

# Indian Summer

## Canadian Army vs. the Mohawks

Jim Campbell

1990

On September 26; 1990 a 78-day siege of two Mohawk territories near Montreal, Quebec, ended when the last group of holdouts walked out of a rehabilitation centre where they had been surrounded by Canadian army troops since September 1<sup>st</sup>. Rather than the unconditional surrender that the state wanted, the Mohawks were able to turn apparent defeat into symbolic victory.

By turning left rather than right as ordered, the 50 Mohawk men, women and children, threw the Canadian army into disarray. With rifles and bayonets at the ready, the soldiers were in a state of confusion, at first unable to figure out what to do, as the Mohawks continued to walk through their lines rather than passively wait to be arrested.

It was only through brutality and overwhelming numbers that the army was finally able to control the defiant Mohawks. In the confusion, two of the most sought-after Warriors were able to escape through the army lines.

The standoff began on July 11, when hundreds of police from the Surete du Quebec (SQ) launched an attack armed with automatic rifles, concussion grenades and tear gas on a barricade at Kanesatake 35 miles west of Montreal. They were attempting to serve an injunction ordering the removal of a barricade which had been erected by the Mohawk community to keep a pine forest and burial site from being turned into a golf course by the neighboring town of Oka.

The police retreated in disarray when a small number of Mohawk Warriors returned fire and a sudden gust of wind blew the tear gas back at the attackers. One cop was killed though it has still not been determined which side fired the fatal bullet. In their panic to leave, the cops abandoned six police vehicles which were immediately turned into a new barricade blocking off the highway.

To support their brothers and sisters, and to forestall a second attack, Warriors at Kahnawake seized the Mercier bridge which rises from their land near the town of Chateaugay, Quebec. Barricades were erected around the bridge and on all highways crossing their land. The Warriors threatened to blow up the bridge, a major commuting route connecting the south shore of the St. Laurence River to downtown Montreal, if any Mohawks were hurt at Kanesatake.

The stage was now set for one of the most remarkable summers in Canadian history. On the nightly TV news, armed and masked Warriors and other Mohawks passionately articulated their position while sitting a few hundred yards from police and army lines. Blockades of roads and railways were set up across the country by other First Nations to support the Mohawks and press their own claims.

There were at least 40 such blockades in British Columbia alone. The only two East-west railways were blocked simultaneously in northern Ontario for over a week, effectively stopping transcontinental rail traffic.

## Support for the Mohawks

The vulnerability of the infrastructure to guerrilla action—thousands and thousands of miles of oil and gas pipelines and power lines across sparsely populated native territory—was driven home by the toppling of five electrical pylons on Chippewa territory in south-western Ontario.

Public opinion polls, radio phone-in shows and the “letters to the editor” columns showed that not only did many Canadians support the demands of the Mohawks and other First Nations, but that much of the support was knowledgeable and conscious and that it came from across the political and social spectrum.

The Independent Truckers Association of Ontario took in truckloads of food to feed the besieged Mohawks. Railway workers, laid-off due to the blockades in northern Ontario, blocked the only highway to demand that the government begin serious negotiations with the land claims of the local Cree and Ojibway in order to get the trains moving again.

On the other hand, at the barricades themselves, white residents of Chateaugay, particularly those who had two hours added to their commuting time by the closure of the Mercier bridge, protested nightly against the Mohawks in demonstrations organized by former and off-duty cops and the KKK. Anyone looking native was endangered and even local black residents were chased and beaten. For three nights in a row a brigade of up to 200 young, white men and women broke off from the much larger demonstrations and attacked the police with rocks, bottles and molotovs. Once they, rather than the Mohawks, became the target of the mobs, the police changed their tactics to bring these demos under control.

At the end of August, police stood by while a racist mob threw rocks at a long line of cars leaving Kahnawake carrying the elderly, children and women, just before an expected army attack. As local radio stations carried reports about the impending evacuation, factories let their workers go home early and the SQ delayed the line of Kahnawake vehicles for over two hours, allowing the racists time to gather. One native man died a few days later of a heart attack after being injured by a large rock.

The Canadian army, having replaced the SQ on the front line at the Mercier Bridge, in mid-August, used all the classic tricks and tactics of counter-subversion: intimidation, provocation, massive firepower, treachery, misinformation, propaganda, starvation, and brutality amongst others. Every tactic was used except for mounting an armed attack. On August 28 the army announced that it would clear the barricades at the bridge. For a few exceedingly tense minutes, it looked as though the long-feared bloodbath would begin. But then, just at the height of tension, under instructions from the community at Kahnawake, the Warriors began helping the army to dismantle the barricades.

Then, in the early morning hours of September 1<sup>st</sup>, the army swept around the barricades to invade Kanesatake outside of Oka. Slowly, methodically, but aggressively they moved against the Warriors. At times the soldiers and Warriors would literally be face-to-face. At other times a combatant would raise an automatic rifle over his head and challenge someone on the other side to shoot.

Under extreme tension, exchanging insults, both sides tried to provoke the other to begin what would have been a calamitous fire fight. The army relentlessly pushed the Warriors back. In the end, the clan mothers, having decided for peace, came onto the scene, and told the Warriors to back off.

A Mohawk force of more than 50 men, women and children retreated to a rehabilitation centre to continue the standoff. A major military operation had been carried off without a shot fired. Both the warriors and the military had been true to their word that they would not fire the first shot.

With the remaining body of Warriors surrounded, Kanesatake, Kahnawake and a third nearby territory of Akwesasne were placed under military and police occupation. The army and SQ attempted to do a weapons search at the longhouse at Kahnawake. The soldiers used rifle butts to beat clan mothers and other Mohawks trying to defend the traditional spiritual and political centre of their nation.

A peace camp set up in support of the Mohawks was continually harassed by conditions approaching martial law. The army and police completely surrounded the camp at the provincial park, stopping and searching everyone who approached. Helicopters hovered overhead all night keeping people awake. Food and medical supplies were cut off and eventually, the army and police moved in and closed down the camp.

As the situation developed through the summer, the state tried to walk a very narrow line. The Mohawks had to be crushed in order to forestall the rapidly developing native movement. Yet, an outright attack that created martyrs would radicalize not only the other First Nations, probably resulting in an ongoing, low level guerrilla campaign, but solidify the increasing politicization of people right across the country.

## **Repression Becomes Evident**

The repressive tolerance which has been developed into a fine art by the Canadian state would be shattered, and overt methods of repression might not be adequate to keep everyone in line. Ironically, the army, drawing on its vast experience with United Nations peacekeeping missions, appeared to be the only competent state institution. The federal government essentially disappeared for the summer.

The army learned the lessons of public relations very well. They spoke directly to the cameras, describing their intentions and actions as being “non-violent,” while they committed one provocative act after another and broke every agreement they made. The army did what seemed impossible—they got the Mercier Bridge open again and seized the territories without precipitating the armed conflict that would have come at a high cost to everyone. It was only when soldiers were seen beating the Mohawks during confrontations that it became apparent that a “peace-keeping” army is, after all, just another army doing its duty to preserve the state.

The native movement has been developing rapidly in Canada for the past several years. Numbering somewhat over a million people, with a young and rapidly growing population, their situation is similar to that of many colonized peoples elsewhere. Either they take a stand and fight for what they want or forever face existence as a marginalized and dispossessed people.

For the most part, the First Nations were never militarily defeated, nor have they ever signed treaties granting settler society use of the land. Large portions of Canada are under native land claims including 85 percent of Quebec and virtually all of B.C. The increasing desperation and devastation of First Nation people in a resource-based economy has brought control of the land more and more into question.

Much of this conflict has occurred with nations in very remote areas. The Lubicon and the Innu had little contact with settler society until after World War II. However, the Mohawks, and the rest of the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy, have had extensive involvement with Europeans from the very beginning of the settler invasions. Kahnawake was the first Reserve created in North America.

It is only because the Six Nations joined with the Canadian militia (with a little help from the British army) in the War of 1812 that Canada has the limited autonomy from the U.S. that it has today. Treaties signed with various European powers going back to first contact acknowledged the sovereignty of the Six Nations. The Canadian state repressed attempts by the Mohawks to maintain their land and their traditional political and cultural institutions in the 1920s and again in the late 1950s. But the Mohawks have never accepted defeat, nor renounced their claims to be a sovereign people. To this day, they do not consider themselves to be either American or Canadian.

## **Harassment Continues**

The loss of immense amounts of land since 1950 either through seizure or through devastation by industrial waste, has made any further loss of land critical. Attempts by the town of Oka to expand a golf course into the Pines, an area planted and cared for by the Mohawks that also contains burial sites, brought the whole issue to a head.

The government has succeeded, for now, in getting the Mohawk struggle off the front pages. The police and courts are fulfilling their roles.

Hundreds of charges such as: rioting, creating a disturbance, wearing a mask while committing a crime, and possession of restricted weapons have been laid against nearly a hundred Warriors and other militant Mohawks. Many have outstanding arrest warrants held over their heads, giving the SQ an excuse at any time to launch major raids against the communities.

Kahnawake, Kanesatake and nearby Akwesasne continue to be occupied by police from Quebec, Ontario and New York state (on Akwesasne). Countless trials will be used to drain the emotional, physical and financial resources of the nation similar to the way in which the Black Panthers, the American Indian Movement and other movements were weakened or destroyed during the sixties and seventies.

There is no need to declare the summer some big victory for “the people,” or for the First Nations. It wasn’t. But over the summer we learned, once again, how quickly a situation can be transformed politically and socially. The sight of the Mohawks standing up to the most hated government in Canadian history struck a responsive chord in both native and non-native people. The self-image of Canada as being a place where tolerance and compromise reign supreme was shattered. The iron fist was pulled from the velvet glove and many Canadians were not impressed.

Mohawk claims of sovereignty, and attempts to negotiate those claims, threaten both the Canadian and Quebec governments and endanger future ecologically destructive mega-projects already on the planning board.

For many in Canada, it is assumed that land under native control would be better maintained than if left to the ravages of the corporations or the grandiose schema of government. The planned destruction of a pine forest for the sake of a golf course offered a perfect symbol of why the environmental movement increasingly identifies itself with the native struggle for land.

It remains unclear whether or not the lessons from this summer will be integrated into people’s consciousness or if, once again, the majority of Canadians will slip into uneasy slumber. But even before the siege began, the whole concept of Canada, which defines itself not as a nation of individuals, but rather of cultures, peoples and regions, was under attack. The current paralysis of the federal governing system, the devastation of the wilderness and the toxic contamination of everything else, combined with harsh attacks on living standards, has increasingly made apparent the limits of the welfare state.

Either we will wait for the system to correct itself in some way, or as individuals, peoples and movements, we can begin to take the matter more into our hands. This summer’s support for the Mohawks’ efforts to control their own lives has at least given some hope that militant self-activity will not always be overwhelmed by the resentment and small mindedness that so often characterizes people’s lives here.

## **Sidebar: Mohawk Nation Defense Fund**

Skyrocketing legal costs have left the Mohawk Nation with inadequate funds for a defense against the numerous charges its members face. Send donations to Mohawk Nation Defense Fund, c/o Caisse Populaire, POB 1987, Acct. No. 80186, Kahnawake PQ JOL 1B0.

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