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Background

There was a long history behind the crisis at [Oka](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/article/oka/); since the 18th century the [Mohawk](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/article/mohawk-of-the-st-lawrence-valley/) had been pressing the government to recognize their right to land in the area, but their requests had been largely ignored. In 1961, a nine-hole golf course was built on land that had been claimed by the Mohawk of the Kanesatake reserve as their Commons (known as the Pines); despite protests that the land included a burial ground, the Mohawk claim was rejected and the golf course was built. In 1989, the mayor of Oka, Jean Ouellette, announced that the golf course would be expanded to 18 holes. He also authorized the construction of 60 luxury condominiums in the Pines. Despite protests by the Mohawk of Kanesatake, and concerns expressed by the Québec Minister of the Environment and Minister of Native Affairs, construction was scheduled to begin.

Blockade and Police Raid

In order to halt further development of the Pines, Mohawk protesters constructed a barricade, blocking access to the area. Mohawk warriors from two other reserves—Kahnawake and Akwesasne—joined the protest, helping man the barricades. After two injunctions to remove the roadblock were ignored, the mayor of Oka asked the provincial police force, the [Sûreté du Québec](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/article/quebec-provincial-police/) (SQ), to intervene. On the morning of 11 July 1990 the SQ attacked the barricade, using 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 and the SQ retreated.

Escalation

Resistance continued, with Aboriginal supporters from across the country joining the Mohawk at the barricades. The SQ constructed their own blockades on roads leading to Oka and the Kanesatake reserve. Mohawk from the nearby Kahnawake reserve blockaded the Mercier Bridge in support, effectively cutting off access between Montréal’s southern suburbs and the Island of [Montréal](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/article/montreal/). The resulting chaos angered local residents, and relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the area worsened. The SQ had to deal not only with the barricades, but also with frustrated and hostile civilians who often blamed them for the situation. At the same time, the demands of the protesters expanded to eventually include full[sovereignty](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/article/sovereignty/).

Federal Involvement and the End of the Crisis

As it became increasingly clear that the SQ could not resolve the crisis, the [RCMP](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/article/royal-canadian-mounted-police/) was brought in to assist them in mid-August. At the same time, Québec Premier [Robert Bourassa](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/article/robert-bourassa/) requested the help of the Canadian [armed forces](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/article/armed-forces/) and 2500 regular and reserve troops were put on standby. On August 20 about 800 members of the Royal 22eRegiment (the “Van Doos”) took over from the SQ at the Kahnawake and Kanesatake barricades, assuming a position only metres from the warriors. Facing increasing numbers of soldiers at the Pines and elsewhere in the Montréal area, as well as reconaissance aircraft above, the protesters were under heavy pressure. By 29 August negotiations had put an end to the blockade of the Mercier Bridge. Mohawk warriors at the Oka barricade continued their protest until 26 September 1990, when they dismantled their guns and surrendered to the army. Several were detained by the military and a number were later charged by the SQ. Five were convicted of crimes including assualt and theft, although only one served time in jail.

Public Response

There was substantial media coverage of the Oka Crisis across the nation, and public opinion varied widely. Many Quebeckers, especially those living in the immediate area, were angered by the blockades. In one incident, local residents stoned about 75 cars—containing mostly women, children, and the elderly—as they tried to leave the Kahnawake reserve (see [Alanis Obomsawin](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/article/alanis-obomsawin/)'s film *Rocks at Whiskey Trench*). However, others sympathized with the protesters, including John Ciaccia, the Québec Minister of Native Affairs at the time. Protests were held across the country in support of the Mohawk, with blockades in [British Columbia](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/article/british-columbia/) and northern [Ontario](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/article/ontario/). Overall, the crisis made more Canadians aware of [Aboriginal rights](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/article/aboriginal-rights/) and [land claims](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/article/land-claims/); it also illustrated the potential for future conflict if such claims were not resolved in a timely, transparent, and just manner.

Resolution?

During the crisis, the federal government agreed to purchase the Pines in order to prevent further development. The golf course expansion and condominium construction were cancelled. After the crisis had ended, the government purchased a number of additional plots of land for Kanesatake. However, these Crown lands have not yet been transferred to the Kanesatake Mohawk.

The Oka Crisis revealed a number of issues in terms of Aboriginal affairs, as well as government and police responses to protests and occupations. The crisis played an important role in the establishment of the [Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/article/royal-commission-on-aboriginal-peoples/). Investigations held after the crisis revealed several problems in the SQ’s handling of the situation, including command failures and prejudice among SQ members. It has never been discovered who fired the shot that killed Corporal Marcel Lemay.