

The Halifax Explosion and the Spread of Rumour, 1917 to the Present

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Atlantic Provinces Library Association conference, June 6, 2014



Halifax explosion was German plot, according to local historian's theory

By MARI A. PRANSTAN Daily News, Dec. 5, 2002

Explosion Rumours



The explosion occurred at 9:04 AM on December 6, 1917, when a miscommunication caused Imo to strike Mont Blanc. The

collision caused a chemical leak, igniting 2600 tons of explosives. The result: 2200 deaths, thousands injured and/or homeless, and millions of dollars in property damage.

Fix Responsibility.

Evening Mail, Dec. 13, 1917

Devastated, Halifax sought justice for the guilty party. World War I was in progress, and a fear of Germans abounded. Historians widely agree the rumour is false.

Theory of Rumour

At times of crisis, rumours serve social purposes:

- Facilitate bonding and social cohesion
- Express collective fears, suspicions, or hostilities
- Satisfy the need for information in ambiguous situations

Methodology

The materials include Canadian and American newspapers, books, & personal letters. Local sources were emphasized due to their higher volume of explosion reports. Articles were viewed on anniversary years, and in each decade. Foreign sources were consulted by availability.

Early Instances of the Rumour Halifax

The rumour was prominent in personal letters, *The Halifax Herald* and *Evening Mail*.

"So long as there are people in Halifax who remember this past week, or whose children remember it, so long will the name of German be a name for loathing and disgust."

(Halifax Herald, Dec. 12, 1917).

Practically All the Germans in Halifax Are To Be Arrested

Halifax Herald, Dec. 10, 1917.

United States

Similar fears were present in the USA. Rumours of German involvement were reported widely in the country, and the story evolved in attempts to explain the event.

STEERSMAN HELD AS SPY AT HALIFAX
John Johansen of Relief Ship Imo Arrested When He Seeks to Flee from Hospital.

New York Times, Dec. 14, 1917

TOOK NOTE IN GERMAN TO HALIFAX
Injured Pigeon Caught; —Spy Message Hinted

Boston Post, Dec. 12, 1917

SEDITION IN PULPIT CHARGED
The Rev. John Steik Said to Have Applauded Halifax Explosion.

New York Times, Aug. 30, 1918

Germany

The Germans never claimed responsibility. An editorial in *Kolnische Zeitung* asked:

"is it not better that these munitions should not have reached the theatre of war and the trenches, there to be used against our people in its hard struggle for freedom and independence, our people which did not seek war, and also did not produce these munitions which have now struck those who wanted to trouble us with them?" (Kitz, 1989)

Key References: Zemel, Joel. Scapegoat: The extraordinary legal proceedings following the 1917 Halifax Explosion. Kitz, Janet F. Shattered City: The Halifax Explosion and the Road to Recovery. Knapp, Robert H.. A Psychology of Rumour. Public Opinion Quarterly, 8(1).

The Rumour over Time

Early anniversary news stories are brief and factual. Until 1977, it was assumed Halifax wished to forget the disaster. The rumour resurfaced on subsequent anniversaries:

- 1984 "Were German spies involved?"
- 1993 "I remember...wondering how the Germans might treat us."
- 2002 Local historian produces a website & novel about his theory of German involvement.

Present Day Fiction & Pop Culture



The rumour appears in fiction. The 2003 film *Shattered City* has revived the rumour, according to the Maritime Museum's FAQ.

Conclusions

- Once published, misinformation spreads dramatically over time and locations.
- The internet allows rumours to spread more quickly and widely than ever. We must strive to publish information responsibly, consume it critically, and verify facts.
- 2017 will mark the 100th anniversary of the Halifax Explosion. The rumour is likely to resurface at that time.