

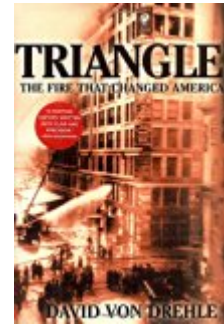
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Von Drehle. *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003. 340 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87113-874-3.

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Fire!

In this highly readable and thorough account, author David Von Drehle not only tells the story of the Triangle fire itself, but also provides the stories of the people and politics of the era. Throughout the book, Von Drehle skillfully sketches the daily lives of those who worked in the garment district. His vivid narrative style is evident from the opening of the first chapter when we read with suspense how striker Clara Lemlich is stalked by a company slugger. The author moves to the shop floor, describing it in such a way that the reader can feel the sweatshop conditions in general and the conditions at the Triangle plant in particular. Given the factory conditions and the ultimate tragedy of the fire, it might have been easy for Von Drehle to make Triangle factory owners Isaac Harris and Max Blanck (the “shirtwaist kings”) stock villains. However, he avoids this trap, showing the factory owners’ own struggles to build and run a business.

Most students of the era will know the story of the Triangle Fire, but this author’s narrative will rivet even a jaded reader. We are frustrated, for example, as we see the communication problems that result from the factory’s reliance on a central switchboard, delaying the spread of word of the fire. One difficulty after another impedes the escape of the workers, from problems with the water hose to the infamous locked door. And we witness in horror the burnings and desperate plunges out windows that killed so many young workers.

Von Drehle does not end the story with the tragedy of

the fire. He also tells the story of the trial of Blanck and Harris. New Yorkers believed someone must be made to pay for the more than 140 deaths—especially when they seemed to have been preventable. Defense attorneys showed that the owners had followed regulations, such as they were, so legally they could not be held accountable. The jury acquitted both men of manslaughter, mainly because the prosecution was unable to prove that the owners knew about the locked door that had prevented the escape of many.

Many New Yorkers were appalled that the existing regulations were so pitiful that a company could comply with them and still have such a disastrous fire. The Triangle fire was not the only factory fire in this era. What made this one different—besides the great loss of life—was that in this case Tammany Hall politicians rather unexpectedly decided to take on the cause of reform. Al Smith and Robert Wagner, both at the beginning of their careers, took the lead in the resulting Factory Investigating Commission. Frances Perkins also played a large role, working with the Consumer League to push changes. Through the work of these three and the Commission, New York state began to pass various reform bills to improve factory safety. Those familiar only with their later work will find these earlier contributions of Smith, Wagner and Perkins enlightening. In all, Von Drehle shows the pivotal role of the Triangle fire in New York politics and how the resulting legislation became a “new model for worker safety.”

Journalist Von Drehle has effectively drawn on Leon Stein's famous account *The Triangle Fire* (1962) and has mined such sources as the Harris, Blanck trial testimony and newspapers of the day. This account manages to reveal both the personal and political story. It will be a very accessible work for college and public libraries.

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