 film *Beans*, which won the *Canadian Screen Award for Best Motion Picture*, portrays the incident through the eyes of a young Mohawk girl. *Tracey Deer*, who lived through the crisis when she was twelve years old, directed and co-wrote the film.^[59]

In art

Joseph Tehawehron David, a Mohawk artist who became known for his role as a warrior during the Oka Crisis in 1990, developed a body of artistic work that was deeply influenced by his experience "behind the wire" in 1990.

In popular culture

In the 1999 film *The Insider*, *Al Pacino's* character Lowell Bergman says "Everybody thinks Canadian Mounties ride horses and rescue ladies from rapids. Mike, they backed locals in Oka in a fight with Mohawks over building a golf course on their burial site, they beat up protesters at Kanesatake".

The Canadian **punk rock** band Propagandhi wrote a song titled "Oka Everywhere", which was released in 1995 on a 10-inch split album with I Spy. It was later re-released on their 1998 compilation album *Where Quantity Is Job Number 1*.

The Canadian indigenous hip hop duo **Snotty Nose Rez Kids** reference the Oka Crisis in their song "Cops With Guns Are The Worst!!!".

See also

- Face to Face (photograph)
- Timeline of Quebec history
- Gustafsen Lake Standoff
- Ipperwash Crisis
- Grand River land dispute
- Seton Portage#Land claims issues
- Burnt Church Crisis
- 2020 Canadian pipeline and railway protests
- Fairy Creek old-growth logging protests

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- ↑ According to Rolland Litalien (a Sulpician priest), when they arrived in the new mission, the Sulpicians had no responsibility for training men for ordination even though their manor house was called 'Séminaire de Saint-Sulpice', the word *séminaire* designating a house for religious education, as in, for example, the *séminaire des ursulines*. Evidently, the expression 'Séminaire de Saint-Sulpice' stuck to apply more permanently until the mid-twentieth century.
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External links

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- [Socialist Studies Special Issue: 20 Years After Oka](http://socialiststudies.com/index.php/sss/issue/view/15) (<http://socialiststudies.com/index.php/sss/issue/view/15>)
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Bloody Blockades: The Legacy of the Oka Crisis

Melinda Meng

11–13 minutes

It's a tale as old as Canada itself: contested First Nations land rights, a lucrative land development, escalating tensions leading to excessive force and damaged relations. For those who know of the Oka Crisis of 1990, history seems to be repeating itself with the latest conflict over the development of a gas pipeline running through Wet'suwet'en territory in British Columbia. The prevailing strategy for dealing with First Nations land rights does not appear to have changed substantially in the last 30 years, leaving many wondering what it will take for the Canadian government to finally learn from its dismal record of protecting First Nations' rights and commit to the path of reconciliation.

Oka is a small village less than an hour outside of Montreal. Its original name is Kanehsatà:ke, a name given to it by the Kanien'kehà:ka (or Mohawk) who are the traditional custodians of the land. In 1717, the Seminary of St-Sulpice mission in Montreal was told to relocate, and French King Louis XV granted them the land encompassing Kanehsatà:ke. The understanding was that the Sulpicians would hold the land in trust for its First Nations inhabitants, but they reneged on this commitment and claimed sole ownership rights. With these newfound rights the Sulpicians began clearing land and selling off plots to European settlers, marking the beginning of a new era.

Even though they were not legally recognized as the owners of the land, the Mohawk continued to build their community around Kanehsatà:ke. An 1881 government initiative to force indigenous inhabitants to leave was largely unsuccessful, and five years later the Mohawk would create the land of "the Pines" that would become the center of the Oka Crisis over a century later. This land consisted of a mountain area where 70,000 to 80,000 pine trees were planted by Mohawk with the help of non-native settlers, after sand avalanches caused by a lack of stabilizing tree roots in the ground threatened the area. Over time the Pines became the home of a Mohawk burial ground, which only added to the controversy when the town decided to build a golf course on the land without the consent of the Mohawk. While the initial golf course development was successfully completed, a critical line was crossed with the announcement of plans to expand the golf course into the cemetery.

In March of 1990, the Mohawk erected a blockade to prevent the arrival of bulldozers scheduled to break ground on the golf course expansion. The municipality was granted an injunction ordering the dismantling of the barricade, but instead of giving up, the Mohawk strengthened their barricade and warriors were seen patrolling the pines. After a second injunction was served in late June, members from the neighbouring Mohawk communities of Kahnawà:ke and Akwesasne arrived to help defend the land and set up a protest camp. By July, the mayor of Oka had decided that the impasse had gone on for long enough and called for the Sûreté du Québec, Quebec's provincial police, to come in and enforce the injunction. An early morning raid staged with 100 police officers equipped with tear gas, concussion grenades, and assault rifles went terribly wrong when shooting broke out between the two groups, leading to the death of Corporal Marcel Lemay of the SQ. The police

retreated, abandoning their cruisers and a bulldozer, and the prevailing Mohawk warriors used these to barricade the highway running through Kanehsatà:ke. The Mohawk warriors of Kahnawà:ke constructed a blockade in solidarity on the Honoré Mercier Bridge, one of the four main bridges connecting the metropolitan island of Montreal to the residential hubs of the south shore. Other First Nations communities in Canada followed suit, with people in places as far as British Columbia blockading roads and railways.

The blockading of the Honoré Mercier Bridge proved to be a tipping point for the many Canadians who until that point had merely been onlookers to the tensions brewing in Kanehsatà:ke. The disruption this action caused to thousands of peoples' daily commutes prompted an extremely racist backlash, with the residents of neighbouring Chateauguay attacking Mohawks driving through and lighting a Mohawk effigy on fire. Supplies to the entirety of Kanehsatà:ke were quickly cut off, even though there were still many civilians and children in the community. Already with one police officer dead and now facing daily outbreaks of violence, Premier of Quebec Robert Bourassa called on the federal government to intervene and send in the Canadian Armed Forces.



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On August 20th, the Canadian Armed Forces were deployed, with 4,000 soldiers stationed in the area around Kanehsatà:ke and Kahnawà:ke. The armed forces successfully negotiated the removal of the blockade on the Honoré Mercier Bridge, but were not as successful on the Kanehsatà:ke front. Authorities instructed the citizens of Oka to evacuate, and fearing for their lives many of the elders, women, and children of Kanehsatà:ke fled by car into Montreal. Along the way they were greeted by angry rock-throwing mobs, resulting in several people being injured. In the end, the two sides reached a deal whereby the blockades would be taken down in return for the permanent cancellation of the golf course expansion. With the armed forces not expecting the sudden exodus from the surrender of the final remaining protestors, the closing act of the crisis quickly descended into chaos. During the ensuing altercation, Waneek Horn Miller, a 14 year old Mohawk resident of Kanehsatà:ke, was accidentally bayoneted in the chest. Luckily she survived, but Waneek was just one of the many civilians who came to harm during this conflict.

Finally after 78 days, the crisis came to an end, leaving a provincial police officer dead and hundreds of Mohawk civilians injured. The events led to the creation of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, tasked with deepening consultation and cooperation between First Nations and governments across Canada. Now, 30 years later, how close are Canadians to actually achieving reconciliation with the First Nations who have been systematically abused for centuries? Despite the moratorium on further development in the Pines, the ownership of the Mohawk over the land has still not been recognized and is still legally held by developers and local government. This "on-going collusion of land fraud" has been formally queried and protested by First Nations activists, but so far the government has not moved to give the land

back to its rightful owners. One of the Oka developers recently offered to "gift" some of the land back to the people of Kanehsatà:ke, a move that has been criticized for the tax benefits that the developer would still be extracting from land that does not belong to him. More importantly, the land would still not be directly held by the Mohawk but by the federal government, who would have the final say in its administration.

The history of the Oka Crisis and its impact is especially salient when taken into consideration with the Wet'suwet'en protests that began in late 2018. This time the conflict was centered around the construction of a natural gas pipeline planned to pass through traditional Wet'suwet'en territory in the province of British Columbia. Once again blockades were erected across Canada, beginning with roads leading to the actual site of development and expanding to encompass railway lines across Canada. The peaceful protest, similar to the blockading of the Honoré Mercier Bridge in 1990, was successful in increasing the visibility of the dispute and putting pressure on the federal government to come up with a resolution.



Tyendinaga rail blockade February 10, 2020 02. Wikimedia Commons Community Archives / CC0

However, the economic disruption this entailed made the movement unpopular with many Canadians, and there has been an increase in hate speech and violent threats made against First Nations peoples. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) was dispatched to enforce a court injunction and remove a blockade in Wet'suwet'en territory, resulting in the arrest of 14 protestors. The publication of a report alleging the RCMP was instructed to use lethal force in the enforcement of the injunction, a claim that has not been verified or confirmed by the RCMP or reputable news media sources in Canada but seems to be supported by video footage of RCMP officers armed with rifles circling a blockade outpost, further aggravated the situation. The arrests and accusations of excessive force sparked significant controversy and a new wave of protests across Canada. Thankfully there have yet to be any fatal incidents recorded in this latest episode of land disputes between First Nations and the Canadian government, but there is no clear resolution in sight.

The Oka Crisis taught First Nations communities across Canada that the fastest way to make Canadians pay attention to their issues and come to the negotiating table was to disrupt their daily lives. Blockades were the perfect tool to accomplish this goal peacefully, but escalation motivated in part by a lingering racist colonial history led to violence and a breakdown in negotiations. Clearly, the Canadian government continues to fail to live up to its obligations to protect the rights of First Nations and correct historical injustices that have scarred indigenous communities for generations.

"Reconciliation" becomes nothing more than window-dressing, a public relations motto that deflects from the costly issue of land ownership and reparations. Raising awareness of these injustices through the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and more recently the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous

Women and Girls is all well and good, but what continues to be lacking are concrete actions seeking to rectify these wrongs. The government seems as eager as ever to call in armed forces instead of meeting at the negotiating table, and without a clear framework for land repatriation, reconciliation is a pipe dream destined to be enmired in pipeline development nightmares.

While the repatriation of all unceded land, which includes the major metropolis of Montreal, might not be the most feasible solution, that does not mean that partial repatriation and other compensatory measures should not be pursued. At the very least the government should ensure the return of land that has yet to be developed, like the Pines, to the Mohawk, and begin making payments towards the purchase of land that they are not willing to repatriate. This would ensure a steady flow of income for First Nations communities that can be used to provide community support services, cultural educational programs, and dependable infrastructure like electricity and potable water, essential resources which the Canadian government has been negligent in providing. Canada sadly cannot return to the past and fix its mistakes, but what the government can do is learn from history and leave a legacy future generations will be proud to uphold. The alternative is facing a major crisis every few decades and apologizing afterwards, a pattern that will take meaningful change to break.