

## THE HALIFAX HORROR.

The disaster at Halifax confounds philosophy. A seaport strongly fortified, it was immune from the devastation of war, and yet it is filled with dead and injured, numbered by the thousands, as if it had suffered bombardment by a powerful fleet, without warning and with no means of defense. On a morning clear and tranquil, when the activities of life were being resumed and the thought of calamity was in no one's mind, there came a great convulsion, which was not the act of God; buildings were blown to pieces, others collapsed, people in the streets died instantly or were mutilated, and in the ruins of houses, which were swept by a conflagration, the occupants with no chance to escape were burned. The earthquake and fire at San Francisco in 1906 was not so great a catastrophe when the loss of life is considered. Two thousand lives were lost in the Halifax tragedy; the number of dead at San Francisco was 500. A disaster for which man was responsible proved to be the more terrible.

After the event it is easy to be censorious. Why, it will be asked, was not a channel kept clear, a mere neck of water, when ships loaded with explosives were passing in or out? The width of the Narrows between Halifax Harbor and spacious Bedford Basin, six miles by four, is less than half a mile. In this passage there is enough sea room if pilots do not lose their heads. It was here, owing to a blunder in signaling, that the French munitions ship *Mont Blanc* collided with the Belgian Relief Ship *Imo*, and soon afterward a deck load of benzine on the munition ship was in some way ignited, and the death-dealing explosion followed. It is a distressing irony that the *Mont Blanc* had almost reached safe anchorage in the great basin beyond, and the *Imo* was passing out on an errand of mercy to desolated Belgium.

Seeking for the immediate cause of this calamity, why, it will be asked, should inflammable benzine be carried on the deck of a ship with high explosives filling every foot of cargo space below? The answer is that great risks are taken, perhaps must be taken, in a war in which the dispatch of munitions is unprecedentedly urgent and the deficiency of ships grievous. The officer of the port at Halifax will no doubt forbid in future the use of the Narrows by other ships when a munitions vessel is passing through. Benzine is dangerous in any cargo, and in future precautions must be taken.

It is not to be expected that absolute safety can be assured in the perilous business of carrying explosives to Europe for our troops and those of our allies, but haste hitherto has made extraordinary peril. The cost in human life and material is steadily and rapidly mounting, and it is a bad way to conduct a war.

In the Halifax disaster there are lessons for the port authorities of New York to heed. Too much care cannot be taken in loading war munitions and in regulating the transportation of them in our waters. We have already had our disasters, and that we have been in the shadow of others there can be no doubt.

*The New York Times*

Published: December 8, 1917

Copyright © The New York Times