

Spies, Espionage & Explosions: A Tale of the North American German Invasion

Don Kane

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Spies, Espionage & Explosions is a what-if page-turner with a compelling historical proposal at its center.

Don Kane's *Spies, Espionage & Explosions* is an excellent historical novel about one of the lesser-known tragedies in Canadian history. In the novel, Kane ponders an intriguing scenario: What if the Germans really did orchestrate the Halifax Explosion of 1917 as a precursor to a combined sea and land invasion?

On December 6, 1917, a Norwegian ship, the SS *Imo*, crashed into a French ship, the SS *Mont-Blanc*, that was transporting explosives in Nova Scotia's Halifax Harbor. The resulting explosion killed almost two thousand people. Another ten thousand more were injured by falling debris, fires, and shrapnel. The Halifax Explosion remains one of the largest human-caused explosions of all time.

Told step by step from the vantage point of Kaiser Wilhelm II, his intelligence agents in Europe and North America, and the various British and Canadian officials arrayed against the "Huns," this novel presents a convincing case of Teutonic terrorism. Namely, the egomaniacal Wilhelm II calls upon his spies to wreck the *Mont-Blanc* as part of a larger strategy of tension. This strategy leads to a German invasion of North America starting in the Maritimes, arguably one of the most important naval stations in the vast British Empire.

While this is clearly a novel, with fictionalized dialogue and the type of character studies that one would expect from a detective thriller, historical research permeates every single sentence. Diplomatic cables, newspaper headlines and clippings, government inquiries, and academic monographs all play a role, but the book is still pleasurable to read and avoids scholastic jargon.

This historical concision is the most captivating quality of the already captivating text, though its endnotes fit oddly in the medium. Some dialogue is overly focused on exposition, particularly within outwardly friendly conversations.

Kaiser Wilhelm II makes an excellent villain with his Nietzschean dreams of worldwide German dominance. On the opposite side, Allied leaders like King George V of Britain and Prime Minister David Lloyd George come across as heroes supported by a legion of honest and unflagging bureaucrats; they are portrayed as the yin and yang of World War I.

The text's balance between history, fiction, and well-informed conjecture is strong. By the end, the idea that the Germans had something to do with the horror at Halifax in 1917 feels concrete, especially with the revelation that, a year earlier, German carried out the Black Tom Explosion in New Jersey, also targeting stockpiles of ammunition.

Spies, Espionage & Explosions is a what-if page-turner that will convince many that the German Empire came frighteningly close to putting its armies ashore in North America.

BENJAMIN WELTON (December 14, 2018)

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