

What Really Caused New York's Deadliest Factory Tragedy?

David Von Drehle. *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America*. Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003; 340 pp..

Reviewed by Louis J. Kern

Until the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center towers on the morning of 11 September 2001, the fire in the factory of the Triangle Waist Company, occupying the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors of the Asch Building on the corner of Washington Place and Greene Street, on 25 March 1911 was the deadliest workplace disaster in the history of New York City. David Von Drehle provides an essentially journalistic account of the events of the fire in the context of contemporary labor unrest in the garment trades, the dominance of Tammany Hall in city politics, and the movement for Progressive reform. He argues that the disaster should be seen, not simply as yet another example of the deadly dangers faced daily by the industrial labor force of the early twentieth century or the routine hazards of the unregulated workplace, but rather as “a crucial moment in a potent chain of events—a chain that ultimately forced fundamental reforms from the political machinery of New York, and, after New York, the whole nation” (3).

Von Drehle's book offers a more politically nuanced and more interpretive reading of the Triangle fire than the heretofore standard account, Leon Stein's *The Triangle Fire* (1962, reissued in a new edition, 2004), that provides an essentially straightforward narrative. Each account has its strengths, however. Stein's work was grounded in his reading of the transcribed testimony of the trial of the Triangle owners, *People of the State of New York v. Isaac Harris and Max Blanck*, richly supplemented by interviews he conducted with twenty-five survivors of the fire (now deceased). Stein's illustrations are also quite graphic and moving. In addition to photographs of the victims and the damage to the building, he includes engravings from the contemporary press, including one from the socialist organ, the *New York Call*, that analogizes the garment company to the triangle of “Rent, Profit, and Interest,” sustained by the hands of the bloated plutocrat and the skeleton of death.

Von Drehle's book is grounded in the personal copies of the trial testimony retained by the defense counsel (the originals were lost in the late 1960s) that he discovered in the library of the New York County Lawyers' Association. Volume two of the three was missing, but this material still provided a substantial record of the case. Like Stein, Von Drehle also made extensive use of contemporary press accounts, especially those of William Gunn Shepherd, the United Press correspondent who was on site from beginning to end of the tragedy, and who maintained an open telephone line to the UP office during the entire time.

Von Drehle's illustrations include photographs of the most important individuals involved in the Triangle and general strike of 1909, leaders of the labor movement and contemporary politics, as well as detailed schematic drawings of the three floors of the Asch Building occupied by the Triangle Co. The book also has a bibliography, but its most significant contribution is the definitive appended list (the first ever compiled) of all 140 identified victims of the Triangle fire.

Von Drehle's account is rather more leisurely paced than Stein's, which has a kind of breathless intensity, heightened by its novelistic style and its exclusive focus on the events directly related to the fire. Von Drehle begins with a discussion of the massive wave of Jewish immigration from Russia and Eastern Europe between 1881 and 1918, provides a descriptive overview of tenement life on the Lower East Side and the evolution of the sweatshop system, and considers in some detail the rise of the labor movement in the garment industry and its relation to Progressive politics and liberal reform.

The development of organized labor in the clothing trades is given extended consideration in *Triangle*, especially the role of Clara Lemlich as a leader of Local 25 (from 1906 on) of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union. Von Drehle considers the failed wildcat strike at the Triangle works in 1908 as well as the more extended general strike of 1909. The role of Progressive liberal reformers associated with the Women's Trade Union League and individual women of wealth—Anne Morgan (J.P.'s daughter), and Alva Smith Vanderbilt Belmont, who were both ardent suffragists is also well-developed here.

Neither Von Drehle nor Stein leave any doubt about the ultimate responsibility for the Triangle tragedy. Insufficient and largely unenforced safety regulations on factories—inadequate fire escapes, lack of sprinkler systems, locked doors, no established procedures for building evacuation, and no regular fire drills (in fact, none at all)—were clearly the immediate causes of the terrible loss of life at the Triangle factory. The question of personal responsibility, therefore, came down to the city building department and the owners—Max Blanck and Isaac Harris. Von Drehle leaves little doubt of the culpability of the owners, who followed a fixed policy of keeping the Washington Place door (one of only two exits) locked at quitting time, a practice intended to curb employee theft. In cross examination during their trial, Harris admitted that the total loss through theft for an entire year would not exceed \$15, and would probably be less. A damning admission set against the loss of 146 lives in the fire. Von Drehle also argues that Blanck and Harris had repeatedly had their factory burned (when unoccupied) between 1902 and 1911 for the insurance money.

But an astute defense lawyer, Max D. Steuer (the attorney for Tammany Hall), and Judge Thomas C.T. Crain's restrictive instructions to the jury insured an acquittal for Blanck and Harris. Ultimately, public pressure, sustained by Progressives, organized labor, and socialists, forced a new generation of the New York Democratic Party, led by Alfred E. Smith, majority leader of the state Assembly, and Robert F. Wagner, state Senate leader, to establish the Factory Investigating Commission (June 1911) that led to a series of twenty-five bills in 1913 that totally revamped fire protection in factories and expanded basic protections for female and child labor. Under their guidance, and the persistent agitation of Frances Perkins, the state legislature also passed a fifty-four hour bill in 1913.

Thus, in the wake of the horrors of the Triangle fire, New York state took the lead in developing a progressive labor code. In the process, some of the key players became national political figures—Al Smith served four terms as Governor of New York and unsuccessfully contested the presidential election of 1928; Robert Wagner became a U.S. Senator, a key New Deal supporter, and co-author of the Wagner-Connery Act (the National Labor Relations Act) that guaranteed collective bargaining, legitimized unions, and created the National Labor Relations Board as an arbitrator; and Frances Perkins, who became Secretary of Labor in the Roosevelt administration, the first woman to hold a cabinet-level post.

Von Drehle tells a compelling story in *Triangle*, and the book won the Christopher Book Award (2004) and appeared on the *New York Times* list of notable books (2004). Nevertheless, the book has some serious drawbacks. The first is stylistic. Unlike Stein's account, that reads like fiction, beginning *in medias res*, grabbing the reader by the throat, and rushing pell-mell to the end of the tragedy, Von Drehle's is a more reserved approach, more leisurely and more discursive. At times, as the text moves back and forth from conditions in the tenements to Tammany Hall politics, to strike conditions, to society women's progressive reformism, to the specific details of the fire, focus is lost and the intensity of the account suffers. The book also suffers from the reprehensible editorial practice of consigning all notation to the rear of the volume without superscript numbers in the text to identify references. As a result, the reader is forced to search out key words in the "Notes" and correlate them with the text in order to identify a given source. A method more clearly designed to discourage the reader from consulting the notes can scarcely be imagined.

Von Drehle is also at pains to develop his thesis of the central significance of the Triangle fire to the development of New Deal liberalism in America. While the impact of the fire on key individuals and on

specific legislation to transform the American workplace is undeniable, this argument ignores the overwhelming impact of the economic collapse and the sufferings of the Great Depression as a more powerful impetus to national reform.

The respective readings of Von Drehle's and Stein's books highlight their emotional differences and the temperamental basis of the former's argument about the impact of the Triangle disaster on the transformation of modern America. Von Drehle concludes his book with the purchase of Tammany Hall by the ILGU in 1943, and argues that the world of New Deal liberalism is the lasting monument to the Triangle victims. Stein, on the other hand, ends with yet another fire in a garment factory in Lower Manhattan on 19 march 1958 in which twenty-four died. The last words of his book are those of Josephine Nicolosi, a survivor of the Triangle fire: "What good have been all the years? The fire still burns."

And so it does. The real issue is-- has the legislation and regulation and the recognition of the right to organize that resulted from the Triangle disaster been enough to secure the safety and security of America's industrial labor force, or have abuses been allowed to continue through evasion and legislative loopholes? The continued existence of sweated labor in the U.S. would suggest that Stein's assessment of the circumstances of the working person's life has remained closer to the historical reality than Von Drehle's more optimistically colored vision would allow, or than we would prefer to think.

Louis J. Kern is a Professor of History at Hofstra University.

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