

The Halifax Explosion

Learning objective

- Students will learn about the Halifax Explosion and the scope of the destruction on December 6, 1917.

Time required

30-40 minutes

Grades

7-12

Materials

- tiled map: *A Nation Takes Shape*
- Halifax Explosion map (Appendix 4)
- Heritage Minutes segment “Halifax Explosion” from *Historica Canada* (optional)
- Google Maps (optional)

Set-up

Print out and assemble the tiled map, arranging your classroom to accommodate its size.

Links to Canadian National Standards for Geography

Essential element 1:

The world in spatial terms

- major cities of the provinces, Canada and the world
- map projections for specific applications

Essential element 2:

Places and regions

- factors that influence people's perception of places and regions
- changes in places and regions over time
- interdependence of places and regions

Essential element 4:

Human systems

- human migration patterns
- types and patterns of human settlement
- cities as providers of goods and services
- changes in human settlement patterns over time

Introduction

Identify major cities and hubs on the tiled map. Ask students which hub they think would have been the busiest during the war and why. Explain that during the First World War, Halifax played an important role as a transportation hub. In 1914, Halifax Harbour linked the Atlantic Ocean with the rest of Canada through railroads. It remains the largest harbour on the East Coast. Using the tiled map and the legend, discuss Halifax's transportation features and hubs such as naval bases, railways and roads in 1919 and why the city was so important then.

Development

Watch the Heritage Minutes segment, “Halifax Explosion” (historicanada.ca/content/heritage-minutes/halifax-explosion).

Discuss the video and people's reaction to Vince Coleman. Explore what Coleman was trying to do and how students think they would react if they had been in Halifax that morning. Note that since many men were fighting overseas, most of the casualties were women and children.

Give your students information about the two ships involved in the explosion: the Norwegian ship, SS *Imo*, and the French munitions ship, SS *Mont Blanc*. Explain that the *Mont Blanc* was filled with explosives, including picric acid, TNT and gun cotton, and that both ships were set to sail to Europe.

Show students the map of the explosion (provided). Ask students how geography played a role in this disaster, focusing on whether Halifax's natural harbour was a double-edged sword (the long, narrow geography of the waterway made it an ideal harbour, but that unfortunately caused the city to develop around it and maximized the damage caused by the blast).

Identify your hometown on the tiled map and label it, including its population. Have students calculate the casualties if this kind of event occurred in their hometown. Using the scale on the tiled map, determine how large the 1.3-square-kilometre blast area would be if it occurred in your hometown, and map it out on the tiled map. Discuss the effects of an explosion of that size on your community and how the surrounding geography would have played a role.

Conclusion

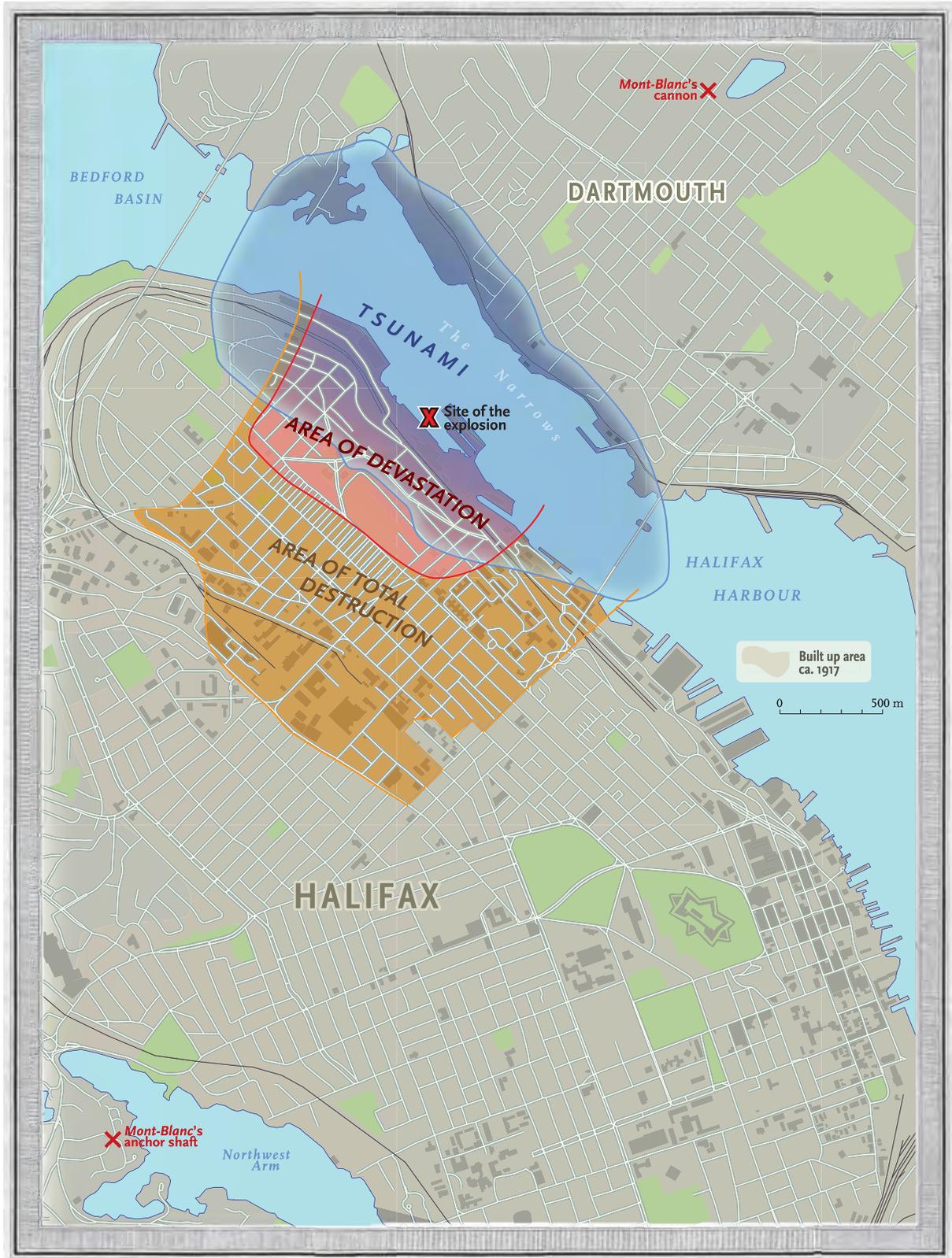
Emphasize that the Halifax Explosion was an unprecedented disaster and remains one of the biggest non-nuclear explosions in the world to date. Ask your students to think about how this disaster might have been prevented. Have students locate another wartime hub during the First World War on the tiled map and predict how that city would have reacted or been influenced if a major disaster had occurred there in 1917 and what would happen today. Discuss other human-caused disasters that have affected Canada in lasting ways, and locate them on the map.

Extend your geographic thinking

Identify major harbours in present-day Canada and research the types of goods that are shipped through them. If Google Maps is available, examine what present-day Halifax looks like and discuss how the city has recovered and redeveloped.

Appendix 4

Halifax Explosion map



CHRIS BRACKLEY/CANADIAN GEOGRAPHIC