

Triangle Fire DBQ

CPUSH

Mr. Burke

Who should bear responsibility for the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire?

To answer this question, students will complete an investigation of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire to examine the social, political, and economic impacts of industrialization on early 20th century society.

With this DBQ student will analyze documents related to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire to determine who was responsible for the fatalities that resulted. In doing so, students will:

- Examine industrial working conditions at the turn of the century.
- Consider the effects of urbanization, industrialization and the Gilded Age on the daily lives of “new immigrants”.
- Examine how disasters often provide impetus for reform

Topic Background

As we remember the 100 year anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911, it still remains one of the most deadly workplace disasters in American history. In just under 30 minutes, a raging fire on the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors stole the lives of 164 young women. Unsurprisingly, the reaction from Americans was one of shock, horror, and outrage; someone was surely to blame. Was it the building owners who violated the most basic of building codes? Was it the factory owners Isaac Harris and Max Blanck who chained the fire escape doors? Was it the fire department whose response time was less than desirable and ladders proved insufficient to reach the women engulfed in flames? Could it be the careless workers who smoked cigarettes on the job while the floor was littered with scraps of textiles? Or, was it the government who provided a futile oversight, if at all, over the lords of machinery? Even 100 years later, the blame game is still played but more importantly, the question still remains. What could have been done differently to avoid this travesty?

New York City was the most densely populated urban area on the planet at the turn of the century. “New Immigrants” from southern and eastern Europe flooded through the gates of New York looking for opportunity and seeking a new life. While some of them indeed pulled themselves up by their bootstraps and made their fortunes, the vast majority remained easy prey

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for the industrial giants. The seemingly endless tide of labor allowed management to manipulate workers, keep wages low, and pit ethnic groups against each other. The most vulnerable of the laboring population were surely the women, especially those who did not speak the native language. While a few charismatic immigrant women tried to organize female laborers, their unions remained relatively weak and unable to make much progress with management. As a result, most women in sweatshops worked in squalid conditions for minimal wages.

The conditions at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City were not unlike thousands of other sweatshops in the Industrial era. This was not a sprawling mill complex of power looms weaving endless miles of cloth. Rather, it was a sweatshop which occupied two floors of the Asch building in the current Greenwich Village which totaled 10,000 square feet.¹ The factory operators were mostly young immigrant women ranging in age from their teens to upper twenties. They were Jews, Italians, Poles, and other Southeastern Europeans performing hard labor for menial wages. The factory owners were Isaac Harris and Max Blanck who made handsome profits by subcontracting labor to individuals. The young women often worked six days a week with hours that ranged from 50-70 hours, often with no overtime pay. Employees could be penalized pay for a myriad reasons: talking on the job, missing a shift on Sunday, or taking too long during a restroom break, among others. Sweatshop employees sometimes had to pay to rent for their seat in factories, to replace their sewing needles if they broke, and even pay the electricity costs of operating the machine. They worked long hours in cramped quarters and strained their eyes due to inadequate lighting. Sometimes they would shift their sewing machines closer to the windows during daylight hours in order to see. The long hours were most certainly strenuous on the hands, the back, the eyes, the mind. The result was a socially stifling atmosphere and one of fear and frustration.²

Sweatshop employees did not willingly accept these conditions nor did they make no attempt to address them. Most notable among their efforts to secure safer working conditions and better wages preceding the Triangle Factory fire was the Uprising of 20,000. In the fall of 1909, female garment employees across New York City were being pressured, once again, to produce more goods for lower wages. The International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) immediately called a meeting to discuss a general strike. Thousands of garment workers from all over the city attended the meeting in which they discussed the prospects of a general strike on November 22nd, 1909. American Federation of Labor President Samuel Gompers spoke and encouraged the women. The young and charismatic 19 year old Clara Lemlich took the podium and told her fellow garment workers in Yiddish "I have no further patience for talk as I am one of those who feels and suffers from the things pictured. I move that we go on a general strike...now!" The following morning, fifteen thousand garment workers across the garment district of New York walked out. As picketing ensued, a total of twenty thousand shirtwaist makers from across the city entered into a general strike. The women demanded an established 52 hour work week for all shirtwaist makers, a wage increase of twenty percent, a guarantee of overtime pay if they exceed 52 hours in a week, and a closed shop. Though some of the smaller factories immediately made the concessions, the majority of the largest employers did not. Exerting their power with capital, thugs were hired to attack and

1 "Triangle Shirtwaist Fire Trial: Building laws." Famous Trials.

<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/frtrial/triangle/trianglscodes.htm> (accessed August 5, 2010).

2 "Sweatshops and Strikes before 1911." The Triangle Factory Fire.

http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/Trianglefire/photos/photo_display.html(accessed July 19, 2010).

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intimidate the strikers. In tandem, factory owners used their political connections with local police forces to obstruct the strikes and arrest the strikers. Women were fined and sometimes sentenced to forced labor by local judges. The public response to overt brutality and corruption was widespread. An additional fifteen thousand shirtwaist workers walked off the job in Philadelphia. A month later, public opinion forced the larger employers to negotiate with the ILGWU and by February of 1910 the strike was over. Management agreed to some concessions including wage increases and better working conditions and the strikers returned to work without a union agreement. Without a contract, the result was minimal gains as most employers refused to honor their agreements, therefore upholding the status quo.³ Though the women viewed the strike as a victory, its failure to secure lasting change led to future industrial disasters.

Perhaps the first sign of the ineffectiveness of the strike was in Newark, New Jersey. Eight months after the strike ended, a fire erupted at the corners of Orange and High Streets on November 26th, 1910. On the fourth floor of the building, a fire broke out in a lamp factory. When the fire spread, the foreman was able to unlock the doors to the exit, luckily, and allow most of the employees a safe escape down the stairs. However, nine girls were burned to death in the fire and sixteen jumped to their deaths from the windows. There was no fire alarm and the fire escape outside the windows failed. Public outrage demanded that laws be enacted to curtail future disasters and ensure employee protection; nothing happened.⁴ The parallels are noteworthy to the coming Triangle disaster.

On March 25th, 1911 the young women returned to work on the eighth, nine, and tenth floors of the Asch building. It was a routine day at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory until approximately 4:40PM, 15 minutes before quitting time, when a fire erupted on the 8th floor. While only speculative, it is widely believed that the fire started in a trash can from an employee's cigarette or unlit match. Once the fire started it force could not be contained; the textile scraps littering the floor became kindling for a ferocious fire that spread quickly to both the ninth and tenth floors of the building. Most of the girls on the eighth floor were able to escape to the stairs and the elevators but within minutes the elevators were engulfed in flames and rendered useless⁵.

On the more crowded ninth floor, the most dramatic events unfolded. Stunned by the suddenness of fire, some girls failed to react at all and died still seated at their sewing machine. There were only three possible options for escape: the elevator, the exit door, and the fire escape outside the window. The elevator was already inoperative and some of the employees jumped to their deaths down the elevator shaft. Other girls panicked and bolted towards the escape door only to find that it was impossible to open. Some employees alleged that factory owners Harris and Blanck had locked the doors that weekend to prevent the theft of shirtwaists, an allegation that was never proven. Regardless, in the mad rush to the exit door the girls may have trapped themselves because the doors opened *inwards* which would have been impossible when scores of women were pushing forward. The last option, the fire escape, was almost instantly rendered

3 "Uprising of 20,000 and the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire." ALF-CIO.

http://www.afcio.org/aboutus/history/history/uprising_fire.cfm (accessed August 5, 2010)

4 Hopkins, Mary Alden. *McChures*, April 1911. <http://www.oldnewark.com/histories/factoryfire01.htm> (accessed August 5, 2010).

5 Davis, Hadley. "Reform and the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire." *The Concord Review* (1988). 1-12. http://www.tcr.org/tcr/essays/Web_Triangle.pdf (accessed August 5, 2010).

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useless when the flimsy metal frame was melted⁶. The failure of these three avenues of escape resulted in an industrial calamity of epic proportions.

With no other option women tried the windows as a last resort, many jumping from the windows in a panic with their clothes and hair ablaze. Some stood at the ledge of the window crying and holding one another before jumping together and free-falling 90 feet. A crowd quickly gathered at Washington Square and witnessed the women hitting the sidewalks by the dozens. No one could do anything but stand in complete horror as the safety nets failed and the fire departments ladders were far too short to reach the ninth floor⁷. By approximately 5:05PM the fire had claimed 146 victims⁸. The worst industrial disaster to ever occur in New York City was over.

The public response was one of outrage, shock, confusion, and sadness. Media publications across the country ran articles about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. People tried to understand how something like this could happen and what could be done to prevent it from happening again. The fact that the victims were predominantly young women between the ages of 16-23 created a greater sense of urgency to achieve justice and devise preventative measures. When journalists caught wind that the factory owners Harris and Blanck may have locked the doors of the 9th floor there was a tangible public backlash against them, even in the less sensational publications. In mid-April, Isaac Harris and Max Blanck were indicted for manslaughter on two accounts. It was the burden of the prosecution to prove that Harris and Blanck had willfully and deliberately locked the factory doors on the day of the fire. The highly publicized trial was filled with emotionally charged testimony and contradictory accounts of what occurred during the fire. Some of the girls testified that Harris and Blanck had indeed chained the door shut that day⁹. Contrarily, other witnesses testified that the doors were not locked that day and if the doors were ever locked that there was always a key in it.¹⁰ Three days after Christmas of 1911, the jury voted to acquit Harris and Blanck of their charges. The justice system had denied the public a singular scapegoat for the tragedy.

Public sentiment also strongly condemned the government. It had not been a secret that the sweatshops of New York were likely to face a major disaster like the Newark fire in 1910. In a cruel irony, a public report 9 days before the fire stated that most sweatshops lacked "even the most indispensable precautions necessary." In fact, the Triangle Shirtwaist factory had passed a routine fire inspection one month before the Newark fire¹¹. The prevailing view was that the government had failed to create effective safety regulations and had absolutely no teeth to enforce compliance with the minimal safety standards that did exist. Two days after the fire, the chairman of the Fire Prevention Committee testified there were hundreds of thousands of safety

6 Davis, Hadley. "Reform and the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire." *The Concord Review* (1988). 1-12. http://www.tcr.org/tcr/essays/Web_Triangle.pdf (accessed August 5, 2010).

7 Davis, Hadley. "Reform and the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire." *The Concord Review* (1988). 1-12. http://www.tcr.org/tcr/essays/Web_Triangle.pdf (accessed August 5, 2010).

8 "The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire Trial: A Chronology." Famous Trials. <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/triangle/trianglechrono.html> (accessed August 3, 2010).

9 "Excerpts from Trial Testimony in the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire Trial." Famous Trials: The Triangle Shirtwaist Trial 1911. <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/triangle/triangletest1.html> (accessed June 28, 2010).

10 *The New York Times*. "Say Triangle Doors Were Never Locked : More Witnesses Contradict the Testimony of Harris & Blanck's Girl Employees" December 21, 1911. <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/triangle/trianglenyt1221.html> (accessed June 28, 2010).

11 "The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire Trial: A Chronology." Famous Trials. <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/triangle/trianglechrono.html> (accessed August 3, 2010).

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violations across New York City and called the current regulations "far inadequate and, indeed, a delusion and a sham."¹² It became clear the government had a responsibility to amend its building codes, improve fire inspections, adopt new fire escape regulations and effectively enforce these policies.

The Triangle Shirtwaist fire provided impetus for reform, but it did not come without a struggle. New York Fire Chief Edward F. Croker issued a scathing criticism of the local government for failing to fund the FDNYC and follow his fire-fighting recommendations long before the Triangle fire. As a result, he quit shortly after the fire. Despite Croker's cynicism and frustration with bureaucracy, many new regulations were adopted by the government. A Fire Inspection Commission was formed to design legislative recommendations to the municipal government; many of their recommendations became law. All factory doors were required to open *outward*. Elevator shafts had to be closed to prevent people from jumping down the shaft. Limits were placed on the amounts of employees per floor and additional fire exits had to be constructed. Fire alarms in any building above two stories high became mandatory. In 1912, New York City required sprinklers on every floor above the seventh floor. In order to enforce these new policies, the labor department was expanded, more building inspectors were appointed and fire-fighting science was improved¹³.

In the end, no one truly bore sole responsibility for the deaths of 146 employees at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory. Isaac Harris and Max Blanck were acquitted for manslaughter and were later brought back to court for civil suits. They eventually settled and paid \$75 per death. However, the insurance company paid Max Blanck \$400 per victim, making him a profit of \$60,000. Blanck would go on to own other sweatshops and, in an unrelated event, would later be fined twenty dollars for chaining the exit locked at a different factory in 1913.¹⁴ Since the building owners did not break any laws, they were not forced to pay any fines. At the governmental level, no one lost their job. This is, however, indicative of the nature of such a disaster. Culpability did not rest with a single individual or institution, it was a collective failure. Most importantly, it was a catalyst for change and steps were taken to prevent another such tragedy. The new regulations provided a solid model for other municipal and state governments to follow. New York would not experience another workplace disaster of this magnitude until two airplanes flew into the Twin Tower buildings on September 11th, 2001.

Vocabulary

Shirtwaist - a highly fashionable and popular women's blouse (shirt) from the early 20th century. It was regarded as the "model shirt for the independent, working woman."

Yellow Journalism - sensationalized reporting which predated tabloid journalism

International Ladies' Garment Workers Union - Labor union which represented the interests of female factory workers.

¹² McClellan, Jim R. *Changing Interpretations of America's Past*. 2nd ed. Vol. 2. McGraw Hill, 2000.

¹³ Davis, Hadley. "Reform and the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire." *The Concord Review*(1988). 1-12.
http://www.tcr.org/tcr/essays/Web_Triangle.pdf (accessed August 5, 2010).

¹⁴ "The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire." Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triangle_Shirtwaist_Factory_fire (accessed August 7, 2010).