



COMMUN VIII  
HISTORICAL CRISIS COMMITTEE (HCC)

BEAVER WARS

*Background Guide*

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# Welcome Letter

Dear Delegates,

My name is Thomas Du, and I am a junior at Commonwealth School. I'm very excited to be running this committee with my classmate Mirai Duintjer Tebbens Nishioka! We've helped run COMMUN committees for the last two years, and we both also participate in Model UN as delegates ourselves. This crisis committee will focus on the Mohawk takeover of critical Mohican territory along the Hudson river, an invasion that sparked a series of sporadic battles in the 17th century. Depending on the history curriculum your school uses, you may already know a bit about the Beaver wars. You also may not have, particularly if your American history class began with the revolutionary period. Either way, there are many fascinating things to learn about 17th century North America, both within this background guide and in further research you conduct.

When the first European explorers arrived on North American shores, they did not find an empty paradise waiting for settlement—although that is how many viewed it at the time. Instead, they explored a vast continent containing multitudes of different American peoples, with their own societies and politics. In this committee, you will each represent a chief of or a delegate from a tribe or country involved in the Beaver Wars. Your goal is to work with your fellow delegates to find resolutions to the impending conflict, while also prioritizing your own communities' interests. This committee will be a crisis committee, which means that it will be more fast paced and there will be sporadic crisis updates that introduce twists to the conflict or reflect your progress on the issue. You will also have the ability to send crisis notes to the back room of the crisis. For those new to crisis, this means that you can send a note to the back room (who respond to crisis notes and deliver crisis updates) detailing an action that you, as your

character, would like to take. In your preparation, be sure to note the timeline that this committee will be using: this committee was convened in 1628 in response to the invasion, and all of the buildup to that event has happened. Remember, however, that because you as delegates are the ones negotiating your way through this crisis, that everything that follows hasn't happened and doesn't have to happen.

On a more logistical note, this committee will require a position paper to be submitted in order to be eligible for awards. Position papers are a great way to organize your thinking on the subject, and in the past we've found that delegates who write them are much better prepared to speak knowledgeably and eloquently about the subject, and end up having a lot more fun. We look forward to seeing your unique take on the crisis and learning more from you on your country or company's relationship to it. If you have any questions, please email us at [tdu@commschool.org](mailto:tdu@commschool.org) or [mnishioka@commschool.org](mailto:mnishioka@commschool.org). Good luck!

All the best,

Thomas and Mirai, '24

## Background Guide

European contact with North America took a variety of different forms. European powers came to the Americas for different reasons and with different objectives, and these goals shaped their policies and actions. European trading policy was particularly important because access to European weapons provided a nearly insurmountable advantage. At the same time, Europeans were by no means the only power brokers in the Americas. Particularly in the first few centuries after contact between Europeans and Native Americans, powerful tribes and alliances were the most important players in North American politics. Outnumbering Europeans thousands to one, any major conflict before the mass arrival of European settlers and standing colonial armies was conducted by Native American warriors. Military prowess in the Americas was dependent on both European arms and Native American manpower, making security dependent on strong cooperation between allies.

From the minute Columbus set foot in North America, Europeans sought riches, land, and profitable opportunities for commerce. In central and South America, Spanish conquistadors toppled prosperous societies and replaced them with a colonial enterprise designed to extract wealth and to eradicate native religions and cultures. British contact primarily came in the form of settlement, as Europeans sought land with which to create permanent settlements. France also created a few settlements in North America, first and foremost the fort-turned-city of Quebec. While there were some Europeans settling in French colonies, France's primary goal was to secure their access to the fur trade. A rising bourgeoisie and middle class desire for luxury goods such as furs had created a massive market for Beaver pelts in Europe, so trading for such furs from Native Americans was an extremely profitable business.

Before the arrival of European settlers, the Huron, Algonquin, and other tribes of the region lived in relative peace and engaged in healthy and sustainable trading of beaver pelts. After contact with Europeans in the late 15th century however, furs began to be more highly demanded. Again, it is essential that Beaver fur—used in producing luxury hats and various clothing items—was an enormously profitable market in 17th century Europe. Due to their relative scarcity in Europe (the beaver was hunted to near extinction) and their relative abundance in the Americas, furs were far more valuable in Europe than in America. As a result, the French began to trade for them and export them en masse to Europe. In exchange, they provided invaluable manufactured goods and tools otherwise entirely unavailable to Native Americans. This economic system was a major aspect of the **Columbian Exchange**, the massive transfer of all kinds of things between Europe and the Americas.

A critical result of this trading was increased competition among Native American tribes. For one, astute tribesmen living in relatively close proximity to Europeans realized that they could get a sizable cut of the profits by acting as middlemen. In effect, they would buy pelts from other Native American groups and sell them to Europeans at a massive profit. Even so, Europeans were happy to buy as many furs as they could get their hands on because furs were extremely valuable in Europe whereas the manufactured goods or weapons they traded away could be easily produced by their more modern and densely populated European societies.

One of the most powerful groups in the Americas was the **Five Nations** that shared a common language, belief system, legal code, and arbitration (court) system. They also shared a deep military alliance and commanded one of the strongest militaries in North America at the time. In 1609, the five Iroquois nations—Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca—leveraged their alliance and created the **Iroquois Confederacy** in an attempt to

strengthen their control over the fur trade. Shrewd leaders realized the value of commerce with Europeans, and the Iroquois expanded their hunting capacities and began trading for European arms. Unfortunately, as they lacked easy access to European trade, their position was threatened by neighboring tribes using cuts of their fur trade to access European markets for muskets. Moreover, overhunting had depleted their lands of beavers. These factors all created a perfect storm for the Iroquois, who were faced with the prospect of losing the keystone of their economy as well as their access to essential military resources their neighbors and rivals would be getting. In order to take control of new hunting grounds and proximity to traders, the Iroquois Confederacy launched attacks on their Huron and Algonquin neighbors. The ensuing violence disrupted the traditional trade networks, causing widespread death and displacement.

French explorer **Samuel de Champlain** had arrived in Canada in 1603 intending to form a new French colony in modern day Canada. After traveling down the Saint Lawrence river, Champlain met the **Huron** and **Algonquin** tribes, with whom Champlain would eventually form partnerships with. After a few brutal winters, Champlain founded the city of Quebec and became somewhat established in the region. Still, Quebec remained a tiny settlement only inhabited by Champlain's crew. When the Mohawk Iroquois attacked their trading partners, there was no French army or militia to come to their defense. The French had only traded a few muskets to their new partners, but Champlain and a few of his men briefly joined their Native partners' forces.

After significant pillaging, death, and displacement, Champlain joined a coalition of Huron and Algonquin forces that began a campaign to push back the Iroquois. In 1609, Champlain participated in a decisive battle against the Mohawk Iroquois that resulted in a coalition victory that greatly strengthened French and Algonquin control of the fur trade. France

was now firmly allied with the Algonquin and Huron, and diametrically opposed to the Iroquois. Champlain would later write in his diary that any chance of positive Iroquois-French relations ended the minute he fired his musket in that battle. Still, the Iroquois had it worse: they lost access to trade with the French, and were driven out of most of their territorial gains.

Fortunately for the Iroquois, the French were not the only European power to enter the fur trade. Drawn by the immense profits available, any European nation with the capacity to do so began to seek a foothold in the trade. In particular, the Dutch (Netherlands) opened a fort and trading post along the bank of the deepwater **Hudson River**. This fort was particularly valuable because it was both a major trading hub for furs, but also guaranteed access to the Hudson river and easy transportation to deepwater Atlantic ports suitable for transportation back to Europe. Built between 1610 and 1614 near the eastern edge of **Mohican** territory, **Fort Nassau** allowed the Netherlands to begin lucrative trading with various Native American tribes in the area. Ten years later, they replaced Fort Nassau with **Fort Orange**, a larger fort and trading post that expanded the Dutch population and influence in the area. The Dutch traded with a variety of different tribes, but preferential relations with their most immediate neighbors resulted in favorable agreements with the Mohicans. At the same time, by creating competition between Native American tribes, European merchants were able to maintain relatively low prices for furs particularly as compared to Europe.

The arrival of the Dutch also provided a lifeline to the Iroquois confederacy and the Mohawks. Having regained a trading partner, the Iroquois built up their military strength over the course of about twenty years. By 1620s, the Iroquois were at a breaking point. Their hunting sites were increasingly depleted, even their newest acquisitions. Moreover, a Dutch **Monopsony (only one buyer)** on purchasing furs, combined with competition between Native American

tribes, maintained low fur prices in the Americas. Cornered, the Iroquois turned to force to secure their status as an important power in the region.

Tensions and skirmishes between the larger Iroquois and the better equipped Mohicans continued until 1628, when the Dutch finally provided a large number of newly manufactured European muskets to the Mohawk Iroquois. The Iroquois acquired a considerable arsenal of European firearms, and already fielded a sizable army. Massively strengthened by their new Dutch allies, they routed the Mohicans and invaded their territory. The Mohicans were almost completely destroyed, and the Iroquois confederation gained exclusive access to trade with the Dutch as they controlled all of the territory around Dutch outposts. In response to this seismic shift in the balance of power, a conference of tribal and European leaders was called to address the crisis caused by the Iroquois invasion.

**\*The real history of this conference was a failure, as diplomacy failed to resolve the situation and 70 years of warfare followed. The background guide ends here because this is the point where you come in. You will be representing the delegates to this committee, and attempting to resolve the crisis without sparking a war.**

## Timeline

1603: Champlain arrives in Canada and begins trading with Huron and Algonquin

1609: Seeking to increase their allies' control of the fur trade, Champlain forms an alliance with Huron (Iroquois' biggest enemy) and Algonquin (who now control trade with the French)

1609: Champlain and allies fight a battle against Mohawks Iroquois, Champlain wins and strengthens French control over fur trade—seen by some as the start of Beaver Wars

1610-1624: Dutch establish trading posts and forts to trade for beaver furs



1610-1628: Mohawk and other Iroquois Confederacy nations build up military strength and begin skirmishes against Mohicans

1628: Seeking to counter French influence by allying with one of the strongest native american powers, the Dutch trade muskets to the Iroquois

~1628 Within the year, the Iroquois drove out the Mahicans (who lived around the Dutch Fort Orange).<sup>1</sup> This is generally seen as the start of the Beaver Wars.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the Dutch essentially doomed their erstwhile allies the Mohicans by agreeing to sell muskets to their strongest native enemy. They did this to create a partnership with a more powerful native ally in an attempt to expand their share of the fur trade. After the invasion, however, the Iroquois were suddenly in a powerful position with the Dutch, as they suddenly had a monopoly on all furs that could be traded to the Dutch.

# Delegate Roles

## Europeans

As a representative of a country, you have the power to make decisions on the behalf of it. This includes but is not necessarily limited to:

- Creating or utilizing military force
- Passing laws or signing treaties with other delegates
- Leveraging your economy to trade or give goods to other nations

As a representative of a crown, you will attempt to further the interest of your home country and its rulers. If you are a representative of settlers, your goal is to further the interests of people from your country who have settled in the Americas.

When preparing for your role, you should be sure to look not only at your country's economic and military resources but also at your relationships with different Native American tribes and the other countries involved in the war.

## England (Settler)

English settlers were trading partners with the Iroquois League, supplying them with technologically advanced European weapons in exchange for beaver fur and various other American Indian goods. Due to the increasing demand from Europe though, the Iroquois were forced to look westward to find more beavers, so they needed to use the English weapons to take control of land taken by neighboring tribes.

### **France (Crown)**

Although the French had been exploring the region near the mouth of the St Lawrence River since the early 16th century, they were never able to substantially create colonies until the founding of Quebec in 1608. This was due to war and politics in Europe in the late 16th century, which distracted French manpower and efforts from being put towards America. The French economy, however, needed a constant supply of beaver fur, but when they went back to the area near the river, they found Native American trading sites abandoned and completely destroyed, with no sign of survivors. This, accumulated with the growing demand for beaver fur, caused the French to find new allies, and use resources to make sure they were able to get these goods.

### **France (Settler)**

Unlike the English and the Dutch, the French were fighting against the Iroquois as allies of the defending confederacies. Like their European rivals though, they were heavily involved in the fur trade, being chief trading partners with the Algonquin and the Huron tribes. By 1609, the French were already allied against the Iroquois, refusing to trade firearms with them, and since the Iroquois would interfere with the exchange of beaver furs between the French and the northern Indigenous people, that animosity grew. Similarly, before the Dutch involvement in the fur trade, the Iroquois had no choice but to rely on the French, so when they lost that requirement tensions began to grow between the Iroquois and the tribes supported by the French.

### **Netherlands (Crown)**

The Dutch were motivated by trade in America, establishing several trading posts along the Delaware and Hudson rivers in hopes of controlling the fur market. Crucially, the Dutch

monarchs were also very interested in breaking France's monopoly over the fur trade in Europe, and sought to counter France's stranglehold over the market. The Dutch West India Company in particular sought to break into the furs market on a larger scale, and were willing to sell to whomever in pursuit of that goal.

### **Netherlands (Settler)**

Around 1610, the Dutch began supplying firearms and valuable tools to the Mohawk tribe in exchange for pelts. This incentivised the already somewhat expanding Mohawk tribe to push into neighboring tribes, in search for more beaver hunting grounds. They also engaged in trade with many other tribes, including other members of the Iroquois Confederacy, the Susquehannock, and the Mohican tribes. In 1614, the Dutch established Fort Nassau, later to be replaced with Fort Orange, in modern day Albany. The founding of this fort gave the Iroquois tribes direct access to the European market, effectively bypassing the French. The Iroquois tribe then no longer had to rely on the French and their allies for European trade.

### **Native Americans**

Without the actual tribes, this committee could not exist. Compared to the countries, they have more of a direct impact on the war, since they are the ones actually warring. Also, they can pass directives faster due to their less rigid governments. As a representative of a tribe, you have the power to make decisions on the behalf of them. This includes but is not necessarily limited to:

- Creating or utilizing military force
- Passing laws or signing treaties with other delegates

- Leveraging your economy to trade or give goods to other nations

When researching your role, you should be sure to take note of your tribe's location and economic resources, but also your relationship with other countries and tribes. Most importantly though, you should also note your tribe's ability to both invade territory and defend from invasions.

### **Mohawks**

The Mohawks were an Iroquoian-speaking Indigenous people of North America, centered primarily in Northern New York, around Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River. As the easternmost member of the Iroquois League, they were not only the traditional guardians of the confederation against invasions from the east, but also one of the main aggressors of the Beaver Wars. They were in close contact with the Dutch with regard to the fur trade, which meant that they were inclined to fight other tribes for control of beaver populations, as it gave the Iroquois direct access to European markets and importantly, the most novel military technology at the time, guns. This made them the strongest tribe in the Confederation.

### **Oneida**

The Oneida were a Native American tribe who lived in central New York, particularly around their namesake, Oneida Lake. Unlike the neighboring Mohawks, the Oneida people had peaceful relations with the French, but since the Mohawks controlled the Iroquois, and were hostile against the French, the Oneida did not interfere when the Iroquois began attacking the

foreigners. Like the other members of the Iroquois though, the Oneida were supplied with arms by their Dutch and English trading partners.

### **Seneca**

The Seneca were a group of Indigenous people who lived south of Lake Ontario (in modern day New York and Pennsylvania), making them the westmost tribe of the Iroquois League. They were in contact with both the Dutch and the British with regards to the fur trade, increasing hostility with competing native groups, especially the Huron, their traditional enemies. Since the Huron were allied with the French, the Seneca were faced with the power that such a powerful country possessed.

### **Onondaga**

The Onondaga were a member of the Iroquois Confederacy that lived south of Lake Ontario. Being the centermost tribe of the alliance, they were home to the Iroquois League's capital, where meetings were held between all five of the original tribes. They were also known as the guardians or watchkeepers of the league, maintaining both law and traditions. They had long-standing peaceful trade relationships with both the French and the Dutch, but, like the Oneida, they were influenced to become hostile due to the power of the Mohawks.

### **Cayuga**

The Cayuga were a founding tribe of the Iroquois league that lived in the Finger Lakes region along Cayuga Lake in New York, making them the westernmost tribe in the confederacy behind the Seneca. The Cayuga primarily had trade connections with the Dutch and the English:

the Dutch established trading posts first, but were eventually replaced by the English in the late 17th century. To help the Iroquois develop alliances with the English, the Cayuga were involved in diplomatic efforts to create incentives for both sides.

### **Huron**

The Huron were a confederacy of Iroquoian-speaking tribes (although not part of the Iroquois League) that lived around the north shore of Lake Ontario in present-day Ontario, Canada. Their earliest European contact came in the form of the French, in which they heard of Samuel de Champlain's exploration of the Saint Lawrence River and allied with them in Quebec in 1609. Even before the French arrived, the Huron had already been in conflict with the Iroquois Confederacy to the south, so when they arrived, and became involved in the fur trade, conflict intensified. As the most advanced fur trading tribe at the time, the Huron were important allies of the French, so they were able to gain support in the form of guns and other weapons.

### **Algonquin**

The Algonquin people were a group of Indigenous people who lived in present-day Eastern Canada. They were at war with the Mohawk's, who sought to take control of the Saint Lawrence River and European trade with it. They were allied with the French through trade, and in 1603, in order to foster good relations with their trade partners, the French promised to aid the Algonquin people in their struggle against the Mohawk's. Because of their war with the Mohawk tribe, the Algonquins were also at war with the rest of the Iroquois Confederacy.

### **Susquehannock**

The Susquehannock people inhabited regions in the southern part of present-day New York, stretching as far as Maryland to the south. They were allied with Dutch traders in 1600, and were also engaged in trade with the French as early as 1608. In 1610 they formed an alliance with Swedish traders who provided them with much needed firearms. They were mortal enemies of the Iroquois Confederacy, fighting with them in territorial disputes.

### **Erie**

The Erie lived on the south shore of Lake Erie, or what is now western New York and northern Pennsylvania. Despite speaking an Iroquoian language, they were not a part of the Iroquois Confederacy. The Erie had very little contact with Europeans. They likely only engaged in trade with some Dutch traders at Fort Orange; some tribes like the Susquehannock provided them with European goods, but although they were allied, the Susquehannock made certain to not trade firearms with the Erie. The Erie aided the Susquehannock in their fights against the Iroquois Confederacy.

### **Neutral**

Named “Neutral” due to their neutrality in the early 17th century, the Neutral people inhabited parts of the north shore of Lake Erie, in modern day southern Ontario. They were advanced agricultural people, and because their territory contained flint deposits, the Neutral were able to simultaneously trade with warring Huron and Iroquois tribes. This allowed them to maintain neutrality, as both sides relied on trade with them. Although they spoke Iroquois, they were very culturally distinct from other Iroquois nations and often competed with them for the



same resources. In the early 1600's, the Neutral were allied with the Wenro people, a coalition formed to defend each other from the powerful Iroquois Confederacy.

## **Mohican**

Known for their intricate tribal culture, the Mohicans were an Algonquian speaking tribe that occupied modern day eastern New York, encompassing parts of Massachusetts and Connecticut. Dutch traders began trading with the Mohicans in 1610, but there was fierce competition for this market between the Mohicans and their western neighbors the Mohawk. Their competition turned into conflict in 1614, and again in 1617. Some truces were organized by the Dutch, but they were often short lived. The Mohicans were allies with the Algonquins and Innu, united against their common enemy, the Mohawks.

## **Wenro**

Residing in current day western New York, the Wenro were a tribe of Iroquian speaking peoples. Closely allied with the Neutral tribe for protection against the Iroquois Confederacy, the Wenro were also on good terms with the Erie and Huron tribes. The Wenro had no direct contact with any European powers, and were thus disadvantaged by their lack of firearms.

