

WARFARE THAT IMPACTED THE HO-CHUNK NATION: 1634-1814

Background

Indigenous people, as with most societies in history, have experienced warfare periodically with often devastating effects. The Ho-chunk people are a good example of that fact. The following information will help you “sort out” the complex wars of the period from 1634-1814. I am utilizing various sources in compiling this, but primarily a web-site first established by Lee Sultzman (note the citation at the end of the document).

Pre-Contact Situation

Wisconsin, in some respects, is right in the bulls-eye of First Nations History. The presence of powerful Indian Nations within the state and the movement of other tribes into the region, particularly beginning around 1400, is a complex history to sort out. The Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Ottawa began moving west along the shore of Lake Huron toward the area where Lakes Superior, Huron, and Michigan meet. As these tribes moved and expanded west and south, tribes located within what we call “Wisconsin” began to feel the pinch. The Menominee, for example, were forced south and became natural allies of the Ho-chunk people. (Other tribes like the Cheyenne, Satai, and Arapaho ultimately were set adrift until they reached the Great Plains). As the Ojibwe moved further south, the Ho-chunk people were fighting for their survival and caught between two powerful tribes – the Ojibwe and the Illinois. Around 1570, this position resulted in a division within the Ho-chunk people and relocation of one faction of the Tribe to what is today south and western Wisconsin.

The Situation Around 1634

It was at this point in Ho-chunk history that the Frenchman Nicollet arrived in Green Bay and made the initial contacts with the powerful tribe. This came in the context of the ever-expanding Fur Trade which had begun in 1603 along the St. Lawrence River. The competition for furs evolved into a cycle of warfare involving the Ojibwe, the Huron, and the Ottawa people – and, again, the Ho-chunk found themselves at odds with all these groups. Nicollet and the French eventually succeeded in playing a diplomatic role between competing tribes and a short-lived truce seemed to offer peace.

The Beaver Wars (beginning in 1628)

The so-called “Beaver Wars” started in 1628 when the Iroquois – the most powerful tribe in the northeast – fought with several tribes for control of the trade. The impact of these wars spilled into Wisconsin because of that movement of Algonquin “refugees” into the region (including Fox, Sac, Ottawa, and Potawatomi). Members of the Potawatomi tribe became the first such refugees to arrive in 1641 and war between them and the Ho-chunk broke out immediately. To make matters worse, the Ho-chunk people were nearly decimated by diseases and starvation after 1634 and for nearly a generation had to hang on for dear life. It is estimated that around the time of contact there were 4000-5000 Ho-chunk warriors, meaning perhaps 15-20,000 tribal members, a number that was reduced by two-thirds over the next 30 years. Warfare with the Illinois tribe in the late 1640s was especially devastating (by some estimates, the Ho-chunk people were reduced to roughly 500 people by 1670). By 1650, the Iroquois had substantially defeated the Huron and nearly 20,000 Algonquin people fled into Wisconsin from the Michigan region. The Iroquois and

the French remained at odds and it was at this point that the Iroquois allied with the British, part of the back-drop for the French and Indian War.

The Situation by the Mid-1600s

The French were able to expand their fur trade operation in the western Great Lakes by 1665. In 1671 the French Government solidified its claim of territory at the so-called "Pageant of Saint Luson" at Sault Ste. Marie. Operating within the context of the "Doctrine of Discovery," the French claimed the interior of North America in the name of Louis XIV and continued to develop extensive trade networks with the various tribal groups. In an odd way, the Beaver Wars ultimately may have saved the Ho-chunk people from near-extinction due to the fact that intermarriage with the Algonquin refugees enabled them to begin to rebuild their population.

The Fox Wars (1712-1716 and 1728-1737)

The backdrop for these conflicts was the growing rivalry between the French and the British for the control of the interior of North America. Shifting alliances among the various tribes that were involved in the fur trade provide a confusing story. French control of the Great Lakes region was based on their ability to draw native people into alliances, mediate disputes among tribes, and gradually enforce their presence through the establishment of forts and missions. The Fox Tribe of northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin, however, proved to be a serious adversary for the French. The Fox eventually aligned with the British signaling the great clash between European powers that was soon to come. The Ho-chunk people remained neutral during the First Fox War, but ultimately sided with the French during the Second War, leading to intense warfare. The effect of this warfare was significant. The Fox Tribe ended up leaving Wisconsin and going south and the French fur traders shifted their attention south to the Ohio River due to the continual fighting that was going on in Wisconsin.

The Struggle for Control of North America

The warfare between Britain and France occurred both in Europe and in the interior regions of North America. Ho-chunk warriors became involved in all stages of the conflict. Though often at odds with the French, the Ho-chunk people ultimately sided with the French against the British. During the 1740s, for example, warriors from the tribe traveled east to Montreal with the Ottawa, Menominee, Ojibwe, Illinois, Potawatomi, and Huron to defend Quebec from the British. British victories began to limit French control in the Great Lakes region.

The French and Indian War (1754-1763)

The Ho-chunk again traveled east during this conflict to fight for the French. Ho-chunk warriors helped to defeat Braddock at Fort Duquesne (present-day Pittsburgh) in 1755. During the eastern fighting, various western tribes contracted smallpox and brought it back to their villages with horrific results. By 1761 British soldiers occupied Green Bay and for all intents and purposes, the French were driven from the interior. Eventually, the British were able to win the loyalty of the Ho-chunk and Menominee people, as evidenced by their support for Britain during Pontiac's Rebellion in 1763. Pontiac was an Ottawa leader who attempted to unite a broad alliance of tribes for the purpose of over-turning British control of the Northwest. The Ojibwe backed Pontiac causing greater tension between them and the Menominee and Ho-chunk people. The Rebellion failed but caused changes in British policies toward the Native people of the region. Ultimately the British Crown issued the Proclamation of 1763 which forbade colonials from going beyond the Appalachian Mountains, thereby ensuring the safety and sovereignty of the

Indigenous people. Unfortunately, the Proclamation Line had minimal effect and westward expansion continued.

The Treaty of Fort Niagara (1764)

More than 2000 Indian people representing 24 tribes (including the Ho-chunk) met with British officials at Fort Niagara (northern New York) formally ending the fighting and supposedly reinforcing the Proclamation Line of 1763. As with many such treaties, this one was not honored.

The Revolutionary War (1775-1783)

The Ho-chunk people allied with the British during this conflict. In the wake of the Revolution (1780s), inter-tribal warfare erupted again over issues regarding the fur trade, particularly the Ho-chunk and the Ojibwe. The Treaty of Paris, signed in 1783, gave the Americans control of the Northwest Territory (eventually the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin). The American victory in the Revolution spelled major changes regarding the tribes of that region.

Northwest Wars (also called Little Turtle's War) (1785-1795)

A confederation of many tribes in the Ohio Country and lower Great Lakes under Chiefs Blue Jacket and Little Turtle waged war against the fledgling US Government. The British were also involved, supplying the tribes with weapons and supplies. The defeat of General St. Clair at the Wabash River was one of the worst defeats suffered by the US Government in the history of the Indian Wars. In 1794, however, General "Mad Anthony" Wayne defeated the native confederation at the Battle of Fallen Timbers. This was the first great test of the Washington Administration and ushered in an ongoing story of land loss and removal for the native people.

The Situation by the Early 19th Century

The purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803 changed the Ho-chunk's homeland from being at the edge to the center of American territory. Prior to that time, the Ho-chunk probably viewed the Americans as a distant enemy. When the explorer Zebulon Pike explored the upper Mississippi in 1805, he met with Ho-chunk people near Prairie du Chien. The push by Americans into the region concerned the Ho-chunk leaders, in part, because of the lead deposits in their territory. (The Fox had allowed the French-Canadian Julien Dubuque to open a lead mine in northern Iowa). This was the context for the rise of Tecumseh and the Prophet, Tenskwatawa, Shawnees who sought to unify the tribes of the region against the oncoming Americans. The Ho-chunk people were one of the most militant members of Tecumseh's alliance. They began making regular visits to Prophetstown (Tippecanoe) in Indiana and, in fact, established a permanent village near the site (Village du Puant).

The War of 1812 (1812-1814)

Sometimes called the "Second War of Independence," the War of 1812 was rooted in shipping and trade tensions with the British and the ongoing difficulties related to the frontier (the lingering fur trade and British unwillingness to leave). The Ho-chunk sided with the British as they had during the Revolution due to their fear of the Americans and the continued incursions into their territory. The War ended in stalemate but was a disaster from the viewpoint of the tribes of the Northwest.

Sources:

Mark Wyman. *The Wisconsin Frontier* (1998).

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