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Oka Crisis of 1990

Indigenous Armed Self-Defense and Organization in Canada

by Gord Hill



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Notes

1. Geoffrey York and Loreen Pinder, *People of the Pines: The Warriors and the Legacy of Oka* (Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1991 [paperback edition, 1992]), 315.
2. Rick Hornung, *One Nation Under the Gun: Inside the Mohawk Civil War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 205.
3. Donna Goodleaf, *Entering the War Zone: A Mohawk Perspective on Resisting Invasions* (Penticton: Theytus Books, 1995), 125.
4. See the video *Rocks at Whiskey Trench*, Alanis Obamsawin (National Film Board of Canada, 2000).
5. Goodleaf, *Entering the War Zone*, 105.
6. York and Pinder, *People of the Pines*, 420–21.

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The people are convinced that they're right. They have a certain patriotism. Unfortunately, they are tossing aside the rules of our white governments. They're in a vicious circle. As long as we don't recognize them as a nation with their own protective force, we can't accept that they can bear military arms. But as long as they don't possess military arms, they will not be able to affirm their rights as a nation.

—Canadian Forces soldier, quoted in *People of the Pines*¹

Oka 1990

One of the most significant acts of armed self-defence in Canada by Indigenous peoples occurred during 1990 in the Mohawk territories of Kanehsatake and Kahnawake in the province of Québec. It became known as the “Oka Crisis.” Oka had a significant impact on Indigenous social movements across the country, and set the tone for Indigenous resistance throughout the 1990s and to this day.

Oka is a small town located 53 km west of Montréal, Québec. It is next to Kanehsatake, a Mohawk reserve territory with a population of around 1,400. In 1989, the mayor of Oka announced plans to expand a nine-hole golf course and build a condominium project on land claimed by the Mohawks, threatening the last pine trees in the area.

For nearly a year, Mohawks and non-Native people from Oka protested, rallied and signed petitions. Runners were sent from Kanehsatake to other Mohawk communities requesting assistance, but in the end only the Warrior Societies responded by sending clothing, equipment, and personnel.

In the early spring of 1990, a small cabin was built on a hardly used dirt road running through the pines. After one attempt to raid the blockade was called off, the Québec provincial police (Sûreté du Québec, the SQ) organized a large, military-style raid involving over one hundred riot

cops, as well as heavily armed tactical units.

The raid was carried out on July 11, 1990, beginning at just after 5:00 a.m. The police approached the blockade and demanded that it be dismantled. Later in the morning they fired tear gas and a short firefight erupted. One police officer was shot and killed (Cpl. Marcel Lemay, a thirty-one-year-old), and the police retreated, abandoning several of their vehicles. These were then used to build barricades as the Mohawks began reinforcing their defensive positions.

Shortly after the failed police raid at Kanehsatake, armed Mohawks in Kahnawake, another reserve territory located near Montréal, blocked the Mercier Bridge, a vital commuter link to the city from the surrounding suburbs.

That night, more warriors clandestinely entered the Pines despite SQ checkpoints that sealed off the area. Most warriors spent the night on patrol or positioned at bunkers and barricades. In the following days and weeks as many as two thousand police from the SQ and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP, Canada's national police force) were deployed to both Kanehsatake and Kahnawake. The state's primary role was to contain the armed warriors and to control racist white settlers rioting in a suburb of Montréal called Châteauguay due to the blockade of the Mercier Bridge.

The next day, soldiers from the Royal 22e Regiment were secretly dispatched to Oka and Kahnawake. Police and political officials had been clearly caught off guard by the Mohawk armed resistance. A top-level aide to Premier Bourassa explained their problem: "It was an armed insurrection. . . . We didn't know what was next. Our police had been defeated and all we heard about was roaming Mohawks with guns. We thought this could be our version of hell—the city shut down, the police in retreat, and the Mohawks standing on top of police cars with their AK-47s held high above their heads."²

The Mohawks had a list of demands, including title to the disputed land, withdrawal of police from all Mohawk territories, a forty-eight-hour period of free movement in and out of Kahnawake and Kanehsatake, and the referral of all



Conclusion

The Oka Crisis of 1990 had a profound effect on Indigenous peoples in Canada and served to revitalize their fighting spirit and warrior traditions. The standoffs that occurred five years later were, in part, a result of the armed resistance at Oka. The resistance influenced and shaped Indigenous struggles from the 1990s to the present. Although the vast majority of confrontations between Indigenous peoples and state security forces are not armed, the armed resistance at Oka served as an inspiring example of Indigenous sovereignty and the necessity of maintaining a warrior force capable of defending and asserting that sovereignty. The image of the masked and camouflaged warrior, along with the iconic Mohawk Warrior flag, continues to be seen, including the recent anti-fracking resistance carried out by Mi'kmaq warriors in New Brunswick, during which six RCMP vehicles were set on fire and destroyed after police raided a blockade. What was especially inspiring about the Oka Crisis was not only that armed warriors confronted police and military forces, but that they also won. To this day, neither the golf course expansion or condominium project has been built.

Instead of deploying military forces, the BC government deployed some 450 heavily armed cops from the RCMP Emergency Response Teams (ERT). They were provided with military assistance and gear, including nine Bison APCs (along with their crews). In addition, the media were not permitted to enter a restricted zone established by the police, which made it almost impossible for the defenders to publicly communicate their position. Instead, the media simply repeated police information as fact, which was later revealed to be disinformation provided by the RCMP. In the largest paramilitary police operation in Canadian history, the RCMP used explosives to destroy a truck being driven by defenders in an agreed-upon no-shoot zone, initiating an hours-long gun battle, which ended with one of the Bisons being disabled. The next day, RCMP snipers opened fire on an unarmed individual, again moving in a no-shoot zone. The standoff ended in late September when the defenders laid down their arms and were arrested.

In the second confrontation of that summer, heavily armed police with military assistance were deployed to Ipperwash Provincial Park to remove a group of Natives reoccupying their reserve land from which they had been forcibly removed prior to World War II. Their reserve of Stony Point was made into a military base and provincial park. In 1993, they had begun reoccupying a part of the base and, in 1995, expanded it into the park. The Ontario government responded with a large police deployment, which eventually resulted in a tactical police unit opening fire on unarmed defenders, shooting a fifteen-year-old youth, Dudley George, in the back and killing him. Following this conflict, the people of Stony Point remained on the former military base (as they do to this day).

disputes arising from the conflict to the World Court at The Hague.

The Mohawks also had three preconditions for any further negotiations: free access to food, unhindered access to clan mothers and spiritual advisors, and the posting of international human rights observers. Both the federal and provincial governments rejected these demands. Despite condemning the warriors as thugs and terrorists, government officials continued to meet with senior Mohawk warriors at a Montréal hotel.



Mohawk spokesperson Ellen Gabriel looks down from the barricade in Kanesatake in the summer of 1990.

Kahnawake: Organized Community Resistance

In Kahnawake, the crisis brought all community factions together in a unified defence. Self-organization within the community included communications, distribution of food, medical supplies, and gasoline. The community radio station, CKRK, became a key communications center and source of info. Even the warriors on barricade duty were fed and

informed. According to one firsthand account, “The media task force also sent runners out in shifts to all the barricades and distributed copies of press releases to the Rotiskenrahkete (warriors). These reports contained daily news . . . [so] people on the barricades did not feel left out and isolated from the rest of the community.”³

At first, there was little organization of barricades at Kahnawake. Once shifts and schedules were made, the situation improved. Kahnawake military veterans were requested to help, as many young warriors did not know how to build bunkers or conduct patrols.

Squads of five men with squad leaders were organized. At the peak of organizing, warriors had two squad leaders and as many as forty warriors per shift at each highway checkpoint. As support for the barricades grew, up to six hundred people took turns on duty. Many Mohawks serving in the U.S. or Canadian military requested leave and returned home to assist in defensive operations on the territory.

Kahnawake served as a main rally point for warriors. In mid-July, a request for assistance wampum was sent to Oneidas in Ontario (the closest allies to the Mohawks). About a hundred Oneida warriors from Ontario, New York, and Wisconsin arrived. Most stayed at Kahnawake, while some joined Kanehsatake.

Altogether, there were fourteen bunkers and barricades at Kahnawake. Bunkers were placed on either side of road barricades to better defend them. Around bunkers and in areas where enemy forces could flank them, booby traps including punji sticks and fishhooks were placed. Other bunkers were used as decoys. Later in the summer, a series of tank trap trenches were dug near barricades to deter armoured personnel carriers. Another tactic used by warriors was placing fake explosive charges and wiring on the Mercier Bridge, making it appear as if it was rigged to explode should police (or later the military) attempt to retake it by force.

There were an estimated six hundred guns in Mohawk hands at Kahnawake (this number is the same given for

report, titled *The Legacy of Oka* and published by the right-wing Mackenzie Institute for the Study of Terrorism in 1991, stated that the use of the military had given the warriors a moral victory in the minds of the public. The images of warriors versus soldiers, along with prolonged negotiations, only served to reinforce the view of the Mohawks as sovereign people with the warriors as their defensive force.

The report recommended that in future conflicts, heavily armed police be used quickly with no time for lengthy negotiations. One effect of such a strategy would be to portray the conflict as a criminal matter, as opposed to an insurgency or civil war, thereby “depoliticizing” the resistance. This strategy closely resembles that adopted by the British in Northern Ireland against the Irish Republican Army during the 1970s, during which the guerrillas were portrayed as drug smugglers and petty criminals.

Another recommendation from the Mackenzie Institute was that the government and security forces needed to gain greater control over the media. The media is a primary means of public communication with immense power to frame and shape public perception. At Oka, the media became imbedded among the defenders; on the final day of the siege, there were still ten reporters inside the barricades. Many continued to give reports right up to the final days. Their presence undermined the overall counterinsurgency effort.

Five years later, in the summer of 1995, this new counterinsurgency strategy was used in two separate conflicts with Indigenous peoples. The first occurred in the south-central interior region of BC, in Secwepemc territory. This was another armed standoff that began after an American rancher demanded that a Sun Dance camp be removed from government land that his cattle grazed on. After cowboys from the ranch threatened an elder and his family in the camp, armed warriors arrived to defend the camp, setting into motion a month-long armed standoff near 100 Mile House, BC (known as Ts’Peten, or Big Lake, in Secwepemc, and also referred to as Gustafsen Lake).

For the Mohawks, there were seventy-five injured, including cuts, bruises, fractures, and tear gas. These included children as young as five, and one elder seventy-two years old. The military claimed to have seized forty-seven weapons from the island, most of them hunting rifles and shotguns.

Following the events of September 18, the military did not attempt another raid into Kahnawake. Lt. Col. Greg Mitchell, a commander of the operation, later stated, “The strong resistance surprised us. . . . It was amazing the way they reacted. . . . Next time my men will be equipped with plexiglass shields and face masks.”⁵

Warrior Withdrawal

At Kanehsatake, the warriors eventually decided that the time to disengage had come, and on September 26, after lighting a ceremonial fire and burning their weapons, they attempted to walk out. Caught off-guard, the military scrambled to intercept and detain the warriors. Scuffles and fights broke out as armed soldiers attempted to apprehend unarmed warriors. Several warriors escaped, and made it into the town of Oka.

In the months following the siege, scores of Mohawks went to trial on charges ranging from mischief to rioting, obstruction of justice, and weapons charges. In one mass trial, thirty-four defendants were acquitted. The most targeted of the warriors was Lasagna (Ronald Cross), who eventually received four years and four months in jail after being convicted of assault, vandalism, weapons offences, and uttering threats. Most of the others who were convicted of charges received prison sentences of under a year.

New Counterinsurgency Plans

In the aftermath of the armed resistance at Kanehsatake and Kahnawake, internal debates occurred over the use of firearms, which affirmed their use as limited but ultimately necessary.⁶

After the events at Oka/Kanehsatake, military and political researchers made several recommendations. One

how many armed warriors were involved), including AK-47s, hunting rifles, shotguns, pistols, and a .50 calibre semiautomatic. Throughout the summer, warriors also continued to buy weapons, ammo, and equipment. In the third or fourth week of the crisis, for example, a shipment of eighty AK-47s was smuggled into Kahnawake. Although they had only pretended to wire the Mercier Bridge with explosives, the Mohawks could easily have done so using explosives from local construction companies in Kahnawake.



Indigenous Solidarity and Military Deployment

While the sieges at Kanehsatake and Kahnawake were ongoing, and as negotiations continued, the “Oka Crisis” was headline news across the country. The standoff had also generated widespread solidarity actions from Indigenous people across the country, including protests, occupations of government buildings, blockades of highways and railroads, and the sabotage of railway bridges and electrical power lines.

Canada faced an Indigenous uprising, and there is little doubt that this widespread solidarity, along with the great potential of Indigenous people to inflict significant disruption of infrastructure (such as highways, railways, and electrical lines), served to limit the use of lethal force by

state security forces. On August 20, after a month of ongoing, armed standoff, military personnel formally replaced the police at both Kanehsatake and Kahnawake.

The deployment of troops at Kanehsatake and Kahnawake was labeled Operation Salon, the largest internal military operation in Canadian history. In all, 4,500 soldiers with more than a thousand vehicles, Leopard tanks, Grizzly and M113 APCs, trucks, artillery pieces, and other equipment were deployed (the Fifth Mechanized Infantry Brigade). In addition, there were also helicopters, Aurora surveillance planes, and naval ships on the St. Lawrence Seaway. The military cordoned off and contained the area, conducted patrols, and prepared for a final assault. They also applied slow but constant pressure, including troop advances backed up by Grizzly APCs.

On August 27, after days of frustrated negotiations, Québec Premier Robert Bourassa declared negotiations over and asked the army to dismantle the Mohawk barricades. In Kanehsatake, warriors went to red alert. The next day, civil protection authorities went door-to-door at Oka advising all remaining citizens to evacuate. The Red Cross brought in stretchers and body bags. Two Canadian Forces fighter planes flew over Kahnawake and Kanehsatake in a show of force.

Mohawk Withdrawal

In the afternoon of August 28, some residents of Kahnawake began to evacuate in a convoy of some seventy vehicles, mostly women, children, and elders. They used the north exit near the Mercier Bridge, but were detained by the SQ, who searched every vehicle, and delayed them for over two hours. In the meantime, local radio stations (including Montréal's CJMS) broadcast the location of the convoy. By the time the convoy was underway, a mob of over five hundred white people had gathered. They began throwing rocks at the Mohawk vehicles, smashing windows and injuring persons inside. Although there were approximately thirty to forty police on hand, they made no effort to stop the rock-throwing.⁴ One

elder, Joe Armstrong (seventy-one years old) was hit in the chest with a large boulder and died one week later of a heart attack.

The next day, Mohawks and soldiers began dismantling the barricades around Kahnawake. Based on agreements with the military, masked and camouflaged warriors who did not carry weapons were not to be arrested. Altogether, it would take a further eight days to dismantle the barricades and reopen the Mercier Bridge.

In early September, the military began advancing on and dismantling barricades in Kanehsatake, using hundreds of troops and armoured vehicles. Along with the warriors were over a dozen media personnel. By September 3, the warriors had retreated to a treatment centre located in Kanehsatake, well stocked with food and resources. The treatment center would be the final defensive position of the warriors until their disengagement at the end of the month, after the military had cut electricity and water.

Raid on Tekakwitha Island

On September 18, soldiers and police raided Tekakwitha Island, a deserted island on the edge of the Kahnawake territory connected by a short bridge. Dozens of troops and SQ landed on the western side of the island by boat and helicopter. As they advanced toward the bridge, hundreds of Mohawks rushed to confront them.

Some thirty soldiers moved to block the bridge by setting up razor wire. Mohawks dismantled the blockade and physically confronted soldiers. The soldiers used rifle butts and fired volleys of tear gas. The Mohawks dispersed and then regrouped. In a second attack, one soldier was beaten semiconscious and others were wounded. Soldiers fired warning shots into the air and pulled back into a defensive position. Reinforcements arrived, and Mohawks were faced with 140 soldiers.

After a seven-hour standoff, eight military Chinook helicopters airlifted the soldiers out. Twenty had been injured.